HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

The Merry Widow 1925

Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957)

OVERVIEW

A silent film adaptation of a very popular operetta was Erich von Stroheim's next project, following the release of *Greed* in mutilated form. Whereas for the latter, he was meticulously faithful to the source (Frank Norris' naturalistic novel), for *The Merry Widow*, von Stroheim liberally created a lengthy prologue, almost two thirds of the film, before handling the original libretto by Viktor Léon and Leo Stein. A contemporary trade paper summarized the plot as the "romance of young prince and dancer"[1]; it also involved a fictional Balkan monarchy, intrigues, wealth, corruption, debauchery, and grotesque figures.

Production. Von Stroheim obligingly fulfilled his mandate—the producer's main requirement[2]—to include two key scenes from the operetta, the interaction at the Maxim and the waltz at the reception (Joan Crawford and Clark Cable briefly appear as dancing extras). There was trouble on the set—the star actress yelled "Hun"[3] (his villainous screen persona as an actor) at him and von Stroheim was almost fired, if it was not for a rebellion threat by the extras and set workers loyal to the director. On the other hand, thanks in part to his unwilling consent to a happy ending, von Stroheim did not have to deal with as much pressure from the producers as his previous film. Unlike those in his previous films, *The Merry Widow*'s leading actors were established stars (Mae Murray and John Gilbert), and consequently, von Stroheim's reputation was elevated as a director of high profile actors. The film turned out to be a success and is generally regarded to be the most accessible of his films.

Source. Austria-Hungarian composer Franz Lehár's operetta was itself inspired by Henri Meilhac's 1861 play; Viktor Léon and Leo Stein had made changes to the play for the libretto. The story took place in a fictitious Balkan country, a 'Ruritania' in the fashion of *Prisoner of Zenda*. In the operetta, the country was called called Pontevedro (changed to Monteblanco in the 1925 film), which vaguely referred to Bosnia-Herzegovina and particularly Montenegro, which was to become a part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia as of 1918. The real Prince Danilo had the film banned in Yugoslavia.[4]

Connections and Legacy. The operetta *Die Lustige Witwe* was first performed in 1905 in Vienna; then in Germany in 1906 and as *The Merry Widow* in London in 1907. Louis Treumann, the first Prince Danilo on stage would be killed at Auschwitz—the operetta happened to be cherished by Hitler, so much so that Dmitri Shostakovich ironically cited it in his Symphony No. 7; or *Leningrad*, which honored the city besieged by the Nazis in WW2.[5]

The operetta's Merry Widow Waltz can be frequently heard in variations in Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* and another 1943 film, Ernst Lubitsch's *Heaven Can Wait.* Von Stroheim's film is the second of several *The Merry Widow* film adaptations: Hungarian *A Vig Özvegy* from 1918 by Michael Curtiz, 1929's *Der Lustige Witwer*, a sound film in 1934 with Maurice Chevalier by Ernst Lubitsch, in Technicolor in 1952, starring Lana Turner, and an Austrian-French co-production in 1962.

As in *Foolish Wives*, the title cards are beautifully poetic. The scene at the nightclub Francois' (which was later mostly eliminated with moralistic concerns) is thus introduced: "Weeping violins and joyous cymbals…the walls are thick... The carpets muffle sound… and Francois is discreet."

Von Stroheim regarded *Greed* as his favorite and least successful film; the reverse was true of *The Merry Widow*. Nonetheless, it is a film full of fascinating details waiting to be discovered; it sarcastically exposes corruption and social degradation, only to lightly coat it with entertaining humor.

CHARACTERS

Sally. Sally O'Hara is the leading performer of the Manhattan Follies, currently on tour in the Balkans.

Prince Danilo. Charmingly irreverent playboy is second in line to the throne of Monteblanco.

Crown Prince Mirko. Danilo's cousin Mirko is the future king; he is envious and wrathful.

Baron Sadoja. The wealthiest man in the country is the financier of the monarch and happens to be a grotesque figure.

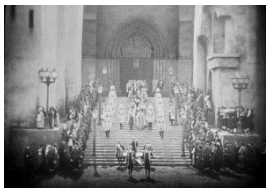
Queen Milena and King Nikita. The rulers of the kingdom steer the two princes in accordance with the interests of the dynasty.

SYNOPSIS

Sally O'Hara is an American entertainer on tour in the Balkans with her troupe, currently visiting the small and picturesque kingdom of Monteblanco. She meets and charms the sly and contemptuous crown prince Mirko and his cousin, the affable and happy-go-lucky second in line Danilo. She also mesmerizes the wealthy financier of the monarchy; the lustful Baron Sadoja's grotesqueness and out-of-the-box sexuality repulses her even more than Mirko. Eventually, Sally and Danilo get intimate and decide to marry—which alerts the royal family. With help from Mirko, the King and Queen manage to prevent the wedding. Furious and feeling betrayed, Sally accepts Sadoja's proposal in order to punish the royals, whose treasury is entirely dependent on her would-be-husband's assets. On the evening of their marriage, the baron dies and Sally—'the Merry Widow'—becomes the sole possessor of his immense wealth.

After a year of mourning, Sally has become a very popular socialite. She throws a party in Paris and invites the two princes just to mock them. At this stage, the royals have completely changed their position and desperately need to find a way to keep the Merry Widow's gold in the country—so Mirko feels free to woo her, while Danilo continues to suffer from heartache and drinks heavily. Mirko's obnoxiousness progressively enrages Danilo and one of their fights leads to a duel. Danilo refuses to shoot at his cousin, whose shot seriously wounds him. At this point, King Nikita dies and Mirko is to become the new king—except that a former grievance holder assassinates him. Sally visits Danilo as he recuperates from his wound and proposes to him. They marry and are crowned as the royal couple.

SCENES



Dreamy City. Castellano is the capital of the fictional kingdom of Monteblanco in the Balkans; "the City in the Sky" is "embraced eternally by the eternal White Mountains." The leading figures of the monarchy are introduced as they have gathered for the Sunday Service at the majestic cathedral. Also present is a grotesque figure, Baron Sixtus Sadoja, the wealthiest man in the country and the indispensable financier of the regime.



Princes. The proud army of the tiny kingdom has just completed maneuvers near the borderlands. A few mechanized and motorized units are seen blending in with the cavalry, as the regiment arrives at a small village atop a mountain. The commanding officers are the crown prince Mirko, a wrathful and repulsive individual, and the irreverent and good-natured second in line Prince Danilo. Soldiers are to spend the evening at the field, while officers check in to the few rooms of the village inn.





The Manhattan Folies. Not before long, other guests arrive at the inn—the Manhattan Follies and its star performer Sally O'Hara are in Monteblanco as part of a tour of the Balkans. The gazes of officers, including the princes, are immediately fixed on the American danseuse. To the latter's dismay, the inn is already packed with the officers and no rooms are available for the troupe. Seeing that Danilo is fluent in English, Sally talks to him about the problem. He finds a practical solution by telling his

subordinates to double up and make room for the entertainers. Mirko also offers his room to Sally, but she picks that of Danilo—she is still clueless about the royal titles of both officers. Later that night, the two cousins' competition for her attention is hilarious; Mirko proves his repulsiveness while Danilo is able to make some progress.



Risqué. A few days later, Mirko and Danilo, in full dress uniform, attend the show of Manhattan Follies featuring Sally O'Hara. Her risqué performance is a great success; among those mesmerized in the audience is also Baron Sadoja. After they check her out with their opera glasses, the men dash to the backstage to woo her; the cousins once again battle wits in a farcical sequence. All three invite her to supper, Danilo prevails.



Francois. Danilo hosts Sally at his private room at Francois, a discreet and notorious maison de rendezvous. A couple of blindfolded musicians on the bed contribute to the ambiance, as Sally and Danilo dine and get intimate. Meanwhile, a wild orgy is taking place elsewhere in the club; Mirko spitefully leads his intoxicated entourage to crash Danilo's room and manages to ruin his evening by embarrassing Sally, who now knows the real identity of the cousins and feels cheated. Following some confusion and a quarrel, she calms down and spends the evening with Danilo. As the iron gate of Francois is bolted, Mirko, as nasty as ever, viciously kicks the cane of the club's doorman, causing him to fall down. Last shot of this sequence shows the city workers systematically cleaning the street.



Intervention. The following day, the news about Danilo's proposal is not received well at the Palace. Mirko keeps mocking him and they end up having a brawl; King Nikita and Queen Milena scramble to prevent Danilo from getting married to a commoner—they succeed quite easily by stressing his duties to the state. Even his sad farewell message to Sally is tossed into the fireplace by the Queen. To make matters as ugly as possible, Mirko visits the cabaret to insult the danseuse, by offering to compensate her with cash. As Sally rips her wedding gown to pieces, Baron Sadoja opportunistically shows up and suggests that she can have her revenge by making the royals subservient to her. All she needs to do is become his—the top financier of the regime—wife.



Wedding and Funeral. Even though Sally is irked by Sadoja, she likes the idea of humiliating the Monteblanco dynasty and accepts his proposal. On their wedding night, Sadoja, overwhelmed by his great fortune, has a stroke and dies. Sally is now the sole possessor of the gold that finances the state. She leaves for Paris and reportedly mourns there; after a year, she is now the Merry Widow, an extremely popular socialite and affluent baroness.





The Merry Widow Waltz. Mirko openly declares his intention to woo Sally and has more fights with his cousin—both of them are in Paris, with Danilo frequenting nightclubs and drinking to forget his lost love. The King and Queen have totally changed their positions on the issue, as they desperately need the Baroness to keep her gold in the country. Meanwhile, the Baroness waggishly throws a lavish party in honor of Mirko at the Monteblancan Embassy in Paris. Danilo also attends and climactic moment is his dance with Sally—as the orchestra recites the Merry Widow Waltz. Still privately furious about his past action and not aware of his feelings for her, Sally thoroughly taunts him. Danilo resorts to drinking.



Duel. During a hunting party, Mirko proposes to Sally—at which moment they come across Danilo, wasted from the previous evening. He is annoyed by Mirko's demeanor and another quarrel ensues. Then, in order to add insult to Danilo's injury—and to the surprise of Mirko—Sally announces her acceptance of the marriage proposal. Danilo charges at his cousin, who invites him to a duel.

Death of the King. Sally begs Danilo not to participate in the duel—he mistakenly assumes that she is trying to protect Mirko because of her love for him. He rejects her pleas on grounds of code of honor, and consequently, parties gather next morning at a foggy spot to settle scores. In spite of what he told Sally, Danilo refuses to shoot at his adversary and fires into the air—followed by Mirko taking his time to aim and coldly shooting his cousin. As the second in line to the throne is seriously wounded, news arrives of the death of King Nikita.



Funeral and Assassination. Crown Prince Mirko is to be the new king, following the funeral of the King (during the solemn ceremony, the army's parade band descends down the stairs, paralleling the same year's Odessa Stairs scene in *Battleship Potemkin* by Sergei Eisenstein). However, an unexpected twist follows, as the doorman of Francois, one of many people bullied by the loathsome Mirko, exacts personal revenge by assassinating the would-be-king during the funeral.



Coronation. Sally visits the recuperating Danilo and under the apple blossoms (anticipating von Stroheim's *The Wedding March*) proposes to him; at which moment they are informed about the murder of the heir prince. Danilo and Sally marry, and they are crowned as the King and Queen of Monteblanco. They happily joke about refraining from using their official titles; he tells her that he is still "plain Danilo Petrovich."



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Sally O'Hara Open (Waggish and Impudent, Worldly)

Waggish and Impudent. Enraged by Sally's assertive demeanor, Mirko calls her impudent. Her independence creates tension in her interactions with the three powerful figures of the Old World. Sally's lack of restraint and self-confidence stirs the conformism of the Balkan country's elites and eventually she transforms Danilo.

Worldly. Sally views Sadoja and Mirko as what they are, promiscuous and opportunistic men; she is willing to give Danilo a chance (even though his initial approach is not totally different from the others). In the second part of the story, her wealth, instead of her body, is the main focus of the men of Monteblanco, notably Mirko. She suspects Danilo's intention may similarly be getting hold of her gold and presents her distance until he proves his sincerity.

Prince Danilo Agreeable (Irreverent, Affectionate, Modest)

Irreverent. At the get-go, Danilo is introduced as a philandering character (delighted by erotica, shortly before lusting after the maid at the inn), not totally unlike his cousin. It is quickly established that he is the pleasant and likeable one; always cheerful and well-liked by people around him. He is a little mischievous and goofy, but those qualities are acceptable compared to the wrathful cruelty of his cousin.

Affectionate. Even though Danilo's approach to Sally is considerably more respectful of her personhood, the beautiful danseuse is initially merely one his potential conquests. The evening at Francois confuses and transforms him; her sensuality makes him affectionate.

Modest. Even before he meets Sally, Danilo likes to be called "Plain Danilo Petrovich," as opposed to prince. She seems to like this egalitarian streak in him and is happy when he reiterates it as the king, during their wedding and coronation.

Crown Prince Mirko Disagreeable (Doppelganger, Odious, Inarticulate and Bizarre, Cruel)

Doppelganger. Essentially, the sly and sinister Mirko character is Danilo's doppelganger. As a pompous and stiff officer, he is a martinet feared by his subordinates, and Danilo is well aware of his

snide cousin's wrathful jealousy. The extremely fastidious and picky character serves to underscore the positive traits of Danilo. The rakish crown prince recalls the villains von Stroheim himself had portrayed in his previous films (the director wished to play this character, but was overruled; it was harder to subdue him when he played one of the main characters—as the production history of *Foolish Wives* contra *Greed* suggests.

Odious. Just how unpleasant Mirko can be is hinted right at the beginning, when he steps out of his limousine to spend the night at the village inn. He is disgusted by a few animals that bother no one; he sees and uses this opportunity to bully and intimidate an underling—"make a note of it… make it now," Mirko orders his adjutant. Similarly, seeing that Sally is repulsed (but not intimidated) by him right away, he tries to coerce her into socializing with him by quite openly threatening her, and later, doing whatever he can to ruin Danilo's relationship with her.

Inarticulate and Bizarre. Less striking than Baron Sadoja's impairment is Mirko's complete lack of eloquence, which places him in the gallery of weird von Stroheim characters. His menacing grin and awful pick-up line ("when I ask a lady–ah- to supper –ah—she generally accepts") makes Sally mock his speech and she has a good laugh. Subsequently, he sexually assaults her, which immediately earns him a few slaps and she dumps her flower bouquets on his head.

Cruel. The evening at Francois is obviously frustrating for Mirko and he has a fit of jealousy when he sees Danilo getting intimate with Sally. First, he tries to sabotage their evening by leading his entourage to bust his cousin's bedroom; later, on his way out of the club at the end of the evening, his contempt makes him kick the cane of the doorman for no reason and causes him to fall down. At the finale, the plot twist comes in the form of this wronged and vengeful doorman who assassinates the crown prince at the King's funeral.

THEMES

Society – (Modernity, Body, Social Etiquette)
Politics – (Military)
Relationships – (Marriage, Family and Conformism, Desire, Sexuality and Innuendo)
Psychology – (Abject)
Flaw – (Voyeurism)

Modernity. While the operetta was set in pre-war Balkans (where the spark that set off the WW1 ultimately ignited), *The Merry Widow* takes place in the interwar period. Alongside a dreamy presentation of the picturesque kingdom, technology of the 1920s is represented somewhat realistically. A couple of half-track vehicles accompany the mounted units of the army and the two princes drive limousines. Later, the wild party at Francois culminates in the darkness and silence of the early dawn hours, where city workers are seen systematically cleaning the streets using a horse-driven water truck. The hybrid use of technology is most evident in the scenes that display forms of lighting, where pre-modern and early modern techniques are either used interchangeably or in combination. The neighborhood of Francois is illuminated with several gas lamp poles. For lighting, candles are used extensively, scores of tall brass candelabras and baroque candlestick sconces are present in various rooms of the palace; Francois is also well-lit with chandeliers. In the Paris episodes, the waltz at the embassy takes place in the bright ballroom, which seems to be mainly illuminated with candles in even larger chandeliers. Then again, the casino Maxim's sign is clearly powered with electricity. Another novelty is commercially distributed photographs; Danilo is delighted to check out several cards in the scene that introduces him as a goofy and philandering. His adjutant tells him that the photographs—presumably erotic—were provided to him by his barber in Paris.

Body. Baron Sixtus Sadoja is first introduced walking erratically, using his forearm crutches, down the stairs of the cathedral. He is most likely in the advanced stages of syphilis; the baron happens to be a lustful sexual deviant. The grotesque figure's bodily and mental deformations go hand in hand. There are several parallels to this theme in von Stroheim's films, where such bizarrerie is a recurrent motif.

Examples are the perceptive village fool in *Blind Husbands*, McTeague's parents in *Greed*, as well as several odd-looking characters in the wedding-banquet scene, and Mother Garoupe in *Foolish Wives*.

Social Etiquette. Publicly, King Nikita and Queen Milena carefully and proudly perform their dignified social roles (while privately, they care mainly about preserving their gold supplies). Mirko is just as rigid about his class identity and often uses his superior position to lash at others. Using the fictional example of Monteblanco, von Stroheim is poking fun at the arbitrariness of hierarchy in a stratified and traditional society. A part of the tension in *The Merry Widow* (unlike the operetta) derives from the encounter of the Old World characters with the American woman. Sally initially doesn't know Danilo's title and when Mirko mentions it, she thinks it is a joke and responds—"then I am Pawlova" (referring to Russian ballerina Anna Pavlovna). Danilo is unlike his family in that he has an egalitarian streak; he likes to be called "plain Danilo" by his men, even before he meets Sally. At the end, she has made him change permanently—now crowned as the King, he reiterates his preference for being called only by his first name.

POLITICS

Military. As in other von Stroheim films there are lots of epaulettes and fancy uniforms with shiny brass buttons. Mirko sports lots of medals on his chest; it is quite obvious that his decorations do not correspond to professional achievements. He is essentially a tyrant feared by his subordinates. Officers appear in several scenes, such as the party at Francois and the ballroom waltz; they are portrayed as pretentious snobs who lead an idle existence. The Petrovich cousins and others obviously belong to the army of a (fictitious) Balkan country, but the military class is represented with sarcasm.

RELATIONSHIPS

Marriage. Danilo's decision to wed Sally is a moment of crisis for the royals; they scramble to convince him to give up the idea. The argument King Nikita makes is—"what's marriage got to do with love?"—which implies that Danilo could very well continue his philandering ways if he could simply regard the institution of marriage separately, from a different angle. Danilo is unmoved by the proposition. Then Queen Milena surprises all of them by merely changing the order of words in the King's question, but by by doing so, upping the ante—"yes, what has love got to do with marriage?" Even the King was not prepared for this much; gist of the Queen's argument (that easily convinces Danilo) is that the individual has a selfless duty to the state and personal happiness is irrelevant; hence, marriage and love are distinct.

Family and Conformism. The royal family is presented as a relic of the Old World, similar to the representation of the Princedom of Monaco in *Foolish Wives*. Von Stroheim pokes fun at the corruption of the dynasty and their pathetic greed for money. Behind the façade of respectability, the main motivation of the King and Queen is to maintain access to the wealth of Baron Sadoja; when he dies, they keep their focus and do everything they can to keep the widow's gold in the country. Queen Milena is highly adept at manipulating the princes, it doesn't take too long before she persuades Danilo to call of the wedding by appealing to his so-called obligations to the state. When Danilo lunges at Mirko, she protectively embraces the obnoxious crown prince. Danilo's alcoholism and suicidal behavior (he was supposed to die in the duel, in the original version conceived by von Stroheim) have to do with the elders of the family. He seems to be aware of this—in a moment of depression, he gazes at the stately portrait painting of King Nikita with resentment, perhaps even hatred. The patriarch's and crown prince's deaths present an opportunity for Danilo to break free from the repressive control of the dynasty.

Desire. The Manhattan Folies' first performance in Monteblanco is eagerly anticipated. Princes Danilo and Mirko are there—so is the wealthy financier of their Royal House, Baron Sadoja. Each one excitedly grabs an opera glass as soon as the main attraction of the show—the American danseuse Sally O'Hara appears on the stage. The scene shows them engrossed by the same object of desire with different focuses: Baron Sadoja singles out Sally's legs and feet, Mirko cares only for her torso, and finally Danilo is interested in her head—which implies that he is the only one who cares about her personhood.

Sexuality and Innuendo. The introduction of Danilo in the film shows him admiring the erotic photos that he borrows (not to return) from his adjutant. In the following scene, the evening at the village inn shows him competing for with Mirko Sally's attention by way of a hilarious footsie play under the dinner table. Later, at Francois, as Danilo and Sally dine, a young, blindfolded couple softly plays music for their enjoyment. Scenes such as these stand in for the explicit depictions of sexuality—e.g. the orgy at Francois—that von Stroheim was pressured not to include in the film. Even in its carefully edited form, the wild party at Francois anticipates the notorious Yoshiwara nightclub of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

PSYCHOLOGY

Abject. Apart from grotesque figures, there are several scenes with connotations of filth and disgust. Examples are the fly sheet that sticks to the back of Mirko's head in the farcical backstage sequence; the city employees cleaning the street of the debauched club Francois; various shots of pigs and dogs in mud. One can recall Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection (*The Powers of Horror*, 1980) here—in contrast to the object of desire, abject means revulsion generated when certain boundaries (outside/inside, animal/human, etc) are transgressed. The lack of respect for borders, according to Kristeva, threatens to breakdown meaning and can be subversive. Several scenes in *The Merry Widow*, such as the ones cited above, are not only amusing, but also somewhat confusing because these manifestations of filth occur at times when lust is a driving force of the characters' actions.

FLAW

Voyeurism. Sporting monocles that make him look even more intimidating and intrusive, Mirko is jealous of Danilo and incessantly monitors his cousin's private life. This parallels references to scophophilia in other von Stroheim films: in *Blind Husbands*, von Steuben keeps leering at Mrs. Armstrong, whose husband is clueless about the intense gazes; in *Greed*, money replaces sexuality as the motive, Maria Macapa is watchful about gold; In *Foolish Wives*, the maid Marushka peeps through the keyhole of the tower room's door; her master Sergius Karamzin had ogled Helen Hughes using a mirror at Mother Garoupe's den. In *The Merry Widow*, Danilo, Mirko, and Baron Sadoja are seen ogling Sarah's body with the help of theater binoculars. Similarly, an early and hilarious scene shows Danilo's manservant peeping through the keyhole to watch his master's affair with a village woman.

Discussion questions

In his 1982 seminar[6] (published in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*), philosopher Gilles Deleuze underscores the importance of the cinema of Luis Buñuel and Erich von Stroheim; he states that "to my mind there are only two figures in cinema who have managed to build from one end to the other this world of impulses and objects, and have let us see the originary worlds that lie under determined states of things … discover originary worlds under, under determined states of things." Consequently, "neither Stroheim nor Buñuel could be integrated into American cinema, even when they were in Hollywood, or when they went there." How would you elaborate Deleuze's argument by using examples from *The Merry Widow* or other von Stroheim films?

Compare *The Merry Widow*'s Francois scene with Buñuel's *L'Age d'or*.

Where does *The Merry Widow* stand among the films that offer representations of the Balkans and Balkan characters?

[1] *Exhibitor's Herald*. August 1925.

[2] Lennig, Arthur. *Stroheim*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky. 2000, 222.

[3] Curtiss, Thomas Quinn. *Von Stroheim.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 1971, 210.

[4] Koszarski, Richard. *The Man You Loved to Hate: Erich von Stroheim and Hollywood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1983, 173.

[5] Mostel, Raphael. "The Merry Widow's Fling with Hitler." *Tablet*. https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/the-merry-widows-fling-with-hitler. 2014. Accessed February 2023.

[6] Deleuze, Gilles. The Deleuze Seminars. https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars/cinema-movement-image/lecture-13. Uploaded 2022. Accessed February 2023.