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Nosferatu's Cats, or: The Birth of the Cinematic Pandemic Vampire

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Abstract: This paper looks at how the three Nosferatu films by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Werner Herzog, and E. Elias Merhige have influenced presentations of vampires and established the Nosferatu figure as a cinematic counterpart to the literary Dracula. In addition, all three films establish the pandemic theme early on in a genre-defining scene, featuring the female protagonist and one or more cats. The significance of the cat scenes is analyzed both in terms of the final film versions as well as in relation to the original scripts and other source materials, which show the significant changes that were made. Spanning the full spectrum of genre films from their experimental to their baroque stages, the three Nosferatu films present a unique type of vampire, which is particularly relevant for our present times.

Keywords: *Nosferatu adaptations; vampire films; pandemic vampire*

100 years ago, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau was getting ready to shoot *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*. An introductory title states that the movie is based on the novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker and freely adapted by Henrik Galeen. However, this seems more of "an identification with a literary source so as to validate Murnau's [own] contribution to the development of an art cinema" (Mayne 1986, 25-26). Murnau's film actually has very little in common with its literary source. It rather presents an anti-Dracula, a very different kind of vampire, one that is specifically cinematic, undead and unreal, part of the land of phantoms and pandemics. Unlike Stoker's Dracula who could only exist on the printed page, Nosferatu self-reflexively celebrates life on celluloid.

In his *Notes for Dracula*, Stoker described his literary character, whose image could not be captured: "Painters can't reproduce him – like someone else … could not photograph -come out like corpse or black … could not codak him – come out black or like skeleton" (Eighteen-Bisang and Miller 2019, 31), and "casts no

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reflection in a mirror … casts no shadow" (Eighteen-Bisang, and Miller 2019, 33). Murnau's *Nosferatu* changed all of that and presented a cinematic vampire, with bold images, constantly playing with shadows and light: "Count Orlok in *Nosferatu* is … a creature of light, shadow and cinematic trickery - … He is purely and properly cinematic" (Weinstock 2012, 82). The self-reflexive and innovative aspects of the film were already noticed by the contemporary press who noted the degree to which *Nosferatu* set itself apart from the dramatic stage ("sprechenrampenfremd (sic)"), literature ("buchfeindlich"), and other films ("ein eigener Stil Film") (Vossische 1922, n.p.).

25 years after the publication of Stoker's novel, *Nosferatu* presented a completely updated vampire, not only for the new medium film but also for a different time and place. Murnau moved the setting to Germany, changed the names of all characters, and included a plot that reflected recent events. The new cinematic vampire from Germany looked like he might have crawled out of a World War I trench, now travelling with his army of rats spreading a pandemic just two years after the end of the Spanish flu: "Between 1918 and 1920, Germany lost roughly 287,000 people in the great flu pandemic — the 'Spanish Flu,' as it's erroneously called today — which killed 50 million worldwide. It was a shattering experience for the Germans, as it was for people everywhere. It may even have helped fuel the rise of Hitler and the Nazis" (Beckerman 2020, n.p.). To reflect the focus on a pandemic, Murnau changed the timeframe of Stoker's 1890s to the 1830s, a decade when another pandemic had ravaged Germany. As Anton Kaes explains: "The year 1838 is mentioned as the date of the mass death, vaguely referencing the cholera outbreak in Germany of the 1830s that killed hundreds of thousands in Europe … Cholera returned periodically in the nineteenth century, claiming an estimated one million victims in Europe alone" (Kaes 2009, 93). Rolf Giesen attests: "[Nosferatu] was more than just a Transylvanian count sucking the blood of the living; he was a synonym of the pandemic, with rats all around him" (Giesen 2019, 38).

The "Lord of the Rats", as Werner Herzog would later call him (Herzog, n.d.), was a monster that was not very selective in terms of his victims. Nina Auerbach describes how "Nosferatu unleashes mass death, not individual sexuality. … [He] is a shadow of his own diseased Germany" (Auerbach 1995, 75). Her reading references Siegfried Kracauer's who described *Nosferatu* "as an allegorical warning against the plague of Hitlerism" (Auerbach 1995, 203). Werner Herzog also saw this connection and stated that Nosferatu predicted the "doom and gloom that would come over Germany under Hitler" (Herzog 1979, DVD Commentary).

Connecting vampires to pandemics was nothing new as they were often seen as scapegoats. After all, as Barber explains, pointing to a suspected 'vampire' was often as simple as "determining who died first of an epidemic" (Barber 1988, 68).

While Nosferatu's sub-title spelled out the film's focus on "The Great Death in Wisborg in 1838," it was visualized in the initial sequence of Ellen and her cat, which has had such an impact that it is now a genre-defining element and only comparable to Jonathan Harker's encounter with the three "weird sisters" in numerous Dracula adaptations and variations. While the sisters' scene establishes the erotic power of the vampire, the cat scene introduces the pandemic vampire. In the three canonical Nosferatu films, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, Werner Herzog's *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht* and E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* the cat scene also shows each adaptation's relationship to its source text with its own particular "mixture of repetition and difference, of familiarity and novelty" (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, 139).

The well-known opening scenes in Murnau's and Herzog's *Nosferatu*, however, are very unlike their initial conceptualizations. In the case of Murnau and his writer Henrik Galeen, the original script starts with Ellen and her cat playing at the window, whereas in the final version her husband Hutter is introduced first. While this would have given the cat scene more weight, it would not have changed its significance as profoundly as another change to the script. In the original version, Ellen was portrayed in a much more stereotypical way as the dutiful Biedermeier Hausfrau in her kitchen who feels "ashamed" for not fulfilling her "housewifely duties:

Scene 5 (The small kitchen)	Ellen, still playing with the kitten, hears Hutter coming and jumps up.
[Shot cooker.	Ellen comes over and begins to busy herself with the saucepans, with a childlike earnestness towards her housewifely duties.]
Shot of door:	Hutter is standing in the door way and laughs and laughs: hiding the bouquet behind his back, he laughs and laughs.
Shot of cooker:	[Ellen turns round, catches sight of her husband and seems a little ashamed that she hasn't made breakfast yet. Now Hutter moves closer to her, looks into the sauce-pan, holds it upside down indicating that it is empty, and looks at her reproachfully.
Title:	*Ellen!* She is sulking now and trying to placate him. But he pulls out his watch: it is late already; he has to go. He kisses her goodbye, but she calls him back again to confess that she hasn't got any money left to do the shopping.

> He pulls out his purse with a sad look and holds it up: there is nothing in it! They both sigh. He leavers with a heavy heart. The moment she is alone she takes a small basket of potatoes, which is all she can find, the last resort of the poor housewife, and starts peeling them. A potato drops on the floor, the kitten comes up and plays with it.] (Eisner 1973, 233)
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> [original formatting]

In *Nosferatu*'s final version, the references to Ellen in the kitchen are gone and she is now ready for her interaction with the animalistic world at the liminal space of the window, the threshold of private and public spheres, Biedermeier home and animalistic/phantom world outside, order and chaos, health and sickness. Lotte Eisner summarizes: "The business with the kitten and Ellen's forgetting to prepare breakfast is omitted. Murnau instead emphasizes the bouquet scene and the happiness of their marriage" (Eisner 1973, 271). We are left with the introduction of Hutter and his mirror-image, foreshadowing a dark Doppelgänger, followed by Ellen and her playful cat. This introductory sequence also introduces Murnau's "use of cross-cutting, which is the primary means by which [he] establishes different forms of identification between Nosferatu and other characters in the film" (Corrigan 2013, 122). Through these means, the symbolic connection to Nosferatu, his rats, and the plague is established immediately, resulting in a cinematic vampire quite unlike the literary predecessor.

During Ellen's interaction with the cat, she playfully dangles a string, which, with the "repetitive swings back and forth …. [suggests] a hypnotist's pendulum" (Kaes 2009, 114). Ellen's hypnotism in this scene and her openness to altered stages and perceptions later in the film also foreshadows the film's end, when she "hypnotizes" the vampire by calming him and making him stay after sunrise. The initial scene presents Ellen and the cat in a tight frame, surrounded by flowers in the open window, and an array of framed portraits on the far wall which adds a doubling effect. Through the open window, Ellen brings the cat back into her Biedermeier home just like she will later open her windows to invite Nosferatu into her bedroom in order to kill him and to end the pandemic. While the film's image of a bird's-eye view of a clock tower established Murnau's formal, cinematic perspective, the cat scene introduces the pandemic vampire and his antagonist, Ellen the vampire slayer. This theme is also stressed in the next shot, when Hutter brings Ellen a bunch of flowers and she asks him why he "killed" them.

At the end of the 1970's, at the height of the New German Cinema, Werner Herzog announced that he saw himself as part of a "generation of [cinematic] orphans with their grandfathers as their teachers" (Herzog 1979, DVD Commentary). He wanted to share a sense of historic belonging and to connect with 'untainted' expressionist German film and Murnau's *Nosferatu* in particular, which he called the best German film ever. In Herzog's words: "We are trying in our films to build a thin bridge back to that time, to legitimize our own cinema and culture. We are not remaking Nosferatu, but bringing it to new life and new character for a new age." (Mayne 1986, 119).

Shot in just over two months from May 1 to July 8, 1978 and on a small budget, *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht* is full of intertextual references to Murnau's film, with certain scenes shot in the same location. But just as Murnau had based his film loosely on Bram Stoker's novel, Herzog also made significant changes to Murnau's plot, similarly referencing a source text to legitimize his own artistic endeavour.

Herzog introduces the pandemic theme with a long, slow pan of a row of mummies at a museum in Guanajuato in Mexico who had died during a cholera epidemic roughly the same time as in Nosferatu, in their case in 1833. While not mentioned directly in the film, the cover of Herzog's script states that his story of the Great Death was set in 1843, the same year it had been in Murnau's original script (Eisner 1973, 288). The mummies are followed by a bat in flight and Lucy waking up from a nightmare, clearly indicating from the beginning that this will be a genre film. In the script, Herzog describes his attempt to connect with Murnau and simultaneously with the New Hollywood of the 70s:

> Nosferatu will be a new version of the silent movie classic NOSFERATU – A SYMPHONY OF HORROR by F.W. Murnau (1922). Like Murnau's film, it will not be a horror movie with only the surface mechanics of this genre. It will be a film of anonymous fear and nightmare. It should work like the first half of JAWS before the shark appears. It will be a film dwelling on the very dark, nightmarish abyss of the German soul. In contrast to Murnau's film, it will concentrate much more on the figure of the vampire and the beautiful, angelic young woman who sacrifices her life. (Herzog 1978, Script IV, n.p.)

Herzog's vampire movie also refers directly to Stoker's source text by using the names from the novel for his characters. In the cat scene, Herzog's Lucy, unlike Murnau's Ellen, has lost her initial, symbolic power. The cats are in control from the beginning, playing with a locket containing Lucy's image. Herzog's Lucy is the object

of an animalistic force that will remain in control throughout the film. What connects Murnau's and Herzog's cat scene, however, is that both made significant changes from their script to the final version.

In his collection of film narratives, *Scenario III*, Herzog shows that initially Lucy's cat had a more significant part to play. Not only does the *Scenario* start with the cat scene, it also states that the cat will make a second appearance later on in the film. In addition, the very first words of the film were supposed to be about the cat, spoken by Jonathan: "That one will be a little devil some day" (Herzog 2019, 45). The *Scenario* then presents a detailed description of the cat and the locket, adding to the importance of this introductory scene:

> This is Lucy's kitten. More about her later. We will recognize her by her little black nose and white socks. The child who gave Lucy the kitten said she had run through flour at the bakery. So here is the little creature, clever and playful, using her paw to bat the small medallion hung from the window's crossbar. Outside the window lies the town of Wismar, and the medallion bears Lucy's portrait. We may call the man who painted the miniature image Herr Henning…. Still chewing, Jonathan pulls on his frock coat and removes the medallion from the crossbar. The kitten tries to bat it again as he slips it into his pocket. (Herzog 2019, 45)

The *Scenario* specifically notes the location of Ellen's medallion which hangs from the "window's crossbar". This would have been the same placement as in Murnau's film but in Herzog's final version, the medallion has been moved away from the liminal space of the open window and now dangles inside the Biedermeier home from the handle of a kitchen cupboard. In addition, the hypnotic effect of the string dangled by Ellen has been turned into an image of an objectified Lucy, who is represented by her miniature image:

> If the kittens in Herzog's film evoke the introduction to the heroine of Murnau's film, there is also a difference in emphasis. Nature, as it is represented at the beginning of Murnau's Nosferatu, is tranquil, domesticated, and definitely subservient to the human order. …. To be sure, the natural tranquility with which Murnau's Nosferatu begins will be challenged by the encounter with the vampire. But whereas such a conflict is gradually introduced in Murnau's film, it is a given in Herzog's. (Corrigan 2013, 122)

The stack of books surrounding the kittens add to the impression of a cultured and idyllic home and together with the apples give the impression of a Dutch still-life painting. The books and apples also signify the thirst for human knowledge, animalistic desire, temptation, and redemption – all of which play central roles in the film. The orderly stacked plates in the background complement the image of a Biedermeier home and point to the same time period as in Murnau's film.

Just like the cat scene, death by sunlight, and the vampire's expressionist shadow, the medallion was also Murnau's invention. It was introduced during the meeting of Hutter and Nosferatu when they talk about the vampire's real estate purchase. Hutter drops it and we see a photograph of Ellen. However, when the kittens play with it in Herzog's film, the medallion contains a painted portrait of Lucy. A photograph would make sense in Stoker's time frame of the 1890s, but Murnau's (and Herzog's) timeframe of the 1830s would make a painted portrait much more likely and realistic.

The kittens only appear at the very beginning of Herzog's film, but both the script in the Werner Herzog Collection and *Scenario III* refer to Lucy's kitten in another central scene. If the initial cat scene showed Herzog's inversion of Murnau's portrayal of Ellen, the second appearance would have illustrated and commented on the most important difference between Max Schreck's Count Orlok and Klaus Kinski's Dracula. When Nosferatu meets Lucy for the first time in her bedroom, he declares that he suffers from "the absence of love" and his inability to die. In his unpublished "Additions to the Script," Herzog describes his vampire's "deep sadness" and compares it to Murnau's Nosferatu, who, at least according to Herzog, only shows a hint of his suffering once, very briefly at the end, when Nosferatu appears at the window looking out (Herzog 1978, Ergänzungen, n.p.). Herzog's updated Nosferatu shows the vampire's sensitive side openly and repeatedly. Seen within the historical context, this emotional, suffering vampire fits in the context of the late 1970s, and is indebted to the popular New Subjectivity literary movement in Germany, as well as the introduction of the suffering vampire in literature, most notably in Fred Saberhagen's *The Dracula Tape* and Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire,* both of which were released just a few years before Herzog's film.

In the script and the *Scenario*, Lucy's cat was not only present during Lucy's and Nosferatu's first encounter, it also reacted physically to the vampire and warned Lucy of him. The inclusion of the kitten in the scene would have stressed the symbolic connection to Nosferatu and his rats, which Herzog had deployed by the thousands to show the vampire's path of pandemic destruction. Without the kitten, however, the scene's focus on Nosferatu's suffering is more pronounced and adds pathos to the figure of the vampire.

Herzog started his *Nosferatu* with mummies from a long-ago plague and he was going to feature them again in the scene before Jonathan Harker finds Nosferatu resting in his coffin in his castle (Herzog 1978, Script III). Just like the second appearance of the cat was cut, this was also not included in the final version. In addition, the focus on the pandemic via the mummies at the beginning of the film was supposed to be complemented with a reference to the pandemic at the end. One of the scripts in the Herzog Collection at the Deutsche Kinemathek has a final paragraph which describes the plague in an almost prophetic manner: "This is the time of the rats. Paradise is near. The city has been blessed. Let chicken sit in your chair. Let rats live in your houses. Blood shall rain from the sky. This is our salvation. You just don't know that the hour of freedom is here" (Herzog 1978, Script I, n.p.).

Herzog could have ended this way but the film's open end with Jonathan Harker as the new Nosferatu riding off into the sunset, literally expands the horizon and Herzog's vision. Rather than the vampire and Herzog looking back to the previous Nosferatu, Herzog now looks into the future and the beginning of a new story.

Herzog's motivation to make *Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht* was to give his "generation of orphaned filmmakers" a connection with the glory days of German expressionist filmmaking. He accomplished his goal and Lotte Eisner, renowned film critic and Murnau biographer, visited Herzog on the Nosferatu set and gave her blessing. Looking back to Murnau rather than at what was happening at the time, also made *Nosferatu* Herzog's "sui generis contribution to the leaden times" of the late 70s in West-Germany, according to (Brittnacher 2006, 124). Herzog declined Alexander Kluge's invitation to participate in the collaborative project *Germany in Autumn* which involved many filmmakers of his generation and which was a reaction to the political upheaval following the Red Army Faction deaths in October 1977.

Murnau's production company Prana had spent more money publicizing *Nosferatu* than on making it. To publicize Herzog's film, a novelization by Paul Monette was released one month before the film premiered in Germany. It also included the cat scene and showed Harker before he leaves for work. The connection of cats, rodents, and the plague was immediately established when Harker called the kitten "a devil" and said to Lucy: "She's here to bring chaos. Why do we need a cat anyway? There hasn't been a mouse in Wismar in a hundred years." (Monette 1979, 11).

Just like Herzog repeatedly talked about this Murnau homage, E. Elias Merhige's also stated his intentions for making *Shadow of the Vampire*, a film about the making of *Nosferatu*:

> *Shadow of the Vampire* is not an homage to Murnau or silent cinema. It's not even totally accurate to history. I'm using Murnau as a way of communicating what the idea of creative genius has become in the 20th century. Our creativity has become so ferocious and so beyond our comprehension that we are terrorising ourselves with it… I wanted to explore the vampiric nature of the cinematic medium. … It was also about an art form in its infancy in a Germany soon to face a dramatic loss of innocence. Irresistible. (Jones 1999, n.p.)

Shadow of the Vampire starts with an extreme closeup of a human eye and cuts to a similar shaped camera lens. The story then unfolds in a multi-diegetic setting where the playful dialogue with Murnau's film is continued and cinematic self-reflexivity is verbalized and visualized. As Caradec explains:

> As the explicit predicate of Merhige's film is to explore the origins of Murnau's, there is a juxtaposition of the two. This is made very clear from the opening shots of the film where the eye of the director and the eye of the camera are successively shown in extreme close-ups, asserting the subjective power of both, but also establishing the dual texts and diegeses in the film: the eye of the director is intradiegetic, while suggesting the interplay between the different diegeses depicted in the film (Caradec 2018, 5).

But Merhige does not only reference Murnau's film. He starts his vision of Nosferatu with a slow, drawn-out, 6-minute-long pan, visualizing a sense of dread reminiscent of Herzog's introductory row of mummies. However, this is the only reference to Herzog, as Merhige explains:

> If you look at Herzog's *Nosferatu,* which I respect very much, what you see is an homage to the master, which is what Murnau is for Herzog. *Shadow of the Vampire* is much more irreverent, and more about invigorating an enthusiasm for the period, and about trying to invoke the past within the present. If those guys were working today, what would their color palette be? How would they work with sound? (Stephens and Merhige, 2000, n.p.)

Like Murnau and Herzog, Merhige begins with the cat scene, this time taking viewers back to Murnau's set and showing the filming of the scene. He leads into the sequence with an iris-in shot as an easily recognizable and typical silent movie transition, presenting Ellen dangling a string in front of a cat on a windowsill. The cat looks just as "hypnotized" as it had back in Murnau's film and we soon find out that it might have been drugged with laudanum to keep it still. The scene then switches to colour and breaks the fourth wall to begin the fictional documentary.

The shot following the cat scene in Murnau's film was of Hutter peeking into the living room with his unforgettable exuberant smile and the "dead" flowers hidden behind his back. Instead, Merhige cuts from the cat scene to a close-up of Murnau wearing his goggles, a realistic reference to what would have been worn in a 1920s film studio but also a genre reference to the visual focus in *Dracula*, with Bela Lugosi's eyes being lit by flashlights and van Helsing's heavy glasses when we first see him in his lab. While we were following the all-knowing narrator looking down at the church tower and the town at the beginning of Murnau's film, Merhige's director and his crew are now looking down on their set from a raised platform. Merhige's Murnau asks his cinematographer Müller "Wolf, have we established pathos?" and he answers with a "Perfectly, Herr Doctor. And in one take." The 'one take' of the cat scene, however, does not only establish pathos and an emotional connection with Ellen but also introduces the genre. While not a vampire comedy in the strict sense, as a mockumentary it is firmly rooted in the postmodern, playing with its intertextual material. Following Thomas Schatz' typology, Murnau had introduced the vampire film genre's "*experimental* stage during which its conventions are isolated and established" (Schatz 1981, 37). He paved the way for Herzog's "*refinement*, during which certain formal and stylistic details embellish the form" and finally *Shadow of the Vampire* which presents the "*baroque* (or "mannerist" or "self-reflexive") stage, when the form and its embellishments are accented to the point where they themselves become the "substance" or "content" of the work" (Schatz 1981, 37). The three canonical Nosferatu films move in their undead, liminal spaces from source text to adaptation, literary source to film, variations and transformations, establishing and expanding Nosferatu as a multimedia text. As Hutcheon and O'Flynn describe it:

> If we know the adapted work, there will be a constant oscillation between it and the new adaptation we are experiencing; if we do not, we will not experience the work as an adaptation. However, as noted, if we happen to read the novel after we see the film adaptation of it, we again feel that oscillation, though this time in reverse. Oscillation is not hierarchical, even if some adaptation theory is (Hutcheon and O'Flynn 2013, 14).

The Nosferatus adapt and 'oscillate' constantly and continuously. *Nosferatu*'s producer and designer, Albin Grau, compared the horrors of WWI to a "cosmic vampire" (Kaes 2009, 99). Other, more recent reincarnations of Nosferatu include a flat-sharing basement dweller in *What We Do in the Shadows*, now called Petyr, Buffy's Master in Season 1, *Nosferatu in Venice* with Klaus Kinski, Jim Shepard's novel *Nosferatu*, appearances in *The Strain*, *Blade*, *Nosferatu vs. Father Pipecock*

and Sister Funk, and the novel and TV-series *NOS4A2*. In *Mimesis: Nosferatu* we see an image of Max Schreck - and a cat. But this time the cat does not play, it just stares into the camera.

Nosferatu established the pandemic vampire on film and added numerous elements to vampire mythology that had not been part of Stoker's novel. In May 2021, the pandemic and the literary vampire were united as Nosferatu and Dracula via Vlad the Impaler became part of an ad campaign to attract people to Bran Castle in Romania where they could get Pfizer vaccinations at the historic site. Nina Auerbach in her *Our Vampires, Ourselves* famously pronounced that there is a vampire for every generation. A recent meme showed another kind of Nosferatu, one that might exactly be what we need now. It is called *Yesferatu*.

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