



JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN: THE FILMS OF WERNER HERZOG

# Nosferatu the Vampyre

## Nosferatu the Vampyre

(*Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht*)

Director: Werner Herzog

Production Companies:

Werner Herzog Filmproduktion, Gaumont

Executive Producer: Walter Saxer

Producer: Werner Herzog

Production Manager: Rudolf Wolf

Assistant Directors: R Emmelt R Emmelts,

Mirko Tichacek

Screenplay: Werner Herzog

Original Novel: Bram Stoker

Original Film Script: Henrik Galeen

Director of Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein

Lighting: Martin Gerbl

Camera Operator: Michael Gast

Special Effects: Cornelius Siegel

Editor: Beate Mainka-Jellinghaus

Production Designers: Henning von Gierke,

Ulrich Bergfelder

Costumes: Gisela Storch

Make-up: Reiko Kruk, Dominique Colladant

Music: Popol Vuh, Florian Fricke

Sound: Harald Maury

Cast:

Klaus Kinski (*Count Dracula*)

Isabelle Adjani (*Lucy Harker*)

Bruno Ganz (*Jonathan Harker*)

Roland Topor (*Renfield*)

Walter Ladengast (*Dr Van Helsing*)

Dan van Husen (*warden*)

Jan Groth (*harbourmaster*)

Carsten Bodinus (*Schrader*)

Martje Grohmann (*Mina*)

Ryk de Gooyer (*town official*)

Clemens Scheitz (*town employee*)

Lo van Hensbergen (*councilman*)

John Leddy (*coachman*)

Margiet van Hartingsveld (*maid*)

Tim Beekman (*coffinbearer*)

Jacques Dufilho (*captain*)

Anja Schmidt-Zaringer, Walter Saxer,

Annegret Poppel, Michael Edols,

Gisela Storch, Martin Gerbl (*diners in square*)

Beverly Walker (*nun*)

Dominique Colladant (*doctor*)

Werner Herzog (*monk*)

West Germany-France 1979

107 mins

Digital

## A contemporary review

Given the current fashion for remakes, together with the bubbling revival of German film production, it's to be expected that the *Caligari* era, stretching gloriously from Rye's *Student of Prague* to Lang's *Testament of Dr Mabuse*, will in due time prove a fertile landscape for cinematic rediscovery. *Metropolis* could rise again, with pauses for industrial inaction; *Kriemhild* could wreak a multimillion-dollar revenge, and there could be a punk-disco version of *Alraune*. But Murnau's *Nosferatu*, in 1922 just about at the heart of German expressionism, is unarguably a special case in that its protagonist shows every sign of remaining permanently undead. Rediscovery is unnecessary; *Dracula* and his acolytes continue to stalk both stage and screen in rude vitality. That Werner Herzog, an original even among a generation of originals, should choose to unleash the Count upon us yet again, suggests an exercise in futility rather than of inspiration.

In its defence, Herzog's *Nosferatu the Vampyre* is concerned not with Bram Stoker but with F.W. Murnau, a homage rarely enough attempted (Godard and Chabrol have paid their respects, but few besides) and never before in the context of *Nosferatu* (pace the Professor of that name in *Alphaville*). Herzog's first step has been the reincarnation of Murnau's vampire, as ineradicably portrayed by Max Schreck, in Klaus Kinski's superb make-up – the same bulging dome above the hollow, sleepless gaze and attenuated front teeth, the same obscene spray of fingernails, the same reptilian glide punctuated by bursts of superhuman energy. Scene after scene constructed around this appalling figure is simply Murnau with colour and sound: the abrupt assault on a paralysed Jonathan Harker, the unhurried voyage of the plague ship, the vampire's choking collapse by the window at sunrise. The warning shadows of the expressionists patrol once more the walls of the stricken town (formerly Bremen, now Delft in Holland), and the sepulchral cloak and hat of *Caligari* himself can be briefly glimpsed outside the Harker home. More subtly, Herzog is perfectly attuned to Murnau's symphony of landscapes, which Lotte Eisner has linked with the spectacular harmonies of Dovzhenko's work; echoing them both, Herzog's *Nosferatu* is a celebration of rolling hills and mists, majestic forests, and the customary turbulence of cascading rivers. When night falls amid this impervious splendour, Herzog reverently allows it to take its time – although dawn, one must admit, is by contrast startlingly brisk.

The story, of course, is another matter. Few spines will be chilled these days by the festive scene, rendered so familiar by Bray Studios, in which Harker speaks the name of *Dracula* at the local hostelry and the innkeeper's wife promptly drops some crockery. Herzog almost, but not quite, decides to play it for laughs, and the uncertainty flows on into later scenes so that, for instance, the Count's excessive interest in the cut on his guest's hand comes perilously close to music-hall melodrama in which everyone knows the script. All the conventions are observed, from the close-ups of a flying bat to the stygian coach-and-four, from the punctured neck-wounds to the spectacle of *Dracula* reposing in his tomb. Through Isabelle Adjani's performance, moreover, Herzog follows the choreography of high tragedy – the arms limply extended in farewell, the eyes and mouth gaping in oval horror at a nightmare, the

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### Signs of Life Lebenszeichen

Mon 1 Jan 12:30; Sat 13 Jan 15:00

### Fata Morgana + The Great Ecstasy of

**Woodcarver Steiner** Die große Ekstase des  
Bildschnitzers Steiner

Mon 1 Jan 18:00; Wed 17 Jan 20:30

### Even Dwarfs Started Small

Auch Zwerge haben klein angefangen

Tue 2 Jan 18:15; Mon 15 Jan 20:45

### La Soufrière Warten auf eine Unausweichliche

Katastrophe + **Lessons of Darkness**

Lektionen in Finsternis

Wed 3 Jan 18:20; Tue 16 Jan 20:40 (+ intro by  
writer Ian Haydn Smith)

### Heart of Glass Herz aus Glas

Thu 4 Jan 18:30; Fri 19 Jan 20:40

### Land of Silence and Darkness

Land des Schweigens und der Dunkelheit

Thu 4 Jan 20:50; Wed 10 Jan 20:45; Wed 17 Jan  
18:15 (+ BSL intro by deaf filmmaker Sam Arnold)

### Aguirre, Wrath of God Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes

Sat 6 Jan 15:15; Sun 14 Jan 11:40;

Tue 23 Jan 18:30

### My Best Fiend Mein liebster Feind – Klaus Kinski

Sat 6 Jan 17:45; Sat 13 Jan 21:00

### Little Dieter Needs to Fly Flucht aus Laos

Sun 7 Jan 15:20; Thu 18 Jan 20:45

### Fitzcarraldo

Sun 7 Jan 17:45; Sun 14 Jan 14:20;

Thu 18 Jan 17:50

### Stroszek

Mon 8 Jan 18:20; Sat 20 Jan 20:40

### Werner Herzog's Tales of Life and Death:

#### An Illustrated Talk

Wed 10 Jan 18:30

#### Nosferatu the Vampire

Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht

Fri 12 Jan 18:10; Wed 24 Jan 20:50;

Sat 27 Jan 15:00

#### Grizzly Man

Fri 12 Jan 20:45; Sun 14 Jan 18:15;

Mon 29 Jan 18:15

#### Echoes from a Sombre Empire

Echos aus einem düsteren Reich

Sat 13 Jan 14:10; Tue 30 Jan 20:30

#### Woyzeck

Sat 13 Jan 18:20; Sun 28 Jan 12:30

#### The Fire Within: A Requiem for Katia and

#### Maurice Krafft

Fri 19 Jan 18:30; Wed 31 Jan 20:50

#### The White Diamond

Sun 21 Jan 18:20; Fri 26 Jan 18:30

#### Into the Abyss – A Tale of Death, a Tale of Life

Fri 26 Jan 20:45; Sun 28 Jan 15:10

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decorous faint on the doorstep when the returned husband fails to recognise her. It's carefully, consistently and courageously mannered, but it goes unsupported by the other performances; Bruno Ganz (as Harker) has a conscientious anonymity, Jacques Dufilho admirably underplays his role as the doomed ship's captain, while Roland Topor is allowed to go way over the top as Dracula's lunatic disciple. The collision of styles provides, as so often in Herzog's films, a special kind of tension, but it creates of *Nosferatu*, unlike the Murnau, or for that matter the Terence Fisher versions, a series of cameos, some successful, some not.

It's when he strays furthest away from Murnau that Herzog is at his most interesting. The disintegration of the town as the plague takes its toll, with Lucy Harker wandering distractedly through the macabre celebrations and being invited by half the production crew to join their Last Supper, is presented with an urgency that supports Herzog's press statement about it being 'no accident that I make this film now.' (Occasionally he retreats to a rooftop, gazing speculatively down at the processions of coffins, but he quickly returns to the heart of the matter – the collapse of a smug and stifling bourgeois community, in which the sacrifice of a girl in order to destroy the plague-carrier is meaningful more as an act of loving acceptance than as the rejection of evil).

From Murnau's images, Herzog creates his own: the magnificent staging of the plague ship taking aboard its deadly cargo, and the helicopter shot of its course across a placid sea; the return of Jonathan Harker, borne by coach between two canals as if marooned in perpetuity; the macabre comedy of Van Helsing's arrest as, bloody stake in hand, he is apprehended by a reluctant citizen who doubts (with good reason) whether the due processes of law have survived; the brief, astounding glimpse, straight out of *Aguirre*, of a raft laden with coffins being swept down a torrential river. Finally, *Nosferatu* shows the plague-carrier galloping across sand-flats on his endless, lethal journey, his continuity praised by a reverential choir on the soundtrack; Herzog finds both image and concept equally glorious.

It's a conclusion that confirms the reason behind the remake – the reprise is not of Murnau but of Herzog. Dracula is an outsider like Kaspar Hauser, Stroszek and Aguirre, a death-seeker amid the troops of somnambulists. Invading Holland with his conquistadorial rats, he bears a priceless gift, as promised by all true prophets – the knowledge of how not to die. There's just one catch: eternal life, secured through the sharing of blood, has its disadvantages. Kinski's voice conveys them superbly by its despairing weariness. 'Can you imagine,' he murmurs hopelessly, 'what it's like to endure centuries of experiencing the same futile things?' Such is the continuing fatalism of Werner Herzog, continuing to revolve in an elegant solitude.

Philip Strick, *Sight and Sound*, Spring 1979