
FOOLISH WIVES

Erich von Stroheim's third film, *Foolish Wives*, is a masterpiece that profoundly marked the public and influenced numerous filmmakers, in particular Jean Renoir and S. M. Eisenstein.

The producer Carl Leammle gave the director carte blanche for making a film 'centred on sex and money', going so far as to authorize him budget overruns, which Universal decided to make known – for publicity reasons –, displaying the incredible growth on a luminous sign on Broadway.

The film was very heavily censored and, after six months of editing, was reduced from eight hours to 100 minutes. But the unprecedented realism extolled by Stroheim and the daring of his direction are still quite visible. European critics showered praise upon it, aware of seeing a masterpiece. Like Blind Husbands, his first film, Foolish Wives would be a success. The budget was \$735,000 according to Stroheim and in truth, according to Universal, more than a million. It would bring in \$800,000¹.

Impressed by Stroheim's genius, Henri Langlois wrote²:

Facing the French, the Germans and soon the Russians, facing Griffith's students: Stroheim, Foolish Wives.

Never was a film more revolutionary. Facing the conception of the silent art through framings and successive shots, an art consisting of marking, linking up the image in movement, avoiding any break, and moving on to the next shots so that they slip between themselves. Stroheim opened the way for contemporary cinema.

Never was a film more daring. Faced with censorship at the very moment when fear was beginning to trouble Hollywood, Erich von Stroheim dared shoot a satire of incredible violence.

Never in the history of cinema, with the exception of a few burlesques, had anyone dared go so far in the depiction of egoism, cynicism, cowardice and cruelty.

Here, the Don Juan character, the real one, is portrayed with the features of a Russian prince living by his wits and taking advantage of the credulity of women. But this time, heaven and hell are not involved: it is men who take charge of meting out justice.

Certain scenes are famous: Stroheim's crocodile tears to move his maid; her despair, underscored by a magnificent dolly shot, ending in very tight close-ups; Stroheim's arrival in the girl's room where the half-light is streaked with sunbeams filtering through the blinds; the ending, where Stroheim's body is thrown in the gutter.

And when we discover that the prince and his sisters are just vulgar crooks, this reassuring ending does not reassure us at all. What the film seems to lose in violence in opposition to a feudal world that already found itself destroyed for the upheavals of the post-war period, it gains in acidity if one is willing to consider that this crook, loved and admired, is received and fêted, living at the expense of a society that is indeed our own.

Foolish Wives was a huge commercial success, showing that daring could be and continued to be profitable. It seemed that henceforth everything would be possible for the director and that he, in turn, was going to be able to express himself with the same liberty as the writer.

¹ Bernard Eisenschitz, *Erich von Stroheim, le cinéaste total, Universal Studios, dix ans de cinéma*, Ed. La Martinière, 2012

² Henri Langlois, *Écrits de cinéma*, texts collected by Bernard Benoliel and Bernard Eisenschitz, Ed. Flammarion/Cinémathèque française, 2014

Foolish Wives

United States, 1922 – 110 minutes

Direction, script and adaptation: Erich von Stroheim

Assistants director: Edward Sowers, Louis Germonprez, Jack R. Proctor

Production: Universal

Photography: Ben F. Reynolds, William H. Daniels

Set: Erich von Stroheim, Elmer E. Sheeley, Richard Day, J. Lambert

Editing: Erich von Stroheim, Bob Roberts and Daniel Mandell, Arthur Ripley

Music: Sigmund Romberg

Cast: Erich von Stroheim, Maude George, Mae Bush, Dale Fuller, Rudolph Christians, Robert Edeson, Miss Dupont, Cesare Gravina

Three adventurers settle in Monte-Carlo: Princess Olga Petchnikoff and her cousin Vera, accompanied by their cousin, Count Sergius Karamzin, a member of the tsar's former imperial guard. In reality, the count has no family ties with them, but together they traffic in counterfeit money to win at gambling. Always irreproachable in appearance, they meet the Special-Envoy of the United States and his wife. In order to squeeze money out of them, Count Karamzin sets about seducing the diplomat's spouse who gradually lets herself be caught in the trap.

Foolish Wives was preserved by Henri Langlois in 1963. A print was duplicated in 1987.

