



Sunrise A Song of Two Humans

When F.W. Murnau left Germany for America in 1926, did cinema foresee what was coming? Did it sense that change was around the corner – that now was the time to fill up on fantasy, delirium and spectacle before talking actors wrenched the art-form closer to reality? *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* – the pinnacle of Murnau’s silent career – certainly suggests this was the case.

Many things make this film more than just a morality tale about temptation and lust, a fable about a young husband so crazy with desire for a city girl that he contemplates drowning his wife, an elemental but sweet story of a husband and wife rediscovering their love for each other. *Sunrise* was an example – perhaps never again repeated on the same scale – of unfettered imagination and the clout of the studio system working together rather than at cross purposes. Murnau had a new Fox studio to transform into moonlit marshes and dazzling gargantuan cityscapes. In his quest for optical experimentation he used every tool available (superimposition, in-camera trickery), inventing those that didn’t already exist (such as his flying camera, floating from cranes above).

Testament to Murnau’s remarkable achievement was the fact that post-*Sunrise* cinema could never again be dismissed as lightweight amusement in quite the same way. Combining Expressionism’s shadows and shards of light with the lyricism of Dutch genre painting, Murnau decreed that cinema could do what art does, and more...

Isabel Stevens, *Sight & Sound*, September 2012

In Jonathan Rosenbaum and Adrian Martin’s publication *Movie Mutations* Raymond Bellour includes FW. Murnau on his list of ‘transcendental’ filmmakers, whose greatness is unquestioned but whose work is rarely discussed nowadays. DVDs of Murnau’s films have hopefully gone some way towards convincing younger cinephiles that he is a filmmaker with contemporary relevance rather than the property of academics.

Sunrise tells the tale of a nameless farmer (George O’Brien) seduced by a sophisticated woman (Margaret Livingston) who encourages him to kill his young wife (Janet Gaynor). While the film’s ideas about sexuality – in which women are defined as mothers or whores – might at first glance seem to belong to a distant era, one could argue that such notions are still very much with us, their assumptions skillfully disguised.

As Robin Wood has pointed out in a series of *Film Comment* articles, *Sunrise* is the central part of a loose trilogy that begins with *Nosferatu Eine Symphonie des Grauens* (1922) and ends with Murnau’s final film *Tabu* (1931). In all three films a young and ‘innocent’ heterosexual couple find their happiness threatened by a single powerful individual. But whereas the first two films associate sexuality with an external menace, in *Tabu* it is the couple who are sexual, and the force that threatens them is a castrating father figure. If

Nosferatu and *Sunrise* suggest that 'evil' is a product of the id, *Tabu* connects it with the superego.

Murnau's lost 1928 film *4 Devils* was virtually a remake of *Sunrise*: in both films a sophisticated woman lures a young man away from his sexually innocent lover. *4 Devils* clearly presented its hero and heroine as childlike, and what struck me on watching *Sunrise* again in this light is the film's emphasis on its central couple's immaturity: 'They used to be like children,' insists a neighbour, her words confirmed by deliberately clichéd imagery of the protagonists' happy past. It is hardly surprising that the homosexual Murnau should have viewed heterosexual fulfilment as a fantasy (the joke of the famous church-steps sequence is surely that the man and the woman have been 'mistaken' for something they are not – two married adults). But here the city woman, whose outlaw sexuality was closer to the director's own, is portrayed in purely negative terms. This woman is essentially the bad (because sexual) mother, and if her attraction to the farmer seems on the face of it almost totally inexplicable, the Oedipal nature of her relationship with him is neatly defined by a scene in which she cradles his head in her lap, like a mother comforting her child.

Brad Stevens, *Sight & Sound*, February 2004

No sooner had the German film industry made its spectacular post-war recovery than it began to haemorrhage talent to the Hollywood studio bosses competing for big names. None was bigger than Murnau after the success of two films in very different genres, *The Last Laugh* (1924) and *Faust* (1926), and William Fox gave him carte blanche to create this elemental fable of temptation leading to redemption. Only in silent cinema could there be 'The Man' and 'The Woman', living in a fishing village near A City. Janet Gaynor played her second innocent of the same year (alongside *7th Heaven*), partnered this time by George O'Brien, as the husband who thinks better of his murderous plan. But more than with almost any other film, it's the composition and movement of *Sunrise* that grip us as we follow the pair from a rural paradise, via a magical trolley-car ride, to the City, where they're reconciled amid its impersonal bustle.

The vast exterior set that Murnau's art department built became almost as famous as Griffith's Babylon for *Intolerance* a decade earlier, and was adapted for several other Fox films; but unlike *Metropolis*, it never becomes the focus of attention. This remains fixed on the archetypal couple and their experiences, recalling the contrasting vignettes of high and low life in *The Last Laugh*. Both films were written by Carl Mayer, the unsung genius of Weimar cinema, who had launched its success with *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1919) and believed passionately in film as visual storytelling, with few or ideally no titles to break the spell. If *Sunrise* still moves us, in a version that's survived with its original orchestral score by Hugo Reisenfeld, it's surely due to Mayer's vision being so faithfully realised by all concerned. Four years later, Murnau was dead and Mayer died impoverished in wartime London, but *Sunrise* still radiates its magic.

Ian Christie, *Sight & Sound*, November 2013

Warner Bros was first out of the gate with *The Jazz Singer* in 1927, but William Fox had been developing his 'Movietone' technology and picking up patents left, right and centre – including crucially the rights to the Tri-Ergon system – a couple of years before Al Jolson uttered his prophetic ad lib, 'You

ain't heard nothin' yet.' Probably the most ambitious of the moguls, Fox was well aware of the power of patents. In the previous decade he had been the last holdout, the independent who broke Thomas Edison's stifling Motion Picture Patents Company and laid the foundation stone of the studio system. With the introduction of Fox Movietone (initially for newsreels), the acquisition of numerous upscale theatres (including the Loews chain and the 6,000-seat Roxy in New York) and the arrival of F.W. Murnau from Germany, arguably the greatest director of the era, Fox staked his claim to the top spot in the Hollywood hierarchy. If everything went to plan he would consolidate his position with the introduction of the widescreen Grandeur process (pioneered by Raoul Walsh in *The Big Trail* in 1930), for which he personally held the patent.

Murnau was his ace. Fox saw *The Last Laugh* in New York in December 1924 and offered the filmmaker carte blanche to make a picture of his own choosing. He put the entire resources of his studio at Murnau's disposal, and agreed to let him retain his core UFA production team for *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927). Like Orson Welles in 1940, Murnau enjoyed unparalleled privilege on the strength of his pedigree as an artist and innovator, someone who would bestow quality and prestige on the business. Fox believed his contract directors (among them John Ford, Raoul Walsh and Frank Borzage) would learn from the German's prodigious technique, his mastery of the mobile camera and his commitment to visual storytelling.

The qualities of *Sunrise* have been well documented (it was placed fourth on the *Cahiers du cinéma* poll of the best 100 films last year). In many ways it represents the apogee of the silent era, a synthesis of filmic devices including dissolves, tracking shots, expressionist acting and lighting and breath-taking set design – and a Movietone score and effects track. Ford called *Sunrise* 'the greatest motion picture ever produced,' and at the first Academy Awards it was singled out as 'Best Picture, Unique and Artistic Production' (as opposed to *Wings*, 'Best Picture, Production').

For all its sophistication, *Sunrise* failed to recoup its costs – it was the first chink in William Fox's strategy. While relations between the studio boss and Murnau remained warm, Fox imposed a happy ending on the German's second Hollywood picture, *4 Devils* (1928, now lost). By the time Murnau shot his third, *City Girl*, the interference became too great, and the director set sail for Tahiti before the film was finished.

Tom Charity, *Sight & Sound*, March 2009

SUNRISE A SONG OF TWO HUMANS

Director: F.W. Murnau
Production Company: Fox Film Corporation
Studio Head: Winfield R. Sheehan
Producer: William Fox
Assistant Director: Herman Bing
Scenario: Carl Mayer
Titles: Katherine Hilliker, H.H. Caldwell
Comedy Consultant: William Conselman
Based on the novel Die Reise nach Tilsit *by:* Hermann Sudermann
Directors of Photography: Charles Rosher, Karl Struss
Assistant Cameramen: Stuart Thompson, Hal Carney
Stills: Frank Powolny
Special Effects: Frank D. Williams
Editor: Harold Schuster
Art Director: Rochus Gliese
Art Department: Gordon Wiles
Assistant Art Directors: Alfred Metscher
Make-up: Carl Dudley

Cast

George O'Brien (*the man*)
Janet Gaynor (*the wife*)
Margaret Livingston (*the woman from the city*)
Bodil Rosing (*the maid*)
J. Farrell MacDonald (*the photographer*)
Ralph Sipperly (*the hairdresser*)
Jane Winton (*the manicure girl*)
Arthur Housman (*the obtrusive gentleman*)
Eddie Boland (*the obliging gentleman*)

uncredited

Gino Corrado (*barbershop manager*)
Gibson Gowland (*angry driver*)
Sidney Bracey (*dancehall manager*)
Phillips Smalley (*head waiter*)
Barry Norton (*dancer*)
F.W. Murnau (*vacationer on boat*)
Sally Eilers
Herman Bing
Robert Kortman
Robert Parrish
Leo White

USA 1927©

94 mins

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Tue 7 Mar 18:00; Sat 11 Mar 20:45
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Citizen Kane Tue 7 Mar 20:30
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Portrait of a Lady on Fire (Portrait de la jeune fille en feu) Wed 8 Mar 20:30
Cléo from 5 to 7 (Cléo de 5 à 7)
Wed 8 Mar 21:00
2001: A Space Odyssey
Thu 9 Mar 18:00

Singin' in the Rain Thu 9 Mar 18:10
(+ intro by Miles Eady, Film Writer and Curator); Tue 14 Mar 14:30
Man With a Movie Camera (Chelovek s kino-apparatom) Thu 9 Mar 20:50
Persona Thu 9 Mar 21:05
Tokyo Story (Tôkyô monogatari) Fri 10 Mar 18:00; Wed 15 Mar 14:30
Close-Up (Nema-ye Nazdik)
Fri 10 Mar 18:30; Wed 15 Mar 20:50
The Godfather Fri 10 Mar 19:00; Sun 12 Mar 18:15
La Règle du jeu (The Rules of the Game)
Sat 11 Mar 18:05
Do the Right Thing Sat 11 Mar 18:10
Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles Sat 11 Mar 18:50
Playtime Sat 11 Mar 20:30
Shoah Sun 12 Mar 11:00
Apocalypse Now: Final Cut
Sun 12 Mar 20:00 BFI IMAX
Taxi Driver Mon 13 Mar 20:40
Seven Samurai (Shichinin no samurai)
Tue 14 Mar 18:40
The Passion of Joan of Arc (La passion de Jeanne d'Arc) Wed 15 Mar 20:40 (with score)

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