



“SUNRISE”: STILL SHINING BRIGHT

BY
Lucy Fischer

Sunrise is a dialectical movie. It obviously was designed by placing things in opposition.

-Nestor Almendrosⁱ

It is no surprise that “Sunrise” (1927) directed by F.W. Murnau was one of the first films selected for preservation by the Library of Congress in 1989—a belated acknowledgment that American cinema was an art form worthy of conservation.

It is also no surprise that when the first Academy Awards were distributed in 1929 for films made during the prior two years, “Sunrise” garnered one for Unique and Artistic Picture. Even eighty years later, it made the American Film Institute’s list of the 100 best American films ever, one of only three silent movies.ⁱⁱ

But what explains the film’s lasting reputation? In my 1998 British Film Institute monographⁱⁱⁱ, I answered that question in depth, but here I must be brief. Phrased most succinctly, “Sunrise” is a work that successfully crosses numerous “borders”—nationally, technologically, thematically, and aesthetically—therefore, giving it a wide and lasting appeal.

EUROPE/AMERICA

While “Sunrise” was made in the United States by a Hollywood studio (Fox Film Corporation) it was directed by a German filmmaker, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (1888-1931) who had only arrived in California a year earlier. He was signed by Fox due to the international success of two of his previous pictures: “Nosferatu” (1922) and “The Last Laugh” (1924).

Murnau, deemed “German genius,” was given almost unprecedented freedom and control over the production. Furthermore, he drew on his German background for sources (“The Excursion to Tilsit,” by Hermann Sudermann)^{iv} and colleagues (screenwriter Carl Mayer and set designer Rochus Gliese). Significantly, the farm village in which the first half of the story transpires, resembled a European hamlet.

But “Sunrise” was also influenced by the German art movement of Expressionism—both in its visuals (with shots entailing forced perspective) and its sensibility. As critic Robin Wood explained, “Expressionism in the German cinema was more than a style; it was an atmosphere and an ethos.” The Expressionism of “Sunrise” lies in its “oppressive sense of doom or fate, and an obsessive association of sensuality with evil.”^v This style affects not only the sets and camerawork but also the excessive acting mode.

While highly influenced by the Germanic, “Sunrise” also bore the marks of a Hollywood film. First, the story line could be seen as standard melodrama, a staple of American screens. Second, the sections of the dram taking place in “The City” gave a greater sense of the modern US. Third, Murnau had all the benefits of working in a well-funded, state-of-the-art Hollywood studio. Thus, we comprehend why critic Graham Petrie called “Sunrise” neither an “American” nor a “Continental” film, but something with a deliberately “universal” quality that mediated between the two.^{vi}

SILENCE/SOUND

Just as “Sunrise” is an uncommon mix of American and European, it also occupies a peculiar median position between silence and sound, making it “a curious technological hybrid.”^{vii} While experimentation with sound in the U.S.A. had proceeded since the 1890s, commercial sound exhibition had been deterred by problems with synchronization and amplification. These difficulties were, largely, solved by the mid-twenties, when various studios adopted competing methods of sound reproduction. Warner Brothers embraced Vitaphone, a sound-on-disc

system, and, in the same year as “Sunrise,” created history by making “The Jazz Singer,” a “part-talkie.”

Fox, on the other hand, having more foresight, utilized Movietone, a sound-on-film system. In 1927, it released a series of newsreels along with “Sunrise,” which was shot silent but synchronized with a masterful musical score by Hugo Reisenfeld for distribution. One particular moment of the score stands out: when the tone of a French Horn substitutes for the voice of a man (fearing his wife has drowned calling out for her). Therefore, “Sunrise” represented both the apogee of silent cinema and an early foray into the sound era.

But why have critics like Jean-André Fieschi deemed it “a summation” and “a point of perfection in the silent cinema”?^{viii} Certainly, it is not its rather ordinary, melodramatic storyline about a nameless farm couple (The Man and The Wife) whose marriage is threatened by the entrance to their rural community of a vacationing City Woman. Seduced by the Woman, The Man plots to murder his Wife on a boat trip to The City, but eventually relents. The couple are then reunited in The City only to have The Wife almost perish when a storm hits on their return boat trip home.

It is, however, how Munau embellishes this rather standard plot material that distinguishes “Sunrise” from other contemporary movies. First, there is the level of acting and how the film makes excellent use of the gestural pantomime that was honed in the silent era. One thinks, here of the moment The Man awakens on the day he will sail to The City and presses his hands to his temples, horrified to recollect his nefarious plan. Furthermore, in other sequences (when The Man approaches The Wife with murderous intent on the boat), the acting is embellished and Expressionistic. Second, there is the productive use of stereotypes indicative of silent film technique, which was required to delineate persona without benefit of speech. Thus, the characters in the film are archetypes: The Man, The Wife, The City Woman (all with their assigned values of potential good or evil). Third, there is the level of cinematography. The graceful camera movement for which “Sunrise” is known (its tracking shots through the marshes, its ride to the city on the trolley) is a signature of the silent era since, with the coming of sound, cameras were often trapped in soundproofed “iceboxes,” unable to move.

LOST/FOUND

At its most profound and basic level, “Sunrise” is a drama of the lost and found. Clearly, this dynamic applies to The Man’s love for his wife, as it does to hers for him. It also relates to the apparent death of The Wife, who is ultimately found alive. While on the surface, this story is one of quotidian melodrama, on another tier, it bears more momentous implications. For the narrative has an almost biblical sense of Paradise Lost and Regained, complete with banishment of the Devil (the City Woman who must leave the farm village). Hence, it is fitting that Jo Leslie Collier refers to its denouement as restoring the farm couple’s “Edenic state” of existence.^{ix}

This dynamic of loss and restitution is inscribed in the very style of the film. What is especially compelling about the scene of The Man’s first tryst with the City Woman in the village marshes is the way the camera “loses” him temporarily, only to “find” him again (after, unexpectedly, “finding” his lover). Here, what is “found” is suspect, since she is not the object The Man truly seeks.

But the notion of the lost and found also applies to the critical response to “Sunrise” which has, historically, traced an eradication and return of regard (like that of The Man for his spouse). In its day, it was a box office failure. As Fox’s most expensive silent film, it did not recoup its costs.^x Furthermore, when released, its artistic worth was hotly debated. While Mordaunt Hall of the “New York Times” called it a “A film Masterpiece,” others were not so kind.^{xi} Robert Herring in a “Close Up” review sardonically entitled “Synthetic Dawn,” wrote: “it succeeds quite elaborately in repeating the superficialities of every age while giving expression to none of the complexities of this.”^{xii}

While, in its own era a reviewer like Herring might dismiss “Sunrise” as ridiculous, in later years (after a period of disregard), it achieved canonical status. For instance, in 1967, “Cahiers du cinema” named it “the single greatest masterwork in the history of the cinema.”^{xiii}

It is a testament to the strength of the work that it refuses to be so discounted. But why and how? To understand this, we must consider a statement made by Alexander Astruc who hyperbolically describes Murnau’s style as involving “murder,” and “assassination.”^{xiv} I would argue that what “Sunrise” annihilates is the viewer’s cynicism--the tendency (as a demonstration of high cultivation) to regard it as dated, outré, or trite.

Curiously, though Herring denounced "Sunrise," he had some insight into it when he said that it "takes us back and makes us unlearn."^{xv} If "Sunrise" causes us a regression, it is to finding our more innocent selves. Thus, it makes us to lose our skepticism regarding the "banalities" of human existence, and the potential for art to move us. (Significantly, in "Sunrise," the couple's former happiness is represented as a time when they behaved "like children"). What "Sunrise" forces us to "unlearn" (when we view it now) is some 125 years of cinema--a history that has hardened us to shameless emotion and inured our guileless response. As Fieschi states, "Sunrise" represents a tradition in which the "sentimental... virus'... dominate[s]."^{xvi} It is to this "contagion" that we succumb.

It is such surrender of which the philosopher Longinus speaks in his classical treatise "On the Sublime." In it, he talks of the aesthetic phenomenon of "transport," of art's casting a "spell" over the audience.^{xvii} It is just this reaction that we have to "Sunrise." If within the film's narrative The Man loses and regains his mind, the same might be said of the spectators, who forsake but retrieve their affective powers.

Thus, the film makes us cross a series of personal borders as well --those between love and hate (for the film's emotionality and platitudes) and between sophistication and naivete. While society quashes our hopes for a world in which good can derive from evil, or in which love can flourish in acute distress—"Sunrise" forbids such sublimation in the name of the Sublime.

"Sunrise" was added to the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 1989.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Library of Congress.

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ⁱ Nestor Almendros, "Sunrise." *American Cinematographer* LXV (April 1984), pp. 28-32, 31.

ⁱⁱ The others were *Intolerance* (1917, D.W. Griffith) and *The Gold Rush* (1925, Charles Chaplin)

ⁱⁱⁱ Lucy Fischer, *Sunrise, A Song of Two Humans*, London: British Film Institute, 1998.

^{iv} Hermann Sudermann, "The Excursion to Tilsit," Trans. Lewis Galantiere (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930).

^v *Robin Wood, "Murnau's Midnight and Sunrise," *Film Comment* 12, no. 3 (May-June 1976), pp. 4-19.

^{vi} *Petrie, Graham, *Hollywood Destinies: European Directors in America, 1922-1931* (London, Boston, Melbourne and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).

^{vii} Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, *Film History: Theory and Practice* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 92.

^{viii} Jean-André Fieschi, "F.W. Murnau" in Richard Roud, ed., *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary/ The Major Film-Makers/ Volume Two* (London: Martin Secker and Warburg, 1980), pp. 704-720, 706.

^{ix}Jo Leslie Collier, *From Wagner to Murnau: The Transposition of Romanticism from State to Screen* (Ann Arbor and London: UMI Research Press, 1988), 107.

^x Allen and Gomery, 103, 91

^{xi} Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen: A Film Masterpiece," *The New York Times* (24 September 1927), p.15.

^{xii} Robert Herring, "Synthetic Dawn." *Close Up*, 2, no. 3 (March 1928), pp. 38-45, 45.

^{xiii} Allen and Gomery 91.

^{xiv} Alexander Astruc, "Fire and Ice." *Cahiers du Cinema* (English version) no. 1 (Jan. 1966), pp. 69-73.

^{xv} Herring 44.

^{xvi} Fieschi 717.

^{xvii} Longinus, "On the Sublime" in Smith, Harry James and Parks, Ed Winfield, eds. *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*. Third Edition (New York: Norton, 1951), pp. 65-111.