

SUNRISE

Directed by F.W. Murnau
Distributed by Fox Pictures
Released in 1927

If all silent films were this compelling, sound would be superfluous.

An archetypal tale of an estranged country couple and a silky-smooth seductress from the city, *Sunrise* remains a triumph of early cinema. The characters have no names, but this play for universality succeeds mightily. What we're faced with is the way of a man; he has peace and comfort with a darling wife, but still the drive to conquer overwhelms. His mistress wants him to satisfy both their lusts in a crucible of death. She concocts a plan to kill the long-suffering wife, staging the murder as an accidental drowning. The man wrestles with his conscience and fights to do the right thing. He invites his wife on a reconciliatory jaunt across the water, which she eagerly accepts. But after he makes his subsequent decision, the movie has plenty of surprises still in store.

Murnau is able to convey the story without the use of momentum-killing dialogue. So instead of breaking away to be told what a character said, body language and other clues convey meaning admirably. Murnau's special talent is for expressing a character's feelings through visuals. Dissolves, superimpositions, distorted sets, and tracking shots keep a viewer's curiosity piqued. The camera takes on a subjective role; we no longer see reality, but the world of the mind. A brilliant example is the man on his bed, before the sunny excursion. He sits, brooding, wracking his brain trying to decide if he will commit murder. Suddenly the arms of his mistress wrap around him and tease him with the promise of sensual delights. He's still there on the bed, but now we know exactly what bedevils him. He presses his hands against his head...slowly the ghostly image vanishes, and he is left alone.

This fable is extraordinary in its pitiable beauty, but even though it conveys a significant message, it's all very simple—just pathos and splendor. That is the fundamental problem with silent film—the medium cannot withstand a complicated narrative. There's not enough ways to convey the requisite information.

Even though the advent of sound proved a hindrance to film's ongoing visual evolution, talkies, immediately accepted by the public, soon garnered the approval of scholars and critics as well. Lest we forget, *Sunrise* was a stunning exception to the usual silent movie fare. The industry needed to change, but we can be thankful that this masterwork was completed just in time.