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TABU (1931)

Directed by F.W. Murnau. Produced and written by F.W. Murnau and Robert J. Flaherty. Photography by Floyd Crosby and (uncredited) Robert J. Flaherty. A Paramount Release. 90 minutes

In 1926, with a cloud of financial uncertainty hovering over the UFA studios, F.W. Murnau left Germany with a valise containing the completed Faust. With this as calling card, Murnau had little difficulty making a deal with Fox Film Corporation. This short-lived association produced Sunrise (1927), and then just too many headaches. It was during the shooting of Our Daily Bread--amid much studio interference--that Murnau decided he'd had enough of the Hollywood system. He sought out documentary filmmaker Robert Flaherty, who had been working in Mexico, and together the two men set sail on Murnau's yacht, the Bali, ~~which he had~~ named after their intended destination. The film that came out of this unique collaboration was one of enchantment--enchantment for the Polynesian islands they filmed, and enchantment at the honest, joyful simplicity of the native inhabitants. The story was also simple: about the love of a sun-bronzed Tahitian fisherman for a young woman whose body has been consecrated to the gods, rendering her tabu so far as mortal men are concerned. Even in this idyllic setting, the filmmakers had their differences. Murnau felt that the

TABU

codification of taboos by the childlike inhabitants of this land was what he wanted to capture. Flaherty thought that the story should depict the impact of civilization on a primitive society, and that these people who had never seen a camera before were having a story "imposed" on them. In the end, Flaherty sold his interest in the film to Murnau, relinquishing any control he had over the production. Murnau finished the film, and it was his particular knack for the rhythms of editing, and the lyricism and simplicity of tone he achieved, that made Tabu the masterpiece it is. Tragically, Murnau was killed in a car accident one week before the film's release in 1931. Floyd Crosby later won an Academy Award for his stunning cinematography.

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--Jeffrey Scheftel