Hugh Ridley

Reflections on the Literary Antecedents of Murnau’s *Tabu*

*Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau’s film Tabu (1931) represents an important moment in film history, but it also stands at an interesting crossroads of literary discussion of the South Seas. The film both moves away from literary sources and shows great sensitivity to those issues which these sources had implanted in the consciousness of developed societies. It responds to a stream of German Expressionist theory whose approach to ‘primitive’ art was more idyllic than that put forward by Wilhelm Worringer in Abstraktion und Empfindung (Abstraction and Empathy, 1908).*

My subject is F. W. Murnau’s *Tabu,* released in 1931, immediately before Murnau’s death in a motor accident, and – hardly less unfortunately – a matter of days before the final demise of the silent movie, so that a kitschy music track had to be added. Murnau worked in collaboration with Robert Flaherty (1884–1951), whose *Nanook of the North* (1921) – set among the Inuit community – and *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* (1926) (set in Polynesia, often referred to as the first ‘documentary’) had been an inspiration to him. With *Man of Aran* (1934) Flaherty came into the orbit of our present geographical situation in Galway. But the collaboration with Murnau was not close. *Tabu* cannot be called a documentary, although it possesses some documentary elements. It departed considerably from the original script on which Flaherty had worked and moved much closer to a simple romance. In that way it stayed close to the preoccupations of its many literary predecessors. When we recall that mixture between scholarly report and romance which Melville’s *Omoo* (with its footnotes from scholarly sources) became, then we can see that even its mixed origin is typical of *Tabu*’s literary antecedents.

*Tabu* is a story set on a tropical island in the Pacific. Reri – a young girl just awakening to her love for Matahi – is unexpectedly nominated as priestess of the island’s cult, and therefore becomes *taboo,* with the imposition of virginity and luxury, when all she wants is simple love. Matahi and Reri refuse to accept the imposition of this status, they elope together, are chased across the islands by the priest Hitu, who will kill Matahi if he cannot restore Reri to the cult. Matahi is working as a pearl fisher and – in order to pay off his debts – is hoping to reach a particularly rich oyster-bed, which is guarded by a precursor of

---

Jaws. When he returns with a priceless pearl he finds that, in order to protect his life from Hitu, Reri has returned with Hitu. Matahi swims through the surf and, without Reri’s becoming aware, catches up with their boat, but Hitu cuts the rope which Matahi has grasped and leaves him to drown in the waves.

The film takes place in a world somewhat before Hollywood. That is to say, we’re not in *South Pacific*: the love is between two members of the same community and there is no imported American starlet to get up the circulation. The whole film was shot on location, Murnau living on his own boat which he had personally sailed from America. There is no American airbase on the island, but actually, as one looks at the young women playing in a river – as Rudolf Arnheim commented – in Tahitian *Rheintöchterchen* style at the start of the film – the captions have just informed us that they are all amateurs –, it’s very noticeable that their gestures and body language have something of Hollywood about them. “Like missionaries of the Red Cross”, Arnheim remarks, “the film people show the islanders what a romantic South Sea island has got to look like”.\(^2\) Despite this, the tenderness of Reri and Matahi has a greater and more gentle physicality than, I suspect, was conventional for Hollywood.

The camera’s eye is definitely European/American and white. There was in any case little difference between the European and American traditions in the exotic novel of the South Seas – a field interesting enough in itself, for the way in which a country (the USA) which had for centuries been serving as utopia to the European cultures is seen here seeking its own utopias, which turn out to be European utopias too. The American line starts in the mid-1840s with Melville’s *Typee* and *Omoo*, texts which Murnau read intensively before making the film, and the first of these was translated by the popular German novelist Friedrich Gerstäcker (1816–1876) before he launched into his own novels of South Sea life, which add a tragic note to Melville’s themes.

The topic of the exotic novel in the nineteenth century cannot be adequately addressed here. It must suffice to say that it represented in both American and European culture one of the most significant sectors of the literary market. From *Robinson Crusoe* onwards it drew its fascination from two elements: the suspension of European norms of landscape and life-style, and the investigation of these norms in the contact with other ethnic and cultural groups. At this point, the exotic novel after François René de Chateaubriand increasingly built its plot on cultural love-stories, and this exploration of the erotic became a principal focus of reader expectation.\(^3\)
