HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Underworld 1927

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

OVERVIEW

Poet's idea of gangsterism
—Sternberg on *Underworld*

Underworld was to French cinema what the introduction of Shakespeare been to its literature
— John Baxter

The success of Josef von Sternberg's film debut, *The Salvation Hunters* (1925), was followed by a less remarkable period, with unfinished projects and his subsequent demotion to assistant director. His breakthrough in motion pictures came with *Underworld* (1927), the first truly modern gangster film. Its critical and popular success restored von Sternberg's reputation as a genius filmmaker.

Reporter's Story. Loosely based on an 18-page-long story penned by Chicago journalist and writer Ben Hecht, *Underworld* touches on episodes of organized crime in early 1920s Chicago. It is the time of the Prohibition and Al Capone; the plot vaguely recalls the assassination of Charles Dean O'Bannion by rival gangster Johnny Torrio and the successful prison break of Tommy O'Conner. Hecht was initially disappointed with the film's lack of faith to the source material and about "half a dozen sentimental touches introduced by its director" (Weinberg, 1978: 34)—consequently, he asked for his name to be removed from the credits. Nonetheless, *Underworld* became an instant success; so much so that queues formed in front of ticket booths and all night screenings were introduced for the first time in motion pictures history (von Sternberg, 1965: 18). 1929's Oscar Prize was awarded to Ben Hecht for Best Original Story.

Gangster Films. *Underworld* is the progenitor of gangster genre best exemplified by the early classics: *Little Ceasar* (1931, Mervyn LeRoy) *The Public Enemy* (1931, William A. Wellman), *Scarface* (1932, Howard Hawks), and *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938, Michael Curtiz) starring respectively Paul Muni, James Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Humphrey Bogart. The genre flourished in later decades with *Godfather* (1971, Francis Ford Coppola), *Scarface* (1983, Brian de Palma), *Once upon a Time in America* (1984, Sergio Leone), *Goodfellas* (1990, Martin Scorcese), and *Public Enemies* (2009, Michael Mann). Among the many notable international gangster films are *Pépé le Moko* (1937, Julien Duvivier), *Rififi* (1955, Jules Dassin), *Milano Calibro 9* (1970, Fernando di Leo), *Borsalino* (1970, Jacques Deray), *Get Carter* (1971, Mike Hodges), and *Infernal Affairs* (2002, Andrew Lau and Alan Mak).

Style and Design. The mobster's moll—"Feathers"—sports an extravagant flapper style. Costume designer Travis Banton would contribute to the iconic image of Marlene Dietrich in 1930s von Sternberg films. A sparkling moment in *Underworld* is the scene of the annual gangsters' ball, which features—amid an abundance of confetti (a von Sternberg motif like fishnets) and an organic, autonomous, and almost unruly crowd. This would be the first sighting of a von Sternberg crowd, which would become a trademark of the director and appear in various forms in *The Docks of New York*, *Blonde Venus*, *The Scarlet Empress*, and *The Shanghai Gesture*. Director of photography Bert Glennon (*The Ten Commandmants* [1923, Cecil B. DeMille], *Stagecoach* [1939, John Ford], *House of Wax* [1953, Andre DeToth]) would also contribute to von Sternberg's next film, *The Last Command*.

Cast. *Underworld* was not only its director's breakthrough, but also that of the leading woman. Evelyn Brent played the independent and strong-willed mobster's moll. In her later career she often played similarly tough characters—dubbed Hollywood's foremost "lady crook" in a recent biography (Kear, 2009:

43). American star Louise Brooks, who worked with Brent in two films remarked on Brent's "masculine defiance"—demonstrated in *Underworld* during the violent showdown with the police, when she holds her own in the bullet-riddled apartment. Evelyn Brent was cast in the following year's *The Last Command*, playing a dangerous Russian revolutionary.

As the leading man, George Bancroft plays gangster "Bull" Weed, "savage innocent, physically unassailable" (Baxter, 1971: 32), yet childish and simple minded. Bull Weed is a local Robin Hood-by-way-of-Capone criminal (Kasman, 2010). He escapes from death row just to confront his inamorato, whom he suspects of having an affair with his sidekick. *Underworld* is the first of George Bancroft's three films with von Sternberg, the others being *The Docks of New York* and another gangster film *Thunderbolt* (1929)—sadly, von Sternberg's *The Drag Net* (which starred both Bancroft and Brent) is considered a lost film.

Legacy. Luis Bunuel named *Underworld* as one of his all-time favorite films (Rodriguez-Ortega, 2005). It was an inspiration for the poetic realism movement in French cinema (Marcel Carne's *Port of Shadows* [1938] and *Le jour se lève* [1939], Jean Renoir's *La Bête humaine* [1938]. According to John Baxter, "it was to French cinema what the introduction of Shakespeare been to its literature" (Baxter, 43).

In Retrospect. In an **interview** he gave to the Swedish television, von Sternberg retrospectively recollected: "I was not a gangster; I knew nothing about gangster. I recreated a world of criminals... a poet's idea of gangsterism (Matan Tal, 2020). *Underworld* features gangsters, but von Sternberg is less interested in 1920s Chicago gangster milieu than the interaction of the lead characters. Consequently, *Underworld* casts its spotlight on emotions and gestures, love and obsession, bonding and loyalty. In his memoirs, von Sternberg called *Underworld* "an experiment in photographic violence and montage" (von Sternberg, 216).

Underworld was followed by two more Josef von Sternberg silent films in 1928, *The Last Command* and his masterpiece, *The Docks of New York*.

CHARACTERS

"Bull" Weed. A "Modern Attila", the powerful and intimidating Bull is a dashing gangster—but more importantly, a compassionate friend and an obsessive lover.
"Rolls-Royce" Wensel. The once bright lawyer has become a homeless alcoholic; Bull reforms and takes care of him. In return, the brilliant "Royce Royce" acts as his grateful and loyal consultant.
"Feathers" McCoy. Bull's girlfriend is a flapper, known for the many feathers that embellish her attire. Bull becomes suspicious that she is cheating him with "Rolls-Royce". Bull and Feathers actually make a good couple as she does not fear danger, but his obsession with her leads to fits of jealousy
"Buck" Mulligan. Rival gangster Mulligan is loosely based on real-life mobster Charles Dean O'Bannion, who was gunned down in his flower shop (a front for his bootlegging). In *Underworld*, after Mulligan tries to molest "Feathers" McCoy, Bull chases him and corners him at Mulligan's flower shop before shooting him.

SYNOPSIS

Notorious Chicago gangster Bull Weed encounters his former lawyer—now homeless alcoholic—"Rolls-Royce" Wensel and decides to keep him under his protection and gets him a job at the Dreamland Café. A couple of evenings later, Bull and flapper girlfriend Feathers are at the café and also is rival mobster Buck Mulligan. The latter insults Rolls-Royce and is subdued by a domineering Bull. A well-groomed Rolls-Royce moves into Bull's old hideout. Bull robs a jewelry shop and plants a flower at the crime-scene in order to lead detectives to Buck's flower shop (a front for his bootlegging). The heist is successful and so is the ploy—Buck is apprehended by the police and has to prove his innocence.

The trio attend the annual Gangsters' Ball, Bull rebukes Rolls-Royce for dancing with Feathers. Later, in the wee hours, while Bull is dozing, he makes an advance on Feather which earns him a slap in the face; she struggles to repel the molester. Bull is alerted to the situation; he chases Buck, catching up with him at his flower shop and shooting him dead. Bull is arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death. Even in his

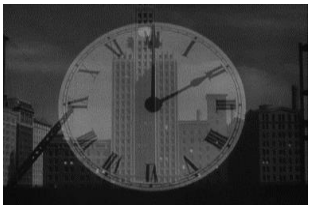
cell, he is furiously jealous about Feathers. He manages to escape. He makes it to the hideout, restless and in a jealous frenzy.

With the failure of the plan, Feathers drives back to the hideout. She is spotted by police detectives on the way and they tail her. Moments after she enters the apartment, the police surround the building. Inside, Bull finds that the trapdoor is useless because the key is with Rolls-Royce. Officers assault with heavy machine guns and Bull frenetically sprays them with his Thompson gun from the window.

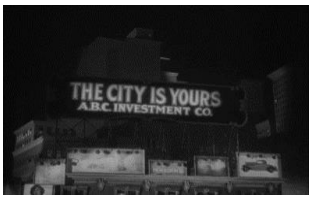
While the siege goes on, Rolls-Royce arrives to the scene and finds a way to sneak through the police blockade. As he approaches the apartment, a bullet from Bull's gun strikes him, but Royce-Royce manages to make it inside. Seeing that his friend has risked his life to be with him, Bull's jealous rage is soothed. He surrenders after inducing Feathers and Royce-Royce to safely get away via the trapdoor. "All this got you was another hour", the police chief remarks—Bull contently responds that his ease of mind was worth it.

SCENES

Chance Encounter at 2 AM. Wandering in Chicago, homeless alcoholic—one-time brilliant lawyer—"Rolls-Royce" Wensel comes across notorious gangster "Bull" Weed dashing out of a bank with his loot. Bull drags the enlivened witness to his getaway car and they exit the crime scene. Modern space and time: *Underworld*'s opening shot superimposes a clock face on a view of Chicago's skyline.



'The City is Yours' anticipates 'The World is Yours' in Brian De Palma's *Scarface*. At his hideout, the benevolent mobster decides to reform his new friend's alcoholism and puts him to work as a janitor at his favorite joint, the Dreamland Café.



Mobster's Enemy. Some days later, Weed and his girlfriend, "Feathers" McCoy, stop by the Dreamland Café for dinner.



Sitting across the hall is rival gangster Buck Mulligan, whose contempt of Bull is fueled by his infatuation with Feathers. Buck gets nasty and tries to impress Feathers by humiliating Rolls-Royce. He throws a ten dollar bill in a spittoon and tells him to fetch it. When Rolls-Royce refuses, Buck turns mad, causing the café's patrons flee in panic. Just then, Bull intervenes and calmly steers Rolls-Royce away. Becoming the laughing stock of his friends frustrates Buck; he watches in awe as Bull crowns his bravado by bending a silver coin with his bare hands and swaggers out. Buck vows revenge.



Bull twists a silver coin as a reminder of his great strength. He is likened to Attila the Hun for his ferocity and power; von Sternberg uses close-up shots as insight into the character—such as this shot of Bull's enraged rival.



Mobster's Friend. A well-groomed Rolls-Royce moves into Bull's old hideout. The apartment has a secret passageway for emergency situations and Rolls-Royce is trusted with the key. He advises Bull to get rid of his rival, Buck Mulligan, by incriminating him. Bull robs a jewelry shop and plants a flower at the crime-scene in order to lead detectives to Buck's flower shop (a front for his bootlegging). The heist is successful and so is the ploy—Buck is apprehended by the police and has to prove his innocence. However, Bull becomes increasingly jealous of Feathers and suspects that she is cheating him with Rolls-Royce.



Gangsters' Ball. Feathers takes an interest in Rolls-Royce, which turns out to be mutual but restrained. The trio attends the annual underworld ball. Amid heavy drinking, a beauty pageant is held and Feathers ends up the winner. When Bull spots her dancing with Rolls-Royce, he harshly rebukes him.



The gangsters' ball is an occasion for an annual truce. The scene features the first von Sternberg crowd: chaotic, fascinating, and unpredictable crowds will reappear in his later films; an intoxicated Bull tries to walk through a roomful of confetti—another stylistic element von Sternberg would reuse, similar to fishing nets.



Crime of Passion. Buck is among the attendees of the ball. In the wee hours, while Bull is dozing, he makes an advance on Feather which earns him a slap in the face; she struggles to repel the molester. Bull is alerted to the situation; he chases Buck, catching up with him at his flower shop and shooting him dead.

Death Sentence. Bull is arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death. Rolls-Royce and Feathers are devastated; they hatch a plan to save him. Gunmen would infiltrate the prison house by way of an inconspicuous hearse; it would "come crashing through like a tank"—and exit with Buck. Rolls-Royce is to create a diversion for the police by waiting at the train station with two tickets, while Feathers would drive Bull away.

Fit of Jealousy. Bull is clandestinely informed about the plan, but he is busy obsessing about the relationship between his wingman and inamorata. The two are indeed in love and deliberate getting away together; however, their loyalty for Bull prevails and they concentrate on saving him.

Prison Break. At the designated time, the hearse arrives before the prison gate. In contrast to the projection of the gangsters, it is right away surrounded by scores of policemen who were somehow tipped off. Despite the rescue attempt being thwarted, Bull manages to break out of the prison by his own means. He makes it to the hideout, restless and in a jealous frenzy. Deep shadows of *Underworld* prefigure the aesthetics of films noir.



Showdown. With the failure of the plan, Feathers drives back to the hideout. She is spotted by police detectives on the way and they tail her. Moments after she enters the apartment, the police surround the building. Inside, Bull finds that the trapdoor is useless because the key is with Rolls-Royce. Officers assault with heavy machine guns and Bull frenetically sprays them with his Thompson gun from the window. Militarized policing: policemen assault Bull's hideaway with inordinate force and army grade weapons—among the weaponry used is a heavy machine gun mounted on a sidecar motorcycle protected by armor plating.



Suspicions Dispelled. While the siege goes on, Rolls-Royce arrives to the scene and finds a way to sneak through the police blockade. As he approaches the apartment, a bullet from Bull's gun strikes him, but Royce-Royce manages to make it inside. Seeing that his friend has risked his life to be with him, Bull's jealous rage is soothed. He surrenders after inducing Feathers and Royce-Royce to safely get away via the trapdoor. "All this got you was another hour", the police chief remarks—Bull contently responds that his ease of mind was worth it.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

"Bull" Weed

Character Bull is strong enough to bend a coin and strikes fear in rival mobsters—but von Sternberg is less interested in recounting his daring crimes than exploring his displays of emotion and interactions with other characters.

Illustrative moments

Compassionate and Benevolent. Bull decides to help Rolls-Royce get "on his feet"; he finds him a job, gives him money, and settles him at his old hideout. In return, he wants nothing—"I help people, people don't help me", Bull laughingly says. The Robin Hood of gangsters is not only presented sympathetically, he is at the center of the plot—this is the quality that leads to *Underworld* being called the first modern gangster film.

Boisterous and Childish. The flamboyant Bull is full of hyperbole. He is an extrovert who likes displays of power and craves the attention. However, when he is convicted and read his sentence at the court, he appears tamed and clueless—as the judge reprimands him about his criminal lifestyle. Super strong and defiant on the surface, Bull is a child at the core.

THEMES

Society – Gender, Anti-alcoholism
Politics – Carnival
Justice – Policing, Crime and Order
Relationship – Loyalty and Sacrifice

SOCIETY

Gender. Feathers is a flapper and represents the modern woman. It is suggested that she may not be literate (holding the book upside down); nonetheless, she is a positive character, strong willed and independent. With Rolls-Royce becoming Bull's best friend, there emerges a love triangle, but Feathers is not a stereotypical seducer or proto-femme fatale. There is genuine affection between her and Rolls-Royce, which is eventually recognized as such by Bull himself. On the other hand, the male characters represent two opposites: Bull is the alpha male, full of hyperbole and flamboyance, while Rolls-Royce is submissive and easy-going.

Anti-alcoholism. Both Bull and Feathers try hard to cure Rolls-Royce's alcoholism. Bull gets him to quit drinking and Feathers urges him not to start again. The emphasis is interesting as bootlegging and moonshining would be one of the main criminal activities of the real life counterparts of Bull (his rival in the film, Mulligan, runs a flower shop to use as a front for bootlegging).

POLITICS

Carnival. The gansters' ball is a once a year event, "a delirious carnival of luminosity and exquisitely choreographed chaos" (O'Brien, 2010). The violent criminals somehow manage to make it through the evening in the spirit of a truce. Von Sternberg includes a sequence with cuts to faces men and women, about two dozen extras shown in rapid succession. They look carefree and happy. The gangsters' ball scene is remarkable for

portraying the wildly energetic crowd as an autonomous entity—as a collectivity of individuals not just a mass of people/extras.

Russian philosopher Mikail Bakhtin's concept of "carnivalesque" is helpful to understand the function of crowds in von Sternberg's films. Focusing on François Rabelais' *Gargantau and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin points to the distruptive and potentially emancipatory practices embedded in a carnival setting. In *Underworld*, the self-contained crowd (criminals) exists outside the realm of law and enforces its own rules ("no guns allowed"). There is even an instance of "mock crowning"—another Bakhtinian concept—in the form of the gangsters' own beauty pageant. Voting process is taken very seriously (votes can also be bought, after all they are crooks) and competition results are displayed in real time. Von Sternberg's *Dishonored* and *Devil is a Woman* also feature carnivalesque moments. Especially *Devil is a Woman* is remarkable for suggesting how the carnival can potentially turn subversive—the plot took place in Spain and the film was banned there (prior to and during the Franco regime). Spanish government also successfully halted the international distribution of the film and came close to getting the film stock destroyed.

JUSTICE

Policing. Army grade weapons have been used by the tactical units of police forces throughout the world, increasingly after the 1990s. *Underworld* has a finale that is packed with an assortment of such weapons and is in a way a prescient note about militarized policing. In this scene, police officers use assault rifles and there is an armor plated motorcycle with a heavy machine gun mounted sidecar. The firepower directed at the apartment's window is devastating, with shards of glass, wood splinters, and holes all over the concrete walls. Overall, the police appear neither very good at dealing with criminals (considering that mobsters hold an annual ball) nor solving crimes (Bull easily gets his rival framed for his own crime)—but they are heavy-handed. *Underworld* offers this picture of law enforcement without commenting on it.

Crime and Order. Bull has a few cohorts but he is always seen acting by himself; so it is not clear whether he is the boss of an organized crime syndicate. Still, *Underworld* is considered a modern gangster film because the story is told from the vantage point of the criminals. Then again, the message that prevails is that of the law: the judge lectures Bull about his mistakes (several title cards are used); his point is not focused on ethics—the judge tells Bull that it is simply not possible to beat the law.

RELATIONSHIP

Loyalty and Sacrifice. Bull is fond of his friend Rolls-Royce and he is obsessively in love with Feathers. The tension arises when he suspects the two are having an affair. On the other hand, they are indeed in love with each other. Ultimately, Rolls-Royce and Feathers decide to forego their feelings for the sake of remaining loyal to Bull. The mobster finally realizes that himself, when his moll and friend risk their lives to be with him. He responds with an equivalent gesture—anticipating *Casablanca*—and steps back to let them be happy.

Discussion questions

Writing on *Underworld* in 1971, John Baxter comments that "after four decades of gangster movies, its histrionic and decorative style are unconvincing and the plot fatally episodic" (Baxter, 42). Baxter had the knowledge of 1930s classics by Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney, as well as 1950s gangster films. On the other hand, Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* was released that very year and many definitive films of the genre were yet to be made (e.g. *Scarface* [1983] and *Goodfellas* [1990]). Now, after almost a century since the release of *Underworld*, the genre has flourished; our experience of films associated with gangsters, mafia, yakuzas, all sorts of mobsters—variations of organized crime and their representation—provide us with a vantage point to re-assess *Underworld.* How does it stand up in a comparison with contemporary classics of the genre. Do you share Baxter's observation?

How would you compare Feathers with other flapper characters from 1920s and 1930s films?

Works Cited:

Baxter, John. *The Cinema of Josef von Sternberg*. London: A. Zwemmer. 1971.
Kear, Lynn. *Evelyn Brent: The Life and Films of Hollywood's Lady Crook*
North Caroline: MacFarland and Company. 2009.
Kasman, Daniel. "For The Icon, The Shadow, and The Glimmer Between: 3 Silent Classics by Josef von Sternberg". *Mubi Notebook Feature*. August 2010. Retrieved November 2021
Rodriguez-Ortega, Vicente. 2005. *Underworld*. Senses of Cinema. Retrieved May 10, 2018
Baxter.
Matan Tal, Youtube. "Rare Interview with Josef von Sternberg". https://youtu.be/03hIHq5n42s. July 29, 2020
Excerpt from "Josef von Sternberg: Een Retrospectieve". Retrieved November 2021
O'Brien, Geoffrey. "Underworld: Dreamland". *The Criterion Collection*.
https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1568-underworld-dreamland. August 2010. Retrieved October 2021
Von Sternberg, Josef. *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*. NY: Collier. 1965.
Weinberg, Hermann G. *Josef von Sternberg*. NY: Arno. 1978.