

Marlene Dietrich

It is impossible to dissociate Marlene Dietrich from the Berlin of 1929. For Joseph von Sternberg, director of *The Blue Angel*, 'the woman who was to charm the world' evoked the city of Beardsley, Baudelaire and Huysmans: artists and poets of decadence but also of modernity. Today, Marlene Dietrich, aptly described by one contemporary journalist as 'a myth, a symbol, an idea', still speaks the fascination of that historical moment, poised between the doomed world of the Weimar Republic and the onset of a new era, between the Berlin and the Hollywood studios.

When Marlene Dietrich arrived in New York on April 9, 1930, accompanied by Joseph von Sternberg, the triumphant success of *The Blue Angel* had preceded her. 'Sign Dietrich' was the verdict of a group of Paramount executives immediately after *The Blue Angel's* screening. Dietrich was to be the answer to MGM's Garbo, and the latest addition to the various waves of Europeans who had crossed the Atlantic to Hollywood.

'Marlene signified not just Berlin but Europe: the transgressive "modern" sexuality powerfully combined with ideas of decadence and impending political doom'

Between 1930 and 1935, Marlene and von Sternberg made another six films together: *Morocco*, *Blonde Venus*, *Dishonoured*, *The Scarlet Empress*, *Shanghai Express*, and *The Devil Is A Woman*. Though these constitute an extraordinarily coherent and formally brilliant body of work, they do not, and neither do her subsequent films, explain her lasting fame. Marlene has had more than 50 books written about her, been scrutinised by semi-logical and psychological

analyses and become a cult for gay subcultures as well as straight male film buffs. She is an international icon even for those who have never laid eyes on her films.

The Marlene of popular mythology has little to do with Maria Magdalena Dietrich (born 1901), a modest actress in routine Weimar melodramas, nor with the subsequently respected 'pro' of Hollywood studios, the anti-Nazi performer who was awarded the medal for freedom by the US war department in 1947 the good mother and good cook (Jean Gabin particularly liked her stuffed cabbage).

Marlene's most precious baggage when she arrived in Los Angeles was Lola-Lola, the sleazy cabaret singer and 'petty-bourgeois Berlin tart' (in the words of Siegfried Kracauer) who, with a few flashes of her suspender belts, nonchalantly reduced Emil Jannings to a pathetic wreck at the end of *The Blue Angel*.

Despite the rapid 'cleansing' and streamlining of her image and poor reception of that film in the USA, Marlene's aura remained that of nightclubs, transvestites, and prostitutes, a heady mixture of lower depths and glamour associated with 1920s' Berlin. The German capital of mass cultural entertainment was also a city of intellectuals: for Harold Nicholson it epitomised 'restless movement' and the collision of the old with the new; playwright Carl Zuckmayer compared it to 'a highly desirable woman'. Marlene signified this mixture of old and new that characterised not just Berlin but Europe from an American point of view: the transgressive 'modern' sexuality (in particular androgyny) of 1920s' Berlin and Paris, powerfully combined with ideas of decadence and impending political doom.

Von Sternberg understood the centrality of this allegorical function. Marlene was made to fit Hollywood stan-



Marlene Dietrich: Anticipated modern ideas of sexual identity

dards of glamour, but her characters were still 'exotically' European - German in *Blonde Venus*, Russian in *The Scarlet Empress*, Spanish in *The Devil Is A Woman*, beyond the (real) need to justify her accent and get past the censors. This allowed the films to celebrate, if ironically, American values, but also to dwell on illicit male pleasures and on male anxieties of social and sexual destitution by projecting them on to a scandalous foreign woman. Sexual promiscuity stood for political aberration.

Dietrich was, however, no downtrodden plaything. Her appeal resided precisely in the power of her cool narcissism, enshrined in close-ups, milky lighting and low-angle shots. Her scripts undermined traditional gender definitions, making her turn the tables on her male partners, often by the sardonic repetition of bits of their dialogue. She was the 'phallic mother', both caressing and cracking the whip, a classic male fantasy yet one that women spectators (who, after all, have

mothers too), have also reclaimed.

What also stopped Marlene from being just a convenient space for male projections was her distancing humour and delight in artifice. Anticipating modern ideas of sexual identity by several decades, she emphasised the construction of her own image: her sculpted face mask-like, her slim body alternatively clad in the cliché fetishes of femininity (feathers and furs) or the ironic emblems of masculinity (top hats and tuxedos), both on and off screen.

Marlene's initial success was precisely located in Hollywood's notion of the 'old world', her Germanity toned down and yet essential to her Hollywood image. But it is her opaqueness and refusal of a fixed identity which now makes her such a powerful icon in our post-modern culture obsessed with surfaces, an icon that can be 'read' in very different ways and appropriated by very different subcultural groups. 9
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