

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



NOSFERATU, DER PHANTOM DER NACHT

By Joel Mynders

Nosferatu, der Phantom der Nacht is Werner Herzog's 1979 homage to the 1922 silent movie *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* by F.W. Murnau. Both are based on the 1897 novel *Dracula* by Bram Stoker and certainly both are prime examples of the overall tradition of German Expressionism in art and film. Herzog placed his long-time friend and antagonist Klaus Kinski in the title role and Bruno Ganz and Isabelle Adjani play the hapless couple Jonathan and Luci.

Herzog follows Murnau's narrative quite closely but with some interesting elaborations. Chief among these is

the more ominous ending in the Herzog version, which enhances the narrative theme and exemplifies Herzog's integrity as an artist and his lack of interest in such pleasantries as a "happy ending". Other variations include the haunting crypt scene in the opening sequence and the scenes of social disintegration late in the story, to which we'll return.

Expressionism as a stylistic mode leaps to the foreground when one considers *Nosferatu* and indeed all of Herzog's work. Death, decay, the occult, impending doom, violence and the notion of evil are repeatedly interwoven in the film's sound and visual elements. This we find in the ghastly close-ups of the corpses in the crypt scene, fantastic and dangerous landscapes, rushing fast-action clouds shots, long angular shadows and dark rooms and hallways. Much of Herzog's visual style comes directly from the Murnau film, especially the appearance of *Dracula* himself. Kinski's vampire, with his deathly pale bald head, protruding fangs, bat-like ears, absurdly long fingernails, long black coat and menacing and exaggerated gestures, is almost identical. Special mention should be made of the haunting and evocative music provided by the German new-age ensemble Popal Vuh, who Herzog uses in many of his other films including *Aguirre*.

It has been more than a century since Stoker wrote his seminal gothic horror and obviously the genre quite early on was taken over by commercial film industries serving up entertainment in the form of shocks, fear and other grotesqueries. But in fact *Nosferatu* is an allegory and is not really intended as a scare film. *Dracula*, his murders, his accompanying rats, the plague they bring, all embody the evil that resides within and around humanity. And like *Dracula*, this evil is immortal, eternal, irrational and beyond the reaches of our intellectual faculties. The Enlightenment has failed us, so says this film. It has duped us into thinking we can discern and understand evil's inner workings and devise appropriate remedies. After *Dracula* arrives in town and the authorities discover his numerous victims the good town doctor dismisses the notion of a supernatural evil being

as simple-minded superstition and declares that the problem must be studied scientifically.

A concomitant theme deals with societal reactions to evil. As the story progresses Dracula's victims pile up, the town population is decimated by plague and civilization is virtually in a state of collapse. An elaborate scene in the town square (not found in the Murnau film) depicts many coffins, out of place farm animals and town folk celebrating with fires, dancing and drunkenness. A party of proper bourgeois people nonchalantly dine at a table and toast their impending doom. Society and all its varying strata are complacent in the face of evil and devoid of moral will. Humanity as an amoral entity is the message here.

In *Nosferatu* the German Society presents in the same work two opposing qualities: a low-brow Friday night creature feature and high-brow German Expressionistic art.