

Saturday 15 March | 16:30

DER LETZTE MANN (THE LAST LAUGH)

Dir. F. W. Murnau | Germany | 1924 | 1h 31m
Accompanied live by The Aljoscha Zimmerman Ensemble
Screening supported by the Goethe-Institut Glasgow

Silent films are possibly unparalleled in their capacity to make the audience experience the pity and fear their protagonists undergo. Our emotions arise from a careful arrangement of tragic elements – a noble hero undergoes a downfall, perhaps through hubris and predestination. An insignificant mistake results in a whole series of events leading to a dramatic change in destiny. Finally, when facing the frailties of human nature and personal fortune, the hero might achieve knowledge and become aware of human fate and the bond of love and hate between us.

The film which you are about to see tells the story of an ageing porter who is demoted to work in a washroom after being caught by the manager of the luxury hotel when resting from his strenuous duties – in fact the porter had only asked a page boy for a glass of water. The loss of status - and in particular of his beautiful uniform - turns out to have severe consequences for the porter's social status and self-esteem.

When first watching F.W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* I was stunned by how this film puts the above elements of tragedy carefully into play. Murnau does so by using innovative filmic techniques and an outstanding cast. As a result his film speaks directly to us and we are invited to accompany the hero on his difficult and tragic path.

Murnau's film stands out as a masterpiece of cinema during the era of the Weimar Republic in Germany. *The Last Laugh* has turned out to be a cornerstone in

establishing cinema as an independent art form. As one critic remarked at the time, the film is a visual narrative, not an implementation of a written script. It is a tragedy told in pictures – note that there are only two title cards needed throughout the film!

The film also pioneered the concept of a mobile, free-moving camera, giving the audience a more subjective and immediate point-of-view. Murnau's collaboration with noted cinematographer Karl Freund, using ingenious techniques like mounting the camera on a bicycle or overhead wires, resulted in hitherto unseen cinematographic perspectives and camera movements. Alongside the protagonist, we are wandering through the crowded streets of a city, staggering up the staircase in a working-class tenement and feeling dizzy after a long night of drinking.

These filmic techniques are complemented with the brilliant acting of Emil Jannings, at the time Germany's highest-paid actor. More than half of the film's budget was needed to pay his fee. Remarkably, Jannings was only 40 years old at the time of shooting the film.

But how, exactly, do these filmic innovations and achievements change our perspective on the fate of the main character? What kind of sympathy do we feel when witnessing the porter's social decline and inner struggles through the now moving lens of a portable camera?

Tragedy's foremost achievement in the spectator, according to Aristotle, is to "purify" our emotions when experiencing the fate and transformation of the protagonist.

When watching *The Last Laugh*, I wanted to ask how our emotions, sympathy and compassion with the old porter relate to his dependence on symbols of status, power and money? Despite the ingenious "subjectivist" techniques employed, I had a persisting feeling of unease – Murnau's film never allowed for a straightforward identification with the heart-breaking story of the old man.

Our hero in *The Last Laugh* turns out to be fragile and vulnerable. And we, the spectators, emotionally share this fragility. Murnau's film cogently makes the point that the power of uniforms, money and social status is fundamentally based on the respect, submissiveness and lack of inner freedom carried by those symbols. The classical tragedy unfolding in *The Last Laugh* might raise our awareness that this still holds true in a complex modern society.

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