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The Last Laugh (Der letzte Mann) 1924

Produced by Ufa. Directed by F. W. Murnau. Original story and scenario by Carl Mayer. Photography by Karl Freund. Design by Robert Herlth and Walter Roehrig. Cast: Emil Jannings as a hotel doorman; Maly Delschaft as his niece; Max Hiller as her fiancé; Emilie Kurz as his aunt; Hans Unterkirchner as a hotel manager; Georg John as a night-watchman. Acquired through the courtesy of Ufa.

It was this film that constituted the revolution: it broke with the past both in technique and in theory. Hitherto, a discontinuous method of pictorial narration had been in general use. Films were composed after the photographic process had been completed, by joining together the various shots taken with a stationary camera, which was shifted only between scenes. In *The Last Laugh* a new and continuous method of narration was used, for here appear prolonged stretches of uninterrupted and uncut images, in which the camera itself has moved to follow the progress of the action. This film took final

objects blur before its vision as they do before his eyes. Jannings' performance has rightly been much praised and if his movements occasionally seem unnecessarily mannered, this may well be because his acting is still largely in the expressionist tradition, whereas the film as a whole is in another style.

The Last Laugh creates strong emotional tension; it achieves a profound tenderness in the first meeting between Jannings and Georg John. The original conception, daring in the extreme in 1924, was carried off with rare success and, considered in its entirety, the film remains a real *tour de force,* even aside from the question of the great influence it exercised.

That absence of subtitles which imparts a peculiar smoothness to the flow of its narrative was not an innovation. A list of earlier titleless films (among which Jessner's *Backstairs* will be noted) is given in Eric Elliott's interesting *Anatomy of Motion Picture Art* (Territet, Switzerland, Riant Chateau, 1928).

The later work of F. W. Murnau, up to the time of his sudden death in Hollywood in 1931, is fairly well known, particularly his *Sunrise:* his earlier work—first in the theatre under Reinhardt and later in films (frequently in association with Freund as cameraman and with Mayer as scenarist, as here) has not yet been the subject of as careful study as it seems to warrant.

Iris Barry

The music for this program was arranged by Theodore Huff.

shape before, not after, "shooting", and was played in sets specially constructed to permit continuous action and continuous photography, with the camera mounted on perambulating trucks or swinging cranes.* It was, actually, the joint product of four men—Murnau the director, Freund the cameraman, Mayer the scenarist and Jannings the principal actor—who together conceived and developed it as a pictorial unit, working with unusual freedom in a studio unparalleled anywhere, at that time, for its technical equipment and the ingenuity of its craftsmen.

Since 1921, during that period of exhaustion and cynicism which followed the post-war upheaval in Germany, a new type of film had evolved, differing in manner and in subject matter from both the expressionist films like *Caligari* and the costume-historical films like *Hamlet*. This group of productions consisted of intimate and sympathetic studies of low life, all utilizing a minimum of characters and displaying a marked respect for the dramatic unities. Despite their insistently realistic flavor, they made virtually no use of natural settings. Street scenes, nocturnal shadows, exteriors of slum houses, everything in these *Kammerspielfilms* was a realism of artifice, derived from the theatre, like so much else of interest in the German film, but rendered more freely when transplanted to the studios. A key-production of this type was *Backstairs* (Hintertreppe) made in 1921 by the great stage director, Leopold Jessner. Others, more familiar, are Karl Grune's *The Street* (1923) and Lupu Pick's *Shattered* (1921). To this important if sombre group *The Last Laugh* definitely belongs; and like them, consciously or unconsciously reflects the mood which gave birth to "the new realism bearing a socialistic flavor," *die Neue Sachlichkeit*, which even then was succeeding expressionism as an aesthetic impulse.

The Last Laugh, together with E. A. Dupont's not widely dissimilar *Variety* (1925) brought the German cinema universal acclaim, led to the rather complete Germanization of the Hollywood studios for a time, and introduced a wide-spread though not always intelligent use of traveling cameras and strange photographic tricks. Yet it is not the use of the moving camera alone which deserves attention in *The Last Laugh*. The ingenious sets look singularly convincing; they occasionally suggest the influence of Adolphe Appia in their broad surfaces, simple illumination and absence of detail. Actually, though the camerawork is striking, its use is not always consistent. At moments the camera is identified with the audience, as an intimate, roving observer of the old doorman as he shuffles about. At other times, the camera is identified with the old man himself, and not with the audience at all;

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*A method first introduced by D. W. Griffith in the Babylonian scenes of *Intolerance* (1916).