

Nosferatu (2024): An exercise in neo-gothic aestheticism

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Director Robert Eggers's *Nosferatu*, the new adaptation of German director F.W. Murnau's 1922 silent masterpiece, is an impressively crafted but ultimately dull and unnecessary remake. While Eggers, a former art director, demonstrates a flair for arranging objects in the frame, his ability to evoke genuine human drama is far less developed.

Lacking the urgency and spontaneity of Murnau's film—and of life itself—Eggers's *Nosferatu* instead imposes on his audience an unconvincing misanthropy. This misguided notion helps render the film emotionally and dramatically inert. Beneath its meticulously composed surface lies a largely empty shell.

Murnau's *Nosferatu*, made in the aftermath of the horrors of World War I and the 1918 flu pandemic, and amid the economic and political turmoil of Germany's Weimar Republic, was never merely a horror film. His film is an Expressionist masterpiece that reflects and speaks to the anxieties of its time.

In Murnau's film, Count Orlok looms at least in part as a metaphor for the social and economic ravages of war and deadly disease devastating Europe. Murnau's use of light and shadow, innovative camera techniques and haunting performances established his *Nosferatu* as a vital and forward-looking work, inseparable from the broader cultural ferment of its era. And while Eggers's film recounts many of the same episodes, Murnau's treatment feels far more sincere and sympathetic than Eggers's, given the younger director's glibly grim view of humanity.

Strangely, Eggers's film feels more distant from the viewer than Murnau's, more removed from today's world by its "once upon a time" fairy tale conceit. In interviews, Eggers has pointed to the influence of folk tales on the film.

Nosferatu is for the most part Eggers's exercise in style over substance. While it meticulously recreates and develops on the gothic aesthetic of its predecessor, it lacks human and psychological power. The story is set in a vaguely suggested 19th-century Europe. What makes Murnau's film so unsettling is its grounding in the material conditions of a society grappling with war and economic crisis. Eggers' film, however, seems uninterested in little more than its own visual spectacle.

The narrative follows Ellen (Lily-Rose Depp), a young woman drawn into the orbit of the mysterious Count Orlok (Bill Skarsgård), whose arrival brings death and despair to her town. While Depp and Skarsgård give committed performances, their characters—like the film itself—feel undernourished and disconnected from any broader significance. Ellen, ostensibly the story's moral and emotional anchor, poses the pseudo-profound question, "Does evil come from within us, or from beyond?" In case the dour film left any doubt, this query was answered definitively by director Eggers in a video conversation with actor Willem Dafoe, who plays an occult expert in the film. "We all have darkness inside of ourselves," Eggers told Dafoe. "It's in humanity."

While the film's craftsmanship lends it a striking visual texture, with its layered lighting and atmospheric production design, these technical achievements feel ultimately hollow. Eggers's seeks to impress by recreating some of the aesthetic trappings of German Expressionism, while stripping them of their historical resonance and weight. Murnau's *Nosferatu* captured the fear of contagion, the specter of death and the instability of the European bourgeois world in intractable crisis.

It also must be said that Eggers, like other celebrated horror filmmakers of his generation, can find

in *Nosferatu* the building blocks for material that allows them to turn their noses up at humanity. However, one cannot imagine such directors taking on subjects like Murnau's deeply humane *The Last Laugh* (a film sympathetic to the plight of an older, laid-off doorman) or *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (Murnau's American masterpiece on the struggles of a young married couple), both immensely beautiful films that were not and could not have been made on the basis of the cheaply disdainful conceptions of Eggers, Ari Aster et al.

Dafoe has acted in important and moving films recently, including *The Florida Project* and *At Eternity's Gate*, but in *Nosferatu* he is compelled to try and breathe life into embarrassing lines such as the following: "I have seen things in this world that would've made Isaac Newton crawl back into his mother's womb. We have not become so much enlightened as we have been blinded by the gaseous light of science. ... If we are to tame darkness, we must first face that it exists." Dafoe's character becomes little more than a mouthpiece for Eggers's bleak musings.

Eggers's *Nosferatu* is a technically accomplished but spiritually and intellectually impoverished creation. Where Murnau's *Nosferatu* terrified and inspired, Eggers's version merely broods, its visual "beauty" a mask for its general emptiness.



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