



Director: F.W. Murnau. *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*. Germany: Prana-Film, 1922, re-release DVD Kino-International 2007. Film/DVD. Not Rated. B/W. Silent with German Intertitles with English subtitles or English Intertitles. Runtime: 94 min.

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One image from *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* is so fiercely prevalent in today's horror and Halloween repertoire that most people know the scene even if they have never seen the film: Count Orlok (played by Max Shreck) rises, with the help of only his mind, like a plank from the floor of the cargo-hold of the ship that has ferried him from Transylvania to Wisborg, Germany. Yet few modern audiences who watch the film in movie halls or at home recognize that moment as a warning, repeated throughout the film, about the dangers that foreigners and especially Jews posed to civilization, that is, Christendom. This sign of Orlok's ability to suspend the laws of science establishes him as an unnatural creature to be feared, a reference clear to the filmmakers and contemporary viewers. Over a century after the film's release, it is worth re-examining *Nosferatu* as a cultural artifact about antisemitism and xenophobia--and not only as an example of prevalent German attitudes.

Directed by F.W. Murnau and adapted by Henrik Galeen in 1922, *Nosferatu* tells the tale of a Transylvanian count who moves to western Europe with nefarious intentions. The film's audiences, then as now, recognized the story line. Indeed, Murnau and Galeen openly admitted that they based the film on Bram Stoker's 1897 novel

Dracula, but they could not receive the rights to make the film. This problem did not prevent them from pursuing the project. First, they changed all of the characters' names--Count Dracula becomes Count Orlok, Jonathan Harker becomes Thomas Hutter, Mina Harker becomes Ellen Hutter, and Professor Abraham Van Helsing becomes Professor Bulwer. The action in the film takes place in Germany, instead of in England (the destination of Stoker's *Dracula*). Even the ending changed in *Nosferatu*. Nonetheless, the novelist's widow Florence Stoker successfully sued in a German court of law to destroy all copies of the film after its release, a key legal decision in both German economic and cinematic history. Fortunately for historians, a few illegal copies survived in France and the United States.[1]

Nosferatu serves as a valuable teaching tool in discussions about antisemitism in Europe for both European survey courses, as well as upper-level German history seminars. Yet the most important theme of the film, antisemitism, must be contextualized within a larger historical and geographical setting. Certainly, the film codes Orlok as a stereotypical eastern European Jew, with extended shots of Orlok's long and pointed nose, the use of extra shadowing to literally darken his bushy eyebrows against a large, pallid forehead,

and costuming that made Orlok's lack of normal, masculine musculature apparent. The German filmmaking team did not create this image: Stoker had provided them with the features to portray Orlok as Jewish. Galeen's script closely follows Stoker's description of Dracula, whom Stoker describes in the following manner: "[Dracula's] face was a strong--very strong aquiline, with high bridge of the thin nose and peculiarly arched nostrils; with lofty domed forehead." [2] As Matthew Biberman has observed, English literature from the medieval period to the early modern era gradually feminized images of Jews. [3] Thus, a useful exercise for students learning about the anti-semitism of this pre-World War II period should not stop at comparing the image of Orlok in *Nosferatu* with later Nazi antisemitic propaganda, for example the marketing material for *Der ewige Jude* (dir. Fritz Hippler, 1940) or images from the antisemitic children's book *Der Giftpilz*. [4] After juxtaposing Stoker's written description of Dracula with the cinematic version of Orlok, a reading of George Orwell's 1945 essay "Anti-semitism in Britain" provides insight into the history of Jewish immigration to England and attitudes towards not only Jews but antisemitism and nationalism. [5]

Orlok, Dracula, and Jews embodied the Other and the xenophobic fears towards immigrants, again a trope easily followed in a larger and longer historical European context. The connection of the Jewish community with plague and death is embedded throughout the narrative of *Nosferatu*. The plague follows Orlok from Transylvania in the east to Wisborg in the west, suggesting the dangers of the invasion of the eastern Jew into western Europe. Orlok literally brings destruction, decay, and death in his wake. At each port the ship stops in rashes of death occur and the entire crew of the ship dies before its arrival at Wisborg. Although the victims seem to be victims of the Black Death, the intertitles explain that "All victims appear to have the same strange wounds on their necks the origin of which is still a mystery to doctors." Orlok thus spreads a kind

of plague specific to him and, by extension, his kind. Moreover, he carries this plague in his coffin-bed, filled with Transylvania soil, thus furthering ideas about Jews' animal-like behavior and filth. To clearly seal his fate as a non-Christian beast, the victims' unidentifiable wounds suggest an allusion to a biblical mark of the beast. Referring again to the Stoker connection to the film's plot, the status of nineteenth-century Britain as one of the most important ports of trade came at a price. The expansion of sea trade with other parts of the world meant an increase in diseases that arrived at ports, leading to a major public debate about the role of the port authority in keeping Britain safe--from diseases, certainly, but also from their foreign carriers. [6]

The medium of film, of course, permitted further articulations of images of Jews more effectively than in books. Here lie the beginnings of specifically German tropes about Jews that provide a bridge between nineteenth-century anti-semitism in European contexts and antisemitic images of Nazi Germany. In one of the most ominous scenes, Orlok's shadow acts as his agent. His shadow-hand stretches out from his body to attack Ellen and squeezes her breast until she faints, thus violating her in a manner that neither she nor her friends and family can protect her against. [7] Orlok thus not only spreads plague, but attempts to usurp Hutter's place with his wife, which puts her purity into question. The shadow is integral to *Nosferatu*; an intertitle admonishes: "Beware that his shadow does not engulf you like a demonic nightmare." This image of a Jewish shadow as an evil, monstrous rapist and killer later found expression in Nazi propaganda claims of a Jewish shadow government. Claims about an unseen, hidden force that permitted Jews to violate and take over the world appeared in multiple Nazi posters and writings; an easily accessible example of this concept is the 1939 excerpt "The Jewish Problem" by Max Eichler, one of the many

sources available at the online German Propaganda Archive.[8]

Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens provides the opportunity to discuss the evolution of antisemitic images and ideas in Europe and Germany prior to World War II Nazi propaganda. These ideas, as demonstrated by an in-depth examination of *Nosferatu* as an adaptation of Stoker's novel, were not unique to German society or cinema. *Nosferatu* has remained a staple of courses on modern Germany and the Holocaust. With a few changes to traditional approaches to teaching *Nosferatu*, the film can take discussions of antisemitism and xenophobia beyond a few famous scenes that serve as visual aids for a lecture and into an investigation of the film as one link in the development of antisemitic thought in Europe.

Notes

[1]. David J. Skal, "The English Widow and the German Count," *Hollywood Gothic: The Tangled Web of Dracula from Novel to Stage to Screen* (New York: Faber and Faber, 1990), 76-101.

[2]. Bram Stoker, *Dracula: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Nina Auerbach and David J. Skal (New York: Norton, 1997), 23.

[3]. Matthew Biberman, *Masculinity, Antisemitism and Early Modern English Literature: From the Satanic to the Effeminate Jew* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004).

[4]. Ernst Hiemer, *Der Giftpilz* (Berlin: Julius Streicher, 1938); stable URL: <http://www.archive.org/details/DerGiftpilz>.

[5]. George Orwell, "Antisemitism in Britain," *Contemporary Jewish Record* (April 1945); available at numerous sites online, such as http://www.orwell.ru/library/articles/antisemitism/english/e_antib (Retrieved October 28, 2009).

[6]. Krista Maglen, "'The First Line of Defence': British Quarantine and the Port Sanitary Authorities in the Nineteenth Century," *Social History of Medicine* 15, no. 3(2002): 413-428.

[7]. Nina Auerbach, *Our Vampires, Ourselves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 73-74.

[8]. Max Eichler, "The Jewish Problem," in *Du bist sofort im Bilde* (Erfurt: J. G. Cramer's Verlag, 1939), 139-142. Stable URL: <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/imbild1.htm>. The homepage for the archive is <http://www.calvin.edu/academic/cas/gpa/>.

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