F.W. Murnau’s classic, groundbreaking Nosferatu in US theaters …

… and two poor, new films (Beasts of No Nation, Rock the Kasbah)

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Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror

“Real art is simple, but simplicity requires the greatest art.” F.W. Murnau

Several Landmark Theatres nationwide are currently screening F.W. Murnau’s classic silent film, *Nosferatu, A Symphony of Horror* (1922), an (unauthorized) adaptation of Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*.

Murnau (1888-1931), considered one of the greatest filmmakers of the silent era, died as talking pictures were taking hold. The future director was born in Bielefeld, Germany, as Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe. He adopted the pseudonym “Murnau” after the small village in Bavaria that was home to the *Blaue Reiter* artistic colony, whose members included Russian painter Wassily Kandinsky and his partner, German painter Gabriele Münter. Murnau had 21 directing credits between 1919 and 1931, including one short, a third of which are considered lost.

Bram Stoker’s ‘undead,’ blood-sucking Count Dracula was loosely inspired by the real-life exploits of the 15th-century Prince Vlad the Impaler of Transylvania in Romania, who was renowned for his excessive cruelty. In Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, screenwriter Henrik Galeen relocated Stoker’s story from London to the fictional city of Wisborg, Germany in 1838 and changed the characters’ names in an unsuccessful effort to evade copyright law (all copies of the film were ordered burned by a judge, but one copy fortunately survived).

The film’s first title reads (depending on which version one sees—we are basing ourselves on the 2007 restored version): “Nosferatu. Does this word not sound like the deathbird calling your name at midnight? Beware you never say it—for then the pictures of life will fade to shadows, haunting dreams will climb forth from your heart and feed on your blood.” Then, “I have reflected at length on the origin and passing of the Great Death in my hometown of Wisborg. Here is its story: Once in Wisborg lived a man named Hutter and his young wife, Ellen.”

So begins the story of the Hutters and their tragic encounter with the sinister figure of Count Orlok (a terrifying, otherworldly interpretation by Max Schreck), who lives in isolation in a remote castle in Transylvania. The Count now desires to engulf Europe with his evil.

Thomas Hutter (Gustav von Wangenheim), a real-estate broker’s clerk, is sent to seal the deal with Orlok, who is buying property in Wisborg, where Hutter and his wife Ellen (Greta Schröder) live. Thomas is unaware that Orlok is the vampire Nosferatu. After a trying journey and warnings by the local population to stay away from the castle, Thomas falls victim to the vampire, narrowly escaping with his life.

Hutter returns home, but Nosferatu is also headed in the same direction, traveling on board a ship, the *Demeter*, in an earth-filled coffin. The log kept by the captain and found on the vessel after his death reads in part: “Mate is talking nonsense. Claims an unknown passenger is below deck. … Rats in the hold of the ship. Danger of plague.”

Nosferatu arrives and infects the picturesque city of Wisborg. Ellen has developed a strange, telepathic relationship with the vampire. He desires her above all. He even takes on, toward the end, the somewhat pitiable role of a desperate suitor. Ellen finds out from the Book of Vampires, which her husband has forbidden her to read, the only means of putting an end to the vampire’s curse and sacrifices herself in the process.

In the mobility and flexibility of its imagery, *Nosferatu* is astonishingly modern. In 1923, Murnau wrote: “What I refer to is the fluid architecture of bodies with blood in their veins moving through mobile space; the interplay of lines rising, falling, disappearing; the encounter of surfaces, stimulation and its opposite, calm; construction and collapse…the play *of pure movement*, vigorous and abundant.”

Also augmenting the movie’s haunting qualities are the distinct rhythms of each of the characters’ movements—like the interplay of out-of-kilter geometrical formations. Moreover, the camera is now “unchained.” Murnau asserted, “The camera is the director’s pencil. It should have the greatest possible mobility in order to record the most fleeting harmony of atmosphere.”

The resulting flowing and non-static camera work establishes the differing relationships to the space occupied by each character and his or her own particular interaction with the vampire’s use of “the oppression of the night.” (French filmmaker Eric Rohmer once commented that perhaps “no other filmmaker has used space more rigorously or inventively than Murnau.”)

Besides playing with space, Murnau fools with time: he speeds up Nosferatu’s carriage as it races through the countryside, as well as the vampire’s actions when single-handedly loading the carriage with coffins. The undead creature also vanishes through walls and is a constantly shifting black form that invades every thing and everyone.

The filmmaker summed up his process, saying that “on account of the way…[objects] were placed or photographed, their image is a visual drama. In their relationship with other objects or with the characters, they are units in the symphony of the film.”

Alexander Granach (a left-wing Jewish actor, who worked with Bertolt Brecht and took refuge in the USSR after Hitler’s coming to power) is queer and disturbing as Nosferatu’s insane, insect-eating slave-accomplice, Knock.

But Schreck as the vampire is the most magnetic figure in the movie. (Schreck, which means terror in German, also worked with Brecht on a couple of small projects.) Often the focus of Murnau’s camera angles, his character appears more a combination of rodent and insect than human. From the first time he emerges from a dark archway, Nosferatu is a menacing apparition, who slithers in and out of shadows, sometimes a

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silhouette and others a fanged, bat-like creature. While slight and hollow-bellied, he has long talons able to choke and extinguish all surrounding life.

As Thomas approaches Nosferatu's castle, the film highlights the monster's embodiment of death by inverting the negative, rendering the Transylvanian forest as a ghostly transparency, as if drained of its life force.

Murnau shot *Nosferatu* in natural settings rather than studio-built sets. Critic Siegfried Kracauer described the film as "a device-created horror fantasy which postulates the existence of specters and their intervention in the course of everyday life." But this "everyday life" quality only enhances the horror.

The stature of *Nosferatu* in the history of cinema has a great deal to do with Murnau's ability to provide an intense emotional experience, pared down to its essential content, and his success (at least from his point of view) in removing extraneous, non-cinematic components inherited from the past.

French film critic Jean-André Fieschi argued that " *Nosferatu* marks the advent of a total cinema in which the plastic, rhythmic and narrative elements are no longer graduated in importance, but in strict interdependence upon each other. With this film the modern cinema was born, and all developments to come, notably those of the Soviet film-makers, became possible."

But significant art always has a social motivation and impulse. Murnau's *Nosferatu* was shot in 1921 and released in 1922, only a few years after the slaughter of the First World War. His lover died in the trenches, along with millions of others. Whatever conscious views Murnau may have had about the conflict, and there is no indication that he was a political opponent, this dark, lacerating work is a response, passed through the director's (and screenwriter Galeen's) artistic filters, to the monumental devastation of the war (and the 1918 flu pandemic related to it, which also killed tens of millions).

There are many indicators of this connection. Hutter receives his "orders," the letter that Knock holds, to go to the east. His wife reacts with fear and anxiety, as though he is heading for the frontlines. Hutter goes off naively and cockily, ignoring all warnings, just like so many young men in August 1914. He can overcome anything, and he obviously welcomes a change in scenery!

A newspaper announces: "A plague epidemic has broken out … masses of young people are dying." Of course, the 1918 flu outbreak did victimize healthy young adults in particular—but so did the war. Wistfully waiting for her husband to return, Ellen stares out at the sea seated in the midst of graves marked by crosses, like those on a recent battlefield.

Coffins are integral to any vampire movie. But they must also have spoken to a population that had witnessed caskets being unloaded day after day for four years. The sight of a line of men carrying coffins through the town's empty streets, watched by Ellen through her window, is still moving, and it must have deeply stirred the emotions of many when *Nosferatu* came out. The latter parts of the film are especially affecting.

One is almost tempted to argue that Murnau's *Nosferatu* is one of the most powerful antiwar films that came out of that period.

Two current films…

Beasts of No Nation

Written and directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga, *Beasts of No Nation* is based on Uzodinma Iweala's novel about the life of an African child soldier. The first fiction film distributed by Netflix, the war movie is set in an unnamed West African country. It centers on Agu (Ghanaian actor Abraham Attah), an adolescent boy who is orphaned when his country becomes a killing field.

After the murder of his father and older brother, a traumatized Agu is found wandering in the wilderness by a ragtag group of guerillas organized and led by the Commandant (Idris Elba), who indoctrinates his young charges to become mindless murder machines. At this point the film turns from being an interesting look at a small African community into a virtually unwatchable catalog of crimes. Drugs and sexual abuse reinforce the Commandant's control over his battalion. After the top leadership of the rebel movement demotes him, he goes rogue. And even more awfulness ensues. Eventually rescued by United Nations troops, Agu and the others may finally have a chance at a childhood.

In an interview, Fukunaga reveals the extent of his superficial thinking: "It's about natural leadership in places of conflict and those people who would have been political leaders in another life or another country where upward mobility was somehow easier. Here's somebody who found his own way and obviously did terrible things, but you could still understand who he was and not just be villainized." Such vague and ahistorical comments will neither help anyone nor form the basis of a serious work of art.

The implied message of *Beasts of No Nation* is that the savagery in Africa must be civilized and controlled through a "humane" interventionist force, such as the UN. The film offers no history, no social context. The great powers are absolved of their responsibility for creating the present horrors in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria and elsewhere. Ironically, Fukunaga calls on the same imperialist powers who produced the devastation to now "rescue" the Africans.

Rock the Kasbah

It is not to veteran filmmaker Barry Levinson's credit that he had anything to do with the would-be comedy, *Rock the Kasbah*. Bill Murray plays Richie Lanz, a sleazy, has-been music-tour manager. He is not above lying to and stealing from prospective clients he solicits out of a fleabag motel in Van Nuys, California.

Opportunity knocks, and he ends up joining a USO tour in Afghanistan with his sole client Ronnie (Zooey Deschanel). After she flees terror-stricken from the war-torn Central Asian country with Richie's passport and money, the latter proceeds to defy the country's taboos and pilot a young Afghan woman, Salima (Palestinian actress Leem Lubany), to the top spot on *Afghan Star* —the country's version of *American Idol*. The movie also features Bruce Willis as a swell American mercenary and Kate Hudson as an even sweller American prostitute.

The film generally stereotypes the Afghan people and exhibits other traces of arrogance and chauvinism. It seems ingrained in the mindset of the filmmakers, contrary to the devastating experience of the past 35 years, that the US can make things better in the country!

Furthermore, the Levinson film was released just as the Obama administration announced an extension of the occupation of American troops in the long-ravaged country. The atrocities will continue. There's nothing funny about that.

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