

The Return of the Corpses. Nosferatu, Phantom der Nacht (Werner Herzog)

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It's hard to be sententious or a preacher while people are dying. Dead people, who we don't see. In Wuhan, the epicenter of the pandemic, the real surprise was the thousands of funeral urns that appeared after the deconfinement. The corpses, reduced to ashes, came to unmask the lie of Chinese power about the real number of deaths¹.

On Good Friday, we heard a singular St. John Passion by Johann Sebastian Bach. In the empty St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, a tenor sang alone, accompanied by a harpsichordist and a xylophonist². Turning away from the nave, without any congregation or music lovers, Benedikt Kristjánsson sings the first chorus (*Herr, unser Herrscher*) in front of the church choir. He is filmed from behind, his long hair falling over his shoulders. The slow gestures of the singer, his movements that seem choreographed, resonate with the portrait of Christ transmitted by Renaissance and Baroque painting.

For more than a month now, thousands of texts have been written about coronavirus all over the world. Our society largely rejects the idea of God. The virus crept into the center a deserted sanctuary. Thousands of texts are now converging on it. Biologists, virologists, sociologists, politicians, journalists, all write and express themselves, with as much passion as the theologians of the past.

Faced with the arbitrariness of death, everyone tries to make up for the absence of meaning by looking for a historical or literary referent. References to Albert Camus' novel "The Plague" (1947), Boccaccio's "Decameron" (1349-1353), or science fiction works such as Richard Matheson's "I am legend" (1954) are often made.

¹ Deconfinement took place in Wuhan on April 8 at midnight, after 77 days of containment. On 17 April, in the face of worldwide disbelief, the Chinese government decided to add 50% more deaths to the statistics. See Julian E. Barnes, "C.I.A. Hunts for Authentic Virus Totals in China, Dismissing Government Tallies", New York Times, 7 April 2020.

² Johannes-Passion, BWV 245, adapted for solo tenor, harpsichord and xylophone after a concept by tenor Benedikt Kristjánsson. Performed by Elina Albach on harpsichord and Philip Lamprecht on xylophone, conducted by Gotthold Schwarz. Remote choirs were performed, via video conference, by the Ottawa Bach Choir, J.S. Bach-Stiftung St. Gallen, Mitgliedern des Thomaerchors Leipzig, Bachfest Family Chor, and Malaysia Bach Festival Singers and Orchestra. The work can be heard on Arte TV until July 10, 2020.

The Corona Crisis in Light of the Law-as-Culture Paradigm

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I would like to draw attention to a film : "Nosferatu, Phantom der Nacht" (1979), a tribute by the great German filmmaker Werner Herzog³ to the "Nosferatu, Eine Symphonie des Grauens" (A Symphony of Terror) filmed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau in 1922⁴.

Herzog doesn't hesitate to show in the first scene what is hidden from us today under the abundance of statistical tables or maps produced by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University⁵ : corpses deformed by an infectious disease. Werner Herzog films at length the mummified bodies of victims of a cholera epidemic in 1833⁶. The filmmaker had filmed the mummies himself by taking them out of the display cases and placing them against a wall, after taking care to classify them by age. This panorama renews the well-known theme of the dances of death by presenting the ages of life. Herzog doesn't insist on the path that leads every human being to death, but on the capacity of death to strike people simultaneously regardless of their age. The mummies all have their mouths open, they seem to be shouting, singing a painful chorale⁷. The end of the scene is marked by the flight, in

³ Werner Herzog's official website offers an excellent introduction of his multiple talents (filmmaker, writer, opera director). See the bibliography about Herzog on the website (<https://www.wernerherzog.com/#works>) and pp. 210-216 of Richard Eldridge's recent book, *Werner Herzog. Filmmaker and Philosopher*, London, Bloomsbury, 2019.

About Nosferatu, see the script published in German: *Stroszek-Nosferatu. Zwei Filmerzählungen*, Munich, Carl Hanser Verlag, 1979; and, in English, in the volume: *Scenarios III. Stroszek. Nosferatu, Phantom of the night. Where the Green Ants Dream. Cobra Verde*. Krishna Winston, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis - London, 2019. See also Ernest Prodolliet, *Nosferatu, Die Entwicklung des Vampirfilms von Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau bis Werner Herzog*, Freiburg, Universitätsverlage, 1980; Siegbert Salomon Praver, *Nosferatu. Phantom der Nacht*, London, BPI Publishing, 2004; and, Inga Ervig, *Werner Herzog: Phantom der Nacht*, Grin, 2005.

⁴ Werner Herzog's film is not a remake of Murnau's film. He is reweaving the thread that had been cut because of Nazism. It gives Werner Herzog's film a historical depth that German cinema had lost. With his contemporaries (Fassbinder, Schlöndorff), he creates a new German school. Werner Herzog develops several projects to redraw the imaginary map of Germany, including a walking tour of the country. In 1978, he stated in an interview: "Meine Hoffnung ist, dass der Film einmal ein Bindeglied zum großen Film des deutschen Expressionismus wird. Unsere Filme sind legitime deutsche Kultur, nur fehlt uns der Geschichtszusammenhang, die Kontinuität, die im Film nur in unserem Lande so vollständig abgerissen ist. Wirkliche Kontinuität wird allerdings nie richtig hergestellt werden können, das ist unwiderruflich dahin, und so wird die Suche bleiben" (My hope is that the film will one day become a link to the great film of German Expressionism. Our films are legitimate German culture, but we lack the historical context, the continuity, which in film only in our country is so completely broken off. However, real continuity can never really be established, it is irrevocably lost, and so the search will remain.)

⁵ <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6>. See, for example, the maps and diagrams provided by the New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/world/coronavirusmaps.html?action=click&module=Top%20Storie&pgtype=Homepage&action=click&module=Spotlight&pgtype=Homepage>.

⁶ These mummies are kept in the Museo de las Momias de Guanajuato in Mexico: www.momiasdeguanajuato.gob.mx. The images are magnified by the musical composition of the rock band Popol Vuh created by the pianist Florian Fricke. See the album in 1978: „*Brüder des Schattens, Söhne des Lichts – Nosferatu*“.

⁷ Werner Herzog writes in his screenplay: "Da sind Mumien an beiden Wänden gereiht, und alle mit weit aufgerissenen Mündern, ein gewaltiger Choral. Links und rechts lehnen die mumifizierten Leichen an der Wand, wie Bretter, die man abgestellt hat. Ihr Anblick ist schaurig. Viele der Mumien sind in zerfressenen Kleidern, manche ganz nackt. Eine junge Frau hat nur zierliche Schuhe an ihren Füßen. Ihre Haut ist bräunlich, wie Pergament. Körper sind halb zerfallen, aber noch in Haltung uns Ausdruck ganz klar. Es sind Männer und Frauen und sehr viele Kinder. Sie stehen in nicht zustande gebrachten Gebärden. Das Entsetzlichste sind ihre aufgerissenen Münder. Sie stehen wie ein Chor von Gespenstern, von dem kein Laut je mehr kommt.", *Stroszek -*

slow motion, of a bat that comes to haunt the heroine's sleep (Isabelle Adjani) who wakes up with a cry of fear. This bat, which heralds the upcoming illness (here, the plague), replaces the microscopic views featured in the 1922 film. Werner Herzog shows us during the beginning credits two kittens playing in a china cabinet. Then, like a never-ending story, he will show us them again at the end of the film, to underline that the story will start again, like the one that touches us today.

The threat of a new coronavirus was known and expected⁸. This makes the slow reaction of western governments all the more disturbing, as the rhetoric of war to declare a state of emergency later unfolds, insisting on the idea of "being at war" to better designate an external enemy. But the enemy is not at all alien. A virus can only exist and reproduce inside our bodies. As we observe every day, the geographical dimension exceeds any local political discourse.

As the geographer Michel Lussault wrote: "We are still a little incredulous that a transitory microorganism, unknown to the battalion, which needs a living body to perpetuate itself by multiplying, has been able to impose itself as a global geopolitical operator. A microorganism which acts well beyond its order of magnitude, which is that of the individuals it contaminates, and also well beyond its sphere of action, which is that of infected organisms, and not that of mobility, production activities and world markets, nor that of the monetary policies of central banks⁹."

Let us observe how Werner Herzog's film initiates the propagation of infection as a global operator, acting at the level of myth magnitude. During the Biedermeier period in Wismar, in the middle of the 19th century, Jonathan Harker (Bruno Ganz) is entrusted with a delicate mission by his superior, the real estate agent Renfield (Roland Topor): he has to go to Transylvania to sell a house to Count Dracula.

Ironically, the hero exclaims: "It will do me good to escape from this city, to leave these canals that lead nowhere and come back to themselves. "It's a metaphor for the world we're living in today: we live in an all-encompassing geographical system. His wife, Lucy (Isabelle Adjani), is opposed to his departure because she has a terrible premonition, she knows that he is going

Nosferatu, p. 158 ff: "Mummies are lined up on the two walls, and all of them, with their mouths wide open, form a powerful chorale. To the left and right, mummified corpses lean against the wall, like boarders who have been shot. It's a scary sight. Many of the mummies are in corroded clothing, some are completely naked. A young woman has only small shoes on her feet. Her skin is brownish, like parchment. Some bodies are half decomposed, but their posture and expression are still very clear. There are men and women and many, many children. They stand inside and don't bring any signs. The most horrible thing is their open mouths. They stand like a chorus of ghosts from which no sound ever comes".

⁸ See Jared Diamond and Nathan Wolfe, "How we can stop the next new virus", Washington Post, 16 March 2020. Jared Diamond, a geographer and biologist at UCLA, is the author of *Guns, germs and steel. The Fates of Human society*, New York, Morton and Compagny, 1999. The book is available at archive.org. Nathan Wolfe is a virologist. See also the documentary film "Epidemics: the invisible threat" (Ansteckungsgefahr! Epidemien auf dem Vormarsch) by Anne Poiret and Raphaël Hitier, filmed in 2014 on the coronavirus. It can be seen on the Arte website until 31 May 2020.

⁹ See geographer Michel Lussault, "Le monde du virus, une performance géographique", AOC (Analyse - Opinion - Critique), 14 April 2020.

to face danger. He doesn't listen to her. As a child of the Enlightenment, Jonathan Harker doesn't care about superstition or what our dreams teach us.

After a four-week riding trip on horseback, Jonathan Harker arrives at Count Dracula's castle. He discovers a disturbing but affable man, who speaks with gentle courtesy. He moves with the same slowness as we found in the tenor of the Johannespassion. The singer announces the death of Christ, Nosferatu, literally, the "undead" in the interpretation of the novelist Bram Stoker, author of "Dracula" (1897)¹⁰, is struck with great weariness because death does not come. The character played by Klaus Kinski is deeply tragic, he suffers from not being able to die, and not being able to love, and be loved. Count Dracula only appears on the screen just a few minutes, while the movie lasts 107. These 17 minutes are pregnant with metaphysics and pain.

On that first night, Count Dracula bites the neck of his sleeping guest. We don't see the scene. The next day, intrigued by this mosquito bite ("Ein Mückenstich," says the script), Jonathan Harker realizes that he is infected. He doesn't want to admit it, but he is infected. Slowly, the disease will spread inside him. Count Dracula returns to haunt him the next night. Many times in the film, Werner Herzog asks his actor, Klaus Kinski, to meticulously repeat the gestures of Max Schreck, who played the Count in Murnau's film. The frames are identical, and in 1979 the filmmaker reproduces scenes already shot by Murnau in 1922. The vampire and the disease cross the ages. The images are superimposed. The imaginary deepens.

The infection has occurred. When the Count infected Jonathan Harker, Lucy, his wife, with a dreadful foreboding, awoke in the night. Count Dracula hears this call... He forsakes the rigid body of the husband and joins forces with the wife. A journey begins, he takes a boat hidden in a coffin to reach the Baltic through the Black Sea. An unlikely route. To reach Wismar, the Hanseatic city of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in northeastern Germany, one had to cross the lands of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (today Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic), then from Dresden, go to Berlin, turn away from Hamburg and head north to reach the Baltic. But it doesn't matter. The important thing is to remember the image of the ship, of the sea: disease travels.

During Count Dracula's voyage, Renfield, the real estate agent who had sent Jonathan Harker to Transylvania, was locked up. He seems to have gone mad. He tries to bite the neck of one of the guards. He stops: "he hears sails rustling"... The evil does not come from elsewhere. It is he who attracts Count Dracula to Wismar. At each stopover, the Count spreads the plague and becomes satiated. He finally lands in a ghost ship filled with thousands of rats ready to perform their duties.

Reading the captain's logbook, the word plague is pronounced. Dr. Van Helsing (Walter Landengast), the town's physician, urges everyone to go home and confine themselves.

¹⁰ The Irish writer Bram Stoker repeated a mistake by one of his sources, Emily Gerard (1885), who thought that Nosferatu meant "vampire" or "not dead" in Romanian. Nosferatu, whose correct form is "nesuferitu", means the offensive, the embarrassing, the unspeakable, and then, the devil.

Considerably weakened, Jonathan Harker is pursuing the Count. He arrives too late at Wismar. Apathetic, he no longer recognizes his wife. The disease is at work. He's slowly metamorphosing. Already he can no longer tolerate the sun.

As the evil spreads through Jonathan Harker's body, Dracula spreads the plague. Werner Herzog had brought 11,000 rats from Hungary to invade the city of Wismar (Herzog chooses the town of Delft for the shooting). When Herzog announced to the mayor of Delft, his plan was to release thousands of rats into the city, the director faced a categorical refusal. The sequence of the boat arrival, bringing Nosferatu to town, was shot in a more accommodating city, Schiedam, a few miles away. If we think of today's policies in favor of animal rights, Herzog's intention of letting loose laboratory rats raised in Hungary, painted in grey as he had only been able to obtain white ones (the rats in the Murnau's film were black), appears not only cruel or insane, but also unaware of potential risks of igniting infectious diseases. Maarten't Hart¹¹, a Dutch expert of laboratory rats Herzog had added to his crew, he witnessed that rats had been starved during their travel from Hungary and began to eat each other upon their arrival in the Netherlands. The insanity of dyeing snow-white rats grey for a pure aesthetic motive led to a 50 percent death toll as the process entailed dipping caged animals in a boiling dye liquid. Maarten't Hart subsequently decided to withdraw from the filming. Although Herzog utterly denies the words of his "rat consultant" by treating them as false allegations¹², what is left to us is the porous side of fiction when what first appears as a sublime film is transform into a horrible reality.

Many things can prevent us from accepting and interpreting what we observe. Dr. Van Helsing, an heir to the Enlightenment, nevertheless refuses to analyze what he sees and to hear what Lucy understood when she read the diary of her husband's stay in Dracula's castle. Nosferatu comes to visit her in her room. She extinguishes the fear in her and, clearing her chest to better discover the cross she carries around her neck, she declares to the vampire: "Salvation can only come from us alone. You can hold on to ensure that even the inconceivable will not disconcert me." In an atmosphere of "Apocalypse joyeuse", the inhabitants of Wismar, who survived the plague, get together on the Grand'place to dance and get drunk, in a last banquet among the rats.

Lucy keeps telling passers-by, "I know the reason for all this evil. Why won't you listen to me? I know the reason." Dr. Van Helsing, meanwhile, said, "These are enlightened times. Science has long since disproved the superstitions of which you speak. " Lucy understands that she must act alone.

She sacrifices herself because she knows that if a woman with a pure soul can make the vampire forget the rooster crowing, the first rays of the day will get the better of him. She kisses her husband one last time. Her husband, who is no longer himself. Then she offers herself to the

¹¹ Maarten 't Hart is an etologist but also a writer. A long story in Dutch, published in 1978, tells of the treatment of rats, the conditions of the filming, and his withdrawal from the project. See "Ongewenste zeereis", Maatstaf, Jaargang 26 (1978), pp. 77-97: https://www.dbnl.org/tekst/_maa003197801_01/_maa003197801_01_0076.php.

¹² See, chapter 5, "Legitemacy", in Paul Cronin, *Werner Herzog-A Guide for the Perplexed: Conversations with Paul Cronin*, Faber & Faber, 2014.

vampire. Just as he infects her, just as he bites her, the slow flight of the bat reappears: *Illness as a metaphor*. While Werner Herzog was filming *Nosferatu*, Susan Sontag was writing her inspiring book, in which she taught us that disease can only be fatal if we allow ourselves to be convinced of its inevitability and of our inability to change the world around us¹³.

The virus is impressive today because it takes advantage of the characteristics of power and efficiency of our world and our beliefs, which it transforms into factors of vulnerability. Count Dracula succumbs. He lets himself be touched, and the crowing of the cock surprises him. Werner Herzog changes the end of the story told by the novelist Bram Stoker and filmed by Murnau. No happy ending. Jonathan Harker succeeds the Count. New *Nosferatu*, he rides a horse and goes off to spread the disease elsewhere. The new vampire leaves town in broad daylight. His illness has become more robust, for he now withstands the light of day. He has mutated.

"Now I know what I have to do" keeps repeating Lucy. Will we be able to hear her?

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¹³ Susan Sontag, *Illness as metaphor*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978.