HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Macao 1952

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)



Independent Exhibitors Film Bulletin, Film Bulletin Company, 1952. Courtesy http://mediahistoryproject.org/ Media History Digital Library.

OVERVIEW

Shanghai Express marked the peak of Josef von Sternberg's Hollywood career in the early 1930s. In 1941, he reimagined China with *The Shanghai Gesture*, the last film he completed. In the following decade, for his final film in the USA, the Chinese coast was once again the setting in *Macao*.

Background. Aside from *The Shanghai Gesture*, von Sternberg's only work in the 1940s had been *The Town*, a thoughtful and engaging propaganda short produced for the Office of War Information in 1943. By focusing on a particular American town and highlighting its virtues, it aimed to remind the soldiers what they were fighting for. With the war over, a long period of inactivity ensued. While the Cold War was in full swing, he was contracted in 1949 by Howard Hughes to direct two films for the RKO. The first, the *Jet Pilot*, was a Cold War espionage flick starring John Wayne and Janet Leigh as Jet Age aviator spies—it would be released only years later, in 1957. The second, *Macao*, was shot in 1951 and came out the following year. Set in, what was at the time, a Portuguese colony, it was a story of adventurers in a foreign land, in the spirit of a diverse array of films such as *Pépé le Moko* (1937), its remake, *Algiers* (1939), *Casablanca* (1941), *Gilda* (1946), *Saigon* (1947), *Calcutta* (1948), and *Hong Kong* (1952). Macao is represented as an exotic setting with an orientalist lens; rickshaws and sampan boats embellish the adventure that revolves around expatriates. Water had often played a key part in his previous films (*The Docks of New York, An American Tragedy, The Blonde Venus*); in *Macao*, most of the action takes place around the pier.

Auteurial? The film stars Robert Mitchum and Jane Russell. Von Sternberg's action scenes were deemed ineffective; consequently, Nicholas Ray was brought in to reshoot certain scenes, such as the fight between Robert Mitchum and Brad Dexter (Baxter, 1971: 167). Ray had already directed the film noir classics *They Live by Night* (1949) and *In a Lonely Place* (1950); his best known work, *Rebel without a Cause* would come out in 1955. Consequently, *Macao* is not pure von Sternberg, but his distinct style can be discerned. Fishnets—one of his favorite motifs—almost entirely cover and obscure the harbor, where a climactic chase takes place. Many scenes take place in bright daylight and there is overall less

emphasis on chiaroscuro photography. When the focus shifts from the bright daylight scenes to the shady affairs of Macao's underworld, his mastery of contrasting light and deep shadows can be seen.

Exotic-Noir. *Macao* is unique for being the only film noir of a director who had influenced the aesthetics of this film cycle (as well as introducing a memorable proto-femme fatale with characters portrayed by Marlene Dietrich). Besides being—by a broad definition—a film noir, *Macao* is also a melodrama. The chemistry between Mitchum and Russell's characters and their lingering intimacy is a welcome element. Most of von Sternberg's previous work lacked passionate climaxes between the leading couple; for example, in *Dishonored* and *Scarlet Empress*, he chose not to include love scenes to wrap up the narrative. Despite its strengths, *Macao*'s reception was negative—"meller has names to help," (*The Exhibitor*) a trade publication tersely hailed the film as a melodrama that was barely held together with its stars; ultimately, it failed at the box office. For his next and final project, von Sternberg left the USA and went to Tokyo in 1953 to film *Anatahan*.

CHARACTERS

Nick Cochran. American adventurer drifts to Macao and is suspected to be an undercover police investigator.
Julie Benton. Café singer Benton is another drifter who gets mixed up in the shady dealings of the Macao underworld.
Lawrence C. Trumble. American salesman is a cheerful and simplistic character. Is he what he claims to be?
Vincent Halloran. Halloran operates the top casino in Macao; he is a fugitive from the law in the United States and therefore cannot enter the international waters extending beyond a three-mile radius of the city.
Lieutenant Sebastian. Corrupt local police officer is in Halloran's payroll.
Margie. Dice girl (Gloria Grahame) is Halloran's girlfriend. She is jealous of Benton getting too close to the casino boss. She lets Cochran get away, which subsequently leads to the downfall of the mobster.
Kwan Sum Tang. The blind panhandler is a wise old man; he tries to help Nick Cochran escape from captivity. A minor "yellowface" character played by Russian-American actor Vladimir Sokoloff, who played a wide variety of nationalities in his prolific career (*The Life of Emile Zola, For Whom the Bell Tolls, Scarlet Street, While the City Sleeps*).

SYNOPSIS

A ferry from Hong Kong brings three Americans to Macao: the WW2 veteran Nick Cochran, the café singer Julie Benton, and the salesman Trumble. Cochran is a drifter who has had a brush with law in the United States; he and Benton are attracted by each other. She quickly gets a job at the top casino and charms its owner—the expatriate Halloran, who is another fugitive. Macao's gambling kingpin is very apprehensive about law enforcement; his goons have already murdered an American detective—he suspects that Cochran is another undercover officer sent to investigate him. The secret investigator is in fact the cheerful and simplistic salesman Trumble, who is surreptitiously closing in on him. Trumble uses Cochran as a pawn to lure the mobster out of the three-mile radius, into the international waters, where he can be arrested. The scheme fails, Trumble is killed by Halloran's henchmen, who capture Cochran and lock him up. Margie, a dice girl and Halloran's girlfriend, lets Cochran escape. Halloran attempts to leave Macao with Benton; Cochran commandeers his boat and following a tussle, subdues and hands him over to the international police. He unites with Benton—evidently the charges against him are dropped as a result of his indispensable contribution to the investigation.

SCENES

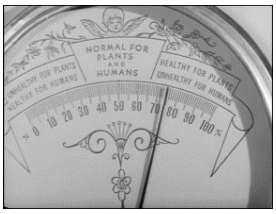
Three-Mile Zone. An American undercover police detective is chased by a bunch of goons—their boss, Vincent Halloran operates the Quick Reward, the top casino in Macao. The neon signs of the opening visually anticipate the first sequence of Tourneur's *Nightfall* (1956).



The New York detective is finally cornered and killed by a knife-throwing henchman. With the threat eliminated, Halloran is relieved for the moment—he is a wanted man and faces arrest as soon as he leaves the three-mile radius of Macao, a colony of Portugal. The credits are superimposed on Macao's coastline—Water had been an important motif in key scenes of von Sternberg's films (e.g. *The Docks of New York, An American Tragedy, Blonde Venus*).



The gambling kingpin feels safe as long as he doesn't step foot in the international waters, where the international police have jurisdiction. Anyone who enters Macao has to pass through the Chief of Police Lieutenant Sebastian, who is in his payroll. Despite being in cahoots with the corrupt local police, Halloran continues to be apprehensive about more undercover investigators sent to get at him. New arrivals aboard a passenger ship are particularly concerning.



"Unhealthy for humans"—a hygrometer underscores the unusual climate and introduces the setting as exotic and dangerous.

Ferry. The passenger ship Takshing docks in Macao; from Hong Kong, she has brought three Americans: Nick Cochran, an easygoing drifter and World War II veteran; Julie Benton, a smart-talking travelling chanteuse; Lawrence C. Trumble, a cheerful salesman of a variety of goods. Cochran incidentally helps Benton get out of a hassle involving a leering passenger, who paid for her ticket and is expecting her to return the favor.



Robert Mitchum stars as the American adventurer who is suspected of being an undercover policeman – Post-war era and the dawn of the American Century are alluded to with a dollar bill he keeps, signed presumably by his former comrades in arms.



Customs. Cochran and Benton appear to be attracted by each other, but that doesn't stop her from helping herself to Cochran's wallet at the first opportunity. With his passport gone and no way to prove his identity, he draws the attention of Lieutenant Sebastian at the customs checkpoint. Halloran is tipped about the mysterious stranger and suspects him to be the new police investigator.



Some shots in *Macao* recall von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941)—such as the traffic policeman with a turban.

A colonial policeman rides his bike, while a rickshaw's wallah carries a passenger—a labor intensive form of transport.



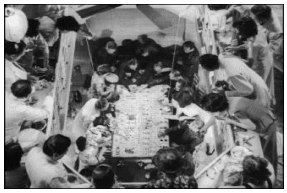
Another labor intensive form of transport, sampan, offers a leisurely ride at the harbor. Cochran and Benton spend time together and are obviously enamored by each other.



Quick Reward. Benton makes up for her wallet snatching by saving Cochran from deportation. She accepts an offer to sing at Halloran's casino, the Quick Reward and charms its proprietor. In

exchange for leaving Macao, Halloran offers money to Cochran, who assumes that the mobster simply wants to eliminate him as a rival for the attention of Benton. Now that he wants to be around her, he declines the offer.

Some scenes in *Macao* recall von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941): the casino is a much smaller version of the massive and pit shaped one in that film; the architectural design of its floors is quite complex and interesting.



Ruse. Trumble offers Cochran a handsome commission for approaching Halloran to sell a diamond ring; the matching necklace is in a safe in Hong Kong and needs to be retrieved personally by the buyer. Halloran recognizes that it is merchandize stolen from him recently, but he plays along. He consents to accompany Cochran to Hong Kong to get the whole set. At this point, it is revealed that Trumble the salesman is in fact the undercover detective tailing Halloran. Trumble meets with the representatives of the international police force to tip them to prepare for apprehending Halloran, who is expected to leave the three-mile zone.

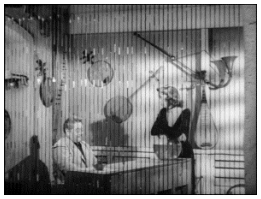
Behind Venetian blinds, a watchful Halloran surveils his casino, recalling Ballin Mundson in *Gilda* (1946), and other film noir villains



Counter Measure. At the appointed time, Cochran is at the harbor, but instead of embarking on the boat, Halloran gets him abducted and locked up. Trumble secretly informs the international police about the disappearance of the American; the consulate's inquiries lead Halloran and Lieutenant Sebastian to panic.

Chase. Meanwhile, Halloran's girlfriend and his casino's dice girl Margie keeps an eye on the captive. She has been annoyed by Halloran's interest in the new singer, so she lets Cochran go, assuming that he would take Benton with him and leave Macao. At the pier, Cochran manages to evade Halloran's henchmen, but they accidentally kill Trumble, who happens to be at the scene.

Gloria Grahame, in a supporting role as a dice girl, is here obscured by string curtains – an example of the gorgeous play of shadow and light in the casino scenes.



Another example of chiaroscuro in the casino scenes; with Korean-American actor Philip Ahn as the henchman.



Arrest. That evening, Halloran decides to leave Macao to get the necklace. Cochran commandeers his boat, slugs the mobster, and hands him over to the international police. Thanks to his assistance to law enforcement, his previous legal problems are solved and he unites with Benton—presumably, they set out to realize their dream of living happily in a Melanesian plantation.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

NICK COCHRAN

Cochran has served “three years, five months and twenty six days” in the navy. Evidently, he has been drifting since and has a history of crime, mainly smuggling—firearms in Iraq and precious stones in Egypt. He has run away from the USA, assuming mistakenly that he killed someone in a crime of passion. His criminal past is apparently no match for that of Halloran and he gets a pardon for his contribution to arresting the mobster of Macao.

Illustrative moment

Languorous and Vulnerable. At the time, Robert Mitchum was an established star, famous mostly for *Out of the Past* and his other films noir (his darker characterizations in *The Night of the Hunter* and *Cape Fear* were yet to come). Mitchum’s low-key performance here almost suggests lassitude, yet it is quite apt for the portrayal of a war veteran who has been perpetually drifting. To Judie Benton, Cochran reveals his vulnerable side; how he felt alone on the New Year’s Eve in the Times Square and why he later refused a job offer to manage a plantation on a Melanesian island—because of his fear of loneliness.

JUDIE BENTON

Benton has worked as a photographer, cigarette girl, fortune teller, and finally as a chanteuse. She comes across as a smart talking and no-nonsense woman who is willing to take risks; she actually longs for a settled life.

Illustrative moments

Belligerent and Worldly. When conversing with Judie Benton, Cochran and Halloran both refer to the chip on her shoulder. She explains that belligerence is a quality necessary for her to survive. She has a temper and acts on a whim. She likes to answer only “small questions” and tries not to reveal too much about herself.

Impulsive and Jealous. The other prominent female part in *Macao* is Gloria Grahame’s Margie. She is reserved and chooses her words carefully; Margie is as laconic as Cochran, who likens her to a sphinx. Judie Benton is more or less the opposite, she is spontaneous and impulsive. With the help of the blind panhandler, Benton finds where Cochran is held captive; here she gets the wrong impression that Margie and Cochran are romantically involved. Later, in one of the visually interesting scenes of Macao, in a fit of jealousy, she attacks him with an electric fan.

Empathetic. Girl next door character has a temper and can get very aggressive; she is also compassionate and empathetic. When Cochran reveals his sensitive side and fears of being alone, she tells him that everybody is “lonely, worried, and sorry.”

Rustic. Benton is surprised when Cochran tells her that he once declined a job offer to manage a plantation in the Melanesian islands. The conversation moves on to her proclivity to such a life, the idea of living together in the country obviously makes them elated. Later, she calls it a dream, because it appears impossible to realize. The ending shows them together; presumably they are going to settle down in a plantation. The worldly, street-smart Judie Benton doesn’t transition to a bucolic country girl, evidently, she was one all along.

TRUMBLE

Dealer of coconut oil, pearly buttons, fertilizers and nylon stockings is in fact a New York detective sent to lure Macao’s gambling kingpin out of the three-mile zone, where he can be arrested by the international

police. The happy-go-lucky and good-natured character is able to deceive Halloran and everyone else about his real identity.

Illustrative moment

Extrovert. William Bendix plays the voluble and cheerful salesman. Bentix had been in Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*; he was also well-known as the star of the radio show *The Life of Riley*, in which he voiced the gullible and clumsy factory worker. In *Macao*, the one person who looks as if he has nothing to hide turns out to be the deceiver. The friendly and jovial salesman is the New York detective who is after Halloran.

THEMES

Society – Exoticism, Colonialism and Corruption, Orientalism, Globalization, Modern Technology
Appearance – Perception, Identity and Deception

SOCIETY

Exoticism. In the *Shanghai Express*, the palanquin was used as a signifier of the Chinese courtesan's higher social status; in *The Shanghai Gesture*, rickshaws played a key role—the powerful urban developer Sir Charteris was spied on and ultimately coerced by his rickshaw wallah, the "coolie." In *Macao* too, the main characters use rickshaws for transport. They also take a leisurely ride on the harbor on a sampan. As wandering drifters, the American adventurers enjoy these labor extensive forms of transport without having to assume the negative connotation of colonizers.

Colonialism and Corruption. At the time of filming, Macao was a Portuguese enclave; it remained an overseas province of Portugal until the Carnation Revolution of 1974 ended the authoritarian regime and led to the independence of the colonies. The film was shot in California, mainly at the RKO studios; a camera crew shot b-roll footage in Macao of the coastline, the vibrant downtown and its traffic (Baxter, 168). These are quite successfully integrated to the main scenes. The opening voiceover highlights not only the exoticism of Macao, but also its dark side. "The Monte Carlo of the East" is described as a hotbed of criminals and a safe haven of fugitives. Macao is depicted as an intrinsically corrupt colony: the chief of police is in cahoots with the number one gangster in the city, bribes can be handed out openly at the customs (officer gladly accepts Trumble's offer of cigars). Representatives of international law enforcement have to wait outside a perimeter and have no jurisdiction in the city. Shortly, Halloran remains untouchable within a three-mile radius. The love triangle between Cochran, Benton, and Halloran (or a square, if Gloria Grahame's Margie is taken into consideration) and the ensuing intrigues could have taken place pretty much anywhere. That said, events and relationships are shaped by the corruptness of the city.

Orientalism. The opening voiceover narration sets the tone as it refers to Macao as "quaint and bizarre … calm and open, veiled and secret." From the get-go, the setting is framed as unfamiliar, mysterious, and dangerous: the opening sequence shows the hygrometer of the passenger ship, with the arrow pointing to very high moisture, "healthy for plants, unhealthy for humans." Characters seem to be unbothered by the climate and humidity; things may not be so different from those they are accustomed to—except for the prevalent corruption.

Globalization. Trumble, the undercover detective, is introduced as a salesman who deals in coconut oil, pearly buttons, fertilizers, and nylon stockings (his carry-on luggage is loaded with cigars, but apparently these are mainly used for bribing officials). The first of these two items are possibly procured from the East, while fertilizers and nylon stockings are apparently exports of American industry. The colony's welcome to the American businessman comes at a price; he needs to be crafty to get his luggage full of goods released from customs. Similarly, the war veteran Cochran finds that being a WW2 veteran means little here. Lieutenant Sebastian tells Cochran that papers documenting his extensive military service "will not grant you immediate access to this part of the world." This particular enclave is somewhat oblivious to the dawn of the American Century—the international police waiting just outside the city limits is prepared to enforce its jurisdiction and overcome the local forces that favor self-isolation.

Culturally, the borders have already mostly vanished: Trumble uses pidgin Chinese English to try to communicate with the female barber, who has fun with him by responding with casual small talk about his favorite baseball team, in flawless English.

Modern Technology. The scene that introduces Benton shows her enjoying music and snapping fingers to the tune from her record player. The opening scene's hygrometer also hints at the challenging climate and high levels of humidity. Benton addresses the problem with her portable air fan; later, in a fit of jealous rage, she uses the same gadget when she lunges at Cochran, who takes cover behind a pillow, leaving the room floating with feathers—reminiscent of the dormitory scene in Jean Vigo's *Zero for Conduct* (1933). Modern advances make life more convenient; with respect to the communications technologies, the situation is more ambiguous. Phone calls between Macao and China are not allowed by the political authority. The main method of communication is cable, which can be monitored by the corrupt local law enforcement. Trumble is able to evade the control over communications by using wireless to inform the international police about Halloran's movements.

APPEARANCE

Perception and Intuition. Corrupt police chief Sebastian interviews the three passengers whom he suspects of being the new investigator sent to nail his boss. After drawing his own conclusions, he reports his findings to Halloran, who, then studies photos of the three individuals and continues pondering about the policeman in disguise. It is a vain attempt; both the gangster and the corrupt lieutenant are unable to discern the reality behind the appearances. They rely on perception and it fails them; on the other hand, a minor character, the blind panhandler, is able to understand—by intuition and listening—the key incidents that take place around the pier. He informs Trumble about Cochran's kidnapping and alerts Benton about where he is held captive. The blind man Kwan Sun Tang recalls the blind panhandler in Fritz Lang's *M*, who plays the most important role in identifying the murderer.

Identity and Deception. Unbeknownst to the criminals, the cheerful and simple salesman is the police detective they fear, while the cool and mysterious Nick Cochran is simply a war veteran looking for a job, drifting from place to place. Deception is not the prerogative of the investigator; other characters also present themselves less than truthfully. Benton cajoles men to pay for her travel expenses and is apparently no stranger to snatching wallets when she appears most amiable. Halloran operates a casino, but is more preoccupied with dealing in precious contraband—after all; it is the diamond necklace that lures him out of his safety zone. Halloran is ready to cheat his mistress Margie—the dice girl twice delivers blows to him, first by releasing Cochran and later assisting the latter to commandeer the mobster's boat.

Discussion question

What makes *Macao* a film noir? What differentiates it from a typical film noir? What makes it a melodrama?

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