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Author(s)	William K. Everson
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"CITY GIRL" (Fox, 1929; released 1930) Directed by F.W. Murnau; produced under the title "Our Daily Bread"; screenplay by Berthold Viertel and Marion Orth from the play "The Mud Turtle" by Elliott Lester; camera, Ernest Palmer; Settings, Harry Oliver; edited and titled by Katharine Hilliker and H.H. Caldwell; release length, including added dialogue sequences: 6 reels; Original length (this print): 9 reels

With Charles Farrell, Mary Duncan, David Torrence, Edith Yorke, Dawn O'Day (Ann Shirley), Guinn Williams, Richard Alexander, Tom Maguire, Ed Brady, Jack Pennick, David Rollins, Werner Klinger, Helen Lynch, Marjorie Beebe, Arnold Lucy, Ivan Linow, Eddie Boland.

The curious fate that befell Murnau's last Fox film has made it not only a "lost" film but a "mystery" film, since it disappeared almost immediately after its release in early 1930 and was never heard of again, and certainly never made available for critical reappraisal. Most references to it in later years, with little information to go on, indicated (incorrectly) that F.W. Murnau never finished the film, and that Fox, afraid of the director's "von Stroheim tendencies", tried to curb his "extravagances" and salvage something from their investment. Firstly, Murnau did finish the film - in its original concept as a silent. Secondly, it seems unlikely indeed that Fox could have been worried about Murnau's extravagances. "Sunrise", if not a profitable film, had been the kind of prestige success that every studio sought, and could afford, in those days. And in any case, "Four Devils" which followed, had been both a critical and a popular success. "City Girl" was a simple and not unduly expensive film, and the only real extravagance - and a justifiable one - had been Murnau's purchase of a farm at Pendleton, Oregon, where he shot much of the film. Fox's doubts must have been occasioned not by Murnau's methods, but by the wisdom of shooting such a film at such a time - a (then) familiar and even old-fashioned story, done as a silent when the sound transition was virtually completed. It was their own judgement that was on trial, not Murnau's abilities. The film was, in any case, hastily doctored and partially re-shot in order for it to qualify as at least a part-talkie, and the 9-reel original was cut to 67 minutes. The last 27 of those minutes became talkie sequences, with an abundance of song (harvester songs, a raw bar-room ditty by Big Boy Williams) and an entirely new (or at least, much heightened) melodramatic sub-plot in which one of the hands tries to assault the heroine, and the father attempts to persuade his son that she has been willingly unfaithful. The new dialogue sequences run to some 48 pages of script, and were written by Elliott Lester, author of the original play. (Lester, father of director Richard Lester, did ~~just a few weeks ago~~)

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L.F. Erickson directed the talkie additions, which ran to 2700 feet, but included (and in some cases were deliberately written around) some half a dozen shots from Murnau's original. (The script very politely refers to these in every case as "footage shot by Mr. Murnau"). As written (and not having seen the release version, I cannot really tell how they play) these new dialogue scenes move like lightning. They start with the arrival of the newly-weds at the farm and rush through the whole farm part of the story in less than half-an-hour, allowing no time at all for atmosphere or motivation. The dialogue includes a lot of facile but unconvincing lines about the importance of wheat-farming as a way of life, and the heroine, an ex-waitress also has a semi-philosophical little speech in which she likens the tyrannical father to a grouchy restaurant customer who deserves the burned toast that he gets!

The version that we are seeing tonight, almost certainly never shown theatrically, is of the full and untampered-with version as shot by Murnau. Any flaws or shortcomings can thus be attributed to him rather than to the studio. Obviously, "Sunrise" would be an impossible film to top - just as "Citizen Kane" was - and by those standards, "City Girl" is a retrogressive step. One wonders actually, why Murnau was so excited by the project. If he wanted, as he claimed, to make "a woodcut" of American farm life, why did he tarry so long in the big city before getting to his basic theme? The early city scenes are pictorially fascinating, and the studio-reconstructed Chicago has many echoes of the Tilsit from "Sunrise" - but it is curiously leisurely in its pace, and if one didn't know better, one would almost think that some of the restaurant scenes had been designed for sound. And the basic dramatic situation had been explored so many times by 1929 -- "The Canadian", "White Gold", best of all of course in "The Wind" -- though it would continue to fascinate directors into the early talkie period and such films as "Devil's Holiday". For a man who had just made "Sunrise" and "Four Devils", it is a curiously unadventurous film - and also a film of restrained style even within its plot boundaries.

Nevertheless, it's a fascinating and rewarding film. Every so often there's a shot - the moonlit farmhouse at night for example - which is just breath-taking; and throughout the camerawork has the careful, formal composition so typical of Murnau. Once in a while an effect is so studied that one forgets dramatic content and diverts one's attention to analysing how the shot was done - as with the on-location shot of the wagon near the end, with a parallel travelling car obviously providing the light-source. Murnau is particularly anxious to avoid melodrama - the approaching hail-storm is played down, as is the fight on the wagon. Both of these elements were enlarged in the sound version.

Charles Farrell has his (then) rather typical role of a parent-dominated youth, and is helped by the lack of sound; his weak voice could only have made the character more unsympathetic. Mary Duncan, like Eleanor Boardman in "The Crowd", grows on one. From initial disbelief that this could possibly be the heroine, she becomes rather moving -- and perhaps so affected Murnau, since the film could really do with a lot more of the wheat-fields and a little less of her. Incidentally, although a few reviews stressed the out-dated quality of the story, they were not at all bad reviews, and it's hard to believe that the value of sound, the prestige of Murnau and the popularity of Farrell, couldn't have carried the film if Fox had really gotten behind it and pushed it. But as still happens, they apparently chose to abandon it as a lost cause.

Incidentally, I think Murnau has a bit of one of the farmhands, but the lighting in that scene makes it impossible to be positive. However, since he gave himself that nice little cameo at the beginning of "Sunrise", it's quite possible he had a scene here too.

Wm. K. Everson

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