Expressive Experimentalism in Silent Cinema, 1926-1929

by

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Introduction

The ‘talking picture’ will be made practical, but it will never supersede the motion picture without sound. It will lack the subtlety and suggestion of vision – that vision which, deprived of voice to ears of flesh, intones undisturbed the symphonies of the soul.

James Quirk for Photoplay, May 1921

Long before I ever encountered James Quirk’s quotation, I sat in Scott Higgins’ introductory film class at Wesleyan University, mesmerized by the “symphony of the soul” that is Carl Theodore Dreyer’s *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* on the big screen. In my naiveté, I had assumed that the distance between the film’s silence and my reality of sound would preclude my total involvement in the film. So I was shocked by the ingenuity and emotional resonance in the visual storytelling of *Jeanne d’Arc*. I could not identify exactly how, but that silent film held me in its sway. And so, three years and many similar silent film-viewing experiences later, I set out to identify and define this phenomenon. My goal in writing this thesis is to explore in depth the formal and stylistic techniques that allow *Jeanne d’Arc* and other films from the last years of the silent era to forge such an extremely intimate relationship between the viewer and the silent moving image.

Though Quirk’s poetic prediction could not have been more off the mark with regard to what would become the overwhelming popularity of the “talking picture” only a decade later, the premium he places on the “soul” of the silent moving image could not be more right. That quality of silent film has indeed borne the test of time. One of the paradoxes of silent film is that though the silence is a means for withholding information on an aural level, that same lack of sound endows the
moving image with an unparalleled capacity to convey both exact and expansive meaning. Though the adage that “a picture is worth a thousand words” is tired and old, the idea that images are more powerful than words, spoken or written, is a continuously resonant one in the study of some of the last films of the silent era.

Because American and European silent film production came to an end within four years of the industrial shift towards sound film in 1927, that year is widely considered to have been the death knell for silent film. The cinema of sound has since the early 1930s been the universally normative method of filmmaking, causing silent film to be inherently defined by what it is not, by the absence of sound. The films made between 1927 and 1930 represent for many historians “the great Last Stand of the silent film,” a retrospective standpoint that credits the unprecedented creativity and artistic license in silent productions to a contemporary sense of fatalism. The last years of the silent cinema did see the art form develop and refine an unprecedented visual power of expression, one far beyond the means of written intertitles or early synchronized sound to convey the interactions of characters, their emotions and psychologies, and the film’s narrative. This artistic development reveals not so much an industrial laissez faire attitude towards silent film directors as the champions of a dying art, but rather the continuation of a building international trend that was cut short by the novelty and popularity of sound.

My focus is on films made in Germany, France, the United States, and England just before and during this transitional period, chosen for their mastery of

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1 There are some notable America exceptions to the discontinuation of silent film production, chief among them Charlie Chaplin’s defiantly silent City Lights (1931) and Modern Times (1936). Since then, silent film has been limited to parody a la James Brooks’ Silent Movie (1976) or avant garde experimentation such as Guy Maddin’s Brand Upon the Brain! (2006).
and experimental use of film form. I will analyze these films for experimentalism within and without the classical paradigm and trace that trend in experimental form and style that continued, however briefly, both independent of and as a response to the introduction of sound. What began as filmmaking forms and styles divided by the lines of national industries gave way to an integrative approach that achieved an unprecedented combination of narrative clarity and emotionally charged access to characters in the last years of silent cinema. In light of this integration, I will explore the cohesions and tensions created by the interactions of various forms of European experimentalism, both with each other and with the formal and stylistic norms of classical Hollywood. In certain cases, I will argue that these interactions became the means by which the last of the silent films negotiated the formal implications of synchronized sound in film. In order to proceed with my discussion of the experimentalist trends in films from so many different countries, I will first provide a paraphrased definition of Classical Hollywood Cinema, my own definition of experimentalism, and definitions of the French Impressionist, German Expressionist, and Soviet Montage movements.

*Classical Hollywood Cinema*\(^3\)

According to David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, the classical approach to filmmaking stabilized after 1917 into a restricted set of formal parameters, the “classical paradigm,” within which both studios and the movie-going

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\(^3\) This definition is indebted to the work of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. For a complete discussion of Classical Hollywood Cinema, see *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
public expected directors to remain.\textsuperscript{4} American film language – how images are used to tell a story and relate the narrative – was based primarily on editing, on the analysis of space, time and action through cutting. Other essential aspects of the classical paradigm included: continuity editing featuring matches on action, observance of the 180 degree rule, motion motivation, and crosscutting; uniformity of lighting in a three-point system; and frontality and the predominance of medium close-up shots of characters.\textsuperscript{5} Of utmost importance was the relative “invisibility” of these formal techniques; with the exception of some more overt use of form in the openings and closings of films, form was to be subordinate to the narrative. The audience’s attention was supposed to be focused on the story itself, rather than the means by which it unfolded in front of them.

Because the classical paradigm relied so heavily on continuity and contiguity editing to convey the narrative, silent films of the 1920s featured many shots and fairly rapid cutting, with an average of four to six seconds per shot.\textsuperscript{6} The paradox of the classical paradigm lies in its emphasis on the formal technique of cutting and simultaneous effort to keep editing “unobtrusive and unnoticed” by the audience.\textsuperscript{7} The rules set forth by the classical system were all geared towards the goal of continuity, lest the viewer be distracted from the story and characters by jarring graphic disparities between shots.

Given this strict adherence to formal and technical norms, how did filmmakers experiment within the classical paradigm? The commercial success of the

\textsuperscript{4} Bordwell et al. 231.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid 240.
\textsuperscript{6} David Bordwell, \textit{The Way Hollywood Tells It} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 121.
\textsuperscript{7} Bordwell et al. 235.
standardized classical system meant that Hollywood directors were allowed some room for innovation, but were rewarded for conformity to the established norms.\textsuperscript{8} Directors had to essentially earn their stripes and know how to work within the paradigm in order to break away from it. Though classical filmmaking was in no way totally formulaic, the dominance of Hollywood was established by standardization that allowed for the volume of production necessary to meet commercial demands.\textsuperscript{9} The success of the system depended upon a certain level of uniformity in production; according to Bordwell et al., “by this point [1924]…inventiveness is a regularized part of the system – guided, limited, controlled.”\textsuperscript{10} To be sure, the late teens and first half of the 1920s saw some experimental filmmaking in the United States, but it was the exception rather than the rule; Hollywood was so powerful and dominant that American production in this period was basically synonymous with classical filmmaking. As I will further discuss in the second chapter, classical Hollywood did allow for experimentation, but within certain formal, industrial, and commercial bounds.

\textit{Experimentalism}

The idea that a particular use of form or style is experimental requires that there be a convention from which to deviate. Definition along these lines is difficult because one runs the risk of oversimplification by polarizing the conventional and the experimental. Traditionally, many film historians have done just that, assigning

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid 233.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid 240.
Hollywood films to the former and European pictures to the latter. This view, however much it is based in fact, is too generalized and simplistic; I will attempt to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what experimentalism meant in terms of both European and American silent cinema.

Despite differences in production practices in Europe and Hollywood by the middle of the 1920s, many European industries produced films that followed the basic set of “classical” filmmaking norms that had taken shape in American film in the teens. The films for which European cinema of the 1920s is now remembered, though, are not the popular ones that formed the bulk of European production, but those that created new aesthetics and presented non-classical approaches to form and narrative – art films, as opposed to commercial productions. This is not to say that Hollywood only produced commercial fare or that the classical style was not artistic and innovative; there was clearly enough flexibility within the classical paradigm to produce the many auteurs for which the studio-era cinema is known. The difference between classical and experimental filmmaking is simply that of different approaches to film language and the viewing experience.

Early film historians write of the European art films as having introduced the possibility of cinema to present another reality or “unreality,” rather than trying to copy the world as the viewer knows it. To create a more formally oriented definition of experimentalism, I would broaden this idea to say that these films are

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11 For a detailed comparison of production practices in Hollywood, France, Germany and the USSR, see Thompson, “Early Alternatives to the Hollywood Mode of Production: Implications for Europe’s avant-gardes.”

12 Lewis Jacobs. The Rise of the American Film. 303. Jacobs belongs to that early school of film history that favored an opinion-based approach, rather than an analytically- or factually- oriented one. Because of this, he is a particularly good source for contemporary perceptions of silent film.
experimental because of the way in which they deliberately draw the viewers’ attention to form and style. Rather than strive to subordinate form to the narrative as classical filmmaking most often does, the experimental impulse either inverts that to favor form over narrative, or, more commonly, strikes a balance between the two. Experimental form serves the narrative as classical form does, but in a more overt and stylized manner. This overtness draws attention to the cinematic mechanism, emphasizing the construction of the framed images and their order as a selective interpretation of “reality.”

Many of the techniques that appear in European art films of this period were not necessarily novel; some, like the use of superimpositions and close ups, had been in use since early cinema. Others were indeed new to filmmaking, such as subjective distortion and extended use of the mobile camera. Whether established or new, these techniques are employed in experimental films in such volume or with such prominence that the manner of telling the story often becomes as important to the meaning as the story itself. Though not always exaggerated, experimental form and style often confound viewer expectations. There is a degree of formal and stylistic self-consciousness in experimentalism that is not typically characteristic of classical cinema; it is rarely so apparent as to distract from the narrative flow, but it is there nonetheless.

Integral to this definition of experimentalism and the films to which it applies is the fact that we are dealing with silent cinema. The film historian does well to remember that it is only retrospectively that we call film from this period “silent.”

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13 Camera movement has been a common technique since the 1910s, but in the European cinema of the 1920s, the “unchained” camera, which tracked and craned around the space of the film world, became far more prevalent.
Synchronized sound in film had been a possibility – or at least the subject of myriad experiments – since the beginning of cinema, but until the end of the 1920s, the idea had never successfully caught on. Before that, film was inherently silent film; there was no need to distinguish the presence or absence of synchronized sound because silence was essential to the medium.

Some filmmakers strove to eliminate completely the need for intertitles, and the more balanced experimentalist relationship between form and narrative lent itself to this goal.\textsuperscript{14} In order for the filmmaker to tell his or her story in a completely visual manner, he or she had to create an aesthetic and capture it on film in such a way that the edited images would communicate entirely on their own. There is in cinematic experimentalism a kind of quest for a pure and perfect expression of emotion through the process of filming, projecting, and viewing the moving image. The experimental filmmakers of the period were artists of the moving image, and their artistry lay in their ability to capture the framed image in what they believed were the best and most effectively expressive ways to do so. The language of film made it possible to relate the narrative using primarily these series of pictures, and experimentalism in a sense expanded on and played with the vocabulary and syntax of that language.

\textit{European Avant-Garde Movements}

The idea of European experimentalism is tied to not only to a comparison with the classical style, but also to its genesis in larger artistic movements. Because of the elusiveness of a clear definition of movements like French Impressionism and German Expressionism, it is difficult to say which films best represent a movement’s

\textsuperscript{14} Murnau in particular was one such filmmaker; I will further discuss this in Chapter One.
artistic principles. The early film historians identified films that they saw as exemplary of those principles and brought them to prominence as the great art films of the silent era. Therefore, as the canon was established, the movements were defined. Because of this mutually defining relationship between canon and movement, the major formal and stylistic characteristics of French Impressionism and German Expressionism can be established through some of those movements’ most prominent films.

French Impressionism

Bordwell and Thompson identify 1918-1929 as the era of the French Impressionist cinema. Because of the emergence of “European-style” filmmaking in the mid-1920s, a discussion of which comes later, I will focus on the years 1919-1924, which Abel specifies as the “First Avant-Garde”. The greater French Impressionist movement had its roots in late 19th century painting and music. French painters strove to realistically “capture the fleeting patterns of light and shadows as they struck the eye.” Though those artists had color palettes at their disposal, this emphasis on the relationship between the human eye and light, or absence of it, lends itself directly and logically to film because film itself is a medium of light and shadows. Rather than reproduce the effect of those elements on the eye with paint or other media, Impressionist filmmakers sought to capture living light and shadow on film, to later be given new life through the beam of a projector. French Impressionist

16 David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Film History: An Introduction, Second Edition. 82.
cinema’s debt to Impressionist painters was reflected also in the extensive use of natural location shooting and landscape.

The concept of photogénie, a term popularized early in the film movement by the director Louis Delluc, is the belief in the expressive power of this new cinematic life and the possibility of capturing an object or person’s essence through the visual isolation of the frame. Revealing the essence of the filmed object is related to the act of seeing, but is slightly divorced from the idea of capturing what is real. The existential tenor in the question of “what is real” – the basis of the nineteenth century Realist movement – emerged in French Impressionism’s emphasis on subjectivity, both direct and indirect: if one perceives something in a particular way, then that is one’s reality. Impressionist filmmakers sought to translate this perception of reality into subjective cinematic terms so that the viewer might understand the emotions and thoughts associated with the character’s experience of the world around him or her. In Menilmontant (Dimitri Kirsanoff, 1926), for example, the mental state of the potentially suicidal heroine is evoked through a superimposition of the river below her over a close-up of her face. This intense subjectivity draws the viewer into the characters’ mind, making the events and actions in the film the means for communicating both the narrative and an internal understanding of the story.

Bordwell and Thompson assert that “virtually any manipulation of the camera could be used subjectively.” Direct and indirect point of view shots – sometimes with visual distortion – and superimpositions were the most commonly employed means for achieving subjectivity through camerawork. The Smiling Madame Beudet

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17 Ibid 92.
18 Ibid 93.
(Germaine Dulac, 1923) focuses on the discontent of the title character; point of view shots of a clock’s pendulum and of her husband’s oddly distorted face reveal her listlessness and dislike of her husband. In a single shot, without sound or title, these techniques convey to the viewer concise and eloquent meaning.

The influence of musical Impressionism appeared in French filmmakers’ use of rhythmic editing to subjective ends. There are three kinds of movement in film: those of the objects within the frame, that of the camera, and the editing. The pace and patterns created by the relationship between these three forms of motion evoke mood and emotion in a manner very similar to that of the tempo and orchestration of a piece of music. So strong was this analogy that some contemporary French filmmakers and critics wrote about films, and especially editing, in terms of “orchestrating movement and life.”

**German Expressionism**

Though German Expressionism is generally placed between 1920 and 1927, there were really two quite distinct periods within the movement. Because of this, there is some debate over the definition of the movement, but not enough to warrant a division into two separate areas of study. Like French Impressionism, cinematic German Expressionism was born out of an artistic movement that had begun in 1908; turn of the century German painters and dramatists represented raw inner emotions through visual distortion and exaggeration and the aesthetic control of choreography. The film to which all film historians refer as the beginning of German Expressionist cinema, and the film that is most closely related to its predecessors in the other arts, is

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The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920). Caligari is famous for and influential because of its intense focus on the visual composition of each shot, its distorted, exaggerated, and geometric mise-en-scene, and the way in which the figures of the actors are visually incorporated into the surrounding aesthetics. Shot entirely on a set, the film made no attempt to mimic or represent the real world, creating a space that afforded the filmmakers complete stylistic freedom and control. Unlike French Impressionism’s distortion of the image through optical devices, German Expressionist distortion relied on design aesthetics. Film form and technique were less important; with so much invested in the aesthetics of the film, the job of the camera was to record what was in front of it. The editing is likewise unremarkable and uses established norms of continuity, such as shot/reverse-shot and crosscutting.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari is an extreme example of German Expressionism, a film that was stylistically different and strong enough to effectively spearhead a cinematic movement. Some other films were made in its vein, but in the middle of the decade, the movement shifted with the stabilization of the German economy and the immediate increase in filmmaking resources and technology. The geometric and painterly qualities of the early films gave way to a more subtle, but still exaggerated, style that incorporated American-influenced lighting and much higher production values. The expressive use of lighting to create specifically delineated areas of light and shadow supplanted the effects of light and darkness that the earlier films had achieved through painted sets.

Certain characteristics of the earlier films were retained, particularly the use of studio sets for control of the mise-en-scene, some distortion, and the treatment of
fantastical themes and characters. In the later phase of Expressionism, however, filmmakers in Germany placed more emphasis on camerawork, both by incorporating techniques from other European movements and by innovating in their own right, especially in the extensive use of the “unchained” or mobile camera. *Variety* (E.A. Dupont for Ufa, 1925) used dissolves, multiple exposures and virtuosic camera angles, and is famous for a scene featuring a camera attached to the top of a trapeze, looking down on and swinging over the crowd with the trapeze artist. The use of the mobile camera was expanded in *The Last Laugh* (F.W. Murnau, 1924), moving in and around the world of the film to create Impressionist-inspired subjectivity, most notably in the scene in which the spinning and jerking camera allow the viewer to experience the protagonist’s drunkenness. With its groundbreaking form and new interpretation of Expressionist aesthetics, Murnau’s work was essential to this second phase of the movement, presenting “an alternative to the intense Expressionism of his avant-garde contemporaries and the slick professionalism of the mainstream.”

*Soviet Montage*

Soviet Montage occupies a somewhat limited place in my discussion of European experimentalism. The influence of the movement is undeniable, and Soviet films of the period are still evoked in contemporary filmmaking and film history. But the Soviet approach to narrative is entirely different from that of any other contemporary movement; Soviet filmmakers used the visual power of the art form as a means for political influence and propaganda. To this end, the stories these films

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tell are abstracted and use images and the associations between them to evoke specific and highly intentional reactions in the viewer. The films of Impressionism and Expressionism seek to impact the viewer as well, but ultimately to do so as part of the narrative process. Though the above definition of experimentalism emphasizes a decrease in the supremacy of the narrative, the western European filmmakers never strayed too far from the idea that film is a storytelling medium. The self-consciousness associated with experimentalism reaches such a height in the Soviet films that form, specifically editing, has complete supremacy. In Impressionism and Expressionism, the spatial and temporal relationships between filmed objects and actions guide the editing process in the creation of a story narrative; in Soviet Montage, it is the editing process – the creation of montage – that dictates the significance and movement of what has been filmed in service of didactic narratives.

Soviet Russia was so separate from the rest of Europe and the United States and its cinema used to such different purposes than in other countries that Soviet Montage was particular to Russian film for many years. Though eventually Soviet Montage had huge implications for the film world, they did not sink in until some time later; *Mother* (V.I. Pudovkin, 1926), which is now considered one of the great films of Soviet Montage, received only moderate attention upon its importation to America in the mid 1930s.\(^2\) Unlike western European filmmakers, Russian talent was not imported to the United States; because I deal in large part with the direct influence of European experimentalism on American film, it is appropriate to focus

\(^2\) Jacobs, *The Emergence of Film Art: The evolution and development of the motion picture as an art, from 1900 to the present*, Second Edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979) 323.
initially on French and German silent cinema and only later to bring in the influence of Soviet Montage.

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The impetus for this project came from my first encounter with Anthony Asquith’s *A Cottage on Dartmoor* in the summer of 2007 and my awe at the direct emotional impact of that viewing experience. Recalling my similar experience with *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, I realized that both films and were released as the entire film world was making the transition into sound. This realization prompted the further pursuit of the possibility that the strong reaction and connection that both films elicited was linked not only to the close proximity of their release dates, but also to their coincidence with the shifts in the flexibility of form, style, and narrative at the end of the silent era.

As I began applying formal analysis to *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc, A Cottage on Dartmoor*, and other silent films from the same few years, what consistently stood out was the “power of visual expression,” as I called it, the ability of the films not only to tell a story, but also to evoke specific emotional responses from the viewer. Kristin Thompson, I found, has a more succinct term and pithy definition for this concept. Thompson defines “expressivity” as “those functions of cinematic devices that go beyond presenting basic narrative information and add some quality to the scene that would not be strictly necessary to our comprehension of it.”  

23 In terms of the films I was watching, the silent films from the end of the

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1920s, how was that expressivity achieved? The answer, I have found, lies in experimentalism.

My initial, more abstract, approach to these and other silent films of the late 1920s was guided by the idea that their experimentation with form and style was the silent picture’s version of the more general, industrial innovation of adding synchronized sound to the moving image. Research of the literature on late silent cinema revealed that this was a common approach; nearly all film scholars position late silent film in relation to the impending domination of sound cinema. Those who have written comprehensive works on the technological and stylistic history of film, like Barry Salt and the team of David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, treat these years as simply transitional, as the step between silence and sound, but without much attention to specific style and technique. Other film scholars, namely William K. Everson, Lewis Jacobs, and Kevin Brownlow, provide historical descriptions of and paeans to the last years of silent cinema that are useful primarily as examples for contemporary opinion. No one, it seems, has used formal analysis to explore and tease out the formal and stylistic trends that characterize and connect the films made between the introduction of sound and the true end of silent cinema.

Retrospective, nostalgic, and teleological views of film have blinded scholars to the fact that the momentum of formal and stylistic innovation in silent film continued apace, if only for two or three years, as the world of film was making the transition to synchronized sound. Though the time frame is a small one, it is important. In the context of film history, these films merit close formal analysis in recognition of their role as the precursors or generators of expressive techniques that
would only appear years later in sound film. But because of the restrictions presented by early sound technology, the experimental expressivity found in films made between 1926 and 1929 is by default a silent phenomenon. I hope to demonstrate that these films make an asset of their silence, that the particular emotional resonance, depth, and texture they create relies on the expressive power of the moving image in and of itself – that it is inherently an originally silent phenomenon.

In applying formal analysis to these films, I seek to understand how, exactly, the integration of silent filmmaking approaches functions in service of such emotional and psychological expressivity. How do the kinds of experimentalism particular to each of the European avant-garde movements impact the viewer differently when they are combined, both with each other and with the norms of the classical paradigm? What are the cinematic prerequisites for achieving expressivity through experimental techniques? Is this kind of experimental expressivity particular to silent film? Can these films ultimately bring us to a more complete understanding of what was lost with the introduction of sound?

The definition of expressivity applies directly to my definition of experimentalism: because of the overt and self-conscious quality of the precedence given to form over narrative, experimental techniques inherently “go beyond presenting narrative information” and add qualities that are “not strictly necessary to our comprehension” of the films’ narratives. The expressivity of these films derives from the particular ways in which they use the different experimental approaches and techniques of the European avant garde movements and combine them not only with each other, but also with the norms of the classical paradigm. No matter what the
combination, each of the films discussed in this thesis – *Faust, Sunrise, Beggars of Life, The Wind, Jeanne d’Arc*, and *A Cottage on Dartmoor* – use some degree of experimentalism to give emotional and psychological depth as well as texture to the viewer’s understanding of and connection to the motivations, reactions, choices, and experiences of the characters. Common to these films is also the fact that they are highly dramatic, and often subjectively so; the moments to which experimental expressivity is best suited are those of intense distress, sadness, devastation, or madness. The films can only convey the characters’ experience through formal and stylistic techniques that overtly exaggerate or differentiate from those already employed in service of the narrative or established aesthetic; the emotions are of such an extremely internal and personal nature that only the expressivity of techniques that move beyond the conveyance of narrative information can suffice. In my formal analyses, I seek to illuminate the progression and function of the experimental silent film techniques that make such expressivity possible.

Chapter One initially focuses on late German Expressionism as exemplified by the work of F.W. Murnau, specifically in *Faust* (1926), and then moves with him to Hollywood, where he made *Sunrise* (1927), a film that was produced within the Hollywood system but was formally and stylistically a direct continuation of Murnau’s particular approach to Expressionism. *Faust* serves as the definition of and foundation for the ways in which late Expressionist experimental technique interpreted the goal of portraying character psychology. Murnau uses fantastical imagery and contrasts of dark and light within the frame to visually orient each character in the battle between good and evil central to the story. The primarily static
frame allows for this expressivity through composition and enhances the moments in which the camera becomes “unchained” in order to convey Faust’s internal psychological state. As the earliest of the films in this thesis, Faust is the primary example of the formal and stylistic overtness inherent to experimentalism. It establishes the means by which experimentalism supports the viewer’s understanding of the narrative by augmenting the emotional and psychological effects and motivations within it.

Sunrise serves as the transitional step between the experimentalism of separate national film movements and the early integration of European and Hollywood filmmaking approaches. The film’s MovieTone score also introduces my exploration of the tension between silent and sound cinema that began in earnest in 1927; the synchronized score challenges the firm line between the two forms, but ultimately serves to augment the expressivity already present in the silent images. The stylization of mise-en-scene is slightly less overt than in Faust, and features a combination of subdued Expressionism and a naturalism that moves towards the verisimilitude of classical Hollywood and nuances the aesthetic reflection of character psychology and relationships. At the same time, Murnau makes far more overt formal choices, especially in the use of extended tracking shots and superimpositions, late Expressionist techniques that balance and contrast the employment of classical paradigm norms. Murnau uses both classical and experimental formal approaches, creating an inextricable integration that emphasizes the expressive capacity of both. Ultimately, the overt formal traits of European experimentalism were far more easily
integrated into the classical Hollywood paradigm than the stylistic ones, and found their way into the last of the American silent films.

Following this trend, Chapter Two is a discussion of two Hollywood films of 1928 that incorporate European experimental techniques: *Beggars of Life*, by the American director William Wellman, and *The Wind*, directed by Victor Sjöström, a European émigré working within the Hollywood system. The first, *Beggars of Life*, is for the most part a film made in accordance with the formal and stylistic norms of the classical paradigm. In the opening scene, however, Wellman incorporates a strikingly overt use of experimental double exposure that reveals the influence of German Expressionism à la Murnau. As a character silently describes a traumatic event that happened to her just before the point at which the film began, a sequence of inserts, point of view, and reaction shots portraying the event are superimposed over her close-framed face. The layers of emotional subjectivity achieved by this experimental use of form pay tribute to the goals of French Impressionism, bringing the viewer into the character’s perception of the event both as it occurred and after the fact. The sequence is brief and the film quickly resumes its conformity to the classical paradigm, but it provides a fruitful analysis of the functions of the experimental influence on a shot-by-shot level.

Experimental form appears throughout *The Wind*, and to a subjective end that is similar to, but far more extended than, the sequence in *Beggars of Life*. The expressivity of experimental form is employed in service of the viewer’s highly subjective involvement in the psychological deterioration of the central character into paranoid madness. Initially, the overt experimental form used to present the
character’s perception of the environment and people around her is limited to occasional and brief glimpses worked into the classical paradigm. As her delusion mounts, Sjöström maintains the viewer’s connection to her through French Impressionist and German Expressionist techniques. The prevalence of subjective superimpositions and overt, directly subjective camera movement, both of which serve as the expressive means for our subjective understanding of her madness, increases until the narrative is entirely subverted to experimental form. But the film is a commercial Hollywood product, and in the end, *The Wind* leaves us in the sane narrative clarity and unobtrusive form of the classical paradigm. *The Wind* was among the last of the American silent films. Industrial and technological delays in Europe and England, however, delayed the true end of silent cinema there, and experimental expressivity flourished in the last of the silent films.

Chapter Three examines experimentalism in *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (Carl Theodore Dreyer, 1928) and *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (Anthony Asquith, 1929), silent films produced by both the Film Europe collaboration and the small, independent studios of British cinema, with specific attention to the introduction of the Soviet Montage influence. *Jeanne d’Arc*, a film made in France by a Danish director with an international crew, is a unique example of the integration of the major European approaches, to the exclusion of the classical paradigm. Dreyer employs French Impressionist and German Expressionist techniques to create a highly subjective and stylized portrayal of the trial and execution of Joan of Arc, using a decidedly anti-classical narrative guided by the principles of Soviet Montage. The German Expressionist aesthetic creates a stark, harsh environment. The film
consistently returns to Joan’s indirect and direct subjectivity in order to compensate for the lack of spatial and temporal continuity of the Soviet Montage-inspired editing patterns. As the trial moves closer towards her imminent death, the film draws further from French Impressionism to convey Joan’s waning lucidity. The three experimental approaches work in a constantly shifting balance across the film, alternately giving way, taking precedence, or collaborating according to the expressive goals of a particular moment or event in the trial.

*A Cottage on Dartmoor* also makes use of techniques drawn from French Impressionism, German Expressionism, and Soviet Montage, but brings in the classical paradigm as well. In order to successfully and expressively use all four of these filmmaking approaches in a single film, Asquith establishes a context of narrative and formal flexibility by cutting up the temporal flow of the story. He abruptly places the viewer in the stylized and unexplained events of the present, displaces the events of the past into the classical paradigm of the middle of the film, and finally resumes in the present. The formal and stylistic overtmost of the opening scene sets the precedent for sequences of expressive Soviet Montage techniques to briefly and overtly emerge from the classical norms. Because the use of Montage is motivated by the viewer’s involvement in the psychological state of the central character, these sequences function also to French Impressionist-inspired subjective ends. This presentation of internal and psychological subjectivity in *A Cottage on Dartmoor* often moves out of the onscreen world; Asquith effectively pauses the classical narrative to allow these moments of expressive mental subjectivity to resonate with the viewer, making the experimentalism appear all the more overt.
In a direct acknowledgement of the growing presence of synchronized sound film, Asquith uses these overt departures from the established presentation of the world of the film to create sequences of images that visually replicate, through both form and content, the characters’ perceptions of sound. *A Cottage on Dartmoor* is the only one of the films in this thesis to so overtly and reflexively approach the idea of synchronized sound. Though the conveyance of actual sound through silent images is impossible, Asquith comes as close as he can to achieving that new aural element while remaining in silence, creating a direct visual access to the characters’ sensory and mental perception of their world that is unparalleled in its expressivity.

In the spirit of elucidating the functions of the techniques that make the expressivity of *A Cottage on Dartmoor* possible and tracing their crossing paths across the lines of national industries and film movements, I begin my exploration of expressive experimentalism in Europe in 1926. The late German Expressionist cinema of F.W. Murnau as manifested in *Faust* gives evidence for the expressivity achieved through the use of European experimental techniques in relative isolation. The year 1926, however, also coincides with the first signs of collaboration between and integration of European *avant garde* movements and Hollywood, and just predates the advent of commercially viable sound film. As one of the last films of German Expressionism, the release of *Faust* marks the start of both a major artistic shift in silent cinema and the first murmurs of the cinema of sound that would soon replace it.
Chapter One

European Experimentalism Comes to Town: German Expressionism, F.W. Murnau, and Classical Hollywood Cinema

The most noted and arguably most notable European films of the late silent era were those that have since earned the label of “art films.” Film has always tread the line between art and commercial product; because filmmaking quickly became such an expensive and potentially lucrative business, industrial circumstances inevitably played a role in the artistic development of the medium. The rates and trajectories of film industry development varied from country to country, resulting in markedly different approaches to filmmaking across Europe. The international exchange of films, therefore, was not simply a commercial exchange but also an artistic one. The rise of art, or experimentalist, filmmaking in Germany occurred as part of the larger Expressionist movement in that country, and came to define German art cinema of the late 1920s.

The trajectory of European cinematic experimentalism was a flexible and mobile trend that grew out of disparate movements, united to a certain extent, and was imported, especially with German filmmakers, directly into Hollywood. The dominant role played by Germany and the ultimate embracing of many aspects of German Expressionist style by Hollywood is exemplified in the work and career of F.W. Murnau. For this reason, the two films discussed in this chapter are Murnau’s *Faust* (1926) and *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927), the former a German production and the latter an essentially German film produced in and by Hollywood.
After Hollywood, the German film industry was the next biggest in the world, and exhibited similar organization and structure, but a slightly different approach to production. Ufa, the largest of the German firms, had considerable resources and was vertically integrated like the Hollywood studios. Ufa productions employed a division of labor, but to a less controlled extent. In the interest of producing art films, Erich Pommer, the head of the firm, gave almost complete artistic freedom to his directors; Murnau would have been involved to at least some extent in every stage of the filmmaking process. The use of “scenarios” rather than continuity scripts meant that in the shooting of a designated scene, the director had the freedom to improvise and decide how many and what kind of shots should be filmed. It was under these circumstances that Faust was produced. Though both The Last Laugh and Faust were popular with contemporary audiences in Germany and abroad, Faust has since then received less attention than the earlier film. As one of what are considered the last two films of the German Expressionist movement – the other being Metropolis (Fritz Lang, 1927), which effectively ruined Ufa – and the last film that Murnau made before moving to Hollywood, it is an important picture to examine.

On a general level, Faust establishes the expressivity of experimentalism in context of German Expressionist cinema and the overt use of form and style to psychologically revelatory ends. More specifically, it establishes the formal and stylistic tendencies of later German Expressionism as practiced by Murnau. In the film, Murnau maintains a considerable degree of the exaggerated stylization and

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emphasis on composition that characterizes early German Expressionist technique, but also employs a slightly more subdued stylistic approach and greater degree of naturalism.

*Faust* is a film of darkness and light, both in form and content. Goethe’s highly dramatic tale of one man’s pact with the Devil and the earthly struggle between heaven and hell is an ideal canvas for the aesthetic extremes of typically Expressionist style. In keeping with the Expressionist emphasis on aesthetic control, *Faust* is shot entirely in the studio. The film makes considerable use of huge set pieces, using miniatures to create the superhuman spectacle necessary for a story based on the contest between heaven and hell. In the human realm of the film, the sets feature some odd angles and distorted perspective, but are for the most part more naturalistic, even classical. Rather than use the sets themselves to create visual contrast, Murnau makes highly expressive – and Expressionist – use of costuming and lighting to create patterns and contrasts of darkness and light within the frame, allowing the characters to embody and move within the visual manifestation of the film’s moral contrast. Combined with the primarily static framing, this emphasis on composition and mise-en-scene creates a more objective, but still psychologically revelatory, experience for the viewer. The prevalence of the static frame also makes those moments in which Murnau “unchains” the camera to subjective ends all the more emphatic and expressive, drawing the viewer – if only briefly – directly into the fantastical unreality of the film’s world.

Though Murnau made *Faust* for Ufa, he was already under contract with Fox Film Company, having signed with them in 1925. Only after *Faust* was released did
he actually immigrate to Hollywood. Based on the success of *Faust* and the earlier popularity with American audiences of *The Last Laugh*, Fox gave Murnau *carte blanche* to use any and all of the resources offered by the Hollywood studio system to create a film like those he had produced in Germany. The result was *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*. Seeking to produce an artistic prestige picture in a Hollywood “briefly obsessed with foreign genius,” Fox poured money into *Sunrise*, giving it major production values.\(^{26}\) The combination of artistic freedom and the established Hollywood mode of production essentially created an ideal version of the circumstances under which he had worked at Ufa. Working on a virtually unlimited budget and with a crew comprised of both German and American talents, Murnau used *Sunrise* to develop and further explore the expressivity of his German Expressionist technique and simultaneously incorporate elements of classical Hollywood cinema to equally expressive ends. Both the circumstances under which *Sunrise* was produced and the film itself represent the first major industrial, formal, and stylistic cooperation of classical Hollywood and European experimentalism.

In *Sunrise*, as in *Faust*, Murnau again evokes a moral opposition through the contrasting elements of a self-contained film world. *Sunrise*, however, achieves those contrasts through a deliberately intertwined and balanced relationship between the experimentalist exaggerations of German Expressionism and the unobtrusive realism of Classical Hollywood Cinema. In order to exert the aesthetic and compositional control necessary to creating this balance, Murnau shot *Sunrise* on studio sets. True to the Expressionist approach, the studio setting allows for the construction of a

\(^{26}\) Baxter, 70.
completely cohesive, stylized, and contrived film world. The integration of a certain amount of classical naturalism, however, slightly tempers this contrivance. The result is a world that is at once expressively stylized and recognizable; *Sunrise* evokes specific visual and moral oppositions while simultaneously inspiring the viewer to relate to the film on a basic experiential level.

What naturalism there is derives from the construction of an ambiguously modern world and the story’s context of a “song of two humans.” In its presentation of that story to the viewer, however, the film exhibits consistent aesthetic overtartness, setting a precedent of stylistic and formal freedom that allows for the frequent moments of extremely overt experimentalism to have expressive, rather than digressive, effect. It is through this overtartness that *Sunrise* formally and stylistically evokes the moral and value-based contrast between city and country. The presentation of the dichotomy in *Sunrise* reflects Murnau’s interest in incorporating classical filmmaking techniques into his established German Expressionist approach. Though *Sunrise* exhibits experimental control and exaggeration of sets, lighting, camera movement, and composition that distinctly mark it as a late German Expressionist film, it also selectively pairs those Expressionist techniques with lighting, framing, and mise-en-scene borrowed from classical Hollywood cinema. The latter rarely appears as purely in the style of classical Hollywood, but reveals the influence of Hollywood on Murnau’s Expressionist technique: he infuses the overtartness and control that are essential to German Expressionism with the relative unobtrusiveness and verisimilitude of the classical Hollywood paradigm.

27 According to a contemporary report, Charles Rosher, the American cinematographer who shot both Mary Pickford’s films and *Sunrise*, recalled that Murnau would constantly ask, “How would they do this in Hollywood?” See Baxter, 69.
By adding a synchronized MovieTone score that includes selective moments of sound effects to match the action on the screen, Murnau exerts control over the viewer’s aural experience in a way that complicates the idea of visual experimental expressivity. The images never rely entirely on the soundtrack for meaning, but their expressivity is augmented by the synchronized music and sound effects. The addition of this controlled aural layer occasionally eliminates the film’s reliance on titles, somewhat paradoxically making the soundtrack the element that allows for the images to remain the film’s primary means of expression. Because of the consistency of its presence, the soundtrack functions in service of the premium that Sunrise places on the expressivity of the image.

Though there is only a year between Faust and Sunrise, that year marked the beginning of a major transition in the relationship between European and American filmmaking, a shift that has been obscured by the retrospective hype over the release of The Jazz Singer in 1927. Made just before Murnau immigrated to Hollywood, Faust effectively marked the end of the German Expressionist movement. In its stylistic and thematic contrasts of good and light against evil and darkness, Faust displays the psychological expressivity through overt style and composition on which the movement was founded. The formal overtness in Faust, especially that of the mobile camera, is particular to late German Expressionism. In Sunrise, Murnau transposes both of these techniques into a more naturalistic film world and subtler choice than the good/evil dichotomy of Faust, but a choice made clear by the unprecedented, mutually dependent, and expressive interactions of German Expressionist and classical form and style.
In *Faust*, the contest between light and dark is as much an essential aspect of the narrative as it is of the film’s stylistic and formal construction. The classic correlation between light and good and dark and evil is established in the biblical standoff of the opening sequence. Mephisto appears like a large, demonic vulture, his horned head in the top of the frame dwarfed by gigantic black wings that fade into the foreground and a darkness punctuated by flashing beams of light across the screen. Closer shots reveal a cowering devil with hideously arched bushy eyebrows on a dark-painted bald head, out of which glow the whites of his eyes. His huge and darkly hideous appearance cues our fear and revulsion of him. Through Mephisto’s visual presentation alone, we understand that he is unequivocally the personification of evil. From the roiling smoke and darkness grows a ball of light that eventually reveals a towering angel, his white armor and huge white wings brilliant under the strong key and back lighting. His glowing brilliance sets him in direct contrast to Mephisto; the way in which the ball of light cuts through the darkness and only later is revealed to hold a man signifies that he is goodness manifested in human form. Like Mephisto, he is a visualization of a powerful and otherwise abstract force. Though the angel represents goodness, the low angle extreme long shot, the brightness of the frame, and his large, jagged sword evokes the awe, rather than the alignment, of the viewer. Mephisto and the angel are both presented as equally imposing and opposing figures, and through this we understand that the contest is not of human proportions, though, as the titles reveal, it will be enacted on a human scale.
This initial opposition then translates to the presentation of Gretchen and a more human version of Mephisto, the two characters on opposing ends of the moral battle that plays out in Faust the man. The initially contrasting stylistic schemes used to present Gretchen and Mephisto create a visual moral distinction that is underscored by, rather than being dependent upon, the explanatory and dialogue titles. The frame is often a sort of patchwork of light and darkness, with shadows dominating the edges and background, punctuated by bright, isolated spots that either illuminate the action or give depth to the frame. True to Expressionist form, the high contrast of the studio lighting creates similar patterns of shadow and light on the characters’ faces in closer shots. This technique blends the characters into the aesthetics of their environment, using their physical facial features to remind the viewer that the characters are merely pawns in the contest between light and dark. Simultaneously, the close proximity of the shot scales allows for the exposition of their facial expressions, which connect the viewer emotionally and psychologically to the characters.

Our second view of Faust shows him in his laboratory, surrounded by smoke and shadows as he tries to turn “base metal into gold.” His alchemist’s orb is the only source of illumination, casting eerie light and dark shadows on his semi-crazed face while infusing his long white beard and mane of white hair with an almost holy glow. This shot works Faust into the previously established aesthetic dichotomy; the brightness of the orb and surrounding darkness evoke the initial contrast of Mephisto and the angel, and the combination of light and dark in the same frame reveal a man divided. Even without the preceding title, which informs the viewer that Faust is a “knave [who] preaches good and does evil,” the message of contrast and conflict is
clear. The shot augments the information provided in the title, emphasizing in clear visual terms the existence of – the potential for – light and dark, good and evil, in this man.

As with Faust, Gretchen’s innocence is established visually by her lighting scheme and costuming. She first appears in Faust’s hometown of the past, a brighter place and time to which Mephisto takes him. Strong key and back lighting, the latter especially in the shot of Gretchen in church, gives her a glow similar to that of Faust before his fall; even in the brightest and purest of environments, this girl stands out as the paragon of youthful virtue. The mise-en-scene likewise highlights her purity, but through different means: the studio set in the shot of Gretchen running up the street to her house surrounds her small figure with the imposing and somewhat dark rooftops of neighboring houses. Layers of near-vertical angles and off-kilter stairs loom over and around her, evoking a crazed world and the imminent threat to innocence. Later, when her innocence is gone, she becomes a part of her environment; flat lighting and manufactured wind blend her into the driving snow as she freezes almost to death with hers’ and Faust’s illegitimate child.

Murnau took full advantage of his practically unlimited budget to create huge miniature set pieces. One of the emblematic images of the film is an extreme long shot of Mephisto towering over a miniature of Faust’s village, lost in the dark void of his gigantic black wings, which fill the background and curve menacingly over the brightly lit rooftops and steeple of the foregrounded village below. Shots such as this fully exploit the prevailing Expressionist tendency to create through film an entirely imaginary and fantastical world. Formally, this shot also exemplifies the technique of
incorporating the human figure into its surroundings and making it a visually expressive component of the set. Mephisto’s winged figure dominates the frame to such an extent that it serves as both costume and set piece. The gigantic size of the wings in proportion to his head and the tiny scale of the humans’ village below creates the perspective necessary to make him more a visual and figurative force than the actual character he later becomes in the more narratively-driven sequences.

As in the earliest Expressionist films, the overt theatricality and contrivance of Faust are the means by which the filmmakers control the specific meaning of the film and evoke the intended reaction in the viewer. The shot of Mephisto looming over the town is almost like a theater tableau, a triumph of staged set pieces. Murnau crosscuts to a street fair scene in which the townspeople discover the arrival of the plague and the pandemonium and destruction that ensues. This crosscutting is important to the human aspect of the narrative because it relates the imminent threat represented by Mephisto’s figure to the actual people in the streets of the village below him, previewing the mortal setting in which the battle between good and evil will play out in Faust. But the shot with which we are left reminds us of the omniscient evil embodied – literally – in Mephisto. Eventually, an almost entirely black shot dimly reveals the smoldering miniature village and a spotlight illuminates Mephisto’s face, isolated in the darkness above like a glowering, evil moon.

Shots such as this use conventionally Expressionist dramatic mise-en-scene and staging to convey the menacing scope of Mephisto’s power. Because of the emphasis on the expressive use of sets and lighting, much of Faust is shot using static framing in service of pictorialism; in this context, nearly every shot becomes a
composition unto itself. Despite the powerful visual expressivity of these images, their static nature requires considerable cutting between varying shot scales and angles – general, unobtrusive analytical and continuity editing that balances the removed effect of the pictorialism with detail and intimacy that furthers the progress of the story. Editing is what separates film from other art forms, so it is that which differentiates German Expressionist film from other manifestations of the artistic movement. A single deliberately composed shot may convey great meaning in and of itself, but its significance to the film as a whole requires that the shot be put in spatial, temporal, and narrative relation to other views of the filmed world. Something must move, and if the camera frames a static shot, then the shots themselves must create the movement.

Murnau reserves his signature use of the unchained camera to show the true extent of Mephisto’s capabilities and for the scenes of highest drama; not until he takes the newly youthful Faust on a magic carpet ride over an extensive and elaborate miniature landscape does the camera move with the characters for the first time. The view is often a directly subjective one, and the sequence is visually stunning: the camera tracks forward, twisting and turning as we narrowly miss a collision with the church steeple and wind our way through a fairytale landscape of mist and trees and craggy mountaintops, past an ancient ruined city and silhouetted flock of cranes, and finally come to rest in a palace. This journey is first and foremost an incredible novelty of silent cinema; such a set and filming technique require no sound to bolster their fantastic effect. But the subjectivity also provides an understanding of the fatal combination of privilege and powerlessness that Faust experiences in Mephisto’s
hands. Through Faust, the viewer, like him, enjoys exclusive access to the wonders made possible by Mephisto’s supernatural powers. Also with Faust, however, we are carried away in the inexorable momentum of the flight, unable to stop or disembark from the cape as it rushes high over the landscape.

When Gretchen is arrested and calls for the absent Faust to save her, a parallel flying shot is utilized to more intense mentally and aurally subjective ends. From a dialogue title that reads “Faust! Faust!,” a double exposure combines a static close-up of her screaming face in the top half of the frame and in the bottom, a rapid track backwards over the same miniature landscape. On its own, the close-up of Gretchen’s face, which simply screams, rather than silently mouths the word “Faust,” would visually evoke the sound of her scream. It is a time-honored silent film technique; a character screams, and though we cannot hear the sound to match the image, the wordless vocalization and facial expression are immediately recognizable and cue the viewer to imagine the appropriate sound. The camera movement in split screen occurs in the landscape shot in the lower half of the frame, but the effect is that her face appears to travel across the ground covered by the tracking of the camera. Because the shot of her face is the visual equivalent of her vocalized scream, we understand that it is in fact the sound of her voice that is traveling over the miles. The first flying shot established the potential to move over the landscape in this way, and here that fantastical possibility allows us to believe that by the same kind of power, Gretchen’s voice might also be capable of such movement.

The next cut is like a match on action, but using inverse treatment of the shots: Faust sits in a static landscape shot as another double exposure of Gretchen’s face
zooms from a close up to an extreme close up until her mouth collides with his figure and he leaps up as though he has heard her. The title is entirely unnecessary; combined with Faust’s sudden reaction, the precedent set by the previous split screen shot clarifies that her voice – as represented by the shot of her screaming face – has reached his ears. The film’s silence makes a necessity of showing the desperate expression on Gretchen’s face in the process of evoking visually the sensory experience of her scream. Because of this facial expressivity, the rushing impact of the double exposure carries extreme emotional depth and meaning, and the silence maintains the meticulously constructed fantasy world of the film. These two virtuosic shots in Faust reveal the full expressive, artistic, and subjective capacity of Murnau’s German Expressionism just before his move to Hollywood and the making of Sunrise.

Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans

The “two humans” to whom the title refers are the central characters of the story, The Man and his Wife. They have lived happily with their baby on a farm until the Woman of the City arrives to the country village on vacation and seduces him. Caught up in the exciting life she offers, he agrees to drown his wife and move with the woman to the city. He tries to murder her but cannot go through with it; despite his terrible intention, his wife forgives him and they renew their vows and love. When she is lost in a storm and presumed dead, but then found miraculously alive, he realizes the value of what he has and the sun rises on a world in which the Man and his Wife are together and all is as it should be.
Like Faust before it, Sunrise deals in the formal and stylistic presentation of a man torn between two conflicting forces: that of the exhilarating but unfulfilling city life and that of the simple but good life of the country village. The essential contest in Sunrise, though, is not as simple as the dark/light and good/bad opposition of Faust, and the form and style of the later film reflect the subtler and more complicated nature of the Man’s choice.

In order that the classical paradigm and German Expressionism are not each linked to one side of the conflicting values of the city and country, which might imply that one approach is better than the other, the style of one and the form of the other are assigned to the visual presentation of the two space. The distinct aesthetics assigned to city and country applies not only the spaces themselves, but also to the narrative elements and characters associated with the two worlds. By means of this integration, each filmmaking approach supports and augments the expressive capacity of the other, working in tandem to evoke the central oppositions of Sunrise. The stark boldness of Expressionist aesthetics and unobtrusiveness of the classical paradigm – frontality, continuity, the static frame – evokes the pure and good simplicity of the country village. The city is presented using the inverse combination: the style is marked by varyingly exaggerated degrees of classical verisimilitude, while the overtness of experimental late Expressionist form – the “unchained” camera, superimpositions – matches the showy modernity of the fast and loose city lifestyle.

In Sunrise, the Woman of the City and the Wife function both as characters and as the personifications of the city and country as two different places, lifestyles, and sets of values. As such, their visual presentations are controlled by the formal
and stylistic differences that visually demarcate the city and village and the choices the Man must make. Because the aesthetics of the village are the same as those of the Wife, the Woman is set in visual opposition to the entire setting; she alone is incongruous with the village aesthetic, so her glamorous and manic presentation and morally dubious actions make her the representative of all that the city stands for. In the opposite manner, the way in which the Wife is entirely absorbed into plain aesthetic and the primitive but good and natural domesticity of the village makes her the embodiment of the opposing space and morality. The value judgment derives from the expressivity made possible by the opposing recombinations of classical and Expressionist style; the classical style and Expressionist form most often used for the Woman stands against the opposite combination that characterizes the Wife, and the combinations specific to each come to visually indicate their opposing values. The early scene that introduces the women of *Sunrise* and the Man’s relationship to them is a fluid amalgamation of classically-influenced and Expressionist technique; as we meet the characters, the aesthetics and formal approaches that the film associates with each draw a clear visual opposition and a more subtle moral one.

We first see the Woman of the City in the seventh shot of the film, an interior shot of her rented room in a house in the village.\(^{28}\) The shot is deep-staged, with a picture frame and candle brighter in the foreground and a background that is somewhat obscured by shadows. This division of the frame by way of darkness and light is to some extent Expressionist, but the lighting is more diffused along the lines of classical three-point lighting, creating a soft and more even glow. The Woman

\(^{28}\) See Appendix A.
prances around between fore- and background, lighting her cigarette, brushing her hair, and flinging clothes, her movements are naturalistic, but almost overly energetic. The speed of her actions undermines the naturalism and gives her a manic quality, which augments the inaccessibility to her character established by the long shot framing; she never stops long enough or close enough for the viewer to establish any kind of emotional connection to her. The cluttered state of the room, the soft lighting, her movement, and the ornate lace detailing of her slip establish within a single framing the simultaneous degree of realism and visual business that pervades the film’s depiction of the fast, loose impersonality associated with the city.

The Woman of the City is visually integrated into the style of her own room, but the cut to Shot 8 reveals how out of place she actually is in the country village setting. The edit suddenly transports us into the distorted and exaggerated aesthetic of early German Expressionism; the kitchen of the same house appears as an entirely different reality of bizarre perspective and proportions that is almost primal in its rustic quality. Giant bowls cling to a slanting butcher-block table, which dwarfs the elderly man and woman who sit slowly eating soup in rough, homespun clothes. The only light in the otherwise dim frame comes from a bulbous lantern hanging over the table in the foreground and a small open fire in the background. Though the setting is far more stylized than that in the previous shot, the foregrounding of the couple and their calm, naturalistic movements make them more accessible to the viewer than the Woman, with her naturalistic mise-en-scene but stylized movements, has yet been. In just these two shots, the overtly deliberate recombination of Expressionist and
classical form and style establishes the visual and physical terms of the film’s moral dichotomy.

When the Woman of the City steps into the back of the frame in Shot 8, she brings with her the aesthetics of the preceding bedroom shot. The slinky lines and sheen of her black satin dress, bare legs, and patent leather pumps introduces what would be naturalism, but in the context of the plain and stylized country kitchen, becomes exaggerated realism. In the background, she slouches lazily in the contemporary style of the flapper, but shows the same energy of movement from before as she gestures to the old woman that she wants her shoes polished. The old man faces forward in the foreground, and the expression on his face is at once disgusted and disinterested; neither representative of the opposed worlds has patience for the other. The stylization and settings of Shots 7 and 8 visually evoke a thematic juxtaposition of the loose morals and fast pace of modern city life and the slower domestic traditionalism of the country village. Through the aesthetic contrast and human expression, this single shot expressively embodies for the viewer the irresolvable conflict between the two worlds.

When the Woman of the City steps outside into the street in Shot 11, the road that stretches forward towards the foreground invites the same movement within the frame as the first shot in her bedroom. When she reaches the edge of the frame, however, the established pattern of edits between the static framings of the interior shots is replaced by a tracking shot as the camera mobilizes and follows her down the street. In this way, the overt and self-conscious quality of the woman’s energetic figure movement from the first shot is transposed into the overtness of experimental
camera movement as she moves into the outside environment of the village. The “unchained” camera in this shot recalls the virtuosic crane shot used to frame the arrival of city vacationers to the idyllic village in the opening scene, the meeting of city and country. This formal technique creates the viewing novelty of being led to often unknown or surprising locations. Later, in the city itself, tracking and crane shots abound to this same novel and overt effect, allowing us, like the Woman of the City, to absorb a general impression of the space around us but not pausing long enough for personal nuance or detail. Unlike the direct subjectivity evoked by the unchained camera in *The Last Laugh* and *Faust*, however, this tracking behind the character gives the camera its own particular space within the world of the film, increasing the self-consciousness inherent in this use of the mobile camera. Even as the camera movement brings the viewer into the film, the sudden and overt quality of the technique in this shot makes the viewer aware of the camera’s presence. This awareness creates a critical distance between the viewer and all that is associated with the city life, preventing alignment with that world and allowing us to pass judgment on it as we do on the Woman.

The introduction of the Wife as representative of the village life in Shot 16 is nearly a point-for-point stylistic contrast of these first images of the Woman of the City. The shot in which she first appears is also a deep-staged interior shot, which allows for the same exposition of appearance and figure movement as in Shot 7. The shot is of the dinner table in the Man’s and Wife’s house, and though it lacks the distorted proportions and angles of the old couples’ kitchen, it is equally sparse and clearly part of the same country aesthetic and life. The lighting in Shots 8 and 12 is
paralleled: the bright light of the lamp sitting on the table illuminates the foreground of the frame, but the surrounding space of the room is mostly obscured in shadow. The setting is also not as rough and primitive-looking as the old couple’s house, but the straight, practical lines of the bare table, walls and doorframe evoke a similar simplicity and create the hard contrasts of the Expressionist aesthetic. The Wife enters in the back of the frame and walks forwards towards the table carrying large plates and cutlery. Her dress and apron have the same homespun quality as the clothes of the elderly couple, and the bulky fabric modestly hides her figure. Her movements are plain as she sets the table with straightforward domestic care, arranging the dishes and spoons symmetrically so that they fit into the plain, straight-lined style of the entire room. The deliberate orderliness of the Wife’s actions is in direct opposition to the way the Woman of the City flings her clothes and musses her hair in Shot 7, obliviousy making her environment more chaotic; once again, the calm, straightforward village stands in contrast to the crazed business of the city.

In the meantime, the Woman of the City is whistling outside to call the Man to the window, away from the Expressionist portrait of domestic simplicity inside. His two options are visually clarified when we cut briefly to the soft-focus, frontal medium close-up of the Woman of the City that makes Shot 13 the exemplar of classical style. The use of classical static, frontal, close framing in this shot is inconsistent with the more removed or self-conscious formal approach generally associated with the city, but its consistency with the static, frontal framing inside the house allows for a direct comparison of the made-up and accessorized Woman in soft-focus and Wife’s plain, pale face and pale blonde hair flattened further by high-
key lighting. In entirely visual terms, the film establishes the aesthetics of the Man’s moral choice: one woman is darkly glamorous and modern, unconcerned with domestic cares, and the other is simple and traditional, entirely involved in her wifely obligations. Shot 14 cuts back inside, framing the Man within the stark contrasts and lines of the house; from within this aesthetic, he chooses the Woman’s flapper’s allure and sneaks out of the house while his dutiful and caring Wife is busy preparing supper in the other room.

In a framing that is identical to Shot 12, the Wife enters the room and approaches the table in the same straightforward, industrious manner as before. When she realizes that the Man has left, her entire body droops and her movements suddenly slow as she puts down the bowl she is carrying and sinks into the Man’s empty chair in utter despondence. He is gone to tryst with the Woman of the City, leaving his Wife to sit in solitude; her lack of movement makes for fewer shadows and less contrast around her figure, further blending her into the aesthetics of the good, simple domesticity she represents. When she gets up, her slow, dejected movements continue to match the plainness of her environment. She goes to the bedroom where the baby is sleeping and rushes to the bed to hug the child and cry, and this action is cut up into three shots, all of which feature frontality, the static frame, and matches on action. The continuity editing and framing cuts up her actions into three direct, sequential movements that evoke the orderliness of her village world and emphasize the film’s use of classical paradigm norms for the portrayal of the Wife, especially in contrast to the fluid unpredictability of the tracking behind the Woman of the City in Shot 11. True to the classical paradigm, this use of “invisible”
form gives precedence to the narrative, allowing the Wife’s clear despair and the pitiful and entirely human interaction of mother and baby to evoke pathos for the Wife that further aligns the viewer with the simple country life they live.

The conflicted position of the Man is revealed by the way in which the film integrates him into the form and style that characterize the presentations of both women. Inside the house, he is formally and stylistically a part of the domestic scene. As with the Wife, the flat, high-key lighting illuminates the rustic quality of his clothing, and match on action cuts between frontal long and medium framing of Shots 14-19 unobtrusively move him through space as he goes to the window and gets his coat before sneaking out.

Once he is out of the house, however, the external shots are all soft-focus and backlit as in Shot 13, and the camera tracks behind him as he walks through the fields to meet the Woman of the City in exactly the manner of her stroll down the street. The self-conscious quality already apparent in this camera movement is heightened to a further extent when the camera turns of its own accord from following the Man to tracking alongside him and then slightly ahead, anticipating his trajectory. This switch from following to preceding formally underscores the inappropriate nature of his choice to meet the Woman of the City: the overt use of Expressionist form is itself not exactly appropriate to a man from the village. There is a pause as he climbs the fence, as if the camera – and by extension, the viewer – is waiting for him, and then he proceeds diagonally towards the camera; just as his jacket fills the frame, the camera turns and proceeds forward through willow branches and stops to frame the Woman from the City. His movement and the camera’s are such that this turning and
pushing through the branches seems to be a sort of mimetic use of the camera, but then he appears in frame left and kisses her. The expressivity of this independent camera movement simultaneously implicates the viewer and creates an overt sense of remove; the viewer is at once guilty as a witness to this illicit meeting and invited to judge the Man’s choice of the Woman of the City over his Wife.

Though we never see the Woman of the City actually in the city she represents, the superimposition of and dissolve to the highly stylized cityscape directly associates her with an introductory portrait of the city as a crazed and impersonal space. The extreme incongruity of the form and style that surrounds her physical presence in the country precipitates an imagined and hyperbolic representation of the dizzying pace and glitter and imposing spectacle of city life that is even more exaggerated than the one that appears when the Man and Wife actually go there later in the film. The extreme stylization of the buildings and cars and lights in the imagined sequence are congruent with the opposite extreme of the ascetic style of the country village, creating an even greater formal opposition of the two worlds than is actually the case. The formal presentation of the imagined city is congruent, however, with that already associated with the Woman of the City: the same roving, mobile camera moves the viewer into and through the stylized and unreal cityscape, never pausing long enough to register any human quality about the place. What human aspect there is, comes Woman of the City, and even she is never presented in a way that the viewer can relate to her on a human emotional or psychological level. The slow dissolve out of the city sequence allows for a double exposure that both surrounds the Woman of the City in the aesthetics of her appropriate environment and
reveals the incongruity of her presence in the country as she dances wildly over the Man in the field. She dances with the same maniacal energy as the city band superimposed over her, exaggerating her movements in Shot 7; in this way, the film visually connects her directly to the qualities of the city itself.

The interplay of the classical influence and German Expressionist influence present in these two early scenes continues throughout *Sunrise*. The Man and Wife’s day trip to the city reveals it as less unreal and stylized, but still as frantic and imposingly modern as the space presented in the imagined superimposition of the tryst scene. Because the unchained camera is so entrenched as belonging to the city life, the film employs it to frame the Man and Wife while they are in the space of the city; like the classical framing of the Woman of the City in Shot 13, this allows for consistency of the formal approaches attached to the city and country, while the styles specific to each space move with the characters. The Man and Wife may be framed in a manner characteristic of the world of the city, but the stylization of their aesthetic presentation reminds the viewer always that they really belong to the pure rusticity of the country. After the couple reconcile and renew their vows of love, the camera tracks behind and alongside them as they move through the busy, impersonal environment of the city like a small, isolated unit of country village simplicity and joy. They stay close to each other, united by their physical proximity and the homespun quality of their clothes and in clear stylistic contrast – and associated moral contrast – with the streets full of anonymous bodies dressed in modern clothing, too busy moving from place to place to form with each other the kind of basic human connection represented by the Man and Wife.
When the Man and Wife leave the city and return home, the film resumes the classical form and Expressionist style associated with the life of the country village, absorbing the reunited couple into their natural environment. The use of the moving camera disappears, and the film resumes the static framing and “invisibile” classical Hollywood continuity editing of the prior village scenes. The use of high-key and source lighting returns, and with it, the high contrast and spaces of shadow and light that enhance the straight-lined rusticity of the country. The identical and uniform treatment of the Man, the Wife, and their surroundings eliminates the contrasts of before, indicating that all is as it should be. Only at the end of the film, after the Wife has been rescued from the storm, does the soft-focus of Shot 13 reappear in a medium close-up of the happily reunited couple. But now, in contrast to before, the Man and Wife are at ease together within their appropriate world, indicating with this expressive inversion of the styles associated with the city and country that the immoral allure of the Woman of the City has been replaced by the Man’s desire only to lead the good, simple life with his Wife.

In *Sunrise*, Murnau visually marks the worlds of the city and country and the narrative elements and characters associated with them, and sets their aesthetics and values in opposition. The places and the people in them are based in the viewer’s reality, but the overt and contrasting stylization of each space establishes and nuances a set of visual contrasts that become associated with the opposing values of the film’s central moral conflict. The assignment to the city and country of opposing stylistic and formal influences creates a greater exaggerated version of “reality” in which both worlds exist. The contrasts within this equally but alternately hyperbolic treatment of
style, form or both, create for the viewer a visually clarified opposition of values, drawing forth the impersonal glittering business of city life and the almost primitive simplicity of the country village life. The combinations of classical Hollywood-inspired style and late Expressionist form of the city and the early Expressionist stylization and classical paradigm of the country work in intertwined and tense opposition, one alternately giving way to the other in service of the moments of greatest expressivity.

The idea of *Sunrise* being “a song of two humans” (my emphasis) alludes to the French Impressionist idea of film as a “visual orchestration,” but relates more significantly to the important role played by the film’s synchronized MovieTone soundtrack. The fact that *Sunrise* presents its images in conjunction with a separately recorded and specifically synchronized musical score and occasional sound effects raises the issue of whether expressivity in silent film is – or should be – entirely restricted to the image.

Though the synchronized soundtrack is made possible by one of the early attempts at commercially viable sound film technology, *Sunrise* is unequivocally a silent film. What sets the film apart from early sound pictures is the fact that there is no synchronized dialogue; when *Sunrise* was released, the difference between silent and sound film was in fact the difference between silent film and “talkies.” The score for *Sunrise* acts for the most part much in the same way as the accompaniment for any silent film. Scores written specifically for a picture, with cues for sound effects to match action onscreen, had been used since the early nickelodeon days of silent

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29 Thompson, “Early Alternatives to the Hollywood Mode of Production,” 353.
film. The uniform track for *Sunrise*, however, plays the same synchronized sounds and score with every showing. Within the music are embedded timed sound effects: shots of trains are accompanied by whistles and the classic chugging of the engine; honking horns, trolley bells and human shouts give aural texture to city scenes; a staccato snorting kind of sound nearly matches the appearance of a horse that startles the Man in his barn. Certainly, a live accompaniment could potentially provide as precise a score, complete with sound effects, but the Movietone soundtrack gives *Sunrise* a consistency of the viewing experience that other silent films without prerecorded soundtracks do not have. More so than in other scored silent films, the music and effects on the original soundtrack match action and emotion in *Sunrise* frame by frame, in exactly the sound-image combinations that Murnau intended.

These exact visual-aural combinations created by the synchronization make the score an integral part of the visual film world that Murnau has so meticulously created. The expressivity of *Sunrise* derives primarily from the film’s particular blend of classical and Expressionist technique, but is facilitated in part by the addition of the synchronized music and sound effects. Because the soundtrack is present throughout, it brings to the film an aural consistency that helps to balance and unite the otherwise contrasting formal approaches. Though sound, like titles, is a different form of expression than the filmed image, the use of a prerecorded soundtrack in *Sunrise* allows the film to remain within its visual world. Murnau does his best to visually integrate the relatively few titles in *Sunrise*, stylizing them to match the aesthetics of the filmed world. He uses rough brushstrokes for the font and makes the words fade in, melt, and change in size to reflect visually the meaning of the ideas.
they represent. Still, it is impossible to escape the fact that the cut to an intertitle moves the viewer out of the action and away from the visual expressivity of the film’s deliberately constructed blends of Expressionist and classical form and style.

The most significant manifestation of Murnau’s reticence to disrupt the visual expressivity of the film appears at the end of Sunrise, when the Man searches desperately for his Wife after they are separated in the storm. Rather than cut to the neutral space of an intertitle from the image of the Man as he calls desperately into the night, Murnau, that great advocate of the titleless silent film, uses his MovieTone soundtrack to replace the Man’s desperate cry with the note of a French horn. In an extreme long shot, the Man climbs out of the water and crouches on the craggy, shadowed rocks, calling the Wife’s name four times. Each time, his voice is matched by the sound of the French horn – two notes, in a high-low sequence. As the search continues, these two notes accompany three closer frontal shots of the Man calling into the darkness that surrounds him, emphasizing the deliberate connection of the mournful note of the horn to the desperation of his search. The sound of the French horn in these shots is able to serve as an integrated substitute for the human voice because the consistency and synchronization of the soundtrack throughout Sunrise has already made that sound integral the world of the film. By maintaining the consistency of the use of the score, therefore, Murnau maintains the integrity of the entire world of the film. In the context of expressivity derived through visual experimentalism, however, this use of the score to emphasize the emotion evoked by an image is a complex matter.
Though the synchronized sound is slightly problematic for the emotion it lends to the otherwise silent image, it maintains the integrity of the interactions and combinations of classical and Expressionist techniques that throughout the film have expressively marked the opposition of country and city and the attendant values of each place. It is important that Murnau reserves this use of the score for the end of the film, when these aesthetic and moral associations are already deeply entrenched; what expressive potential the music has is ultimately in service of the greater expressivity of the film’s aesthetic contrasts. The French horn becomes the means for the continued consistency of the formal and stylistic dichotomy of the two worlds that is essential to the viewer’s understanding of the Man’s choice. In this scene, the Man has already chosen the country village, which for the viewer also means that he has chosen the place presented with the aesthetics of early Expressionism and the unobtrusive form of the classical paradigm.

The world Murnau has created, therefore, restricts his formal options for expressivity at this point in the story. He cannot use a title and overt experimental form like double exposures and tracking shots as he does to convey the distress of Gretchen’s cry in Faust because to do so would break out of the classical paradigm assigned to the country aesthetic. Murnau must present the Man’s moment of greatest desperation in accordance with the static framing and shadowy naturalism that marks the space represented by the Wife. Using the Expressionist form and classical aesthetic that Sunrise has associated with the city to visually evoke the Man’s anguish at potentially losing his Wife would undermine the aesthetic contrast on which the expressivity of the entire film relies. The score allows Murnau to evoke with the
French horn the forlorn quality of the Man’s cry and maintain the classical formal approach, ultimately achieving expressivity through the contrast to, rather than direct use of, experimental technique. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, it is the consistency of form, rather than the overtness of it, which makes these shots expressive.

Conclusion

The differences between Faust and Sunrise, made only a year apart, reveal a major shift in the silent filmmaking world. When Faust was made, the experimental European avant garde movements and Classical Hollywood Cinema practiced their versions of the art in relative isolation. The production of Sunrise was a turning point at which the filmmakers brought their talents directly to Hollywood and collaborated to produce films that more thoroughly integrated the different approaches.

In both an industrial and formal context, Faust is an entirely German Expressionist film. It derives its essential moral narrative contrasts from the expressive formal interplay of darkness and light that characterized German Expressionism from The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari onward. In Faust, Murnau initially establishes the light of the good and the dark of the evil through early Expressionist pictorialism. For the majority of the film, however, that contrast is applied to a world that is fantastical to a certain extent, but presented in the more naturalistic style that Murnau had previously used in The Last Laugh. In particular, the hard contrasts of black and white are replaced by the subtler contrasts of shadows and darkness created by lighting; this allows the characters to move more fluidly within the visual contrasts of the film’s aesthetics, expressively conveying the constant potential for the good or evil associated with light and darkness. The overtness inherent in late Expressionist
form and style expressively connects the viewer to Faust’s and Gretchen’s experiences as the pawns within this greater contest between good and evil.

The less fantastical context and more complicated dichotomy of the city and country in *Sunrise* require the expressivity of a subtler aesthetic contrast than that of *Faust*. The interpenetration of the apparently disparate German Expressionist cinema and Classical Hollywood cinema in *Sunrise* serves this subtlety perfectly; the film combines them so fluidly that the representations of both the city and the country serve equally the classical goal of narrative clarity and the experimental goal of expressivity through overtness. Expressivity throughout the film depends upon the aesthetic contrasts and the opposing values they evoke, and is achieved either through the absence of one filmmaking approach and presence of the other, or through direct comparison within the same frame. Though the expressivity of *Sunrise* truly derives from the images, this mutually dependent integration of the classical paradigm and the experimentalist impulse of Expressionism is facilitated by the constant presence of the MovieTone score. That aural consistency is eventually matched by aesthetic consistency when the film eventually comes to rest on one side of its moral and aesthetic contrasts. The combination of classical form and Expressionist style that marks the presentation of the *denouement* gives proof that the apparently opposed experimental and classical approaches to the relationship of form and narrative can work in tandem to achieve expressive ends.

*Sunrise* occupies a prominent and complex place in film history. Despite the popularity of Murnau’s German films, *Sunrise* was only a critical, not a commercial, success. Why would American audiences have spurned this film, when Murnau’s
Last Laugh and Faust had done so well only a year before? It cannot be said that American audiences were not able to appreciate the experimentalism and fantasy of Murnau’s style as seen in his earlier films. Maybe the innovative combination of Expressionism and the classical paradigm created a film that was either not fantastical or not realistic enough for contemporary audiences. Or perhaps the answer lies simply in the film’s release just at the beginning of sound cinema, which would quickly replace its silent predecessor. Whatever the reason, Murnau only lasted a few years in Hollywood. But the impact of the German Expressionism he brought with him was indelible, influencing American filmmaking long after he removed himself from the system. He was not alone; at the end of the 1920s, the influx of European filmmakers to Hollywood precipitated the integration of experimentalism and the classical paradigm not only in “art films,” but also in the last of the commercial American silent films.
Chapter Two

Innovation Within Bounds: Experimentalism and the Classical Paradigm

Two elements influenced and freed the production of silent films in Hollywood in the years 1927-1929: the importation of European films and filmmakers and the introduction of synchronized sound to the moving picture. This chapter examines the impact of these factors – one primarily formal and stylistic, the other primarily technological – on the form and aesthetics of some of the last of the Hollywood silent films. Though there can be no argument against the crucial role of American cinema in establishing film language by means of analytical editing, no true history of cinema is complete unless one takes into account the European influence on the form and style of Hollywood films in the late 1920s. The techniques and talents of German Expressionism, French Impressionism, and Soviet Montage were the most significant contributors, with the addition of the Swedish filmmaking approach brought to Hollywood by Victor Sjöström.

This period in film history is one marked by the integration of these disparate European approaches and classical Hollywood cinema and the industrial sea change of Hollywood’s move towards a cinema of sound. In the last years of the 1920s, what began as the European experimentalist trend opened up to include the classical Hollywood approach to filmmaking. Two films – *Beggars of Life* (William A. Wellman, 1928) and *The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928) – provide two distinct opportunities to examine varying degrees of the use of and expansion on experimental European techniques within the Hollywood studio system. Both of these pictures
both adheres to and departs from the classical paradigm as defined by Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, balancing digressive overtness and “invisible” continuity so that the apparently disparate goals of experimentalism and classical Hollywood, respectively, are achieved in tandem. The cooperation of approaches endows these films with the necessary simultaneous clarity and freedom of narrative and form to negotiate the expressive potential of synchronized sound in silent film aesthetics.

It is important to look at *Beggars of Life* and *The Wind* in the context of experimentalism because the American films to which scholars most often refer as clearly exhibiting the European influence are decidedly of the avant-garde, produced independent of the Hollywood studios. Though such films are undoubtedly critical to experimentalism, the central position they have been given puts too much emphasis on the ways in which a few independent American directors broke completely with classical filmmaking norms by both adopting European experimental techniques and innovating their own. Wellman and Sjöström, in contrast, remained within Hollywood, working European formal and stylistic innovations into the classical system; industry and audience demands required that the new techniques be used in conjunction with the codified means for telling a story with moving pictures.

The apparent restrictions and standardization of the classical Hollywood cinema are often contrasted with the formal freedoms of European experimentalism. However, it is important not to do as many contemporary critics did and disregard the sophistication and creativity that had developed in American film production by the middle of the 1920s. Formal and stylistic innovation – albeit restricted innovation –

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30 Jacobs, *The Rise of the American Film* 333. This includes films such as *Manhatta* (1921) and *The Life and Death of 9413, a Hollywood Extra* (Robert Florey and Slavko Vorkapich, 1928).
had always been encouraged in Hollywood. But the difference between mid-1920s inventiveness and the experimentalism of the later 1920s is a loosening and exaggeration of form, due in large part to Hollywood’s increasing interest in and openness to European experimentalism, and the subsequent importation of German, French, and other European filmmakers. The issue at hand is not whether either American or European films were superior to the other, but rather the integration of one extremely codified formal system and several far less rigid approaches.

The integration of the experimentalism that European filmmakers brought with them played an important role in the changes and developments in storytelling in the silent films made in Hollywood during this period. Experimental and innovative techniques expanded and gave expressive texture to the classical narratives of Hollywood films, increasing emotional and psychological depth through aberrant but integrated uses of form and style. Because German directors comprised the majority of the talent brought over from Europe, it follows that late Expressionist techniques were among the most commonly used and prominent of the European influences. The increased mobility of the “unchained” camera was paramount, as was – especially in the style of Murnau – the telling of the story through cinematic means rather than the literal and literary functions of titles. The experimentalism in these American films incorporates also the French Impressionist goal of conveying characters’ subjective perceptions of their world and events, particularly through superimpositions, but also through attention to the emotional effects of editing pace.

*Beggars of Life* is a film made primarily within the general parameters of the classical system, but it uses elements of overt formal experimentalism – particularly
so in one early sequence – in service of the viewer’s more intimate involvement in the characters’ emotions and psychologies. For the most part, the film conforms to the classical continuity conventions of medium close ups, inserts, reaction shots, frontality, and matches on action. But Wellman selectively borrows from all three of the major European art cinema movements, incorporating them into a single sequence that is psychologically subjective and narratively essential. The brilliance of the film’s integration of the approaches to filmmaking is that the European-inspired formal techniques are for the most part worked in so smoothly that they, like their more “invisible” classical counterparts, function in service of the narrative. The experimentation in the film is subtle enough and congruent enough with classical norms that the story is never lost in the visual telling of it.

_Beggars of Life_ takes from German Expressionism the fluidity of the increased use of the moving camera; in place of long shots or analytical cuts in or out, pans and tilts function to gradually reveal information and tracking shots follow characters’ movements. These techniques demonstrate the control of the image that is essential to silent film and makes all the more intimate the moments at which experimental technique increases access to the characters. The most overt and notable example of experimental form comes in the opening scene, with a long take superimposition which functions to the French Impressionist end of revealing the emotional state of the character. But this superimposition serves a narrational function as well: as the character silently tells the story of an event from the past, the filmed images of that event are double exposed over her speaking face. This use of the superimposition reveals the assimilation of experimental form into the importance
that classical Hollywood places on the narrative and through this, the silent film’s formative negotiation of the idea of sound in film.

*The Wind* (Victor Sjöström, 1928) is an excellent companion and counterpoint to *Beggars of Life*, both in terms of form and content. One of the most obvious differences between the two films is the fact that Sjöström is not an American director; he is a Swedish director working in Hollywood with Lillian Gish, one of the great stars of American silent film. Because of this, *The Wind* serves as the means for examining experimentalism in a Hollywood film from the opposite direction: a Swedish director takes on the classical paradigm while remaining true to the lyricism of his European artistic sensibilities.\(^\text{31}\)

*The Wind* tells the story of Lettie (Lillian Gish), a young woman trapped by circumstance and her environment; the film follows the episodic narrative arc of a classical melodrama, fading in and out between distinct, situational scenes. But it also relies heavily upon character psychology and the natural environment, making it an ideal vehicle for Sjöström to exercise experimental techniques and his signature expressive incorporation of landscape. Like *Beggars of Life*, *The Wind* adheres to many of the formal rules of the classical paradigm, including matches on action, contiguity, and static, frontal camera angles. However, psychological expressivity achieved through experimental form is present throughout the entire film. In the exposition of character relationships – in terms of what they think, rather than what they actually say and do – the film relies on abnormally extended segments of closer shots and cuts motivated by glances and reactions. The increasing frequency and

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\(^{31}\) Sjöström was, after all, the man responsible for such poignant and lyrical films as *Ingeborg Holm* (1913), of which one contemporary reviewer said, “Film can be art!” (Christopher Oscarson, National Gallery of Art Retrospective on Victor Sjöström, http://www.nga.gov/programs/filmsjostrom.shtm).
overtness of experimental techniques over the course of the film corresponds to Letty’s descent into madness, building from subtle and well-integrated moments to an entire scene featuring the subjective portrayal of her insanity. This is followed by a return to normalcy on both a formal and narrative level. As in Beggars of Life, The Wind balances classical and innovative form, creating moments of pure visual expressivity that communicate psychological and emotional depth to augment that created by the classical system.

The inclusion of experimental technique in these films serves to create moments and even entire scenes in which form is foregrounded to expressive ends, resulting in a more overtly intimate understanding of and relationship towards the emotional and psychological states of the characters. Unique to these films as products of classical Hollywood – as opposed to contemporary productions in Europe or the anomalous Sunrise – is the simultaneously digressive and integrated role of this experimentalism. Because classical Hollywood generally emphasized verisimilitude, the experimentalist impulse manifests more formally than stylistically. The “reality” of the appearance of the filmed world remains for the most part intact, but the way in which space and time are framed by the camera and cut up and connected via the editing visually conveys the characters’ internal perceptions of their world.

Both Wellman’s and Sjöström’s films infuse experimental techniques into the structure of classical narratives, but in two different ways. Beggars of Life makes experimental use of superimposition and editing to reveal and involve the viewer in the psychology of the main female character through one powerful opening sequence. The most experimental sequence comes very early in the film, and the remainder
generally conforms to classical norms and the controlled innovation allowed within them. *The Wind* moves in the opposite direction. It works over the course of the entire film towards that same kind of emotional expressivity found in that one sequence in *Beggars of Life*. The ebb and flow of emotional and psychological intensity that the *Beggars of Life* sequence traces through individual shots is echoed on the scale of the entire narrative of the Sjöström film. Moments of indirect and direct subjectivity that initially conform to classical norms lay the foundation for intensified formal play to create mental subjectivity; this subjective presentation increases in frequency and duration until it eventually controls the narrative. If only briefly, the use of experimental form makes the viewer more aware of both the medium and provides essential access to the mental state of the characters. When the films return to “invisible” form, as they all do, and the narrative continues along more classical lines, the viewer carries forward the intimate access to the characters afforded the experimental digression. Ultimately, formal experimentalism serves to augment the psychological and emotional texture of the classical narratives found in *Beggars of Life* and *The Wind*.

*Beggars of Life*

For the most part, *Beggars of Life* conforms almost entirely to the classical paradigm as set forth by contemporary Hollywood. The picture, however, provides fertile ground for examining experimentalism within a mainstream Hollywood film of 1928; *Beggars of Life* is particularly useful to my argument because it was made by a decidedly American director, rather than by a European director working in Hollywood. Having worked his way up the studio ladder from messenger boy to
director, Wellman was one of those Hollywood directors so well versed in the classical paradigm that he could depart from it with ease.

_Beggars of Life_ appears as a classically conventional film because in many ways, it is. The story is relatively straightforward. Hoping for a handout, a hobo walks into a man’s house to find him sitting dead at his kitchen table, shot in the head. A Girl dressed in boys’ clothes appears and, in an extremely experimental sequence, confesses to murdering him because he was sexually abusive. The hobo allows her to go with him and a freight-hopping, law-evading adventure ensues. Eventually, they run into trouble with a rough group of hobo, but are saved by Oklahoma Red (Wallace Beery), the ringleader of the hobo posse. Despite the Girl’s and hobo’s apparent toughness and mutual lack of interest in each other, they ultimately fall in love. The film as a whole is not a particularly psychological one, and makes limited – but highly effective – use of character subjectivity and emotional expressivity. Both _Beggars of Life_ and _The Wind_ feature careful but pointed treatment of the sexual vulnerability of women at the hands of depraved and abusive men. _Beggars of Life_, however, does not ultimately seek to make any great comments about contemporary society, and is in the end a sweet and adventurous tale of love against the odds.

In the context of both the commercial and aesthetic pressures of sound on silent films made in this brief transitional period, it is of great importance that the _Variety_ review of _Beggars of Life_ bills it as a sound film. Though the original synchronized score is lost and _Beggars_ today is seen as a purely silent film, the

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32 Review, _Variety_, September 26, 1928, 14.
review reports that Beery had some speaking and singing lines, which are “little more than a recitation.” The review pans the film for this failure to live up to the new expectations of sound films and for what it identifies as poor direction and “continuity treatment,” and a slow opening. One wonders if the reviewer might have felt more favorably about the film if it had been released as a silent picture.

The fact that Beggars of Life was released as a sound film but is now considered a silent film raises some important questions about the modern conception of films in the transitional period. It is possible that Variety billed it as such as part of the fervor building around sound film or “talkies” in contemporary trade publications. The addition of Beery’s few lines could almost be seen as grounds for considering Beggars to belong to that bastardized medium known as the “goat gland talkie,” in which sound was artificially added post-production. With the addition of those few lines, it seems that Wellman tried to make the leap into sound film territory with the kind of soundtrack experimentation that Murnau used in Sunrise. After some consideration, I have decided that this film should be treated as silent because of the modern viewer’s experience of it as such; to approach it as a talkie would be a purely hypothetical and speculative exercise. Beggars of Life’s original release as a sound film, rather than an entirely silent one made concurrently with early sound pictures, further opens the discussion of the pressures of sound on silent film aesthetics and even the greater incorporation of sound into that aesthetic.

Because the story is paramount in Beggars of Life, the film illustrates that experimentalism can exist even as form remains subordinate to the narrative. The

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33 Ibid.
34 Jeanine Basinger, in conversation, October 2007.
visual expressivity of European-inspired form adds to, rather than digresses from, the fluidity and intelligibility of the story. Not only is there a clear influence of European experimental form, but Wellman also extrapolates on these innovations, using them to enhance the revelation of character psychology and emotion and the intimacy of the viewer’s relationship to the characters. This is especially so in the notably stylized and extended double exposure in the beginning, which responds visually to the new presence of sound in cinema.

Despite the emphasis that European directors like Murnau placed on the sparse use of intertitles, the majority of *Beggars of Life* requires several titles per scene – and occasionally lengthy ones at that – to ensure the intelligibility of the comedy and essential plot nuances and details. This reliance on the written word helps to place the film firmly within the bounds of the silent classical paradigm; classical Hollywood certainly never eschewed the use of titles, either for explanation or dialogue. *Beggars of Life* never relies entirely on classical filmmaking norms, as exemplified in the first scene, which features the film’s most overtly experimental sequence. The clear influence of European filmmaking manifests in a lengthy superimposition that immediately involves the viewer in the Girl’s story by coming as close as silent film possibly can to having her literally tell it to the viewer. This sequence thus becomes the means for negotiating the idea of sound in what is for the modern viewer a completely silent film. The viewer’s understanding of this sequence depends on the narrative set-up of the intertitles and the classical exposition that precedes it. But the comprehension of and involvement in the fear and anger that motivated her to shoot her abusive guardian and the different, more pitiful fear of
being accused of murder come from the visual expressivity of the long, silent superimposition. This sequence begins with the fourteenth shot of the film, only two minutes and twenty seconds after the end of the credits. Its placement in the film’s opening, where departures from formal norms were considered more acceptable, should not, however, discredit the boldness of Wellman’s break from silent Hollywood norms and his effort to tell the story through purely visual means.

The scene in which the sequence appears opens with the Hobo, who has come begging to the open door of a country house. Seeing the plate of food set before the man sitting at the kitchen table, the hobo offers to work for some breakfast. When the man does not respond, the Hobo enters the house, still making his case. Dialogue titles relate his pleas, intercut with shots from his point of view of the man sitting motionless with his back to the door. In these shots, Beggars of Life makes an asset of its inherent silence: the man’s unresponsiveness can be totally visual because his silence matches that of the medium. And so, inherently, we share his experience and are immediately drawn further into the world of the film.

When the man does not answer, the Hobo enters the house and approaches the table, then freezes in alarm. In a medium shot, the camera slowly tilts up from the man’s boots to his head, following a trail of blood to its source at the bullet hole in his temple. This is not shown through the Hobo’s point of view; his gaze stops directly on the man’s face, so the tilting view is the viewer’s own, providing a moment of shock separate from that of the hobo. The Hobo’s surprise causes him to knock over

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35 Of note is the fact that, despite the incredible formal inventiveness and narrative importance of this sequence, the Variety review complains that the “opening is very slow, giving over 20 minutes to a couple of meaningless incidents.” Even considering the spin inherent in trade publication reviews, it is clear that there was little appreciation of the kind of experimental formal play seen in this sequence. (Review, Variety, September 26, 1928, 14)
a sugar bowl, alerting the Girl, who is upstairs, to his presence. She comes down the stairs and explains herself, which precipitates the sequence of double exposed shots.

In relaying the course of events prior to the superimpositions, *Beggars of Life* moves smoothly in and out of classical and experimental form, demonstrating clearly the integration of filmmaking approaches. From shot to shot, the fluctuations in approaches correspond roughly to the level of viewer involvement and access to character emotion; the overt formal choices provide cues that clearly guide viewer reaction, while the classical techniques function in a more expository way. The sequence in question begins after the last title in the series, and the first shot is a panning side medium long shot as he hesitantly approaches the man in the chair. The shot is a leisurely twenty-four seconds long; over the course of the sequence, the pace oscillates between quick and relaxed until the double exposure eventually combines the two impulses.

Rapid cutting, combined with a sudden but narratively acceptable break in continuity, reveals through visual means that the Hobo and the Girl first become aware of the other’s presence in the house aurally:

Shot 17: <1 second. Long shot match on action. The Hobo jumps back and knocks a cup off the table.
   Shot 18: <1 second. Medium shot. The cup and its contents fall to the floor.
   Shot 19: 1 second. Long shot. The Girl whirls around in surprise in the doorway of a different room, knocking a picture frame off a desk.
   Shot 20: 1 second. Medium long shot. With the dead man’s body in the foreground, the Hobo whirs around and looks up the stairs behind him.

For the Hobo and the Girl, the source of the sound the other makes is heard but not seen, while for the viewer, the exact opposite is the case. This brief sequence
is typical of the classical paradigm in both its use of extremely quick cutting to show
causal immediacy of the action and in the inference of sound via the image of the
sound-making object or action. The rapidity of the cuts makes seeing almost
tantamount to hearing. While these shots are true to the continuity of time and action,
they very briefly but nevertheless blatantly break spatial continuity in service of the
other two guiding principles. The aural subjectivity implied through visuals in the
aforementioned shots is replaced by the visual hyperbole of the Girl’s subjective point
of view:

Shot 22: 7 seconds. Starts same as Shot 20. The Hobo is turned to
look up the stairs and a tilt up reveals the Girl in extreme long shot
looking down at him.
Shot 23: 6 seconds. Dissolve to a low angle medium long
shot. The Girl in the same position.
Shot 24: 1 second. High angle extreme long shot from the
Girl’s point of view. The Hobo looking up, with the dead man
slumped behind him.
Shot 25: 7 seconds. Dissolve to high angle medium shot. The
Hobo in same position, with dead man’s body still in background.

These dissolves create momentary double exposures that formally foreshadow
the long superimposition at the stylistic crux of the sequence. Before that, though,
there is a deliberated twenty-eight second extreme long shot that shows the depth of
the entire space. The figures are staggered from left to right in the frame, with the
dead man in the fore, the Hobo behind and to the right of him, and the Girl in back on
the stairs. The Girl slowly descends and the Hobo backs up until the dead man is
between them. This functions like a mid-sequence master shot, and we switch briefly
back to classical norms for a medium shot dialogue exchange shown in shot/reverse
shot with intertitles. Titles of the dialogue are used initially to set up the situation,
intercut with classical medium framing and shot/reverse-shot editing. She explains
that the man adopted her from the Orphans’ Home and has been sexually abusive ever since. The last title reads: “– and then this morning –”

The next shot, Shot 34, marks the beginning of the most experimental sequence in the entire film, the one featuring the most significant intersection of European-inspired experimentalism and the aesthetic and subjective expressions of sound in silent film. As the Girl begins her emphatic speech, the camera pans and tracks in just the smallest bit, moving into a slightly angled close up of her face. This camera movement is minor, but clear and self-conscious enough that it seems to signal the formal movement of the film’s transition from classical norms to pure experimentation. As the camera moves closer to the Girl, it places the viewer in a position of spatial intimacy that allows for the emotional intimacy typically associated with facial close-ups. The shot of her face holds for one second before another image – that of a close up of a woman’s hands serving steak and eggs from the pan to a plate – is superimposed over it. When this first superimposed shot fades in, the facial close-up fades out slightly, and the film for a moment looks as though it will dissolve into a flashback sequence of the Girl’s story as she begins to speak. Instead, the shot of her speaking face holds underneath, and does so until even after the end of the visual story.36

Because the flashback sequence is superimposed, the close framing of the Girl’s face is essential to maintaining the viewer’s connection with the character in the present even as the superimposition presents the events of the near past. The experimental technique gives equal precedence to form and narrative; it relays the

36 In all of the following shot breakdown passages for this sequence, the close up of The Girl’s narrating face will be assumed. Unless the interaction of the two images is formally significant, I will describe only the superimposed image.
circumstances of the murder, which is vital to the story, but the layering of the close and subjective shots in the superimposition and the long take close-up brings the traumatic effects of the event to the fore. With its lack of intertitles, this sequence maintains the visual integrity of the film. The viewer is prompted to identify with and feel pathos for her character not only despite the fact that her exact words are never revealed, but precisely because of the narrative and expressive power of the visual combination. The sequence uses the moving image as an equally, even simultaneously, effective means of relating the narrative and increasing the viewer’s subjective involvement and, through brief moments of direct subjectivity, implication in the Girl’s experience of the murder.

Even when the superimposed shots give an objective view of events, as in the first shot of the hands serving breakfast, the close-up of her face lends a sustained indirect subjectivity to the sequence, a constant reminder that what we see is both the viewer’s and her own experience of the murder. We are at once objectively invested and subjectively involved. The combination of her silently narrating face and the dialogue titles that set up the scene makes clear that the hands at the stove belong to the Girl, even though the shot neither cuts nor moves to show her face. The first five shots are explanatory, cut together in a series of succinct actions and reactions that function as brief visual sentences to which the victimized expression on the Girl’s face in close-up gives emotional inflection and emphasis.

Shot 35: 12 seconds. Medium close up of guardian’s hands tapping a fork on the table. The Girl’s apron enters in the background and her hands put the breakfast plate on the table. His hands grab her arm and grope up to her shoulder.
Shot 36: 7 seconds. Frontal medium close up of the Girl’s arm and shoulder. Man’s hands tearing at her dress as she struggles to get away.

Shot 37: 8 seconds. Medium close up of lower half of man’s and the Girl’s legs; she is struggling. Track left to reframe her feet as she walks slowly backwards along the table, away from him.

Shot 38: 7 seconds. Same as start of Shot 37. Pan left as he slowly walks forward.

Hands and feet, the primary physical means for movement and action, express both the entire body and the relationship of the characters. The absence of faces from these shots and the continual presence of the Girl’s face in close-up initially reminds the viewer of the pastness of the sequence and the fact that it is her story, increasing the sense of remove established by the objective framing. Shots 34 and 35 are especially expository in that the frame is so full of objects, patterns, and movement that the slightly faded-out close up in the center of the frame is only a faint reminder of her narrating presence. Though the superimposition obscures the Girl’s expressions, the shots are essential both to the narrative and to creating sympathy for her character. When her shoulder jerks away as he tears at her dress in shot 36, frame center is cleared for the close-up to come to the fore, and the distress of her expression matches that which the witnessing of such abuse has created for the viewer.

The trauma of the abuse is obvious in the depiction of physical force and violence in these shots, but the pained and desperate look on her face as she narrates gives the impact of the violence a personal context. The slight fading in and out of the close-up functions as a sort of simultaneous and future reaction shot, creating an immediate and intimate understanding of the trauma as it is occurring. This fading creates a similar but subtler visual and emotional oscillation between exposition and
character reaction as the cuts that a more strictly classical version of the sequence might have included. Because of this subtlety, the direct emotional connection to the Girl is never lost in the telling of her story. Instead, the combination of the more classical, narratively-driven use of objectivity and subjectivity in the superimposed sequence and the experimentalism of the visual layering unites the emotions of viewer and character. As objective as the presentation of the murder scene may initially appear, our access to it is still through her; it is always her interpretation of the events.

With the addition of faces and direct subjectivity to the superimposed shots, form blurs the line between what is her experience and what is ours. The viewer’s involvement increases, and we cannot help but sympathize with her position and actions. The sequence becomes further wrapped up in this experimentation with the layers of narration, time, and subjectivity. The viewer is worked further into an alignment with the Girl’s point of view in the past and with her character in the present:

Shot 39: 6 seconds. The Girl’s point of view, frontal medium shot of guardian advancing towards the camera; camera tracks backwards. Tilt down to reveal his hands groping in front of him. The double exposure makes his hands frame the image of the Girl’s face in the shot underneath.

The abrupt switch to the Girl’s point of view within the montage shots specifies and personalizes the viewer’s understanding of the threat posed by the leering rapist. The images are no longer just translating her story, but providing for the viewer her very experience; her fear and victimization become our own. Because this shot is superimposed over the close-up of her face, however, the viewer at once is
the Girl and watches her. As the layering of the shots creates this dual role for the viewer and confounds the division between past and present, the framing of the double exposure reminds us of the fact that the threat is, or was, only to her. When the camera tilts down to frame his outstretched groping hands, the composition is such that it appears to the viewer as though he is clutching at the Girl’s head in the close-up underneath. Though he advances towards the camera, and therefore towards the viewer as the Girl, this interaction of the double exposed shots serves – somewhat paradoxically – to remove the viewer from the situation; we are reminded that the experience is the Girl’s, and that we only have access to it through her narration in the present. At the same time, the direct point of view creates a kind of mental subjectivity in that the shot of him also represents her memory of the assault. In this context, we are privy both to her thought process as she narrates and implicated by direct subjectivity in the events as they happened that morning. Both positions function to involve the viewer directly in her feeling of victimization and anger; because we are directly exposed to the threat of his leering advance and her emotional recollection of the event, we are able to excuse her murderous act.

The next shot, Shot 40, moves the viewer back out of her direct subjectivity, but not at the expense of our connection to her emotions. In a medium long shot, the Girl hurls herself backwards into the frame. Yelling and crying, in desperation she grabs a gun off the wall and points it both at her assailant and directly at the camera. Though this is technically from the point of view of her guardian, the precedent of our involvement in her subjectivity makes it more of a reaction shot to the shot of his
threatening advance than as a means for his subjectivity. Rather, the shot is indirectly subjective, a clear and direct view of the Girl at the height of her desperation, and the potential for his subjectivity is overridden by our established involvement in her emotional experience. Camera movement is important to this distinction: the Girl’s backwards movement segues from the tracking of the previous shot, and though the man was still moving forward at the cut, Shot 40 is a static view of her. More importantly, the framing of the double exposed shots combines in such a way that her face in close-up covers her body in medium long shot, containing and obscuring the past action in the present narration. The effect is of a double indirect subjectivity that reinforces the fear and anger that would lead to such a desperate act as shooting the man.

In the subsequent shots, the sequence adopts briefly the classical shot/reverse shot pattern.

Shot 41: 4 seconds. Medium close up of man’s taunting facial expression.
   Shot 42: 1 second. Close up side shot of the Girl’s hands on the rifle. She moves the butt into center frame and pulls the trigger.
   Shot 43: 7 seconds. Medium long shot of man. Gunsmoke billows and he staggers backwards into a long shot framing, holding his head.
   Shot 44: 4 seconds. Medium close up of the Girl, who stares and then screams in alarm.
   Shot 45: 10 seconds. Medium long shot of man, table in foreground. He sits heavily in his chair, a line of blood coming from his temple, and stares openmouthed. He droops; he is dead.
   Shot 46: 2 seconds. Same as Shot 44. The Girl screams again.

The cuts back and forth slightly draw out the time it takes for the Girl to shoot the man, allowing for an emotionally emphatic series of actions and reactions. The

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37 It is possible too that Wellman shot it this way partly for the time-honored and unfailing novelty effect of the camera – and therefore the viewer – looking down the barrel of a gun.
length of the shots varies to match the speed of action and movement, but the rapidity of the editing increases in general, borrowing from the French Impressionist technique of increasing the cutting pace to reflect the growing mental distress of the characters. Wellman uses the rapid editing technique selectively: the shots of the Girl and the trigger are uniformly briefer and rush towards the violent climax, highlighting the instinctive nature of the shooting. In the same manner as the plaintive expression on her face in the close-up underneath, the impulsive rapidity of the shots and her terrified reaction reveal not a murderess, but a victim who acts – or acted – in self-defense. In formal contrast, but in support of the evocation of sympathy for the Girl, the longer takes of the man initially prolong the menace of his abuse and then emphasize the deadly significance of her violent defense.

The final superimposed shot extends to the extreme the weighted, deliberate length of the shots of the man. It runs for a full twenty-seven seconds, following the Girl and her slowly dawning recognition of what she has done and her need to run away. The shot resumes the technique of tracking to reframe walking feet, returning to the more objective presentation of hands and feet as indicative of character emotion and reaction.

Shot 47: 27 seconds. Medium side shot of the Girl’s feet. Pan right to reframe as she walks slowly forward and stops in front of dead man’s feet. Track back and right as her feet turn and walk toward the stairs, then tilt up as she ascends slowly at first then quickly exits the frame. The superimposition fades out, and the close up of the Girl remains for four seconds.

The Girl of the past is gone, and the Girl the narrator remains, finishing her story over the next cut back to the pseudo-master shot that established the space prior to hers’ and the Hobo’s first words of dialogue. Though what took place in the time
between her hasty and fearful retreat is neither shown visually nor told in an intertitle, the first shot of the Girl in the attic provides enough of an explanation. The film then bookends the superimposition sequence with just the close up of her face, using a closer-than-average but still classically normative shot to bridge the gap between classical and experimental form.

The initial suggestion of a flashback in Shot 34 raises hypothetical questions that highlight the expressive power of the silent image and the negotiation of sound in the context of the sequence’s experimentalism. From the Variety review, it is clear that Wellman chose to use synchronized sound in at least one scene. The fact that in this sequence he instead elected to represent the Girls’ monologue through experimental visual terms speaks to the expressive capacity of such formal play. It also invites comparisons between the silence of the scene and the sound that might have been. How would the impact of the sequence have changed if the event told through the superimposed images had been replaced by synchronized speech accompanying such a long take of the Girl’s face? Arguably, no matter how much sympathy a voice to match her face might possibly have evoked, the length of the take would subvert that potential. It would evoke a more removed kind of emotional resonance and sympathy for the Girl than that created by the direct visual subjectivity of the sequence as it actually appears. The viewer would understand the murder and its circumstances only in the abstract, in the images that her words would conjure up in each viewer’s mind. The earnestness and fear of her facial expressions would be clearer, but the subjectivity would only ever be indirect, as opposed to the highly involving shots of the murder sequence. Even if the speech were inflected with the
Utmost vocal emotion, without the images her description could neither exert the same control over the viewer’s comprehension of the murder nor hold the same intensity as the editing and subjectivity of the superimposition.

The possibility of the opposite combination of sound and image raises an entirely different question. Could the constant presence of the Girl’s face in close-up point forward towards the technique of voiceover narration used in the sound film? Had this been a sound film, her voice narrating over the murder flashback could have replaced the close up, and might have achieved the kind of subjectivity and intimacy it affords. Conversely, it could also potentially have distanced the viewer from the event and the Girl’s fear and anger. Just as dialogue titles inserted into the silent sequence would have interrupted the narrative flow and quick building of fear and anger, so, too, could the literal translation of voiceover narration; either of these situations depend on the actual words of the hypothetical narration. The viewer neither hears nor reads what the Girl is saying, but instead bears direct— in some shots, directly subjective— witness to her story. By collapsing time and subjectivity in the visualization of her narration, the sequence simultaneously involves the viewer in the Girl’s emotions both during and after the murder. The close up of the Girl adds a visual layer for the viewer to absorb, but it does not introduce an entirely new element in the way that a soundtrack with spoken narration would. Where literal words might, in their explicitness, detract from the impact, the silence gives precedence to the Girl’s facial expressions and so explicitly directs the viewer’s emotional response. Hearing her voiceover say, “I was frightened” would potentially

38 These functions of narration are indebted to lectures from Jeanine Basinger’s “Alfred Hitchcock” course, Fall 2007.
create a far more removed position for the viewer than does actually seeing and relating to the look of fear and victimization on her face.

As fruitful as such speculative comparison to sound film is, it is important to examine this sequence also in the context of experimentalism in a silent film made within the classical Hollywood system. In a more classical film, the initial cut to the close up probably would have dissolved or racked out of focus into a flashback, and the entire scene would have played out as just a sequence of visual narration without the Girl’s face narrating behind the images. The series of superimposed shots relates a clear line of action and is entirely intelligible in terms of the narrative; the sequence remains true to the causality of classical narrative on a shot-by-shot level. Because of the narrational premise, however, the sequence would probably be intercut with titles, the addition of which would visually interrupt the emotional and physical momentum of the actions and editing.

Though the editing pares down the course of events so that each framing and angle reveals a separate space and action, every shot directly follows from the preceding shot and directly sets up the one to follow. With or without titles, the editing of the sequence serves the goal of causal clarity, but it is not achieved through strict adherence to the classical style. Strictly in terms of form, the disregard for exact temporal and spatial continuity and use of reaction shots and close up inserts in the sequence possibly indebts it to Soviet Montage principles; the Montage influence manifests in much the same way for the entirety of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*, which was also released in 1928.\(^{39}\) The emotional and pathos-evoking effect of

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\(^{39}\) The next chapter features an in-depth analysis of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc.*
Jeanne d'Arc speaks to the strength of the technique outside of Russian films, and watching just the Beggars of Life murder sequence without the double exposure of the Girls’ face would undoubtedly have a similarly powerful, though smaller-scale, impact. Though the cutting rate is not as rapid as that championed by the Soviet school,\textsuperscript{40} the emblematic nature of the shots, especially the inserts and reaction shots, lends itself to the conclusion that this is a sequence inspired by Soviet Montage technique.

This condensation of the action into a sort of montage is the means by which the film visually narrates the telling of the story. The visual translation of the Girl’s narration cannot appear like the rest of Beggars of Life because she, not just film, is the medium. The story of the murder is presented through her, as hers, rather than as another event told directly to the viewer in the established language of film. In order to integrate the Montage-influenced formal departure that this narrative layering necessitates, Wellman must further depart from classical norms. On a larger narrative scale, the edited sequence is motivated by the Girl’s and the Hobo’s exchange, and provides the causal explanation for the scene into which he walked. But by combining actions from two different points in time, Beggars of Life breaks with classical temporal and formal restrictions in favor of a heightened emotional connection to the Girl.

The editing moves the viewer between objectivity and indirect and direct subjectivity, but never at the expense of narrative continuity between each successive action and reaction. Especially with the directly subjective shots, this sequence in

\textsuperscript{40} The Average Shot Length of just the superimposition shots is 8.3 seconds, nearly two seconds longer than the A.S.L. of late American silent films as estimated by Barry Salt. See Barry Salt, \textit{Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis} (London: Starword, 1983), 212.
and of itself could effectively evoke the Girl’s desperation and the fear of and repulsion for her guardian that is necessary to the creation of viewer sympathy. However, the emotional effectiveness of the sequence – specifically the evocation of the viewer’s sympathy for a murderess – derives significantly from the persistent visual presence of the Girl’s emphatic and imploring facial expressions in close up. If the order and duration of the shots in the superimposition exemplify the influence of Montage tradition, the indirect – and in Shot 39, direct – subjectivity of the experience adds to the evidence for the influence of French Impressionism. Wellman’s experimental choice to use the double exposure augments the emotional expressivity already present in the sequence, giving depth to the viewer’s understanding of the Girl’s psychology.

The overtness of the experimentalism in this sequence disrupts the “invisibility” of classical storytelling. It draws attention to form and the way in which the story is told and emphasizes the characters’ emotional reaction and investment in order to achieve a parallel effect in the viewer. But this formal self-consciousness also functions in service of the narrative through the emotional expressivity it achieves; the way in which the Girl tells us her story is as important as the story itself.

*The Wind*

*The Wind* is a far more psychological film than *Beggars of Life*. As such, Victor Sjöström takes the same principles that the Wellman film incorporates into a single emotionally and narratively revelatory sequence and weaves them throughout the entirety of *The Wind*. The film tells the story of Letty, a young woman who
moves from Virginia to Texas to live with her beloved cousin Beverly, only to encounter his wife Cora’s hostility and the madness-inducing, incessantly driving desert wind. Cora jealously throws Letty out of the house and forces her to choose between marrying Lige, the rough but kind rancher, and becoming the mistress of Wirt, the wealthy but slimy cattle trader. As an honorable woman, Letty is cornered into an unhappy, unconsummated marriage to Lige. The constantly howling wind increases her unhappiness and paranoia and the threat of the infamous “norther” windstorm and Letty’s certain insanity looms. One day, Lige goes out with other cattlemen to round up wild horses and returns home with an injured Wirt, for whom Letty is forced to care. When Lige and the men go back out as a norther approaches, Wirt surreptitiously turns back. The norther brings with it the full realization of Letty’s madness. Wirt returns in the midst of the norther and the apex of Letty’s paranoid insanity and rapes her, for which, in quiet, deliberate retribution, she shoots him. Letty tries to bury him in the sand, but the wind quickly uncovers the grave. The original story ends when Letty then walks out into the desert to die, but Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio executives made Sjöström film a new and more commercially-viable ending.41 Lige returns to find Letty totally crazed; she tells him that Wirt raped her and she shot him, and Lige forgives and comforts her. His reassuring presence and love suddenly brings Letty back from insanity and they live happily ever after. Upon release only two months after *Beggars of Life*, *The Wind*, which never tried to be a sound film, did not even receive enough attention to garner a *Variety* review. This omission speaks to the commercial climate of the period and

41 This is according to Lillian Gish, who gives an introductory speech at the beginning of MGM’s VHS re-release of *The Wind.*
the immense popularity of and demand for sound film over the incredible artistry displayed in *The Wind*.

In the first half of *The Wind*, the emphasis of the scenes lies in establishing within the more classically expository form the viewer’s alignment with Letty and brief but marked access to the first signs of her impending madness. *The Wind* remains relatively true to classical formal and stylistic norms for much of the first half of the film, and the aberrations – most notably a fantastical and possibly mentally subjective shot of a bucking stallion superimposed over stormclouds to represent the infamous “norther” – are likewise brief. The second half of the film, which begins when she marries and settles in with Lige, but wants nothing more than to leave Texas, chronicles the accelerated momentum of her approach to madness. The scenes in this second half achieve further mental subjectivity via an increase in the frequency and intensity of experimental form and style, evoking Letty’s increasingly crazed perception of the world and people around her. Because the story of *The Wind* chronicles her descent into madness, what would in another film be the digressive nature of such overt formal experimentalism instead is essential to the narrative.

From the start, *The Wind* aligns the viewer with Letty through indirect and direct point of view shots, which are presented through classical eyeline matches, close-ups, and inserts. Throughout the film, medium close-ups create indirect subjectivity, allowing for Gish’s famously expressive face and eyes to wordlessly reveal her emotions. Frequently, indirectly subjective shots of Letty’s expression – often in medium or medium close-up – guide the viewer’s reactions to and interpretations of the world around Letty. Though titles often provide important and
clarifying information and dialogue, it is these shots that reveal the real relationships between her and the other characters. The combination of the contrasting functions and effects of Letty’s indirect subjectivity augments the deliberate confusion of the real and the imagined within the otherwise straightforward classical narrative. As Letty loses control of her agency and her grip on reality, and the imminent threat of the wind and her madness loom closer, the frequency and duration of her point of view shots – indirect, direct, and mental – increase. Through this technique, her subjectivity becomes the primary means for the viewer’s access not only to her personal reactions, but also to entire external actions and events.

*The Wind* conforms to the pattern of the classical episodic melodrama; the scenes are established, developed, and concluded, but left open enough that the end of one connects to the beginning of the next. Often, one scene reinforces and develops the information and relationships established in the preceding scene. Episodic narratives often can – and in the case of *The Wind*, do – place the viewer in an uninformed position at the opening of a new scene. Because of the ambiguity of the ellipses between scenes, or episodes, in this film, the viewer often has no knowledge of what has occurred in the interim. *The Wind* compensates for this lack of narrative information with increased access to the psychology and emotion of character interactions. This access comes through the evocation of indirect subjectivity – primarily that of Letty – by means of the classical formal techniques of close framing, eyeline matches, and reaction shots. Classical Hollywood cinema often makes brief use of these techniques to show characters’ direct spatial and emotional relationship to their objectively presented environment. In *The Wind*, single reaction shots abound
to such an indirectly subjective extent that the world is presented *through* them. This increases the narrative responsibility on the unspoken emotional effect that Letty’s and the other character’s actions have on each other. It is often the revelation of character relationships through wordless glances, rather than the exposition of their actions, that moves the narrative forward.

The third and fourth scenes in the film exemplify how from the beginning, Letty’s perception of both the people around her and the nearly-animate wind guide our understanding of narrative development both within and between scenes. The third scene is that of Letty’s first meal at her cousin’s house, an uncomfortable affair made all the more so by a dinner of steer innards and two additional male guests who compete for her attention. But the real significance of the scene is the establishment of the relationship between Letty and Cora. Shots of offscreen glances, followed by eyeline matches, and closely framed reaction shots reveal Cora’s clear hostility, Letty’s shocked disappointment in the harsh realities of life in Texas, and the tension between these two very different women.

Establishing the elliptical transitions that persist to the end of the film, the scene fades out to black and the next fades in on Letty’s hands ironing shirts. The film then cuts out to a long shot to reveal Cora in the same room, butchering a huge beef carcass that hangs from the ceiling. The difference between the two women’s actions, between the appealing soft whiteness of the ironing and the viscous black of the butchering, creates a dichotomy of visual characterization within one framing. This is one of the few early instances of overtly stylized mise-en-scene, and evokes a
visceral reaction that aligns the viewer with Letty and against Cora, stylistically supporting the subjective alignment achieved through form.

When Cora removes the heart from the carcass, her action is intercut with shots of Letty’s silent reaction of disgust, which reinforces the viewer’s own. Moments later, after Cora’s young son refuses to hug her because she is covered in blood and prefers gentle, maternal Letty, the cut to Cora’s reaction reveals fuming rage, which she then takes out on the carcass, hacking at the flesh. The disgusting and violent nature of the butchering undermines the potential for our alignment with Cora through her reaction shot. The entire scene is relayed without intertitles; through the visual expressivity of the mise-en-scene and facial expressions, the viewer understands unequivocally that in the undefined amount of time since the dinner scene, the dynamic between the women has only grown more hostile.

Many of the scenes and the transitions between them function in a manner similar to that exemplified by these two, as small narrative units linked by what they reveal about the changes – or lack thereof – in the psychology and emotion of characters and their interactions. This sort of floating episodic structure creates temporal and narrative ambiguities; at the opening of each scene, it is never immediately clear how much time has elapsed and what events have occurred therein. Even the last segment of the film, in which the causality between the scenes of Lige going out, Letty alone at home, and Wirt attacking Letty clearly take place over a shorter period of time than any of the other segments, there is still uncertainty as to whether the events occur in a single day or more. Because Letty is at the center of the film, the episodic and largely subjective presentation of *The Wind* forces the viewer to
rely largely on her facial reactions to people and interpretation of events in order to orient him or herself in the narrative. The cumulative effect of this episodic structure is that of a roughly chronological passage of time marked by isolated incidents of psychological and emotional salience. The course of Letty’s progression from disappointment to psychological distress and desperate insanity serves as both the central element and measure of narrative causality and progress. Though Letty cannot be the film’s narrator in the sound film sense, there is something of the narrational quality of the Beggars of Life sequence in the constant return to shots that reveal visually her internal perception of her environment and situation. The story about her is effectively told through her by way of subjective formal presentation.

As the title suggests, the wind plays a central role in The Wind. My choice of verb is intentional; in Letty’s direct interaction with the element, it functions almost as a character in the film. The narrative and psychological importance of the wind, an inanimate force whose presence and power are typically represented by the sound it makes, poses a particular challenge to The Wind as a silent film. Sjöström’s signature directorial style is perfectly suited to a film in which the natural world plays such an essential role. He uses shots of blowing sand to give visual clarity to an otherwise invisible element and gracefully incorporates the wind into the established classical formal presentation of indirect subjectivity.

The wind’s psychological impact on Letty manifests through her subjective presentation of her experience of the element as a physical presence. In the first scene, a shot from her direct point of view shows sand roiling and churning against the window of the train taking her to Texas, blown by the relentless wind. The shot
appears three times in the scene, intercut with eyeline match medium close-ups of Letty staring at the window. The wind clearly mesmerizes and terrifies her; her expression is that of a person who wants to look away but cannot. Through these two shots, we understand that the wind has a psychological power over Letty to match the physical force evidenced by the blasts of sand against the window. This transitioning between direct and indirect point of view is the first instance of viewer involvement in Letty’s perception of the wind, and lays the foundation for our visual access to her strange relationship towards the element. The compelling and magnetic quality of the wind is reinforced by the recurrence of this point of view shot/reverse shot within the brief first scene. Over the course of *The Wind*, the visual pattern of these shots provides an exclusive view of the way in which the howling wind gradually breaks her grip on reality. As the film progresses, parallels of and variations on these shots appear countless times to similar, but increasingly significant effect.

The most common variation evokes what in a sound film would be the aural subjectivity of the sound of the wind over the medium close-up of Letty; the shot of the sand, if it were included at all, would only be for emphasis. The penultimate shot of scene four is an example of this variation. In medium close-up, Letty suddenly stares crazily into offscreen space and then turns her gaze to a specific point. Her wide-eyed stare clearly indicates both that she is listening to something and the paranoid fear it evokes in her. This is followed by a cut to a direct point of view shot of sand blowing violently against the window of the house. The silence of *The Wind* gives equal visual significance to both the ambiguity of the first shot and specificity of the second, creating a causal sequence that gives emphasis and clarity to the
otherwise illogical madness-evoking effect of the wind. Throughout the film, these two shots serve as periodic reminders of the wind’s constant presence and as a reference point for, and means for alignment with, Letty’s precarious psychological state.

Letty’s internalization of the threat that the wind, and specifically the “norther” windstorm, poses to her sanity manifests four times in a non-diegetic superimposition long shot of a white stallion bucking and rearing over an extreme long shot of big brewing stormclouds. The shot appears for the first time in the first scene, when Wirt tells Letty about northers. The shot suddenly cuts into the otherwise unobtrusive presentation of the scene, an overt and abrupt digression from the narrative. As the film gradually increases the connection between Letty’s growing paranoia and the norther, however, the shot becomes integrated into the diegesis as a mental point of view. The film presents the shot as the image that the idea of the norther conjures up in Letty’s mind, giving us the most intimate access possible to her mental state. At the same time, the shot of the violently bucking horse in and of itself visually conveys the power of the windstorm as both a physical and psychological force.

In the last segment/second half of the film, Letty’s paranoia builds to such a pitch that experimental form, which has previously served as a clarifying narrative device, conversely becomes the means for obscuring the narrative. When the cattlemen bring an injured man into the cabin, a title tells us that Letty assumes the man is Lige. She pulls the blanket away from the man’s face, revealing Wirt, and the film cuts to the now-familiar close shot of Letty, allowing us to register her horror.
The subsequent point of view shot is a medium close-up of Wirt with his hands covering his face. An identically framed superimposition shot dissolves in, but shows Wirt’s face uncovered; he then turns and looks greedily in Letty’s direction. As the direct point of view shot transforms into a mentally subjective one, the viewer understands the predatory threat that Letty sees – literally and figuratively – in Wirt. The film ensures this viewer perception by intercutting the superimposition with the more classical medium close-up reaction shots of Letty’s terrified face. The superimposition dissolves out, followed by the familiar shot of Letty in medium close-up, eyes wide in fright as she listens to the offscreen wind. Just before the fadeout, an outside shot gives resonance to her aural perception.

The use of the superimposition in Letty’s point of view shots confounds the viewer’s understanding of what is real and what is not; these shots control our access to the film, and what is essentially her mental narration through filmed images limits the viewer’s knowledge to her perception. The visual confirmation of the wind’s presence outside confirms Letty’s fear of something physically extant, however irrational that fear may be. This contrasts the imaginary nature of Wirt’s lascivious gaze in the superimposition, but the similarity of her reaction to both the wind and the man link those two as a unified threat. Though the visual presentation of her mental subjectivity reinforces her delusional state and makes her to an extent an untrustworthy narrator, our access to the film itself is limited to her interpretation, and so we share in her perception.

The control exerted by Letty’s subjectivity over the formal presentation and narrative of *The Wind* reaches its apex in the climactic portrayal of her complete
mental breakdown. Lige, Wirt, and the other cattlemen have ridden off into the approaching norther, leaving Letty alone with her paranoid fear of the windstorm.

The first cut is from an external shot of the men far out in the desert to an indoors shot of the moving shadows cast on the cabin wall by the swinging of a hanging lantern. The film then cuts to a medium shot of Letty curled up on a bed in the corner, staring out in wild terror. The sequence continues with a series of shots inside the cabin and out, intercut constantly with this shot of Letty: inserts of the lantern and bowls rocking on the shelves and long shots of blowing sand and cattle stampeding out of Lige’s corral. The medium framing of Letty is a more removed shot scale than The Wind normally uses in showing her relationship to the wind. This serves to show the norther’s force as a physical reality, not just the imagined power represented by the previous superimposition shots of the bucking stallion.

That physical reality unites with Letty’s mental reality as the windstorm builds; dissolves, rather than hard cuts, formally underscore the blurred line between the two. The shots of her resume the familiar wide-eyed, medium close-up framing as she begins to react physically, clutching her hair and putting out a fire caused by an overturned lamp. An insert of the swinging lantern dissolves to her crazed and terrified expression, and the subsequent dissolve is to an indirect point of view in which the entire cabin bucks and sways in the frame as the camera slowly pans back to the medium close-up of Letty. The fact that this point of view is indirect is essential; Letty’s delusional indirect point of view combines with the viewer’s uniquely objective access to the narrative. The film, which for the most part strives for verisimilitude, departs entirely from that goal, presenting an entire world – not
just a character – gone mad. This shot is followed by a similar one that is actually from Letty’s direct point of view. The switch serves to reinforce our perception that the norther’s effect on our viewing experience is indeed the same as her physical experience. In this way, *The Wind* establishes that Letty’s reality, which confounds the viewer’s expectations of what is real, is the reality that the viewer must comprehend in order for the film to expressively and successfully relate the story of her madness.

Yet the incomprehensibility of such insanity is revealed in the film’s inability to maintain her crazed point of view, and precipitates the return to more objective and classical form. Wirt forces his way into the cabin and assaults Letty; the scene eventually fades out on the clear indication that he is going to rape her. Her struggle to escape is punctuated by two final images of the mental point of view superimposition of the stallion. After the shots of the swaying cabin, however, the non-diegetic and imaginary nature of the stallion shot undermines its previously evocative and involving subjectivity. The remove it creates in comparison to the topsy-turvy world established inside the cabin instead serves the converse function, signaling the transition into the viewer’s more distanced view of Letty’s experience and psychology. The film cannot directly address the rape for censorship reasons, but also could not possibly convey the realities of the mental distress of such an attack. After the rape, when the norther is past, the resumption of the viewer’s more removed position continues as Letty subsides into a calmer, more internal insanity. She shoots and buries Wirt, the portrayal of which events returns *The Wind* to its pattern of expository action followed by indirectly subjective close reaction shots. After she
buries him, however, one more sequence of cuts between indirect and direct point of view brings the viewer back into Letty’s delusional perception of the world. In medium close-up, Letty stares out the window of the cabin with her familiar wide-eyed look of horror, and cuts to her view of Wirt’s grave show that the wind is blowing the sand away, exposing his hand. The combination of these shots presents the objectively terrible prospect of a body emerging from its grave through the subjective horror of Letty’s perception that Wirt is actually rising from the dead. The alternate reality of her subjectivity has set the viewer up to abandon rationality along with her, and we share her fear that Wirt is returning as we watch the subsequent medium close-ups of a man’s hand forcing open the cabin door. But it is Lige, not Wirt who enters, and his presence precipitates a return to actual and classical narrative logic. The switch coincides with objective classical form to an extent unprecedented in the film, cutting between shot/reverse shot medium close-ups and medium two-shots of Letty and Lige and relying heavily on dialogue titles as she confesses her love for him. This return to more classical form seems to present a sane and normal world, but the shot from Lige’s point of view of Wirt’s undisturbed sandy grave creates a lingering ambiguity about all that we have seen through the experimentally subjective presentation of Letty’s madness. Thus, the building, peaking, and subsiding of the viewer’s involvement in Letty’s emotions and psychology through the expressivity of experimental form parallels the arc of the classical narrative.

42 It is possible that Sjöström shot the scene in this classical Hollywood manner because this was an imposed “Hollywood ending.” This is not to say that classical form in any way lends itself to disingenuous narrative, but it seems appropriate that Sjöström would use the formal approach developed by Hollywood in service of an ending insisted upon by industry executives.
Conclusion

Both *Beggars of Life* and *The Wind* are firmly grounded in the filmmaking norms of the classical Hollywood paradigm. In *Beggars of Life*, overt experimental technique is used only extremely selectively. The sequence of the Girl’s superimposed narration is formally extremely digressive, but Wellman works into it, justifying the formal hyperbole of the sequence with the extremity of the murder scene situation. The silence of the film allows for the images of the double exposure to interact in such a way that the narrative information is clearly conveyed. The inherent subjectivity of the superimposed shots and the expression on the Girl’s narrating face provide intimate access to her emotions and justify to the viewer her extreme action.

Through experimental emphasis and expansion of these same classical techniques, *The Wind* successfully involves the viewer in Letty’s madness and fear. Just as the experimentalism in the *Beggars of Life* sequence made the Girl the narrator of her own story, *The Wind* uses subjective experimental devices to the extent that Letty’s mental state exerts complete control over the presentation and narrative of the film. The success of the *Beggars of Life* sequence and the entirety of *The Wind* in visually evoking for viewers and involving us in the course of these women’s actual and psychological experiences is proof of the powerfully expressive capacity of the formal cooperation of experimentalism and the classical paradigm.

The advent of sound in film was an international phenomenon, but because of disparities in technological sophistication and industrial standardization from country to country, it took time for sound filmmaking to be feasible in all national cinemas.
The widespread adoption of sound film production in Hollywood in the last years of the 1920s brought silent film to a slow grinding halt in the United States, but in European countries, industrial factors delayed the transition to sound. And so the momentum of the experimentalist trend in silent filmmaking takes us back across the Atlantic, where financial restraints delayed the adoption of new sound technology and international collaboration fostered the continued flowering and development of silent film art.
Chapter Three

The End of an Era: Film Europe and British Silent Cinema

The industry-wide turn towards sound film in Hollywood around 1928 did not take immediate effect in Europe. European and British films continued to produce silent films of startling expressivity, continuing the trend in integrative experimentalism to the end of the decade. Since the early teens, European film industries had competed with Hollywood in both the international and domestic markets. The volume of production in America was so much greater than that of any other industries that many European countries imposed protective importation caps and domestic quotas to foster domestic production and exhibition. When the political and economic havoc wreaked by World War I began to settle in the mid-1920s, Germany – specifically Erich Pommer at Ufa – spearheaded an effort to combine European national resources and talents, creating a “continental market” that could better compete with American production rates. This resulted in a brief period of intense collaboration in film production that became known as “Film Europe.”

Thus, in these final years of the silent film, the salient techniques of French Impressionism, German Expressionism and Soviet Montage came together in what is referred to as the “International Style.” Though not exactly a movement, the term stands for the collaborative inter-European films produced under the shifting economic and industrial circumstances that characterized this transitional period. The formal condensation and blending of these movements’ disparate approaches to

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43 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction*. 169
44 Ibid 170.
filmmaking augmented the stylistic and formal flexibility of silent narrative, of which there is scarcely a better example than *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (Carl Theodore Dreyer, 1928).

Though form and style are paramount in *Jeanne d’Arc*, the narrative both accommodates and benefits from its integration of the three primary European experimentalist movements and their different approaches to cinematic storytelling. Emotional and psychological subjectivity is achieved through Impressionist use of the facial close-up and rhythmic editing. The sparse and stylized sets and stark, flat lighting create a harsh and ascetic Expressionist atmosphere. The associative editing of Soviet Montage appears in *Jeanne d’Arc*’s consistent disregard for spatial and temporal continuity and contiguity. Dreyer’s film does not exactly represent an apex or culmination of each of the movements that had come before; rather, it is the unique product of their collaboration and deliberately mixes and juxtaposes the techniques of each to achieve its visceral and consuming effect on the viewer. By virtue of its purely experimental form and style but simultaneous historical context, the film is half-realistic and half-fantsastical. Through the consistency of its experimental form and style that recalls that of *Faust* and *Sunrise*, *Jeanne d’Arc* presents a highly subjective account of the trial of Jeanne within the entirely self-contained world of the film. One consistent aspect of these last products of the silent cinema is the intensification of the viewer’s involvement and, more significantly, implication in the characters’ emotions and experiences. In *Jeanne d’Arc*, this is achieved not necessarily through an increase in direct subjectivity, but more generally through the overall expressivity of its several experimental influences.
Due to its combination of style and form taken from the major European experimental movements, *A Cottage on Dartmoor* (Anthony Asquith, 1929) is an appropriate companion to the European Style *Jeanne d’Arc*. As a film made in England, however, *A Cottage on Dartmoor* is not a direct product of Film Europe, but rather a film influenced both by that confluence of experimentalist tendencies and by the Classical Hollywood Cinema. It is also a result of the small scale of the British film industry during this time that, by dint of limited resources, continued producing silent films to the very end of the silent era.

*A Cottage on Dartmoor* gives balanced favor to both the major European filmmaking trends and the Hollywood approach. The story of the film is centered around the crazed obsession that results from the unrequited love that Joe, a barber, has for Sally, a manicurist. Asquith takes a relatively simple story line and turns it into what is often an indirectly, directly, mentally, or even viscerally subjective viewing experience, intimately involving the viewer in Joe’s increasingly violent obsession. Though this subjectivity provides a clear understanding of an otherwise illogical state of mind, the formal balance provided by the more objective and expository classical paradigm ensure that we are never entirely implicated. The majority of the film’s narrative is based in classical paradigm norms, but it is inflected with sequences that feature a combination of French Impressionist subjectivity and Soviet Montage associative editing reminiscent of *Jeanne d’Arc*. The overtness of the technique and the abruptness with which these sequences appear augment their expressivity, moving the viewer suddenly and powerfully into Joe’s state of mind. It is also through these techniques that the film directly, even
reflexively, attempts to recreate in visual terms the additional sensory layer of synchronized sound.

Both Jeanne d’Arc and A Cottage on Dartmoor reveal the extent and expressivity of the integration of filmmaking approaches at the very end of silent cinema. As a product of Film Europe, Jeanne d’Arc is an example of the expressivity made possible by the integration of exclusively experimental approaches and the near elimination of classical paradigm norms. But the film is not a contest of experimental overtess; rather, the German Expressionist, French Impressionist, and Soviet Montage influences work in a constantly shifting collaboration and cooperation throughout Jeanne d’Arc. A Cottage on Dartmoor likewise employs the techniques of those three movements, but places them in a formal and narrative context often guided by the principles of the classical paradigm. The expressive power of Dreyer’s film lies in the cohesion of its self-contained world, whereas the expressivity of Asquith’s film is dependent precisely on the looseness of its formal parameters. What Jeanne d’Arc and A Cottage on Dartmoor share is the narrative flexibility that allows them to augment their particular uses of experimental form and style at moments that require particular expressivity, often to the effect of increased viewer involvement through all manifestations of subjectivity.

La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc

La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc (Carl Th. Dreyer, 1928) is one of the – if not the single most – seminal films to come out of the collaborative efforts of Film Europe. Dreyer, a Danish director, was hired to make the film for a French production company, with a German and Hungarian crew and a primarily French cast. Using the
original transcript from the trial of Joan of Arc, Dreyer employed a balanced combination of the cinematic techniques and terms of French Impressionism, German Expressionism, and Soviet Montage to recreate through silent film the course of Joan’s trial and execution. Especially notable from not only a formal perspective, but also from an historical one, is the use of Soviet Montage form: chronologically, it was the latest of these stylistic movements, and its influence was likewise delayed, making it particular to the end of the silent era.

One prominent contemporary critic called the confluence of these avant-garde influences in Jeanne d’Arc “the vindication of the major cinema devices.” Though the statement has a teleological ring to it, Jeanne d’Arc does indeed so distinctly and fluidly combine the devices of the primary avant-garde movements that the film achieves an emotional, psychological and associative expressivity nearly unparalleled in experimentalist silent cinema. In combining and selectively emphasizing the goals of French Impressionism, German Expressionism and Soviet Montage, Dreyer establishes a relationship between viewer and film distinct from that of any of the three movements. Rather than integrate the techniques of these influences into a classical narrative, with its attendant “invisibility” of form, Dreyer assembles their most salient and overt elements into a completely non-classical film. The film tells a story, but the arc traces an emotional and psychological progression

46 The fact that a contemporary critic would refer to Jeanne d’Arc as a “vindication,” however, is notable because it implies a general skepticism or resistance to the experimental techniques employed in the film. The pursuit of this idea would involve considerable speculation, but does reveal the extent to which these avant-garde or experimental films differentiated themselves from the majority of film production worldwide, which had by and large adopted the film language developed in the classical Hollywood cinema.
more than a narrative one. *Jeanne d'Arc* functions within the rules of its own unique paradigm. Using all of the European avant-garde techniques at his disposal, Dreyer both portrays the emotional and psychological nuances of Joan’s experience and meticulously constructs for the viewer a similar, but still singular, experience of the same events. In light of the nearly complete absence of classical narrative, form, and style displayed in *Jeanne d’Arc*, the film’s effectiveness of expression is a testament to, rather than a “vindication” of, the techniques and approaches to filmmaking developed and promoted by the European avant-garde.

*Jeanne d’Arc* meets the apparently disparate goals of all three of the film movements from which it draws precisely because of the way in which the different techniques offset, balance, and enhance one another in the film. The set is distinctly Expressionist in the earliest sense of the movement. The sparse and distorted aesthetic reveals a crazed, bleak world that harkens back as far as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*: window frames are askew, and chairs and Joan’s headboard list at odd angles. The use of tracking shots to follow figure movement, scan down rows of people, and close in for emotional and expressive emphasis reveals the influences of French Impressionism and later German Expressionism. Cuts between close facial shots – ranging from medium close-ups to intense, almost extreme close-ups – dominate the film. This is especially the case in the trial sequence. The close-ups simultaneously evoke the emotional subjectivity of French Impressionism and, in the style of Soviet Montage, connect actions that are neither necessarily contiguous nor continuous, thereby denying the establishment of clear spatial relationships.
Jeanne d’Arc likewise subverts classical narrative cause and effect on a formal, shot-by-shot level. Though the close framings emphasize reactions and the direction of characters’ gazes, cuts are rarely made on clear eyeline matches, preventing the establishment of spatial relationships. Instead, shots revealing the characters’ reactions to something happening or being said are crosscut with shots of the event from various angles and undefined vantages in the room. The effect of this relative abstraction is atmospheric rather than causal, highlighting through omission the mutually dependent relationship between cinematic space and time that defines classical narrative. The general course of events is clear, but the exact sequence of the smaller actions portrayed in each shot is most often ambiguous. This is partially due to the lack of shots establishing the physical positioning of the characters, but it is also because of the film’s silence. Without synchronized sound, the film is freed from the need for aural-visual continuity, and can simply cut to a shot of the desired facial reaction. The viewer is constantly moved around the space and in and out of the action, at once entirely involved in the psychological impact of events and, by virtue of deliberate spatial ambiguity and formal self-consciousness, removed from the full understanding of causality normally conveyed by classical narrative. In this way, we are essentially as controlled by the filmmakers’ decisions as Joan is by the power of her interrogators; indirectly, we understand through form her helplessness and the inexorable momentum of the trial.

A story that is as historically accurate as Jeanne d’Arc professes its to be provides the ideal template for the experimentalist focus on form and style displayed in the film. The result is Dreyer’s highly stylized imagination of history through an
incredibly intimate emotional and psychological portrayal of Joan’s interrogation, degradation, and death at the hands of her inquisitors. This film is far more about how the story is told than what the story is because the trial and its outcome are common knowledge, and even if they are not, the initial title reveals all. In the absence of a compelling narrative arc, what drives the film forward is the novelty of interpreting Joan’s experience, of creating from the sainted girl “the real Joan, not in armor, but simple and human, a young woman who died for her country,” as the introductory title promises.

The intimacy of the indirect and mental subjectivity that dominate and characterize Jeanne d’Arc are tempered by the characteristic self-consciousness of experimentalism and the use of intertitles. The viewer’s exclusive access to Joan’s emotional and psychological experience of the trial, achieved primarily through intimate close framings, is established early in the film; that subjectivity often makes our access to her the means for understanding the narrative itself. The dominance of close framing, however, also establishes a pattern of associative editing that forces us to construct meaning from series of spatially and temporally ambiguous, but expressively stylized, images. This places the viewer in a simultaneously active and subjective relationship to the narrative that is unique to Jeanne d’Arc’s particular combination of experimental European filmmaking techniques. At the same time, the overtness of the experimental approach and the omniscience that builds throughout the film function to establish a certain level of remove that is more authorial than necessarily objective. With the augmentation of experimentalist form and style
comes the heightening of the viewer’s involvement, investment, and even implication in the events portrayed.

One of the most salient formal and stylistic traits in *Jeanne d’Arc* is that of close framing of the human face. The majority of the interactions in the film are exchanges – both spoken and tacit – between characters in close-ups and medium close-ups. The highly consistent use of close framing plays an essential role in the manifestation of the film’s experimentalist European influences. Close framing guides the viewer’s understanding of character emotions, exploits the aesthetic potentials of the human face, and dictates the abstracted and associative cutting patterns that persist throughout the film. The consistent use of the close-up both facilitates this kind of experimental expressivity and stands in contrast to the classical paradigm, which most often reserves such shots for cut-ins, reactions and often only briefly increased access to character emotion and psychology. The combination of these experimental approaches to the close-up is the primary means by which the narrative progresses, especially in the interrogation scene. But because the close-up is frequently our only access to that narrative, the experimental form places an additional premium on the emotionally and aesthetically expressive potentials of the human face.

Watching *Jeanne d’Arc* is an unrelentingly emotional and psychological experience for the viewer. This is largely due to the indirectly subjective view of Joan’s own tortured experience provided by the close proximity of the camera to her facial expressions. The human face is the original and ultimate medium for directly conveying emotion, and Dreyer makes full and extensive use of that naturally
expressive capacity. The viewer is brought directly into Joan’s emotional experience through the intimacy and undeniable emotional explicitness of the close framing.

Especially in the context of such a personal film, facial expressions often reveal far more than words could ever do. The effectiveness of the experimental prevalence of the close-up relies to a certain extent on the information provided in the dialogue titles. The personal nuances of the characters and their relationships, however, are most often revealed in close-ups associated with glances and visceral reactions rather than words. Because these interaction and reaction shots are connected only by the cuts of the editing pattern, the film makes the viewer compensate for the lack of spatial, temporal, or aural relationships. When Joan does not immediately know how old she is, we assume that the judges’ amused looks are in reaction to her ignorance, but this causality is only the product of the cut to their faces from the shot of her counting on her fingers, rather than a definite causality based on a framing that would put her action in direct spatial or temporal relation to their reaction. In the associative style of Soviet Montage, the abstraction of the space forces the viewer to take a specific and active role in the narrative. Based on the generally accepted functions of the cut on a glance or between characters’ reactions, we are expected to mentally create causal connections from the edited construction of series of facially expressive close framings. In this way, we both read the direct expression of emotion revealed in a single close-up and read meaning into the close-up shots based on those that appear before and after it.

Either by virtue of these montage cuts or, in late German Expressionist-style moments, through tracks in to closer framings, the camera never allows the viewer to
rest far from the characters for long. The interrogation scene features frequent tracks in on the priests and judges, formally evoking both the rushes of anger and indignation that Joan’s responses elicit in them and also the menacing force of their judgment. Throughout, the film always returns to a close shot of Joan in order to register her current emotional and psychological state; we often simply watch her, absorbing the stages of her degradation through the expressions on her clear, open visage. Because of the prevalence of her close-framed face, the viewer gauges events and actions through her facial emotional response to them. In this way, the viewer’s emotional access to the film is so often through her that our involvement in the entire film is inherently connected to her emotional state. The rare instances when the film does not cut to her face coincide with the moments of her exhausted unconsciousness and, later, execution; the inaccessibility of her indirect subjectivity in these moments serves to augment the ultimate incomprehensibility of her pain and death.

Faces, and at times just parts of them, so often occupy all of most of the frame that they are equally as important to the aesthetics of the film as they are to the creation of subjectivity, fulfilling the goals both of Expressionism and Impressionism. The panchromatic stock that Dreyer used – one of the major innovations of the period – allowed for him to do without makeup or soft lighting, and the effect is one of faces that appear as sparse and stark as the film’s set. The close-up shots turn Joan’s very face into an abstract composition, often making her round, staring eyes and strong cheek- and jaw- bones appear as a study in smooth, clean lines that evokes her youthful and beatific innocence. In direct contrast, the old age and comfortable
impregnability of authority that characterizes the judges comes through in the shadowed wrinkles, loose jowels, and deep-set lines of their elderly faces.

Such compositional treatment of the human face becomes even more apparent in close shots that only partially frame the head. Shots in which only part of a character’s face occupies the frame serve as reflections of the characters’ mental state, allowing a particular feature to represent an emotion or reaction. When one of the guards accuses Joan of blasphemy, his speech is relayed through an extreme close-up of his mouth as he yells; the frantic movement of his lips and the spit flying from them obviates the need for a title by visually clarifying his rage. When Joan’s stupid cell guards torment her, dressing her up as a monarch with a straw crown and an arrow, the camera dissects her image into smaller pieces. At this point in the film, her face and expressions have become such constants that here Dreyer reveals only parts of her head in order to evoke meaning entirely from the framing, rather than from Joan’s expression. One shot reveals only the top quarter of her crowned head in the bottom left corner of the frame; this partial framing of her face subverts the personal intimacy normally evoked by the close-up, formally reflecting her powerlessness to react emotionally to the inhumanity of the guards’ treatment.

Within this context of the close-up, expression through the eyes is paramount. The trial scene makes frequent use of titles to convey the course of the inquisition and judgment, but far more can be read in Joan’s frightened, wide eyes and the disapproving glances of the judges and priests than in the words of the titles. Though her eyes are among the most expressive elements in the film, they are simultaneously one of the most inaccessible. The intimacy of the framing exposes the energy and
direction of Joan’s every glance, blink and stare, providing emotional nuance to these reflexive or reactive movements. At the same time, the trance-like quality of her devotion often manifests in a wide-eyed and directionless stare that indicates her mental remove from her surroundings and implies her connection to God, or at least her conviction in this connection. In many shots of Joan, she either gazes serenely or stares wildly into space. Though the ambiguous direction of her gaze is partially due to the lack of established spatial relationships, it often gives the impression that she is witness to some thing or presence – one cannot help but conclude that she is looking at a divine being, or even at God – invisible certainly to the people around her and even to the camera’s eye. Because of the undefined direction of her gaze, the shots in which the judges speak directly to the camera are not clearly from her direct point of view; they are more a means of implicating the viewer as the viewer than they are for Joan’s direct subjectivity. Her attention seems to be somewhere other than in the rooms in which we see her, and there is often what appears to be a delay in her recognition of the questions posed to her. Just as we must wait for a title – which sometimes never comes – to explain the words being mouthed at the camera, it is as if she, too, must wait for full comprehension of the words being spoken to her. This augments the impression that her mind is not entirely occupied by the present moment, but also creates a narrative lag that places an additional premium on her expressions as our means for comprehending what has been said and how it impacts her emotionally and psychologically. The predominance of the indirect subjectivity created by the shots of her expressive eyes and the inaccessibility of her moments of
mystical devotion serve to make the brief and few instances of direct point of view from her perspective all the more powerful.

Because the evocation of a personal connection to Joan derives partly from the emphasis Dreyer places on the historical authenticity of the words in the trial’s transcript, titles are essential to Jeanne d’Arc. The visual disruption of the dialogue titles necessitated by the silence of the film, however, would appear to present an obstacle to the intense subjectivity evoked through the images. By creating a mutually dependent relationship between the titles and the close-ups, but only using titles when exact understanding of the words is necessary, the film gives ultimate emphasis to the expressivity of the experimental use of close framing.

At the beginning of the inquisition, the head judge asks Joan how old she is. In a slightly low angle medium close-up, we watch her pause and begin to count hesitantly on her fingers. A brief cut-away reveals the judge’s skeptical and amused expression, and then we return to Joan. She finishes counting and begins to speak; the shot is broken by a title with the words “Nineteen…I think.” The peasant’s ignorance confirmed by the title elicits some pathos in the viewer because of the trial’s context of religious and judicial power exerted over an illiterate but devoted young peasant woman. But it is the expressions read in the medium close-ups that are truly heartbreaking: the concentration and slight confusion of her expression underscores her simple, earnest naiveté in the face of the condescending authority of higher knowledge. The film does not linger; the next shot uses a quick track out to reveal the amusement not only of the head judge, but also that of the judge sitting beside him. As elsewhere, the title and overt camera movement reminds the viewer
of his or her inherent remove from her experience, but the intimate proximity of the shots of Joan serves to immediately bring us back into our involvement and our direct, almost visceral, sympathy for her that characterizes the film.

The uniform brevity of the titles both integrates them into the rapid rhythm of the editing and plays down their significance to the emotionality and expressivity of the film. They are never longer than four or five seconds, lingering just long enough to relate the historical words before allowing us to return to the far more expressive images. The resulting de-emphasis on the information conveyed in the titles and emphasis instead on facial expression and the subjective experience of the trial is a prime example of Jeanne d’Arc’s subordination of the narrative to form and style. Perhaps part of this derives from the historical nature of the story; there is no suspense, and no one wonders how it will end. Because of this, Dreyer is able to focus on creating the personal emotional experience of such a well-known historical event rather than simply the story of the trial.

La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc clarifies its formal and stylistic terms through the role of the close-up in establishing editing patterns, subjective access to Joan and other characters, and the emphasis on expressive composition and settings. As the film progresses, those terms are applied to increasingly less intimate and contained environments than the inquisition room and less temporally concentrated events than the single interrogation. This widening of the world of the film functions to augment and expand on these effects of the experimental use of close framing.

There are three major narrative sections in Jeanne d’Arc. All three feature the same basic formal and stylistic approaches, but to slightly altered ends. In each
successive movement, the film’s setting increases to encompass larger and more environments and additional characters. With this comes a limited increase in both omniscience and directorial point of view, manifested in sequences that take the viewer away from Joan and use the film’s experimental form in the expressive exposition of the larger setting and circumstances of her trial. The shift in point of view is limited, however, because within it, the film continues to return to Joan and close framings of her face. This continued intimacy maintains our indirect and direct access to her experience and her centrality both to the action and to the personally charged emotional and psychological involvement of the viewer.

The first movement is that of the trial, which takes place entirely in one room and consists of Joan’s formal inquisition by various priests and judges. The opening tracking shot defines the long rows of interrogators and the placement of Joan’s stool on the floor below them, but this is as close to an establishing shot as the film ever gets. The film remains true to its Soviet Montage influences for the remainder of the segment, and the space is cut up into abstraction by virtue of constant editing between closely framed shots of Joan and varying shot scales of her interrogators from multitudinous and often dizzying angles. Without the classical physical and temporal points of reference to guide an understanding of space and action, the viewer’s perspective is primarily a psychological and emotional, rather than a visual and causal, one.

Joan’s face, especially when framed in close-up, is the single most emblematic image of the entire film in part because of the frequency with which it appears, but mostly for the wordless expressivity Joan conveys through her figure
movement and especially through her eyes. The judges, priests and guards (and later the villagers) are framed in countless different shot scales and angles, chief among them the low angle medium long shot. The effect is of their omnipresence and power; when the frame is not full of Joan’s face, it seems as though no matter where the camera goes in the room, they are there, looming and discussing and scrutinizing. Was this a sound film, the interrogator’s voices could easily create the sense of their dominance and Joan’s vulnerability and effectively eliminate the visual formal play required to achieve such a level of expressivity. But the silence of Jeanne d’Arc allows us to understand this dynamic through the Soviet Montage influenced framing of the men and, even more importantly, through the very absence of their speaking faces and inherent aural elimination every time the film cuts back to Joan’s beatific face.

The second movement in Jeanne d’Arc involves an opening up of the film’s environment. Dreyer crosscuts between Joan’s cell and the room in which the interrogators confer, and eventually brings the viewer with Joan into the torture chamber. This expansion of the space of the film and the physical, rather than cinematic, division of the space is likewise an expansion of the omniscience created by the closer shots of the men’s reactions and interactions in the chapel. Joan is physically separated from her interrogators, but rather than remain with her in her prison cell, we move back and forth between her humiliation at the hands of the guards and the forging of a letter from King Charles. The premise of the forged letter having been established through an earlier title, the film moves directly between close shots of a hand copying the king’s signature and the brutally close views of Joan’s
abject figure dressed in crown and arrow. This crosscutting to an action that is intentionally designed to deceive her moves us away from her experience and provides access to knowledge beyond her own, implicating the viewer in the judges’ manipulation of Joan. The crosscut shots of her prison cell juxtapose the guards’ abuse and the judges’ abuse of power; though the viewer’s omniscience implicates us to a degree, the knowledge we acquire from it serves ultimately to augment the sympathy for Joan that is simultaneously evoked by the guards’ abuse of her.

In this segment, the intense indirect subjectivity of the trial is joined by moments of direct point of view subjectivity. Continuing the pattern of eyeline match point of view shots begun earlier when Joan sees a cross in a shadow cast on the floor of her cell, she looks to the “sympathetic” priest for guidance in her answers in the second half of the interrogation. As with the cross, the framing in the successive cuts to his face from shots of hers becomes increasingly closer, suggesting her increasing dependence on his approval. Though the viewer already knows that the priest is disingenuous, we share in her clear feeling of abandonment through the intimate close framing of her devastated expression when he averts his eyes and refuses to give her his nod of affirmation.

The viewer’s involvement in Joan’s experience peaks in this section as a direct result of the expressivity achieved through experimental form. The direct subjectivity established in the trial in Joan’s cell eventually makes way for the intense mental subjectivity that climaxes with the torture sequence in a remarkable collaboration of French Impressionist and Soviet Montage technique. The sequence begins with the cut to a tilt down a huge chain to the menacing hook at its end, and
the momentum of the editing picks up from this shot. The rhythm of the cuts is matched by movement either of the camera across static objects or of movement before the static frame; the tempo is measured both within and without the frame. As the spiked wheel begins to spin, the rapidity of the cuts and movement within the frame increases. Shots of the spikes whirring both near and directly towards the camera are quickly intercut with the familiar medium close up of a crazed and terrified Joan, close framings of irate judges, and the fountain pen she holds in her hand. The movement of the torture wheel and the editing visually and physically evoke in the viewer the dizziness that Joan is clearly experiencing. Though none of these shots is clearly from her direct point of view, the overall effect is of both her indirect and mental subjectivity; the alignment of her experience and that of the viewer is emphasized by the abrupt halt in the rhythmic momentum of the sequence that coincides with her loss of consciousness.

The period of Joan’s un- and semi-consciousness begins the third and final movement and is marked by the same expository approach seen before in the crosscutting away from her and her cell. The dialogue-heavy exchanges between the interrogators are the closest the film ever comes to classical form and narrative techniques; they are framed in static medium shot scales intercut with dialogue titles. When Joan revives, this relative objectivity gives way to increased omniscience that manifests especially in shots of the villagers outside and persists to the end of the film. It is punctuated by brief moments that return to Joan’s direct psychological subjectivity, but never again to the same extent. The remove from the previous
intensity of her subjective experience reflects her loss of lucidity and the challenge of subjectively portraying her ever-more-imminent approach towards death.

It is in the second half of this last movement that the influence of Soviet Montage really comes to the fore. Joan’s initial abjuration follows a purely associative sequence that cuts shots of her despairing face together with images of a shovel flinging dirt, maggots crawling in the eye socket of a human skull, blooming flowers, and the cross. This sequence functions as a sort of speculative preview of her actual death at the stake, which in actuality focuses far more on the surrounding environment. As the film cuts between shots of birds flying, the guards, burning wood, and the familiar close shot of her face shows the life slipping out of her, the frame becomes more obscured by smoke and flames until the final image of Joan is that of a slumped silhouette in profile. Just as when Joan lost consciousness before, her death frees the film from its intimate portrayal of her experience, allowing the frame to move out to take in the previously peripheral outside world. With this new freedom, the film finally gives way to a chaotic montage of rioting villagers that recalls the steps sequence in *The Battleship Potemkin*, but the impression that remains long after *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* is done is one of having moved with her through her final hours and to the end of her life.

*La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* employs German Expressionist and French Impressionist techniques, but combines them within the context of the associative, rather than narrative, goals of Soviet Montage. In so doing, the film achieves its expressivity through a balance of experimental techniques that evokes a pre-*Sunrise* isolation of European and American filmmaking. There is no classical paradigm
against which to set the experimental form and style that comprises the film, so the three avant garde approaches have to offset and support each other’s expressive experimental potentials. The close-up is the perfect means for this collaborative effort, bringing to the fore the primary goals of all three movements, which function in service of a subjectively expressive viewing experience. Having established its formal parameters primarily through the prevalence of close framing in the film’s opening, Dreyer is able to apply those formal principles to a wider environment. Until the bitter end, though, the film always returns to the indirect subjectivity of shots of Joan’s face; the circumstances of her trial make her essentially powerless to express herself, so the film stays close, allowing her face to become the means for wordless expressivity.

A Cottage on Dartmoor

Like the Hollywood films discussed in the previous chapter, but to a greater and even more emphatic extent, A Cottage on Dartmoor incorporates the formal and stylistic techniques of European art cinema movements and those of the Classical Hollywood Cinema. This incorporation is not the same mutually dependent integration of experimentalism and the classical paradigm seen in Sunrise; rather, Asquith uses the unobtrusive form and style of the classical paradigm as a framework into which he builds the expressive experimental techniques of German Expressionist aesthetics, French Impressionist subjectivity, and Soviet Montage associative editing. In this way, the film falls somewhere in between the way in which Hollywood late silent films like Beggars of Life and The Wind incorporate experimentalism tempered
and controlled by classical form and narrative, and the entirely experimental approach of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc*. The *Variety* review applauds the “good photography and effects” and “simplicity of telling” exhibited in the film.\(^47\) Though the experimentalism at times subverts immediate cause and effect, the greater trajectory of the narrative is grounded in classical causality; the *Variety* quotations testify to the successful integration of emotional and psychological expressivity through experimentalism into a clear, classical-inspired narrative. The various combinations of classical and European experimental techniques create flexibility within the formal, stylistic, and narrative levels of the film. By establishing early the acceptability of elements from any of the various approaches to the world of *A Cottage on Dartmoor*, the film is able to move freely between them to enhance, rather than lose its control over, the viewer’s understanding of the story and emotional and psychological connection to the characters.

The world of the film is a recognizable one. The degree of verisimilitude in the realistic setting and level of conformity to classical paradigm norms, however, is by turns inflected with or disrupted by European experimental form and style, but always to heightened expressive ends. German Expressionist style creates a shadowy aesthetic that reflects the dark psychology of obsession central to the story and augments the film’s prototypical noir elements. The emphasis on subjectivity – indirect, direct, and mental – derives from French Impressionism, evoking and clarifying the characters’ emotional connection to the world around them. The evocation of mental subjectivity most often manifests in sequences involving a

\(^{47}\) *Variety*, April 16, 1930, 49.
combination of the rhythmic editing of French Impressionism and associative editing of Soviet Montage. Some of these sequences cut together images that are part of the diegetic world, and others depart entirely from the diegesis. In both cases, the sequences occasionally serve also as the film’s expressive means for addressing through silent images the idea of sound in film, expanding the parameters of the filmed world to include an additional formal layer similar to that of synchronized sound.

*A Cottage on Dartmoor* tells the story of Joe, a barber’s assistant consumed by unrequited love for Sally, a manicurist who works in the same barbershop. He tries to win her over by inviting her to a talkie, dining at her boarding house, and bringing her flowers, but to no avail. She is simply not interested, implicitly because she wants a man with some money and stability. That man arrives in the person of Harry, a Dartmoor farmer who becomes a daily patron of the shop after forming an instant crush on Sally; after one date, they are engaged. Joe’s obsession and Sally’s failure to reciprocate make of him a brooding monster, leading him to nearly cut Harry’s throat as Joe gives him his daily shave. Harry survives, and he and Sally are married and eventually have a child. Joe, in the meantime, is sent to Dartmoor Prison, from which he has vowed to escape and finish off the couple; eventually, he does escape, but ultimately loves Sally too much to hurt her. The police arrive and Sally takes pity on Joe, hiding him in the attic where her baby is sleeping. Harry returns home and discovers the convict in the attic, but for Sally’s sake, he helps Joe escape from the police. But Joe, still lovesick, immediately turns back toward the cottage and Sally, only to be gunned down at the door and die in her arms.
Similar to the narrative structure of *Jeanne d'Arc*, *A Cottage on Dartmoor* is divided into three major narrative sections. Were the narrative to follow a linear progression as Dreyer’s film does, however, it would be divided into two halves. One would detail the development of Joe’s feelings for Sally from a crush to the crazed obsession that leads him to his attempt on Harry’s life, and the other would start with Joe’s escape from Dartmoor prison and end with his death. Asquith obviates the need for the ellipsis between these two separate points in time through temporal rearrangement of the narrative into three sections, moving first from the night Joe breaks out of prison, then to the past and his obsession with Sally, and resuming again in the present through to his death at the end of the film. In breaking up the temporal continuity, Asquith creates an overarching context for formal and stylistic freedom in every aspect of the film; the transition from the first to second section is abrupt and unexpected, setting a precedent of non-conformity to classical narrative causality. This freedom allows him to infuse each of the three greater narrative sections with its own particular blend of experimental style and form, each functioning to different, but ultimately unified, psychologically and emotionally expressive ends.

The first section of *A Cottage on Dartmoor* is also the shortest, and throws the viewer into the midst of the story, presenting the two main characters without actually providing exposition for them or their relationship to each other. The section is comprised primarily of an extended crosscutting sequence of Joe on the lam and Sally in her cottage, which creates a stylistic contrast between the two spaces and underscores the initially ambiguous connection between the two characters. The combination of the abrupt beginning and the German Expressionist style that
dominates the sequence turns the crosscutting technique of the classical paradigm into a medium through which formal and stylistic expressivity gradually begin to clarify the narrative.

The film begins with Joe on the bleak, shadowy grey moor, in a sequence of discontinuous, discontiguous shots that are decidedly Expressionist in their lighting, framing, and treatment of the human figure. In the first shot, Joe’s body drops suddenly in front of the camera in a medium framing, his form a study in movement and texture. Extreme long shots frame the escaped convict running like mad across the darkly silhouetted horizon of the desolate moor. The distorted perspective that is characteristic of German Expressionism manifests in shots like the one in which the depth of field is so flattened that what appears to be a small stream in the foreground becomes a puddle when only Joe’s boot fills the frame as he splashes by the camera. Despite the static framing and lack of narrative context, the movement of the editing and within the frame conveys Joe’s urgency and momentum.

In the opposite balance of form and style, there is tracking in the crosscut shots of Sally, but the closer and more intimate shot lengths required by the interior setting give energy to her comparatively calm movements. This contrast between the shots of Joe running and those of Sally bathing her baby and embroidering a handkerchief is tempered by the similarities in the lighting of the two environments. Though the focus in the cottage is softer than in the shots on the moor, the bright, strategically placed source lighting creates a chiaroscuro effect reminiscent of Faust or Sunrise. The resulting shadows give the inside of the cottage a surrounding darkness that echoes the nightfall on the moor. For all the disparities of setting and
action, the consistently shadowy shots of the moor and cottage environments create a
darkly menacing aesthetic connection between the two characters. This aesthetic
connection is confirmed when Joe’s eyeline match reveals that he is headed towards
the cottage in the distance.

When an interior shot tilts down with Sally as she walks down the stairs and
reveals Joe’s presence to only the viewer, the established stylistic continuity persists
in the flickering lamplight shadows on his face. The sharp contrasts of the shadows
simultaneously blend him into the cottage environment and augment the threatening
intensity of his expression, confirming the menacing nature of his presence. When
Sally looks up from pricking her finger and sees him standing there, the viewer
assumes that her frightened expression is due only to his physical presence. This
shot is followed by a sudden series of four cuts between Sally’s and Joe’s points of
view of each other. Each cut moves the camera successively closer to them, from
medium long to medium close-up framing, and the medium close-up reveals that the
fear in Sally’s expression is now mixed with recognition. This shot is followed
immediately by an incredibly rapid track in on Joe’s face, an overt use of form that
subjectively underscores the impact of the recognition. Through this exaggerated use
of classical shot/reverse shot editing, the film formally reveals that there is more to
the situation than just the threat posed by an escaped convict to a woman alone. Sally
begins to speak, and the film cuts to a title of the word “JOE!” This title confirms
their formally established personal and narrative connection, raises questions in the
viewer’s mind about what happened to bring them into these circumstances, and
serves as the transition into the film’s second section, which immediately follows.
The dialogue title is the first of *A Cottage on Dartmoor*, and it disrupts the pattern of purely visual stylistic and formal expressivity of the wordless opening. It is also the one instance in the film in which this often-problematic element of silent film technique plays an essential role with respect to both narrative and form. The title is integrated into the film by established classical narrative conventions, and the cut to the title gives meaning to Sally’s silent speech, clarifying to the viewer that these two people know each other. The visual neutrality of the black title frame also breaks the aesthetic continuity of the constant crosscutting throughout the preceding sequence. This visual disruption functions to remove the viewer from the time and place of the scene in the cottage and to bridge the gap between the abstraction of that formal approach and the more classical form and style that initially characterizes the second section of the film.

The shot after the title introduces the viewer to the barbershop and the past in the middle section of the film, which takes up the bulk of both story time (many days, weeks) and screen time (nearly an hour). The abrupt switch to the classical form and style that initially characterizes the second section appears at first almost experimentally overt for its contrast to the stylization of the first section. But the film quickly settles into the unobtrusiveness of establishing shots, frontality, shot/reverse shot, and analytical editing, and the “JOE!” title quickly becomes the first of the many that the film uses within dialogue sequences. The spatial and temporal transition to the flashback section is clarified narratively by the friendly interactions of Sally and Joe, stylistically by the high-key lighting and soft focus, and formally by adherence to the “invisibility” of the classical paradigm. The primarily classical use
of form and style becomes the visual marker of the past and a happier, more carefree Sally than in the first section. Sally especially is consistently presented in the soft focus and diffused light of the classical medium close-up that reflects both her integration into a “normal” world and Joe’s subjective and admiring view of her. As Joe’s crush on Sally becomes increasingly more apparent and apparently intense, form and style begin to reflect his psychology and emotions. Expressionist style darkens and slightly distorts Joe’s aesthetic presentation, incorporating shadow-making high contrast lighting and occasional low angle framings of Joe’s intent gaze, which rarely moves from Sally’s on- or offscreen presence, into the classical presentation of the world around him.

The motif of watching carries throughout this flashback section, and recalls the importance of reaction shots to character psychology and relationships that is so central to both The Wind and La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc. Like Sjöstrom’s classical Hollywood film, but unlike Dreyer’s European Style film, these shots are created through the eyeline matches and direct points of view of the classical paradigm that dominates the second section. As Joe’s adoration turns to vengeful obsession after Harry arrives and captures Sally’s heart, the abundant use of these shots to convey Joe’s gaze involve the viewer indirectly and directly in his subjective view of Sally. Through the use of the classical paradigm, the film also maintains a degree of objectivity and viewer omniscience, providing occasional indirect points of view of other employees in the barbershop, which reveal that people within the film world see his obsession, too. This creates a slight remove from the viewer’s involvement in his growing jealousy, associating classical form with a more critical and informed
omniscience that allows us our own narrative access. In this second section, therefore, Joe’s delusional perspective and the expressivity of experimental style associated with it initially informs our understanding of the narrative.

In concurrence with the progression of Joe’s feelings for Sally from admiration to brooding obsession, the aesthetics around him become progressively more shadowy and Expressionist as low angle shots and close-ups of Joe appear more frequently. The darkness and distortion of these techniques expressively reflect that of his mental state, and are underscored by the direct, shot-by-shot contrast of the Expressionist style to the classical style used for Sally and the “normal” world of the flashback section. One low angle shot appears repeatedly, nearly every time Joe is shaving a customer. In medium framing, the customer’s head – most often Harry’s – appears only in the lower edge of the frame as Joe looms above. Always just behind and above him, shining directly down at the camera, is the bright barber's spotlight, which creates glaring contrast and dark shadows that augment the always tense and intently brooding expression on Joe’s face.

As Harry courts Sally, and Joe’s jealous obsession mounts towards its nearly murderous climax, the viewer’s access to the narrative becomes more subjective, moving us farther into Joe’s increasingly dark psychological state. This change in viewer perspective is initially achieved through an increase in the established, more classical means for character subjectivity. But further intimacy comes with the introduction of far more experimental techniques that function as the means for subjective expressivity. The intensity of this experimentalism ebbs and flows across the second part of the flashback section, concurrent with the lows and highs – which
become increasingly higher – of Joe’s jealous obsession. The moments of greatest experimental overtness of form and style swell out of the subtler indirect and direct subjectivity of the classical paradigm, diffused lighting, and soft-focus style used for the presentation of Sally’s world in the flashback.

The apex of the viewer’s subjective involvement in and intimate understanding of Joe’s psychological and emotional subjectivity coincides with the murderous peak of his obsession: consumed by jealousy and rage, he attempts to cut Harry’s throat as the farmer is sitting in the barber’s chair and Sally is giving her new fiancé a manicure. This appears in a brief, eighteen-second sequence that combines the editing principles of Soviet Montage and the subjective pacing and point of view of French Impressionism. The sequence creates a sudden, visceral experience of mental subjectivity through rapid and associative montage reminiscent of the torture chamber sequence in Jeanne d’Arc. This sequence is stylistically facilitated by the harsh, high-key spotlighting that characterizes the established Expressionist stylization used to evoke Joe’s dark – and in this scene, murderous – state of mind.

Formally, the overtness of the montage is augmented by its sudden departure from the classical paradigm of the barbershop and the use of images that are not grounded in the established onscreen world. The viewer is fluidly and abruptly moved into Joe’s mental subjectivity, making us at once acutely aware of and intimately involved with the visual expressivity of the montage images.

The initial pace of the analytical editing that sets up the tense circumstances of Harry’s shave and manicure is normal, even deliberate, with shots ranging from five

48 See Appendix B.
to over twenty seconds. Once Sally begins the manicure and the three main characters share the same space, the framing becomes closer, moving the viewer from a relatively objective view of Harry and Sally’s interaction into Joe’s subjective view of the situation. The low angle close-ups that replace the low angle medium shots of Joe convey an indirectly subjective understanding of his seething rage. The cut to the shot of Sally’s ring not only transitions the viewer into Joe’s direct point of view, but also his mental subjectivity via the use of the iris; rather than use, for example, an extreme close-up, Asquith employs a shot scale that could take in more of the environment around her hand, but deliberately blocks it out to convey the concentrated intensity of Joe’s gaze. The closer framing coincides with shorter takes in a combination of Impressionist and Montage influence that divides the space and time into a subjective abstraction of the action through shots of Sally’s hand, the razor hovering near Harry’s neck, and extreme close-ups of Joe’s glaring eyes. The pace of this cutting increases to two seconds per shot, and the film suddenly gives way to a lightning quick free-form montage of images that are not of the onscreen world: within four seconds, a taught string stretches, crosscut with the extreme close-up of Joe’s eyes, and then snaps; cannon fire, and suddenly, for a fraction of a second, an insert of just the color red occupies the entire frame.

With this sequence, the initial restriction of Joe’s direct subjectivity to the “realistic” film world is released, and the film moves into his head in the manner of *The Wind* and *Jeanne d’Arc*. Similar to Dreyer’s use of shots of blooming flowers before Joan’s execution, Asquith takes the associative ideas of Soviet Montage and expands them. He creates psychological subjectivity and meaning through a series of
images entirely divorced from the narrative, but which connote tension and violence. As in the portrayals of Joan’s death and Letty’s insanity, the images may not be what Joe actually sees in his mind’s eye, but their abstract nature evokes the impossibility of truly replicating or understanding a homicidal state of mind. Because the use of expressive experimental style and form has already established the subjective context and possibility for such mental subjectivity, this departure from the general verisimilitude of the onscreen world is a fluid one. The transition into Joe’s mind is only a matter of seconds, but the overt formal digression provides expressive texture and depth to our understanding of the level of his crazed obsession.

After the flash of red, the film returns to the onscreen world as Joe first threatens to slit Harry’s throat, and then actually does it, though unsuccessfully, when Sally lunges forward to stop him. This return brings back the relative objectivity of the more classical narrative exposition and dialogue titles typical of the flashback sequence, but the classical paradigm is no longer matched by classical style. The public nature of the transition of Joe’s obsession from internal psychological state to its physical manifestation in the attempted murder precipitates a change in the stylization of the entire onscreen world, not just the space around him. The aesthetic of the whole barbershop becomes a subtler version of the Expressionist high contrast and shadows previously associated with Joe; his violent act has made the whole world dark, not just the one in which he and his disturbed mind exist. He is arrested and vows to come back some day and finish off both Harry and Sally; these wild threats and the change in style segue directly into the return to the confrontation in the cottage, which marks the transition into the third and last narrative section.
Sally appears exactly as the cut to the flashback left her, standing frightened and transfixed in the shadows and dim glow of the lamp. The consistency of the shadowy Expressionist style from the barbershop to the cottage and Joe’s ultimate threat now endows this moment of recognition with even greater fear and tension than when it first occurred. In a sequence of close, indirectly subjective shots, Sally tries to run up the stairs, but Joe catches her and they struggle in this dark and shadowed environment until a policeman arrives at the door and Joe releases her. In an inexplicable moment of forgiveness, Sally takes pity on Joe and hides him in the attic where her baby is sleeping. She lets in the policeman, and the arrival of this representative of order and the “real” world precipitates a return to the classical paradigm and the brighter and more diffused, but still shadowy, soft focus of classically-inspired style. This formal and stylistic change brings with it a more objective position for the viewer. With the exception of occasional crosscuts to Joe hiding in the shadows of the attic, this classical form and style dominates, allowing for the narrative to progress with minimal and unobtrusive stylistic inflection until after Harry, in another inexplicable act of mercy, helps Joe escape out of the house.

Once Harry leaves Joe to continue his escape with a horse and change of clothes, Joe’s solitude and an insert shot of a beautiful photograph in his hand of Sally standing in bright sunlight in front of a blossoming tree signal the return of the experimental form and style that has been used throughout the film to evoke his indirect, direct, and mental point of view. Shots of Joe’s slow movements and contemplative face in medium framing as he changes his clothes are crosscut with shots of the dark and craggy horizon, the shadow of prison bars, the handle of a
guard’s gun, and the photograph, which dissolves into an actual shot of a sunlit, blossoming tree blowing in the wind. The crosscutting of these images with the shots of Joe imply that they are mentally or directly subjective. The evocative contrast of the emblematic shots reveals the qualities of what he clearly perceives as his two options: return to the darkness and shadows of either the moor or prison, or go back to the brightness and beauty that Sally represents.

Faced with these two prospects, Joe turns and, in a low angle tracking shot, begins to run back. Borrowing once more from both Soviet Montage and French Impressionism, this tracking shot is crosscut with shots of rushing surf and flowing water that are only ambiguously of the onscreen world. The pace of the cuts increases until each shot is only a second in length. The juxtaposition of these images emphasizes the similar movement in both, and creates the impression that his return to Sally is as inexorable and natural as the flow of rivers or the tide. This poetic notion is confirmed by the brief cut to a crashing wave as Joe falls into the doorway of the cottage, having been gunned down by a guard as he ran. Sally cradles him as he dies, and the penultimate image is of her close-up, out of focus face. The viewer leaves the film world from Joe’s dying direct point of view, and the dissolve to the final shot of blossoms in the wind is both mentally subjective and, like the similar shot in the execution of Joan, conveys the ultimate incomprehensibility of death.

Like Jeanne d’Arc, the primarily subjective presentation of A Cottage on Dartmoor lends itself to experimentalism. A character’s mental state is not required to follow the logic of narrative causality, so direct access to their psychological and emotional perceptions of the world around them serves the precedence that
experimentalism gives to form over narrative. With the balance between the narrative ambiguity of the crosscutting and the aesthetically unifying Expressionist style of the first section, the film effectively hits the ground running in terms of experimental expressivity. In the flashback section, because the context for the use of experimental technique is provided by the classical paradigm, the overt and self-conscious qualities of the experimentalism are augmented. The classical indirect and direct subjective view of Joe’s experience establishes the context for the moments in which the film abruptly employs overt experimental technique to provide access to his mental subjectivity; because these experimental moments move the viewer out of the narrative, they function on a purely expressive level. The fluid combination of classical and experimental style and form is made possible by the narrative freedom that characterizes A Cottage on Dartmoor and functions as the means for the film’s most effective emotional and psychological expressivity.

* * *

Unique to A Cottage on Dartmoor, the sequences in which Asquith combines Soviet Montage and French Impressionism function in some cases also as the means for addressing through silent form the concrete idea of sound in cinema. The addition of synchronized sound creates a new formal cinematic layer, and in order to visually explore and attempt to replicate the experience of watching a sound film, A Cottage on Dartmoor uses extremely overt experimental form to create its own particular, silent version of that additional layer.

The opening section and transition to the flashback set a precedent of formal flexibility that allows the film to depart from the classical paradigm norms that
dominate the flashback section. This departure takes the form of sequences that, like the barbershop murder attempt, are edited in the associative style of Soviet Montage. These sequences appear abruptly, and either abstract the space of the film world until it is nearly unrecognizable or, like the expressive portrayal of Joe’s rage, deal entirely with images that depart from the onscreen world. In either case, the precedence that Soviet Montage gives to form over narrative is so antithetical to the narrative goals of the classical paradigm that the sequences function effectively as the silent formal equivalent of the new sound layer. The abstract quality of the montage sequences is balanced by the French Impressionist influence. Though the departure from classical norms is abrupt, it is consistently motivated by character subjectivity; because this motivation comes from within the film world, the abstracted sequences are always directly connected to the events of the narrative, even as they briefly subvert narrative to form. The result is an incredibly expressive use of experimental form that creates for the viewer not only a subjectively visceral experience of the emotional and psychological qualities of events and characters, but also evokes visually their aural perception of the world around them.

The first overt attempt at visually representing aural subjectivity occurs early in the flashback section of *A Cottage on Dartmoor*. The sequence begins with indirectly subjective shots that reveal Joe’s anger at the sight of Sally and Harry flirting at a barber’s chair nearby, and then an abrupt and brief formally experimental sequence clearly reveals that Joe’s irritation is exacerbated by his talkative customer. The customer’s beaky profile is suddenly intercut with a series of graphic matches of a close-up of the profile of a rooster against a black background. In a series of one-
second shots, the images are intercut eight times before we return to Joe’s glowering and irritated expression. The meaning is clear, both visually and in the imagined sound that the image precipitates in the viewer’s mind: the man’s speech is as annoying and nonsensical to Joe as the crowing of a rooster. The sequence is abrupt in its overtness, but brief enough to give a visual interpretation of Joe’s aural subjectivity. It also serves to further involve the viewer in his mental subjectivity, building us towards our understanding of his increasingly crazed obsession.

The most significant of these sequences that use visual expressivity to evoke the aural viewing experience occurs in the appropriately reflexive setting of a movie to which Harry takes Sally on a date. Unbeknownst to them, Joe is sitting in the row behind, watching Sally with an expression of steady, obsessive intensity. In almost dizzying layers of reflexivity and subjectivity, we watch Joe, who watches Sally and Harry as they and the other audience members watch and react to the offscreen film. The film-viewing – the departure of the characters from their world into the world of the film they are watching – creates the narrative context from which extremely overt formal play can emerge and still keep the viewer within the established realism of the world of the film. Appropriately, our own viewing experience of the characters’ viewing experience becomes an exercise in formal self-consciousness.

Asquith uses the Soviet Montage idea that associative editing can have a direct physical impact on the viewer to cinematically represent the act of watching a silent film with live musical accompaniment. To this end, he cuts up the space into a discontiguous series of close-up and extreme close-up inserts of the different instruments and musicians in the theater orchestra, various audience members, Joe
watching Sally, and Sally watching the film. The pace of this Montage cutting gradually quickens to split-second shots, until at the peak of this sequence, various shots of instruments and musicians no more than a few frames long race across the screen so that in and of themselves, most of the framed images carry little inherent meaning. The clarity of Sally’s and Joe’s faces within the frantic pitch of the editing, however, creates an indirectly subjective view of, but a visceral sharing of, their film-going experience. The rhythm of these shots of the orchestra in this sequence is measured in a musical way, as if the shots are the equivalent of musical notes. The prevalence of shots of musical instruments underscores this analogy, creating the impression that the increased editing pace is concurrent with the tempo of the music. This visual replication of the accompaniment connects the pace and tension of *A Cottage on Dartmoor* itself with the silent short that the characters are watching. As the pace quickens, the expressions on the faces of the audience become more intent and focused on the unseen screen, signaling their growing involvement in the film they are watching and mirroring our own viewing experience. The montage ends abruptly with the end of the musical accompaniment, which is indicated by a sudden eight-second close up of a drumroll. As the characters return to their real world from that of the film, we return to the classical paradigm and the narrative: the shot of the drumroll, which indicates the end of the silent short, is followed by a more classical medium close-up of Sally and Harry laughing at what is clearly the punchline while Joe glowers behind them.

Within the film itself, the whole scene functions as one long moment of expressivity; it does not serve any directly narrative purpose because there is no
interaction between Joe, Sally, and Harry; there is no great revelation that he is stalking them. In terms of the story, nothing actually happens, and as such, the scene in its entirety functions to the expressive end of further involving the viewer in the subjective experience of Joe’s obsession. Because the virtuosic experimentalism and reflexivity of the scene visually evokes the aural experience of all of the characters in the audience, the montage sequence also functions to draw the viewer into the world of the film as a whole. This movie theater scene is both testament and tribute to the emotional expressivity of silent film. The reflexive expressivity of the experimental techniques it uses to reveal the emotions evoked in the silent film audience members within the film make *A Cottage on Dartmoor* itself a silent film that is simultaneously creating a viscerally emotional experience for its own viewers. A portrayal of the expressive capacity of the medium is in itself an exercise in experimental expressivity.

*A Cottage on Dartmoor* was one of the last of the major silent productions, and exhibits an unprecedented integration of techniques from both sides of the Atlantic. The film employs its combination of silent filmmaking approaches to create an intensely subjective viewing experience, part of which directly and reflexively addresses the implications of sound in film. The masterful balance of narrative and form and the startling power of purely visual expressivity derived from the blending of approaches in Asquith’s film points to the direction in which silent film might have headed had it not been cut off by the rise of sound film to ubiquitous status in America and Europe within the year of *A Cottage on Dartmoor*’s release.
In their own ways, both *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* and *A Cottage on Dartmoor* are illustrative of the European experimentalism that persisted in the face of the coming of sound. *Jeanne d'Arc* remains decidedly a silent film, drawing from the three movements that defined the European *avant garde* to create a controlled, subjective, and visceral silent viewing experience. The evocation of emotional and psychological subjectivity relies on the expressive capacity of the silent images and their arrangement to speak for themselves. The film never acknowledges the fact that the images are not accompanied by synchronized sound because the silence is integral to the self-contained quality of the world on the film.

*A Cottage on Dartmoor*, too, combines the German Expressionist, French Impressionist, and Soviet Montage impulses in service of emotional expressivity, and likewise relies on the expressivity of the *silent* image. But Asquith’s film uses those impulses to the contrasting ends of creating a film that is not limited to the images of the onscreen world. Just as *Jeanne d’Arc* uses Soviet Montage editing primarily to abstract the images *within* the space of the film, *A Cottage on Dartmoor* uses it to introduce abstract but expressive images *into* the world of the film. Asquith’s film meets the presence of synchronized sound head-on with this expressive use of experimental technique, creating a film that is unique in the reflexivity and effectiveness of its visual evocation of the aural viewing experience. Because of, rather than despite, their differences, these two films testify to the continuation – however short-lived – of experimental silent film in its own right, independent of the changes coming out of Hollywood: the cooperative efforts of many European industries and the independence of British filmmakers produced two masterpieces of
silent film art as the paradigms of American filmmaking were being upended and, ultimately, transformed.
Conclusion

In each of the films in this thesis, the heights – or depths – of the characters’ subjective emotional and psychological distress coincide with the moments of greatest formal or stylistic overtness: Gretchen’s disgrace and arrest; The Man’s distraught search for his lost Wife; The Girl’s frightened and defensive act of murder; Letty’s paranoid madness; Joan’s exhausted devotion and death; Joe’s crazed obsession and death. From *Faust* to *A Cottage on Dartmoor*, the films formally and stylistically recognize that such moments are, in their intensely personal and internal nature, beyond silent narrative exposition. These expressive shots, sequences, and scenes are not essential to the viewer’s understanding of the narrative itself, but they are vital to our involvement and investment in the characters and the events precipitated by narrative causality. Through my formal analyses, I have attempted to elucidate what I believe is the essential role of experimental silent filmmaking techniques in creating such expressivity and such intimate relationships between the viewer and these films from the last years of the silent cinema.

In tracing the various manifestations of late silent film experimentalism from the European *avant garde*, to Hollywood, and back to Film Europe and British independent production, my goal was to illuminate how experimentalism functions to expressive ends in the films made in the integrative and collaborative circumstances of the final years of silent cinema. Because the most fruitful analysis of these films puts them primarily in the context of their silence, the expressive negotiation of sound through experimental silent film technique became a corollary, only addressed where
that negotiation was clearly intended and integral to the expressivity of the silent images.

With respect to *Beggars of Life* and *A Cottage of Dartmoor*, this project has to a limited extent confirmed my original idea that the experimentation in the last years of silent cinema was in direct response to the industrial pressures exerted by sound. When expressive experimentalism is applied to moments of silent narration, as in *Beggars of Life*, or the representation of aural subjectivity, as in *A Cottage on Dartmoor*, the implication of synchronized sound places these films in their historical context of the end of silent cinema and the beginning of the sound era. The fact that the experimental approach to silent form and narrative in these films is capable of evoking the impressions of synchronized sound, however, ultimately serves as testament to the expressive capacity of silent film experimentalism. Though the films negotiate the idea of sound in film, they remain decidedly within the parameters of their silence. These films, along with all of the films from the last years of silent cinema, deserve close formal analysis in terms of their inherent silence, in a context primarily independent of – and only occasionally informed by – the rise of synchronized sound.

In these latest of the silent films, the overtness of experimental techniques effectively moves away from the narrative, breaking out of the established formal and stylistic parameters of the world of the film to allow the complexities of the characters’ emotions and states of mind to resonate with the viewer. The establishment of those parameters – however firm or flexible they may be – is paramount; they create a basic relationship between form and narrative and the
context in which formal and stylistic experimentalism can be overt, but not so overt as to be confusing and alienating. Though experimental form and style do not function in direct service of the narrative, they nuance the characters and world of the film with emotional and psychological expressivity that augments the viewer’s investment in the events presented by the narrative exposition. The relationship between narrative and experimental expressivity, therefore, is a more complex one than that of simply being mutually exclusive; the integration of experimentalist approaches into each other and into the classical paradigm often allows for expressivity to appear as form and narrative are balanced. Even in Jeanne d’Arc, the one film discussed here that completely rejects classical narrative causality in favor of a looser and more associative exposition of events, that exposition is expressively inflected by moments of overt experimentalism through the combination of avant garde techniques.

The integration of European experimental approaches and techniques in Faust and Jeanne d’Arc serves this function because the techniques are alternately either overt or subtle. This fluid balance allows the approach or combination of approaches best suited to a particular expressive goal to come to the foreground at the appropriate moment. Sunrise achieves this effect as well, but through a carefully worked balance of Expressionism and the classical paradigm. In Beggars of Life and The Wind, expressive experimental techniques overtly emerge from or are subtly worked into the stylistic verisimilitude and “invisible” form of the classical paradigm. A Cottage on Dartmoor represents the combination of the approaches used in all of the other five films. Asquith selectively and expressively marks past and present, subjective
presentation and objective exposition, sanity and madness, silence and sound, with
the techniques of the three primary European avant garde movements and the
classical paradigm. This combination of the four approaches does not, however,
make *A Cottage on Dartmoor* the apex of this trend in formal and stylistic integration.
Instead, the film is evidence for the beginning of another shift in the relationship
between European and American approaches to filmmaking and by extension, in the
relationship between silent film form and narrative. But that development was never
to happen, at least not in silent cinema; by 1930, the year after *A Cottage on
Dartmoor*’s release, silent film production had ceased in Europe as well as America.

Though silent cinema came to an end, clearly all was not lost in terms of
filmmaking artistry. Formal and stylistic experimentalism very similar to that of the
silent films analyzed here has appeared in sound films in the form of, for example, the
montages of Slavko Vorkapich, in Alfred Hitchcock’s masterful use of subjectivity,
in the dark shadows of film noir. How these manifestations of originally silent film
experimental technique function specifically within the world of the sound film could
be a fruitful subject of further study.

Because many of the expressive experimental techniques used in the films
discussed in this thesis have been assimilated into cinema of sound, I cannot,
ultimately, assert that they are exactly specific to silent cinema. I have attempted to
show that the creation of visual experimental expressivity is essential to the
emotionally and psychologically intimate qualities of these six exemplary films in an
almost purely silent filmmaking context. Though this expressivity is not necessarily
*specific* to the silent film, I believe that it is indeed *suited* to the premium silent film
places on the expressivity of the moving image; words, written or spoken, often
cannot suffice to express such states of mind as the distress, fear, anger, madness, or
even death of the characters in these films. Experimental approaches to silent
filmmaking seek to find in the self-conscious presentation of images – either those
within the onscreen world or without it – the means for an emotional viewing
experience beyond that evoked through the form and style used in the exposition of
the narrative.

And so I finally return to where I began, to the desolation and helplessness I
felt as the expressive images of *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* appeared before me, and
long after it was over. *Jeanne d’Arc* is about the course of Joan’s trial and execution,
but what we carry away from the viewing experience are visual memories of formal
and stylistic overtness: the consistency of her beatific face in close-up, the rapidly
increasing rhythm of the cutting to match the whirring of the torture wheel, the shot
of birds in flight as Joan burns at the stake. How the narratives of these last films of
the silent cinema get us to those moments of heightened expressivity is paramount.
But essential also to the power of the films is how we as viewers feel when the form
and style of the silent moving images convey a meaning beyond the narrative, and the
indelible impression of an emotional viewing experience created by the expressivity
of their experimentalism.
Appendix A
Sunrise Shot Breakdown: City Woman, Country Wife

7. 4:21. Interior Long. Fade in on the Woman of the City’s (WC) bedroom. Framed mirror and burning candle on dresser in right foreground. Dresser with clothes draped everywhere in mid-ground, open armoire in shadows in background. Candle is glowing source light; soft focus. WC enters from background in her slip, walks into diffused source light, lights cigarette, brushes hair, flings clothes, and begins to dress.


10. 5:31. Interior Long. Rustic outside door and road. WC exits door and steps into road, framed by diffused light from door.

11. 5:34. Exterior Extreme Long. Road. Two villagers talk in right foreground, lit by source light from window behind them. MATCH ON ACTION as WC exits door in background, walks down road toward frame left. PAN left to reframe in Long, the TRACK behind as she continues down road. HOLD as WC stops at the stone wall and bright window of a house.


14. 6:34. Interior Medium. Same as Shot 6. Man turns towards window behind him, clearly having heard the whistle.

15. 6:40. Exterior Medium. Same as 7. WC whistles again.

16. 6:42. Interior Medium. Same as 6. Man turns back to table, gets up and walks slowly toward window. Wife enters background frame right, walks forward to table and into bright source light from lamp. Begins busily setting table as man watches.
from background. Wife wears a loose apron and homespun dress and has blonde hair and a pale face. Wife exits into background, Man hangs his head.

17. 7:31. Interior Medium. Man in frame left, looking offscreen to where Wife exited. Frame mostly in shadows. Man steps into dim light in frame center, turns towards camera, and scratches neck pensively, then looks up.

18. 7:36. Interior Medium. POINT OF VIEW of table. Lamp in frame left, glowing brightly on plain cups, plates, bread, white tablecloth.

19. 7:40. Interior Medium. Same as Shot 11. Man turns slowly toward frame right and offscreen window.

20. 7:52. Exterior Medium. Road. Side shot of WC, same as end of Shot 5. WC leans into diffused source light from Man and Wife’s window and whistles towards house. Man’s shadow appears behind curtain over window. He gestures towards frame right and she nods. WC walks toward frame right, PAN to reframe in Extreme Long. HOLD as she walks out of frame.

21. 8:16. Interior Medium. Man in high key lighting; high contrast shadows. In frame center, he quickly changes his coat.

22. 8:27. Interior Long. Same as Shot 6. MATCH ON ACTION. Man finishes putting on coat, walks from shadows in background towards light of lamp on table. He furtively looks towards where Wife exited, then quickly exits frame left. HOLD on empty frame. Wife enters quickly from background, holding big bowl. She stops, sees the empty room. Wife walks to table and bright light and slowly sets the bowl down and sinks into Man’s vacated chair.
Appendix B

_A Cottage on Dartmoor_ Shot Breakdown: Seeing Red

1. :16. Interior Medium Close-up. Barbershop (all Interior shots are barbershop). Sally enters frame, sits with face in frame left. Looks shyly, then lovingly at offscreen Harry. Soft focus, low key lighting.

2. :11. Interior Medium. Low angle. Harry’s head in bottom foreground in Medium Close-Up. Joe’s hand shaves Harry’s face. Joe’s head in top third of frame, behind in Medium. Joe shaves Harry while staring offscreen at Sally, pauses razor briefly at Harry’s neck. In top frame right, very bright orb of wall source light behind Joe; high contrast shadows.


4. :04. Interior. Close-up. Joe’s face, chin cut off by frame bottom. He glares offscreen at Sally. Soft, high key lighting; high contrast, shadows on Joe’s face from source light bulb behind him.


7. :13. Interior. Close-Up Insert. Sally’s hands give Harry’s hands a manicure. Harry’s hand stops hers, turns it over, and plays with the engagement ring on her finger. High key, high contrast shadows.


11. :03. Interior. Medium POINT OF VIEW. Harry and Sally’s hands in frame center. Rapid IRIS in to frame hands, engagement ring.


18. :01. Same as Shot 16. String snaps in SLOW MOTION.

19. < :01. Insert from out of onscreen world. A strong stream of water across the frame.

20-26. :04. Six Extreme Long Inserts, each less than a second long. Cannon fire in each shot, frames fill with explosions.

27. :01. Insert of COLOR RED. Fills entire frame.


Title: “Don’t move or I’ll cut your throat!”
Bibliography


Filmography


