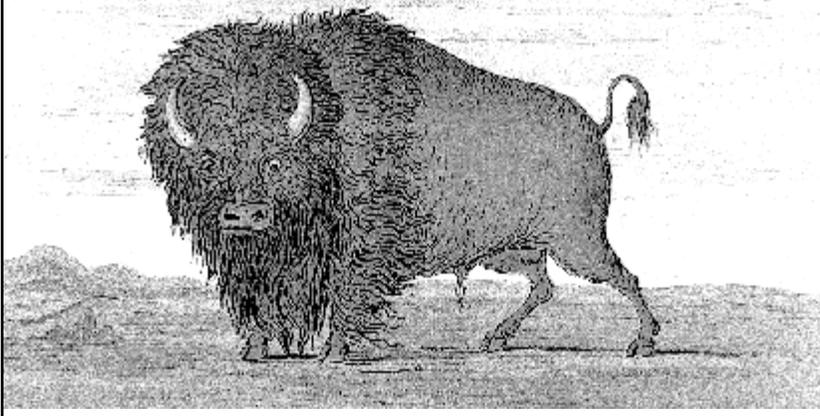


The Buffalo Film Seminars



Conversations about great films with Diane Christian & Bruce Jackson



F.W. MURNAU (Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe, 28 December 1888, Bielefeld, North-Rhine-Westphalia, Germany – 11 March 1931, Santa Barbara, California, road accident) made 18 of his 22 films in Germany. Of those he is perhaps best known for *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (*Nosferatu the Vampire*, *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror*, 1922). His last film, made shortly before his death, was *Tabu, a Story of the South Seas* 1931. Murnau was a genius at mood, particularly gloomy and scary mood, and he frequently focused his camera on monsters or people at the periphery.

GEORGE O'BRIEN (19 April 1900, San Francisco – 4 September 1985, Tulsa, Oklahoma) appeared in 84 films from *White Hands* in 1922 to *Cheyenne Autumn* in 1964. In the 1930s and 1940s he acted in dozens of unmemorable westerns and crime films with such titles as *Bullet Code* 1940, *The Marshal of Mesa City* 1939, *The Fighting Gringo* 1939, *Racketeers of the Range* 1939, *Lawless Valley* 1938, *The Renegade Ranger* 1938, *Border G-Men* 1938, *Frontier Marshal* 1934, *The Gay Caballero* 1932, and *Riders of the Purple Sage* 1931. He was also in three memorable John Ford films in the 1940s: *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* 1949, *Fort Apache* 1948, and, as the narrator, *December 7th* 1943.

JANET GAYNOR (Laura Gainor, 6 October 1906, Philadelphia – 14 September 1984, Palm Springs, California, pneumonia) appeared uncredited in 20 films (*Cupid's Rustler* 1924 to *Don't Shoot* 1926) before getting her name on the screen for the first time in *The Midnight Kiss* 1926. After that she appeared in 40 other films, the best known of which is *A Star is Born* 1937. She also appeared in *The Farmer Takes a Wife* 1935, *Tess of the Storm Country*, and *Daddy Long Legs* 1931. In 1929, she won an Oscar for Best Actress in a Leading Role for her work in three films: *Seventh Heaven* and *Sunrise* in 1927 and *Street Angel* in 1928.

MARGARET LIVINGSTON (25 November 1900, Salt Lake City – 13 December 1984, Warrington, Pennsylvania) first appeared in *The Invisible Chain* 1916; her last film was *The Social Register* 1934. There were 76 others. She was married for 31 years to bandleader Paul Whiteman.

CHARLES ROSHER (17 November 1885, London, England – 15 January 1974, Lisbon, Portugal, from a fall), was nominated for six best photography Oscars *Show Boat* 1952, *Annie Get Your Gun* 1950, *The Yearling* 1946 (won), *Kismet* 1945, *The Affairs of Cellini* 1934 and *Sunrise* (won). Some of his other 129 films were *Kiss Me Kate* 1953, *Annie Get Your Gun* 1950, *Tess of the Storm Country* 1922, *Little Lord Fauntleroy* 1921, *Pollyanna* 1920, *With General Pancho Villa in Mexico* 1913. **KARL STRUSS** (30 November 1886, New York, New York – 16 December 1981, Santa Monica, California) received four Oscar nominations: *Aloma of the South Seas* 1941,

SUNRISE: A SONG OF TWO HUMANS (1927)

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 Barber

Jane Winton...The Manicure Girl
Arthur Housman...The Obtrusive Gentleman
Eddie Boland...The Obliging Gentleman
Barry Norton...Dancer

Directed by F.W. Murnau
Story by Hermann Sudermann ("Die Reise Nach Tilsit") and Carl Mayer
Titles by Katherine Hilliker and H.H. Caldwell
Produced by William Fox
Original music by Timothy Brock
Cinematography by Charles Rosher and Karl Struss
Film Editing by Harold D. Schuster
Art Direction by Rochus Gliese
95 minutes
Academy Awards for Best Actress in a Leading Role (Gaynor), Cinematography (Rosher, Struss), Best Picture, Unique and Artistic Production
Selected for National Film Registry by the National Film Preservation Board, 1989

The Sign of the Cross 1932, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* 1931, and *Sunrise* 1927 (won). Some of his other 137 films were *The Deerslayer* 1957, *Mesa of Lost Women* 1953, *Limelight* 1952, *Rocketship X-M* 1950, *The Macomber Affair* 1947, *Tarzan and the Leopard Woman* 1946, *The Great Dictator* 1940, *Island of Lost Souls* 1933, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* 1931.

SUNRISE A Song of Two Humans. Lucy Fisher. BFI Publishing 1998

...the decision to produce *Sunrise* was a fortuitous historical accident by which the resources of Hollywood were put, for once, at the service of a great film artist'.

Of course, Murnau's success should be seen as part of a broader context—that is the international cachet of German cinema in the silent era. Such directors as Ernst Lubitsch, Fritz Lang, Ludwig Berger, Paul Leni, and E.A. Dupont had already made their mark on American cinema, and films like *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1919), *Passion* (1919), *The Golem* (1920) and *Siegfried* (1924) had achieved acclaim. According to Allen and Gomery, Fox Studios signed Murnau in order 'to demonstrate that they were more than venders of entertainment for the masses but were also patrons of the highest cinematic art' (99). Since *The Last Laugh* had been a commercial failure in the United States, Fox could have had no delusion that Murnau would be a box-office winner.

Murnau was given almost unprecedented freedom and control over his first project for Fox—a film titled *Sunrise* to be based on a story by Hermann Sudermann. In addition to his drawing on a German literary source, Murnau employed a host of European colleagues for the project. His scenarist was Carl Mayer (1894-1944), an Austrian writer who collaborated with Murnau on seven films over the course of his career, including *The Last Laugh*. With Mayer, came the legacy of German Expressionism: he had co-authored the script for *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Some claim that Mayer was influential in bringing camera movement to Murnau's work, and in valorising a purely visual (almost title-less) form of silent cinema (Desilets, 6-7). Rather than travel to Hollywood, Mayer remained in Germany to write the treatment for *Sunrise*, which modified Sudermann's story about a married farmer who becomes involved in an obsessive, adulterous affair.

The set designer for *Sunrise*, Rochus Gliese (1891-1978), was also German, but, unlike Mayer, he accompanied Murnau to Hollywood. Gliese had worked on three of Murnau's previous films. . . .Gliese's work was central to the visual effect and aesthetics of *Sunrise*, and the film immediately became known for its grand, ambitious and expensive *mise en scène*. (Mordaunt Hall, in his *New York Times* review, referred to *Sunrise* as costing 'a staggering sum of money'.) Especially noteworthy was the elaborate artificial city Gliese created for the farm couple's visit to town, as well as the scenery they passed on their way there during a trolley ride. Eisner quotes an Austrian journalist who wrote:

Only what was strictly

Sunrise was shot as a silent film



necessary was constructed, and the sets never went beyond what the camera itself required. Everything was built in terms of the camera lens, using . . . *trompe d'oeil*. (Eisner, 180)

Gliese was also responsible for constructing a simulated rural village by the shores of Lake Arrowhead, California to serve as the farm couple's community. Though the locale of *Sunrise* is left vague (the intertitles explain that it is 'no place' and 'every place'), to Eisner, the village 'looks completely German', with *The Wife* (Janet Gaynor, 1906-84) 'a sort of German Gretchen'.

One of the cameramen on *Sunrise*, Charles Rosher (1885-1974), was an Englishman who had worked in Hollywood since the early days. By the time Rosher met Murnau, the cinematographer had worked with Cecil B. DeMille and was Mary Pickford's chief cameraman and publicity photographer. Rosher's first professional contact with Murnau was when the cameraman spent a year in residence at the Ufa studios in Berlin, serving as a consultant on Murnau's last European film, *Faust* (1925)...Rosher claims to have learnt a great deal from *Faust's* German cameraman, Carl Hoffman. . . .Both Rosher and the other cameraman on *Sunrise*, Karl Struss, received the first Academy Award for Cinematography in honour of their work.

[Struss began his career studying photography at Columbia and later became a member of Stieglitz's Photo-Secession group. Did fashion and celebrity portraiture work.]

[Murnau coached George O'Brien (the Man) to act with his back, insisted he wear lead weights in his shoes during the first part of the film (including the scenes in the marshes where he meets his paramour, the Woman from the City). This strategy gave O'Brien a slow, lumbering, gait that connoted monstrosity.]

Jo Leslie Collier sees Murnau's style as marked by German Romanticism as well as by Expressionism, thus supporting Fieschi's sense of the film's 'strategic refusal to let itself be defined by any particular aesthetic dogma' (Fieschi, 704).

"One would hesitate to call *any* film the finest of its era, though as a climax to the silent film, one could certainly defend the statement if it were applied to *Sunrise*." William K. Everson

but synchronised with a musical score for distribution.

While the film's bold straddling of silence and sound is intriguing, its release was not a commercial success. As Allen and Gomery note: 'Poorly promoted, released amidst the hoopla of *The Jazz Singer* and mistimed with Fox's Movietone newsreel, *Sunrise* had no chance at the box office.' As Fox's most expensive silent film, it failed to recoup its costs.

But it is to Murnau's credit that the country is not made to seem entirely attractive or safe. Though it is clear that the sense of menace that permeates The Man's midnight walk to the marshes is related to the Woman from the City, it is also the swamp that seems dangerous in its ability to drag one down. Similarly, the picturesque lake on which the couple's village sits is, at one moment, a site for a tourist postcard, and at another, a crime scene.

While the city is tied to the figure of a seductive, home-wrecking woman—and thereby carries considerable negative weight—it is also a site of great excitement and appeal.

The City Woman fits the classic model of the vamp in both her clothing and mannerisms. Since the term 'vamp' derived from the word 'vampire', it is not surprising that she resembles Murnau's Nosferatu—magically summoning The Man with her whistle, hovering over his neck as she kisses him, and slinking off at dawn when The Man is reunited with his wife. The kind of illusionism Doane associates with vamps is, here, registered in the City Woman's engagement of masquerade (costume and make-up), her encouragement of the man's duplicity (cheating on his wife, secretly planning her demise), and her association with the 'movie' of the city which plays in The Man's mind. Obviously, *Sunrise* is also a story of a 'fallen man'—on several registers; moral, economic and psychic. In its focus on beleaguered masculinity, it once again references German cinema of the 20s, which displayed 'a certain ambivalence in male self-images and male sexuality'.

For Janet Staiger, the *femme fatale* is a figure that fundamentally bespeaks social turmoil:

The character of the vamp seems almost to be merely a foil for an extensive examination of the power of sex, women's rights in this new age, and the crumbling belief in the assertion that some nineteenth-century notions of the family's behavior were still pertinent for twentieth-century America.

The contrast between the vamp's sexuality and The Wife's maternity is made clear early on in the film with scenes of the lovers' embrace in the marsh intercut with shots of The Wife and child at home.

The power accorded to the *femme fatale* is a function of fears linked to the notions of uncontrollable drives, the fading of subjectivity and the loss of conscious agency—all themes of the emergent theories of psychoanalysis.

Psychological themes are central to *Sunrise*, which was made when 'Freudian gospel began to circulate to a marked extent among the American lay public'.

Murnau is concerned with the broad forces of the psyche (love, hate, lust, regret, guilt)—drives that ostensibly motivate, plague and bedevil humankind.

In the more 'magical' sequences, however, Murnau literally depicts a character's consciousness, in an attempt to 'photograph thought' Murnau boasted that critics described him as a 'mental director' (Ibid.) And indicated his interest in stream of consciousness techniques. As he stated:

We have our thoughts and also our deeds. James Joyce, the English novelist, demonstrates this very well in his works. He first picturizes the mind and then balances it with action. After all, the mind is the motive behind the deed.'

This is displayed in *Sunrise*, during the sequences in which The Man sees an enticing vision of the city (associated with his temptation), or when he imagines an image of drowning his wife (linked to his homicidal tendencies). Murnau also gains access to a character's anteriority through the technique of superimposition—for example, when The Man lies in his bed on the evening he first considers murder, water imagery is layered over his body. In the same scene, images of the Woman from the City are matted into the frame and matched so perfectly to his torso that she seems to embrace him—a representation of his lust. Finally, when The Man overcomes his moral struggle, and his sanity is restored, his new found peace is represented by a scene of the couple walking through an imaginary field in the midst of city traffic.

Martin Scorsese called *Sunrise* a "superproduction, an experimental film and a visionary poem."

[Murnau the name young art historian Plumpe chose was the Bavarian town associated with the famous Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider) movement in Germany in the early 1900s.]

The driving force behind the Blaue Reiter group was a Russian émigré to Munich—Wassily Kandinsky—who drew around him such painters as Gabriele Muntz, Alexei von Jawlensky, August Macke, Franz Marc, Marianne von Werefkin and Paul Klee.

Several of the Blaue Reiter artists painted scenes of Murnau—a village (situated by a lake) not unlike the fictional one in *Sunrise*.

According to Annette and Luc Vezin, the Blaue Reiter group imagined a 'universal' art that was characterised by 'neither nationality, nor frontiers, but simply humanity'. This philosophy fits with Murnau's titling of *Sunrise* as 'a song of two humans'.

There is another episode which happens in the city that is relevant to themes of vision and the cinema: the church scene. The couple, having struggled with the recognition of infidelity and violence, is finally reunited, and they walk dazedly through town. As they embrace, bells are heard, and a church comes into view with a wedding in progress. The couple exchange poignant glances and head toward the chapel. Once inside, they become the *spectators*; as they watch, the minister asks the groom whether he will protect his bride from harm. Touched, The Man says 'yes' (in unison with the groom), and then falls sobbing into his wife's lap.

What is shown here is a demonstration of the power of spectatorship—the very kind on which *Sunrise* depends—an acknowledgment of the capacity of drama to force the viewer to identify with its personae and to be moved to catharsis. It is as if the farm couple take the place of the cinema audience as they in turn watch a bride and groom who are substitutes for themselves. As Dudley Andrew states: 'The film here signals the mode of response it demands from us, signals itself as ritual, the very observing of which has the power to liberate the viewer'.

In 1967 *Cahiers du cinéma* named *Sunrise* 'the single greatest masterwork in the history of the cinema'.

Philip Kemp, in *World Film Directors* V.I (1890-1945) Ed. John Wakeman. H.W. Wilson Co. 1987 NY:

Of Murnau's total output of twenty-one films, nine are currently thought to be lost.

A recurrent theme in Murnau's work is of individuals who cut themselves off from some form of primal innocence (often represented by a simple country life) in order to plumb forbidden depths, physical or emotional. By doing so, they release dark, chthonic forces that threaten to destroy them. Variations on this theme underlie *Faust*, *Sunrise*, and *Tabu*.

The film [*Der Letzte Mann*, 1924] attained an unprecedented degree of camera mobility and camera subjectivity. Working closely with Karl Freund, Murnau and Mayer devised means of liberating the apparatus from its tripod, letting it wheel and soar around and within the action.

The visual fluidity gained by this *entfesselte Kamera* ("unchained camera") was hailed by such young filmmakers as Marcel Carné, who wrote: "The camera. . . glides, rises, zooms or weaves where the story takes it. It is no longer fixed, but takes part in the action and becomes a *character* in the drama."

In America, he hoped, he would find new opportunities to develop my artistic aims." He may have also hoped to find greater personal freedom; as a homosexual, he had always felt oppressed by the threat of Germany's savage penal code. He arrived in Hollywood in July, 1926. Under the terms of his contract, Fox's "German genius" had complete freedom to choose his own subject, could spend as he liked, and would be wholly free from studio interference—at least on his first film.

Sunrise may well be the most German film ever made in Hollywood. Watching it, one can easily forget that it is, in fact, an American movie, made with American actors and a largely American crew; the look and feel are so entirely consistent with Murnau's previous work.

. . . often regarded as (in David Robinson's word) "the apogee of the German Expressionist cinema."

"Real art," Murnau once observed, "is simple, but simplicity requires the greatest art." *Sunrise* was shot almost entirely under studio conditions, but achieves—especially in the first half of the film—a cool unforced atmosphere in which naturalism and expressionism seem to merge in a dream landscape, real and unreal at once.

Robert Sherwood, reviewing it in *Life*, called it "the most important picture in the history of the movies."

Join us next week, Tuesday, September 3, for Peter Lorre in Fritz Lang's *M* (1931).

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