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Von Sternberg/Dietrich : A Unique Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

A Berlin nightclub was the setting for the meeting of two of Hollywood's favourite celebrities: Marlene Dietrich and Josef Von Sternberg. Their meeting marked the start of a working relationship which spanned six years and seven films. The Blue Angel (1929) was the building bricks for their collaboration and it was followed by six other films, Morocco (1930), Dishonoured (1931), Shanghai Express (1932), Blonde Venus (1932), The Scarlet Empress (1934) and The Devil is a Woman (1935). These films, as well as their creators, have been much analysed over the years. They are renowned for their enchanting, captivating qualities which are due to the combined ability of Von Sternberg and Dietrich to excite and elude their audience. The mysterious qualities present in their seven films have raised questions for film theory which theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Gaylyn Studlar have endeavoured to answer. However there is no theory behind these films. The work of Von Sternberg and Dietrich remains a mystery to the cinema audience, even today.

While the films are beautiful on an aesthetic level they also allow scope for intense study. The complexity of the Von Sternberg/Dietrich relationship is reflected in their work together.

Film critics refer to Von Sternberg as Dietrich's svengali. The development of the German actress into a Hollywood star has been credited to her discoverer, Von Sternberg. In Chapter One I establish her development from Marlene Dietrich, the young wife and mother to the world famous star who stole the hearts of the cinema audience in the 1930's. In this chapter I introduce the films while also discussing Von Sternberg's choice of characters for his star. Von Sternberg's fascination with detail was very important in the building of his ideal female star. Every exact detail of Marlene Dietrich was moulded and shaped to create a perfect image for the public. He used lighting and costume to enhance her physical beauty while

the mysterious settings lend her their exotic mystique. However as Raymond Durgnat points out,

> "just as Miss Dietrich is other than Sternberg's Marlene,
> so Sternberg is more, far more, than Marlene's svengali."
>
> (Durgnat, 1966, p.272)

Marlene Dietrich's input became as powerful as his. She provided the foundation which helped him build the stairway to fame and fortune. She became the medium through which he could experiment with his fantasies and likewise the fantasies of the audience.

In Chapter Two I deal with some of the theories put forward in relation to theses films. In her thesis on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), Laura Mulvey uses Morocco as an example of typical female representation in classic Hollywood cinema. I question Mulvey's use of Morocco in this relation. Although Marlene Dietrich is portrayed to the audience as a feminine, fetishized heroine, I firmly believe that she is not a typical example of the passive female. Joan Riviere's thesis on "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1929) describes femininity as a mask which may be put on or taken off. Femininity may be used as a tool to gain power in a patriarchal society. I discuss these two theories in relation to chosen examples from the seven films in an effort to prove that Dietrich's feminine actions in these films are a carefully thought out plan of defense against the male order.

From the beginning of their collaboration, Von Sternberg was aware of Dietrich's natural ability to appeal to both the male and female audience. This trait is specifically associated

with the Dietrich allure. In Chapter Three I discuss Dietrich's relationship with her audience. I refer to Mulvey's theory again in this chapter and I question whether Dietrich's sole purpose is to satisfy the male gaze or does she force the male audience to question the stability of their sexuality? I choose specific examples and discuss them in relation to the idea of male narcissism, while the underlying notion of voyeurism in these films, is also referred to.

CHAPTER ONE

The Creative Formation of the Ultimate Screen Goddess

In Hollywood cinema history Josef Von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich have always been closely associated together as a 'couple'. Although both Dietrich and Von Sternberg had careers before and after their collaboration, it was the series of seven films between 1930-1935 which established their fame. Before meeting Von Sternberg, Marlene Dietrich had established her name on the German cabaret scene. This is where Von Sternberg first met her and he was immediately excited by her charm and mystique. Von Sternberg had already directed nine films by 1929. These included the successful The Salvation Hunters (1925) and Underworld (1927). Recognizing the young director's talent, Paramount showed interest and he was signed up to direct The Blue Angel (1930). In 1929 Von Sternberg visited Berlin in search for an actress to star opposite Emil Jannings.

The Blue Angel is an adaptation of Heinrich Mann's novel Professor Rath. The story tells of a respected Professor, who in an effort to protect his pupils from a desirable woman, falls victim to her charms. As a result of acting upon his foolish desires and fantasies he loses his position and responsibility. Von Sternberg's ideal image of Lola Lola was inspired by the work of the Belgian artist Felicien Rops. Rops was a symbolist whose work portrayed erotic, androgynous woman often associated with death. These women were dressed in vamp-like, semi-naked cabaret costumes with top hats. Rops surrounded them with mysterious settings not unlike the setting Von Sternberg used in 'The Blue Angel' (Ref. ill. No. 1). We can imagine Lola Lola fitting in comfortably with Felicien Rops' androgynous women. For Lola Lola Von Sternberg wanted a woman to echo the erotic, uncontrollable, fantastical world Rops portrayed in his work. This is why Von Sternberg had such trouble finding his star. It was vital that she would possess these qualities of androgynous sexuality and immortality. He auditioned many young actresses with no luck. When he met Marlene

illustration No. 1

Lola Lola in The Blue Angel

Dietrich he was attracted and impressed by her 'cool indifference' which is usually associated with the masculine sex.

In her book, Dietrich's daughter Maria Riva is adamant that Dietrich always possessed many of the magic qualities which Von Sternberg took advantage of during their collaboration. What Von Sternberg did was to take these qualities, acknowledge their potential and make them grow. He did not create Dietrich. She had a strong existence before he discovered her but he did recognize her qualities and use them cleverly to create a star.

> I did not endow her with a personality that was not her own; one sees what one wants to see, and I gave her nothing that she did not already have. What I did was to dramatize her attributes and make them visible for all to see.
>
> (Del Gaudio, 1993, p.31)

Von Sternberg's fascination with a Cambodian myth indicates his obsession with the creation of his star. The myth tells of a turbulent ocean agitated for a thousand years that brings from it's depths a woman who was to capture and charm the world. This myth can be related to his discovery of Dietrich in turbulent Berlin and his creation of a star who shocked and charmed the cinema audience of the '30's.[1]

Von Sternberg's fascination with accessibility/inaccessibility, promise/denial of the erotic is present throughout his career. Dietrich became a medium through which he could

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[1] Del Gaudio, 1993 p.31.

experiment with these fantasies. Her mise-en-scene was due to the mystery which is created by the clever use of her unique traits to portray Von Sternberg's personal fantasies. He controlled every movement of her career. He determined her physical appearance: how she was lit, how the camera positioned her on the set and what costume she wore. Her androgynous appeal was acknowledged through the use of gestures and costumes (Ref. ill. No. 2). The characters chosen for her were particularly strong, 'masculine' roles. There is nothing weak or waif-like about the characters in the Dietrich/Von Sternberg films. All of these characteristics came together to create Dietrich the star. Von Sternberg needed Dietrich to provide the building bricks for his dreams. Indeed, Von Sternberg, claimed that Dietrich's input was enormous to a shot. Very often Dietrich gave him a shot that was better than he could have imagined and definitely better than he could have directed any actress to perform.

Von Sternberg is a master of using film in a symbolic manner, maintaining the inaccessibility of not only the character but also the star. The Blue Angel is a brilliant example of how the inaccessibility of Lola Lola is maintained and consequently the untouchable star, Marlene Dietrich is created. The film opens on a busy market day. A cleaning lady lifts the iron grid off a tobacco shop to reveal a glass window with a poster of Lola Lola's cabaret act. This is our introduction to the object of desire. The lifting of the iron grid is like the pulling back of a theatrical curtain to give us a glimpse of what is yet to come. It also introduces us to a new fantastical world full of erotic and teasing notions. Lola Lola's mystique is allowed to roam free. It begins to work it's magic on our imagination as we are introduced to her erotic posture on the poster. The characters remains inaccessible to us as this is only a representation of Lola Lola. We must observe from a distance and await the promised beauty. The cleaning lady clumsily tries to assume the seductive posture of Lola Lola to no

illustration No. 2

Amy Jolly's androgynous cabaret costume in Morocco.

avail. She is no match for the fetishized, erotic Goddess on the poster. Angerly she throws the bucket of water at the window but Lola Lola's poster remains untouched by the dirty water, protected by the pane of glass. Frank McConnell notes in his analysis of The Blue Angel that,

> If Lola Lola lies behind the shield of glass.....
> Dietrich lies behind the role of "Lola" even more
> inaccessibly and tantalizingly.
>
> (Del Gaudio, 1993, p.32)

Von Sternberg's characters often play the role of the cabaret singer. As in Morocco, Blonde Venus and The Blue Angel much of Dietrich's time is spent in the dressing room preparing to perform or to put another layer onto the mystery. The introduction of performance within a performance may be seen as an additional layer to the character and to the star. In Blonde Venus in the cabaret scene Helen Faraday appears on stage in a gorilla costume bound by chains as the chorus girls, disguised as a tribe, dance primitively around her. The atmosphere is of a primeval force. She removes her costume slowly in time to the music of the native drums. On removal of one mask she reaches for another. This time it is a curly blonde wig which she places on her dark hair. Now completely out of her gorilla costume we see before us a beautiful, erotic vision (Ref. ill No. 3). Here Von Sternberg is using costume as a disguise in an investigation of appearance versus reality. In "appearance" she was a gorilla but in "reality" she is a beautiful woman. She has become a teasing, seductive vision, a constant danger to the male. Von Sternberg experiments with this notion throughout his films but a particularly good example of it arises in The Blue Angel. On Lola

illustration No. 3.

Helen Faraday having emerged from her ape costume in Blonde Venus.

Lola's second appearance on stage she wears an eighteenth century costume of the French upper-class. This costume represents dignity and respectability. The costume was altered by Von Sternberg to reflect the opposite. When Lola Lola turns her back to the audience the dress is backless and her legs are on view to the audience. On "appearance" we expect respectability but in reality respectability was the furthest notion on Lola Lola's mind.[2]

Deceiving the audience by surface illusion fascinated Von Sternberg. His understanding of the erotic charges associated with the dressing and undressing of the screen image is evident in the majority of his films. In The Blue Angel Lola Lola often teasingly strips down to her undergarments. By doing this she is promising satisfaction yet she denies fulfilment immediately as she never completely removes all her garments. The audience is allowed to witness Lola Lola's mystery begin to unfold by the removal of her layers but we are never allowed to know or see the 'real' Lola Lola.

On a metaphorical, symbolic level Von Sternberg's clever use of the underpants introduces us to another unique aspect of Dietrich. Up until the 1850's women never wore underpants. This garment was specifically associated with the male gender. Stage girls wore underpants only while performing.

As Lola Lola climbs the stairs to her changing room she removes her underpants and they fall on Professor Rath's shoulder. This hints at cross-dressing, a subject which dealt with again in such films as Morocco and Blonde Venus. Anne Hollander suggests that the use of such garments probably formed the connection between female performers and sexual

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[2] Del Gaudio, 1993 p.34.

corruption by referring to transvestism and the sexually forbidden.[3] Dietrich was notorious for her masculine traits. Von Sternberg highlighted her naturally androgynous persona through the use of costume and gesture. Peter Bogdanovich notes that Dietrich's allure lies in her ability to appeal to both the male and female audience simultaneously.[4] Much of the appeal of film stars lie in their audience's ability to connect with their screen characters. Men can connect with her because they acknowledge that she mirrors their own masculinity. At times she appears very butch on screen. She flirts with pretty girls and looks as good in a tuxedo as any man. In The Blue Angel Lola Lola definitely assumes the masculine role. In appearance she is feminine and beautiful yet she is far from the traditional simpering female.

Through her representation of the masculine she reduces her leading male to a non-threatening feminine state. This is reversing normal role playing. Professor Rath is reduced to putting on her stockings and holding her powder as she prepares to go out and earn the money. But The Blue Angel only scratched the surface of what was yet to come. In The Scarlet Empress (1934) we see Catherine gain power over Peter. His final costume is a long white night-dress, in which he could be mistaken for an old lady, while we see Catherine ring the bells of victory in a hussars military uniform (Ref. ill. No. 4). In Morocco Dietrich shocked the audience when she appeared on screen in a black tail and top hat. She once said that because she was dressed as a man she acted like a man.[5]

In a confident, cool manner she mingles amongst the audience. Calmly she approaches a

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[3] Del Gaudio, 1993 p.35

[4] Bell-Metereau, 1993 p.104

[5] Tompson, David, Late Show, BBC, London.

illustration No. 4.

'Catherine the Great' in her hussars military uniform in The Scarlet Empress.

young lady and proceeds to kiss her on the lips. This gesture was added purely to shock. The tilting of her hat was her own addition to the scene. These gestures were not in the script and Von Sternberg did not direct her to perform in this way. They were a personal touch added by Dietrich. In her homeland Germany, it wasn't unusual to see two women embrace and through-out her life she constantly mocked the conservative manner of the Americans. Von Sternberg was summoned before the Paramount chiefs and forced to defend these actions. Dietrich waited for him to buckle under the pressure of censorship. However Von Sternberg won his battle against censorship and the scene was left in. He also won the admiration and respect of Dietrich. By the end of their second film together their personal relationship was firmly established. She completely trusted him and she never questioned his talent. She presented him with some of the most intricate, photogenically impossible costumes, knowing that his technical expertise could overcome any problem.

These films could belong to the silent era and their director knew the language of the silent film extremely well. Dialogue was not important to Von Sternberg: he believed that a story could be told without words. Every gesture Marlene Dietrich acts out can be analysed to convey a message to the audience. When we see Lola Lola in The Blue Angel assume a masculine sitting position on a chair during her final rendition of 'Falling in Love Again' we understand her confidence and her victory over the possessiveness of the Professor (Ref. ill. No. 5). As we watch Amy Jolly fix her bow tie into position while balancing a cigarette in her mouth we wonder is this a man, or a woman, or perhaps both? (Ref ill. No. 6).

In silent films, lighting played as important a role as gestures. Few directors could equal Von Sternberg's beautiful use of lighting in a shot. He was as much a painter as he was a director. He perceived the actors' physical form as a canvas on which he could paint with

illustration No. 5.

Lola Lola during her final rendition of 'Falling in Love Again.'

illustration No. 6.

Amy Jolly's butch, masculine appearance in Morocco.

light and shade. Both actor and setting worked in conjunction to create a wonderfully balanced, aesthetically appealing still life. The actors simply added more depth, texture and tonal qualities to the shot. The essence of the famous Dietrich face was the way light was used to give her face a glowing appearance. A combined Von Sternberg/Dietrich decision determined that her face be lit by a strong light placed high above her head. This highlighted her cheekbones and heavy eyelids. Her physical beauty was enhanced and captured beautifully in intense close-up shots.

The best example of this is in a scene in Shanghai Express (1932). Shanghai Lily enters the cabin and turns off the light. Moonlight shines in through a window directly above her head. The silver light shines on her hair causing it to glow and shimmer in the moonlight. She tilts her head up towards the light and for a lasting moment in a very emotional scene we see the beautiful Dietrich face. This is the face that made them both famous. This is the face Von Sternberg mastered to perfection. She raises her cigarette to her mouth and we see her hand quiver in the moonlight (Ref. ill. No. 7). In this one scene, without any dialogue, but purely through the use of light and gesture, Von Sternberg allows the audience to see Shanghai Lily's true suffering.

In the wedding scene in The Scarlet Empress Dietrich is filmed behind lace in the warm glow of candlelight. Her eyes shimmer with tears as she frantically observes her new surroundings with fear. Von Sternberg's light retains Dietrich's beauty on film while she acts out Catherine's agonising struggle to the audience.

Every item on Von Sternberg's sets are lit with as much accuracy and precision as Dietrich's face. Objects sparkle and glow as they move in the amazing light. The masquerade ball in

illustration No. 7.

A combined Von Sternberg/Dietrich decision determined that her face be lit by a strong light placed high above her head. (Shanghail Lily in Shanghai Empress).

Dishonoured (1931) resembles the opening scene in The Devil is a woman (1935). Both generate a claustrophobic atmosphere whereby the actors can barely move on the screen. They are entangled and surrounded by rivers of glowing streamers. The screen is alive with texture. The Russian Court in The Scarlet Empress dances and liquefies in the candle light. The light catches the burning candles as they drip with wax. Every prop is highlighted and shimmers in a celebration of light (Ref. ill. No. 8). The play with light and shade which causes sculpted forms to appear to melt into one another is always associated with Von Sternberg's work.

illustration No. 8.

The play with light and shade which causes sculpted forms to appear to melt into one another (The Scarlet Empress).

CHAPTER TWO

THE VON STERNBERG/DIETRICH FILMS IN RELATION TO FEMINIST FILM THEORY

The inability of film critics to class the Von Sternberg/Dietrich films into a genre has given rise to much debate. The rare characteristics of these films disallow the spectator from categorising them or placing them under a specific heading. The films may be visually related to the Film Noir style, which first appeared in the 1940's, while the film theorists such as Laura Mulvey consider the films to be examples of classic Hollywood cinema based on their representation of the female role.

Film Noir gets it's name from a visual style. The films contain scenes of lurking shadows, dark interiors and contrasts between dark and light. Brightly lit shots and sun-drenched landscapes are rarely evident in films associated with Film Noir. The term 'noir' also serves as a metaphor for their contents. A sense of bleakness and darkness is always present. The truth is often obscured and we are unable to distinguish between reality and appearance. These elements would seem to promote the connection between the Von Sternberg/Dietrich films and Film Noir.

Most films associated with Film Noir evolve around a crime which is usually centred around the femme fatale's violent passions. The woman challenges the social norm and male power. As Judith Williamson acknowledges in Consuming Passions

> The most striking aspect of the conflicts and ambiguities in these films is that they confront men, in the form of women.
>
> (Williamson, 1986, p.173)

The femme fatale uses her femininity in an effort to gain power in a dominantly male society. Society will not allow this to happen and in a statement of morality the woman is punished for her threatening passion. The accused female may be domesticated by the male through marriage or turned into an object of desire for the male to fantasise about. By turning her into a fetish object she becomes less of a challenge to male authority. Von Sternberg's films are all about the battle of the sexes and the female always wins. She never becomes subject to a dominant male. Her passion and power is never destroyed although it may be argued that she is responsible for her own self-destruction.

The treatment and representation of the female role is discussed in detail in Laura Mulvey's thesis, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. Mulvey argues that mainstream Hollywood cinema accepts and portrays society in a manner which establishes the male as the ruler. According to Mulvey society exists in a pattern whereby the ultimate symbol of power is the phallus and the person in possession of this symbol assumes a powerful role in society. It is the woman's lack of possession which establishes the phallus as the ultimate, all-powerful symbol. Femininity's existence stands merely as a subject to the dominant masculine order. The female can only be recognised as a castrated version of masculinity, hence lacking in power. This establishes the male in an active role while forcing the female to assume a passive role. Society evolves around the male and he determines the role and nature of all around him. The female stands bound by society whereby men can command and act out their fantasies on her. Passive femininity signifies and establishes the existence of masculinity.

Mulvey discusses the relationship between society and film. According to her thesis mainstream Hollywood cinema echoes the active/male and passive/female very accurately.

The function of the leading female in film is purely to provoke and encourage the male protagonist. As Budd Boetticher clearly states,

> What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.
>
> (Mulvey, 1975, p.809)

The male fantasises and gazes upon the female. Classic Hollywood cinema is styled in accordance to this theory. Von Sternberg was adamant that there is only one audience. The actors perform solely for the director. However in theory there are two audiences. One is the actor's fellow performers on the cinema screen and the other is the spectators watching the film. The woman is made into a spectacle for both. This is achieved by creating a main all-powerful male character and allowing the spectators to associate themselves with him. This gives them a power over the female role and both audiences are raised to a sense of erotic rapture by the appearance of the desired female.

As one of the examples for illustration of her theory she chooses the Von Sternberg/Dietrich film, Morocco. Her choice of film is problematic. By choosing this film she is placing it under the heading of classic Hollywood cinema, as she relates her thesis to this style of film. Von Sternberg presents Dietrich as a fetish item through the use of costume and camera work. However I do not believe that Marlene Dietrich assumes the traditional passive female

role, subjected to the cruelty of the active male. Von Sternberg has changed the traditional role of the female in these films. In The Blue Angel Professor Rath does not possess the symbolic phallus. It's Lola Lola who assumes the dominant role in the plot and in doing so she takes control. He is a subject to her power. Likewise in Dishonoured, X-27 plays the dominant role and had it not been that she was a woman, could have earned the title of the most successful spy in history. I acknowledge Dietrich's intense femininity at times in these films but I feel this was a conscious decision taken by Von Sternberg. Marlene Dietrich is extremely feminine in The Scarlet Empress but she was staging her femininity in an effort to gain power in society. It is this theory of staging femininity, discussed by Joan Riviere in "Womanliness as Masquerade" (1929), which I feel bares great relevance to the Von Sternberg/Dietrich films.

In her thesis Joan Riviere discusses femininity in terms of a mask called 'womanliness' which may be put on and taken off. She acknowledges that in the past, a woman in the work place with intellectual goals was considered masculine. While treating women with successful careers she developed the theory of masquerade. In her study of one woman who was engaged in work of a propagandist nature in America she drew some interesting conclusions. At rally meetings this woman could stand on a platform and gain the crowd's attention. In doing so she was assuming an active public role in society and automatically questioning the traditional passive role of the female. She appeared a very successful, confident leading female. However she was conscious of the contempt experienced by her male peers and after each rally she suffered severe anxiety and a strong need to be reassured. It was a common occurrence that after her speech she would approach these males and proceed to appear extremely feminine in their presence. Her appearance on stage was in complete contrast to her appearance after speaking. She assumed a very passive role, appearing very vulnerable.

Riviere established her actions as a typical example of the masquerade of femininity. On stage she became a dominant female by directing the attention of the crowd on herself. After her speech she became very aware of the immediate danger. She had gained the power of the phallus and in doing so she had upset patriarchal society and challenged it's power. In private she rebelled against these revengeful men and resented any assumption that she wasn't of equal standing to them. In her powerful state she immediately had to accept her situation and in desperation she acknowledged her condition of womanhood. By performing in this manner she was taking two important steps. Firstly, she was gaining the reassurance of her male peers by presenting herself to the male society as a non-threatening, fetishized female, seeking the sexual support of the dominant male. Secondly she was protecting herself from the revengeful male. As Gaylyn Studlar points out

> "Masquerade serves as the female's defensive strategy with the patriarchy."
>
> (Studlar, 1988, p.72)

Theorists such as Lacan claim that masquerade is the essence of femininity because in society femininity exists in reference to the patriarchal position.[6] Femininity draws on the existence of the patriarchal power. Staging femininity is evident in all of Von Sternberg's films. He constantly questions the power of the woman over the power of the man. Through Dietrich's fetishized image she gains power over her spectators watching the film and her spectators in the film. According to Mulvey the actress is purely an object of the male gaze. I feel Rivieres' theory provides us with a better understanding of Dietrich's role in these films.

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[6] The Women's Companion to International Film.

In The Scarlet Empress we are introduced to Sophia as a sweet and mannerly young princess. She has led a very sheltered childhood, never encouraged to question her position of circumstance. By the end of the film Sophia is transformed into a powerful queen. The historic title 'Catherine the Great' is well suited to the new ruler of Russia. As a young Princess Sophia is taken from her sheltered childhood and thrown into the disorderly Russian court. After much pain and suffering at the cruel hands of power, she is forced to assess her existence in her new environment. After the birth of her son, Catherine acknowledges her position as a woman. She comes to terms with male power and realises her position in relation to this power. Sophia the child vanishes and 'Catherine the Great', the deadly femme fatale makes her entrance (Ref. ill. No. 9). Catherine takes the elements of the masquerade and turns them to her own advantage. By cleverly using her femininity as a political tool she encourages Count Alexei to fall in love with her and in doing so gains his admiration and loyalty. She flirts and seduces the army officers in an effort to gain their support for the rebellion. While her husband Peter ravishes and terrorises Russia, Catherine slowly builds up an army for her planned rebellion. The once powerful men of the Russian Army become mere conquests of her destructive power and in the final scene we see them raise her high upon their shoulders, proclaiming their absolute loyalty to the new Tsarianna of Russia.

Dishonoured tells the story of the wartime spy X-27. The chief of the secret service requests her service for her ability to 'handle men'. Lieutenant Kranau soon acknowledges her tantalizing, treacherous power:

> "…. You bring something into war that doesn't belong in it. You trick men into death with your body."

illustration No. 9.

'Catherine the Great', the deadly femme fatale makes her entrance.

Her first mission is to seduce an officer in order to gain top secret information. He is distracted from his position by her charm and beauty. Her victim Colonel Kourin, is surprised to learn of her position in the secret service. A man could never have charmed and manipulated him so cleverly. X-27 acknowledges the power her physical beauty has over the male species and uses it to her own advantage. Later in the film we see Dietrich assume a role unlike any thus far in her career. Dressed as a country peasant with a pale bulbous face, X-27 is employed in a hotel as a house-maid where secret meetings are being held. She is discovered and trapped by Lieutenant Kranau. Fully aware of the danger that awaits captured spies, she turns to him in desperation and requests for her last night to be spent in his company. Kranau is entrapped by her charm and cannot resist the temptation. On his surrender to her beauty he becomes the captured victim and X-27 assumes the powerful position. Von Sternberg reverses the normal role-playing. Kranau becomes her puppet. When she offers him a glass of wine he never suspects it s poisonous content.

The heroine is fully aware that her quest for power is dependant on how she appears before men and how they perceive her beauty. In the Von Sternberg/Dietrich films the female spends a lot of time observing her reflection in the mirror in search of the perfect image, the perfect image which she believes will attract and entrap the men who view her.

CHAPTER THREE

How the Film Audience may perceive the Von Sternberg/Dietrich Films

Within psychoanalytic film theory 'the look' is a term used by theorists to explain the relationship between the screen image and the spectator. While there are exchanges of looks between the characters within the screen spaces, the spectator's look is similar to that of camera. In this chapter I will focus on the spectator's look in relation to the screen image.

Film theorists have drawn on the ideas of Freud's work on the libidinal drives when studying the spectator's look. Scopophilia, the drive to pleasurable looking has been closely associated to specific qualities of cinematic pleasure. Pleasure in relation to cinema is strongly connected not only to voyeurism but also narcissism. In a cinematic context the notion of voyeurism is very strong. The screen image, which is the object of the spectator's gaze, is distanced from him/her in a way that a return look is impossible. Narcissism describes the spectator's identification with the screen image as his/her ideal self-image.[7] By looking at both narcissism and voyeurism in relation to the cinema audience, the mystery and enchantment of Von Sternberg/Dietrich films will begin to unfold before us.

The concept of narcissism is discussed by Mulvey. Lacan describes how the moment a child recognises his image in a mirror is crucial for the establishment of his ego. This happens at a time when the child's imaginative capabilities surpass his physical capabilities. This results in the child's recognition of his reflection as joyous, in that he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. The recognition of his image is overlaid with misrecognition because the recognised image is conceived as a true reflection of the self. The misrecognised image projects this image forward as an ideal ego. This moment marks the beginning of a life-long love affair with one-self. At this

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[7] The Women's Companion to International Film,

moment the child establishes a relationship with "I" and this marks the birth of his ego. [8] Throughout our lives we are open to influences which shape and mould our perceived image of ourselves. The film industry feeds upon this love affair between image/self-image. As mentioned in Chapter One, the allure of film stars lies in their ability to connect with their audience. Narcissism is a major link between film stars and audience. Strong similarities may be made between the screen and the mirror. Both, frame the human form in it's enviroment.[9] The spectator may look at the image on the screen in the same manner as he/she may look at their reflection in the mirror.

The film is influential enough to allow temporary loss of ego. As the child looking in the mirror misrecognises his true reflection, the spectator may also become unaware of his perceived being. Hence the film encourages the spectator to suffer temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing it by allowing the spectator to experience joyous recognition of his/her ideal ego in the film star. Von Sternberg provides his audience with a mythical landscape and characters which are strong and appealing enough to encourage the audience to want to be like the heroine.

On first observation the cinema would seem to be remote from the undercover world of a voyeur. Film actors knowingly and willingly act before the camera in comparison to the unknowing and unwilling victim of a voyeur. However what is seen on the screen is the isolated and sealed world of cinema. The actors and actresses are unaware of the large audience as they proceed to act out scenes for our entertainment. In a sense, the film industry is playing on the voyeuristic fantasies of it's audience. In the auditorium, isolated

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[8] Mulvey, 1975, p.807.

[9] Mulvey, 1975, p.807.

by darkness, the spectators are allowed to feel that they are the only ones watching the moving images on the cinema screen.[10] This seems to promote the concept of voyeurism. The cinema screen gives the spectator an illusion of looking in on a private world.

In Chapter One, I referred to Von Sternberg's use of costume to portray the androgynous appeal, which Dietrich was notorious for. In this chapter I will deal with the male attire as a parody of male narcissism.

In Blonde Venus costume, specifically male attire, is essential to Helen's control of the performance. On a poster advertising her Paris cabaret act she is depicted as an abstract art deco nude (Ref. ill No. 10). The advertisement portrays her purely as an object for the male gaze. On stage she appears in a white tuxedo suit. Her male attire defies the spectator's expectation that her body is the main attraction of the show. Her costume displays the fluidity of sexual identity.[11] Helen Faraday is an example of a type of performer who can drift between masculinity and femininity.

As Gaylyn Studlar points out,

> Without the phallus, Helen assumes the male prerogative of sexual freedom with only the exterior trappings of 'masculinity'. She becomes a mirror reflection of the male manipulative power.
>
> (Studlar, 1988, p.73)

[10] Mulvey, 1975, p.806.

[11] Studlar, 1988, p.73.

illustration No. 10.

The poster advertising Helen's cabaret act depicts her as an abstract art deco nude.

This scene is extremely important because it ridicules and parodies male narcissism. The male spectator is forced to question his attachment to the heroine. Earlier on in the film she is presented to the male audience as a primitive goddess, born as an object of beauty for all men to gaze upon. In this scene she is laughing at masculinity and seriously questioning the power of the "dominant male".

By Von Sternberg's and Dietrich's second film together, they had established the mise-en-scene associated with the Dietrich allure. In Morocco, Amy Jolly, steps out from the foggy darkness of the docks and into the Von Sternberg light. Through a veil of lace we see her wonderful glowing face. On her first introduction she captures the erotic interest of the spectator. Le Bessière's obvious interest in Amy Jolly represents the male spectator's equally lustful notions of the desired heroine. As pointed out in Chapter Two, according to Mulvey's theory the male spectator may gain power over the heroine through his direct association with the dominant hero. However as the film progresses we can see Amy Jolly's refusal to be dominated or controlled by the desiring male. During her first appearance on stage we see her in a black tuxedo suit. Her butch actions do not soften her very masculine appearance in her male attire. Amy gains the male's prerogative of sexual freedom. She becomes a mirror reflection of the man's power.

> In donning the male attire, Dietrich transforms the spectacle of female representation into a ritualized acting out of bisexual identification.
>
> (Studlar, 1988, p.73)

Laurence Kubie claims that cross-dressing enables a person to become both sexes without completely rejecting the person's original sexual identity.[12] Amy's performance questions the importance of the anatomical possession of the penis: the physical difference between the sexes. In this scene Amy's pretence at masculinity is formed around her clothes and actions. Her tuxedo and flirtation with the lady in the audience suggests a sliding in sexual identity. The cinema audience is puzzled as to whether this is a man or a woman, or perhaps both?

In Blonde Venus Von Sternberg introduces Helen Faraday in the nude form. This presents the audience with notions of the erotic while also portraying the purity of Helen in her primal state. Nudity in film serves a variety of functions. Within its historical/artistic context the stylised nude body represents pure, unblemished beauty. However taken within a film context nudity may present the audience with notions of the erotic and sexual. Von Sternberg's introduction of Helen in her primal state suggests a state of pure sexuality.[13] The scene quickly moves on from the Bavarian stream where Helen was swimming, to New York and a shot of the bath water in which Helen's son bathes. The audience is given very little time to adjust to the transformation of Helen, the carefree young actress, to Helen, the New York housewife and mother. The audience presumes that the young legs we see splashing in the bath water are the same pair we saw previously in the Bavarian stream. The water of the Bavarian stream and the New York bath water creates a continuity in the shot which prevents any interruption in the audience's concentration. This allows the spectator to carry the erotic notions of Dietrich forward to direct them onto the young boy's legs. The male spectator is tricked into possessing erotic notions for Helen's son. While the fascination

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[12] Studlar, 1988, p.73.

[13] Del Gaudio, 1993, p.43.

with the fetish legs of Dietrich seems to promote his heterosexuality, the erotic connotations suggested by the appealing legs of a young boy strengthens the question of the male spectator's homosexuality.

Amongst Dietrich's many admirers and spectators Von Sternberg was her most loyal and admiring subject. His loyalty to her was as uncompromising as his undying love. Despite this, her dressing room door was often locked and this action warned intruders that her latest affair was in progress behind closed doors. Maria Riva associates Von Sternberg's constant moodiness and general uncompromising stubborn manner to her constant humiliation of him through her brazen infidelities. Her actions in front of the camera didn't differ from her real life appearance. She was aware of his admiration for her and her treatment of Von Sternberg in 'real life' wasn't unlike the relationship she has with her leading men in these films. Like the hero in classic Hollywood cinema, Von Sternberg's greatest wish was to conquer her resilience and possess his heroine, moulding her into his fantastical image of the ideal woman. The only barrier was Marlene Dietrich's unconquerable independence. While acting in front of the camera, Dietrich seems aware of Von Sternberg's presence. She acknowledges that he is using her for his fascination of her image. She acts scenes for him, deliberately making herself into an object of his gaze. This creates a certain tension in the film, as the audience are aware of another story, similar to the plot of the film, taking place outside the frame. During the 'Hot Voodoo' number in Blonde Venus Helen smiles confidently into the camera. Her look is directed so intensely at the camera that the audience is left to wonder, is this Helen Faraday smiling at us or is this Dietrich jokingly teasing Von Sternberg. While shooting close-up scenes, Von Sternberg insisted on the crew leaving the set. The emotional close-up of Dietrich during the wedding scene in The Scarlet Empress is a result of hours of work by Dietrich and Von Sternberg. No crew member was present

during the filming. In this scene the audience is subjected to the intensity of Catherine's suffering. Tears well in her frantic eyes and the spectator in the audience feels that he/she is invading on a personal, emotional moment for Catherine. Unwillingness is written all over her face and in this sense the spectator assumes the role of a voyeur. The audience is looking through the camera lens at Catherine in her isolated world. She's unaware of our intrusion. However the audience is also observing through the ingenious eyes of Von Sternberg. The audience may only see what the director wishes them to see. Dietrich's glossy, sensuous image is rooted in Von Sternberg's lust for her and his simultaneous need to repress the threat that her sexuality poses to him. The 'femme fatales' fascination and simultaneous threat has gained her the reputation of a deadly, forceful woman. This is partly due to her representation in thee arts as a harmful character. In 'real life' Dietrich was renowned for her sexual fluidity and her uncompromising need to control and dictate all around her. Similar to the male victim, Von Sternberg was forced to realise her powerful position. This identification allowed him to experience himself in the powerless position of her victim.

As Durgnat points out...

> "Woman is 'fatale' because erotic passion is subversive.
> Eve offers the apple of fulfilment and inner freedom."
>
> (Durgnat, 1966, p.267)

Mulvey claims that erotic representation of the female in Hollywood cinema, forces the

audience to assume the role of the male spectator, regardless of their gender. In Hollywood cinema the characters women are asked to identify with are usually victims of the patriarchal power. The appeal to the female spectator is based on her socially engrained victimisation at the hands of patriarchy. In Von Sternberg's films Dietrich has a certain power. She is an object of the male desire, but she is not a passive object of a controlling gaze. She looks back with defiance. Her gaze asserts presence and power in contrast to the male's gaze which often leads to his submission to her power. Mulvey claims that Dietrich is fetishized to an extreme so that,

> the powerful look of the male protagonist is broken in favour of the image of direct erotic rapport with the spectator.... There is little or no mediation of the look through the eyes of the main male protagonist... The most important absence is that of the controlling male.
>
> (Mulvey, 1985, p.812)

Unmeditated by the male gaze, the gap between the direct erotic image and the spectator narrows. This gap allows the female spectator to step beyond identification with the image and may encourage a position of desire which crosses the boundaries of heterosexuality.

As I have established, these films are problematic because they go against the normal format for classic Hollywood films and raise questions for Mulvey's theory. Dietrich does not fit the image of the de-eroticized film heroine nor is she the traditional passive object of the male gaze. Her open sexuality seems to draw forward feelings from straight and lesbian

women, gay and straight males. In Women and Films (1991), Ann Kaplan discusses Helen's Paris cabaret scene in Blonde Venus. As Dietrich enters the stage she reaches out to fondle the scarf of one of the chorus girls. She uses her masculine disguise to legitimize the action. Kaplan claims that at this moment the female spectator may receive a powerful erotic charge due to her connection with both the male attire (which represents masculinity) and the effect of the pronounced female-female eroticism being shown:

> Dietrich manages to combine being on display with a subversive female-female bonding that functions in a mode quite other than the male objectification of the female.
>
> (Kaplan, 1991, p.58)

This momentary female-female bonding subverts the patriarchal system and creates a gap through which women may connect with the heroine.

> Dietrich's appeal is rooted in her "androgynous eroticism highly charged by sexual ambiguity."
>
> (Shudlar, 1988, p.49)

CONCLUSION

In the final weeks of filming The Devil is a Woman, Von Sternberg wrote a sad note to Dietrich.

> I am tired, beloved. I can no longer fight with you,...
> I can add nothing to you. I'm only plagiarizing myself.
> My parting gift to you will be the greatest 'Dietrich film'
> yet. In it, I give you all my talents. You will see the
> ultimate Dietrich and it will be your favourite of our
> seven films.
>
> (Riva, 1992, pg344)

The Devil is a Woman was Von Sternberg's last precious gift of love to Marlene Dietrich. She loved and adored her face in this film (Ref. ill. No. 11). This was the face she tried hard to preserve all her life. It sparkles and glows in front of the camera. Nothing distracts from her icon perfection. There is no indication of her sadness and suffering at the thought of losing Von Sternberg. Nothing was allowed to infiltrate and damage the product. The audience is never allowed to witness the 'true' Marlene Dietrich.

Although close to her husband it was clear that professionally Dietrich was completely dependant and attached to Von Sternberg. Almost thirty years after The Devil is a Woman Dietrich told The Sunday Times of her complete despair during the filming of The Devil is a Woman.

> I didn't leave Sternberg. He left me! That's very
> important. In my life, he was the man I wanted to

illustration No. 11.

Marlene Dietrich in The Devil is a Woman.

please most. He decided not to work with me any more and I was very unhappy about that.'

(Lloyd, 1983, p.37)

The characters Concha Perez and Don Pascal strongly resemble Dietrich and Von Sternberg and the plot in this film is as tragic and as romantic as Von Sternberg's life with Marlene Dietrich. In fact this film was so personally linked to Von Sternberg's own experience that he puts himself into it twice. Under their carnival masks, both Romero's and Atwills mouths and moustaches greatly resemble the director's. Lionel Atwill's tragic character, Don Pascal is astonishingly like Von Sternberg. As in the Von Sternberg/Dietrich relationship there is an interplay between puppet and manipulator, master and victim with no clear distinction between them.

The Devil is a Woman contains all the identifying traits of the Von Sternberg/Dietrich films. This film is as ambiguous as the previous six films. Von Sternberg never fully explains Concha Perez and her actions and in doing so he seduces the audience into studying and observing her more closely. At the end of the film Concha exercises the same cruelty and control over her audience as she does over her male victims in the film. The audience is left with nothing to grasp, much less to embrace or understand.

The complexity and ingenuity of these films baffle and encapture the imagination of the cinema audience, while the festivity and aesthetic balance of the Von Sternberg/Dietrich works amuse and satisfy. Their appeal does not centre around the plots in the films. It is their unisexual appeal to both heterosexual and homosexual, male and female which opens these films to all audiences.

On the day The Devil is a Woman came to an end, Von Sternberg wrote another note to Dietrich. He signed it,

> "Danke, es war himmlisch, auf wiedersehen."

(Riva, 1992, p.344)

This translates into...

> "I thank you, it was heavenly. Till we meet again, good-bye."

(Riva, 1992, p.345)

Later that day Von Sternberg announced the end of filming and quietly left the set. As Riva states in her book,

> Scattered sparks of his brilliance would glow again over the remaining years, but they were the afterglow of what had once been celestial fire.

(Riva, 1992, p.345)

Dietrich continued her career in film and later returned to her former career as a cabaret artist, a role she played so well in her films. However it is the Von Sternberg/Dietrich collaboration that both director and actress are best remembered for. Although Von Sternberg is described by many as Dietrich's creator it should also be clear that Dietrich moulded and manipulated him as much as he manipulated her natural traits and talents. Their's was a collaboration unique in film history.

illustration No. 12.

Meeting and Loving Von Sternberg in Venice.

"In my life, he was the man I wanted to please most."

(Dietrich, The Sunday Times, 1983).

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