

Sunrise:

A Song of Two

Humans

(1927, F.W. Murnau, USA)

Component 2: Global Filmmaking Perspectives (AL)

**Core Study Areas:
Key Elements of Film Form
Meaning & Response
The Contexts of Film**

**Specialist Study Area:
Critical Debates (AL)**

Rationale for study

- *Sunrise* is a 'super-production, an experimental film and a visionary poem' (Martin Scorsese). The film is unique in that it is a German Expressionist film made with German talent for a Hollywood Studio (Fox). It reflects silent film at its peak as an art form, released just days before the premiere of the first 'talkie', *The Jazz Singer*.

STARTING POINTS - Useful Sequences and Timings/Links

- The Man meets the Woman from the City (10mins)
- The Man and the Wife in the city (40mins)

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS - Key Elements of Film Form (Micro Features)

Cinematography

- The opening vacation montage employs multiple exposures and super-impositions to convey summertime in an expressionist style.
- The film uses light sources such as a candle on the table and light through a window – this use of single light sources is typical of the late silent period.
- When the Man and the Wife renew their love in the church, they move from shadow into light. The lighting is a metaphor for the renewal of their marriage vows.

Mise en Scene

- The film contains many visual oppositions including: day vs. night; the city vs. the country; the dangerous Woman from the City vs. the innocent Wife.
- Murnau employs 'forced perspective' – an expressionist device where objects in the foreground are large, making the background recede.
- The mise en scene is symbolic, reflecting the characters' psychological states. The mud the Man and the Woman from the City wade though is a metaphor for their relationship.

Editing

- Murnau employs long takes throughout

and would often hold a shot longer than is usual in Hollywood film, giving the film a lyrical and poetic quality.

- The film's opening montage employs rapid editing to give a graphic representation of the summer holidays in the city.
- The film's most famous scene, where the Man and Wife walk through the city, not noticing the traffic, uses a dissolve shot to merge the city and the country together.

Sound

- Although *Sunrise* is a silent film, it was synchronised with a musical score.
- The sound of bells is used as a motif at various points – bells sound as the Man decides to spare his wife. Later, bells are heard again and the Man and the Wife emerge from the church. Here, bells signal the Man's change as he repents and renews his love for his wife.

CORE STUDY AREAS 2 - STARTING POINTS - Meaning & Response

Representations

- The Woman from the City represents the 'flapper' figure. Flappers were women in the 1920s who enjoyed a new-found freedom and American jazz music. They rejected Victorian modes of dress, favouring short bobbed hair and short shirts. Here, the flapper is represented as a threat to the stability of marriage.
- The characters are universal types, hence their titles – the Man, the Wife, etc.
- The city is represented as a place of decadence and fascination. The film does not indicate specific locations – it seems to merge the European and American city.

Aesthetics (i.e. the 'look and feel' of the film including visual style, influences, auteur, motifs)

- Murnau uses long, fluid camera movements. He stated, 'The camera is the director's pencil. It should have the greatest possible mobility in order to record the most fleeting harmony of atmosphere'.
- At times the camera is subjective, reflecting the eyes of the Man. When the Man meets the Woman from the City, the tracking shot becomes subjective.

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 - STARTING POINTS – Contexts

Technological

- Murnau uses every technical device available to filmmakers at that time. The film exemplifies the late silent period, where filmmaking had reached its artistic peak.

Institutional

- *Sunrise* was Fox's most expensive silent film, intended as a 'prestige picture' for Fox to demonstrate that they were purveyors of high cinematic art, as well as mass-produced entertainment. German directors such as Murnau were viewed as artists by Hollywood studios and Fox gave Murnau complete freedom and control on *Sunrise*.
- Although *Sunrise* earned three academy awards, including the Oscar for Best Picture, the film failed to recoup costs at the Box Office.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA - DEBATES: REALISM VS EXPRESSIONISM - STARTING POINTS

- *Sunrise* calls into question Bazin's notion that realist devices such as long takes and deep-focus are opposed to expressionism. Murnau employs expressionist *and* realist aesthetics. He utilises both montage *and* deep-focus and long takes.
- The subjective camera serves to merge fantasy and reality.