

# Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau

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Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (December 28, 1888 - March 11, 1931) was one of the most influential directors of the silent film era.



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He was one of a number of German film directors to take part in the expressionist movement that took root in German cinema during the 1920s, and he directed a number of movies that were influential and remain widely seen among film scholars today. Some of Murnau's output from the silent era has been lost, although many of his films still survive; film scholars widely acknowledge them as masterpieces.

# Career

## Birth and early years

He was born as Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe in Bielefeld, Germany. He attended the University of Heidelberg and studied art history. He took the name "Murnau" from a town in Germany. He was a combat pilot during World War I and directed his first film *Der Knabe in Blau* ('The Child in Blue') in 1919.

## German Films



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Murnau's most famous film is *Nosferatu*, a 1922 adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* that caused Stoker's estate to sue for copyright infringement. Murnau lost the lawsuit and all prints of the film were ordered destroyed, but bootleg prints were stored and preserved over time, so that *Nosferatu* is widely available in the present era. Werner Herzog remade the film in 1979. *Nosferatu*, subtextually, depicted demoralized Germany post World War I. The vampire, played by German stage actor Max Schreck, resembled a rat which was known to carry the plague. The origins of the word are from Bram Stoker's novel where it is used by the Romanian townsfolk to refer to *Dracula* and presumably, other undead. "*Nosferatu*" is similar sounding to the Greek "*nosophoros*", roughly translating to "plague-bearer", which may be a possible root of it.



Nearly as important as *Nosferatu* in Murnau's filmography was *The Last Laugh* ("Der Letzte Mann", German "The Last Man") (1925), written by Carl Mayer and starring Emil Jannings. Often voted second greatest film of all time by international critics' polls, the film introduced the subjective point of view camera, where the camera "sees" from the eyes of a character and uses visual style to convey a character's psychological state. It also anticipated the *cinéma vérité* movement in its subject matter.



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Murnau's last German film was the big budget Faust (1926) with Gösta Ekman as the title character, Emil Jannings as Mephisto and Camilla Horn as Gretchen. Murnau's film draws on older traditions of the legendary tale of Faust as well as on Goethe's classic version. This carefully composed and innovative feature contains many memorable images and startling special effects, with careful attention paid to contrasts of light and dark. Particularly striking is the sequence in which the giant, horned and black winged figure of Mephisto (Jannings) hovers over a town sowing the seeds of plague. The acting by Ekman (who miraculously transforms, in the course of the film, from a bearded old man to a handsome youth) and the sinister, scowling, demonic Jannings is first rate and the virtually unknown actress Camilla Horn gives a memorable performance as the tragic figure of Gretchen.

# Hollywood



Murnau emigrated to Hollywood in 1926, where he joined the Fox Studio and made *Sunrise* (1927), a movie often cited by film scholars as one of the greatest films of all time. Filmed in the Fox Movietone sound-on-film system (music and sound effects only), *Sunrise* was not a financial success but received several Oscars at the very first Academy Awards ceremony in 1928. In winning the Academy Award for Unique and Artistic Production it shared what is now the Best Picture award with the movie *Wings*. On the DVD version of the film one can see Murnau in a couple of the outtake shots.



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Murnau's next two pictures, *Four Devils* (1928) and *City Girl* (1930), were modified to adapt to the new era of sound film and were not well received. No copy of *Four Devils* now exists. Their poor receptions disillusioned Murnau, and he quit Fox to journey for a while in the South Pacific. Together with documentary pioneer Robert Flaherty, Murnau travelled abroad to Bora Bora to realize the film *Tabu* in 1931. But Flaherty left after artistic disputes with Murnau who had to finish the movie on his own. Because of images of bare-breasted "native" Polynesian women the movie was censored in the United States. The film was originally shot as half-talkie, half-silent, before being fully restored as a silent film - Murnau's preferred medium.

# Death



Murnau did not live to see the premiere of his last film; he died in an automobile accident in Santa Barbara, California on March 11, 1931. The car was driven by Murnau's fourteen-year old Filipino lover Garcia Stevenson. Murnau was entombed on Southwest Cemetery (Südwest-Kirchhof Stahnsdorf) in Stahnsdorf near Berlin. Only 11 people showed up for the funeral. Among them were Robert Flaherty, Emil Jannings, Greta Garbo and Fritz Lang who delivered the funeral speech. Garbo also commissioned a deathmask of Murnau which she kept on her desk during her years in Hollywood.

## Legacy



A fictionalized account of the making of the film *Nosferatu* was *Shadow of the Vampire* by director E. Elias Merhige. Murnau is portrayed by John Malkovich. In the film, Murnau is so dedicated to making the film genuine that he actually hires a real vampire to play Orlok.

# Filmography



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- Der Knabe in Blau (The Blue Boy, released 28th June 1919)
- Santanas (released around 30th January 1920 but made in 1919)
- Der Bucklige und die Tänzerin (The Hunchback and the Dancer, released 8th July 1920)
- Der Januskopf (Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde / The Head of Janus, released 17th September 1920)
- Abend - Nacht - Morgen (Evening - Night- Morning, released October 1920)
- Sehnsucht (Desire: The Tragedy of a Dancer, released 18th October 1920)
- Der Gang in die Nacht (Journey Into the Night, released 13th December 1920)
- Schloß Vogelöd (The Haunted Castle, released April 1921)
- Marizza (released 20th January 1922 but filmed in 1921)



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- Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens (Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror, released 5th March 1922)
- Der brennende Acker (The Burning Soil, released 16th March 1922)
- Phantom (released 29th October 1922)
- Die Austreibung (The Expulsion, released 23rd October 1923)
- Die Finanzen des Großherzogs (The Grand Duke's Finances, released 7th January 1924)
- Der letzte Mann (The Last Laugh, released 23rd December 1924)
- Herr Tartüff (Tartuffe, released 25th January 1926)
- Faust (released 14th October 1926)
- Sunrise (released 23rd September 1927, won a special Oscar for "Unique Artistic Presentation" at the first Academy Awards)



- 4 Devils (released 3rd October 1928, is generally regarded as one of his best works and is a highly sought-after lost film)
- City Girl / Our Daily Bread (released 19th May 1930)
- Tabu (released 18th March 1931)