HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Blonde Venus 1932

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)



It is as if the Delphic Oracle had stepped down from her pedestal to give her opinion about the weather.
—Josef von Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*

"Down to Gehenna, or up to the throne, he travels fastest who travels alone."
—Rudyard Kipling, "The Winners" (handwritten on Helen Faraday's mirror in *Blonde Venus*.)

Motion Picture Herald, Quigley Publishing, 1931. Courtesy http://mediahistoryproject.org/ Media History Digital Library.

OVERVIEW

"Song of Manhattan" was the title of a story co-authored by Josef von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich; (Baxter, 1993: 15) after many months of tough negotiations with the production company and multiple major revisions of the screenplay, it was released as *Blonde Venus* in September 1932 while the Great Depression was in full swing.

This is the only time the USA is the setting in Dietrich and von Sternberg duo's seven-film cycle (which geographically covers Germany [*The Blue Angel*], Morocco [*Morocco*], Austria [*Dishonored*], China [*Shanghai Express*], Russia [*The Scarlet Empress*], and Spain [*The Devil is a Woman*]). "Released at a time when many Americans were desperate to make sense of the economic, technological, and social changes that had affected their country," (8) the *Blonde Venus*' protagonist is "a woman attempting to reconcile the contradictory demands of economics, morality, and desire" (9). A mother is torn between her devotion to her family and her desires; will she lose everything or is a fulfilling resolution possible?

Lineage, Connections and Legacy. *Blonde Venus* can be broadly grouped together with other Depression-era dramas that dealt with social problems (e.g. *I was a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, Union Depot, Taxi!, Wild Boys of the Road, Our Daily Bread*). With its heroine becoming a fallen woman following her affair, *Blonde Venus* also has an affinity to the women's films genre and elements of films

such as *The Patsy* (1928), *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928), *Susan Lennox (Her Fall and Rise)* (1931), *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* (1931), *The Easiest Way* (1931), *Baby Face* (1933), *The House on 56th Street* (1933), *Confession* (1937), *Stella Douglas* (1937).

In *Blonde Venus*, Dietrich sings three songs, "Hot Voodoo," "You Little So-and-So," and "I Couldn't Be Annoyed." With the latter, in white tailcoat suit and top hat, she references her own act—scandalous for the period—in *Morocco* (1931). "Hot Voodoo", with Dietrich emerging from a gorilla costume to don a flamboyant Afro wig, has contributed to the film's iconic status. The scene interestingly predates 1933's *King Kong*; it has been recreated by Uma Thurman as Poison Ivy in *Batman & Robin* (1997, Schumacher) and by Paul Jabara in drag in *The Day of the Locust* (1975, Schlesinger); also referenced in fashion photography (Kate Moss) and music videos (Madonna). The choreography also hints to the influence of the first modern international Black star Josephine Baker (Pesto, 138: 155). *Blonde Venus* has been extensively written about; its rich intertextual connections continue to make it a favorite of cultural theorists (e.g. Robin Wood, Florence Jacobowitz, E. Ann Kaplan, Lea Jacobs, Mary Ann Doane, and Janet Staiger).

Constrained Auteur, Industry and Censorship. *Blonde Venus* is a Pre-Code (the few years between the adoption of sound and the full enforcement of the Motion Pictures Producers Code in mid-1934) drama that addresses controversial issues such as single parenting, adultery, and prostitution; at times, it evokes destitution—with biographical elements from von Sternberg's youth and his experiences as an immigrant, notably the flophouse scene. Actually, the story was conceived as the foundation of a "darker film. (Baxter, 156)" Paramount Pictures strived to make the material less offensive and acceptable for the Hays Office (the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America) when it did not yet have the power to enforce its rules. The screenplay proposed by von Sternberg was not approved; he, in turn, refused to use the second version. The "evolution" of the screenplay is recounted in detail by Peter Baxter (77); it is an interesting case study of the auteur challenged by social and economic forces. Detailed discussions about specific scenes and the plot reveal "skirmishes between the productive plant of the dominant culture itself" (Jacobs, 1998: 181); They also suggest how "censorship is dependent on narrative modes" (Baxter, 86). According to Lea Jacobs, the intensive battles fought around the film make it an "atypical but not aberrant" (Jacobs, 105) example of artistic creativity ultimately reaching a compromise with institutions. It demonstrates how von Sternberg's "idiosyncrasies flourished *because of* and not just *despite* censorship" (185). *Blonde Venus* can be considered as a hinge in von Sternberg's oeuvre; it would be followed by *The Scarlet Empress* and *The Devil is a Woman*, mainly unchained expressions of his unique artistic vision.

CHARACTERS

Helen Faraday (Helen Jones/Blonde Venus). German chanteuse gets married to Ned Faraday and moves to the US to live as a housewife for about six years, until he gets sick and needs money to get well.

Ned Faraday. Helen's husband is an industrial chemist. He suffers from radium poisoning and needs funds to finance an experimental treatment. Helen raises the money quickly with a check from Nick Townsend and presumably with her earnings from the cabaret.

Nick Townsend. The wealthy politician is a playboy and has an affair with Helen.

Johnny. Helen and Ned's son is five years old. He orchestrates his parents' reconciliation by encouraging them to reenact their first encounter and their account of falling in love—his favorite bedtime story, "Springtime in Germany."

"Taxi" Bell Hooper. The cabaret singer is overshadowed by Blonde Venus. Helen teases her about the nickname ("do you charge for the first mile"); Taxi tips her about the wealth and generosity of Nick Townsend.

Detective Wilson. Wilson comes close to locating Helen, but it is she who initiates contact—as a streetwalker. The lascivious detective quickly forgets his professional objective. The character is not a glowing representative of law enforcement. Their interaction ends as Helen decides to give up running away and lets Wilson report her location to Ned Faraday. Sidney Toler's best known (yellowface) role was the Chinese-American detective Charlie Chan.

Cora. In New Orleans, Cora (Hattie McDaniel—*Gone with the Wind*) is Helen's maid and friend.

SYNOPSIS

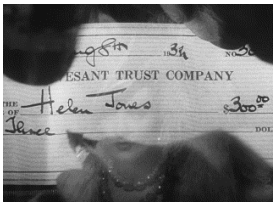
Ned Faraday is a research scientist who gets fatally ill with radioactive poisoning; his wife Helen, a former café singer, decides to earn the money necessary for a costly experimental treatment. As the "Blonde Venus," she quickly becomes a sensation and easily raises the funds necessary—thanks to the contribution of a wealthy politician named Nick Townsend. While the husband is in Germany for his treatment, Nick and Helen have an affair. Eventually, Ned is totally cured and returns home to find it vacant. When Helen confesses to the affair, Ned scolds her and demands the custody of their son Johnny. Helen runs away with the little boy, travelling from city to city and hounded by detectives. With her pursuers closing in on her, she is unable to work at cabarets and resorts to streetwalking. Finally, their location is discovered and Ned takes Johnny away. Helen briefly drifts and struggles, then makes a comeback. Her rebirth as a successful chanteuse takes place in Paris. A chance encounter with Nick almost brings them together; but he persuades her to visit her boy first. The reunion of mother and son proves how indispensable she is at home. With Johnny reminding them how they once loved each other, Helen and Ned are affectionately reconciled.

SCENES

Springtime in Germany. The forest hike takes a group of American students to a small pond, where the sight of skinny-dipping women bedazzles the young tourists. One of them, Ned Faraday, begins to flirt with a swimmer and learns that Helen and her friends perform at a local cabaret.



New York Family. Approximately six years have passed. Ned and Helen are now happily married. She is a housewife and raises Johnny (whose favorite bedtime story is "Springtime in Germany"); Ned Faraday's work as an industrial chemist provides the family with a meager income. During an experiment, Ned gets poisoned by radium and is expected to die in eight months. A fellow scientist is not interested in his radium infected body, but while he plays with a skull, he informs Ned about an experimental treatment offered by a German professor in Dresden. It is an expensive procedure, one which the Faradays cannot afford. When Helen learns about his predicament, she decides to return to the world of entertainment in order to raise the funds.



Affair. Helen catches the attention of an agent and is hired as a singer. Her stage name gets changed to Helen Jones and she is dubbed the Blonde Venus. Even though her first show—entering the stage in a gorilla costume and singing "Hot Voodoo"—is a great success, she will not have to wait for the paychecks to cover some of Ned's expenses—a backstage visit by wealthy politician named Nick Townsend sparks a romance and he writes a check for her. Helen's image is superimposed on Nick Townsend's check, which catapults her husband to Europe. As soon as Ned leaves for Germany, Helen and Nick launch their affair.

Vacant Home. Months pass; Ned's treatment is a success and he is completely cured. Seeing that Helen is inclined to resume her marriage with Ned, Nick decides to leave for Europe; but before that, he suggests that they spend their last weeks away in the country. Ned returns to the US two weeks ahead of schedule and finds the apartment empty. Helen finally shows up, but little Johnny is not with her and Ned is furious. He admonishes her severely before declaring his decision to assume sole custody.





Runaway. Instead of bringing Johnny to Ned, Helen takes the little boy and runs away. They move from city to city; initially she finds employment at cabarets and tries to keep her chin up. Not before long, Ned contacts the police and gets detectives to trail Helen. With the net tightening around her, she is unable to work and runs out of money. She survives by washing dishes at taverns and it is hinted that she resorts to prostitution.

She is tried for vagrancy in New Orleans and is ordered to leave the city. According to the sheriff's bulletin, information is "wanted" about Helen Faraday and no warrants have yet been issued. "She is a cabaret entertainer; watch all such places" the notice states and detectives hound her relentlessly. – She is tried for vagrancy—not streetwalking—at the New Orleans court.



Exhausted. A detective traces Helen to Texas and begins to lurk around her dwelling in Galveston. Finally, she gives up and goes out to initiate contact with Detective Wilson. Assuming that she is soliciting prostitution, he lewdly follows her to her shack, where he comes face to face with Johnny. Ned is alerted and soon arrives by train.

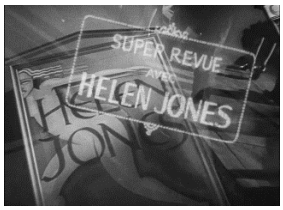
Helen loses hope and gives up, delivering Johnny to Ned. She is a broken woman, until she is able to make a comeback. – Nick chivalrously facilitates the reunion of Helen with her son, and consequently, the reconciliation of husband and wife.

After handing Helen the fifteen hundred dollars she provided for his treatment, he takes his son and leaves. Helen is now all alone; she stays in flophouses and goes around drunk. She hands her money to a fellow derelict and vows to succeed by her own means.



Triumphant. Some time has passed; Helen has traveled and worked; she has bounced back and resurfaced in Europe—she is in Paris as a top-billed revue performer. Nick also happens to be there and they have a chance encounter. He proposes, but also urges her to get in touch with her kid. They travel to the USA and Nick offers to pay Ned to let Helen see her son. Ned is so frustrated with the offer of money that he defiantly lets her in.

Helen loses hope and gives up, delivering Johnny to Ned. She is a broken woman, until she is able to make a comeback. – Nick chivalrously facilitates the reunion of Helen with her son, and consequently, the reconciliation of husband and wife.



Little Johnny asks his parents to reenact the story of their first date—"Springtime in Germany." Ned is initially reluctant, but Johnny decisively steers the two, until they recognize their love for each other. Helen requests permission to stay and Ned tells her that she belongs home, with them.



Helen Jones' rebirth in Paris revues as "Helen Jones," heralded by Art Deco ads and signs.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

HELEN FARADAY (Open) The talent scout changes Helen's last name to Jones and the venue's proprietor dubs her as the Blonde Venus. Helen Faraday combines the identity of a mother (single mother for the most part) and a professional entertainer during the Great Depression. Von Sternberg thought that the role was so different from his previous work with Dietrich that he likened it to the Delphic Oracle stepping "down to give her opinion of the weather" (Von Sternberg, 1965: 264). The character goes through stages and evolves. In her biography, Dietrich's daughter Maria Riva recalled that her "mother loved the *Blonde Venus*, because in it, she got to play a housewife, a mother, a fallen angel, a whore, and a successful nightclub entertainer" (Riva, 1994: 144).

Illustrative moments

Devoted Mother. The day before the shooting of *Blonde Venus* began, the dead body of aviator Charles Lindberg's son was found (Baxter, 133)—the baby had been kidnapped a couple of months ago. In her biography of Marlene Dietrich, her daughter Maria Riva recounts how she was worried about threats—they had received an extortion note and hired an armed bodyguard (Riva, 111, 132, 134, 142). Helen is always concerned about Johnny and does her best to take good care of him.

Ambiguous and Hybrid. Devoted Mother is one of the hats Helen is wearing. She is not exactly being a successful entertainer, a passionate lover, and a great mother all at the same time. It seems that the identities are compartmentalized and somehow do not conflict with each other. The contemporary ads prepared for *Blonde Venus*' publicity mostly downplayed or ignored the motherhood angle and spotlighted the seductive chanteuse character (Haralovich, 2007: 162). On the other hand, it seems that the character's adventurous love life is balanced by her being an excellent mother. This duality is an important part of the moral integrity of the character (Jacobs, 89). The "Hot Voodoo" scene signifies Blonde Venus as "a hybrid figure," (Pesto, 156) "both animal and human, white and not white, primitive and modern, but finally, ultra white and ultramodern in her performance of a modern primitivism" (Pesto, 154).

Aphrodite/Venus. Some of the contemporary advertising material prepared to market *Blonde Venus* used a sketch of Marlene Dietrich in the likeness of Venus de Milo, with her gloved—invisible—hands and semi-transparent dress, evoking the classic sculpture (Haralovich, 162). The dutiful homemaker, who is busy with daily chores, becomes Aphrodite when she sings "Hot Voodoo", "You Little So-and-So," and "I Couldn't be Bothered."

Strong and Defiant. Helen's dressing room in her Paris show has the following two lines of a Rudyard Kipling poem—"The Winners" (1922)—handwritten on her mirror: "Down to Gehenna, or up to the throne, he travels fastest who travels alone." Helen returns from Europe to the USA triumphantly; she has achieved success without the support of men—both Ned and Nick are basically "superfluous, Helen can exist without them" (Jacobowitz, 44).

How she bounced back after total defeat in Texas is not shared with the spectator. Yet, we may assume that solidarity with other women would have made a positive contribution to her struggle. This can be inferred from some of her previous interactions with women: the Norfolk woman manager (whose appearance and mannerism hints at queerness) had tipped her about Ned aggressively searching for her—she had empathetically advised her to stay away from cabarets not to get caught ("I've a kid of my own"); Helen's African-American maid Cora, in the final part of her adventure, was a sweet friend who took care of her—she had carefully sized up Detective Wilson to help Helen thwart the threat; the desperate woman in the flophouse who considered suicide—Helen had defiantly handed her all the money Ned gave her, in order to start from scratch. In *Blonde Venus*, female bonding "subverts the system" (Kaplan, 1992: 59).

NED FARADAY (Disagreeable) Ned desperately searches for a cure to his illness; Helen not only makes an effort to help him, she actually solves his problem. Then again, their marriage gets sour, because raising the necessary funds involves Helen's affair with Nick Townsend.

Illustrative moment

Self-Righteous and Cruel. Ned calls Helen "rotten" and wants the sole custody of Johnny; when she takes the boy and runs away, Ned unleashes detectives to trail her and pursues them relentlessly. He recalls some of the prim and haughty passengers of von Sternberg's *Shanghai Express*, such as Mrs. Haggerty and Mr. Carmichael (the latter calls the two modern courtesans in the train "rotten"). When Ned comes to the Galveston train station to pick up Johnny, he is untouched by how devastated Helen is.

In 1932's *Screenland* magazine's story version of *Blonde Venus* (written by Mortimer Franklin), Ned is considerably different and so is the ending: Nick approaches Ned to let Helen be free; when he refuses,

Nick blackmails him by his dubious relationship with a young maid—Ned instantly yields and is out of the picture. This story was possibly based on the earlier version of the screenplay, which reminds us of the various possibilities the plot could have evolved into.

NICK TOWNSEND (Agreeable) The source of Townsend's wealth and the nature of his involvement in politics are not explained. He simply exists as the love interest of Helen Jones (he meets her after she gets her stage name). Dietrich's co-star in 1931's *Morocco* was Gary Cooper; Nick Townsend is played by another major star, Cary Grant, (Von Sternberg, 264) who was not yet as famous as he would become in just a few years. Von Sternberg, in typical fashion, takes full credit for launching Grant into "a stellar career" from being "one of Mae West's foils"(264). Dietrich's daughter remarks in her biography of her mother that she referred to him as the "shirt seller" because that was reportedly what the actor did for additional income (Riva, 144). Neither Ned, nor Nick really share the spotlight with Helen; *Blonde Venus* is her story.

Illustrative moments

Nonchalant. Nick is a notorious playboy and tolerates no competition when he first approaches Helen; yet he is surprisingly detached—so much so that at critical moments he asks her questions about her love for Ned and reminds her of the necessity to reunite with her son. When her husband returns from Europe and she decides to break up with Nick, he reacts with moderation and simply declares his intention to leave for Europe.

Urbane and Chivalrous. When Helen and Nick have a chance encounter in Paris, it looks like they might reunite. However, he insists that she should first make an effort to see her child. Nick chivalrously facilitates the reunion of Helen with her son, and indirectly, the reconciliation of husband and wife. When Nick sees that Helen is affectionately taking care of Johnny, he lets Ned know that his driver would be ready for her—just in case—and leaves them alone.

THEMES

SOCIETY

Motherhood. 1932 was marked by the Lindberg kidnapping; the baby of the aviator Charles Lindberg was kidnapped in March and his body was found in May. Marlene Dietrich had reasons to fear for her child and took protective measures as *Blonde Venus* was shot. The film parallels her maternal compassion, as she plays a devoted mother and—for the most part—a single parent. When her desires conflict with her motherhood, she seems to split personalities: she is either Johnny's mom or the Blonde Venus, who is having a passionate affair with Nick Townsend. This duality (104) makes her character ambiguous.

Single Parenting. When Ned leaves, Johnny asks whether his father is "gone for good"; later, when the detectives are on their trail, he tells his mother that he wishes that they would never be caught. As mother and son remain happy in their seclusion, *Blonde Venus* invites rethinking motherhood outside the family (Jacobowitz, 1990: 48) When, Ned picks up Johnny as the sole custodian of the boy, he too becomes a single parent. Evidently, he is comparably less successful—Helen seems to think so, when she is finally allowed to visit Johnny.

Race. The single most spectacular scene in the *Blonde Venus* is arguably Helen's first cabaret gig, singing "Hot Voodoo." Dubbed a "Sternbergian bizarrerie" (Weinberg, 1978: 61) by Herman G. Weinberg, it features Dietrich on stage in a highly realistic gorilla costume, surrounded by African women (mainly in blackface). The dancers carry spears and oval shields with primitive patterns, which denote them to be tribal warriors (anticipating *King Kong*'s [1933] Skull Island). In contrast to the fabulous exoticism of this scene, African-Americans appear as workers engaged in mundane work; there are also instances of stereotypes, such as the stuttering bartender. Reportedly, the original screenplay explicitly located the cabaret in Harlem (Jacobs, 89) and it had more references to race.

Economics, Poverty, and Commodification. In 1932, Mexican social-realist muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros painted a portrait of von Sternberg and created a mural in Los Angeles titled *Tropical America* (non-extant), which led to his deportation. Peter Baxter regards *Blonde Venus* to be a comparably subversive work, despite mostly successful corporate and institutional efforts to truncate it.

Nick Townsend is the only well-off character—the source of his wealth is never specified, he is introduced merely as a politician. Apart from him, most of the other figures are struggling to survive and scenes of showbiz glamour are undercut by destitute and gritty realism—particularly effective are shots of the Norfolk women's rooming house and the flophouse (possibly inspired by von Sternberg's own experiences as an immigrant).

Prices and value are important topics—point blank, Ned Faraday enters a professor's office to sell his radium-poisoned body for experimentation. He is told that it is not worth much; as a courtesy, the scientist offers to pay fifty dollars for it. This will not be the last reference to bodily commodification; it opens up possibilities for comparison with future references to money: The experimental treatment costs fifteen hundred dollars and Helen's wage at the cabaret is about $250 per week. She doesn't need to wait for her paycheck; all of a sudden, Nick Townsend writes her a personal check (not explained why) for $300—which catapults Ned to the other side of the Atlantic for his treatment. That is six times the amount he could get for his body. There is no reference whatsoever to Nick's payment being for sex; then again, Helen gladly accepts it and it marks the beginning of their affair. When Johnny asks her mom whether eight-five cents is "a lot of money," she is practically broke, but replies that it is not. Helen has nothing to pay the Greek restaurateur and offers to wash the dishes instead. At this point, it is subtly hinted that the lewd man might be excited about something other than the dishes. However, in the next phase of the mother and son's getaway, it is pretty obvious that she is prostituting. As Helen escapes not to surrender custody of Johnny, she is not charged with a specific crime; the sheriff's bulletin states that only information is wanted and no warrants had yet been issued. Soon, Helen finds it impossible to make money by legitimate means and eventually runs out of it. Then, in New Orleans, she is tried for vagrancy—not streetwalking—at the court.

Science and Technology. *Blonde Venus*' jumps in time also feature allusions to modern transportation technologies—images of trains and ocean liners provide credibility to drastic movements in space and sudden jumps in time. 'Ned is cured' or 'Helen's rebirth' are merely parentheses in a formal narrative; thanks to exciting modern technologies, they are not allowed to distract from the plot. On the other hand, a modern advance is an unsettling cause of concern—radium almost kills Ned (foreshadowing Marie Curie's death in 1934, believed to be a result of long-term exposure to radioactivity).

RELATIONSHIP

Desire and Emancipation. Von Sternberg and Dietrich's original treatment intended to explore the question whether it is possible for a woman to be in love with two men at the same time. The final screenplay and the film, as the outcome of a series of negotiations and compromises, ends with the restoration of the family; hence, Helen and Nick Townsend's love affair has to end (once again) abruptly. If one were to disregard the ending, Helen could have kept both her son and her love interest. In *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*, Janet Staiger argues that *Blonde Venus* points to the possibilities of fandom and the ability of spectators to imagine alternatives (Staiger, 2000: 88-89) An example is a short story version of *Blonde Venus*, published in the September 1932 issue of *Screenland* magazine. Written by Mortimer Franklin, this story has major differences to the film—noteworthy is the ending, with Nick Townsend cunningly blackmailing Helen's husband to drop out of the picture and share custody. This story does not end with the reconciliation of Ned and Helen. Staiger maintains that notwithstanding the shaping of the narrative by the industry, fans "may have been resisting or even laughing at the official version," (89) as they continue to imagine interpretations in which desire and emancipation prevail.

QUEST

Water. *Blonde Venus* makes use of ellipses with huge jumps in time: Ned and Helen meet in Germany—five years pass and they are living in the USA as a married couple with a son; Ned Faraday leaves for Germany, fatally ill, and returns months later, completely cured—his experience takes place off-screen; Helen and Johnny swiftly change locations and evade the hounding detectives; Helen hits rock bottom and manages to make a spectacular comeback in Paris. These jumps in time are typically connected with views of the ocean—or the pond in the Black Forest, which marks the transition from Germany to the USA.

Parallels. Water had often played a key feature in other von Sternberg films: as the setting of a suicide attempt in *The Docks of New York,* a murder (or manslaughter) in *An American Tragedy*, an exotic-noir with sampan boats and junk ships in *Macao*.

Discussion questions

Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) includes an essay about Greta Garbo and her film *Queen Christina* (1933), titled "The Face of Garbo." Is his approach also useful for understanding the star persona of Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*?

In his 1978 article "Venus de Marlene" (Wood, 1978: 58-63), Robin Wood argues that Helen's control over Johnny parallels that of the control of men over her. Do you agree?

Why does Helen initiate contact with Detective Wilson?

What are visual examples to the use of ellipsis in *Blonde Venus*?

How would you compare *Blonde Venus* with Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* with respect to masculine rage?

In her groundbreaking 1975 essay, "**Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema**", Laura Mulvey argues that in films of traditional Hollywood, patriarchal unconscious shapes viewers' film watching experience, so that the audience derives pleasure from film through voyeurism and identification with a masculine gaze, which is represented by the camera. In Mulvey's essay, the two directors discussed in detail as examples of this concept are Alfred Hitchcock and Josef von Sternberg. How is *Blonde Venus* an example (or counterexample) of Mulvey's argument about creation of women as the object of male gaze?

How would you compare the fallen woman theme in *Blonde Venus* and *Stella Dallas*?

What are some examples of "traces of insurgent otherness" (Baxter, 133) in *Blonde Venus*?:

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