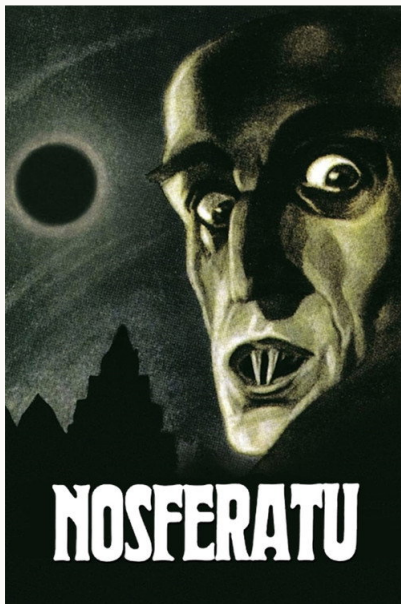




HORROR · FANTASY

Nosferatu

1922 · Directed by F.W. Murnau

Silent Cinema

German Expressionism

Horror

A young property agent leaves his devoted wife and travels to the Carpathian mountains to close a deal with a reclusive nobleman, Count Orlok. The journey grows stranger at every stage. A silent, unauthorised take on Dracula, told as a slow, uneasy fairy tale.

DIRECTOR F.W. Murnau

YEAR 1922

RUNTIME 1h 34m (94 min)

COUNTRY Germany

GENRES Horror, Fantasy

CAST Max Schreck, Gustav von Wangenheim, Greta Schröder, Georg H. Schnell, Ruth Landshoff

MUSIC Hans Erdmann

IMDB 7.8 / 10 (120,332 votes)

ROTTEN
TOMATOES 97% (critics)

TMDB SCORE 7.7 / 10 (2,539 votes)

WHERE TO
WATCH

Free: [Search YouTube \(restored / 4K\)](#)

Free: [Search YouTube \(all versions\)](#)

Free: [Search Internet Archive](#)

Stream (US): Amazon Prime Video, AMC+ Amazon Channel, Shudder, Shudder Amazon Channel, Screambox Amazon Channel, FlixFling, Eternal Family, Cultpix

Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, FlixFling

Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home, FlixFling

Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The earliest surviving screen vampire, and the template for what followed

F.W. Murnau's film is the oldest surviving screen adaptation of the Dracula story. Max Schreck's gaunt, rat-like Orlok fixed the vampire on screen as a pale, inhuman figure, far from a charming aristocrat.

2 Horror built from images, not sound

With no dialogue and no effects budget, the film creates dread through framing, shadow, editing and location. It shows how much a camera alone can make an audience feel.

3 A key work of Weimar-era German cinema

Murnau takes the stylised unease of German Expressionism out of the studio and into real landscapes, giving the movement one of its most distinctive and influential results.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of German silent cinema and the foundation of the cinematic vampire, it helped establish horror as a genre with its own visual language.

WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a film where the landscape and the camera are as frightening as the monster, and let the slow pace work on you.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How Count Orlok is framed: his posture, stillness and the way the shots hold on him are very different from how the other characters are filmed.
- The cutaways to nature, from waves and clouds to small animals. Notice what they add to the mood and how they link scenes together.
- The tinted colour of the print and the use of shadow. Consider what each colour suggests at different times of day.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

What makes a figure frightening when he never speaks and barely moves: the way he looks, the way he is filmed, or the way others react to him?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Industry:** Prana Film, a small Berlin company founded in 1921 and interested in the occult, made it. Nosferatu was its only production, and it was made without securing the rights to Bram Stoker's novel.
- **Dominant styles:** After *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), German cinema favoured distorted, painted studio sets. Murnau instead mixed some stylisation with real buildings, ships, forests and mountains.
- **Technology:** Silent film relied on intertitles, live musical accompaniment and colour tinting of black-and-white prints, with colours used to signal night, day and mood.
- **Audience:** Postwar German audiences were used to stories of fate, madness and menace. Horror as a recognised genre barely existed yet, so there was little formula to follow.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

TRADITION

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Gothic literature

The unlicensed story source, itself part of a long tradition of Gothic tales about aristocratic menace and the supernatural.



FILM

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

Proved that stylised, uneasy fantasy could succeed in German cinema, though Murnau moved away from its painted sets toward real locations.



TRADITION

German Romanticism

Its paintings and tales of nature, death and the uncanny inform the film's landscapes and its fairy-tale tone.



THIS FILM

Nosferatu (1922)

NEW AT THE TIME *It brought supernatural horror to feature length with a monster who looks truly alien, filmed largely in real locations rather than purely on painted sets.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in Weimar Germany in 1922, amid hyperinflation and postwar trauma, by an independent company that had almost no money.

- **Country and moment:** Germany was four years out of the First World War and defeat. Its new democracy was unstable, and many people had lost family, savings or certainty. Death, plague and fear of the unknown were familiar themes to audiences.
- **Economy:** Inflation was spiralling toward the hyperinflation of 1923. Money lost value quickly, but cinema was still popular cheap entertainment. Films also earned foreign currency, so the industry kept expanding.
- **A short-lived independent studio:** Prana-Film was founded by Albin Grau and Enrico Dieterle in 1921, and *Nosferatu* was its only production. Its budget was limited, and it made a risky choice by adapting Bram Stoker's *Dracula* without buying the rights.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Murnau had served in the war as a soldier and then as a pilot, and he was already an established director. Much of the film was shot on real locations in Germany and Slovakia rather than in a studio. Stoker's widow later sued, and a court ordered copies destroyed.

WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Deliberate and atmospheric. Scenes hold longer than in modern horror, and tension builds through anticipation rather than shocks.
- **Format:** Silent film with German intertitles, usually shown with English subtitles. A restored print comes with a recorded orchestral score.
- **Colour:** Black and white with colour tints in good restorations, so blue, amber or sepia may wash over whole scenes.
- **Performance:** Stage-influenced and stylised: broad gestures, fixed stares and exaggerated posture, which suits the story's fairy-tale tone.
- **Aspect ratio:** Roughly 1.33:1, the standard silent-era frame. Runtime varies by restoration, around 90 to 95 minutes.
- **Versions:** Several cuts and restorations exist with different intertitles, character names and tinting. Choose a recent restoration for the best image.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

10+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings are PG (GB), 12 (DE) and unrated (US). Nothing is graphic, but the lingering dread and silent pacing suit around 10 with a parent.

Official ratings: US NR · UK PG · Germany 12

- **Good for:** Older children and teens curious about film history will enjoy the striking shadows, inventive camerawork and atmosphere that shaped later horror, plus a haunting score and a chance to try a silent film.
- **May unsettle, scary imagery:** The central figure has a deliberately eerie, rat-like look, and several shadow-heavy shots are designed to chill. Little is shown in gory detail.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** A constant mood of dread, dark omens and mortality hangs over the story, more through atmosphere than explicit content.
- **May unsettle, peril:** Characters face a sustained sense of menace and threat, with several tense, suspenseful stretches.
- **May unsettle, pace:** It is silent and black and white, with story told through text cards and exaggerated acting. Younger viewers may lose patience.
- **Explain first:** It is a silent film from 1922, so the story is carried by music, expressive acting and occasional written title cards you may need to read aloud.
- **Explain first:** Effects are simple, handmade tricks such as camera speed and shadows. They look eerie and dreamlike rather than realistic, which is part of the charm.
- **Explain first:** Some versions have tinted colours and different musical scores, so the look and mood can vary depending on which copy you watch.

Talk about it after: *>How did the filmmakers create fear without sound or modern effects, and which images or shadows stayed with you most?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.

After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film can be read as an account of dread as something that arrives from outside a settled, ordinary world and cannot be reasoned with. Its monster is a force more than a character, and love, in the form of sacrifice, is the only thing that can stand against it.

THEMES

- **Contagion and fear of the outsider:** Orlok arrives from the East carrying disease with him. The film can be read as reflecting Weimar anxieties about illness, war and strangers, though that reading is interpretive.
- **Love as sacrifice:** Ellen's devotion to her husband becomes the film's moral centre. The story suggests that purity and willingness to give oneself are the only weapons against the Count.
- **Nature and the supernatural:** Murnau links the monster to the natural world, from predators to storms to the tide. Evil appears as part of nature's cruelty, not a separate realm.
- **Rationality versus superstition:** Characters in authority dismiss warnings and explain away what they see. Knowledge is held in old books, not in the sensible world of business.
- **Desire and appetite:** Orlok's hunger is physical, but his fixation on Ellen has erotic overtones. The film can be read as treating desire as something predatory.

Key scenes

Hutter's arrival at the castle

This is where the film's tone shifts from the everyday to the uncanny. Orlok's first appearance, framed in a doorway, establishes his look, his stillness and the rules of the film's horror.

The voyage of the ship

The crossing shows Murnau building terror through accumulation and absence. A sailing ship becomes a closed space where fear spreads, and the cutting makes the threat feel inevitable.

Orlok's shadow on the stairs

The shadow climbing toward its victim is among the most reproduced images of silent horror. It shows how the film makes menace out of light and shape, with the monster barely visible.

Ellen's final sacrifice and the dawn

The ending joins the film's themes of love, sacrifice and nature. It also shows how Murnau uses light itself as a plot device and moral force.

Filmmaking

- **Cinematography:** Fritz Arno Wagner shot on real locations including castle ruins, Baltic ports and mountain landscapes. The images give the supernatural a physical, documentary-like reality that studio sets could not.
- **Performance and make-up:** Max Schreck's make-up, long fingers, stiff walk and fixed stare turn Orlok into a creature, not a gentleman. The contrast with the more naturalistic Hutter makes him feel alien.
- **Editing:** Parallel cutting links Orlok's progress with events elsewhere, creating dread across distance. Cutaways to nature give the film a rhythm of ominous pauses.
- **Design and shadow:** Albin Grau's costumes and sets, together with sharp contrasts of light, give the film its Expressionist character. Shadows often stand in for the physical presence of the monster.
- **Music and tinting:** Hans Erdmann's score, partly reconstructed in modern versions, supplied emotional guidance. Colour tints separate day, night and interior mood across the film.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

Hutter, a young estate agent in the German town of Wisborg, is sent by his eccentric employer Knock to Transylvania. A nobleman, Count Orlok, wants to buy a house in Wisborg. Hutter leaves his wife Ellen despite her unease, and the villagers near the Count's castle warn him not to go on.

At the castle Orlok signs the papers. He sees a portrait of Ellen and becomes fixated on her. Hutter discovers what his host really is and barely escapes, while Orlok sets off for Wisborg by sea, travelling in coffins filled with earth.

On the ship the crew die one by one until the vessel arrives with only corpses aboard. Orlok comes ashore, and the town is struck by an epidemic that its doctors cannot explain. Knock, who has gone mad and serves the Count, is taken into custody.

Ellen reads a book about vampires and learns that a woman pure of heart can destroy such a creature if she keeps him with her until the first light of morning. She sacrifices herself and invites Orlok to her room. He loses track of the hour while feeding, and the rising sun destroys him. Ellen dies in Hutter's arms, and the plague ends.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **An unlicensed Dracula:** Prana Film did not obtain the rights to Stoker's novel. It changed the names and setting, but Stoker's widow, Florence, sued after release, and a German court ordered the prints destroyed. Some copies survived abroad, and the film lived on.
- **Albin Grau's vision:** Grau co-founded Prana, produced the film and designed its look. His interest in the occult shaped the project, and he promoted it as a work about plague and the supernatural, not just an adventure story.

- **Real places, not painted sets:** Murnau and cinematographer Fritz Arno Wagner filmed on location, including the Carpathians in Slovakia and northern German ports. This set the film apart from the studio-bound stylisation of Caligari.
- **Max Schreck's Orlok:** Schreck was an experienced stage actor, and his transformation under heavy make-up created the rat-like Count. His name means fright in German, which fed legends that he was not a real person.
- **A film nearly lost:** After the court ruling, the surviving prints were scattered and altered, with different titles and intertitles. Modern restorations reassemble the film from several archive sources, which is why versions still differ.
- **Myth:** Max Schreck was a real vampire, or the identity behind the role was a mystery. **Reality:** Schreck was a working German stage actor. The vampire rumour is a later joke, which the 2000 film *Shadow of the Vampire* turned into fiction.
- **Myth:** Every copy was destroyed after the lawsuit, so the film was thought to have vanished. **Reality:** The court ordered destruction, but copies survived in several countries and circulated in altered versions. Restorers have since assembled the film from those surviving prints.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

TRADITION

Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Gothic literature

The unlicensed story source, itself part of a long tradition of Gothic tales about aristocratic menace and the supernatural.



FILM

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

Proved that stylised, uneasy fantasy could succeed in German cinema, though Murnau moved away from its painted sets toward real locations.



TRADITION

German Romanticism

Its paintings and tales of nature, death and the uncanny inform the film's landscapes and its fairy-tale tone.



THIS FILM

Nosferatu (1922)



FILM

Dracula (1931)

Universal's version, with Bela Lugosi, adapted the same story in a more theatrical and talkative style, shaping the vampire's image for decades.



FILM

Nosferatu the Vampyre (1979)

Werner Herzog's remake, with Klaus Kinski, openly reworks Murnau's film and its images as a tribute.



FILM

Vampyr (1932)

Carl Theodor Dreyer's dreamlike vampire film also builds fear from atmosphere and light, extending the poetic approach to horror.



FILM

Shadow of the Vampire (2000)

A fictionalised story about the making of Nosferatu that plays with the myth around Max Schreck.

Reception and reputation

Nosferatu premiered in Berlin in March 1922, with a staged event themed around the film. Reviews were mixed to positive, and critics noted its atmosphere. The commercial run was cut short by the lawsuit from Stoker's heirs, and Prana Film went bankrupt soon after.

Its reputation grew slowly through screenings abroad and, later, restorations and the rise of film scholarship. It is now regarded as one of the high points of German silent cinema and a founding work of horror, admired for its images more than its plot.

Cultural impact *beyond cinema*

- **Copyright survivor:** Stoker's widow Florence won a court ruling ordering copies destroyed, yet prints survived abroad. The film's later rediscovery turned it into a famous case of an unauthorised adaptation outliving its suppression.
- **Orlok as pop icon:** Count Orlok's bald head, pointed ears and long claw-like fingers became a recognisable image, distinct from the suave Dracula. He is parodied in *SpongeBob SquarePants*, where a "Nosferatu" image appears in the episode "Graveyard Shift".
- **Fiction about the film:** The making of the film has itself become a subject. *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000) imagines Max Schreck as a real vampire, with Willem Dafoe in the role. It builds on the film's mystique.
- **Live screenings today:** Nosferatu is often shown with live or newly composed scores, including organ and orchestral performances. It is regularly screened around Halloween and used in film courses as a key example of German Expressionism.

Its lasting influence

Its imagery shaped how later films pictured vampires, from Universal's *Dracula* to Werner Herzog's remake and many modern horror films. Orlok's shadow and silhouette became standard visual shorthand for menace, and the film showed that atmosphere alone could carry a horror feature.

WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Sunrise (1927)

Murnau's Hollywood work shows his visual mastery and fluid camera in a very different, romantic story, and is among the greatest silent films.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

The film that made Expressionism famous. Compare its painted, distorted sets with Nosferatu's real locations.

SEE ITS INFLUENCE

Frankenstein (1931)

Universal's early sound horror, with a monster whose image defined the genre. Compare how it uses sets, shadow and sympathy.

JUMP FORWARD

Nosferatu the Vampyre (1979)

Herzog's remake shows how a later director reimagined Murnau's images and story in colour and sound.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Vampyr (1932) COMING SOON

Dreyer's early sound vampire film builds dread through dreamlike light, an alternative to Murnau's approach.

FULL CAST AND CREW



F. W. Murnau
DIRECTOR



Max Schreck
ACTOR
as Count Orlok



Gustav von Wangenheim
ACTOR
as Hutter



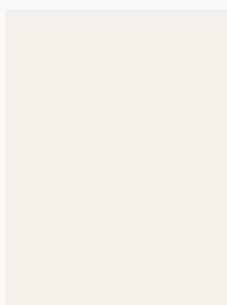
Greta Schröder
ACTOR
as Ellen



Georg H. Schnell
ACTOR
as Harding



Ruth Landshoff
ACTOR
as Ruth



Hans Erdmann
COMPOSER

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