

GCE A LEVEL



WJEC Eduqas GCE A LEVEL in FILM STUDIES

COMPONENT 2

Silent Cinema Teacher Resource

CASE STUDY: SUNRISE (MURNAU, 1927)



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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 students will have little awareness of German Cinema of the 1920s or the production contexts of *Sunrise*. This exercise will enable students to contextualise the film and guide their expectations before the screening.

In small groups, students will be given an aspect of the film’s context to research. They 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. Encourage students to express ideas in their own words. Avoid using Wikipedia and instead guide students to other dedicated and more reliable 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.

Possible responses

These questions should elicit the students' personal response to the film. Their responses can provide a springboard for further analysis of the core and specialist areas.

- Students may respond to some of the special effects used in the film such as the use of superimpositions in the opening montage (although at this stage we may not expect students to know the technical terms).
- They might refer to the sequence where the traffic stops for The Man and The Wife on their trip to the city as memorable for its use of special effects and emotional impact – this is one of the most famous sequences in the film.
- Some students might comment on the artistic use of intertitles, particularly when the word 'drown' appears to drip down the frame.
- Students may comment on their experience of watching a silent film with no spoken dialogue – they may find they have to focus more on the screen and can't 'look away' as easily.
- Some students will find the acting overly melodramatic and strange – this can lead to discussions about performance styles in the silent era and the need to emote visually.
- Students may begin to discuss aspects of representation, such as the binary oppositions between The Wife and The Woman and the city and the countryside.

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. Students may make notes, then feed their responses back to the whole class. Encourage students to add to their notes during whole class discussion. You may elaborate on their points and provide more context where 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?

Possible responses and teacher guidance

- Students may pick up on oppositions such as The Woman's dark clothing vs The Wife's blonde hair and lighter clothing. Question students further on the ideological implications of these representations.
- Consider what Murnau is suggesting about the impact of modernity and urbanisation on women. You might contextualise these representations by showing students images of 1920s flapper girls – urban, independent women who wore shorter haircuts and skirts. Consider The Woman as the vamp figure which was common in films at the time – the sexual, alluring woman.
- Consider how The Woman differs to The Wife. The Wife dresses in more traditional, rural clothing. She is presented as innocent and angelic. Ask students to consider how these representations reflect long-standing representations of women; the sexual woman who resists marriage and must be contained vs the homely, 'good' woman.
- 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.

Possible responses

- Students may discuss how the film's love triangle narrative is universal and timeless.
- The City is never named and doesn't appear to be a specific place. The story could take place anywhere.
- As the film is a German–American production, the universal names and themes means the film can play to audiences in different countries and easily understood.

Task 4: Aesthetics

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

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.

Students may write the paragraph on aesthetics under timed exam conditions as preparation for their exam.

Possible responses

- Students may use adjectives such as lyrical, slow, romantic, striking, artistic, fluid, dream-like, abstract, expressionist.
- Students are likely to choose a memorable sequence such as the trip to the city, the opening montage or the marsh sequence. Their analysis can be used as a starting point for a whole class sequence analysis.

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.

Possible responses

- Students may refer to the use of long tracking shots and mobile camera movement. They may discuss how this contributes to the overall fluid, lyrical aesthetic of the film.
- The use of the long dolly shot during the trip to the city reflects the transition from country to the city – it gives us the sense of the characters on a journey and reflects their personal journey as husband and wife.
- Students may discuss how rapid montage editing is used when The Woman tried to convince The Man to come to the city with her. The city is imagined as a place of excitement and wonder as implied with quick edits and dissolves.

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

Possible responses

- Students may refer to the sequence in the church where The Man repents and the couple renew their love for each other. They move from the shadow to the light, reflecting the renewal of their relationship and forgiveness.
- In the houses in the country, there is often a single light source such as a candle on a table. This reflects the rural life in contrast to the bright big city.

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?

Teacher guidance: Bailey explains how some of the film’s effects were achieved. Some key points to highlight are: “The opening montage section, ‘Vacation Time’, like all of the even more complex multiple exposure sequences throughout the film, was done in camera on a single strand of film, by masking part of the frame, then rewinding and exposing another section.

“There is a cut to an interior scene that introduces The Woman from the City. As she moves about the room where she is staying, we see the sloped floors built with a rake, much like a Broadway stage. This and the forced perspective of her room and the dining room where the older couple is eating soup at a tilted table with a somewhat diagonally hanging lamp, show dramatically the expressionist art direction that will pervade the interiors of the entire film.”

Encourage students to follow the links provided on the webpage to other useful websites on the film.

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?

Possible responses

- Students may discuss the binary oppositions between the country and the city. They may discuss the allure of the modern city vs the simple rural life. Encourage students to think about how the oppositions between city and country are resolved in the film, particularly when The Man and The Wife take a trip to the city. There is a dissolve from the city to the country as they couple walk forward together, reconciling the two.
- Students might refer to other oppositions such as day vs night and light vs dark. Consider the dark, muddy and foggy marshes vs the light in the city when The Man and The Wife leave the church.

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.

Possible responses

- Students may look at how the actors use their bodies in an exaggerated manner. They may apply their contextual study of German Expressionism to look at how actors were often part of the overall design, often creating abstract shapes with their bodies. In Sunrise, weights were placed in George O'Brien's shoes to make him appear distorted and frightening. This is most evident in the sequence where he walks towards his wife as though he may drown her.

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?

Possible responses

- Bells are heard at key moments in the film. We hear bells when The Man decides to spare his wife. Bells also sound when The Man and The Wife emerge from the church – here bells reflect the wedding vows and signal the renewal of their marriage.
- The orchestral score is highly emotive. The use of string instruments contributes to the lyrical feel of the film and emphasises the reconciliation between The Man and The Wife.
- Students should give personal responses based on their experience of watching a sequence without sound, then with sound. They might discuss how the sequence without sound feels slow and lacks emotion.

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')

You may print out copies in advance for students to read in their small groups. The PDF is also available in the files section of the WJEC/Eduqas Film Studies Facebook group.

In pairs, students take one section of Allen and Gomery's chapter and answer the specific question on that section. Students then feed back to the whole class. Students should make notes on each group's responses to ensure they cover all the key aspects of the film's production and social contexts.

The questions relate to the specific part of each chapter. All answers are in the chapter. You may need to guide students to the response if there are areas they have missed.

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.

These questions are designed to encourage students to think about the realist and expressionist debate using their own examples from the film. You can discuss these areas in more detail through the key sequence analysis.

Possible responses

- Students may refer to the opening sequence and The Man and The Wife walking through the city as the most overt examples of expressionism. The opening montage is a visually complex sequence using multiple exposures. Part of the frame is masked, as another sequence is superimposed over the top.
- The moment where The Man and The Wife are enraptured with each other in the restaurant combines realism and expressionism. We see a subjective reality as the background around them is replaced by what appears to be flying cupids above their head. When the waiter interrupts them for the bill, we return to their 'reality' as The Man struggles to find the money to pay the bill.
- Sunrise is an intimate drama, unlike expressionist films such as The Cabinet of Dr Caligari and Nosferatu which are horror films and Metropolis which is science fiction.
- Students may refer to cinematic devices such as the use of superimpositions to reflect the inner psychology of the characters. One example is where The Man and The Wife walk through the city and the countryside is superimposed over images of the city.

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?

Possible responses

- The musical track gives a sense of foreboding as low tones are used to build suspense and reflect the sinister nature of The Man at this point.
- The foggy, muddy marshes reflect the doomed and immoral nature of the relationship between The Man and The Woman.
- The use of low-key lighting is used in conjunction with the foreboding musical track and foggy marshes to create a threatening and sombre mood.
- The long, fluid camera follows The Man as he wades through the muddy marshes, suggesting he is going far from home and into a dark, nightmarish world.
- The Woman from the City is a binary opposition to The Wife. She wears all-black expensive clothing and has black bobbed hair. She is an archetypical 'vamp' figure, ready to lure The Man away from marriage and the country. The use of cross-cutting, from The Wife at home sobbing, in full light, to the dark and mysterious Woman from the City emphasises these oppositions. The Wife is indoors at home with their child, while The Woman meets The Man outdoors – she is not domesticated.
- The intertitle 'couldn't she get drowned' functions as more than just giving the audience The Woman's speech. The titles literally drown off the screen then dissolve into an image of a long shot of the man pushing The Wife off the boat. This image may be from the perspective of The Woman who imagines the scene.
- A superimposition is used as The Man and The Woman look into the distance with images of the city appearing. Here the film combines realism and expressionism, since the images function to reveal the characters' imagination, as they picture the city together. The city is represented as a place of fun and excitement, an opposition to the simple life on the farm.
- The city is presented in an abstract, expressionist manner with use of montage and dissolves. Images of musicians and dancers are expressionistic, as their movements form part of the overall abstract design within the frame.

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?

Possible responses

- The moment where the traffic stops as The Man embraces The Wife uses forced perspective. This is an expressionist device where objects in the foreground are large, making the background recede.
- The tracking shot of The Man and The Wife walking through the city traffic reflects the chaotic nature of the city. The city seems to engulf the characters, yet as the traffic stops, The Man and The Wife are in the centre of the frame as the focus is on the personal narrative of the love between them.
- The chaotic city has an emotional impact on The Wife. We are constantly reminded of The Woman as this is the place where The Man planned to move to with The Woman. The Woman embraces the hectic excitement of the city, whereas for The Wife, the city is confusing and chaotic. When The Man and The Wife rekindle their love, the city can be more easily navigated, as The Wife reconciles her initial overwhelming emotion.
- The superimposition of nature and the countryside over the city reflects The Man and The Wife's reconciliation of city and country. They are now no longer oppositions as The Man and The Wife can enjoy the pleasures of visiting the city now that they have renewed their love for one another. The countryside reflects the beauty and simplicity of their relationship.

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).

If time allows, you may give students the option to complete both essays, one as a timed essay in class and the other as a homework task. A timed essay in class will help prepare students for the forthcoming exams.

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.