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Trio of Terror

Lyz Reblin

Key words, concepts, and names: Nosferatu, Dracula, Vampyr, Vampire, Horror.

Intro

From the earliest silent films such as Georges Méliès' *The Devil's Castle* (1896) to the recent *Twilight* adaptation, the vampire genre, like the creatures it presents, has been resurrected throughout cinematic history. More than a hundred vampire films have been produced, along with over a dozen *Dracula* adaptations. The Count has even appeared in films not pertaining to Bram Stoker's original novel. He has been played by the likes of Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee (fourteen times) both John and David Carradine, and even Academy Award winner Gary Oldman. For as long as vampire movies have been made, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* has never been out of print.[1] Yet despite the multitude of vampire movies and TV shows made in the past century, three of the earliest portrayals have remained the most influential and terrifying from generation to generation: *Nosferatu* (1922), *Dracula* (1931), and *Vampyr* (1932).

Thesis

This article will discuss the chronology of how these films, all literary adaptations, were inspired by German Expressionistic films such as *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1920) and *Doctor Mabuse* (1923), along with then becoming the inspiration for later vampire films through their establishing of conventions such as dream-like cinematography and fantastical mis-en-scene. These three films are the basis not only for all films in the vampire sub-genre to follow but also bare significance in their reflections of the times in which they were made.

Inception of the Vampire Film

Historians regard the first vampire film, and also the first horror film, as Méliès' *The Devil's Castle*, made in 1896. It took seventeen more years for Americans to take a bite at the vampire film. The obscure Robert Vignola created the first American vampire tale, blandly titled *The Vampire*. However, three years after its disappointing performance, the film was almost immediately forgotten due to the creation of a similar American film. Edwin S. Porter, a much more respected and famed director, sunk his teeth into the vampire story with *Village Vampire* in 1916. Porter had success with horror in the past, directing the first adaptation of *Frankenstein* six years earlier.

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However, though influenced by Méliès' style, both his camera work and plot lacked originality.[2] European filmmakers continued to outshine their American counterparts in this particular sub-genre of the horror film, culminating in the pinnacle of silent vampire films: F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horrors.*

Nosferatu was part of the German Expressionistic style that changed the face of horror films forever. Horror films, or at least the characteristics of the genre as presently recognized, arose from this particular approach to filmmaking. According to S. S. Prawer, Germany's "rich heritage of demonic folklore, Gothic fiction, and black Romanticism," combined with the political and social turmoil following World War I, provided the cynical atmosphere needed for filmmakers to begin creating terror movies.[3]

But what were the characteristics of German Expressionism that made it such a perfect fit for tales of terror? The overall theme that all German Expressionistic film aesthetics relied on was psychology. From the mise-en-scene, to the camera work, each technique employed was used to reflect the internal state of the characters. The German theatre had been using Expressionism as early as 1908.[4] Filmmakers then adopted the painted skewed scenery and leftist political discourse of the stage for their artistic works.

NOSFERATU

Influences for *Nosferatu*

Arthur Robison's *A Night of Horror* (1916) was Germany's first vampire film and possibly the first attempt at putting German Expressionism on film. The "background and lighting are very expressionistic and help to suggest Werner Krauss's confused state of mind."[5] Werner Krauss later would go on to star in *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (1920), regarded as the first true German Expressionistic film. *Nosferatu* shared several German Expressionistic characteristics with *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (*TCODC*). Plot wise, each film is a frame story. The encompassment of the story within a story was symbolic of the Germans' post-WWI mindset. Cinema became a way for them to expose and analyze their fears in a cathartic manner as they "tended to withdraw from a harsh outer world into the intangible realm of the soul."[6] Visually, both films also have a strong use of shadows, whether it be the somnambulist Cesare crawling along and against a wall, or the vampire Count Orlock creeping the stairs with his shadow preceding him in some diabolical and horrific twist on Peter Pan's animated shadow. Each of these moments also relies on the actor and the scenery becoming one. *Nosferatu* leaned on natural locations instead of studio backdrops like *TCODC*. Their nightwalkers share a similar relationship with their sets. Both Cesare's and Count Orlock's movements are reactions to their predicaments. Cesare moves fluidly, almost like a dancer, as he is part of a madman's dream. Count Orlock is restricted and stiff in his movements, for he is an outsider in this world and must move with much trepidation. Cesare blends into the jagged and slanted scenery that matches the overall theme of madness created by the lighting and mise-en-scene. Count Orlock becomes one with the sets when at times he is confined to an imaginary coffin by the numerous Gothic archways Murnau places him in.

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Nosferatu, the "first" adaptation of *Dracula*.

Nosferatu is considered the first film adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula*. F.W. Murnau, like D.W. Griffith, had adapted a horror novel before when he directed *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in 1920 (which features a young Hungarian actor named Bela Lugosi).[7] Yet when it came to reworking *Dracula* for the screen, Murnau took much more creative liberties towards the work. There have been many arguments proposed concerning why F.W. Murnau's tale differs both in plot and theme from its source material. Some film historians may argue that the changes were made to prevent the company from being sued by Bram Stoker's widow for copyright infringement. The novel was never copyrighted, however, and therefore became part of the public domain upon its publication. Mrs. Florence Stoker still sued Prana, who was producing the film, but preventing a legal battle was not the sole reason behind the alterations.[8]

Fear of such a lawsuit could explain the name changes (Count Dracula to Count Orlock, Mina to Nina), but director Murnau and screenwriter Henrik Galeen had a different vision and message for the vampire than Bram Stoker. While it might have foreshadowed the rise of Nazism, *Nosferatu* ,and others of its ilk, may also have been a reaction to the external tyrannical forces wreaking havoc in post-World War I Germany. Count Orlock represents a figure from outside coming to take over and destroy everything the locals of the town of Bremen hold dear. Nina's martyrdom signifies the difference between Count Orlock as merely a metaphor for disease and pestilence to one of tyranny. The monster is overcome "in the spirit of Christian love," unlike in the novel where the monster is destroyed by revenge and anger-fueled violence.[9] Later, when Werner Herzog remade his own vision of *Nosferatu*, changes in the storyline were based partly on the altered political and cultural climate of Cold War Germany. No longer was the fear of tyranny Germany's own personal horror; in fact the Cold War regime was in decline. The film, therefore, becomes a more artistic piece than political commentary, focusing further on the horror rather than the message. While Nina's sacrifice in Murnau's version is a triumph over evil, Mina in Herzog's film only succeeds in defeating Count Orlock but not her husband, who by the end of the film has replaced Orlock and become a vampire himself. Herzog was not attempting to make a film that spoke to his people; in fact he created a global movie by having an English language version distributed by Twentieth-Century Fox. He focused on the dreamlike qualities of the lost German Expressionism which influenced American horror and film noir that global audiences responded to so well. [10]

The Legacy of *Nosferatu*

Though the politics and fears surrounding the original *Nosferatu* have dissipated today, the film still manages to terrify and affect a modern global audience. It would take nearly half a century for the grotesque image of Count Orlock based on the folkloric tales of the vampire to begin to compete with Bela Lugosi's iconic romantic portrayal of the creatures of the night. In Werner Herzog's remake of the film in 1979, Klaus Kinski dons makeup and prosthetics similar to Max Shreck's portrayal. The vampires in Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*, produced that same

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year, also had rodent-like facades. In more recent portrayals, the vampires in *Lost Boys* (1987) and the *Buffy* universe have disfigured faces when they "vamp-out."

Various forms of Count Orlock have also appeared in other mediums besides the cinema. In the role-playing game "Vampire: The Requiem," the Nosferatu are a clan of vampires "cursed to be social pariahs and their very presence is uncomfortable for others."[11] They commonly suffer from a similar disfigurement as Count Orlock as personified by Jeff Kober who played the nosferatu Daedalus in the soap-opera vampire series *Kindred: The Embraced*, based on the White Wolf role-playing game. Even an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants* entitled "The Graveyard Shift" featured Count Orlock (mistakenly called Nosferatu by Spongebob) and edited clips from the 1922 film.

Nosferatu changed more than just the face of the vampire, but the entire legend for the creature as well. Tales of the vampire leading up to the twentieth century did not include sunlight as a tool for exterminating them, yet this is now a modern day attribute for these monsters. It was Count Orlock's death that started the trend for vampires unable to come out during the day. Though some of the older depictions of vampires in folklore have them being weakened or made powerless during the day, the sun was not a weapon of exterminating them. Despite the popularity of *Dracula*, few remember from the novel that the Count himself could walk in daylight. When Jonathan Harker returns to London, walking in town with his fiancée Mina, "he gazed at a tall, thin man, with a beaky nose and black moustache and black pointed beard."[12] Even with the large number of tales whose vampires are not deterred by UV rays, sunlight still remains the bane of most modern vampires in film and other mediums.

DRACULA

Dracula, the play

Though *Nosferatu* might have added sun tan lotion to the list of necessities for a vampire, Hamilton Deane and John L. Balderston's theatrical adaptation, followed by Todd Browning's film version of *Dracula* created the costume and personality for the generic vampire. Two years after *Nosferatu* had invaded movie theatres around the world, a licensed version of *Dracula* came to the London stage. An Irish playwright named Hamilton Deane received permission from his family friend Florence Stoker to adapt her late husband's novel into a play. When *Dracula* made its move to Broadway, John L. Balderston was brought in for rewrites.[13] Just as Murnau altered the plot to fit his thematic vision, Deane and Balderston had to abridge the story and adapt it for their theatrical production. The play's structure and characterizations became the source material for multiple *Dracula* film adaptations, exemplified by John Badham's *Dracula* in 1979. It was not until Francis Ford Coppola's *Dracula* in 1992 that the majority of the novel's scenes and characters came to life on the silver screen.

From the very onset of the play, the novel is cut down considerably. The playwrights take out Jonathan's journey to Transylvania, instead starting the story approximately midway through the novel. One of the most important and influential changes the play made to the text was switching the roles and attributes of Mina Harker and Lucy

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Westerna. In the beginning of the play it is Mina Weston who becomes the first victim of Count Dracula while Lucy Seward, daughter of Doctor Seward and fiancée to Jonathan Harker, has fallen ill from the very disease that so recently killed her best friend. Deane also altered the ending, cutting out the chase to Dracula's castle. Instead the play ends in Carfax Abbey, where both Renfield and Lucy are released from the Count's control after Doctor Seward, Jonathan, and Van Helsing stake him.[14]

Dracula, the film

When Todd Browning brought *Dracula* to screens in 1931, it was a blend of both the play and the novel. This was not Browning's first foray into the realm of vampires. Already an experienced director, Browning was responsible for the lost classic vampire film: *London After Midnight* starring Lon Chaney. But Lon Chaney passed away just as Universal Studios was acquiring the rights to *Dracula*. The head of Universal, Carl Laemmle Jr., and Browning were left without their go-to star for terror and the stakes could not have been higher. With the nation on the cusp of the Depression and the studio on the verge of bankruptcy, it was actually Browning and Laemmle Jr.'s last choice for the lead that brought Universal their newest horror idol and financial savior.[15]

Bela Lugosi starred in the title role on the American stage. Lugosi's performance of the Count, on both stage and screen, was influenced by his experience in German film. The exaggerated hand and facial actions, along with the fluidity of his movements harken back to German Expressionistic films such as Conrad Veidt's performance as Cesare in *TCODC*. *Dracula* was influenced by other German Expressionistic films when it came to its cinematography as well. German director of photography Karl Freund worked closely with Browning, adjusting the stage show for film. A key aspect of this change was the use of close ups. Influenced by the tight shots of the eyes of both Caligari in *TCODC* and the title character of Doctor Mabuse in his many films, similar close ups were used when shooting Bela Lugosi and his hypnotic stare.[16]

When it came to the script, Browning added a sequence similar to the novel with the journey in Transylvania, but Jonathan Harker was replaced by Renfield (played by Dwight Frye). Also, the roles of Lucy and Mina are delineated as they are in the play, with the exception of their first names being switched. The characteristics of Mina from the play are given to Lucy Seward, and vice versa. Though Browning strived for a closer adaptation to the novel, Lucy is still missing her numerous suitors. After Lucy is killed by the Count, the "film falls back on the style and conventions of the stage play," and concludes in Carfax Abbey.[17]

Legacy of *Dracula*

Still highly theatrical and lacking the cinematic techniques of *Nosferatu* or even the simultaneously shot Spanish-version of *Dracula*, the film nonetheless became a monster hit with audiences. The success of the film led to numerous sequels and tie-ins with other Universal monsters, such as *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), *Son of Dracula* (1943), and *House of Frankenstein* (1944). While none of the sequels reached the cult status of their predecessor, *Son of Dracula* initiated the connection between New Orleans and vampires to the notice of the national public.

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Though voodoo legends of the region have included forms of the creatures for years, the vampire Alacard (played by Lon Chaney Jr.) attempted to wreak havoc in New Orleans in *Son of Dracula* decades before Anne Rice wrote her bestselling novel *Interview with the Vampire* (1976),

Dracula's power and popularity is so great that it has overshadowed even its own novel, creating numerous misconceptions about the written character of Count Dracula. For instance, the Count is not the smooth, debonair gentleman as Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee, and Frank Langella have portrayed him as. Instead, Bram Stoker described the Count as having hairy palms, pointy ears, sharp nails, and even bushy eyebrows, a creature leaning more towards Max Shreck's Count Orlock than Bela Lugosi's suave foreign aristocrat.[18]

Despite its alterations to Stoker's novel, the 1931 film has become the most omnipresent influence of vampires in pop culture, whether it is the new image of the Count it has created, or the sparse lines of dialogue that have been spoofed and satirized in films such as *Love At First Bite* (1979) starring George Hamilton and Mel Brooks's *Dracula: Dead and Loving It* (1995). Bram Stoker's work is the most adapted vampire novel of all time, and Todd Browning's version is probably the most adapted vampire film.

VAMPYR

Influences for *Vampyr*

Vampyr, on the other hand, may lack the blatant cultural pervasiveness of its predecessors, but makes up for its lack of pop cultural significance in its originality and innovation. *Vampyr* is a loose adaptation of the most famous female vampire and second most adapted vampire novel, *Carmilla*. Just as her male counterpart Dracula is based on the historical figure Vlad the Impaler, the fictional Carmilla can trace her roots to the infamous Countess Elizabeth Bathory. At first look, Bathory is not your common Other. She was an aristocrat in Hungarian society. But her tendency to drain and then bathe in the blood of her young servant girls led to her imprisonment.

The Film

Vampyr did not just ignore many plot points of its source material that featured its creature in an unflattering light, but it created a whole new convoluted plot structure. Only seventy minutes, the film is paced even slower than most European films of the period. The film jumps in between surrealistic scenes and those that contain any pertinent plot information. The most straightforward and direct knowledge delivered in the film is through a book on vampires Gray receives, just as in *Nosferatu*. Containing sparse dialogue and subtitles for what dialogue there is the text from the book becomes the only reliable source of information for the audience.

But the images, though confusing, become the trademark of the film. While shadows are used as an extension of character in *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* warning the audience of the impending arrival of a vampire, shadows in

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Vampyr are their own characters. They become the phantoms that haunt Gray on his passage in this isolated village, and also lead him further on his journey.

As in all horror movies, the central emotional element, the desired reaction the filmmakers intend, is fear. With *Vampyr*, director Carl Dreyer changes the conventional treatment of the monster into a being not from outside, but from within. In both *Nosferatu* and *Dracula*, the vampire is a foreigner, wreaking havoc away from their own lands. But in *Vampyr*, the vampire comes from within the town. Assisted by a local doctor, the hag/vampyr begins to turn the young daughter of a nobleman into a vampire. The terror grows as the young girl begins to ogle her own sister as the next victim. It is never explained in the film whether the vampyr originated in the film's setting, but she is not its newest arrival. In fact, it is the human protagonist of the film who "invades" the village. Also, as in *TCODC*, our protagonist is unreliable. But instead of his lack of believability being the twist in the film, Dreyer tells us from the very beginning with an intertitle that Allan Gray is "a dreamer, for whom the boundary between the real and the unreal has become him."[19] We then view the entirety of the film in a similar manner to the protagonist, questioning the events presented to us and our own suspension of belief. Influenced by both *Doctor Mabuse: The Gambler* (1922) and *The Testament of Doctor Mabuse* (1933), Gray suffers from visions of shadowy figures and ghosts that even makes the audience unsure of their validity.[20]

Though Dreyer shifts vampires from being part of a post-colonial discourse such as it was in the *Dracula* novel, he still has his vampire on the outskirts of society. In the Jungian theory of archetypes there is the stock character of the Other. This antagonist can represent anything from a foreigner, to an uncivilized native, a homosexual, to (in *Vampyr*'s case) a woman. The characteristics they all share are their being one outside of the civilized world. The inclusion of the doctor, a well-respected man within the community and civilization, as the vampyr's assistant, fills in the gap for a non-Other antagonist.

Legacy of *Vampyr*

Vampyr's attempt at adapting *Carmilla* became the influence for *Dracula's Daughter*. This sequel to *Dracula* still shrouded the lesbian element of the story, but did hint at the relationship much more than its European predecessor had. In *Vampyr* only one's knowledge of its source material could lead to such conclusions about the relationship between the vampire's victim and her sire. *Daughter of Dracula* was just one step closer to fully exploring the sex within *Carmilla*. Just as British Hammer productions explored the darker, more monstrous side of the alluring Count Dracula, they did not shy away from the graphic nature of the female vampire in their numerous lesbian vampire films.

Danish Dreyer utilized not only the German Expressionistic use of shadows, but also Murnau's unhinged camera. This technique then influenced and was employed by James Whale who directed *Frankenstein* (1931), a Universal horror film premiering the same year as *Dracula*. In both *Frankenstein* and *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), Whale's camera follows the action by moving through walls to keep up with characters. Dreyer uses the camera in a similar manner, having it travel in and out of buildings, skewing the audience's perception of the landscape.

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The most memorable camera technique Dreyer used may also be the most memorable moment of the film. Having fallen asleep chasing after the vampyr, our hero dreams that he is still running after her. He then finds himself stuck within a coffin, staring at the vampyr as he is about to be buried alive. The shot is a point of view shot, putting the audience within the grave staring up. By connecting the audience with the hero's plight, the horror and tension grows, as we the viewer becomes the victim. This particular use of point of view has been used in several horror films since. For instance, the musical horror-comedy remake of *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), the audience is forced to watch the maniacal dentist at work from inside the patient's mouth.[21]

But, up until this point in cinema, horror was associated with darkness. The villain would wait in the shadows, hiding. Murders would commonly happen at night. The German Expressionistic movement used a sharp contrast between light and dark to portray good and evil. In *Vampyr*'s case, though, the story is told with the predominate color being white. The unconventional use of bright light places the audience in what is usually a comfortable atmosphere, one in which you can see everything but you cannot believe your senses.[22] The practice of not hiding the evil within darkness and adjusting the audience's perception of the symbols of good can also be seen in films such as Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1982). The Overlook Hotel is open and bright so the monsters, which come from within the family, cannot hide. The visual of pure white snow becomes a horrific image as it is a trap for the family and a grave for Jack Nicholson's character. Even films that do use shadows and darkness are still influenced by *Vampyr* and its less is more visual theory, one in which graphic images are not needed to scare the audience. Just by creating an uncomfortable and tense situation the audience begins to fear even what they have yet to see. Films such as the 1942 version of *Cat People* do just that, hiding the monster and letting the audience create a mental picture in their mind, possibly more terrifying than what a special effects team would generate. In fact, you never see the vampire in the film *Vampyr* using her supernatural abilities or attacking her victims.

Conclusion

When Florence Stoker won her suit against Prana, all prints of *Nosferatu* were ordered to be destroyed. But unlike its title character, several prints escaped untouched, and the film remained for the enjoyment of generations.[23] Though all of the vampires in each of these three films were eventually destroyed, their films have happily and terrifyingly proved to be as long-lived as the creatures they portray.

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