HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

The Merry-Go-Round 1923

Rupert Julian (1879-1943) and Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957)

OVERVIEW

Von Stroheim intended to follow 1922's *Foolish Wives* with *The Merry-Go-Round*, set in the Belle Époque Vienna. He conceived the scenario, and was involved in the set and costume design. Of the total of about fifteen hundred scenes that were envisioned planned, he had completed 271 (Weinberg, 1975: 3) before he was sacked by the producer Irving Thalberg, after five weeks of filming. The director Rupert Julian was assigned to the project and per von Stroheim's demand, his name was removed from the credits.

The film is interesting for von Stroheim, not least for the fact that an unidentified portion of is his contribution. In general, the themes and tropes bear resemblance to what he had been experimenting with in the previous films *Blind Husbands*, *The Devil's Passkey* (lost film), and *Foolish Wives*; it signals the direction he would take with his more mature works, particularly *The Wedding March* (1928).

The plot in von Stroheim's first films revolved around a married couple whose relationship was tested by the intrusion of another man; with *The Merry-Go-Round*, the axis of the action shifts to the encounter between an aristocrat and a commoner—this preoccupation would continue in *The Merry Widow* and *The Wedding March*.

The story takes place on the eve of the First World War and Emperor Franz Joseph is one of the secondary characters—he is the driving force of the loveless marriage between the young count and the powerful minister's daughter. In *The Wedding March*, Emperor Franz Joseph of the Habsburg monarchy would be portrayed by the same actor (Anton Vaverka) 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).

Amusement parks, with their swing rides, Ferris wheels, and ghost trains have been popular film settings. The carousel has particularly enjoyed much attention and was featured in a variety of film genres, ranging from musicals to horror. Films with memorable scenes that take place on a carousel are *Sally of the Sawdust* (1925, D.W. Griffith); *The Barker* (1928, George Fitzmaurice); *Liliom* (1934, Fritz Lang) *Strangers on a Train* (1951, Alfred Hitchcock); *Night Tide* (1961, Curtis Harrington); *Carnival of Souls* (1962, Herk Harvey); *Charade* (1963 Stanley Donen); *Mary Poppins* (1964, Robert Stevenson); *Sudden Impact* (1983, Clint Eastwood).

The Merry-Go-Round 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), *The Wedding March* (von Stroheim, 1928), *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).

The Merry-Go-Round is historically significant as an early instance of the curbing of an auteur's control and the emergence of the role of the executive producer. The producers were bothered not only by concerns about efficiency and finance, but also by the fact that von Stroheim posed a threat to the film company's authority because he personally commanded the loyalty of most of the cast and crew.

It is estimated that about a one-third of the scenes belong to von Stroheim. Some of these may be impossible to identify, but the wild party and the introduction of the aristocrats clearly bear his signature. Also, the actor playing the villain Schani resigned in protest after von Stroheim was fired, so the scenes with this character were definitely shot by Julian. Almost all of the title cards, with their poetic language, also hint at von Stroheim's style.

Von Stroheim would once again make Vienna the setting in his 1928 film *The Wedding March*, which presents a complete exploration of the themes he did not have a chance to develop in *The Merry-Go-Round*.

CHARACTERS

Count von Hohenegg Franz Maximilian von Hoheneg is an idle playboy, who is expected to marry the daughter of the Minister of War.

Agnes. Agnes Urban works as an organ grinder at the merry-go-round at Vienna's Prater.

Sylvester Urban. Agnes' father is a puppeteer (and later a Grimaldi-style clown). His wife is sickly ill.

Schani. The nasty and sadistic Schani Huber is the employer of the Urbans. He abuses both father and daughter; attempting to kill Sylvester and rape Agnes.

Bartholomew. The laconic hunchback is the handler of the orangutan—which will play a key role in the story. Bartholomew is hopelessly in love with Agnes.

Gisella von Steinbruck. The countess is the daughter of the powerful Minister of War and the bride picked by the Emperor for Franz von Hohenegg. She is domineering and controlling.

The Emperor. Emperor Francis Joseph is played by the same actor, Anton Vaverka, who appeared as the Emperor of Austria-Hungary in von Stroheim's *The Wedding March* (1928).

SYNOPSIS

Count Franz von Hohenegg is a young aristocrat, who spends his days fulfilling ceremonial duties as the Emperor sees fit. One such obligation is marrying the daughter of the powerful minister; his fiancée Gisella doesn't mind her future husband spending his time at wild parties at nights. One day, Franz visits the Prater and meets the organ-grinder Agnes; the two are attracted by each other. She believes his lie that he is a tie salesman, who simply looks like the famous count. Bartholomew, the caretaker of the orangutan at the amusement park is in love with Agnes. He tries to warn Agnes and her father, Sylvester the puppeteer, that Franz belongs to royalty but fails to persuade them. Agnes and her father Sylvester are bullied by their violent employer Schani, whose attempt to rape her is stopped by Sylvester. The old man gets to be jailed and Franz offers assistance—expecting sexual favors in return. Once he gets to know Agnes a little, he falls in love with her and considers marriage. However, the Emperor is enraged at the idea of his nephew marring a commoner and ruining his plan for a marriage of convenience with the influential minister's daughter. Franz is reprimanded and placed back on track. Bartholomew's orangutan kills Schani.

War breaks out; Franz meets Agnes' father on the battlefield. Sylvester is fatally wounded and refuses to forgive Franz for lying to his daughter. Back at the Prater, Bartholomew wins the lottery and proposes to Agnes. As they prepare to wed, Franz returns from the front. She forgives him and accepts his proposal. Bartholomew selflessly steps back to let them go ahead and marry as true lovers.

SCENES





Pre-war Vienna. The setting is Belle Epoque Vienna's amusement park the Prater. The proprietors and laborers at the Prater provide joy to the city's residents, but they strive to survive economic difficulties. From time to time, a brief shot of a merry-go-round appears—overlooking the revolving platform is a grotesque and devilish giant; he watches the predicament of the humans with great amusement and laughs cruelly.



The Court of Hohenegg. Among the city's prominent figures are the aristocratic family of von Hoheneggs; the spotlight is cast on the dashing and carefree Count Franz von Hohenegg. His time is divided between being prepared by servants for courtly appearances during the day and the entainment offered by the city's venues in the evening.



A Convenient Arrangement. Count Franz von Hohenegg is engaged to the daughter of the Minister of War. The cigar chomping Gisella is domineering and possessive; she tells her father that she has picked Franz because he "appeals" to her. She keeps her fiancé under control and allows him some space; Franz meekly tries to avoid her and the only reason for them being a couple is that the Emperor has deemed their marriage appropriate and beneficial for the state. Franz is totally subservient to the elder Hohenegg and dutifully maintains his relationship with Gisella—obviously content that he is somewhat free when darkness falls—when Gisella doesn't seem to mind him spending time at wild parties.



The Prater. Agnes Urban is a young organ-grinder; she works with her father Sylvester the puppeteer. Father and daughter are both abused by their employer, the sadistic Schani. There are other colorful characters in the amusement park, such as the hunchback Bartholomew—the handler of the mighty orangutan is in love with Agnes. Bartholomew tells Agnes Urban that he would like to marry her. Although she is not in love with him, Agnes is fond of her soft-spoken and good-natured co-worker; consequently, their marriage seems to be a viable option.



The Urbans. At home, Agnes' mother is sickly ill and the Urbans desperately try to comfort her—which is made even more difficult as their boss Schani doesn't miss any opportunity to psychologically and physically torture her and Sylvester. He attempts to rape Agnes, who is able to evade the assault—which will not be the last one.



Cruelty. Agnes' mother dies—alone, because Schani has made sure that both Sylvester and Agnes are kept busy with trivial tasks so as not to accompany Mrs. Urban in her final moments. Schani is also violently cruel towards Bartholomew, which doesn't go unnoticed by the latter's loyal and beloved orangutan—frequently throwing fierce glances at Schani, who nonetheless feels confident enough to taunt the animal, locked up behind thick iron bars in its cage.



The Encounter. One day, following a typical day being bossed by both the Emperor and his fiancée, Franz joins his friends to have fun at the Prater. He notices Agnes and the two have a chat—he introduces himself as a necktie salesman, a lie that he will stick to, and one that will have consequences. The two seem to be enamored by each other. Later that evening, as the amusement park closes, Schani once again makes his move and sexually assaults Agnes. Sylvester is able to intervene and lightly wounds Schani with a knife. The police constable arrests Agnes' father. Not only is Schani unbothered by the law, he cockily fires the Urbans—who are hired by the proprietress of a neighboring parlor.

Emotions. Agnes has a chance encounter with Franz as he is leaving a haute couture store—his workplace, he explains, sticking to his initial lie about his identity. Upon learning of Sylvester's run in with the law, he promises to solve the problem. Under the pretense of introducing her to an influential affiliate that can pull the strings to get her father released from jail, he leads her to a certain maison de rendezvous run by Madame Elvira—whom he instructs to get Sylvester free while he and Agnes dine. Moments later, Franz makes a sexual advance, yet is taken aback when Agnes reveals that she is a virgin. After she leaves the apartment, Franz realizes that he is in love with her.



Blossoms. Franz's intervention has lead to Sylvester's release from jail. Next day, he visits the Urbans at their home and meets Agnes' father—Bartholomew happens to be there. News of the royal marriage has made it to the headlines of the newspapers and Bartholomew bluntly points out that Franz peculiarly resembles the heir to the throne, the Count von Hohenegg, who would soon be wed to Gisella von Steinbruck. Franz is surprised and panics, but manages to persuade the Urbans that he merely happens to look like the famous aristocrat. Their next meeting occurs at the orchids near her workplace, where under blossoms they flirt and happily talk about marriage.



Clown. The Emperor is annoyed that Franz has made decisions for himself and is planning to marry a commoner, which would ruin the strategic marriage of convenience. A quick admonishment suffices to change the younger von Hohenegg's mind. Meanwhile, Agnes' father has started to work as a clown. During an show, the malacious Schani notices a large flower pot sitting on a window sill right above the pupper theater and stealthily gets it trip and land on Sylvester. The old man is seriously injured and is taken to the hospital with an ambulance. In the evening, back at the Prater, Bartholomew quietly unlocks the orangutan's cage. The animal climbs the wall of Schani's home and enters it from the window, kills him without making a sound and returns to its cage.



Hospital. The Emperor makes an inspection visit to the hospital—Franz is a member of the entourage. They briefly stop by Sylvester's bed. This chance encounter ends up being momentous as Franz maintains his distance to the Urbans, Agnes is distraught and Sylvester is furious. Franz unsuccessfully tries to make up for his calculated rudeness—Gisella is there too and she makes sure to humiliate Franz and sabotage his attempt to converse with the Urbans. Sylvester is to remain contemptuous until his death.



War. World War One breaks out; Franz and Sylvester meet once again on the battlefield as soldiers of the Empire of Austria-Hungary. Agnes' father is one of those wounded by a heavy artillery shelling; Franz is one of the officers in the area and spots Sylvester. He approaches the fatally wounded man to alleviate his pain and seek redemption for his past actions—but Sylvester refuses to talk to him and remains scornful in his final moments.





Reunion. The "comrades" at the Prater are struggling with conditions that were made worse by the war. By a stroke of fortune, Bartholomew wins the lottery. He is now able to propose to Agnes and she accepts it. As they prepare to wed, Franz, who is on leave from the front, comes for a visit. Although reluctant at first, Agnes welcomes him and seems to forgive the lie that had so much angered her father. Franz proposes—during the war, his bossy fiancée Gisella had died as a result of a disease. Bartholomew selflessly steps back so that Agnes can marry the man she loves. The kind-hearted Bartholomew is consoled by his loyal orangutan.





CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Franz. Rational (Pragmatic Rake)

Pragmatic Rake. Franz anticipates Nicki of *The Weeding March*—he likes to play the playboy, but is totally subservient to the authority of the senior members of the family. He would never oppose the commands of the Emperor as that would jeopardize his standing in the dynasty and claims to prominent imperial positions in the future. Nicki waits for his parents to pick a wealthy bride for him and Franz obliges when the Emperor tells him that he is to go ahead and marry the influential minister's daughter, because that is the best for the interests of the monarchy. As in *The Wedding March*, a brief argument suffices to persuade the younger von Hohenegg; the Emperor simply tells him that the action is necessary for the benefit of the state. Franz finds out that his love for Agnes is such that he simply cannot forget her. The death of his fiancée conveniently eliminates the major obstacle and he is able to propose to Agnes. Neither he nor the viewer need to bother wondering about the omnipotent Emperor's reaction, contemporary audiences would be aware that the Great War signaled the end of many dynasties including the Habsburgs.

Agnes. Emotional (Trustful)

Trustful. Agnes is sweet, demure, and innocent. She easily believes that Franz genuinely plans to marry him and is skeptical when Bartholomew present her proof that he is a soon to wed aristocrat. The innocent dreamer is not unlike Mitzi in *The Wedding March*—yet that was a richer and more interesting character—there is no visual parallel in the *Merry-go-Round* to such spectacular scenes in *The Wedding March* as Mitzi's love for doves or her fear of the Iron Man. Almost all of the main characters in *Merry-go-Round* have parallels in *The Wedding March*, but the latter film is so much more developed as one of von Stroheim's most mature works. *Merry-go-Round*'s characters lack complexity, which would mainly be the outcome of the official director Rupert Julian's artistic input and style.

Schani. Disagreeable (Odious)

Odious. Schani is a sadistic villain—he misses no opportunity to psychologically and physically torture and harm Agnes and her father. He is not as particularly disgusting as his grotesque counterpart and namesake in *The Wedding March*. The latter was simply repulsive before he did anything, Schani here is a more superficial character existing as a threat to others—twice attempting to rape Agnes, pummeling Bartholomew, trying to kill Sylvester.

Bartholomew. Agreeable (Selfless)

Merry-go-Round nods to Edgar Allan Poe's Murders in the Rue Morgue with the murder of Schani by Bartholomew's orangutan. The otherwise calm and peaceful animal is leaves its cage to kill Schani whom it obviously despised because of his vicious treatment of his caretaker. The orangutan may be viewed as Bartholomew's alter-ego, the diminutive hunchback is typically soft-spoken and meek. At the end, he wins the lottery and is ready to wed Agnes, yet he steps back so that she can be happy by marring the man she truly loves.

THEMES

Society – (Modernity, *Social Etiquette*)
Relationships – (Marriage)
Quest – (Authenticity)
Psychology – (Redemption)

SOCIETY

Modernity. 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. Von Stroheim's interest in modern emergency services and technological advances was displayed in several of his films (e.g. the ambulance *that swiftly took Mitzi to the hospital* in *The Wedding March*, the efficient and professional fire brigade in Foolish Wives); here, an ambulance rushes to the scene to take Sylvester to the hospital after he is seriously wounded by Schani's insidious scheme. The constable in the amusement park uses a public telephone in a conveniently located callbox to call the emergency dispatcher. The whole operation is flawless, in spite of the presence of the large crowd including Sylvester's clown act's spectators, several frightened kids. Also, police are quick to show up at the amusement park after Sylvester lightly wounds his employer who he catches attempting to molest Agnes. Arguably, these scenes were toned down from the original conceptions envisioned by von Stroheim—they remain less spectacular compared to similar scenes in his other films. Similarly, another possibly toned down concept is the city as 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*. The bordello scenes in *The Merry Widow* and *The Wedding March* featured representatives from different social backgrounds and classes, who would perhaps not often cross paths with him in daily life. Likewise, another social space is the wine garden in The Wedding March, where members of public from different strata come together and have a chance to interact; here, Nicki and Mitzi flirt under the apple blossoms. This theme is hinted at in *The Merry-Go-Round*, Franz participates in wild parties where no one can quite match his position in the hierarchy of aristocracy. Also, the amusement park's orchid is where Franz and Agnes meet—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.

Social Etiquette. Von Stroheim evidently anticipated that contemporary audiences in the United States would have been entertained by manifestations of class distinctions belonging to the Old World. A great deal is made about the identity of Franz and his position in the hierarchy; the main tension is generated by his attempt to marry a commoner—an idea detested by the Emperor. Franz resorts to lying to keep his identity secret and to be able to continue his relationship with Agnes. The ridiculous obsession with social etiquette offers a chance to mock the elites and their idle lifestyle. In The Merry Widow and The Wedding March, the unlikely couple's love prevailed in different ways—the latter denied them an opportunity to unite. Here, von Stroheim's original idea was to opt for a gloomy ending, with separation and death. Instead, Julian chose to unite Franz and Agnes despite the odds.

RELATIONSHIPS

Marriage. Loveless Marriage is a recurrent theme in von Stroheim's films. Here, Franz is simply waiting to be wed to the daughter of the powerful minister whom he evidently dislikes and fears. When he makes a weak attempt to deviate from this plan and marry a commoner, he is reprimanded by the patriarch of the family. His domineering fiancée Gisella is also not in love with him, she merely seems to enjoy her position of power to be able to choose whomever she fancies—she tells her father that she has picked Franz simply because she likes his appearance. Similarly, at the amusement park, Agnes is considers marrying Bartholomew—twice, initially as a respite from Schani's molestations and later as a way to a comfortable life after he wins the lottery.

QUEST

Authenticity. As in *The Merry Widow* and *The Wedding March*, von Stroheim was keen to depict the decadence of a decaying social system. Until his dismissal by the company, he worked together with Art Director Richard Day to design elaborate costumes with historic accuracy. Same actor in The Wedding March (Anton Vaverka) portrays the Habsburg Emperor, and he indeed resembles Francis Joseph. As in other films, his detail oriented approach aimed not only to create visually pleasing scenes, but to achieve a high degree of authenticity. Even though this film features less shots of the city, evidently Vienna was intended to be represented realistically. On a side note, Vienna was also the setting of a film that Josef von Sternberg had wanted to direct but was not realized—that director's approach to authentic however, was completely different.

PSYCHOLOGY

Redemption. Franz lies to Agnes and her father about his identity and keeps his aristocratic title a secret. He is able to convince them that he is just an ordinary necktie salesman who looks peculiarly like the famous count. Once the Urbans realize his lie, Sylvester becomes contemptuous and refuses to talk to him, lashing out at him even in his final moments at the battlefield. Franz seeks redemption; even though he is denied it by her father, Agnes eventually forgives him.

Works Cited:

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