"…und sonst gar nichts!" Marlene Dietrich's
Star-Discourse Between Negation and Deferral

Thomas Elsaesser

...und sonst garnichts

The obituaries made the words of Lola Lola from her most famous chanson in her most famous film her epitaph: *ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt, und das ist meine Welt... und sonst garnichts*. Unofficial inscription on Marlene Dietrich's tomb, the refrain offered itself not so much as an obvious metaphor for a life that slowly extinguished itself on a dying fall, like a musical note muted and finally enveloped by silence. Rather, it came to connote the very understatement and self-deprecating irony with which she commented on her own achievements, making fun of her nonchalant glamour and dismissing virtually all her films as *Quatsch* and *Kitsch*.

But the insistence on the phrase hints at Marlene as the essence of the cinema's insubstantiality, a fantasmagoria of light and shadow, an illusion woven out of suggestion, insinuation ... *und sonst garnichts* .... Outside her films, Marlene did not exist, or at any rate, it announced that the life of flesh and blood of one Maria Magdalena von Losch was of a fundamentally different order of being.[1] A banal observation, perhaps, and yet one not without resonance, when we think of what Marlene Dieterich was to the cinema: the very idea of a star, with the self-evidence and self-identity of a trade-mark, an icon. But also a kind of coin: fingered a thousand times, as it passes from hand to hand, but still valid currency. We all know her image and her look - perhaps too well to still notice it. If like few others, she stands in equal measure for the seductive promise and unattainable remoteness that make us return, again and again, to the cinema, such currency demands its price. Looking at her image from the vantage point of a life that now is no more, one is only too aware that much of it was also lived as a prisoner to that image: something, someone having to retreat into the shadows, in order for the image to stay bright.[2]

Her essence as a screen goddess was supposed to be the light falling on her uncannily high forehead and illuminating those heavily veiled yet piercing eyes, her mystery was supposed to be the shadows sculpting her cheek-bones and moulding her face into the sleek apparition of something forever parting the air with a resolute chin and a pair of pursed lips. What cruel irony, then, that she, whose most enduring love-affair was with the camera, should end her days fearing the camera as her worst enemy? It is an appealing myth, touching something halfway between the morbid and the metaphysical. The more so, since it invites comparison with Dietrich's arch-rival, Greta Garbo, another icon of the cinema who chose to live out her life as a recluse, eventually hiding from the light in her Zurich or Rome apartments, in order for an immortality caught on celluloid to survive the ravages of age, time

and disease. An old morality play, in other words, attends upon the myth of movie immortality - which perhaps gives a clue to one aspect of the cinema's deeper significance. What some have always sensed is that the cinema ultimately does not so much preserve life as it is the 20th centuries only authentic way of dealing with death. Baroque by its very nature, rather than merely in its stylistic excesses, the cinema is the art of excesses, for some of which, perhaps not entirely by accident, Dietrich's Svengali, Joseph von Sternberg became famous.

For this reason it may be wise to temper mourning for this star and her image. The fact is that stars are no more. Television has made even the celebrities of the big screen mere 'personalities', whose task is not to be remote, unattainable or mysterious, but to persuade us of their ordinariness (and thus to reconcile us to ours). Instead of being forever themselves, like 'real' stars, personalities forever advertise themselves, and this ceaseless activity stops them from merging with their image. But the 'fifteen minutes of fame' which, metaphorically, is all that television gives to those the public loves is mercifully too short to freeze their image, or to leave it in a timeless limbo. Being Marlene Dietrich meant sixty years of frozen fame. An achievement, but also a burden.

Hausfrau Sieber

Every myth demands its counter-myth, if only to keep the myth in place. As to the myth, we can agree that it is largely the creation of Joseph von Sternberg, first in the films he made with her, and then in his autobiography.[3] The counter-myth was that of the Prussian 'Hausfrau', self-disciplined and self-sacrificing, loyal if not exactly faithful to Rudolf Sieber, her husband and her only daughter's father, an accountant at Ufa, and later a Californian chicken farmer. She herself took charge of the counter-myth, not least by making it true: always there to help friends in need, generous in spirit and deed, ready to take a stand when it came to defend human decency and show moral integrity. She had the good fortune that her inevitable career move after THE BLUE ANGEL in 1930, namely to go to Hollywood, was interpreted as political far-sightedness and principled dissent. By 1941, the War and the Allied propaganda offensive against Nazi Germany had given her a chance to let the interpretation catch up with the facts. She served her adopted country well, taking to the GI's uniform as easily as she had done to top hat and coat tails in MOROCCO ten years earlier.

There were plenty of ways of weaving the myth into the counter-myth: foremost the reminiscences of her lovers off-screen, Maurice Chevalier, Jean Gabin, Hemingway. With remarkable unanimity (which in the end, was not without a certain remarkable banality) all testified to Marlene's good sense, maternal instincts and eminent practicality: proof that they knew how to navigate the myth as well as the counter-myth. Cocteau talked about the

goodness of her heart which placed her "above fashion, above style, even above ... fame."[4] Typical is also Hemingway's remark: "she has a voice that breaks your heart, but what if it does break, if she is there to put it together again!"[5] Falling in love again - with your mother.

The obituaries, like the lovers, are unanimous in remembering an extraordinary woman and a unique phenomenon. They also revel in constructing paradoxes and oppositions: the myth/counter-myth of palpable sexuality paired with down-to-earth common sense is usually the master-narrative, but built upon it are other oppositions: that of the world star, but with very few films; that of the great actress, but with a very narrow range; that of quintessential femininity and allure intensified to the power of n, and the bi-sexual, cross-dressing lesbian image that went with male clothes and raunchy double-entendres.[6]

It is these paradoxes, so fascinating to the popular press, that have also interested, albeit in a more refined way, the film-scholars and theorists, for whom Marlene Dietrich became something of a paradigm. In Laura Mulvey's essay on voyeurism, fetishism and visual pleasure, for instance, the Sternberg/Dietrich narratives become the complementary opposite (the fetishistic side) to the scenarios on which she builds her case against Hitchcock's `woman-to-be-looked-at' (the voyeuristic side of the male gaze).[7] But what was Dietrich in MOROCCO, DISHONOURED, BLONDE VENUS, SHANGHAI EXPRESS: pure product of male fantasy and scoptophilia, or a woman who took charge of herself, *returned* the Look, in fact, initiated it? It was around the Sternberg/Dietrich films that feminists also tried to deconstruct Mulvey's persuasive argument, developing theories of cinematic identification around male masochism rather than about `sadism, demanding a story'.[8]

Once the relation with Sternberg severed, Marlene Dietrich instinctively seemed to have dissociated herself from becoming the jealous guardian of her own image, mainly by taking control over its multiple and contradictory meanings. To the extent that she reinvented herself over and over again, she was quite capable of stepping out of the time-warp of Sternbergian fantasy. Not only with DESTRY RIDES AGAIN, or as the owner of Chuck-A-Luck in Fritz Lang's RANCHO NOTORIOUS did she play against type. The roles for Wilder (in A FOREIGN AFFAIR and WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION), Hitchcock (in STAGE FRIGHT) and Welles (TOUCH OF EVIL) were such knowing recreations of previous selves and previous images that the flash-back as verbal and visual technique of unreliable narration might have been expressly invented for her, as in Hitchcock's STAGE FRIGHT and Wilder's WITNESS FOR THE PROSECUTION. Dietrich practiced a special form of pastiche, which was always also a homage to the moments in history that had made those other images possible and plausible as counter-images. The same goes for her stage performances in later years: never a particular fan of Brecht, she nonetheless showed a quite striking ability to act a role by citing it as a stance, an emotion -- which in turn gives us a glimpse of how deeply Brecht's celebrated

`distanciation-effect' was the natural language of Berlin show-business, a source from which Brecht benefitted as much as did Marlene.

This points to another paradox that could repay further attention: Marlene Dietrich - symbol of everything that makes the cinema modern, non-theatrical and specifically cinematic - is also, as a performer, a phenomenon that belongs to a particular time and a particular place. As THE BLUE ANGEL shows, Dietrich is not only a product of the Weimar period and the Berlin which came to symbolize it, she is also, in the type of woman she represents, quite intimately linked to other German stars and performers from the 1920s. A more pertinent structural relation than to Garbo would be between Marlene Dietrich and Louise Brooks (especially as Dietrich came to connote `Europe' to America, where Brooks connoted `America' to Germany, Italy and France).[9] Yet Dietrich also signifies in relation to an earlier, binary pair: Henny Porten and Asta Nielsen. What ties Dietrich to the former is the counter-myth of the Prussian Hausfrau, which at that time was not a counter-myth, but the star-image and cultural meaning of precisely someone like Henny Porten. What ties her to Asta Nielsen is the ability to ironically invert her own image.

The Singing Saw

The passing reference to Wilhelmine and Weimar Germany could be the moment where the fetishist and mythologist of `Marlene' leaves off and the film historian tries to get in a word as well. A possible image of Marlene might be not with feather boas, wide-brimmed hats, frou-frou clothes and slit skirts revealing legs that could not possibly be as long as they seem. What arrested me, looking through a coffe-table book, was another image: a young woman sitting on a chair, a saw squeezed between her thighs, playing it with a violin bow. [10] Marlene Dietrich and *The Singing Saw* were notorious in the late-1920s. It was her big number in Vienna throughout 1927, before she moved to the musical review *Zwei Krawatten* where she was supposed to have been `discovered' by Sternberg. In 1940, Marlene and the singing saw make another appearance in Tay Garnett's SEVEN SINNERS. This saw with a single handle is so aptly and suggestively named *Fuchsschwanz* (fox's tail) in German: in the Hollywood movie, the verbal joke is gone, and with it some of the Berlin *Schnauze* (`lip') that must have sustained the act. One of the things that fascinate me about this image of Marlene with a tail between her legs is that before it is image it must have been also a sound, and an oddly unconventional one. It reminds us that the Sternbergian creature of light and shadow, this pure presence of the image and the look, had a voice, inseparable and integral to her identity, one that drew its strength not from its purity, but instead, from its raw materiality. The saw offers itself to so many interpretations, metaphoric and psychoanalytic, scurrilous and sarcastic: as stand-in for a man, the saw becomes a kind of rude allusion to all the things

she could do to men: a typically Berlin brand of humour, in the same vein as the double entendres in the songs that Friedrich Hollaender, Mischa Spolianski and Robert Liebmann used to write for her. In this respect, Marlene and the whimpering saw already represent an ironic comment on the male masochism which feminist critics were later reading out of the roles assigned to her by Sternberg. And what could be more pointedly psychoanalytic than the saw as symbol of that vagina dentata which is standard equipment for every femme fatale?

More prosaically, the image also signals something else. The fact that she is so obviously performing a variety number suggests that part of Dietrich belongs to a pre-cinematic tradition, that of the burlesque and the cabaret, as well as to the early years of the sound film. Weimar film culture was also a music culture (even before `the coming of sound), a fact often convenienty forgotten in the sea-change from popular entertainment to `film art', but also from Berlin to Hollywood. As to the variety show: we can see how Sternberg had to refine and even repress these associations of the singing saw, in order to arrive at the `pure-image-und-sonst-garnichts' myth. As to the early years of the sound film: it was said that THE BLUE ANGEL made enough money for Ufa that it practically paid for the costly conversion of the studio to sound. And yet, by contemporary standards, THE BLUE ANGEL was by no means the most adventurous or innovatory of sound films; what it did have in common with many other German films which wanted to introduce the new technology was that much of it took place in a cabaret, the Blue Angel of the title. It was a setting that justified the mixture and differentiation between sound-effect, song and human voice, while it also motivated a narrative made discontinuous by individual turns and numbers, disguising the technical difficulties of recording original sound in continuity.

If the *Singing Saw* is what Sternberg had to forget in his story of how he plucked a plump chorus girl from anonymity to make her one of the cinema's most enduring icons, it is probably also what Dietrich had to remember. First, when she broke away from Sternberg, to play comic, nostalgic or parodic versions of that `pure image' he fashioned for her. And second, when she took up her career as a stage performer, singing for the Allied troops, and then, in the 1960s, as the world's most glamorous grandmother. It may well be that ultimately, it is this background as a variety-artist which ensured that her career took a different turn from that of Garbo. As the cinema's own disavowed origin comes into view, myth and counter-myth can be glimpsed together for just a brief instant, not as the play of paradox and contradictory signifiers around the empty sign that is Marlene, but as the history of that singing saw whimpering its own ironic comment on Marlene's hymn to disavowal: *...und sonst garnichts*.

Notes:

1. See Sybil Delgaudio, *Dressing the Part. Sternberg, Dietrich, and Costume* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press 1993) and Carole Zucker, *The Idea of the Image. Josef Von Sternberg's Dietrich Films* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1988).

2. The retreat is chonicled in the biography of Maria Riva, *Meine Mutter Marlene (*Munich: Goldmann, 2000).

3. Joseph von Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry (*New York: Macmillan, 1965).

4. Jean Cocteau: »Grußwort an Marlene«, in Werner Sudendorf (ed.), *Marlene Dietrich. Dokumente, Essays, Filme* (Frankfurt a.M., Berlin, Wien: Ullstein, 1980), p. 283.

5. Ernest Hemingway: »Mama zu Ehren«. W.Sudendorf, *ibid*., p. 275.

6. See »Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians« in Wednesday K. Martin and Martin Duberman (eds.), *Marlene Dietrich* (London: Chelsea House Public Paperbacks, 1995).

7. Laura Mulvey, »Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema«, *Screen* vol. 15 no. 3, Autumn 1975.

8. Gaylyn Studlar: *In the Realm of Pleasure. Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

9. On Louise Brooks, see »Lulu and the Meter Man« in Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 259-292.

10. Reproduced in Helga Bemman, *Marlene Dietrich. Ihr Weg zum Chanson* (Berlin: Lied der Zeit Musikverlag, 1990), p. 38.