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The Scarlet Empress 1934

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

A relentless excursion into style.
—Josef von Sternberg, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*

OVERVIEW

Catherine the Great, the last reigning empress of Russia, has been the subject of many films; there were two of them in 1934—while *The Rise of Catherine the Great* (Paul Czinner) was a melodrama that aspired to historical accuracy, Josef von Sternberg's *The Scarlet Empress* that came out eight months later was nothing of the sort.

Debauchery vis-à-vis the Hays Code. *The Scarlet Empress* is technically a pre-Code film (the few years between the adoption of sound and the full enforcement of the Hays Code in mid-1934); yet it saw widespread release after the Motion Pictures Production Code had started to be rigorously implemented. It is rather incredulous—and fortunate—that this historical fantasy ended up getting an approval seal. *The Scarlet Empress* is arguably one of the most adult films of the pre-Code era.

This wildly imaginative—and penultimate—film of von Sternberg-Dietrich film cycle, features a depraved and grotesque Russian palace as a debauched setting. Empress Elizabeth's inner circle has no shortage of sexual innuendo and extramarital affairs—which would have been problematic for the Production Code, but the presence of a brief sequence is even more baffling—it shows various forms of cruelty (e.g. beheadings, torture by an iron maiden and other methods, notably a gigantic bell with a human clapper).

Representing History. Besides Elizabeth and Catherine, there are other historic figures in the historic extravaganza, such as the counts Orlov and Alexei, but the associations are mostly superficial. Peter III's biography outlines his—evidently unsuccessful—attempts at modernization of the Russian state. In the film, he is a dangerous dunce. His only connection to modernization is his pet unit of Hessian troops; Peter's modern infantry contrasts with the traditional Cossack cavalry preferred by both Elizabeth and Catherine in the film.

It is of course Catherine's story; and it shows her quest to adapt to conditions and achieve sexual empowerment—her success ultimately brings political power. This is a different role for Marlene Dietrich, who had played cabaret performers in von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel, Morocco*, and *Blonde Venus*; a courtesan in *The Shanghai Express*, and a streetwalker-turned-spy in *Dishonored*. Travis Banton, the prime mover of the Dietrich image, was the designer of the costumes. Catherine's power and glamour reach their pinnacle at the end; dressed in a majestic Hussar (light cavalry) uniform, she topples and replaces the weak male ruler.

Empress Catherine II has fascinated filmmakers and continues to do so. A decade before von Sternberg, Lubitsch had directed *Forbidden Paradise* (1924); a decade later, Preminger would complete *A Royal Scandal* (1945). Among the many actresses who portrayed Catherine II were (roughly in chronological order), Mae West (1944 play), Tallulah Bankhead, Jeanne Moreau, Hildegard Knef, Bette Davis, Jane Fonda, Helen Mirren, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Ella Fanning. In the 2010s, Russian television aired two ambitious series revolving around the powerful monarch.

Auteur and Design. *The Scarlet Empress*' imperial palace evokes figures of Slavic and Russian folklore, Baba Yaga and Koschei "the Immortal"/"the Deathless". Leo Braudy likens the palace to a "gargantuan and surrealistic ski lodge" (Braudy, 1977: 89). Comparing *The Scarlet Empress* with Rossellini's *The Rise of Louis XIV* (1966), he points out that whereas in the latter the character is

controlled by the décor, von Sternberg has the character “move behind” it, rather than being swallowed by it like a doll (90).

The grotesque Imperial palace’s chief attractions, the huge Rodin-like sculptures were made by Peter Ballbusch and paintings (some of them with religious themes, particularly annunciation) by Richard Kollorsz. Ballbusch and Kollorsz were collaborators of the painter David Siqueiros and reportedly helped the artist on his mural *América Tropical: Oprimida y Destrozada por los Imperialismos* (*Tropical America: Oppressed and Destroyed by Imperialism*) (Baxter, 1993: 184). *The Scarlet Empress*’ representation of the court of Moscow has influenced Eisenstein’s *Ivan the Terrible*; the grotesque palace anticipates Kane’s Gothic castle in Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*.

Expressionist art design of Hans Dreier is matched by von Sternberg’s use of light; in contemporary sources, he is also listed as the uncredited lighting technician of the film. As the supreme example of a classical auteur, Josef von Sternberg liked to assume credit for various aspects of filmmaking. *The Scarlet Empress* was no exception; in fact, he had more control of it compared to some of his other films. In his memoirs—as typical for him—von Sternberg claimed to be responsible for “everything” in *The Scarlet Empress* (von Sternberg, 1965: 265).

Music. In *Dishonored*, von Sternberg had explored the possibilities of diegetic sound, e.g. the soundtrack was dominated by variations of Ion Ivanovici’s “Waves of the Danube” waltz, mostly played by Marlene Dietrich’s character. There were also a military band playing the national anthem at the mask ball and a drummer accompanying the firing squad at the end. In *The Scarlet Empress*, classical compositions are splendidly employed to intensify the drama. The recurrent one is Tchaikovsky’s *Marche Slave*; the opening uses his Symphony No. 4; and the furious musical climax in the finale features his *1812 Overture*. Works of other composers—Wagner, Mendelssohn, and Rubinstein—can be also be heard throughout the film. There is also a short playful violin composition by von Sternberg himself (265). This is not one of the spectacular scenes, such as those with the cavalry or the feasting royal crowd; nonetheless, an interesting one that tells something about each player in the power struggle at the imperial palace. It is an amusing but key scene—the archimandrite is seen collecting donations from the top figures in the palace; von Sternberg’s accompanying tune highlights their temperament, weaknesses, and aspirations.

In his 1949 assessment, filmmaker Curtis Harrington likened the film itself to a musical composition: “in form, *The Scarlet Empress* was an attempt to devise a pictorial movement, having its counterpart only in a symphony. The various sequences of the film could be likened to a scherzo, a rondo, an andante, etc” (Harrington, 1949: 15).

Reception. Austrian director G.W. Pabst was a fan of *The Scarlet Empress* and didn’t miss European screenings, which left him jubilant: “I don’t believe what I am seeing, but there it is! I think I am losing my mind … it is so incredible!” (Weinberg, 1978: 34).

A contemporary reviewer of *The Scarlet Empress* had mixed feelings in 1934:

> “For Mr. von Sternberg, having sacrificed story, characterization and life itself to his own hungry and unreasonable dreams of cinema greatness, has at the same time created a barbaric pageant of eighteenth-century Russia, which is frequently exciting”(*The New York Times*).

Later, Pauline Kael reiterated a similar sentiment:

> “Von Sternberg had a peculiar notion that this showy pomposity proved that film was an art medium. The picture is egocentric and empty of drama, yet it has the fascination (and the tediousness) that bizarre, obsessional movies often have” (Kael, 2022).

Robin Wood noted that the box office failure of *The Scarlet Empress* (signaling von Sternberg’s doom) had to do with the fact that contemporary audiences didn’t know what to do with it: “Were we supposed to laugh or weep? Was the film’s ending exhilarating or horrifying?” (Wood, 2022). Almost a century later, viewers may still be perplexed and charmed by similar questions, posed by the one of a kind *The Scarlet Empress*

CHARACTERS

Catherine II. Prussian Princess Sophie Frederica Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg is picked as the royal bride for the Russian throne. She quickly excels in power intrigues and ultimately stages a palace coup that makes her the Empress.
Count Alexei. The emissary of the Russian court is a senior official and member of the inner circle of Empress Elizabeth (also, her lover). He is infatuated with Catherine, who teaches him that infidelity is her prerogative.
Peter III. The childish and unintelligent heir to the Russian throne, Grand Duke Peter, deeply concerns his aunt Empress Elizabeth; she wishes him to have a son, so that the future of the dynasty would be secured. This is the debut film in the long and distinguished career of actor Sam Jaffe.
Empress Elizabeth Petrovna. The promiscuous and domineering matriarch wants nothing more than an heir—other than Peter—for her empire.
Captain Orlov. A wealthy aristocrat and junior officer whom Catherine picks as her lover. Orlov commands the barracks and ultimately serves as Catherine's chief aide in her palace coup.
Countess Elizabeth "Lizzie". Peter's Tatar mistress is smart and dangerously observant; she challenges Catherine's ascent to power as her rival.
Ivan Shuvolov. Empress Elizabeth's paramour. The minor part is played by Heinrich von Twardowski. German actor's first role was in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. As an émigré, he often played Nazis in Hollywood—notably the SS General and Nazi bigwig Reinhard Heydrich in Fritz Lang's *Hangmen Also Die*! (1943).

SYNOPSIS

Daughter of provincial Prussian aristocrats is picked as the bride of Grand Duke Peter, the designated successor of Russian Empress Elizabeth Petrovna. The half-crazy Peter couldn't care less about his wife, while the Empress pressures Catherine to produce a boy. Naïve young woman is initially overwhelmed by the domineering matriarch and the intrigues of her court. She is receptive to the advances of Count Alexei, an aristocrat in the Russian Palace, but is disillusioned to find out that the womanizer is also the Empress' paramour. Catherine quickly understands how things work in the depraved palace and begins to build up her own power base; she charms the clergy and the army—literally romancing multiple officers at the same time. Meanwhile Peter III becomes the Emperor following the death of his aunt. After teaching Alexei a lesson for his infidelity, Catherine orchestrates a coup; her inamorata and chief aide, Captain Orlov, kills Peter. Catherine II is blessed and crowned by the archimandrite as the new ruler.

SCENES

Prussian Princess. Young Princess Sophia Frederica Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg leads a carefree life with her provincial Prussian aristocrat family—a strict and ambitious mother who sees to it that the little countess is disciplined and well-informed about the bizarre chapters in the history of oppression. The iron maiden is just one of the horrifying images in the brief sequence where the child Sophia/Catherine is told about the atrocities of notorious "hangmen" imperial rulers—these tales will have a formative influence on Sophia.



Sophia grows up to be a beautiful woman, so much so that the court of Moscow picks her as the bride for the nephew of the Russian empress. An envoy arrives with lavish gifts and arrogant manners; Count Alexei escorts the countess and her mother to the Russian palace. During the seven weeks long journey, Catherine and Alexei's mutual attraction irks her mother. A sizeable Cossack detachment escorts Catherine from Prussia to Moscow, the scene recalls von Sternberg's *The Last Command* (1928).



The Court of Moscow. Empress Elizabeth is delighted by Sophia's arrival—right away, she changes her name to Catherine and reminds her that she is eagerly expecting her to give birth to a boy. Then again, Catherine discovers in shock that her would-be husband Grand Duke Peter is somewhat of an imbecile. The childish heir is always preoccupied with his toy soldiers and real ones, a detachment of Hessian troops. Empress Elizabeth and her throne, featuring a huge eagle sculpture by Peter Ballbusch –



Empress' paramour Shulov in front of another Ballbusch figure. Émigré actor Heinrich von Twardowski mostly played Nazis in Hollywood, such as SS bigwig Heydrich in *Hangmen also Die!* (1943)



Grand Duchess. A spectacular wedding ceremony is followed by a lavish banquet. Empress Elizabeth keeps urging Catherine to bear a son, which seems problematic because of the obviously distant relationship between the young royal couple. The banquet at the palace shows a von Sternberg crowd, fascinating, busy, and inward looking.



Joys of the Palace. Catherine is already the second most powerful woman in the empire and finds much to enjoy at the palace. She and Count Alexei, the emissary who brought her to Russia, continue to flirt; he gifts her a locket, which is adorned with his portrait. Her affair doesn't bother Peter, who is himself very fond of his mistress, Countess Lizzy of Astrakhan. Peter looks gratified in full dress uniform drilling his Hessian troops indoors.



The Tatar countess is in charge of entertainment at the palace; the dangerously observant Lizzy briefly challenges Catherine's ascent to power.



Tight Control. Seeing that the male heir she awaits won't be coming anytime soon, Empress Elizabeth forcefully intervenes. She observes that her nephew spends too much time with the Tatar Countess Lizzy, so she gets her kicked her out of the palace. After getting rid of this important distraction on Peter, she focuses on Catherine and her affair with Count Alexei—who also happens to be one of the Empress' numerous lovers. Elizabeth makes sure that Catherine not only realizes that Alexei belongs to her, but also torments her by making sure that she witnesses their rendezvous—Richard Kollorsz is the painter of the artworks in the palace, which feature the theme of annunciation.



Awakening. Her realization about Alexei's infidelity is a wake-up call for Catherine. Out of anger, she tosses his gift locket from the window overlooking the garden. When the pendant gets entangled in a branch, she regrets her action and decides to retrieve it. In the foggy evening, the commander of the night watch apprehends her—he isn't convinced that she is the Grand Duchess. The tense exchange abruptly ends with her passionately making love to the young lieutenant—Bert Glennon's expressionist cinematography prefigures film noir aesthetics.



Power. To the surprise of Peter and delight of Elizabeth, Catherine is expectant—obviously as a consequence of the evening at the palace garden. No one cares about the real father; the birth of a boy ushers in a new phase for her at the palace. Her position as the mother of the future emperor solidifies her position in the dynasty; she now turns to building new alliances. Her power base steadily expands with the incorporation of the clergy and the army. She is particularly close to the archimandrite, an influential figure who can pull the strings in the capital; as well as Captain Orlov, the commander of the barracks, who also becomes one of her lovers. Meanwhile, Elizabeth's health quickly deteriorates, increasing the stakes in the struggle for power.



Reign of Peter III. Grand Duke Peter, whose contempt for Catherine grows by the day, clandestinely brings back his beloved Countess Lizzy. As he schemes to replace Catherine with her, the Empress dies and he ascends to the throne. Emperor Peter III's reign unleashes a wave of political terror as well as random violence. He finally declares his intention to do away with Catherine and has her imprisoned.



Catherine Triumphant. Catherine responds by staging a coup; her loyal and powerful allies in the church and army scramble to enthrone her. After having the garrison soldiers swear their oath of loyalty to Catherine, Captain Orlov personally murders Peter. Subsequently, the Archimandrite swiftly blesses and crowns her. Catherine then jubilantly leads a detachment of Cossack cavalry right up the marble stairs of the palace, all the way to the top floor—literally ascending to the throne.



Unconventional and fascinating ascent to power—in the company of dozens of Cossack cavalrymen, Catherine rides atop her horse all the way up the marble stairs to the throne floor – Catherine is enthroned in full Hussar uniform, exalted and omnipotent.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Catherine II – Rational (Ingenue, Debauchee, Veiled, Grimacing)
Count Alexei – Emotional (Swaggering and Arrogant, Emasculated and Deflated)
Peter III – Closed (Glassy Eyed, Uninhibited Manchild, Grinning, Subjugated Victim)

CATHERINE II (Rational)

Princess Sophia Frederica becomes Catherine; she is cut off from her family, her religious and national identities are replaced by new ones. Initially, the innocent young woman has trouble adapting to the new setting, but learns quickly and eventually thrives in the intrigue-laden and corrupt environment.

Illustrative moments

Ingénue. Little Sophia has a strong-willed and ambitious mother who doesn't want her to play with toys—"she is seven!" she admonishes her nanny. Her mother would like her to grow up quickly and make a successful marriage. In Russia, she will be subjugated by another powerful mother figure, Empress Elizabeth. When she first arrives in Moscow, Catherine is innocent, polite, and sweet-natured. She is expected to be a submissive and obedient wife; the question is, will she play along?

Debauchee. Catherine's adaptation entails her transformation from ingénue to a debauchee. This transformation parallels her struggle to survive and attain power in the palace. Is Catherine a seductress? The process of her sexual empowerment leads to political power in a network of relations, where promiscuity is more or less the norm.

Veiled. Long and masterful shot of Catherine during the religious ceremony shows her behind a veil. In this scene, the archimandrite is baptizing her as a Russian Orthodox. The sequence is captivating because of her ambivalence. Her husband Peter is also there, malevolently grinning as usual; Catherine

is obviously concerned and seems to be taking thoughtful glances in his direction. There is also Count Alexei; at this stage, the two are enamored with each other. In a conventional melodrama, this scene could have pointed out to love and her bonding with Alexei as a solution to her entrapment in the palace. Despite lack of dialogue, lengthy shots of her veiled face imply that she is on her own and is not looking for a savior. Alexei is standing in the hall somewhere, just as Peter is. She will soon recognize the Count as the womanizer that he is and teach him a humiliating lesson. Von Sternberg's use of light and shadows highlight Catherine's ambivalence and independence.

Grimacing. The denouement shows Catherine (now Catherine II, the Empress of Russia) jubilantly standing by the throne, after she and her loyal Cossacks gallop up the stairs of the palace. The state's capacity for oppression—previously hinted at—is now in her control and she is exalted at her own omnipotence. The smile is so much different from the bizarre grin of Peter; whereas the latter was pointless and malevolent; her grimace signifies her delight in attaining absolute power.

COUNT ALEXEI (Emotional)

Among Count Alexei's many titles are "Field-Marshal of the Russian Army, Grand Master of the hunt, Lord of the Chamber, and Ambassador Extraordinary." He is charming and rakish; as the principal love interest of Catherine, he is positioned as a leading man in the story—except that there is not really a place for a leading man here.

Illustrative moments

Swaggering and Arrogant. Alexei comes to the Prussian town as the emissary of the mighty Empress and doesn't care about the fancy titles of the aristocratic family. He curtly unloads gifts from the Empress, fur for the young Sophia and hot water bottles for her mother to keep her warm for the journey. In spite of their high standing in Prussia, the visit is a ticket for upward mobility for the von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg family. Alexei is aware that the Prussians are more than eager to become kin with the Petrovna dynasty and not least, to see their daughter become a grand duchess.

Emasculated and Deflated. The pompous Count is willing and excited to continue flirting with the wife of the future emperor. The problem is, he is not exclusively interested in Catherine; Empress Elizabeth demonstrates to her that Alexei is one her own—many—paramours. In time, Catherine understands the nature of the social relations in the palace; she takes her revenge from Alexei by inviting him to her room, only to instruct him to put off all the candles and leave from a back door, making sure to let in Captain Orlov, who is waiting outside. This is exactly how Empress Elizabeth had deflated Catherine by making her witness Alexei's visit to her room. Similarly, Catherine shows Alexei his place; they remain political allies, but he can do nothing but watch Orlov's intimacy with Catherine.

PETER III (Closed)

Peter is the heir to the Russian throne, unless a more suitable candidate emerges—this is what his aunt strives to achieve by bringing Catherine from Germany as a bride. The "halfwit" that no one really takes seriously, plays with tin soldiers and proudly drills his private Hessian guard detachment—hinting to the fact that he is extremely frustrated with his powerful aunt's domination. Peter may actually have ambitions of his own and Countess Lizzy has already placed her bet on him. His brief shot at imperial power is a series of proclamations that announce his irrational measures and unleash a wave of political terror; we get the feeling that the indiscriminate violence and uninhibited abandon are outcomes of a lifetime of personal subjugation.

Illustrative moments

Glassy-Eyed. Peter's eyes are constantly shiny, as if he has just cried or laughed really hard, but his blank stare reveals no emotions. People refer to him as a halfwit and imbecile; Empress Elizabeth obviously thinks similarly of her nephew. Years of being looked down has turned Peter into an introvert, who is content with his own peculiarities. Peter is either busy with his toy soldiers or the real ones—his

Hessian guard—a modern infantry unit (as opposed to the traditional Cossack cavalry). He likes to march them around when the weather permits and inside the palace when it is rainy—the indoor parade scene is introduced by a humorous intertitle to underscore his eccentricity.

Uninhibited Manchild. With his childish habits and love of toys, the adult future emperor Peter seems to belong to Peter Pan's Neverland. It is hardly innocence though; just as cute little Sophia's (future Catherine) childhood imagination blended with images of horrible atrocities, Peter evidently grew up witnessing political terror and has consequently developed a penchant for amusing himself by watching public executions. As is the case with Catherine, the identity of the individual—cartoonish as his oddities may be—is a manifestation of the power relations.

Grinning. Cheshire Cat Grin—popularized by Lewis Carrol's classic *Alice in Wonderland* denotes the appearance of a smile without the general air of happiness one would expect to see accompany it. In *The Scarlet Empress*, Peter may act childishly, but combined with his blank eyes, his malevolent grin is considerably scary.

Parallels. The unsettling grin anticipates notable cinema villains such as John Lithgow in *Raising Cain* (Brian de Palma association goes deeper, considering Peter's voyeurism and his love of poking holes in walls with a huge hand drill). Other contemporary examples are Jack Nicholson in *The Shining* and Willem Dafoe in *Wild at Heart* (besides Dafoe's several other films). In horror, Pennywise in *IT* sports such an evil clown smile. Indeed, Peter's bizarre grin predates some of the most notorious figures of the horror genre—specifically the slasher subgenre's serial killers.

Subjugated Victim. Peter's cruelty reaches its peak when he gets to hold the reins of the empire; his proclamations unleash a wave of terror. It is hinted that the irrational violence is a consequence of his subjugation by an authoritative aunt. In spite of Peter's comedic madness, the later banquet scene has a touching moment when he, as the emperor, demands a toast for his "friend" Countess Lizzy. Catherine isn't pleased and spoils the occasion before walking out, but it is interesting that no one really cares about Peter's choices; the Grand Countess replaces the Empress and Peter continues to be subjugated.

THEMES

SOCIETY – Sexual Empowerment, Matriarchy
POLITICS – Political Power and Intrigue, State and Corruption
JUSTICE – Violence
FLAW – Voyeurism

SOCIETY

Sexual Empowerment. *The Scarlet Empress* was the sixth and penultimate film of the von Sternberg-Dietrich collaboration. Since *The Blue Angel*, audiences had grown accustomed to a certain image of the star and—judging by the box office success of consecutive releases—expected to watch her display more of this persona. She had played cabaret performers in *The Blue Angel, Morocco*, and Blonde Venus, and a streetwalker-turned-spy in *Dishonored*. The persona basically signified a strong willed, independent, and irresistible woman. In *The Scarlet Empress*, she is brought to the Imperial Russian palace because of her attractiveness. Once she gets to learn how things work there, she quickly expands her power base; forging alliances by using her sexuality—a title card underscores that she acquires the loyalty of the army thanks to her affairs with members of the garrison. So is Catherine II simply a seductress? In the 1930s, that may have been one way to characterize her position in the network of power relations, but the character appears more complex today, in light of our contemporary sensibilities and decades of feminist thought. As she is carving her future in the hierarchy, Catherine interacts with men of power as an equal—ultimately she becomes superior.

Matriarchy. The two families in *The Scarlet Empress*, the Prussian aristocrats and the Russian dynasty are controlled by strong-willed women. Sophia's father—the decision maker of the von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg family—advises her, before she embarks on her journey to the Russian capital:

> "Always to be honest and truthful; to be a faithful wife and a loyal subject of your new country. Be kind to those who are in your service... and obedient to your husband and superiors, and strive at all times to be worthy of your glorious destiny."

Needless to say, she doesn't exactly heed his advice. The von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburgs are actually dominated by Sophia's strong-willed and ambitious mother, who is more interested in royal titles and cares little about ethics. When Sophia becomes Catherine, she is faced with a much more powerful domineering matriarch, who is an egocentric control freak.

POLITICS

Political Power and Intrigue. A key scene is emblematic of the power games in the palace; it shows the archimandrite collecting donations from the most powerful figures. The humble looking wise man represents clergy, an important clique; each response reveals the character (and in hindsight, seals the fate of the donor). Calculated and excessive generosity (Catherine, Captain Orlov, and Count Alexei) is intended to earn the sympathy of the clergy; judging by the archimandrite's demeanor, it is a successful approach. These three would eventually end up as the winners in the power struggle. One of the losers, the Chancellor is thrifty; he drops a coin, which annoys the old man. The Chancellor is not more corrupt than the others, but just short-sighted. Another one, Countess Lizzy recklessly tosses a piece of leftover food to the donations tray. She is an important player in the power struggle, but Catherine will emerge as the winner; Lizzy is solely counting on her proximity to Peter. Finally, Peter slaps the man of religion, who is bold enough to hit back with the line, "that was for me, now what have you got for the poor?" This scene, for which von Sternberg personally composed a short violin composition, displays the power dynamics and shifting alliances in the palace. Catherine observes the system and adapts very well to the conditions. In the final stage of her fascinating ascent to power—in the company of dozens of Cossack cavalrymen—she rides atop her horse all the way up the marble stairs to the throne floor. Catherine is enthroned in full Hussar uniform, exalted and omnipotent.

State and Corruption. At a time when authoritarianism was in full swing, *The Scarlet Empress* presented a mockery of centralized state authority. The empire's riches and ruthless military apparatus do not conceal the corruptness and ignorance of the self-important officials. The idle and super rich elites of Imperial Russia lead an insouciant existence at the expense of the masses, which rarely enter the frame, then only as victims of oppression and intimidation. During an executive meeting, Elizabeth, who is one of the many illiterates in the palace, says she has no time for trifles as she has a war to wage—apparently with Finland (the story takes place in 1774; although no direct reference is made to it, Russian Empire had just victoriously concluded a war with the Ottoman Empire).

JUSTICE

Violence. The Russian palace has no shortage of sexual innuendo and extramarital affairs; these would be troublesome for the Production Code, but particularly surprising is the presence of a brief sequence which shows various forms of cruelty (e.g. beheadings, torture by an iron maiden and other methods). Little Sophia (before she becomes Catherine) is intrigued when she overhears that her physician happens to double as the public hangman. Then, she asks, "can I become a hangman someday?" Her tutor responds by reading her stories about tzars and tsarinas who were also hangmen—i.e. atrocious oppressors. It is possible to look at her quest as an affirmation of this initial question; she does succeed in becoming a hangman-tsarina.

FLAW

Voyeurism. Not only is voyeurism a popular subject of cinema, filmmaking and spectatorship are intrinsically voyeuristic. Many films have explored the affinity of the camera and the gaze, most famously, *Rear Window* (1954), *Peeping Tom* (1960), and *Psycho* (1960). In retrospect, it is evident how *The Scarlet Empress* was well ahead of its time in multiple aspects. One of these is the way it tackled the theme of voyeurism.

Marlene Dietrich is often obscured behind veils and tulle, the director playing with the spectator's desire to gaze at the star. A more interesting manifestation of voyeurism in *The Scarlet Empress* is the childish Peter's unsettling gaze. In one scene, the "halfwit" Peter uses a very large hand drill to poke a hole to the

most important room in the palace, that of his aunt. His motivation is not definitively explained. Empress Elizabeth is not at all surprised; apparently this is not the first such occurrence. She seems to believe that her nephew is trying to watch Catherine, who happens to be in the room at that moment. This is dubious, as Peter says she hates his wife and they mutually have no interest in each other. Another way to approach the appalling incident is to connect it with the promiscuity of the Empress. Yet, she is clearly not an exception in the palace, which is a notorious hotbed of affairs. Then again, the scene is even more incredible by the presence of Peter's sly mistress Lizzy by his side. It would be an understatement to describe her role as accompanying him; the scheming Tatar countess is eagerly steering him to gaze into the vault of power. Notwithstanding his peculiarities, Peter is well aware that he is ridiculed by his aunt and is being denied access to power by the all-powerful matriarch. She hurriedly arranges the marriage to obtain an heir she can control—Peter stands no chance of ruling the empire as long as she is alive. His gaze, penetrating the wall, is vacant and unsettling; it is his demand for power.

Discussion questions

Consider comparing *The Scarlet Empress* with the same year's *The Rise of Catherine the Great* (Paul Czinner and Alexander Korda); possibly taking into consideration the other Korda produced historical drama from the previous year, *The Private Life of Henry VIII*.

How does *The Scarlet Empress* represent religion, particularly the concept of annunciation?

What are some of the elements in *The Scarlet Empress* that might have influenced Sergei Eisenstein in *Ivan the Terrible* and Orson Welles in *Citizen Kane*?

How would you compare *The Scarlet Empress* with contemporary takes on Catherine II and other powerful monarchs? Possible examples are *Elizabeth: the Golden Age* (2007) and the Russian *Ekaterina* (2014).

In what ways is *The Scarlet Empress* different from 1930s films that show an interest in history, such as *Rasputin and the Empress* (1932), *Cavalcade* (1933), *Conquest* (1937)?

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