Josef von Sternberg, UNDERWORLD (1927, 80 minutes)

Academy Award—1929—Best Writing, Original Story: Ben Hecht

Directed by Josef von Sternberg
Written by Howard Hawks (scenario) and Ben Hecht (story)
Produced by B.P. Schulberg
Cinematography by Bert Glennon
Second Unit Director Henry Hathaway
Presenters Jesse L. Lasky and Adolph Zukor

George Bancroft...’Bull’ Weed
Evelyn Brent...’Feathers’ McCoy
Clive Brook…Rolls Royce Wensel
Fred Kohler...’Buck’ Mulligan


1944 To Have and Have Not, 1943 Corvette K-225, 1941 Sergeant York, 1940 His Girl Friday, 1939 Only Angels Have Wings, 1938 Bringing Up Baby, 1934 Twentieth Century, 1933 Today We Live, 1932 Scarface, 1931 The Criminal Code, and 1923 Quicksands.


Philip Carli. “Philip Carli brings both prodigious musical talent and a committed scholarly outlook to his lifelong passion for the music and culture of the turn of the last century. He discovered silent film at the age of five and began his accompaniment career at thirteen, with a performance for Lon Chaney’s 1923 version of The Hunchback of Notre Dame. While at college he programmed and accompanied an annual series of silent films, and also organized and conducted a 50-piece student orchestra using 19th-century performance practice. Since then, he has continued his studies of the film, music and culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, earning a doctorate from the Eastman School of Music. He has at the same time toured extensively as a
American director, was born in Vienna, eldest child of a poor Orthodox Jewish family. His father, Moses Sternberg, “was an enormously strong man who often used his strength on me….After each beating, the punishing hand was extended to be kissed, this in a noble tradition then prevalent.” Moses’ wife Serafin (born Singer), whom her son described as “gentle, with no experience taming a lion,” could do little to protect the children. When Sternberg was three, his father, unable to find work in Vienna, left for America to seek his fortune, planning to send for his wife and children later. Meanwhile the boy was left largely to his own devices, happy to explore the “children’s paradise” of Vienna, and especially the nearby Prater amusement park, until he was sent to school at the age of six. Here he was taught compulsory Hebrew by “a frightening monster with beard and piercing eyes” whose favorite diversion—according to Sternberg—was to terrify his young pupils until they messed their pants, and then beat them for doing so.

In 1901 Moses Sternberg sent for his family to join him in New York, though without providing any money for their fares. Somehow Serafin transported herself and her three children to Hamburg, and from there across the Atlantic. In New York Sternberg picked up basic English and attended the local public school. “The three years spent there are an absolute blank. Not one single day can I recall, nor one teacher.”

At the end of those three years Moses Sternberg, who had managed to find only menial, dead-end jobs, returned with his family to Vienna. “But not long after, like a squirrel that keeps turning a cage, he once more left to try his fortune, went again to the same country, and again in vain.” In 1908, his family once more followed him, this time for good. Sternberg attended high school on Long Island, but dropped out after a year spent “doing nothing but struggling with the English language.”

An aunt who owned a millinery store offered him work as an apprentice, from there he moved to the stockroom of a large lace house on Fifth Avenue. At seventeen he changed his name to ‘Josef’ and left home. He lived anywhere, took any work he could find, and in his spare time read all he could and studied art, determinedly making up for his scanty and haphazard education. A chance encounter during a rainstorm led to Sternberg’s first contact with films: he became apprentice to a man who coated, patched, and repaired film stock, a job that also involved occasional stints as a projectionist. Rapidly gaining skill and expertise, in 1914 he joined a more prestigious organization, the impressively named World Film Corporation of Fort Lee, New Jersey, becoming chief assistant to the director general, William A. Brady. Sternberg’s instincts for the visual image...
were by now well developed. His main task was to cut, patch, rettitle, and generally doctor the crude products of Brady’s company.

When the United States entered the war in 1917, Sternberg joined the Signal Corps, where he helped make training films; Victor Fleming, Wesley Ruggles, and Lewis Milestone were among his fellow workers. After being discharged he returned briefly to the World Film Corporation, before leaving to gain wider experience on a number of independent productions in America and Britain. His first credit as assistant director was on The Mystery of the Yellow Room (1919) directed at the Fort Lee studios by the émigré Frenchman Emile Chautard. In 1921 he traveled to Europe, staying for two months in Vienna, where he met the Viennese autor Karl Adolph, and undertook the translation of Adolph’s novel Töchter (Daughters of Vienna, 1923). In London Sternberg worked as assistant director on several films for Sir Charles Higham’s Alliance Productions, including The Bohemian Girl (1922), before returning to the United States. In 1923 he arrived in Hollywood.

With the exception of Chautard, for whom he retained both professional and personal respect, Sternberg had been distinctly unimpressed by the directors he had worked with (although they were, he commented dryly, “not altogether without value, for they showed that no special skill was needed to be a director”). His opinion of the Hollywood output he had seen was scarcely any higher. Most of it he dismissed as worthless, although he appreciated D.W. Griffith’s skill with the camera, and commended Chaplin for his “pictorial sobriety” and ability to portray “the most primitive emotions.” One of the few directors who earned Sternberg’s unqualified approval was Erich von Stroheim, “who invested his films... with an intensity that bristled.” Sternberg’s admiration for Stroheim (also, by coincidence, the product of a poor Jewish Viennese family) was manifested less in his work—though traces of Stroheim’s visual influence are evident in Sternberg’s early output—than in the public persona he chose to adopt: arrogant, tyrannical, and intolerant of all who contradicted him, or whose abilities he considered inferior to his own. The last category included virtually everybody—especially actors—with whom Sternberg had been in contact.

In Hollywood, he soon found work as assistant director on By Divine Right (1923), an independent production directed by Roy William Neill. Thanks to the film’s star and coproducer, Elliott Dexter, Sternberg acquired a further attribute in common with von Stroheim: the aristocratic particle “von,” which Dexter thought would look better on the credits. The addition, according to Sternberg, was made without his knowledge, but he seems to have made no objection, then or later.

After working on some half-dozen independent productions, in which he was allowed to direct an occasional scene, Sternberg got his chance to direct a picture of his own. He was approached by a young British comic actor, George K. Arthur, whose Hollywood career was flagging. Arthur had a script he had written entitled “Just Plain Bugs,” and a few thousand dollars of savings. He was prepared to finance the movie and to pay Sternberg $500 to direct him in it. Sternberg read the script and returned it with the advice that he burn it before anyone else could see it. In its place said Sternberg, he would provide a script of his own, at no extra cost—an offer which Arthur accepted “with tears in his eyes.” Sternberg, for his part, was attracted by directing a film without interference and with no restrictions apart from those imposed by the minuscule budget.

The Salvation Hunters (1925) was filmed in three-and-a-half weeks and cost $4,900. The story concerned three young derelicts (expressionistically designated The Boy, The Girl, and The Child) living on a huge dredge in San Pedro harbor, the vicissitudes they undergo, and their eventual—and somewhat unconvincing—triumph over their muddy circumstances. “There are important fragments of life that have been ignored by the motion picture,” proclaimed Sternberg’s opening title portentously, “because Body is more important than Thought. Our aim has been to photograph a Thought.” This aspiration was scarcely fulfilled by the movie that followed, for all its pictorial originality. Kevin Brownlow found it “pretentious... a flat and largely unimaginative exercise in filmcraft,” although he allowed it “a certain austere dignity.”

...Already the director’s preoccupation with pictorial composition—especially in the play of light and shadow—and his relative indifference to story line were clearly in evidence.

"Instead of the Elinor Glyn plots of the day, I had in mind a visual poem. Instead of flat lighting, shadows. In the place of pasty masks, faces in relief, plastic and deep-eyed. Instead of scenery which meant nothing, an emotionalized background that would transfer itself into my foreground. Instead of saccharine characters, sober figures moving in rhythm... And... the hero of the film was to be a dredge."

The premiere of The Salvation Hunters in a small theatre on Sunset Boulevard, was a disaster. “The members of the cast were in the audience, which greeted my work with laughter and jeers and finally rioted. Many walked out, and so did I.” However, George K. Arthur had contrived to show the film privately to Charlie Chaplin and Douglas Fairbanks, both of whom responded with enthusiasm. (Chaplin is said to have claimed, later, that he only praised it by way of a joke.) United Artists bought the picture for release, and Sternberg, now suddenly famous, was invited by Mary Pickford to direct her next film, to a scenario of his own choosing.

—Sternberg duly came up with an outline of the proposed movie. It was to be called Backwash and Pickford
would play a blind girl living in a Pittsburgh slum. Most of the action would take place in her own mind, using subjective camera. Pickford, who had commended Sternberg for his “freshness and originality” decided that such qualities might be taken too far the contract was terminated. Sternberg, now much in demand accepted an 8-picture contract with MGM. His first assignment was The Exquisite Sinner (1925), a romantic drama set in Brittany.

Both studio and stars were bewildered by Sternberg’s idiosyncratic—and autocratic—working methods. Robert Florey, assistant director on the film, described the final product as being exquisitely photographed, “full of interest, and the direction showed the humor of which Sternberg was master.” The studio, however, found the film incomprehensible and had it completely reshot by Phil Rosen (as Heaven on Earth). “The result,” said Sternberg, “was two ineffective films instead of one.” Nonetheless, he let himself be persuaded by Louis B. Mayer to undertake another assignment: The Masked Bride with Mae Murray. This was an even greater fiasco. After two weeks of shooting, Sternberg pointed his camera upwards at the studio roof, finding there “more interest than was apparent in the perfect material that clung to the polished floor,” walked off the set, and took his leave of MGM. (The picture was completed by Christy Cabane, who took directorial credit.)

Charlie Chaplin now asked Sternberg to direct a film for him. Entitled The Sea Gull (no connection with Chekhov’s play) or alternatively A Woman of the Sea (1926), it was intended as a comeback vehicle for Chaplin’s former costar, Edna Purviance. Sternberg’s screenplay, based on an idea by Chaplin, was a love story set in a fishing community on the California coast. When the film was completed, it received one private screening, after which Chaplin withdrew it, allowing no further showings. The only print was eventually burned by the US tax authorities, this being the only condition under which they would allow Chaplin to list the film as a tax loss. John Grierson, one of the few people to see the picture, described it as “a strangely beautiful and empty affair—possibly the most beautiful I have ever seen—of net patterns, sea patterns and hair in the wind.” Sternberg took the episode philosophically: “[Chaplin] charged off its cost against his formidable income tax, and I charged it off to experience.”

The possibility of working with the theatre director Max Reinhardt now took Sternberg to Germany, but the project came to nothing. Returning via England he met and married a minor actress named Riza Royce, and they together traveled back to Hollywood. With four failed assignments behind him Sternberg’s reputation had slipped badly and he was glad to accept an offer from B.P. Schulberg of work as an assistant director at Paramount. He was to remain at the studio for eight years and to make fourteen films for it—the bulk of his output, including all those reckoned to be his finest work.

His first major assignment was to direct retakes on Frank Lloyd’s Children of Divorce (1927), a task that involved reshooting half the film within three days. Sternberg accomplished this so successfully that the studio decided to entrust him with a picture of his own—“a little one,” Sternberg later explained, “a film no one might notice if it were left unfinished.” The script was adapted from a story by Ben Hecht, based on his experiences as a crime reporter in gangster-era Chicago, and the title, which Sternberg thought a good one, was Underworld (1927). George Bancroft starred as the mobster Bull Weed, with Clive Brook as his melancholy protégé—an alcoholic lawyer who has fallen for Weed’s mistress Feathers (Evelyn Brent).

Underworld, wrote Kevin Brownlow, “was the film that began the gangster cycle, and it remains the masterpiece of the genre, containing all the elements which became clichés in later pictures. Similar assessments of the film have often been made, though not all critics would agree. Andrew Sarris thought it “less of a proto-gangster film than a pre-gangster film,” and John Baxter wrote that its “reputation as ‘the first gangster film’ is unearned. . . . After four decades of gangster films, its histrionic and decorative styles are unconvincing, and the plot fatally episodic.” But though any claims of realism now seem hard to sustain, the film remains effective through the power of its emotionally charged images, notably in the central sequence of the gangland ball.

Hecht’s initial reaction was to demand his name be removed from the credits. The studio, with misgivings about the film’s commercial potential, premiered it surreptitiously in a minor New York theatre, without a press showing. Against all expectations, and apparently through word of mouth alone, it became a smash hit, and all-night screenings had to be arranged to meet the demand. Hecht, having presumably overcome his aversion, won an Oscar for best original screenplay, and Paramount gave Sternberg a $10,000 bonus. Possibly as a further token of their regard, the studio also asked him to cut Stroheim’s The Wedding March (1928) to an acceptable length. Sternberg claimed he had von Stroheim’s approval for this operation, but whether he did or not, Stroheim apparently never spoke to him again.

In 1927 Paramount had borrowed Emil Jannings, then widely regarded as the world’s greatest actor, from the UFA studios in Berlin and were searching for suitable properties to display their prestigious acquisition. Sternberg provided the story for Street of Sin (1928), assigned to Mauritz Stiller, which cast Jannings in the improbable role of a Soho burglar named Basher Bill; and also directed him in a far more suitable vehicle, The Last Command (1928).

Andrew Sarris described The Last Command as “Sternberg’s most Pirandellian film” Undoubtedly its plot—suggested by Lubitsch—is more dominant and more closely structured, than usual. Jannings plays a Hollywood extra, a frail old recluse who is cast as a Russian general in a war picture. A long flashback shows that the old man is a Russian general, who once served as a revolutionary the man who is now directing the Hollywood movie. In the film’s final sequences the old general imagines he is leading a real charge against the enemy and dies on the set. The story allowed Sternberg to alternate biting satire on the Hollywood studio system, shown as both obsequious and callous, with bravura visual episodes in the revolutionary sequences. His aim, he wrote, “was to extract the essence of the Hollywood film factory and to flash the essentials of a revolution without being realistic with either. I was an unquestioned authority on Hollywood, and that made it difficult to be unrealistic in picturing it. I felt more at home with the Russian Revolution, for there I was free to use my imagination alone.”
Both aspects of the film worried the studio executives, who maintained that Sternberg’s view of the Russian Revolution was “distorted,” and that his “untruthful” presentation of Hollywood would alienate the public. *The Last Command* would have been shelved, had not a major company shareholder seen it and insisted on its release. The film was a considerable critical success, gaining Academy Award nominations for best picture and best story and an Oscar for Jannings’ performance, though return at box office was disappointing.

By now Sternberg had acquired his permanent reputation as a cinematic tyrant, an arrogant perfectionist demanding total and unquestioning obedience from everybody on the set, actors in particular. “The only way to succeed,” he is supposed to have remarked, “is to make people hate you. That way they remember you.” Anecdotes abound concerning his outrageous behavior. Among the actors with whom he most notoriously clashed were Jannings, Sam Jaffe, Grace Moore, Wallace Beery and William Powell; the latter demanded a clause in his contract exempting him from ever working with Sternberg again. John Wayne confessed that Sternberg “scared him stiff” and Janet Leigh recalled that the director “had the most infuriating way of saying something,” though she conceded the effectiveness of his methods. In his role of tyrannical genius, Sternberg costumed himself appropriately, generally favoring jodhpurs and riding boots. He invariably carried a cane on set, and for *I, Claudius* he added an ornate Javanese turban.

Sternberg’s own attitude was simple and—granted his premise—eminently logical. He believed that “anything that aspires to be a work of art can have but one creator”—who, in the case of a film, was the director. Actors, therefore, were merely one element—albeit a highly important one—of the material with which the creative artist worked. “An actor is turned on and off like a spigot, and like the spigot, is not the source of the liquid that flows through him. . . . How can the sculptor be honest with the piece of clay that considers itself more important than the hands that mold it?” Such views could hardly fail to arouse resentment among the majority of actors. For Sternberg, the ideal player was one who—like Dietrich—would place herself unquestioningly and unreservedly in his hands.

Of Sternberg’s three remaining silent pictures, two may no longer exist; no prints are available in any archive. The first of the missing films, *The Drag Net* (1928) returned to the gangster milieu of *Underworld,* with George Bancroft playing a police detective, and William Powell a smooth gangland boss. It was poorly received at the box office, as was *Docks of New York* (1928)—of which prints have, fortunately, survived. This was a waterfront drama about a ships stoker (Bancroft) who rescues a prostitute (Betty Compson) from drowning and goes through a fake marriage ceremony with her. He plans to leave her the next morning but at the last moment changes his mind. Sternberg made superb use of his grimy settings, with dark figures silhouetted against gleaming nets or looming through iridescent fogs. But he also depicted his protagonists with uncharacteristic affection. “He achieves,” wrote Kevin Brownlow, “a feeling of warmth and humanity—he seems to care about his characters, instead of using them. . . .merely to form patterns of light and shade.” And Andrew Sarris thought that here, “more than in any previous film, Sternberg has integrated spectacle and psychology.”

Accounts of the other “lost” film, *The Case of Lena Smith* (1929), suggests that this may have been an even more personal work, and perhaps the finest of his silent movies. Set in the Vienna of Sternberg’s childhood, it recounted the misfortunes of a peasant girl who has a child by a dissolute young officer, and is said to have been an exceptionally beautiful film. *Thunderbolt* (1929) was Sternberg’s first talkie, shot initially as a silent and hurriedly remade with sound. The splices show, most obviously in the sequence where the gangster hero (George Bancroft yet again) is serenaded in the death cell by a full prison orchestra rendering negro spirituals. Elsewhere, though, the film displays some interestingly experimental use of the soundtrack. Peter Baxter singled out “an almost frenetic nightclub scene” that “exploits the dramatic possibilities of multiple sources of sound.”

But once more Sternberg’s career seemed to be in decline. *Underworld* apart, none of his Paramount films had done well in commercial terms. He badly needed a hit—and got one, from a rather unexpected source. In the temperamental, self-indulgent Emil Jannings, Sternberg the great manipulator of actors had almost met his match. After completing *The Last Command—*Jannings had reciprocated Sternberg’s feeling that he never wanted to work with him again. The actor returned the compliment. Yet word now came from Germany, that to guide him through his first sound movie, Jannings would accept no other director than Sternberg. The film would be a Paramount/UFA coproduction. Sternberg arrived in Berlin with his wife in late 1929.

Rejecting UFA’s first suggestion of a film about Rasputin, Sternberg chose a subject adapted from a novel by Heinrich Mann, *Professor Unrath.* It provided a vehicle for the archetypal Jannings role: a figure of self-satisfied dignity brought low. In this case, the protagonist is a provincial schoolteacher who becomes hopelessly infatuated with Lola-Lola, a singer in a sleazy café, and is utterly humiliated and degraded, ending as a stage
clown. When Lola leaves him for another man, he returns old and broken to his school and dies at his desk. Lola was yet to be cast; against everyone’s advice, Sternberg chose a little-known revue artiste, Marlene Dietrich, who had given little previous evidence of acting talent. “Her appearance was ideal; what she did with it was something else again. That would be my concern.”

The Blue Angel (1930), wrote Andrew Sarris, “is the one Sternberg film the director’s severest detractors will concede is beyond reproach and ridicule.” Much of it, though—especially considered beside his Hollywood films with Dietrich—looks crude and clumsy, particularly in the English version. (The film was shot in English and German versions; most critics prefer the latter.) Jannings’ style of acting has not worn well, and many sequences seem static and overarranged.

But despite its weaknesses, the film retains remarkable psychological and emotional power, thanks to the cold, ironic intensity with which Sternberg observes his characters and to the casual sexuality of Dietrich’s performance, which created one of the screen’s most enduring erotic icons.

Siegfried Kracauer saw in The Blue Angel a prefiguration of coming political events, asserting that it “poses anew the problem of German immaturity and moreover elaborates its consequences. . . . These screen figures anticipate what will happen in real life a few years later. The boys are born Hitler Youths.” Sternberg denied any such intentions, stating that he knew at the time little about Germany and nothing about Nazism. . . .

Response to The Blue Angel, in Germany and all over Europe, was immediate and spectacular. Even before the film opened, Dietrich had accepted a contract from Paramount (offered on Sternberg’s recommendation), and she sailed for New York on the night of the Berlin premiere. She was greeted on arrival by a lawsuit from Riza Royce von Sternberg, alleging alienation of affection. The Sternberg marriage had never been a great success (the couple had already divorced in 1927). But were subsequently reunited, and it now collapsed in a mess of accusations, legal claims, and emotional scenes. Paramount tried to hush the affair up, to little effect, and Mrs. Von Sternberg was granted a divorce—on grounds of cruelty—in June 1930. Sternberg himself never admitted that his relationship with Dietrich was anything but professional, and claimed that even in that regard he lost interest in her after Morocco. Against this stands the evidence of the films, which would appear to trace an even more obsessive fascination, though tempered by ironic self-awareness, as he transformed a “modest little German Hausfrau” into “a celluloid monument,” a mythic figure of ambiguous sexuality.

. . . Morocco was released before The Blue Angel and Sternberg, Dietrich and Dreier (art director) were nominated for Academy Awards. . . .

While Dietrich took a prolonged vacation in Germany, Sternberg was asked by Adolph Zukor to direct an adaptation of Theodore Dreiser’s An American Tragedy. This had been assigned to Eisenstein, but Paramount took flight at his proposed treatment, finding it too political. Sternberg, on his own admission, was not interested in the novel’s political dimension: his version of Dreiser’s story of a man impelled to murder by his social ambitions concentrates on the personal angle, emphasizing the self-destructive nature of the hero’s sexual drive. He regarded the assignment, though, as no more than “a little finger exercise,” and his lack of involvement shows in the film, which is flat and cold. Dreiser subsequently sued Paramount for distorting his novel, much to Sternberg’s amusement.

Sternberg’s concept of film as “a visual poem” reached its apotheosis in Shanghai Express (1932), perhaps his finest picture. The plot of the film concerns a train journey from Peking to Shanghai, interrupted by a bandit attack. But the subject of the film is Dietrich’s face, on which it plays an endless series of variations: veiled, shadowed. Wreathed with smoke, nestling in furs or feathers, framed in patterns of black on white. . . .

“His settings,” David Thomson commented, “are the Shanghai, Morocco, Imperial Russia and Spain only possible on the sounds stages and backlots of California, and the plots are as melodramatically separate from ordinary patterns of life as his images are from a Chinese or Spanish reality.” When some years later, Sternberg first visited China, he was gratified to find that the reality differed so greatly from his imagined version. . . . Sternberg went to Germany in 1932 while Dietrich prepared for Song of Songs with Mamioulou directing. Sternberg returned to Hollywood in 1933 & signed a two-picture deal with Paramount. . . .

In his last two films with Dietrich, Sternberg claimed to have “completely subjugated my bird of paradise to my peculiar tendency to prove that a film might well be an art medium.” The first of these films, The Scarlett Empress (1934), he described as “a relentless excursion into style which, taken for granted in any work of art, is considered to be unpardonable in this medium.” The film traces the metamorphosis of the innocent young German princess, Sophia Frederica, into the tyrannical and sexually rapacious Russian empress, Catherine the Great.

. . . “In its final, delirious vindication of Dietrich’s openmouthed depravity,” asserted David Thomson, “it is American cinema’s triumph of l’amour fou and a surreal masterpiece.” . . . It failed badly at the boxoffice and was condemned by the critics as self-indulgent rubbish, irrelevant to Depression-torn America. . . .
embraced it from the start. The aristocratic moniker was tacked on to his name to add an extra flourish to the credits around him early in his career, largely, if not entirely, with his separate von Sternberg from the mythology that began to form with the first hints of an ironic excessively mannered,” adding that “the subtle humor of the Sternberg oeuvre as a whole has been overlooked by critics intent on confusing seriousness with solemnity.

Sternberg’s films, in John Baxter’s view “have a psychological power that transcends simple plot. Under his scrutiny a reality emerges that is at once obvious and infinitely complex in its implications, the world of human emotion, of love and its dark concomitant, the desire to destroy.” …

Sternberg described his last film, “made under almost ideal conditions,” as “my best film—and my most unsuccessful one.” The Saga of Anatahan (1953) was made in Japan…. The story furnished Sternberg with an almost clinically pure demonstration of his perennial thesis: the destructive power of sexuality and uncontrolled emotion.

…For David Thomson, as for many others, “Sternberg now stand clear as one of the greatest directors and the first poet of underground cinema.”

In The Devil Is a Woman (1935), Sternberg “paid a final tribute to the lady I had seen lean against the wings of a Berlin stage,” and it is hard not to see the film as a valedictory summing-up of his relationship with the star he had created.” …]

The seven films with Dietrich are generally agreed, by both his admirers and his detractors, to form the central achievement of his oeuvre.

“His world,” according to David Thomson, “is pessimistic because it mocks the idea of meaning. . . . The human willfulness and stupidity that attempt to control it are true gestures of vanity in the face of destiny.” Commenting on the charge of social irrelevance, Andrew Sarris asserted that “paradoxically, Sternberg and Dietrich today look deeper and more dazzling than ever, while most of the cinema of the breadlines looks excessively mannered,” adding that “the subtle humor of the Sternberg oeuvre as a whole has been overlooked by critics intent on confusing seriousness with solemnity.

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Geoffrey O’Brien: “Underworld: Dreamland” (Criterion notes)

In a photograph of Josef von Sternberg from 1937, he looks like a character from one of his own films: a turbaned magus with elegantly trimmed beard and mustache, holding a cigarette as he gazes out obliquely, with the hint of an ironic expression too remote to be called a smile. It remains difficult to separate von Sternberg from the mythology that began to form around him early in his career, largely, if not entirely, with his encouragement. The “von,” for instance, was not his by birth but was tacked on to his name to add an extra flourish to the credits of a 1924 film (By Divine Right) on which he had assisted director Roy William Neill—it wasn’t Sternberg’s idea, but he embraced it from the start. The aristocratic moniker helped establish his image as another exotic European import, when in fact his roots as a filmmaker were purely American.

He was born in Vienna in 1894, but his family came to America seven years thereafter, and although he did return to Austria between the ages of ten and fourteen, it was in Fort Lee, New Jersey, that he made his first tentative steps into the film business. He came to film almost randomly, as a repairer of damaged celluloid, an appropriately technical job for someone whose technical mastery was evident from his earliest efforts. He worked, virtually from the start, at all aspects of filmmaking, as cutter, cameraman, and screenwriter, and aspired always to combine those functions and more. Of The Scarlet Empress (1934), he would later remark, not untypically: “With one exception, every detail, scenery, paintings, sculptures, costumes, story, photography, every gesture by a player, was dominated by me.”

The first film he directed, The Salvation Hunters (1925)—a low-budget independent feature coproduced with the English actor George K. Arthur—caught the attention of Charlie Chaplin and launched von Sternberg into a directorial career that initially seemed to unravel as rapidly as it had taken shape. He signed to M-G-M and made a film, The Exquisite Sinner, that was later largely reshot by another director; its follow-up, The Masked Bride, was abandoned by von Sternberg (in Andrew Sarris’s account, “he turned his camera toward the ceiling and walked off the set”) and finished by someone else. Chaplin then engaged him to make The Sea Gull (1926) but, for reasons never fully clarified, suppressed the film after a single public screening (the only print known to survive appears to have been subsequently destroyed for tax reasons). At this early stage, von Sternberg had already acquired his unshakable reputation as a self-vaulting artist and tyrannical taskmaster, driving his actors through endless retakes and striving, as he always would, for a monopoly of creative control. “If Sternberg set out to inspire general dislike,” Kevin Brownlow has written of the filmmaker’s relations with his Hollywood colleagues, “he succeeded impressively.” (William Powell, after starring in The Last Command, had it written into his contract that he was never again to be directed by von Sternberg; Joel McCrea walked off the set of The Scarlet Empress after a single encounter.)

Von Sternberg’s technical know-how made him eminently employable, however, and in 1927 he was entrusted with Underworld, a scenario about Chicago gangsters concocted by Ben Hecht, who certainly knew something about the subject. Hecht was aghast at what von Sternberg did to his story—only a few elements of the original had been preserved, and Hecht’s hard-boiled veneer had given way to a more romantic, not to say operatic, mood—but the film was a massive and unexpected hit, and its success launched an eight-year association with Paramount, by far von Sternberg’s most productive period. Underworld was followed by the masterpieces The Last Command and The Docks of New York (both 1928), along with two other silent films now lost (The Drag Net, 1928, and The Case of Lena Smith, 1929). After his first talkie, Thunderbolt (1929), another gangster vehicle with George Bancroft, von Sternberg went to Berlin in 1930, at the invitation of producer Erich Pommer, to make what would become the most famous of all his films, The Blue Angel. Its worldwide impact was magnified when von Sternberg brought his discovery, Marlene
Dietrich, to Hollywood and proceeded to work with her on a series of the most obsessively personal films ever made there. But when the popular triumphs *Morocco* (1930) and *Shanghai Express* (1932) were followed by the formally masterful and commercially disastrous *The Scarlet Empress* and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), Paramount was through with him. Afterward, he worked only sporadically and never with the budgets—or the freedom to use them to the limits of his imagination—that he had previously enjoyed. Von Sternberg, later in life, made no great claims for *Underworld*, describing it in his autobiography as “an experiment in photographic violence and montage.” He emphasized the concessions he had made to the mass audience (that “homogeneous herd,” as he characteristically described it, “united on its lowest level”): “I had provided the work with many an incident to placate the(110,538),(533,742)

Rarely again would such images be rendered with the unyielding precision and florid magnificence that von Sternberg brought to them. Charting his characters’ movements through shadowy alleys and subterranean nightspots, he turned drab urban spaces into an ominous labyrinth, a mythic place. Audiences may well have been persuaded that they were getting the hard-boiled lowdown on a big city’s lower depths, but anything like documentary realism was far from von Sternberg’s concerns. It is safe to say that gangsters and Chicago and the literary aspirations of Hecht interested him only to the extent that they could be made part of that imaginary universe he was beginning to formulate, and that would masquerade elsewhere as Russia, North Africa, China, Spain, and the South Pacific. Neither quite European nor quite American, he created, naturally enough, a cinema of exile, taking place everywhere and nowhere. *Underworld* is of a piece with the dream poetry of *Morocco* and *The Saga of Anatahan* (1953) and was received as such by spectators around the world. In France, it was given the resonant title *Les nuits de Chicago*, inspired perhaps by the patch of gorgeous intertitle lyricism that opens the film: “A great city in the dead of night . . . streets lonely, moon-flooded . . . buildings empty as the cliff-dwellings of a forgotten age.”

What is apparent from the outset is the extreme concision of von Sternberg’s cinematic language. Preambles and subsidiary details interest him not at all. A gangster named Bull Weed (George Bancroft) and an intellectual drunk whose claim of trustworthy silence earns him the nickname Rolls Royce (Clive Brook) encounter each other on the street in the wake of a violent bank robbery. They bond in an exchange of glances that conveys everything we need to know about them: Bull is tough, generous, and stupid; Rolls Royce is capable of loyalty yet endowed with infinite irony. The two male leads represent altogether opposed types: Bancroft a raucous, barreling force of nature, brutal yet openhearted; Brook (as the first of many protagonists one might easily take as a surrogate for the director) a tightly controlled embodiment of brooding intellectual detachment masquerading as sardonic humor.

With barely a pause, we find ourselves off the streets and deep in the nocturnal world of the Dreamland Café. There could hardly be a more appropriate name for this early example of the primal Sternbergian locale, the place where time is suspended so that the most elemental human confrontations and transactions can play themselves out as dreamlike ritual: the unconscious as nightclub or brothel or casino. He would return to such an interior again and again, in *The Docks of New York, The Blue Angel, Morocco, Blonde Venus* (1932), *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941). It is, as well, the perfect simulacrum of the film studio, where artifice reigns supreme and reality itself becomes malleable through the deployment of artfully fake decor and carefully manipulated lighting effects. (In his next work, *The Last Command*, the film studio would be the literal setting.)

Following a brief evocation of the scurrying of alley cats, the archetypal woman (never far to seek in his films) enters the visual field—Feathers McCoy, incarnated by Evelyn Brent as a sort of abstract quintessence of the flapper, sheathed in a feather-fringed coat and further adorned with a white feather boa that, in a manner typical of von Sternberg, establishes itself as a primary element of the movie. To identify the character with the garment is not simple fetishism (if fetishism is ever simple) but a means of shifting the spectator to the plane of perception where, for von Sternberg, the real narrative action unfolds: the level where cloth and flesh and glint of eye, texture and curvature and depth of shadow, outweigh the plot points that serve merely to direct us toward those effects. This is not to say that he indulges in meaningless abstraction but that he arrives through abstraction at the deep story, the inward story, for which the outer is camouflage. At the heart of the fake is the real.

As Feathers bends at the top of the stairs to adjust her stocking, a loose feather floating down lands at the feet of the disheveled Rolls Royce, employed at sweeping out the place. The way the movement of a single feather seizes hold of our perception establishes the unique flavor of von Sternberg’s film world. This feather, and nothing else, will be the center of the
universe for as long as he decrees. The peculiar undulant beauty of its movement, the power of its compressed radiance: such things are not incidentals but essence. In his autobiography he writes: “Light can go straight, penetrate and turn back, be reflected and deflected, gathered and spread, bent as by a soap bubble, made to sparkle and be blocked . . . The journey of rays from that central core to the outposts of blackness is the adventure and drama of light.”

The adventure and drama of light is anything but cold. It finds its ultimate expression in those close-ups of faces that are the pivot points of von Sternberg’s films, everything around them serving only to bridge the gaps between one glance and another. If for a time, at least, he managed to be both supremely self-expressive artist and canny manipulator of popular taste, it was because he could combine in a single image the most obvious meanings and the most infinitely variable shades of ambivalence. The dance of desire and resistance in the relationship of Feathers and Rolls Royce is carried out entirely in a language of glances and gestures that has retained its sense of intimate reality. This place where lovers’ eyes meet, or fail to meet—a place potentially of savage cruelty and abject self-punishment, where all possible contradictions of feeling may come into play—is von Sternberg’s native ground, around which all the rest of his world is constructed out of shadows and nets and paper streamers.

Vision as erotic experience, so basic to how movies work their effect, has rarely been acknowledged so lucidly as in von Sternberg’s films. This is perhaps the secret to their enduring freshness: for all the baroque complication and fine-wire work with which they are put together, his worlds have the liberated mercurialness of free-floating desire, even as they penetrate into undiscovered reaches of the decadent and grotesque. The great centerpiece of Underworld, the criminals’ annual ball, is a sodden, bestial mess that is made to seem lighter than air, a delicious carnival of luminosity and exquisitely choreographed chaos. Here as elsewhere in the film, one can become absorbed simply in following the movements of bodies in space, delighting in patterns whose rhythmic beauty exists quite apart from the brutal appetites and uncontrolled rages of the characters. Of all directors, Josef von Sternberg most completely took charge of the terms in which his work would be discussed, in statements unsurpassed for unapologetic bluntness: “My pictures are acts of arrogance.” “All art is an exploration of an unreal world.” “To reality one should prefer the illusion of reality.” “Actors are material with which one works.” “Marlene is not Marlene, she is me.” As curator of his own legend, he could easily be seen as passing over into self-parody. Fun in a Chinese Laundry (1965), his disdainful, self-aggrandizing autobiography, written in a style that alternates between heavy irony and purple patches of exotic description, manages simultaneously to elaborate his myth and to undercut it. If his is a cinema of masks, the I of this memoir virtually declares itself yet one more mask, and one calculated more to repel than to attract.

It is nonetheless one of the best books about the chaotic circumstances under which films are actually made, and ultimately as clear an enunciation of aesthetic principles as any director has formulated. He speaks again and again of the “loose ends” and “slippery factors” inherent in filmmaking, the random expressiveness of anything that comes within range of the camera and microphone, an expressiveness that must be curtailed rather than encouraged: “The director writes with the camera whether he wishes to do so or not.” His art, finally, was not one of expansion and profusion but of rigorous compression, eliminating everything that did not pertain to the essence of what he wished to show: “To photograph a human being properly, all that surrounds him must definitely add to him, or it will do nothing but subtract.”

Had von Sternberg made only his great silent trilogy—Underworld, The Last Command, and The Docks of New York—he would endure as a supreme example of what it means to write with film. We would miss only the more extreme personal elaborations of the later work: the seven films with Dietrich (which seem more than ever a single film and a central text of the twentieth century) and the final masterpieces, The Shanghai Gesture and The Saga of Anatahan, along with a handful of unforgettable scenes in the mutilated Jet Pilot (1950), a regrettable solitary example of what he could do with color. His high opinion of his own capabilities and his majestic sense of his poetic vocation might indeed seem like intolerable arrogance were they not so undeniably justified.
COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2014 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS SERIES 28:

February 4 Jean Cocteau, Orpheus, 1950, 95min
February 11 Kenji Mizoguchi, The Life of Oharu, 1952, 136 min
February 18 Satyajit Ray, Charulata/The Lonely Wife, 1964, 119 minutes
February 25 Metin Erksan, Dry Summer, 1964, 90 min
March 4 Monte Hellman, Two-Lane Blacktop, 1971, 103 min
March 11 John Cassavetes, Killing of a Chinese Bookie, 1976, 135 min
March 17-22 Spring break
March 25 Agnes Varda, Vagabond, 1985, 105 min
April 1 Gabriell Axel, Babette’s Feast, 1987, 104min
April 8 Louis Malle, Vanya on 42nd Street, 1994, 119 min
April 15 Wes Anderson, The Royal Tenenbaums, 2001, 110 min
April 22 Tommy Lee Jones, The Three Burials of Melquaides Estrada, 2005, 120 min
April 29 José Padilha, Elite Squad, 2007, 115 min
May 6 John Huston, The Dead, 1987 83 min

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