Nosferatu (2024): A Truly Monstrous Monster

Carol Senf

Since writer/director Robert Eggers chooses to follow the same narrative trajectory as previous *Nosferatu* films, people reading this review might well ask, "Why do I need to see this new version? What does it do that previous adaptations did not?" My answer is that the biggest changes are that Eggers focuses on Ellen's motivation to sacrifice herself to a creature so obviously evil and that Eggers also establishes the full extent of Orlok's evil. Not only is he a creature of consummate evil, he is also a moldering dead body to whom Ellen is nonetheless sexually responsive. As a result, *Nosferatu* provides its actors (Lily-Rose Depp as Ellen Hutter, Bill Skarsgard as Count Orlok, and Nicholas Hoult as Thomas Hutter) with rich and complex roles. In addition, masterful cinematography, a haunting musical score, and lavish period costumes make it a pleasure to watch. But don't take my word for it. Though it did not win any of them, the film received Academy Award nominations for production design, best makeup and hairstyle, cinematography, and costume design, not to mention similar nominations by BAFTA.

First, let me confess that I am a total sucker for adaptations of the vampire in fiction and narrative film because there are so many ways to examine a figure of absolute evil who nonetheless proves compelling and seductive. I have also studied vampires of all kinds for fifty-five years though I am particularly interested in Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). While many film adaptations depict a vampire that retains elements of his humanity (among them are the brooding lover played by Gary Oldman in Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), the even more sympathetic figure played by Frank Langella in *Dracula* (1979), the almost entirely human warlord played by Jack Palance in a 1974 television miniseries), films influenced primarily by Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) focus almost entirely on the vampire's animal traits, his otherness.

Eggers continues in that vein, emphasizing the vampire's animalistic features yet also suggesting that some humans are drawn to a creature that is objectively both horrifying and disgusting. That ambivalence is worth our attention because it reveals human complexity, especially their attraction to what they know to be evil. While obviously influenced by previous versions of Nosferatu—as well as one scene that I suspect is influenced by Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872)—Eggers adds to our understanding of that ambivalence. Moreover, exploring how Eggers differs from his predecessors helps viewers to see and appreciate his unique contributions to this subgenre of *Dracula* adaptations.

The first is *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), a silent film directed by F. W. Murnau with a screenplay by Henrik Galeen. To avoid paying royalties to Stoker's estate, Galeen and Murnau changed the names of the characters (Count Orlok for Count Dracula, Thomas and Ellen Hutter for Jonathan and Mina Harker, and so on) and shifted the location to Germany. Nonetheless, the plot is so close to *Dracula* that when Stoker's widow and literary executor took Prana Films to court for copyright infringement they won the lawsuit, and Prana was ordered to destroy the negatives and all prints of the film. Fortunately for vampire lovers everywhere, a number of prints escaped and were made available from the 1930s on.

In 1979, German filmmaker Werner Herzog recreated *Nosferatu the Vampire* to honor the 1922 silent film that he regarded as the greatest film ever made in Germany. Featuring Klaus Kinski as the vampire and Isabelle Adjani as Lucy Harker, Herzog mostly returns to Stoker's names though he sets the film in Transylvania and Wismar, Germany. In this version, Jonathan Harker travels to Dracula's castle to arrange the sale of property. Encountering villagers who attempt to convince him not to go to the castle, Harker dismisses their fears as superstition and continues to the castle to arrange the sale. Dracula sails to Wisnar, where it appears that the crew

died of plague. Once the rats escape the ship, Wisner succumbs to a plague that scientists and physicians cannot control until Lucy, reading a book that Jonathan brings with him, learns that the sacrifice of a virtuous young woman is the only way to destroy a vampire. She vows to save Wisnar by holding him in her bedroom until the morning sun destroys him. What makes this film different from Murnau's original (as well as from *Dracula*) is that Jonathan becomes a vampire and rides away in the final scene of the film, revealing that evil triumphs.

Another film that might have influenced Eggers is *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), directed by E. Elias Merhige and written by Steven Katz. The film depicts the filming of Murnau's version and features Willem Dafoe as Max Schreck (the actor who played Count Orlock in Murnau's film and John Malkovich as a very obsessed and drug-addled Murnau). While members of the crew begin to worry that their lead actor is actually a vampire, the film is most interesting in its depiction of obsession and in its borrowing of silent film techniques.

The *Nosferatu* films that influenced Eggers share certain characteristics. Whether the vampire is named Count Dracula or Count Orlok, he is presented as a supernatural threat whose residence in a desolate castle suggests he is a being from some dark and primitive past who wishes to enter the modern world. Moreover, his connection to the animal world is reinforced by ratlike teeth and ears as well as the plague he brings with him. Despite his animalistic appearance, however, he is also presented as a sexual threat that arrives to intrude in the lives of the newlywed Hutters, a threat that the Mina character accepts because accepting his sexual advances will save her entire community.

Indeed, all the *Nosferatu* films distinguish themselves from *Dracula* by having the Mina Harker figure embrace the vampire whereas Stoker's character never chooses to have a relationship with the vampire. In fact, Stoker reveals her revulsion: "I was bewildered, and strangely enough,

I did not want to hinder him. I suppose it is a part of the horrible curse that such is, when his touch is on his victim" (266). As a result, the *Nosferatu* adaptations bring Mina to the forefront and reveal her courageous decision to accept the vampire's fatal embrace.

Although all the versions of *Nosferatu* ultimately destroy the vampire at the conclusion, they also reveal his power over others, usually the agents of modernity, including the lawyers, scientists, and real estate agents who introduce him to the modern world. As such, *Nosfereatu* films are very much unlike Stoker's novel (as well as many of its film adaptations), which emphasizes the power of modernity over the primitive past.

Eggers makes some significant changes, first by introducing Ellen as a teenager who experiences an orgiastic dream encounter with a dark and predatory figure. This scene very much resembles the beginning of *Carmilla* when Laura is visited by a young woman who curls up in bed with her. While the sexual component is latent in Le Fanu's tale, Eggers emphasizes the explosive physicality of the encounter. Ellen feels guilty about the encounter, but it continues to haunt her. (Frankly, I could have done with a bit less of Ellen's orgiastic writhing, as the clear sexual component needs no exaggeration.) Nonetheless, she grows up, marries the perfectly conventional Thomas Hutter, and strives for normalcy in her life.

Both their honeymoon and their desire for normalcy are interrupted when Hutter's boss sends him to Transylvania to negotiate a sale of property. The employer, Herr Knock, displays the same irrational behavior evident in earlier versions of *Nosferatu*. His irrationality—like that of Stoker's Renfield—is manifested in his insatiable appetite. It appeared to me, however, that Eggers entertained the idea of conflating his appetite for food with financial greed but chose not to pursue it. Herr Knock thus becomes less complex and interesting than the Renfield character on which he is based.

Eggers is more successful with his depiction of Thomas Hutter, and I note here that almost none of the film adaptations of *Dracula* or *Nosferatu* make the Jonathan Harker character as interesting or complex as he is in Stoker's novel. Eggers also succeeds in making Hutter a stand-in for the viewing audience. Bitten by Orlok when he visits his home, Hutter escapes from the castle and returns to Germany where he does what he can to support his increasingly hysterical (and I mean that word in the nineteenth-century clinical sense) wife. Nonetheless, because he seems to share her fascination with the monster, Ellen chooses to distract him while she seduces Orlok to his destruction. It is a clear gender reversal as Eggers focuses on Ellen's heroic sacrifice and on Hutter's intense blue eyes and look of bewilderment. His is the face of the ordinary human who is both fascinated and repelled by the presence of such absolute evil.

Meanwhile, the *tour de force* performance is Bill Skarsgard's as Count Orlok. Whereas earlier versions depict Orlok as wooden but also animalistic and vaguely menacing, the stiff movements detract from his power over the human characters. Skarsgard, on the other hand, evokes a kind of raw power over everything. And the power of his otherness is reinforced by the prosthetic body suit (there is a good reason the Academy nominated the film for makeup) that reveals he really is a decaying corpse. That otherness is also reinforced by his voice. Not only does he speak a dead language (a reconstructed form of Dacian, the language of the people who once lived in what is now Romania and Moldova), he also studied with an Icelandic opera singer to learn to lower his voice to sound menacing. Everything about him thus evokes evil, but it also suggests the kind of power and dominance that can be seductive. As a result, Ellen's response is not just her desire to protect her family and her community. It is also the highly sexualized response to his powerful presence. Even though I wish Eggers had spent more time exploring all the reasons humans respond so positively to Orlok, I appreciate his desire to examine their ambivalent

responses and attempt to depict why evil is so compelling. *Nosferatu* was not exactly the Christmas gift I had hoped for, but it is an intelligent retelling of the *Dracula* story. If you are interested in vampires, you should see it.

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Carol Senf is Professor in Literature, Media, and Communication at Georgia Tech, and she has been interested in vampires since childhood, resulting in her book, *The Vampire in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1988). She has also published books and articles on *Dracula* and Stoker, including "Dracula: Stoker's Response to the New Woman," *Victorian Studies* (1982), "Blue Books, Baedekers, Cookbooks, and the Monsters in the Mirror: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Food for Monsters: Popular Culture and Our Basic Food Taboo* (2019), and "Dracula and Women," *The Cambridge Companion to Dracula* (2017). In addition to vampires, Senf has also written on the Brontës, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Sarah Grand. As evidenced from this review, she also ventures into the present, looking at popular fiction and film.