

Menschen am Sonntag (People on Sunday) (U)

24 February 2003

Germany 1929

Directors: **Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer**

Running Time: 75 minutes

Leading players: **Brigitte Borchert** (Brigitte), **Christel Ehlers** (Christel), **Annie Schreyer** (Annie), **Wolfgang von Waltershausen** (Wolfgang), **Erwin Splettstösser** (Erwin) .

SCRIPT: **Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak** from an idea by **Kurt Siodmak**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Eugen Schüfftan** assisted by **Fred Zinnemann**.

This film will be introduced and given musical accompaniment by Andrew Youdell.

The action concerns four characters of humble background – a driver, a salesgirl, a commercial traveller and an extra – who set off from their homes in Berlin to spend the day at Wandsee. They idle around, bathe and flirt, before returning to the city refreshed and enriched by a simple day off.

I suppose what is so remarkable about *People on Sunday* is that it is so unlike everyone's idea of a typical silent film, which is not to belittle popular knowledge unduly. I do not allude simply to boisterous two-reelers featuring Buster Keaton and Ben Turpin; we are all much better educated now, thanks chiefly to Brownlow and Gill's *Hollywood* TV series and the Thames Silents that followed. How many times have we gasped at what 'they' were already doing back then, technically speaking. But, with the exception of the flagship restoration of *Napoleon*, our diet has all been very US-biased, and even if Murnau, Pabst, Dreyer, Eisenstein are well known to you, I bet you haven't seen many silent *documentaries*.

I use the term documentary advisedly: the picture has a story structure and is scripted, but the parts are enacted by non-professionals assuming their real-life roles. Furthermore, the makers were undoubtedly influenced by the documentary work of Walter Ruttmann whose best known film is *Berlin – die Symphonie einer Grossstadt* (sic) (*Symphony of a Great City*) (1927). His films, though documentary in theme, were avant-garde in execution, selecting and editing images for their formal qualities rather than their literal meaning. Devices in *Menschen am Sonntag* such as the freezing of the picture when the protagonists are photographed are redolent of such a fresh, adventurous approach and may surprise us today by their modernity.

Finally, tonight's presentation is of course famous for the future careers of many of its creators, whose early work it was. It was made at a time of financial upheaval (years of hyperinflation) and burgeoning political change, but

the year was to prove a terrible turning point in both arenas. Giants of the German cinema had already emigrated to the US or France. In their turn would follow Robert Siodmak (1933 to France, then the US where he directed *The Killers*, 1946), Ulmer (about the same time, to the US where he directed the B movie classic *Detour*, 1946), Wilder (1934 to the US, need I say more?), Kurt Siodmak (1937 to the US where, like Ulmer he worked in the horror/exploitation field, writing *The Beast with Five Fingers*, 1947 and directing *The Magnetic Monster*, 1951), Schüfftan (1932 to France where he shot *Quai des Brumes*, 1938, and then the US, where he received an Oscar for *The Hustler*, 1961), and Fred Zinnemann, who in 1929 had been set to work on a documentary project with Robert Flaherty before that fell through and the present film came up; he returned to Hollywood, via Mexico, in 1934 and his directing career flowered in the fifties (*High Noon*, 1952).

How did these now legendary figures view *People on Sunday* years later? As the affectionately ironic fruit of a youthful collaboration, no doubt. On location in Paris for *Love in the Afternoon*, 1957, Wilder would remark: "Hell, I haven't seen that picture in nearly thirty years. All the old guard worked on that."

David Clare