The Fear of Death in Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens (1922)

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Close reading Death Expressionist film Fear of death German expressionism Nosferatu Siegfried Kracauer The First World War

Heikki Rosenholm
hepero[a]utu.fi
Doctoral Student
Cultural Heritage Studies
University of Turku

This overview deals with the Expressionist German silent film, Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens (1922), directed by F.W. Murnau. The article is based on my 2016 Master’s Thesis for Cultural Heritage Studies (see Rosenholm 2016). The aim of this examination is to take an in-depth look at certain scenes in the film and to analyse elements regarding the theme of death, or to be more specific, the fear of death. This theme is approached by delving into the teachings of German film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, and by analysing the Expressionist Film Movement and its relation to German Society in the 1920s.

This overview closely examines different depictions of the fear of death in Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens, an Expressionist German silent film from 1922 that was directed by Friedrich Wilhelm “F.W.” Murnau. Murnau’s film is loosely based on Irish author Bram Stoker’s gothic horror novel, Dracula (1897). The basis for this article is my master’s thesis: Vampyyrin varjossa. Pelon elementit elokuvassa Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens (unofficially in English: In the Shadow of the Vampire. The Elements of Fear in Nosferatu – Eine Symphonie des Grauens) in which the film’s elements of fear were analysed with the close reading method of my own development, which was based on various, diverse theoretical methods (see Rosenholm 2016, 17–29). The objective of my thesis was to determine how certain scenes of the film implied the broader fears of 1920s German society.

The events of Stoker’s Dracula take place in late 19th century England during the Victorian era. It tells the tale of an undead vampire, Count Dracula, who attempts to move from the distant Eastern European land of Transylvania to England. Dracula’s goal is to find new victims in order to quench his thirst for blood. Standing in Dracula’s way, however, is a small group of men and women: solicitor Jonathan Harker, his wife Mina Murray (later Harker), Doctor John Seward, the nobleman Arthur Holmwood, an American cowboy Quincey Morris, and a Dutch professor named Abraham
van Helsing. The group eventually manages to drive Dracula back to Transylvania and destroy him. Other important characters involved in the novel are Lucy Westenra, a friend of Mina and Dracula’s first victim, and Renfield, a patient at Dr. Seward’s insane asylum who has a supernatural connection with Dracula.

*Nosferatu*, the very first unauthorized film adaption of the novel, changed various details from the novel, most of which were done by the film’s screenwriter Henrik Galeen (see Rosenholm 2016, 2, 11–13, 45). *Nosferatu* is set in 1830s Biedermeier-era Germany in the fictional town of Wisborg. Although the name Transylvania’s remains the same in the film, the main characters’ names have all, however, been changed: Dracula is known as Orlok (also referred to as Nosferatu in the film), Jonathan Harker appears as Hutter, Mina Murray as Ellen, Renfield as Knock and van Helsing is called Dr. Bulwer. Certain major characters from the novel, such as Quincey Morris, do not make an appearance at all. It is widely believed that the reasons behind the various name changes were due to copyright issues as the production company, *Prana Film*, had not obtained the rights to the novel (see Rosenholm 2016 2–3). In addition to the various name changes, the film also alters some of the novel’s other major elements. For example, Orlok spreads the plague everywhere he goes and his death differs from the novel; instead of being killed by the vampire hunters, he is killed by rays of sunlight.

*Nosferatu* also deals with numerous fears of which many can be associated with 1920s German society. This overview takes an in-depth look at one of the most common elements of fear visible in *Nosferatu*: ‘the fear of death’. The fear of death is present for the majority of the film and is particularly noticeable while examining the scenes that feature the main antagonist, Orlok. Different reactions to the fear of death are also seen through the reactions of the other major characters in the film. However, before going into the in-depth process of analysing the film, I will review the history of Germany and the Expressionist Film Movement in the 1920s as it places *Nosferatu* and other Expressionist films in their wider historical and socio-cultural context. The analysis of *Nosferatu’s* scenes is conducted in the latter part of the article.

**The Short History of Expressionist Film in 1920s Germany**

The history of Expressionist films is closely related to the history of 1920s Germany. To be more specific, German Expressionist cinema was greatly influenced by the events following the First World War (1914–1918). Before the war, Germany had been known as the German Empire from
1871. However, after accepting its defeat at the hands of the Allied forces in 1918, the German Empire was then reformed into a federal republic the following year. An unofficial historical designation for the republic is the *Weimar Republic* as the new constitutional law for the German state was declared in the city of Weimar in 1919. Nonetheless, the era of the Weimar Republic was short lived and came to its conclusion in 1933 when Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor and, together with the Nazi Party, seized power from the Republic’s coalition government. (Rosenholm 2016, 1–2, 29, 32; see Kershaw 2008, 367–377.)

The reasons for the short life of the Weimar Republic were closely related to the heavy economic burden of First World War reparations, which the Republic had to carry throughout its existence from 1919 to 1933. For example, there were numerous economic crises throughout the years and violent riots on the streets of major cities became commonplace. One of the main reasons for the country’s collapse was the Treaty of Versailles, which for many Germans was better known as ‘diktat’ (referring to what Germans saw as the harsh and unfair penalties that the victorious parties had levied on the country). The Treaty declared that Germany alone was the War’s only guilty party and, as a consequence, had to pay significant war reparations, surrender its territories and reduce the size of its military forces. (See Rosenholm 2016, 30; Kershaw 2008, 367–372; see also Kracauer 1987, 43–44.)

All these actions had a substantial impact on Germany and in a mostly negative way. However, for the film industry, the state of post-war Germany offered several benefits. According to cinema researchers Pam Cook and Mieke Bernink, ‘The end of the war, the collapse of the November uprising and massive inflation all contributed to an export boom in the German film industry that began in 1919’. (Cook & Bernink 1999, 67.) In addition, after the outbreak of war in 1914, Germany imposed restrictions on foreign films in its domestic markets. As a result, German films had little to no competition and various production companies therefore had considerable space to expand. However, many of the films made in 1913–1919 were considered poor and cheap exploitation films that had little chance of succeeding in foreign markets. This led to the eventual decision of several major industrialists to merge most of the production companies into one new company, *Universum Film AG* (Ufa), with the goal of creating high quality films for both domestic and foreign markets. (Kracauer 1987, 36–37; Cook & Bernink 1999, 67; Cousins 2004, 95–96.)

Ultimately, Expressionist art films were chosen as the flagship for German cinema abroad. Expressionism itself was a part of larger art movement that had its roots in the late 19th century. The main idea behind Expressionist art was the portrayal of subjects’ negative emotions in a very
distorted and chaotic manner. The milieu of expressionist paintings was usually set in a dream-or fantasy world-like setting, which made it easier for the painters to express their negative emotions. Generally, Expressionism resisted the realism and objectivity of the 19th century. This setting was also the main source for many Expressionist films, which were further influenced by the chaotic times of the Weimar Republic: The films were usually set in worlds where the environment was distorted, and buildings, walls, ceilings, furniture and even shadows, were exaggerated and asymmetrical. The distortion of the environment was also reflected in the main characters who were usually mentally unstable or in a state of confusion. (See Holte 1997, 29–30; Rosenholm 2016, 32–35.)

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, 1920), directed by Robert Wiene, is one of the most famous of the Expression films of the era and universally considered as one of the founding works of the Expressionist Film Movement. The sets were designed by artists Hermann Warm, Walter Röhrig, and Walter Reimann, who came up with the idea of painting bizarre looking buildings and objects, as well as shadow and lightning effects, in the sets. The result was an expressionist, dream-like twisted world that avoided all the bases of rationality. The film, in short, tells the story of Dr. Caligari who arrives to a German town called Holstenwall. After his arrival, mysterious murders start to take place all over the town. Franzis, a young student, whose friend is a

Image 1. ‘The Scream’ (1893) by Norwegian Expressionist artist Edvard Munch. The creature in the foreground has been compared to an individual suffering from mental disorder, which thus causes the environment to feel distorted and chaotic.

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victim to one of the murders, becomes suspicious of Dr. Caligari and starts his own investigations. Franzis discovers that Dr. Caligari is indeed behind the murders and has been using a somnambulist, Cesare, to carry out the murders.

Other major Expressionist films include many of Fritz Lang’s films such as *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (*Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*, 1922), *Die Nibelungen* (1924), *Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (*M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder*, 1931). Many of the Expressionist films commented on the chaotic age of 1920s German society; *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, for its part, is widely considered as a critique of authoritarian government. (Holte 1997, 29–31; von Bagh 2004, 87; Cousins 2004, 95–101; Rosenholm 2016, 32–36; see also Kracauer 1987, 58–72.)

Image 2. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (left), *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (middle) and *Metropolis* (right) are some of the classic Expressionist films.

The Golden Age of Expressionist film lasted from 1921 to 1924, while the movement persisted until the early 1930s. The main reasons for its decline were the rising tensions in the German political environment as well as the return of Hollywood films, which flooded the German markets in the late 1920s. However, instead of completely disappearing, the style of the films simply transferred, mainly to Hollywood films, as German Expressionist film-makers immigrated to United States when political tensions began to increase in Germany. The style of Expressionist films is particularly noticeable in Universal’s 1930s horror films and also in much film noir from the 1940s and 1950s. These films all share the same slow pace, dark and grim atmosphere, mentally unstable characters, and also utilize strong shadow effects, sets and make up. (Cook & Bernink 1999, 68; Cousins 2004, 98–99, 195–198; Hakola 2011, 31–32; Rosenholm 2016, 36–37, 45.)

German film researcher and theorist Siegfried Kracauer states in his famous book, *From Caligari to Hitler. A Psychological History of the German Film* (1947), that the events of 1920s Germany are
especially apparent in Weimar-era German films (see Kracauer 1987, 9–16). Kracauer’s main thesis is that the films predicted the ascension of Hitler and his Nazi Party in Germany (Kracauer 2004, 11). This so called ‘reflection theory’, that films directly reflect the state of the society, has been much criticized in film studies. Indeed, the main issue that critics have with Kracauer and his book, besides the controversial suggestion that Weimar-era films predicted the ascension of Hitler, is that he considers the audience as an easily manipulated and passive receiver. His critics maintain that he doesn’t take into consideration the individual and sees the audience as one simple mass (see Kracauer 2004, 6, 8–9; see also Kracauer 1999, 389–391). Alternatively, contemporary scholars widely agree that films work in active and complex socio-cultural interaction with their audience. (See, for example, Salmi 1993, 152–156; Hakola 2011, 53–55; Ahonen 2013, 26–29.) Kracauer’s book, however, was a major turning point for film studies as it was the very first work that considered fictional films as reliable source material for studying the socio-cultural and historical contexts of society.

While his proposition that Weimar-era films predicted the rise of Hitler can be rightly criticized, Kracauer’s argument regarding the visible economic, social and political agencies in German cinema, is certainly worth consideration. It can always be argued how explicitly these elements are involved in Nosferatu; this also raises issues regarding the researcher’s risk of possible over-interpretation. However, when taking into account the other source materials of the socio-cultural and historical contexts that are examined, it does help confirm certain aspects of the theory and lessen the possibility of making digressive interpretations (see, for example, Ahonen 2013, 343–346). Even though Kracauer’s study has created much controversy among film researchers, the fact remains that his study has had an impact on many later studies regarding how films could possibly represent the psychological as well as socio-cultural state of a country (see, for example, Bordwell 1985; Hansen 1994; Koch & Gaines 2000; Beckman 2014).

**Nosferatu and the Theme of Death**

For example, although Nosferatu is considered a part of the Expressionist Film Movement, it contains elements of romantic art-style cinema as well. The later films of Nosferatu’s, F.W. Murnau’s have actually been described as more romantic-style as opposed to expressionist-style cinema. The influence of the romantic style can be seen in Nosferatu’s landscape shots such as Transylvania’s beautiful green valleys, flowing rivers, sunrises and sunsets, and the high Carpathian Mountains reaching towards the sky. But as seen in the film, there is also plenty of expressionist
landscape scenery that shows ghostly and white-coloured forests, raging rivers, ominous winds and the valleys of Transylvania turned into a land of death. (See von Bagh 2004 (1998), 89–90; Cousins 2004, 101; Rosenholm 2016, 41–42; Perez 2013, 7–8.)

Image 3. The above images display the romantic style while the below images are reminiscent of the expressionist style in Nosferatu. Also, worth noting are the shifts in the tint of colours with romantic style shots being mostly displayed in red and yellow while expressionist hues usually appear in blue or green colours.

Murnau, as well as screenwriter Henrik Galeen, doubtlessly played an important role in many of Nosferatu’s features such as its expressionist artistic design and story elements; after all, both shared a prior history in the Expressionist film movement (see, for example, Murnau 1999, 499; Galeen 1999, 447–449). However, the person who had the greatest influence on Nosferatu was undoubtedly Albin Grau. Grau produced the film and was also responsible for the film’s costumes and set designs. Grau, together with fellow producer Enrico Dieckmann, founded Prana Film with the goal of producing occultist films. In the end, Prana Film managed to produce only one film, which turned out to be Nosferatu. The collapse of the studio was due to the lawsuit filed by Bram Stoker’s widow for copyright infringement following the film’s release. Prana Film lost in the courts and soon declared bankruptcy in order to avoid paying copyright infringement penalties. The court ordered all copies of the film to be destroyed. However, some prints of the film survived
throughout the years and *Nosferatu* and many other Expressionist films became legal again during the 1950s and 1960s. (Rosenholm 2016, 43, 47–48.)

Image 4. The illustrations of the Vampire Book (left) and incomprehensible inscriptions in Orlok’s contract (middle, right) were some of the occultist details that Albin Grau implemented in the film.

Grau was personally very interested in occultism and was also fascinated by death cultures as well as Eastern European vampire folklore. The impact of these contributors is seen in many ways throughout *Nosferatu*. For example, Orlok’s appearance isn’t as aristocratic as Count Dracula’s in Stoker’s novel and the pale white Orlok resembles a resurrected body that rises from the grave to drink the blood of the living. Orlok’s bald head, rodent-like front teeth, long and thin arms, and sharp claws are, to some, reminiscent of a cross between a rat and a human skeleton. Orlok’s resemblance to a rat is no coincidence; in the film, Orlok spreads plague everywhere he goes and is followed by rats. This element of death associates Orlok with the historical ‘Black Death’, which was carried by rats and killed millions of Europeans in the mid-fourteenth-century. In Eastern European vampire folklore, it was also believed that vampires carried epidemics. (Rosenholm 2016, 46–47; see also Perez 2013, 8–9.)
The story of Nosferatu was also inspired by the events that Grau experienced in 1916 Serbia during the First World War. Grau had heard a story from a peasant in a local tavern about a vampire, *nosferatu*[^1], who woke up at night to drink the blood of the living. He tells this story in great detail in an article ‘Vampires’, originally published in 1921. Grau’s interest in the theme of death is also explained in the same article as he interestingly states that Nosferatu was somewhat inspired by the millions of casualties from the First World War. (See Grau 2013, 35–37; see also Rosenholm 2016, 43–44.) Grau, by associating the deaths caused by the plague in Nosferatu with the deaths caused by the First World War, proves that the historical events indeed had at least somewhat of an impact on the theme of death. In the 2013 commentary made for Nosferatu, film historian David Kalat argues that the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918, which also claimed millions of lives around the world, also affected the theme of death as presented in the film (Kalat 2013). One can always argue that films are affected by their cultural and historical context but in the case of Nosferatu, I maintain with a strong degree of reliability, that the film was indeed thus influenced by recent history.
The cultural heritage of *Nosferatu* is today very widespread and the impact that *Nosferatu* had on later vampire and *Dracula* films has been broadly acknowledged. The legal proceedings that followed soon after the release of the film, brought worldwide attention to *Dracula* and eventually transformed it into a pop culture phenomenon, a status that it retains even today. (See Rosenholm 2016, 13-16.) *Nosferatu* also changed the conceptions regarding vampires. For example, it was the very first movie in which a vampire was killed by sunlight. Further, it portrayed the vampire in a very animalistic and primitive way, which is truer to its folklore origins (see, for example, Hovi 2014, 66–70). Two major film tributes for the film have been made so far, the first being Werner Herzog’s remake of the film *Nosferatu the Vampyre (Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht, 1979)* and the second being Elias E. Merhige’s *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), which is a fictional account of the events surrounding the filming of Murnau’s *Nosferatu*. The film has also played a role in popular culture: the rock metal band *Blue Öyster Cult* released a song *Nosferatu* in their 1977 album *Spectre*, as a tribute to the film; and the popular animated television series, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, featured the character of Orlok in a small cameo role in a 2000 episode.

Nosferatu is not only unique among other Expressionist films; it’s also exceptional when compared to later vampire films because of its focus on the theme of death. The film pays scant attention to other themes such as sexuality, religion or unknown cultures, which are often the focus in many other vampire (specifically in Dracula) films (Rosenholm 2016, 4). Nature and other general environments play a major role in creating the deathly and spooky atmosphere, which also creates an interesting mixture of romantic and expressionist styles. The reasons for Nosferatu’s unique death theme can also be traced back to the film’s historical and cultural context.

Additionally, Nosferatu itself is not as political as many other Expressionist films were. The political is diminished in the film by having the film take place in a distant, semi-fantastical and -historical past. The film makes no attempt to be political; it was Albin Grau’s wish to focus on occultist lore and that’s what Nosferatu is ultimately about. Nosferatu works as an allegory for victims of war and epidemics, which was influenced by the recent chaotic events in Germany, occultist beliefs and vampire folklore. In this sense, Nosferatu is indeed closely related to death, and especially the fear of death.

The Transformation of the Fear of Death

The fear of death is one of the most basic fears of humankind. Death as a theme, for example, is one of the most common topics in philosophy. Death has been a topic of discussion among ancient
Greek philosophers such as Epicurus, Plato and Aristotle (see, for example, Warren 2004), and has, as a theme, remained popular, particularly among late 19th and early 20th century German philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger (see, for example, Heidegger 1992, 279–311; Nietzsche 2001, 26–27).

Academic studies have, especially during the 21st century, been more interested in death studies. In her book, *Fear. A Cultural History* (2005), Joanna Bourke examines cultures of fear. Bourke analyses the cultural meanings of fear, including the fear of death, in British and American cultures from the late 19th to the mid-20th centuries. For example, in the late 19th century, people were afraid of being buried alive or of God’s judgment and the possibility of going to Hell after death. These fears of death were replaced in the early 20th century with the fear of ‘nothingness’ after death, and a sudden and a violent death due to the events of the First World War. (Bourke 2005, 3–4; see also Kershaw 361–377) During the 21st century, death has become distant from the everyday experiences of people. The fears about death, however, remain but in different forms. According to Bourke, ‘People are more worried about the excessive death prolongation of life after all pleasure has been removed than about the sudden death.’ (Bourke 2005, 4.) Today, the images of death in the media and popular culture are also more common, which brings death closer to us than ever before, but at the same time it makes it seem like something that only exists in fiction or far away from us (see Hakola & Kivistö 2014).

Even though Bourke’s study focuses on British and American cultures, it is still relevant regarding Germany experiences in the early 20th century. Frank Furedi, another researcher of fear, has said, ‘How we react in general and how we fear in particular is subject to historical and cultural variations.’ (Furedi 2006, 7.) The First World War was a turning point in the culture of death and this was especially felt in Germany during the époque of the Weimar Republic. The fear of ‘nothingness’ after death was also present in society and is also seen in *Nosferatu*; the victims of Orlok don’t turn into vampires but nevertheless die in a horrific manner, while religion is absent or scarcely mentioned in the film. The theme of death has always been closely related to horror films (see Hakola 2011, 10) and while it’s important to note that film genres as such, did not officially exist until the 1930s, *Nosferatu* could still be considered as the first horror film that deals with the theme of death.

In the next section, I will show through the example of three of the film’s scenes, how *Nosferatu* portrays the fear of death. I will analyse each scene’s content before drawing my final conclusion.
The scenes are: (1.) *Hutter’s Journey to the Land of Transylvania*, (2.) *Orlok aboard the Demeter* and (3.) *Orlok’s Demise at the Hands of Ellen*.

**First Scene: Hutter’s Journey into the Land of Transylvania – The Arrival of the Fear of Death**

*Time: 00:22:22–00:26:16 (refers to the time of the scene in 2013 Blu-ray copy)*

In this scene, the fear of death is expressed to the audience through Hutter’s (Gustav von Wangenheim) journey in the land of Transylvania. It begins with Hutter entering Transylvania and finally meeting Count Orlok (Max Schreck) outside his castle. Hutter embodies an individual who has never been in contact with death and is about to experience it for the very first time in his life. The fear of death takes a hold of Hutter, as well as the audience, during his journey to meet Orlok. I refer to this first stage as *the arrival of the fear of death*.

The scene has been preceded by events that showcased Hutter in Wisborg, where he enjoyed a cursory, happy and joyful life with his wife, Ellen (Greta Schröder). Hutter’s fate is, however, altered when his employer Knock (Alexander Granach) sends him to Transylvania to meet a new client, Count Orlok. Without showing any kind of hesitation, Hutter accepts his newly given task and soon embarks on his journey. Hutter’s journey starts in a very cheerful and happy manner, but as he travels deeper into the land of Transylvania, the atmosphere of the film evolves into something more dark and grim. Hutter, as he journeys, also takes the audience into the same world as him.

What is also seen in the preceding scenes is that Hutter has actually received warnings about Count Orlok from the local peasants. At a local inn he even read a vampire book that warns of Nosferatu. Hutter, however, ignores the book’s warnings and instead goes straight to bed in order to prepare to cross the Carpathian Mountains the next day.

On the next morning, Hutter gets a ride from a local coach to a mountain pass, however, the coachman refuses to take him any further. Hutter then takes his bags and continues his journey on foot. The transition from the normal world to the unknown world happens in the next moment when Hutter crosses the bridge (image 7), which is followed by an intertitle with the film’s storyteller saying:

No sooner had Hutter stepped across the bridge, than the eerie visions he had often told me about seized hold of him.

Image 7. Hutter crossing the bridge and taking a step into an unknown land. The boundaries between familiar and unknown worlds are not clearly visible.
Hutter’s journey now takes an entirely different turn. The bridge scene has been analysed by Craig Keller who has said that scariest thing is that everything looks exactly the same on the other side of the bridge (see Keller 2013, 48–49). We cannot differentiate between the familiar and the other unknown world. Even Hutter seems to be oblivious to this reality; he is seen looking back at the camera and seems to be quite cheerful. The music played during the shot is also very joyful, not to mention that the bridge scene takes place during daytime. The atmosphere of the bridge scene basically plays with audiences’ minds by convincing them that nothing is going to change on the other side. However, the intertitle’s words ‘the eerie visions he had often told me about seized hold of him.’ indicate something completely opposite and this is proven to be the case later in the scene.

After crossing the bridge, Hutter travels for a while and arrives on the side of a road. Soon, a carriage arrives ridden by a mysterious coachman covered in black clothing. The coachman is actually Orlok in disguise who advises Hutter to climb aboard. During the ride, the carriage goes through a ghastly white forest, which emphasizes the unknown world to which Hutter has entered.

Image 8. Orlok, disguised as a coachman, rides into the fog and takes Hutter though a spooky white forest. The landscape’s style has turned from normal and romantic, into abnormal and expressionist.

The coachman leaves Hutter in front of the castle gates and exits the site. Hutter takes a look at the huge gates and steps inside the courtyard of the castle. There he is greeted by Count Orlok, who welcomes him and says: ‘You have kept me waiting – waiting too long. Now it is nearly midnight. The servants are sleeping!’ Orlok signals for Hutter to follow him inside the castle. Together, they both enter the dark tunnel and disappear into the darkness (image 9).
So how do the elements of the fear of death stand out in the scene? As stated earlier, this is the first time Hutter comes into contact with an unknown world with which he is unfamiliar. The romantic landscape turns expressionist and the only ‘living’ creature Hutter meets after crossing the bridge is Orlok who looks entirely different from the other people Hutter has earlier met in Transylvania. This is because, after crossing the bridge, Hutter has entered the land of the dead with Orlok being its only resident. Orlok represents death and what it causes to an individual. Orlok is neither dead nor living and is actually balanced between the two worlds (image 10).

The transition from the land of the living to the land of the dead is visually portrayed in various ways. Some of the most notable visual details are the numerous doors and gateways shaped like an arch. The arches resemble coffins and when Orlok is seen standing next to or passing through them, they represent the boundaries between life and death, which are very vague in the film. (Perez 2013, 13.)
Hutter doesn’t exactly know how to react to the ‘deathly figure’ of Orlok. This is seen through his uncertain expressions and gestures (image 11). Hutter represents an individual who has never been in contact with death. He simply follows the embodiment of death, Orlok, into the tunnel, believing that there is nothing to be worried about. However, the fear of death has now arrived and seized Hutter for the first time.
Image 11. Hutter’s facial expressions and reactions during his journey indicate that he’s uncertain how to react to new and unfamiliar experiences.

In the scenes after Hutter’s journey, his arrival and resulting slide into the grip that the fear of death holds, is emphasized even more as Hutter stays as a guest in Orlok’s castle and eventually discovers the truth about his host (see Rosenholm 2016, 55–70). That being said, I will not go through these scenes, rather, the next scene I analyse concerns the transition to the fear of death as seen through Orlok and the sailors aboard the vessel Demeter.

**Second Scene: Orlok aboard the Demeter – The Transition to the Fear of Death**

*Time: 00:58:13 – 01:02:08*

In this scene, Orlok travels across the sea to reach Wisborg. The scene can be interpreted as the transition to the fear of death from the barren and primitive land of Transylvania to the sophisticated and modern town of Wisborg. I refer to this as the second stage: *the transition to the fear of death.*
The fear of death begins to take shape aboard the *Demeter* before it reaches Wisborg. The scene also introduces the association of Orlok with the rats that aid him in spreading the plague.

The scene starts by showing a sailor resting in the cargo hold of *Demeter* where the coffins of Orlok are also laid out. Suddenly, the spirit of Orlok rises from one of the coffins, which terrifies the sailor who soon dies off screen. An intertitle follows, explaining that:

It spread through the ship like an epidemic. The first stricken sailor pulled the entire crew after him into the dark grave of the waves. In the light of the sinking sun, the captain and ship’s mate bid farewell to the last of their comrades.

Only the Captain (Max Nemetz) and the First Mate (Wolfgang Heinz) remain. After throwing the body of their last comrade in the sea, the First Mate picks up an axe and cries to the Captain: ‘I’m going below!!! If I’m not back up in ten minutes…’

Image 12. The First Mate prepares to go into the cargo hold to find the cause of the crew deaths. The Captain decides to turn around and walk back to his post.

The First Mate then enters the cargo hold and, axe in hand, starts to break apart the coffins. To his shock and terror, he discovers Orlok and the rats from the coffins. Orlok rises from one of the coffins and reaches out his arm to the First Mate. The terrified First Mate flees back to the deck and jumps into water. Orlok then rises from the cargo hold and slowly advances upon the last remaining crew member, the Captain.
The fear of death takes hold of the First Mate when he discovers Orlok in the cargo hold. The First Mate’s reaction represents the panic that fear of death may cause an individual. Unable to face the fact that he is about to die, he flees and jumps into water, sharing the same fate as the rest of the Demeter’s crew before him. The Captain can only watch hopelessly as the First Mate disappears into the raging waves of the sea. The Captain, however, does not panic and shows great determination. Not planning to abandon the ship, he ties himself to the helm and watches in horror as Orlok approaches. The scene ends, showing the empty sailing vessel followed by the intertitle: ‘The ship of death had acquired its new captain.’

Orlok’s slow advance is very much like death, which also approaches slowly and inevitably (see Perez 2013, 9). The Captain knows that death is unavoidable and with the little time he has left, he decides to prepare for it as best he can. Although his actions do not save his life, in return, he
receives a different death than the First Mate: The Captain doesn’t die in panic or horrified but with
dignity and determination. Although the Captain’s death might not be peaceful, he shows signs of
resisting death.

The First Mate and Captain display, as seen earlier, different kinds of fears of death: ‘If the vampire
represents impending death, the film’s other characters, all stylized, generalized figures drawn with
the broad strokes of expressionism, represent different responses to death, different ways in which
the self may approach life as death approaches’. (Perez 2013, 11.) The First Mate and Captain are
no different; they try to fight against the fear of death only to lose their lives in the end. While the
First Mate reacts in horror, the Captain’s reaction is more steadfast and prepared.

The fear of death no longer remains confined to the land of Transylvania and it undergoes a
transformation. When Orlok boards the Demeter with his coffins, he eventually turns it into a ship
of death. The transformation happens both physically and spiritually in which Orlok and his rats are
the physical manifestation of death. The winds that blow the sails of Demeter and the spiritual
appearance of Orlok all represent the otherworldliness of death. This same kind of transformation
also happens in the city of Wisborg, with the events of Demeter foreshadowing this. After reaching
Wisborg, the fear of death has completed its transition from the shadows and soon becomes part of
the normal and familiar world instead of only remaining in the unfamiliar and unknown world.

Image 15. Orlok walking slowly towards the Captain of Demeter (left). The point of view from the hatch of
the cargo hold resembles an open grave where the dead watch the living (Perez 2013, 9). The Captain can
only watch in horror as Orlok approaches to take his life (right).

Another important detail surrounding the events taking place on Demeter is the showcasing of
Orlok’s invincibility; as the embodiment of death, he cannot be defeated. This is seen when the First
Mate tries to battle Orlok with an axe and when the Captain shows great resilience by tying himself
to the helm. Both efforts are ultimately in vain as Orlok manages to end both their lives. Later in the film, Orlok’s invincibility is further emphasized by demonstrating the ineffectiveness of religion (crosses have no effect) and science (Dr. Bulwer’s minimal role) (see Perez 2013, 10–11, 28). Both of these doctrines are useless as Orlok is death himself and can never be defeated. However, the fear of death that Orlok also represents is possible to strike down as seen in the next analysed scene in which Ellen is the main character.

Image 16. Orlok represents death and the fear of death, both spiritually and physically. Orlok’s spiritual form diffuses his presence everywhere (left). His physical form on the other hand reminds the viewer that the death is closer to us than we may expect (right).

Third Scene: Orlok’s Demise at the Hands of Ellen – Conquering the Fear of Death.

Time: 1:26:26 – 1:34:15

The film’s final scene shows the destruction of Orlok at the hands of Ellen. Victory, however, does not come without Ellen’s ultimate sacrifice, her life. In this scene, the fear of death enters its third and final stage: conquering the fear of death.

In the preceding scenes, Orlok’s arrival to Wisborg onboard the Demeter were shown. Orlok immediately headed out to the streets of the town while carrying one of his coffins and later dissolves into thin air in front of the house he had purchased earlier from Hutter. Orlok is next seen in the final scene when he confronts Ellen. Orlok’s arrival to the city also meant the advent of the plague, which now breaks out in Wisborg. This completes the transformation of death; from the
remote land of Transylvania, death now becomes part of ordinary life among the residents of Wisborg (see Rosenholm 2016, 75–79; Perez 2013, 18).

Image 17. Upon his arrival, Orlok, walks through the empty streets of Wisborg with one of his coffins. The shape of the arch is once again present in the buildings he passes by.

Moving on to the final scene, which begins with Orlok looking outside his building’s window to Ellen’s bedroom where she is resting together with Hutter. Orlok, using his vampire powers, forces Ellen to open the window and invite him into the building (this is actually a reference to conventional vampire folklore in which a vampire has to be invited inside before it can enter the building). Meanwhile, Ellen wakes up the sleeping Hutter and sends him to fetch Dr. Bulwer (John Gottowt).
Hutter leaves the house in order to fetch Dr Bulwer. Meanwhile, Orlok walks through the staircase towards Ellen. Hutter manages to find Bulwer and together they head back to Ellen. However, by this point, Orlok has already reached Ellen’s bedroom and has started to drink her blood. What Orlok doesn’t notice, while drinking the blood, is the slowly rising morning sun. At the same time, in the town’s prison, the captured Knock senses that his master is in danger.
As Orlok realizes that he has stayed too long in Ellen’s bedroom, he stops drinking her blood and walks towards the window. Orlok reaches his arm towards the sun as if trying to grasp the sun itself. Soon, the rays of light destroy Orlok, leaving only a trail of black smoke behind. Knock, also realizing the gravity of the situation, cries in desperation ‘The master… is… dead’. Ellen, lying in bed and realizing that Orlok has been destroyed, gets up and shouts ‘Hutter!’ and then collapses. Hutter, who has just arrived with Dr. Bulwer, catches Ellen in his arms and witnesses her death. With Ellen’s sacrifice, the citizens of Wisborg have been saved from the terror of Orlok and the plague he brought. Dr. Bulwer looks at the lovers with sadness and allows Hutter to mourn Ellen’s death in peace. Finally, Bulwer looks towards the camera and an intertitle follows with Storyteller saying:

Witness the miracle on the heels of the truth: at that very hour, the Great Death came to an end, and as if confronted by the victorious radiance of the living sun, the shadow of the Deathbird was dispersed.

At the end of the final scene of the film, the last shot shows Orlok’s castle, which now lies in ruins due to his death.

The final scene of the film is quite compelling; mainly because of Ellen’s sacrifice and the multiple interpretations it has caused among audiences, film critics and scholars. Firstly, it’s important to note that typically, credit for the destruction of Orlok is given to ‘radiance of the living sun’. This could be seen as a reference to the power of the nature as Orlok emerged from the depths of nature,
it is also the same nature that destroys him. This essentially refers to the natural circle of life and death.

However, Ellen’s role shouldn’t be underestimated; the part she played in destroying the vampire was also essential and proves that it’s possible to affect natural events. Kracauer himself asked if Orlok embodied the destructiveness of nature in the form of the plague or if the image of the plague represents Orlok? Kracauer states that if we go with the former, then Ellen is a passive victim whose sacrifice was for nothing as Orlok would eventually have been destroyed by natural forces. Kracauer instead argues for the latter interpretation, claiming that Ellen is a victim of a tyrant and has to endure the hardships in the name Christian love. (Kracauer 1987, 75.)

However, film researcher Gilberto Perez doesn’t support Kracauer’s argument as ‘A tyrant, however, is a political figure; the reign of death that Nosferatu represents is not a political order because it cannot be changed, it can only be faced; the death that comes to all the living falls outside the political because it is something inevitable’. (Perez 2013, 9.) I agree with Perez’s statement, as Orlok certainly is not as political character as is the character of Dr. Caligari, for example. However, the fact remains that it is Ellen who stalls the vampire long enough so that the rays of sunlight destroy him. Without Ellen’s actions, it could be assumed that Orlok might have managed to slip away.

F.W. Murnau was also known as a director who favoured strong female characters in his films. This could partially explain why Ellen is responsible for destroying Orlok, and why the role played by the male leads Hutter and Bulwer is greatly diminished in the final scene. Murnau interpreted Ellen as the main heroine of the tale who must destroy Orlok. (Kalat 2013.) Kracauer, for his part, actually credits Ellen’s role to Henrik Galeen instead (Kracauer 1987 (1947), 73–74.) But whatever the reason, the fact remains that Ellen’s role is important in the destruction of Orlok.
Ellen’s actions also prove that one doesn’t have to act passively and accept the forthcoming. Ellen shows the ‘real’ way of resisting death, which is about accepting one’s own death. As Ellen accepts death, she realizes that it’s inevitable, something that all living things must face some day. This gives her a peaceful death, something that the First Mate and the Captain also tried to accomplish but failed to achieve in the end. Ellen’s actions, however, prove that while avoiding death is impossible, it is possible to be delayed and that conquering the fear of death is entirely possible.

In summary, we could provide three reasons that explain why Orlok is destroyed. First, the rays of sunlight; they represent the natural causes as death is a natural event and simply a part of the circle of life. Second, Ellen’s intervening actions; she stalls Orlok long enough so that he doesn’t notice the morning sun in time. The third reason, a fact of pure coincidence and unpredictability could be taken into consideration; Orlok simply doesn’t notice the rise of the morning sun and could have
survived if he had not been overconfident in his abilities. These three reasons are also something that can be associated with the fear of death: it is a natural event, one can fight against it or it is also a matter of coincidence.

But Orlok’s destruction doesn’t mean the end of death or the fear of death itself. Orlok’s arrival in Wisborg symbolizes death becoming part of everyday life. After Orlok’s death, death has simply returned back to nature, from where it will eventually rise again. So, what does this all mean in the end? One could say that Orlok, in a questionable manner, did a favour to the townspeople of Wisborg as he made them aware of the fear of death. By realizing that death will now always be a part of their lives, they will be more respectful and show more appreciation towards life itself. Each person’s life is unique as every living being only lives once. One could say that this is what Ellen also wanted to achieve with her final sacrifice; that life is precious.

Image 22. Hutter and Bulwer arrive too late to save Ellen, who soon dies in the arms of Hutter (left). Bulwer then takes one final look towards the audience (right).

‘After the death diffused everywhere in the stricken midst of the familiar, the death personified by the vampire when he reappears at the film’s conclusion is not death generally but the death each human being must face individually’. (Perez 2013, 29.) Ellen’s sacrifice forces individuals to think about their own death and how to face it. Ellen’s example shows that by making death one’s own, conquering the fear of death is entirely possible. Ellen is not ignorant of death in the manner in which Hutter is, nor is she as terrified as the First Mate or as bravely acquiescent as the Captain of Demeter. She doesn’t resist inevitable death but rather makes it her own, which gives her a peaceful death without experiencing physical or mental pain.
Conclusion: The Meaning of Fear of Death in *Nosferatu*

*Nosferatu* can certainly be described a timeless classic that still holds the audience in its grasp. In fact, the different meanings of death and its fears in *Nosferatu* provide a very accurate portrayal of its socio-cultural-historical context. The First World War caused millions of deaths and also changed the meaning of death itself. No longer was death viewed as something peaceful, as something that should be ignored or as something that should be considered as an ‘abnormal part of life’, but instead, death could be seen as something that could happen to the young and healthy, suddenly in a violent manner and/or to anyone everywhere: Death therefore became a natural occurrence in life.

But one could also maintain that *Nosferatu* is not strictly tied only to its own time and place; it could also be seen as a reflection of contemporary cultures of fear in some ways. But just as in the film, the fear of death has been transformed. The meaning of the fear of death today is more about survival and prolonging life as long as possible. In the 1920s, after the first modern global war, people living in the western world became afraid of ‘nothingness’ after dying. Today, the fear of death has been replaced by the fear of being forced to stay alive against one’s own will. (Bourke 2005, 49–50.) This, in turn, is related to contemporary questions regarding themes such as euthanasia.

The state of Weimar-era Germany is visible in *Nosferatu*, although it’s not demonstrated in the same way as in other Expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, which commented on the state of society in 1920s Germany by placing their settings in a more identifiable environment. *Nosferatu* is different. It is set in a distant past, in a dream- and fantasy-like world (Transylvania) mixed with elements of the normal world (Wisborg). The various socio-cultural problems of Germany in the 1920s have all taken different forms in *Nosferatu*: For example, the death caused by the plague among the townspeople of Wisborg reminds viewers about the victims of First World War and the devastated Transylvanian landscape resembles the destruction caused during the First World War, while the film’s various characters – Hutter, Ellen, the First Mate and the Captain – display different aspects of death and the reactions it causes in different individuals.

Regarding the main theme of *Nosferatu*, the fear of death, the film could be said to expresses three different kinds of stages of the fear of death:
1st stage: The Arrival of the Fear of Death. This stage was seen in the first analysed scene when Hutter enters the land of Transylvania and comes into contact with Orlok. At this stage, the fear of death is described as something new, unknown and terrifying, which one doesn’t know how to react to. The fear of death’s arrival is unexpected and what it causes in individuals is always a personal, and not universal, reaction. It takes a firm grip of its victim and doesn’t let go easily. Once the fear of death arrives, the victim sees things in a different light, no longer being able to return to their past life.

2nd stage: The Transition to the Fear of Death. The second analysed scene in which Orlok is sailing in Demeter across the sea with his coffins and rats shows that the fear of death is something you can resist and fight against, although it may still remain unbeatable. The First Mate and the Captain both show different kinds of reactions to the fear of death, proving the point, as with Hutter before them, that the fear of death is not universal. The fear of death goes through a transition; from the world of the unfamiliar it moves into a world of normality. It transforms into different shapes, which in turn cause diverse reactions in individuals. The fear of death that Hutter and the sailors experienced is different than what Ellen or Knock experience due to these reasons.

3rd stage: Conquering the Fear of Death. In the third and final analysed scene, Orlok and the fear of death that he represents, meet their demise at Ellen’s hand. The scene clearly shows that accepting the fear of death and deciding on the fashion of one’s own death enables its conquest. When Ellen accepts her fear of death, she is granted a peaceful death with a positive outcome: Orlok, the embodiment of evil and death, is ultimately destroyed and the citizens of Wisborg can then live in peace. In the final stage, the individual conquers the fear of death. Depending on the reaction, the individual gains either a peaceful or a restless death. The fear of death’s final attack, death itself, cannot be conquered, but its power can be reduced. In the end, the film declares that Ellen’s method is the best compared to, for example, how Hutter, the First Mate and the Captain dealt with Orlok. The final conclusion also raises the question of whether interfering with natural causes, such as death, is necessary; if death emerges from the depths of nature, then it should be assumed that it will eventually return back to where it came from.

In Nosferatu, the fear of death is described in diverse ways, which can lead to several possible interpretations. I have simply displayed one way of analysing the scenes, which is through the standpoint of close reading while taking into consideration the historical and socio-cultural context of 1920s Germany. I also argue that the aforementioned three stages of the fear of death still remain to this day but in different forms. Most likely, the majority of people are no longer afraid of being
buried alive or of a violent death. Instead, survival and being ‘forced’ to stay alive are today associated with the fear of death.

References


Films


Film images for *Nosferatu* used in the review have been taken from a 2009 DVD copy or YouTube video of the film. English translations are from a 2013 Blu-ray copy.

Documentaries


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Notes

[1] The term nosferatu is interesting in and of itself as its etymology is ambiguous and difficult to determine. It’s been associated with Romania even though it’s unknown in the Romanian language. This is most likely because of a mistake in English translation as the term was popularized by Stoker in *Dracula*. Stoker discovered the word from Emily Gerard’s ‘Transylvanian Superstitions’ (1885), which was one of his source materials for the novel. In her book, Gerald mentions that Romanian peasants believe in a vampire, also known as nosferatu. (See Hovi 2014, 64–65.)