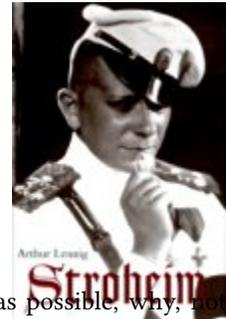


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Arthur Lennig. *Stroheim*. Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2000. xv + 514 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2138-3.

Reviewed by Frank Oglesbee (Eastern Illinois University)
Published on H-PCAACA (August, 2000)



Lennig, cinema professor, cineaste and determined researcher, has sought to write the most accurate book possible about the life and career of the controversial (and legendary) director, Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957). The book title is itself an indication of this, as the von was added by Stroheim when he entered America in 1909; to that he added, throughout his life, a variety of stories about his family background, military experience, etc. Moreover, numerous tales swirl about him, concocted by studio publicity hacks, columnists, and serious film historians who did not dig as long and deep as Lennig. The book is basically chronological/biographical, with long glosses on periods of Stroheim's life, and on his major films as director and actor. Lennig considers his subject a complex man, who sought artistic perfection in his films, whose apparent cynicism hid a humanitarianism, and whose refusal to compromise wrecked his directing career.

Long before I saw Stroheim on screen, I read about him in an article (about 1950) in the British magazine *Lilliput*, which included the familiar story of Stroheim appearing in *Birth of a Nation* in blackface. S. J. Perelman, in one of his anti-nostalgic essays on the films of his youth, mentions Stroheim as a Pharisee in *Intolerance*. Both the *Lilliput* article and a recent *New Yorker* piece (July 3, 2000, p. 27) by Ethan Coen (somewhat like Perelman in its attitude toward the "director's cut") claim that Stroheim insisted that costume for actors in his films include the correct period/place underwear. Lennig says no to these: his research shows that Stroheim had not met Griffith until after *Birth of a Nation*; the Pharisee credit is probably to make up for not crediting Stroheim as an actor in another Griffith film (he apparently worked on set design for *Intolerance*).

However, Lennig's purpose is to explain what Stro-

heim did and how, and, as much as possible, why, not simply to point to errors. To find out he relied little on interviews with people who had known or worked with Stroheim in those days, since memory after 40 or 50 years can be unreliable, especially for people who lived in a world of illusion to begin with. Lennig examined trade journals, studio house organs, reviews, scrapbooks, memos, letters, financial records, and other such documents as he could find. Contrary to some other writers' belief, Stroheim's birth record was not destroyed in WWII; Lennig found it, and also an old registry listing where the family lived in Austria. This may be less than fascinating detail, but it's part of Lennig's efforts to find out where Stroheim came from and how these origins and his life in America interacted in his work. The man had no theatrical background in his family or education; despite his frequent appearance in the role of an army officer (including Field Marshal Rommel) he had only weeks of unsatisfactory service in Austria and New York, although he continued to maintain he had been an officer; his family was far from elite, yet he often presented upper-class Europeans in his films (usually in derogatory contrast to those of lower social class). And he became *The Man You Love to Hate* for his portrayals of decadent European evil (*Hearts of Humanity*, *Blind Husbands*, *The Wedding March*). Lennig devotes a chapter each to ten films, including, of course, *Greed*, Stroheim's hoped-for masterpiece with its 8-hour director's cut. Lennig is appreciative of Stroheim's strengths as a director—his use of invisible editing to help reveal character, for example—but is equally clear that much of Stroheim's career problems were the result of his own refusal to consider budget and time restrictions; studio executives had a point in claiming that audience would not flock to 4-6-8 hour movies, and theater owners didn't want to book

them.

The book's last section of chapters examines Stroheim's career at its nadir, out of work and money, through his brief stint as a \$150 a week writer at MGM, to his sudden revival as an actor. Stroheim found his best opportunities in France, where he played the WWI German officer in Renoir's *La Grand Illusion*. As an Austrian Jew who had played several unsympathetic German roles, he was probably as lucky as Lennig says to get out of France before the Germans took over, and then got one more such role (though the character is complex) as Rommel in *Five Graves to Cairo*. His last American film role was as the former director turned butler to silent film star Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*.

Parts of the book I found slow going, and there's really no explanation of Stroheim's apparent fascination

with the numbers 3 and 13, but Lennig is trying to present as much of his many years of research as he can, and is dealing in some cases with films which have vanished, or have not been found in the version Stroheim made; he also tries to explain the man as well as his methods, without engaging in wild attempts to read the minds of people based on little fact and much speculation. Overall, he's succeeded in about 460 PP of text, plus a Filmography, detailed chapter notes, a select bibliography, an index, and numerous photographs. Other people may go from here to find other documents, or even parts of or entire films, but absent that, I doubt we'll see a better-done examination of Stroheim.

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Citation: Frank Oglesbee. Review of Lennig, Arthur, *Stroheim*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. August, 2000.

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