

Blu-Ray Review: 'People on Sunday' Foreshadows Independent Cinema

Submitted by [mattmoviemann](#) [1] on July 7, 2011 - 7:21am

- [Billy Wilder](#) [2]
- [Blu-ray Review](#) [3]
- [Brigitte Borchert](#) [4]
- [Criterion Collection](#) [5]
- [Edgar G. Ulmer](#) [6]
- [Fred Zinnemann](#) [7]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [8]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [9]
- [People on Sunday](#) [10]
- [Robert Siodmak](#) [11]
- [Theater, TV, DVD & Blu-Ray](#) [12]

CHICAGO – One of the most important home entertainment releases of the year is Criterion's high-definition restoration of Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer's "People on Sunday," an extraordinary filmic landmark from 1930 that is a must-see for any self-respecting cinephile. Watching it for the first time, I felt like I was witnessing nothing less than the birth of independent cinema.

Coming out on the heels of "city symphony" pictures such as Walter Ruttmann's 1927 opus "Berlin: Symphony of a Great City," and Dziga Vertov's 1929 classic "Man With a Movie Camera," "Sunday" blended the stylistic flourishes of avant-garde documentaries with experimental narrative structures. At its core are five non-actors playing characters loosely based on themselves, and the film's witty prologue notes that after production wrapped, they all returned to their regular jobs.



Blu-Ray Rating: **5.0/5.0**

A triumphant success with critics and audiences alike, this silent German masterwork united a group of brilliant unknowns, many of whom went on to find fame and fortune in America. Siodmak ("The Killers") and Ulmer ("Detour") were joined by cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan ("The Hustler"), camera assistant Fred Zinnemann ("High Noon"), journalist-turned-writer "Billie" Wilder ("The Apartment") and co-writer Curt Siodmak ("The Wolfman"). Their combined efforts produced a picture considered by most film scholars as a groundbreaking precursor to both Italian Neorealism and the French New Wave. Though it was based in the intellectualism of Weimar Germany's New Objectivity movement, it subverted studio conventions by embracing a more expressionistic visual approach to the material. Originally restored in 1997 at the EYE Film Institute Netherlands, the vast majority of the footage was discovered and is featured on this pristine Criterion edition with improved subtitles. The crystalline picture quality brings new life to Schüfftan's mesmerizing lens, finding the melancholy beauty in the seemingly banal. His camera often rests at the level of his actors, capturing nuances that couldn't possibly be conveyed from more conventional angles. As the weary citizens of Berlin head to the Nikolassee beach for a day of lounging in the sun, the filmmakers skillfully mix actual documentary footage with staged sequences that carry a distinct aura of authenticity.

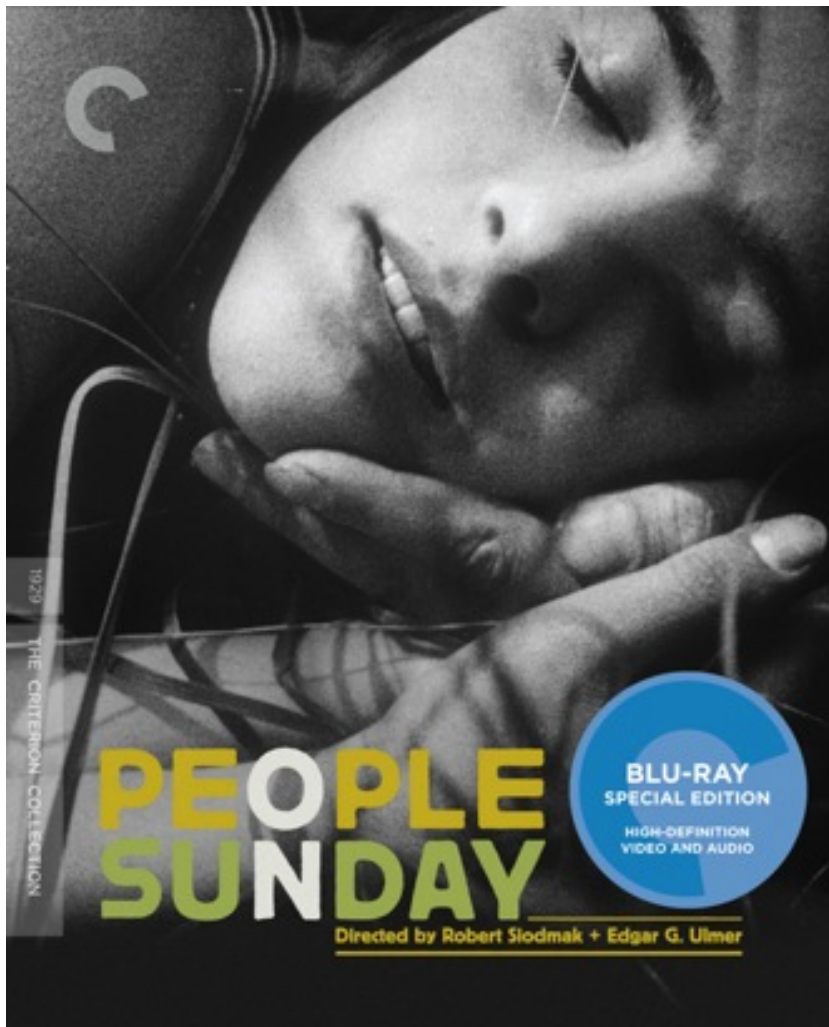


Christl Ehlers and Brigitte Borchert star in Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer's *People on Sunday*.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

During the film's charming opening act, the connections between five principal characters are established. A radiant film extra (Christl Ehlers) catches the eye of a womanizing wine salesman (Wolfgang von Waltershausen), while her best friend (Brigitte Borchert) works at a record shop. Meanwhile, within the sleepy walls of an apartment, a domestic dispute erupts between a taxi driver (Erwin Splettstösser) and a fashion model (Annie Schreyer). There's a memorable moment when the couple tears apart pictures of movie stars taped on the wall to rid each other of their respective Hollywood fantasies. Though none of the actors look like celebrities, all three actresses have an earthy beauty that trumps any number of overly made-up screen sirens. The rest of the film follows the friends on their Sunday excursion, filled with lustful urges and sordid betrayals that seem to evaporate in the summer haze. The filmmakers' cynical perspective on seasonal flings is effectively juxtaposed with the idealistic imagery of escapism. Many of the film's most unforgettable moments are worthy of Eisenstein, such as a sequence of beach-dwelling faces that freeze as a photographer snaps pictures of them. Another great scene occurs as the friends' squeals of delight fade into a montage of laughter, beautifully illustrating the universality of the human experience.

"People on Sunday" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.33:1 aspect ratio), and includes two uncompressed stereo soundtracks: a silent-era composition performed by the Mont Alto Orchestra and a far more interesting modern score from Elena Kats-Chernin, performed by the Czech Film Orchestra. Whereas the classical score is more low-key and less emotionally motivated by the onscreen action, Kats-Chernin's score goes so far as to include subtle sound effects for train whistles and swinging doors, while making intriguing use of operatic vocals. It also enhances the bittersweet tone of the production, avoiding mawkish sentiment at every turn.



People on Sunday was released on Blu-Ray and DVD on June 28, 2011.

Photo credit: The Criterion Collection

In Gerald Koll's excellent 2000 German documentary, "Weekend am Wannsee," it's revealed that the picture's original composer, Otto Stenzeel, utilized a series of pop standards that may have contributed to the film's commercial appeal. Borchert's reminiscences are particularly fascinating, such as her claim that the film was entirely improvised, and her candid admittance that she was initially attracted to von Waltershausen until she realized that he had a girlfriend. Also among the interviewees are restoration head Martin Koerber, who discusses the meticulous process of stitching together various prints of the picture to create a version that's closest to the original cut. He speculates that roughly eight minutes are still missing from the film, which he says may have simply been additional documentary footage. Curt Siodmak is also on hand to share some poignant insights, though his soundbites are too fragmented (he'll say something interesting, and then the film will cut before he has a chance to elaborate). Siodmak praises Schüfftan for altering the function of cinematography, resulting in a film that was more "about the camera" than the actors. The visual poetry was so provocative that it caused censors to disapprove of a shot featuring a naked mannequin that was originally intended to follow a prolonged love scene (the shot is restored in Koerber's cut).

Another gem available on this disc is Eugen Schüfftan's 35-minute directorial debut, "Ins Blaue hinein" ("Into the Blue"), a superbly realized slice of privileged life that bears several thematic and stylistic similarities to "People on Sunday." The accompanying booklet features a splendid essay from film scholar Noah Isenberg as well as separate (and strikingly different) accounts of the production's origins from Robert Siodmak and Billy Wilder. My favorite quote comes from the effortlessly eloquent Wilder, who says, "We went kilometers out of our way to avoid all the well-trodden paths, following instead a narrow, wholly unused, frightfully lonely course: the road sign that marked it read: 'Life.'"

'People on Sunday' is released by The Criterion Collection and stars Erwin Splettstösser, Brigitte Borchert, Wolfgang von Waltershausen, Christl Ehlers and Annie Schreyer. It was written by Billy Wilder and directed by Robert Siodmak and Edgar G. Ulmer. It was released on June 28, 2011. It is not rated.



[13]

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