This article – which makes the case for *Sunrise* as a timeless masterwork, one that offers new insights on each and every viewing – seems especially apt on this occasion of a brand new edition of a film that premièred more than eighty years ago.

For Andrew, *Sunrise* offers the “clear and satisfying experience” of a classic, but goes even further – like only a true masterwork can – to demand “re-experience”, ultimately mastering us in its timelessness and depth.

What follows originally appeared in *Film in the Aura of Art* (1984) – one of Andrew’s many books on cinema. He is R. Seldon Rose Professor of Film and Comparative Literature at Yale University.

NOTE: The frame illustrations referred to in square brackets can be found throughout the article.
Despite the lapidary language we customarily employ to characterise them (as precious, brittle gems, priceless pearls), elasticity is the property of lasting works of art. It is perhaps their defining property. Not only do great works absorb the shocks and insults to which spectators put them year after year and century after century but their resiliency is in large measure their attraction for us. *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) is elastic enough to return to us intact after scores of conflicting interpretations have, over decades, pulled it this way and that. Indeed, our own interest in the film is held by its refusal to succumb completely to any one experience or interpretation of it. *Sunrise* demands re-experience because it “speaks back” to our first experience with an authority we can hardly resist considering autonomous.

Indeed, the very greatest works offer us a clear and satisfying experience only as a prelude to a demand for re-experience. As Paul Ricoeur has said, their discourse conveys at once both a message and a “surplus” so that even the most carnal and ravishing encounter with the work’s body spends neither us nor the work. We distance ourselves, survey our experience from on high, and feel compelled to return to that body. Its “surplus” protects the work from being devoured either in the flesh (by carnivorous experience) or in its image (by an Olympian and final critical view). A gravitational force, this surplus allows for, and demands, a complex reaction to the work, one that draws us close but keeps us separate. Our re-encounters with a work are merely repetitious if they refuse the offer of the surplus and fetishise one aspect of the work. But if we return to the work risking our first view of it, risking as well our view of ourselves, a dynamic is put into play that is oriented toward the future of the work and of ourselves. To be able to explain the *discourse* of a work of art is to seize its signification; that is, to seize it as a mark of something past and absent in a “regressive hermeneutics”. But to respond to its *surplus* is to put comfortable explanations in jeopardy and to regard that mark as alive, as capable not simply of repeating its message but of ushering in new significance without warning, displacing its past, displacing our attachment to its meaning. A “progressive hermeneutics” attends to this surplus striving for comprehension of self, of artwork, and of the shifting (elastic) process that forms their rapport. The tension between explanation and comprehension is the counterpart of the dialectic between criticism and experience, between our “placing” of the work and our “being placed” by the work.

Most film criticism has emphasised the repetitious nature of film viewing. Auteur and genre studies as well as psychological and ideological analyses all assume that ritual and obsession are at the basis of most cinematic creation and experience. Such criticism has few qualms about paring down a film to its “essential structure”, reading the film as a symptom of a more fundamental obsession or state. Like any symptom, we attend to such films only long enough and in such a way as to read correctly the situations they indicate. In a mass art this seems appropriate.

But the film masterwork strikes us as far more than a symptom, and it demands to be heard again even after we have traversed it and attained the meanings it seemed at first to symptomise. This is the reason for our sense of the autonomy of such a film, and this is the reason that explanatory analyses are appropriate but in no way exhaustive, for they stir up more questions than they answer.

The fullest criticism of a film like *Sunrise* is a never ending one, a dialogue with the film that demands several “critical passes”, each one qualifying its predecessor. We may well begin with a view of its relation to Murnau’s themes and styles or
with its particular evocation of the pastoral, the melodrama, or the medieval fable, but we will be forced to return to it again to go beyond these initial positionings of the film in an oeuvre and in a genre. These successive readings, suspicious or synthetic, develop a history of experience and of understanding so that the term “artwork” might better be thought of actively, as that which is done and changed, rather than passively, as an object to be weighed, measured, and catalogued.

The primary and overwhelming subject of Sunset is self-consciously announced in the film’s first titles: the bitter and the sweet, mixed in every life, are hailed as the timeless strains of a song celebrating the life of two humans. In a first passage through the film, Sunset promises to deliver to us a concept, and observe for us the achievement, of humanity. The film’s drama chronicles the movement toward this goal as a movement toward the bond of the couple.

This is a song of two humans and this two-ness is essential to the possibility of both song and humanness. Since the plot involves three characters, since Margaret Livingston received star billing along with Janet Gaynor and George O’Brien, this can only mean that she, the cat woman and vamp, is non-human, inhuman.

Just as this most natural of worlds refuses a song of three, so also is a solo inconceivable. The world of Sunset is erotic at its base. Man needs woman and she him. Together they produce the song. The energy of the unattached human as it searches for or neglects its mate is capable of wreaking inhuman suffering. The film traverses that suffering and promotes a discovery of the song of humanity as a ritual in which the free sexuality of the individual is anchored by another human. The naturalness of the sun beaming down its approval on the couple at the end is not available to the individual. When light floods the wife feeding her chickens earlier in the film, its sanctifying glow is qualified by the mise-en-scène which divides the outside from the inside [1], the left from the right, making us recall the pathetic distance between her bed and that of her husband; she is no Beatrice. Her achievement comes only in relation to her husband as she is transformed from the wounded bird of the café to the mothering bird of the church [2, 3].

It is in the church that the couple is furthest from home, yet it is here that they re-achieve their union and validate the family and community life behind them [4]. Before they begin their voyage home (stepping out of the church to the approval of a city community and marching toward and within a rear-projected Edenic landscape), a beam of light delicately mottled by an ornate window grid fixes itself upon them [3]. The film will end when another such beam can transfigure them and their home [5], but only after the man expiates the offence that has driven them to the city and extirpates its cause. In the church they bow before a higher law and are illuminated; in the finale they become that law, become the sun, and illuminate the entire community. In John Donne’s terms we witness their “canonisation”: this is the community’s song about a pitiable couple who are not merely returned to the welcoming community but whose return validates that community. From the outset, then, Sunset is a purgatorial community ritual flowing from the screen to the spectator, who is invited by the song into the ritual and into the community. The first viewing of Sunset is a complicit and integrating one.

What is it that gnaws at the achievement of this canonisation, that makes us view this film askance? Surely it is the suspicion that the community of 1927 America has cleverly designed this “miracle” for its own aggrandisement and perpetuation. The song of two humans becomes the song of nature, and both not only are domesticated at the end but decree
the law under which domestication becomes a value. In this sleight of hand the ideology of the average spectator undergoes a glorification achieved by the very characters (the potentially universal Man and Woman) whose problems brought that ideology into question. Since their capitulation to the laws of society (the laws of family) is pictured as the triumph of love (eros and agape ringing out from the church bell tower) they bring back from the church not only their determination to live within the law, but a renewed grace, love, which is the source of the law.

Thus, through experience innocence is regained, not only the personal innocence conferred by forgiveness but a communal innocence that celebrates the origin of the laws of the family and validates a posteriori the drama that questioned those laws. As Mary Ann Doane has so forcefully shown, the image of the sun serves to mask the contradictions in this solution.

The Man, in the beginning of the film, is tempted to test and transgress this law, but the law is re-invoked as supreme by the closure of the film. Furthermore, the man reasserts the place of the father within the family unit. The sun here serves to sanction and naturalise the Symbolic Order and the symbolic activity of the text.... Yet, the final signature of the text is not that sun which is the most natural thing in nature but an artificial stylised sun.

The natural originary presence (of the sun), sanctioning the textual work and its symbolic activity, is always already metaphorical – and everything, including nature, becomes Text.\(^\text{3}\)
This theme in a way that is new. While his problematic can be thought of as banal, powerful, ideologically complicit, eternal, or whatever, his film, as a visual meditation and interpretation of that problematic, permits us to make a gain, achieve a perspective, on its dark psycho-social origins, origins that will continue to fascinate us as they fascinated Murnau, who returned to this problem again and again.

The surplus of meaning which overruns the banks of Sunrise’s traditional narrative is first of all a visual surplus. The precision of the compositions suggests a second text and a second context for meaning. And it suggests this immediately, for following the title cards announcing the narrative and thematic concerns of the film is a series of four autonomous shots grouped under the heading “Summertime–Vacation Time [6–9].” Under the aegis of this title and attributable to no source, these shots are able to establish a “look of the world” before that world becomes implicated in narrative. Thematically vacation time promises to test the values of a leisured class, but it suggests as well a visual variety based on free movement, free activities, and the boundlessness of a bright outdoors.

Narratively Murnau’s four shots denote, in succession, “Goodbye to the City”, “Vertiginous flight toward pleasure”, “Relaxation”, and “Welcome to the calmness of a new environment”. While Sunrise is certainly another song validating the chaste life of the family while brutally banishing the sexual visions it couldn’t help but entertain, while it is another compulsive version of a general myth, a symptom of a lasting psychosocial scene, the film continues to haunt us in its particularity. In our next return to the film we must not neglect its claims to universality which stem from its ideological work as allegory, but we must attend to the “progress” of this film in relation to its themes. For Murnau has reimagined
The final shot (actually three related shots) is classically composed by a camera that is inside a vacation boat as it nears a village shore. Two thin masts trisect the screen. Small sailboats run laterally across the top. Following an insert of the shore, the movement of the camera becomes autonomous as it cranes up for a full look at the village before descending toward the dock where onlookers are gathered to welcome it.

The shots establish four different graphic paradigms, and each of these paradigms will play a key role in the film's visual drama. The final shot of the prologue, with its intricate movement and perfect composition, might well be considered the most “typically Murnau” and it is with this that we begin.

A.) Let us call its effect “classical”, since it is in itself harmonious and geometrically proportional and because its simplicity allows us to read into it allusions to established graphic traditions. The passengers are arranged on the boat as in some early nineteenth-century French painting: the two thin masts trisect the screen like pillars in a quattrocento Annunciation. The natural lines of movement in this composition are accentuated and complicated by two gentle motions: a sail-boat breezily traverses the top of the frame right to left, and the camera lazily slides forward with the progress of the boat. Far from disrupting the composition, this movement seeks to rebalance the screen or to create a symmetry in time. In this case the camera gently leaps from the people on the boat, and, after surveying the village in its tame flight, comes to land on waiting onlookers and a waiting dock. Thus the moving camera independently seeks out the ideal (classical) point of rest, locking within the shot the energy that motivated it.

Much has been made of Murnau’s virtuosity with camera movements, and those in Sunrise are breathtaking. Their power, however, largely stems from the spareness with which he employed this technique – only fourteen of over six hundred shots. Several of these are follow-shots in which the stationary camera decides to pursue the character in view. More accurately, the camera is pulled in the wake of a drama receding from it. The vamp early in the film walks by the panning camera and threatens to go completely out of view, but soon we are implicated in the cadence of her plan. Later, the man, back to us, wanders toward the marsh, and the camera, full of our desire, initiates one of the most complex and thrilling movements in all of cinema. It crosses the fence at its own spot, turns on the man who in his stupor passes by it and makes for the vamp. But the camera finds its own, more direct path, pushing past bushes until she is revealed in the moonlight. When the man re-enters screen left we are doubly startled, having forgotten that we had abandoned him. Indeed, we are perhaps ashamed to have reached the vamp before him in our driving impatience. This shame is intensified at the end of the sequence when the camera, nose in mud, sniffs after the retreating sinners. It is a daring, highly unconventional shot, and it delivers its image of guilt not only by its content (high-heel shoes oozing with mud, while the marsh refuses to give up the imprint of the shoe), but by making us feel guilty as we literally track the couple down.

For the most part these tracking movements serve to animate and prolong classical compositions rather than manufacture drama. While it is true that most of the tracking shots, notably the trolley ride, open up new acting spaces for the marital drama, the very stateliness of the duration of these shots moves our attention from the drama to focus on the very design of the image. Indeed, the moving camera allows us to watch the shot in the process of being designed. This graphic rather than dramatic use of tracking contributes to the persistent view of Murnau as an “aesthetic”, high-art director, a view reinforced by biographical attention placed on Murnau's study of art history and on the pictorialism of his earlier films, especially Faust. Scrutinised with the eyes of an art critic, Sunrise becomes
an endless series of citations. Robin Wood⁴ catalogues many of these: the still lives of wooden bowls and bread on a table that is raked a la Van Gogh [10]; the second honeymoon voyage in which the vertical moon-streak and small sailboat on the dark lake recall paintings of the Brucke group; the scene of the search for the lost wife with its frontal image of bobbing lanterns, suggesting impressionism [11]; the inserts of the village itself [12], seen always mistily or at night with the steeple and full moon prominent above the clustered houses, which draw on a frequent topos in late nineteenth-century painting. I leave it to others to establish the sources for such “pictorially aware” compositions as those given us in the amusement park, café, or church.

Wood goes on to suggest that the stylisation of certain gestures is an even more important aspect of the heritage of painting in this film. The baby reaching to touch its mother’s face [13]; the wife feeding her chickens [1]; the insert of the “holy” family under a fruit tree and beside the ox-drawn plough – one could multiply such scenes which suggest, which cry out for references. Frequently the drama itself is rendered as a conflict of pictorial styles. The delicately curved neck of the wife, whose head is consistently surrounded by a horizonless field of water, is juxtaposed with a frontal view of the man whose gesture of rowing thrusts him aggressively toward us. Indeed, the film as a whole has been seen as a conflict between expressionism and naturalism, Germany and America.

As in any fable, the story proceeds between two distinctly segregated poles: the vamp and the wife, the city and the country, land and water, night and morning. While the alternation of these elements produces a dramatic energy which is intensified by sequences of conflicting pictorial styles, the same energy can also he released within a single shot through the use of diagonal compositions, to which I now turn.
B.) Conflict is explicit in the paradigm announced by the film's second shot – a locomotive screaming diagonally across the screen, crossed by another to form an X [7]. In the body of the film itself such energy is not so self-contained, for diagonals appear only one at a time and point to a space and a time beyond them.

Murnau saves this composition for a particular moment in the film, giving us a strong clue to the rhetorical strategy at work in his storyboard. After the wife has agreed to the journey and has said goodbye to her baby, we see the boat, the death ship, tied to the dock. Its diagonal composition is marked by the entrance of the man who draws the line with his heavy feet. There follows a sequence of some twenty-two shots before he and his wife are alone on the lake. Nearly all of these shots are self-consciously diagonal, a fact that gives unity to the sequence and allows for a silent drama between man, woman, boat, and dog [14, 15]. Murnau would never allow such compositions to achieve their own resolution but he does let them build the growing tension. For instance, the direct energy of the man is countered by that of the dog pulling frantically at his chain to form an even purer diagonal. After ten shots elaborating this graphic drama, Murnau shows us the boat leaving the shore and, instead of cutting to the charging dog, he allows the dog to enter the scene from the centre, leap off the dock, and swim out to the boat.

A number of diagonals recur in the following sequences until the boat reaches the farther shore. In the city itself they are essentially absent. That they represent and contain a driving and perverse energy is attested to by their use in conjunction with the vamp. Particularly at the film's end she is shown walking downscreen along roads or fence lines whose diagonal composition leads her to the bottom corner of the frame. Unforgettable is the scene in which she is driven by the man diagonally to screen left and then rolled to the bottom front of the screen by force of a fence which has cued the direction of the action all along. Indeed, the vamp's final exit from the village drops her diagonally away from us to the upper left-hand corner of the screen, leaving the glistening lake restored [16]. Murnau emphasises the defeat of the diagonal when the shot following her exit displays the crossed bodies of the reunited couple [17]. The diagonal is a figure of absence as well as of passion; it is an image of a lack as well as of the drive to fill that lack. In Sunrise it is overcome by the presence of the cross which brings all energy back to a centre and holds it there.

The interplay between squarely composed images and unbalanced or diagonal ones, between the crossing trains and the pleasure boat, dramatises the narrative in a traditionally pictorial manner. Murnau's achievement here lies in his ability to make this interplay deeply conflicting without resorting to conventional montage, and it is this for which we normally salute him. Each shot has an integrity that makes it valuable in itself. Placed in sequences these shots resonate even more fully because of the dramatic context in which they participate.

But such pictorial interplay is not unique to Sunrise. One finds it surely in Murnau's other works and in early German film generally. Moreover, Murnau isn't at all faithful in Sunrise to this strategy. The barbershop sequence, for instance, is a traditional Hollywood set piece complete with establishing shot and an elaboration of fragments. At one point eleven straight glances stitch the comic scene together, culminating in close-up inserts of the masher's shoe being stepped on and the husband's pocketknife slowly opening. What could have been a suspenseful scene is lightened in the overarticulation of its presentation. By rendering it via comic-strip montage, Murnau sets this fake drama off against the more primitive
and powerful dangers which flank it and which he delivers to us intact, as if in awe of their permanence and seriousness.

The great moments of *Sunrise* certainly could not exist in montage. The evil and grace which this film imagines for us cannot be given fragmentarily nor could they be grouped and held within such logical and essentially human boundaries. The intelligence of the stylistic oppositions labelled here classical and dynamic is not congruent with these more super-natural aspects of the film. Through its occasional montage and through its consistently tasteful stylistic deployment *Sunrise* will always be recognised as a model film; but it is despite this taste and intelligence that *Sunrise* makes us return to it once more seeking the source of its more primitive attraction for us.

**C.** The first and third shots of the prologue provide entrees to another type of experience that *Sunrise* dares to envisage. If the frame and all its potentials for repose and dynamism can be seen as cultural modes of organising conflict, these two shots suggest the film’s openness to noncultural forces, to chaos and the preternatural.

Initially the third shot appears conventional enough, the two forces in the frame, an advancing ocean liner and a resting female bather, cut off from one another in split screen [8]. This shot in fact is the transition to the purely reposeful classical composition of the final prologue shot discussed above. It tames the dynamism of the crossing trains and, while maintaining the explicit conflict between two entities, it gives each entity an autonomous space within which to relax. Thus far the shot is interesting, even logical, but certainly not remarkable.

Suddenly a form disturbs this interplay. A figure rises from the bottom of the screen, a man pulling himself up to be with the woman. While his motion might be seen to counterbalance the descent of the ocean liner from the top left of the frame,
constantly run our eyes around the perimeter of the screen in search of the unknown.

Murnau first discovered this structure in Nosferatu when the mystery ship glides into the pretty harbour, disrupting its peaceful sleep and infesting it with plague. He returns to this very image on smaller scale in Sunrise. At the beginning and end of the murder voyage occur shots in which we see at first only a dock or a mooring post. Silently into the frame slips the shadow, then the prow of the rowboat. While the framing of these last shots is in part motivated by the function of a harbour, a dock, a mooring post, all of which exist to wait upon the arrival of a vessel, Murnau nonetheless could conceivably keep us waiting interminably in expectation of that which we cannot see. This sense of the interminable lies behind the most effective use of this compositional structure, the scenes of the search for the wife.

Lanterns bobbing from the prows of a huddle of rowboats create an effect Robin Wood termed “impressionist”[11]. Like some Monet painting the function of the edges of the frame is very problematic. This scene with its complex molecular movement, its indecipherable composition, and its context of a black surrounding lake seems aimless. These boats go nowhere. These searching light beams cannot penetrate the lake below. The pathetic husband tests all perimeters. Once he even calls out along the frontal axis directly at us, the spectators. Is there any space that will yield up his wife? At the end of the sequence, in what is surely the film’s most pathetic moment, his boat drifts and bobs completely out of frame. This moment of despair is achieved by the failure of cinematic framing, by the dispersal of the filmed elements in search of an absent centre.

In the midst of these directionless shots Murnau inserts a privileged narrator’s view of the wife floating unconscious. This miraculous vision which no one sees begins on solid black.
For four full seconds we are asked to stare at the imperturbable lake, an image of the husband’s despair. Then a form grows in the upper right and begins slipping down the diagonal. The camera doesn’t budge. It can’t frame or even locate her. When she has completely disappeared bottom left we realise we are without bearings and that this inhuman accident of sight is over. The husband recovers a piece of lace, a trace of this passing, but the lake is black again. What we have been given here is a glance at grace. Its possibility has been affirmed as it has passed through our view, but its absence from the man and his drama has also been marked. Grace is as unframable as death. We glimpse only its trace.

It is in this same transcendent space, this time conjured up in flashback by the rescuer, that we view the miracle of the wife’s recovery [20]. Once again a pitch black lake covers the screen, an undifferentiated chaos within which composition is meaningless. Then the rescue boat nudges in from bottom right and constructs the diagonal along which the wife begins to descend. The space of nothingness has been graced, yet remains imaginary, to be called to mind in memory or in story.

D.) I have saved for last the first shot of the prologue, indeed of the film; for in its obvious internal mutation (from static drawing to live action), it introduces both the simplest and the most important paradigm of shots [8].

To begin with the simple, this shot announces a drama between expressionism and naturalism. The stylised flat of the train station with its latticework lines is animated without warning, great billows of smoke rising in the middle of the picture. As one train and then another moves out of the station, our eyes scan the screen for the realistic detail we had at first ignored in attending to the extraordinary design of the scene. One can hardly help watching for this kind of interplay throughout the film. Contemporary critics were alert to the contradictions Murnau’s relocation in Hollywood was certain to elicit. George O’Brien’s heavy, hunched saunter plays against a sweet and airy Janet Gaynor, natural in the American way except for the East European wig all her fans bemoaned. More subtly, the peasant house which the vamp inhabits is European in decor and in presentation (the curiously raked table) [10, 12], whereas the final scene of the peasants is shot straight-on in American style. One is tempted to label all the dark scenes (marsh and both lake journeys) as German in their style, while the sunny sequences, particularly the middle portion of the film in the city, might be termed American. But this formula is too pat and fails to account for the graphics of the Luna Park and the café sequence. Nevertheless it may be true, as has been suggested, that this film is Murnau’s final death struggle with the expressionism of his early films.

The expulsion of the vamp is then a clear victory for Janet Gaynor (her hair now luxuriously undone) and the American way.

Much more important than this obvious mixture of styles, the first shot of the film undergoes internal transmutation and it is this above all that characterises Murnau’s approach to action. Here a static design is magically animated. Later superimpositions will invade an image from within and corrupt or save it. Think of the lake bubbling over the face of George O’Brien, or the three faces of the vamp fading in from the space around O’Brien to tempt him on.

Referring to the darker German films of Murnau, Alexandre Astruc discussed the power of this method:

What will the image become? The meeting place for a certain number of lines of force whose placement will directly recall Velasquez and Caravaggio. Yet each image demands to be
So many shots reinforce this vision. Smoke and fog rise up from the centre of dozens of seemingly static compositions. Murnau even used this structure in his intertitles when the graphics of “couldn’t she get drowned?” become liquid and slide iconically to the bottom of the screen, dissolving into a pictograph of the wife falling from a boat and in slow motion descending to the bottom of the lake and of the frame. Indeed the final image of the film is the resurrection of these graphics, “Finis” rises (as from the lake) to centre screen and to a solidity that it has been the film’s job to achieve.

Surely the most powerful use of this structure and one that speaks to us with an innate strength the years cannot diminish are the performances of the principals at those moments when we see an emotion or idea crossing their faces. Janet Gaynor stands before George O’Brien and his request that she come with him across the lake; she hesitates, her lips quivering, and then explodes into an unforgettable smile, certain that the long night of her husband’s inner struggle is over.

Characteristically, Murnau refuses to cut away from her to the reverse shot of O’Brien, for the drama must develop within the scene and in its own “rural” time.

Other privileged moments occur at the café as the man passes her the plate of cakes and her face disintegrates in tears. In the church it is O’Brien’s turn to crumble and be restored in front of his partner. And of course at the film’s end these two human faces beam together in transfigured joy only to demand further transcendental mutation: all within the immutable stillness of a perfectly composed frame these faces dissolve into and become the glorious superimposed sunrise. The energy of their love cannot push the film forward in time; instead it accumulates in the frame until it literally radiates its final image.

A perfectly framed and static view of the man’s home is undone by a single movement, his shadow appearing in the window signalling the vamp [21]; or later in nearly the same situation, the shadow of his head by a small window preceding the sudden swinging open of the door [22]. These shots have something of the demonic about them as the composition disintegrates into a threatening action, threatening primarily because the mutation originates in the centre of the frame.

Murnau carefully blocks his scenes to achieve this kind of effect. The crucial scene of the husband’s return to his bedroom, sick with evil passion spent and with the onus of more evil deeds still to do, is given as an intrusion into the sanctuary of his wife’s resting place. Small and unaware, she lies bathed in moonlight while from a downstage centre doorway first his shadow and then his hulk looms up and covers her. Like the superimpositions of the vamp that finally urge him to take the awful step [23], to ask his wife to boat with him, there is no forewarning. In the centre of a marital bedroom the spectre appears. In the midst of life, temptation unaccountably wells up. Evil in the world of Sunrise cannot be warded off by vigilance. There are no boundaries to protect. It arises and corrupts from within.
T
he parabolic origin of *Sunrise* is unmistakable. The characters are nameless, their drama timeless. Its impact applies “wherever the sun rises, whether in city or country”.

Who is presenting us this parable? Images, and paradigms of images, exist only as they are presented and become present to someone. Just as stories are more than a sequence of events, so images are more than an array of pictorial elements. What narration is to story, so framing is to images. Indeed the very term “to frame” is ambiguous enough to refer to representation and narration alike. We frame a picture and we frame a story. In motion pictures we frame both. And so, who is presenting us the parable of *Sunrise*? Early in the film we are shown. As the man leaves his home to pursue temptation in the marsh, we are given a sudden unaccountable explanatory insert. Two village women recall how “they used to be like children but now he ruins himself; moneylenders take their farm”. These women conjure up the appropriate images to support their gossip and then one of them, whom we shall later recognise as the nurse, says, “while she sits alone”. Her glance curiously seeks our own and for an instant we can be certain that the entire film is a community parable told by its citizens to us, an extension of that community. Thus the framing of the flashback to explain the story shows the visible presence of the storyteller and lets us infer the framing of the film as parable. In the film’s final sequence the community once more explains to itself, and to us, the miracle of the rescue, taking credit for the happy end.

Between these two blatant interventions of community there exist many moments and types of framing, all of which put the images of the film to use. Think of the explicit dreams conjured up by one character for another: the image of the wife falling from the boat inserted by the vamp into the mind of the man so forcefully that it recurs even when he is alone; the pastoral garden in which the “remarried” couple takes their promenade; the angels with violins they dream up at the carnival; and so on.

This ability of characters in the film to situate or frame a scene leads to another graphic paradigm not mentioned above: *repoussoir*. When a character in foreground is silhouetted by the light stemming from a background scene, that character’s thickness is lost but his or her control over the background scene is established. This paradigm is inaugurated in the film’s first sequence when the vamp slips into the dining room of the home where she lodges. The peasants in the foreground literally frame her entrance [10]. The next sequence opens with a more dramatic instance of this effect. Two more peasants, so sharply silhouetted as to be featureless, stand up against the camera [27]. The vamp’s exit from the house throws the deepest plane of the frame into brightness and focus so that we observe her, through these nameless peasants, slink up the street. These two shots in fact prepare us for the villagers’ flashbacks to come. The drama of the film is seen by and through the eyes of the village.

Other uses of *repoussoir* include the vision of the city seen through the backs of the couple viewing it; the trolley trip to the city in which the driver is flattened and darkened against the bright landscape developing before him. The most complicated uses of this shot are reserved for the last third of the film: the wife in a glance-object format eyes a couple dancing at the amusement park. This couple is shot to look like paper dolls pushed up against the dance-hall window. Behind them the sparkling room appears full of other dancers and the band. Since the camera begins to track in on this view we are in the position of the wife framing a heavenly couple who in turn sense the paradise behind them. Even more complicated is the search for the adrift wife. Here the vamp frames the townspeople, first through her window and then catlike from the tree branch...
above them while they in turn are silhouetted against a further scene, the arena of the search itself [28].

These remarkable shots which explicitly pose the question of seeing and conjuring are only the exposed side of a structure that never ceases to operate in the film. Sunrise is an elaborate interplay of viewers viewing and wilful characters striving to frame their desires. Nor are we as spectators aloof from this interplay. We too have our desires and strive to frame this parable for ourselves. When the vamp slinks down the street she passes the village observers [27]. They lose interest, yet we pan with her, we track behind her, caught up in her lure and in the mystery of her project. She stops to peer in the window of a home where a man is having his hair cut. We have voyeuristically caught her in her own voyeurism. Guilty already, we track on to the fence of another house. She whistles at the little square of a window in front of her [21]. The power of her whistle is part of her encompassing glance. Inside the man at his table decentres the classic composition by leaning nearly off-screen in response. When she whistles again he stands in the middle of the screen against a post. To his left is the kitchen with his off-screen wife. To his right the off-screen source of the alluring whistle. He is caught. It is enough for Murnau to show us from the vamp’s viewing spot the shadow of a hand motioning in the window. The vamp has made her conquest by commanding the field without being seen.

In the famous tracking shot which discovers her under the moonlight she prepares to be seen, but only as a necessary tactic in her larger plan. She wants not to be taken but to take. In the scene which follows it is she who controls the frame from its centre [29]. She grasps his head and glares at us defiantly. She proposes the murder and keeps the man from recoiling out of the frame. Right up against the edge he leans, lifting his hands in horror. But he does not leave. And when he throws the vamp to the ground she knows she will win. Her final strategy is to point to the glories of the city. Sitting before us, exactly replicating our own viewing situation, the couple looks on at the marvellous vision unrolling before them, a vision that inspires the vamp’s voluptuous dance and the man’s aroused passion. It is “a movie” that has seduced him. He gives himself to her. The actual moment of sexual intercourse is signalled by a long shot of the moon beside the village steeple.

The erotic iconography of this piece of censorship is unmistakable, but the shot serves to return the story to more distant hands. The vamp who has controlled each frame to this moment is relieved of the image in her frenzy. This is why we must follow her tracks and locate her once more in the succeeding shots. The steeple image has implicated the cosmos itself in the sin and has allowed the vamp to step out of the frame without losing her control over the man. Alone, he is seen groping his way amidst the shadows of fishnets and branches, still caught in his sin. It is only in sleep that her spell is loosed, the water bubbling through his consciousness like the river of Lethe, like the water into which he must send his wife. 8

The flowing dissolves carrying this water culminate in a tableau of the village at dawn stretched out along the lake. Murnau here has taken narrative authority from the man, expressing thereby that relaxation of conscience the guilty seek in unconsciousness. This momentary and illusory relief persists into the next shot as we re-enter the room to find the wife hovering solicitously over him, encompassing him in her selfless gaze. The peacefulness of this transition is shortlived, however, broken by the mad eyes of the waking man which in delirium have mercilessly brought back in hallucination the bundle of bulrushes he had so carefully shoved out of view.

This startling return of the film to his eyes is a burden on the viewer who had only been too glad to be under the domestic
we had an interplay of wills, now we have a convergence of wills. Where before we participated in the flight of desire, now we participate in the desire for stasis.

The entire city section is cushioned in protective brackets that insure its harmony. The trolley, which leads the disconsolate couple in, later takes them happily away. Twice the wife is protected from the treacherous traffic: once blinded by despair, once by euphoria. Twice the couple find themselves in restaurants, once unable to eat or look at one another, they must leave; later they eat and look so much that they fly away in imagination. Between all this narrative protection and framing lie the great images of reconciliation for which the film is well known, the scenes in the church and in the photographer’s studio.

The reconciliation in the church, after the failure of flowers and cakes, is attributable no doubt to God and his visible presence in the lighting of the mise-en-scène. But more powerfully, it is a product of art, of a mediated experience that allows both parties to mingle their feelings at a protective distance. The spectacle of the wedding depersonalises the power of love so that it can bypass the horrendous breach of promise represented in the film’s first movement. Where personal love failed (cake and flowers), institutional love succeeds. The unworthy find worth beneath the umbrella of the church’s blessing, a blessing general enough to extend beyond the sanctuary and into the congregation.

In positioning themselves before this ritual the couple asks anonymously for the blessing. They view in order to be renewed. By reason of their anonymity the couple here implicates the audience once and for all. The gaze of the spectator in the back row is bound up in the gaze of the man at the ritual before him. His identification with the groom and its power to bring him to his knees keys our own identification with the man. The film here signals the mode of response it demands from us, signals
itself as a ritual, the very observing of which has the power to liberate the viewer. Having looked at this spectacle the man no longer needs to look at his wife. He buries his head in her lap and she bends her neck in protection. This pietistic moment closes the distance between them so that their glances no longer need to meet or avert themselves. They look now together at a future that opens up before them, thanks to the mediation of a spectacle engrossing enough to command both their views, meaningful enough to unite them.

If the sequence in the church places the spectator within the process of narration, the photographer catches that same spectator in the act of imaging. The couple themselves demand a final framing in which the world looks at them, in which they lose their sight and become sighted. Their kiss, inverted in the lens, captured and held on the photographic plate, is the culmination of their reconciliation. It is this physical object, this icon, which rests cushioned between the frames and brackets of the city section [31].

The pleasure the photographer takes in framing them, a pleasure multiplied by all those who watch their country dance at the carnival, is of course entirely too facile. The anarchic impulse of adultery is not so easily tamed. The dance and the photograph embody a social solution (an artistic solution) to a problem society only pretends to control. The photograph and the dance, like Murnau’s classical compositions, pretend to hold and objectify a social value, but these values themselves can be seen within a larger, nonsocial context. This shifting of contexts produces the film’s most beautiful moment. As they sail borne under a benevolent honeyed moon, the couple in foreground “images” a barge of dancing peasants floating across the top of the frame [32]. This scene brings into nature the dance of the amusement park, and it explicitly rhymes with the vision of the city framed earlier by the vamp. Like that earlier vision and
like the wedding spectacle viewed in the church, the image of
the barge produces immediate consequences for the viewers.
The couple reaches together in their one explicit moment of
mutual sexual interest. But the barge floats off the screen, and
its iridescent bonfire gives way to the surrounding blackness
of the lake. The family unit is blessed by society in the photograph
and in the serenading barge; but both blessings are suddenly
nothing more than little squares within a larger more forbidding
frame.

In this context, the wind preceding the storm is unframed
and unframable. Driving the city dwellers out of their artificial
pleasures, it leaves the floating couple without social support.
Nature’s passion, indiscriminately unleashed in this storm,
threatens the simple reconciliation of the city. Passion and the
vamp demand to be heard.

The fairy-tale quality of this cosmic justice is supported by
the shift of the film to the view once more of the vamp. Bare
skin gleaming in the intermittent light, she glares at the towns-
people first through her window and then from her tree [28].
At the height of the drama we are presented with the film’s
most complicated visual moments. We frame the vamp who in
glance-object format frames the townspeople on the shore;
they themselves are staring into the darkness of the lake at little
rescue boats. The men aboard those boats look in despair at the
forlorn husband whose eyes frame the blackness of the water.
At the centre of this intricately embedded structure is the wife’s
absence. At the outside stand we, the film spectators who, with
the vamp, observe the pathetic impotence of society in the face
of this absence.

The final drama to be played pits the dominant gaze of the
demonic vamp against that of the man. Having looked into the
nothingness of the water, he returns to the sanctuary of his
marital bedroom and kneels before the empty tabernacle of his
wife’s bed. He ought, it seems, to give up sight and life right
here, but he is awakened from his emptiness by the whistle of
the vamp come back to envelop him. Her error is to enter the
space she has framed. Whereas before he had gone to her, now
she goes to him, invading the sanctity of the house [22].

Murnau achieves an enormously satisfying shift of power
by letting us watch, from her imperious post behind the fence,
the foolish audacity of the vamp. Instead of commanding the
scene from that post, this time she inserts herself into the scene.
The terror of the storm, the night, and the dark side of passion
are condensed in her small form which hesitates outside the
house. In chasing her down and brutally burying her beneath
the frame, the husband clears the way for refilling the house.
The all-seeing vamp has been seen; passion has been recognised
and dealt with. Domestic life can now be sanctified by nature
itself [5]: the entire family, seen all together for the first time
since the pastoral flashback, arranges itself on the wife’s bed.
The cross of her window frame, instead of throwing its portentous
shadow, is now wreathed with flowers. This unmistakable Easter
icon is motivated only by the resurrection of a wholesome love
through the near death of the innocent wife, who suffered to
redeem the sinful husband thereby casting Satan back to hell.

This ending satisfies the on-screen community. Outside the
couple’s room they recount the rescue. And then, as if to laugh
at the fate just overcome, they re-enact comically the origin of
the story: the rescuer accepts a kiss, two kisses from the nurse,
and his wife tweaks him by the ear. This little flirtation once
more traces the cracks in the social structure, cracks it was the
work of this film to caulk. It recalls other “light” moments like
the man’s attack on the barbershop masher, like the comic
flirtation of the vamplike manicurist, and like the sudden
violence of the woman with the falling shoulder straps. Together
these jokes dismiss with laughter the paradox of sexuality as
Visual life is an oscillation between searching and being positioned. In *Sunrise* this oscillation is explicit, and we have used the dialectic “framing–being framed” to describe it, but we might as easily have talked about surfaces and depths. For to hold an object or a person in view is to pin it to the screen and to treat it two-dimensionally. Whereas, to be at the mercy of an unstable frame or of a scene (the wife adrift) that resists framing is to experience the solidity of that which we seek.

This opposition between framing and being framed is at the heart of cinema. In its determination to create good stories and beautiful tableaux, cinema tries to hold the world in its power. In its failure to do this, in the nonnarrative, unpainterly aspects which form the grain of every film and become foregrounded in some, cinema is at the mercy of what it strives to perceive. This opposition of surfaces and depths speaks explicitly to the viewer of the film, for it marks a tension in the movie theatre. On the one hand the spectator joins the community and “uses” the example of the story to recover and reinvest a commitment to culture. The film is like a mural painting on which the viewer can see the couple, the community, the locales of danger, and even himself, and across which a world view is reframed. On the other hand this same spectator has paid an admission fee to leave social positioning behind and to dream alone in the theatre whatever dreams the film might evoke. A voyeur concealed before a fascinating spectacle he does not control, that spectator wants in part to be caught out, framed suddenly by a turning of the light on him.

The very phenomenon of cinema, it seems, feeds these conflicting impulses. As social critics insist, movies are the plaything of the dominant ideology. They are, even in their pretences at social comment (pretences *Sunrise* at least has the good taste to ignore), thoroughly institutional products...
supporting an institutionalised way of life. Yet movies are also considered dream material capable of appealing to and unleashing our most nonsocial fantasies.

It is *Sunrise*’s feat to have paid tribute to both these impulses in its narrative structure, in the interplay of its graphics and, most stunningly, in its implication of the viewer within its flow. Watching it, we are led to agree with the nurse that there is a moral order in the universe and that it has generated our culture. But we can also sense the mystery of events beyond the nurse, beyond the community. The primordial chaos of the vamp and the inhuman beauty of the apotheosis of the couple let us imagine a life beyond social health and prosperity. And in our imagining the film repositions us, decentering us from our social selves. It is no doubt this tension between the positioning we perform on the story and that other positioning it performs on us that makes us return to this film again and again.

The experience of *Sunrise* is in the mode of the experience of any masterwork. Its story is as conventional and ideological as renaissance *topoi* like the Nativity or Flight to Egypt. Its craftsmanship, like the flawless form of a fifteenth-century classic, seems unquestioned and unquestionable. It puts the eye and the mind to rest. But as classic, *Sunrise* assumes the aura of the institutions with which it is complicit; it is after all a product made under the patronage of William Fox. Fox bought Murnau and his German expressionist team explicitly to construct for him a piece of high art. This mogul of the “low-class film” commanded the creation of an artwork to rise loftily like a dirigible over his studio as advertisement and as example.9

No doubt the Medicis had better taste than William Fox, but they served in their day a similar function: to foster work that would at once advance the art and uphold the culture, drawing special attention to its patron. Such works deserve their homes in the Uffizi at Florence or the Venetian Accademia, or the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., places whose location and architecture assure our proper respect.

The thousands of viewers who file up to such works, like those who are placed before *Sunrise*, are placed before a cultural monument. The stability and “correctness” of the story and the form assure their respect and perhaps their admiration. The very structure of these works likewise insists on a certain positioning of the spectator called for by the use of perspective and, in *Sunrise*, by the narrative. Hence the spectator not only fixes a world but is fixed in relation to that world. This is the hidden and insidious task of every classic: under the guise of greatness and even of freedom, supported by a philanthropic patron, artists advance the institution of art for the glory of culture. The artist’s product becomes an artefact of prestige and of the market, capable of being owned, sold, used as collateral. And collateral it genuinely is, for it guarantees the social order that produced it! Moreover, as a classic it is displayed pedagogically to instruct all members of a culture in the rightness of that culture and in the reposeful attitude they should assume before an order that is both vast and natural.

But *Sunrise* is more than a classic, and it is on this surplus that we must end. When Giotto shaped his *Fuga in Egitta* (*Flight into Egypt*) (1304–1306) he did not disturb the story nor did he disrupt its visual form, creating as he did a much-imitated composition. This is Giotto’s classicism; but his faces go beyond such good taste and sense. They have mystified and disturbed for centuries and they will continue to do so. They mark a dimension of his painting which cannot be accommodated to an institution and which cannot be easily “placed” by a spectator. Indeed, they unsettle the spectator in a depositioning that requires a reappraisal of the work, if only to permit that befuddled viewer to regain balance. Similarly Piero de Cosimi’s
Medici-sponsored allegories disorient us by the distension of his figures and Filippino Lippi’s by the strange radiance of his colours. This radiance doesn’t serve the monumental aspect of his painting; it disturbs it, haunting the spectator in the process.

In the same way Sunrise can disturb and disorient even while it recounts a myth, even while its form puts us at ease. In the eerie, unpredictable power of the frame, and in the even less predictable transference of the work of framing, Sunrise continues to unsettle. We admire its surface to be startled by its depth.

If this is the potential of all cinema, it is the realisation of a very few works indeed. And if we sense something beyond respect and admiration for this film we must find a new word for our experience: awe. Sunrise partakes of the awesome. And it insists that we return to it, not in blind obsessive re-enactment but in a deepening comprehension of both work and self insured by the oscillation of positioning and unbalance we undergo. If this film is a masterwork, its mastery is something that changes hands. Ultimately we master this film only to find ourselves mastered in return.

REFERENCES


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