

RECOVERED TREASURES: GREAT FILMS FROM WORLD ARCHIVES

January 15–February 20, 2011

THE GHOST TRAIN (EL TREN FANTASMA)

Sunday, January 30, 2:00 p.m.

1927, 73 mins.

Live music by Donald Sosin

Restored 35mm print from Filmoteca UNAM, Mexico City

Written and directed by Gabriel Garcia Moreno. Photographed by Manuel Carriedo.

Principal cast: Manuel de los Ríos (as Paco Mendoza, alias el Rubi), Carlos Villatoro (Engineer Adolfo Mariel), Clarita Ibáñez (Elena).

Yesterday, I attended the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' preview of the world re-premiere of John Ford's *Upstream* (1927), which screens for the public tonight. "Re-premiere" because the film was long believed to have been lost before it was rediscovered last year in the New Zealand Film Archive; the film is part of [75 American silent films](#) that are currently being brought to the U.S. under the guidance of the National Film Preservation Foundation (NFPF). In addition to the NFPF and the New Zealand Film Archive, the re-premiere is possible with the cooperation of the Academy Film Archive, which found the film and supervised its preservation, which was paid for by Fox, who owns the rights. The NFPF's Annette Melville tells me an effort on this scale probably couldn't have happened in previous decades, when rights holders and archives were more possessive with their materials; global communications and current

technologies are helping facilitate new discoveries, and recent attitudes embrace this cooperation as a win/win cultural scenario.



Upstream is a big win for John Ford enthusiasts. It's one of only about a dozen films that survive today from Ford's silent period, which numbered over 60 titles. It was made in 1926 at a time when Fox was under great expansion, in large part under the creative inspiration of F.W. Murnau,

who had been invited to the studio and given carte blanche to make *Sunrise*. I've written about [Murnau's influence on Frank Borzage](#) before in conjunction with Janet Bergstrom's excellent documentary on Edition Filmmuseum's DVD of *The River*, but Murnau's influence was widespread.

Sunrise was produced at Fox from August of '26 to February of '27, when Ford saw a rough cut and went on record proclaiming it the greatest film yet produced, and suggesting that he didn't think it would be surpassed for a decade. Ford travelled to Germany to shoot some footage for upcoming works and to study Murnau's craft. As Joseph McBride describes it in *Searching for John Ford*: "During his month in Berlin, Ford gave himself a crash course in German filmmaking techniques. He screened several of the major expressionist films and spent time with Murnau, who graciously showed him some of the extensive preproduction designs for his pictures and explained his shooting methods."

Ford's next two films—*Four Sons* and *Hangman's House* (both of which are available in the *Ford at Fox* DVD box set) were highly indebted to Murnau's mobile camera, moody sets, and expressive acting. As Tag Gallagher describes it in *John Ford: The Man and His Films*: *Ford was enchanted by the intense stylization of Murnau's painterly invention, in which a character's conscious rapport with his physical world seemed suddenly palpable. Ford's movies had been relatively unstylized. But henceforth lighting creates dramatic mood through emphatically contrasting black and whites,*

macabre shadows, shimmering shafts of light, chiaroscuro, and other abstractions.

Upstream is being touted as a late-'26, Murnau-influenced production, but having seen the film, I'm hard pressed to make a very strong case for that. Firstly, it's a light drama with a lot of humor, so it doesn't afford a lot of opportunities for brooding cinematography. Its plot revolves around a love triangle in a boarding house full of eccentric vaudeville performers, and an opening title card describes their lives as "burlesque." An ostentatious actor goes to Europe to play Hamlet and is an unexpected success, and a lot of the film stresses the difference between passion and loyalty and earning respect versus caprices of fame and shallow pride.



There are a few moments in the film that evoke Murnau's expressionism: a long traveling shot down a dinner table featuring various characters is unusual for Ford, who typically preferred stasis; a nervous actor imagines the spirit of his mentor in a shot that recalls the climax of *Nosferatu*; flashbulb explosions from news reporters precede a character's entrance and emphasize the emotional potency of the moment in the eyes of his abandoned lover; and the stage decor of the

Hamlet production compares to the grandeur and artificiality of Fritz Lang's *Die Nibelungen* (1924), with the play's resounding applause doubly-exposed for intensity. But by and large, the film feels like an effective but fairly classically styled studio drama, and citing examples such as these can seem a bit reaching.

This may have to do with the fact that *Upstream* was made prior to Ford's Berlin tour, which by all accounts seems to have been the decisive event for his evolution as an artist.

Another lost film that exists in part is Ford's *Mother Machree*, which was shot in September '26 but not released until '28 after it had been retooled for sound. Gallagher describes the surviving footage, writing that "pre-Murnau Ford—pretty and picturesque, just like *The Shamrock Handicap*—contrasts with post-Murnau expressionism," and cites examples of the latter,

such as "angled shots of a tenement staircase" and another shot's "theatrically expanded perspective." There isn't anything so overt in *Upstream*, so I suspect it was made even before *Mother Machree* (I haven't yet been able to track down production dates).

If that's the case, it's not really fair to judge the film in relation to the work of

Murnau. *Upstream* is an entertaining film with very charming performances, good timing, and breezy humor; one scene involving foot play under the dining table and mistaken identities is particularly funny, largely from the way the scene is cut and the way the actors play against type.

Any rediscovered Ford is a welcome turn of events, and this film helps flesh out the talents and aesthetic inclinations of the filmmaker on the brink of his artistic evolution.

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