



BORDERLINES FILM FESTIVAL

SUNRISE: A SONG OF TWO HUMANS (U)

Director: F.W. Murnau

Starring: George O'Brian, Janet Gaynor, Margaret Livingston

US, 1927, Silent + Live Musical Accompaniment

Adapted from the short story *The Excursion to Tilsit* (1917) by Hermann Sudermann, a farmer is tempted away from his simple country life with his wife and child by a devious woman from the big city. Director F.W. Murnau and writer Carl Mayer transform this simple story into lyrical and flowing cinematic poetry.

Murnau's first film made in the U.S. for 20th Century Fox came after eight years of work in Germany, most famously *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922) and *Faust* (1926). The film that got him noticed by Fox was *The Last Laugh* (1924), in which Murnau used only one intertitle (text that appears on screen for dialogue or description). Murnau felt that a film's story should be told in its visuals, saying "*the camera is the director's sketching pencil (...) and it is important the mechanics of cinema should not be interposed between the spectator and the picture.*" Murnau continued in this mindset with *Sunrise*. The film gradually phases intertitles out, letting the fantastical visuals tell the story.

While the film was a critical success, winning three Oscars, it fell flat financially. Despite this, Fox kept Murnau on. He made three more films, none as successful as *Sunrise*. Murnau wished in 1925 to one day make a film "*without any [inter]titles whatever.*" This would never come to pass, as Murnau tragically died, at only 42, in a car accident shortly after the completion of his last film, in 1931.

Heralded by both contemporary and modern critics (voted the eleventh best film of all time in Sight & Sound Magazine's 2022 poll), the film's magnificent way of showing different stages of love and betrayal remains unique. "*I imagine it is possible to see Sunrise for the first time and think it simplistic (...) but silent films had a language of their own; they aimed for the emotions, not the mind, and the best of them wanted to be, not a story, but an experience*" (Roger Ebert). This is exactly right. Love and lust can conquer any sense we have, so why tell this story in any traditional sense?

Quotes from *The Ideal Picture Needs No Titles*, article by F.W. Murnau in Theatre Magazine, 1928.

Notes compiled by Stuart Newnham (The Courtyard/Radix Film Club)

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THE ADVENTURESS Ninón Sevilla stars as Elena, an upper middle-class young woman whose life is sensationally turned upside down.

SOUNDTRACK TO A COUP D'ÉTAT Jazz and decolonisation tangle in this remarkable documentary from Johan Grimonprez.