



DRAMA · ROMANCE

Sunrise

1927 · Directed by F.W. Murnau

Silent Cinema

German Expressionism

Melodrama

Classical Hollywood

A farmer's marriage is unsettled by a woman from the city who has come to the village for the summer. One day the husband asks his wife to come away with him on a trip. Part fable, part love story, told almost entirely through images and music.

DIRECTOR	F.W. Murnau
----------	-------------

YEAR	1927
------	------

RUNTIME	1h 34m (94 min)
---------	-----------------

COUNTRY	Germany/USA
---------	-------------

GENRES	Drama, Romance
--------	----------------

CAST	George O'Brien, Janet Gaynor, Margaret Livingston, Bodil Rosing, J. Farrell MacDonald
------	---

MUSIC	Hugo Riesenfeld
-------	-----------------

IMDB	8.1 / 10 (55,712 votes)
------	-------------------------

ROTTEN TOMATOES	98% (critics)
--------------------	---------------

METACRITIC	95 / 100
------------	----------

TMDB SCORE	7.8 / 10 (935 votes)
------------	----------------------

WHERE TO	Free: Search YouTube (restored / 4K)
----------	--

WATCH	Free: Search YouTube (all versions)
-------	---

	Free: Search Internet Archive
--	---

	Rent: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home
--	---

	Buy: Amazon Video, Apple TV Store, Google Play Movies, YouTube, Fandango At Home
--	--



Part one is spoiler-free. Part two, "After watching", reveals the story, scenes and ending.

Before watching

Spoiler-free

WHY WATCH THIS?

1 The summit of German silent style, made in Hollywood

This was F.W. Murnau's first American film. Fox gave the director of *Nosferatu* and *The Last Laugh* a large budget and real freedom. The result is the most lavish version of German visual technique ever put on screen.

2 A film that tells its story through the camera

Almost no dialogue is written out. Moving camerawork, superimpositions and built-to-scale sets carry the emotion. Few silent films show so clearly how much images alone can say.

3 A simple story with unusual emotional range

The plot is a fable, but it moves between menace, tenderness and slapstick comedy without strain. Janet Gaynor's performance shows why silent acting could be so direct.

WHY IT MATTERS IN CINEMA HISTORY

A defining film of late silent cinema, *Sunrise* is where German Expressionist craft meets the Hollywood studio system. It also arrives just as synchronized sound is beginning to reshape the medium.



WATCH WITH INTENTION

YOUR LENS

Watch it as a story told by the camera: let the images do the explaining, and treat the few title cards as secondary.

THREE THINGS TO NOTICE

- How often the camera moves, and how it follows characters through space instead of cutting between fixed views.
- The contrast between the village and the city in light, set design and the pace of the editing.
- How superimposed images are used to show what a character is thinking or imagining.

ONE QUESTION TO CARRY WITH YOU

The characters are called only The Man, The Wife and The Woman from the City. What does the film gain by leaving them without names?

CINEMA AT THE TIME

- **Technology:** Fox released Sunrise with a synchronized Movietone score and sound effects recorded on the film itself. There is no spoken dialogue, but the music was fixed rather than left to each theatre's orchestra.
- **Industry:** Hollywood studios were recruiting European talent. William Fox brought Murnau to California with a large budget, and Murnau brought his own screenwriter and designer.
- **Dominant styles:** German cinema of the 1920s favoured stylised sets, expressive lighting and a camera freed from the tripod. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924) was the key example.
- **Director's moment:** Murnau was already famous for *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Faust* (1926). Sunrise tested whether his style could work in a sunlit American setting.

WHERE IT CAME FROM

FILM

The Last Laugh (1924)

Murnau and Carl Mayer's earlier film proved that a story could be told with almost no intertitles and a camera that moves freely.



MOVEMENT

German Expressionism

Stylised sets, dramatic lighting and psychological imagery from German silent cinema shape the look of the film.



FILM

Nosferatu (1922)

Murnau's own earlier work showed his command of atmosphere, nature imagery and expressive composition.



THIS FILM

Sunrise (1927)

NEW AT THE TIME *It treated a plain domestic tale with the scale and fluid camerawork of a grand spectacle, and it told the story through images instead of captions.*

SOCIAL CONTEXT

Made in 1927 by a leading German director newly arrived in Hollywood, as Weimar-era filmmakers were drawn to American studio money and resources.

- **Germany to Hollywood:** After German cinema's boom in the mid-1920s, Hollywood recruited its top talent. William Fox brought Murnau to the USA with large resources and creative freedom, making this his first American film.
- **Country and moment:** The late 1920s saw rapid urbanisation in both Germany and the USA. The film's contrast between countryside and big city reflects a real tension of the period, as many people left rural life for the cities.
- **The filmmaker's situation:** Murnau had made his name with Weimar-era films such as *Nosferatu* and *The Last Laugh*. Fox gave him a lavish budget, a German crew and enormous studio sets, which was unusual for a newcomer.
- **Society and audience:** American audiences in the prosperous late 1920s were used to big-city entertainment and mass leisure. Murnau, a European arrival, offered a story grounded in a simple, universal human situation rather than in any specific time or place.



WHAT TO EXPECT

- **Pace:** Unhurried and rhythmic. Early scenes are slow and atmospheric, and the middle section is more playful and episodic.
- **Style:** Expressive and fable-like, with stylised acting that is more restrained than in many silent melodramas.
- **Sound:** Silent apart from a synchronized orchestral score and effects. There are very few intertitles and no spoken dialogue.
- **Format:** Black and white, in a near-square frame. Restored versions with the original score are the best choice.
- **Tone:** Moves between dark menace, comedy and sentiment. Accept the simple moral framework and watch how it is staged.

WATCH WITH KIDS?

8+ SUGGESTED AGE

Ratings are DE 6, FR U and US unrated; 8 is suggested because of the silent format, on-screen text and some serious, tense moments.

Official ratings: US NR · Germany 6 · France U

- **Good for:** Children who enjoy visual storytelling may like the expressive acting, inventive camerawork, lively fairground and city scenes, and moments of humour. It's a good, gentle introduction to silent cinema.
- **May unsettle, mature themes:** Serious adult emotional tensions drive the story, shown through intense expressions and mood rather than explanation. Younger children may need help following them.
- **May unsettle, peril:** Some tense, dramatic sequences involving danger, including scenes at night and in bad weather.
- **May unsettle, pace:** Silent, black-and-white and theatrical in style, with a measured pace in places that may test younger viewers' attention.
- **Explain first:** There is no spoken dialogue. The story is told through images, music and short text cards, so you may want to read them aloud.
- **Explain first:** The acting is deliberately big and expressive, as was usual in silent films. It's a style, not overacting.
- **Explain first:** The film is nearly a century old and black and white, with a mix of rural and early big-city life.

Talk about it after: *How did the film show you what the characters were feeling without spoken dialogue? Which image or expression stays with you most?*

Cinespective's own guidance, a draft. Check it against the official ratings and your own judgement.



After watching

CONTAINS SPOILERS

THE FILM, UNPACKED

CENTRAL IDEA

The film is about how a marriage can be damaged and then rediscovered. It treats love as something that has to be re-won, and it frames the contest as one between country and city, guilt and forgiveness, darkness and light.

THEMES

- **Temptation and guilt:** The Woman from the City stands for a seductive, modern pull, and the film is hard on the husband's weakness while still granting him a path to redemption.
- **Country versus city:** Village and city are both treated as places of danger and delight. The city is first corrupting, then briefly an enchanted playground.
- **Marriage renewed:** The central stretch plays like a second courtship, in which the couple rediscover each other through small, ordinary shared experiences.
- **Universal figures:** The unnamed characters turn a specific story into a parable about any couple, which suits the film's subtitle, A Song of Two Humans.
- **Nature as judgment:** Water, weather and light behave almost like moral forces, reflecting the characters' inner states.

Key scenes

The marsh meeting

A long tracking shot follows the Man through reeds and moonlight to the Woman. It shows how camera movement can convey desire and guilt without a single word, and it sets the film's expressive tone.

The trolley ride to the city

The journey dissolves from rural landscape into city streets. Murnau lets the camera and the environment show the move from one world to another, mixing realism with dreamlike transition.

The city day

The film becomes a sequence of comic and tender episodes. It shows the couple's feelings reviving, and it proves that Murnau's style could handle lightness as well as dread.



The storm on the lake

The emotional stakes return in a sequence built from weather, water and cross-cutting. It tests the couple, and it pays off the film's use of nature as a moral force.

Filmmaking

- **Camera movement:** Murnau and his cinematographers, Charles Rosher and Karl Struss, keep the camera in motion, often tracking through space. This gives scenes a continuous, floating quality typical of the German tradition.
- **Set design:** A huge city set built on the Fox lot used forced perspective to look larger than it was. Rochus Gliese's design makes the city seem both real and exaggerated.
- **Superimposition:** Images are layered, so that desire or fear appears over a character. Because the technique is visual, thought can be shown without text.
- **Performance:** Janet Gaynor and George O'Brien play with a physical directness that is less theatrical than much silent acting. Margaret Livingston's glamour gives the Woman from the City real menace.
- **Music and sound:** Hugo Riesenfeld's score follows the emotional shifts closely, and recorded sound effects add a few punctuating details.

THE FULL STORY

The full plot, including the ending.

A farmer is drawn into an affair with a woman from the city who is spending the summer in his village. She urges him to sell the farm and come away with her, and she persuades him that his wife stands in the way. She suggests that a boating accident on the lake could free him.

The husband invites his wife to spend a day in the city. She trusts him and is happy, but as they cross the lake in a rowboat she realises what he intended. He cannot go through with it, and she runs from him onto a trolley bound for the city.

He follows her. In the city, after a church wedding they happen upon, the couple are reconciled. They spend a day of small pleasures at a barber, a photographer's studio and a fairground, and their love is renewed.

At night they sail back across the lake. A storm blows up, and the boat is lost. The Man reaches shore and finds that his wife has not returned. Believing she has drowned, he turns his anger on the Woman from the City. Then the wife is found alive, rescued by the fishermen who had been searching the lake. The Woman leaves the village, and the sun rises on the reunited couple.

BEHIND THE FILM

- **Fox's gamble:** William Fox brought Murnau to Hollywood after *Faust*, and gave him a large budget and unusual control. The film was a prestige project for the studio, and it was made for artistic reputation rather than quick profit.



- **German collaborators:** Murnau worked with screenwriter Carl Mayer, who had written *The Last Laugh*, and designer Rochus Gliese. The film is based on a story by Hermann Sudermann, *A Trip to Tilsit*, moved to an unspecified setting.
- **Building a city:** The city sequences used a vast set on the Fox lot, with forced perspective to make streets seem deeper than they were. Real trolley tracks helped link the country and the city on screen.
- **Early synchronized sound:** Fox released the film with a Movietone soundtrack of score and effects. That put *Sunrise* among the first features with a recorded soundtrack, just as audiences were about to hear Hollywood dialogue.
- **Myth:** *Sunrise* won the first Best Picture Oscar. **Reality:** At the first ceremony there were two top prizes. *Wings* won Outstanding Picture, while *Sunrise* won Unique and Artistic Production, a category that was never given again.
- **Myth:** It is a German film. **Reality:** Though made by a German director with German collaborators, *Sunrise* was produced by Fox in Hollywood and shot in California.

LEGACY AND CONNECTIONS

Its place in the lineage before → after

FILM

The Last Laugh (1924)

Murnau and Carl Mayer's earlier film proved that a story could be told with almost no intertitles and a camera that moves freely.



MOVEMENT

German Expressionism

Stylised sets, dramatic lighting and psychological imagery from German silent cinema shape the look of the film.



FILM

Nosferatu (1922)

Murnau's own earlier work showed his command of atmosphere, nature imagery and expressive composition.



THIS FILM

Sunrise (1927)



FILM

Tabu (1931)

Murnau's final film, made in the South Seas, continues his focus on love threatened by outside forces, in a more documentary setting.





FILMMAKER

Alfred Hitchcock

Hitchcock learned from German silent cinema, and its emphasis on visual storytelling shaped his early films.



TRADITION

Late silent Hollywood romance

Fox's romances of the period, including Frank Borzage's *Seventh Heaven*, shared *Sunrise*'s lyrical, emotionally direct approach.

Reception and reputation

Critics greeted *Sunrise* warmly and admired its visuals. It did not draw large crowds, though, and Fox did not recover the heavy investment. It arrived just as sound pictures were about to take over the market, which left it less visible than it might have been.

Sunrise is now often cited among the greatest films of the silent era, and many see it as the point where visual storytelling reached its peak before sound. Its reputation has grown steadily as restorations and revivals have made it widely available.

Awards Oscars and Cannes

Academy Awards (first ceremony, 1929): won Unique and Artistic Production; won Best Cinematography (Charles Rosher and Karl Struss); Janet Gaynor won Best Actress for a combination of her work in *Sunrise*, *Seventh Heaven* and *Street Angel*; nominated for Best Art Direction (Rochus Gliese).

Cultural impact beyond cinema

- **Janet Gaynor's stardom:** Janet Gaynor won the first Academy Award for Best Actress, honoured for several films including *Sunrise*. The role helped fix her screen image of vulnerable, luminous sincerity, which made her one of Hollywood's biggest stars of the late 1920s.
- **A story retold:** The film's source, Hermann Sudermann's story "A Trip to Tilsit", was filmed again in Germany in 1939 as *Die Reise nach Tilsit*, directed by Veit Harlan. The tale of a husband tempted by a city woman has circulated in several national film cultures.
- **Revival screenings and teaching:** *Sunrise* is regularly shown in restored prints, often with live musical accompaniment, and is a staple of film courses. Its synchronized music-and-effects soundtrack also makes it a common example of the silent era's late sophistication.

Its lasting influence

Sunrise became a model of how fluid camerawork, layered images and designed spaces could carry emotion. Its influence shows in the way Hollywood and European filmmakers absorbed German visual storytelling, notably in Hitchcock's early work.



WHAT NEXT?

CONTINUE THE DIRECTOR

Nosferatu (1922)

Murnau's earlier masterpiece shows the darker side of his style and the German origins of the techniques Sunrise brought to America.

EXPLORE THE ERA OR MOVEMENT

The Passion of Joan of Arc (1928)

Another late-silent landmark that pushes visual storytelling to an extreme, using faces and framing instead of words.

COMPARE ANOTHER APPROACH

Metropolis (1927)

Released the same year, it shows a different German approach to scale and design, focused on spectacle and social allegory.

JUMP FORWARD

Singin' in the Rain (1952)

A comic look back at the moment when sound reshaped Hollywood, a change that was just beginning when Sunrise appeared.

FULL CAST AND CREW



F. W. Murnau
DIRECTOR



George O'Brien
ACTOR
as The Man (Anses)



Janet Gaynor
ACTOR
as The Wife (Indre)



Margaret Livingston
ACTOR
as The Woman from the
City



Bodil Rosing
ACTOR
as The Maid



J. Farrell MacDonald
ACTOR
as The Photographer



Hugo Riesenfeld
COMPOSER