HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Foolish Wives 1922

Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957)

OVERVIEW

"Tapestried perfection of the whole."
—Mae Tinee (M.D. Wilkins)
Chicago Daily Tribune, Oct. 8, 1922

Billed "the first million dollar picture ever made," *Foolish Wives* shared a premise with Erich von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands* (1919)—once again, an American couple's marriage is put to test in the Old World, but it was so much more ambitious than his modestly budgeted first film. "Until the coming of Orson Welles, *Blind Husbands* was the most impressive and significant debut film in Hollywood history" (Koszarski, 1983: 2); it was followed by *The Devil's Passkey* (lost film); these two films also happened to be extremely profitable; hence von Stroheim was given a blank check for *Foolish Wives*, based on his own screenplay and featured himself as one of the main actors.

Characteristics and Significance. Approaches and practices we are accustomed to (or take for granted) in contemporary cinema such as verisimilitude, reflexivity, and stream-of-consciousness narration, von Stroheim boldly explored and exploited. Elaborate sets for the French Riviera were constructed and scores of extras were employed. Von Stroheim's attention to detail and keenness for authenticity is seen in palace as well as the squalor sequences.

Von Stroheim nods to various artistic styles, such as expressionism (e.g. the tower room and counterfeiter's daughter's bedroom) and realism (the palace; the squalor). The countryside scene, with its marshy reed beds, heavy rain, and grotesque abode, anticipate Lang's *Die Nibelungen* and Murnau's *Sunrise*. Fast-paced cross-cutting is particularly effective at the denouement, which shows Helen mentally and physically preparing for her illicit rendezvous, her husband being kept busy at a roulette hall, and the impostor's jealous maid having a nervous breakdown about the upcoming meeting at the tower room. These trajectories meet and explode, as the maid commits suicide after setting the house on fire, and the husband finds out about the affair.

The title cards are nothing like those forcefully inserted into *Greed* by one of its editors (e.g. the laughable "let's sit on the sewer"); they are beautifully poetic. Here is an introduction to the setting: "Monte Carlo! Brine of the Mediterranean… Breeze from Alpine snows… roulette… Trente-et-Quarante… Ecarte…. Mondaine… Cocotta… kings and Crooks… Amoura! Amoura! And suicides… and waves… and waves… and waves…" The main tension in the film is eloquently hinted: "Women's vanity… flattery; subtle, insistent… Busy husbands… idle, foolish wives…" Later, the rustic rendezvous is introduced: "Dense marshes… slimy… sombrous… betraying… then… night."

A contemporary reviewer in *Photoplay* praised the film: "Portraits such as Griffith himself never dreamed of. Beautiful bits of acting. Monte Carlo, as real as itself. Photography and decoration of unsurpassed appeal. And an insight into continental morals and manners such as only, so far, we have been able to get from certain books and paintings" (Photoplay, 1922). However, the same writer concluded that "it is not good, wholesome entertainment" and is "an insult to every American." *Foolish Wives*' approach to moral issues and sexuality generated a backlash that forced the removal of some scenes. Even more damaging for the film and von Stroheim was the professional price he ultimately had to pay for his refusal to adhere to the producer's demands; *Foolish Wives* was edited down to a much shorter version than he intended—"skeleton of my dead child," he called it (Curtiss, 1971: 131).

There is a well-known anecdote about von Stroheim using real caviar (brunch at Villa Amorosa), instead of the marmalade that would typically be used in other productions; the anecdote is generally used as evidence of the director's extravagance, in assessments of the fierce battle between him and the producers. Von Stroheim lost most of these battles; he is regarded as one of the early instances of an artistic genius checked by the entertainment industry. *Foolish Wives* displays his masterful exploration of the grim realities of post-war society and morals, through thinly veiled eroticism, humor, and reflexivity.

CHARACTERS

*Count Sergius Karamzin***.** "Captain of the Third Hussars, Imperial Russian Army," claims to be a White Russian aristocrat in exile; he is a con artist based in Monte Carlo.
*Andrew J. Hughes***.** The U.S. Special envoy to Monaco is excited about his new assignment. He is "forty-one, sun burnt, and married."
*Helen, his Wife***.** The diplomat's adventurous wife is twenty-one years old and is very fond of the novel *Foolish Wives*, penned by "Erich von Stroheim."
*Princess Olga Petchnikoff and "her cousin, Her Highness" Vera***.** Sergius' "cousins" and associates (possibly mistresses) are con artists like himself. They have police records and sport blonde wigs on top of their dark black bob hair.
*Maruschka***.** Petchnikoffs' maid is hopelessly in love with Sergius.
*Ventucci and Marietta***.** Cesare Ventucci is a top-notch counterfeiter who supplies Petchnikoffs their fake money. He is very fond of his mentally challenged adult daughter Marietta.
*American Marine***.** Minor character has three encounters with Helen (played by Harrison Ford).

SYNOPSIS

Sergius Karamzin lives in a Monte Carlo villa with his supposed cousins Vera and Olga Petchnikoff. They pretend to be Russian aristocrats, but are in fact con artists. The counterfeiter Ventucci supplies them fake bills, which they exchange to real money at casinos. The trio decides to act upon the arrival of an American diplomat and his wife, in order to move up the social ladder. Sergius makes advances on Helen Hughes, while her husband Andrew remains politely skeptical. The five acquaintances continue to socialize. Due to bad weather and Sergius' trickery, a day in the countryside ends up with him and Helen secluded in a strange den in the marshes. Fortunate coincidences prevent Sergius from taking sexual advantage of the situation. The following day, Helen returns to her husband, who asks questions, but does not pressure her. Later that night, Mr. Hughes is kept busy by the Petchnikoffs, while Sergius invites Mrs. Hughes and begs for money.

The villa's maid—another woman abused and exploited by him—becomes furiously jealous and sets the place on fire. The life threatening situation ends with the arrival of the fire brigade (and after Sergius displays some cowardice). Helen is taken to hospital; her husband discovers proof of Sergius' advances and smacks him. The trio of con artists has no choice but to leave Monaco for good. Before they can finish packing up, the Petchnikoff women are arrested by the police. In the slums, Sergius sneaks into Ventucci's daughter's bedroom to rape her; he is killed by her father and thrown into a manhole. At the hospital, as Helen recuperates, her favorite book *Foolish Wives* is tossed aside by Andrew in a 'voila!' moment.

SCENES

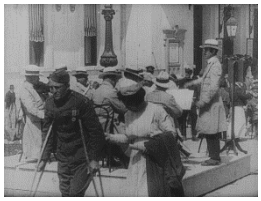


The Russian émigrés of Villa Amorosa. Princesses Olga and Vera Petchnikoff, and their cousin Sergius Karamzin live in a lavish coastal villa in Monaco—the wealthy White Russian aristocrats in exile are actually con artists (and possibly lovers). The trio of fake Russian émigrés are sufficiently connected and esteemed in Monte Carlo; they launder counterfeit money through gambling, besides swindling from unsuspecting socialites. Sergius is a relentless womanizer, who is often warned by his 'cousins' not to mix business with pleasure. Sergius and the two women indulge in luxurious treats, served by a grim butler and a maid named Marushka, who, for some reason, keeps throwing concerned glances at her employer Sergius.

Con Operation. At the core of the aristocratic imposters' operation is a skilled counterfeiter named Cesare Ventucci, who is very fond of his daughter Marietta, a grown woman with a child's intelligence. Ventucci regularly feeds the con artists fresh supplies of his latest work. During regular visits to Villa Amorosa, he is annoyed by Sergius' interest in Marietta, but remains subservient to his employers.



The French Riviera. Monte Carlo is bustling with activity and is drawing excited crowds. Then again, men with forearm clutches and others on wheelchairs are not uncommon—there are many disabled World War One veterans around. Sergius claims to be a former cavalry officer, sports shiny brass buttons and fancy epaulettes; he commands the parade squad. An important guest is expected—the United States Special Envoy to Monaco. Sergius' associates point out that the visit might offer interesting potential for their operation—much needed social elevation—and that they should make contact with the Americans.



The Americans. Ambassador Andrew J. Hughes is a serious diplomat and is excited about his new assignment in the Old World. He is expected to greet the parade squad and present his credentials to the Prince of Monaco at the Palace. Despite revealing a few cultural differences, the reception goes very well. Hughes' wife also looks happy; she is mostly absorbed in her reading—a novel titled *Foolish Wives* by the author "Erich von Stroheim." Not before long, Sergius uses a ploy to catch her attention and impress her. The first contact is followed by him and his associates formally introducing themselves to the couple at the promenade.





Barcarolle. The five acquaintances continue to socialize; Andrew Hughes is very polite, but also curiously observant. Sergius shows off his marksmanship skills at a sporting event—unlike his wife, Andrew doesn't look amused at the sight of him killing doves. At night, Helen receives flowers from Sergius—whom she believes is a dashing cavalry officer. They all go out for an evening excursion to listen to barcarolle. By the Russians' clever last minute trick, Helen and Sergius end up in the same boat by themselves, so that he can woo her unbothered by Andrew's inquisitive gaze. Later in the evening, back at their hotel, Helen doesn't show much interest in her husband's attempts to communicate and carries on reading her novel.



Seclusion. The following morning the cousins meet Helen at Hotel des Reves, supposedly to introduce a nice country spot. Helen finds herself taking a walk with Sergius, while Olga remains at the inn. A while later, downpour of rain makes it difficult to return—Sergius has made his best to prolong the walk and they are far off from their starting point. At the reed marsh, she has an accident and falls unconscious. They seek refuge at a place deep in the marsh, which turns out to be very familiar to the con man—the lodging of Mother Garoupe, a grotesque and shady resident of the marshes. Helen is laid to rest; a note is sent to the inn to Olga by way of Sergius' dog. Upon receiving it, Olga informs Andrew that her wife is well and will be back as soon as the weather improves. He merely casts a knowing glance and smirks.



Ogling. Sergius moves forward to take advantage of the situation (as he has most likely done so many times at Mother Garoupe's den). However, an unexpected visitor arrives, a monk requests shelter, and before laying down, throws a suspicious look at Sergius—which suffices to destroy the latter's hope



of intercourse. In the morning, Helen is dropped to her hotel and she sneaks into her bedroom, while Andrew seems to be sleeping.



Foolishness and Revelation. At night, Andrew is invited to a private roulette hall, where the Petchnikoff cousins intend to keep him busy, so that Sergius can work on Helen. Accordingly, he invites her to the tower room of the mansion. Helen ponders for a while, and then decides to accept the invitation. At the door, she encounters a certain war veteran, an American marine, for the third time—in previous instances, she had been annoyed by this man's ungentlemanly refusal to pick up various stuff she dropped. Now, she realizes the reason—the veteran has lost both of his arms in the war. Helen is distraught; she embraces the soldier and apologizes.



Tower Room. Sergius puts up an act to arouse Helen's pity and convinces her to pay him a good deal of cash. Meanwhile, the maid Maruschka has gone berserk after the arrival of Sergius' female companion (not much time had passed since Maruschka herself had handed her life savings to him, in anticipation of marriage). She finally snaps and torches the tower room, trapping Sergius and Helen inside, before committing suicide. The fire brigade rushes to the scene and opens a life net—Sergius is first to jump down, Helen follows him, but is injured.



Packing Up. At the hospital, Andrew finds Sergius' note to Helen; right away, he catches up with him at Villa Amorosa to deliver a punch, before commanding the Russians to get lost immediately. The cousins decide to part ways with Sergius; as they pack up, Olga and Vera are apprehended by the police. Detectives remove their blonde wigs and identify the women from the police files.



Manhole. At dawn, Sergius heads out to the slum, to Ventucci's home, casting a disinterested glance at a manhole in the middle of the street. It doesn't take long for him to sneak into Marietta's room. Next—scene—is Ventucci dragging his corpse. It is merely implied that Marietta was raped in the interim. Ventucci throws the body down the hole and casually walks back to his house. At the hospital, as Helen recuperates, her favorite book *Foolish Wives* is tossed aside by Andrew in a 'voila!' moment.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Count Sergius Karamzin – **Disagreeable** (Reptilian and Licentious, Bogus, Cheeky Coward, Cunning and Cruel)
Helen Hughes – **Open** (Adventurous); **Unconscientious** (Vain)

Andrew Hughes – **Closed** (Prosaic, Clumsy); **Rational** (Worldly)

Count Sergius Karamzin. **Disagreeable** (Reptilian and Licentious, Bogus, Cheeky Coward, Cunning and Cruel)

Reptilian and Licentious. While Andrew Hughes is rational and reserved, Sergius Karamzin is virile and licentious. He has a habit of licking his lips like a lizard when he is aroused. This is a continuation of the despicable Hun persona that von Stroheim portrayed in his war era films as a supporting actor. With the end of the war, and with *Blind Husbands*, the persona shifts from being murderous to licentious. In their first encounter, Sergius' gaze is focused on Helen's legs, and later, when they are secluded at Mother Garoupe's shack, he uses a hand mirror to ogle the exhausted Helen. He gets progressively nasty and ultimately loathsome, at which point he meets his death at the hands of Ventucci, after climbing through his daughter Marietta's window to rape her.

Bogus. Notwithstanding the true answer to the question whether he has a real military or aristocratic background, Sergius is a spurious player. He uses his fancy uniform to impress, manipulate, and swindle from Monaco's socialites. He is a zealous trickster.

Cheeky Coward. Sergius may or may not have a real military background; he acts cowardly during the fire at the tower room, an unexpected action from a man who claims to be a dashing cavalry officer. When the fire brigade opens the life net, he is the first one to go; Helen Hughes follows him, but is considerably injured. A group of active duty officers approach Sergius to make sense of his behavior—they are obviously very surprised, but their camaraderie forces them to have an open mind about the situation. Sergius calmly explains that his action was deliberate; his intention was to demonstrate what to do to Helen Hughes and encourage her to jump down the tower. The officers listen, and although they do not look totally persuaded, they seem to show some empathy. If it was not for Andrew Hughes' rebuke, Sergius probably would have got away from this scandal with his reputation unscathed. The incident suggests how elites have a tendency to neglect each others' misdoings.

*Cunning and Cruel***.** In the scene at the club, Sergius demonstrates his excellent marksmanship by shooting pigeons released one by one. Andrew Hughes is mildly disgusted by the senseless killing, while Helen seems to be impressed and quietly thrilled. The cruel shooting anticipates Jean Renoir's (an admirer of von Stroheim) *The Rules of the Game* (1939) and its hunting scene; also, later works, such as *The Hunters* (1977) by Theodoros Angelopoulos. In *Greed*, Marcus Schouler's vicious entrapment of McTeague was hinted by a cat sinisterly approaching two birds; in *Foolish Wives*, the club scene foreshadows Sergius' cruelty.

Helen Hughes. Open (Adventurous), **Unconscientious** (Vain)

*Adventurous***.** The book Helen Hughes is reading has the same creator's name and title as the film, but apparently the novel (presumably it is a work of fiction) may not have the same content. Whatever she is reading, it inspires her to be more adventurous, using the visit to the Old World as an opportunity. She is pleased with Sergius' attention and easily fooled by his trick of using a bellboy to have his aristocratic title loudly announced. Noticing him ogling her legs, she even provides him an even better view. At the finale, Andrew's voila moment mocks the consequences of her adventurousness. A glimpse of a certain page is intended as a moral lesson for her: "and thus it happened that disillusionment came finally to a foolish wife, who found in her own husband the nobility she had sought for in a counterfeit."

Vain. Helen's egocentric and insensitive character may indeed be foolishness, not necessarily because of her relations with her husband, but due to her misapprehension of events and persons. A major example to her failure to accurately interpret things around her is her interaction with a minor character—the American marine who stays at the same hotel as the Hugheses. On two occasions, she drops things to the floor and seeing that this gentleman is close by, expects him to pick them up for her. He does not—which, in the first instance, presents an opportunity to Sergius to demonstrate his manners. She is visibly irked by the marine's (he is in uniform) seeming indifference. Then, in the third instance, she notices that the soldier is a veteran, who has lost both of his arms in the war. She is devastated and apologetic; the revelation leads her to embrace the man.

Ambassador Hughes. Closed (Prosaic, Clumsy); **Rational** (Worldly)

*Prosaic***.** Andrew is not as indifferent as Doctor Armstrong in *Blind Husbands*, but he is serious and a little reserved. He just expects Helen to fulfill her role as a wife, without being proactive about their relationship.

*Clumsy***.** When Andrew's visit to the Prince of Monaco to present his credentials creates an awkward moment, with him realizing that protocol requires him to take off his white gloves. He has a little bit of trouble doing that, which annoys the master of ceremony. Eventually, the reception goes very well. Andrew is a thinker and is characteristically matter-of-fact, he may sometimes be somewhat clumsy.

*Worldly***.** Andrew is rather smug; as Helen and Sergius interact, he typically reacts by smirking—particularly when he is informed that Helen won't be returning for the evening after the day in the countryside (when she was actually at Mother Garoupe's with Sergius. Contrary to Helen, he is quite worldly and the ending shows his voila moment, when his wife recuperates at the hospital. Her beloved novel echoes his victory—"and thus it happened that disillusionment came finally to a foolish wife, who found in her own husband the nobility she had sought for in a counterfeit."

THEMES

SOCIETY – (Opulence and Class, Social Etiquette, Modernity)
JUSTICE – (Crime and Capitalism)
POLITICS – (Military and War)
RELATIONSHIPS – (Marriage, Desire)
QUEST – (Reflexivity, Voyeurism)
FLAW – (Voyeurism)
APPEARANCE – (Authenticity and Deception)

SOCIETY

Opulence and Class. Several wealthy Californians were among the extras seen at the French Riviera set. A well-known anecdote about von Stroheim is about his insistence for serving real caviar during the scenes that required it, for the sake of verisimilitude. *Foolish Wives* was filmed in 1921 and released in 1922—at the dawn of the decade known as the Roaring Twenties, associated with Jazz music, bob cut hair, and flapper style; preeminence of design, consumerism, and new leisure activities—also, a diverse economy with vast class difference. In his discussion of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, Fredric Jameson maintained that,

> "the twenties were the last moment in which a genuine American leisure class led an aggressive and ostentatious public existence, in which an American ruling class projected a class-consciousness and unapologetic image of itself and enjoyed its privileges without guilt, openly and armed with its emblems of top-hat and champagne glass, on the social stage in full view of the other classes" (Jameson, 1990: 98).

Monte Carlo's wealthy, in *Foolish Wives,* indeed resembles the *The Shining*'s spooky hotel's past clientele—which, Jameson argued, were haunting the Overlook Hotel, as well as capitalism itself. The Hugheses are exposed to the lavish lifestyle and unabashed enjoyment of wealth of the Old World's elites. While the Petchnikoff women are phonies, Sergius may or may not have an aristocratic background; in any case, their opulent lifestyle at Villa Amorosa places them within the upper class of the French Riviera. Their idle existence recalls figures from Russian literature, such as Prince Myshkin of The Idiot. Bogus or not, they are tokens of the corrupt upper class of the Old World, where class difference is so wide and is visually underscored—as Sergius' visits to the slum reveal. Here, poverty looms large and reminders of World War One, limbless veterans, are frequent.

Social Etiquette. Helen Hughes is often seen absorbed in her book "Foolish Wives" by the author "Erich von Stroheim." At one point, the director von Stroheim displays a passage from the book (at about the time her husband is presenting his credentials to the Prince of Monaco). It reads:

> "To the average American, written or unwritten codes or honor and etiquette and are unessential, as, in his tiresome chase after the dollar, he has no time to cultivate that, for which the European mainly lives. In his battle of wits, fought for commercial superiority, the fatigued body forgets sometimes to react even to the most primitive and fundamental laws of politeness."

Ambassador Hughes has an awkward moment at the beginning of the reception, a trivial matter related to his gloves, which, apparently is a big deal for the master of ceremony. In any case, the reception goes very well and the Prince is cordial to the American envoy. The matter is merely a somewhat amusing challenge of intercultural communication. On the other hand, the cultural comparison is persistently made in other situations. Basically, Sergius, with his excellent manners and mastery of social etiquette, is contrasted with the matter-of-fact Andrew Hughes.

Modernity. Hugheses make the transatlantic journey on board a warship. This all-steel, turbine powered naval vessel, the U.S. cruiser "Salem," is the first of several modern advances seen in *Foolish Wives*. Other forms of modern transport are trucks (an army unit is seen arriving in one); which prove extremely useful in the denouement, when firefighters rush to the emergency with several fast trucks. The fire brigade itself is modern; highly efficient and professional. Telephones also play prominent roles. They offer convenience, but also not totally reliable information. Andrew Hughes makes calls (simple room order) and receives them (deceptive news from Olga Petchnikoff about his wife, who was stranded in the marshy territory).

Other than various innovations and novelties, the filmmaking style of von Stroheim is refreshingly modern, so much so that it is well ahead of its time. He may be considered the cinema's "first modernist" (Anderson, 2011) with his interest in notions such as reflexivity and self-referentiality (e.g. the leading woman reading the book "Foolish Wives" by the author "Erich von Stroheim"), which would be the further explored by the French New Wave directors decades later.

JUSTICE

Crime and Capitalism. The Russian cousins' con artistry is fueled by counterfeit money; their operation rests on laundering the fake money through gambling. Counterfeiting was also instrumental for the master villain in Fritz Lang's Dr. Mabuse films. In *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922) counterfeiting was a means to sabotage the economy by increasing inflation and in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), the master-villain's ultimate objective was to infiltrate the bank's vault to replace the real currency with the fake bills. In *Foolish Wives*, the crime itself is a means to rise in the social ladder, make influential friends (such as Ambassador Hughes) and become untouchable. Unlike the criminal operations in the Mabuse films, the endgame here is not simply to achieve power, but to do so legitimately, by taking advantage of already established networks of nepotism.,

POLITICS

Military and War. As in von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands*, the military makes appearances in *Foolish Wives*. In his debut film, the Austrian mountain troops had played a secondary role in the ending. Here, sailors on board the American warship Salem salute Andrew Hughes, and subsequently, a parade unit in Monaco participates in the welcome ceremony. Other than that, military symbols are used heavily, such as the regalia and uniforms of the Prince of Monaco and his entourage; also, Sergius himself, with his fancy epaulettes and uniform with shiny brass buttons. His claim that he participated in the First World War as a cavalry captain of the Imperial Russian Army cannot be confirmed or refuted---but he makes full use of the uniform and the title. Then again, there are quick shots of several war veterans, using forearms crutches or wheelchairs. These are the real participants of the war and parts of its legacy. One of these figures, an armless American marine, first confuses and frustrates Helen Hughes, who is later devastated, when she comes to understand his situation. She apologizes for her 'foolish' attitude.

RELATIONSHIPS

Marriage. As in *Blind Husbands*, the American couple's marriage is tested in the Old World, represented by Sergius, virile and licentious; also, corrupt and immoral. On the other hand, Andrew Hughes is focused on his job and public appearance; he is rational and worldly. He may not be as prosaic as *Blind Husbands*' Doctor Armstrong, but his wife Helen welcomes the excitement offered by 'Count Karamzin.' In fact, Sergius and Helen debate about this cultural difference, which begins with his question "your husband seems a bit piqued tonight." Helen complains that her husband is not open-minded and polite enough ("Andrew means well"), while Sergius points out that a major problem in marriages is the husband taking his wife for granted. A title card, as poetic as most of the others, underscores the tension—"woman's vanity… subtle… insistent… busy husbands… idle foolish wives…"

Desire. Foolish Wives balances dark comedy with eroticism, particularly revealing are some of the intertitles, such as the one that introduces the evening Sergius and Helen spends at the secluded den of Mother Garoupe, deep in the marshes: "Dense marshes… slimy… sombrous… betraying… then… night."

The long walk under heavy rain and a small accident has totally exhausted Helen; yet, for Sergius, Mother Garoupe's shack promises to be the site of his illicit rendezvous. Sergius has a lizard-like way of licking his lips with his tongue when he is aroused, and in this instance, he takes his time to ogle the semi-conscious and half-dressed woman. His ploy is ruined by the arrival of a vigilant monk and his huge St. Bernard dog (paralleling the watchful mountain guide Sepp in *Blind Husbands*, who made sure his friend's wife was unbothered by Eric von Steuben).

QUEST

Reflexivity. Several decades before the term postmodernism was coined—right at the dawn of the twentieth century modernity—von Stroheim inserts fascinatingly reflexive elements into the text. Helen Hughes is typically absorbed by her book "Foolish Wives", authored by—not Sergius Karamzin—but "Erich von Stroheim."

Voyeurism. Voyeurism as a theme (see *Flaw* below) also implies cinematic exploration by von Stroheim. Not only is voyeurism a popular subject of cinema, filmmaking and spectatorship are intrinsically voyeuristic. Many films have explored the affinity of the camera and the gaze, such as Josef von Sternberg's *The Scarlet Empress* (1935) and Fritz Lang's *The Thousand Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960); and most famously, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) and *Psycho* (1960), as well as *Peeping Tom* (1960) by Michael Powell.

FLAW

Voyeurism. Before Sergius ogles Helen Hughes at Mother Garoupe's, he does so at their very first encounter at her hotel, with the camera singling out her legs to show his point of view. Interestingly, the gazes are reciprocal. Sergius himself is presented as an object of desire, with focus on his shiny black leather boots, which Helen also seems to check out. The viewer is granted access to both perspectives and shares the gaze. The peak of voyeurism comes near the ending, when the jealous maid Maruschka peeps through the keyhole of the tower room and snaps; she commits suicide after setting the villa on fire.

APPEARANCE

Authenticity and Deception. It has been noted in the "Overview" section that verisimilitude was a key concern of the film's set design, Villa Amorosa itself was costly to build and recreating the shore line of the French Riviera was even more so. Several actual California millionaires participated to the filming as extras. Von Stroheim wanted real caviar to be served at relevant scenes, so that the actors could immerse themselves in the characters. Sergius may actually be a White Russian aristocrat and may have participated in the war, but his successful personification of a former cavalry captain is irrelevant. He is a phony figure, whose mannerism and fake identity aims to deceive and manipulate others. When Andrew confronts and punches Sergius, the latter says that as an officer, he demands an apology. He doesn't deserve one, Helen's husband rebukes, as he is "not even a man." At the end, in a voila! moment, Andrew tosses Helen's book "Foolish Wives" aside; the final page of it is captured by the camera. It reads: "and thus it happened that disillusionment came finally to a foolish wife, who found in her own husband the nobility she had sought for in a counterfeit." Helen herself realizes her real foolishness way before the end, when she finally understands the American marine is a—real—veteran who has lost both of his arms in the war.

Discussion questions

How would you compare the representation of the countryside—the rustic getaway—in *Foolish Wives* with F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927)?

What are examples of scenes that signify expressionist, baroque, and realist aspirations?

One contemporary reviewer of *Foolish Wives* thought that von Stroheim "out-Griffiths" (*New York Times*, 1922) Griffith. What may be *Foolish Wives*' D.W. Griffith inspirations, if any?

Compare von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands* and *Foolish Wives* with Cecil B. DeMille's *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919).

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