

# Horror Reverie I: A Symposium Celebrating 100 Years of *Nosferatu*

## Introduction. *Nosferatu*: A Glacial Draught of Air Still Blowing from Beyond

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## SPECIAL FEATURE

### Horror Reverie I: A Symposium Celebrating 100 Years of *Nosferatu*

#### INTRODUCTION

##### *Nosferatu*: A Glacial Draught of Air Still Blowing from Beyond

Cristina Massaccesi

It is a real pleasure to take part, albeit only virtually and *post facto*, in the first Horror Reverie symposium organised by Kristopher Woofter, Gary D. Rhodes and Mark Jankovich to celebrate the centenary of F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*.<sup>1</sup> This occasion has stirred all kinds of interesting ways to pay homage and remember such a crucial contribution not simply to horror, but to cinema in general. In the last few months, I have had the chance to discuss *Nosferatu* with journalists, radio programmes and, last in time but not least in terms of interest, with a very engaging group of North London secondary school students whom I met last week during a symposium entirely devoted to the heart-shattering cultural and political events that took place in 1922, the year during which the plague of Fascism was unleashed on Europe while the vampiric plague was brought by the Undead onto the unsuspecting town of Wisborg and its inhabitants. All this interest in *Nosferatu* seems to echo the famous words of Thomas Elsaesser:

the excess energy of the undead is now readable as belonging to the cinema and its eccentric patterns of propagation and proliferation across the culture at large. Not only in the way films have deposited their coffins in galleries, museums, schools and libraries, but also thanks to the Renfields—cinephiles turned necrophiles—at home in archives, lovingly restoring perished prints and reviving the ‘originals’ at Sunday matinees or special retrospectives. (2007, n.p.)<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The subtitle to this Introduction is an allusion to the words of Béla Balázs on the chilling effect of *Nosferatu* as “the glacial draughts of air from the beyond.” The line is quoted in Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967, p. 97.)

<sup>2</sup> The essay, “No End to *Nosferatu* (1922),” appears in the booklet accompanying the DVD of *Nosferatu* released by Eureka in 2007. See also Thomas Elsaesser (2009), “No End to

I think these words ring as true now as they ever did. Contributions such as the one by Stephen R. Bissette on the unexpected link between Henrik Galeen and Vermont and on his search for the final resting place of the “retired movie director” prove how far the interest in a film and in the people involved in its making can go, and in what surprising direction our interest can take us. Having had the chance of watching the recordings and reading the proceedings of the symposium, I have found all contributions original, fascinating, and also crucial in adding new and intriguing details to the film and its paratext. The strong impression of a never-ending dialogue between the film, its makers and us, here on the other side of a one-hundred-year divide, runs as a sort of leitmotiv throughout the three panels.

Imbued as it is with Albin Grau’s esoteric vision, *Nosferatu* speaks across ages and generations, and the cyphered letter the Count sends to Knock is a particularly intriguing piece of dialogue *in absentia*, of a voice that we like to think was launched into the future. While I was researching my 2015 book on *Nosferatu* for the Devil’s Advocates series, I came across a 1980 article by Sylvain Exertier published in the French magazine *Positif* that conducted an intriguing breakdown of the letter. Although the document was not entirely deciphered, Exertier explains an ample selection of the symbols and drawings used in the message. As I discuss in my book (47-8), the letter is marked by what Exertier calls a “relative legibility” (quoted in Massaccesi, 47, my translation), a rather striking fact considering that the document is a grimoire that should not be readable without the help of a key usually only owned by the ritual’s master and his disciples. The symbol opening the letter—a Kabbalistic square enclosed in a circle representing chaos—should function as a key providing the details for the performing of the ritual. The first line of the letter, instead, can be read as a sort of title and it is enclosed in between two Maltese crosses—the symbol of the crusading order of the Knights Hospitalier—that seem to suggest that Count Orlok is indeed about to embark on his own personal crusade. There are many other fascinating symbols used in the letter, such as traditional swastikas representing perseverance, and a dragon’s head placed before a wavy line suggesting how death will bring destruction coming from across the sea. Exertier and other scholars with him are not conclusive on whether the letter represents a tongue-in-cheek touch in the film or an actual message to fellow occultists: some details—such as the rapidity of the sequences in which the letter is featured and the employment of rather obvious drawings (a dragon, a skull, a snake) to represent common concepts like death and destruction—

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*Nosferatu* (1922)” in *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era*, edited by Noah Isenberg (New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 79-94).

seem to point in the first direction. At the same time, however, Albin Grau's serious and lifelong involvement with occultism and the interest for the mystical sciences that was widespread amongst many German Expressionist filmmakers would appear to be an indication that what we have here is something deeper and much more complex than a simple cinematographic prop. In response to Grau's grimoire, we have, of course, the one prepared—but ultimately not seen—for *Shadow of the Vampire*. What Mehrige calls “a living conversation between *Shadow of the Vampire* and *Nosferatu*,” this sort of bridge that can create a dialogue on a much deeper level, constitutes one of the most fascinating and enduring aspects of Murnau's work.

It was interesting to notice throughout the symposium several references to the pulse of the film, to the idea of *Nosferatu* almost as a living and breathing act of cinematography. The film's narrative is sustained by an inner rhythm that quickens and slows down, keeping the viewers on the edge of their seats. For most of its narrative, *Nosferatu*'s plot unfolds in a linear fashion, and we witness the events as they take place, discovering what is happening roughly at the same time as the characters. From a cinematographic point of view, this coherent universe is put on the screen by following the editing principles of continuity and by avoiding shots that could potentially disrupt the audience's perception of space, time, and cause-effect links. There are, however, some instances where Murnau shakes the linearity of the narration through the technique of crosscutting, and it is easy to notice how the director switches to this narrative mode in every sequence that constitutes a crucial turning point in the narrative. For instance, Orlok's attack on Hutter is intercut with Ellen's somnambulism whilst the vampire's voyage towards Wisborg is orchestrated as a piece of cinematic virtuosity that is crosscut with four other narrative strands. Finally, the narrative climax of the film intertwines three storylines: Ellen waiting for Orlok in her bedroom, the vampire's shadow approaching along the stairs, and Hutter going to fetch Doctor Bulwer for help. As stressed numerous times during the symposium, Murnau's use of dramatic crosscutting is certainly one of the most interesting features in *Nosferatu* and it fully validates the use of the word “symphony” in the film's subtitle. The director's approach to the crosscutting technique is also notable throughout the film because Murnau invests it with a series of complex and highly symbolic meanings that go well beyond the exclusive production of narrative tension. In *Nosferatu*, the events, characters and sets are interlocked through a series of sinister correspondences and analogies that could appear to be shocking or somewhat inconsequential to a distracted eye (think for example of the use of the shadow of the vampire's hands that connects in a circular narration Orlok's attack on Hutter and Ellen's sacrifice) but that are in fact perfectly interconnected. This all-encompassing approach to film editing, bringing

together narrative threads and deeper correspondences, has at the same time an anticipatory and intellectual quality: it propels the action forward by providing the film with a frantic pace, especially in the film's second half that is entirely sustained by the tension caused by Hutter's and Orlok's parallel rush to Wisborg. At the same time, though, simultaneous actions resonate at a deeper and visionary level by filling the narrative gaps that are inevitably created between events taking place in distant spaces and times.

The cohesive universe of *Nosferatu* is not only created by what we see, but also by what we do *not* see on the screen—hence the importance of the lost scenes eloquently discussed by Lokke Heiss in his contribution. The “less is more” principle is a powerful force behind the enduring vision of *Nosferatu*, not only in the scenes that were not realised, but also in the way other moments have been rendered more poignant through a process that we could call, borrowing a famous definition by Scott McCloud (1994), “amplification through simplification” (30). At times, we have clear annotations made by Murnau in the film's script that suggest modifications to Galeen's work. At other times, the result on the screen is significantly different from the original idea. A good example of this process of stripping down details to reach the meaningful core of a moment is the medium long shot with Ellen sitting on a solitary bench along a windy beach dotted with several crosses bent by a relentless wind. The original script—that, slipping back into Stoker's novel, names the place as ‘the graveyard of Whitby’, a mistake that was corrected by Murnau to ‘Heligoland’—suggests a rather different set up for the scene: “a long row of benches. People are strolling up and down looking out on to the sea...sitting on the benches and enjoying the view.” Compared to the more mundane idea suggested by Galeen in the script, what we have on film is an infinitely more haunting and melancholic vision. Ellen's solitude and concern are heightened by her physical isolation from other human beings and by her demeanour and attire. She appears on the beach in the attitude of a *Rückenfigur*<sup>3</sup>—thus investing the sea with the extra function of becoming a mirror for her turbulent state of mind—and the beach seems to be completely devoid of other signs of life and is on the contrary full of reminders of death and loss such as the crosses and her black dress. The haunting vision of Greta Schroeder staring out at sea—whence, it is crucial to remember, Orlock is coming, not her husband—is a powerful example of the amplification process applied to the film.

The female heroine in *Nosferatu*, as underlined during the symposium, is portrayed in an elusive and subtle way. Mina, Ellen's literary counterpart in Stoker's *Dracula*, is a modern Victorian woman. Although not a “New Woman” in the purest sense of the word and somewhat conventional in her

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<sup>3</sup> A figure seen from behind.

outlook on life, she nevertheless has a job and knows how to use technology—it is thanks to her skills in using a typewriter that Dracula's movements are reconstructed and the vampire is finally killed—and her character is fashioned as a combination of traditional feminine warmth and masculine determination. As Van Helsing declares in Chapter XVIII: “Ah, that wonderful Madam Mina! She has man's brain—a brain that a man should have were he much gifted—and a woman's heart” ([1897] 1988, 238).

Compared to Mina, Ellen is harder to understand. The first time we see her, she is playing joyfully with a kitten and could at first appear as a rather carefree and even childish character. However, this superficial impression is soon dispelled by what can be interpreted as a deep affinity with nature hinted at by Ellen's easy proximity with a domestic predator. There are many instances in the film when this aspect becomes clear; for example, her reaction in the sequence where she is presented with a posy of flowers by Hutter gives us a glimpse into a melancholic personality finely in tune with the idea of mortality. If Hutter is constantly filmed running about the set or in motion—as pointed out in the symposium by Argyle Goolsby (Panel One), “the one time he stops, the one time he collapses, and lets go and accepts everything that happened, that's happened to him, [Ellen] is gone”—his wife is often framed in a static situation, for instance embroidering at the window or sitting on a solitary bench on the beach. Yet, her constant proximity to thresholds and open spaces, such as the window and the sea, seems to suggest the possibility, perhaps even the desire, for an escape into a different reality to which she seems to be already alert on a deeper and metaphysical level. When compared to Mina Harker, who eventually survives her encounter with the vampire—or more precisely, is saved from the vampire by the Crew of Light, the men surrounding and protecting her—Ellen is also a much more tragic and solitary heroine whose faith almost coincides with that of martyrs. Her death is not caused by weakness, but it is rather an act of supreme self-sacrifice, and also of self-assertion.

Many other interesting points have been discussed during the symposium, from *Nosferatu's* distinct lack of modernity (John Browning, Panel Three) to the repurposing of Orlock's vampiric image (Murray Leeder, Panel Two) in later films. It would be beyond the remit of this short framing piece, however, to touch them all. I will leave the discovery of the many engaging angles brought out by the contributors to the readers of this issue of *Monstrum*. Before doing that, though, I would like to briefly recall the circumstances of my first encounter with Murnau's film, as all the speakers have done during the symposium, thus providing a sort of virtual logbook detailing the format, time, and impact of this initial meeting. I first watched *Nosferatu* during a late-night broadcast on the third channel of Italian public



television. It must have been in the early 1990s, most likely in 1992 or 1993, when I was a high school student and always on the lookout for old films. Like many of the contributors to the symposium, my first glimpse of Count Orlock was on a small TV set, in a black-and-white copy of the film, and I have no idea to this day of the version I watched that night. I distinctly recall, however, that I had only recently finished reading *Dracula* for the first time and that I was slightly obsessed with the novel and its imagery. I had also gone to the cinema to watch Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), and the three things somehow coalesced in my brain: the romanticised grandeur of Coppola's film, the grittiness and desperation conjured up by Murnau, and somewhere in-between Stoker's novel, modern and ancient, scientific and outlandish. It would be years before that late-night watch would find its way into my academic work, but I think it would be safe to say that the first impact with the film stayed with me always. And this idea of the formative encounter, of a meeting that somehow managed to shape our imagery and stayed with us even when not directly involved with Murnau's film, is an aspect that comes across very clearly throughout the symposium and brings us together.

Thank you for reading.

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