

STERNBERG AND DIETRICH



THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPECTACLE

JAMES PHILLIPS

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To Peter Brennan and his genius for happiness

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Introduction

DIETRICH'S FACE AND THE TALKING PICTURE

IN THE SEVEN sound films that Josef von Sternberg made with Marlene Dietrich between 1930 and 1935, the face of his star, in assuming the form in which it was to become famous, exploits the unexpected possibilities and licenses with which synchronization confronted the cinema. It is the face that knows how to enjoy its freedom from the easy legibility that the silent film demanded of actors for the purpose of carrying the narrative. The close-up, having ceased to preoccupy itself with registering reactions, can give itself up to the scrutiny of a woman's deliberation of prospects and proposals. There is no need to rush; there is no desire to rush. This is not—or not simply—a director's infatuation with his star. In the Sternberg close-up, the face has withdrawn from its immediate surroundings and takes the time to think. Mulling over its options, knowing that there are plenty of other sign-systems at work in the synchronized film to advance the story, the face acquires and inhabits an agency and spontaneity specific to it. If Marlene appears to resist objectification in Sternberg's films, if no gaze can confidently pretend to reify her, it is because her face looks out upon a future that is irreducible to the determinate situations in which she finds herself. It is the face as subject. Hers is a face whose affective volatility is cued to the cracks in the present. At issue is not the aloofness with which Garbo already had looked beyond the environments that constrained her, just as

the alternatives Marlene contemplates have little to do with the resolutely abstract future that can only ever be a source of melancholy. This spatiotemporal independence of Marlene's face, even as it lends itself to the publicity shots with which Paramount flooded the print media, is originally and maximally a spatiotemporal independence that Sternberg invents within the motion picture rather than from it. It is the depth that he opens up within the cinematic image by dint of mercurial changes in facial expressions deploying themselves over a white surface.

It is well known that Sternberg did not, strictly speaking, discover Dietrich when he cast her in the role of Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* (1930). In a sense, however, Dietrich could not be discovered in the numerous silent films in which she had been playing bit parts since 1923. She had to lie in wait for the sound film and for how Sternberg might find a way of shooting her to suit it. Much has long been made of the celebrated butterfly lighting whereby Sternberg and his cinematographer Lee Garmes illuminated for all the world to see a beauty that Dietrich had until then not known better than to keep hidden in broad daylight. Yet there is in Marlene's beauty also something inseparable from the constellation of challenges and opportunities of the sound film. It does not so much preexist the sound film, a potentiality captive to poor lighting and the weight that Sternberg was to insist that Dietrich lose, as come into being with the sound film's greater tolerance for emotional inscrutability. Marlene's is the face of the talking picture in its break with the cosmopolitan communication that had conscripted for its medium the physiognomies and gestures of the actors of the silent film.

In *Der sichtbare Mensch* (1924), Béla Balázs reflects on this affective internationalism of the silent film with which Dietrich's peculiar talents for ambivalence are hard to reconcile:

The laws of the film market permit only universally comprehensible facial expressions and gestures, every nuance of which is understood by princess and working girl alike from San Francisco to Smyrna. We now already have a situation in which the film speaks the only universal, common world language understood by all. Ethnic peculiarities, national specificities sometimes can lend style and colour to a film, but can never become factors in causing the story to move on, because the gestures which convey the meaning and decide the course of the action must be uniformly comprehensible to every audience everywhere, otherwise the producer will lose money on the film.¹

If Chaplin was able to dispense with intertitles in his silent films because of the extreme clarity of his actions and expressions, Dietrich by contrast was able to linger within the uncertain intersections and crossovers of the emotions because the

narrative burden had been assumed by the recorded dialogue. She brings into play an independence that resembles but differs in kind from the surliness with which Georgia Hale, Evelyn Brent, and Betty Compson respond to their surroundings in Sternberg's earlier work. Whereas the stories of the silent films in which they appear are stories told by their faces of how their initial suspicions are mollified, Dietrich never lets herself be won over by the story being told around her. Hers is the face that emerged into view when the dust settled on the ruins of the Tower of Babel of the silent film—her features compose the letters of the judgment on the latter's aspirations. While Balázs entertained hopes that the sound film, after an initial flirtation with dialogue, would apply itself to recovering what the silent film had accomplished by way of a universal gesturology, Sternberg and Dietrich were to embark for a different destination. Opting for neither the photographed theater that Balázs considered the sound film's regression to the earliest efforts of the cinema nor the corporeal cosmopolitanism by virtue of which he believed the silent film came into its own as an art, they undertake to construct a new type of image. Together Sternberg and Dietrich will reinvent light, investing it with a milkiness that is at once transparent and opaque. The luminous and limpid cloud of their films is the native element of Dietrich's stardom, for she is there in plain sight with the double conspicuousness of beauty and fame while also unplaceably exotic and inassimilable to the concerns and cognitive habits of the notional everyman. The eye sees, but it also can never be done with looking, because something is withheld from it without, however, being imperceptible. This archness is inherent in all beauty and merges with and leavens the archness of Dietrich's own persona.

Not having to ward off the viewer who cannot enter the frame, Marlene is profligate with invitations. But she invites without letting the consciousness of her invitation disappear behind her sheer physical presence. By means of this consciousness and agency of the address, Sternberg and Dietrich imbue the proximity and intimacy of the close-up with a simultaneous distance. The close-up suffers a defeat in the epistemological claims made for it, because an increase in visibility does not here stand in correlation with an increase in intelligibility. This should not be confused with a decadent aestheticism, let alone a cognitive nihilism. What Sternberg and Dietrich contrive to produce—and what tests their fortitude, ingenuity, and combined technical and histrionic talents—is a close-up of a human face. This cannot be taken for granted based on the automatism of cinematographic recording, because the defining difference of the human face from objects is an affair of ethics and not of technology.

The obsessive attention to detail with which Sternberg and Dietrich went about the close-up has, of course, less to do with responding directly to a long-standing ethical imperative than with converting this imperative into an artistic challenge.

Human personhood in its very irreducibility to phenomena and to the various protocols for their use was to be rendered phenomenally: the noumenal was to be made flesh. To censure Sternberg for not treating every face in his films the way he treats Marlene's is to interpret ethically the conversion of an ethical imperative into an artistic challenge. This would be a category mistake. The artistic challenge is a response to the ethical imperative and is not a substitute for it (needless to say, a face does not become the site of an ethical demand only when the full resources of a major Hollywood studio are at its disposal). Where there is a fault in relation to this ethical imperative, a fault that corresponds to the sin of idolatry, it lies with the viewer who, unable or unwilling to see past beauty and fame, reserves for the star the comportment that is due to all persons as human beings. Sternberg himself, admittedly, dallies with this fault. He commits it artistically and as such he does not commit it in earnest. Within the cinematic horizon of spectacle he cannot but adhere to the limitations of the phenomenal, even as he puts them into question. Marlene is the subject that has come down to earth to dwell among the objects of perception. She relieves the viewer of the ethical imperative to look beyond the thingliness of that which presents itself to the gaze because she offers a tangible equivalent of that beyond. This is something other than the infernal temptation of pure materiality. For those who have only eyes to see it is even a training in a sensitivity to the non-giveness of the human person. In the dark, where we cease to show ourselves as an object among objects, we are all what Marlene is in the light.

A visual rendition of transcendental personhood is intrinsically ambiguous. It points to a beyond of the phenomenal realm, indicating the deficiencies and moral shortcomings of a practice whose assumption is that it deals only ever with objects—in the case of Sternberg's collaborations with Dietrich, this takes the shape specifically of an assertion of female agency. And yet, the beyond to which it ostensibly and ostentatiously points is itself but a fold within the visual—the face is less the outward expression of a person than a surface that has confected its own version of subjectivity. The paradox of their collaboration is that Sternberg instrumentalized Dietrich's face to create a suggestion or appearance of agency. Given that the expressiveness of an actor's face is not reliably at the beck and call of psychological movements within the depth of the character, Sternberg did not always deem it advisable to discuss with Dietrich her characters' motivations. When it came time to shoot her final close-up in *Morocco* (1930), for instance, he directed her to count backwards from forty, subsequently passing off the visible evidence of her mental concentration on this task for the internal debate over whether to follow Legionnaire Tom Brown (Gary Cooper) out over the dunes.²

In his reflections on screen acting in his autobiography, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry* (1965), Sternberg does not disparage the intelligence and autonomy of actors simply

to exalt his own. The nature of studio shooting is such that the intelligence that would preside internally over the production of meaningful gestures and expressions is confounded:

Children, animals, or actors are deliberately invested with an intelligence that seems to stem from them. In the popular film cartoons the audience knows that behind the tail-wagging duck there is someone who is causing it to move and squawk; and when a ventriloquist pulls a puppet out of a box, the source of the doll's intelligence is understood not to be his own. But when a film actor who undergoes considerably more manipulation than any duck or dummy begins to appear to function, he is judged, even by the shrewdest critic, on the basis of being a self-determining and self-contained unit of intelligence. This is not so. The machinery of the motion picture does not permit it. [. . .] In contrast to the theatre, the actor who ventures into the films not only will not know where the audience is but he will soon cease to care whether there is one or not. Three cameras may be aimed to him from as many directions. A camera may be pointed at him from ten feet above his head and another from below his feet, and he may or may not know what part of his person will be visible afterward unless he is in constant contact with the cameraman who, having troubles of his own, may have come to the sound conclusion that it is none of the actor's business. The actor himself cannot judge what part of himself is being immortalized as it is not his distance from the camera but the focal length of the lens which determines this.³

According to Sternberg, the multiple disorientations of the studio set press upon actors a choice: either to acknowledge the loss of significant agency and to entrust themselves to the formative impulses of the director or to persist in a baseless fantasy of control, thereby achieving nothing besides wreaking havoc on the production. Dietrich, in contrast to her industry peers, acceded to Sternberg's demands with a passivity that conjured up its own inordinate self-discipline: "No puppet in the history of the world has been submitted to as much manipulation as a leading lady of mine who, in seven films, not only had hinges and voice under a control other than her own but the expression of her eyes and the nature of her thoughts."⁴ Dietrich endured what other actors were unwilling to endure because she was committed to the image that Sternberg was fashioning of her in the furnace of Paramount's studio lighting: "In my films Marlene is not herself. Remember that, Marlene is not Marlene. I am Marlene, she knows that better than anyone."⁵ The complement of this declaration of directorial authority, however, is that we cannot see Sternberg properly in the standard portrait photograph—just as we are exhorted here to discern his