

Nosferatu the Vampyre (1979)
Directed and written by Werner Herzog,

The Transylvanian Transformation: A Review

It was fortunate for Lucy that her ankles were less attractive than her neck. As the female hero of *Nosferatu*, Werner Herzog's idiosyncratic West German version of the Dracula story, she had her hands full coping with the supernatural without worrying about being up to her knees in rats.

A beautifully filmed remake of Murnau's 1922 expressionist classic, *Nosferatu* follows in the cloven footprints of the original by drawing an explicit link between the vampyre myth and the black death. In transplanting himself from Transylvania to Germany, Dracula was accompanied by a ship full of rats, each with excess baggage: the bubonic plague. Soon Bremen was transformed into a City of the Macabre (which probably meant that the local undertaker was a Scottish immigrant). As the death count grew, people feasted or danced among the pine boxes which contained either deceased compatriots or Eastern European soil, not because they had escaped the black death but because they were plagued by it. It was probably because there were so many immobile remains left around that Lucy was able to walk untroubled among the rodents.

Besides this intermingling of myths, the movie is interesting on several other counts, and especially one Count, for it is in its characterizations that the movie is most singular. Dracula was either addicted to bleach or was recurrently visited by ghosts, because his face was ivory white (or perhaps he had once bitten his lip, drawn blood, and then couldn't stop). Spock-eared, he looked like a cross between a corpse and a rat. This image is a far cry from the handsome, Casanova portrayal of Dracula seen in the recent production with Frank Langella. This lady-killing vampyre, who could transform himself from a two-legged to a four-legged wolf when escaping through his victim's bedroom window, had retractable teeth which conveniently shrank to normal length when he wished to neck (in the conventional sense). Herzog's Dracula, in sharp contrast, was gruesome.

The helpless victim in this tale of rats and bats was not Lucy, as in the 1890s Victorian novel, but her husband, Jonathan Harker. He returned from his real estate transaction in Transylvania marvelously transformed, having forgotten to take along his six-pack of crosses. The full extent of the transmogrification, however, was not immediately apparent. At first his batty behaviour was attributed to brain fever -- a very understandable reaction in the light of his night-time experiences in the black depths of Dracula's castle. It fell to Lucy to nurse this pain-in-the-neck back to health.

If this wasn't enough, it also fell to Lucy's lot to save the city from the ravages of the land-speculating Count, and try to rescue her husband from the lingering effects of Dracula's embrace. (In transforming Dracula from a fiend into a great lover, our modern movie makers have missed an obvious implication here and we can anticipate the 1980s gay version of the myth). Meanwhile, Dracula set out in search of Lucy by night, bounding across the Town Square with his arms raised, attempting to imitate evilness

afoot. In this version the Count didn't have to wait for that notorious "first bite". He had caught a glimpse of Lucy's full-throated portrait in Jonathan's golden locket while busily occupied in the general area beneath his guest's chin. "What a lovely neck!" he said, meaning Lucy's. (Dracula was, one may say, "into" necks). This ominous line of the Count's was reminiscent of that famous response in the early Bela Lugosi film -- to Jonathan's offer of a glass of Roumanian red, Lugosi had replied, in his best Transylvanian accent: "I don't drink wine." He was fond of the colour but found the taste a little thin, thereby casting theological doubt on its supposed transubstantiation during the sacrament.

Luckily for Lucy, it transpired that Jonathan had been given a book on black magic while in the Carpathians, the German translation being readily available on the black market. Armed with this new knowledge and Jonathan's journal, Lucy turned to Dr. van Helsing for help. Probably familiar with Bram Stoker's book, she knew that van Helsing had been conceived originally as an immaculate master of the occult, a 19th century Simon Wiesenthal who hunted vampyres rather than Nazis. Much to her chagrin, Herzog tampered with the script and cast the doctor as a transparent coward who covered his fear with a scientific mistrust of the supernatural. He shuffled away leaving Lucy with the task of saving the city.

So we had a female hero and it would seem a feminist version of Dracula. But, alas, Herzog made his heroine according to the traditional mold. Lucy couldn't be expected to act forcefully, to do the bloody work. Such transgressions were the province of men, or vampyres. So while the men appeared as victims or cowards, Lucy, left to battle alone, could only resort to her charms, to female manipulation.

A hitherto unnoticed footnote in the vampyre chronicles, between hints about the plentiful use of garlic at dinner and the correct temperature to keep your cross scalding hot, informed the reader that if a woman with a pure heart and a soul the colour of Dracula's skin would give herself willingly and succeed in detaining a vampyre until dawn, he would be destroyed by the light of the morning sun.

So Lucy made her preparations. To keep her husband from interfering with the transfusion to be transacted in her bedroom, Jonathan was hemmed into a corner of the living room by a semi-circle of sacred wafer crumbs left by Lucy, who otherwise was a very tidy housekeeper. He may have been the host, but he probably wasn't consecrated and Lucy didn't want to take any chances.

Dracula came to the prepared feast, complete with an engraved invitation, was detained only momentarily by a temptingly translucent nightdress, and was quickly up to his neck in necking (in the unconventional sense). But when the Count rose to withdraw himself from Lucy's chamber and his fangs from Lucy's throat, she reached out to him and gently lured him back. So Dracula, having found Lucy much better than a blood-bank, went back to make another withdrawal, being particularly fond of AB negative. He was definitely beginning to get in over his head.

Soon Lucy was paler than her smock and becoming more feeble with each slurp -- definitely good to the last drop -- while Dracula, who must have getting bloated, showed little power of resistance.

Suddenly we heard a cock crow (a peculiar teutonic hybrid). Lucy expired as Dracula

was transfixed by a ray from the rising sun and crumpled in agony to the floor -- a timely message about the dangers of over-indulging,

Van Helsing put in a late appearance, in time to have a change of heart, or two. Fortunately Dracula's body was not the victim of a fade-out as it had been under Murneau's earlier direction, and the evidence was palpable at Lucy's feet. A born-again believer, the doctor knew intuitively what was necessary and immediately fetched the required surgical instruments from his case: a hammer and stake. Since he had earlier professed disbelief in vampyres, we may conclude that he had a heart transplant in mind.

Much to my disappointment, having crushed mosquitoes after they have well and truly feasted, there was no evidence of an immense splatter from the gorged Count.

So Dracula became un-un-dead. But Lucy's victory was transitory because her sacrifice had not saved her husband. Having persuaded the maid to clean up Lucy's mess, Jonathan intervened in time to accuse van Helsing-of-the-bloody-hands of murdering the Count. Probably he meant malpractice for doubtless the good surgeon, in purposing a heart operation, struck too low and only concocted stake and kidney.

The movie concluded with Jonathan-of-the-enlarged-eye-teeth riding away into the sunrise, a considerable feat in itself since his new grin bore witness to the transcendence of his mortal self. Love was only partially victorious and, in the end, evil un-lived on to feast again on the bloodthirsty anticipation of future cinema audiences.

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