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| Von Sternberg, Josef (1894-1969) |
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| Born Jonas Sternberg in Vienna to impoverished Orthodox Jewish parents, Josef von Sternberg migrated to New York in his teens. There he changed his name and endured the hardships of immigrant life. After working on a succession of film jobs, he eventually became a director. The experience gained in the various skills involved in movie-making would eventually allow him to claim an absolute, almost craft-like control over his films, often dismissing the work of his collaborators. Self-proclaimed as ‘Hollywood’s messiah of film art,’ von Sternberg consciously sought an anti-realistic approach to cinema. His skilful lighting, often combining strokes of light and shade in sharp chiaroscuro, and his expert use of décor, costumes, props, and actors yielded compositions that conferred a poetic and abstract dimension upon his films, often at the expense of dialogue and narrative coherence. |
| Born Jonas Sternberg in Vienna to impoverished Orthodox Jewish parents, Josef von Sternberg migrated to New York in his teens. There he changed his name and endured the hardships of immigrant life. After working on a succession of film jobs, he eventually became a director. The experience gained in the various skills involved in movie-making would eventually allow him to claim an absolute, almost craft-like control over his films, often dismissing the work of his collaborators. Self-proclaimed as ‘Hollywood’s messiah of film art,’ von Sternberg consciously sought an anti-realistic approach to cinema. His skilful lighting, often combining strokes of light and shade in sharp chiaroscuro, and his expert use of décor, costumes, props, and actors yielded compositions that conferred a poetic and abstract dimension upon his films, often at the expense of dialogue and narrative coherence.  Von Sternberg’s filmmaking career can be divided into three distinctive stages: his silent films (1925-29), his collaboration with Marlene Dietrich (1930-1935), and his years of decline (1935-1958). His first film, the privately financed *The Salvation Hunters* (1925), was a beautifully photographed allegorical story about derelicts adrift in a menacing environment. It earned him a contract with a Hollywood studio and inaugurated a critically acclaimed string of titles about urban low life. *Underworld* (1927), his first partnership with male star George Bancroft, is considered an early classic of the gangster genre. *Der blaue Engel* [*The Blue Angel*] (1930), a German-American collaboration, marked his transition to sound and the start of his second period. Its success gained him and the then unknown German actress, Marlene Dietrich, international stardom, and set off a series of six titles designed especially as Dietrich’s vehicles, produced by Paramount.  The Sternberg-Dietrich collaborations shaped Dietrich’s star persona; their mounting artificiality and narrative incongruity was met with commercial and critical failure, and with the eventual termination of his contract with the studio after the release of *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935). Controversy over his work was also stirred by his polemic adaptation of Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1931).  After his extraordinary work with Dietrich, Von Sternberg encountered great difficulties in resuming his career. Of his third stage, only two films bear his distinctive style, *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) and *The Saga of Anatahan* (1952, 1958). Contemporary film critics dismissed Dietrich’s melodramas as fanciful male fantasies, characterised by his obsession with the female star, whom he converted — as some critics put it — into ‘a paramount slut.’ Critics and film scholars have more recently acknowledged the value of his films. Von Sternberg’s eccentric style and disregard for realism and narrative flow may be seen as attempts to import into a commercial format some strands of visual and literary modernism — photographic Pictorialism, the textural complexity of art nouveau, and the overwrought style of literary decadence. Von Sternberg was celebrated post-facto as an involuntary surrealist by French critics such as Ado Kyrou and influenced numerous American experimental filmmakers from the 1940s to the 1960s: some, such as Gregory Markopoulos, through his occasional teaching at the University of Southern California, and others, such as Jack Smith, through his peculiar style and uncompromising practice.  Feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s found in his titles compelling, often contradictory, representations of the workings of gender. While Laura Mulvey saw in his films an attempt to erase sexual difference through insistent fetishisation of female characters, Gaylyn Studlar discerned an alternative gender dynamics centred on the mother, and mother surrogates, as main signposts of people’s psychosocial development. Selected Works (Filmography): Some of Von Sternberg’s films were lost or destroyed; this is a partial list of the ones that have survived.  *The Salvation Hunters* (1925)  *Underworld* (1927)  *The Last Command* (1927)  *The Docks of New York* (1928)  *Thunderbolt* (1929)  *Der blaue Engel* [*The Blue Angel*] (1930)  *Morocco* (1930)  *Dishonored* (1931)  *An American Tragedy* (1931)  *Shanghai Express* (1931)  *Blonde Venus* (1932)  *The Scarlet Empress* (1934)  *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935)  *Crime and Punishment* (1935)  *The King Steps Out* (1936)  *Sergeant Madden* (1939)  *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941)  *The Town* (1943) (short)  *Jet Pilot* (1950; 1957) (mutilated)  *Macao* (1952) (mutilated)  *The Saga of Anatahan* (1952; 1958) |
| Further reading:  (J. Baxter)  (P. Baxter)  (P. Baxter, Just Watch! Sternberg, Paramount and America)  (Brownlow)  (Gallagher)  (Sternberg)  (Studlar)  (Thompson)  (D. Thompson)  (Von Sternberg) |