

THE LONG AND CINEMATIC SHADOW OF THE VAMPIRE NOSFERATU

FRAN MATEU
MIGUEL HERNÁNDEZ UNIVERSITY OF ELCHE
ARTS RESEARCH CENTER (CÍA)

INTRODUCTION

The vampire Nosferatu has left an indelible mark on the history of horror films, inspiring various reinterpretations over the course of a century. The initial film, directed by F.W. Murnau and released in 1922, laid the groundwork for the genre, establishing many of the visual tropes that would be associated with vampires in cinema for decades to come. For example, this film introduced iconic elements such as the vulnerability of vampires to sunlight and established an atmosphere of gothic horror that would influence later filmmaking. Decades later, in 1979, Werner Herzog offered his own vision. This version, while faithful to the original spirit, delved deeper into the loneliness and *pathos* of the vampire, presenting him as a tragic figure doomed to immortality. Herzog managed to update the story for a modern audience while maintaining the dreamlike, spectral atmosphere characteristic of the original.

Robert Eggers' recent adaptation, released in late 2024, represents the third iteration of Nosferatu in the cinematic medium. This new version seeks to

revive the horror generated by the original film, while bringing a contemporary vision to the vampire myth. As we will point out at the end of this chapter, which will explore these three versions of the vampire over more than a hundred years, each of these versions reflects not only the technical advances of cinema at the time, but also the socio-cultural changes and concerns of its time. As such, *Nosferatu* continues to fascinate audiences and filmmakers alike, demonstrating the enduring relevance of this iconic character in popular culture.

NOSFERATU, EINE SYMPHONIE DES GRAUENS (1922)

As is well known, the figure of *Nosferatu* has its roots in the epistolary novel *Dracula* (1897), by the Irish writer Bram Stoker. However, it was the film adaptation by a young Murnau that gave visual life to this creature of the night, the unforgettable Count Orlok played by Max Schreck, establishing many of the visual tropes associated with vampires in cinema. The film was produced in post-war Germany, during the Weimar Republic, being a period of political, social and economic turmoil that was significantly influential (Mustafa, 2023, pp. 35-36). Murnau, along with other filmmakers of the time, used the medium of film to explore themes of anxiety, alienation, and the dark side of human nature. The film's production was fraught with legal difficulties due to the failure to acquire the rights to Stoker's novel (at a time when copyright management, moreover, was not as clear-cut as it is today). Murnau and his team tried to circumvent these problems by changing names and plot details, but these efforts proved unsuccessful, and Stoker's widow successfully sued. As a result, all copies of the film were ordered destroyed, although fortunately some copies (or parts of these) survived (Hand, 2012, p. 63).

The visual style of *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* is a paradigmatic example of German cinema. The film employs innovative techniques for the time such as the use of negatives to represent an *inverted* world (which creates a phantasmagoric effect by inverting the tonal values in certain scenes, such as Hutter's carriage ride); filming in real locations, which adds a touch of authenticity to the narrative; or by applying color filters to indicate the time of day (or night) in which the story takes place. However, the application of color filters was a convention of the time for silent films, helping the audience to interpret the moment in which the action

was taking place. Thus, in daytime scenes a yellow filter is used; in nighttime scenes a blue filter; during dawn and dusk Murnau chose a pink color for these transitional scenes; and interior scenes during the day were sepia, while at night a yellow-orange tone was used.



Figure 1: *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (two frames with colored filters).

Source: Murnau (1922).

The story largely follows the structure of the novel, but with notable changes (especially in the last act). In addition, Renfield's character gains prominence, while Van Helsing's role is reduced. Similarly, the most noticeable change is in the transformation of the sophisticated Count Dracula into the monstrous and repulsive Count Orlok, whose appearance more closely resembles a rat or vermin, reflecting the era's fears about the spread of disease (Sharret, 2017, pp. 56-57). On these aspects, Murnau's film explores the theme of contagion, both literal and metaphorical. Orlok's arrival in the fictional town of Wisborg coincides with a plague of rats, a powerful symbol in a Europe still remembering the pandemic of the misnamed Spanish Flu. Thus, the vampire itself becomes a metaphor for disease, social decay and moral corruption. In fact, it is one of the earliest examples in cinema of the seepage of the monstrous into everyday life (hence also the fact that it is shot on real locations). The film also addresses themes such as repressed sexuality and forbidden desire, represented through the fascination of Ellen Hutter (equivalent to Mina in the novel, and played by Grete Schröder) with Orlok. Moreover, the final death of the vampire at the hands

of Ellen, who sacrifices herself to destroy him, adds a layer of moral complexity to the plot (Kawin, 2012, pp. 23-25).

Although Murnau's film is often categorized as expressionist (Choe, 2016, pp. 93-116), there are nuances. Expressionism is characterized by the distortion of reality, the use of artificial sets and dramatic lighting that emphasizes the emotions and psychological state of the characters (Elsaesser, 2016, pp. 18-19). In contrast, Murnau chooses to shoot in many natural locations, which provides a sense of realism that contrasts with the artificiality typical of expressionism. This aesthetic choice allows for combining elements of gothic horror with a more tangible representation of the scenic space. Expressionist cinema, moreover, aims to provoke an intense emotional response through exaggeration and visual abstraction. Murnau, however, maintains a more subtle approach and a more restrained atmosphere of unease. The film uses horror as a means to explore themes such as death or desire, but avoids falling into the emotional hyperbole of expressionism.

Likewise, Murnau implements innovative cinematographic techniques that are not strictly aligned with expressionism. For example, his use of camera movements (which he would take to the extreme in *Der Letzte Mann*, released in 1924) and depth of field to create visual tension are more a reflection of his interest in narrative development, and less an attempt to distort reality. The way he presents Orlok, using unusual angles, shows a concern for visual impact without necessarily adhering to expressionist principles. German expressionism emerged as a response to the social and political crises of the time, reflecting a deep pessimism about the human condition. Although the film reflects some of these concerns, its focus is more on supernatural horror than a direct critique of contemporary society. This may suggest that Murnau was more interested in exploring horror as a universal phenomenon, rather than using it for aspects more connected to expressionism. In any case, although the film shares elements with expressionist cinema (such as the use of exaggerated shadows or unusual camera angles), its aesthetic, narrative and technical choices distinguish it from the movement's defining characteristics. To that end, the film goes beyond the limitations of expressionism by combining realism with fantastic elements, thus offering a more complex vision.

NOSFERATU: PHANTOM DER NACHT (1979)

Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht (1979), directed by Werner Herzog, is a very personal reinterpretation of Murnau's classic. Herzog, known for his very particular, and often challenging, approach, offers a more complex and psychologically profound take on the vampire story (Kawin, 2012, p. 97). Herzog's film was produced at a time when the New German Cinema was at its peak. This movement, of which Herzog was a key figure, was characterized by its experimental approach and its desire to address complex and often dark themes. Thus, the film can be understood as a bridge between classical German expressionism (from which the original work departs to some extent, as we have indicated) and contemporary auteur cinema. The production was notorious for the tumultuous relationship between Herzog and its lead actor, Klaus Kinski, who plays Count Dracula. As is well known, their continuous clashes during filming have become a cinematic legend, adding a further substratum of tension.

Herzog maintains many visual elements of Murnau's film, such as the use of light and shadows with a dramatic or narrative functionality, or the careful composition of the shots. However, Herzog uses a more naturalistic approach, and adds his own distinctive stamp with long, contemplative shots of desolate landscapes, along with a muted color palette that contributes to an atmosphere of melancholy and decay. Herzog uses images of nature to underscore human insignificance in the face of larger forces. The shots of desolate landscapes and towering mountains serve as a metaphor for the eternity that the vampire must face. The plague of rats that accompanies Dracula symbolizes not only the physical disease, but also the moral corruption that spreads with his presence. The plot follows Stoker's novel more closely than Murnau's version, reincorporating elements such as Jonathan Harker's journey to Transylvania, and Van Helsing's role is more prominent. However, Herzog adds his own vision and interpretation, exploring more deeply the psychology of the characters and the philosophical implications represented by immortality (Kawin, 1980, pp. 45-47).

Klaus Kinski's performance as Count Dracula is central to Herzog's film. Unlike Murnau's Count Orlok, Herzog's Count Dracula is a more complex and tragic figure. While maintaining a repulsive, vermin-like appearance, but with

less exaggerated makeup than in the original version, Kinski brings an emotional depth to the character, portraying him as a being tormented by his own immortality and loneliness. This loneliness is visually reflected in the scenes where Dracula wanders alone through the deserted streets of the plagued city, symbolizing his perpetual isolation. Unlike other romantic depictions of vampirism, Herzog presents immortality as an unbearable burden. Count Dracula longs for death, seeing his eternal existence as a prison from which he cannot escape. This interpretation adds a tragic dimension to the character. Similarly, Isabelle Adjani, in the role of Lucy (equivalent to Mina in the novel), delivers an ethereal and emotional performance that complements Kinski's intensity. Thus, Adjani provides a ghostly presence that contrasts with the dark vampire, bringing a Pre-Raphaelite beauty and dramatic intensity that enhances the film's gothic atmosphere. Her performance adds layers of complexity to the relationship between the vampire and his victim/object of desire; as well as reflecting the sacrifice and inevitability of death.



Figure 2: *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*.

Source: Herzog (1979).

In addition, Herzog deepens the themes of Murnau's version, but expands and reinterprets them as well. The plague of rats remains a central element, but here it becomes a broader metaphor for social and moral decay. Dracula's arrival in Wismar triggers not only a physical plague, but also a kind of spiritual decay in the city. Images of corpses and dead rats serve as a constant reminder of

mortality, contrasting with the vampire's unwanted immortality. The filmmaker explores the idea of vampirism as an existential condition, depicting Dracula as a being trapped in a meaningless and eternally unfulfilled existence. The film also addresses themes of faith and reason, represented through the conflict between science (embodied by Van Helsing) and supernatural forces. This dichotomy reflects the anxieties of a society in transition between the ancient and the modern.

NOSFERATU (2024)

Nosferatu (2024), directed by Robert Eggers, stands as a reimagining of the vampire classic, fusing elements under a contemporary vision of gothic horror. The film is distinguished by its careful visual composition, which includes the use of light and shadow, an eerie atmosphere, as well as an immersive sound design, all elements that contribute to intensify the experience for today's audiences. Eggers achieves a certain balance between fidelity to the original material and the incorporation of new interpretations. One notable aspect of this version is the characterization of Count Orlok (closer to a living dead), played by Bill Skarsgård. The actor undergoes a radical transformation, both physically (with the addition of a prominent mustache, a common feature among Transylvanian nobles of the era) and vocally, to embody a version of the vampire that moves away from the traditional romantic image, presenting instead a disturbing creature whose appearance no longer resembles a vermin. This iteration returns the vampire to its folkloric roots, emphasizing its predatory and supernatural nature (Pizzello, 2025, pp. 50-61).

This new version of the iconic story by Bram Stoker and screenwriter Henrik Galeen stands out for its approach from a female perspective and its exploration of themes such as seduction, sexual liberation and the social expectations imposed on women at the time. Thus, the film is notable for its focus on the character of Ellen Hutter, played by Lily-Rose Depp. The actress's performance, which oscillates between unhinged and melancholy, brings a greater emotional complexity. Likewise, the film is also notable for its historical and social contextualization, reflecting the tensions and anxieties of its time, while drawing parallels to contemporary concerns. Likewise, Eggers fuses genres and

styles, incorporating elements of possession cinema and erotic-necrophilic thrillers. This combination contributes to a richer visual and narrative richness, creating a cinematic experience that is both an homage to its predecessors and an innovative work in its own right, especially in aesthetic terms.



Figure 3: *Nosferatu*.
Source: Eggers (2024).

On the other hand, Eggers has followed the tradition of using real locations, some of which were already used in previous versions of the vampire story, such as Pernštejn Castle in the Czech Republic, where Herzog also shot his version of the vampire. One of the most prominent locations is the exterior of Hunedoara Castle, also known as Corvin Castle, in Romania. Although not the famous Bran Castle, commonly associated with Dracula, Eggers chose this fortress to represent the home of Count Orlok. To recreate the fictional town of Wisborg, however, Eggers' team built elaborate sets at Barrandov Studios in Prague. Thus, production designer Craig Lathrop designed more than sixty sets, including five complete streets for Wisborg, based on the architecture of port and Hanseatic cities in Poland and Germany (Pizzello, 2025, p. 55).



Figure 4: *Nosferatu*.
Source: Eggers (2024).

Aesthetically, the film uses a combination of soft natural light and artificial light to create a romantic atmosphere inspired by 19th century art. Color filters were used to replicate the original tints (blue, ash gray and sepia) of Murnau's version, digitally retouched for maximum contrast. Also, a large number of shots (filmed on celluloid) are symmetrical. In them, Eggers uses frontal planning and oppressive spaces, inspired by Murnau's film. He also employs sequence shots that offer a certain *realism*, and includes the use of hand-held camera and slow editing in the final third of the film, reminding us of Herzog's version. Eggers' film is distinguished by its meticulous attention to technical detail, creating an immersive visual and aural experience that pays homage to earlier versions, while bringing a contemporary take on the classic *Nosferatu*.

CONCLUSIONS

In examining the three versions, we can see how each filmmaker has approached this story reflecting both technical advances in cinema and socio-cultural changes. Murnau's version, as a silent film, relies heavily on visual language to tell its story (although it uses many intertitles). The use of shadows and unusual camera angles sets a tone of unease that has influenced later fantastic cinema. Herzog, for his part, retains many visual elements of Murnau's film, but

combines them with the possibilities of sound film and color, allowing him to offer a different visual aesthetic. His approach, as we have already pointed out, is more contemplative and melancholic. With respect to Eggers' version, the filmmaker seeks to evoke the aesthetics of silent films but takes advantage of current technological possibilities. All this merging the traditional with modern technology. In addition, the filmmaker orients the story towards a more feminine approach with respect to its precedents, placing Ellen at the center of the plot.

Since its release in 1922, the iconic figure of Nosferatu has transcended from an unauthorized adaptation of Stoker's novel to become an enduring symbol of cinematic horror and a catalyst for the evolution of the vampire genre in film. Indeed, its influence can be seen in numerous examples. In aesthetic terms, the image of Count Orlok, with his exaggerated features, elongated fingers and menacing shadow, has influenced later depictions of vampires. For example, in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (F.F. Coppola, 1992), film from which Eggers also draws inspiration for his version of Nosferatu, the initial appearance of Count Dracula (played by Gary Oldman), with his long fingers and independently moving shadow is an homage to Murnau's film. In addition, the film explores themes of forbidden desire and moral corruption that resonate with Nosferatu. Similarly, in works such as the television adaptation of Stephen King's novel *Salem's Lot* (Tobe Hooper, 1979), *Subspecies* (Ted Nicolaou, 1991) or *30 Days of Night* (David Slade, 2007), vampires move away from the romantic image to take on a more monstrous and terrifying aspect.

Likewise, in the film *What We Do in the Shadows* (Taika Waititi and Jemaine Clement, 2014), the most archaic vampire of the group explicitly resembles the classic image of Nosferatu. Also, it should be noted that the approach to themes such as contagion, moral corruption or forbidden desire has influenced a multitude of horror works. For example, the idea of the vampire as a plague carrier has been repeated in works such as the novel *I Am Legend* (1954), by Richard Matheson, or in the series *The Strain* (Guillermo del Toro and Chuck Hogan, 2014-2017). In addition, the image of Nosferatu has transcended cinema, with more examples such as the film *Mimesis Nosferatu* (Douglas Schulze, 2018), to become a recognizable cultural icon. He has appeared in video games, comics, songs, and even episodes of animated series such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* (Stephen Hillenburg, 1999-), demonstrating his pervasiveness in popular culture.

A particularly interesting example of the lasting influence of the vampire *Nosferatu* is the film *Shadow of the Vampire* (E. Elias Merhige, 2000). This metacinematic work reimagines the making of Murnau's original film, playing with the idea that Max Schreck, the actor who played Orlok, was actually a real vampire. The film not only pays homage to the original film, but also explores themes such as the nature of cinema, the line between reality and fiction, and the price of art. The film, starring John Malkovich as Murnau and Willem Dafoe as Schreck/Orlok (who years later would play Professor Von Franz, a transcript of Van Helsing, in Eggers' version, offering more metacinematic depth to the subject matter), received critical acclaim and two Oscar nominations, demonstrating the continued interest and fascination with the figure of *Nosferatu* almost eighty years after its original release.

However, the future of *Nosferatu* in cinema also faces challenges. Market saturation with vampire stories could lead to audience fatigue. In addition, increasing viewer expectations in terms of visual effects and complex narratives could make it more difficult to capture the terrifying simplicity of the original film. Despite these challenges, the persistence of *Nosferatu* in the cultural imagination suggests that it will continue to be a source of inspiration for filmmakers and a fascinating figure for viewers. Its ability to evoke primordial horror, combined with its thematic richness and historical significance, ensures that Count Orlok will continue to haunt our screens for years to come. Ultimately, the legacy of *Nosferatu* transcends horror cinema. It represents a pivotal moment in the history of cinema, an enduring example of the power of the film medium to evoke emotion and explore profound themes. As cinema continues to evolve, *Nosferatu* remains a landmark, a reminder of the medium's origins and a constant challenge to filmmakers seeking to capture the same sense of horror and wonder that Murnau achieved a century ago. *Nosferatu's* shadow, like the shadow crawling down the stairs in the iconic scene from the original film, continues to loom over the cinematic landscape, promising new interpretations, reflections and nightmares for generations to come.

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Echoes of Fantasy and Reality

Francisco Cuéllar Santiago
& Vicente J. Pérez Valero (Eds.)



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Index

- Fictions Of The Shadow, Myth, And Transmedia*
FRANCISCO CUÉLLAR SANTIAGO & VICENTE J. PÉREZ VALERO [p. 10](#)
-

ECHOES OF FANTASY AND REALITY

- Alphabets For The Shadows. The Design Of Three Alphabets To Talk To The Dead.*
ÁNGELA SÁNCHEZ DE VERA TORRES [p. 25](#)
- Impossible Mazers: Transmedia Representations Of The Fantastic Rhizome*
ANDREU MARTÍNEZ CHAVES [p. 39](#)
- From Garden To Farm, Techno-Exploitative Intentions Of Techno Bros In Two Of
Liliana Colanzi's Pastoral Horror Sci-Fi Short Stories*
MIGUEL ÁNGEL ALBÚJAR-ESCUREDO [p. 49](#)
- Archetypical Displacement Of The Female Hero In Epic Fantasy. From Literary
Sagas To Television*
ANTONIO CASTRO BALBUENA [p. 62](#)
- Beyond Reality; Transmedia Landscapes In Fictional Narrative*
NÚRIA HERNÁNDEZ SELLÉS & MARTA RIVAS PÉREZ [p. 76](#)
- The Influence Of House Of Leaves In Video Games*
VÍCTOR GAYOSO MARTÍNEZ [p. 90](#)
- Fairy Tales And Fantasy: Mapping The Chronotope Of Olvidado Rey Gudú*
CRISTINA LANDÍN JIMÉNEZ [p. 103](#)
- Xenia: Homeric Hospitality In Frodo's Journey*
MARCELA NARANJO VELÁSQUEZ [p. 116](#)
- Archetypes Of Old Age In Folk Horror: Beware Of The Elders In Andy Fetscher's
Old People*
MARTA MIQUEL BALDELLOU [p. 128](#)
- Prey And The Hermeneutics Of The Shadow: An Approach To The Introspective
Fantastic*
JOSÉ MANUEL CHICO MORALES [p. 142](#)
- The Witch In Folk Horror. An Analysis Of Its Evolution From The Monster To
The Feminist Icon Throughout The Films Akelarre (2020) And Hellbender
(2021).*
ELENA MENÉNDEZ REQUENO [p. 155](#)
- Unspeakable, The Art Of Talking About Forbidden Topics Through Fantasy
& Horror*
BEN MANZANERA [p. 169](#)

<i>The Notion Of Myth In S. Langer And Its Relation To Contemporary Fictions</i> DEBORAH RODRÍGUEZ RODRÍGUEZ	p. 184
<i>Asimov, Adams And The Teleology Behind Computational Universes</i> ELVIRA SUSÍN-CASTÁN	p. 193
<i>The Psychological Basis Of Magical Transformations In The Tv Series Charmed</i> ALBERTO RODRÍGUEZ GÓMEZ	p. 206
<i>Sorceresses (Dis)Empowered? An Analysis Of The 'Charmed' Series</i> MARÍA AMPARO CALABUIG PUIG & AUGUSTO ALMOGUERA FERNÁNDEZ	p. 218
<i>A Visual Reflection On The Fantastic And Magical Realism: Fuseli's Nightmare (1781) And Böcklin's Triton And Nereid (1873)</i> LUKAS BROCK	p. 233
<i>Deliverance: The Game Is Survival</i> JUAN AGUSTÍN MANCEBO ROCA	p. 248
<i>The Poetics Of The Immense: Scale And Visual Metaphor In The Cinema Of Denis Villeneuve</i> LEÓNIDAS SPINELLI CAPEL	p. 263
<i>The Long and Cinematic Shadow of the Vampire Nosferatu</i> FRAN MATEU	p. 278



Since time immemorial, humanity has lived between two worlds: that of tangible reality and that of intangible fantasy. *Echoes of fantasy and reality* is a phrase that resonates deeply in the human experience, as it encapsulates the constant interaction, sometimes harmonious and sometimes conflictive, between what is and what could be. This duality has been a source of inspiration for artists, philosophers, scientists, and dreamers, who have attempted to decipher the boundaries and connections between both realms.