



THE MUSEUM OF WESTERN FILM HISTORY

Greed (1924)

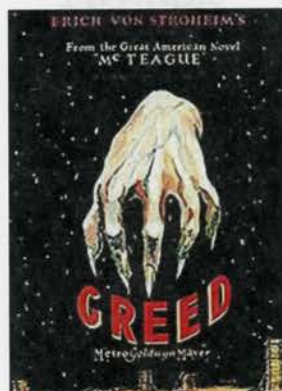


Greed (1924) is one of the greatest silent films ever made, although the film was a box-office failure at the time. The 'lost' film masterpiece is a dark study of the oppressive forces that decay and corrupt three people - a simple, uneducated former miner and dentist (McTeague) in turn of the century San Francisco, his miserly, vulgar and pathological wife (Trina), and their mutual friend and McTeague's ultimate nemesis (Marcus) - all are caught up by their squalid, debased passion,

compulsion and greed for gold. The wife's fixation on money causes the dentist to lose everything - he kills her, becomes maddened with the same lust for gold, then takes flight only to find himself handcuffed to his dead pursuer in the fateful conclusion. The film is a morality tale about how the characters are dehumanized by the influence of money upon their lives.

The film was directed by the ambitious, extravagant, stubborn and independent-minded Erich Von Stroheim - he spent nine months shooting the film and a total of fifteen months writing and editing it (from 1923-1924). Production costs were close to half a million dollars. Von Stroheim is better known for his role as Gloria Swanson's butler in director Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and as the prison-camp commandant in director Jean Renoir's *La Grand Illusion* (1937-French).

The film's elaborate script, adapted by June Mathis and Von Stroheim himself, was taken from Frank Norris' naturalistic, best-selling epic novel *McTeague: A Story of San Francisco* (written when Norris was twenty-three in 1895 and published in 1899). But the original tragic tale was modified - the pre-1906 earthquake plot was updated to begin in 1908 and covered a fifteen year period (until 1923). Since Von Stroheim was determined to accurately recreate and recapture every detail of every single page of the source material, the film became very complex and grew to unacceptable proportions. He also insisted on filming in natural, non-Hollywood studio locales - using real exteriors in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and interiors and street scenes in San Francisco and in Oakland. And he filmed the final fatal confrontation and shoot-out sequence in the sweltering heat of Death Valley under the very harshest conditions.



Greed, still a powerful masterpiece, is only a truncated fragment of its original form that was first presented to the Goldwyn Company (the first cut was 47 reels, the second cut was approximately seven hours and 42 reels long). It is most noted for the director's struggle with Irving Thalberg at MGM, the studio that eventually released the film and wanted it to be of acceptable, commercial length. [A reel is approximately ten to twelve minutes in length.] Von Stroheim cut the film down to about 24 reels (a four-hour version).

Stroheim's own director/friend Rex Ingram cut the film further to between 15 and 18 reels (a three-hour version). It was edited even more - the current release version of the film is now shown at approximately two and a quarter hours (about 10 reels), one quarter of its original length. The severe editing was completed by Joe Farnham and June Mathis, Goldwyn's story editor, who hadn't read either the book or the screenplay. Reportedly, the 32 reels of edited negatives were melted down by MGM to extract the valuable silver nitrate from the film stock.

Gold-related objects in the black-and-white film (i.e., gold coins, gold plates and vessels, gold tooth fillings, a giant gold tooth, a brass bedstead, gilt frames, the birdcage, the canary, and gold itself) were hand-tinted frame-by-frame in the original release prints. But the original print of the film has been lost forever, although there have been repeated rumors of its existence. There is a restored, four-hour version, reconstructed by film archivist Rick Schmidlin. He pieced together existing footage and 650 stills with the use of the continuity script to create a fuller sense of Stroheim's original film (with its numerous subplots and complexities).