

One of the great silent films of the Weimer German Republic is *Der letzte Mann*, In English it is translated as *The Last Man*, but was released in the United States as *The Last Laugh*. This is a film that celebrates *Kammerspielfilm*, which portrays a character study of a person in a lower middle-class life. Unlike German Expressionism, it focuses on the psychology of the character and eschews elaborate set designs. Also, unlike Expressionism, it avoids the use of title cards, preferring to let the actors use their emotions and the setting to portray what they are talking about.

Der letzte Mann does borrow the concept of subjectivity from Expressionism and it does everything it can so that you may consider the story from the viewpoint of our protagonist, whom I shall refer to as “the man”. Very rarely do we see a shot that is not from his perspective, but they are brief and either further the story or they show you the setting. When the man takes a short respite from his job, there is a brief shot where his manager makes a note about his work behavior. We also see a woman, joyful about meeting him at work, turn horrified when his lie is revealed. We also see gossips hard at work as they destroy his reputation in a series of shots. But again, all of these scenes are about his story. There is a very brief B-plot his daughter being wedded off, but this circumstance serves to show him more alone after his fall from grace.

To summarize the plot, the man is a doorman for a prestigious hotel called the Atlantic. This job comes with a uniform that he is immensely proud of. Indeed, a famous film critic, Lotte Eisner stated that “It is pre-eminently a German tragedy and can only be understood in a country where uniform is king, not to say god. A non-German mind will have difficulty in comprehending all its tragic implications.”

One day he is demoted to being a washroom attendant (although Murnau pointed out that the attendant makes more money than a doorman) and his uniform is taken away from him.

The man is so devastated that he steals his uniform back just so that he can wear it walking home, lest the neighbors lose their proud image of him. Eventually this lie is foiled, and the man is ruined by the gossip of his neighbors. He returns to the hotel at night, surrenders his uniform to the night watchman, and goes to sleep on his chair in the washroom. The watchman gives him his own coat out of pity.

This would be the end of the film, but the producers did not want to show such a bleak ending to an audience who was already down on their luck. Thus, the only title card in the film appears, which is an apology essentially by Murnau. We cannot have an ending like this, so the old man inherited riches from a customer. The last minutes of the film has him eating and drinking splendidly in the hotel's restaurant and sharing his wealth with the former watchman. He tips everyone very well and the film ends.

His Pride

I would like to call attention to three portions of the film which focus on his subjective perspective. The first part will focus on his pride in wearing the uniform and his position in the community. The second part is a short vignette where the man gets drunk at his daughter's reception, mostly because it is a work of great acting, it is funny, and various camera movements and effects are used to portray the drunkenness and the hangover. Lastly, we shall see how he views himself after his downfall.

The film starts by showing you how busy the hotel is, almost frantic. People are in a rush to go to and fro. We first see the man outside in the pouring rain, through the doors. He is escorting people into cars with an umbrella making sure that they do not get wet. His strength is shown by him lifting a large trunk by himself and bringing it inside. Emil Jannings, the actor, is a very large man. The camera makes him seem even larger by shooting from a slightly shorter

shot, so that his waist is at the bottom of the screen and his head almost to the top. He also has a face of magnificent sideburns and whiskers, which he takes the time to preen with a mirror in front of the hotel. He never fails to salute the guests. He helps two young ladies into their car through the rain. As they grab his arms, you can tell that he enjoys his job immensely.

When the man marches home to his tenement, he obviously brings some of the pomp and grandeur of the hotel with him. He salutes to his neighbors, and they tip their hats in return. The charwomen life and smile as he leaves his apartment, and he takes the time to help a fallen child and to give her a treat. It is very obvious that he is immensely proud of both his job, and how he is perceived by his community.

The Stupor

Although it happens after his demotion, the man steals his uniform back and manages to eke out one more day of respect from his neighbors. It is the day of his daughter's wedding, and even though he misses the wedding because he must attend to his duties, when he returns home the party is still going on. He walks up the stairs, stooped now and anxious. And then he is greeted by the new bride and groom. You can tell that he's forgotten all about the wedding because he lights up immediately. He stands up tall and proud again and salutes the guests. They toast him and he starts preening his whiskers.

The party wraps up and the man is left alone, still drinking. His uniform is now off, but he has forgotten about it. He nods and sips his wine and is still joyful and very drunk. The actor does an excellent job portraying himself as such. He's a little disheveled and his salutes are backwards, and he is very unsteady on his feet. He blows his whistle and mimes his performance of duties.

He sits down while a drunken musician plays a waltz, and the camera spins the room behind him. There is a brief scene that was shot by attaching the camera to the actor's waist and he shows you the room while he staggers about. He then falls into a drunken dream, the entrance of the hotel superimposed on his sleeping close-up and the camera becomes deliberately blurred. He walks into a very wide set, meant to be the hotel and he picks up a piece of baggage than six men cannot move and hurls it into the sky, then catches it like he is Hercules. Everyone starts clapping in the dream.

Morning comes and with it, the hangover. He is greeted by the effect of a double-visioned landlady trying to serve him coffee. He's still unsteady on his feet and remembers that he is not wearing his uniform and is late for work. He manages to get it back on and go outside, but now he sees everything through a fisheye lens.

The Fall

When the man loses his position, he immediately shrinks until he is the same size as his shorter manager. His whiskers, once magnificent, become misshapen lumps of hair on his face. He is stooped to begging, trembling as he does so, to try to stave off this fate. As he goes to the washroom, he is given towels, which he barely acknowledges. He walks like a man to his death on the gallows, slouched forwards, barely cognizant of his surroundings. At his duties, he is stooped and slower than ever. One customer even loses patience with him right after the landlady discovers his ruse. He has no pride anymore. He has been defeated by old age and he must wait for death. Above him, for the washroom is down some stairs, the rest of the hotel bustles just as much as it did before, except this time, without him. No one notices his absence.

The movie has turned into a metaphor for society's treatment of old people. They are shuffled off and forgotten about.

At night, he attempts to go home, but instead of marching home, he sneaks, like a fearful thief, back to the tenements. He is wearing his stolen uniform. Of course, he is seen immediately, and cat-called. Because this is a silent film without title cards, we're not certain what they are jeering him about, but it is no longer respectful. Everyone in the neighborhood looks out their window and he quickens his pace. We get a multiple montage of the image of the laughing face, which was used previously by the camera director Karl Freund in *Metropolis*. He enters his apartment, stooped and looking like he was beaten, but it's no longer a home. His daughter lives with her husband upstairs now. It's just an empty, dark room.

For the rest of the film, he's no longer a man. He's a shambles. He can no longer look people in the eye or stand straight. Now would be a good time to bring in some of those sets from German Expressionism and have him walk through a Hell. But the theme of this film, *Kammerspielfilm*, would not go to such dramatic extravagances. Instead, it solely focuses on Emil staggering, broken, until he returns to the washroom, which is now his crypt.