

Waking Dreams: F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* and Weimar Era Cinema

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Friedrich W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) is a seminal work of its kind. As a silent film, the fantasy travels beyond the theatrical backdrops of Melies' *Trip to the Moon* to on-site locations in Bavaria. As a vampire movie, it is one of the earliest of its genre. As an example of German Expressionist cinema, trick editing supercedes the distorted *mise-en-scene* of its predecessors. Because *Nosferatu* is so expansive, scholars typically focus on only one or two aspects of the film, thus neglecting to discuss how discreet elements of style and narrative might work holistically. For example, Tony Magistrale in his book *Abject Terrors*, adheres to the psychological methodology first posited by Siegfried Kracauer.² Magistrale does not subscribe entirely to Kracauer's position that the vampire portends the rise of the Nazi party, yet his own conclusion, that *Nosferatu* reflects post-war anxiety, is based more on the film's narrative content than style. On the other side of the spectrum is Lotte Eisner's *The Haunted Screen*, which touts *Nosferatu* as a formal masterpiece of Expressionist cinema, yet continually foregrounds Murnau's naturalism and places it in direct contrast to the more obvious films of his contemporaries (i.e. Robert Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1926)). While Eisner is correct to point out the opposition between naturalism and Expressionism, her analysis fails to explain the nuances of this dichotomy. It is the purpose of

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² Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947.

this paper then to detail the instances of naturalism and Expressionism in F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*. It is my position that Murnau utilizes formal aspects to delineate a specific thematic geography within the film. On one hand is "reality" – that which is objective and rational - expressed through naturalism. On the other hand is the supernatural – that which is subjective and irrational - represented by the kind of optic distortion typical of German Expressionism. Between these two poles is an intermediary realm best illustrated by a narrative "mistake;" the shadow of the vampire. I posit that middle spaces such as latter are the truly Expressionistic moments in the film because Murnau not only questions the fabric of reality through formal means, but also exposes the horror of *Nosferatu* as real via plot development. In this view, neither the objective nor the subjective has precedence. Instead, the fantasy is supported by cinematic techniques as a plausible circumstance where the unthinkable is true; a state much like the post-war anxiety German Expressionism is touted to characterize.

Murnau manipulates formal aspects of cinema to establish the dichotomy between naturalism and Expressionism. As one would expect, scenes of domestic interiors and pastoral exteriors are filmed with an almost documentary exactitude that characterizes the style of Murnau's cinematographer, Fritz Arno Wagner. Showing a debt to pre-WWI Scandinavian filmmakers, as well as the theater tradition of Reinhardt, Wagner's penchant for "low-contrast, realistic photography" that incorporates "the whole range of intermediate grays" is best exemplified by these types of shots.³ In shot 20 for example, the main character, Hutter, walks down a cobblestone street directly toward the camera.⁴ On one side of the path is a large building that casts a shadow. On the other is a smaller building with trees and foliage that sway

³ David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film (Fourth Edition)*. London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004: pg. 100.

⁴ This method of enumerating shots is taken from Richard B. Byrne's *Films of Tyranny*. (Madison, WI: College Printing and Typing Co., Inc., 1966: pg. 99.)

in the breeze and cast dappled sunlight across the brick wall. One can see how Wagner retains the full spectrum between black and white, which exposes details such as fabric creases on jackets, individual cobblestones and tree bark patterns. However, the shots that treat landscape as a discreet viewing phenomenon as opposed to a backdrop for human action are more indicative of Scandinavian film. Shot 67 fades into a long take of fog rolling over a mountainside and immediately pans right.⁵ The scene is not ponderous with stillness. The viewer does not have much time to digest it. However, the low contrast photography captures craggy niches and, most importantly, the fog, which impresses upon the viewer an ominous feeling despite the lack of narrative content otherwise.

Murnau and Wagner shoot domestic interiors within the full spectrum of grays as well. Although there are moments when light is deliberately composed, such as the halo of sunlight around Knock's head in the office scene, the world outside Count Orlock's castle is depicted naturalistically. Here, everything is ostensibly as it seems. The sun rises, people greet each other on the way to work. The most significant portion of this world's order is that everything has a rational explanation.

Despite appearances, Lotte Eisner intimates that naturalistic lighting is actually Expressionistic in the way that artists of this movement, particularly Murnau, were "obsessed with inanimate objects."⁶ Eisner cites the eerie motion of the dead sailor's empty hammock and the lone cabin lamp as specific instances of the Expressionist proclivity to imbue everyday objects with emotional weight. However, her earlier statement concerning Murnau's treatment of landscape, "Nature participates in the action..." activates and, thus anthropomorphizes, the natural world, which is akin to the intellectual process that takes place when inanimate objects

⁵ Byrne 103.

⁶ Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1952: pg. 105.

are understood to symbolized or express subjective meaning.⁷ In this way, what is an extremely natural shot actually doubles as an Expressionist symbol. While one cannot disagree with the potentially ominous mood of certain shots or the fact that Murnau's training as an art historian made him fully aware of any given compositions' subjective impact, one also cannot help but wonder if one is being set up for something else. As we shall see, natural lighting works as a counterpoint to the sculptural darkness of Count Orlock's castle, where the supernatural and the subjective truly manifest themselves.

Count Orlock, a.k.a. Nosferatu, first appears as an entity emerging from darkness in shot 148.⁸ Just as Hutter walks into the courtyard, the vampire glides toward the camera into the scene through a pitch-black archway.⁹ Nosferatu's stark white face and hands are the only thing in view until he steps into the presumably moonlit passage.¹⁰ Through the creative, yet subtle make-up on actor Max Schrek, we see that the figure is grotesque. However, the long shot distance does not reveal details of the vampire's face, which redirects the sense of unknown terror in the scene. Instead, high contrast lights and darks develop *Stimmung*, or mood. Stark contrast renders quantifiable space into an unfathomable depth by flattening the distance of the tunnel. As Nosferatu emerges, the viewer realizes that the passageway is deeper than it appears. This trick of perception creates a great deal of ambiguity and anxiety because Nosferatu is not seen until the moment he steps into the moonlight; when it might be too late, as it were. Additionally, high contrast lighting gives the vampire an architectural quality in this shot as his disembodied visage briefly hangs in the center of the opaque blackness like the grotesque door-

⁷ Eisner 99.

⁸ Byrne 109.

⁹ In *The Haunted Screen*, Lotte Eisner comments that Murnau creates an "atmosphere of horror by a forward movement of the actors toward the camera." pg. 102.

¹⁰ I presume that the viewer is to understand what is most likely sunlight as moonlight for three reasons. First, Nosferatu berates Hutter for arriving "after midnight" in shot 152. Second, vampires cannot live in sunlight according to folklore. Third, the scene is tinted blue, which is a convention in early cinema for depicting night.

bosses often seen on Gothic buildings. As one sees throughout the film, the floating, ghostly entrance through a series of darkened doorways is Count Orlock's chilling *modus operandi*. Considering the admonition of an earlier intertitle – “Do not utter its name, lest it rise from you.” – this formal reiteration of the vampire as something that emerges from equivocal depths is highly appropriate.

Murnau and Wagner also use light as a plastic form in and of itself. After surviving his first night in Orlock's castle, Hutter rises to find a table set for breakfast, which is depicted in a circular matte close-up. In the following shot, Hutter walks toward the dining area. It is interesting to note here that the entire length of the hall is captured with a long shot. This particular distance choice reveals not only checkered floor tiles that run on right to left diagonal, but also angular slivers of light that cast harsh shadows against the main axis of the room. These slivers of light enhance the diagonal of the tiles and underscore the right angle of the room as one beam falls on the jamb of an arch. The combination of acute and right angles is as a matrix for distortion and ambiguity. However, the distortion is not overwrought as it would be in Robert Weine's highly Expressionistic film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919). It is entirely plausible that these shapes are those caused by light projecting at a certain angle to the building. Nonetheless, the angle of the sun's rays is too precisely aligned with the tile pattern to be an accident. Because of this unnatural distortion, one suspects that not even the safety of dawn is what it seems in Orlock's castle.

Murnau establishes formal dichotomies such as light/dark and naturalistic/abstract through the manipulation of light. Given the content of the respective poles, a thematic opposition between rational and irrational is created. This polarity is further developed through the development of two secondary characters: the town doctor and Professor Bulwer. The town

doctor is the first to appear when the natural order starts to disintegrate. During the second night Count Orlock feeds on Hutter, Ellen wakes in a somnambulist trance that goes on for duration of the evening. She is released when Count Orlock leaves Hutter's room. As she falls back to sleep, the doctor proclaims her bizarre night terrors, which could also be seen as prescience, as "harmless congestions of the blood."¹¹ Similarly, when Count Orlock arrives in Wisborg, the town doctor describes the strange deaths that follow in the vampire's wake as "the plague" and everyone is advised to stay indoors.

Professor Bulwer is the second character that underscores the rational, yet his version of science gently subverts the empiricism of the medical community symbolized by the town doctor. Described in the intertitle as a Paracelsian, Professor Bulwer is the only character in the city that considers vampires an option, even if metaphorically.¹² In his botany lecture, he refers to the Venus flytrap as the "vampire of the plant kingdom" and similarly describes a "polyp," shown in an insert shot, as "transparent, without substance, almost a phantom." This dialogue surrounding the latter specimen is particularly important because the idea of an unseen force acting as a destructive agent is associated with Knock's madness by intercutting between the lecture hall and the jail cell where the town doctor tries to diagnose the elder real estate agent. The "polyp" lecture is also compelling because the specimen is illustrated with a close-up, which invokes a microscope or seeing that which was thought not to exist through science.

¹¹ It is debatable whether the psychic connection is with Hutter or Nosferatu. At the end of the scene, Ellen holds out her arms screen left, and then the shot cuts to Nosferatu glancing screen right and walking briefly in that direction before exiting the room. The quote is derived from the intertitle.

¹² It is interesting to note that Murnau lists Professor Bulwer as a Paracelsian because this particular group of medical philosophers was the first to deny the idea of the humors, blood being one of them. This bit of information creates an interesting sub-dichotomy between the town doctor, who attributes Hellen's night terrors to a disease of the blood, and Professor Bulwer, who deals with the unseen (i.e. microscopic) through empirical observation, yet seems to take vampires seriously. Additionally, some sources and versions of the film call him "VanHelsing," a reference to the conventional nemesis of the vampire. Yet, he is not responsible for killing the vampire in the film's climax. For more information about how Murnau subverted the VanHelsing/vampire dichotomy for Expressionistic purposes read "Film, Society, and Ideas: *Nosferatu* and *Horror of Dracula*," by Lane Roth in *Planks of Reason*.

Murnau begins to question the stability of rational and irrational by establishing liminal zones where the two intermingle. The earliest one of note takes place in the country inn. Here, Hutter encounters a group of superstitious peasants who warn him of the dangers that lurk outside once night falls. He laughs at their irrational simplicity and lack of education. One could almost believe Hutter's insouciance if this scene were filmed like other realistic ones. Yet the viewer cannot help but notice that the light in the tavern is slightly different. While not entirely like Orlock's castle, the usual realistic range of grays used in interiors is replaced by higher contrast. Hanging lamps cast triangular swaths throughout the room, chopping it up into discreet, sculptural sections. A group of women cower with rosaries in one. The innkeeper emerges from blackness into light and back again as he walks to Hutter's table. Similarly, when Hutter turns in for the night, a single candle that casts harsh contrasting shadows across his face lights his bedroom where he reads a small book titled *The Book of Vampires*. However, he laughs this off as folklore, just as he did the admonitions of the country folk, much to his own danger. If one views these scenes according to the opposition of rational and irrational, the content of this scene would indicate that the villagers' fears and the book are indeed fantasies. Yet this intermediate space, as defined by the light, suggests an area where irrationality and superstition are tightly woven into the fabric of everyday life, where the supernatural cannot be separated from reality.

A final, but not exhaustive, instance of an intermediate space is the shadow of the vampire seen in the film's climax.¹³ Some scholars consider this an oversight on the filmmaker's part because vampires are not supposed to cast shadows in most folk traditions. However, they fail to consider how Murnau may have deliberately subverted the rules of folklore to achieve a

¹³ I qualify this final instance as not exhaustive because other salient moments, such as the carriage ride through the forest filmed with stop action photography and projected as a negative, exist. However, the paper focuses on light more than editing, so I've left it out for brevity.

more contemporaneous effect, which is clear when one considers the murder scene from Weine's *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. In *Caligari*, the murder is not explicitly depicted. Instead, that which is too terrible to see is mediated through shadow. We see the victim start in fear at the murderer's approach. However, we are not privy to the perpetrator's identity or the direct experience of the struggle. Instead, the victim sinks below the camera frame and we see his shadow stabbed repeatedly by that of the murderer. Similarly, Count Orlock's shadow approaches the boudoir of his prey. Siegfried Kracauer refers to this convention as "mobiliz(ing) light" and suggests that these dramatic effects express a sense of subjectivity and interiority throughout the film that "(mark) it as the scenery of the soul."¹⁴ Manifesting the subjective is undoubtedly one goal of German Expressionism, yet the staircase scene questions the boundaries of what is subjective and what is objective. For Orlock to cast a shadow, he must have mass, which implies the truth of his existence within the microcosm of the film. However, he does not just exist within the Expressionistic confines of his castle. Instead, he ascends a staircase in the domestic realm; an instance of the irrational puncturing the membrane of the rational, thus creating a liminal zone where anything is possible. And indeed the unthinkable happens. Orlock feeds on Ellen and is vanquished by the sun when dawn breaks. No evidence remains of the monster. A dead woman is the only witness. Yet the irrational has left an undeniable mark on the rational world.

As it has been shown here, Murnau blurs the boundaries between reality and fantasy, rational and irrational, in order to challenge how exactly the world is perceived and how we explain it. Murnau weaves formal elements into the narrative that disrupt the viewer's expectations and leaves only questions and anxiety in his wake. However, this ambiguity is deliberate. To quote the filmmaker himself, "I like the reality of things, but not without fantasy;

¹⁴ Kracauer 75.

they must dovetail. Is that not so with life, with human reactions and emotions? ...After all, the mind is the motive behind the deed.”¹⁵

¹⁵ Richard McCormick and Alison Gunther-Pal (ed), *German Essays on Film*. London: Continuum, 2004: pg. 68.

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