

FILM

McTeague (1899)

Frank Norris

(1870-1902)

adaptation by Erich von Stroheim

Greed (1924)

ANALYSIS

“What von Stroheim produced in *Greed* was a very lengthy, visual translation, in effect a cinema-novel whose working script attempted a page-for-page transcription of *McTeague*. In his wish to respect and preserve the authenticity of the novel, von Stroheim organized a series of production methods that stressed his idea of a faithful adaptation. He filmed *Greed* on location, without using a single studio set. In San Francisco, he reconstructed the pre-earthquake scenes of the novel and required his principal actors to sleep in the building where most of the early portions of the story were filmed, so that they could ‘really feel inside the characters they were to portray.’ The Death Valley episodes were shot at the peak of summer, when the wildly intense heat drove the actors to their limits, and made them authentically hate each other. Von Stroheim managed to reopen the Big Dipper Mine and made everyone—camera and light crews included—go down three thousand feet to shoot the Sierra mining sequences.

Von Stroheim’s identification with Norris is evident in these complicated maneuvers, as in his presumption to speak for the author in the design of the film. Later he wrote, ‘I was given *plein de pouvoir* to make the picture as the author might have wanted it’; and he complained that these terms of artistic freedom soon changed. As it turned out, Louis Mayer and Irving Thalberg of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer ‘did not care a hoop about what the author or I...had wanted.’...Von Stroheim eventually found that a commercially viable film would not allow the telling of the whole ‘truth’ as perceived by Norris and himself.... Von Stroheim had completed a rough edit by early 1924 which was shown in Hollywood to a small group of critics and journalists. It was, according to viewers, somewhere between forty-two and forty-five reels long, which took about nine hours to screen. The exhausted audience appreciated the director’s’ artistry but was baffled about prospects for distribution and marketing. The film had to be drastically cut, but the hypersensitive von Stroheim would have to be convinced of this. Finally, he was. By March of 1924, von Stroheim had cut it nearly in half...The negative was finally handed over to studio editors anyway, just as von Stroheim had feared; and it was reduced to the ten-reel version available today... Thus, the film we see is only a series of fragments from von Stroheim’s composition....

However much he may have been, circa 1923, Norris’s disciple regarding truth in art, von Stroheim had his own way of doing things from his own perspective. Indeed, one of the major differences between the film’s structure and that of the novel lies in point of view. The pressure of *McTeague*’s angle of vision in the novel’s perspective emphasizes the limited and especially selective interest—the desire and the paranoia—of the hero’s personality. This, in turn, eventuates in a theme emphasizing the incomplete or fictional nature of any human understanding, in accord with the prototypical naturalist agenda. There is something solipsistic and degenerate in the narrow channel of *McTeague*’s point of view; and the psychology of Norris’s work in a sense lies in this narrative structure: the angling and paced repetitions that function with the rhythm of obsession.

Von Stroheim’s camera, on the other hand, relieves the pressure of *McTeague*’s perspective in the novel and distributes it among the various characters. His technique results in a more traditionally omniscient perspective, where the camera, as narrator, records all of their actions like an all-seeing witness to their foolishness. The absence in the film of *McTeague*’s narrow-scope vision deflates the obsessive looking that expresses the hero’s desire in the novel; the film replaces it with a general desire on the part of the camera

to look, and to see *everything* in the corners of character normally hidden in early cinema—and not rendered so visible in *McTeague*.

As Barbara Hochman suggests in *The Art of Frank Norris, Storyteller*, Norris's narrator speaks in an explanatory voice at points, discursively accounting for present conditions by reference to the chemistries of the genetic inheritances and the past environmental shapings of the characters; but in a larger sense, the novel's movement can be understood as experimental in its resistance to overt, logical explanations of character and event in terms of cause and effect. Its design appears in this way to match the sluggish rhythm of *McTeague*'s understanding.

Von Stroheim's glossing of such determinants, like his massive collages of detail in the camera's generous scan, are elaborated in a full visual drama. From the opening at the Big Dipper Mine on, we witness the behavior of figures clearly presented as sources of *McTeague*'s own character. Norris only briefly relates that *McTeague*'s largely undescribed mother had dreams for her son; von Stroheim fully visualizes the perfectly self-sacrificing mother whose only delight in a hard life is her sole offspring, and he even provides footage in which her success-fantasy for her boy is enacted. The repeated visualization of Marcus's rage over the loss of the money won by Trina magnifies extravagantly the representation of the same in the novel. Also, as Leger Grindon has observed, von Stroheim amplifies the sexual investment of objects and the displacement of their social functions for psychic ones; the 1920s, Freudian significations so generally available in *Greed* thus contribute to the film's willingness to account for things in a manner that the novel rather resists.

The barn doors and irises that serve as editorial devices in the movement from sequence to sequence in the film again emphasize von Stroheim's more traditional story-telling logic; like a series of doors or apertures that open and close, they announce the flow of time in the endings and beginnings of things, eliminating the considerably more abrupt transitions of the novel. *Greed*, while more modern than *McTeague*, ironically appears to proceed in its narration by an older, nineteenth century style. We might hypothesize that von Stroheim's lengthy exposure to fictions of Prussian gallantry, and the very lively way he moved as director among the tangible dimensions of these sentimental stories, infected his narratology with the explanatory habits that we find in *Greed*. As with Norris in his idiosyncratic blending of the traditional and the innovative in his fiction, von Stroheim takes us back in time, as he takes us forward to the modernist sensibility, establishing his own signature after first acknowledging Norris's. Like the miner searching for the mother lode, and Norris for the nuggets of truth and their faithful depiction, von Stroheim plays in his film between receptivity to 'what is there' and interpretive projection, between fidelity to the real and violation of the same in his desire to be naturalistic and true to his sources."

Mary Lawlor

"Naturalism in the Cinema: Erich von Stroheim's Reading of *McTeague*"

Frank Norris Studies 8

(Autumn 1989) 6-8

"What you get from Norris at all times is such a high degree of visualization that it is no wonder Eric von Stroheim, who kept *McTeague* at his bedside, saw a great film in it and indeed made one in 1924. Von Stroheim's original *Greed* lasted nine and a half hours. He vainly fought to the end of his life to show at least a four-hour version, but everything about the film has become Hollywood history at its darkest. The two-hour eversion, which I have seen, is yet as compelling as the novel. Von Stroheim actually took his actors to the desert itself for the final catastrophe, and relentlessly put Gibson Gowland as *McTeague* and the young Jean Hersholt as Schouler through the struggle. So terrible were the heat and vacancy of Death Valley that the actors threatened to kill von Stroheim if he ordered another day's shooting.

In *Greed* the fate of *McTeague* and Trina is underscored at their wedding by a scene not in the novel. In the street a funeral procession is passing by. Von Stroheim added other things—a horseshoe on the door of the *McTeagues*' grubby lodgings after their descent, flypaper hanging over the bar in the saloon where *McTeague* is treated to whiskey after whiskey before he departs in a rage and kills Trina. With his obvious rapture in every detail of the novel itself, von Stroheim devastates the viewer as Norris does the reader by the force with which every general motive is somehow brought down to the individual 'specimen' with the most concentrated sharpness and directness. Desire is all. Moment by moment we are swept into a human

arena where in theory all is 'primitive' but in substance reminds us, like the heartbeat we vaguely hear within ourselves, of what drives us. The rage within our hearts has been transferred to the world of external objects and atrocious deeds."

Alfred Kazin
Introduction, *McTeague*
(Vintage/The Library of America 1990) xvi-xvii

"Stroheim reflected Norris's Naturalism by carefully contrasting the main plot of *McTeague* and Trina against the sub-plots of Zerkow and Maria and Old Grannis and Miss Baker, where the Realistic aspects of the central story are set off by the exaggerated and pathological portraits of the minor characters. Yet because the ten-hour, forty-two reel film was reduced to ten reels by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer's own sense of greed, these sub-plots were completely eliminated (today most of the original footage is considered lost), and as a result *Greed* is thought to be a departure for von Stroheim—in which he made a Realistic film instead of a Naturalistic one. Of course, Stroheim disowned the final version of *Greed* (which was a box-office failure), but in the long run the film, in spite of the massive cuts, received much critical praise. In the words of film historian Joel W. Finler, '*Greed* has become one of the most celebrated *films maudits* in the history of cinema, and it is one of the few silent films which lives up to its reputation as a true film classic'."

Jerome Loving
Introduction, *McTeague*
(Oxford 1995) xxiv-xxv

Michael Hollister (2016)