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F.W. Murnau*: Nosferatu*, 1921
The Audience, Technology and *Nosferatu*

The advancement in technology was one of the few visible conquests for Germany in 1918, after the devastating outcome of the First World War. The country was weighed down by a sense of defeat which was further worsened by the German inflation of 1914 by soldiers who needed to be integrated back into society, by political change that brought the formation of the Weimar Republic and by the moral chaos of the times. In the 1890's, the rotary dialer was perfected and after the war, radios of acceptable quality became widespread, bridging the gap of communication within the society. The most proclaimed victory for Germany was the establishment of the Universum Film-aktiengesellschaft (Ufa) in 1917, a German motion-picture production company located in Berlin. Germany had consolidated most of the nation's leading studios and thus, created the Ufa, the most modern and technically advanced group of production studios in the world. The ability of Germans of every class to escape the silence of defeat to the silence of film was a source of great healing for Germany. *Nosferatu* by F.W. Murnau, who was part of the Ufa, is just one of the great films of the time that I have seen this year, allowing me to feel more connected with my German heritage and reflect upon post-war Weimar Germany. The representative power of this film is a metaphor for the current events of the time. The audience of 1921 identified with the impulses and desires brought on by the inflation. The depressed times makes the society feel "undead" like the vampire, who teaches a lesson on immortality through the theme of black versus white and good versus evil. Ultimately, it is the relationship to the technology of the time that is proof of *Nosferatu's* healing power to the Weimar Republic in 1921.

Technology has done wonders to strengthen human bonds of communication, but with every gain in technology there is a loss of certain human characteristics. For example,

if I talk with a friend on the phone as opposed to in person I have not only lost the physical greeting of a hug, I have lost the visual contact of her facial expressions. Furthermore, if I chat with a friend on the Internet, not only have I lost the elements of a confrontational conversation, but also I have lost the sound of my friend's voice. With each advanced form of technical communication, the more human elements are sacrificed. Technology provides a separation from self and for the audience of 1921, this was an advantage. Although they had little technology to escape to, the audience did have film. It is this need to escape the aftermath of war that is of great healing and comfort to the audience. *Nosferatu* gave the audience the power to escape reality, transform and be transformed.

After the First World War the advances in technology allowed Germany to promote the inflation due to the ability to print unlimited money. More powerful than technology as a means of destruction is technology as a means of reflection. Technology reflected the isolated feeling in Germany and the chaos of the inflation. A common exacerbation was, '"Mothers begging for their starving children, and all these prostitutes on the streets!"' (Widdig, 197).

The technology that shaped the presentation of the movie is the greatest source of impact to the audience of 1921. The absence of the technology of sound added to the suspense of the movie and allowed for more control over the movie because the dialog must be created in the mind of the viewer. The movie gave the viewer the ability to participate in the movie because other senses needed to be called upon to make up for the lost dialog. The dialog was in turn replaced by daunting music which, easily created suspense for the audience 1921, who had not been desensitized.

Nosferatu, because it is a silent film provided the audience of 1921 with less which surprisingly allowed them to gain more from the movie. The lack of desensitization also, allowed the audience of 1921 to be easily manipulated by *Nosferatu*. At the beginning of movie the senses are bombarded with silent images of a cat, flowers, women weaving and

laughter. These pleasing images are presented with soothing music and in black and white. However, the movie is subtitled, *A Symphony of Horror*. One is lured in with good images and then presented with the darker side.

The audience of 1921 is warned of the dangers in participating in the movie. When Thomas embarks on his journey, it is stated in writing within the movie, "Doesn't this sound like the midnight call of death? Speak it not aloud or life's pictures will turn pale shadows and nightmares will rise up to feed on your blood." This statement is only being shared with the audience. A secret is being shared with the audience, who is forced into silence and passivity. The audience is shown, “the midnight call of death,” a secret world of immortal vampires that is much darker than their own. Also, the audience is warned of being associated with this evil and told that its power can “feed on [their] blood.” This secret entrapped the audience of 1921 in the reality of the movie and at the same time it, ironically gave the audience freedom to participate to the desired extent and the ability to be in control.

One form of technology is demonstrated when Thomas writes a letter to his wife Ellen. He writes her after the vampire bites him and tells her not to mourn his absence and mentions that he has been stung on the neck by mosquitoes. Thomas is still in great denial that the vampire is real. Thomas writes, "One's dreams are heavy in this deserted castle, but do not fear." A clear connection is made between Thomas' contamination by the evil vampire and his unconscious. His whole psyche has been infected and he has been transformed. This movie was created shortly after Freud’s theories of the unconscious and new ideas on dream analysis became popular. This scene tells the audience that it is important to control one’s id impulses, unconscious desires of sex and aggression. Germany is feeling the painful effects of war and emotions are high. The inflation is making the country impulsive. In this scene, the audience gets to live vicariously through Thomas, experiencing his highs and lows while gaining a release of tension, an escape from reality and knowledge of the consequences of uncontrolled impulses.

When Thomas writes the letter to his wife Ellen, he is standing alone with nothing but green countryside behind him. The movie seems to be warning the audience of the dangers of crossing borders and boundaries as Thomas has done. The Weimar Republic of the time was gravely concerned with the moral chaos of the times. There was a sentiment of impulsiveness brought on by the inflation. People were, ‘“purchasing yesterday’s less expensive goods with tomorrow’s inflated dollars”’ (Widdig, 34). Thomas’ trip is provoked by impulsive instincts that stem from greed. Yet, his actions do not come without great sacrifice and separation from loved ones due to the lack of technology. He left for the “land of phantoms” and subjected himself to ghosts and robbers. When Thomas stops for dinner he mentions that he is going to Count Orlock's castle and is warned "evil spirits become all-powerful after dark." In the next scene it appears to be a happy morning when Thomas finds The Book of the Vampires. But the next scene is of horses scattering and a hyena running. The horses demonstrate the animal motif present in the movie. The scene compared animals to humans and made the clear distinction that an animal's instinct about danger are greater than that of a human. It is stated, "Men do not always recognize the dangers that beasts can sense at certain times.” This is also, a foreshadowing of the danger awaiting Thomas. This reference to animal instincts can be read as another reflection on inflation and the power of technology to desensitize. Technology creates extreme sensations and this causes our primitive instincts to get weakened as we loose touch with our feelings because more and more special effects are needed to generate the same emotions. In Weimar Germany, the impact of printing extra money was not foreseen. Humans are being shown as lower than a less evolved species because they lack animal instincts. Like Thomas, Germany did was not aware of the danger of printing extra money with the help of technology. Humans lack the intuitive ability that animals have of sensing danger. Technology plays a strong role in giving us superhuman capabilities that allows us to attract more danger and furthermore, allows us to become desensitized by technology that creates this danger.

In this black and white movie there truly are no gray areas. The black and white theme translated to day versus night and good versus evil. This movie tells the audience to be afraid of night and to be wary of danger in order to scare people into conformity. Impulses and tensions were high in Germany and there is the desire that society conforms and resists the impulses and chaos brought on by the inflation.

Although Thomas did not have the innate instincts of animals to recognize danger, he is given the opportunity to learn of the capabilities of nature from Professor Bulwer. Bulwer studies the strange correspondence of animals to human life. He is fascinated by the power of the Venus flytrap emphasizing that it is from the "vegetable kingdom." This plant takes the life of another and feeds off of it for survival. The audience gains a feeling of being understood as they too are driven to desperate measures to survive their present conditions. They are made to feel that their impulses are normal which brings awareness, acceptance and healing.

The most technically advanced scene occurs at the climax of the movie when Thomas is finally taken to Count Orlock's castle by a phantom. The phantom appears in the forest after Thomas is forced to continue on foot when his carriage driver refuses to take him any further. A carriage comes toward Thomas in fast motion as a special effect is created. A cloaked phantom in a carriage with cloaked horses and covered eyes points to Thomas and motions him into the carriage. The carriage again speeds away and the film negative shows Thomas being slowly carried to the other side, Orlock's castle. Due to this climatic scene that was enhanced by the technology of the time, the audience of 1921 escaped from reality and was brought to a darker world than even the one that they know.

The vampire is a symbol of the “undead”, the anti-human and the moral chaos of the times. He sleeps during the day and is awake at night. He pushes the limits of immortality. The audience can identify with the vampire because they feel dead from the tragedy of war. There was a feeling of being “undead” in Germany. Germans were starving and there were women standing in bread lines with the desire to provide for their

children. They were depressed and weak and many lost the will to live. These desperate times brought the desire to lie, cheat and steal to survive. Like the vampire they were pressed with the desire to take from the life of another to save their own life. Thus, Thomas' blood that was taken by the vampire is appropriately called the "hellish elixir of life." Seeing the alternative the audience no longer desired to be "undead" and at this awareness began the process of healing.

The audience of 1921 wanted freedom. Both the vampire and the audience long death. The vampire is immortal, something every human desires to achieve. However, the vampire creates the longing for the power to survive. They are shown that immortality; the unattainable would allow them to conquer. They are "undead" like the vampire yet they are mortal. The vampire longs to be mortal. The vampire demonstrates that this too is a trap, which erases the audience's desire to be immortal. In the modern *Nosferatu, Shadow of the Vampire*, the vampire looks with longing at the image of a rising sun on a film screen. The sun represents death to the vampire and he longs for what he cannot attain. He is trapped between two worlds. He must love in order to become human and he must become human before he is able to die. He cannot be both human and immortal. The audience is attracted by the vampire and in the end repelled by him. They are soothed by the catharsis and can begin to accept their fate.

The audience finds resolution and the power to conquer evil in the end. Ellen is envious of the vampire's immortality and falls in love with the vampire and his sense of power. She becomes aware that his love for her will give him freedom and grant him the ability to die. She is warned not to touch The Book of the Vampires, but she cannot resist for, "her soul heard the call of death." She is tempted by fate and sacrifices herself to stop the cycle. The audience is shown that they too can be martyrs. After the vampire takes Ellen, he watches the sunrise and the rooster crow, as he is reborn.

The audience is lured in by the techniques of the movie and follows Thomas on his journey tempted by greed. In the process they gain control over their impulses that

are made to feel natural and a new understanding of death. They no longer feel "undead" nor desire to be immortal. They have been slightly desensitized from being exposed yet they are less vulnerable. Awareness has been brought to the forefront that could be accepted because the audience was made to feel understood. Also, they were able to escape their reality while simultaneously experiencing identification. They were brought to a darker world and now, they are ready to return to the hardships of reality with confidence that they can conquer. It has been a therapeutic experience and due to the power of technology and film they have started the healing process.

Widdig, Bernd, Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany, Berkeley, UC Press, 2001
p. 33-52 and p.113-133