

# HISTORICAL ESSAYS AND REVIEWS



Charcoal Sketch by Albin Grau

## **ALBIN GRAU**

### **Lighting Design in Film**

First published as "Licht-Regie im Film," in *Berliner Zeitung am Mittag (Film-B.Z.)*, no. 64 (March 5, 1922). Translated by Alex H. Bush.

Set design is, for the most part, more the concern of the painter than the architect; film relies exclusively on visual effect. Unfortunately, the art of our time is so burdened by the nightmares of the past that people believe the architect is the only one who can sort through the "trash heap of art" that the storeroom of almost all film studios represents. And he is indeed the only one, as long as the pure film of illusion [Illusionsfilm] with naturalistic decor continues to prevail.

In short, the task is as follows: set design has to make the rhythm of life, the spirit of various epochs believable as an artistic reflection of our spirit, according to a given dramatic situation. As Herwarth Walden said, art is presentation, not representation.

When applied to film, architectural design must not strive to be anything other than an atmospheric frame governed by the painterly arts, welded to the dramatic events, nothing other than the great fundamental tone [Grundton] to which the plot is tuned: the "play space" created by the artist is in harmony with the scenic events.

It is clearly evident that the essential lifeblood of set design is lighting. Though it is actually the main factor, lighting is usually put in place only once the set is already "standing." Thus the light sources usually produce conceptions of space that the artist had no intention of creating. Either the light twists or ruptures the space, or it turns out that the available light sources are insufficient to illuminate everything. Lighting must be taken into consideration—and must indeed be the foremost consideration—from the outset, when the decor is first being sketched out. Light is not there to illuminate the decor but to shape the image in its components—scenery and story—and bring it to life.

Let us envision the process of a studio shoot with an eye toward lighting technique. To create clear images, the camera lens requires great brightness, so sunlight is supplemented by the strongest artificial light sources. Unfortunately, this practice has the disadvantage that it renders a distinguishing lighting with a sense for the pictorial nearly impossible, or at least very difficult to create. We never get the feeling that there is a central light source—sun, moon, lamplight, and so on—but rather an even, neutral

brightness prevails, which naturally does not allow any unified visual impression to emerge.

Theoretically, there are two possible ways to redress this. We could introduce an even stronger principal light source on one side—a bulb as bright as the sun—which would then create light and shadow effects. However, we do not yet have such a strong light source in practice. That leaves only one other possibility—namely, the opposite: we must create shadow sites in the decor, or parts that absorb the light more or less strongly. Color, with its varying light sensitivity, offers us a way to do this. Thus, even in our black-and-white art, color has an important role to play, and, I might add, there are still large and almost completely unexplored areas in the realm of film design technique.

In connection with this, I would like to anticipate an objection that will most certainly arise, namely that adhering to such practices will make it impossible to shoot natural settings.

Yes and no: in any case, this is not the upshot of my remarks. I would like to remind the reader of Japanese and Chinese gardens and landscapes. Why do they look absolutely stylized, even in photography? Because when choosing subjects for shooting, we take account of East Asians' great spiritual capacity for stylization and show only those natural scenes that suit our artistic sense of Japan and China.

And at home? Do similar things not exist here? Seen with profane eyes, nature is profane; that is the reason why "similar things do not exist" here. Germany, yes, all of Europe, is richly blessed with natural scenery of stylistic grandeur; we only need to have the eyes to see it.

And one last comment: film professions often go to great lengths to pretend that the represented space continues on to the right and to the left, which discredits the effect of the image; the scenery seems to be haphazardly cropped. This problem could be remedied by eliminating purely illusory set design. The painter-architect must arrange the frame of the story. Only that can yield effective images.



## **F. W. MURNAU**

### **My Ideal Screenplay**

First published as “Mein ideales Manuskript,” in *Film-Kurier* 6, no. 74 (March 26, 1924).  
Translated by Christopher M. Geissler.

Were the other arts not to exist, film would have been forced long ago to find its own techniques—and this for the same reason that ancient man was forced to communicate through images before the first system of writing was developed.

Still lacking any techniques of its own, film does everything on the basis of a false model. It makes use of the means of the novella, the novel, and the play; it borrows all the

techniques from the other arts without the slightest need to develop its own.

The ideal screenplay (understood as an ideal challenge, not an ideal form overall) would be a kind of film poetry that would artistically force the director to act solely according to the intentions of the writer, at least where no improvisation is possible. If the director can operate freely without violating the poetry, perhaps even using improvisation to reach a high level for the first time, then it is the director who is the author.

The ideal screenplay should provide even a naïve viewer a reassuring feeling that he is in the presence of a harmonious structure. It must not crawl, and its internal structure ought to correspond with its external structure, even with regard to the placement of the camera.

One can see from the use of titles the degree to which the other arts have paved the way for film. The title, seen as a something that logically comes between images, is quite simply an obstructive presence in film. As a stand-alone element, the title is unavoidable at first. Film is still too young an art; it does not yet fully appreciate its own forms of expression and its material; it avails itself of all possibilities without any degree of sophistication.



## HENRIK GALEEN

### Fantastic Film

First published as "Der phantastische Film," in *Film. Photos wie noch nie* (Frankfurt: Frankfurter Societäts-Druckerei, 1929), 37. Translated by Michael Cowan.

It is about time that we updated our dictionaries. Today, most expressions no longer coincide with the concepts they are supposed to illustrate. After all, do terms like "friendship," "heart," and "soul" still mean the same thing they did when the old dictionaries were written?

What meaning do the old "fantastic" dream worlds of Grimm, Hauf, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and perhaps even Edgar Allan Poe still have for us, and more significantly for our children, today? Let us observe this literature through our modern lenses. It offers us a brilliant form of stimulation, but nothing more; for even Jules Verne pales by comparison with the fantastic we now see all around us every day. Today's reality rivals with yesterday's fantasy. And thus in order to create fantastic films, we should direct our attention to new problems springing from our current context.

What do we call "fantastic" today? Everything which, although excluded from the habitual reality of everyday life, appears possible in the subconscious. In fact, the domain of fantastic

film is inexhaustible, and we can safely include within the category of the fantastic those films we tend to call "grotesque" and thus correct our obsolete dictionary definitions. After all, the famous shoe-eating sequence in Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* is not only grotesque but can also be counted as fantastic. Without a doubt, it has moved into this higher region.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, we have become more cheerful; we no longer cry over the story of a fairy tale prince living off of roots in the forest. We no longer aspire to be princes; without shedding a tear, we prefer to observe ourselves suffering a "fantastic" hunger and gnawing on the soles of our own shoes. The traditional motifs haven't changed. The giant from Harold Lloyd's *A Thousand to One*, who becomes a servant to the hero out of gratitude, or Buster Keaton's cow who, when Keaton performs the good deed of extracting a thorn from its foot, follows its new master with an unlikely and truly "fantastic" intelligence—are these not old fairy tale motifs dressed in new clothing? Seeing Douglas Fairbanks' flying carpet, our youth shake their heads in disbelief. They sense the film trick and search for the technique by which it was created. Where are the screws? Where is the motor? We are no longer astonished by technological feats. We have grown accustomed to seeing new technological wonders on a daily basis. Indeed, we are only really astounded when the daily newspaper contains no reports of new inventions or wonders of technology.

We are thus beginning to seek these wonders in and around ourselves, and the implausible is becoming fantastic. We notice the astonishment of dogs and children when they circle around a mirror after perceiving the wonder of a second face reflected in the front. We then ask ourselves, what if this double, this other, who resembles you so closely, walked out of the mirror's frame...? From this single observation, we draw all the conclusions and create the doppelganger film. But is it plausible in reality that two people would resemble each other so closely? Although our understanding rejects this possibility, our subconscious affirms it, and this contradiction provides a sufficient basis on which to construct all fantastic possibilities.

People often ask me why we do not cultivate more fantastic films today, why they appear so rarely. I believe that I can and must respond as follows: because the unusual, the strange only appears in exceptional cases, and the exceptional can never become an everyday affair.

On the other hand, even the most realistic films ought to contain at least a touch of the fantastic, when we consider that the fantastic is the most authentic child of the imagination.



## ESSAYS ON THE PRODUCTION

--I., Der Gruselfilm. In: Der Film (Berlin) vo. 6, no. 42 (October 16, 1921), p. 54

The Horror film.

Under the title "Nosferatu", Heinrich Galeen wrote a "symphony of horror" for Prana-Film G.m.b.H., the likes of which have probably never been shown in a movie before.

It's strange what an enormous attraction horror has, although everybody wants to know as little as possible about it. As obvious as the trick possibilities of the movie seem to be, almost all previous attempts have been more or less unsuccessful. It is precisely the sharpness of the photographic plate that requires precision work for such films, which generally cannot be

achieved. This film, already three months in the making, will be an attempt to use the film image for material by E.T.A. Hoffmann or Poe in new artistic and technical ways. The names of these writers are not just a vague comparison, because the Prana film has absolutely no intention to achieve the cheap effect of horror novels; rather, the effect should not be destroyed by a nonsensical plot, but rather be enhanced by a meaningful one. The "Nosferatu" is a legendary figure, a symbol of death. His intervention or appearance means destiny. Here is a young girl who, through him, will become the conqueror of death.

In the sharp light of Jupiter's lamps, of course, the uncanny is robbed of its most secret charm. And as frightening as Max Schreck is with his red-painted eyes, his artificially toothless mouth, and the claws on his hands, he remains more or less an actor, albeit a good one. On the other hand, the embarrassing realism of a pack of screeching rats scurrying out of dark holes was hard to beat.

The movie, which was partly shot in the High Tatras, shows, judging by the photos, a number of wonderful scenes, not all of them gruesome; they are interspersed with many friendly, picturesque and lovely images, which are all too realistically muted by the shifting of the action back to the Biedermeier period.

Nosferatu, already sold to America, gobbles up considerable sums of money, but the care with which F.W. Murnau directs it will certainly pay off. The sets and costumes are designed by Grau, the photography by F.A. Wagner, and Dr. Hans Erdmann is in the process of writing his own music for the film.. Among the better known leading actors, who were not chosen for their illustrious names, but for their suitability and character, are Greta Schröder, Gustav von Wangenheim and John Gotto.

Anonymous, Nachtaufnahmen zu Nosferatu. In: Der Film (Berlin) vo. 6, no. 43 (October 23,1921), p. 24

## Night shots for "Nosferatu"

On Thursday, the last scenes of the Prana movie "Nosferatu" were shot in the Jofa studio. Among other things, a part of the Galatz Harbor was set up outside. In a picturesque arrangement, old sailing ships were anchored, bales and barrels lay on the quay, dock workers were at work -- the pressure of something sinister and terrible seemed to weigh on everyone. Bathed in ghostly light, in the pitch-black night, the scene made an excellent impression, even on the expert who is accustomed to looking behind the scenes of the movies. -- Not far from the sailors, an airplane stood on the ground; the engine gave momentum to the propeller, and -- in the harbor, the sails billowed mightily and the flags and banners fluttered merrily in the breeze. -- As always, each scene is worked through by the artistic director of the company, Mr. Albin Grau, according to psychological and painterly principles, before it is handed over to the director, Murnau, and ready to be shot. Every gesture, every costume (from around 1840), every step and every movement must be calculated according to the laws of psychological effect on the viewer. Grau and Murnau achieve a remarkable filigree work without neglecting the larger contours of their work.



Das Fest of Nosferatu. In: *Film-Kurier* (berlin) vol. 4, no. 50 (March 3, 1922)

The ball, which the Prana Film Society has organized in true American style in honor of the premiere of the great Prana film "Nosferatu," will take place on Saturday, March 4, in the entire space of the Zoological Garden. The festival begins at 8 o'clock sharp.

Appearance in Biedermeier is desired but not required.

## REVIEWS

e.j., Review. In: *Vossische Zeitung* no. 111 (March 7, 1922).

This is film: ghostly carriages rush through forest ravines, ghosts chase people, the plague breaks out, ships sail unmanned into harbors, coffins with earth and mice jump out of cellars onto carriages, onto ships, into holes in crumbling houses. This is film: a ghostly creature crawls and climbs across the screen - and in between, as a concession to the average audience, a love story with a tragic ending. "Nosferatu" is the name of the movie, which follows in the footsteps of "Dr. Caligari" for five scary acts. Since no theater owner wanted to let it into the house, it was first shown at a special event in the Marble Hall of the Zoological Garden, after an inappropriate prelude and before a graceful dance and ball. Henrik Galeen, the sensitive author, is a squire from the school of Wegener. His vampire "Nosferatu" could have come from Wegener's workshop: a film in its own style. Murnau, his visual director, presents the images, carefully staged and self-contained. The castle of horror, the house of Nosferatu are gripping achievements. A museum of motifs. He gives the role of Nosferatu to a newcomer to the screen: Max Schreck. He plays him as a goblin, dark, pale as a corpse, with devil's claws. Another character is Alexander Granach, deliberately grotesque. Refreshing in all this sad darkness: Gustav v. Wangenheim, the hero, the ray of hope, the conqueror of the vampire. And Greta Schröder, his wife, photogenic in great scenes. Hans Erdmann, who composed the music for "Symphony of Horror", found a solution to the problem of film composition.

H.W. (= Hans Wollenberg), Review of Nosferatu. In: Lichtbild-Bühne, No. 11, March 11, 1922

It is said that some ladies who attended the "Nosferatu" premiere on Saturday had a bad night. And this does not seem implausible. Only Hoffmann, Poe, and Ewers in the field of literature have so far succeeded in transforming horror into art. And the man from the Grimm fairy tale, who wanted to learn how to be scary, would have gotten his money's worth with this movie. The Nosferatu movie is a sensation because it radically leaves the beaten track of love stories and mechanistic adventures that have been rehashed a hundred times. It draws on an unconstrained fantasy whose source is the gruesome superstition of the vampire who drinks

human blood. The story of the ghostly vampire Nosferatu, who spreads death, pestilence, and horror, is transformed into a light show with spellbinding force. Mood-setting elements are brought in wherever the lens found them: Foreboding high mountain cliffs, raging seas, storm-

tossed clouds, eerie masonry. It is a prime example of how the movie must use the moods of the landscape to its own ends. This Prana film, which was only seen by a small circle on Saturday, must be shown in cinemas; one does not have the right to deprive the public of such an interesting (not to say sensational) work, such an overall performance. This premiere was part of a festival organized by Prana.



Anonymous Review of Nosferatu. In: Film-Hölle nr. 4 (Berlin), April 1922, p. 4 f.

"The 'Leipziger Volkszeitung' of March 15, 1922, tries to make the film "Nosferatu" quite scary. "Behind the mysterious story of the movie NOSFERATU," the newspaper from Upper Saxony writes tremulously,

there is a very sober, but equally misguided political speculation. It is not for nothing that the company has the means to develop a publicity campaign that has probably already swallowed up most of what the film can bring in the best case. It has succeeded in making it clear to certain very influential and solvent industrial circles that this film, and similar ones to follow, are the best means of deterring workers from undesirable excessive political activity. Nothing is more suitable for this purpose than to push the broad masses into the nowadays very suggestive but politically completely harmless field of occultism. The preoccupation with the supernatural would seize the individual to such an extent that interest in political matters would recede into the background. At first one is tempted to laugh at such things. But the idea that workers would be frightened by the spectre of Nosferatu is grotesque. On the other hand, the fact presented here opens up remarkable perspectives. It suggests that the dangerous spiritualist and occultist hype, to which many thousands of shattered souls have fallen victim since the war.

It suggests that the dangerous spiritualist and occultist hype, to which many thousands of shattered souls have fallen victim since the war, is at least in part a well-considered and generously organized move by industry to divert the workforce from its political goals by means of this brain disease. In the past, religion had to be preserved for the people to keep them in the stupor necessary for capitalist interests. Today, occult superstition is to take the place of faith, which has all too little appeal. Once again, the worker is to be enveloped in the fog of supernatural dizziness, which is to deprive him of a clear view of sober reality... If these lines are enough to warn the working class not to take their pennies to the cinema, where they will be shown a propaganda film paid for by industry in order to make them stupid, then the whole beautiful plan will have fallen into the water, and the ghost of Nosferatu can let himself be eaten by his own rats...

Pitiful voice of the Volkszeitung, pitiful and deplorable voice of the Volk, The ghost of Nosferatu has driven you mad, too! Not a syllable of occultism is mentioned in the whole movie. And . . . if industrial circles really put their money into the Prana film company and have since lost horribly, they have of course made a 'speculation'. Because these people have no idea about movies. They want to make money. Nothing else! They would just as soon invest their capital in cheese or sanatoriums if they were offered the same tempting promises of profit. They have not the slightest interest in dumbing you down any more than you have already been dumbed down - after producing this unsurpassably stupid warning call.

Anon. (Béla Balázs), Review in *Der Tag* (Wien) Nr. 100 (March 9, 1923)

There was a movie called NOSFERATU, which rightly called itself "A Symphony of Horror". Fever and nightmares, night shadows and premonitions of death, delusions and ghostly hauntings were woven into the images of gloomy mountain landscapes and stormy seas.

There was also a ghostly carriage in the forest, which was neither supernatural nor gruesome. But there was an air of the supernatural over his nature paintings. Storm clouds in front of the moon, a ruin at night, a dark, unrecognizable silhouette in the empty courtyard, a spider on a human face, the ship with black sails sailing into the canal and no living creature visible to steer it, howling wolves in the night, and horses suddenly frightened without us knowing why-these were all possible images in nature. But a frosty breeze from the other world blew into them. It is certain that no written or spoken poetry can express the ghostly, the demonic, and the supernatural in the way that film can. For man's language is a product of his rationality, and therefore even the Orphic words of dark magic are at best incomprehensible, but not "supernatural". This essentially means that it becomes incomprehensible when it is incomprehensible. This is the self-defense of human intelligence. But a glimpse of it can be clear and understandable even if it is incomprehensible. And that is what makes our hair stand on end.

# CLOSE<sup>6</sup> UP

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## COMMENT AND REVIEW

FILM CURIOSITIES.—No. 1.

*Dracula*—Produced by Murneau in 1920.

They say that *Dracula* was produced without the consent of Mrs. Bram Stoker, who afterwards took legal action to prevent the film being exhibited, and even went to the length of ordering that all copies should be burnt. In Paris they call the film *Nosferatu le Vampire*; perhaps that is meant as a disguise. As a curiosity it is not without interest and it has often been quoted; but to-day we expect so much from our films (*The Peasant Women of Riazanj* had sociological as well as great dramatic importance). . . .

The film opens with the beautifully composed pictures typical of Murneau (one spot light on the hair, now turn the face slightly and another spot light . . .). But this! Is this overacting, or is it my fault for not entering into the spirit of the story? It is unquestionably a faithful transcription of the book; vampires sink back into coffins of cursed soil, bats hang in dark raftered corners, Alfred Abel (Count Dracula) wears a fearsome mask adorned with jagged fangs, while Margaret Schlegel (poor heroine) faints repeatedly.

## CLOSE UP

Murneau wanted to give the public a thriller, and when a slow procession of coffins winds out of the town, preyed on by the undead it is thrilling, but a glimpse of the Count himself brings a smile to the lips. "That's a vampire," one thinks, "and isn't he funny?" If Dracula had been a little less determined with his teeth and nose, had looked more or less normal, one might (given the right mood and a romantic temperament) have thought: "Well, most devils do look like men", and indulged in an orgy of shivers.

The "kick" of the picture is a series of shots of a vampire-haunted boat. One by one the crew fall victims to the strange malady and die. The mate commits suicide by throwing himself over the side; the captain ties himself to the wheel. Then the boat cuts through the water without any guiding hand; the sails billow out in the breeze. Lonely vessel cutting through the phosphorescent waters of the night. Of course that is right! I have always felt that these wonderful ships with their intricate sails had a life of their own, it may be in the power of the undead, but, freed from the attentions of the living, it lives by itself.

I must confess that certain shots in Dracula's castle, and the fly-eating lunatic gave me a tiny shudder, but the shudder came principally from memories of the novel read surreptitiously by candlelight at the age of ten.

Werner Krauss is in the cast.

OSWELL BLAKESTON.

Note: Murnau is consistently misspelled as "Murneau"; Count Dracula is not played by Alfred Abel but by Max Schreck, and the "poor heroine" is not played by Margaret Schlegel but by Greta Schröder.

For an overview of *Nosferatu's* American reception in 1929, see [here](#)

