



Stroheim

By Arthur Lennig

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Erich von Stroheim (1885-1957) was one of the giants in American film history. Stubborn, arrogant, and colorful, he saw himself as a cinema artist, which led to conflicts with producers and studio executives who complained about the inflated budgets and extraordinary length of his films. Stroheim achieved great notoriety and success, but he was so uncompromising that he turned his triumph into failure. He was banned from ever directing again and spent his remaining years as an actor. Stroheim's life has been wreathed in myths, many of his own devising. Arthur Lennig scoured European and American archives for details concerning the life of the actor and director, and he counters several long-accepted claims. Stroheim's tales of military experience are almost completely fictitious; the "von" in his name was an affectation adopted at Ellis Island in 1909; and, counter to his own claim, he did not participate in the production of *The Birth of a Nation* in 1914. Wherever Stroheim lived, he was an outsider: a Jew in Vienna, an Austrian in southern California, an American in France. This contributed to an almost pathological need to embellish and obscure his past; yet, it also may have been the key to his genius both behind and in front of the camera. As an actor, Stroheim threw himself into his portrayals of evil men, relishing his epithet, "The Man You Love to Hate." As a director, he immersed himself in every facet of production, including script writing and costume design. In 1923 he created his masterpiece *Greed*, infamous for its eight-hour running time. Stroheim returned to acting, saving some of his finest performances for *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), a role he hated, probably because it was too similar to the story of his own life.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In a thrilling biography of one of Hollywood's great originals, Lennig strips away the legends surrounding director/actor Erich von Stroheim. A notorious fabricator, this master of silent films and actor in talkies and silents invented a past for himself as an Austrian nobleman with a distinguished military career. Actually, Stroheim, the son of a Jewish hatmaker, arrived penniless in New York in 1909 at age 24, crowning himself "von" on Ellis Island. In Austria, he had joined the army but was discharged after five months as unfit for military service. Puncturing the lingering myth that Stroheim became an assistant director on D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, SUNY film professor emeritus Lennig, who did remarkable sleuthing in Austria, Paris and Hollywood, establishes that Stroheim was never even on the studio lot. Lennig convincingly portrays Stroheim as an exasperating, tragic, noble, partly self-destructive genius, doomed by Hollywood commercialism because he was an obsessive perfectionist and extravagant spender, a novelist at heart whose striving for full characterizations and intricate plotting led to gargantuan shooting scripts. Lennig compares the full prints of Stroheim's films with the disastrously truncated released versions, revealing the artistry that often ended up on the cutting-room floor. Best remembered as an actor for roles in Jean Renoir's *La Grande Illusion* (1937) and Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), Stroheim reveled in playing bad guys--crook, lecher, rapist, evil Hun, mad doctor--yet resented being typecast. Lennig reveals a complex man: caring and sentimental beneath the cynical aristocratic exterior; a religious mystic who renounced Judaism and assumed the mantle of Roman Catholicism, who went to fortune-tellers and made major career moves according to their advice. Lennig's masterful knowledge of film history and technique informs this penetrating biography. Photos. (Jan.)

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From Library Journal

Timed to coincide with Turner Classics' world premiere of a restored director's cut of Erich von Stroheim's silent masterpiece *Greed*, this book aims to puncture the Stroheim myths--myths that, to his liking, obscured his past and nonaristocratic origins. Better known to contemporary film audiences as an actor (Max in *Sunset Boulevard* was among his most famous roles), it is Stroheim's work as a director that is Lennig's (emeritus, film, SUNY at Albany) main focus. He devotes a chapter to each of the films he directed, including two of Stroheim's lost films. An extremely readable book, this biography manages to convey Lennig's appreciation of Stroheim's genius. Still, he doesn't shy away from exploring the affairs that forced Stroheim to act to support himself. (Always uncompromising, Stroheim tended to produce long movies resembling today's TV miniseries, because for him showing his film characters going through all the minutiae of daily life was crucial for character exposition.) Highly recommended for academic and large public libraries.

-Marianne Cawley, Charleston Cty. Lib., SC

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From [Booklist](#)

When film lovers discuss cinematic geniuses destroyed by commercially minded studio executives, Erich von Stroheim is inevitably the first one they cite. One of the most gifted filmmakers of the silent era, he was noted for uncompromising perfectionism, an eye for opulence, and a stubborn intransigence that evinced a self-destructive urge. His magnum opus, *Greed*, was slashed by the studio from eight hours to just over two; subsequent films met similar or worse fates. Stroheim reluctantly returned to acting, his Teutonic air and stern visage earning him the sobriquet "The Man You Love to Hate." He had significant roles in two indisputable classics, *Grande Illusion* and *Sunset Boulevard*, but his career remains reckoned one of tragically wasted talent. Lennig, who has restored Stroheim's mangled early masterpiece *Foolish Wives*,

debunks several familiar anecdotes, many of them fabricated by Stroheim himself, who didn't confine his storytelling to the screen. Lennig's prose is often overblown, and he sometimes overstates the case for Stroheim's talents, but his expertise makes this the best Stroheim book by far. *Gordon Flagg*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joseph McNeal:

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