

MARLENE DIETRICH: A synthesis of eroticism

This essay will discuss how eroticism was revealed or concealed in terms of the mise en scene, props, and costumes in Marlene Dietrich's films.

MARLENE DIETRICH

INTRODUCTION

Marlene Dietrich was the synthesis of eroticism in the thirties. Joseph Von Sternberg directed vehicles, which allowed Dietrich to become a sexual icon. Eroticism was a theme, which flowed rampantly through all seven of the Sternberg and Dietrich films.

This essay will discuss how eroticism was revealed or concealed in terms of the mise en scene, props, and costumes. For purposes of clarity, the discussion on mise en scene will include the first scenes in each of the film with erotic themes. Only the elements, which reveal eroticism, will be discussed in terms of mise en scene. Sternberg's most obvious tool to conceal or reveal eroticism was his concentration on using dualities. This essay's challenge will be to omit dualities, as much as possible, by finding other symbols and images, and ways, which revealed or concealed eroticism.

In this light, this essay will focus more on examining how Sternberg reveals and conceals eroticism in individual scenes and characters. These mixed themes within the same scene and or character will produce a discussion on ambiguity and its role in interpreting eroticism in the Sternberg and Dietrich films. Examples shall be drawn from Shanghai Express, The Devil is a Woman, the Blue Angel, Morocco, and Blond Venus.

MISE EN SCENE

Dietrich's eroticism was often revealed or concealed when a combination of elements inter-acted within a scene. The most obvious tool, which created this inter-

action between different elements, was the mise en scene. Mise en scene will be used to discuss the tone of the film when Dietrich made her first appearances. Mise en scene will enable one to analyze the various elements, which change from film to film, and revealed or concealed eroticism. One notable exception was Shanghai Express where the scene, which was selected, occurred later as opposed to the opening scene. The reason being was that Dietrich's appearance which saw her arriving in a black car, did not contain eroticism in the light of this paper, therefore a scene following the opening of the film was selected.

Dietrich's first appearance in the Devil is a Woman revealed her eroticism in terms of her acting style. Eroticism became obvious when Dietrich singled out a stranger by blowing him a kiss from her position on the float. Eroticism was then enhanced when Dietrich laughed hysterically at Antonio who was caught up in a delirious crowd while desperately attempting to reach her. Sternberg revealed eroticism, in this scene by emphasizing Dietrich's ability to find a man in a sea of people, flirt with him, and then laugh hysterically when he tries to reach her. The tease, which Dietrich often used was reinforced in the following scene where a man chased Her all the way home.

However while Dietrich's eroticism was revealed in her inviting gestures, her costume, in the opening scene also physically concealed her, by a mask and braids which hung from her veil. This is not to mention the amount of clutter created by a sea of confetti, which added to the costume's role as barrier between Dietrich and the audience. Thus this barrier physically concealed Dietrich while her gestures revealed her which sent mixed messages and created ambiguity.

The effect of concealing and revealing within the same scene and the same character contributed to the ambiguity of Dietrich's eroticism in The Devil is a Woman. Dietrich thus became inviting in terms of her apparent eroticism but was concealed by distance, caused by her height as she was sitting on a float, and her costume, which literally hid her. She then conveyed a message that was both inviting and forbidding.

To explain how Dietrich could be, both forbidden and erotically inviting at the same time, one could look at her first appearance in Morocco. In Morocco for instance, Dietrich made her entrance, amongst a lot of clutter, dressed in a silky smooth black dress with a veil, which covered her face. The scene depicted a woman who's uninterested in men and was in a seemingly state of depression. Apart from the mixed messages, which her costume conveyed, Dietrich interacted with Menjou who came to her aid when she dropped her suitcase. Menjou lent his help during which

she barely looked at him. He then offered his card, which she accepts still without looking at him. Dietrich then proceeded to move closer to the dock where she tore the card and snapped it off her hand.

Eroticism revealed itself through Dietrich's actions, which both looked at Menjou in a sexual manner and, through her pleasure in tearing his card. Eroticism also manifested itself through Dietrich's costume, which exposed her slender body. However, the opposite is true, eroticism also concealed itself through Dietrich's rejection of Menjou and through her costume's veil which suggested she wanted to be hidden.

Eroticism, in Morocco, was revealed in a new light when Dietrich tore Menjou's card knowing very well that Menjou could see her, which produced a cynically erotic grin on both their faces. The grins signified that Dietrich was playing hard to get while Menjou approved of her position. Although their encounter was anything but friendly, their grins signaled the approval of an interest in another encounter as their grins illustrated anything but displeasure. Dietrich, in this light, became forbidden through her ability to conceal herself in terms of her personality, by not letting anybody get too close to her and through her costume by refusing to let anybody observe her as she hid behind her veil.

Dietrich's eroticism, in terms of costumes alone, arose out of the natural beauty, which was emphasized her slender body. She managed to stick out from the crowd despite the clutter and despite the fact that she barely said a word. Her costume, though it does not reveal 'skin', does reveal her slim figure. Dietrich's veil was the element, which made her costume un-inviting. One could state that veils, are for the most part, worn at funerals and weddings, and convey a message which state; I'm mourning or married. Therefore in terms of eroticism Morocco's opening scene both concealed and revealed her eroticism by making her inviting and forbidden by the lore and repressed signals of her costume, personality, and gestures.

As compared to Dietrich's first scene in Morocco, Shanghai Express lacks in erotic content because no one fulfills the male role which traditionally falls for her attraction. She did appear mysterious and Sternberg did try to conceal her as long as he could, for reasons other than eroticism. The first signs of eroticism, however, arose when Dietrich met Harvey for the first time on the train, just before it left the station. They were framed in separate window frames where each one had their own frame, symbolizing a difference in ideology. Their difference in ideology was quickly supported by their discussion of their past relationship thus revealing their erotic past. As they discussed she moved into his frame, suggesting an erotic

attraction, but quickly moved back into her frame. As the color of white verses black held a lot of meaning in terms of eroticism, they were both framed with colored flags on either side. A black flag, which was associated to Dietrich and a white one to Harvey which, symbolized the good and evil, in their characters, in terms of their topic of conversation, eroticism. Therefore eroticism in Shanghai Express was revealed in terms of the past which gave the film its erotic content in the present. The costume did not play the erotic role it did in Morocco because Dietrich was half covered by a window frame.

Blond Venus, for its part, utilized a very different image of Dietrich, which visually represented her as erotically innocent but symbolically erotic. In this scene Dietrich was illustrated as being the leader of the Blond Venuses in the pond by single handedly confronting the men. She appeared to have nothing to do with sex when in reality, we found out that she worked in a cabaret nightclub. The theatre business in the era, the film was set in, was a lot more sexually explicit then the theatre we know today. The modern day's eroticism in theatre had just been replaced with strip clubs, which found their ancestral beginnings in the early vaudeville/cabaret acts. This being said, Dietrich's eroticism was first apparent when we saw her bathing nude with six other women, which gave the scene a homosexual theme. The scene, other then painting Dietrich as the leader, further emphasized her supremacy through the composition of the shot which separated her from the rest of the woman by situating her between two branches which hung over the water.

Visually, Sternberg selected a setting, which looked innocent and most probably fooled most of the audiences of the day. However the important element in this film was the symbolic representation which occurred through the narrative. The symbolism of women bathing together was and still is a lot more accepted then the equivalent scene with men. In essence, Sternberg succeeded in projecting Dietrich in an erotic manner by placing her in a setting, which, unless analyzed carefully, looked perfectly saintly.

Dietrich's first appearance in The Blue Angel was marked by photographs as opposed to her live appearances, so this film's opening scene will be analyzed from the appearance of the first picture to her first appearance on stage. Dietrich's first appearance began with the use of props and involved different elements of mise en scene. Sternberg chose to introduce his partnership with Dietrich in The Blue Angel, by introducing her through a series of photographs, which served the purpose of intensifying her persona on film. A poster on a wall, which was being washed by a cleaning lady, marked Dietrich's first appearance. The washing of the poster suggested an erotic theme, as Dietrich's costume was erotic in nature. Therefore the washing of the poster symbolized a cleansing of filth and her "erotic" sins. We then

saw another picture of Dietrich when a student tripped, as he's left class, and dropped his pictures of Dietrich on the floor. This scene illustrated eroticism as it represented students that were under age, yet owned pictures of her and went to the cabaret. Then the professor added to this eroticism as he blew on Dietrich's dress to get an eye full, which further intensified eroticism.

The next scene in Dietrich's first appearance was marked by the performance of her first song, which depicted female and male sexuality. Dietrich's musical appearance was constructed to reveal sexuality to a maximum without necessarily using images of hard core sex. In essence Dietrich's opening performance in *The Blue Angel* revealed sexuality in a more obvious manner, then her later films because no attempt was made to hide Dietrich's sexuality. In her later films, Dietrich's sexuality was indirect or was represented through symbols as in *Blond Venus*. Furthermore, in terms of the opening scenes that were analyzed in this essay, the use of under age boys made the metaphor of eroticism more apparent to the average viewer. Sternberg made no attempt in this film to conceal eroticism and therefore it was an easier task to interpret *The Blue Angel*.

PROPS

The Blue Angel's fluent use of props in their opening scenes provided important symbols in the discussion of eroticism. However props in various parts of the Sternberg films have also played important roles in revealing or concealing eroticism.

Sternberg's first use of a prop occurred during Dietrich's first musical number in *The Blue Angel*, which used a spotlight to flash professor Rath as he found himself in the middle of the crowd. Dietrich "flashed" the professor with a light as opposed to revealing her body parts to illustrate Dr. Rath's sexual innocence. Furthermore Dietrich's use of the light allowed her to illustrate her sexuality by singling out her man from the audience, similar to *The Devil is a Woman* where Dietrich noticed Antonio in the crowd of clutter. Sternberg makes use of two other props in relation to eroticism in *The Blue Angel*, Dietrich's panties and doll. Sternberg used Dietrich's panties as a prop to conceal the professor's erotic attraction, which renders Rath an excuse to return to see Dietrich. Therefore Dr. Rath's eroticism is concealed in good faith as it plays into conserving Rath's teaching position.

Sternberg continually used props to illustrate Rath's lack of eroticism and portrayed him as a child in relation to Dietrich. He essentially transformed sensual and erotic scenes into child like situations. After Dietrich told Rath he was very

handsome, making him blush, She used face powder to change the scene into farce like child comedy. Dietrich blew into the bowl whose end result made Rath look like a child after finishing a meal.

Perhaps the best imagery, in *The Blue Angel*, which reveals Rath's lack of eroticism, was the use of the doll, which was found beside Rath instead of Dietrich. This scene essentially mocks Rath's eroticism by depicting him in bed with a doll as opposed to a woman. In essence this relationship illustrates characters at opposite poles, which makes their relationship seem artificial, untrue to life and unrealistic. Sternberg then uses a curtain to further support their artificial relationship by hiding Dietrich behind it, while she changed, which made Dietrich's nude appearance, seem indecent in front of Rath, even though they were married. Therefore Sternberg's use of props in *The Blue Angel* served to illustrate Rath's lack of eroticism, which in contrast to Dietrich, accentuated her eroticism. Sternberg and Dietrich's first film together illustrated a constant contrast of two people's eroticism as opposed to a one women "domineering" show which occurred in *The Devil is a Woman* among others films.

The use of props in *Shanghai Express* occurred in a much subtler manner than *The Blue Angel*. *Shanghai Express* used props in a much more sophisticated and intellectual fashion as opposed to *The Blue Angel*'s obvious and straightforward illustrations.

The first interesting use of a prop was Dietrich and Harvey's comparison of medals, which occurred in their meeting just before they proceed to dine on the train. The medals symbolized their different ideologies where Harvey states that it is a new medal for his service in the army whereas Dietrich's medal was described as becoming. Harvey mentions becoming because he knew that the medal represented another man with whom she had an affair. Sternberg cleverly used the comparison of medals to reveal Dietrich's eroticism. In the process of their discussion the medals revealed Harvey's innocence and Dietrich's eroticism.

Another clever use of props occurred in the following dinning car scene where everybody united. Harvey, angry with Dietrich, sat with close friends whereas Dietrich was seated alone in her corner. The eroticism arose when Dietrich used a glove as prop which she sensually undressed her hand with, as she looked Harvey over from top to bottom. Her expressive motion, as she undressed her arm, and the timeless erotic look in her eyes illustrated eroticism as one-sided coming from Dietrich. This, again, was in sharp contrast to *The Blue Angel*, which focussed on the male character to reveal the female character's eroticism. In *Shanghai Express*, the

opposite was true; it was Dietrich's eroticism, which was used to reveal Harvey's eroticism.

In Morocco, there was another new interesting use of props, which situated Dietrich in moments of decision making, was the use of mirrors which split her in two. The mirrors reveal Dietrich's eroticism by illustrating Dietrich's two faces where she was asked to make a decision between whom to choose. She displayed an act of eroticism by concealing her love for two men at the same time. She told Menjou, in the first use of mirrors, that she did not know if she loved him or not while we simultaneously saw Dietrich's two faces in the mirror.

However the use of mirrors was also used in another scene where she acknowledged her love for the legionnaire and told him to wait for her. However the scene again demonstrated Dietrich's indecisiveness as she only told the legionnaire to wait for her without ever telling him that she loved him. The erotic element arose through Dietrich's ability to keep her men in suspense as she kept them interested while never directly telling them that she loved them. However the legionnaire noticed the bracelet and decided to abandon Dietrich, the same way that Dietrich classically abandons her men, by never telling Dietrich in person, that he's not interested. The legionnaire chose to use the mirror, the same prop that Sternberg used to reveal Dietrich's indecisiveness, by writing on it that he had changed his mind. Finally the mirror became a factor when Dietrich was asked at Menjou's wedding dinner whether she was sure about getting married, thus avoiding the question and said; nothing's the matter.

In contrast, in *The Devil is a Woman* there was only one prop, which in the context of this essay was worth mentioning, was the use of a toy. The toy was a jack in the box, which Dietrich sent Antonio after he gave her a long chase all the way home. The use of this prop revealed eroticism because Dietrich had just sent Antonio on an erotic goose chase in which the jack in the box added to this erotic game, which kept men in suspense. Therefore the imagery of men who are "horny" enough to chase a woman all the way to her home was pursued to a new height when the use of a toy symbolized a "pun" that she was toying around with the men.

Similarly *Blond Venus* also made use of a toy to reveal eroticism in that particular scene. The use of a mannequin as a "girl toy" suggested homosexual themes. The scene occurred when Townsend met Dietrich in Paris where she had begun her new life after losing custody of her son. Townsend tried to convince Dietrich to return to America to see her son but she refused. The eroticism in this scene arose in its mise en scene where Dietrich was seen hugging a mannequin with Townsend finding

himself on the opposite side. The mannequin was placed separating Townsend and Dietrich at all times. The interpretation of homosexuality in this scene arose from Dietrich's past statement, which said that she would start a new way of life suggesting homosexuality. This new homosexual life was made plausible when one considered the emotional pain that her ex-husband had put her through by retaining custody of their children. Furthermore when Townsend asked her to break her shield of ice, she replied "I can't" while she tightly hugged her mannequin. These clues, although Sternberg did not develop this theme, suggested that such an interpretation was open to discussion. Although, Sternberg revealed eroticism through homosexuality, Sternberg left the scene and theme without revealing whether Dietrich did have a homosexual affair in her stay in Paris before Townsend discovered her there.

Therefore the use of props in the Dietrich films suggested a number of different erotic themes, ironies, and metaphors. Sternberg used props as toys for Dietrich to play with, while he simultaneously revealed or concealed eroticism.

COSTUMES

Costumes fulfilled a double role as they illustrated Dietrich's sexuality while they simultaneously concealed as much of Dietrich's eroticism as they could. This in essence created ambiguity, as Sternberg seemed to attach double meanings to everything he did, especially costumes.

Perhaps the most obvious scenes, which involved the portrayal of eroticism through the use of costumes, were Dietrich's musical numbers. The best of these numbers was a scene from Morocco where she appeared on stage dressed up in top hat, white tie and tails. Her sexuality was both revealed and concealed in this scene because her femininity was concealed behind her male outfit while she revealed her heterosexuality by flirting with both the legionnaire and Menjou. Her sexuality is further made ambiguous when she kissed a woman for giving her a flower. Furthermore, in the following sequence a man was shown, holding up her scarf, as she walked by and, as if insulted, she pulled it out of his hands. The use of the scarf, which followed her previous costume, helped make her sexuality at once both concealed and revealed, as we cannot be sure of her sexual orientation.

Dietrich's final costume, as she walked off into the desert, revealed an image of innocent, as its color was a saintly white. The costume was the type which one would wear at a dinner party therefore no one would expect Dietrich to walk off into the desert with such an outfit. The outfit in essence does not in any way suggest

that she will be driven by eroticism. Furthermore the costume suggested that she met him to bid him farewell as opposed to walking off into the desert, which illustrated that she still did not know whom to choose. The costume highlighted Dietrich's slim body, which revealed eroticism, not to mention the fact that Dietrich, in this closing scene, must once and for all decide what she will do. Sternberg, in this particular instance, used the contrast of black and white to illustrate both innocence and eroticism.

In *Blond Venus* her first use of costumes, which concealed her sexuality, occurred when she met the director of the new play. Her costume was in no way sexually explicit because she was wearing a fur coat, which depicted her sexual vulnerability. She had been out of the theatre scene for many years and as the director kept making passes at her Dietrich kept wrapping herself up with the collar of her coat. She gave the impression of being vulnerable because her constant hugging of herself symbolized her sexual insecurity. The scene illustrated Dietrich's ability to attach sexual meaning to a variety of costumes without necessarily relying on her exquisite dresses, which she wore in her other Sternberg films.

Blond Venus also provided another sequence where Dietrich made use of a costume, other than her traditional gowns, which illustrated a sexual content. Her appearance in an ape costume linked her sexuality to that of a beast. She entered dressed in the ape costume, where she then changed into her, so-called *Blonde Venus* costume. The scene seemed to imply her bestiality in reference to sexuality and presented Dietrich as a woman that was hard to handle.

The Blue Angel, for its part, illustrated another way in which costumes could be used to conceal and reveal eroticism at the same time. In *The Blue Angel* Rath's first visit to Dietrich's dressing room, appeared to illustrate her eroticism as she changed her clothes in front of him. However all Dietrich was trying to do was conceal one of his student's identity, whom was hiding behind her blind where she usually changed. This, in essence, rescued Rath's student from being caught and being associated to eroticism. One could elaborate further by stating that Dietrich did not want to reveal her eroticism to the student and chose to change in front of the professor instead.

This scene in essence illustrated how one could both reveal and conceal sexuality by the simple use of a costume change. Furthermore, the scene's use of two males, one which was concealed and one which was revealed complicates the puzzle as one had to interpret who Dietrich was revealing her sexuality to and who she was concealing it from. Therefore, was Dietrich only trying to be nice to conceal her

eroticism from the young boy or was she using that moment to flirt with two men at the same time?

Costumes could also reveal or conceal eroticism through the use of black and white colors in relation to the narrative. *The Devil is a Woman* was a primary example where costumes revealed or concealed eroticism because white was used to illustrate innocence and black was used to illustrate promiscuity. The most dangerous of the two colors, in the context of *The Devil is a Woman*, was white because it was used to lure the male into Dietrich's erotic game.

Eroticism was concealed and revealed when the interplay of the color of the costumes, combined with the narrative. The narrative was important in terms of how much or how little the characters knew about Dietrich's erotic flirtations. Dietrich was dressed in white for practically every scene, which involved flirtations with a man for the first time. The scene where she was dressed as a nun, although the outfit was not white, the white veil helped us perceive that she was a nun. Secondly, the scene where Dietrich and her mother visited Pascal, where they ask for more money, also included a saintly white outfit. The third time the color of a costume was used occurred when Dietrich sang with three men in the carnival, which then linked her to another meeting with Pascal. The fourth scene involved her first meeting with Antonio where once again she arrived all dressed up in white to display her erotic innocence, not knowing that Antonio knew about her erotic games. Had Dietrich known about Antonio and Pascal's meeting, she most probably would have appeared in black, according to the costume color pattern in this film, as she did at the carnival where she met Pascal for the second time. In fact the following four scenes, the pistol shootout, the visit at the hospital, her begging for passports at the governor's office, and the final scene where she decided not to take the train, were scenes where she was dressed up in black. Her black costumes illustrated that every male she came in contact with knew about her escapades and therefore the imagery of white gowns was deleted as no male could be introduced into Dietrich's eroticism. The eroticism of the scenes from *The Devil is a Woman*, mentioned above, and arose out of Dietrich's ability to arouse the men's sexuality, after having had sex with them, to a degree where she could manipulate them out of their money. In essence eroticism developed out of Sternberg's ability to manipulate the costumes' colors by illustrating the saintly white in a reversed role of evil, which in this film, meant eroticism.

Costumes, which appeared at different occasions in the films, displayed eroticism at different levels depending on the audience's narrative knowledge in relation to the costume. The costumes, which appeared in the opening scenes, tended to reveal and conceal information that was more ambiguous and open to interpretation than

costumes later on in the film. Therefore the meaning of the costumes evolved along with the narrative. This in essence added ambiguity, at times, when scenes were isolated in the context of costumes. Finally the above examples on costumes provided an illustration as to how Sternberg exploited their use according to their styles and their contexts.

CONCLUSION

Marlene Dietrich demonstrated in many respects, based on the above essay, that she the synthesis of eroticism in the thirties. Joseph Von Sternberg directed vehicles, which allowed Dietrich to become a sexual icon by cleverly using mise en scene, props, and costumes to reveal or conceal eroticism. Eroticism was a theme, which was central to the Dietrich and Sternberg collaboration in their well-remembered partnership of seven films. This essay attempted to use examples of mise en scene, props, and costumes to demonstrate how eroticism was revealed or concealed.

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