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The Devil is a Woman 1935

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)



Motion Picture Herald, Quigley Publishing, 1935. Courtesy http://mediahistoryproject.org/ Media History Digital Library.

OVERVIEW

The Devil is a Woman (1935) marks the end of Josef von Sternberg's seven-film cycle with Marlene Dietrich; it would be his last film with high production values.

Film Maudit. In his autobiography *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, von Sternberg bitterly noted Spain's attempt to ban *Viridiana* (1961) made by Luis Buñuel, "one of its most able directors" (high praise coming from an artist who spared almost no one from his sarcastic lashing in his memoirs) (267); von Sternberg could relate, because *The Devil is a Woman*'s screening was hindered for more than two decades by the Spanish government, which nearly managed to get the master film stock destroyed.

The Woman and the Puppet. Along with Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977), *The Devil is a Woman* is one of the best known versions of *The Woman and the Puppet* (*Le Femme et le pentin*), Pierre Louÿs 1908 novel, adapted by novelist John Dos Passos (*U.S.A.* trilogy, *Manhattan Transfer*, 1929). *The Woman and the Puppet* would inspire the opera *Conchita* (1911) by Riccardo Zandonari; Marlene Dietrich's Concha has an affinity to the titular character of the Prosper Mérimée novella and George Bizet Opera *Carmen*. Louÿs' novel was adapted in 1920 and 1929 with the same title; later in 1958, as *Le Femme et le Pentin* by Julien Duvivier, starring Bridget Bardot (English titles *The Female/A Woman Like Satan*). There is also an Egyptian production, *Libat el-Sitt* (1946).

Caprice Espagnol. Von Sternberg's decision to name his version of *The Woman and the Puppet* as *Caprice Espagnol* was overruled— Nikolai Rimsky Korsakov's orchestral suite Caprice Espagnol OP 34,

inspired by Spanish folk songs, accompanies the scenes beautifully in *The Devil is a Woman*, a love triangle between an uncompromising seductress, her desperate upper-class lover, and a young, dashing revolutionary in early twentieth century Spain, with the bulk of the story taking place during the pre-Lent carnival.

Auteur and Muse. Elements of *The Devil is a Woman* invite making parallels to the real-life relationship of Dietrich and von Sternberg—not least intriguing is the physical resemblance of the leading man, played by Lionel Atwill, to the director. Since *The Blue Angel*, stories in the popular press about Dietrich and von Sternberg's collaboration would often raise comparisons with Professor Henry Higgins and Eliza Doolitle (from George Bernard Shaw's 1913 play *Pygmalion*), as well as Svengali and Trilby (from George Du Maurier's 1893 novel *Trilby*). Von Sternberg considered *The Devil is a Woman* to be a "final tribute" to Dietrich (von Sternberg, 267)—a "parting gift," her daughter Maria Riva echoed, citing his press statement: "everything I have to say about Miss Dietrich, I have said with the camera" (Riva, 342). One of *The Devil is a Woman*'s multiple layers is undoubtedly shaped by the relationship between its principal creators; analyses from that perspective are rewarding and yet could hardly be definitive. Charles Silver considers its autobiographical quality "one of the most beautifully realized enigmas in the history of cinema (Silver).

Photographing the Carnival. Von Sternberg maintained that classical paintings were a more important inspiration for him in his formative years, compared to the films of other directors. The rich details of the hectic carnival scenes recall Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Fight Between Carnival and Lent* (1559). The masquerade is perceived as a threat by the political authority and the festivities are strenuously endured by the provincial governor—their subversive potential evoking philosopher Mikail Bakthin's notion of the carnivalesque. Von Sternberg, one of the few directors who was a member of the American Society of Cinematographers, personally photographed *The Devil is a Woman* (his assistant was Lucien Ballard [*The Wild Bunch*, 1969]).

Spectacular Extravaganza. *The Devil is a Woman* was not successful at the box office and it was disliked by the critics. An exception was the contemporary *The New York Times* review, which maintained that it was "one of the most sophisticated films ever produced in America" (Sennwald). Susan Sontag considered the film an illustration of "camp," which she defined as a sensibility and "a certain mode of aestheticism" that privileged "artifice and exaggeration" (4) In "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), she famously stated that "the hallmark of camp is the spirit of extravagance … Camp is the outrageous aestheticism of Sternberg's six American movies with Dietrich, all six, but especially the last, *The Devil Is a Woman.*"

CHARACTERS

Concha Perez. Concha works at a tobacco factory and lives with her mother. Don Pasqual warns Antonia about her deceptive ways; his relationship with her turns out to be much more complicated. Is Concha a femme fatale?
Don Pasqual. Captain Don Pasqual "Pasqualito" Costelar was a senior Spanish official until he resigned following a scandal involving Concha Perez. He likes to think of himself as a protector and lover of Concha, but she has other thoughts. Is Pasqual a blind bull?
Antonio Galvan. Antonio is a Republican and a revolutionary, who is wanted by the police. With everyone wearing masks, Seville's masquerade offers him some respite. Here, he encounters Concha, who charms him, as well as Don Pasqual, who cautions him about her.
Governor Paquito. Seville's top administrator commands the city's police—the Guardia Civil—during the tumultuous carnival. He is one of the men hopelessly seduced by Concha, who addresses him affectionately as "Paquitito."
Senora Perez. Concha's mother is scheming and manipulative.
Morenito. Concha's lover is a bull fighter. This character is never heard speaking.

SYNOPSIS

Lavish festivities are taking place in turn-of-the-century Seville; among the masked carnival crowd is the revolutionary Antonio, who is running away from the police. He follows an alluring woman and is handed

a message for a rendezvous at night. While idling away the hours, he meets an old comrade-in-arms, Don Pasqual, who warns him about the mysterious woman and recounts his own history with her. Several flashbacks show Pasqual being lured by the manipulative Concha, sinking deeper and deeper into submission and humiliation. Antonio is sympathetic to the Don's ordeal, but meets with her nonetheless. Not before long, their tryst is interrupted by none other than Pasqual, whose obsession with Concha has made him disregard his own advice. In a fit of jealousy, he challenges Antonio to a duel. Next morning, Pasqual—despite being a crack shot—refuses to shoot and gets wounded. He is taken to the hospital while Antonio is jailed. Meanwhile, the carnival is over and the Civil Guard forcefully unmasks the riotous crowd; Antonio is at risk, as his political identity would soon be found out. Luckily, the governor happens to be another hopeless admirer of Concha and not only accepts her pleas, but also gives them two passports to safely leave Spain. At the train station, Concha has a change of heart; while the train takes Antonio to Paris, she returns to Pasqual.

SCENES



Carnival. In turn-of-the-century Spain, Seville is getting ready to celebrate the pre-Lent carnival. Governor Paquito ambiguously orders the menacing-looking Civil Guard troops to go easy on the townsfolk (as well as the "crooks") during the festivities and refrain from making too many arrests—yet they are given a free hand to shoot down troublemakers.

In 1934, the Hays Office can enforce the Code; despite its innuendo, *The Devil is a Woman* is approved. – Internationally, Spain is not pleased with the representation of its Guardia Civil. The pressures from that country come close to destroying the film entirely; its screening is hindered for nearly three decades.

Encounters. The governor is fearful of the masquerade and its subversive potential. Antonio Galvan is clandestinely enjoying the festivities; the young Republican has blended in with the ecstatic and masked crowd.



Seville's city-wide masquerade is a brief respite for him—as one of the revolutionary leaders, he is wanted by the police. During the procession, an alluring woman riding the street float bedazzles Antonio. Amidst an abundance of confetti and streamers, he trails her to the gate of a mansion. A message signed by Concha Perez tells him to meet her during her customary evening carriage ride. To pass the time, Antonio goes to a café where he meets a friend from his time in the military. Don Pasqual is an older man who has recently resigned from his senior administrative position. Upon learning about Antonio's rendezvous, he warns him about Concha and urges him not to "go to near her." He then proceeds to recount his history with the notorious Concha, "the toast of Spain."

First Flashback. Pasqual meets Concha aboard a train that was stranded during an avalanche. She has a quarrel with a Gitano woman and the two have a catfight. Pasqual steps forward to get Concha out of trouble and she seems to be pleased with the attention of the protective upper-class officer. When the train finally reaches its destination, she gives him a kiss on the cheek and bids farewell; rejecting his subtle request for sexual favors.



Second Flashback. Pasqual is inspecting labor conditions at a tobacco factory where Concha happens to work. She is delighted to receive a gold coin from him; later, she takes him home, where her scheming mother makes Pasqual relieve them from their debts. Concha shows her mother the catch of the day, ostensibly a gold fish, while Pasqual pretends not to notice the pun about being ensnared and will continue to be subjugated. He is too enamored by Concha to care about getting fleeced and seems unbothered by the sight of a young man, who is introduced as a "cousin."

Pasqual is a wealthy aristocrat who has an important position in administration; Concha is a worker at the tobacco factory.



Third Flashback. Pasqual's generosity doesn't make Concha less remote. He is even more confused when she sends him a letter—insincere and manipulative—about her frustration with him for giving money to her mother.

Fourth Flashback. Months later, Concha resurfaces; together with her mother, she pays Pasqual a visit. He is gently steered to make more payments to the mother, while Concha maintains her distance.



Pasqual is a wealthy aristocrat who has an important position in administration; Concha is a factory worker. Women doing laundry in Concha's neighborhood (B-roll footage) – Workers of the tobacco factory.

Fifth Flashback. Pasqual happens to be in Cadiz, inspecting coastal fortifications and runs into Concha singing at a tavern. He desperately begs for her attention while she continues to be ambiguous. Pasqual recalls contemplating murdering or leaving her—he chooses neither; instead he sinks into degradation. One night, further humiliated by Concha's affair with Morenito the bull fighter, he beats her up (off-camera), which evidently changes nothing in the power dynamics of their relationship.

A cluttered and rich von Sternberg frame with Captain Don Pasqual, in full dress uniform sporting his military medals, sandwiched by the nautical décor of the tavern as he sits in front of a fish net, with a model of a sailing ship in the foreground.



Sixth Flashback. Pasqual pays the tavern's proprietress to release Concha from her contractual obligations. Concha is exhilarated and almost gives him a kiss—then abruptly leaves for an outing in the country with her lover Morenito. Pasqual wraps up the story by mentioning how he had to resign from his commission when his affair with Concha became the subject of a public scandal. He urges Antonio, once again, not to "go near that woman."

Rendezvous. Despite his friend's warnings, Antonio makes it to his rendezvous with Concha. They go to a nightclub's private room, where he scolds her for playing games with his friend. Then, a messenger brings a letter to Concha, from none other than Pasqual—yet another desperate plea for her affection. She divulges the content of the letter to Antonio; they subsequently kiss—which gets interrupted as the writer of the message shows up. In a fit of jealousy, Pasqual challenges Antonio to a duel and menacingly demonstrates his skills as an expert marksman. Pasqual shows off his marksmanship skills standing in front of a cartoonish depiction of bull fighters humiliated by a bull.



Duel. Next morning, the two parties secretly meet at a secluded spot in the forest. Concha is unnerved, knowing that Antonio does not stand a chance against Pasqual, whom she tries to persuade to give up (as can be expected at this stage, by adding insult to his injury and talking about Antonio as the only man that she loves.) Guns are drawn, but surprisingly, Pasqual intentionally shoots into the air and gets badly wounded by the bullet from Antonio's gun. Tipped by an informer, the governor





rushes to the scene and arrests Antonio, while Pasqual is taken to the hospital. At this point, the carnival is over and the Civil Guard is fiercely unmasking the population.
Once the carnival is over, the riotous crowd is forcefully unmasked to end the threat to the social order. The governor and his aides, including the chiefs of the ominous-looking Civil Guard, recall the army's top brass in von Sternberg's *Dishonored*.

Plans. Concha goes to the hospital, but Pasqual would like to be left alone. At the hospital, looking at the wounded Pasqual, Concha contemplates—but what exactly? Ultimately, she chooses to stay with him. Comparisons between Pasqual and Concha's relationship and that of von Sternberg and Dietrich are possible.



She then stops by the jailhouse for Antonio. Authorities have not yet found out that he is a leading revolutionary, yet the discovery is imminent. They decide to go to Paris together, if Concha can manage to get him released. A quick visit to the governor—another one of her fans—not only secures Antonio's freedom, but also provides them two passports to leave Spain.



Change of Heart. Concha and Antonio arrive at the border station and get their papers checked. He embarks on the train, but she has a change of heart and remains on the platform to watch him leave with an astounded expression on his face. Apparently, she has decided to resume her relationship with Pasqual.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

CONCHA PEREZ

A contemporary essay in *Photoplay* by Otto Tolischus hails Marlene Dietrich as the "sublimation of European femininity" (Tolischus, 129). Concha is Dietrich's first non-Austro-German role in Hollywood. Her character in *The Devil is a Woman* is feminine and sensual and yet not really a seductress in the film noir sense. Amazingly, Concha is not punished for her sins at the end, which leads Hermann G. Weinberg to conclude that the character is a "devastating critique of the whole idea of femme fatale" (Weinberg, 88).

Illustrative moments

Scheming Harlot. On the surface, Concha appears as a callous gold digger, delegating her mother to the task of extracting money from Pasqual. In the second flashback, following their chance encounter at the tobacco factory, they go to her home; there, she greets her mother by saying "look mamma, I've got a fish." As the catch of the day, she is ostensibly referring to the gold fish she has in a little jar dangling from her hand. Don Pasqual pretends not to notice the pun about being ensnared and will continue to appear content to be subjugated.

Promiscuous. *In Devil is a Woman*, Marlene Dietrich sings only once, in the penultimate flashback; apparently she is no longer employed at the factory and works as a chanteuse at a lowly establishment. Pasqual happens to be present when she sings the hilarious "Three Sweethearts Have I" song:

> But believe me, please believe me.
> When I tell you that I haven't got a sweetheart.
> Chorus: Do you mean to say that you have none?
> Did you hear me say that I had none?
> No, I only said I haven't one.

Pasqual has to endure the song and when she comes by, he desperately begs for her affection. A little later, she will allow him to be near her, only to leave for a country outing with her lover Morenito.

Capricious. Caprice Espagnol was the title von Sternberg picked for the film. Concha is at times coy, then she is petulant; she alternates between being remote to being inviting, consequently frustrating and confusing Pasqual.

Uncompromised. Pasqual is one of the men who try to use Concha, but she is firm about setting the parameters of her relationships. Nothing Pasqual does or says changes her uncompromised stance.

Poised and Contemplative. The key scene in *The Devil is a Woman* is Concha's visit to the hospital after the duel. Pasqual is not only badly wounded, he is also mentally exhausted and has no strength left to deal with her. He wants to be left alone and she complies; just before she leaves the room, she takes a moment to look at Pasqual lying defeated in his bed. The moment of contemplation is interesting; we may not know what exactly she is thinking, but this scene prepares the ground for the denouement, when she makes the unexpected move to leave Antonio and return to Pasqual.

DON PASQUAL

Pasqual is a pillar of society; he is a wealthy senior administrator, evidently holding a position as an official whose assignments involve inspecting factories and military structures. He uses his social status to earn the affection of Concha, offering her money and "the protection" of his name by marriage. Then again, once he steps out of the space inhabited by his class, he struggles to remain composed in the unfamiliar territory. When he visits Concha at the backstage of the shabby nightclub, the gazes of shady regulars makes him uncomfortable. He is embarrassed and ruminates that he should have come to the lowly establishment in civilian clothing (i.e. disguised as an ordinary and unprivileged person)—"but I like your uniform," Concha immediately rebukes him. Class is central to Pasqual's identity and his relation to Concha.

Illustrative moments

Protective. In the first flashback scene at the derailed train, Pasqual emerges out of nowhere to offer Concha his support in a somewhat difficult situation. He looks imposing and self-confident in his full dress uniform that displays his military medals and signifies his social status. She is gratified with the attention and finds it useful; the mere opportunity to act as a powerful protector makes Pasqual smug and puffed up.

Humiliated and Submissive. In a matter of a few flashbacks, Pasqual moves from being jealously protective to pathetically jealous. He interrupts Concha and Antonio's tryst at the ballroom and yells that he is ready to fight not to lose her—then she shows him his place, fiercely responding with the question, "how can you lose what you never possessed?" During the confrontation, Pasqual is standing in front of a large painting depicting a seemingly epic bull fighting scene. He then demonstrates his marksmanship skills to impress Concha and intimidate Antonio prior to the duel. Despite his bravado, it only takes a moment before he gets humiliated once again by Concha's admonishing question. Now, the painting is seen more clearly and from a better angle; the scene depicted in fact has a cartoon quality that mirrors his situation.

ANTONIO GALVAN

Antonio would like to win the heart of Concha, but he ends up becoming one of her superficial love interests, such as Morenito the bull fighter. On the other hand, Antonio Galvan is a sympathetic character and a Republican; which would have most likely factored in to the aversion of the Spanish government to *The Devil is a Woman*.

Illustrative moment

Dashing and Daring. As opposed to Pasqual, Antonio is young and virile; he is able to catch the attention of Concha from a distance during the tumultuous carnival. With his mask, trying to blend in with the crowd and evade the Civil Guard, the dashing character recalls the *Mark of Zorro* (1920) which featured the first film appearance of the masked hero. When they meet, Concha would like to see him

without a mask (anticipating the governor's order to unmask the carnival crowd to exert control and dominate).

THEMES

Society – Gender, Class
Politics – Carnival, Masquarade, and Politics; Oppression
Relationship – Love, Innuendo
Psychology – Degradation

SOCIETY

Gender. Florence Jacobowitz views *The Devil is a Woman* as a "severe critique of the gender relations in a capitalist society." (34) Men try to exploit Concha and she finds ways to dominate them. Pasqual finds out that Concha cannot be bought; even when he pays money, she reframes it as a meaningless transaction between him and her mother. It means nothing to her and she actually admonishes him for it. Ultimately, she asserts her control over Pasqual (his self-defeat in the duel), as well as the governor, Paquito, who humbly serves her by issuing the passports she wants. Vis-à-vis Concha, both Pasqual and Paquito are "bearers of the law, who encounter difficulties in enforcing their oppressive codes."

Class. Gender and class inequality are intertwined in *The Devil is a Woman*. The tobacco factory where the all-female (and underpaid—the gold coin that Pasqual nonchalantly tosses is worth a year's wages, Concha remarks) work force is inspected by lewd administrators, among them Pasqual, who is there to check out the attractive women. Concha ignites a crisis of gender norms by resisting subjugation to the powerful man. Similarly, she also poses a threat to the social hierarchy, as the "empowered class is threatened by those who violate the rules of commodity exchange" (34).

POLITICS

Carnival, Masquerade, and Politics. The story of *The Devil is a Woman* takes place during Spain's Restoration Period (1874-1931); the film was released during the period known as the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939). The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) between the Republicans and the Nationalists was just around the corner; it would pave the way for the authoritarian regime of General Franco. The political implications of the *The Devil is a Woman* led the film to be banned in Spain (prior to and during the Franco regime). It bothered Spanish diplomats so much so that they pressured Paramount to withdraw the film from circulation and destroy the film stock (Baxter, 1971: 129). They successfully halted the international distribution of the film; a master copy was indeed publicly destroyed, but another one survived to resurface in 1959.

Spain protested the representation of its officials in the film; the scene deemed specifically unacceptable was one that showed the Civil Guard troops getting drunk. It is likely that the entire masquerade context, with its rowdy and unpredictable crowds, formed the backbone of the censorship demands. In the film, the top administrator of Seville, Governor Paquito is unnerved by the carnival crowd, ambiguously ordering his troops to refrain from interfering with the "people's enjoyment," but also instructing them to summarily execute trouble makers rather than arresting them. The young Antonio is a Republican and a dashing revolutionary. He uses the carnival as a cover, blending in with the masked crowd. Ultimately, he manages to evade the Civil Guard and escape to Paris. When the carnival is over, the governor orders his troops to unmask the population as a way to reassert political control.

Russian philosopher Mikail Bakhtin's concept of "carnivalesque" is helpful to understand the function of crowds in von Sternberg's films. Focusing on François Rabelais' *Gargantau and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin points to the disruptive and potentially emancipatory practices embedded in a carnival setting. *Devil is a Woman* is remarkable for hinting how the carnival can become subversive.

Parallels. In von Sternberg's *Underworld*, the gangsters' ball, with its self-contained crowd (criminals), exists outside the realm of law. There is even an instance of "mock crowning"—another Bakhtinian concept—in the form of the gangsters' own beauty pageant. In *Dishonored*, the approximately seven-minute long masked ball scene (which has very little dialogue) is not central to the plot, yet the masquerade marks the moment that the strong female character asserts herself.

Oppression. Pierre Louÿs 1908 novel *The Woman and the Puppet* was adapted by novelist John Dos Passos (*U.S.A.* trilogy, *Manhattan Transfer*, 1929). Passos went to Spain during the Civil War and was a supporter of the Republicans. *The Devil is a Woman*'s portrayal of the Civil Guard in brief scenes subtly hint at his aversion to methods of police states. In Spain, Passos was disenchanted after witnessing comparable measures carried out by the Republican side and stated that "the trouble with an all powerful secret police in the hands of fanatics, or of anybody, is that once it gets started there's no stopping it until it has corrupted the whole body politic" (Simkin).

RELATIONSHIP

Love. Concha keeps urging Pasqual to prove that he loves her. As he desperately tries to win her heart, Concha's demand sounds irrational and insincere, as if it is part of her sadistic scheme to play with Pasqual. However, the question is actually not only valid, but also profound: she is asking how deep his love is and how different it is from infatuation. Subsequently, she observes that it is not love, but vanity; that she amuses and excites him, but he does not really love her. Concha and Pasqual's relationship is at odds with conventional representations of lovers in classical Hollywood. In a rare positive contemporary review, *The New York Times* critic perceptively observed that "it is not hard to understand why Hollywood expressed such violent distaste for Josef von Sternberg's new film. For the talented director-photographer, in *The Devil Is a Woman*, makes a cruel and mocking assault upon the romantic sex motif which Hollywood has been gravely celebrating all these years" (Sennwald).

Innuendo. While its sexual references are not as explicit as *The Scarlet Empress* (which was one of the last films to more or less evade the Code that was fully enforced in 1934), *The Devil is a Woman* also includes dialogue that the Hays Code, in theory, would not embrace. Pasqual persistently makes sexual advances on Concha; the proprietor of the shabby nightclub mentions that Concha packs them [men] in like sardines; Concha says that her "mother can climb anything." Innuendo contributes to hilarious situations, such as when the ballroom waiter leaves Concha and Antonio alone in the private room and is baffled when he is told to bring playing cards.

PSYCHOLOGY

Degradation. In Louÿs' novel *The Woman and the Puppet*, Don Diaz (counterpart of Don Pasqual) retrospectively reviews his alternatives to deal with Conchita (corresponding the film's Concha): "to leave her forever, to force her to stay with me, to take her life—I took a fourth path: I submitted to her way of treating me" (44). In *The Devil is a Woman*, Pasqual mentions two alternatives, leaving or killing Concha; forcing her to stay is not an option. He too pursues another path: continuing the affair and accepting her for what she is; enduring and—evidently—enjoying humiliation. Gaylyn Studlar points to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's (from whose name the term masochism was later coined) novella *Venus in Furs* (1870) for a helpful framework to understand the power dynamics in *The Devil is a Woman* (Studlar, 117).

Discussion questions

How would you compare *The Devil is a Woman* with Luis Buñuel's adaptation of the same novel, *That Obscure Object of Desire*?

How do you interpret Concha's motivation for returning to Pasqual?

Von Sternberg's final film with Marlene Dietrich, *The Devil is a Woman*'s "devil" has an affinity to the character Lola Lola in their first collaboration, *The Blue Angel*. According to Siegfried Kracauer, Lola Lola kills Professor Rath (Kracauer, 117). On the other hand, Josef von Sternberg thinks that Rath destroys

himself (Bogdanovich, 241). What are some of the similarities and differences between the power relations between Rath/Lola Lola and Pasqual/Concha?

Is Concha a noir woman? Is she a proto-femme fatale?

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