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Dartmouth Film Society Film Notes

SUNRISE (1927) "A Song of Two Humans"

The man - George O'Brien
The wife - Janet Gaynor
The woman from the city - Margaret Livingston
The maid - Bodil Rosing
The photographer - J. Farrell McDonald

The barber - Ralph Sipperly
The manicure girl - Jane Winton
The obtrusive Gentleman - Arthur Housman
The obliging Gentleman - Eddie Boland

Based on the short story, "Die Reise nach Tilsit" (1917), by Hermann Sudermann (1857-1928). Scenario by Carl Mayer. Decor by Rochus Gliese (assisted by Edgar Ulmer and Alfred Met-scher). Photographed by Charles Rocher and Karl Struss. Edited and titled (with only 30 captions, painted rather than printed) by Katherine Hilliker and H. H. Caldwell. Musical score by Dr. Hugo Riesenfeld. Directed by Fred W. Murnau (the pseudonym of the Westphalian, Friedrich-Wilhelm Plumpe (1899-1931), assisted by Herman Bing. Presented by William Fox, distributed by Fox Film Corporation. 10-11 reels; 90 minutes. World premier in New York at the Times Square Theatre on Friday, September 23, 1927.

F. W. Murnau was one of the greatest of German directors, producing many classics including the great THE LAST LAUGH (1924) with Emil Jannings and the earlier horror classic, NOSFERATU (DRACULA) (1922). William Fox saw these films when they were shown in the U. S. and was impressed enough to invite Murnau to come to Hollywood and make a film. Murnau agreed with the stipulation that complete control of the film be given him without any interference from the studio. Fox concurred and Murnau called together his staff in Berlin where the entire film was written and designed before leaving for America. True to his word, Fox turned over the studios to Murnau and provided him with a large budget. That the movie was costly to make is evident in the spectacular sets, especially those of the "exterior" scenes such as the swamp and the carnival. When the film was finished everyone seemed pleased with the results, including Fox, Murnau, his actors, and the public at large. Everyone, that is, except a few terribly artistic critics who couldn't imagine Murnau being able to work in wicked Hollywood. Murnau stayed in this country to work on TABU (1931) with Robert Flaherty, a collaboration that was broken off due to the clash of Flaherty's realistic approach and Murnau's romantic approach. Murnau was killed shortly after the production of that picture, March 1931, in a car accident.

SUNRISE was based on the title story of a collection of short tales by Hermann Sudermann entitled Die Reise nach Tilsit (1917) (The Excursion to Tilsit). The film was not a literal representation of the story and several critics cited this as evidence of Hollywood's interference with "art" but the changes made appear to improve the story as a cinematic translation rather than to detract from its meaning. In characterizing the mood of SUNRISE it is not sufficient to call it just a "love" story, or a "drama", or a "melodrama". It is all of these and much more; it has been called the only completely poetic film that Hollywood ever produced. This is not to say that the film is experimentalist, arty, or stogy, but rather that there are no traces of a cold, intellectual approach to the creation of the film. Franklin, in Classics of the Silent Screen, says that SUNRISE was, "one of the warmest, loveliest, and most tender films ever made, beautifully acted, sensitively directed, and with some of the most stunningly rich photography..." Murnau projects his feeling for the romantic when he presents the message of the film at the very beginning in the opening title:

"Sunrise --- a story of two humans. This song of the Man and his Wife is of no place and of every place; you might hear it anywhere at any time. For wherever the Sun rises and sets -- in the city's turmoil or under the open sky on the farm -- life is much the same: sometimes bitter, sometimes sweet, tears and laughter, sin and forgiveness."

SUNRISE has dated very little over the years and the effective use of "trick" photography works surprisingly well both as a vehicle for informing the audience of an intended mood or attitude and as a means for pictorially representing the imaginative processes of the main characters. The musical score, containing a number of well-known themes from classical pieces, was synchronized with the film after it was completed and as such is one of the first sound movies. The superimposition of one secondary musical theme on top of the primary theme is used several times and gives the impression of unified movement, unhampered by incidental events.

George O'Brien, who plays the husband, had come a long way since his first real break into films in THE IRON HORSE (1924). Before that he had been an assistant cameraman with Tom Mix, a boxing champ, and stuntman. After a long and successful career in Westerns, O'Brien made his last film in 1951, GOLD RAIDERS. Janet Gaynor still appears on television frequently and also on Broadway. Her most famous film was SEVENTH HEAVEN with Charles Farrell.

Henry Buchtel