Lesson or Leisure and Flair versus Finance: Differing Approaches in Early Film

Any artistic pursuit struggles to balance expression with financial realities. As cinema progressed in its early development, its intentions diversified. *Auteurs* recognized film as an opportunity to sway viewers' thoughts and emotions. Studios saw its potential to be exploited for revenue. In this essay, I will discuss this divergence by exploring the differences in early creative films focused on social commentary and in Hollywood films which aimed to entertain and cash in, and I will further consider elements of each branch within German director F. W. Murnau's first Hollywood production.

D. W. Griffith was a highly influential filmmaker who made lasting cinematic innovations. Although a pragmatist who produced films for studios, his personal work sought to communicate lessons of morals and values. This is evident even in his early films, such as the 1909 piece "A Corner in Wheat". His impoverished, rural Kentuckian upbringing undoubtedly shaped the messages in this work (Mast 42). Scenes of the poor and hungry, waiting in line for overpriced bread, are cross-cut with scenes of the rich throwing an extravagant party funded by profits from monopolized wheat. These projections from his own life made the reality tangible for the masses.

Emboldened by the effectiveness of this method of storytelling, Griffith went on to create feature films centered around social commentary. Perhaps the most well-known instance is his infamous 1915 film *The Birth of a Nation*. Informed by his background with a Confederate soldier father, Griffith aimed to portray the decline of the post-Civil War South and its 'salvation' through the Ku Klux Klan (Mast 51). The film's ability to influence was all too clear: *The Birth of a Nation* resulted in the resurgence of the Klan in the early 20th century (Mast 56). Griffith's films elicited reactions from filmmakers all around the world.

While *The Birth of a Nation* resulted in a re-emergence of violent white supremacy, it also garnered responses from African-American creators. Oscar Micheaux, a black filmmaker from the Midwest, laid the framework for race films through works like *Within Our Gates*. In early cinema, black characters were primarily exploited for demeaning comedic or villainous roles. Race films, on the other hand, were created for black audiences, and they featured black casts (Kuhn). These films gave African-American perspectives to events like those depicted in *The Birth of a Nation*.

Micheaux noted which subjects Griffith had used to inflame his audience, and he presented them from an African-American point of view. *Within Our Gates* explored the topics of lynching, sexual assault, and racial identity. It exposed racial injustices and spoke to the reality of white-on-black violence. Rather than portraying black people as perpetrators, it showed the extent of their systematic persecution in American society (Siomopolous). Race films followed early Hollywood structuring: they focused upon the story more than the method of telling it. Much like in Griffith's work, moral convictions remained central to the plot.

European cinema was also greatly influenced by Griffith's work, though it was analyzed more for its style than its substance. The Kuleshov workshop at the Moscow Film School conducted editing experiments that would determine the trajectory of Soviet filmmaking for years to come. Due to a film stock scarcity during World War I, students primarily worked with pre-existing film scraps. They pieced them together in numerous ways, created different sequences out of the same parts, and studied how they could shape a narrative's meaning. They also analyzed and dissected a Griffith film, *Intolerance*, in order to fully master effective editing techniques and to develop ideologically charged films (Mast 121). Students noted the power of

his parallel editing and cross-cutting segments, and they conducted research in order to further evolve this method.

A marker of Soviet cinema is its dynamic editing. Filmmakers recognized their ability to not only mold a narrative through purposeful juxtaposition, but they also realized editing's potential to produce intellectual *and* emotional responses (Mast 122). Sequences which utilize these powers are given the signifier "Soviet montage". Some of the most famous examples of Soviet montage occur in Sergei Eisenstein's 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*. To one end, Eisenstein communicates themes of brotherhood while highlighting communist values. He cross-cuts shots of the battleship crew members completing individual tasks to clean and maintain their ship (00:08:33-00:08:53). These actions, while on their own mechanical and mundane, become electrifying when shown together. Through this sequence, the audience implicitly understands the efficiency in the group acting as a single entity.

Eisenstein also employs powerful editing during the infamous Odessa Steps massacre scene. Close shots of civilians build the audience's empathy, and wide shots of soldiers rushing in compound feelings of dread and tension. Eisenstein leans in to the emotional hold that he has on the viewer. His piecing together of so many quick shots demands attention; the audience becomes enveloped in the drama of the montage. While Griffith's films featured many innovative techniques, they ultimately revolved around plots depicting his visions of good and evil (Mast 50). Soviet cinema discovered how artistic approaches could enhance dramatic storytelling while also influencing the audience's ethos.

Cinema also emerged as an important cultural channel in Germany following the First World War. With the birth of the Weimar Republic came the Golden Age of German filmmaking (Mast 104). The collection of German artists creating during this time had direct influences on

one another's styles; as a result, films from this era coincide with contemporary art movements (Corrigan 63). German Expressionism arose as the first act of German cinema.

Expressionism prioritizes the conveyance of psychological and internal motives rather than an accurate depiction of reality. Filmmakers experimented with non-linear plotlines and utilized unconventional techniques to portray a character's inner world. Dramatic lighting was used to manipulate shadows across unnatural, surrealist set designs (Mast 106). The subject matter of these films was often tragic and profound, and each character portrayed would be deeply affected at the story's conclusion. These artistic films were produced through collaboration, and the crew's focus was on the success of the overall piece rather than emphasizing a few key players.

Robert Wiene's 1920 film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* is one of the most famous examples of German Expressionism. Deranged characters rove across a set with impossible construction. Shifted perspectives in each room confuse the viewer, and pronounced shadows expose and obscure the distorted framework even further (Corrigan 61). These characteristics of the *mise-en-scène* emphasize the tormented psychology of the narrator.

The director F. W. Murnau drew influence from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* for his own 1922 psychological horror film: *Nosferatu, a Symphony of Horror* (Mast 110).This film dwells in two realms: the real and the uncanny. The mysterious realm of Count Orlok, the vampire, is signaled through both the twisted *mise-en-scène* of his castle as well as his otherworldly makeup and costuming. It provides contrast to Murnau's addition of on-location shooting. In this way, he invites the vampire to skulk into the audience's world. By placing otherworldly elements in an otherwise stable and naturalistic setting, the illusion of safety disappears. The effect is haunting;

the film would not hold the same weight of horror without Murnau's manipulation. In *Nosferatu*, the plot is straightforward: its creative experimentation marks it as an enduring artistic piece.

Perhaps the pinnacle of silent art cinema is the French piece *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) by Danish *auteur* Carl Theodor Dreyer. For this film, Dreyer used the real-life transcription of Joan of Arc's trial as the framework for the plot. The film's structure already provided, Dreyer was able to focus on his expressive and stylized cinematographic techniques. For a silent film that relies so heavily upon dialogue, the nuances of the camera direction guide the story. Dreyer uses intense close-ups and thoughtful angles in order to enhance the emotional gravity of each scene.

The editing style in *The Passion of Joan of Arc* was also highly innovative. Dreyer employs montage in a similar manner to Eisenstein. During one sequence, the audience is shown torture instruments in segments. They are abstracted, filled with light and shadow, and they become menacing shapes which build an aura of vague yet overwhelming dread (00:38:40-00:40:30). The way he builds these shots together with increasing pace and intensity is reminiscent of the aforementioned sequences in *Battleship Potemkin*. This use of montage, however, has a differing objective from the Soviet implementation. While Eisenstein's focus was on that of the individual parts making up a whole, Dreyer centers his montage around the reaction of Joan (Maria Falconetti). In doing so, the audience's emotional response becomes attached to Joan's; her anguish transcends the screen. Dreyer's ability as an *auteur* allowed him to orchestrate an intensely powerful piece. Not only does his direction guide the film, but it also shapes the viewer's inner experience.

Two great *auteurs* of early American film also harnessed the medium to convey a greater meaning. Charlie Chaplin, part of Griffith's lineage via Mack Sennett, invented his Tramp

character to portray class and social issues through comedy. His youth as an impoverished orphan who immigrated to the United States colors each of his films (Mast 67). In "The Immigrant" (1917), Chaplin not only empathizes with his lower-class audience but also comments on society's systematic oppression of the poor. In this era, filmgoing was seen as a lowbrow activity; Chaplin's working-class audience could relate to the shame of being unable to participate in a more affluent lifestyle.

By the time Chaplin's 1925 feature film *The Gold Rush* came out, the cinema audience had broadened. Here, he used the Tramp to detail the corrupting nature of wealth and the dangers of greed to crowds of Jazz Age moviegoers. This use of comedy as a cloak for earnest messages was also used by Buster Keaton. He rivaled Chaplin's work with a style developed to suit his own ideas.

Keaton was a veteran of World War I with a middle-American upbringing. An early start in vaudeville was key for developing his signature deadpan comedic style (Mast 97). We see the marriage of these defining components in his 1926 film *The General.* The on-location shooting showcases the wild beauty of the United States, and the protagonist's ingenuity is a sharp and deliberate contrast to the military's by-the-book priorities. *The General,* too stark and irreverent for its audience, did poorly at the box office and damaged Keaton's career. The financial priorities of the American film industry had begun to take precedence.

As cinema gained popularity, American filmmakers began to cater to the fantasies of their audiences. The work of the *auteur* no longer held the same weight. The experiences and philosophies of filmmakers were not the foundation for popular films. They relied more upon the past and present experiences of the audience as well as their desires and ideals. Both *Safety Last!* and *It* are prime examples of this societal reflection and wish-fulfillment.

In *Safety Last!* (1923), a man (Harold Lloyd) faces high stakes in pursuit of wealth, along with the status and affection that accompany it. Centered around a large metropolitan area department store, the film shows a vast divide between the working-class employees and the wealthy people who patronize it. Unlike the previously discussed socially-conscious films, though, *Safety Last!* does not put forth a critique on these socioeconomic conditions. Instead, the protagonist merely strives to climb the social ladder. Contrary to *The Gold Rush*, the happy ending does not unfold from an acceptance of the protagonist's true self; Harold Lloyd's character simply gets the money and thus gets the girl.

The film *It* (1927), also set in a metropolitan department store, focuses on an employee (Clara Bow) seducing the store owner. She is a flapper with fashion and values that mirror the new woman of the Jazz Age. Her lifestyle is carefree, and her charm is undeniable. *It* was a window into a world that some audiences had not seen before. While America was definitely aware of the 'new woman', this liberated lady would still have been an anomaly to the everyman audience. This film does not seek to teach any of its players nor viewers a lesson. The plot moves along steadily to a happy conclusion, and no character is markedly changed or evolved.

The film *It* made a star out of Clara Bow, and Harold Lloyd cemented his 'glasses character' as an icon of the 1920s. This celebrity culture became even stronger in Hollywood during the Jazz Age, and the industry came to rely upon the star system rather than plot for their profits. Films used this style-over-substance as an opportunity to flaunt lifestyles of extravagance. Rather than a view into the intricacies of life and emotion, American audiences were satisfied with presentations of materialistic ideals and uncritical images of society and opulence.

The above-noted German Expressionist director F. W. Murnau, is an interesting example of the intersection of European and American film. Upon being offered a Hollywood contract, he produced his first piece of American cinema, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* in 1927. The company that contracted him, Fox Studios, was aiming to produce and distribute films with a more artistic approach ("F. W. Murnau"). These films, of course, were still primarily intended for an American audience. As a result, *Sunrise* is an interesting showcase of European methodologies and priorities in a Hollywood context.

Sunrise features a straightforward plot: a man is having an affair with a woman from the city who is vacationing in his village for the summer. She suggests he drown his wife and move to the city. The man nearly goes through with the murder but realizes he cannot do it. He and his wife spend a day in the city, and they fall back in love. This love is reaffirmed when they reunite after they nearly die in a storm at sea.

While certainly more morbid than *It*, the two films follow uncomplicated love stories to a happy conclusion. Although *Sunrise* contains more nuance than *It*, there is no doubt it was crafted with the intention of appealing to the American box office. Its European influence becomes clear through its emerging themes. Much like Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*, an undercurrent of warnings about Jazz Age aspirations rush beneath the surface of *Sunrise*. The seductress functions as a representation for the new 1920s woman and the world from which she came. In this way, the film cautions its audience about the selfishness and the amorality in their growing cities. The city woman disrupting peaceful village life is also reminiscent of Murnau's isolationist themes present in *Nosferatu*.

There are notable similarities between *Sunrise* and *Nosferatu*. Murnau continued to use his Expressionist techniques to convey the psychological realm of his subjects. While he

primarily employed special effects in *Nosferatu* to heighten supernatural elements, we see them used to convey characters' hopes, dreams, and fears in *Sunrise*. Superimposition makes several appearances. As the man lies in bed plotting his wife's murder, a thin image of waves appears, layered atop his tormented countenance (00:19:40-00:20:00). It is a sinister effect that forces the audience to feel his restless, sickening anxiety. Superimposition is also used to convey the grandiosity and chaos of the city. An impressive vision of the skyline appears over the man and the mistress as she tries to lure him into moving away to the city with her (00:14:50-00:15:01). It is an exciting picture she paints, and we can see how the man is tempted by such an enticing mirage. The depths to which Murnau sought to explore his characters' motives and desires speak to his foundation in European cinema.

Murnau also utilizes artistic *mise-en-scène* to add depth to *Sunrise*. While he employed the uncommon technique of on-location shooting for his films in Europe, he chose the inverse for his first American production. Much of *Sunrise* takes place on constructed sets. He populates these sets with diffuse but powerful lighting. His interplay of light and shadow nurtures feelings of uneasiness in his audience. Much like in the famous scene of Count Orlok's shadow ascending stairs in *Nosferatu*, shadows of still-obscured figures lend the film a sinister touch. For example, when the man believes his wife has drowned at sea, there is a shot of his bedroom in the dark lit by moonlight from a window and candlelight through a doorway. His shadow trudges in the light cast through the doorway, growing larger as he slowly advances (01:27:45-01:28:00). The moodiness of this set, paired with the character's circumstances, reaches beyond the range of emotions attained in a typical Hollywood film.

Further differences exist between *Sunrise* and *It*. The cinematography of *Sunrise*, for example, is far more complex. Both debuted in 1927, but the look and feel of these films have

stark differences. The camera in *Sunrise* is a moving player; in *It*, the camera is fairly static. Not only does *Sunrise* feature tracking shots, but there are also moving overhead shots achieved by placing the camera along a ceiling track. *Sunrise* does follow one key Hollywood direction that is also heavily applied in *It*. There are many intimate close-ups of the main characters; they appear in flattering lighting while the camera lingers on their faces. A special attention is paid to the protagonists that eludes secondary characters. This feature of Hollywood cinema correlates to the celebrity star system that audiences had begun to recognize. The technique was effective: Janet Gaynor won an Academy Award for her role of wife in *Sunrise* (Mast 117). Actors and actresses had become knowable, and crowds wanted to see them.

While the synthesis of experimental creativity with a Hollywood context made for an award-winning film, it was not enough to attract the Jazz Age audience. *Sunrise* was ultimately unsuccessful at the box office. The average American filmgoer had stated their preference, and the Hollywood standard has continued to observe the money-seeking formula and trajectory established during this era.

The 1920s in film began as an age in which *auteurs* could flourish. With complete control over the *telos* of a film, their clear visions and ideologies created artifacts that reflect their understanding of society. As the star system shifted into prominence, American audiences favored entertainment over contemplation. This divergence predisposed the nature of independent film and studio productions for decades to come.

Works Cited

Corrigan, Timothy, and Patricia White. *The Film Experience.* 5th ed., Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018.

Dreyer, Carl Theodor, director. *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Société Générale Des Films, 1928.

Ebert, Roger. "Sunrise Movie Review & Film Summary." *RogerEbert.com*, 11 Apr. 2004, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-sunrise-1928. Accessed 12 Nov. 2020.

Eisenstein, Sergei M, director. *Battleship Potemkin*. Amkino Corporation, 1925.

"F. W. Murnau". *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 7 March 2020, https://www.britannica.com/biography/F-W-Murnau.

Kuhn, Annette and Guy Westwell. "Black cinema (US)." *A Dictionary of Film Studies: Oxford University Press*, 2020, *Oxford Reference*. https://www-oxfordreference-com.aurarialibrary.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780198832096.001.0001/acref-9780198832096-e-0060#. Accessed 12 Nov. 2020.

Mast, Gerald, and Bruce F Kawin. *A Short History Of The Movies*. 11th ed., Pearson Education, Inc., 2012.

Murnau, F. W., director. *Sunrise: a Song of Two Humans.* Fox Film Corporation, 1927.

Siomopolous, Anna. "The Birth of a black cinema: race, reception, and Oscar Micheaux's Within Our Gates." *Moving Image,* vol. 6, no. 2, 2006, p. 111+. Gale Academic OneFile, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A177402202/AONE?u=auraria_main&sid=AONE&xid=4c9ed82e. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.