"TABU" (Paramount, 1931) Written and directed by F.W. Murnau Camera: Floyd Crosby; musical score, Hugo Riesenfeld; 8 reels

Although the French "auteur" theory of film criticism was formulated long after Murnau's death, his relatively few films represent a body of work that tends to support that often-disputed theory quite as much as the work of Hitchcock, Ford, Hawks and other directors more commonly linked with this school of study. While it is certainly possible to enjoy and appreciate Murnau's films on their own individual level, at the same time the rewards are greater if one is familiar with all of his films. Despite their disparate themes, locales and geographic locales, there are many clearly defined links (repeated themes and even repeated scenes) between "Faust", "Nosferatu", "Sunrise", "City Girl" and "Tabu" - to name just five of his better-known works.

Like Chanlin's "City Lights", "Tabu" was planned and made wholly as a silent and released - well after the sound film had arrived and silents were commercially obsolete - with just a musical score. "Tabu", often referred to as the "Flaherty-Murnau" production, was indeed planned as a collaboration between Robert Flaherty, the American documentarian, and Murnau, the great German master of fantasy and poetic drama. Not unnaturally, the two personalities clashed; one a realist, the other a romanticist, their approaches to film were automatically at variance. There was no ill will between them; each respected and liked the other; but it soon became obvious to both that no good film could come from their partnership. Accordingly, Flaherty withdrew before the film was properly under way, and the film that emerged was wholly Murnau's in conception and execution. (A similar situation occurred in an earlier film, "White Shadows in the South Seas", which we played a scene or two of back-to-back with the Murnau film, becoming wholly the work of W.S. Van Dyke.) Certain film historians (aided by the Flaherty supporters and clan) still knowingly falsify the facts by referring to it as a joint production of the two film-makers, and even compound the evasion of truth by referring to Flaherty first. (Today's print, of a 1950 reissue, contains credits designed to bolster the Flaherty participation.)

"Tabu" is an American film in that it was financed by and released by an American company, Paramount, which had been pleasantly surprised by the boxoffice and critical response to Flaherty's earlier "Iona". But in that it had no stars and was the work of one man, Murnau (assisted by that fine American cameraman Floyd Crosby, whose lyricism was later somewhat wasted in American-International's beach-party and surfing pictures!) it could, with some justification, also be considered a German film. But regardless of its nationality, it is undoubtedly the finest poetic-documentary that the American cinema has produced, if indeed one can fit it into that very convenient "documentary" category. "Tabu", which started life as a simple picturization of the life of the Polynesians - somewhat like "Nordenskiöld" - was transformed into something quite different when Murnau took over. There was documentary coverage of island life, and the expected vistas of surf and palm trees, but these were merely the backdrops to a story as mystical as Murnau's old German fantasies. The story is too simple and delicate to risk foretelling here, but Murnau imbued it with all his own particular poetry and that romantic fatalism so beloved of German directors in the post-World-War One period. The figure of the Holy Man is really an extension of the Fate figure, that personification of Destiny (and usually with an ear to an ancient anthem), and against whose will the pleas of young lovers were foredoomed to failure. As always with Murnau, while the construction and content may be quite complex, the execution is often deceptively simple - as witness the long-held climactic shot of the film, accomplished without fancy angles or elaborate cross-cutting.

Although a critical success and not altogether a boxoffice failure, "Tabu" was too down-beat (especially in the depression years) to prove a resounding success, and too it had the commercial drawback of being essentially a silent film. When first shown in 1931, its pictorial loveliness and stately visuals seemed dated and out of touch with those times when the movies had become the talkies. Its gloomy forebodings of death and its theme of the impossibility of escape from one's fate had an ironic real-life counterpart. Just before the film opened in 1931, Murnau was killed in an automobile accident. He was one of the few really great directors - some think, and not without justification, the greatest - and his last films had shown him to be at the height of his powers. Whether he would have been defeated by sound, or whether he might have been the first to reshape the language of film in the sound era (the only "giants" of equal stature, Griffith and Eisenstein, not only didn't succeed - they didn't try) we'll never know. 

-- 10 minute intermission --
"SVENGALI" (Warner Brothers-First National, 1931) Director: Archie Mayo
Sceneplay by J. Grubb Alexander from the novel by George Du Maurier;
Camera, Barney McGill; Sets by Anton Crot; special effects by Fred
Jackson; edited by William Holmes. 8 reels

With John Barrymore, Karolyn Harsh, Donald Crisp, Luis Alberni, Bramwell
Fletcher, Lumsdon Hare, Paul Porcasi, Carmel Myers.

To say that this "SVENGALI" is by far the best screen adaptation of
Du Maurier's "Triiby" is perhaps, of itself, small tribute. The early silent
Maurice Tourneur version was oddly disappointing for that great pictorialist
director, and a British version of the 60's (with Hildegard Knief and Donald
director, and a British version of the 60's (with Hildegard Knief and Donald
Wolf) was a ponderous bore. However, both by reason of its own merits and
those of ultra-mild competition, this Warner Brothers foray certainly is
the best and the most faithful to the spirit if not the letter of the
original, especially insofar as the ending is concerned. And it could have
hardly have been made at a more propitious time. Barrymore, at the peak of
his artistry and with his wonderful voice only now being exploited by the
movies, was one of the most successful of the silent stars who had made
the transition to sound - and was just at the right age to be a perfect
SVENGALI. Too, the film was made at a time when German and Gothic
influences were particularly strong in Hollywood, not least in the
year of popular and elaborately visual horror films. At any other time,
and with another star, "SVENGALI" might have been less macabre - but
Barrymore's own love of the bizarre ensured that the moments of horror
were played, beautifully, for all they were worth. "SVENGALI" is a
magnificent pictorial treat, far more mobile in its camerawork than most
films of the period, full of superb lighting, long and elaborate travel
shots, a marvelous trick pullback from a window and across the roofs of
Paris (a scene that has to be studied many times before it gives up its
secret) and some of the finest sets ever created by the talented Anton
Crot. Some of them are on screen for just a few seconds, but what opulent
and atmospheric sets they are.

Barrymore is himself obviously having the time of his life - it's a great
bravour performance with the same combination of malicious wit, charm and
unadulterated evil that he gave to his Jekyll and Hyde performances eleven
years earlier. But again, he is too much a respecter of the theatre to
treat lightly the scenes that require serious acting; how effortlessly,
with a shrug and a few words, he can make us pity a man that seconds before
we had been despising! Nobody else has a ghost of a chance, least of all
Marian Harsh, too perfectly type-cast as Triiby, though Luis Alberni, a
faithful friend here as in other Barrymore movies (and in life, too) has
some moments, and Carmel Myers has a chance to virtually repeat her role
from the earlier Barrymore silent "Beau Brummel".

Today "SVENGALI" is such a thoroughly cinematic piece of work that it is
difficult to understand why it was generally poorly reviewed at the time,
though many essentially visual early talkies, retaining the basic and
wonderful gammer of the silents, were likewise dismissed rather
contemptuously as being unsophisticated and old-fashioned. Reviews apart
however, "SVENGALI" was a smash success - enough so to warrant a careful
rehash the following year in "The Mad Genius" (a lesser film, despite a
fine Barrymore performance and a bizarre climax, and needless to say this
time the reviews were more enthusiastic!) Archie Mayo, who directed
"SVENGALI", is an inconsistent director of no recognisable style, but the
ability to bring the right style to certain films. Some of his early
silents were dull pot-boilers, while his talkies ranged between the
pretensions of "The Petrified Forest" and the conventions of "The Great
American Broadcast" to one of the worst adventure epics of all time (Gary
Cooper's "Adventures of Marco Polo") and one of the strongest of the early
gangster films, "Doorway to Hell". If "SVENGALI" is his best film
(as it probably is) then one can say with certainty that his worst film
was a cheapie of the 60's titled "The Beast of Budapest!"

With "SVENGALI" it is impossible to decide whether some of the best
touches (the neat and deceptive scene with the milestone, the wickedly
suggestive fadeout as Svengali is ticking off Triby's past amours)
are attributable to him, the scenario, or to Barrymore. However, they're
there, and the film is a rich combination of film and theatre, so perhaps
it doesn't really matter.

William K. Everson