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## Review Essay

### Silence Restored: Three Re-Released Films by F.W. Murnau

By Ken Calhoon

***The Last Laugh (Der letzte Mann)*. F. W. Murnau, dir. Starring Emil Jannings, with an original musical score by Giuseppe Becce, expanded and re-orchestrated. Eureka!, 2008 (1924). 1 DVD + 36-page booklet. £19.99.**

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***Sunrise*. F. W. Murnau, dir. Starring Janet Gaynor and George O'Brien. Original Movietone score and alternate Olympic Chamber Orchestra Score. Eureka!, 2011 (1927). Dual format (Blue Ray and DVD) + 20-page booklet. £12.99.**

***City Girl*. F. W. Murnau, dir. Starring Charles Farrell and Mary Duncan, with a new musical score by Christopher Caliendo. Eureka!, 2011 (1930). Dual format + 28-page booklet. £14.99.**

The most recently reconstructed version of F. W. Murnau's *The Last Man* (1924), released in English originally as *The Last Laugh*, commences with a cautionary epigraph: "Today you are the first [*der Erste*], revered by everyone, a minister of state, a millionaire, perhaps even a prince [*ein Fürst*]. Who knows what you'll be tomorrow?" Absent from other available variants of the film, these words provide the coordinates of a plot that steers between "first" and "last" while parsing the ambiguity of the latter ("least"? "ultimate"?), which the divergence in titles amplifies. Restored to the film's opening frames, these lines key the narrative in terms of a lexical tension—one that later reappears in a newspaper notice, which the camera makes legible to the viewer, and which echoes the Biblical assurance that "the last shall be first."<sup>1</sup> This ancient promise is invoked in conjunction with the comedic reversal of fortune heralded by the English title.

The "last man" of the German title is an aging porter, who after years of service at a luxury hotel is reassigned to a subterranean lavatory. Where once he paraded proudly before the hotel's grand edifice,





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Fig. 1. Murnau's deposed doorman inches into view.

he is now reduced to proffering towels and shining shoes. His demotion entails the forfeiture of his imposing uniform, which has long made him a celebrity among his social peers. Divested of his regal prop, the weakened, bent, and conspicuously heavy character, ponderously portrayed by Emil Jannings, projects the burden he has become. This projection becomes literal when the deposed doorman's stooped and distorted shadow inches cautiously into view, betraying the inner defeat he is at pains to conceal (fig. 1). He manages to smuggle the uniform out of the hotel and wear it home, for a while preserving his status in the eyes of his neighbors, who greet him warmly and readily return his signature salute. They may simply be humoring him, but humor is proper to the genre, the aim of which is inclusion. When, however, his disgrace is finally revealed, acceptance gives way to isolating ridicule, which drives him back to the dismal washroom. The scene darkens on the slumped figure, his bowed head suspended in the halo of a sympathetic nightwatchman's lamp.

The scene has the feel of finality. Its baroque tenebrism casts the old man as a martyr, his station as a cell. (In earlier shots, sunlight streaming down through a metal grate throws shadows in the pattern of prison bars.) At this point a scrolling, hand-lettered text declares that here, "at the site of his humiliation" (*an der Stätte seiner Schmach*), the poor fellow would have lived out his waning days in misery. The "author," however, has taken pity on his forlorn subject and supplied an alternate ending. The improbable outcome is explained by the newspaper notice, mentioned above, which reports that the lavatory attendant has become the accidental heir of a wealthy Mexican who died in his arms. The narrative resumes on a jovial note: the privileged patrons of the hotel's dining room laugh benevolently, if uncontrollably, as they read the news. In their midst, the now former attendant revels in the fruits of his newfound riches. His excessive feasting, of which the (also former) nightwatchman nervously partakes, is but one expression of the generosity this "last man" embodies—a largesse he presently extends to his surprised successor below stairs.

This felicitous turn of events, which Jannings himself is said to have urged on the production, may seem an arbitrary measure for enabling the proverbial "happy ending." The film even

makes explicit the reversal as *deus ex machina*, as if to excuse the supposed violation of dramatic integrity. Nevertheless, the unlikely development issues from within, the result of a compassion so superabundant as to overflow the diegetic frame. The peripeteia is a genre-driven necessity, already foreseen by the epigraph and confirmed by the Biblical verse cited as part of the newspaper notice (“the last shall be first”). In mining the modern social implications of Christian eschatology the film delivers advance corroboration of Erich Auerbach’s claim that “the origins of prophecy seem to lie in the politico-religious spontaneity of the people.”<sup>2</sup> Thwarted by the classical separation of styles, social energy found a conduit in the vertical dynamism of Biblical narrative, in which misery, signaling divine favor, catalyzes transformation: “precisely the most extreme circumstances, in which we are immeasurably forsaken and in despair . . . , give us, if we survive them, a personal stamp which is recognized as the product of a rich existence.”<sup>3</sup>

Shakespeare’s *Lear* exemplifies the coalescence of high and low, of first and last. The decrepit and senile king, whose degradation, following Auerbach, is a foil against which his greatness is all the more apparent, is Jannings’s “role model” in *The Last Man* as well as other films, including *The Last Command* (USA, 1928) and *The Blue Angel* (Germany, 1930), both directed by Joseph von Sternberg. In the former, the very title of which echoes Murnau’s, Jannings plays a Russian archduke who, a decade after the Soviet Revolution, is found living in poverty as a Hollywood extra. Then one day he is given the opportunity to play a version of his once noble self and dies—literally and heroically—in the heat of (staged) battle. Jannings received the Oscar for this performance, but the imminent arrival of sound would thereafter restrict his work to films shot in German. The first of these was *The Blue Angel*, in which a once respected schoolteacher becomes amorously involved with the burlesque performer Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich). Stripped of his position, the discredited pedagogue becomes a member of the traveling company, appearing on stage as a clown and compelled to crow like a rooster. His death is framed in a manner similar to the provisional ending of *The Last Man*: physically and spiritually spent, he returns to his old schoolroom where he is found collapsed on his desk, his head caught in the beam of a custodian’s lamp.

The professor’s strained and pathetic crowing, which lends creaturely poignancy to his tragic humiliation, offsets the fact that Murnau’s doorman suffers in total quiet. *The Last Man* has no dialogue. Its characters are seen speaking, but not once is their speech conveyed to the audience by means of dialogue cards. At four junctures, the viewer is presented with written text. In addition to the epigraph, the newspaper entry and the lines explaining the reversal of fortune, there is only the typewritten letter informing the porter of his demotion. A particular virtue of the current reconstruction is that it is based on an original German print and is faithful to the role these texts play in the film.

Fearing that a film so reliant on pantomime would not appeal to their publics, distributors across the English-speaking world introduced both dialogue cards and other titles. An Australian print, for example, interrupts a shot of a housekeeper, shown vigorously beating a rug, with the caption “Surrender all hope ye moths who enter here.”<sup>4</sup> Its facetiousness notwithstanding, this addition, true to the mechanics of secondary revision,<sup>5</sup> gets at something silenced, so to speak, by the film in its purer form. The inserted title, after all, alludes quite transparently to the words inscribed above the entrance to hell in the third Canto of Dante’s *Inferno*, “Abandon all hope ye who enter here.”<sup>6</sup> Dante’s epic poem may be thought to have relevance for a film that maps its narrative of descent and decline onto the architecture of both the hotel and the block of working-class flats where the porter lives with his niece (fig. 2). The inner courtyard of the latter is introduced with a sequence the bitter realism of which stands out in this film. As evening falls, the lamplit quarter is alive with neighbors milling about while others arrive home from work. In one shot, several women in shawls are huddled by the entrance to an apartment, which, like the hotel’s washroom, is mostly below ground. The wells of the windows and stairs glow with turgid light. After the women disperse, a tall man roughly prods his wife inside, ducking as he follows her through the low entrance. The subsequent shot reveals the interior to be little more than a catacomb, where an angry mother is seen literally corraling her children and chasing them with a switch.

These brief glimpses of unalloyed domestic strife escape the salvational itinerary of comedy and are instead consistent with the enveloping gloom, which Murnau, along with cinematog-



Fig. 2. The Dantean architecture of *The Last Man*.

rapher Karl Freund, impregnates with mythic hopelessness. This is a world *crossed into*. The doorman's uniform, by means of which he assumes the role of fool, enables him to shuttle between two realms. The shot of his difficult ingress (fig. 1) is a veritable study in thresholds and the metamorphoses they impose. The prominent assembly of timbers buttressing the outer walls of two facing buildings, a formal reduction of Venice's Bridge of Sighs, resembles a feature found throughout Piranesi's *Prisons*, the first of which date from around 1745. Piranesi's etched fantasies of hopeless oblivion mediate between Dante's elaborate architecture of hell and the nineteenth-century neogothic imagination, as exemplified by Gustave Doré's copious illustrations of *The Divine Comedy*, published in the 1860s. Doré's engravings (like the earlier works of British artist John Martin) exhibit a proto-cinematic quality, exposing the filmic potential of Dante's vision itself. Conversely, the aforementioned caption gives vent to the Dantean undercurrent of Murnau's film, legible not only in a visual language that casts the modern metropolis as a fallen world but also in a common, truer conception of comedy as collective redemption.

The subtitle of Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) effectively mutes its own Dickensian echo, displacing not two cities but a city and its opposite, a quaint and picturesque hamlet on the shores of a lake. An establishing shot, variations of which appear throughout the film, presents an irregular assembly of thatched-roofed dwellings at water's edge (fig. 3). An ominous *chiaroscuro* suffuses a scene whose management of light and shadow, along with its rustic theme, is clearly indebted to the Dutch pictorial canon. The same can be said of a lamplit still life, also from the film, which conveys the simple virtues of rural living. Both are typical of Murnau's painterly sensibility, already observed in *The Last Man* and equally evident in *Nosferatu* (1922), *Tartuffe* (1925), and *Faust* (1926). The studied artistry of Murnau's German oeuvre inspired William Fox, keen on garnering prestige for his American studio, to recruit the director from Berlin.

*Sunrise*, the first of three films that Murnau would make for Hollywood, is a tale of two national cinemas. The city that lies across the water is a collage of urban amusements—a sum of the dispersive forces which the above images, in their compositional integrity, may be thought



Fig. 3. *Sunrise*: The sun rises over an irregular assembly of thatched-roof dwellings at the water's edge.

to counteract. The lake that separates these worlds proves small enough to cross in a small skiff. Eventually, however, it convulses with all the tempestuous violence of the Atlantic (the name, incidentally, of the hotel in *The Last Man*). Likewise, the temptations of modernity already erupt within the moonlit fens of the preindustrial world: A struggling farmer, the married father of a small child, has fallen under the spell of a woman from the city—a seductress who presses her lover to orchestrate the “accidental” drowning of his young wife. Husband and wife thus embark on an impromptu journey across the lake, though their departure is briefly interrupted when their dog, sensing evil, breaks free and swims out to the boat. Once the prescient pet is returned to shore, the journey resumes, the determined husband leaning grimly into the oars and swinging the boat towards open water. A reverse shot mid-turn frames the young woman, fixing her as the object of his determination. She glances about anxiously while the camera, mounted behind her and aimed along the axis of the shifting boat, pans across the village as they leave it behind.

A veritable demonstration of the “180-degree rule,” this fluid pivot heralds the reversal that, in *Sunrise*, is cast as a change of heart: finding himself unable to carry out his deadly plan, the husband rows feverishly to the far end of the lake, where his disconsolate wife flees to a waiting tram. He follows suit, and the tram, looping rather improbably through the forest at lakeside, bears the couple into the busy metropolis. The husband’s contrition is sealed when he breaks into sobs at a wedding, which they witness upon entering a church. Reconciled, the two venture out into the street, their euphoria back-projected as a tranquil vision that envelops them and makes them oblivious to the speeding cars, which honk and swerve to avoid them. A comical pile-up abruptly dispels the sylvan illusion and inaugurates a series of light interludes, of which the urban phase of the film largely consists. These include a visit to a salon where the husband is treated to a shave while his wife timidly resists a dandy’s advances. She then escorts her freshly groomed husband to a photographer, who places the couple before an artificial backdrop—an image of natural innocence not dissimilar from the filmed tableau that, in the episode described earlier, screens out the city and its perilous traffic.



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Fig. 4. The husband from Murnau's *Sunrise* peers out at his wife feeding chickens.

These backdrops, meant to efface the chaos of urban life while resituating the couple within a visual regime suggestive of home, lack the depth and dynamism of the carefully composed shots with which Murnau invests that rustic world with the very forces (economic as well as erotic) that threaten to sunder it. The establishing shot of the village (fig. 3) swells with sinister potential, as does the iconic moment in which the husband, lurking in the shadows behind a door, peers out upon the sunny scene of his wife feeding chickens (fig. 4). This shot, more so than those of the city with its traffic and myriad amusements, is pregnant with a modernity defined by its antagonism to the world the farmer and his wife inhabit. Once they arrive in the city, such imagery survives only as flattened cliché: the photographer's pull-down screen of trees and sky, or the "Midsummer Peasant Dance," which a brass band strikes up in honor of the man, who (true to his agrarian role) captures a piglet and returns it to the attraction from which it has escaped.

The "Midsummer Peasant Dance" finds a powerful visual echo when, after nightfall, the two begin their journey home. Under sail and arm in arm, they wave to a passing raft on which a group of peasants are dancing ecstatically in the glow of a bonfire. Spellbinding in and of itself, the drifting spectacle accentuates the contrary direction while lending the as yet quiet depths, in the words of Conrad's Marlow, "the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention."<sup>7</sup> Blowing wisps of smoke, luminous in the firelight, are the first signs of the sudden storm that will soon cast the young woman into the water, where the distraught husband, after searching desperately for hours, presumes her drowned. The forces of nature execute the plan he has long since abandoned, though she is later found alive, kept afloat by the same bundled rushes with which the temptress had furnished the husband (as a means of saving himself after the feigned accident).

Biblical props of sorts, the rushes help emphasize the salvational thrust of a plot whose resolution is consistent with the restored harmony of the musical cadence. *Sunrise* was the first production to use the Movietone process for recording sound on film, allowing for a synchronized

orchestral score as well as the simulation of diegetic effects, such as the puff of locomotives, the peal of church bells, the strains of dance music, the crash of thunder, the howl of wind, the squeal of a pig, not to mention the crescendo of angry motorists honking and growling at the couple insouciantly crossing the boulevard. 1927 was also the year of George Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, in which actual car horns were used to suggest the excited cacophony of traffic. Within three years, Schoenberg would compose his "Accompaniment to a Film Scene" (Op. 34). While its threefold cue "Looming Danger, Fear, Catastrophe" indicates development, Schoenberg's nine-minute piece, which consists of sharply contrasting fragments, merely confirms an anxiety and thus manifests the kind of disruptive force that *Sunrise*, with its wholesale concession to the "human factor," naturalizes and absorbs. The commonly heard criticism of the reversal of fortune in *The Last Man* reflects a resistance to the explicit mechanism of that reversal. In drawing attention to its own constructedness, the earlier film also exposes the emptiness of its redemptive coda. The promise of ultimate reward, which modernity has stripped of its power, is reclaimed in *Sunrise*, in which the restoration of lost bliss is all the more mechanical for seeming natural.

Adorno (no friend of the cinema) characterized Schoenberg's "Accompaniment to a Film Scene" as a "heresy" against the very practice he established, the "structural stringency" of which served as a bulwark against "the ubiquity of the commercial enterprise."<sup>8</sup> The many commentators who marvel at the unprecedented expense of Murnau's urban sets effectively succumb to the temptation personified by the seductress, whose real aim is to cash in on her unsuspecting lover's holdings. (She is seen circling newspaper advertisements enticing farmers to liquidate their land and "come to the city.") The daylong sojourn in the metropolis does nothing to disabuse the husband and wife of their innocence, which their urban counterparts in fact celebrate. The film is arguably more "realistic" where it is less cinematic—where it becomes (to borrow from Auerbach's analysis of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*) "a series of pure pictures . . . transforming the nothingness of listless and uniform days into an oppressive condition of repugnance" (489).

The visual style of *City Girl*, the most American of Murnau's films (and the last of his three outings for Fox),<sup>9</sup> dovetails with a dispositional frugality that translates into an animosity to the image. It is the story of a young man, Lem, sent by his father from Minnesota to Chicago to negotiate a good price for the family's wheat harvest. The stern *pater familias* dispatches the young prodigal eastward with written instructions that culminate in the admonition "Don't lose our money!" These words summarize the father's severity, as does the scene in which he scolds his young daughter upon catching her "wastefully" braiding several ears of wheat into a garland. After pressing the orphaned stalks between the pages of the family bible, he takes his place at the head of an austere laid table and leads his small clan in the Lord's Prayer. The verse isolated by a lone title-card—"Give us this day our daily bread"—identifies the perpetual toil of the family's livelihood as Adam's legacy ("In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread"<sup>10</sup>). A consequence of original sin would seem to be an enmity to images that efface the labor that is the proper lot of fallen humanity. The shot of the child, lost in her leisurely braiding beneath a tree and surrounded by fields of golden grain, is emblematic of a gentle condition. It has a precursor in Theocritus's first idyll, which includes the following scene, carved into an ivy-wood cup: a youth, charged with keeping foxes out of the vineyard, distractedly plaits rushes and flowering plants into "a beautiful cage for a cricket."<sup>11</sup> Lem's young sister falls prey to an economy that is also consistent with an emerging grammar of cinematic narrative. More than a visual style, "realism" is a disposition whose credo is the folly of dreams.

The principal victim of disenchantment is Kate, the titular "city girl," who works as a waitress at a busy Chicago lunch counter. Wary on her feet and palpably suffering in the heat of late summer, she is shown—in a rare moment of rest—contemplating a calendar on the wall by the kitchen. The camera dwells, as does she, on the painting reproduced on the calendar—an impressionist rendering of sheep grazing in the sun beside a gnarled oak. Numerous safety pins have been inserted in the board, arguably implicating the calendar within the tradition of *trompe l'oeil*, exposing the flatness of the bucolic scene within the depressed social world. A comparable moment occurs the same evening, after Kate has struck up a conversation with Lem while serving him lunch. She enters her darkened apartment—a one-room affair appointed with a narrow bed, a simple wash basin, and two undraped windows framing buildings on the opposite side of the street. Immediately beyond the windows, the elevated train flashes past, left to right, then right to left (fig. 5).





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Fig. 5. Kate, the *City Girl*, watches the elevated trains go by past her window.

The racing trains notwithstanding, the scene is uniquely quiet in a film that otherwise yearns to be heard so ardently that it projects its printed dialogue in comic vernaculars (beginning with an African American porter's "Last call fo' lunch in the dinin' car!"). Shots of Kate seated on her bed beneath a bare light bulb, or standing before the window looking out into the night, recall Edward Hopper's many desultory depictions of urban solitude. The rapid flicker of film itself, simulated by the passing train, disturbs her contemplation of a still image, namely a billboard advertizing Minnesota (Lem's provenance) as a holiday destination. Pictured against a rising moon are a young man and woman in a canoe; he rows while she strums a guitar, the whole scene dissipating in the rippled surface of the lake. The image is devoid of the dark potential, explored in *Sunrise*, of the water crossing (not that *City Girl* is without its own nocturnal peril). After gazing longingly at the billboard, she nurses a struggling geranium on the window sill then turns to an object of particular symbolic and aesthetic character: a mechanical songbird in a cage. She winds up the mechanism then sits pensively, head on hand, while the bird sings (fig. 6). Distant heir to the artifice in which Theocritus's shepherd delights, the mechanical illusion is the foil against which Kate's disillusionment is measured. The sequence that concludes with this shot exhibits the painterly habits that define the better moments of the best of these films, *The Last Man*—habits that grant images their immense silence. What is most striking about this most American of Murnau's films, however, is this somber interlude, a meditation on the fate of art and of meditation itself.



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Fig. 6. Kate sits listening to the singing of her mechanical bird

### Notes

1. *King James Bible*, Matt. 19:30.
2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 21.
3. Auerbach, 18.
4. This detail is contained in the “making of” documentary by Luciano Berriatúa, included on the DVD.
5. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Avon, 1965), 526-46.
6. Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Penguin, 1982), 42.
7. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness & The Secret Sharer* (New York: Signet, 2008), 95.
8. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 19, 94.
9. The second, *4 Devils*, is lost.
10. *King James Bible*, Gen. 3:19.
11. Theocritus, *Idylls and Epigrams*, trans. Daryl Hine (New York: Atheneum, 1982), 4.