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Imitations of Immortality: "Shadow of the Vampire"

Cover Page Footnote

James Craig Holte is a Professor of English and Director of Graduate Studies in English at East Carolina University, where he teaches courses in film and literature.

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At some future conference a round-table discussion entitled “The Golden Age of Film and Fantasy” will be scheduled, and as the participants debate the merits of particular film -- arguing the success of adapted high fantasies, the problem of original screenplays, the relationship of horror to the fantastic, the transforming nature of animation, the role of children’s fantasy in film, and the problematic role of computer graphics in special effects -- they will be discussing the films of today. We are in the midst of a unique period in film history. This is a wonderful time for films of the fantastic. Consider what we have seen recently and argued about passionately in discussion groups and with colleagues and students: adaptations of *The Fellowship of The Ring* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*, *The Matrix*, *Shrek*, *Moulin Rouge*, *Vanilla Sky*, *AI*, *The Mummy* and *The Mummy Returns* and popular remakes of *Planet of the Apes* and *The Time Machine*. All of these films were mainstream Hollywood productions with large production and advertising budgets, and all of them attracted both popular and scholarly interest. It seems as if fantasy may have finally escaped from its genre ghetto; the headline might read “*The Margin Has Finally Gone Mainstream; Fantasy Rules!*” However, in the noise created by all of these interesting fantastic films, a film of interest may have gotten lost, and I wonder if, at that roundtable in the future, anyone will mention a small but interesting film, *Shadow of the Vampire*?

E Elias Merhige’s *Shadow of the Vampire* (Lions Gate Films, 2000), starring John Malkovitch and Willem Dafoe, is an adaptation of, mediation upon, and fantastic assertion about F W Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1921), which has been called by Roger Ebert “the best of all vampire movies.” The premise of the film is indeed fantastic: Max Schreck, the actor who plays Count Orlock, is a real vampire discovered by *Nosferatu*’s director Murnau, who promises Schreck that he can sink his teeth into the film’s leading lady if he will play an actor playing a vampire in the upcoming film. Fantastic, yes, but no more fantastic than the premise of most films about the undead, and what makes *Shadow of the Vampire* such an interesting film is that it takes its vampire (or vampires, depending on how one defines who the monsters are in this movie) seriously. It also takes film seriously.

In a real sense, *Shadow of the Vampire* is as much an homage to Murnau’s classic film as Werner Herzog’s acclaimed 1979 remake of *Nosferatu*, a horror film that took itself seriously. It seems that the directors of the descendants of *Nosferatu*, the first serious vampire film, refused to position the vampire in the world of camp, comedy, or romance, instead fixing him firmly in the uncomfortable genre of horror, just as Murnau and screenwriter Henrik Galeen did when they adapted *Dracula*.

In adapting Stoker’s long episodic novel Murnau and Galeen simplified the text to develop a coherent screenplay. They changed names and places and cut heavily but retained the basic narrative thrust and thematic power of the novel. They also employed many of the conventions of German expressionist cinema, which questioned Western objectivity and rationality by emphasizing stylistic distortion to express emotional and psychological reality. Sets, motion, camera angles, lighting, make up, and costumes also stressed the fantastic over the representative. Throughout the film, Murnau and cameraman Fritz Arner Wagner created a visual metaphor of

vampirism as disease. Death spreads wherever the vampire appears. Much of the power of the film comes from the dramatic performance of Max Schreck as Count Orlock. As David Skal, wrote in *Hollywood Gothic*,

The central striking image of *Nosferatu* will forever and always be the cadaverous Max Schreck as the vampire, his appearance totally unlike the film vampires that were to follow. Schreck's characterization of Dracula as a kind of human vermin draws its energy in part from Stoker, but also from universal fears and collective obsessions. (52)

The film's power and the creativity of Murnau and Schreck have been widely recognized. Film historian Gerald Mast, for example, writes in his influential and popular *A Short History of the Movies*:

Unlike the later incarnations of Dracula -- Bela Lugosi, Christopher Lee, Klaus Kinski [one could add Gary Oldman's name to this list] -- Murnau's vampire (Max Schreck) was no sexy, suave, debonair figure who stole the lady's heart before he stole her blood. Murnau's vampire was hideously ugly -- a shriveled ashen little man with pointed nose, pointed ears, and a pointed head. This ugliness made the sexual implications of the vampire's relationship with humans -- particularly the use of the man's bedroom for the primary setting of the nightmare bloodsucking -- even more horrifying. (144-45)

Nosferatu has become a cultural icon, a recognized representation of the dark, or nonromantic, aspect of vampirism. In a sense it is unique, one would think almost impossible to adapt (rather than recreate as Herzog did), unlike the host of romantic vampires who, following the other thread of Stoker's narrative, haunt the multiplexes of contemporary suburban America. To use *Nosferatu* in a new, intelligent, and commercially successful way would be quite an achievement, and *Shadow of the Vampire* is such an achievement. Like *Nosferatu*, it takes vampirism seriously indeed.

Merhige situates his film almost effortlessly. Black and white title cards explain that Murnau adapted *Dracula*, changed the title, and created one of the most famous films of all time; then we see an extreme close up of an eye in color, cut to an old-fashioned film camera, hear the words, "Roll camera, and begin," and watch in black and white inside an iris as one of the opening scenes from *Nosferatu* is filmed. Throughout the filming, Murnau (John Malcovitch) provides his actors and his audience, with a running commentary on the plot of the film and the motivation of the characters. One of the benefits of silent film was that a director could really direct in real time. In addition, Murnau's comments on the plot, characters, and psychological states of his cast provide insightful reading of *Dracula* itself as well as an illuminating depiction of filmmaking during the silent period. Finally Murnau explains to his cost-conscious producer that the crew will be leaving Berlin for filming in Czechoslovakia and that the extra cost is the "price of genius." Greta (Catherine McCormack), the actress playing Ellen (Mina) in the adaptation complains that she needs to stay in Berlin and perform before live audiences, and says, pointing to a camera, that "this thing takes it [life] from me." In a very real sense this thing -- this film, this camera, this vampire and/or this director will take her life. The next morning, after a trip across the border on a train named "Charon" the cast and crew learn that a method actor named Max Schreck will be playing the vampire and that he will only appear at night and in full makeup, staying within his character for the entire filming.

The rest of the film follows inevitably from this suggestive beginning, as Merhige skillfully develops the threads of his narrative. The main thread involves the making of *Nosferatu*, and Merhige follows the simplified plot that Murnau and Galeen adapted from Stoker: Hutter, (not Harker) travels to the land of the shadows, assists a mysterious Graf Orlock (not Count Dracula) in a real estate purchase in Western Europe, is abandoned by the vampire, who travels by ship to

Bremen (not London) to infect the city and attack Hutter's wife Ellen (not Mina), who, in the end, sacrifices herself to destroy the vampire. Merighe provides shots from all of the major scenes of *Nosferatu*, but he also provides the set up and shoot for each scene. Every black and white *Nosferatu* scene is framed with full color scenes of Murnau's instructions to his cast and crew; the set up of props, lights and cameras; Murnau's commentary on the motivation of the actors and the action to be film; and his commentary on the shot itself. The thread of the making of the movie is fascinating in itself, especially as Merighe documents the limitations of early twentieth-century film equipment and the creativity of directors, cinematographers, and cameramen and actors as they invented a new art form on the fly. But this is only the skeleton upon which the flesh of the film is overlaid.

An equally significant thread is the mystery/horror narrative that frames the black and white *Nosferatu* scenes. Members of the film crew are dying, killed and drained of blood, and the unresolved question is whether there is a real vampire on the set or whether some deranged killer is using the filming to attack the filmmakers. The evidence is deliberately ambiguous. No one in the cast or crew believes in vampires, of course; the entire enterprise is a fiction, of course. Except, perhaps, for Murnau and Schreck. In a wonderful scene that captures the unease and uncertainty that is a crucial element in almost all successful vampire narratives, Murnau meets Schreck at night in the moldering castle that serves as the film's set. Murnau accuses Schreck of attacking his cinematographer, who is necessary for the completion of the film, arguing "Why him? Why not the script girl?" Schreck responds by asserting that he believes the writer is "no longer necessary." To which Murnau argues that the two of them had an agreement, that all of his people are necessary, and that Schreck must keep himself under control. This is clearly an indication that the vampire is real. However, it is possible to read the scene another way. Perhaps the cinematographer is suffering from the intensity of the filming and that Schreck and Murnau are both staying in the characters of their method-acting fiction, complete with blood drinking and bloodletting. Perhaps there is no vampire, simply two professionals, totally engrossed in their craft and willing to sacrifice everything, including their own sanity, and everyone, including the rest of the cast and crew, for art and genius. Perhaps.

The third thread of the film involves character. Who is the monster in this vampire film? Max Schreck is either an accomplished actor playing a vampire or an accomplished vampire playing an actor who is playing a vampire. In either case he is a pathetic creature, reduced to accepting caged rats and bottled blood in payment for the performance of his life, or perhaps his unlife. Midway through the film, for example, he accuses Murnau of "setting a poor table" and remarks that he "once drank from golden chalices." The "vampire" is pathetic here, a creature out of place in time and space who appears confused by the marvelous new technology of film he finds himself surrounded by. Murnau, on the other hand, is a perfectly inhuman monster who puts his "art" and his "genius" above the lives and interests of his cast and crew, going so far as to promise Schreck the leading lady, but only after the film is finished. In his monomania to create a masterpiece and control every aspect of a production that cannot be controlled Murnau loses his humanity, driving his cast and crew to an inevitable bloody conclusion in the creation of his masterpiece. In fact, the relationship between director and controlled performer is similar to that of another pair of German expressionist performers, Dr Caligari and his emaciated protégé, Cesare. One is never far from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* in serious vampire narratives.

The final thread of interest in the film is the production itself. Film is a collaborative art, and a film is a success not because of an actor, a director, special effects, or a subject matter, but rather because many elements come together to create an arresting visual narrative that draws viewers into an imagined world and sustains them while they are participating in the world within the frame. Even if we love the children of the night, not all vampire films are worth our time. *Shadow of the Vampire* finally works because it is a well-made film, not because it is meditation on the nature of vampirism or a retelling of a classic tale.

First, the production of *Shadow of the Vampire* was blessed with an intelligent script, written by Steven Katz. The idea that only a vampire could play such a famous vampire is inspired, and the knowledge of early film history and German expressionism presented in the film provides a solid foundation upon which to build the rest of the movie. Second, Merhige's decision to combine black and white and color photography as well as to insert shots from *Nosferatu* into his film enabled him to create a visual world within the frame that is suggestive of the silent cinema but captures the immediacy of modern film. In addition, Merhige fills the frame with wonderful props -- hand-cranked cameras, old lights, dark aviation goggles, and even a biplane -- that help create the illusion of authenticity. Third, the performances of John Malkovich as Murnau and Willem Dafoe as Max Schreck/Count Orlock are masterful. Malkovich is a perfectly controlled dictatorial director for whom art is more important than life, and Dafoe is both pathetic and horrific at the same time, not an easy feat to accomplish.

Shadow of the Vampire achieved both critical and popular success. It was nominated for numerous international awards in a variety of categories, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor, Best Makeup, Best Costume, Best Screenplay, Best Actor, Best Movie, Best Cinematography, Best Sound, and Best Sound Editing. It was nominated for two Academy Awards: Best Actor in a Supporting Role and Best Makeup. The film won awards from the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films, as well as a Bram Stoker Award, a Chicago Film Critics Association Award, and an Independent Spirit Award. Not bad for a remake of a film that was supposed to have been destroyed by court order.

One of the problems faced by film critics and film teachers is the creation of expectations. Discovering a film on one's own is a delightful experience; coming to a film after hearing of its wonders or being told "that this is one of the finest films of the early color period, or silent era, or recent cinema," the kind of comment often made in undergraduate film classes, is often an invitation to a let down. It is almost impossible to view a film in a vacuum, and by placing *Shadow of the Vampire* within a context that includes both *Nosferatu* and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, a context that the film demands, writer Steven Katz and Director E Elias Merhige force viewers to approach this film as a work of art, and by saying that they are successful, I may be setting up some of you for a let-down. But on second thought, given the overblown plots and underdeveloped characters in such recent vampire films as *Dracula 2000* and *Queen of the Damned*, I think it is worthwhile to praise a film that demands a knowledge of film history and relies less on special effects and flying body parts and more on acting and light and shadow.

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