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CINE 290: Introduction to the Advanced Study of Cinema

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22 April 2022

F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise* and Ambiguity As Explored Through A Queer Dialectic

## **Introduction**

F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) presents a dialectic between traditional biblical expressions of sexuality and a subversively queer aesthetic and narrative which reveals the ambiguous dynamic of the film as a whole. At first glance, *Sunrise* seems like a simple moral parable about the virtues of the rural Christian heterosexual lifestyle, but deeper analyses uncover paradoxes and complexities as multifaceted as the social norms the film attempts to reproduce and reinforce. Interrogating *Sunrise*'s straight/queer dialectic helps unlock the ambiguities of the rest of the film.

## **A Straight, Surface-Level Reading**

At its most obvious level, *Sunrise* is an allegory arguing for the conservation of the purity of rural heterosexual married life. This is conveyed through both the narrative and the aesthetics of the film.

The plot of *Sunrise* espouses the virtues of traditional heterosexuality. A Man and his Wife live in pastoral bliss—until the Man is sexually tempted by a visiting City Woman to kill his Wife and move to the city to live a life of decadence. His conscience prevents him from the murder at the last second. Hoping to repent, the Man takes the Wife on an extensive outing in the city and their relationship is rekindled throughout a series of lighthearted set pieces. The Wife goes missing in a storm and is assumed to be dead. Now a changed person, the Man grieves and

desperately searches for her. She is eventually found and all is well again. Life for the characters returns to a pastoral, heterosexual ideal.

*Sunrise*'s cinematography and mise-en-scene draw on and contribute to a long lineage of art that idealizes traditional heterosexual lifestyles. *Sunrise*'s aesthetics are directly extracted from religious art as well as the pastoral style of painting popular in the 19th century. By reproducing works of "fine" art which viewers have long been conditioned to consider perfect and beautiful, *Sunrise* utilizes the cultural association between traditional heterosexuality and beauty to further its narrative. In doing so, *Sunrise* also reinforces this association.



Fig 1: François Boucher, Pastoral landscape with a shepherd and shepherdess (1730), compared to a similar pastoral scene from *Sunrise*



Fig 2: Sassoferatto, The Virgin in Prayer (1640–1650), compared to *Sunrise*'s Wife

Even when *Sunrise*'s parallels to traditional painting are not as readily apparent as the above examples, subtler techniques (such as lighting the main characters to have a glow on their cheeks and hair) can evoke classical religious artwork (the golden halo) and all its connotations of heterosexuality, purity, tradition, and perfection.

It must also be noted how much emphasis the film gives to social structures. The true shift in the Man's character occurs when—after nearly killing the Wife—he goes to a stranger's wedding with her. It is not self-motivated desire, but a fresh realization of the sacredness of the social contract made in the church institution which drives the Man to seriously reconsider his relationship to his Wife. In *Sunrise*, self-motivated desires are deviant, corrupting, and sinful, and the maintenance of religious tradition is the ultimate priority and force for good.

### **A Queer, Deeper Reading**

Upon deeper analysis, *Sunrise* makes queer narrative and aesthetic choices despite—or in addition to, or in tandem with—the film's obvious extremely heterosexual elements. Whether an amount of queerness was intended by the director F.W. Murnau, who was likely gay, or simply an accident, queer elements are present in the film's form, its aesthetics, and even its narrative. The Man in particular is laden with queer meanings—this does not mean that the character himself is necessarily queer in identity, but that his narrative and aesthetics open the way for queer readings of the film as a whole.

Silent film as a form has a certain “queerness” in and of itself regardless of specific content. The following points are expanded from Barbara Hammer's poetry-documentary film *Nitrate Kisses*. Silent film is composed of exaggerated, theatrical, heterosexual acting that may tap into queer people's understanding of what it is to enact a straight sexuality that—to them—feels ingenuine, performative, and excessively obvious. The form's extreme emotional

affect can be cathartic to a group which has been taught to repress its emotions. Even silent film's lack of speech can resonate with those who grow up not having or using words to describe their intense feelings. Hollywood certainly did not intend silent film to be queer, but it resonates with queer energy and may even be a distant ancestor of the postmodern queer genre of camp.

Revisiting *Sunrise*'s basic plot structure reveals queer themes and choices in what seems at first to be an allegory for the virtues of traditional straightness. To begin, the Man begins the story with a "perfect" marriage, but he is dissatisfied, even in anguish to the point where he spends the first act of the film considering a violent escape. If this is the ideal heterosexual relationship as reinforced by the film's aesthetic choices, is heterosexuality really so wonderful? The Man is tempted away from the Wife specifically by a promise of sexual expression and the "anything goes" ethos of the city. Could the City Woman be a stand-in for queer sexual temptation? The Man and Wife fix their marriage not through any sign of physical affection, but through a series of outings; the relationship between men and women that the film values is close and caring but ultimately chaste. In the end, the Man's temptations are seen as wrong—but they are also forgiven. He is allowed to retain his place in his family and community.

The role of social structures in the film as exemplified by the wedding moment sheds more light on the narrative's possible queerness. As stated above, it is not the Man's self-motivated desire, but a renewed realization of the sacredness of the social contract made in the church institution which drives him to seriously reconsider his relationship to his Wife. His romantic attraction to her plays little to no role. The Man's desires are irrelevant compared to his perceived obligations to the church and the community—an experience that resonates with queerness.

Although the Man is the narrative agent in *Sunrise*, aesthetically, he is presented as an *object* of desire; given that the director is a man, this saturates the film with a sense of queer fantasy. This is accomplished partially via the form of the orchestrally scored silent film. Much like a dream, words are indistinct and substituted with the pure mood of the orchestra.



Fig 3: The Man as object of desire part 1

The Man and City Woman's kiss scene is an example of the Man as an object of desire and of the queer/straight dialectic more generally. The scene begins with repoussoir—one of many techniques to make the film visually mirror the “fine art” of classical painting. Townspeople stand at the edges of the frame and direct our attention to the action by observing it themselves, reinforcing the role of social obligations in all their complexities. Most love stories are individualistic, but *Sunrise* is very concerned with the standing of its protagonist in his family and community—even as the film perhaps replicates the attitudes that create his struggles. Next in the scene is a masterful long tracking shot again meant to call attention to the “fine art” quality of the narrative and its message. The Man walks through hills and over a fence (transgressing boundaries) to meet the City Woman. There is a cut to the Wife and her baby, who are in the same physical positions and shots as the City Woman and Man; the Man is lying down being comforted, like the baby. In this way, the Man is associated with innocence and the need for

guidance, care, and love. One could explain this vulnerable physical positioning as a visualization of how the Man is being controlled by the City Woman in this moment—nothing more than an aberration—except that he is placed in a similar mise-en-scene with the Wife:



Fig 4: The Man as object of desire part 2

Much work has been done on Laura Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze”; *Sunrise* may open up discussion of the “queer gaze” as a way of looking that invites and even eroticizes male emotional vulnerability—regardless of whether the man being gazed upon is shown with another man.

*Sunrise* takes its heterosexual drama to such “on-the-nose” extremes that at times it can feel like a parody of itself—regardless of whether or not such humor is the unintended product of a different era’s artistic sensibilities. If a character asks a man to kill his wife, for example, audiences might expect a degree of tact. In *Sunrise*, the City Woman simply asks, “Couldn’t she get drowned?”

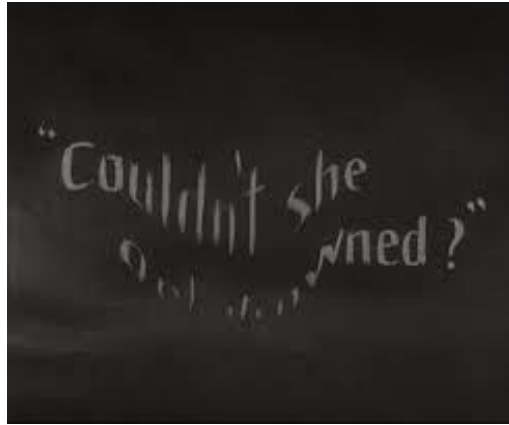


Fig 5: "Couldn't she get drowned?"

For further emphasis, the words melt off the screen as if getting drowned themselves. Dialogue is limited in a silent film, which forces characters to quickly get to the point, but *Sunrise* manages to express many subtleties wordlessly. For all its melodrama, *Sunrise* explicitly incorporates a sense of humor (e.g., the Man and Wife breaking the photographer's statue), so it is possible that some of the film is ironic.

### **A Film of Simultaneous Opposites**

Investigating the relationship between heterosexuality and queerness in *Sunrise* provides a way of interrogating a pattern that reoccurs frequently in the film as a whole. *Sunrise* is not as heterosexual as it first seems to be, but it is also not secretly arguing for queer sexual liberation; it is at once both straight and queer—and neither straight nor queer—in a way that provokes inquiry into the self-evidence of this binary. This ambiguous, multifaceted dynamic repeats itself throughout the film with dialectics of city/country, tradition/innovation, and gentle masculinity/violent masculinity.

The city is presented as a place of corruption in the beginning of the film, but the city is also what fixes the relationship between the Man and the Wife. The city has new experiences to explore which are first presented as decadent sin but later presented as harmless fun. In this way,

the pattern between straight/queer is repeated: *Sunrise* is not as anti-urbanism as it initially seems, but it is not secretly pro-urbanism. It is both pro-city and anti-city simultaneously. *Sunrise* lends the question: is the city a physical place or a certain mode of perception—when the Man and Wife go into the city, are they not swept into sin because they retain their rural mode of perception?

For a film so nominally fixated on the preservation of “the old ways,” *Sunrise* is technologically and artistically groundbreaking. Its innovative ingenuity creates a surprising and memorable viewing experience even one hundred years after the film’s release. For example, Murnau edited film stock so that it would have a translucent effect, allowing him to depict the City Woman as translucent as she holds the (non-translucent) Man. This conveys that the Man is fantasizing about her, but she isn’t actually there. Also notable is the tracking long shot of the kiss in Figure 3, which could only have been executed with a complicated dolly system to allow the camera to glide seamlessly over the hills and the fence. *Sunrise* is inspired by painting, but it is a film—an art only made possible by means of technological development. *Sunrise* was also one of the first feature films with a synchronized musical soundtrack, and it takes clever advantage of this, for example, with a two-note trumpet motif that indicates a character calling the Wife’s name. In *Sunrise*, the significance of innovation and tradition mirror the straight/queer dynamic; they are opposites, but they co-exist.

*Sunrise*’s barbershop scene applies this ambiguous dynamic to forms of masculinity. *Sunrise* gives the Man the role of both an emotionally vulnerable lover and also the stoic decision-maker of his household. He is loving, paternalistic, and occasionally violent toward the Wife. In the barbershop scene, the simultaneous presence of the opposites of male softness and male aggression comes to a peak. The scene includes a queer-coded barber who embodies male



gentleness and effeminacy. His visibility may serve as a subtle reminder that the world of Man and Wife is not the only world. Even though his queer mannerisms are perhaps intended as comedy, he is not portrayed as morally corrupting (like the City Woman). In the same scene, the Man most embodies male aggression, threatening to stab a stranger who sat next to the Wife.



Fig 6: Simultaneous opposites of male expression

*Sunrise* shows the most violent masculinity and the most gentle masculinity in the same scene, and neither are portrayed as incorrect. Is the Man's violence here a symptom of his inherent gentleness, showing the Wife his renewed care for her? Is the Man's gentleness a performance to make up for his inherent violence? With his dark impulses and sweet demeanor, the Man himself embodies opposite ends of a presumed binary which are shown to be ambiguous and co-existing.

## Conclusion

In *Sunrise*, narrative and aesthetic elements which seem obvious are actually laden with alternate ambiguous meanings. The film seems to be a simple parable in favor of preserving a rural Christian heterosexual tradition, which is reinforced by its pastoral and religious art aesthetic. However, intentionally or unintentionally, the film's plot and aesthetics resonate with queerness due to a proto-camp silent film acting style, a potential "queer gaze" on the Man, and a narrative which prioritizes social obligations and chaste relationships between men and women over actual heterosexual attraction. Investigating the film's surface-level heterosexuality and its

deeper queer potential helps to understand *Sunrise* as a whole and the way the film upsets binaries with the presence of simultaneous opposites.