



## Murnau, Friedrich Wilhelm (1888-1931)

by Daryl Chin

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A publicity portrait of F. W. Murnau (1929).

Acclaimed as the greatest director of the German Expressionist period (1919-1933), F.W. Murnau created the first masterpiece of the horror film, his exquisitely stylized *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1921).

Shooting on location, Murnau employed the limited special effects available at that time to create an atmosphere of genuine disquiet. The performance of Max Schreck remains unparalleled in its eerie malevolence.

Because of copyright difficulties with the Bram Stoker estate, *Nosferatu* had limited release worldwide. No such problems impeded the release of *Der letzte Mann* (1924; American title: *The Last Laugh*), universally acclaimed as possibly the greatest film yet made upon its worldwide release.

What is remarkable about *Der letzte Mann* is that the story is told without titles: this tale of an elderly man's fall from his position as doorman (epitomized by the elaborate uniform he wears for his job) to a subsidiary position as lavatory attendant (symbolized by the stripping of his uniform) is told with brilliant incisiveness through camera movement, visual composition, and lighting, all employed to provide a subjective perspective to the narrative.

This film established its star, Emil Jannings, as a major international film actor, and led to his coming to America (where he would win the first Academy Award for Best Actor). Jannings' status was further established in Murnau's film of *Tartuffe* (1925), a fluid but somber version of the Molière play.

The success of *Der letzte Mann* enabled Murnau to make *Faust* (1926), the most expensive movie made in Germany to that time, in which Murnau was able to create an entire medieval universe with monumental sets, sweeping locations, and elaborate costumes. The expenses were so overwhelming that the film proved unsuccessful financially, which might have marked the end of Murnau's career if he had not already accepted an offer to go to the United States.

The director's contract with William Fox stipulated that Murnau would be allowed to make a film with no interference; the result was *Sunrise* (1927). Working with many of his colleagues from Germany, including scenarist Carl Mayer, cameraman Karl Struss, and art director Rochus Gliese, this "song of two humans" remains one of the most beautiful films ever made, a magical parable about a peasant couple whose love is threatened but who find renewed commitment.

The enormous sets (the "big city" set was the largest ever built in the United States up to that time) made *Sunrise* a financial disaster upon release; its status as a silent film just when sound was coming in did not help either. Nevertheless, the film was widely acclaimed, and won several Academy Awards during the first year of those awards, including Best Actress for Janet Gaynor, Best Cinematography for Karl Struss and Charles Rosher, and a special award for "Artistic Quality of Production."

The financial failure of *Sunrise* imposed compromises on Murnau's next two productions for Fox. Failures on every level, *Four Devils* (1928) and *City Girl* (1929) caused Murnau to seek to re-establish his career.

In 1930, Murnau set out to form a production company with the documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty. However, once on location in the South Pacific, Flaherty backed out of the production, leaving the film entirely in Murnau's hands. The resulting work, *Tabu*, proved to be magnificent, a tragic love story in which the location shooting pioneered in *Nosferatu* found its culmination.

Murnau died in a car crash a week before the premiere of *Tabu* in 1931; the movie would go on to win an Academy Award for Best Cinematography for Floyd Crosby, the father of rock musician David Crosby.

An imposingly tall, thin man of aristocratic demeanor, Murnau (born Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe on December 28, 1888 in Bielefeld, Germany) was the product of the artistic ferment of the Weimar Republic. Before embarking on his career as a filmmaker, he trained as an art historian, which may explain the painterly images of his films and the primacy he accorded to the visual. He also worked under the legendary theater director Max Reinhardt.

In Berlin, Murnau moved in artistic circles where homosexuality was accepted as a matter of course. In Hollywood, however, Murnau's homosexuality was the cause of much gossip, including the infamous rumor that his death on March 11, 1931 in an automobile accident was precipitated by his fellating his chauffeur while the latter was driving.

All evidence has shown this rumor to be false, yet it persists. Similarly, the recent film *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), which stars John Malkovich as Murnau, depicts the director as a man so driven that he willingly allows murder. The need to defame gay artists itself demands a psychological study.

While the scandalous rumors surrounding Murnau's death resulted in the appearance of only a handful of mourners at his funeral, one of those was Greta Garbo. She requested that a death mask be made, which she kept on her desk throughout her life.

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