

CINEFANTASTIQUE

SCREENING THE IMAGINATION

Week 2: *Nosferatu* (1922) *Haxan* (1922), *Metropolis* (1927)

Nosferatu, *Dracula* and Florence Stoker

- 1922 *Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie des Grauens* is released by German company Prana Films – Albin Grau
- Not bothering to seek permission to get the rights, the film is effectively a pirated version of *Dracula*
- Florence Stoker, Bram Stoker's widow takes legal action through the British Society of Authors
- 1929 the Film Society turns over their print of *Nosferatu* to Florence Stoker for destruction
- However, the film surfaces in New York and Detroit.

Albin Grau (Producer)

- A lifelong student of the occult and member of Fraternitas Saturni,
- Grau was able to imbue *Nosferatu* with hermetic* and mystical undertones

**Hermeticism* - a philosophical and religious tradition rooted in the teachings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus combining knowledge from various esoteric practices and belief systems including astrology, alchemy and theurgy (divine magic)

The Look of *Nosferatu* (1922)

- Unlike *Caligari*, natural settings and locations are used
- The distorted views and shadows are created using lighting and camera placement – eschewing the ‘painted shadows’ and ‘angled set designs’ of *Caligari*

The Shadow of the Great War

- The figure of Count Orlock can be seen as a representation of mass death and the mourning many countries were still experiencing

The Vampire = war and death?
War and death = the vampire?

“Nosferatu unabashedly sought the approbation of postwar intelligentsia, and its pestilential images were widely considered to be a reflection of the war and its wrenching aftermath.”

David J Skal

“Mysticism and magic, the dark forces to which Germans have always been more than willing to commit themselves, had flourished in the face of death on the battlefields. The hecatombs of young men fallen in the flower of their youth seemed to nourish the grim nostalgia of the survivors.”

Lotte Eisner

“Does the image of pestilence, serve to characterize him as a bringer of destruction?”

From Caligari to Hitler (Siegfried Kracauer)

***Nosferatu* and Responses to Death**

- The Professor – treats death as biology, loses touch of the meaning of death (and life)
- The Real Estate Agent – takes death personally, identifies with it, can't cope, goes insane
- The First Mate – sees the vampire (death) falls overboard in disbelief
- The Ship Captain – approaches death with resigned dutifulness
- Flowers adorn the scenes with the husband and wife
- Flowers symbolise their 'blooming' love
- Flowers though are transient – their happiness will be temporary
- Ghostly photography make them phantoms
- Love and happiness may pass out of existence
- The film is a funeral march, lined with floral tributes the dead

***Haxan* (1922)**

- A Swedish/Danish documentary style silent horror
- A mix of dramatized scenes and 'studies' depicting witchcraft (or supposed witchcraft) and medieval torture
- At the time, it was the most expensive Scandinavian film ever made
- Banned in the US and heavily censored in other countries for its depictions of torture, nudity and sexual depravity
- Much of its imagery could have been ripped from the canvas of Hieronymus Bosch
- Based (in part) on *Malleus Maelficarum* – a German 15th century 'guide for inquistitors'
- The lengthy film is split into four parts

The Film Chapters

- 1) A 'study' of medieval accounts of demons and witches
- 2) A series of vignettes examining superstition and beliefs around satan and witchcraft
- 3) A story used to demonstrate how suspected witches were dealt with in the middle ages – contains explicit torture scenes
- In Part 4 – Christensen seems to be making the claim that most women who were accused of 'witchcraft' were actually 'mentally ill'
- There is a sort of 'ham-fisted' psychiatry at play
- Part 4 of the film feels full of contradictions and (unintentional) ironies
- Christensen talks about the advances in psychiatry – stating the way 'disturbed women' are treated in mental hospitals is much more humane, when in fact, women in particular were often treated appallingly at that time.
- There is no issue raised about the treatment of women patients for 'Hysteria'
- Christensen asserts that the victims of witch hunts were probably suffering from afflictions like kleptomania or somnambulism
- There is no mention of the abuse caused at the hands of a land hungry upper class or church officials aiming to retain power

***Metropolis* (1927)**

- Directed by Fritz Lang, *Metropolis* contains some of the most visually iconic imagery in cinematic history. It is also, paradoxically a critic of dictatorship which also became an influence on actual dictators
- *Metropolis* tells the tale of a futuristic and dystopian society where rich idlers retain all the privileges life has to offer while a bigger group and slave-like citizens carry out all the work

“These dead eyed robotic figures, mercilessly exploited by the trivial idlers of Metropolis, made an extraordinarily potent image: gullible, expendable, industrious, they did exactly what they were told – a rare stabilizing virtue for as long as it lasts.”

Phillip Strick

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- Yet, while the film carries an anti-dictatorship message (though the ending seems to renege on this slightly) its imagery inspired the look of Nazi propaganda

“The overwhelming use of geometrical symmetry...the architecture of Metropolis seems to look forward to the fascist mise-en-scene of Leni Reifenstahl’s Triumph of the Wills, with its construction of Hitler as a God-like figure and feverish rendering of his appeal.”

From Caligari to Hitler
Siegfried Kracauer

Special Effects

- Eugen Schüfftan created pioneering visual effects for Metropolis.
- Miniatures of the city
- A camera on a swing
- And, most notably, the Schüfftan process – where mirrors are used to create the illusion that actors are occupying miniature sets.

The Maschinenmensch (Robot)

- Created by sculptor Walter Schulze-Mittendorff.
- A whole-body plaster cast was taken of actress Brigitte Helm, and the costume was then constructed around it.
- She sustained cuts and bruises while in character as the robot, as the costume was rigid and uncomfortable

Next Week

Un Chien Andalou (1929)

Vampyr (1931)

The Bride of Frankenstein (1935)