

Foolish Wives

By Daniel Eagan

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In a radio tribute to director D.W. Griffith, Erich von Stroheim spoke warmly about his one-time mentor. For his part in Griffith's "Hearts of the World" (1918), Stroheim said, "It meant the chance around the corner. It meant everything." Stroheim got his first breaks in the movie business as an assistant and uncredited bit actor for Griffith. Later he was hired by Douglas Fairbanks, who fired him during a wave of anti-German hysteria brought about by World War I.

Stroheim used the war to capitalize on his Austrian heritage, embarking on a string of roles as villainous Huns. One thing he learned from Griffith was the value of excess. Both artists viewed excess as a virtue. Stroheim pushed harder and farther than his peers, realizing that a heavy had to earn recognition from viewers just as heroes did. His bad guys didn't just menace women, they tore dresses off with their teeth and tossed wailing infants out windows.

Excess became the key to Stroheim's directing style as well. His stories revolved around debauched aristocrats and the hypocritical nouveau riche, with an occasional saintly innocent thrown in. He added a deviant gloss to the risqué films by Cecil B. DeMille and Ernst Lubitsch, one as close to pornography as mainstream film could get at the time. Stroheim was just as excessive with physical details, constructing enormous sets and ordering expensive costumes. His working methods infuriated studio executives. He would shoot a scene, view the footage, rewrite the script, and shoot the same scene again, repeatedly, adding salacious bits and extravagant props as he went along.

Stroheim sold one of his scripts, "The Pinnacle," to Carl Laemmle at Universal. In it he played a junior German officer who tried to seduce an American wife. By the time it was released in 1919, Laemmle had retitled it "Blind Husbands." Stroheim complained about the alteration, but not about the profits the film made. After directing "The Devil's Passkey" (1920, a lost film), Stroheim offered Laemmle a similar tale of seduction, this time set in Monte Carlo. The "Foolish Wives" title evoked "Blind Husbands,"



This ad promoting the film appeared in Universal Weekly, June 3, 1922. [Courtesy Media History Digital Library.](#)

but Stroheim upped the ante on every level for his new film. Now he was a Russian aristocrat ensconced with two female "cousins" in a waterfront mansion. His story would unfold on gigantic sets that attempted to reproduce Monte Carlo landmarks, in particular a blindingly white casino that towered over the landscape.

The sets gave "Foolish Wives" a weight, a verisimilitude, that many films of the time lacked. Stroheim showed a generation of filmmakers just how much the medium could achieve given unlimited time and resources. His actors had real spaces to work in, and wore clothes rather than costumes. Today filmmakers strive to shoot in accurate locations, but at the time few directors insisted on seeing an actual ocean outside the window of a set. Stroheim wanted everything real. Like many artists, he was seduced by his tools, by what Orson Welles would refer to as the "toy train" aspect of filmmaking. Stroheim liked to show off the details of his productions, the expensive nooks and crannies, whether they applied to his story or not. He chose visual pleasure over narrative concerns, a significant problem when it came to sexual fetishes.

Filming on “Foolish Wives” began in July 1920. Eleven months later, Stroheim had shot sixty hours of material, with no end in sight. Irving Thalberg, Laemmle’s new production executive, tried to rein Stroheim in, threatening to give the film away to another director. Since he was the lead actor, Stroheim was gambling that he couldn’t be replaced as director. Accounts vary, embellished with the passing of time. Threats may have been issued, showdowns either occurred or didn’t, and perhaps cameras and equipment were taken off backlot sets and returned to storage. By June 1921, filming was over.

After months of editing, Stroheim handed Thalberg a thirty-reel feature running over six hours. In later interviews and articles, the director claimed that he wanted to exhibit the film in multiple parts, over the course of two nights. “Of course, the moguls that were Irving G. Thalberg could not see the possibility.” Editor Arthur Ripley was assigned to reduce the running time by half. Censors asked for more cuts. By the time of its general release, “Foolish Wives” was down to ten reels; even shorter versions came out later.

Not all of the problems associated with “Foolish Wives” were Stroheim’s fault. Rudolph Christians, who played the American envoy Andrew Hughes, died of pneumonia on February 7, 1921, seven months into filming. For Christian’s remaining scenes, Stroheim used actor Robert Edeson, shooting him from behind. But in truth “Foolish Wives” ended up the way it did because the director’s intransigence in the face of cultural and economic realities. Stroheim knew he was taking too long, spending too much, and filming objectionable material. Griffith did the same thing, and was lauded as a genius.

But Griffith also had greater understanding of how film narratives worked. In later years Stroheim would learn how to construct scenes. To focus attention

within the frame, to build emotions through editing. Here he frequently seems at a loss, cutting from one shot to another for no reason, dawdling over insignificant moments, botching big scenes like a climactic fire.

Laemmle worked overtime building publicity for “Foolish Wives,” erecting a billboard in Manhattan detailing its expanding budget and even hiring composer Sigmund Romberg to write a score. Scheduled tours brought movie fans to gawk at the life-size re-creations of Café de Paris, Hotel de France, and the casino. “Foolish Wives” had been an attempt on Laemmle’s part to burnish his studio’s reputation, but the film was ultimately too expensive to be profitable. A July 7, 1921 Universal “Daily Memorandum Picture Costs” listed the total amount spent to date on “Foolish Wives” as \$1,053,290.80 — more than thirty times the cost of an average feature.

The picture ended up in the top ten performers of the year, but Stroheim would never again enjoy such creative freedom. Thalberg removed him from his next production, “The Merry Go Round” (1923), prompting Stroheim to sign with Samuel Goldwyn to adapt the Frank Norris novel “McTeague.” Ironically, a series of mergers placed Stroheim under Thalberg once more at what became Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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