HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

The Salvation Hunters 1925

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

A director who chose to write with a camera in the first person.
—Andrew Sarris on Josef von Sternberg

It is a great picture—and different.
—Charlie Chaplin on *The Salvation Hunters*

OVERVIEW

One of the early truly independent films—if not the first—*The Salvation Hunters* was released in 1925. It was an instant box-office success; Josef von Sternberg's film debut attracted massive acclaim, both from critics and Hollywood celebrities. It helped establish Sternberg as one of the "Pantheon directors"—the top category in Andrew Sarris' formulation of the auteur theory, reserved for filmmakers "who have transcended their technical problems with a personal vision of the world … and whose films exist in a self-contained world with its own laws and landscapes" (Sarris, 1968).

Josef von Sternberg's (born in Vienna as Jonah Stern) first exposure to motion pictures was working as a cleaner and repairer of film stock. Subsequently, he got involved in editing and became an assistant director. *The Salvation Hunters*—based on an idea by Sternberg—was self-financed by him and the film's leading man George K. Artur. With a very modest budget of $5000, the shooting took place in Los Angeles.

Story of Destitute. The film opens at a harbor which serves as a home to a young man and woman. Out of desperation, the destitute couple and the orphaned boy in their company decide to try their luck in The City. As they try to negotiate urban squalor, shady characters approach to exploit them. Despite all the odds, the trio emerges from this struggle as a happy family. Characters in the film are named "Boy", "Girl", "Child", "Brute", "Man", and "Woman". They represent universal types; also, the harbor and The City are generic modern settings. The leading woman—The Girl—was played by the then unknown Georgia Hale. In 1924, she was as an extra for *By Divine Right*, which had Sternberg as an assistant director. He spotted her on the set (as she was reading a book—*Daughters of Vienna*, translated from German by Sternberg himself) and recruited her for his film debut (von Sternberg, 1965: 154-155).

Reception. Right after the success of *The Salvation Hunters*, Georgia Hale went on to star in *The Gold Rush* by Charlie Chaplin, one of the first admirers of Sternberg's film. Chaplin and stars such as Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks were among its other early viewers; they embraced *The Salvation Hunters* wholeheartedly. "It is a great picture—and different" Chaplin remarked (Weinberg, 1978: 22) and ranked it among his top four films. "A master technician" said Mary Pickford, who "has a sense of drama possessed by few" (Baxter, 1971: 31). Sternberg's fellow Austrian, the renowned theater director Max Reinhardt said that "it is inconceivable that such cinematic greatness could have come from America." (22) "With one fell swoop", Sternberg recalled in his autobiography *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, "I had become a member of the inner circle" (von Sternberg, 160).

Introducing Josef von Sternberg. A title card dedicates *The Salvation Hunters* to the "derelicts of the earth". Sternberg, with his childhood spent in Vienna and the USA, was no stranger to poverty; as an autodidact he too overcame tremendous odds and established himself as an important 20th Century artist. *The Salvation Hunters* ends with a note of hope—soon to become a much needed one, with the Great Depression almost around the corner and the Roaring Twenties about to end. Thanks to his credit from the popularity of *The Salvation Hunters*, Sternberg would continue working on larger projects with considerable freedom and exert his control as an auteur. His output in the late 1920s would include the first ever gangster picture in the contemporary sense, *The Underworld* (1927) and one of his masterpieces *The Docks of New York* (1928). After directing Germany's first sound film *The Blue Angel*

(1930), his career would continue breathtakingly spectacular Marlene when retrospectively asked to *Salvation Hunters* at a screening at to introduce this film" Sternberg said,



with a string of unique and Dietrich films in the 1930s. Later, comment on his first gem *The* The New School, "I don't know how "since it introduced me (118)."

CHARACTERS

The Boy. Despite no foreseeable end to unemployment and poverty, The Boy is a hopeful dreamer. The Girl considers him to be a coward—but that is about to change.

The Girl. She obviously resents the harbor and its mud, but things take an even worse turn at The City, with its sharks intending to exploit the attractive young woman.

The Kid. Orphaned boy is protected by the hero and the heroine. The happy-go-lucky kid becomes a key part of the "family".

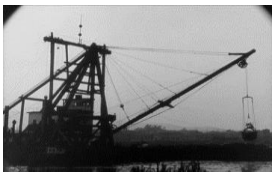
The Brute. A middle-aged man—apparently another dweller of the harbor—is seen abusing The Kid and he later attempts to molest The Girl. A barely noticeable signal from the latter to the dredge operator lands a clawful of mud on The Brute and the threat is neutralized—for the time being.

The Man. The Man—a small time hustler—notices the poor protagonists as they arrive in The City and immediately schemes to turn The Girl into a prostitute.

The Woman. She represents what The Girl might end up becoming; The Woman was most likely a victim of a similar ploy of The Man years ago.

The Gentleman. The Gentleman looks like a middle class figure, wears better clothes and he is the only person in the story who is looking to spend his money. He appears on the scene as a prospective customer, patiently waiting for the The Man to coax The Girl into prostitution. The Gentleman is played by Stuart Holmes, the only well-known actor in the cast at the time.

SCENES



The Harbor. A huge claw is at work at the harbor, the metallic arm ceaselessly moving back and forth to scoop out mud.



The dredger keeps unloading, the mud seems endless. Watching the dredger is a young woman and her companion; they call the dock their home. "The Girl"

and "The Boy" are joined by an orphaned kid whom they try to protect.



The Child, The Boy, and The Girl aredestitutes who stick together; Actress Georgia Hale played in Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*. As a master of lighting, Sternberg's compositions featuring her hint at his collaboration in the 1930s with Marlene Dietrich. The Girl—was played by the then unknown Georgia Hale. In 1924, she was as an extra for *By Divine Right*, which had Sternberg as an assistant director. He spotted her on the set (as she was reading a book—*Daughters of Vienna*, translated from German by Sternberg himself) and recruited her for his film debut (von Sternberg, 1965: 154-155). Right after the success of *The Salvation Hunters*, Georgia Hale went on to star in *The Gold Rush* by Charlie Chaplin, one of the first admirers of Sternberg's film.



The Boy spends his time daydreaming amid rotting wood and decaying fish.

The harbor offers no prospects, and then there is the dredger's claw swinging around. There is also an obnoxious individual in the vicinity.



The Girl and The Boy call the Harbor their home; the place is dangerous, the dredger poses a serious threat, but it is not the only one, there is also The Brute lurking around. They decide to go to The City for a better future.



Urban Squalor. The City is not unlike the harbor, the "rotting timber" and "decaying fish" of the Harbor are replaced by dilapidated buildings and poor crowds. What's more, "man's worst enemy is man. A city is full of enemies." At The City, The Boy tries to find a job but it looks hopeless.

A shadowy figure watches the young protagonists as soon as they step into The City looking for a place to live. The small-time hustler approaches them and offers them an apartment to stay for free—until one of them finds employment. The line of work he has in mind is prostitution and the good Samaritan is scheming to exploit his unsuspecting victims as their desperation mounts. The Girl is groomed also by the next-door neighbor, The Woman, who is supposedly The Man's female companion—and probably an earlier victim.



Hard Times. As The Man foresaw, the trio soon find it difficult to endure hunger. The Boy keeps daydreaming, oblivious to what's going on around him. In his fantasies, The Boy imagines himself sharply dressed and driving a nice cabriolet. The Girl and The Child happily accompany him; they are led to their mansion by an entourage of servants who resemble flashy tin soldiers.



When he is not daydreaming, the Boy admires and mimics body builders, whose photo cutouts he encounters on a wall.



Frustrated, The Girl admonishes him for being a weak coward. The Man subtly steers her to the idea of prostituting. He is quite successful, as she slowly begins to consider it as the only option for them. Evidently, after much internal struggle, she decides not to follow that path and returns to The Boy and The Kid. Then, there appears an eager prospective client—The Gentleman. Encouraged by The Man, he makes an advance and is subsequently refused. The Gentleman seems to experience an ethical qualm; before leaving the apartment, he offers help in the form of cash.

The Gentleman—a client of The Man—waits patiently, for The Girl to give up and become a prostitute. He seems to have slight ethical qualms and ends up helping the protagonists by giving them some cash.

Hope. All is not lost for The Man, who is bent on carrying out his ploy. He decides to lure the trio to a picnic in the country. He drags along The Woman in order to distract The Girl, as he works on his plan to seduce and entrap her. The group drives to an empty lot and have their picnic. The Man's advances on The Girl annoy the little kid, who gets in his way. In return, The Man slaps and shoves him. Watching them passively from a distance, The Boy is progressively outraged; finally he intervenes. In the ensuing fight—to the surprise of everyone—he beats The Man to a pulp and drops him to the seat of his fancy cabriolet. The Girl is delighted, The Kid is overjoyed, and The Boy is proud. After so much hardship, their first victory feels like "conquering The City, harbor, the mud". They walk towards the sunset, "now confident in their destiny."

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

THE BOY

The Boy is a good-natured introvert; he is an optimist who lives a better life in his dreams. His self-contentment and lack of ambition frustrates The Girl.

Illustrative moments

Amicable. The soft-spoken Boy has a mild demeanor and shows no interest in quarrelling, let alone fighting.

Weak. The Girl scolds The Boy for his incessant dreaming and passive attitude—she calls him a "weakling"; The Boy's reaction is typically quiet.

Cowardly. At the sight of The Brute abusing the little kid, The Boy wants to intervene, but is unconfident. He continues to remain timid and unassertive in The City, even after The Man's scheme becomes obvious.

Dreamer. Even when there is no hope that their situation would improve, The Boy keeps daydreaming about the grand times to come—his fantasy features a footman (resembling a live tin soldier) who leads a trio of majestically uniformed servants that escort the couple to their mansion.

Affectionate. The Boy adores The Girl and acts as a gentle and loving father figure for The Child.

THEMES

Society – Modernity, Modern City and Class, Commodification and Nature, Immigration, Masculinity, Corruption
Psychology – Nature of Human Beings
Change – Destiny

Modernity. The huge metal claw of the dredger goes back and forth to unload mud. The harbor is a work in progress; there is no stopping industry and technology. People have to watch out for the fast movements of the dredger not to get hurt.

Modern City and Class. **"**Children of the Sun" and "Children of the Mud" are two distinct social identities that are spelled out in the title cards. The Boy feels like he belongs to both (but is somehow trapped among the "Children of the Mud". The City is hardly any better in terms of offering a better life compared to the harbor and its endless mud. It is dangerous and full of strife.

Commodification and Nature. "Here your dreams come true"—a billboard greets the picnickers as they get out of The City for a day out. The country seems to be constituted of vacant lots waiting to be commercialized and incorporated into The City.

Destiny. Being a realist, The Girl is frustrated with The Boy for his naïve belief in destiny and a better future. On the other hand, with his boosted self-confidence, The Boy ends up—according to a title card—"conquering The City, harbor, the mud". His optimism prevails and *The Salvation Hunters* suggests that it is possible to beat destiny by believing in oneself.

Immigration. The Girl and The Boy go to The City to find a better life, just as others who move across national borders. During his last attempt to find a job at the harbor, The Boy comes across a poster in Chinese and is baffled.

Nature of Human Beings. An early title card states that "man is man's worst enemy"—and in The City, there are many enemies. A malicious and crafty man (The Man) sets his eyes on the naïve

protagonists as soon as they arrive at The City. Danger lurking in The City is just as threatening as the dredger's intimidating claw.

Masculinity. The Girl admonishes The Boy for not acting manly enough. He has trouble fitting into the gender roles. In his confusion, he struggles—when The Boy sees photos of strong men flexing their muscles, he amuses himself mimicking them. The Man—typically beady-eyed—notices and mocks The Boy's weak arms.

Corruption. *The Salvation Hunters* unsubtly points to prostitution as a social problem. The opening scenes introduce the harbor with images of rotting; in The City, social corruption corresponds to the physical decay of the dock.

Discussion question

Sternberg has mentioned that he had almost no influence from the films of other directors, although he had a positive view of a few of his colleagues. Are there parallels in *The Salvation Hunters* to Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* and G.W. Pabst's *Joyless Street*? Is there any trace of influence of Charlie Chaplin on *The Salvation Hunters*? Has *The Salvation Hunters* influenced any of Chaplin's later films? Any other directors and films that you find comparable to Sternberg's style and themes?

What does *The Salvation Hunters* say about Sternberg's view of destiny?

What is distinct about the three adult males, The Brute, The Man, and The Gentleman? What kind of universal traits do they supposedly represent with respect to their names?

According to Andrew Sarris, Sternberg's films are "poetic without being symbolic" (Sarris, 77). How would you evaluate this statement in the context of *The Salvation Hunters*?

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