Culture and Audience in the Silent Film Era:
Who Was *Sunrise* For?

Does a person watch a movie because they like it, or is what they like determined by what they watch? Can we tell from a movie who was watching, or only who the director thought would be? Is film, in its role as an aspect of the popular culture of its time, a democratic medium or an oligarchic one? The film industry certainly likes to think of itself in terms of the former, but such a viewpoint does not necessarily hold up to scrutiny.

In *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Miriam Hansen argues that the mythology of film's origins as a working-class medium may be just that, a myth. While the very early nickelodeons saw mass appeal with working-class patrons for their relatively low cost of view ship. As a result, the film industry and upper and middle-class society as a whole came to view such "cheap amusements" with disdain, seeing them as of no redeeming value and speaking of them in the same terms as prostitution. It was that stigma which attracted moral crusaders who thought that film needed to be policed in order to ensure that the medium worked "in the service of moral uplift, acculturation, and the containment of class conflict" (Hansen 63). Film producers and distributors meanwhile supported the move away from nickelodeons in an effort to force the audience into the more lucrative market of what we would now call feature-length productions (62).

The 1927 silent film *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* provides an interesting opportunity to discuss the topic for reasons that will soon become apparent. The film stars George O'Brien as a farmer who is cheating on his wife, played by Janet Gaynor, with a woman from the big city, played by Margret Livingston. The Woman, who is credited simply as The Woman From the City, is the primary antagonist of the film, as she is the one who sets the plot in motion by trying to convince her paramour to murder his wife. Out of the three, she is visibly distinct; whereas the Man and his Wife dress in the simple clothes of country laborers, the Woman is clearly upper or upper middle class, with something of the fem fatal about her a good twenty years before that archetype became popular. Also, unlike the other two, she is totally unsympathetic, being depicted as selfish, greedy and a bit haughty even when not actively planning someone else's murder.

With this in mind, it seems like the film is trying very hard to appeal to the working class. While the upper classes are not cast as always evil, the working-class characters are, with one important exception we will discuss in a moment, universally good. Instead of wealth making someone evil the film seems to suggest that transgressing social norms does, or perhaps that such transgressions are something only villainous characters do. It isn't enough for the Man and Woman to be having an affair, they also need to be willing to murder for it, and in the latter case disturbingly cheerful about the prospect. The idea of selling the farm and moving to the city also comes from the woman, making it so the audience only sees it in the context of a murder plot, thus implicitly linking social climbing to criminality. All the above fits in line with the "moral uplift" and "containment of class conflict" described by Hansen.

The result is a film trying very hard to appeal to the working class. It affirms, albeit indirectly, that they should be satisfied with their status and that only criminals and sexual deviants, which in that era were one and the same, desire to change it.

Works Cited

Hansen, Miriam. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, Massachusetts. 1991.

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans. Directed by F. W. Murnau, performances by George O'Brien, Janet Gaynor, and Margaret Livingston. 1927.