

*Nosferatu, showing at the Village Twin,
Double Bay (Sydney).*

Dracula is one of those names which give rise to thoughts of yawning graves, ruined castles, creaking coffins, middle-European accents and the terrified shrieks of your schoolfriends in the back row of the pictures. Horror movies seemingly operate on the principle that every now and again we find entertainment in being scared out of our wits, and are prepared to pay for the privilege.

The horror genre relies very heavily on classic frighteners like wolf men, vampires and Frankenstein monsters who prey on a vulnerable and hapless community and who are despatched by brave and forthright defenders of law and order. Secure in the knowledge that anti-social deviants have been routed, we can presumably sleep peacefully in our beds, an activity much less likely if we pondered the real anti-social forces in our midst.

At any rate, it is one of the ironies of the genre that the originals of these dread figures were seen by their creators not as preying monsters but as victims of the complacency, intolerance and stupidity of bourgeois society. Arguably, both Frankenstein and Dracula, through circumstances not of their choosing, find themselves isolated, loveless and misunderstood. Their unavailing quest for understanding and solace leads them to revenge themselves on the "normal" society which has selfishly and heartlessly rejected them.

Murnau's expressionist classic, *Nosferatu* (The Undead), also uses the vampire legend critically, an approach which is followed by contemporary German director, Werner Herzog in his version currently on release.

In Murnau's *Nosferatu*, a 19th century Bremen estate agent (Jonathan Harker) leaves his lovely wife and happy domestic idyll to cross the wild Carpathian mountains. His task: to negotiate a house sale with the strange, remote and dreaded Count Dracula. When the Count catches sight of a locket cameo of Jonathan's wife, he imprisons Harker and flees by coach and boat (accompanied by the coffins of unconsecrated soil which vampires need for daytime sleeping) across the Baltic to Bremen. Harker makes his escape and urgently hurries toward his hearth and home.

The Count arrives first, and makes good his presence in his city mansion while the rats who travelled in the coffins spread the plague in the town. In the face of this disaster, the city officials are competitive, carping and ineffectual, and the populace appears fearful but directionless. Only the doctor, who has knowledge of vampires, and the innocent, pure-of-heart Lucy — who is willing to sacrifice herself in order to entrap the vampire in the fatal rays of daylight — are capable of

defeating the undead menace. Harker arrives home to find the city saved, the vampire and the plague conquered through the unity of knowledge and purity.

Some analysts have understood Murnau's 1922 film as an extended argument for vigilance against the post-war emergence of a "strong man" like Hitler and the plague of national socialism. Others have seen in it the claim by the German "mandarin" class (of which Murnau was a part), composed of the propertyless educated, the professionals — represented in *Nosferatu* by the doctor — for primacy. In this interpretation only the mandarins can save Weimar Germany beset by the twin evils of a bumbling, squabbling, and outmoded aristocracy (the ineffectual Bremen officials) and the passive, feckless masses (the sheep-like Bremen populace). Whichever view you choose, Murnau's film is seen as highly political.

It is against this background that we consider Herzog's *Nosferatu*. Herzog is a prolific member of the group of politically conscious West German filmmakers who came to prominence in the late '60s and '70s. Although Herzog resists strongly the implication that his *Nosferatu* is a "re-make", it borrows scenes, shots and even framing from Murnau's film. The contemporary *Nosferatu* is, of course, in color, but the dialogue, although spoken, is almost as sparse and stilted as in the earlier, silent version. Much of the film's tension and interest arises from our constant comparison between present and previous versions, and in deciphering the differences between Murnau's and Herzog's political commentary.

Herzog's version is, if anything, bleaker. In this *Nosferatu*, in contrast to Murnau's, Harker succumbs to the Count's need for blood, and arrives home, ill and an amnesiac, to a Weimar (an obvious political comment here) besieged by the plague. The Count, as in the Murnau film, has arrived with coffins and rats and the city fathers once more appear both foolish and helpless. Meanwhile, Lucy lovingly tends her distressed husband. When approached by Count Dracula, who tells her of his loveless life, she rejects the vampire. However, the situation in the plague-ridden town worsens — the profligate and promiscuous engage in joyless, despairing revels — and Lucy resolves to sacrifice herself in order to destroy the vampire. She proffers her neck to the Count, and in a much more overtly erotic scene than in the Murnau film, she keeps him at her bedside until the dawn's rays kill him.

At this point the doctor rushes in, discovers the fatally wounded Count and, over Harker's protests, drives a stake into the vampire's heart. Harker then demands that the doctor be arrested for the murder of the Count, and in a Kafka-esque scene, a blustering, but somehow authoritative

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The present institutions are dominated by imperialist powers, despite some straining for a bigger role by PNG and Fiji, and also Western Samoa.

From this arises another question: is it viable to have so many mini-states, each existing alone, rather than try to build a South Pacific Federation in which each state would maintain its independence, but in which unity could be gradually built, first from a common political struggle to rid the Pacific of direct colonialism, then to fight for economic co-operation, co-ordinate pressure and demands on the dominant neo-colonial powers, and so on?

An OAU-style organisation, pledged to fight colonialism in the region, and to build unity, would enable the South Pacific nations as a whole to take a much more active role in world affairs, to seek genuine independence at least at a diplomatic level,

and to seek to establish links with the African nations in particular, whose struggles and situation have some important similarities (for example, the OAU struggle against racism in southern Africa has its parallels with the struggle against French colonialism in New Caledonia and Tahiti).

Such an OAU-style organisation is not the end-all of the struggle. Imperialism and neo-colonialism remain and will remain implanted, as they are in the majority of the African members of the OAU. The anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist forces will also have to seek their own form of unity in the region.

But an OAU-style organisation would also provide protection for nations such as Vanuaaku which will undoubtedly be in the vanguard of the struggle against French imperialism in the South Pacific. That is not a minor consideration.



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official forces the reluctant and bewildered bailiff to take the more-or-less unresisting doctor to an unstaffed jail and court. No one, except the bailiff, finds these proceedings peculiar. After the doctor is taken away, Harker orders that the room where the Count was killed and Lucy's body lies, be closed up, never to be opened. For the first time since his return from the Carpathians, he smiles; we see his fangs; the Count is dead, long live the Count! In the final scene, Harker whips his horse across the shoreline where he previously walked with his loving wife, galloping into the middle distance, the vampire abroad again.

Herzog's political message would appear to be that sacrifices to stave off external threats are useless. The threat does not come from outside, but is nurtured and nursed within our domestic walls.

The bureaucracy, relying on authoritarianism and bluff, is content to incarcerate the righteous avengers (shades of Baader-Meinhof?) and to ignore the desperate and despairing nature of social reality. In circumstances of bourgeois complacency, and in the absence of any sense of community or of the danger about to overtake society, is it any wonder that the menace, aided by a foolish, officious bureaucracy, can re-establish itself?

Herzog's political vision is bleak. His film, opening with mummified cadavers silently screaming their pain and closing with the new Dracula losing himself anew upon the world is more manifestly horrific than any horror movie.

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— *Kathe Boehringer.*