

Sunrise: Social Contexts

Aesthetics

Lotte Eisner, who wrote the first critical assessment of Murnau's work, said in *The Haunted Screen* (1969):

"In Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, the greatest film-director the Germans have ever known, cinematic composition was never a mere attempt at decorative stylisation. He created the most overwhelming and poignant images in the whole German cinema. *Sunrise* combines elements of *Kammerspielfilm*'s realism, but exaggerates these by employing expressionistic elements to bring to the surface the emotions of the characters. With Fox's unlimited budget and vast resources available to Murnau in Hollywood, he was able to develop his strong aesthetic on a larger canvas. With *Sunrise*, he did indeed create the 'masterpiece' William Fox had sought."

Representation

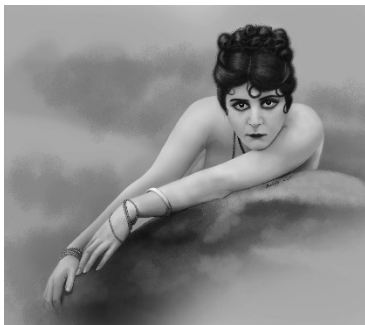
The film was made in 1926/1927 but the unnamed setting and characters, allow them to stand for anywhere and anyone. The city represents the present (jazz bands, luxury fashion, electric lights and motor cars) and future (spectacular modernistic sets); the country, the past (horse-drawn carts, candles/lanterns and lack of decoration). Within these spaces, we can explore issues of representations of gender and age and a lack of representation of any ethnicity other than white.

Age

The ages of the three central characters are not given, but the fragility and passiveness of the wife indicates that she is younger than her husband. The predatory woman from the city exudes confidence, but there is an element of 'desperation' in her pursuit of this married man, indicating that she may be a few years older than he is. The actors were 20 (Gaynor), 31 (Livingston) and 27 (O'Brien).

Gender

Critics of Murnau's films tend to praise their aesthetic, and offer criticism on their gender representation. In the New York Herald Tribune's obituary of Murnau, the columnist Richard Watts Jr commented that, there was that weakness of the director in handling women. In *Sunrise* Gaynor was unnecessarily handicapped by a clumsy headdress [and] that character of the villainess was overstressed in the early Theda Bara manner. (Watts, 1931)



"The Vamp" as she was known, Theda Bara

The central characters in *Sunrise* are so simple that they take on archetypal qualities. They are unnamed, referred to as only the man, the wife and the woman from the city. Two are defined by their gender (man and woman from the city), but the third by her role (wife). The dialectical of the narrative is reinforced by the two female roles whose function is both archetypes (good wife/wicked mistress) and also personification of locations. The wife belongs to the day, the past and the country. The woman in contrast reflects the night, the present/future and the city. The wife is shot in soft,

bright but diffused light, which bounces off her blonde hair, giving her a halo effect. She radiates innocence, which is emphasised in her matte, light-coloured, cotton clothing and bonnet. Her glowing brightness is a signifier of purity. In the first third, she is shown in the domestic setting, cooking and caring for her baby and husband. We see her tenderly covering the husband with a blanket even though he has been out all night with his mistress. Her role is simply one of loving wife', regardless of her husband's treatment towards her.



Light and dark, a contrast the dialectical of the narrative

In contrast, the woman from the city exudes sexuality. She can be seen as an example of the new woman, a frequent archetype in the German culture of the period. In 1919 women had been given right to equality of education, civil service appointments and professional pay. This new freedom and employment opportunities among single women were seen as a threat to the traditional other/wife role. The new woman was seen as a sign of modernity and sexual liberation, and became an enduring image throughout the period, especially the mid- to late 1920s. By having the wife triumph over the woman from the city, suggests that being a mother and wife was the desired role for women at this time. Considering Murnau's own homosexuality, it is interesting to note how he explores sexuality and what it means to be a man in his films. In many of his films, men are not portrayed as stereotypically virile, masculine types, but instead as emotionally confused. Whereas the duality of good/bad woman is shown through the wife/woman from the city, the male equivalent is seen in the man, who is alternately monstrous and 'normal', depending on which of the two women he is being influenced by.

Ethnicity

For contemporary audiences watching silent films, the absence of non-white actors is striking. In most Hollywood films of the period, ethnic minorities were usually depicted as racist stereotypes such as the noble savage stereotype of Native Americans, savage Arabs, Mexican bandits, Asian-American waiters and black servants or simple buffoons. This was compounded by the frequent casting of white actors in these roles, whose make-up (known as blackface/yellowface) and costuming would allude to the characteristics of the ethnic group being depicted. Sunrise's setting is expressionistic; although, offering the illusion of reality, its styling marks it as different. All the actors are Caucasian, including those that may have traditionally have been ethnically cast such as waiters or jazz musicians.