HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Morocco 1930

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)



Exhibitors Herald World, Quigley Publishing, 1930 (Lantern – Media History Digital Library)

OVERVIEW

Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco* was released on 14 November 1930, two weeks before the United States premiere of his first film with Marlene Dietrich, his racier and unsettling masterpiece *The Blue Angel*.

Source and Setting. *Morocco* was intended as a star vehicle to introduce Marlene Dietrich to the American audience. It was her idea to adapt Benno Vigny's novel *Amy Jolly*, which was a love story set during the Rif War. Morocco features a love triangle between a revue performer, a soldier of the French Foreign Legion, and a socially prominent Frenchman. Best known precursors of films set in the Sahara desert were *The Sheik* (and 1926's *The Son of the Sheik*) with Rudolf Valentino and Jacques Feyder's *L'Atlantide* (1921), based on Pierre Benoit's 1919 novel (remade in sound by G.W. Pabst in 1932). Unlike Feyder and Pabst's films, which were shot on location in Africa, *Morocco* was set in Mogador and shot in California. Von Sternberg thought that authenticity was overrated; he had not been to Germany before he directed *The Blue Angel*; neither had he been to China, Russia, and Spain prior to directing *Shanghai Express*, *The Scarlet Empress*, and *The Devil is a Woman*. Ironically, years later, von Sternberg proudly remarked that the realism of *Morocco* was personally commended by the Pasha of Marrakesh, who had assumed that the film was shot on location (von Sternberg, 1965: 242).

Significance and Reception. *Morocco*'s themes include identity, class, commodification, love, and desire. The film's star Marlene Dietrich was set up by Hollywood as a rival to the immensely popular Greta Garbo; she was promoted as "the woman every woman wants to see"—a truly iconic scene of film history features Dietrich, sporting a top hat and tuxedo, kissing a female spectator. *Morocco* has been a key text of the psychoanalytic-feminist discussion of Gaylyn Studlar in her *In the Realm of Pleasure: von Sternberg, Dietrich and the Masochistic Aesthetic.* In a collective 1970 text, Cahiers du Cinéma theorists have offered an insightful analysis of power and class dynamics based on "erotic (fetishist) myths of bourgeois society" (Baxter, 1980: 85-91). As one of the early sound films, *Morocco*'s innovative use and "subtleties of audio" has been likened to Brahms and Ravel by Hermann G. Weinberg (1978:100). One

example of such innovation is the soundtrack continuing after the film ends and credits roll; another one is the synchronization of diegetic music and action (e.g. the legion's drum and beagle).

At the 1931 Academy Awards, *Morocco* was an Oscar nominee in the best director, actress, cinematographer (Lee Garmes), and art direction (Hans Dreier) categories. Andrew Sarris called *Morocco* von Sternberg's "Hollywood film par excellence" (Sarris, 1998: 222). The director—usually reserved in assessments of his own films—proudly remarked that Sergei Eisenstein had considered *Morocco* to be his most beautiful film.

CHARACTERS

Mademoiselle Amy Jolly. Worldly showgirl Amy Jolly arrives in Mogador to perform at Lo Tinto's nightclub.
Légionnaire Tom Brown. Brown is a carefree womanizer—until he meets Amy Jolly**.**
Monsieur La Bessier. The upper-class Frenchman is in love with Amy Jolly.
Adjutant Ceasar. Tom Brown's commanding officer is frustrated with his wife's interest in Private Brown. Nothing is revealed about the past of many of the characters; in the case of Ceasar, at least a fact is known about his previous life—he had been a member of the German Air Force before joining the Legion. He is grim, scheming, and unforgiving.
Madame Ceasar. It is implied that Ceasar's wife has a checkered past and had an affair with Tom Brown; she is still infatuated with him. When she sees Brown with Amy Jolly, she arranges a couple of thugs to assail him.
Lo Tinto. The proprietor of the nightclub is a greedy and farcical figure.
"A Sergeant". The bossy junior commander tries to discipline Tom Brown.
French General. The minor part of a guest at the engagement was played by von Sternberg's mentor, the director Émile Chautard, for whom he had worked as an assistant in *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (1919). Von Sternberg would cast Chautard once again in *Shanghai Express*.

SYNOPSIS

Showgirl Amy Jolly comes to Mogador and begins performing at Lo Tinto's cabaret. She meets La Bessier, a wealthy and influential Frenchman, who is charmed by her, and also Tom Brown, a handsome legionnaire and a popular ladies' man. Amy Jolly and Brown are attracted by each other; he subsequently runs into trouble because of his past affair with the wife of his commanding officer Captain Ceasar. La Bessier steps forward to save Tom Brown and in return, finally makes some progress with his courtship of Amy Jolly, proceeding to shower her with expensive gifts before proposing.

While the legion is hunting rebels in the Sahara, Ceasar plots to kill Brown but gets shot himself. Just as La Bessier and Amy Jolly are celebrating their engagement, the legion returns and she drops everything to frantically search for Tom Brown. She receives the selfless support of La Bessier and eventually finds Tom Brown at a tavern in Amalfa. Despite a terse exchange, she is quickly able to confirm that her love is reciprocal. Next day, as the legion departs for a new assignment, Amy Jolly joins the "legion of women" that follows their legionnaire lovers faithfully, and with unyielding determination, everywhere their missions take them.

SCENES



Mogador. Having completed yet another strenuous expedition in the Sahara, the French Foreign Legion returns to its barracks in the town of Mogador. The worn-out legionnaires are welcomed by a group of women who trail them wherever their expeditions take them in the desert. One of the soldiers, Tom Brown is particularly popular with the women of Mogador. Despite his sergeant's scolding, Brown is already making arrangements for the evening.



On Board. A ferry approaches the port of Mogador, on board is the worldly and disillusioned revue performer Amy Jolly. Her enigmatic allure intrigues a regular passenger named La Bessier; she remains unmoved by the wealthy Frenchman's advances and declines his offer to help her in Mogador. An officer observes that she is what they call a "suicide passenger," one of many "one-way tickets" that come to Morocco, but never return to Europe.



Revue. Amy Jolly is performing to a packed room at Lo Tinto's cabaret. La Bessier is among the audience, and so is Tom Brown, accompanied by his cohort of rowdy legionnaires. His commanding officer, Captain Ceasar is also there. Tom doesn't try to hide that he knows the Captain's wife; Ceasar is noticeably irked by Madame Ceasar's lurid interest in Brown. Then, Amy Jolly takes to the stage, sporting a tuxedo and a top hat. She charms everyone, flirts with a female spectator and gives her a kiss, just before tossing a flower to Brown. She then proceeds to her side gig of walking around and selling pricey apples—La Bessier eagerly buys one, which fails to significantly improve his standing with Amy Jolly. She then offers an apple to Tom Brown and instead of change, discreetly hands him the key to her home.



Dangerous Rendezvous. Later in the evening, Tom Brown visits Amy Jolly in her shack in a shady part of the town. Although they are mutually enamored, Amy Jolly is anxious about falling in love with Brown and asks him to leave. Subsequently, out on the dark street, Madame Ceasar jealously spies them. Captain Ceasar is also lurking in the shadows—it is his suspicion of his wife's infidelity that has brought him there. Madame Ceasar is enraged to see Tom Brown getting intimate with Amy Jolly; she fetches two local thugs to kill him. Brown overpowers and wounds the assailants; observing that the incident is getting out of control, Captain Ceasar quietly leaves the scene.



Love Triangle. A military inquiry is administered by Captain Ceasar and Amy Jolly is invited as a witness. Even though Tom Brown does not identify the second women at the scene, Ceasar intuitively knows that it is his wife. Tom Brown's silence makes things difficult for him and he is jailed. Seeing that Amy Jolly is upset, the influential La Bessier offers to intervene on his behalf. He takes advantage of his friendship with Captain Ceasar and saves Tom Brown from being court-martialed.



Departure. Amy Jolly's two suitors courteously shake hands. Tom Brown briefly considers deserting the legion and leaving for Europe with her—who welcomes his suggestion. However, he is discouraged by the sight of La Bessier's expensive gifts for her and gives up the idea. Next morning, he leaves with his legion for a dangerous expedition in the Sahara. During the departure, Amy Jolly is told that a certain "rearguard" of local women never fail to follow the troops. She is impressed with the selfless dedication of these women.

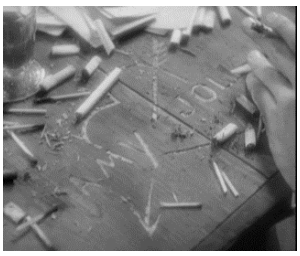
Deadly Expedition. It turns out that Ceasar has been scheming to eliminate Tom Brown. The legion encounters an enemy strongpoint at the Amalfa Pass; Tom Brown is specifically picked by Ceasar and ordered to attack the position. Together, the Captain and Brown approach the machine gun nest. Ceasar prepares to kill Brown himself—yet he suddenly gets mowed down by the enemy's machine gun. Brown resumes the mission—the fate of the operation is not revealed.



Engagement. La Bessier and Amy Jolly are hosting a lavish dinner party to celebrate their engagement. He gifts her expensive jewelry and she seems to be content with his attention. Everything changes when tunes of the legion's drum and bugle are unexpectedly heard from a distance—announcing the soldiers' return to the town. Amy Jolly is flabbergasted and without bothering to explain anything to the guests, she desperately dashes out to find Tom Brown.



Finding the Legionnaire. Tom Brown is not with his unit; Amy Jolly is told that he needed to remain in Amalfa and is advised to check out the local hospital. She returns to the mansion and tells La Bessier that she is leaving right away; he doesn't hesitate to accompany her. Tom Brown is not at the Amalfa hospital—Amy Jolly finds him at a shabby tavern. Despite a tense conversation, neither of them reveals their feelings. However, right after Brown leaves the joint, she notices that he had been carving her name on the wooden table. She is now able to confirm that her love is reciprocal.



The Desert. La Bessier takes Amy Jolly to the gate of the town to catch up with the legion, which has just left the town to embark on a new mission. She sees the 'legion of women' preparing to follow the troops; bids the compassionate La Bessier farewell and gives him a quick kiss. Then, kicking off her heels, Amy Jolly joins the women as they walk with determination after the legion into the desert.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Amy Jolly (Closed)

The Amy Jolly character is designed to introduce Marlene Dietrich to the American audience. There is a slight parallel with her Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*—a travelling showgirl—but she is much less assertive, unpredictable, and provocative. Amy Jolly is independent and worldly; yet, she ultimately chooses to be one of the 'legion of women' who faithfully and selflessly follows their lovers everywhere.

Enigmatic. Amy Jolly is alluring and pleasant, but hardly transparent; she reveals very little about her past (the long gone sable coat is a hint to a more prosperous lifestyle) and her emotions (she waits to be fully sure that Tom Brown loves her, before she admits her feelings about him).

Independent and Elusive. On board the ship, La Bessier emphasizes his social position to gain Amy Jolly's attention; offering help and indicating his influence has obviously worked for him before, but this time it does not. As soon as he walks away, she tears his business card. His second attempt at Lo Tinto's tavern is also a failure, the purchase of the pricey apple is appreciated by Amy Jolly, but she is not impressed by his economic power. She continues to elude La Bessier until Tom Brown is cornered and the influential Frenchman is his only ticket out. This is the first time she forsakes her independence; the ultimate sacrifice comes at the end, when she chooses to become one of the legion of women, who selflessly follow their legionnaire lovers.

Savvy and Worldly. Amy Jolly carefully preserves her independence. She thinks that social interactions are motivated by exchanges, i.e., when La Bessier offers to help her (more than once), she immediately understands that his assistance would be followed by a demand, which is an accurate interpretation of his actions. On the other hand, her apple gig at the cabaret subtly underscores her promiscuity—moderate compared to von Sternberg's final film with Dietrich, *The Devil is a Woman*.

Pleased. Amy Jolly is afraid of falling in love with Tom Brown mainly because she is not sure of his feelings, especially after he changes his mind and decides not to go to Europe with her—choosing instead to leave the town for another mission with his unit. She confronts him at a shabby tavern in Amalfa; a terse exchange leads to nothing and it seems that they are both willing to break up—then she notices the carving of her name on the table; close-up shows her relief and satisfaction, now fully assured that her love is reciprocal.

Tom Brown (Emotional)

Tom Brown has been in the foreign legion for three years—no information about his life prior to the legion is provided. He is an impetuous adventurer; the ultimate question is, will he change and commit to a life with Amy Jolly?

Weary. Brown remarks that three years in the legion was like three hundred. He adds that his life before becoming a legionnaire was just as weary. Lo Tinto advises Amy Jolly to disregard any legionnaire boasting about his supposedly aristocratic origins and hidden treasures; like Tom Brown, most have humble backgrounds and are in Africa out of desperation rather than a sense of excitement.

Importunate Womanizer. Brown's first scene shows him flirting with a local Mogador woman as soon as the legion returns to its barracks; his second appearance is at the cabaret, where he is openly flirting with Madame Ceasar, his former inamorata and the wife of his commanding officer. At this point, he catches the eye of Amy Jolly and their mutual attraction develops into a tension charged relationship.

Thoughtful. During their first meeting, Amy Jolly tells legionnaire Brown that "I never found a man good enough for that," indicating marriage—to which he responds,"that's just the way I feel." Gradually, they both realize their own willingness to commit. Initially Tom Brown is wry and frivolous; eventually, the carefree character becomes serious and thoughtful.

La Bessier (Open)

La Bessier belongs to the group of Europeans who spend only some of their time in Morocco (as opposed to Lo Tinto and Captain Ceasar, who can be classified as permanent residents). La Bessier is an upper-class Frenchman who is considered by acquaintances to be a man of the world. He is a popular figure and is known to socialize with a wide array of individuals, including those who may not be members of his social class.

Sybarite Debonair. La Bessier's first appearance is on board the ferry. He is charmed by Amy Jolly and begins flirting right away. He is polite, stylish and confident; yet, Amy Jolly is able to see through his elegance and refined manners and rejects his advances. Overall, La Bessier is a sybarite who likes to enjoy the best of things and believes that he can use his wealth to get whatever he wants.

Stoic. La Bessier is quite firmly rejected by Amy Jolly twice (on board the ferry and later at Lo Tinto's tavern). Yet he maintains his composure and is unruffled even after Amy Jolly turns him down in front of his own social circle. He is restrained and yet intrigued by her aloofness.

Helpful and Resourceful. La Bessier first offers to help Amy Jolly in Mogador as they meet on board the ferry, later, he buys one of her apples at a high price, and ultimately, he is sincerely supportive of Amy Jolly's attempts to unite with Tom Brown. La Bessier is resourceful and is keen to share what he has in order to facilitate a relationship.

Selfless and Conciliatory. La Bessier finally gets what he wants: Amy Jolly has to accept his offer to help and consequently, his proposal—which he hopes, would eventually lead to reciprocal love. However, her affection comes at a price—she wants to save Tom Brown and La Bessier is in a position to help the man she really loves. From the beginning, it is clear that La Bessier is able to be close to Amy Jolly only because of his role as an accessory for her real romantic relationship. Fascinatingly, not only does he accept the situation, he does his best to help her overcome obstacles in her relationship with Tom Brown. La Bessier explains that he does so because he truly loves Amy Jolly and hence wants her to be happy.

Humiliated. Ultimately, La Bessier joins the ranks of other Josef von Sternberg characters that are—often willingly—humiliated. Among these are *The Blue Angel*'s Professor Rath, *The Devil is a Woman*'s Don Pasquale, and *Anatahan*'s Kusakabe.

THEMES

Society – Identity, Race, and Class; Commodification
Relationship – Love, Desire, and Jealousy

SOCIETY

Identity, Race and Class. In their in-depth analysis of *Morocco*, Cahiers du Cinéma theorists make insightful observations about the multi-layered nature of identity in the narrative (85—91). On one level, characters are defined by geography, which points to their national and racial origins. There are the Europeans (Amy Jolly and Captain Ceasar), who are in Africa for a limited period of time. Ceasar's past is not exposed at length, but it is mentioned that he was previously an officer in the German Air Force. It is implied that Madame Ceasar, another middle class European, has a checkered past. Others, such as La Bessier and the proprietor of the tavern Lo Tinto have been residing in Mogador for many years and have much stronger ties to Africa. Lo Tinto is nowhere near as influential as La Bessier, who is clearly the most powerful of the characters. On the other hand, Tom Brown and his fellow legionnaires are Europeans who are in Morocco as a result of their assignments; their economic status is barely distinguishable from the average locals.

The element of economic class conflates with the characters' origins: La Bessier is wealthy; Ceasar and Lo Tinto are middle class; Amy Jolly is somewhat lower on the spectrum and the legionnaires, as well as most of the locals, are near the bottom of the scale. It is possible to change one's class position—Amy Jolly was once a prosperous socialite. She sarcastically laments over her long gone "sable coat" which Tom Brown interprets as a clue to her past identity. Amy Jolly proves that it is possible to move in both ways along the class axis: she becomes a showgirl at an undistinguished venue far away from Europe, then, she once again moves up the class ladder by getting engaged to La Bessier; she quits her job at Lo Tinto's and moves to her fiancé's spectacular mansion. As a result of the significance of economic and geographic factors, an accurate assessment of identity can be made via a matrix that takes both of them into consideration: La Bessier is both upper-class and a Westerner, whereas Tom Brown is a European who is economically on the level of the locals of Mogador.

Commodification. Cash value of things—including human interactions—would be explicitly and exhaustively pointed out in von Sternberg's 1932 film *Blonde Venus* (in relation to Ned Faraday's life saving experimental medical treatment and his wife's various actions to cover the high expenses). Although on a lesser scale, *Morocco* too makes it clear that the dreamy world of legionnaires and cabarets in the exotic Sahara is not outside the realm of commodification. During Amy Jolly's side gig of selling apples at the cabaret, Tom Brown dryly observes that the price equals his two weeks' pay. Her response is to gift it ("you can have it for nothing")—this unexpected gesture confuses Brown because he is not used to things that do not have an exchange value. Things indeed have a price—and a cost—as the worldly La Bessier seems to know too well. He intends to impress Amy Jolly with his wealth, which intimidates her love interest Tom Brown, who realizes that he cannot in any way compete with his

adversary's offerings to Jolly. Eventually, La Bessier's tactic succeeds, because Amy Jolly understands that she can only save her inamorato's life with the help of this influential suitor.

RELATIONSHIP

Love, Desire and Jealousy. There are two love triangles in *Morocco*: the first is composed of La Bessier, Amy Jolly, and Tom Brown; the second has Tom Brown, his commander Captain Caesar, and the latter's wife Madame Ceasar. The dynamics of the two sets of relationships sharply contrast. In the first triangle, La Bessier emerges as a loving and selfless figure. He explains that his love for Amy Jolly entails his willingness to do whatever it takes to make her happy; he is compassionate and conciliatory. Following the death of one (or perhaps both) of the thugs that Madame Ceasar unleashed on Tom Brown, the legionnaire faces a severe punishment and La Bessiere intervenes on his behalf to save him. La Bessier not only saves his rival to please Amy Jolly, but ultimately selflessly escorts her, as she frantically searches for Tom Brown in Amalfa. He takes her to Tom Brown's garrison with his limousine and kisses her goodbye as she leaves him to follow the legion into the desert. As opposed to the courtesy in the first love triangle, the second one is toxic. In the second triangle, both Ceasars are possessive, spiteful, and scheming. Once she sees him with Amy Jolly, Madame Ceasar arranges thugs to assail Tom Brown. Captain Ceasar's jealousy is just as murderous; realizing that his wife is in love with Tom Brown, he plots to eliminate him. He attempts to get the legionnaire killed at the Amalfa Pass, but fails gets shot himself.

Discussion Questions

How would you compare *Morocco* with other films of the period that were set in Sahara? Best known precursors of films set in the Sahara desert were *The Sheik* (and 1926's *The Son of the Sheik*) with Rudolf Valentino and Jacques Feyder's *L'Atlantide* (1921)—which was remade in sound by G.W. Pabst in 1932.

How would you compare La Bessiere with other—certain—male figures in von Sternberg's films—such as Don Pasquale in *The Devil is a Woman* and Professor Rath in *The Blue Angel*, and Count Alexei in *Scarlet Empress*?

What are some of the contemporary cinematic references to Dietrich's tuxedo scene? How do these films rework the iconic scene?

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