

BERND HERZOGENRATH

**(AMERICAN) CULTURE AND ITS DISCONTENTS –
THE CASE OF F. W. MURNAU**

On June 22, 1926, the German magazine *Film Kurier* announced German director Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's departure to the United States.

The stabilization of the German 'Mark' in 1923 a couple of years before had marked the beginning of a crisis in the German film industry, with export decreasing, and a lot of the film corporation and joint stock companies going bankrupt. As a result, the foreign competitors, in particular the Hollywood corporations, were invading the German market. The attempt of German Studios to compete with the American rivals by producing artistic special features on a large and costly scale did not really pay off. Parallel to this economic crisis a process of 'sellout' to overseas took place. Hollywood 'lured' German directors, script-writers, cameramen, actors etc. to the States to *both* harm a potential competitor *and* to gain prestige. When studio mogul William Fox of Hollywood's Fox Film Corporation brought Murnau over to work in Hollywood, giving the director an enormous production budget, complete creative control, and the promise of no studio interference, it was his intention to have Murnau create a prestige production full of that European aesthetic, not just another 'American movie'. By promising full artistic freedom – a freedom which has become legendary – to Murnau, Fox managed to convince the 'genius' Murnau, as he liked to call him, to sign a contract to direct four films for Fox.

It should be noted that this was a very clever business move for Fox, and not an act of philanthropic patronage. After years of Tom-Mix-Westerns, Fox was hoping to get more than a foothold in the area of what in the Hollywood Studio System was called 'specials' – the most expensive and prestigious production category, designed to be "perceived to be of 'quality' by contemporary molders of public opinion about films" (Allen 1977: 330). With the help of Murnau, Fox aimed at gaining access to the 'quality' markets that had been so far dominated by *Paramount* and *MGM*. By concentrating on 'specials' at the expense of the Western line-up, which had been Fox's trademark before, in 1926 Fox's Broadway stage adaptations *What Price Glory?*, *The Music Master*, *The Monkey Talks*, *A Holy Terror* and *The Cradle Snatchers* appeared in the category 'Best Film of

the Month' in the influential magazine *Photoplay*. Fox, by hiring Murnau, wanted to consolidate his claim to become Hollywood's most prestigious studio. The marriage of Murnau's genius and Hollywood's technological supremacy should enable the German director "to put [...] subjective thought on the screen, to open the mind, the heart, the soul" (*Moving Picture World* 69). By that move, Fox, as a patron of cinematic art at its highest, would be able to shoot down charges that claimed Hollywood to cater to the lowest instincts, to mass produce objects without nutritional value whatsoever.

It were such claims that made the German *Film Kurier* assure its readers that Murnau would be in Hollywood only for a short time, giving a guest performance, so to speak. To the question if Murnau was aware of that art-hostile "American danger", Murnau responded "What naive spectre for weak-minded dilettantes". And the *Film Kurier* comments: 'Murnau knows and loves only one thing: the victory of film as a work of art' ('Murnau ist heute abgereist', my transl.). In 1927, Murnau debuted in the U.S.A. with the Fox Film Corporation's production *Sunrise*, starting only a few days before *The Jazz Singer* – the first 'talkie' – thus marking the very end of the silent era. *Sunrise* shows Murnau's fascinated and critical reflection on modernity and the American experience. Constantly shifting between and combining both an American and a European perspective, oscillating between German Expressionism and American Melodrama, *Sunrise* manages to stage the paradoxical constitution of modernity. Yet, despite the film's stringent play with binary oppositions, *Sunrise* continually strives for a realm stressing the both|and in favor of a simplistic either|or.

Only three years and two (*Four Devils*, *City Girl*) films later, however, due to his problems with Fox, Murnau produced his final film *TABU* almost as a means to exorcise the pressure of the American Way of Life and its stress on economic success. My paper will concentrate on the two films that somehow 'frame' Murnau's 'American Experience' – his Hollywood debut *Sunrise*, Murnau's first film shot and produced in America, and *TABU*, his last film, shot and produced independently after Murnau had turned his back to Hollywood. Due to their exposed position to Murnau's experience in|of Hollywood|America, I will read this 'frame tale' as a commentary on that experience, as a self-reflective statement on film as a work of art.

Sunrise tells a simple tale – almost as simple as a Sunday School fable – very elegantly. The first of very few intertitles tells us that "This song of the Man and his Wife is of no place and every place; you might hear it anywhere at any time. For wherever the sun rises and sets in the city's turmoil or under the open sky on the farm, life is much the same; sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet". A farmer, known only as the Man (George O'Brien), is seduced by the Woman from the City (Margaret Livingston) who vacations in the country village situated on a lake-shore. He is literally mesmerized by the corrupt vamp's promises of the glitz and glamour of the City. She suggests that he run off with her after drowning his Wife (Janet Gaynor), and his initial burst of violent protest gives way to her spell. Wracked with guilt but committed to see the deed through, he rows his

Wife out to the middle of the lake, where he plans to kill her. When the moment comes, though, he cannot bring himself to kill her. After he rows to the shore, the terrified Wife runs away. She tries to escape him by boarding a trolley bound for the City. He follows, and the film's center section takes place in the City (a remarkable set complete with bustling streets and a Luna Park fun center), where the Man and the Wife spend a day in the city falling in love all over again, where they seek out and, in a church where a wedding is taking place, find their reconciliation and redemption. While rowing back home that night, however, a fierce storm tosses the Wife into the turbulent black water. The Man washes up on shore and, with their neighbors, searches the lake and the surrounding marshes for her. The Woman from the City, thinking that he has successfully done away with the Wife, comes to the Man, who is seconds away from strangling her when he receives word that the Wife has been found alive. With the City temptress ridden out of town, the Man and the Wife reaffirm their newfound devotion as an art deco sun rises and fills the screen over their rejoined hearts.

Now, I am not suggesting that the whole film can serve as an allegoric fable of Murnau's American Experience, but I venture to say that at least some of its images (and statements) are close enough to a self-reflexive statement on the medium 'film', and the particular circumstances this very movie was created in. In his book *All That is solid melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman gives the following description of modernity:

Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology. In this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity [...] of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. (Berman 1988: 15)

So, if *Sunrise* has more often than not been read in terms of the binary oppositions it displays – country|city, the Madonna|the whore, expressionism|melodram, classical|modernist – I would argue Murnau's achievement rather lies in the complexity of the shifting relations between the various dichotomies. Thus, *Sunrise* orchestrates the oppositions, the antinomies, and the separation and alienation implied, but it transgresses those seemingly fixed borders. Modernity thus is defined not so much by the contradictions, but, as again Berman puts it, the "attempt by modern men and women ... to get a grip on the modern world and make themselves at home in it" (1988: 5). Lucy Fischer, commenting on Berman's description of modernity with regard to *Sunrise*, states that "[o]ne can view *Sunrise* precisely in those narrative terms – as the farmer and his wife journey from the Old World to the New, endeavoring to accommodate themselves to 'its possibilities and perils'" (Fischer 1998: 40). Deliberately mis-reading the meaning of Old World and New World in Fischer's statement – that is, as tradition and modernity – I will add the opposition Europe|USA to the list of binaries, and thus add Murnau's going to Hollywood, and his experiences there, as another possible subtext.

First, I will try to establish some relations between some of the films' images with the signifier 'Murnau'. Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau was born in Bielefeld, Germany, as Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe. He adopted the name 'Murnau' as a *nom de plume*, Murnau being the name of a small rural village in Bavaria, known for it being the 'home-base' of the artist colony *Der Blaue Reiter*, members of which were Wassily Kandinsky and Gabriele Münter. Now, here we already have at least 3 things that can be related to *Sunrise*. Plumpe, Murnau's 'maiden name', so to speak, immediately calls into mind the German word 'plump', which means 'coarse,' 'clumsy', and 'heavy-handed' – the usual derogatory associations city-people have with regard to 'country-fellows'. The village of Murnau, which provided Plumpe with his *nome de plume*, is situated at the Staffelsee in Bavaria, a scenery quite similar to the rural village built as location at Lake Arrowhead, which was used for *Sunrise* – see e.g. Gabriele Münter's paintings *Staffelsee mit Nebelsohne* [*Lake Staffelsee with Misty Sun*] and *Blick aufs Murnauer Moos* [*View On the Murnau Marshes*].

Now, there would be a possible connection, a tentative identification of 'the country' with Europe (or even Germany). As additional evidence, it should be noted that the scenes taking place on 'the country' use lots of images derived from European genre painting, in particular images taken from German Romantic landscape painting, and from Dutch Masters such as Vermeer, whereas the city is represented as 'pure spectacle.' There is maybe even a connection between 'the [plump] Man' with Murnau himself – remember that there was the at least implied charge of Murnau 'betraying' the German film industry, committing artistic sell-out to the Moloch of Hollywood. I am not implying that Murnau by this act attempted to 'kill off' German film, but I think it is quite safe to say that the notion of betrayal was at least 'in the air' with German critics and film industrials. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the one who is trying to lure him away is coming from 'The City' – the Woman from the City is depicted as a dark, feline creature of the night (a cat, maybe even a [William] Fox) who is quite interested in 'the money'.

Be it as it may – one of the crucial scenes between the Man and the Woman from the City is the famous scene in the marshes, where "the Man and the Vamp lie on the grass and watch the film of the city projected against the sky" (Doane 1977: 74). That scene almost perfectly doubles the position that the spectator of the movie *Sunrise* is in when sitting in the cinema – a frame within the frame. Taking place in the fertile swamps – maybe even reminiscent of the fecund part of the acreage of Rancho La Brea christened 'Hollywood' in 1886 by H. H. Wilcox – the vision is immediately related to a kind of eroticism and desire, a connection supported by the Woman from the City's ecstatic dancing. The vision is thus a 'mutual creation' of the 'art of representation' and an almost sexual desire and force. Let me quote Gilles Deleuze. According to Deleuze, German Expressionism evoked

a dark, swampy life into which everything plunges, whether chopped up by shadows or plunged into mists. *The non-organic life of things* [...] which is

oblivious to the wisdom and limits of the organism, is the first principle of Expressionism, valid for the whole of Nature [...]. From this point of view natural substances and artificial creations, candelabras and tress, turbine and sun are no longer any different. [...] In all these cases, it is not the mechanical which is opposed to the organic: it is the vital as potent pre-organic germinality.” (Deleuze 1986: 50–1).

Read in this way, the vision|film is almost like a reversed Platonic cave-allegory, where the vision is not a minor reflection of an idea ‘somewhere outside’, but originates in matter, to begin with.

The ‘vision-of-the-city-film’ thus almost percolates out of that vital and fecund swamp. Thus, in order to become cinematic art with a vital force to move people, the spectacle (Hollywood) has to be inoculated with intensity – hence the mud on the high heels of the Woman from the City, and hence the unwillingness of the Man to have his ‘workers’ hands’ polished over and ‘culturized’ by the Manicure in the City. In contrast to that erotically charged vision, the city itself, later on in the movie, is merely a ‘pure spectacle’ marked by technological advance, cultural laws and poses, which has to be brought ‘to live’ for and by the couple, and by the fact that it has to be paid for – mark the recurrent motif of the Man having to pick small change out of his pocket.

Other images where intensity ‘enlivens’ a pure spectacle are the moment when the Man and the Woman for a moment leave their ‘imposed positions’ in the photo studio and kiss – this moment captured on film provides a much more lively picture than the ones displayed in the shopping window of the studio. Or, the country dance in opposition to the posed and trained movements of the dancers in the ballroom – and even if these coarse and plump folks from the country are close to being ‘reduced’ to a spectacle, their intensity makes it not only enjoyable to themselves – almost entranced by their dance, because it reflects their new-found love and intensity – but also ‘infecting’ and moving the audience.

On the level of ‘practical production’, I argue, this structure – the marriage of Europe and Hollywood as a marriage of ‘art’ and ‘spectacle’, maybe articulated best in the famous trolley ride, where the trolley provides the space ‘in between’ country and city, slowly merging the one into the other, with the intensity (of the characters’ feelings) displayed against (or, within) a ‘moving background’ that somehow mirrors the ‘moving picture’ itself – is repeated. When the German journalist Arnold Höllriegel visited Murnau in Hollywood while shooting *Sunrise* in December 1926, Höllriegel claimed that Fox had brought over Murnau because he saw that “the mere and empty stupendousness is close to an end. Hollywood’s film production, as sweet as ice-cream and soda, is just as empty”. Commenting on the immensely costly and lavish set up for *Sunrise* – a whole city being built on the Fox production site by Rochus Gliese, a fact that Höllriegel finds a “very American” thing to do for a European, Murnau answered: “In my film [...] you will hardly be allowed to notice this square and these cars once the great emotional

conflict between the two people begins. All this is only decoration, background – only America can provide this, although it's not even the most important thing" (Höllriegel 1926). Thus, it is the combination of intensity *plus* spectacle that should do the trick; here Fox and Murnau were on equal terms – at least theoretically.

On the other hand, Murnau claimed that in America, he found and felt a "wonderful youth and freshness", comparing his coming to the U.S.A. as a European to a "driver shifting gears from the first to the third" (*Film Kurier*, 'Das Murnau-Bankett'). Thus, it is not only a one-sided transaction that plays off the country (Europe) against the City (Hollywood). With regard to the notion of "youth and freshness" celebrated by Murnau, it should be noted that the 'woman' looks much younger after their visit to the city, when she dances while sitting in the boat – a mirror-scene to the Woman of the City's ecstatic dancing in the marshes. In the end, after she has been rescued from the waters, the Woman – her hair now loose, and far from being as restrained as it was the first nine tenths of the movie – does not look like an image sprung from an Early Dutch Master painting anymore, but more like a pre-Raphaelite Angel, much more dynamic.

Thus, it is the combination – country and city infected by each other – that proves fruitful. Yet, audiences and sales figures did not reward Murnau's concept – *Sunrise* proved a financial flop, a success only with intellectuals – and even there, some comments disliked the 'art house' approach, ridiculing German directors as 'prima donnas' (Fischer 1998: 19) and *Sunrise* as the sort of movie "that fools highbrows into hollering 'Art'" but without "story interest", about which Murnau could learn a great deal from "local talent" (*Photoplay*). Since the combination of intensity and spectacle, genius and commerciality did not pay off (or, pay off only artistically, but not financially), Fox was beginning to put pressure on Murnau concerning his next projects for Fox. In a letter to Murnau he writes: "I look forward to receiving your complete scenario. I hope it will contain pathos, thrills, well-timed and well-calculated comedy situations intermingled with the other emotions which I am certain every large picture requires" (qtd. in Eisner 1973: 183).

After Murnau's next film *The Four Devils* was changed and given a new, happy ending by Fox, and after his next project *Our Daily Bread* was changed into *City Girl* and disqualified by Fox as too peripatetic, boring and 'un-American', Murnau cancelled his contract with Fox. David Flaherty, the brother of Robert Flaherty, with whom Murnau was to collaborate on his next project, *TABU*, wrote: "Hollywood got on his nerves, all this pressure from the studios, and all this affectation. He had to break out of that prison" (Flaherty 1960: 15). By 1930, Murnau had made three films for Fox and was thoroughly disillusioned by the process. He did not want to dissociate himself from the kinds of resources that Hollywood production offered – after a long and tangled process, *TABU* was to be released by *Paramount* – but to make films on his own terms, independently, without studio interference in the production process, and without the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. With this in mind he formed a partnership with pioneering documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty, who was also alienated by Hollywood and longed to create work outside the commercial film industry.

It is difficult to imagine two filmmakers whose work and fundamental view of life could be so different. Murnau's universe is one in which humans act, but are at the mercy of the elements, of the market, of age, of fate. Flaherty's documentaries, like *Nanook of the North*, are about people adapting to their environment, about people who can succeed despite what fate throws their way. Needless to say, any kind of partnership that may have existed between the two did not last long and though the film is labeled a Murnau-Flaherty Production, *TABU* is Murnau's film. *TABU* is the last of the silent films, made two years after the talkie revolution. It was also Murnau's last work. It is the culmination of Murnau's career, containing elements that remind me of many of his other films.

TABU is the story of Matahi and Reri, two young people in love with each other on an island whose inhabitants still live their lives according to traditions that go back hundreds of years. But a ship comes to their South Sea island, and on that ship is Hitu, who bears the news that Reri must leave her home to be the sacred virgin on an island far away. She is 'tabu' [taboo], a human being that cannot be desired. Matahi and Reri flee the island and end up on another island where the influence of the outside world is much stronger. Matahi is an excellent pearl diver, but does not make enough from his pearls to pay the debt that grows because of his generosity. Between debt and Hitu, who finally finds them, there is little room for them to breathe or endure. While Matahi secretly goes out to find a beautiful pearl in a 'Tabu' pearl bed guarded by a shark, with which to pay for the ship that will help them escape, Reri finally leaves with Hitu – because otherwise Matahi will die. When on return Matahi finds Reri gone, he paddles and then swims after Hitu's boat in order to save Reri. As the exhausted swimmer grabs the rope on the side of Hitu's boat, Hitu cuts the line. The boat pulls further away as Matahi sinks beneath the waves.

Like *Sunrise*, *TABU* is a meditation on the Murnau-formula that Robin Wood has described as "a couple, and a force that threatens to destroy them" (Wood 1971: 25). Other points of connection are the scenes of tribal dances, which call into mind the couple's country dance in *Sunrise*, and Murnau's ingenious use of the sparse number of titles – remember that for him, "the ideal picture needs no titles – by its very nature the art of the screen should tell a complete story pictorially" (Murnau 1928: 41). Thus, in *TABU*, most of the titles are not so much inserted texts, but *pictures* of texts, that is, of scrolls and contracts, like when you scan a text and save it on your computer as a 'jpeg-file'. Likewise, in *Sunrise*, Murnau had used titles pictorially as well – the most famous example being the scene when the Woman from the City suggests to murder the Wife: when the title appears, 'Couldn't she get drowned', the words appear one after the other, like in a spoken statement, and the letters of the word 'drowned' slowly 'drown' on the page – an example of on-screen concrete poetry.

Like with *Sunrise*, it might prove fruitful to read *TABU* in the light of – and as a comment on – Murnau's American Experience. In its return to a simplicity lacking the spectacle connected with the signifier 'Hollywood' – though not less spectacular on its artistic terms – a return on many levels: production, finance,

and content, *TABU* can be read as a harsh critique of culture and both its progressive and repressive tendencies, quite similar to Freud's 1930 seminal text *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Again, *TABU* plays out intensity against the fake spectacle – as he told David Flaherty: “Hollywood snowstorms [are] made of nothing but cornflakes” (Flaherty 1960: 14). Also, Murnau is able to combine his own craving for simplicity in life – “The thought of cities and all those people is repulsive to me” (qtd. in Eyman 28) – with his artistic vision of ‘film as art’, so that *TABU* again becomes both an expression of and a self-reflexive statement on film – on film-as-intensity, as Murnau saw it.

Thus, e.g., in the final haunting scene, in which Murnau refuses to ‘cut’, to focus on either Matahi's or Hitu's face, on letting the scene almost unbearably linger on, Murnau lets us not *see* Matahi's pain, but to *feel* it. One means to ‘translate’ intensity onto|into images is Murnau's use of movement. As an ‘image’ in itself, movement dominates *TABU* in the guise of the constantly moving characters – running, swimming, rowing, climbing trees, and the movement of water – the sea, the waterfall, the streams, posed against the static rigidity of the tribal law epitomized by the almost always motionless Hitu. For Murnau, movement was related to the camera itself. In an article for the German *Filmwoche*, Murnau had stated his vision of the camera “freely moving in space”:

The fluid architecture of bodies with blood in their veins moving through mobile space; the interplay of lines rising, falling, disappearing; the encounter of surfaces, stimulation and its opposite, calm; construction and collapse; the formation and destruction of a hitherto unsuspected life; all of this adds up to a symphony made up of the harmony of bodies and the rhythm of space; the play of pure movements, vigorous and abundant. With this mechanic, de-materialized apparatus it can be achieved and created. What we are asking for is not a new, complicated technical apparatus; far from it – from the artistic aspect we are asking for the contrary, the recovery of a simplicity and definitiveness of the technical process, which ultimately is again artistic, because it creates a completely neutralized material susceptible for every kind of shaping. (‘Aufnahmeapparat’, my transl.)

In *TABU*, this theorem is perfectly realized. The almost natural and organic camera movements, combined with the shift from ‘cultural poses of intensity’ so dear to Expressionism, to the more ‘natural intensity’ of the Pacific Islander's bodies, *TABU* moves with what Scott Eyman calls Murnau's “typical pathological intensity toward what can be called pure cinema: characters being instead of acting, information and conflict communicated through direct cuts” (1990: 80), thus making *TABU* Murnau's most sensual, relaxed, and less ‘formal’ film.

Far from the madding crowd, far from the Hollywood studio system and financial pressure, Murnau was trying to create and develop what he saw as ‘the ideal picture’. As he had stated in the *Theatre Magazine*:

As to the general future of motion pictures – I can say nothing definite; one can merely conjecture. The only point on which I would assert myself is that the ordinary picture, without movietone accompaniment, without color, without prismatic effects and without three dimensions, will continue as a permanent form of the art. Future developments may give birth to other forms, but the original form will continue with an identity of its own. (41).

Thus, Murnau's discontent of modern civilization and the fake spectacle (for which Hollywood should serve as a short-hand) plus his craving for 'simplicity' on all levels combine in *TABU* to an unfortunately belated plea for a 'pure film'. Or, as Murnau had it: "Real art is simple, but simplicity requires the greatest art" (1928: 72).

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