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The Return of the Corpses. »Nosferatu – Phantom der Nacht« (Werner Herzog) and Illness as a Metaphor

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 deaths.¹ 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 xylophonist.² 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.

In two months, from March to April 2020, thousands of texts have been written about coronavirus all over the world. Our Western 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.

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

¹ Deconfinement took place in Wuhan on 8 April 2020 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 Barnes: C.I.A. Hunts for Authentic Virus Totals in China.

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, members of the Thomanerchors Leipzig, Bachfest Family Chor, and Malaysia Bach Festival Singers and Orchestra.

³ Werner Herzog's official website offers an excellent introduction of his multiple talents (film-

Symphonie des Grauens («A Symphony of Terror») filmed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau in 1922.⁴ 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 University:⁵ corpses deformed by an infectious disease. Werner Herzog films at length the mummified bodies of victims of a cholera epidemic in 1833.⁶ 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 chorale.⁷ The end of the scene is marked by the flight, in 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-

maker, writer, opera director). See the bibliography about Herzog on his official website and Eldrige: Werner Herzog. Filmmaker and Philosopher, pp. 210–216. About *Nosferatu*, see the script published in German: Herzog: Stroszek-Nosferatu. Zwei Filmerzählungen; and, in English, in the volume: Scenarios III, Translated by Khrishna Winston. See also Prodolliet: *Nosferatu. Die Entwicklung des Vampirfilms*, pp. 79 ff.; Prawer: *Nosferatu. Phantom der Nacht*; and Ervig: *Werner Herzog: Phantom der Nacht*.

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: »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«; transl. by the author.

⁵ Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University: COVID-19 Dashboard. See, for example, New York Times: Coronavirus-Maps.

⁶ These mummies are kept in the Museo de las Momias de Guanajuato in Mexico. 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: »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« (Herzog: Stroszek – Nosferatu, p. 158 ff.; transl. by the author).

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 expected.⁸ 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«. ⁹ 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 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 charac-

⁸ See Diamond/Wolfe: *How We Can Stop the Next New Virus*. Jared Diamond, a geographer and biologist at UCLA, is the author of *Guns, Germs and Steel*. Nathan Wolfe is a virologist. See also the documentary film *Ansteckungsgefahr! Epidemien auf dem Vormarsch* (»Epidemics: the invisible threat«) by Anne Poiret and Raphaël Hitier, filmed in 2014, on the coronavirus.

⁹ See geographer Lussault: *Le monde du virus, une performance géographique*. The quote goes on and on: »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 banks«; transl. by the author. See also the very interesting article by another geographer, Jacques Lévy: *L'humanité habite le Covid-19*.

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.

ter 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: »[H]e 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. 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 Hart,¹¹ 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 allegations,¹² 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 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 us.¹³

¹¹ Maarten 't Hart is an ethologist 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 Hart: Ongewenste zeereis.

¹² See Cronin: Werner Herzog: A Guide for the Perplexed, chapter 5.

¹³ Sontag: *Illness as Metaphor*.

This problem (the representation of the disease) is found in the many accounts of the plague. It is rare, however, to read the story of a plague *survivor*. We have such testimony in a letter from Erasmus of Rotterdam. Written in 1518, it relates a journey from Basel to Leuven, during which the humanist contracts, or thinks he will contract the plague, in Cologne. Let us look at his testimony, recounted in an epistle written on 15 October to his friend Beatus Rhenanus.¹⁴

On September 11, 1518, Erasmus of Rotterdam was in Bonn. When he was about fifty years old, he was at the height of his glory; the humanist has just published the first edition of the Greek text and its Latin translation of the New Testament. Advisor to Emperor Charles V, he left his printer in Basel, Johann Froben, to go to Leuven. This journey is recounted in a letter written on October 15 to his friend Beatus Rhenanus. He takes the boat in Bonn early in the morning and docks in Cologne at 6, under an already noxious sky (l. 12: »cælo iam pestilenti«). Everyone tries to avoid the city for fear of the plague. As the humanist is unable to rent a two-horse carriage, he decides to leave the city on his limping horse. He goes to Bedburg and the residence of Count Wilhelm II Von Neuenahr in Bedburg north of Cologne. He stays there for five days, in good health, in a delightful atmosphere, and reviews the proofs of the second edition of his New Testament. A terrible wind storm accompanies him next on a four-day Dantestic journey to the Southern Netherlands. Vomiting, shivering, fainting on his horse, nothing is spared him. Erasmus accurately describes his human misfortunes: his lower abdomen, black pus oozing from abscesses, the lack of hygiene. Arriving in Louvain on the evening of September 21, he does not dare to go to his home, the Collège du Lis, for fear that a rumor of plague might arise because of him (l. 194–195: »si pestis rumor ex me fuisset ortus.«). His printer friend, Dirk Martens, takes him in. A ballet of surgeons and doctors then begins. Erasmus questions his friend and asks him if they have diagnosed the plague? Dirk Martens answers positively. Erasmus, surprisingly, because he is generally afraid of the plague, starts laughing profusely, and »does not let any fantasy of the plague enter his mind« (l. 212–213: »Risi satis, nec ullam pestis imaginationem demitto in animum«). The humanist finally recovers, after 4 weeks of convalescence. After returning home, he wonders about the reality of the illness he has suffered. And concludes: »If there was a plague, I drove it away by effort and sorrow, as well as by fortitude; for very often, a large part of the illness lies in the imagination of this disease« (l. 250–252: »Si pestis fuit, pestem eam labore et incommoditate animique robore depuli: quando saepenumero magna morbi pars est morbi imaginatio.«).

¹⁴ Erasmus' correspondence was edited by Percy Stafford Allen with the help of his wife and his colleague H. W. Garrod from 1906 to 1947, cf. Allen (ed.): *Opus Epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami denuo recognitum et auctum*. The letter relating to the trip is epistola 867. Cf. Gibaud: *Les tribulations d'Érasme de Bâle à Louvain: 4–21 septembre 1518*.

Erasmus does not write »in the patient's imagination«, but, »in the patient's imagination of the illness.« In this sense, the humanist anticipates Susan Sontag's essay by five centuries. Illness is not only an affliction of the body but also of the representations we make of the world. As these two authors see it, we must cure ourselves, but above all, we must strengthen what we believe in if we wish to be healed. Erasmus' reaction is exemplary. He protects his community (the Collège du Lis), isolates himself (he refuses to let friends come and visit him), but above all, he laughs. At the end of the letter, the humanist confides in his friend Beatus, telling him that he feared death in his youth, but that old age has made him serene. All the more so since the monument attesting that he lived is ready, his edition of the New Testament (l. 272–273: »iam nunc paratum est monumentum quo posteris tester me vixisse«). Erasmus drew strength from his laughter and thinking back to the core of his life, his work as a philologist on the holy text. The current virus is impressive today because it transforms the power and efficiency of our world and beliefs into factors of vulnerability. Count Dracula succumbs. He lets himself be touched, and the crowing of the cock surprises him. He's dying because he couldn't find the strength in him to laugh or be loved.

Werner Herzog goes even further because he 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?



Fig. 1: The bat that heralds the disease, »Nosferatu – Phantom der Nacht« (movie by Werner Herzog 1979), screenshot.

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Fig. 1: The bat that heralds the disease, »Nosferatu – Phantom der Nacht« (movie by Werner Herzog 1979), screenshot. Reproduced with the permission of Werner Herzog Film, Wien, Austria.