
The Theodore Huff Memorial Film Society
October 21, 1974

Two early 20's German films

SCHLOSS VOGELSD (THE HAUNTED CASTLE) (Decca Bioscop, Germany, 1921) Directed by F.W. Murnau; Script by Carl Mayer from the novel by Rudolf Stenzel; Camera, Fritz Arno Wagner; Isaac Sheffer; Sets, Herman Warm; 6 reels With Arnold Kortz, Dulu Keyser Kortz, Lothar Meinert, Paul Bildt, Olga Tschechohoven, Paul Hartmann, Herman Valentin, Julius Falkenstein, Walter Karth Kahle, Victor Blatner, Leon Nest.

As the earliest available Murnau (the 1920 "Der Gang in die Nacht" has been rediscovered in Europe but is not yet accessible here), "Schloss Vogelsd" is obviously of tremendous value as a historical and importance. However, those values are admirably very largely restricted to the Murnau student. It is no fault of the film that it cannot live up to its English title: it is a slow, psychological suspense drama rather than a horror film or fantasy, and is frankly rather tedious stuff for the non-specialised viewer. For those more interested in its background, I suggest recourse to Lotte Eisner's recent book on Murnau, which certainly provides a fairer analysis than we can provide in this short space, although I suspect that (seen only recently by Mme. Eisner) it is written with a real bias, making it sound far more exciting than it is merely by stressing its links with later and more accomplished Murnau works. True, our print is flat and dull, lacking the pictorial lustre it may have had originally, and it is not helped by German-dome English titles, which are often hilariously exact straight translations of the German originals. Some of the interior sets are impressive, but unfortunately one gets too familiar with them: the occasional exteriors - the mysterious coach lumbering towards the castle, for example - are more exciting and anticipates the later "Nosferatu." One really cutting use of shadows for menace is actually limited to a comic hallucination scene - but probably come in very handy for the posters and trailers! However, it's a most useful milestone if only to show what fantastic strides Murnau was making in a very short period; "Nosferatu," made later the same year, is incomparably better, and it is hard to realise that "Faust" and "Sunrise" were only five and six years away respectively.

OTHELLO (UFA, Germany, 1922; US release, 1923) Directed by Dmitri Buchowetski Photographed by Carl Hasselman; 6 reels

With Emil Jannings as Othello, Werner Krauss as Iago, Ida Lenkeffy as Desdemona, Theodor Loos as Cassius, and Iya de Putti as Iago's wife.

It is some twenty years since we last showed "Othello" at the Huff; then it was helped considerably by a beautiful toned print which made the most of the costuming and the handsome if theatrical sets. Today unfortunately only a blank and white copy of merely acceptable standards is available, but since, like "Schloss Vogelsd," the film is primarily of academic interest, the lessened pictorial values, while irksome, aren't of major importance. Shakespeare on the silent screen was surprisingly prolific, though usually not very successful. Too often the procedure was to make a notched act in the lead and assume that he or she could carry it, and the result - as in Johnson's portrayal of "Hamlet" - was often like watching a play without the benefit of its dialogue. Othello, apart from being visually interesting, at least uses screen actors who were able to obtain results visually, through the use of their faces and bodies. Jannings and Krauss are almost inspired casting, even though the results are occasionally a little like Karloff and Lugosi, or even a laurel & Hardy spoof. (Jannings was very ill during the production, which may account for his unusual restraint, though one would like to believe that the subtle underplaying was his own idea. Krauss, reportedly, was on one enormous bender throughout the entire film, which may, or may not account for the Ford Sterling-like quality of much of his villainy!) Quite certainly the screen has never had a more revolting Iago than Krauss, whose off-putting qualities are enhanced by a costume consisting largely of transparent black silk! However, in fairness, both Jannings and Krauss were critically well received at the time. "Exceptional Photoplays" of February, 1923, was most astute in the production, and its review, obviously written by someone who knew his Shakespeare, pointed out the "minister, Jack-in-the-box" quality of the character as written. Rene Clair, writing in "Philosophies on the Cinema," likewise (and perhaps over-generously) praises both the strength of the film as one of the best examples of filmed Shakespeare to date, and stressed that just as Mercutio could be played as a hero-clown, so could Iago as a villain-clown. "...translates Iago's perfidious deeds into movement. One gets the impression that he was being battled by his frantic rushing about much as in the play he did by saying a few words" was profitable but not very distinguishing. The print appears to be complete, other than for the diagonal shortening of the murder scene. The American subtitles, when not quoting Shakespeare direct, attempt to imitate him - this resulting in such joyous phrases as "Art drunk?!?"