

Angel Sings the Blues: Josef von Sternberg's The Blue Angel in Context

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Abstract

This essay reconsiders *The Blue Angel* (1930) not only in light of its 2001 restoration, but also in light of the following: the careers of Josef von Sternberg, Emil Jannings, and Marlene Dietrich; the 1905 novel by Heinrich Mann from which *The Blue Angel* was adapted; early sound cinema; and the cultural-historical circumstances out of which the film arose. In *The Blue Angel*, Dietrich, in particular, found the vehicle by which she could achieve global stardom, and Sternberg—a volatile man of mystery and contradiction, stubbornness and secretiveness, pride and even arrogance—for the first time found a subject on which he could focus his prodigious talent.

Keywords: *The Blue Angel*, Josef von Sternberg, Emil Jannings, Marlene Dietrich, Heinrich Mann, Nazism.

Resumen

Este ensayo reconsidera *El ángel azul* (1930) no solo a la luz de su restauración de 2001, sino también a la luz de lo siguiente: las carreras de Josef von Sternberg, Emil Jannings y Marlene Dietrich; la novela de 1905 de Heinrich Mann de la cual se adaptó *El ángel azul*; cine de sonido temprano; y las circunstancias histórico-culturales de las cuales surgió la película. En *El ángel azul*, Dietrich, en particular, encontró el vehículo por el cual podía alcanzar el estrellato global, y Sternberg, un hombre volátil de misterio y contradicción, terquedad y secretismo, orgullo e incluso arrogancia, por primera vez encontró un tema en el que podía enfocar su prodigioso talento.

Palabras clave: *El ángel azul*; Josef von Sternberg; Emil Jannings; Marlene Dietrich; Heinrich Mann; nazismo.

Introducing . . .

In 2001, seventy-one years after it became world-famous, after it made its leading woman world-famous, we got the full-length original version of *The Blue Angel* (*Der blaue Engel*, 1930). The American premiere of this restoration was in New York.

The original version is only twelve minutes longer than the print first shown in the United States in December of 1930, but those few restored brief sequences, along with the fresh print and the sharp new subtitles, give us the chance to see an extraordinary work at its best.

The Blue Angel is a cask of contradictions. The first German sound film, it was made in Berlin in 1929, and is sometimes considered the ultimate flowering of the great German cinema of the 1920s; but the director, Josef von Sternberg, was technically an American. He was an Austrian émigré who had lived in America since he was seventeen (at the time of the movie he was thirty-five), had served in the U.S. Army during World War I, had succeeded in Hollywood, and was no longer fluent in the German language. Emil Jannings, the German star who had worked in Hollywood with Sternberg in a silent picture (*The Last Command* [1928]) and had returned home (like many foreign actors) because his accent barred him from American sound films, had sworn that he would never work with this director again; yet it was Jannings, facing his first sound film at home, who asked Sternberg to come over and direct him—even though Sternberg had made only one sound film (and, oddly enough, the first gangster film, *Underworld* [1927]—in silence). During the making of *The Blue Angel*, Jannings and Sternberg quarreled bitterly, yet the film contains some of the best work of each. Marlene Dietrich, the leading woman, was publicized as a Sternberg discovery, but she had already been in nine films and in numerous Berlin plays. (It was on the Berlin stage that Sternberg first saw her.) The screenplay is based, rather loosely, on a 1905 novel by Heinrich Mann, and Sternberg maintained that, despite the final credits that cite three German writers (including the comic playwright Carl Zuckmayer) in addition to himself, he was the real adapter of the book.

Emil Jannings

Let's start our discussion with Emil Jannings. In 1930 he was Germany's best-known actor. After briefly immigrating to Hollywood, he garnered the first Academy Award for Best Actor with his performances in two films: *The Way of All Flesh* (1927, Victor Fleming) and *The Last Command*. The latter was an outrageously melodramatic offering from Paramount, directed by one of Hollywood's most colorful, most talented, and most disliked men—Sternberg, a man who once remarked that the way to get others to remember you is to get them to hate you. According to Sternberg's autobiography, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (1965), he and Jannings managed to end their collaboration on the film gracefully, but the actor William Powell, who was also in *The Last Command*, was more adamant in expressing his opinion of Sternberg. He demanded a clause in his contract that would protect him from ever being directed by the diminutive Austrian émigré again.

When Sternberg arrived in Berlin to direct Jannings' first sound film for UFA (Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft), he learned that there was no screenplay—not even an idea for one. Various subjects, including Rasputin, were mooted. Then Jannings brought him the Mann novel. Sternberg must have recognized that the story was the sort of drama that Jannings had already scored in, the proud man who suffers a tragic fall (the grand hotel doorman in F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* [1924], the banker in Fleming's *The Way of All Flesh*, the czarist general in Sternberg's *The Last Command*), but Sternberg also saw the gleaming cinematic possibilities in the book for himself as

well as Jannings. He then found the woman, the new Lilith, who was essential to this story.

Marlene Dietrich

A screen test of Dietrich (at age twenty-eight) for the role is shown as a prelude to the 2001 version of *The Blue Angel*. She stands facing us behind an upright piano, her arms on it, her chin on her hands in parodic coquette pose, and sings “You’re the Cream in My Coffee”—in perfectly acceptable English. Twice she sings it, and twice she breaks off to excoriate the pianist in German. With piercing hindsight, we can see at once that she was perfect for Lola-Lola. (Note: as was common with many films in many countries in those days, *The Blue Angel* was shot in two languages simultaneously. After a scene was done in German, it was immediately repeated in English. It was the [inferior] English version that was first shown in the United States.)

The now legendary status of *The Blue Angel* is traceable not only to its impact on global audiences as one of the earliest sound masterpieces, but also to its role in making Dietrich a star and, ultimately, nothing less than a cultural myth. With her husky voice, “perfect” legs, and distinctive beauty, Dietrich’s appearance in the film catapulted her to international stardom. Yet her physical attributes had been displayed in earlier films. In *The Blue Angel*, however, Dietrich projected something more, a personality, a *persona* that fascinated audiences and marked the beginning of her collaboration with Sternberg, the man who became known as the Svengali to her Trilby, the Pygmalion to her Galatea. She would go on to make six films in Hollywood with him—*Morocco* (which, in 1930, demonstrated Dietrich’s appeal to American audiences before the début in the U.S. of *The Blue Angel*), *Dishonored* (1931), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *Blonde Venus* (1932), *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935)—perhaps the most remarkable collaboration between actress and filmmaker that the cinema has ever seen.

It was against the objections of both Jannings and producer Erich Pommer that Sternberg chose Dietrich to play Lola-Lola. (Heinrich Mann’s friend Trude Hesterberg was considered; so were the stage actress Grete Massine, the singer Lucie Mannheim, Brigitte Helm from *Metropolis* [1927, Fritz Lang], and even the lesser-known Käthe Haack.) Dietrich was familiar to German audiences through her recordings as well as her stage work and movies, in addition to her highly publicized relationship with the Austrian film star Willi Forst, but Sternberg’s *The Blue Angel* crystallized aspects of her personality and talent that had not been exploited in her previous pictures, such as *Die Frau nach der man sich sehnt* (*Three Loves*, 1929; Curtis Bernhardt), where she is sufficiently compelling (and attractive) as a *femme fatale* but physically awkward and often embarrassingly unsure of herself in her acting. In *The Blue Angel* Dietrich was transformed into a performer whose seamless portrayal of her character astounded critics, dismayed her co-star, and mesmerized audiences.

Novel into Film

As for Heinrich Mann’s novel *Professor Unrath* (in German, *Unrat*), it tells the story of a *Gymnasium* (a college-preparatory high school) teacher whose fascination with a lower-class aspiring singer/entertainer leads to his dismissal from his post. He

avenges himself on the class system that he blames for his fate by turning his house into a gambling den and using his new wife to take down the town's social elite. The novel, then, is essentially an attack on the period's reactionary politics and a protest against the false morality and corrupt values of the German middle class. Mann's "message" is that the respectable bourgeoisie is conformist and law-abiding only by default, that is, because of a lack of imagination and courage; deep inside, however, each bourgeois is a gambler and a rake. But, to make the film more popularly appealing, Sternberg insisted on largely depoliticizing this narrative and, cutting the novel in half (though adding a number of minor characters like the clown), focused only on the bourgeois professor's surrender to an actual cabaret singer—a beautiful female member of the *Lumpenproletariat* (whose name was changed from Rosa Fröhlich to Lola-Lola) with no aspirations except momentary pleasure—and his destruction at her hands. The professor's sadistically sociopathic rebellion against the bourgeoisie is totally eliminated from the movie adaptation, even as Sternberg later eliminated Theodore Dreiser's social commentary from his 1931 film of *An American Tragedy*.



Silence Become Sound

Jannings' choice of Sternberg to direct *The Blue Angel*, it has to be said, was not an impulsive one. As difficult a director as actors might find him, Sternberg had already proven his adept, innovative handling of sound film, that nemesis of many a silent-picture star; and Jannings' own success in *The Last Command*, though a silent film, was also an indicator of Sternberg's ability to evoke critically acclaimed performances from his players, as beleaguered as they might feel under his direction. Sternberg's experiments with sound in *Thunderbolt* (1929) and *The Blue Angel* reflected his belief that sound was a liability to the visual expressiveness of the medium. To Sternberg, film had to break the boundaries of simple reproduction or mimesis, of merely imitating the world as it existed, including its sounds. The artistic potential in sound, to be sure, was technically difficult to achieve in the years immediately following its 1927 feature-film début. Indeed, many filmmakers were content to treat sound as a device over which they had little control. But Sternberg, for his part, refused to abdicate control.

As a result, critics and audiences alike were captivated by the subtleties of sound in *The Blue Angel*. Sound was used to achieve a sense of space, of distance, and of the events occurring offscreen, beyond the camera's reach. Sound was also used in this film to establish character and to create atmosphere. Amid the incessant babbling of many contemporaneous movies that filled every moment with talk or music, *The Blue Angel* also distinguished itself through its use of expressive silence. Ironically, Sternberg was

later lambasted by critics for being decadently obsessed with visuals to the point, some said, of no longer being a director but a cinematographer instead: his innovative use of sound was quickly forgotten. Critics of Sternberg's work in the 1930s for Paramount also cited his preoccupation with Dietrich as a key factor in his artistic decline. Indeed, by the end of 1935, and the end of their seven-picture collaboration, Dietrich would be regarded by Paramount as a more highly valued "property" than Sternberg, the man who "discovered" her.

That Dietrich would become a preoccupation for Sternberg is first revealed in *The Blue Angel*, where Professor Immanuel Rath (Jannings) is a less central character in comparison with his role in Mann's novel. The first shot of the film demonstrates Sternberg's change of dramatic focus: a poster of Dietrich as Lola-Lola advertises her appearance at the Blue Angel Cabaret. In Mann's novel, the would-be singer becomes only a pawn in her husband's schemes. In Sternberg's film, Lola-Lola's sexual autonomy and Rath's self-abnegating desire for her lead to the latter's social as well as sexual humiliation. It could be argued, however, that Lola-Lola does not destroy Rath (spelled "Raath" in Mann's novel); he destroys himself by choosing to take up with her. This theme of male self-annihilation, moreover, appears repeatedly in Sternberg's pictures, and, already visible in such silent films of his as *The Exquisite Sinner* (1926), *The Docks of New York* (1928), and *The Case of Lena Smith* (1929), it continued to be seen—subsequent to his work with Dietrich—in *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941) and *Macao* (1952).

The Blues Angel

The Blue Angel's story is, if not especially novel, classically simple and strong. From a shot of a cleaning woman's imitation of Lola-Lola's leggy pose in the poster, the film moves to introduce Professor Immanuel Rath. The middle-aged Rath, a bachelor living a routine existence in an unnamed seaport town, is observed as he prepares for school. At breakfast, he whistles to his pet canary. When it does not respond, he discovers that the bird is dead; he cradles it in his hand. Sternberg eschews maudlin background music here: Rath's concern is accompanied only by silence. His sympathy for his pet is cut short when his maid enters the apartment. She curtly remarks on the bird's demise and unceremoniously carts it off to the nearest stove for incineration. Rath just sits, absentmindedly stirring into his coffee the lump of sugar meant originally as a treat for his pet. The scene then ends.

While the introduction to Rath establishes his capacity for feeling and his emotional vulnerability (as well as the feminine harshness of the world he inhabits), the next scene establishes another aspect of Rath that is developed at length in Mann's novel but is sublimated in Sternberg's film to the theme of sexual obsession: his tyrannizing of his all-male class at the high school. Through vocal inflection and facial expression, Jannings communicates this teacher's enjoyment in humiliating his students. They are terrified of him. Rath catches one student, Lohmann, with a risqué photo card of Lola-Lola, complete with a feathered skirt that conveniently blows up to reveal considerably more of the singer. Angst, the class pet, looks on approvingly as Rath berates Lohmann, but Angst is later tripped up by Lohmann and two other students, after which Angst's own sexy Lola-Lola cards spill out of one of his textbooks onto the floor. Rath then interrogates Angst (a scene that is cut out of some prints) to learn that Lohmann and Goldstaub will be at the Blue Angel that night. As Rath surreptitiously

blows on Lola-Lola's feathered photos, music from the cabaret provides a sound transition to the next scene.

Ostensibly outraged that this nightclub allows his students to enter, Rath goes there to protest. (All of us amateur Freudians know at once why he is really going there.) As faraway foghorns sound from the harbor, Rath makes his way to the Blue Angel through narrow, cobblestoned streets dwarfed by crooked, ominously leaning buildings that look as if they came from the expressionist classic *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). Once in the cabaret, Rath gets confused by all the decorative netting and cables. (These are a Sternberg trademark, used by this director, along with low-hung lamps, to fill the “dead space” that separates the camera from its subject, and the subject from its background, so that he could achieve the gradations of light necessary to fill the screen as he wished, giving it, in this case, an air of scented, smoky claustrophobia and of a milieu where the persistence interference of mute objects is akin to the loosening of base instincts.) The professor soon becomes the object of attention when Lola-Lola turns a spotlight on him as she sings about finding the right man. Then, spotting Goldstaub and Lohmann, Rath quickly chases them—backstage, into Lola-Lola's dressing room.

Shortly thereafter Lola-Lola herself comes backstage. Rath pompously introduces himself, but she quickly deflates his superior manner by chiding him for not taking off his hat. Other performers, including a mournful, ever-watchful clown, pass through the room as Rath accuses Lola-Lola of corrupting his students. At the same time, she brazenly undresses in front of him and coyly teases the professor, even to the point of dropping her panties on him as she stands on a staircase leading to her bedroom. Lola-Lola soon leaves to sing her next number. A flustered Rath then meets Kiepert (Kurt Gerron), the magician-leader of the entertainment troupe currently in residence at the Blue Angel. Meanwhile, Goldstaub—hiding behind a dressing screen—attempts to escape the room. Rath pursues him and the other students into the street.

The next night, Professor Rath returns to the Blue Angel to retrieve his hat (let's have a Freudian smile) and return Lola-Lola's panties (put into his pocket by Goldstaub). Warned of their teacher's approach, Lohmann, Ertzum, and Goldstaub hide in a cellar that has a trapdoor to Lola-Lola's dressing room. Rath hears her sing one of her songs (marvelous songs that Friedrich Holländer wrote for the picture), then Lola-Lola calculatingly seduces him. She sits Rath down beside her at her dressing table and asks him to hold a box of mascara. Smiling at her guest, she suddenly spits into the mascara before applying it to her eyelashes. Lola-Lola's unself-conscious coarseness or vulgarity and easy sexuality here contrast with the bourgeois pretentiousness and romantic naïveté of Rath. So romantically naïve is he that he soon finds himself defending Lola-Lola against a drunken sea captain who assumes, upon prompting from Kiepert, that she is sexually available. Rath promptly boxes Kiepert's ears and throws the captain out.

When Professor Rath discovers his three students in hiding, he is surprised by their reaction. Lohmann is defiant because, as he says, they are all after the same thing (meaning Lola-Lola). Rath indignantly shoves him and assuages his own overexcitement by drinking champagne. The next morning, he awakens in Lola-Lola's bed. Their breakfast scene together finds her solicitous of Rath's welfare—and Rath still rather confused. He hurries off to class, where his students greet him with shouts of “Unrath,” meaning “excrement” or “garbage,” and a chalkboard full of suggestive pictures linking their teacher to Lola-Lola. The headmaster arrives and restores order to the classroom, but he warns his colleague against forming a relationship with Lola-Lola.

Rath defiantly proclaims his intention to marry the woman, after which the headmaster tells him that he cannot keep his position at the school if he does so.

When Rath appears at the Blue Angel to propose, Lola-Lola is getting ready to leave for the next town and the next cabaret. At first shocked by his marriage proposal, she finally reacts with laughter and amusement. The film then carefully establishes through dialogue and acting that Lola-Lola is actually attracted to Rath because of his innocence and “sweetness.” A joyful wedding celebration ensues, after which Rath’s staunch declaration that the obscene photo cards of Lola-Lola will never be sold again is gradually forgotten. The passage of time finds Lola-Lola still singing, but a much-changed Rath—a kind of obese poodle traveling with the show in which his wife stars—is now hawking the photo cards. Five years pass, as his dishevelment and despair increase. Rath is even seen applying clown makeup in a visual echo of the sadly silent clown’s presence in earlier scenes. When Kiepert announces that the troupe is going to play the Blue Angel again and that Professor Rath will be a featured performer before his hometown audience, Rath is panic-stricken. He says that he will never do it.

Like the beginning of the film, the next scene opens with a poster of Lola-Lola. A sign pasted on the poster announces the “Personal Appearance of Professor Immanuel Rath.” Upon the troupe’s arrival at the Blue Angel, Lola-Lola flirts with Mazeppa (Hans Albers), a handsome young strongman whose engagement at the cabaret is ending. But because of Lola-Lola, he decides to stay. Rath watches the strongman and his wife as he moves onto the stage for his final humiliation. In the act in which Rath takes part, Kiepert uses him as the stooge for his magic tricks, as he once used the clown. Kiepert declares Rath’s head to be “quite empty.” A man in the audience, disgusted by the callousness of the proceedings, decides to leave. Kiepert then pulls eggs from Rath’s hat and breaks one on the professor’s forehead, after which Rath crows on demand in a heartbreaking variation on his wedding-breakfast byplay with Lola-Lola.

When he sees Mazeppa and Lola-Lola kissing offstage, however, Rath goes wild. Continuing to crow, he runs after his wife and begins to strangle her. The spontaneity of Rath’s attack, the depth of his degradation, and the overwhelming sense of his loss make this scene emotionally wrenching. The sound of his mad crowing, the lurching of his huge body, Dietrich’s fearful retreat, the screams and scattering of the chorus girls—all of these are conveyed through precise camera setups and sterling sound (including the sound of offstage activity). Rath is finally overpowered and put into the straitjacket that is used as a prop in Mazeppa’s act. After Rath has calmed down, Kiepert releases him.

Lola-Lola is now onstage, repeating her opening anthem, “Falling in Love Again” (a song associated with Dietrich from this point on in her career). She sings that she cannot be blamed if men, like moths to a flame, burn their wings when they encounter her. Astride a chair, looking down on her audience impassively, she shows no sign that her husband’s emotional turmoil has touched her. Rather, Lola-Lola is narcissistically self-contained, impervious to Rath’s desire and to his downfall. He, for his part, has left to steal through the streets back to his old school. Re-entering his classroom, Rath dies with his arms wrapped around the desk that was once his. A traveling shot encompasses the empty room with the tender slowness of a last embrace—the very shot that was used earlier when, on the point of leaving the school for good, Rath had sat, lonely, at his desk—and serves as an obituary that impressively summarizes the tale of the dead man, whose head has sunk onto his desk. A running motif in *The Blue Angel* has been the old church clock that chimes a popular German tune devoted to the praise of loyalty and honesty (“*Üb’ immer Treu und Redlichkeit . .*

.”)—a tune expressive of Rath’s own inherited beliefs. In the concluding passage of the film, after Lola-Lola’s own song has faded away, this tune is ironically heard for the last time as the camera shows the dead Rath’s face, illuminated by a night watchman’s flashlight.

Auteurism, Angelicism, and Nazism

The Blue Angel is often referred to as Sternberg’s best picture. No doubt it was his most unequivocal critical and commercial success. Happily, he lived to see his *oeuvre* critically resurrected by *auteurist* critics in the 1960s. *The Blue Angel* was one of his few films that did not require reassessment, its position in cinematic history was assured, if not for its dramatic and aesthetic accomplishments, then solely for bringing Marlene Dietrich to stardom. Nevertheless, some may find the movie difficult to watch. *The Blue Angel*’s depiction of a coldly uncaring milieu and of Rath’s masochistic downfall within it results, to be sure, in a film that is not always easy to like but that still must be admired.

Emil Jannings’ acting in the picture does take a bit of getting used to, for at first he appears feeble and monochromatically comic. He creates a performance as he goes, however, carefully adding stroke after stroke, and this might strike modern audiences as slow. But if we allow that he is performing to his own metronome, very conscientiously, his performance gradually becomes immense. The scene with the eggs, in which he wears a clown’s wig and makeup before an audience that used to know him as a dignitary, glimpsing his wife being embraced by another man in the wings while the magician forces him to crow like a demented rooster—the utter ravage of a self-debased man—is one of the most shattering moments in all of cinema.

Still, Jannings had hoped to add shadings to his character from Sternberg’s direction, but that direction did not materialize as far as the actor was concerned. Instead, he felt he was little more than a character player to an unknown woman named Dietrich. For this reason, throughout the shooting of *The Blue Angel*, Jannings threw tantrums, threatening to walk off the set and doing everything he could to break down the rapport between director and female star. After the film, he was to demand successfully of UFA that he have total control over the material in all of his subsequent films—a decision that destroyed him as a screen star. (Contributing to his professional demise was the fact that Jannings remained in Germany during World War II to become a willing tool for the Nazis, making race-slurring films for Joseph Goebbels’ Ministry of Propaganda. During the same period, by contrast, Marlene Dietrich would become an American citizen and an influential anti-Nazi activist, spending much of the war entertaining troops near the front lines and doing radio broadcasts on behalf of the U.S. Office of Strategic Services.)

Dietrich, a bit more plump, and attractively so, than she was later permitted to be in American films, clearly was a star before she actually became one. She has the ease, the bravura, and the wry contempt for the world that were soon to become internationally known. Her feline stroll onstage, her pointed, mocking stares, her casual use of her own sexual allure to beguile the giggling, simpering Jannings—these became elements in a screen persona that Dietrich was to exploit for the rest of her career. What is here also particularly fine is the compassion that she feels for her pathetic professor-husband, her gentleness with him. The Venus in this Venusberg is as tender as she can be with her elderly Tannhäuser. Without question, Sternberg deliberately created a star

vehicle for the young Dietrich, pouring all his energy and imagination into the role of Lola-Lola. Borrowing from the drawings of the erotic artist Félicien Rops, he created a figure out of a teenager's sexual fantasy, a vision in black stockings and heavy make-up wearing a heavily tilted top hat. Dietrich's poses and movements onstage were mapped out with choreographic care, her songs crafted for her uninspiring voice by Holländer in such a way that each tune required only two or three notes.

Three other members of the cast require comment. Rosa Valetti, who plays Kiepert's wife, was a celebrated Berlin cabaret performer who had been in the first production of the Brecht-Weill *Threepenny Opera* (1928). Hans Albers, the circus strongman who tempts Dietrich and causes trouble in the last sequences, became a wildly popular theater star. (After his death he was even on a German postage stamp.) These two people, and the almost devilishly perfect casting throughout, create a cabaret universe into which the professor wanders as from another planet. But one cast member requires his own note—and then some: Kurt Gerron (about whom a documentary, *Prisoner of Paradise*, was made in 2002). He plays Kiepert—a heavy man with jowls and a gruff yet humorous voice—with accessible compassion. As the magician of the troupe, Kiepert pulls eggs from the groom's nose at the wedding party of Lola-Lola and Professor Rath—one of which will later be broken, in the climactic cabaret scene, on Jannings' clown-wigged head. The fate under Hitler for some of the others in the cast (like Károly Huszár) was as black as Gerron's, but his story has always seemed a touch more bitter for a reason unrelated to reality: as Kiepert, the manager of the cabaret troupe, he is so completely in command.



Sternberg especially wanted Gerron for *The Blue Angel* because this native Berliner had become a cabaret-theater-film darling of the city. Born in 1897 to a middle-class Jewish family, he had served in World War I, was wounded, and during convalescence began medical studies. After he returned to the front and after the finish of the war, Gerron completed his medical studies. Still, more seductively than medicine,

the theater called Gerron—especially the cabaret world where, a sort of quintessential Berliner, wry and satirical, he was quickly taken up by audiences. Not long afterward he was enlisted for cinema and appeared in almost sixty pictures in nine years. He was also called to direct films and become one of the leading comedy directors at the pre-eminent UFA Studios. And he was called by the legitimate theater, as well. He was precisely the sort of theater-canny actor who appealed to Bertolt Brecht: Gerron was in the premiere of *The Threepenny Opera* and was the first person to sing “Mack the Knife.”

But in 1933 the Nazi fist descended. Gerron fled to Paris, where he quickly snuggled into work. (*The Blue Angel* itself was banned in Nazi Germany in 1933, as were all the works of Heinrich Mann, among those of a number of other writers and artists.) He played in a German exiles’ cabaret there, and he directed three films. He was then invited to direct a film in Austria, after which he moved to Amsterdam. In Amsterdam he directed four movies and helped to run a Jewish cabaret. But the illusion of safety was blown away. The Germans arrived, and this time Gerron, with his wife, could not flee. They were sent to a transit camp in the Netherlands, Westerbork, where there were 16,000 inmates and a well-equipped cabaret theater. Gerron made the most of both facts. Then in February 1944 he was sent to Theresienstadt, a concentration camp in German-occupied Czechoslovakia, where in 1944 inmate Gerron was ordered to direct a propagandistic documentary film called *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews*. (In it, amidst painted buildings, installed flower boxes, improved diet, and provided clothes, children smile, people sit together, eating and talking—all of them, as we know now, obeying unheard orders and under threat of death if they behaved otherwise.) As soon as the Germans were through with Gerron, he and his wife (along with many of the people in this film) were shipped to Auschwitz in Poland, where they were gassed and incinerated on November 15, 1944.

Related to this matter of Nazism and the Jews, it could be argued that *The Blue Angel* avoids, with an assiduity that appears to be exhausting, any allusion to current (as opposed to direct reference to Mann’s turn-of-the-century) social conditions in Germany. It suppresses the social environment and tears the performers out of any social context in which their actions might have gained contemporary significance. Placed in such a vacuum, neither Lola-Lola nor Rath has enough air to breathe, which confirms that it is less the reality of their existence that is being demonstrated than that the existence of reality itself is being veiled. Between 1929 and 1930, that reality would have included the following events: the stock-market crash on Wall Street in the United States touches off worldwide economic crisis and the withdrawal of loans to Germany; Wilhelm Frick is appointed Minister of the Interior and of Education in the coalition government of Thuringia, the first Nazi to hold any ministerial-level post in pre-Nazi Germany; Allied troops withdraw from the occupied Rhineland; the Reichstag (Parliament) is dissolved; the Nazis increase their number of seats in the reconstituted Reichstag from 12 to 107 (18% of the vote).

Cabaret Context

Yet the social environment *does* manage to seep into the filmic environment of *The Blue Angel*, if only indirectly. Before I explain, first, some context. The dadaists had begun as early as 1916 to poke fun at the humanistic ideals and institutionalized conventions of classical art and literature, arguing that the idealism of both German classicism and its opposite, expressionism, amounted to nothing when confronted with

the inhumanity of World War I. Trying to forget the recent military past, to reject the Kaiser's authoritarian rule, to call into question all aristocratic notions of culture inherent in the old political system, and to enjoy the present of the early 1920s, many German intellectuals therefore embraced American mass culture, which swept through the major cities, making traditional concepts of art appear isolated, elitist, and even undemocratic. Mass culture encompassed Charlie Chaplin, Josephine Baker, movies, jazz, and boxing, but, above all, it represented modernity and the ideal of living in the present.

As a result, cabaret revues of the kind found in *The Blue Angel*—where they are anachronistically featured to an extent that they could not be in *Professor Unrath*, given that Mann's novel was published twenty-five years earlier—had become the most popular form of live entertainment in Berlin. Consisting of a large variety of quick-paced numbers (songs, theatrical skits, recitations, comedy, dances), they had a structural affinity to the fragmentation of urban experience; their juxtaposition of sights and sounds seemed to express modernity more directly than classical theater ever could. Friedrich Holländer, one of the most prolific and popular songwriters in the Weimar Republic, started his own cabaret, Tingeltangel, a proletarian version of the cabaret immortalized in *The Blue Angel*, in which Marlene Dietrich sings Holländer's own memorable tunes. And from 1921 to 1931, one of the most popular cabarets in Berlin was, not Der Blaue Engel, but Der Blaue Vogel (The Blue Bird). The revue craze lasted as long as prosperity did: from 1924 to 1929. By 1931, in the face of rising unemployment and social unrest, the popularity of revues had dropped noticeably. The Roaring Twenties were over, helped along by Joseph Goebbels himself, who in his periodical *Der Angriff* (*Attack*) showed his contempt for cabaret decadence—particularly of the kind found in the German tradition of political-satirical cabaret—and vowed to put an early end to what he saw as a dangerous contribution to the disintegration of morals.

Like the cabaret tradition, the character of Rath himself has a social dimension. This archetypal figure—who resembles such German characters as the philistine in *The Street* (1923, Karl Grune), the café owner in *New Year's Eve* (1924, Lupu Pick), and the hotel doorman in *The Last Laugh*—instead of remaining or even becoming an adult, engages in a process of retrogression effected with ostentatious self-pity. This retrogression into immaturity is mirrored in *The Blue Angel* by the conduct of the schoolboys and the cabaret artists, whose sadistic cruelty toward Rath results from the very kind of immaturity that forces their victim himself into submission. It is as if the film were offering a metaphorical warning, for these screen figures anticipate what will happen in real life in Germany only a few years later. The students are born Hitler youths, it could be said, and even the cockcrowing device belongs to a group of similar, if more ingenious, contrivances much used in Nazi concentration-camp “entertainments” to humiliate the inmates and amuse the guards. Only two characters stand apart from these events: the mute, attentive clown and the night watchman at the school who is present at the professor's death (and who recalls the night watchman who befriends the doorman in *The Last Laugh*). These two symbolic figures witness, but do not participate in, Rath's degradation; whatever they may feel, they do not say and they do not interfere or intervene. Their silent resignation (especially the clown's) seems to augur a similar passivity on the part of the German people under totalitarian rule from 1933 to 1945.

Symbolism, Cinema, Sternberg

So much for the absence from *The Blue Angel* of a social dimension—or an escapist-cum-ethereal one, for that matter. (“Blue angel” refers not only to the slang term for amobarbital, a barbiturate with sedative-hypnotic effects—first synthesized in Germany in 1923—but also to the German romantic symbol, along with the “blue flower,” of metaphysical striving for the infinite and unreachable, for absolute emotional as well as artistic fulfillment: both references thematically fitted to Rath’s tale.) As for its visual dimension, its visual texture, that is all Sternberg. He already had a legendary reputation as a master of lighting who knew how to illuminate with shadows, a creator of worlds in which he then placed his films. Indeed, it could be said that Sternberg was committed to a style where lighting and atmosphere themselves conveyed the story and where each performer’s dramatic encounter with light, if you will, spelled out his or her very thoughts. (Charles Chaplin, incidentally, was so impressed after seeing Sternberg’s first film, the naturalistic *Salvation Hunters* [1925], that he engaged Sternberg to direct a non-comic film for Chaplin’s then inamorata, Edna Purviance. The film—alternately titled *The Sea Gull* and *A Woman of the Sea*—was completed in 1926, was viewed by Chaplin [who found the picture too sophisticated for general audiences], and then was secreted in a vault and never seen again.)

Sternberg’s use of symbolism throughout *The Blue Angel* is as pronounced as Jannings’ acting style, and, like it, overwhelms us with its very deliberateness. In the first sequence, in the professor’s home, when his songbird—the only creature for which he had affection—is found dead in its cage, the professor is rendered loveless. When he first enters the cabaret, which has a maritime décor, he gets tangled in a net. At the wedding party for Rath and Lola-Lola, the eggs that Kiepert the magician produces from the professor’s nose take on added significance, as symbols of fertility, in the climactic moment, when one of them, instead of cracking open to give birth to a life, is simply cracked to pieces on Rath’s pate. Throughout the backstage scenes early in the picture, the clown (later revealed to be another of Lola-Lola’s discarded lovers), in an outsized collar, is in the background observing the professor, never speaking; and in the crowing scene, it is the professor, “collared,” who wears that collar. The symbols transmute: they grow from signifiers into components of the film’s very structure.

Most impressive is Sternberg’s gift of concision and elaboration: of gliding and dwelling, gliding and dwelling. He knows when to compress, when to intensify. The scene in which the professor terminates his lifelong teaching career is very brief and thoroughly convincing; the cut from there to the wedding party, and the cut from the professor’s objections to the photo cards to his peddling them, serve as Sternberg’s license to expand and exult in the major scenes—like the early ones with Rath in Lola-Lola’s dressing room, where physical detail seems to make the drama more grave than does the story itself. Indeed, Lola-Lola sings on a miniature Blue Angel stage so overstuffed with props that she herself seems part of the décor, as does Rath when he appears in the company of a wooden caryatid that supports the tiny gallery from which he glares down at his idol. A last contradiction, then: Sternberg’s very virtuosity makes the film a triumph over virtuosity.



The Blue Angel became, like most of Sternberg's films, an autobiographical excursion. In the material on Rath's teaching methods, for example, Sternberg paid back his own early torment at the hands of his Orthodox Jewish father, who had forced him to learn Hebrew with frequent physical punishment to drive home the lesson. (The aristocratic "von" was added to his surname by a Hollywood producer who thought it would look better on a cinema marquee.) And, by choosing a turn-of-the-century setting, Sternberg placed the story during the period of his own youth, decorating it with images of adolescent eroticism: on the walls of the Blue Angel Cabaret, therefore, he plastered scores of apposite posters and sketches, in addition to hanging the café with cardboard cutouts, streamers, dangling angels, fishing nets, veils, and stuffed birds in an impressive re-creation of the sleazy atmosphere of cabaret life that owed a great deal to the *Kammerspiel* ("chamber film") tradition.

But, apart from his work with Dietrich, Sternberg's films rarely had wide commercial appeal and, after his working relationship with her and Paramount ended in 1935, he found the major studios unresponsive to his ideas. His subsequent Hollywood pictures—with the exception of *The Shanghai Gesture* for United Artists—were infrequent and rather routine. Nonetheless, even before *The Blue Angel* was finished, its own success was obvious. (So much so that it was remade in 1959 by Edward Dmytryk for Twentieth Century-Fox, with May Britt and Curd Jürgens in the leading roles, though this misguided venture only served to increase the original's mystique.) Sternberg had shown tests of Dietrich to Paramount head B. P. Schulberg when the latter visited Berlin, and the studio immediately signed her to a contract. The premiere of the film, on March 31, 1930, was a sensation; that night, Dietrich and Sternberg sailed for America, to be met at the dock in New York City by Sternberg's wife and a

process server with writs against Dietrich for libel and “alienation of affection.” (Though Sternberg and his wife were divorced shortly thereafter, he and Dietrich themselves never married.) Neither director nor star was concerned. Dietrich had found the vehicle by which she could achieve global stardom. Sternberg—himself a volatile man of mystery and contradiction, stubbornness and secretiveness, pride and even arrogance—had found the subject on which he could now focus his prodigious talent. The rest, to alter the phrase only slightly, is film history.

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***The Blue Angel* (1930)**

Director: Josef von Sternberg. Screenplay: Carl Zuckmayer, Karl Vollmöller, & Robert Liebmann, from the 1905 novel by Heinrich Mann titled *Professor Unrath*. Cinematographers: Günther Rittau, Hans Schneeberger. Editors: Walter Klee (German version), S. K. Winston (English version). Music: Friedrich Holländer. Sound: Fritz Thiery. Art Directors: Otto Hunte, Emil Hasler. Costume Designer: Tihamer Varady.

Cast: Emil Jannings (Prof. Immanuel Rath), Marlene Dietrich (Lola-Lola), Kurt Gerron (Kiepert, Magician), Rosa Valetti (Guste Kiepert, Magician’s Wife), Hans Albers (Mazeppa, Strongman), Reinhold Bernt (Clown), Édouard von Winterstein (School Headmaster), Hans Roth (School Caretaker), Rolf Müller (Angst, Pupil), Roland Varno (Lohmann, Pupil), Karl Balhaus (Ertzum, Pupil), Robert Klein-Lörk (Goldstaub, Pupil), Wolfgang Staudte (Pupil), Károly Huszár, a.k.a. Charles Puffy (Innkeeper), Wilhelm Diegelmann (Sea Captain), Gerhard Bienert (Policeman), Ilse Fürstenberg (Rath’s Maid), Weintraub Syncopators (Orchestra), Friedrich Holländer (Pianist)

Running time: 124 minutes. Format: 35mm, in black and white

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

The Salvation Hunters (1925)
The Exquisite Sinner (1926)
The Sea Gull, a.k.a. *A Woman of the Sea* (1926, unreleased)
Underworld (1927)
The Last Command (1928)
The Dragnet (1928, lost)
The Docks of New York (1928)
The Case of Lena Smith (1929)
Thunderbolt (1929)
The Blue Angel (1930)
Morocco (1930)
Dishonored (1931)
An American Tragedy (1931)
Shanghai Express (1932)
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)
Macao (1952)
The Saga of Anatahan (1953)
Jet Pilot (1957)

Filmography: Key Works of the Weimar Republic

The Ark (1919), directed by Richard Oswald
The Doll (1919), directed by Ernst Lubitsch
Nerves (1919), directed by Robert Reinert
Different From the Others (1919), directed by Richard Oswald
Tartuffe (1925), directed by F. W. Murnau
Berlin, Symphony of a City (1927), directed by Walter Ruttmann
Alraune (1928), directed by Henrik Galeen
Sex in Chains (1928), directed by William Dieterle
Spies (1928), directed by Fritz Lang
Fräulein Else (1929), directed by Paul Czinner
Diary of a Lost Girl (1929), directed by G. W. Pabst
Mother Krause's Journey to Happiness (1929), directed by Piel Jutzi
The Blue Angel (1930), directed by Josef von Sternberg
People on Sunday (1930), directed by Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer, Robert Siodmak, Fred Zinnemann, & Rochus Gliese
Farewell (1930), directed by Robert Siodmak
M (1931), directed by Fritz Lang
Kameradschaft (1931), directed by G. W. Pabst
Hell on Earth (1931), directed by Victor Trivas
Mädchen in Uniform (1931), directed by Leontine Sagan & Carl Froelich
The Threepenny Opera (1931), directed by G. W. Pabst
The Captain from Köpenick (1931), directed by Richard Oswald
Kuhle Wampe, oder: Wem gehört die Welt? (1932), directed by Slatan Dudow
Raid in St. Pauli (1932), directed by Werner Hochbaum
The Blue Light (1932), directed by Leni Riefenstahl & Béla Balázs
Morgenrot (1933), directed by Vernon Sewell & Gustav Ucicky