HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

The Wedding March 1928

Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957)

OVERVIEW

> Far in advance of what anyone in the 1920s in America, or perhaps even in the world, was doing.
> —Arthur Lennig, *Stroheim*.

Upon immigrating to the USA at the age of 24, Erich von Stroheim reconstructed his identity as a noble Austrian. With *The Wedding March*, he revisited his birth city (he was removed from the production of the 1923 *Merry-Go-Round,* also set in Vienna) for a tale of love between an aristocrat and a commoner.

"In its entirety an Erich von Stroheim Creation," as introduced by a title card, *The Wedding March* was written by von Stroheim, who was also the leading man, opposite Fay Wray (*King Kong, The Most Dangerous Game, Viva Villa!)* in her first lead role. Art Director Richard Day designed the sets that ambitiously recreated a nostalgic and decadent Vienna.

The story takes place on the eve of the First World War, in the spring of 1914. Emperor Franz Joseph of the Habsburg monarchy is portrayed by an actor in a ceremony early on in the film. Among the other notable representations of the Emperor are *The King Steps Out* (von Sternberg, 1936), *Sissi* (Marischka, 1935), *Sarajevo* (Ophüls, 1940). The assassination of his nephew Franz Ferdinand (in July) would be the spark that ignited the WW1 (Franz Josef I's wife Empress Elizabeth "Sisi" was also assassinated in 1898).

With several shots of daily life in the city showing early modern forms of commute and advertising, von Stroheim re-imagines the city. *The Wedding March* is notable among the many cinematic representations of Vienna, such as *The Marriage Circle* (Lubitsch, 1924—also, *The Smiling Lieutenant*, 1931), *The Mistress* (Wiene, 1927), *Dishonored* (von Sternberg, 1931—also, *The King Steps Out*, 1936), *Waltzes from Vienna* (Hitchcock, 1934), *Sissi* (Marischka, 1935), *Letters from an Unknown Woman* (Ophüls, 1948—also, his 1940 film *Sarajevo*), *The Emperor Waltz* (Wilder, 1948), *The Third Man* (Reed, 1949), *The Night Porter* (Cavini, 1974), *Bad Timing* (Roeg, 1980), *Before Sunrise* (Linklater, 1995), *Klimt* (Ruiz, 2006).

As in previous von Stroheim films, the footage of *The Wedding March* was edited multiple times (five major edits[1]), with the director eventually losing control of the final work. The director Josef von Sternberg was involved in the editing (this was after the completion of *The Last Command* and before his masterpiece *The Docks of New York*), reportedly, with the approval of von Stroheim. In his memoirs, von Sternberg claims that he intended to undertake the editing to save the footage from ordinary 'cutters.'[2] Von Stroheim was an inspiration to von Sternberg, most obviously in his debut film *The Salvation Hunters*; whatever was his motivation, his work as an editor failed to save much of the footage that von Stroheim wished to use, and consequently, did not alleviate the director's problems with the producers.

Eventually, it was decided to release some of the footage edited into a second stand-alone film with substantial scenes from *The Wedding March* to serve as a reminder. This second film, *The Honeymoon*, depicted what took place later in the story, with a showdown in the Tyrolian Alps; the two men ending up participating in the war and the leading woman joining a monastery.

The Wedding March was not a commercial success; *Photoplay* magazine called it "throbbing story"[3] that "wasted"[4] its large budget. In the 1950's, von Stroheim provided input for an editing in France that would be close to his original intentions; the second part, *The Honeymoon*, was completely destroyed in a nitrate (the extremely flammable material of early film stock) fire.

The Wedding March, even though it was cut down, is a complete film, one of the last that von Stroheim would be able to direct. It may be his most mature, complex, and personal work.

CHARACTERS

Nicki. Prince Nickolaus "Nicki" is the son of the von Wildeliebe-Rauffenberg couple.

Mitzi. Young Mitzel "Mitzi" Schrammel plays the harp alongside her violinist father at the beer garden; she meets Nicki at the royal ceremony.

Cecilia. Daughter and heiress of the wealthy "corn-plaster magnate" Fortunat Schweisser walks with a limp. Portrayed by ZaSu Pitts from *Greed*.

Schani. The obnoxious butcher is Mitzi's boyfriend.

Other Characters:

Prince and Princess Wildeliebe-Rauffenberg. Ottokar and Maria von Wildeliebe-Rauffenberg are Nicki's parents; the aristocrats are broke and need funds urgently.

Katerina Schrammel. Mitzi's domineering mother will do anything to get her married to the butcher. Played by von Stroheim regular Dale Fuller.

Martin Schrammel. Mitzi's father plays violin at the beer garden; he is supportive of his daughter. Cesare Gravina, another regular of von Stroheim's films, who was in *Foolish Wives*, *Merry-Go-Round*, and (the mutilated footage of) *Greed*.

Fortunat Schweisser. Cecelia's father has made a fortune by manufacturing band-aids; he wants to elevate his social position with an aristocratic title. .

Eberle. The inn-keeper/proprietor of the wine garden would like to wed his son Schani with Mitzi. Played by another von Stroheim regular, Hughie Mack.

SYNOPSIS

The aristocratic family of von Wildeliebe-Rauffenburg badly needs money to continue their lavish lifestyle. When the lazy playboy Nicki is commanded by his parents to 'marry money,' he obediently begins waiting for them to pick him a suitable bride. However, during the Corpus Christi ceremonies, he is enamored of a young woman among the spectators. The daughter of the petit bourgeois Schrammels, Mitzi is expected to marry Schani the butcher, who evidently only repulses her. Nicki and Mitzi flirt under apple blossoms at the wine garden, where she and her father work as musicians. Schani gets increasingly nasty; his violent temper parallels Mitzi's fears about the mythical Iron Man who, according to lore, terrorizes the maidens of the Danube.

Meanwhile, Nicki's parents have chosen a bride—Cecelia is the daughter of the industrial magnate Fortunat Schweisser, who would like to barter a tiny portion of his wealth for an aristocratic title. Her thoughts about her limping legs make Cecelia sad and unsure about what to think of the marriage arrangement. In any case, the news of upcoming high-profile wedding makes it to the headlines. Mitzi finally learns about it; to Schani's great dissatisfaction, even though she is devastated, the news doesn't lessen her disgust for him. Following a sexual assault that is stopped by his father, Schani vows to murder Prince Nicki to punish Mitzi. The denouement features the wedding march, with the thoughtful bride and the somber groom, followed by their ecstatic parents. Schani is present at the cathedral to carry out the assassination. Suddenly, Mitzi appears and prevents the attack by promising to marry him. Schani is jubilant, Mitzi is in tears, Nicki silently weeps, and Cecelia perceptively notes the intense emotions.

SCENES



Vienna, 1914. Modern Vienna is bustling with activity; trams, a few automobiles, and horse carriages converge on the large boulevards filled with crowds. It is Corpus Christi Day and Emperor Franz Joseph I is due to attend the annual ceremony at the St. Stephen's Cathedral, the time honored pride of the city that contrasts with the feudal and menacing Iron Man statue. Not far from the grand Habsburgian Palace is the residence of the von Wildeliebe-Rauffenberg couple, "aloof, feudal, imposing, but crumbling."





Aristocrats. Prince Ottokar and Princess Maria Wildeliebe-Rauffenberg are broke aristocrats; they need funds to keep up their lavish lifestyle and the retinue of servants. They wake up with straps on their faces to hold their double chins and immediately begin insulting each other. Their son, Prince Nicki, just like his father, holds important honorary ranks. First thing in the morning, the playboy's request for money is brushed aside and he is advised to "marry" it. Only when he consents to go along the marriage arrangement that his mother deems appropriate does she hand Nicki some cash. Servants assist the family members dress up in their fancy uniforms to attend the ceremony (also, the princess' moustache is shaved off), in which Nicki will be in charge of the parade squad.



Commoners. The Schrammels, a petit bourgeois family, have taken their place among the excited crowd that has assembled for the spectacular procession. Mitzi is a harp player at the wine garden, where her father Martin works as a violinist. Her mother Katerina has made up her mind to wed Mitzi to Schani the butcher. Schani and his father Eberle, the proprietor of the wine garden, are together with the Scrammels. The lively group is in a picnic spirit; as they wait for the Emperor's arrival, they begin to gorge their food, with Schani constantly spitting disgustingly.



Ceremony. Nicki's small unit of horsemen takes position right in front of Mitzi and her companions. Schani, always on the lookout for getting the best of everything, leads others to the front, so that they stand at the front of the spectators, right next to Nicki and his horse. Mitzi and Nicki are instantly enamored by each other. As Schani and the others devour their snacks, Mitzi silently flirts with the mounted officer in his full dress uniform.



Procession. The procession begins and ceremonial cannon fire causes Nicki's horse to rear in panic; in the brief mayhem, Mitzi's leg is injured and she falls unconscious. As she is rushed to the hospital, Schani scolds Nicki for the accident, which gets him arrested by the constables. The solemn ceremony finally takes place—without Mitzi and Schani watching—and the Emperor salutes the cheerful spectators. (*This brief sequence was chosen by von Stroheim to be filmed with two-color Technicolor film*.)



Apple Blossoms. Nicki visits Mitzi at the hospital, and a few days later, at the wine garden, where she plays the harp alongside her violinist father Martin Schrammel. They walk under the apple blossoms—she with the crotches she needs to use until her leg fully heals. The garden is whimsical and she takes him to a broken horse carriage, which she likes to think of her buggy to paradise.



The Butcher. While Mitzi's father is totally supportive of his daughter's decisions, her domineering mother Katerina is not at all pleased to see Nicki, "the woman-hound," around her. She slaps Mitzi several times, but her daughter remains defiant. Katerina subsequently tips her preferred son-in-law—who is now released from the jail for his misdemeanor during the ceremony—about the threat

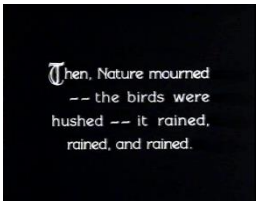
to their wedding plans.



The Iron Man. Mitzi is repulsed by Schani's obnoxiousness and his forced kiss causes her to spit—almost a vomit. Later, when she meets Nicki, she opens up to him about her fears about the mythical Iron Man, who, according to lore, causes terror by abducting maidens bathing in the Danube. Nicki dismisses her fears as superstition.



Arrangement. Nicki visits the bordello just to pass the time before he can join mitzi at the wine garden, when her parents would be sound asleep. Among the regulars of the high end brothel are Nicki's father Prince Ottokar von Wildeliebe-Rauffenberg and the wealthy manufacturer Fortunat Schweisser—Ottokar and his wife had already set their eyes on Schweisser's limping daughter for a marriage of convenience. When the two men are intoxicated enough, they discuss the marriage arrangement and agree on a deal.



Reactions. Fortunat Schweisser informs his daughter Cecelia about the deal he made with the aristocrat. She is saddened by the thought of her disability disqualifying her as a desirable bride, if it was not compensated by her father's millions. Nicki too is told what to expect; always skeptical about the bond between his parents, he makes a few sarcastic remarks, but complies, obviously in light of his much stressed financial needs.



Threat. The high-profile marriage makes it to newspaper headlines—to the great satisfaction of Schani. He cruelly informs Mitzi about the wedding; her devastation infuriates him, but does not produce the outcome that he had hoped for—he still disgusts her. His sexual assault is prevented by his father. To punish Mitzi, Schani vows to murder Nicki during the wedding.



Reflection. Plagued by mixed emotions and thoughts about her disability, Cecelia melancholically prepares for her wedding. Meanwhile, Mitzi is also confused and depressed for different reasons; during a confessional, she reflects on the events by confiding in the priest. She looks relatively peaceful as she leaves the confession box.





The Wedding March. The majestic wedding ceremony finally takes place; Nicki's choice of apple blossoms for the bride's bouquet has charmed Cecelia. He remains silent and somber, while she occasionally casts questioning glances at him. As they lead their overjoyed parents out of the cathedral, Schani is seen among the spectators, preparing for an ambush. Before he can make his move, Mitzi appears and stops him from carrying out the assassination, by pledging to marry him. As he wildly celebrates his triumph, Mitzi's sobbing is noticed by the bride and groom. Cecelia knowingly asks Nicki about his love for apple blossoms. While Schani is jubilant, Mitzi is in tears and Nicki silently weeps— Cecelia perceptively notes the intense emotions.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Nicki – Rational (Pragmatic Rake)
Mitzi – Emotional (Fatalist Dreamer, Innocent, Selfless)
Schani – Disagreeable (Odious)
Cecelia – Conscientious (Innocent and Shrinking, Perceptive)
Schweisser – Rational (Complex)

Nicki. Rational (Pragmatic Rake)

Pragmatic Rake. First thing the lazy playboy does on Corpus Christi Day is to beg his parents for pocket money. After being refused and insulted, he is advised to "marry money." He obediently complies and waits for his parents to pick a suitable bride for him. When they decide on Cecelia Schweisser and command him to wed the industrialist's daughter, Nicki makes a couple of sarcastic remarks, but he is more or less acquiescent. All this is after he falls in love with Mitzi and their romance under the apple blossoms, when he was surprised by Mitzi's superstitious beliefs in "people's fancies"—Nicki, after all, is a rationalist.

Mitzi. Emotional (Fatalist Dreamer, Innocent, Selfless)

Fatalist Dreamer. Nicki is surprised at Mitzi's belief in the Iron Man lore and considers her superstitious. The mythical figure explains her fatalistic view of the world. While the maidens of the Danube promise everything that is positive, the apparition of the medieval knight terrifies her, because it signifies death and sorrow. In both cases, she believes that events are predetermined and inevitable.

Innocent. Similar to Cecelia, Mitzi is pictured in the company of white doves that signify her innocence. Another parallel between the two women is that Mitzi also needs to use crotches after getting knocked down by the rearing horse during the ceremony. While Cecelia's disability is permanent, Mitzi's injury heals after a while. For both women, the limping leg signifies their vulnerability.

Selfless. The ending is tragic on one level because of the fact that the lovers fall apart. Less evident is Mitzi's tremendous sacrifice: in order to save the man she loves, she consents to marrying the man who makes her vomit uncontrollably.

Schani. Disagreeable (Odious)

Odious. Schani's father Eberle is—generally—proud of his go-getter son; Mitzi's mother obviously agrees and considers him a great candidate as her son-in-law. On the other hand, Schani is introduced gorging food during the ceremony, constantly spitting and being repulsive. Mitzi can barely hide her disgust. Schani gets increasingly nasty; his forced kiss causes Mitzi almost to vomit and a subsequent sexual attack is stopped by his father. He may well be one of the factors behind Mitzi's dread of the Iron Man—after all, it is not only tragic but also terrifying that she ends up having to marry Schani.

Cecelia. Conscientious (Innocent and Shrinking, Perceptive)

Innocent and Shrinking. Following the deal he makes with Nicki's father at the bordello, Fortunat Schweisser comes home in the early hours of the morning to tell his daughter about his plans. She is spending time with her white doves—similar to Mitzi—and is unsure about how to react. She seems to welcome the idea, but her thoughts about her disability make her question her self-worth.

Perceptive. When Schweisser approaches her daughter to give her the news about the marriage, Cecelia immediately notices on his suit the barely visible traces of the rough night he spent at the bordello. She remains silent about it. Similarly, she quickly perceives during the wedding march Nicki's special connection to the tearful woman among the spectators; she also gathers that apple blossoms are dear to his husband because of Mitzi.

Fortunat Schweisser. Agreeable (Complex)

The corn-plaster magnate is a secondary character, but proves why *The Wedding March* is one of von Stroheim's most mature films. On the surface, Schweisser is a nouveau riche, who can socialize with people like Prince Ottokar in special, unusual circumstances (e.g. by throwing a party at the bordello), but does not belong to the same social circle as the elites of the society. His daughter's marriage is the key to elevate his social status. Then again, his motivation is not simply his selfish desire for social mobility, it is

obvious that he loves his daughter and genuinely believes the marriage arrangement to the popular prince would make her happy.

THEMES

Society – (Modernity and Modern City, Consumerism, Religion, Body, Social Etiquette)
Relationships – ([Loveless] Marriage, Family)
Psychology – (Abjection)
Quest – (Authenticity)
Past – (Remembrance, Fatalism and Sense of Doom)

SOCIETY

Modernity and Modern City. The film begins with several shots of pre-war Vienna, featuring early modern forms of urban transport on wide boulevards, where large crowds congregate. A mixture of modes of transportation co-exists, such as a tram, a few motor cars, and several horse carriages. Similar to the highly efficient and professional fire brigade in the *Foolish Wives*, an ambulance rushes to the scene to take Mitzi to the hospital after the rearing horse knocks her down. The constable in charge of the security of the ceremony at that spot uses a public telephone in a conveniently located callbox to call the emergency dispatcher. The whole operation is swift and flawless, in spite of the presence of the large crowd that has assembled for the ceremony.

The modern city is a hotbed of exciting and unpredictable encounters, in the fashion of those traced in Marshall Berman's seminal study of the experience of modernity and space in 19th century literature in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*. An example is the bordello scene—the wild party recalls a similar (almost completely removed) orgy scene at the Francois club in *The Merry Widow.* At the high-end brothel in *The Wedding March*, the impoverished aristocrat meets representatives of different classes, who would perhaps not often cross paths with him in daily life, such as the bourgeois Fortunat Schweisser. Another social space is the wine garden where Mitzi plays the harp and retreats to her favorite spot under the apple trees to dream. It is here that members of public from different strata come together and have a chance to interact; Nicki and Mitzi flirt under the apple blossoms. This social space recalls the fairground in *Greed*, where the Sieppe family enjoys picnics. On a side note, Vienna's Prater must have had important impact on the young von Stroheim, as it did on Josef von Sternberg.

Consumerism. Shops aim to attract customers with their displays and early forms of modern advertising and marketing are occasionally seen, such as the billboard that advertises a cacao brand. When Nicki visits Mitzi at the hospital, he makes a good impression on her by presenting a gift of Mertners chocolate in its well-designed and attractive box that underscores the brand with stylish font. Mitzi is pleased and comments that the sweets are much nicer compared to the—anonymous—jelly beans she is used to. Another important industrial brand is "Schweisser's Red Raven Corn Plasters." Fortunat Schweisser proudly presents one to Nicki's father at the bordello, when the aristocrat slightly injures his leg following an orgy. Schweisser personally applies one of his products to the cut on Prince Ottokar's leg (the band-aid almost immediately detaches, but both men are too drunk to notice that), just before they strike a deal about wedding their children. Ottokar and his wife are very impressed with Schweisser's wealth, but they can't help but make derogatory comments about their nouveau riche future in-law and his corn-plaster business—"he is ambitious," they say, indicating their expectation that the capital would undoubtedly be used in other, and more prestigious, lucrative enterprises.

Religion. Several times, characters interact in front of religious artifacts, such as crucifixes, mitres, and monk portraits. The menacing, medieval Iron Man statue serves to contrast with the majestic and inviting St. Stephen's Cathedral ("guiding, comforting, consoling," which functions as the setting of the denouement. The knight in shining armor, according to lore, abducts the maidens bathing in the waters of the Danube River. "Heartless, soulless, threatening," the Iron Man, a strange medieval figure, signifies Mitzi's fear of men and particularly the odious Schani, who, with her mother's support, is most likely to end up being her husband. In the destroyed second part of *The Wedding March*, *The Honeymoon*, the ending reportedly had Mitzi joining a convent (while the two men participated in the WW1). This tendency

for featuring religious motifs recalls similar scenes in von Stroheim's *Blind Husbands, Foolish Wives,* and *The Merry Widow*. Following the marriage arrangement between Nicki and Cecelia's fathers, Mitzi is devastated, but not exactly angry. She visits the church and her confession to the priest is a moment of reflection. The content of the interaction is not hinted by title cards; however, it may be considered to be a transformative moment. She obviously doesn't regard Nicki's decision to marry another woman as a betrayal. It parallels Cecelia similarly thoughtfully musing in her bedroom as she melancholically thinks about the future and, judging from her glances at her feet, about her disability.

Body. The limping legs of Cecelia are underscored as the source of her unattractiveness (by Nicki's parents as well as herself) and insecurity. Interestingly, Mitzi also—temporarily has a limping leg, from her injury when the rearing horse at the ceremony causes her to fall down. After she is released from the hospital she uses a crutch to walk until her leg fully heals. The two women do not meet and have an encounter only at the very end, when Cecelia sees her during the wedding march and asks Nicki who was the tearful "sweet girl." Cecelia is in a way similar to Mitzi; in separate scenes, both women appear in the company of white doves that signify their calm and peacefulness. This focus on body and a specific part of it recalls *The Merry Widow*'s Baron Sixtus Sadoja, who 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; this grotesque figure's bodily and mental deformations go hand in hand.

Social Etiquette. Mitzi is impressed by Nicki's uniform and social status—"I bet your name is a kilometer long". Nicki's formal name is long indeed (Prince Nickolas von Wildeliebe-Rauffenburg), but it is initially introduced as mockery of the Old World's aristocratic traditions, with Nicki refusing to leave his bed and flirting with a maid, his title "Royal Life-Guard—Mounted," in humorous contrast with his idle and lazy lifestyle. Similarly, his mother Maria Immaculata wakes up displaying considerable facial hair, which is taken care of by the time she shows up at the procession. Nicki's father Prince Ottokar, "the General of all cavalry and captain of all guards" is a somewhat frail man, who repulses his wife. Several servants help make the aristocratic family presentable for the public occasions they attend (e.g. the princess' moustache is shaved off). Von Stroheim offers a general a critique of class and elitism in the guise of the mockery of aristocratic conventions and their ridiculous obsession with social etiquette.

Parallel. This theme parallels von Stroheim's *The Merry Widow,* 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.

RELATIONSHIPS

(Loveless) ***Marriage***. Point blank, two title cards introduce von Stroheim's key interests in *The Wedding March*: "Love… without thee marriage is a sacrilege and mockery"; followed by "dedicated to the true lovers of the world." Right away, an example of such a marriage is presented. Nicki's parents detest and repulse each other; theirs is a marriage of convenience, mocked in another title card as "an ideal, blissful union." Nicki also sarcastically notes his parents dislike for each other—yet, for financial reasons, he is willing to play along with their plans for him to "marry money." Marriage is presented as one of various arrangements that elevate the individual and decisions pertaining to it require business acumen. Cecelia Schweisser, always self-conscious about her limping legs, asks her father why the Prince would choose to marry her. "Corn-plaster magnate" Fortunat Schweisser replies that the question "how could he love me" is irrelevant, because of the twenty millions she possesses as an heiress to his businesses. The deal between the two fathers is farcically sarcastic: "You have a nice son, and no money," Schweisser

puts it bluntly, and asks “how much?” His initial offer is rejected by von Wildeliebe-Rauffenberg, but a deal is reached with the offer of one million Kronen.

Family. As in von Stroheim’s *Blind Husbands* and *Foolish Wives*, the sarcasm directed at the morals of the Old World is a subtle mockery of the family as an institution. Parents who behave as business partners decide on the future of their children. The aristocratic von Wildeliebe-Rauffenberg couple’s domineering behavior is paralleled by Mitzi’s petit bourgeois mother Katerina, who would like her preferred son-in-law to remain unchallenged, because she believes that the butcher promises a secure social future. Parents dominate their children’s decisions—Nicki pokes fun at his father and mother’s marriage, only to have one quite like theirs; Mitzi ends up marrying the man who makes her vomit. It looks like the film ends before they can express any resentment, such as the somewhat hateful glance of Prince Danilo to his father’s portrait picture in *The Merry Widow*.

PSYCHOLOGY

Abjection. *The Wedding March* adds to von Stroheim’s gallery of grotesque figures, interesting scenes and a particularly relevant character, the butcher Schani. In his first appearance, Schani is promoted as a go-getter by his father to Mitzi and her mother Katerina Schrammel. First thing Schani does after he proves his father’s point is to begin devouring food disgustingly, occasionally spitting and repulsing, as well as embarrassing Mitzi. When Prince Nicki visits her at the hospital with his nicely packaged gift of fine chocolates, she considers the sweets from the jelly beans she is used to and evidently detests—the gelatin based product being another reference to her future husband, who slaughters pigs for a living. Schani is shown in his work environment, covered in blood and filth, in contrast to the neatly dressed Nicki. The actress portraying Mitzi, Fay Wray (soon to star in *King Kong*), is photographed glamorously, except in those scenes in which she reacts violently to Schani by spitting almost a vomit after an unwanted attempt to kiss. The recurrent motif of grotesqueness recalls scenes in von Stroheim’s previous films: the fly sheet that sticks to the back of Mirko’s head in the farcical backstage sequence of *The Merry Widow*; the city employees cleaning the street of the debauched club Francois; various shots of pigs and dogs in mud. Similar bizarrerie in the form of 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*. It would be interesting to borrow 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. Such scenes are sometimes farcical and at times amusing, but also somewhat confusing because these manifestations of filth and repulsiveness occur at times when lust is a driving force of the characters’ actions.

QUEST.

Authenticity. Von Stroheim’s attention to detail once again increased production costs and antagonized him with the producers. On the other hand, the sets that represented Vienna were so authentic looking that a member of the crew chose to wed in the St. Stephen’s Cathedral designed by Art Director Richard Day.[5] Also relevant is von Stroheim’s decision to experiment using two-color Technicolor film for a specific sequence. This technique is employed in the high point of the procession scene, when Emperor Franz Joseph I finally makes his appearance and visits the cathedral. The abrupt use of color differentiates this sequence, only a couple of minutes long, from the interaction that takes between Mitzi and Nicki at the ceremony. By representing the Emperor in color as realistically as possible, von Stroheim gives this particular a documentary touch, contrasting with, but also contributing to, the whimsical romance story that wraps it.

PAST

Remembrance. It has been noted by von Stroheim biographers that *The Wedding March* may have certain biographical elements and hints at von Stroheim’s life in Vienna, before he left the city at the age of twenty-four to immigrate to the USA. It is known that in 1898, he (in his early teens) participated as

a spectator[6], in a ceremony similar to the one depicted here, where he plays the cavalry officer commanding the parade squad. Similarly, in his early years in California, von Stroheim wrote a play named *In the Morning*, with characters that anticipated those in *The Wedding March*; the story recalled his own family's bankruptcy as the cause of his immigration to the USA. In his remembrance of his birth city, von Stroheim creates the figure of the Iron Man to symbolize darkness, in contrast to the positive qualities associated with St. Stephen's Cathedral.

Fatalism and Sense of Doom. An earlier title card points out that there is no such thing as an accident, "it is fate—misnamed." Mitzi's favorite pastime is to daydream on the buggy in the apple orchard and ponder her fate; she likes to imagine that the mythological figures of the Danube's maids sometimes come to the shore to bring good luck, happiness, and love. Then again, her hopes for the future are threatened by an apparition, the image of the Iron Man. She believes that the ghastly knight occasionally appears, to drag away a maiden; he signifies sorrow, grief, and death. Nicki dismisses these notions as "people's fancies." However, Nicki and Mitzi's final moments together are cross-cut with the deal reached at the bordello between Nicki's father Ottokar and Schweisser. It is decided, on his behalf, that Nicki is to wed Schweisser's daughter—the lazy playboy had already declared his willingness to 'marry money.' Then, Mitzi and Nicki's kiss is interrupted by her vision of the gigantic knight. The Iron Man has the last laugh and to Mitzi's horror, the apparition goes past them with a steady plod and carrying a helpless maiden. A while later, a title card states that "then nature mourned—the birds were hushed—it rained, rained, and rained." The film ends with a shot of the Iron Man.

Discussion questions

Compare the bordello scene in *The Wedding March* (together with *The Merry Widow*'s Francois club scene) with Luis Bunuel's *L'Age D'or*.

Compare the representation of the city with other cinematic representations of Vienna, such as *The Marriage Circle* (Lubitsch, 1924—also his 1931 *The Smiling Lieutenant*), *The Mistress* (Wiene, 1927), *Dishonored* (von Sternberg, 1931—also his 1936 *The King Steps Out*), *Waltzes from Vienna* (Hitchcock, 1934), *Sissi* (Marischka, 1935), *Letters from an Unknown Woman* (Ophüls, 1948—also his 1940 *Sarajevo*), *The Emperor Waltz* (Wilder, 1948), *The Third Man* (Reed, 1949), *The Night Porter* (Cavini, 1974), *Bad Timing* (Roeg, 1980), *Before Sunrise* (Linklater, 1995), *Klimt* (Ruiz, 2006).

[1] Weinberg, Herman G. *Stroheim: A Pictorial Record of his Nine Films.* New York: Dover. 1975, 179.
[2] Von Sternberg, Josef. *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*. NY: Collier. 1965, 34-36.
[3] *Photoplay*, August 1928, 4.
[4] *Photoplay*, November 1928, 54.
[5] Brownlow, Kevin. *The Parade's Gone* By. NY: Ballantine. 1970, 279.
[6] Lennig, Arthur. *Stroheim*. Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky. 2000, 6.