The story in Murnau’s film is presented as a history of the plague epidemic that, in 1838, ravished the German city of Wisborg. Murnau’s vampire is both a bloodsucker and a plague bringer. As in Dracula, he wishes to settle on West European soil, and this time chooses Germany. The degenerate real-estate agent Knock offers him a house in Wisborg and sends his employee, Thomas, to Transylvania to finalize the deal. Thomas’s Transylvanian experiences are very similar to those of Jonathan Harker, with the added privilege of having his own neck bitten by the Count. After the purchase contract is signed, the Count departs for Germany with a cartload of coffins filled with native soil.

1. Unable to obtain a copyright permission for filming Stoker’s novel, Murnau strove to make his film as dissimilar from Dracula as possible, shifting the time and location of the story’s events and altering the characters’ names. What are the most important thematic changes made by Murnau? Do they impoverish or enhance the vampire plot? How?

2. Having substituted Germany for England as a target of vampiric invasion, Murnau could have easily “transported” his Count by land instead of “plagiarizing” the itinerary of Stoker’s hero. And yet, Murnau chose to retain the sea route. How can you explain this choice? Why is the sea (seafaring?) important for Murnau’s version of the vampire story?

3. Critics agree that Nosferatu owes much of its appeal to the portrayal of its central hero. The barely human Count Orlok takes to an extreme Stoker’s concept of the vampire as the threatening “other,” the “alien.” How is Orlok visually dehumanized (appearance, movement)? What non-human (or subhuman) life forms does his image evoke?

4. The vampire’s alliance with rodents (rats, mice)—a marginal moment in Stoker’s Dracula—has a prominent place in Nosferatu. Why is this connection important for Murnau? How is this motif linked with the main story line in Nosferatu?

5. In what ways does the film suggest kinship between the “master,” Orlok, and his slave, Knock?

6. The architecture of Orlok’s German dwelling contrasts starkly with that of the other houses in Wisborg. How? What is the purpose of this contrast? Where is Orlok’s house located? Why is this important?

7. While the film consistently positions Orlok’s body in doorways and rectangular enclosures, Ellen is constantly positioned in front of open windows. Thus the scene leading to her perdition (Ellen at the window, her arms outstretched to welcome Nosferatu) all but repeats the earlier sleepwalking scene. What does this parallelism suggest? How does it unsettle the manifest meaning of Ellen’s actions?

8. The seduction scene is orchestrated as an intercourse between a dark shadow and a body clothed in white. How are the terms of this intercourse inverted in the scene of Orlok’s destruction?