**Nosferatu (1922)**

Directed by F.W. Murnau.

Starring Max Schreck as Count Orlock.

Production:

Murnau was a German Expressionist. This movement began after World War I. In cinema, a new art form, German directors often focused on topics from the occult that allowed them to explore abnormal mental states. Some of this interest arose in reaction against the defeat of Germany in the war, which created national gloom. A more important source was the influence of new theories in psychology, notably Sigmund Freud’s ideas which argued that unconscious sexual impulses influence conscious behavior and that the difference between normal people and abnormal ones results mostly from how they developed. The importance of this last idea is that it denied there is any absolute difference between normal and abnormal but rather saw the difference as a continuum rather than an absolute distinction.

New approaches in the visual arts toward abstraction influenced the emerging art of film as well. By its nature, film tends toward abstraction. Editing, shot composition, focus effects, etc. created possibilities unknown in, say, stage drama, moving cinema away from the simple depiction of reality. Several early filmmakers saw an analogy between their art and music in that film could create a rhythm of images; hence, quite a few early films are titled “symphonies”; even Walt Disney had this idea when he called his first cartoons “Silly Symphonies.” Murnau called *Nosferatu* “a symphony of horrors,” which suggests his emphasis on building shocks by manipulating the rhythm and pace of his screen images.

Background:

Murnau decided to film Stoker’s *Dracula* and was almost through production when Stoker’s widow filed suit. The director had not asked for permission to use the novel. Murnau changed the names of the characters: Hutter = Harker, Ellen = Mina, etc. However, he lost the lawsuit and was supposed to destroy all prints of his movie. A few survived and the print we saw was a restored version.
Legends:

*Nosferatu* generated the legend that its star Max Schreck really WAS a vampire. This legend generated the recent film *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) starring John Malkovich as Murnau and Willem Dafoe as Schreck. One reason for this belief is that “Schreck” is German for “terror, fright.” However, this does appear to be the actor’s real name! See [http://www.kjenkins49.fsnet.co.uk/max.htm](http://www.kjenkins49.fsnet.co.uk/max.htm) for details.

Modifications of Stoker’s story:

- Name changes (for reason mentioned above)
- Knock, Hutter’s employer, is clearly in league with the vampire before Hutter goes to Transylvania.
- The Lucy story is entirely omitted. So are the three men. So are the female vamps who want to kiss Harker. Other characters are pared down, e.g. the Van Helsing character.
- Ellen (= Mina) is the object of Orlok’s particular interest. Unlike Mina, she is a conventional young wife (no shorthand, typewriting, etc. – not a “New Woman” type).
- The vampire looks different from the character Stoker describes: Orlok looks like a human bat. Compare Stoker’s description of Dracula. *Nosferatu* apparently invented the idea that vampires are killed by sunlight. Although Stoker’s novel presents Dracula mostly at night, the vampire is described as walking the streets of London during the day, so evidently sunlight doesn’t bother him.
- Murnau’s film entirely changes the ending and, hence, thematic focus of Stoker’s novel. Ellen, who fears for Jonathan after his return from Transylvania, learns that if a good woman can keep a vampire feeding on her until daybreak, the rising sun will destroy the creature. She does this, Nosferatu dies, but so does she. Compare Stoker’s more “wild west” ending, with Mina and the men pursuing Dracula across Europe.

Technique:

Filmmakers in Murnau’s era were limited to black and white film which was not very “fast” compared to later film stock. This meant that the cameraman had to flood a scene with light in order to get a good image on film. This limitation ALSO implied that filmmakers could limit lighting to get deep blacks and shadows. One explanation for the numerous horror movies in early film history may stem from this technological reason. Slow film stock also made night shooting extremely difficult.

Murnau turns these technical drawbacks into artistic capital. He used tinted film stock to suggest the difference between night and day, inside and outside – night scenes are tinted blue, interiors and daylight scenes are sepia (brown) in tone. The tinting implies an opposition between day and night that has thematic importance in *Nosferatu*.

Murnau experimented with two other film techniques to heighten the difference between daylight reality and the terrors of the “land of phantoms.” First, as Hutter approaches the Carpathian mountains, we see a panorama of them in a positive print (mountains
are dark, sky is light). Later, as he rides in the ghostly coach to Orlok’s castle, we see a similar view in a negative (lights and darks reversed). Again, the contrast of light and dark – actually, a reversal of them – chimes with the contrast between day and night established by the tinted film stock.

Another technique involves “undercranking” the camera (advancing the film through the shutter at a less than normal rate) to create fast motion. We see two shots of coaches traveling through the mountains. The first, which takes Hutter to the pass, is shot at normal speed; it looks “real.” Later we see Dracula’s coach in an undercranked shot; it appears to be moving faster than any real coach could.

A more influential innovation involves the use of parallel editing (or parallel montage) when Murnau intercuts shots of Hutter in jeopardy in Orlok’s castle with shots of Ellen sleepwalking. Obviously, Ellen and her husband are separated by a long distance, the breadth of Europe. But unlike the characters, the camera can be in two places at the same time. The intercutting amplifies the strength of Orlok’s powers by showing their effect on the woman he has chosen and also develops the strong sympathy – almost telepathy – between Ellen and Hutter.

Elements relevant to an analysis/comparison:

The film techniques suggest the basic opposition is between day and night.

The opening shots suggest that the day is Ellen’s domain: we see her in a sunny garden among flowers. The garden setting also associates her with nature, fertility, innocence. The flowers Hutter plucks for her evoke her comment that he has killed them. This foreshadows her fate in two ways: she herself will be killed, and the plucked flowers connote sexual defloration.

Night is Orlok’s realm. The danger of the night is first intimated by the innkeeper who warns Hutter. We only see Orlok at night, naturally, and his connection with night is underscored by his similarity to a bat, a nocturnal creature that flies at night and sleeps by day. (Again, technique underscores theme.)

The use of the negative shots as Hutter approaches the castle may suggest that, on the thematic level, day and night will be reversed; or, more plausibly, that the values associated with day and night are interdependent and not necessarily mutually exclusive. This assessment seems to square with the Freudian notion that the difference between normal sexuality and abnormal sexuality is largely a matter of degree rather than an absolute difference in kind. The reason I drag Freud and sexuality into this discussion is that Nosferatu foregrounds sexuality in a way that Stoker’s novel could not. Hutter kisses Ellen at least five times in the first ten minutes! Orlok’s fascination with Ellen stems from his admiration of the beautiful miniature portrait Hutter carries. And the ending is rife with sexual implications.

The interpenetration of night and day is centered chiefly on Ellen, initially the sunniest figure in the film. When Hutter is in danger, she starts to sleepwalk, a sign that night is no longer peaceful. One might say that sleepwalking, on the structural level, represents
a daytime, conscious activity – walking – performed unconsciously at night. Psychologically, the sleepwalker is an active body temporarily beyond the control of the conscious will. Naturally, this emphasis on the body of Ellen cut off from her daylight sense of self becomes important in the resolution of the story. Sleepwalking sexualizes her on screen in a way the modest wife in that garden would perhaps not entirely understand – but the viewer does! Nosferatu explicitly links love (and sex) with death, an age-old theme in world literature. Here we witness Ellen sacrificing herself for love of Hutter via an act which looks very much like a sexual encounter with a man (OK, a vampire) who isn’t her husband. He literally spends the night with her. The last scenes depend on the tension between the purity of her motives and the wantonness of her actions. Her sacrifice seems noble, but it can also be regarded as a punishment for violating conventional sexual mores. In Freudian terms, she abandons the psychological repressions that govern her daylight hours. (It’s worth noting in this context that not too long before Murnau made this film, Freud shocked himself and his followers by arguing that our unconscious harbors a death instinct as well as a life instinct – Thanatos as well as Eros. See Freud’s amazing book Beyond the Pleasure Principle. The age-old connection between love and death was given new psychological currency in Murnau’s time.)

If we play out these ideas, we get a better idea of what Murnau was getting at and how radical his movie is compared to Stoker’s attempt to button up the sexual implications of his story. Consider this: Murnau infantilizes Hutter, makes him child-like. Can you note any details that suggest this? Notice, by the way, that Hutter (unlike Ellen) gets a good night’s sleep at the inn. This may SEEM trivial, but the contrast to Ellen’s sleepwalking is pretty clear, so it must be significant. More far-fetched, perhaps, is to examine his entrance to Orlok’s castle as a reverse birth: he walks through a tunnel (which is NOT in Stoker) which we can liken to a trip back through the birth canal to a womb-like state, reinforced by the fact that food for Hutter magically appears, just as the embryo gets food automatically in the womb.

What does his infantilization suggest about his relationship with Ellen? She represents the so-called Madonna-whore stereotype: chaste and submissive by day, sexually wanton at night. Her seduction of Orlok saves Hutter by sacrificing herself – more in the manner of a mother saving a child than a wife saving a husband. (After all, can’t Hutter do anything to save himself? He seems almost incapable of taking any sort of action at all!)

This line of reasoning, basically Freudian, helps make sense of an important image in the opening scene: the garden. Is it reasonable to regard that as another Eden in which Hutter and Ellen, though married, are both child-like, especially about the darker side of human sexuality? (Notice all the kissing which seems affectionate rather than passionate.) The difference between them is that Ellen comes to know the darker side of human nature, especially her own as evidenced by her seduction of Orlok. Although we can see another Eden myth at work here, Murnau’s focus (unlike Stoker’s) is not on the religious implications; the movie is almost devoid of the Christian symbols Stoker plays up. The “fall” from Eden is Ellen’s; Hutter is too passive, even too dense, to access the darker forces in his psyche, unlike his wife. Ellen’s sacrifice represents her
ambivalent but tragic acceptance of unrepressed sexuality; her nighttime surrender restores the rightness of the daylight world.