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THE GREAT AMERICAN FILMS



Los Angeles County Museum of Art

November 15—December 16, 1973

7:00 pm, November 17, 1973

(SUNRISE)

A Song of Two Humans

A Fox Film Corporation Release, 1927, 97 minutes

A William Fox Production; Directed by F.W. Murnau; Screenplay by Carl Mayer, from the story, "Die Reise nach Tilsit," by Hermann Sudermann; Edited and Titled by Katherine Hilliker and H.H. Caldwell; Cinematography by Karl Struss and Charles Rosher; Musical Score by Hugo Reisenfeld Art Direction by Rochus Gliese; Assistant Art Directors: Edgar Ulmer and Alfred Metscher; Assistant Director: Herman Bing

Cast: George O'Brien, Janet Gaynor, Margaret Livingston, Bodil Rosing, J. Farrell MacDonald, Ralph Sipperly, Jane Winton, Arthur Housman, Eddie Boland, Gino Corrado, Barry Norton, Sally Eilers and Robert Kortman.

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") (1924). 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 and his actors, and the public at large. Everyone, that is, except for 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 Hollywood has 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" 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 process 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.

- from an article by Henry Buchtel

35mm print of the original sound version from the archives of the Museum of Modern Art (Eileen Bowser), courtesy of 20th Century-Fox (Jonas Rosenfield and Joseph Tiunis)

The Music before the Film: String Quartet in G Minor by Claude Debussy