

GCE A LEVEL



WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

COMPONENT 2

Silent Cinema Student Resource

CASE STUDY: SUNRISE (MURNAU, 1927)



Silent Cinema Student Resource

Case Study: *Sunrise* (Murnau, 1927)

Sunrise exemplifies filmmaking at its artistic peak during the late silent period. Director F.W. Murnau used every device available to filmmakers at the time to produce a lyrical, artistic and timeless love story. Sight and Sound magazine voted *Sunrise* the fifth greatest film ever made in their 2017 Greatest Films poll. The film is hailed by critics as a masterpiece. Martin Scorsese described the film as a “super-production, an experimental film and a visionary poem”.

Sunrise was directed by German director F.W. Murnau as a ‘prestige picture’ for Fox studios. Although *Sunrise* is a silent film, it was produced with a synchronised score and released just weeks before the first ‘talkie’, *The Jazz Singer*. In this regard, it is a hybrid between a silent and sound film. Its unique context, as a German Expressionist film produced for a Hollywood studio and as a hybrid silent and sound film, ensures it is a fascinating film to study.

Task 1: Contexts – before the screening

It is likely that you will have little awareness of German cinema of the 1920s or the production contexts of *Sunrise*. This exercise will enable you to contextualise the film and guide your expectations before the screening.

In small groups, you will be given an aspect of the film’s context to research. You will feed back to the group in the form of a short presentation or a handout. This should not be a cut and paste exercise. You should express ideas in your own words. Avoid using Wikipedia and instead look at other dedicated sources, such as sections in film studies text books, dedicated websites on German Expressionism, documentaries and clips from other German Expressionist films.

Group 1: The career and auteur signature of F.W. Murnau

You should look at Murnau’s career as a filmmaker. How did he develop as a director? Does he have a distinct auteur trademark? Consider how he combines the Kammerspielfilm (research what this is) and German Expressionism. Which key films did he direct before *Sunrise*?

Group 2: UFA studios in Germany and Fox Studios in Hollywood

Research the development of UFA studios in the 1920s. Which key German Expressionist filmmakers and films were developed at UFA? Was there a studio style or were films in a variety of styles and genres produced at UFA? Then research Fox studios in Hollywood. What kind of films were produced at Fox in the 1920s?

Group 3: The aesthetics of German Expressionism with examples from films

Research the key characteristics of German Expressionist films. Provide images from films which exemplify the German Expressionist style. Give a brief history of German Expressionism as a movement – when did it begin and end? Consider the influence and popularity of German Expressionist films abroad.

Group 4: *Sunrise* – the film

Find information about the production and reception of the film. Explain why Fox Studios wanted to produce a German Expressionist film. How successful was the film when it was released? Why is the film now considered to be one of the greatest films of all time?

Task 2: General questions after screening

- Discuss your experience of watching Sunrise. How is it different to watching a film with spoken dialogue?
- What were the key striking and memorable moments in Sunrise? What is particularly striking about these moments?
- Make some initial notes on the film’s form and representations. We will expand on these when we look at each core area in more detail.

Tasks: Core areas

This set of questions relates to each of the core areas: representations, aesthetics, film form and contexts. These questions can be answered individually or in small groups. Make notes then feed your responses back to the whole class and add to your notes if necessary.

Task 3: Representations

- What are the differences between The Wife and The Woman from the City? To what extent do these characters conform to gender stereotypes?

The Wife	The Woman from the City

- The characters are universal types, hence their names The Man, The Wife, The Woman. Consider what is universal about the film's narrative and each of the main characters

Task 4: Aesthetics

- How would you describe the overall look and mood of the film? Think of as many adjectives as you can.

Adjectives to describe *Sunrise* (e.g. poetic):

Look at your descriptions of *Sunrise*'s overall aesthetic.

- State in a short paragraph how at least two aspects of film form contribute to the overall aesthetic in a specific sequence.

Two aspects of film form:
Explain how they contribute to the overall aesthetic of *Sunrise*:

Film form

Task 5: Make notes on the following areas of film form based on the questions provided. Use examples from the film to illustrate your responses. Feed your responses back to the whole class.

Cinematography and editing

Murnau stated that “the camera is the director’s pencil. It should have the greatest possible mobility in order to record the most fleeting harmony of atmosphere.”

- Comment on how camera movement is used in *Sunrise* and its effect on the overall aesthetic of the film.
- Consider the function of long takes and then moments when the editing is more rapid.

Single light sources are often used in *Sunrise* to draw our attention to aspects of the mise-en-scène.

- Give two examples of how lighting is used in the film to draw our attention to specific characters or objects.

Example 1:

Example 2:

Research task: Read this analysis of the film’s effects and cinematography by cinematographer John Bailey in *American Cinematographer*: <https://ascmag.com/blog/johns-bailiwick/karl-struss-a-tripod-in-two-worlds-part-four-sunrise> Bailey explains how many of the film’s effects were achieved.

What further insights into the film’s use of effects and its production do you gain from reading this article?

Mise-en-scène

Sunrise uses binary oppositions throughout.

- List the visual binary oppositions within the mise-en-scène.
- What is the function and meaning of these binary oppositions?

Performance

The actors’ performances may seem exaggerated compared to acting styles today. As there is no dialogue, the actors express their emotions through the use of the body and facial expressions.

Consider actor George O'Brien's performance as The Man.

- How does his performance in the first half of the film reflect his monstrous nature? Give specific examples from the film.

Sound

Although *Sunrise* is a 'silent' film, it has a synchronised score. The score was a Movietone-recorded orchestral score by Hugo Riesenfeld. This created a uniform experience for spectators who would all have seen the film with the same score. In this sense, *Sunrise* is a transitional film as the silent era gave way to sound films.

The sound of bells is a motif used throughout the film.

- State where bells are used and what function they serve.

Choose one dramatic sequence from the film. First, watch the sequence with no sound. Then watch the sequence again with the synchronised score.

- How is your experience of the film different with the score? How does the orchestral score heighten the emotion of the scene?

Social, political, cultural and institutional contexts

Task: research exercise

Read Allen and Gomery's chapter on *Sunrise* in *Film History* (available as a PDF online – search for 'Allen Gomery Sunrise')

In pairs, take one section of Allen and Gomery's chapter and answer the specific question on that section. Feed back to the whole class.

Group 1: The Background of *Sunrise* and The Biographical Legend of Murnau, pp. 91–94

1. How does *Sunrise* stand apart from other American and German films of the time?
2. Why was Murnau highly regarded by filmmakers in Hollywood?
3. What did 'German cinema' come to stand for in America during the 1920s?

Group 2: The German Film in American Critical Discourse, pp. 94–96

1. Which German films first sparked the interest of American critics and why?
2. How did American critics respond to *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*?
3. How were German directors regarded by American critics?

Group 3: Murnau and the Fox Strategy, pp. 99–100

1. Why did Fox give Murnau complete freedom on *Sunrise*?
2. Why did Fox choose to hire Murnau? How did it fit into their business strategy?
3. What is a 'prestige picture'? How is *Sunrise* a 'prestige picture'?

Group 4: The Discourse on *Sunrise*, pp. 100–104

1. How did American critics respond to *Sunrise* when it was first released?
2. Why did American critics respond in this way?
3. Which elements of the film bear the hallmarks of a Hollywood production and which elements are more typical of German expressionism?

Debate: Realism and expressionism

Murnau combined expressionism and **Kammerspielfilm**. Kammerspielfilms were emotionally realistic and intimate dramas. The narratives were grounded in a reality and often focused on the psychology of lower middle-class characters. Expressionism and psychological realism in *Sunrise* complement rather than contradict each other.

Task: In small groups, answer the following questions:

- Give examples of expressionist devices in the film. How are they used?
- Give examples of psychological realism. What cinematic devices does Murnau use to give us the inner workings of the character?
- Give examples where the film combines expressionism and psychological realism.

We will look at the use of expressionism and psychological realism in more detail through analysis of the marsh sequence where The Woman tries to convince The Man to drown his wife.

Task: Sequence analysis 1 – the marsh sequence (11.08–16.55)

Watch the sequence twice and make notes based on the following questions.

- What realist techniques are used? What expressionist techniques are used? How does this sequence combine realist and expressionist techniques?
- How does the mise-en-scène reflect The Man’s psychological state?

Task: Sequence analysis 2 – The Man and The Wife take a trip to the city and The Man repents (34.19–46.50)

Watch the sequence twice and make notes based on the following questions.

- How does the film reconcile the binary oppositions of country and city in this sequence?
- What special effects are used and to what effect?

Summative assessment task: Essay question

These essays can be completed either in class as a timed essay (40 minutes) or as a homework task (1000 words maximum).

Answer one of the following essay questions:

How has studying the institutional and cultural contexts of *Sunrise* developed your understanding and appreciation of the film?

Or

How does Murnau combine realism and expressionism in *Sunrise* and to what effect? Refer to key sequences in your response.