

Nosferatu (1922) – opening scene critique



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Nosferatu (1922), directed by F. W. Murnau and also known as the first big screen version of Stocker's "Dracula", is considered a cinematic masterpiece. In this silent movie, Hutter, a real estate employee, is assigned by his boss to visit Count Orlock (the vampire) who shows interest in a residence, and in Hutter's wife, Ellen. The mise-en-scene and Murnau's style of expressionism in this movie makes it one of the most "naturalistically-creepy" movie.

The connotations quoting Cavallius in the beginning, however, give a sense of alarm/danger ("blood", "plague", "terrible epidemic"). But then again, the music in this first scene doesn't give off the atmosphere that it will be based on horror. Instead, it introduces the main characters, Hutter and Ellen, in a happy, calming and romantic setting. The establishing shot shows the top of a church overlooking a still small city (a bit dead and empty).

Centered in the middle of the frame, it balances the composition and gives a sense of reality and religiousness.

The next scene introduces Hutter. This scene is divided into two: On the left, Hutter is fixing his shirt through a mirror placed on top of a portrait. Hutter's back drives our attention to his reflection on the mirror where he looks smiling narcissistically. On the right, a window and a single almost dried out plant. He is only concentrating on his reflection (the present), ignoring the portrait (which is smaller and placed under his mirror) as if ignoring the past and the plant (symbol of life/nature which is real in contrast of his virtual reflection/image).

A cut, then, introduces Ellen: A girl playing with a kitten. Contrasting Hutter's bare/dead window, Ellen is playing at a window filled with plants and flowers, and has her back turned to the a flowery wall paper covered almost entirely with portraits. Their backs turned to the "nature morte" may imply their desire to escape what is dead. She is shown as the typical feminine woman of the 1850's smiling joyfully and innocently. The next scene shows Hutter between the plants picking flowers for Ellen.

Then while Ellen is knitting, a cut reveals a frame showing a dark door that opens and Hutter's white head (in contrast with the dark door) pops out off centered. Hutter's exaggerated, almost devilish, smile, the asymmetrical frame and the way he bows as if talking with a child hints that something isn't going right. The couple is centered in the frame. Giving her the flowers, he almost pushes her back and lets the flowers come between them. Ellen holds them in a motherly way close to her heart and looks at them sadly. Her reaction to the flowers shows her caring sense to the living nature.

Hutter hugs her almost mechanically while laughing at her reaction. He seems as if he doesn't care about her feelings, which amuses more than worries him. Through the opening scene, a happy couple in a domestic lifestyle is introduced. Murnau must have made sure to give an almost very normal couple of the 1850's which enforces the sense of normality. Murnau, and other German filmmakers of the time, developed their own style (compared to Hollywood movies) by using symbolism and mise en scene to add mood and deeper meaning to a movie.