A review of selected primary sources on *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas*

Tabu: A Story of the South Seas (1931) may not necessarily be F. W. Murnau's most renowned piece of work, at least not reaching the canonical status of some of his other pictures*; Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922); *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), for example. Despite this, the film and its release, I suggest, has a fascinating aura of ambiguity: Its questionable form, in contemporary scholarly discussion, has been understood to challenge the definitions of both documentary and fictional film. In addition, its release was in the era of talking pictures dominating the film market. By analysing five primary sources from the time of *Tabu*'s release I hope to provide clarity over these ambiguities by understanding the different values of audiences at the time, and how these values affected their perception of the film.

To introduce the idea of varied audience values I shall first discuss 'The Academy and the Cameramen' (Experimental Cinema, 1932). This article from *Experimental Cinema,* a magazine that attempted "to counteract the… tendencies of the capitalist film industry" (**P.1**), describes how *Tabu*'s Academy Award for Best Photographic Work sparked controversy among established Hollywood photographers, and discusses the validity of the arguments put forward by said artists. The author first introduces the trouble caused at the Awards, describing the various arguments that the "incensed" (**P.57**) cameramen expressed against *Tabu* - notably the displeasure that "the photographer… was not a "*recognised*" photographer" (sic) (p.57). After a scornful critique of the assumed criteria for a photographer to be 'recognised' in Hollywood, the author concludes that this tension is "simply another manifestation of that narrow, ignorant outlook… which seems to be an inveterate characteristic of the Hollywood Movie-mind." (P.57)

Critically speaking, it is clear that this article is fraught with bias, filled with bold and scathing comments such as the one seen above, or describing the conventional Hollywood cinematography as "a bogus conception of photography..." (P.57) In addition, when considering the pragmatics of the article, one can identify that it is teeming with sarcasm; "a terrifying gush of ballyhoo…" "These precious photographic geniuses..." "The dinner at which this august personage somnambulistically presided…" (P.57) Radical and hyperbolic statements such as these carry implications of contempt for the mainstream Hollywood network, attempting to satirically evoke stereotypical imagery of bourgeois and wealthy artists content in an elitist industry. Such bitterness and exaggeration may be of no surprise

after reading an editorial statement that openly confronts the struggle "against the existing monopoly of film-art by Capital" (P.1) but could nonetheless be considered a hindrance to the validity of the writer's arguments. As such the article would be restricting for any scholarly research of the Academy's Awards or its motives for giving *Tabu* such an award. It is also important to note that this level of subjectivity may border close to propaganda; stating that the "cameramen's union of Hollywood… has no desire to encourage new talent…" (P.57) for example demonstrates a partial approach to the discussion that may, if nothing else, be said to have tainted the arguably noble goals of the magazine and limit the accessibility of its aspirations to those who already have them - outlining a paradoxical and perhaps ironic notion of exclusiveness.

However, though the article largely consists of opinion and bias, it does provide a valuable insight into the divide within audiences. To some, including the article's author (and the Academy), *Tabu* is an impressive spectacle worthy of recognition. Inversely, some photographers disagreed, believing that the alternative filming environment provided the Flaherty/Murnau production team with an unfair advantage, making the film ineligible for an award. This may be said to demonstrate different values that audiences had at the time of *Tabu*'s release - in this case an appreciation (or disliking) of the film's cinematography and aesthetics that countered the conventions of Hollywood.

Continuing on this idea of audience appeal, it may be useful to consider what companies behind the film deemed to be of most importance. When Paramount Pictures acquired world distribution rights for *Tabu* they certainly considered it cause for celebration: As seen in *Paramount Around the World* (Paramount Pictures, 1931), an internal company magazine for employees and "Paramounteers" (**P.2**), the deal was thought to be a "[capturing of] one of the prize films of the year." (**P.3**) An editor's introduction, feature article and double-page collage of stills, positive reviews and a poster across four pages (**P.2-5**) accumulates to convince the reader of the absolute triumph that the company achieved in its acquisition. Furthermore, in a possible attempt to reflect the vast scale of *Tabu*'s distribution, a peculiar graphological design choice was made; having the article's border consisting of "TABU" (sic) printed repeatedly and consistently around the page. Whether this was simply an aesthetic choice or one that was intended to remain prominent in the reader's mind, it certainly reflects the company's pride in acquiring the rights for distribution.

It is interesting to see how the magazine attempted to strike a balance between an appreciation for both *Tabu*'s artistry and Box Office potential. On one hand, the author(s) hoped to emphasise Murnau's mammoth feat in creating the film; "...a rapturous and touching romance…" "...superb directorial craftsmanship…" (P.3) It is clear that *Tabu* was seen by Paramount to be more than just standard studio-based fare, rather something more significant, going so far as to state that "[it was] a monument to [Murnau's] artistic genius." (P.5) Inversely, however, there is a noticeable underlying focus on the financial benefit of the negotiations: The collage features a poster ad that "convincingly sold the public on the spirit… of the film." (P.5) In addition, the article describes *Tabu* as "solid Box Office" (P.3) and the editor's introduction even states that the film being "readily salable in the foreign market" (sic) was a factor "that strongly influenced" the executives at Paramount. (P.2) Evidently, though an appreciation for the artistry in Murnau's work is present, it is the economic promise of *Tabu* that primarily appealed to Paramount.

Paramount Around the World is clearly a publication purposefully designed to motivate, inspire and instil a sense of pride and prestige in the company's employees and acquaintances. Despite this, I argue, Paramount still understood the artistic merits that audiences appreciated, as seen in the collage (P4-5): Stills that exemplified the beauty of the film's cinematography, adjacent to poster illustrations and emotive language such as "forbidden.." (sic) to capitalise on the exoticism of the supposed everyday life of Polynesian society shows that the executives were fully aware of the artistic weight that the film carried and indeed how to capitalise on it. The typography in particular demonstrates an awareness of such appeal, by prioritising the directorial credit and the fascination of a foreign culture with a larger font. Moreover, the reviews that surround the page are fraught with overwhelmingly positive descriptions of the film being "[g]orgeous," or "enchanting" with visuals that are "handsomely," "beautifully," "stunningly, exquisitely" photographed. (P.5) Clearly, there was an awareness of the gravity of *Tabu*'s visual accomplishments that would aid the film's marketing in an era of talking pictures.

Though my past two sources were primarily appreciative of the films photographic and aesthetic qualities, I would like to bring attention to the film's soundtrack. Being in an era of talking film, *Tabu* was a silent picture that was still popular among audiences and critics. Of course there may be an infinite number of variants that would generate such an appeal but my next source argues that the greatest marvel of Murnau's picture is not the pictures at all, rather Hugo Riesenfeld's synchronised score. Joseph O'Sullivan fondly recalls in his article

'*Music as the Narrator*' (Motion Picture Herald, 1931) how the music "is made an integral part of the narration, to a degree beyond previous screen treatment." (**P.14**) Clearly, O'Sullivan understands the film's score to be of more significance than simply an accompaniment to the film, rather an unprecedented accomplishment in employing music to aid the narrative. In a flattering description of Riesenfeld's composition, he speaks of the score's "rich tapestry of tonal texture" that provokes "a multitude of sensory impressions..." (**P.14-15**) believing the score "is handled with an authoritative appreciation of dramatic values." (**P.58**)

Evidently, O'Sullivan's passionate engagement with *Tabu*'s score surpasses the average appreciation of a film's musical accompaniment. As denoted in the article's subheading, '*Music as the Narrator*' acts as "[a] musician's exposition for laymen," (sic) referring to the author's intention of presenting the interpretation of a "music cognoscenti" (P.14) in an accessible format for the average *Herald* reader. As such, the written article borders illustrations of transcribed sheet music from the film's soundtrack. O'Sullivan, being a composer and musician, used his expertise to regularly write about film soundtracks for the magazine. As a result, it can be said (with some confidence) that the article carries some weight in its points and would be useful for further scholarly research into soundtracks in the silent film era or, in the context of *Tabu*'s release, the evolving nature of film score composition. Knowing his audience, O'Sullivan avoids any technical jargon that would limit or restrict readers without an understanding of music theory. His hand-drawn transcriptions of each of the four outlined themes within *Tabu* are accompanied by a descriptive caption that demonstrate, in O'Sullivan's view, the evocative nature of the score and its synchronicity. As with my previous sources, this article acknowledges the exotic, emotional and, at one point, the visual appeal of Murnau's film: "Of the witchery of the pictorial matter, there is no question…" (P.14) In this instance, however, it is questioned whether these characteristics would have been as memorable "if it were not for the entrancing musical conception synchronised by Dr. Riesenfeld." (sic)(P.14)

O'Sullivan raises two questions through his appraisal in his article, both of which surround audiences' values: What is the most significant factor of Murnau's last picture that made it so popular at the time of release? Moreover, was *Tabu* a landmark film in a time of evolving audience appeal?

Of course the former is a question that could have a limitless number of answers and interpretations dependant on the writer; several different examples of *Tabu* being praised for

different reasons have already seen - in the opinion of Joseph O'Sullivan, for example, the film's strongest and most significant asset is its synchronised score. The latter question, though, may be better answered by my next source; an excerpt from *The Illustrated London News* (1931). A small article by Michael Orme and full page advertisement featuring stills and an accompanying anonymous paragraph, *Tabu* is once again praised for its "glamour," (Michael Orme, **P.29**) with an appreciation of the film's dramatic elements. Most significantly Orme boldly states that he cannot believe that "after seeing "*Tabu*" the public will allow the silent picture to be sent once more into limbo." (P.29) Here the focal point of discussion is the film being silent in an era of talking pictures. Typically this would be perceived as perilous and problematic for the film among audiences, but this article argues that the film is an "oasis amongst the rocks" of the typical Hollywood conventions "which imperil the talking film." (P.29) Clearly Orme deemed *Tabu* to be of great importance, not only because of Murnau's competence as a filmmaker, but also due to the film's unique ability to capture "a magic… that could not be expressed in other medium than that of the kinema." (P.29) Similarly, the advertisement claims that the film "revives the glories of the silent film…" (**P.30**)

Bold claims, certainly, but not ones that are necessarily confined to this publication. In a review seen in the previously mentioned *Paramount Around the World* collage, *Tabu* "[represented] one of the finest examples of the art of the silent motion picture." (Paramount Pictures, 1931, P.5). Similarly, Joseph O'Sullivan claimed that *Tabu* was a "remarkable example" of a new art; the synchronised score. (Motion Picture Herald, 1931 P.14). Evidently, Murnau's film was recognised as more than just a good film; instead one that would stand out amongst competition for an originality that was significant enough to disturb the regular climate of Hollywood distribution - either in a revival of the supposedly archaic silent film format or the invention and popularisation of a new one.

The Illustrated London News is useful for introductory research into *Tabu*'s critical response, though also serves as an insightful example of what publications found most appealing about the film: Though this newspaper, as well as other articles and advertisements, displayed a fascination of the photogenic qualities of the film and its setting, any stills of the islands of Bora Bora are absent. Instead, there is a focus on the supposed culture in the South Seas; Matahi hunting a fish with a god-like aesthetic; a young boy playing with a pet; a local native percussion orchestra; tribal dances; a close up of Reri. All of these stills are accompanied by captions featuring descriptive and evocative language such as "living bronze…"

"picturesque…" "[a] fine figure of manhood…" "native beauty…" (**P.30**) Such fruitful anchorage demonstrates a focus on the exotic fascination of *Tabu*. It is not the idyllic shores or mountains of the islands that are on display, rather the faces and rituals that appear within the narrative. Said parts of the film are described as a "charming study of" or "wonderful picture of life among Polynesian natives…" (P.30) in an attempt to represent such activity as everyday occurrences of Polynesian life.

This leads on to my final point and my final source. For some time, as mentioned, *Tabu* has been the centre of many scholarly writings and discussions surrounding its form. As seen above, *Illustrated London* deemed the film to be a fair and realistic representation of Polynesian culture. But how important is this in understanding the film's historical significance? While this is not something that can be wholly answered without plentiful readings of secondary sources from throughout the years, an elementary understanding of academic approaches to documentary can at least be gained from Paul Rotha. In his book *Celluloid: The Film To-day* (Rotha, 1931) Rotha speaks of the documentary film representing reality "without mock-heroism and faked scenery," as the "life and blood of good film-making…" (**P.33**) Clearly the author possesses a strong opposition to the conventional releases of Hollywood, bitterly describing them as "slop sentimentality, sophisticated bed-passion and revenue choruses." (**P.32**) Instead, he has a passionate admiration for filmed 'reality', using *The White Hell of Pitz Palu* (Arnold Fanck, Georg Wilhelm Pabst, 1929) as proof that "film could be clean, healthy, vigorous stuff." Interestingly, though, Rotha lists *Nanook of the North* (Robert J. Flaherty, 1922) and *Moana* (Flaherty, 1926) alongside *Tabu* as a few isolated examples of films seen in a market that has otherwise "not to any great extent entered the field on non-theatrical production." (**P.34**)

This is an invaluable insight as to the approach that critical academic writings had at the time of the film's release: It is now understood that *Tabu* (as well as the other examples that are listed) is far from 'real', rather a docufiction picture. Here, however, Rotha places the film in the "fields of natural resource cinema." (**P.35**) Rotha's passions are remarkably subjective. In fact, he later become an established (perhaps 'recognised') documentarian later in his career, with his first production being a short promotional documentary released the same year as *Celluloid*. Evidently the writings of adoration for documentary in Rotha's book were foreshadowing of his succeeding endeavours, and as such may not be useful for advanced documentary research in specifically their critical approaches to early 'reality' filmmaking,

but rather as an added perspective on perceptions of documentary around the time of *Tabu*'s release.

Celluloid, like all of my other sources, omits any question of *Tabu*'s authenticity, rather accepting the film as reality. Moreover, each source has its own motives and reasoning for deeming the picture to be nothing short of a success - its visual appeal, its economic potential, its orchestral score, perhaps even its rejection of Hollywood conventions. No matter the reasoning, these sources (and their omission of discussion of form) establish an understanding that *Tabu* has remained prominent throughout history through its groundbreaking production that dazzled audiences and distributors alike, making it truly a worthy remembrance of and testament to F. W. Murnau's cinematic vision and genius.

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