HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Blind Husbands 1919

Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957)

OVERVIEW

> Until the coming of Orson Welles, *Blind Husbands* was the most impressive and significant debut film in Hollywood history.
> —Richard Koszarski, *The Man You Loved to Hate*

Erich von Stroheim's directing debut came after several years of work as an actor and assistant director. The silent film *Blind Husbands* was based on his own script; it was set in the border of Italy and von Stroheim's birth country Austria (he would become an American citizen in 1926), in the Dolomitic Alps and shot (in the company's California lots) in seven weeks with a budget of about forty thousand dollars (Weinberg, 1975: 3). Von Stroheim had intended to name the film The Pinnacle, but was overruled, and consequently, published a statement of protest as an advertisement in a trade paper. He would continue to antagonize producers—one of the factors that led to him working primarily as an actor in the later decades of his Hollywood career.

Blind Husbands features a love triangle, with the director playing a brazen womanizer who threatens the stalled marriage of the Armstrong couple. Von Stroheim's attention to detail—he had worked as one of the assistants of D.W. Griffith—shows with the set design, but unlike the latter, he chooses not to use many close-up shots. The story is quite simple, yet acting is subtle and notable; particularly effective is silent film era star Francelia Billington portraying the wife, who emerges as a multi-faceted character. His 1924 film *Greed* would also introduce characters achieving almost real dimensions. Technically, the director's rapid cross-cutting is well ahead of its time and anticipates Soviet montage. The surreal nightmare sequence, with von Stroheim's character's ominous face and hand surrounded by pitch black, prefigures similar scenes in the films of Lang and Hitchcock.

The historical background of *Blind Husbands* was shaped by the end of the First World War and the Spanish Flu of 1918. Oddly enough, the film states that the story takes place three years after the end of the Great War—two years in the future. In his recent acting during the war, von Stroheim had turned to play villains (for example *The Heart of Humanity,* with a notably cruel part) as a result of the public's aversion to Germanic characters. Here, the villainy is relatively toned down; Eric von Steuben (note the name similarity) mainly serves to highlight the problems in the sophisticated American couple's relationship. Similarly, there appears a contingent of Austrian infantry, but the military's role is minimal, also reflecting the spectators' weariness with war.

Among *Blind Husbands*' themes are love, adultery, leisure (tourism), modernity, and courage. The complexity and palpability of the female character's emotional rollercoaster is enriched by privileging her point-of-view, which is by itself a remarkable approach, even by the standard of later decades. *Blind Husbands* was a commercial and critical success—*New York Telegraph*'s columnist hailed him as a new "super-director," (Koszarski, 1983: 40) on a par with, but stylistically distinct from, Cecil de Mille, D.W. Griffith, and Maurice Tourneur. *Blind Husbands* is one of the few films of von Stroheim that is more or less intact; it would be followed by *The Devil's Pass Key* (lost film) and *Foolish Wives*.

CHARACTERS

*Doctor Armstrong***.** The avid mountaineer appears to care less about his wife than his hobby.
*Margaret Armstrong***.** Margaret feels lonely and sad; initially, she doesn't welcome von Steuben's advances but gradually seems to enjoy the attention and companionship.
*Eric von Steuben***.** Played by—note the name similarity—Erich von Stroheim, the dashing Austrian cavalry officer is a relentless womanizer and an awful mountain climber.
Sepp. "Silent" Sepp is the laconic and wise local guide and a good friend of Doctor Armstrong.

SYNOPSIS

Doctor Armstrong and his wife Margaret visit the Alpine town of Cortina, a popular holiday resort of American tourists. Here, they are greeted by the laconic local guide Sepp. Another guest of the hotel is Lieutenant von Steuben, an observant and relentless womanizer who doesn't waste any time to catch Margaret's attention. Mrs. Armstrong is confused; even though the Doctor is clueless about what is going on, his friend Sepp remains watchful.

The climb undertaken by a group of amateurs ends with a serious accident. Doctor Armstrong leads a rescue party to save them. While he is away, von Steuben continues his advances, but ultimately Margaret rejects him. Eventually, the rescuers return, but stress makes Margaret sick. While attending to her, the doctor notices von Steuben's card and gift; he suspects an affair and schemes to confront the lieutenant by challenging him to climb the pinnacle of the Dolemites.

The two men ascend and after overcoming serious setbacks (unlike Armstrong, von Steuben is not a competent mountaineer), they reach the summit. Here, Armstrong threatens the lieutenant, who admits—falsely, out of fear—that Margaret was positive to his advances. Before he can read it, her letter to von Steuben flies away with the wind and Armstrong begins the descent by himself. As he climbs down, he comes across the letter—it reveals that she had actually declared her loyalty to her husband. Even though Armstrong tries to help him, von Steuben falls to his death. Back at the town, the Armstrongs happily reconcile; Sepp advises his friend to be loving to his wife.

SCENES

Dolemite Alps. The Alpine town of Cortina is attracting American tourists and the tiny community is preparing for new guests. The local guide, "Silent" Sepp is eagerly anticipating the arrival of his friend and fellow mountaineer Doctor Armstrong.



Also on board the horse carriage that carries the doctor and his wife Margaret is the Austrian officer von Steuben, who is silently observing the couple. The lieutenant manages to have a brief exchange with Margaret—which goes unnoticed by her husband, apparently absorbed in deep thoughts.



Tourists. In Cortina, the Armstrongs are greeted by Sepp and they take lodging at the local hotel; von Steuben also checks in at Hotel Croce Bianca. The following morning, the guests gather at the dining room for breakfast. Von Steuben flirts with two local women—more or less simultaneously; all the while watching out for any opportunities that may help him catch Margaret Armstrong's attention.



With her husband engrossed in his book, Margaret wanders outside for fresh air—which presents an opportunity for von Steuben. He gets up and hands her coat before she can feel the morning chill. She appreciates the lieutenant striving to make her comfortable and lets him hang around. Doctor Armstrong is not at all bothered; Silent Sepp however, seems to take note of von Steuben's interest in his friend's wife.



Socializing. In the evening, the guests gather at the hotel's garden. Among the other tourists is a young couple, who appear to be passionately in love. Their intimate relationship contrasts with that of the Armstrongs—Mrs. Armstrong sadly glances at them. Von Steuben continues to alternate flirting with the waitress and another local woman—who gets progressively jealous. He is primarily focused on Mrs. Armstrong and manages to accompany her with a violin as she plays the piano by herself.



Other Tourists. Also among the guests is a trio of somewhat vulgar American holiday-makers; they are enthusiastic about climbing the extremely challenging Mount Dolemite. As a seasoned climber, Armstrong tries to convince them that the undertaking is way above their skill level and very dangerous; then again, von Steuben blatantly encourages them. The three men decide to embark on the climb the following morning.



Confusion. In the evening, Margaret is thoughtful and uncertain. She is obviously considering the lieutenant as a romantic candidate—and yet her affection for her aloof husband remains strong. Next day, the three amateurs go ahead and begin climbing the mountain. The Armstrongs leisurely go around the town and check out local souvenirs and handicrafts—with von Steuben tailing them. He keenly observes—unlike her husband—that Margaret is charmed by a little antique keepsake box at a gift shop. Suddenly, the doctor is summoned by the family of a seriously sick kid. Margaret continues the tour of Cortina with von Steuben; the lieutenant is exhilarated by the chance to improve his standing with her. In spite of the lurking presence of the watchful Sepp, von Steuben is able to amuse and moderately charm Margaret.



Trouble. The three American adventurers reach the pinnacle, but have a serious accident during the descent. The townsfolk learn about their ordeal; with their binoculars, they desperately view the injured and stranded climbers. It is decided that a rescue party should be formed immediately. As an advanced mountaineer, Doctor Armstrong is expected to join the group. He does so wholeheartedly; he is assured by Lieutenant von Steuben that he would take good care of his wife.



Close call. While the Doctor is away for the daring rescue operation, von Steuben and Margaret stroll around; he gifts her the little trinket box that she had fancied the other day. Later at the hotel, an uninvited von Steuben manages to enter Margaret's room.



Initially Margaret looks uneasy, and then panics as an inquisitive (and jealous) maid loiters in the hall. The possibility of a scandal ends von Steuben's hope for a liaison; Margaret firmly tells him to leave and goes to sleep. He appears undeterred.



Nightmare. The townsfolk rejoice as the rescue party returns. There are seriously injured men that are carried on stretchers and Margaret fears that her husband might be among them. Doctor Armstrong happens to be all right, but the tension proves too much for her and she faints. During the evening, she struggles with fever and has a nightmare, with von Steuben appearing as a diabolical figure in pitch dark. Meanwhile, the Doctor notices the antique box and finds the lieutenant's card inside. He becomes suspicious and thinks of a ploy.



Ascent. Doctor Armstrong suggests a bold expedition to the summit and invites von Steuben, who hesitantly accepts. The Armstrongs, Sepp, and von Steuben leave the hotel and hike to another lodging that is higher up in the mountain. Some of the other guests, such as the young tourist couple, also relocate.



Letter. The couple sleeps in separate rooms to let Armstrong rest for the ambitious climb. Von Steuben makes reckless attempts to contact Margaret, but is deterred by a vigilant Sepp, who obviously knows for sure what is on the lieutenant's mind.



Margaret spends the evening writing a letter to the brazen lieutenant—the content of it is not explained. When she is done, looking peaceful and satisfied, she slips it under the lieutenant's door. A little later, he reads it, but his ambiguous expression reveals nothing about her message.



The Pinnacle. At dawn, Armstrong and von Steuben head out for the climb, which proves to be very dangerous. The lieutenant is not at all as skilled a mountaineer as Armstrong, who saves his partner in dire situations. Finally, they reach the summit; here, the doctor confronts the lieutenant about his suspicions. He finds the letter penned by Margaret, but it flies away with a gust of wind before he can read it. Armstrong threatens to throw him off the mountain unless he admits the content of Margaret's letter—von Steuben says that she was indeed positive to his advances. Distraught, Armstrong lets him go, but cuts loose the rope that held them together—he begins the descent on his own. Meanwhile, sensing trouble, Sepp leads a detachment of local mountain troops to help his friend. Von Steuben remains terrified by himself, knowing that it is impossible for him to descend safely with his mountaineering skills.



Reconciliation. As he climbs down the mountain, Armstrong finds Margaret's letter somehow perched on a branch. When he reads it, he realizes that von Steuben had lied to save his neck, thinking that the truth would not be as persuasive—Margaret had actually firmly turned him down and expressed her commitment to her husband. He makes an attempt to go back and save the lieutenant. At the same time, the mountain troops that have also approached the summit try to help both men. It is too late—von Steuben tries to descend and falls to his death. The climbers regroup and return to the town, where the Armstrongs happily reconcile. As they leave, the laconic Sepp advises his friend to be loving to his wife.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Doctor Armstrong. **CLOSED** (Introvert); **CONSCIENTIOUS** (Heroic)

Armstrong is polite, considerate, and trusting. He is also indifferent as far as his marriage is concerned. He helps others selflessly—first he treats a sick child and later, leads a rescue party assembled for the stranded amateur climbers. On the other hand, he needs help and advice to save his marriage—words of wisdom provided by "Silent" Sepp.

Introvert. Initially appears almost lethargic, either lost in his own thoughts or preoccupied with a book. He represents the titular and emblematic "blind husband." His indifference frustrates and saddens his wife. Except for his failings as a husband, he is a positive figure—helpful, kind, and brave. The reconciliation at the end does not come as a result of him changing his ways and becoming less self-centered, but it is hinted that he might heed Sepp's advice and be more attentive to his wife—she seems to be optimistic about the future of their marriage.

Heroic. Despite his failings as a husband, Armstrong is a positive character, who ultimately emerges as the hero who saves others at the risk of his life. His bravery is significant because it contrasts with the bravado of Lieutenant von Steuben, who is revealed to be an awful outdoorsman and quite a cowardly one. Even the presence of a detachment of Austrian mountain troops does not overshadow the physical competence of Armstrong.

Margaret Armstrong **EMOTIONAL** (*Unsure, Tormented*)

Blind Husband's spotlight is on the emotional rollercoaster of Mrs. Armstrong. The character emerges not only as a complex, but as an incredibly palpable one. *Blind Husbands* is well ahead of its time because this character that seriously considers having an affair with another man—not because she has to, but because she might choose to do so.

Unsure. As opposed to the trio of vulgar American tourists, the Armstrongs are a sophisticated couple and she is an independent woman. Margaret is committed to her husband but is obviously unhappy with their stalled marriage. His self-absorbed demeanor makes her bored and sad; she envies the young couple at the same holiday resort as they frequently cuddle and kiss.

Her husband is not only happily preoccupied with his hobbies, he seems to be indifferent to her. The dynamics of their marriage is noted by von Steuben even before they check in at the hotel, during the carriage ride. Initially she maintains her distance to his advances—using any opportunity to approach her and creating one when none presents itself. She is pleased when he fetches her coat and offers pillows to make her comfortable at the garden. When she is sadly playing the piano by herself at evening, von Steuben is there to accompany her with a violin. After the doctor is summoned for an emergency, the lieutenant does his best to entertain her.

Tormented. Two striking scenes highlight Margaret's pain: first, she spends the evening in deep thought while her husband is in deep sleep. She looks at the Doctor and visualizes the bed without him. It is clear that she is devoted to him despite her lack of happiness. Second, after she falls ill, she lies in the bed with fever and has a nightmare. The ominous sight of von Steuben's head and a single hand emerges in a pitch black backdrop, increasing her torment.

Eric von Steuben **DISAGREEABLE** *(Reckless and Annoying)*

Played by von Stroheim, Lieutenant von Steuben is a sexual predator, who is not as cruel and dangerous as the Germanic villains he had recently portrayed (e.g. *The Heart of Humanity*), but is as licentious as his Count Sergius Karamzin in *Foolish Wives* (1922). The brazen womanizer's advances tests the marriage of the Armstrongs.

Reckless and Annoying. Von Steuben is the exact opposite of Armstrong: virile, intrusive, and cheeky. His annoying presence serves to test the marriage of the Armstrongs. The denouement comes with his elimination from the love triangle as he falls to his death. The dramatic ending is somehow cathartic; things seem to improve between the couple and it is suggested that there is reason to be optimistic about the future of their marriage.

Sepp AGREEABLE, CONSCIENTIOUS (*Wise and Friendly*)

"Silent" Sepp is an easy-going and amiable character who lives in Cortina and works as a guide. He is a competent mountaineer and a good friend of Doctor Armstrong. Sepp is not talkative and seems to prefer the company of his beloved dog. Gibson Gowland would play the leading man in von Stroheim's 1924 masterpiece and film maudit *Greed*.

Wise and Friendly. In *Greed*, Gowland's McTeague is a slow thinking man of enormous physical strength; in *Blind Husbands*, his Sepp is a wise and perceptive man of few words. While Armstrong fails to notice von Steuben making advances to his wife, the observant Sepp is suspicious of the Lieutenant from the get-go. He keeps an eye on him after the doctor is summoned for an emergency and has to leave Margaret with the brazen womanizer. Later, as the men prepare for the climb to the summit at the mountain lodge, Sepp guards Margaret's door and successfully averts von Steuben's reckless attempts to contact her during evening. Sepp is a poet who doesn't talk much, but utters the key closing line of the film—he advises Armstrong to be loving to his wife. It is noteworthy that the man of science is badly in need of advice from the man of nature. Sepp is a vigilant friend and perceptive—folk—philosopher.

THEMES

SOCIETY – (Leisure)
POLITICS – (Military)
RELATIONSHIPS – (Marriage, Love, Desire, Lust)
PSYCHOLOGY – (Courage)
PAST – (Archaism)

SOCIETY

Leisure. The holiday resort offers a retreat from modernity; then again, two modern notions, tourism and sports play a prominent role. The small town of Cortina is a tourism hotspot and its economy is structured around the international guests, with hotels and souvenir shops. Similarly, in spite of the presence of military figures, the film chooses to salute mountain climbers for their heroism—Doctor Armstrong is seen visiting the memorial to a fallen outdoorsman. *Blind Husbands* itself was dedicated to pioneer mountain guide Sepp Innerkofler who had died while trying to save people at Mount Cristallo (von Stroheim confused the names of two members of the Innerkofler family, Sepp and Michel[1][Koszarski, 2022]). The 1919 film (story set in 1921), anticipates the Roaring Twenties' social interest in new leisure activities and fields of modern recreation such as tourism and sports.

POLITICS

Military. Representations of military figures in *Blind Husbands* are von Steuben and the Austrian army unit. Lieutenant von Steuben is not only a negative character—a sexual predator—but also an inferior sportsman. The characterization of this officer possibly mirrors the public's weariness with things associated with war. The Austrian mountain troops and their officer play a minor part; they are good-intentioned and capable, but it is a civilian, Doctor Armstrong, who emerges as the most skillful and courageous individual in Cortina.

RELATIONSHIPS

Marriage. The Armstrongs' recall Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (Koszarski, 2022). Their stalled marriage is tested and it survives the threat. Interestingly, it is not certain whether their love prevails. After

hard thinking and soul searching, Margaret decides that her commitment to her husband is still strong. On the other hand, there is the promise that he might heed his friend Sepp's advice and be more affectionate. *Blind Husbands*' leading woman is a complex character because of the way she interprets love, as opposed to conforming to norms. After all those understated gestures—there are no histrionics in this silent film—the ending is considerably shocking, with the violent death of Lieutenant von Steuben, whose elimination presents an opportunity for a fresh start. The narrative explores the possibility of love in marriage.

Love. None of the characters actually appear to be in love. Doctor Armstrong is totally indifferent to his wife, she strives to remain loyal to him, not because of her love, but because she would like to be faithful. She feels neglected and considers von Steuben as a romantic candidate, and the latter is basically lecherous. The only person that refers to love is Sepp (at the very last scene), who is friendly to the Armstrongs, but is essentially a loner himself, who mostly enjoys the company of his dog. The ending comes with a positive note—after all, the intrusive European officer is no more; even then, we do not know if the couple will (or can) heed the advice for love.

Desire. *Blind Husbands* is far ahead of its time because of the way it portrays the leading woman's actions. Contrary to the approach that might be preferred in other narratives (to this day), her consideration of an extra-marital affair is not explained with outside factors—such as critical financial necessities or vital family obligations—which would have served to morally justify her motives. It is purely her choice that she considers a romantic affair and the main factor is desire.

Lust. Von Steuben is licentious and immoral. This virile Old World character shows von Stroheim (as actor) moving away from his war-era murderous Hun types to playing sexual predators—it anticipates his reptilian Count Sergius Karamzin in *Foolish Wives*, who has a habit of licking his lips with his tongues when he is aroused. *Blind Husbands*' von Steuben is not a well-developed character; he serves to expose the problems in the marriage of the American couple.

PSYCHOLOGY

Courage. Von Steuben looks sharp in his neat lieutenant's uniform with shiny medals on his chest and a fancy ceremonial sword in its scabbard. In contrast, Doctor Armstrong looks somewhat lethargic and detached. Yet, when faced with the dangerous task of climbing the Alps, the officer proves to be incapable and quite scared—truly the lounge lizard who is hopeless in nature. On the other hand, the intellectual is dexterous and resolute; he is not afraid to climb the steep mountain twice—to save the amateur climbers and then for a dramatic confrontation with von Steuben at the summit.

PAST

Archaism. *Blind Husband*'s (1919) story is stated to take place in 1921, but the setting has a turn-of-the-century vibe, with limited occurrence of modern advances. Considering the historical context (World War I and the Spanish Flu), it can be said that the mountain resort offers much needed relief from modern life, not just for the film's characters, but its audience as well. During the second half of the film, the Armstrongs, Sepp, and von Steuben encounter a village idiot who loudly mocks the bizarre love triangle and points out what others pretend not to see. Similarly, it is Sepp, the local guide and folk philosopher, who has the final word—love. Interestingly, while Armstrong is skilled and courageous, the scientist is badly in need of some advice, which is provided by Sepp. As a man of nature he advices his friend—the last scene of the film—to be loving to his wife.

Discussion questions

How does *Blind Husbands* anticipate the German 'mountain films' of the 1930s? How is it different from them?

What is the thinking behind von Steuben's lie about Margaret Armstrong's letter? What is the consequence?

What may be some of the D.W. Griffith inspired shots in the film? How is von Stroheim's style mainly distinct from Griffith, even at this very early stage in his career?

Does the idea of the pinnacle have a religious element? Any scenes that support this perspective?

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