

MODERNISM BORN OUT OF CLASSICAL CINEMA: THE BODY OF MARLENE DIETRICH IN THE FILMS OF JOSEF VON STERNBERG

In the beginning was a classical body

Can an actress's way of acting tell us how classical cinema operated? Can a Hollywood star reveal to us the desires of American filmmakers to transgress classical conventions? The body of Marlene Dietrich can. To prove it, I believe it is first necessary to debunk the legend that has obscured the importance of this female figure, which claims that Marlene Dietrich was discovered and moulded by Josef von Sternberg. Historians and biographers (Walker, 1967; Spoto, 1992; Dyer, 1998) all tell the same story of how Sternberg was captivated in a Berlin theatre by Dietrich's "natural eroticism" while he was looking for an actress to play Lola-Lola in his film *The Blue Angel* (*Der blaue Engel*, 1930). The story goes that this film brought Marlene Dietrich international fame, Hollywood took notice and Paramount signed her up to turn her into the new star of the 1930s. But as the historian Joseph Garncarz (2007) reveals, what actually happened was quite different: the actress, when she met Josef von Sternberg, was not merely a supporting actress, but a figure who had already become well-

known -not only in Europe but also in the United States- for the melodramas she'd starred in in Germany. She had begun to attract critical attention for a series of films in which she shamelessly copied the image, gestures and style of the most important actress in classical cinema at that time, Greta Garbo. Joseph Garncarz, in his passionate article "Playing Garbo: How Marlene Dietrich Conquered Hollywood" (2007), compiles the opinions of German and U.S. critics who appraised Dietrich's imitative performances, arguing that their comments, most of which were admiring, were what convinced Paramount to sign the German actress at a time when the film studio was looking for a face to compete with Metro Goldwyn Mayer, which had exclusive rights to the *Divine* Garbo. Indeed, *The Blue Angel* had only just premiered in Europe when the new star was signed up. Furthermore, the producers who had seen it told Josef von Sternberg that for the new film *Morocco* (1930), Marlene Dietrich's character should have nothing to do with the "vulgar" Lola-Lola, but instead should recreate the Garbo-esque mystique that she had exuded in her earlier German melodramas.

It is not my aim here to engage in an exaltation of Marlene Dietrich at the expense of the undeniable talent of Josef von Sternberg. But it seems to me extremely important to stress the fact that the actress took an active and creative role in these films. James Naremore (1988: 156) points out how difficult it is in these films to identify when the director might have surrendered his control over the staging to allow the star herself to take over. Based on this idea, I will use the Dietrich/Sternberg formula to refer to aspects of her performance that might equally have been the work of either the director or the actress. The power that the stars had over the production during Hollywood's Golden Age was huge: historian Mick Lasalle (2000), examining the contracts of Greta Garbo and Norma Shearer, notes that these actresses had the authority to decide on how their shots were framed, and could intervene in the final edit of the film. Similarly, Joseph Garncarz explains that in Germany the production system in the 1920s allowed actors total control over their image. Marlene Dietrich thus decided to take a classical body —no less than Greta Garbo's— as her model when she first entered the *Dream Factory*. She then chose to fan the flames of the Pygmalion legend when expressing her point of view and personality because, as Garncarz intuited (2007: 116), she understood that the fable of the poor, unknown girl who dreams of being an actress and becomes famous and successful in Hollywood invited those who had suffered the Crash of '29 to believe once again in the American dream.

Alexander Doty (2011), following Garncarz's research, analyses the similarities and differences between Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, and suggests that from the moment that Paramount had signed the *new Garbo*, they immediately saw a need to differentiate her from the original figure. To do this, Paramount immediately began describing Dietrich as their *answer to Garbo*. This apparent contradiction in Paramount's publicity is key to under-

standing how classical cinema operated: the creators of the films of Hollywood's Golden Age reworked their stories with new elements or variations based on established formulas; they could thus challenge their own conventions in a quest for constant renewal. They weren't afraid of new forms because those new forms emerged from old structures or conventions. It is thus not surprising that along these lines Miriam Bratu Hansen (2000) should argue that classical cinema exhibits what she calls "vernacular modernism". I am adopting this same position because I believe that Marlene Dietrich, with her initial imitation of Greta Garbo, demonstrating that she understood the formulation of the classical image, came to explore new attitudes in front of the camera that can be defined as modern. But with an important qualification: this is a modernism that arose out of classicism, far from the reasoning of Bill Nichols (1981: 106) when he connects the modernism of Josef von Sternberg's style with that of Ozu or the new European filmmakers. In this article, I will explore Marlene Dietrich's gestural repertoire to demonstrate how traces of modernism arose naturally out of classical forms.

Marlene Dietrich's *impertinent expression*

In the early 1980s, Dietrich took part in a documentary about her career, *Marlene* (Maximilian Schell, 1984), on the condition that she would not be shown on screen, but that only her voice would be heard. In the first part of the film there is a montage of images directed by Sternberg in which Dietrich appears in different love scenes with her partners. The voice of the eighty-three year-old actress is laid over the soundtrack of these classic scenes, declaring that her performances "were corny". Director Maximilian Schell, who converses

Morocco
(Josef von Sternberg, 1930)





Blonde Venus
(Josef Von Sternberg, 1932)

with the actress throughout the film, unhesitatingly corrects her comment, clarifying that she “was not corny”, but that her performances were in keeping with the “romantic” films of the era. Dietrich retorts with meaningful bluntness: “I gave the impression that I was a romantic, but really I was impertinent.” It is obvious that Marlene Dietrich was fully aware that fifty years earlier she had played some female characters which, in spite of their

classical appearance, were not exactly the established models.

This impertinence was one of the features that the actress (in the role of Amy Jolly) brings to the screen as early as the opening of *Morocco*, in the scene where she is famously dressed in male attire. And it is not so much the androgyny suggested by her appearance as the serene and swaggering attitude she displays before an audience that boos her aggressively. Marlene Dietrich shows the world that she is invulnerable. This is her impertinence: making visible her status of almighty star, who controls the unfolding events of a plot written just for her. There in the unruly crowd is the legionnaire Tom Brown (Gary Cooper), who is the only one who applauds her with enthusiasm and even

tries to silence the jeers. While Tom takes the spotlight down in the stalls with his standing up to the crowd, a close-up of Amy, smoking, almost motionless, watching the situation from above, reveals in her hint of a smile the power that she, as the star, has over the scene. It is no accident that the three wide-angle shots of Tom are taken from the point of view of Amy who, with her controlling gaze, reduces the figure of the hero, thereby supporting Gaylyn Studlar’s (1988) theory that Marlene Dietrich is always the dominant subject of the scene.

It is no surprise that the audience immediately settles down to watch and listen to her attentively. With the slightest gesture, Dietrich dismisses the lascivious invitation of a man in the hall and, a little later, she shares the famous kiss on the lips with another woman,

revealing that although she still has her eye on the soldier, she is also attracted by female beauty. To activate the erotic imagination of the spectator was the primordial objective of the films of the era: from Greta Garbo to Norma Shearer, from Jean Harlow to Mae West, the 1930s constantly challenged audiences, even after the imposition of the Hays Code in 1934. Classical cinema needed provocation, and censorship was there to underscore it.

But Marlene did not stand out because of her androgynous provocation. It was the revelation of her acting style that set her apart. Her smiling face, seeming to mock the scene, distinguished her from any other actress of the era. A fan from 1930 would describe it simply and meaningfully in the magazine *Photoplay* by asserting that “Marlene Dietrich has everything that Garbo has and something else besides: humour!” (Doty, 2011: 119). It is clear that while the *Divine Garbo* created an image in which romance triumphed at the end of her films and she offered herself with conviction, sanctity and transcendence, Marlene Dietrich questioned her own attitude to love or even put forward the idea that the emotions could not be taken too seriously. In this sense, it can hardly be accidental that in her introductory song she should slyly insert a playful air into her performance when, after singing of the sorrow of being separated from a loved one, she brazenly declares that new love affairs would soon come her way. It is right at the moment when the star begins with elegant subtlety to poke fun at sentiments of love that her face and her body shine their brightest: her impertinent smile wins over the spectators in the hall. Because this performer’s way of presenting the sentimental, of opening a new discourse about passion, is what differentiated her from any other actress of her time. The protagonist of melodramas in which the plot was driven by emotions, Marlene Dietrich emerged as a figure who sought to be idealised like Greta Garbo, a sophisticated and glamorous

female legend who acted *for love*, just as the classical canon required. At the same time, she developed a discourse on the fleetingness of the emotions, which she engaged in with an air of distance. With a refined sense of humour, Dietrich was able to deconstruct the classical discourse. But she was not a comedienne; compared to the comical qualities of Jean Harlow or Mae West, Marlene Dietrich’s approach was always a complex attempt to combine opposites: her humour was profoundly serious.

This acting style at once had a huge impact on the inner workings of the *Dream Factory*: two years after the release of *Morocco*, Greta Garbo imitated Marlene Dietrich in the opening scenes of *As You Desire Me* (George Fitzmaurice, 1932), in which she played a cabaret singer with bleached blonde hair and black trousers who dismisses the gallant attentions of her suitors, in a mocking attitude towards love. The intention of the Swedish star seems clear, as Richard Corliss (Doty, 2011: 113) suggests, the *Divine Garbo* was, in this opening scene, parodying her German rival. In this way, Greta Garbo confirmed that Marlene Dietrich’s transgression of classical convention could be absorbed into that same convention. It is well known that an open competitiveness existed between the two stars, a fact that helps explain the way classical cinema was orchestrated because they competed over the variations or transgressions that had been successful with the audience: for example, in *Dishonored* (Josef von Sternberg, 1931) Marlene Dietrich played a melodramatic spy analogous to the one that Greta Garbo had played in *The Mysterious Lady* (Fred Niblo, 1928), and, a few months later, the *Divine Woman* herself would again play a spy in *Mata-Hari* (George Fitzmaurice, 1931), following Dietrich’s success; after this, it would come as no surprise that Marlene Dietrich should answer Garbo’s *Queen Christina* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1933) with a royal portrayal of her own in *The Scarlet Empress* (Josef von Stern-

berg, 1934). The two actresses depicted women of dubious sexual morals, which always made their characters extremely fascinating. Marlene Dietrich took the morality of the melodrama as her starting point, but her ironic attitude opened up a new discourse on love that the classical tradition then adopted in order to offer unexpected new narratives.

Previous authors (Sarris, 1966; Wood, 1978; Nichols, 1981) have offered detailed discussions of the irony apparent in the endings to the six films that Sternberg and Dietrich made for Paramount. Given that only the director’s style has been examined to argue for the parodic nature of these final scenes, I would like to turn the focus to Marlene Dietrich’s facial expressions to explain how the actress participated in the interrogation of the classical *happy ending*. In *Shanghai Express* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932), for example, Dietrich’s performance up to the final kiss is, beyond any doubt, a simulation, a dramatisation of the happy ending. Andrew Sarris (1966: 35) has already pointed out that this film has a “false happy ending”. And indeed, although the director positions the protagonists in close shots while they declare their love for one another, the male character (Clive Brook) suddenly comes out with a question that is unequivocally comical: “How in the name of Confucius can I kiss you with all these people around?” The question is preceded by the restless, sarcastic gaze of Marlene Dietrich who, from the beginning of the scene, accentuates the theatrical nature of her performance, flaunting her awareness that she is merely acting, thus participating in a scene that is deliberately staged to appear artificial. Her reply to his question, after Sternberg has inserted a shot of the station filled with people, is utterly ironic: “There’s no one here but you and I.” The protagonists then kiss and once again the director superimposes the shot of the station crowded with passengers. Sternberg makes use of Dietrich’s ironic presence to underline the falseness of the fiction,

to expose the multiple subtleties that make the performance possible.

Marlene Dietrich, in fact, always acts as if she were on a stage. While the stars that preceded her had contributed to the creation of the illusion that we were not merely witnessing a portrayal, Dietrich transgressed the classical transparency, making her role as an actress visible. During the film *Shanghai Express*, the protagonists make it clear that they don't trust one another; as a result, when the *happy ending* arrives, Marlene Dietrich ridicules this imposition of the *Dream Factory* by constructing an overplayed moment of happiness which she offers as theatrically as possible.

What is extraordinary is that her dramatisation is not based on exaggerated gestures, but on an impertinent impassivity. In her case, the excess lies in the fact that she barely acts at all. In the scene of the lesbian kiss, for example, she seduces the woman only with her gaze: a long, cold stare, and then suddenly, as if she were not planning a transgression, the kiss. The theatricality here is indisputable because the audience applauds enthusiastically and she even responds, albeit with only the slightest gesture of her hand towards her hat. But in the previous scene, Marlene Dietrich, playing the woman fleeing to Morocco to escape a mysterious past, reacts just as artificially when the character played by Adolphe Menjou approaches her to help her: When the contents of her suitcase fall out, Amy Jolly is unable to pick them up in a conventional way, moving instead with an almost mechanical unnaturalness, making her presence as a body palpable. The spectator isn't watching Amy Jolly, but an actress who is (not) acting.

Dispensing with the expressive movements canonised by Lillian Gish or Greta Garbo (to mention two actresses who knew how to soften emotional exaggerations in their bodies and faces,

but who made the spectator experience the emotions), Marlene Dietrich moved the spectator equally with her impassivity. This tendency towards containment in her acting, towards restraint of her emotions, contrasts with the sump-

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tuous wardrobe that the actress wore in Sternberg's films. Feathers and even more ostentatious attire combined with the overloaded scenery and the visibly artificial lighting used by the Viennese director; Sternberg liked to expose the falseness of the show to the spectator and so dressed her star in a lush manner, far removed from ordinary reality. I suspect that Dietrich's restraint and even the slowness of her gestures is the technique that actress and director used so that the figure of the star could *be seen* in Sternberg's mannerist *mise en scene*. In this sense, the scene in which the actress emerges from a gorilla costume in the film *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932) seems to me paradigmatic: Dietrich pulls off the false monkey head and extracts herself mechanically from the beast's hairy chest, putting on a curly blonde wig without dramatising the mutation, while dancers and musicians dressed as African savages fill out one of the most surrealist frames the director ever staged. The absurdity of the set is utterly outlandish, but Marlene Dietrich, with her impassivity, performative restraint, provocative gaze and impertinent smile, dignifies the imaginative delirium of the action. This is how she

became the most idealised body of the era. Her appeal was not her legs ("the prettiest in the world", as she allowed them to be publicised), but her bold display that proclaimed her ostentatiously -but also paradoxically- to be an embodiment of eroticism. In such moments, Marlene Dietrich came closer to the iconoclast discourse that Mae West was building around the female presence than the core ideals that Greta Garbo had established for classicism. In other words, Dietrich would introduce an self-conscious, ironic and reflective gaze that compelled spectators to look at her in a different way, leav-

ing no doubt to the contrary. Dietrich was Manet's *Olympia* in relation to Titian's *Venus of Urbino* : images which, in short, displayed the erotic female body not in a totemic but in an interrogative, openly impertinent way.

A classical body for modernism

In *The Devil is a Woman* (Josef von Sternberg, 1935) we find one of Marlene's most honest performances: shortly before the end of the film, her character asks a stranger for a cigarette and tells him, with a smiling and somewhat melancholy expression, that she had once worked in a cigarette factory, thus recalling a scene from the first part of the film. This is the last shot filmed by Sternberg that spectators would see of Dietrich. The least visibly artificial expression that they would film together in a film in which the actress played one of the most implausible and theatrical characters of her career. The scene may seem mannerist (the actress recalling a moment of her portrayal) but instead proves utterly genuine: without losing her impertinent smile, she offers a hint of a melancholy look back on her past performances with Sternberg.

This purity in her expression was not new: already in *Dishonored* we can de-

tect, in one of the most shocking moments of Dietrich's performance, an equally revealing expression that appears immediately after an extremely artificial scene in which the actress, in the role of the spy Marie Kolverer, faces death in a brutal execution. Nobody who has seen this film could forget Marlene Dietrich looking at her reflection in the cold metal of a soldier's sword to check how she looks a few moments before her death. A little later, as the protagonist awaits the execution order, a close-up shows her staring ahead bravely, facing death with a defiant, passionate smile; but a soldier interrupts the shooting with a speech on the injustice of war and the star, resuming the fictitious tone of before, takes advantage of the unexpected pause in the action to apply her lipstick and adjust her stockings. In the end, her body falls as she is shot down by the firing squad. And what is surprising is that, immediately after this extravagant *mise en scene*, reality bursts onto the screen. In the perceptive words of Diderot: "The height of the sense of the real in art is the height of artifice" (Drove, 1994, 63). Indeed, after the actress's ostentatious dramatisation, spectators are shown a female figure which, perhaps for the first time in the history of classical cinema, is given to them in a form that is all too human: a victim of violent aggression, the actress falls back from the rapid impact of the bullets, inscribing at this moment, in a realistic manner completely distinct from the way that female protagonists normally died in the *Dream Factory*, the resistance of the flesh in the fragile bone structure of a woman who, in spite of having disguised her confrontation with death, breathes her last without being able to mask the terror of being hewn down by the bullets. Marlene Dietrich's body is made real because what prevails in the scene is the insolence of the mean-

inglessness, of the chaos: completely indifferent to imaginary significations, a star is killed senselessly by a firing squad.

It is obvious that the Dietrich/Sternberg team were testing out new ways of presenting a body. Jean-Luc Nancy (2003: 99) writes: "let there be writing, not about the body, but the body itself. Not bodihood, but the actual body. Not signs, images or ciphers of the body, but still the body. This was once a program for modernity." It is clear that in this last gesture, which includes a notion of reality, the creators of *Dishonored* came even closer to what would later become modernism. A modernism which, it is worth repeating, emerged from classicism itself. Without a doubt, the goddess Marlene Dietrich confronted the vulnerability of love, faced up to the loss of intensity of relationships and exposed the arbitrary nature of the emotions, moving away in such moments from the idealist romantic discourse of the time, and towards the lived experience of the human being. In her first film for Paramount, *Morocco*, the lovers, in the changing room—a space where masks are usually removed—converse for the first time

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to declare their mutual attraction. But, unexpectedly, the scene does not lead directly to the classical kiss on the lips; instead, the passion of the two lovers is shown as sporadic. There is no deliberate *crescendo* in the portrayal of this first encounter; the hesitant lovers appear undecided and indifferently insin-

uate that they don't believe in love as a promise of eternal happiness, because they have suffered disappointments in the past; thus, in spite of the attraction they feel, they appear tired, unexcited by an experience which they remark they have already failed at before. Indeed, Gary Cooper and Marlene Dietrich are placed in a situation in which I would argue the spectator's patience has never been put so much to the test: for eight drawn-out minutes, the lovers move together and apart, speaking in enigmatic metaphors that prevent the meaning of their dialogue from being understood; on the narrative level, words do not serve to advance the plot; on the contrary, they deliberately slow it down. So what is the purpose of this scene, in which Gary Cooper even looks at his watch, as if bored with not being able to act passionately? To dramatise, in a psychologically realistic way, the rational doubts that hold two mutually attracted bodies back from each other. I don't believe that modernism could be better represented than this.

It is a modernism which, moreover, has been reinforced since the emergence of the argument (Dyer, 2001: 199) that Josef von Sternberg projected his amorous feelings for Marlene Dietrich onto his filming of her. Just as Jean Luc Godard had done with Ana Karina, Michelangelo Antonioni with Monica Vitti or Ingmar Bergman with Liv Ullmann, Sternberg toyed with the idea of using the camera to capture Marlene Dietrich's most intimate secrets, but in her sometimes impertinent, sometimes melancholy or defiant expression the actress reveals the energy of a woman who shimmered in the gaze of the man behind the camera. The statements of both suggest it was a tempestuous relationship that kept them united and distant at the same time, just as was the case for the characters she played in their films. For this

reason, I propose the consideration of the six films with Paramount as a series of essays reflecting the feelings not only of the director but also of the actress; six confessional tales that expressed the emotions of both creators at the time of filming.

If a dialogue existed between director and female star in other productions in Hollywood's Golden Age, it was because the star had considerable power. Already in the 1920s, Norma Shearer was enriching the direction of Monta Bell with daring expressions of complicity that revealed the attraction and, sometimes, aversion that existed between them. It is doubtful that Karina, Vitti or Ullman ever participated as freely in the creative development of a film. Perhaps the blame lies in the exploitative gaze of Roberto Rosellini who, in his desire to show the inner expressions of his wife Ingrid Bergman, silenced the actress's creative expression without realising it. The active impertinence of Marlene Dietrich stands in contrast to the muted sobbing of Ingrid Bergman: these are two very different forms of expression in the history of cinema that help explain why the six Dietrich/Sternberg films should not be considered a precursor to modernism, but rather, another trace of the *vernacular modernism* of classicism. Marlene's body shows how classical convention sought new forms of expression: with Marlene Dietrich, the *Dream Factory* was taken to its most brilliant creative zenith.

Notes

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Núria Bou (b. Barcelona, 1967) is a teacher and director of the Master's program in Contemporary Film and Audiovisual Studies at the UPF Department of Communication. She is the author of *La mirada en el temps* (1996), *Plano/Contraplano*, (2002) and *Diosas y tumbas* (2004). In the anthologies *Les dives: mites i celebritats* (2007), *Políticas del deseo* (2007) and *Las metamorfosis del deseo* (2010) she explores her current fields of research: the star in Classical Hollywood Cinema and the representation of female desire.