January 31, 2023 (Series 45:1)
F.W. Murnau SUNRISE (1927, 94 min)

URL for this week's Vimeo intro to the film (and all other Vimeo intros and Zoom discussions since March 2022):
https://vimeo.com/user80710589
URL for all 7:00PM Tuesday Zoom discussions:
https://buffalo.zoom.us/j/93763641566?pwd=YS96cVh5c0EwS3lCcENDYzIyWm9Rdz09

Academy Awards for Unique and Artistic Picture. Best Actress in a Leading Role, and Best Cinematography (1929)
Selected for preservation in the National Film

Directed by F.W. Murnau
Written by Carl Mayer (scenario), Hermann Sudermann (original theme by), Katherine Hilliker (titles) and H.H. Caldwell (titles)
Produced by William Fox (uncredited)
Music R.H. Bassett (Los Angeles premiere) (uncredited), Carli Elinor (Los Angeles premiere) (uncredited), Erno Rapee (New York premiere) (uncredited), Hugo Riesenfeld (uncredited), Willy Schmidt-Gentner (uncredited)
Cinematography Charles Rosher & Karl Struss
Film Editing Harold D. Schuster (uncredited)

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 Barber
Jane Winton…The Manicure Girl
Arthur Housman…The Obtrusive Gentleman
Eddie Boland…The Obliging Gentleman
Herman Bing…Streetcar Conductor (uncredited)
Sidney Bracey…Dance Hall Manager (uncredited)
Gino Corrado…Manager of Hair Salon (uncredited)
Sally Eilers…Woman in Dance Hall (uncredited)
Gibson Gowland…Angry Driver (uncredited)
Fletcher Henderson…Performer - Song: 'Tozo' (uncredited)
Thomas Jefferson…Old Seaman (uncredited)
Bob Kortman…Villager (uncredited)
F.W. Murnau…Dancer (uncredited)
Barry Norton…Ballroom Dancer / Kissing Couple (uncredited)
Robert Parrish…Boy (uncredited)
Sally Phipps…Ballroom Dancer / Kissing Couple (uncredited)
Harry Semels…Carnival Gallery Man with Pig (uncredited)
Phillips Smalley…Head Waiter (uncredited)
Leo White…Barber (uncredited)
Clarence Wilson…Money Lender (uncredited)

F.W. MURNAU (b. Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe on December 28, 1888 in Bielefeld, NorthRhine-Westphalia, Germany—d. March 11, 1931, age 42, in

Santa Barbara, California) has been called “the greatest poet the screen has ever known” by French film theorist and director Alexandre Astruc. German director Murnau did more than any of his contemporaries to liberate the cinema from theatrical and literary conventions, achieving a seamless narrative fluency by freeing the camera to discover varied perspectives in the medium’s fledgling stages. According to TCM: “Criticized for facile, underdeveloped characters, Murnau was more a painter than a novelist, his art more concerned with mood and rhythm than whether his characters were dimensional. He was a master chiaroscurist, brilliantly orchestrating a world moving between lightness and shadows, exemplified by his most well-known film *Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens* (*Nosferatu the Vampire, Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror*, 1922). While many film historians consider the film to be Murnau’s masterpiece, it received a mixed initial critical reception. The estate of Bram Stoker sued the producers for unauthorized use of the novel and an English court ordered all copies and negatives of the film to be destroyed. Fortunately, this could not be enforced in Germany, though the producers divested themselves of all materials by selling them to Deutsche Film Produktion. As a child, Murnau wanted to be an actor. Because his parents were against his ambition to go to the theater and because they also did not accept his homosexuality he changed his name from Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe to Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau. He studied art and literature history at the University of Heidelberg. During World War I, he was a combat pilot. After World War I he went back to Germany where he met the important theater man Max Reinhardt. Reinhardt was impressed by Murnau and he admitted him to the Max-Reinhardt acting school. There he not only learnt acting but was also introduced to the direction. Signed by William Fox in 1926, he remained under contract until 1929. During his tenure he brought much prestige but little financial reward to the studio through the expensively-produced *Sunrise* (1927), for which he was effectively given carte blanche. Much of the success of this film was the result of Murnau’s creative collaboration with his German art director Rochus Gliese. Many of Murnau’s expressionist techniques were later emulated by other Hollywood directors and changed cinema forever. In 2000, Murnau was played by John Malkovich in *Shadow Of The Vampire*, an outrageous caricature of the real man which angered many of the director’s admirers. In July 2015 Murnau's grave was broken into, the remains disturbed and the skull removed by persons unknown. Wax residue was reportedly found at the site, leading some to speculate that candles had been lit, perhaps with an occult or ceremonial significance. As this disturbance was not an isolated incident, the cemetery managers are considering sealing the grave. Of the 21 films Murnau directed, 8 have been completely lost. One reel of his feature *Marizza, genannt die Schmuggler-Madonna* (1922) survives, too. Especially his lost American film *4 Devils* (1928) is a major loss of silent cinema art. Check your attic.

GEORGE O'BRIEN

(b. April 19, 1900 in San Francisco—d. September 4, 1985, age 86, in Tulsa, Oklahoma) appeared in 84 films from *White Hands* in 1922 to *Cheyenne Autumn* in 1964. In 1924, Director John Ford picked virtually unknown George to star in his first picture, *The Iron Horse* (1924). Over the next two years, he would appear in four more Ford films and would co-star with Janet Gaynor in *The Blue Eagle* (1926) and *Sunrise* (1927). O’Brien remained popular until sound came along. By that time, his popularity was sliding, but he did make the transition to sound. With his rugged looks and physical size, he soon became a cowboy star. He was in some of the best stories ever written, *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1931), and 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) and *The Gay Caballero* (1932). He would appear in a few films outside the horse set, such as *Ever Since Eve* (1934), but those roles would be few. By the end of the 1930s, George was still a popular 'B' movie Cowboy Star, but he would not take the parts as seriously as he did a decade before. During World War II, he hung up his spurs, and he re-enlisted in the Navy where he fought in the Pacific and was decorated many times. After the war, when he would not find work in acting, his old friend John Ford gave him work with the cavalry in three of his films. 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, in *December 7th* (1943).

JANET GAYNOR (b. Laura Gainor on October 6,1906 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—d. September 14, 1984, age 77, in Palm Springs, California) 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, 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. She was the first actress to win the Academy Award as best actress. In the early years, actors could receive one Oscar for several films. Gaynor won for Sunrise (1927), *7th Heaven* (1927) and *Street Angel* (1928). For her outstanding performance in *A Star is Born* she was nominated for another Oscar, but lost to Luise Rainer's performance *in The Good Earth* (1937), her second in as many tries. After appearing in *The Young in Heart* (1938), Janet didn't appear in another film until her role as Pat Boone's mother in *Bernardine* (1957). Her last performance was in a Broadway version of *Harold and Maude*.

MARGARET LIVINGSTON (b. November 25, 1900 in Salt Lake City, UT—d. December 13, 1984, age 84, in Warrington, Pennsylvania) first appeared in *The Invisible Chain* (1916); her last film was *The Social Register* (1934). From the age of 16 she played leading roles in the silents, usually as vamps or the "other woman". Her voice presented no problem when talking pictures came into vogue' in fact, she dubbed Louise Brooks in the mystery *The Canary Murder Case* (1929). She was married for 31 years to bandleader Paul Whiteman. She was also the mistress of Thomas H. Ince and on the fateful trip aboard the Hearst yacht when Ince was shot two days before he died. A long-standing rumor was that Hearst was actually aiming for Charlie Chaplin who was having an affair with *his* mistress. The story was the basis of the play and movie *The Cat's Meow* (2001).

CHARLES ROSHER (b. November 17, 1885 in London, England—d. January 15, 1974, age 88, in Lisbon, Portugal) was once the highest paid cinematographer in the world. Nominated for six best photography Oscars for *Show Boat* (1952), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950), *The Yearling* (1946, won), *Kismet* (1945), *The Affairs of Cellini* (1934), he finally won for tonight's film. From 1919 to 1928, he worked at United Artists becoming the favorite cinematographer of the company's biggest asset, Mary Pickford, lighting her in such a way that her true age never interfered with the image of the ingénue she persisted in portraying on screen. During this period, Rosher also developed his own unique visual style, which married artistry with technical know-how. He was much acclaimed for the sharpness and clarity of his photography, for the effects he achieved by combining natural and artificial light, photographing people against reflecting surfaces (glass, water), double exposure effects, and split screen techniques. 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 (b. November 30, 1886 in New York, New York—d. December 16, 198, age 95, in Santa Monica, California) was initially a photographer becoming part of the group associated with the great photographer Alfred Stieglitz. His photographs were published in leading magazines, including *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. Struss moved to Los Angeles in 1919 to practice his craft as a still photographer. He subsequently was hired by producer-director Cecil B. DeMille to serve as a cameraman in his second-unit. Along with Rosher, he won the first-

ever Oscar award for cinematography at the first Academy Awards, for *Sunrise* (1927). He received three additional Oscar nominations for *Aloma of the South Seas* (1941), *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931). Karl Struss was not only one of the first cinematographers to work in color (he shot in two-strip Technicolor on the original screen version of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* (1925), he also was a pioneer in three-dimensional cinematography in the 1940s and 1950s. 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) and *Island of Lost Souls* (1933).

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

"MURNAU," F.W. (Friedrich Wilhelm Plumpe) (December 28, 1888-March 11, 1931), German director, was born in Bielefeld, Westphalia, into a prosperous middle-class family of Swedish origin. His father who had inherited a thriving textile business, bought a large country estate near Kassel, to which the family moved when Murnau was seven. "We children were delighted," his brother Robert recalled. "There was everything we could wish for in that garden….It was a miniature paradise." Their elder half-sister set up a theatre in the attic, which captivated Murnau; when she left for boarding school he took over as director.

An ill-fated business speculation put an end to this idyll. The estate was sold and the family moved to a rented apartment in Kassel. For a while Murnau made do with a puppet show, but before long with the help of his brothers he had designed and constructed a chamber theatre with a full-scale stage. Performances were mounted every Sunday, to paying audiences. Murrnau's father was less than appreciative of these activities, or of his son's passion for literature, but Murnau was encouraged by his mother Ottilie and by his father's sister Anna. After graduating from high school, where according to Robert he had been an outstanding pupil, Murnau enrolled at Heidelberg, where he studied literature and history He also acted in local amateur productions, and was noticed in one of them by Max Reinhardt, who invited him to join his Deutsches Theater company.

For a stagestruck young man, an offer from the famous Reinhardt was too good an opportunity to miss. Somehow contriving simultaneously to continue his studies, he embarked on an acting career. It was then that he adopted the stage name of Murnau (a small town in Bavaria)—apparently less for euphony than to prevent his father from finding out what was happening. The plot failed dismally; easily recognizable by his exceptional height, he was soon spotted by a family friend, and his irate father cut off all funding. Luckily his maternal grandfather came to the rescue, and Murnau was able to complete his studies. Having graduated he joined Reinhardt on a full-time basis as an actor and assistant director, touring with the company in Germany and Austo-Hungary.

While still a student Murnau had formed a close and lasting attachment to a young poet, Hans Ehrenbaum Degele, whose parents, a Jewish banker and a noted opera singer, treated Murnau with great kindness and became a second family to him.. Degele's death early in the First World War deeply affected Murnau, further darkening his already melancholic temperament.

On the outbreak of war, Murnau was drafted into the infantry and saw service on the Russian front before being commissioned and transferred to the air force as a pilot. He survived seven crashes without serious injury, but in 1917, whiie on a combat mission, got lost in fog and landed in Switzerland, where he was interned for the duration. Conditions were by no means onerous; the Swiss authorities allowed him to direct theatrical productions and even to compile propaganda films for the German Embassy in Bern.

This first contact with the cinema evidently fired Murnau's imagination. Released at the armistice, he returned to Berlin determined to dedicate himself exclusively to filmmaking. In 1919, along with the actor Conrad Veidt and other colleagues form his Reinhardt days, he formed the Murnau Veldt

Filmgesellschaft. The company's first production was *Der Knabe in Blau* (*The Blue Boy,* 1919), of which—as of most of Murnau's early work—no prints are known to survive. A Gothic melodrama inspired by Gainsboroough's famous painting, it involved an impoverished young aristocrat (Ernst Hofman) haunted by an ancestral portrait, a missing emerald bearing a family curse, and a troupe of traveling players of whom one, a beautiful gypsy, ensnares the hero to his ruin.

No reviews of *Der Knabe in Blau,* good or bad, have been traced, Murnau and his associates proceeded to a more ambitious project: *Satanas* (1919), a three-episode film modeled after the then influential pattern of Griffith's *Intolerance.*, In various guises, Lucifer (played by Conrad Veidt) contemptuously manipulates human affairs in Egypt, Renaissance Italy, and revolutionary Russia. (Carl Dreyer followed a very similar scheme in *Blade af Satans Bog,* made around the same time.) The script was by Robert Wiene, director of *Das Cabinett des Dr. Caligarii*, and the cinematographer was Karl Freund, making the first of his nine films with Murnau. Again, no prints are extant, but contemporary reviews suggest that Murnau's gift for creating visual beauty was already evident.

Even less is known about *Sehnsucht* (*Longing,* 1920) which may also have been called *Bajazzo*, and seems to have concerned a Russian dancer (Conrad Veidt) who falls in love with a Grand Duchess. *Der Bucklige und die Tanzerin* (*The Hunchback and the Dancer*, 1920) marked Murnaus' first collaboration with the script-writer Carl Mayer. Mayer, who had coscripted *Caligari*, was one of the key figures of German silent cinema, perhaps the first writer to think wholly in cinematic terms. "A script by Carl Mayer," wrote Carl Freund, "was already a film." The appearance of a Mayer script was that of a dramatic poem, a detailed recording of every shot and rhythm that he had formed in his imagination….If one man should ever be given credit for the best film work to come from Germany, it would have to be Carl Mayer." Mayer is also generally credited with initiating the *kammerspiel* genre—pictures dealing with intimate human situations, handled realistically and often set in relatively humble surroundings, like Murnau's *Der Letzye Mann* (1924)….

Of Murnau's total output of twenty-one films, nine are currently thought to be lost; of these, *Der Januskopf* (*The Janus Head,* 1920) sounds the most intriguing.. Based without acknowledgment on Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* it was scripted by Hans Janowitz, Mayer's co-writer on *Caligari,* and starred Conrad Veidt as Dr. Warren….

The earliest of Murnau's films known to survive is *Der Gang in die Macht* (*Journey into the Night,* 1920), rediscovered by Henri Langlois in the vault of an East Berlin film archive.

Murnau's cycle of peasant films, which reached its apotheosis in *Sunrise*, opened with the crisply titled *Marizza, genannt die Schmuggkermadonna* (*Marizza, the Smugglers' Madonna*, 1921), another of the "lost" movies….

The "perfect form" of the silent movie, Murnau once stated, would be one without a single intertitle—an ideal famously realized in *Der Letzte Mann.*

"Perhaps no other filmmaker has used space more rigorously or inventively than Murnau," Eric Rohmer commented. Already, in *Schloss Vegelot,* that spatial skill is clearly in evidence. In one scene a man confronts the woman whose husband he has just killed, an act which she has half-consciously desired, in a narrow, high-ceilinged room whose gloom is pierced only by two tall windows like accusing eyes. The couple stand as far as possible from each other, leaning backwards against opposite walls, the expanse of the desolate room between them-each isolated, yet trapped in the aridity of their mutual guilt.. …this sequence

hints at the film Murnau was about to make—his first masterpiece and one of the greatest of all horror films.

"A chilling draught from the world beyond," in Béla Balazs's phrase, blows through *Nosferatu* (1922), far colder than anything in the many subsequent versions of the Dracula story, for all their greater technical sophistication. In the whole span of horror movies, perhaps only Dryer's *Vampyr* matches it for sheer unearthliness. …

Within Germany, *Nosferatu* established Murnau's reputation as a major director, and remained famous enough to be reissued eight years later with the coming of sound, in a botched-up version with additional sequences and a dubbed soundtrack, (This version, entitled *Die Zwolfle Stunde* [*The Twelfth Hour*, 1930] was not authorized by Murnau, who probably never even saw it.)

Jean-André Fieschi, in Richard Roud's *Cinema,* writes that "Murnau was one of the first systematically to consider the shot. . . as a space negotiable in every way. . . inviting the most unpredictable courses. Like a stage whose specific (variable) scale induces the precedence of gesture, movement, attitude over plot or décor. Murnau's discoveries on that score in *Nosferatu* were of great importance here, liberation from the theatre was finally and decisively achieved." And Fieschi concludes with this large claim: "The genius of Murnau: *Nosferatu* marks the advent of a total cinema in which the plastic, rhythmic and narrative elements are no longer graduated in importance, but in strict interdependence upon each other. With this film the modern cinema was born." In 1979 Werner Herzog paid Murnau characteristically obsessive tribute with a remake (*Nosferatu Phantom der Nacht*) that reproduced much of the original almost shot for shot.

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."…

Der Letzte Mann was Murnau's first film for UFA, now headed by Erich Pommmer. Its success encouraged Pommer to assign him two big-budget, prestige projects, based on major literary classics, beginning with *Tartuffe (Tartuffe*, 1920)…. Murnau's final film for UFA (and his last film in Germany) tackled one of the commanding heights of German literature—Goethe's *Faust* (1926)…. In a book dedicated entirely to a detailed study of this film, Eric Rohmer observed that here "Murnau put into effect his total mastery of cinematic space….No other cinematic work has left so little to chance." …By the time of its release, Murnau was already in Hollywood, preparing his first American film….

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. The script. taken from a story by

Hermann Sudermann, *Die Reise nach Tilsit* (The Trip to Tilsit), was again by Carl Mayer, who had been invited to accompany Murnau to America. (He refused, preferring to stay in Germany and deal with Hollywood at a safe distance.) The happiness of a young rural couple is threatened by a seductive city woman, who captivates and obsesses the husband; at her urging , he evolves a plan to drown his wife on a supposed pleasure outing to the nearby city. At the last moment, he shrinks from the deed, but the wife guessing his intention flees in terror. He catches up with her, filled with remorse, and during their day in the city manages to regain her confidence. Their mutual love is reborn. But on the way home across the lake a storm overturns the boat and the wife is apparently drowned. The husband, wild with grief, violently attacked the city woman when she comes to him. Then the wife is found, alive. As day breaks the couple embrace ecstatically, while the temptress returns defeated to the city.

Many critics have seen *Sunrise* as structured—over-simplistically, some have maintained—around a pattern of paired opposites, "between sunrise and sunset, the country and the city, good and evil, divine grace and black magic, natural and unnatural acts, and finally the blonde, beatific wife…and the dark sultry city woman…in their struggle for the Man's soul," as Molly Haskell summarized it (*Film Comment,* Summer 1971). The dichotomies are not quite so clear-cut; it is after all through the glittering excitements of the city that the couple are reunited. As if to emphasize their archetypal, mythic nature, the three characters—there are only three that matter—have no names being referred to simply as The Man (played by George O'Brien), The wife (Janet Gaynor), and The Woman from the City (Margaret Livingstone). Many expressionist plays use the same device, and *Sunrise,* for all its Hollywood provenance, has often been 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. Murnau and his designer, Rochus Gliese, took full advantage of their carte blanche to construct hugely elaborate sets, wild desolate marshes, a lakeside village, a refulgent amusement park and for the young couple's first awed view of the city, a vast urban square—complete with traffic, streetcars, subway entrances neon signs and towering buildings—which covered some twenty acres of studio lot. Around these expanses the camera prowled and glided, outdoing even *Der Letzte Mann* in it tireless motion. "The premise of the film, Rodney Farnsworth wrote "is that the camera will move; and that it will have any excuse to move. Plot and characters seem pretexts for movement and light."

Sunrise, in Jean Domarchi's opinion, is unquestionably "the most beautiful film there is" and was voted to be so in a 1958 *Cahiers* poll. If not all critics would go quite that far most have agreed that it is a pictorial feast, full of hauntingly beautiful scenes-the brooding marshlands, lit by a mist-swathed moon, through which the Man treads somberly, as though under a malign compulsion to meet the City Woman, the sizzling restaurant-cum-dance-hall, enchanting and bewildering the eye with shimmering lights reflected in multiple vistas of glass, all brilliant and ceaseless movement, the peaceful journey home across the wind-rippled lake, before the storm strikes, with a vision of distant festivities, dark Goyaesque figures around a flickering bonfire. Probably the most famous sequence is the long trolley-ride bearing the agonized estranged couple, just after the abortive murder attempt, from the countryside into the city. This sequence, for which two miles of trolley track were laid, extending from real forest into the constructed cityscape, was described by Molly Haskell as "one of the most ecstatic movements in all cinema. The psychological suspension between anguish and relief is exquisitely, and physically,

sustained by the breathtakingly lyrical delirious motion of the trolley through real space."

Sunrise received three Academy Awards—best actress, best cinematography (Charles Rosher, Karl Struss), and "artistic quality of production"—and was hailed by American critics as a masterpiece. Robert Sherwood, reviewing it in *Life*, called it "the most important picture in the history of the movies." In *New Republic* Louise Bogan wrote: "Here is camera technique pushed to its limits, freed from pantomime and parade ….Not since the earliest, simplest moving pictures…has there been such joy in motion as under Murnau's direction." Some—wrongly in fact—deduced studio interference in the happy ending and in episodes of clumsy comedy in the city scenes, In the second half of the film, Lewis Jacobs considered "the lyricism was dissipated by comic relief, the universality was destroyed by melodrama," but overall "this synthesis of all factors to create a particular mood for a scene or a sequence imbued *Sunrise* with a psychological intensity and a rare style." ….

On release, the critical success of *Sunrise* was far from matched by its box-office takings, and the film failed to recoup its formidable costs. Fox, no doubt feeling that genius could be purchased at too high a price, tightened his grip; the remaining two films that Murnau made for the studio were subjected to close control and released in forms very different from his original intentions.

It is not clear whether or not *Four Devils* (1928) should be numbered among Murnau's lost films. According to Lottle Eisner, a negative is preserved in the Fox archive, and in recent years there have been recurrent though unfulfilled rumors that a print was about to surface, At all events nobody appears to have seen the film since well before World War II, although Mayer's original script still exists….

In February1929, disgusted and disillusioned with Hollywood, Murnau broke his contract with Fox. While shooting *City Girl* he had met David Flaherty, brother of Robert Flaherty, director of *Nanook of the North* and *Moana*, and the idea of a joint venture arose. Flaherty, after the failure of his attempted collaboration with Woody Van Dyke on *White Shadows of the South Seas*, was equally jaded with the Hollywood system. This, and their shared idealism, may have prevented the two men from realizing that their respective approaches to filmmaking had in fact very little in common.

Murnau had bought a luxurious yacht, which he named the *Bali*, and planned to sail it to the South Seas, in his eyes an unspoilt paradise. Flaherty, keen to revisit the islands where he had made *Moana*—and perhaps to exorcise memories of the *White Shadows* debacle—readily agreed to accompany him and offered as the first of a planned series of joint projects a story about pearl fishers exploited by local Chinese merchants. The film was budgeted at some $150,000, and a contract was signed with a newly established company, Colorart. At the end of April 1929 Murnau sailed for Tahiti, where Flaherty met him with the news that Colorart was bankrupt. Murnau, who had been well paid at Fox, decided to finance the film out of his own savings—thus giving himself the final say over what kind of film should be made.

Though far from an anthropological purist, Flaherty found himself increasingly unhappy over what he saw as Murnau's desire to impose a fictional plot and European cultural values on the Polynesian material. After some months he resigned from the project, leaving Murnau to complete the picture by himself. The disagreement, though profound, seems to have been without rancor. Flaherty always afterwards spoke of Murnau and his work with respect.

Just how much of *Tabu* (1931) should be attributed to Flaherty, credited as co-writer and co-director, is unclear. Most writers have agreed with Richard Griffith's assessment of the film a "a Murnau treasure not a Flaherty one….It is a beauty filtered and refracted through the imagination of a European of the twenties, who saw what he had come to see and had eyes for nothing else." Two young islanders, Matahi and Reri, fall in love. But Reri is a sacred virgin consecrated to the gods, and when the lovers run away together they violate a powerful taboo. Hitu, the old priest chief, pursues them and takes Reri back. Mahati, swimming desperately after their boat, is drowned.

As Gary Lewis noted (*Film Heritage*, Spring 1966), *Tabu*, like so many of Murnau's pictures, is " a film about Fate and Death….the ultimately metaphysical themes which always interested him." Robin Wood considering *Nosferatu*, *Sunrise* and *Tabu* as a trilogy, pointed out that each involves "three central figures: a couple and a force that threatens to destroy them. In all three films the couple present no interpretive problems, but the 'force' remains to some extent mysterious…shadowy or equivocal in meaning.' Jacques Fieschi (*Cinématographe*, February 1981) even saw the film as a Polynesian idyll recast in expressionist terms.: "The face of the old priest is carved into an Expressionist Destiny….From the joys and nightmares of Matahi, Murnau still extracts the ontological drama of his German protagonists."

Alexandre Astruc identified "the key to all of Murnau's work" as "this fatality hidden behind the most harmless elements in the frame." Even in this remote, sunlit paradise, Fate is omnipresent and inescapable. The shadow of old Hitu, falling across Reri's sleeping body, recalls that of Nosferatu cast on the wall outside Nina's room.

Most of *Tabu* was filmed with a nonprofessional cast on Tahiti, where Murnau had built a bungalow. He wrote to his mother: "When I think I shall have to leave all this I already suffer all the agony of going. I am bewitched by this place….Sometimes I wish I were at home. But I am never 'at home' anywhere—I feel this more and more the older I get—not in any country nor in any house nor with anybody."

Before shooting was complete, money had run out. Flaherty came to the rescue, persuading Paramount to take the film on a fifty-fifty distribution deal. *Tabu* had been filmed silent; sound effects and a banal music track were added to Murnau's annoyance, and the film opened to great critical acclaim…..*Tabu,* made in staunch independence, far from the crass commercial concerns of Hollywood, proved the box-office hit of Murnau's American career, But by the time it opened on March 18, 1931, Murnau was no longer alive to savor the irony.

A week earlier, he had driven with friends up the coast from Los Angeles in a hired Rolls-Royce. A chauffeur came with the Rolls, but Murnau objected to him as "too ugly." One of his companions was Garcia Stevenson, a young Filipino whom Murnau had engaged as chauffeur on a forthcoming trip to Germany—more for his looks, apparently, than for his driving ability. Near Santa Barbara, Stevenson persuaded Murnau to let him take the wheel. The car went off the road and overturned, but all the passengers escaped—except Murnau. His head hit a post, and he died a few hours later.

According to Kenneth Anger, in *Hollywood Babylon*, rumors circulated round the movie colony that Murnau had been fellating the young Filipino at the time of the accident. Hollywood, scandal-conscious as ever, played safe; only eleven people attended the funeral. Among them were George O'Brien, Edgar Ulmer, and Greta Garbo, who for many years afterwards kept Murnau's death mask above her desk.

By general consent, Murnau ranks as one of the great film directors. Jean Demarchi, never one to balk at unqualified superlatives, called him "the most important filmmaker of the twentieth century…the greatest director of all time." Alexandre Astruc, with slightly more restraint, described him as "the greatest poet the screen has ever known. . . the most *magic* director in the history of the cinema.". . .

Lotte Eisner, who considered him "the greatest film-director the Germans have ever known," linked his achievement to his melancholic, sexually tormented temperament: "He created the most overwhelming and poignant images in the whole German cinema. . . .All his films bear the impress of his own inner complexity, of the struggle he waged within himself against a world in which he remained despairingly alien."

…Vague and unsatisfactory though the term is "poetry" may perhaps sum up Murnau's work—if by poetry we understand the attempt to endow words, or in this case images, with the greatest possible resonance, to deepen and extend meaning beyond the

readily expressible. Murnau, as many writers have noted, seems in his best work to be trying to show us more than we can see, to be about to seize the intangible.

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

In July 1926, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau (1888-1931) travelled from Germany to the United States–traversing national and continental perimeters– to make *Sunrise* for the Fox Films Corporation in Hollywood. Born F.W. Plumpe in Bielefeld, Westphalia. He adopted the name of Murnau after a small Bavarian town famous for its artists' colony, the Blaue Reiter group.

Between 1919 and 1923, Murnau directed some fourteen films, most of which have been lost. Especially noteworthy is *Nosferatu* (1922), his brilliant adaptation of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*– a film which many have seen as presaging *Sunrise* in its fascination with 'perverse' love With *Der Letzte Mann* (1924), Murnau achieved international fame and became renowned for his camera movement. When the film opened in the United States as *The Last Laugh,* it enjoyed great critical success.

As Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery note, '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'. 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. 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 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'.

Due in large part to Gliese's superb work on the film, *Sunrise* received a special Academy Award for 'Artistic Quality of Production'.

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. He did fashion and celebrity portraiture work, and was cinematographer on *Ben-Hur* (1925) and *Sparrows* (1926)–where he worked with Rosher who engaged him for *Sunrise.*

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.

…William Everson wrote "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.*"

Sunrise was shot as a silent film but synchronised with a musical score for distribution.

Almendros called *Sunrise the* 'peak of the genre' and Fieschi called it 'a point of perfection in the silent cinema'

While aspects of its acting style are influenced by Expressionism, other elements belong to the broader history of gestural pantomime perfected by D.W. Griffith.. . .

Because of the success of Riesenfeld's score, it is hard to imagine *Sunrise* conjoined with any other accompaniment. Yet, as part of the 1988 Sundance Film Festival, a new composition (written by David Newman) accompanied the exhibition of the film and was performed again in 1992 by the Los Angeles Pops Orchestra.

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 misteamed 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. But in historicising the City Woman, it is also important to see her as a 'flapper'–the archetypal metropolitan female of the 20s.

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. Mary Ann Doane wrote

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.

In addition to being a film about a woman nearly drowning, Molly Haskell finds *Sunrise* a work 'about a man losing–and regaining–his mind'. This is not surprising, as insanity often involves a 'plunge' to the depths of existence. Psychological themes are central to *Sunrise,* which was made when 'Freudian gospel began to circulate to a marked extent among the American lay public'. Significantly, the cinema played a crucial role in this dissemination. As Allen notes: 'lurid motion pictures. . . had their effect on a class of readers and movie-goers who had never heard and never would hear of Freud and the libido'. Murnau and Mayer brought a psychic perspective to the film, influenced by German Expressionism, but, in *Sunrise*, it serves a more realistic story line than it did in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* or *Nosferatu.*

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, 'Films of the Future'). 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." (The Ideal Picture')

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.

One could argue that the psychic trajectory traced in *Sunrise* is daring, rather than tame. For, in The Man and The Wife, we have characters who leave the constrained, sentimental world of standard melodrama and descend into the abyss of the psyche–testing the limits of human emotion, looking malevolence in the face, and, then moving on. If *Sunrise* teaches us anything, it is that love is only possible by confronting hate—that attaining spiritual heights is likely only if one has sunk to corporeal depths. Perhaps that is why Dorothy Jones argues that *Sunrise* is not a conventional morality tale. Instead, she claims, it demonstrates 'that good and evil are both part of living, that our mistakes and our suffering need not ruin us, but that what these events mean to us and what we do with them are what matters, for they may indeed become the very means by which our tomorrow may prove to be a better day'. That The Man must almost slay his wife in order to love her, that The Wife must confront his treachery, yet forgive him, reveals how we must face the heart of darkness in order to see the light (an image that evokes the daily cycle so crucial to the narrative of *Sunrise*).

It is very strange to me that we have a generation born and grown to manhood since the motion pictures were invented and yet so far, no great Poet of the new art has arisen. F.W. Murnau ('Films of the Future')

In perhaps a gesture of false modesty, Murnau, writing in 1928, decried the dearth if cinematic poets–though he himself was clearly a candidate for such an appellation. Decades later, in fact, Martin Scorsese called *Sunrise* a 'superproduction, an experimental film and a visionary poem.' (*A Personal Journey*, Part II).

[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 Munter, 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*.

In addition to the obvious associations with the landscape, some of the theories propounded by the group seem relevant to Murnau's work. As the quote from Kandinsky's 'Reminiscences' (1913) reveals, the artist saw creation in terms of merged oppositions. [Kandinsky saw abstraction and realism as 'two paths which lead to one and the same goal'.]

He also reveals his interest in musical form–not dissimilar to the structure of *Sunrise*, which Murnau deemed a 'song.' Interestingly, one of the artists associated with the group was the painter/composer Arnold Schoenberg.

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'.

Murnau, though a former military pilot, was a pacifist. If he had any interest in making a war film, it was not to 'treat. . .the glorification of gore and wholesale slaughter, but rather to disclose its perniciousness. . .convincing people of the utter futility of physical combat' (Murnau, 'The Ideal Picture').

While *Sunrise* plays on metaphors of light and dark, day and night, the sun and the moon, it relieves them of their religious overtones (which are implicit in Sudermann's short story) and draws on a more primal and natural iconography. Though Murnau's Man and

Wife are ‘remarried’ in a church, it is less a religious act than a psychic and metaphysical encounter.. . .But it is its moral ‘pollution’ that makes *Sunrise* so intriguing, As Pauline Kael has written (in regard to cinema in general), ‘What draws us to movies in the first place, the opening into other, forbidden or surprising, kinds of experience, and the vitality and corruption and irreverence of that experience are so direct and immediate and have so little connection with what we have been taught is art’.

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’.

Roger Ebert: “Sunrise” (2004)

The camera's freedom to move is taken for granted in these days of the Steadicam, the lightweight digital camera, and even special effects that reproduce camera movement. A single unbroken shot can seem to begin with an entire city and end with a detail inside a window -- consider the opening of "Moulin Rouge!" (2001). But the camera did not move so easily in the early days.

The cameras employed in the first silent films were lightweight enough to be picked up and carried, but moving them was problematic because they were attached to the cameraman, who was cranking them by hand. Camera movement was rare; the camera would pan from a fixed position. Then came tracking shots -- the camera literally mounted on rails, so that it could be moved along parallel to the action. But a camera that was apparently weightless, that could fly, that could move through physical barriers -- that kind of dreamlike freedom had to wait until almost the last days of silent films. And then, when the talkies came and noisy sound cameras had to be sealed in soundproof booths, it was lost again for several years.

F.W. Murnau's "Sunrise" (1928) conquered time and gravity with a freedom that was startling to its first audiences. To see it today is to be astonished by the boldness of its visual experimentation. Murnau was one of the greatest of the German expressionists; his "Nosferatu" (1922) invented the vampire movie, and his "The Last Laugh" (1924) became famous for doing away altogether with intertitles and telling the story entirely with images.

Summoned to the United States by William Fox to make a film for his new studio, Murnau worked with the cinematographers Charles Rosher and Karl Struss to achieve an extraordinary stylistic breakthrough. The Murnau admirer Todd Ludy wrote: "The motion picture camera -- for so long tethered by sheer bulk and naiveté -- had with 'Sunrise' finally learned to fly."

The film was released at the very moment when silent films were giving way to sound; "The Jazz Singer" was already making its way into theaters. Murnau's film

actually had a soundtrack, avoiding dialogue but using music and sound effects in sync with the action. By the next year, audiences would want to hear the actors speaking, and that led to an era of static compositions and talking heads, unforgettably lampooned in "Singin' in the Rain."

Released in what Peter Bogdanovich calls the greatest year in Hollywood history, when silent films reached perfection and then disappeared, "Sunrise" was not a box-office success, but the industry knew it was looking at a masterpiece. When the first Academy Awards were held, the top prize was shared: "Wings" won for "best production," and "Sunrise" won for "best unique and artistic picture."

Its story can be told in a few words. It is a fable, denying the characters even names; the key players are The Man (George O'Brien), The Wife (Janet Gaynor, also an Oscar winner that year), and The Woman from the City (Margaret Livingston). In a quaint lakeside village, the city woman has come for a holiday, and lingered on to seduce and entrap the man. In a remarkable early sequence, we see her smoking in her room, prowling restlessly in lingerie, and then walking through the village to the lighted window of the man's cottage, where she whistles (there is a low and ominous musical note on the soundtrack). Inside the cottage, the man hears her, we see torment and temptation in his face, and finally he slips out of the cottage; when his wife returns to the table with their dinner, he is gone, and the movie juxtaposes her embracing their child and the woman from the city embracing him.

But look at the shot that shows the man and the city woman slipping off into a foggy marsh area. Although the ground is muddy and uneven, the camera seems to glide smoothly along with them, pushing through shrubbery, following their progress, finally watching them embrace beneath a full moon. I've seen "Sunrise" several times and always noted this shot without quite realizing how impossible it was.

Now I have had it explained. The commentary track on the 20th Century-Fox DVD is by the gifted cinematographer John Bailey, who is a student of early camera techniques and a particular admirer of Struss. He explains that the marsh is a studio set, that the sky and the moon are actually quite close, and that the camera platform is suspended from overhead cables so that it glides behind them as they push through the mud and the shrubbery.

If the poetry of this scene is haunting, listen to Bailey as he analyzes some of the famous later scenes, including two boat trips across the lake and a fantastical interlude in the city on the other shore. He has the gift, rare among experts, of explaining his art with such love and clarity that everyone can understand; he uses the writings of Struss, still photos taken on the set, and above all his own instinct and experience to explain how extraordinary shots were created.

Many of the best moments involve superimposed images. At one point, we see the man being enveloped by two ghostly images of the woman from the city. We see a train passing in the foreground while extras walk in the middle distance, and the city rises in the background. We see a frenzied nightclub scene, musicians on the left, dancers in the center, all seeming to float in a void.

These shots, Bailey explains, were created in the camera. It was an era before optical printers, let alone computers; the camera operators masked part of the film, exposed the rest, then masked the those portions and exposed what remained. Meticulous control of the lens and the counting of individual frames was necessary. In addition, they were made of different kinds of reality; the train was a model which looked large in the foreground, the extras were real, the city was a form of matte drawing…..

The power of "Sunrise" comes precisely through its visual images, and Bailey makes a good case that Struss, who got second billing after Charles Rosher, made the key contribution. He had purchased his own camera, powered by an electric motor, which set it free to glide through space and give "Sunrise" its peculiar dreamlike quality. And he devised techniques to create some of the effects; looking at stills taken on the set, Bailey takes hints from such details as a black back

cloth that was used to obscure part of an image so it could be replaced with another.

The story, as I said, is very simple, but it has power. The woman from the city persuades the man to drown his wife so they can run away together. The film has few titles, but they are dramatic: the word "drown" swims into view and then appears to run down the screen and disappear.

As the man and his wife begin their boat journey across the lake, Bailey notes that the camera always regards him from a high angle, even when he is towering over his wife and the natural angle would have him looking down at the camera. This strategy keeps him subservient to the camera and emphasizes the pressure he's under; and Murnau underlines his tortured psychological state by making the actor, O'Brien, wear shoes with lead weights in them, so that he steps slowly and reluctantly.

He does not after all drown his wife. In the city, which is constructed from fanciful sets that suggest the "city of the future" often seen in silent films, the man and wife fall back in love -- and then, as they return across the lake, a tempest overturns the boat and it appears she may have been drowned by chance.

It's very broad melodrama, and the realism of spoken dialogue would have made it impossible. But silent films were more dreamlike, and Murnau was a genius at evoking odd, disturbing images and juxtapositions that created a nightmare state. Because the characters are simple, they take on a kind of moral clarity, and their choices are magnified into fundamental decisions of life and death.

I imagine it is possible to see "Sunrise" for the first time and think it simplistic; to be amused that the academy could have honored it. But silent films had a language of their own; they aimed for the emotions, not the mind, and the best of them wanted to be, not a story, but an experience.

Murnau, raised in the dark shadows of expressionism, pushed his images as far as he could, forced them upon us, haunted us with them. The more you consider "Sunrise" the deeper it becomes -- not because the story grows any more subtle, but because you realize the real subject is the horror beneath the surface.

THE SPRIING 2023 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XLV:

Jan 31 ***Sunrise*** F.W. Murnau, 1927
Feb 7 ***The Public Enemy*** William A. Wellman, 1931
Feb 14 ***Late Spring*** Yasujiro Ozu, 1949
Feb 21 ***A Man Escaped*** Robert Bresson, 1956
Feb 28 ***Contempt*** Jean-Luc Godard, 1963
Mar 7 ***Nashville*** Robert Altman, 1975
Mar 14 ***Dersu Uzala*** Akira Kurosawa, 1975
Mar 28 **Seven Beauties, 1977**
Apr 4 ***Brazil*** Terry Gilliam, 1985
Apr 11 ***Babette's Feast*** Gabriel Axel, 1987
Apr 18 ***Age of Innocence*** Martin Scorsese, 1993
Apr 25 ***Magnolia*** Paul Thomas Anderson, 1999
May 2 ***Moonlight*** Barry Jenkins, 2016
May 9 ***The Tree of Life*** Terrence Malick, 2011

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