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Sunrise (dir. F.W. Murnau)

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SUNRISE (1927)

Produced by Fox Studios; directed by F. W. Murnau; written by Carl Mayer from a story "Trip to Tilsit" by H. Sudermann; designed by Rochus Gliese; photographed by Charles Rosher and Karl Struss. With Janet Gaynor, George O'Brien and Margaret Livingstone

1927 was quite a memorable year for Hollywood motion pictures. It was the year of WINGS, WAY OF ALL FLESH, KING OF KINGS, IT, FLESH AND THE DEVIL. The Academy Awards were founded in 1927. Janet Gaynor won the best actress award for her performance in three films, one of which was SUNRISE. SUNRISE also shared the best film of the year award with WINGS; and its cameraman, Karl Struss and Charles Rosher received the best photography accolade.

During this year, the insatiable Hollywood appetite for importing foreign, particularly German, film people reached its peak with the arrival of Emil Jannings (best actor of 1927), Conrad Veidt, Pola Negri, Ernst Lubitsch, Michael Curtiz, Paul Leni, E. A. Dupont, Pabst, Karl Freund, Theodore Sparkuhl, William Diertele, and SUNRISE's director, F. W. Murnau.

The writer-producer team which Fox assigned to SUNRISE - Mayer and Murnau - was a product of the Golden Era of the German film. Their outstanding collaboration was THE LAST LAUGH, but Murnau had also directed FAUST, TARTUFFE and NOSFERATU (DRACULA), and Mayer had written CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI and several other films.

Mayer agreed to adapt Sudermann's "Trip to Tilsit" for Fox but refused to travel to Hollywood. He wrote the complete script in Europe. In later years, he made films in Paris with Elizabeth Bergner and her director-husband, Paul Czinner, and he spent 12 years in England, assisting Paul Rotha with his documentary unit. He died there in 1944. While a consultant on a good many British films of the '30s, he took no screen credit. He worked on PYGMALION and MAJOR BARBARA among many. A meticulous workman, slow, careful, patient, he would spend days composing a few screen shots, might have a script in work for a full year. During this time, he would take long walks brooding over his conception, solving film problems according to rigid visual principles he had set himself. By choice, he never wrote for any other medium than the screen. His gift and his technique were wholly visual. His scene descriptions and instructions for director and cameraman were enormously detailed and accurate. Though Murnau, in THE LAST LAUGH, is credited with the impetus given to the use of a moving camera, Rotha attributes this departure to Mayer who, after consulting with Karl Freund, LAST LAUGH's cameraman, as to its advisability, repeated what he had already done on LAST LAUGH with the moving camera in mind. The idea had first come to Mayer in writing NEW YEAR'S EVE, a German film in which a clock figured prominently and which Mayer wanted to have appear larger and larger in succeeding scenes. The camera was set in a perambulator and the first dolly shot was made.

Even more distinctive than his great technical feeling for the motion picture, expressed in an atmospheric flow of images without need for printed subtitles, was his choice of subject and development of character. His people were usually from the lower middle class, and often the film centered about one main character - human, simple, warm.

Mayer, in Germany, usually sat in on the shooting and the editing of his films. No one knows whether travel to Hollywood was so distasteful he gave up this extraordinary control or whether it was denied him from the beginning.

November 14⁶, 1966 - P. 2

While there may have been moving camera before LAST LAUGH, it was Murnau's supremely sensitive, creative, interpretive use of the subjective camera in exploring the feelings of the doorman that made it revolutionary. Its movement was always logical, motivated and alive to every nuance of the script, its vivid and affectingly mobile all the more effective, by being heightened by moments of utter immobility. Freund's technical ingenuity matched Murnau's inspiration. Murnau brought his cinema skills to SUNRISE and his visual ideas were carried out by German colleagues imported to assist him: designer Rochus Gliese and the two cameramen, Struss and Rosher.

Fox went all out on production - building Murnau a special city which came across well on the screen. On its release, SUNRISE was hailed universally for its pictorial beauty, its quiet rhythm and its extraordinary depth of character and its touching simplicity. Now Hollywood could be as artistic as Europe. The American directors began imitating the styles of the German directors.

SUNRISE was criticized mostly for the formula finale which finds the philandering husband punished for his deeds to satisfy the screen's moral code. Many felt that the film should have ended after the affecting scene in the church in which, in effect, the couple is spiritually remarried.

Rotha felt that far from being a masterpiece, SUNRISE is all bluff, insincerity and nonsense, and its only "art" deriving from arty publicity, manufactured by Fox. He admits the picture is well done and "clever", but claims that Hollywood dismembered Murnau as it did Lubitsch and Seastrom and that Murnau's subsequent film, FOUR DEVILS, on a circus theme, was even worse. Murnau later collaborated with Flaherty on TABU which came out more Murnau, the studio perfectionist, than Flaherty, the documentarian, though both men bore great respect for one another. Murnau died in an auto crash in 1931.

Rotha's anti-American prejudice in his evaluation of SUNRISE overcame his high esteem for Carl Mayer. Yet even today, the script of SUNRISE is circulated about Hollywood as a model of structure and continuity in a scenario. As for Murnau, in the enduring popularity of SUNRISE for cinema students, he has created at least one-half of a masterpiece in the face of Hollywood convention.

NOTES by N. Levy

PROJECTION by Dan Silverman and
Edward Jackson

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