

# Nosferatu the Vampyre 1979

Werner Herzog 1942-

## OVERVIEW

Behind Herzog's version, of the long honored tradition of Dracula movies, lie most notably the novel by Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897), and based on it F. W. Murnau's film *Nosferatu* (1922)—that is 'the bird of death'—a classic of expressionist horror. This modern horror legend was not being launched in an atmosphere of harmony, furthermore, for Stoker's executors refused permission for Murnau's filming, which was essentially the unauthorized brainchild of Stoker's original fancy. There have, as is known, been many versions, take offs and thematic twistings of the Stoker tale, which itself had its roots in Romanian history, Vlad the Conqueror, a recluse of the Carpathian mountains. And with that we are back to the fifteenth century. As for the modern modern versions of the tale, just turn to the kid next door, and ask when first he chewed popcorn at his local theater, and screamed at the appearance of Count Dracula. Herzog's version (1979), is only one in a tradition, but it is one with tweaks of its own, largely visual. When it comes to the 'misty Carpathian landscapes,' the bony pale face and the fingernails of Dracula, the red sailed plague ship sailing into the ports of Europe, or the terror of the vampire, as he hears the cock crow; when it comes to the crowning dreads of the film, the Herzog of *Aguirre* or *Fitzcarraldo* is unlikely to disappoint us.

## STORY

**Setting.** Herzog works off of the Murnau directed version of *Nosferatu* (1922). He opens by introducing us to a mainline realtor, Jonathan Harker, whom we are to place in the fictional German city of Wismar, in the early nineteenth century, and to his pretty wife, a recent bride. The two have just settled in their sunny, attractive flat, and the young lady has just suffered from a nightmare attack in which flying bats figured. The pair are shaken, but unfortunately, Harker is about to be sent away from home, for as much as four months, on a real estate purchase assignment. The job is to sign a contract with a client, of Harker's real estate company, who wants to purchase a property in Wismar; by name he is Count Dracula, and he lives in a distant castle in the Carpathian mountains. To perform the assignment means to leave behind the anyway highly unsettled and nervous new bride.

**Journey.** Harker sets out on horseback for the long journey to his client's castle. Increasingly misty and mountainous landscapes render the trip slow and exhausting, and with little encouragement along the way. When he stops at a local village, and explains to the villagers where he is going, they do their best to make him turn back, not to risk the dangers ahead. Harker persists, though, in places having to struggle ahead on foot, over boulders, and across mountain passes. At last one night he arrives at Dracula's castle, is met by the count, and is set down before a large dinner, in the dark and menacing dining room.

**The Count.** While Harker eats, the Count stares at him from across the table, and when Harker makes the mistake of cutting his hand, while peeling an apple, the Count moves in on him, to suck up the blood. Harker keeps him at a distance, for the time being, but during the next night, in a series of oneiric passages, the count makes many blood sucking advances against the horrified Harker. By morning, when vampire time is over, Harker finds himself locked alone in the castle. The count, equipped with his private coffin-bed and a collection of ready made coffins, has started off down the river, on a trip which will generate the plague, kill off his crew, and eventually bring him to Wismar, and to Harker's wife, of whom a miniature photo, shown to him by Harker, has proven to be a powerful turn on.

**Return.** In escaping from the castle, in which he has been imprisoned, Harker falls from an improvised bedsheet, and hurts himself badly. He is taken to hospital, and only after a while transported back to his home town and wife. By that time, unfortunately, his brain has been badly affected—whether from the

experience of Dracula or his fall—and he is unable to recognize his wife. In a semi vegetable state Harker remains in his own house while in the world around him Dracula and his now crewless plague ship have arrived in Wismar.

**Dracula.** The count, now installed in the house he has purchased in Wismar, makes his way to the house of his neighbor, Harker, hoping to gain access to the beautiful Lucy for whom he had seen Harker's luring miniature.. The Dracula who makes this approach can for a moment remind us of Cyrano—in Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*—or of the Beast, in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*—a dreadfully unacceptable suitor fatally attracted to a lady whose charms he finds irresistible—though to her he is loathsome. The pathos of the situation is of course meaningless to Lucy who wants nothing but the annihilation of this blood sucker. This she accomplishes, by so fascinating him that he overstays his sexual advances, finds himself awake in the fatal element of daylight, and perishes. The Herzogian tweak, to this ending, is that Harker, who has been looking more vampire like all the time, is last seen riding away from home on a fast horse, looking for all the world like the next Count Dracula.

## THEMES

**Bloodsucking.** We first see bloodsucking (vampirism) in Count Dracula's castle, when Harker cuts his hand while peeling an apple. The blood on Harker's hand turns the Count on big time, and in a fashion we would call psycho-sexual. Dracula's sexual attraction to Harker's wife is largely thirst for blood from her neck.

**Plague** Dracula takes infected soil with him and his crew, on their trip to Wismar. Dracula himself is an infected being, and helps to transmit his foulness to ship and crew; rats breed recklessly in the coffins they are carrying; and by the time the ship lands at Wismar its human population—except Dracula—is all dead of plague.

**Love** Harker is in love with his new bride, as the film opens. Their lives are before them. Yet shortly after their wedding Harker accepts a real estate assignment to Transylvania, an assignment which will keep him away for four months. What kind of love has he, for his bride? Has he a touch of his own draculean nature already latent in his bland exterior?

**Terror** Harker's bride is subject to terror. From the film's inception, onward, she is susceptible to dreadful night visions, and since they involve bat-like presences, she is vulnerable in advance to the terror which will enter her life with the advent of Dracula as suitor.

## CHARACTERS

**Jonathan Harker,** a young professional real estate agent, who accepts an assignment for contract signing with a certain count Dracula, who lives high in the Transylvanian mountains. The rest is history.

**Lucy Harker.** Jonathan's young bride, whom he has to leave alone for several months, during his more than eventful journey to Dracula's castle. At the end she falls prey to the advances of Dracula, whom she figures out how to kill, by exposing him to daylight.

**Count Dracula.** The owner of a dilapidated castle in Transylvania, and in the end a pitiful addict of vampirism.

## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### JONATHAN HARKER

**Character** Jonathan Harker is a clean faced young professional in a German town, who is given the assignment of getting a house purchase contract signed by a count Dracula who lives in the distant Carpathian Mountains. Harker makes the long trek, on horseback and foot, only to find himself assaulted by the vampire Count. With great difficulty, Harker escapes from the Count's castle, and eventually gets

back to Wismar, and his wife. Unfortunately, though, his experiences and injuries have deranged him, so that he no longer recognizes his wife. In the end, after the death of Dracula, Harker regains his vigor, but by this time he is himself turning into a Dracula, and rides away into the distance, on his own journey.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Ambitious.** When we first meet Harker he has just settled into Wismar, just married a lovely bride, and is ready for a successful professional career as a realtor.

**Persistent.** On his trip to Count Dracula's castle, Harker proves himself tough and persistent. Villagers, along the way, strongly urge him to turn back, but he refuses their many warnings. The road grows too rough for horse travel, so he continues on foot, climbing over boulders and through passes.

**Reckless.** In his effort to escape from Dracula's castle, Harker jumps a long distance onto a rocky escarpment below the castle walls, and is badly hurt. This fall, plus the trauma of his encounter with Dracula, renders him incapacitated until the death of Dracula.

**Draculan.** In the final developments of the film, as Harker regains his health, we realize that his own face, like Dracula's, is pale and increasingly elongated, with ever more rat like teeth. He is turning slowly into a vampire, and in the end rides away toward the hills of Transylvania.

### **LUCY HARKER**

**Character** Lucy Harker is the newly wedded bride of Jonathan Harker, come to live in the seemingly idyllic little town of Wismar. When we meet her she is a happy new bride, except that she is beginning to be plagued by nightmares, in which eery bats assail her. Her husband is uneasy about leaving her, but his work calls him. During her husband's prolonged absence, on the trip to Transylvania, Lucy is subject to any number of extrasensory dreams in which she intuits the danger her husband is in, at the hands of the vampire. This anxiety returns to haunt her in person, when the Count moves to Wismar, moves in as a next door neighbor, and woos her until she destroys him.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Isolated.** When Harker leaves for Transylvania, Lucy is left isolated in Wismar, except for a couple of kindly neighbors, whom Harker exhorts to look after her.

**Intuitive.** By Intuition, in her dreams, Lucy is conscious of the vampire assault against her husband by the vampire Dracula.

**Horrorified.** After months of awaiting the return of her husband, Lucy is horrified to find that he does not recognize her. She has to care for him like a child, until Dracula has been killed.

**Abandoned.** After killing Dracula, by exposing him to daylight, Lucy can expect that Harker will recover, as he does, but in fact she must endure something worse: Harker appears to be turning into a vampire, and rides away, leaving her.

### **COUNT DRACULA**

**Character** Count Dracula. Is a vampire count, who dwells in an ancient dilapidated castle in Transylvania. He decides to purchase a house in Wismar, and for this reason receives the real estate agent, Harker, as a guest In the castle. Having locked Harker in the castle, the Count makes his way by ship through the waterways of Europe, to Wismar. The ship carries plague, and all its crew die *en route*, so that Dracula arrives in Wismar alone on his plague ship. Furtively, Dracula sneaks away from his ship, and that night attempts to put the make on Lucy, who has fascinated him since Harker showed him her picture. Making love to her neck, that night, he does what she wants him to do, loses track of time, stays up past the cockcrow, and expires in the light of day.

### **Illustrative moments**

**Welcoming.** In his eery fashion, Dracula welcomes Harker at his Castle. He ushers the visitor into a dining room set with a large meal. And throughout the meal he watches his guest, no doubt waiting for the moment of truth, when he will spot some blood flowing from the guest's body.

**Vicious.** While Harker is sleeping, on his first night in Dracula's castle, Dracula locks Harker into the building, and makes his own escape, by water, on the way to Wismar. His intention? To beat Harker to Wismar, so he can make out with Harker's wife.

**Furtive.** Upon arrival in Wismar, in his ship on board which plagues have killed the crew, and rats have filled the coffins, Dracula sneaks off into the bushes with the coffin he carries with him, and which he sleeps in, and heads for the new property he has purchased.

**Assault.** That very night, Dracula attempts to make love to Lucy—Harker himself still being semi-comatose—and prepares to sink his teeth into her lily white neck, which she has exposed to him. At just that moment, though, the cock crows and daylight proves fatal to the nocturnal vampire.