

## ***Blind Husbands* (1919)**

*Kay Kirchmann*

*dir. Erich von Stroheim; prod. Carl Laemmle; screenplay Erich von Stroheim; photography Ben F. Reynolds. silent, 35mm, black/white, 93 mins. Universal Studios, distrib. Universal Studios.*

*Blind Husbands* was Erich von Stroheim's first directing job, after he had previously worked as an extra, actor, military advisor, and assistant for, among others, D. W. Griffith, upon leaving his home country, Austria, in 1909 to immigrate to the United States. There, his range of roles would initially be limited to the

figure of the amoral German »Hun,« which eventually earned him the nickname »The Man You Loved to Hate« (Koszarski). Meanwhile, von Stroheim created his own fictional persona, using false statements concerning his confession, his supposedly noble descent, and his wide military experience, all of them self-fictionalizations only unmasked with the discovery of his birth certificate in 1966 (Lignon). The line between the self-stylization of his life's journey and the profiles of the characters he portrayed became increasingly blurred, with respect to both his own films and his appearances in the films of other famous directors (e.g. Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion*, or Billy Wilder's *Five Graves to Cairo* and *Sunset Boulevard*)—roles that von Stroheim was forced to accept more and more, once no major film studios were willing to offer him directing jobs after 1933. The reason was von Stroheim's notorious perfectionism, which made him infamously overspend any budget and abandon all shooting schedules, leading to legendary conflicts with producers like Carl Laemmle or Irving Thalberg, and which was also one of the reasons why nearly all of von Stroheim's directorial works were later cut or recut by his producers.

However, these aspects of Erich von Stroheim's biography and self-elevation as an artist figure, only briefly sketched here, have proven critical for the central place he occupies within a history of global melodrama. Von Stroheim decisively remodeled the generic precepts of directors like Griffith and synthesized them with the literary influences of Viennese modernism (especially that of Arthur Schnitzler). Similarly, the settings



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of his films sprang from a partly phantasmic, partly meticulous reconstruction of European settings in U.S. film studios (Cuff). For example, von Stroheim's excessive realism led him to recreate the Monte Carlo setting for *Foolish Wives* (1922) in great detail, even though these sets were on screen for but a few minutes. Only two of his altogether nine films—*Greed* (1924) and *Walking Down Broadway* (1944)—were set in the United States, with all others set in Europe (Weinberg). This also applies to *Blind Husbands*, which—together with the *The Devil's Passkey*, now lost, and *Foolish Wives*—forms the so-called trilogy of Seduction. The Armstrongs, a U.S.-American doctor-couple, spend their vacation in Cortina d'Ampezzo in the Dolomites, where they encounter the Austrian Lieutenant Eric(h) von Steuben (played by von Stroheim), who quickly notices that Margaret (Francelia Billington) is neglected by her husband, Robert (Sam de Grasse), and he therefore tries to seduce her. After a long deliberation under the incessant observation of Sepp (T. H. Gibson-Gowland), a mountain guide who is a friend of Robert's, Margaret finally renounces von Steuben's erotic advances. Nonetheless, a dramatic showdown ensues between the rival men during a mountain tour, with von Steuben finally falling to his death from the mountaintop. Upon his departure, Robert promises Sepp that he will take better care of his wife.

Von Stroheim makes clear that he almost provocatively adheres to traditional melodramatic triangulation when he opts not to list the characters' actual names in the opening credits but lists them instead as »The Husband,« »The Wife,« and »The Other Man« and thus strips them of any individualization. And despite the film's ending, which would be worthy of a morality play, *Blind Husbands* sharply differentiates itself from the familiar sentimentalisms of melodrama, instead portraying its protagonists both as sex-driven and with a moral integrity that is superficial at best: »There is an honest depravity to his characters, none of whom shy away from, or apologize for their amoral desires. The philandering wife of *Blind Husbands* and the duplicitous seducer of *Foolish Wives* are certainly a world away from the True Heart Susies of D. W. Griffith« (Gallagher). American Puritanism, personified in the film by Robert, whose sense of duty causes him to overlook his wife and her needs, is countered by von Stroheim's character, the caricature of a superficially polite and educated European aristocrat and officer, who is, however, ultimately exposed as a braggart and pathological womanizer: »The lieutenant's part was an extension of 'the man you love to hate,' the Prussian villain created by von Stroheim in films like *The Hearts of Humanity*« (Koszarski 41). Again and again, von Stroheim acts out the female characters' erotic fascination for uniforms, here as well as in later films, supplemented by the allure of other fetishes such as the monocle, the rapier, and gloves. Von Stroheim, according to André Bazin, is the inventor of a »Cinema of Cruelty,« whose symbolic manifestation is represented by uniforms and other military devotional objects. In contrast to the erotic attraction in the female gaze on the militaristically adorned body, the gazes with which Sepp and von Steuben alternately assess their clothing are marked by pure contempt. Von Stroheim's historical contribution to the development of melodrama lies in the reflexive integration of scopophilia and fetish into the genre's formal arsenal. In his taxonomy of cinematic signs, Gilles Deleuze has identified von Stroheim, along with Luis Buñuel, as a protagonist of the so-called impulse-image, and emphasized the constitutive importance of the fetish and, consequently, of the partial object for this special form of the cinematic affection-image (2002, 128-30). One of von Steuben's very first looks at Margaret during

the carriage ride to the hotel is already directed at her shackles and shoes, which are highlighted as special objects of display through his monocle.

Nevertheless, the voyeuristic curiosity in *Blind Husbands*, as in von Stroheim's other films, does not merely consist of a libidinal-voyeuristic visual paradigm. It is furthermore substantially supplemented and superimposed by a masochistically connoted *compulsion* to watch, especially in the context of female characters. The fetish, and the gaze at it, are, as Heide Schlüpmann has pointed out, central elements of masochism (46), which is why they take on such dominant roles in von Stroheim's films. As Deleuze (1991) has shown for literature, on the basis of Sacher-Masoch, and for film, on the basis of Josef von Sternberg, the masochistic gaze is initiated by a painful-pleasurable submission—grounded in infantile emotional needs—to the feeling of helplessness and the separation from the object of desire, irreversible but still played out again and again. On an aesthetic level, this corresponds with an emphatically desexualized coldness of style and gestures (Studlar 21), as has also been attested time and time again in the case of von Stroheim's films (Schlüpmann 47). Fully committed to this visual paradigm, Margaret's gaze, too, masochistically rests one time after the next on the happiness of the honeymooners, which is diametrically opposed to her own married life, and she also subdues herself to the controlling, and potentially deprecating, stare of the mountain guide. Furthermore, the »Vamp«-waitress (played by Fay Holderness), who is infatuated with von Steuben, follows his simultaneous courtship of several women with a self-tormenting, lustful devotion to masochistic pleasures of watching.

Coldness, cruelty, fetishism, masochistic curiosity—these are the structural changes that von Stroheim added to the early history of the melodrama. These innovations are linked back, on the one hand, to the stylization of the actor's body as a depraved figure of art, and, on the other hand, to the overwriting of U.S. genre traditions with the discourses of European literary and intellectual history (e.g. Sigmund Freud, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch) at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. *Blind Husbands* therefore stands at the beginning of a short-lived filmography that nevertheless provided decisive impulses for the globalization of melodrama.

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