

Josef von Sternberg

original name Jonas Sternberg

original name Jonas Sternberg (born May 29, 1894, Vienna, Austro-Hungarian Empire [now in Austria]—died December 22, 1969, Hollywood, Los Angeles, California, U.S.), Austrian-born American motion-picture director whose films are characterized by pictorial richness and photographic craftsmanship. He is especially known for his seven films with actress Marlene Dietrich.

Early work

Sternberg emigrated with his family to join his father in New York when he was seven, but they were sent back to Vienna by his father in 1904. He returned to the United States in 1908, and he took the first name of Josef. In 1911 he began patching film for the World Film Company in Fort Lee, New Jersey, and he rose through the ranks there as editor, writer, and assistant director. In 1917 he enlisted in the army, where he served in the Signal Corps during World War I and made training films. After leaving the army in 1919, he traveled widely in Europe, where he occasionally worked as an assistant director.

By 1924 Sternberg had settled in Hollywood and was assistant director to Roy William Neill on *By Divine Right*. It was on this film that the “von” was added to his name. (He claimed it was to “even up” names in the credits; however, many believe it was to make him sound more prepossessing.) Von Sternberg was Neill’s assistant on *Vanity’s Price* (1924) and replaced him as director after Neill was fired during production. Soon von Sternberg was given the unusual opportunity to direct his own screenplay for *The Salvation Hunters* (1925), financed by British actor George K. Arthur, who was looking for a screen vehicle. It was an evocative portrait of the dockside underclass that von Sternberg rendered in a documentary style quite different from the visual excess and expressionism of his later films. Douglas Fairbanks was impressed by the film’s original style and had United Artists (UA) pick it up for distribution. The film was a box-office flop, but the studios took notice of von Sternberg, and he was offered a contract at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM). His first film, the serious World War I drama *The Exquisite Sinner*, was taken out of his hands and almost entirely reshot as a comedy, *Heaven on Earth* (1925). MGM’s treatment of *The Exquisite Sinner* prompted him to quit production on the crime story *The Masked Bride*, and he was released from his contract. He then made *A Woman of the Sea* for Charlie Chaplin at UA. However, Chaplin was dissatisfied with the film; it was never released, and all prints were later destroyed. He signed with Paramount in 1926, where most of his great films would be made.

Films of the late 1920s

Von Sternberg’s first film at Paramount, *Underworld* (1927), was a seminal gangster drama that made the many others that followed possible. George Bancroft starred as the remorseless mobster “Bull” Weed; Evelyn Brent played his moll Feathers; and Clive Brook played his lieutenant Rolls Royce, who also loves Feathers. In *The Last Command* (1928) Emil Jannings gave an Academy Award-winning performance as a Russian émigré who ends up working in Hollywood for a sadistic director (William Powell), his former rival in the old country. *The Dragnet* (1928; now lost) teamed Bancroft and Brent again in a tale about an ex-cop (Bancroft) who loses himself in the bottle before being redeemed; Powell again was cast as the villain.

The Docks of New York (1928) revisited the territory of *The Salvation Hunters*, with Bancroft as a ship stoker who saves a girl (Betty Compson) from killing herself; he marries her first as a kindness and then falls in love with her. It was von Sternberg’s most enduring silent movie, and some argue that it is his masterwork. In the costume drama *The Case of Lena Smith* (1929; now lost), Esther Ralston played an Austrian peasant who is seduced and abandoned by a soldier. *Thunderbolt* (1929), his first talkie, had Bancroft as a convict on death row who is planning one more murder.

Films with Dietrich

Underworld had been von Sternberg’s sole commercial success at Paramount. Producer Erich Pommer, who had returned to Germany from Hollywood with Jannings after the introduction of sound, invited von Sternberg to make his next film at UFA in Berlin. *Der blaue Engel* (1930; *The Blue Angel*), filmed simultaneously in German and in

English, was a raw portrait of sexual degradation in which a distinguished professor (Jannings) is brought low by his obsession with the sultry nightclub singer Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich in her breakthrough role).

Just before *The Blue Angel* finished shooting, Dietrich was signed to a Paramount contract. Back in the United States, von Sternberg and Dietrich made the romantic adventure *Morocco* (1930), about the love between cabaret singer Amy Jolly (Dietrich) and French Foreign Legion soldier Tom Brown (Gary Cooper). *Morocco* was a hit at the box office, and Dietrich, whose exotic femme fatale image was being carefully crafted by von Sternberg, became an instant Hollywood star. Both Dietrich and von Sternberg were nominated for Oscars.

The World War I spy romance *Dishonored* (1931)—about an Austrian spy, X-27 (Dietrich), who falls for Russian spy Colonel Kranau (Victor McLaglen)—was a disappointment, with a hackneyed premise and a lack of chemistry between Dietrich and McLaglen, who was miscast as a dashing spy. Von Sternberg was not able to fit Dietrich into his adaptation (1931) of Theodore Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy*. Sylvia Sydney played the factory girl fated to die at the hands of her lover (Phillips Holmes). The material clearly eluded von Sternberg.

Von Sternberg and Dietrich were reunited with memorable results on *Shanghai Express* (1932), an exotic adventure set on a train traveling through war-torn China. Dietrich had one of her most famous roles as Shanghai Lily, “the White Flower of the Chinese Coast.” Warner Oland and Anna Mae Wong delivered memorable performances as a warlord and a prostitute, respectively, and Jules Furthman's jaded screenplay and Lee Garmes's Oscar-winning cinematography were equally essential. It was a box-office hit and was nominated for the Oscar for best picture; von Sternberg received his second (and last) nomination for best direction.

Blonde Venus (1932) was a “woman's picture” in which Dietrich played a nightclub singer who sacrifices her honour to a millionaire (Cary Grant) so as to raise money to treat her sickly husband (Herbert Marshall). The sequence in which Dietrich emerges from a gorilla suit in one of her numbers is particularly notable. The *Scarlet Empress* (1934) immersed Dietrich's Catherine the Great in myriad stylistic flourishes and ornate art direction. Despite its obvious expense, the film failed at the box office.

The final collaboration between von Sternberg and Dietrich, *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), saw Dietrich's character again assume the role of the dominant, taunting manipulator of men whom audiences had not seen since *The Blue Angel*; as temptress Concha Perez, she emasculates the pride of 19th-century Spain, a distinguished officer (Lionel Atwill) and a political radical (Cesar Romero). The film was a commercial failure, and Paramount production head Ernst Lubitsch fired von Sternberg, essentially ending his career as a first-string Hollywood director.

Later films

Von Sternberg found a temporary home at Columbia, where his first film was an adaptation (1935) of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The film was shot in a moody expressionist style by Lucien Ballard but suffered from an inadequate budget and a screenplay that took great liberties with Dostoyevsky's masterpiece. The operetta *The King Steps Out* (1936) was set in the court of Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph (Franchot Tone), with Grace Moore and Frieda Inescort playing sisters who cannot decide which one should become empress.

In 1937 von Sternberg went to England to direct *I, Claudius*, based on Robert Graves's novel, for producer Alexander Korda. The film starred Charles Laughton as the Roman emperor Claudius and Merle Oberon as Messalina. However, production was shut down after Oberon badly cut her face in a traffic accident, and the film was never completed. Instead, von Sternberg languished for a couple of years until MGM asked him to direct *Sergeant Madden* (1939), a maudlin drama starring Wallace Beery as a police officer estranged from his son.

The Shanghai Gesture (1941) permitted von Sternberg to return to his favoured domain of exotic depravity. Reminiscent of *Shanghai Express*, the film was an atmospheric drama about the denizens of a gambling den and featured a good performance by Victor Mature as the apathetic Dr. Omar, “doctor of nothing.” However, the film was poorly reviewed. It would be 11 years before von Sternberg's name was credited to another feature production, although he made the propaganda short *The Town* in 1943 and was one of several uncredited directors on *Duel in the Sun* (1946).

Finally, von Sternberg went to work for Howard Hughes at RKO. The fruits of his labours were the Cold War romance *Jet Pilot* with John Wayne and Janet Leigh—shot in 1950 but tinkered with by Hughes for the next seven years before being released—and *Macao* (1952), a handsome if uninventive noir starring Jane Russell and Robert Mitchum (which was extensively reshot by Nicholas Ray before it was released). Von Sternberg's most-notable

project during this period was the Japanese *Anatahan* (1953; *The Saga of Anatahan*), a film he wrote, produced, directed, photographed, and narrated. It was based on a true World War II incident in which a group of Japanese soldiers hid on a small Pacific island until 1951; during those years some of the soldiers were killed in quarrels over the sole Japanese woman. Von Sternberg considered it his greatest film.

Whether von Sternberg realized that it would be the last film he would ever make is unclear. But his autobiography, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (1965), leaves little doubt that he saw his life after Dietrich as a series of disappointments, betrayals, and ill fortune.

Michael Barson

Additional Reading

Cite

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