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Sunrise: A Murnau Masterpiece

DOROTHY B. JONES

DOROTHY B. JONES served as chief of the film reviewing and analysis section of OWI during World War II. This piece on *Sunrise* will appear in somewhat revised form in her forthcoming book on important American films which were studied while she was a Fellow of the Rockefeller Foundation in the field of film criticism. Having just completed a study of the portrayal of India and China in Hollywood motion pictures for the Center for International Studies at M.I.T., Mrs. Jones is now working on another survey of Hollywood film content for the Fund for the Republic.

AMONG THE WORKS of the German-born director F. W. Murnau, *Sunrise* (1927) remains today a film which is still enjoyed and appreciated by discriminating cinema audiences, as well as by many average movie-goers when they are given the opportunity to see it. Despite the fact that *Sunrise* is a silent film, the average person enjoys it as a fascinating story told with honesty and sincerity. Others with more finely developed capacities for discrimination find additional pleasure in the profound understanding of human nature—implicit in all of Murnau's best work—and also admire and appreciate the subtle artistry with which he fashioned this picture.

Yet, strangely enough, *Sunrise* is a film which has rarely been given serious consideration by film critics. Although all have not expressed the scorn which Paul Rotha recorded in *The Film Till Now*,¹ most critics have either ignored it completely in their discussion of Murnau's work or passed over it lightly as an unfortunate, Hollywood-influenced production unworthy of its talented director. A quarter of a century, although possibly not an appreciable length of time for a film to live, may perhaps give us the perspective necessary to reevaluate *Sunrise* and to understand why it has thus far stood the test of time.

Based on the short story "A Trip to Tilsit" by Hermann Sudermann, *Sunrise* tells of a young peasant whom a city woman seduces

¹ (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1949), 182. This assessment of *Sunrise* originally appeared in 1930, but Rotha in no way amended it in his 1949 edition as he did by adding footnotes with respect to *Intolerance* and a number of other films.

to drown his wife. He takes his wife across the lake to the city but cannot carry through the plan. The young couple rediscover their love for one another and spend a happy day in the city. On the trip home however, a storm blows up, the boat is capsized, and the wife is lost. The city woman, assuming that her plan has succeeded, goes to the house of the man who is nearly insane with grief and anger. He is choking her to death when word comes that his wife is safe. The city woman leaves and the man and wife continue their life together.

A motion picture telling such a story is bound to be a psychological melodrama. But in the hands of Fred W. Murnau, this story is told with such striking simplicity that it has the universal appeal of a fable. The film has a lyric quality which has rarely been achieved in moving images. And the camera which focuses almost exclusively on the young peasant and his wife is less concerned with the objective events of the story than with the meaning of the events to these two human beings.

A high tribute to the artistry of this film is the pervading naturalness and simplicity. For, although Murnau deliberately created a simple folk tale, he simultaneously has shown us the tremendously complicated human motivations and the subtle moods which lie behind the actions of even the most simple people. The postures and movements of the actors, the varying pace as the story unfolds, the lighting, the camera movement, and, above all else, the relationship of the central characters to the ever-moving backgrounds in which they are pictured have all been employed as means for helping us to share and understand the human emotions which are dramatized in this film.

Thus, Murnau was not content to characterize the peasant (as Sudermann did) as a boorish, overbearing and somewhat cunning man whom one can readily imagine capable of murdering his wife. Instead, the peasant in the film is pictured as an essentially simple, hard-working young man who loves his wife and child. By so doing, Murnau has given his central character greater universality; but, at the same time, he has raised the interesting

psychological question of how it is possible for such a man to agree to murder his wife. In the opening sequences, Murnau sets out to provide the answer by detailing with remarkable cinematic skill and artistry the nature of the man's relationship to the city woman.

Under a low full moon, the man is seen moving slowly through the mists of the dark meadows to a rendezvous with the city woman. The camera slowly follows him, then moves on past him to a clump of willows, and finally on through the willow branches to reveal a clearing where waits the city woman, dressed in a tight-fitting black gown, sophisticated, bored, twirling a flower in her hand. As she hears the man approaching, she hurriedly powders her nose; then she looks expectantly toward the camera as he comes toward her, and they embrace and kiss fiercely.

In the scene which follows, the city woman suggests that the man murder his wife. He is horrified, grabs her by the throat, and almost strangles her. As he gets up to leave, she comes after him. He tries to fight her off, but she holds him by the neck and then by the hair as she finally succeeds in kissing him passionately on the face, and then on the mouth. They drop to the ground; and bending over him with more kisses, she tells him, "Leave all this behind—come to the city." In large type, the words are repeated: **COME TO THE CITY.**

Crucial to an understanding of the entire story is the rising emotional climax of the man's seduction by the city woman; and this is reproduced by the succession of carefully selected and combined background images, as well as by the actions of the players themselves. The sequence begins with what Lewis Jacobs has well described as a mood of "quiet sensuality. . . . [in which] The overhanging mists, the dew, the full moon, the sinuous and constant movement of the camera—all combined to create a dark, somnolent mood."² But this mood prevails only in the first part of the sequence. When the siren whispers in his ear that he should murder his wife, the scene becomes one of violent anger; and

² *The Rise of the American Film* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), 363.

this mood, in turn, is transformed by the city woman into one of violent sexuality.

This last mood is accomplished, in part, when she forces him to submit to her kisses and is carried further up a rising scale of sexual excitement by the images (presumably of her creation) on the screen which suggest the excitement of city life. As the meadow behind them dissolves into a travel shot of a large city square at night filled with moving traffic, the couple appear to move into the center of the square, and eventually fade from sight as the whole screen pictures a succession of rapid travel shots. Whereas in the opening of the sequence the camera moves slowly and sensuously, now it moves rapidly and with abandonment in long breath-taking and dizzying strokes, peering down glittering streets and finally climbing recklessly up the side of tall buildings to take in the sky line of the metropolis alive with moving searchlights. The sexual significance of the dance-band and dance-hall images which follow is implicit: the dance-band leader with his back to the camera dominates the screen (the man who calls the tune and sets the pace for the dancers) while to his right, the screen features the dance floor with its scattered dancers; and this entire image moves in a circular fashion toward him as if gyrating to the wild music of his band.

But the movements of the dance-band images which next fill the entire screen are at an even higher pitch of excitement and are still more clearly sexual in their kinesthetic meaning. All of the musicians rise up and down in unison on the stressed beat; and, in the interim, they sway in unison from side to side. The sexual significance of this rhythmic pattern is once more related to the man and city woman when they reappear on the lower half of the screen where the woman is revealed on her knees doing a wild orgiastic dance to the music of the band. As the band fades from view, the city woman has obviously aroused the man into taking an active role as her sex partner. There immediately follows a blurry long shot of the village as seen from over the lake, with the full moon just begining to pass behind a cloud. By means

of its total imagery, this shot suggests the exquisite sensation of intense sexual pleasure (which, as suggested by this diffuse long shot, blurs awareness of objective reality); and, at the same time, it symbolically suggests the imminent climax of passion (as the moon starts to pass behind a cloud). But even more telling is the contrast between the hazy beauty of this long shot of the village and the dark ugliness of the following close-up which shows the matted bulrushes to reveal where the pair have lain together. Further, as the camera pans slowly a little to the left, the deep mud close by is revealed; and the camera follows their footprints through the mire until her high-heeled, patent-leather shoes come into view. Then, the camera tilts up to take in her black figure gathering together the rushes with which he is to save himself after drowning his wife. In these two successive shots, Murnau has contrasted the pure beauty of intense sexual feeling with the dark cold ugliness of the return to realities which follow when, passion spent, the man is left to face the meaning of his act.

This seduction sequence makes possible our understanding how such an essentially simple and boyish person could agree to murder his wife. The nature of the man's relationship to the city woman is clearly suggested by visual analogy in the early part of the sequence—before the murder of the wife has been proposed. From a view of the lovers, the film cuts to show the young wife seeking solace at the bedside of her child whom she holds on her arm and kisses. In the succeeding image, the city woman is holding the man on her arm as she kisses his face and neck, while he (in a comparable position to the child in the previous picture) lies back smiling. By this association of images, the relationship between the city woman and the man is defined: she, the worldly-wise woman, is as the mother; and he, as the child.

Also from the seduction sequence, we learn that this woman is sexually the active aggressor rather than a mere temptress. She has just suggested that he murder his wife, yet he allows himself to be seduced and thus commits himself to her and to her plan for murder. They have lain together on the rushes in the mud, the

picture tells us; and he has become as cruel as she, for he has accepted her and is wedded to her and what she stands for. He feels guilt toward his wife, but he is bound by an even greater guilt to the city woman—the shared guilt of a sex act which has committed him to murder—which is made clear when we see him for the first time following his seduction. Gathering the rushes, the city woman turns to him and says, “After the boat has capsized, save yourself with these bulrushes. The rushes will hold you up—scatter them before you reach the shore and tell everyone she drowned by accident.” (Throughout this scene, the man stands passive, his hands thrust into his pockets, his back to the camera, his shoulders hunched over in the depressed and somehow bestial posture, which remains characteristic of him until later when his resolution breaks, and he finds himself unable to carry through the city woman’s plans.) The rushes are now symbolic both of the death plan for the wife and of the act of infidelity, two secrets which the man shares with the city woman.

Bearing the bundle of rushes, the man returns home and stealthily enters the barn. About to hide the rushes, the man is nosed by the horse and is so greatly startled that we become aware of how acute is his feeling of guilt. As he covers the bundle carefully with canvas, pressing it down out of sight with both hands, something in his manner and gesture suggests that in his own mind he is already hiding the dead body of his wife.

That the man’s guilt centers upon this bundle of rushes is brilliantly suggested in his manner of awakening the next morning. In sleep, he moves slightly and turns his face toward the camera. Then his eyes abruptly open, and in sudden panic he sits bolt upright on the edge of the bed, his eyes wide with terror. There is a quick cut to a shot in which the camera moves in very quickly toward the bundle of rushes, now half-revealed as they lie under the canvas, and brings them into sharp focus in a close-up. Again we see his startled face, as he throws back the comforter and peers more closely. Realizing he has been dreaming, the man relaxes, puts his head down on his hands, and covers his eyes.

The camera's rapid truck in on the bulrushes, bringing them from a blurry to a clear focus, reproduces the startled sensation of awakening and carrying the fearful vision of a dream over into reality; and the man's reactions indicate the weakening sensation of relief which follows. More than this, we realize fully the man's great guilt as he awakens in horror to the thought that the rushes have been uncovered.

But Murnau uses still other means to show the man's acceptance of the city woman's plan to murder his wife. The very image of the murder which the man carries in his mind is the one originally supplied by the city woman. During their rendezvous in the field, the woman had first asked, "Couldn't she get drowned?"; and the caption dissolved into a picture of the husband standing in the boat and pushing his wife into the water. This image makes specific the woman's plan as her words urge him, "Then overturn the boat, it will look like an accident." Later when the man thinks of the plan to which he has become partner, this same image reappears and makes plain that *her* thought is dominating him.

Even more explicitly, the following morning the man weeps with remorse as he looks out through the doorway at his young wife feeding the chickens; and the ghost image of the city woman appears behind him, her hands going around him as she presses him close and kisses him. He averts his face, and her image dissolves, but now again, she appears below him, smiling, her lips lifted to his, inviting a kiss. At the same time, a large close-up of her, kissing his hair, appears behind him. The size of this close-up, a ghost image which takes up almost a third of the screen, suggests the overpowering influence of her presence. He presses his clenched fists against his temples, and the images slowly fade.

Throughout the entire first portion of the film, we see a man in deep conflict. This is perhaps most vividly summarized in a single close-up shortly after he has asked his wife to go across the lake with him to the city. She gaily makes preparations for the journey, obviously convinced that this is a gesture of reconcilia-

tion. Then there is a close-up of the man's hands as they move down slowly and deliberately around the bundle of rushes, like hands around the neck of a victim who is about to be strangled. His hands lift the bundle up slowly, and the camera tilts up to reveal his face, taut and glassy-eyed. The grim gesture in relation to the symbolic bundle of rushes makes clear that although he feels impelled to go through with the murder of his wife, he feels deep rage toward the city woman; and it is she, rather than his wife, whom he would really like to murder (for when the city woman first suggested the murder, he attempted to choke her; and later, at the close of the film, when he believes his wife to be lost, he does in fact almost murder her in this fashion). Yet there appears to be no way out, no way to resolve the conflict. The depth of his resultant depression is suggested by his stooped posture, his sluggish walk, his unshaven and generally unkempt appearance, his dark brooding countenance, and his complete self-absorption which sets him apart from all that goes on around him.

In all of this, Murnau demonstrates an intuitive understanding of the dynamics of personality. But *Sunrise* raises and convincingly answers the even more amazing psychological question of how a woman can accept and forgive her husband after he has planned to murder her. To begin with, the man and wife are shown to be simple peasant people, and their life together has been a good one. We catch a glimpse of this early in the film when the servant tells of what their life was like before the coming of the city woman: “They used to be like children . . . carefree . . . happy. . . .” And in a brief flashback, we see the man plowing the field while the wife and child sit under a tree close by; then he stops his work to play with the child. Clearly, this young couple loved one another and enjoyed life together prior to the arrival of the city woman.

But the real answer to the question is to be found in the characterization of the wife as a gentle, loving, and genuinely happy woman. Above all else, her womanly qualities of tenderness and compassion are repeatedly emphasized—as she weeps and fondles

the baby after her husband has left her to meet the city woman, as she lovingly covers her sleeping husband and gently strokes his brow the following morning, and as she tenderly stoops to feed the baby chicks and shows kindness toward the dog.

Actually in the wife, Murnau has created an image of pure goodness, just as in the city woman his creation is one of evil. Never for one moment is there a shadow of jealousy, anger, or even resentment in this woman whose husband has not only been unfaithful, but has planned her murder. Yet so great is Murnau's skill and understanding as a master of character that we do not resent this perfection in the wife; in fact, we are scarcely aware of it. For he has succeeded in making this image of human perfection completely real and understandable by combining mature serenity and compassionate understanding with childlike innocence and simplicity. There is no trace of righteousness in this woman; indeed, her goodness appears like the innate goodness of an essentially happy child.⁸ Although she is pictured as a mother, the wife appears to rely upon the servant who cares for the child. Indeed, the wife herself often seems to be like a child; for example, her appearance on the night of her husband's seduction: she is sleeping in the moonlight, and the long shot of the bedroom makes her seem small and childlike.

The wife's complete trust and reliance upon her husband is the key which makes her behavior appear believable. To her husband's infidelity and his attempt to kill her, she responds like a child whose trust in an adult has been broken; when he leaves her for another woman, she is heartbroken; when he attempts to murder her, her first reaction is one of fear and withdrawal, then of grief. These are the reactions of a child who feels his security completely bound up in an adult and who feels hopelessly incapable of doing anything to free himself from the relationship. Yet in the process of reconciliation, the wife shows a maturity and

⁸ The concept of the innate goodness of children is one that predates our knowledge of personality development based on psychoanalysis. However, it remains a myth which our culture finds difficult to relinquish and which Murnau utilized in his creation of this character.

understanding which do not appear in the least inconsistent with what has gone before.

As the man and wife set out on their journey across the lake, an incident occurs which foreshadows the events to come. The dog, barking loudly, wants to follow them. (Perhaps the animal has sensed something wrong in the man's dark mood.) He breaks his chain, jumps the fence, and swims toward the boat. The wife wants to turn back at once; but the husband, with his hard and distant mood, turns a deaf ear to her pleas. (What is the suffering of a dog to a man who is about to drown his wife?) Only after the wife helps the animal into the boat does the husband turn back, unwillingly. As he walks the dog up the little hill back toward the kennel, the wife looks after him with troubled eyes. Now fully aware of his dark mood, she starts to rise as if to get out but soon relaxes, smiling a little at her own doubts; then sitting there with the rippling water filling the screen behind her, she begins to look genuinely frightened and again starts to rise. But the man comes down the path; and the wife, looking small and alone, sits back again in the stern of the boat. A moment later, they are pulling away from the shore—his body crouched over the oars, his dark face lowered, his thoughts centered within himself.

When they reach the center of the lake, the man rows more and more slowly and finally stops altogether. The wife leans forward toward him, her eyes wide with fear. He puts first one then the other oar into the boat and moves toward her, his hands hanging apelike by his sides, his face cruel, hard, and determined. The wife draws back in terror, then, as his figure looms over her, pleads for mercy. A close-up of his two hands outstretched as if about to throw her overboard is followed by a pan shot of his arms thrown in a sudden gesture across his face; the awful moment has come and gone, and his resolution is broken. Quickly he steps back and frantically rows toward the shore, as she sits in the stern, her face covered with her hands. A rapid series of brief shots spell out the empty moments as, head down, he rows desperately with increasing speed, and as numbly she sits with her hands covering her

face. Neither looks at the other, but as the boat hits the shore, he moves toward her and makes a gesture to help her out of the boat. Suddenly activated by fear of her husband, she rushes past him, jumps onto the shore, and runs away while he, calling and pleading, follows her.

The sequence of the trolley ride into the city with its series of long unbroken shots is one of the most volubly expressive passages of the entire picture. The interminable agony of these two human beings huddled on the platform of the trolley—she numb and remote, drawn as far away from him as possible, he mute and miserable beside her—is more acutely felt because of the landscape which flows endlessly past the windows. Following its winding track, the trolley carries them along the edge of the lake (where, as if in mute reference to what has gone before, a lone boat is seen out on the water), through the woods, into the outskirts, and finally into the very center of the city itself. Despite the gradually increasing activity around them, they remain unseeing until the trolley comes to a stop at the end of the line in the middle of a wide city square.

In the city, the camera follows the couple as each moment brings them a little closer to that moment of understanding which is the rebirth of their love for one another. The simplicity, the subtle beauty with which this is achieved on the screen is difficult to describe in words. The dangers of moving traffic, the impersonality of the crowds, the strangeness of the city places—all help to draw them together as he protects and guides her through the streets. Filled with remorse, he tries to reassure her of his love; but though she accepts the food and flowers which he offers her, his kindness only makes her weep the more. Finally they go into a church where a wedding is taking place. Seated in one of the rear pews, they listen together as the wedding vows are taken. “Keep her and protect her from all harm,” the minister tells the groom, and the husband too is finally able to weep. “Wilt thou love her?” the minister asks; the groom nods solemnly. And the husband, tears falling, gropes blindly for his wife’s hand and puts

his head down on her lap, as she caresses and strokes his head. Now she guides him (as he guided her when she wept) out of the pew to the side aisle. In the corridor of the church, they are shown standing together, her arms about him, his face hidden on her shoulder. He drops to his knees, hiding his face against her. A close-up shows her stroking his hair, and he raises his face to ask, “Forgive me.” In answer, she kisses his brow. There follows a close-up of two bells in the church tower, swinging in alternate directions, yet tolling together. The man is weeping now in relief, and she kisses his cheek. He smiles, and she, smiling also, gently turns his face toward her (out of shadow and into light) and kisses him tenderly on the mouth. There follows now a huge close-up of the two bells tolling in unison, ringing out the joy of new love and the harmony of human understanding.

The reconciliation of this husband and wife is one of the most moving stories ever told on the screen, and it is told almost entirely visually. (There are only half a dozen titles in this entire portion of the film—from the time when the man sees he cannot go through with the murder until the scene just described.) So well are these two human beings portrayed that at no moment is there any doubt as to what they are feeling. Their emotions are expressed not only in their carriage, movements, and facial expressions, but by the telling way in which they are pictured in relation to the scene around them. In addition to the examples already given, we have them leaving the church and walking out into the square, unaware of the traffic around them. The background itself dissolves to express their subjective attitude toward reality, for they are seen to be walking dreamily through a meadow full of flowers which indicates that they have returned once more to the country scenes in which they first fell in love. But it is of supreme importance that each successive stage of the reconciliation is pictured at considerable length. We do not sense briefly, but instead observe over a period of time and in some detail the full expression of each feeling and attitude; and thus, we ourselves become fully steeped in the subtly changing moods

of these two people. Furthermore, this slowness of pace allows time for us to absorb the deeper meanings implicit in the physical posture and movements of the actors. For example, early in the reconciliation sequence, the wife looks into her husband's face as she accepts the flowers which he offers her and then weeps into them. We cannot help but be aware (though perhaps unconsciously) that the wife is holding these flowers exactly as a mother cradles a baby in her arms. By his direction, Murnau time and again subtly suggests the thought behind even the simplest act and gesture.

Naturally for a contemporary movie audience, *Sunrise* moves at a much slower pace than today's sound films. But if the observer adjusts himself to this pace at the beginning of the picture, he will be rewarded except possibly for a few individual scenes in which the actors' motions have been slowed down to the point of tedium, to detract from rather than add to the sense of reality. However, the artistry of this film is so great that even in such scenes, Murnau's intention may well have been to create deliberately a partial sense of unreality. For example, in the tense moments when the husband walks toward the wife in the stern of the boat, his actions are so slow that they appear almost as slow-motion photography; and his posture and movements are therefore exaggerated so that they become strange and unnatural. A sense of the unbelievable actually happening before our eyes was undoubtedly exactly what Murnau was aiming for to make this moment appear like some strange nightmare. Today, however, the sense of the unbelievable goes beyond what Murnau intended; therefore, the effect he desired is not wholly achieved, possibly because the contrast in pace intended in this scene has been heightened further by the conditioning our eyes have been given during the intervening years through a much faster tempo of movement on the screen.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about this motion picture is the fluidity of its images, which flow freely from objective to subjective realities and back without any break in continuity. For

example, after the man leaves the city woman and returns home, he is shown lying on his bed and looking toward his wife (and toward the camera) who is sleeping nearby. He continues staring in horror toward her, and slowly water begins to appear on the lower rim of the screen, gradually flooding it completely and obliterating all else but his outstretched figure. He appears to be completely surrounded by the rippling water, while his eyes remain open in the same fixed expression of horror. Then gradually his figure is obliterated by the water; and, as the morning sun catches the ripples, the camera pans up to reveal the shore line of the town shrouded in the morning mist; and this is followed by a picture of his wife, standing in the morning light, looking down on him as he sleeps.

In addition to the complete fluidity of images, this segment also illustrates another characteristic of the entire motion picture—the richness of meaning inherent in the images. The image of the man staring in horror toward his wife is seen sufficiently long for us to grasp what he is thinking. Then, as the water begins to appear at the bottom of the frame, we feel from the image itself how this thought (of the drowning) slowly hems him in and finally surrounds him until he loses consciousness in sleep (as suggested by the obliteration of his figure beneath the water itself). The image has symbolic meaning also, for we see it is he (rather than his wife) who is drowning—he is being lost because of his acceptance of the city woman’s plan for murder, just as he was lost once he submitted to her sexual advances. Indeed in this image, Murnau again links the murder plan and the seduction, for the image of the man’s outstretched figure being gradually surrounded and finally submerged by the rippling water is also symbolic of the sex act which sealed his acceptance of the murder plan. And this same image may be interpreted as having future reference as well, for the waters which, in this scene, shut off his sight of his wife, are, we are told, the waters of the lake near the village—the same waters into which he will peer hopelessly, after hours of search, believing that she is forever lost to him.

Murnau's method of cinematic expression in much of the film is unique. As in the seduction sequence and others, the walk of the married couple into the center of the square outside the church conveys its meaning not by relating one completely fresh image to the next, but by retaining an image of the person (or people) and by slowly dissolving the background so as to make it expressive of the thought or mood of the person being shown. In some instances, the image of the person also dissolves into a mood picture which occupies the entire screen. Here, the step back to objective reality is taken by a brief intermediate one of the reappearance of the individual whose thought is being portrayed. This figure appears before the mood background disappears and before the original scene is reaffirmed. Thus both the objective situation and the emotions or thoughts of the person being shown are visually interpreted, and continuity between them is unbroken. So, Murnau's film moves with ease from the act itself to the unconscious idea behind it, from the reality in which a character finds himself to his concurrent fantasy, and back once more to reality with complete freedom—all of which suggests again and again the depths which lie beneath the surface of human behavior.

Murnau uses other cinematic means for communicating the thoughts of his characters. For example, when a character speaks of a past or anticipated event, Murnau pictures it, and always in such a way that he distinguishes it from the immediate events of the story itself. For example, to represent a remembered scene (as when the servant recalls the happy days of the young couple), he slightly blurs the focus in order to contrast the vague quality of recollection with the more precise vision of reality. Or to picture a plan of action which is told by one person to another (as when the city woman outlines her plan of murder to the man), Murnau records the action in slow-motion which helps show that the act is one of passion rather than careful design. One of the remarkable things about all of these devices is that they are natural to the style of *Sunrise* and are consequently accepted without conscious realization that they are in any way unusual.

In this connection, and purely from a pictorial standpoint *Sunrise* is one of the most beautiful motion pictures ever made. Close study reveals that the composition of each shot in relation to the motion to be photographed within it must have been planned in advance and executed with great care. Unforgettable for their sheer beauty in composition and expressive motion are such pictures as that of the wife, framed in the doorway. As she makes the simple gesture of stooping down to feed the baby chicks gathered around her, a feeling of womanly tenderness is captured in an image of lasting beauty. Another memorable moving image is the city woman's view of the village street from her bedroom window, as the peasants with their lanterns begin to gather for the night search on the lake.

Fred W. Murnau was a true motion-picture artist. Perspective, composition, action, balance of motion within the frame, and lighting were all fully conceived in advance and were carefully worked out on the set before anything was recorded on film. All of the sets for *Sunrise* were built with the perspective of the camera in mind. For example, the ceilings of the interiors slanted downward, walls converged slightly toward the back of the set, and floors slanted slightly. Yet, as seen through the eyes of the camera, the interiors appear only to have unusual depth.⁴ Those who worked with Murnau state that he was an artist who knew always exactly what he wanted and tirelessly aimed to achieve it.

Murnau expresses meaning frequently by means of subtle symbolism. The reeds which symbolize the man's act of infidelity as well as his acceptance of the city woman's plan for murder play a particularly ironic role in the closing portion of the film. After their reconciliation, the young couple spend a happy day in the city, sharing many small adventures. They sail home by moonlight, deeply content in their new love. But as they near home a sudden severe storm blows up. The man remembers the bulrushes which he had surreptitiously hidden in the prow of the boat and with which he had intended to save himself. Now he

⁴ This effect, known as "forced perspective," obviously requires that the camera on such a set be placed only in one position and remain stationary in photographing the action.

manages to tie the rushes with a rope to his wife's back as she clings to him in helpless terror.⁵ A moment later the mountainous waves sweep over them both, and the boat is capsized. The man is washed ashore, but the wife is lost.

During the search which follows, the bundle of rushes plays an important and pictorially dramatic part. Summoned from their beds by the husband, the men of the village leave in their small boats to search the lake. We see a long shot of the dark water as from the top right corner of the frame the body of the wife, supported by the bundle of bulrushes, floats on the tide downward to the lower left of the frame. The search continues, and the husband leans far out over the prow of one of the boats, his lantern almost dipping into the dark water, as he calls her name repeatedly into the night. Again, we see the wife's body move silently through the water across the frame. But this time a trail of rushes marks her path for one bundle has scattered, and her head is slowly being submerged. This trail of rushes comes into the light of the husband's lantern, and we see his horror-struck face. There is a beautiful and dramatic close-up of his lantern held over the dark water as a bunch of the rushes which support her wet shawl move into its light, followed by another bunch containing the rope. Again, we see a close-up of his horror-struck face, then, a shot of the old man at the oars who, after looking toward the husband at the prow, silently removes his hat and bows his head. Now the husband collapses, and one of the men comes to help and comfort him.

Thus, to the end, the rushes remain symbolic of the man's betrayal of his wife. The outcome—or what appears to be the outcome when the search is abandoned—is exactly as the man and the city woman had planned: he has been saved, the wife has been drowned, and the villagers accept it as an accident. But the meaning of these events to the man himself has now been completely altered by intervening happenings: whereas before he wished his

⁵ By associative image, the film underscores his protective role by picturing next the terrified child at home clinging to the servant who holds the babe in her arms as she looks out of the window at the pouring rain and lightning.

wife dead so that he could go away with the city woman, now he wants his wife alive; whereas before he desired the city woman, now he is certain that he loves only his wife. He must suffer not only the anguish of her death, but the horrible guilt of knowing that only a few hours ago he had wished for it.

There are innumerable other instances of the use of symbolism throughout this film. For example, the flowers offered by the man to the wife after they leave the restaurant have a double meaning: flowers are an expression of love not only for the living, but for the dead. Symbolically they are an appropriate offering: they remind us (and her) that he had wished her to be dead; and, at the same time, they express his present feelings of love toward her. Also the two bells in the church tower ringing out together are expressive of the harmony and joy that the man and wife are feeling together; they are the wedding bells which mark their consecration to one another.

Meaning in *Sunrise* is also frequently communicated by establishing significant contrasts, either within a given image or by contrasting a mood or circumstance to an earlier one which occurred in the same setting. For an example of contrasting a character and his background in a given image in order to heighten our awareness about the mood of the character we see the husband, his head lowered over the oars in dark brooding, against the lake which glitters brightly in the sunlight. Similarly, the city woman, with her sophisticated clothes, her affected manner of walking, etc., appears in striking contrast among the simple peasant folk. This latter contrast is seen in reverse in the barbershop and ball-room scenes when the man and wife with their quaint country dress and manners mingle with city people. For contrast of mood in the same setting, we have the gay mood of the young couple as they board the trolley to return home, for this cannot be seen without recalling the agony which marked their trolley ride into the city. Nor can the husband's grief as he enters the bedroom and passes his wife's empty bed be seen without recalling his earlier entrance after his seduction by the city woman. These contrasts

in mood are strongly felt not only because they occur with the same people in the same setting, but also because the camera records the scene from exactly the same angle to intensify our unconscious awareness.

In any discussion of contrasting moods in *Sunrise*, the striking difference in feeling between the first and second portions of the film must be noted. Lewis Jacobs has written,

... the first half was characteristically Murnau. . . . This half had a lyrical quality and was removed from the real world. . . . The second half, obviously suffering from Hollywood interference, was completely different. Its mood was realistic; the lyricism was dissipated by comic relief; the universality was destroyed by melodrama.⁹

The same contrast in the handling of the first and second portions of the film has been noted by many other critics, and most of them have similarly assumed that the shift was due to interference with Murnau's original purposes.

Actually, however, when we grasp the underlying theme of this film, no such interference is apparent. The mood which Murnau created in the first part of the film does indeed remove it from the real world, and this is exactly as Murnau had intended. He was picturing a situation of conflict which drew the man into a world where his real values and his normal perspective on his life had, through his infatuation with the city woman, been completely altered. A man obsessed, he moved in a strange and unreal world. This mood continues unbroken until the man finds himself unable to go through with the city woman's plan for murder, and at this moment the spell is broken. The period of reconciliation forms the transition to the second portion of the film, which Lewis Jacobs has correctly described as realistic. Now the man is no longer being driven by emotions which run counter to the main current of his life and remove him from reality into a strange and unreal world. From a man living in torment, he becomes once more himself, a simple peasant who is in love with his pretty wife. Consequently the entire mood and treatment become realistic. Notably, humor begins the moment the reconciliation has been

⁹ *Op. cit.*, 362.

completed: outside the church, people line the walks awaiting the appearance of the bride and groom; but the peasant and his wife come out of the church, their arms entwined, oblivious of all around them, and make their way through the aisle of curious and amused onlookers. And as the pair, imagining themselves in a flowering meadow, walk out into the square, our smiles turn to laughter, especially when they find themselves embracing amid the confusion and hubbub of stalled traffic. Finally, reaching the curb in safety, they, themselves, laugh heartily—not only at the incident but in relief at being at long last in the fresh air of normalcy. Here, the realistic mood and treatment, with accompanying strains of humor and gaiety, begin and continue unbroken until the tragedy of the storm when the man is once more thrown back into the world of nightmare. And now reality itself appears to have taken on the shape of that nightmare. The return to the earlier mood is tremendously effective, since it reminds us that reality often does confront us with circumstances which seem to reflect and stir up our deepest conflicts, throwing us into a torment which mocks the normalcy of our more healthy emotions.

Thus, not only are the changes of mood from unrealistic to realistic and back again completely in keeping with Murnau's purpose, but they come about gradually and understandably in terms of what is happening to the characters. With truly remarkable insight, Murnau has used the peasant's familiar background of the village to heighten the sense of nightmare and the unfamiliar scenes of the city as a background for the naturalness and genuine feeling between the husband and wife. And, with the three central characters themselves, the contrast also in a sense becomes one between the simplicity and naturalness of country life on the one hand and the complexity and synthetic qualities of city living on the other. (This contrast is humorously underscored, for example, in the series of alternating shots which place the natural grace and simplicity of the man and wife in counterpoint to the pseudosophisticated manner of a city couple who are among the onlookers during the peasant dance in the ballroom.)

Although the realistic scenes of the city may not have the same lyricism of the earlier and final sequences of the film, they have a charm and warmth and reflect Murnau's sensitivity and understanding of people. Instead of detracting from the universality of the film, the sequences in the city add to it; for the two dominant moods of the picture, though in complete contrast, complement each other. They are "the bitter and the sweet" which Murnau refers to in his line of preface; they are what the modern psychiatrist might more accurately describe as the sharp difference of feeling which exists when we are dominated on the one hand by unconscious (socially unacceptable) drives, or on the other by conscious (socially acceptable) ones. That this contrast was Murnau's intent, rather than the result of interference from Hollywood, is borne out by the fact that Charles Rosher, Karl Struss, Frank Powolny, and others who worked with him on this picture all assert that Murnau worked entirely without studio interference of any kind and that the picture was, in every sense, one of his own making.⁷

The happy ending of *Sunrise* has also been marked by some critics as a Hollywood imposition. Some, among them the noted British critic Paul Rotha, apparently feel that the picture should have ended in tragedy, that the wife should have been drowned in the storm, leaving the man to face the bleakness of life without her. Such a point of view is in a way understandable since, except for the happy ending, *Sunrise* almost perfectly fulfills the definitions of tragedy outlined by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. To begin with, the man fits Aristotle's definition of a tragic hero, for he is "neither eminently virtuous or just, nor yet involved in misfortune by deliberate vice or villainy, but by some error of human

⁷ Charles Rosher, who photographed *Sunrise*, was in Berlin with Murnau when the director worked out his plans for the picture. According to Rosher, the film was completely planned by Murnau before he came to this country. Even the sets for the picture were designed in Berlin. Murnau signed a contract with William Fox with the understanding that he would first make *Sunrise* and that he would be given a free hand in carrying out this picture. William Fox kept his word. He assigned a unit manager to handle the business details of the picture, but all final decisions on the production were made by Murnau himself. Charles Rosher reports that no one but himself, Murnau, Karl Struss (who was also responsible for some of the photography), and the film editor saw any part of the picture until it was completed.

frailty.” Such a man is by far the best hero of a tragedy, Aristotle tells us, “for our pity is excited by misfortunes undeservedly suffered, and our terror, by some resemblance between the sufferers and ourselves.” In this respect the man in *Sunrise* is an ideal hero, for his weakness, as dramatized in the film, is a universal one, existing in every human being to a greater or lesser degree. Actually, the man’s weakness is inherent in his passive tendencies, his unconscious desire—existent in all of us to some degree—to be led, controlled, possessed, and perhaps even violated by someone stronger than himself. These tendencies are activated in his relationship to the aggressive and dominating city woman, and because of them she is able to seduce him into the idea of murdering his wife.

Tragedy in its highest form must also involve “discovery,” according to Aristotle, “a change from unknown to known, happening between those characters whose happiness or unhappiness forms the catastrophe of the drama, and terminating in friendship or enmity.” In the Greek tragedies, this meant the discovery of blood ties between two persons, either one or both of whom were unaware of the relationship. In a modern drama, it is appropriate that the revelation should be one of a psychological rather than purely physical sort. Thus does the man in *Sunrise* discover that his wife, whom he has agreed to do away with, is actually the woman he loves. This “discovery” by the man of an already existing fact (which one feels is understood and fully accepted by the wife from the beginning of the story) is beautifully and subtly dramatized in the early city sequences, and culminates in their reconsecration to one another in the church.

Another primary element of tragedy as defined by Aristotle is “revolution” which he describes as “a change . . . into the reverse of what is expected from the circumstances of the action.” This, indeed, is what occurs in *Sunrise* in the latter portion of the film. After a happy day in the city, the young pair plan to sail home by moonlight—“a second honeymoon.” All is well between them, and one expects that they will return happily to their home and

that the city woman will be sent on her way. Just as on the trip across the lake to the city, we had a sense of impending danger, now by the very contrasting circumstances of the homeward journey, we are assured of a happy and safe return. But the reverse of what is expected happens. Thus the climax of the story involves "revolution" in the Aristotelian sense.

But inevitably in evaluating *Sunrise* in these terms, we come to the crucial matter of the happy ending itself. Now the modern idea of tragedy rests primarily on the question of whether the ending is happy or unhappy. This factor was not so important in the judgment of Aristotle who applied the term "tragedy" to many plays of high seriousness which ended happily (for example, Sophocles' *Philoctetes*). In defining what he regards as the "perfect" plot for tragedy, however, Aristotle does specify that "the change of fortune should not be from adverse to prosperous, but the reverse . . ." And it might be argued that had the wife been drowned *Sunrise* would have been in form almost a perfect Aristotelian tragedy. Such a fateful ending would even have met Aristotle's requirement of implied design, for the man in the end was forced to suffer by chance that which he had originally intended should happen. Since the artistry of this film is so great, and since it has been substantiated that Murnau completed his picture without interference of any kind, the question then arises as to why Murnau rejected an unhappy ending.

Before answering this question it may be well to point out that the short story on which the film is based did have a tragic ending. In the story, however, the man is drowned while his wife survives: he could have saved himself, but instead, in his efforts to save her life, he loses his own. This tragic ending appears to be completely correct for the story as it is developed by Hermann Sudermann, for in it the man is shown to be far more villainous than in the picture. Also in the short story, the man schemes over a long period of time with the woman (the servant in the household of the young peasant couple) and cold-bloodedly plans his wife's murder. Sudermann has the man redeem himself at the end by dying

in the act of saving his gentle wife. Through such an ending, good triumphs over evil: the good wife survives, the evil woman fails in her murder plan and loses the man, and the man proves himself essentially good through his act of sacrifice. Thus, Murnau had two possible tragic endings from which to choose. On the one hand, had the wife been drowned, the film could have provided the emotional catharsis found in the highest form of Aristotelian tragedy. On the other hand, had Murnau followed the original story more closely, the picture could have been a tragedy in the modern sense of the word, carrying with it a sense of finality, of heroic grandeur, of exaltation.

Actually, neither of these endings would have provided a convincing or satisfying conclusion for the motion picture which Murnau made, for his entire development of the story makes the ending which he chose the only possible one for this picture. Murnau rejected both these tragic endings because either one of them would have negated the film's underlying mood and theme and destroyed the remarkable unity of his work. For Murnau did not want to make us feel either purged of emotion (in the Aristotelian sense) or exalted (in the manner of the more modern tragedy). From his film in its entirety, he wanted above all else simply to make us feel the wonder of human relationships—the complex motivations which govern the lives of human beings (even the lives of a simple peasant and his wife), the nuances as well as the quiet depths of understanding which exist between a man and a woman who love one another, the subtle moods which color the days of our lives. *For the theme of the picture is that not events themselves, but their meaning to human beings and the use to which we put them is what matters.* This theme is inherent in the development of the story which writer Carl Mayer and director Murnau worked out together, and it accounts for the unusual cinematic techniques which Murnau used throughout in telling this story—techniques which, as we have already shown, made it possible for him to place primary emphasis throughout on the *meaning* of events to his central characters. This theme is

likewise borne out by the film's ending. Murnau shows how the man's affair with the city woman, even his attempt to carry through the city woman's plan for murder, brings the man and wife to a new awareness of their love for one another, thus enriching their lives. And, significantly, it is the bundle of reeds (symbolic of the man's infidelity and the murder plan) which the man uses to save his wife. By the end then, the reeds become the very means by which these two people are able to continue their life together.

Thus in *Sunrise*, Murnau tells us 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 is what matters, for they may indeed become the very means by which our tomorrow may prove to be a better day. Life goes on, Murnau tells us, and bitter or sweet is essentially good, for there is always the promise of the sunrise and another day.