

Review of “*Nosferatu*” in the 21st Century: *A Critical Study*, edited by Simon Bacon; and *The “Nosferatu” Story: The Seminal Horror Film, Its Predecessors and Its Enduring Legacy*, by Rolf Giesen

Cristina Massaccesi

Journal of Vampire Studies, volume 4, 2024, pp. 84–92



Journal of Vampire Studies (ISSN 2651-8988) is published annually on behalf of the Vampire Studies Association. For information about the association, visit <https://vampirestudies.org/>.

© 2024 Cristina Massaccesi. This work is licenced under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.en>), except where otherwise noted. Only copyright holders may use their work commercially outside publication in the journal. Remittances obtained from journal sales or webhosting are income streams for the Vampire Studies Association. Commercial agreements breaching these terms and conditions not permitted.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed by contributors are theirs and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the journal, its editorial board, advisory board or the publishing entity. All contributors take full legal responsibility for their work.

Book Reviews

BACON, SIMON, ed. *“Nosferatu” in the 21st Century: A Critical Study*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022 [2023]. Pp. xiii + 262. £72 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-80085-640-0.

GIESEN, ROLF. *The “Nosferatu” Story: The Seminal Horror Film, Its Predecessors and Its Enduring Legacy*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2019. Pp. 225. \$29.95 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-47667-298-4.

Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens had its gala premiere on March 4, 1922, in the Marble Hall of Berlin’s Zoological Gardens. F. W. Murnau’s enigmatic work, accompanied by a complex and elusive production and distribution history, is a highly ambiguous film that brings together the narrative linearity of a folktale with the complexity of a poetic idea of cinema, rich in correspondences and secret affinities that still fascinates and intrigues viewers and scholars more than one hundred years after its release.

As noted by Thomas Elsaesser, “the excess energy of the undead is now readable as belonging to the cinema and its eccentric patterns of propagation and proliferation across the culture at large. Not only in the way films have deposited their coffins in galleries, museums, schools and libraries, but also thanks to the Renfields—cinephiles turned necrophiles—at home in archives, lovingly restoring perished prints and reviving the ‘originals’ at Sunday matinees or special retrospectives.”¹

The ongoing interest in *Nosferatu* is attested by a seemingly inexhaustible output of books, conferences, panels, and essays devoted to the film and the lore that still surrounds it. Even beyond academic dialogue, the film proves its enduring legacy by means of citations, homages, and remakes, such as the one directed by Robert Eggers and starring Bill Skarsgård, Nicholas Hoult and Lily-Rose Depp in the three main roles of Count Orlock, Thomas Hutter and Helen, that Focus Features will release on December 25, 2024.

As part of this uninterrupted discourse about the original film, the two volumes discussed in this review are particularly interesting examples to

¹ Elsaesser, “Six Degrees of *Nosferatu*,” *Sight and Sound*, February 2001, 15.

consider due to their nature and almost opposite focus. Rolf Giesen's book, *The "Nosferatu" Story*, attempts a reconstruction of the background and cultural milieu that ultimately gave life to the film. It is the work of a cinephile "Renfield," to borrow Elsaesser's definition, that tries to bring together archival research and testimonies to create a history of the film and its context.

As part of this uninterrupted discourse about the original film, the two volumes discussed in this review are particularly interesting examples to consider due to their nature and almost opposite focus. Giesen's book attempts a reconstruction of the background and cultural milieu that ultimately gave life to the film. It is the work of a cinephile "Renfield," to borrow Elsaesser's definition, that tries to bring together archival research and testimonies to create a history of the film and its context.

Conversely, Simon Bacon's essay collection looks firmly at the future, the legacy of Murnau's work in the twenty-first century, and the ways the film has percolated through culture. It does so by combining essays and flash fiction and by covering a broad range of aspects, from the film's themes to its transmedia impact. In a short piece published on Liverpool University Press' blog, Bacon points out how:

The movie remains a dark mirror to the troubled world we live in, as striking and important in the 2020s as it was a century ago, as the all-consuming shadow of the vampire spreads ever wider throughout contemporary popular culture.

There always seems something slightly anachronistic in talking about *Nosferatu* and the future. Count Orlock is such a vivid manifestation of the archaic and mythical that he more obviously represents a monstrous past sucking the lifeblood out of the present than any attempt to envision a future, or at least one that does not result in death — unlike most other vampires, Orlok does not replicate himself but only consumes.

However, in spite of the film being set in the past . . . its director, F. W. Murnau, not only made a strikingly modern movie but purposely constructed his vampire to be both universal in nature and transhistorical as well — he put a symbolic "pin" in his vampire so that it would remain relevant across time.²

² Bacon, "Nosferatu: Looking at the Future," Liverpool University Press Blog, January 18, 2023, <https://liverpooluniversitypress.blog/2023/01/18/nosferatu-looking-to-the-future/>.

Giesen opens his book by introducing some of the key players in German cinema who, though not directly involved with Murnau's film, contributed to the creation and shaping of the Expressionist movement. These first chapters are an interesting attempt to show the influence of filmmakers and writers such as Paul Wegener and Hanns Heinz Ewers—the “Godfathers of German Film Fantasy,” as Giesen calls them—and the central position of their 1913 film *Der Student von Prag* (*The Student of Prague*) in the construction of German auteur cinema's “Weltgeltung (worldwide recognition)” (10). They also set the tone of the rest of the volume.

In a similar fashion, Giesen devotes chapter after chapter to the writers and filmmakers first involved in the development of Weimar cinema, such as Conrad Veidt and Robert Wiene, and then to those who contributed directly to the production and release of *Nosferatu*, from Albin Grau to Henrik Galeen. The book is certainly rich in detail, providing an overview of German cinema in the 1920s. However, I would argue that the overabundance of information—and, most of all, the way it is organised—also constitutes the volume's major drawback.

In a little more than two hundred pages, Giesen crams in seventeen chapters, bracketed by an introduction, an appendix, two filmographies, chapter notes, bibliography and index. Of the two filmographies, one (the second) covers the “The Silent Era of German Expressionist, Fantasy and Alchemical Films,” whilst the first is devoted to *Nosferatu* and its remakes, different cuts, homages, art projects and even some school projects. Apart from the anecdotal evidence of the never-ending fascination exercised by the film, the list comes across as fastidious and somewhat irrelevant in its most minute entries, especially considering the lack of contextual details that accompanies some of them.

The impression left on me by the filmographies mirrors the broader reaction I had after reading the book. While I agree with the importance of placing *Nosferatu* within the wider context of Weimar cinema and German Expressionism, Giesen's volume lacks focus, academic integrity, and critical substance. It presents some unsubstantiated claims and structural problems that, combined, become rather problematic and detrimental to the overall impact of the volume.

Some chapter titles are almost misleading. For instance, chapter 5, “Dracula in Germany: Henrik Galeen and the Screenplay for *Nosferatu*,”

opens with a long section about Albin Grau and Prana Film then proceeds to a quick account of the Spanish flu, mentions Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu's fondness for the Dracula character and its lore, and some other sideways topics that provide an overall impression of disorganisation and confusion.

Similarly, chapter 12, "Fritz Lang Hits It Big—And Murnau Carries On," is almost entirely devoted to Lang's 1927 film, *Metropolis*, but it is never entirely clear what its relevance or connection might be with the book's main subject matter. As previously underlined by other reviewers,³ the lack of coherence and cohesion within the book makes it hard to identify its main argument and establish its actual relevance.

Giesen is certainly a knowledgeable and passionate supporter of Weimar cinema, Expressionism, and everything related to *Nosferatu*. A tighter control on the material included in the volume, and a more attentive editorial work, however, would have much improved the significance of his contribution to the academic discourse surrounding Murnau's film.

In terms of academic integrity, Simon Bacon's "*Nosferatu*" in the 21st Century is instead characterised by its solid structure and organisation and follows a very cohesive and coherent progression. The collection is varied and invariably engaging, with several high-quality contributions. There are four sections in the volume that intersect and resonate with each other: Adaptations, Characters, Themes, and Transmedia. Each section is opened by a flash fiction by Elizabeth Davis, who also provided an opening contribution ("Land of Phantoms," xiii) and a closing one ("Late Night Movies," 247).

The essays and flash fictions are further contained, in a manner that reminded me of the visual play with arcs and archways in the film, by two evocative illustrations. The first, by Derek Newman-Stille, is accompanied by a quotation from the film's book on vampires (ii) that, by placing the shadow of Count Orlock in proximity with some rats, reveals "the primitive, elementary aspect of Orlock and his verminous nature" (15). The final illustration, by Madeline Potter, sees Orlock's profile dissolving into a myriad of bats (249), suggesting it as flying away towards new lives and

³ For instance, Tony Williams, "Told It Slant – *The Nosferatu Story* by Rolf Giesen," posted by Matthew Sorrento, *Film International*, May 6, 2020, <https://filmint.nu/told-it-slant-the-nosferatu-story-by-rolf-giesen/>.

new incarnations.

Within these suggestive images, the volume covers a wide range of topics that place Murnau's film into a wide web of references and connections. The essay by Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, "Shadow Play: From *Nosferatu* to *Shadow of the Vampire*" (25–40), discusses the film's most well-known adaptation, E. Elias Merhige's *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000). Giesen unfairly dismisses the film in his book, claiming it "bears not much truth, neither to the background of the original production nor to the characters involved . . . a hopeless screenplay that was based on a single idea" (131).

In Bacon's volume, though, Merhige's combination of "making of" and "what if" is discussed as a fascinating hybrid that combines biographical cinema and backstage drama with the tropes of traditional vampire film, while at the same time commenting and analysing ideas such as that of the vampire as a cinematographic construct, and that of cinema's inner nature as being equivalent to some kind of parasitic vampire. As stressed by Weinstock, "*Shadow* rethinks and reworks *Nosferatu* (which itself was a rethinking and reworking of *Dracula*). In the process, it reveals that which the cinema typically seeks to conceal, that its reality depends upon artifice and its truths are always partial" (40).

The last two essays in the first section are Murray Leeder's "Can(n)on Fodder: *Star Trek Nemesis* and the Remans" (41–53) and Andrew M. Boylan's "Yes! We Have *Nosferatu*. We Have *Nosferatu* Today": *Nosferatu* and Comedy" (55–67). Leeder's essay looks at the intersection between *Nosferatu* and the *Star Trek* canon, and at the way the characters of the Remans and their sudden appearance in the controversial and unsuccessful *Star Trek: Nemesis* (2002) constitute an unprecedented break in the complex but inherently coherent *Star Trek* canon.

Leeder contends in a clear and engaging manner that the Remans are coded in a problematic way. They are presented as a race of monsters existing in perpetual darkness, slaves to the Romulans, and characterised by Orientalising traits. The borrowings from both *Dracula*, on a narrative level, and *Nosferatu*, from a formal point of view, remain superficial and emptily "cool" and contributed to the underwhelming reception of the film: "The Remans emerge as deeply reactionary monster figures. . . whose elimination the re-secure the social equilibrium is seen as a positive development. But even worse than that, they are simply uninteresting.

And so, like their cinematic forerunner, the Remans vanish, not with the first rays of the morning, but into the misty realm of canonical neglect.” (52)

Boylan’s essay instead looks at the comedic heritage connected to the original film. The first part of his contribution looks at how certain parts of Murnau’s film, such as the famous sped-up carriage scene, can be perceived in a comedic manner by our twenty-first century’s sensitivity. The second part of the essay, instead, considers how humour and terror can intersect in several productions, from films (*Shadow of the Vampire*, *What We Do in the Shadows* [2014]) to TV shows like *The Fast Show* (1994–2014) and *SpongeBob SquarePants* (1999–). Boylan links the vampire’s comedic afterlives to the iconic status of Orlock and its distinctive image, which allowed the character to step from its original screen incarnation into the limelight of pop culture.

The closing essay in the first section of the volume is nicely linked to the contribution opening the second part of the book. The essays collected in the Characters section look at the “afterlives of some of the main figures from the original film and how certain readings and interpretations of certain of their characteristics have found a very particular foot hold in the twenty-first century.” (16). Stacey Abbott in “The Face of Human Corruption: The Legacy of Max Schreck’s Personification of the Vampire” (73–86) examines how the distinctive look of Murnau’s Count Orlock and its interpretation by German actor Max Schreck has influenced twenty-first-century’s film and television in a strand that is distinct from that of the more urbane drawing-room vampire, initiated by Bela Lugosi’s Dracula.

After looking at the relationship between Murnau’s re-imagined vampire and Stoker’s original, Abbott analyses several case studies, ranging from Joss Whedon to Werner Herzog. The persistence of the monstrous vampire conjured up by Murnau and, crucially, by Albin Grau, is connected in Abbott’s words to “an image of the vampire that embodied Grau’s perception of the undead as the corruption of the human form. Rather than fade away with Orlock at the end of the film, Max Schreck’s personification of the vampire continues to provide a visual language for what Grau saw as the corruption of humanity, fostering an important alternate path for the cinematic and televisual vampire that continues to hold sway” (86).

The second essay in the section shifts the perspective from the vampire to the female heroine of Murnau's film. Victoria Amador constructs a fascinating comparison between Murnau and Herzog's versions of Ellen/Lucy in "Nevertheless, They Persisted: The Heroines of *Nosferatu* 1922 and 1979" (87–99), pointing out, at the same time, how the characters can come across as "ultimate victim but also a figure of female agency" (16). Amador elaborates: "Murnau and Herzog illuminate something beyond the familiar gothic trope of the damsel in distress – the agency demonstrated by Ellen and Lucy. Both women are almost ghostly in their spirituality and Victorian fragility, their appearance conforming outwardly to the era's expectations for young matrons. Nevertheless, their instincts and intuition, and the actions they take which save their husbands at their own expense, elevate them from martyrdom" (88).

The collection is also compelling in the way it links *Nosferatu* to the COVID-19 pandemic through Nancy Rosenberg England's essay, "Answering *Nosferatu*'s Knock: Madness in Times of Pandemic" (101–110), which focuses on the character of the estate agent Knock; a conflation of two characters from Bram Stoker's novel, Renfield and Mister Hawkins. Knock is analysed in his trajectory to madness and in his acting as a scapegoat and a target to the hysteria instigated in the citizens of Wisborg by the arrival of Orlock and the plague. The author notes that

his name is intriguing because Knock does open the gate to the grim reality of death and anxiety during a pandemic.

Having decoded some of the messages and meanings in Knock's madness (destructive influence, scapegoating, stigma, harbinger of death) and the madness of the townspeople (fear, anger, desperation, powerlessness, prejudice), we can further recognise their timeliness in current societal fears. (107)

The connection between vampiric characters and queerness is explored in Thomas Brassington's "'Hello, Uglies': *Nosferatu*'s Queer Legacy in the 21st Century" (111–26). Brassington looks at the way Orlock's iconic ugliness acts as a catalyst for its power and queer appeal. With a focus on the photographs taken by Greg Bailey of performer Arran Shurvinton, known as Noss(feratu), the essay proposes a reading of Orlock's ugliness as a form of liberation from enforced beauty and gender expressions: "Rather than this coercive system of gender expression, the promises of ugliness

for Noss transformed gender expression into gender play. Monsters like Orlock, by virtue of their ugliness, promise an alternative relationship to the body and the material and media that make gender coherent. In doing so, fresh gender expressions can cohere freely and playfully” (124).

The Themes section reprises some crucial aspects in *Nosferatu* that have already been addressed in other scholarly contributions. It does so, however, in an engaging and original manner that connects the thematic issues already present in the film to twenty-first-century concerns. Opening with Anya Heise von der Lippe’s “[F]illed with Goddamned Soil from the Fields of the Black Death’: Tracing the New Materialist Vampire in Murnau’s *Nosferatu*” (131–42), that shifts the more common reading of the films focused on anthropocentrism to a more unusual look at non-human agency. The other contributions in the section examine equally engaging topics, such as the connection between the vampire and contagion (Catherine Pugh’s “The Deathbird of Disease: Count Orlock and the Monstrous Virus,” 161–79) or the triangle formed by hunger, consumption and consumerism as a central element in Murnau’s film that is explored by Lorna Piatti-Farnell in “The Vampire’s Hunger: *Nosferatu*’s Legacy of Blood, Luxury, and Roaring Consumerism” (143–59).

Finally, the Transmedia section presents essays on the evolution of the relationship between *Nosferatu* and other media. Leah Richards looks at the evolution of the soundscape accompanying the film and at the ways it changed over time thus influencing our reception of Murnau’s work in “Settling the Score(s): *Nosferatu* Symphonies, Concept Albums, and Improvisations of Horror” (185–96). Carl Wilson’s “*Nosferatu*, *Gnomeferatu*, and *Orlox*: A Survey of Count Orlock’s Vampire Clan in Video Games” (197–209) investigates the presence of Murnau’s vampire in videogames and considers how this continuous presence has an effect on the reception and interpretation of the original film, whilst Kristofer Woofert’s “Actuality in the Shadows: F. W. Murnau’s *Nosferatu*, Pseudodocumentary, and Mockumentary Aesthetics” (211–33) examines the way the film can read under the lens of documentary cinema and as a part of the broad sub-genre of found-footage films.

The last contribution to the book, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr.’s “A Soundtrack of Horror, or the Un-Dead Live in Person: *Nosferatu* and Live Performance” (235–46), takes into consideration live performances connected to *Nosferatu*, from those acting as a sound accompaniment to

the film to live theatrical experiences, to see how they can “add elements of unpredictability and variation into what is usually a set thing.” (245)

Thanks to the variety and solidity of the contributions, this collection is a welcome and important addition to the scholarly works about Murnau’s film. As Gary D. Rhodes states in his foreword, “*Nosferatu: A New Kind of Vampire*” (ix–xi), “*Nosferatu*’s increasing age makes it all the more removed from our time and place, all the more like a nightmare dreamed not by ourselves, but by someone else, so long ago. The older *Nosferatu* gets, the more powerful it becomes, gripping our imagination tightly in its claw-like hands” (xi). New publications, such as those considered in this review, cinematographic retrospectives, and exhibitions keep alive the Gothic imagination that has always accompanied the film and have injected new energy into the many questions *Nosferatu* still raises about the inner nature of cinema and the enduring fascination for what may be hiding in the darkest recesses of the movie screen. *Nosferatu* is still with us—and so it shall be for a long time.

CRISTINA MASSACCESI

University College London, UK

Bibliography

Bacon, Simon. “*Nosferatu: Looking at the Future.*” Liverpool University Press Blog, January 18, 2023. <https://liverpooluniversitypress.blog/2023/01/18/nosferatu-looking-to-the-future/>.

Elsaesser, Thomas. “Six Degrees of *Nosferatu*.” *Sight and Sound*, February 2001, 12–15.

Williams, Tony. “Told It Slant – The *Nosferatu* Story by Rolf Giesen.” Posted by Matthew Sorrento. *Film International*, May 6, 2020. <https://filmint.nu/told-it-slant-the-nosferatu-story-by-rolf-giesen/>.

CALZONI, RAUL, AND KIRSTEN VON HAGEN, eds. *Der Vampir: Ein europäischer Mythos des kulturellen Transfers* [The vampire: A European myth of cultural transfer]. Munich: AVM.edition, 2023. Pp. 236. €32,00 (softcover). ISBN 978-3-95477-155-4. PDF supplied by publisher.

Obviously building on Thomas Bohn’s seminal work, *Der Vampir: Ein*