HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

The Docks of New York 1928

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

OVERVIEW

Dramatic! Living! Powerful!
Photoplay, 1928

Just as the era of the silent films was approaching its dusk, Joseph von Sternberg released what some critics believe to be his masterpiece and the apex of silent cinema—on a par with Murnau's *Sunrise* and Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Weinberg, 1978: 113). In a twist of fate, *The Docks of New York*'s release (September 16) partially overlapped with the screening of the part-talkie *The Singing Fool* (the follow up to the sensational *The Jazz Singer*, the first sound film that used separate phonograph records for synchronized music and dialogue). Its contemporary reception encumbered by a technological limitation, this 76 minutes long gem was truly appreciated only later, for its dreamy and vibrant atmosphere, sensual photography and performances; elements that make it look powerfully real, even though it is hardly a realistic film.

Collaborators and Connections. *The Docks of New York* was based on John Monk Saunders short story "The Dockwalloper" and adopted by Jules Furthman (*Only Angels Have Wings, Rio Bravo, The Big Sleep,* and *Nightmare Alley*; *Morocco* and several other films with von Sternberg). Von Sternberg-Furthman collaboration was an extensive and productive one; it is one of those "instances where the writer is so intrinsically in synch with the director's vision that their mutual contributions cannot be easily distinguished" (Silver, 2010).

Hans Dreier (*For Whom the Bells Toll, A Farewell to Arms, Double Indemnity, Sunset Boulevard*) designed the nautical-themed décor of the notorious Sandbar and the dilapidated shacks overlooking the wharf. Harold Rosson (*The Wizard of Oz*, *The Asphalt Jungle*) was the director of photography, who created expressionist compositions with contrasting deep shadows and brightness—mystified by steam and fog.

The foggy port, crumbling shack, and nautical tavern prefigured visual and thematic elements in films such as *Moontide* (1942, Archie Mayo), *Modern Times* (1937, Charlie Chaplin), *Port of Shadows* (1938, Michel Carné), and *You and Me* (1938, Fritz Lang). Aspects of *The Docks of New York* itself may be said to be influenced by Erich von Stroheim's *Greed* (1924), "but von Sternberg's soft-focus, rather caressing lightning lent them a glamour and feeling quite unlike von Stroheim's harsh, bitter work" (Harrington, 7).

Assessment. 'Finest film I've ever seen,' remarked Bernard Shaw (Weinberg, 43) and a piece from 1928's *Photoplay* expressed enthusiasm about *The Docks of New York*: "Von Sternberg, the mad young director who made *Underworld*, has selected a situation unlimited in dramatic value—a wedding in a brothel! He has given his story that subtle emotional undercurrent, rare to the cinema" (virtualhistory.com).

Kevin Brownlow considered *The Docks of New York* to be "one of the finest achievements of a period when fine achievements were commonplace. Its impact has gained strength with the passage of time. It is one of the enduring masterpieces of the American cinema" (Brownlow, 1970: 229). Charles Silver observed that "it largely established the themes and style (camera movement, lyrical lighting effects, etc.) that, I believe, helped to make Sternberg the most important American director of the early sound period" (Silver).

Von Sternberg's filmmaking privileged abstraction over character development, and in that respect, *The Docks of New York* is somewhat of an oddball. Peter Bogdanovich recalls that von Sternberg regarded it as one of his less personal films; those he referred to positively, but also with some distance—with lines

such as ‘oh, it’s a good one, you ought to see that’ (Bogdanovich, 137). Such reservation might have to do with the contrast between the cold and reserved image of the director and the *The Docks of New York,* sensual and affectionate.

CHARACTERS

Bill Roberts. “The Stoker” Bill Roberts is a swaggering brawler and wants to have a good time in his only night in the port. Is he somehow going to choose to settle down with Mae?
Mae. Mae is introduced as “a Girl” in the credits. She is world weary and suicidal; she gets to like the larger-than-life Bill. Mae is attracted by the promise of a “decent” life.
Andy. Andy, “the third engineer” is an obnoxious man and a petty tyrant—only aboard the ship though, as nobody cares much about him at the Sandbar. There, he comes across his estranged wife Lou, but he has his eyes set on Mae—which earns him a punch from Bill. Ultimately, he is—not fatally—shot by Lou.
Lou. Lou is just as unhappy as Andy for their unexpected reunion. The more experienced and compassionate Lou is protective of the younger woman—to the point of shooting Andy when he attempts to rape Mae. The Moscow Academy graduate and esteemed actress (“The People’s Artist”[1]) Olga Baclanova nearly cried because of von Sternberg’s harshness, but reportedly she said that she later understood how it was a calculated move to create a certain mood for a specific scene.[2]
“Sugar” Steve. Bill’s sidekick and fellow seaman (introduced in the opening title card as “his Pal”) tries to prevent him from committing to women. Steve is straightforward and well intentioned, but apparently he has a corrosive influence on Bill’s relationship with women.
Hymn-Book Harry. The port’s dignified looking pastor makes a living by serving the morally ambiguous clientele. Played by German actor Gustave von Seyferttitz (*Dishonored* and *Shanghai Express* with von Sternberg; Professor Moriarty in 1922’s *Sherlock Holmes*).

SYNOPSIS

A tramp steamer docks in New York and the tyrannical third engineer warns the overworked crew to soberly report back to the ship the next morning. The boorish and raunchy stoker Bill can’t wait to make the most of his night ashore. Moments after he steps on the pier, a woman attempts to commit suicide by jumping into the water; Bill saves her and takes her to a shack above the Sandbar, the hangout of rowdy seaman. She agrees to be entertained by him down at the bar and rather likes his crazy ways. On a whim, Bill persuades Mae to get married right then and there; amid the mock solemnity of the bar crowd, the local pastor weds them. Next morning, seeing that Bill is preparing to sneak away to the ship, Andy makes a move on Mae—and is shot by his estranged wife Lou.

Bill curtly explains to Mae that he is what he is and has got to go. After his ship leaves the port, Mae is arrested for the garment Bill stole for her from the closed pawn shop. Meanwhile, Bill gives up his internal struggle and jumps overboard. He swims to the shore and shows up at Mae’s trial, to confess that he is the one who snatched the dress. He is sentenced to a short jail sentence and Mae vows to wait for him.

SCENES

The Steamer’s Stokers. The steamer’s stokers feed the furnace at an exhausting pace, in what looks like an industrial setting from the previous century. Not before long, the tramp steamer docks in the New York harbor; the stokers can at last stop feeding coal to the furnace and relax, even if only for a single evening.



Their overbearing foreman, “the third engineer,” swings from the ladder to bully the men; his gestures are ape-like. Andy bluntly cautions them to be ready and sober the next morning.



The men are compliant; they do not want to hinder their only opportunity to enjoy themselves at the local tavern. They gather in front of graffiti of nudes to take a longing look—as they probably did many times during the last thirty days at sea—before they clean up and disembark. Hyper-masculine focus of the opening scene features aestheticized male bodies, with the seamen admiring graffiti as abstractions of women.



The Pier. The foreman Andy is the first to make it to the local tavern. He is surprised—not pleasantly—to see his estranged wife Lou dancing with a man. It has been three years and Lou is just as annoyed to see Andy. Meanwhile, the boisterous stoker Bill Richards steps on the pier and heads out to the rowdy Sandbar. At that moment, a woman attempts to commit suicide. An onoeric scene introduces Mae as a reflection on the water; she is about to attempt suicide. The woman jumps into the dark water;



Bill goes after her and pulls her to safety. To the astonished looks of a few passersby and his pal Steve, Bill lifts the unconscious woman. Amid fog and dim lights, Bill is seen behind fish nets, carrying the unconscious Mae to the dilapidated shacks above the Sandbar.



The Sandbar. The bartender's wife and waiters are absolutely unwelcoming and it takes Bill considerable jostling and shoving to make it to a shack. Here, Andy's wife Lou rushes to resuscitate the younger woman and takes care of her compassionately. Bill gets a hot drink for Mae; since she also needs dry garments, he helps himself to a nice evening dress for her from the closed pawnshop. When they are finally alone in the run down room, Bill claims he can uplift her mood and Mae agrees to let him entertain her. They go down to the Sandbar.



The clientele of the Sandbar is a typical von Sternberg crowd: unruly, dynamic, and inward-looking. – Finally, an authority figure appears, as the stern, paternalistic, and perceptive judge of the night court, who pulls Bill's ear.

A Solemn Ceremony. At the tavern, Bill alternates between displaying bravado, showing off his muscles, and exchanging punches with a few men—among these is the third engineer Andy. The narcissistic Bill offers Mae a chance to appreciate his biceps and tattoos.



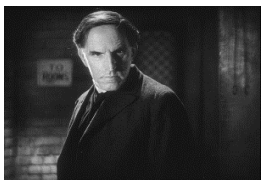
Spotlight may be on Bill's extravagance and antics, but female bonding between Mae and Lou will soon prove decisive.



The foreman learns the hard way—to the delight of Lou—with a sore jaw, to stay away from Mae. The latter talks about her past regrets (Bill, naturally, has none); to cheer her up and win her favors for the night, he comes up with the idea to get married right away. This requires the services of the local pastor. "Save your soul and money, come to Hymn-Book Harry"; the pastor advertises his services with a flyer on the pianola of the Sandbar.



The local pastor, the peculiarly dignified “Hymn-Book Harry” is fetched—the dignified looking pastor is played by Gustave von Seyferttitz.



The rollicking clientele behave themselves and assume an air of mock solemnity; the pastor pronounces the couple husband and wife.

Next Morning. Bill is sober now and obviously has no qualms about sneaking out to be present at the roll call of his ship, which is destined for the next port of call. With him out of the picture, Andy feels he can seize the moment of opportunity. He corners Mae in her room and attempts to rape her—before Lou steps in and shoots him. Police are initially confused about the culprit and detain Mae. Bill notices the commotion and returns to support her. Then, Lou confesses and is arrested; Mae is released.

One Last Smoke. Mae would like to persuade Bill to stay, but that seems to be out of the question. So she pleads him to hang around with her just for a little while. He reluctantly complies, but their quiet final moment together is ruined by the arrival of “Sugar” Steve. “His pal” (as listed in the credits) urges him to head out to the ship with him. As Steve is pulling his arm, Bill’s shirt pocket accidentally gets ripped. Mae offers to fix it, but tears in her eyes pose a difficulty. Bill gets affectionate and increasingly confused; he finally succumbs to Steve and leaves the shack.



‘Three on a Match’: Mae angrily observes that Bill’s pal Steve is trying to bring back luck to her.

Overboard. In the boiler room, things are as they used to be, with stokers feeding the furnace of the ship, which is slowly leaving the port. Suddenly, Bill has a change of heart, steps out to the deck and jumps overboard. The crew watches him swim ashore. In the next scene, he appears at Mae’s trial—she has just been sentenced to a month in jail for the theft of the garment. Bill steps forward and confesses that snatching the dress was his doing. After a quick rebuke, a paternalistic judge sentences him to two months. Mae is jubilant and vows to wait for his release.



Finally, an authority figure appears, as the stern, paternalistic, and perceptive judge of the night court, who pulls Bill’s ear.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Bill Roberts – Open (Swaggering Drifter, Narcissistic, Virile, Affectionate, Ductile and Resilient)
Mae – Emotional (World Weary and Vulnerable, Remorseful and Bitter, Sensual and Shrewd, Hopeful)

BILL ROBERTS

Character The physically imposing Bill is a force to be reckoned with; at the same time, he is a likeable simpleton. The burly stoker substitutes “mannerism for emotion” (Baxter, 54); he surprisingly moves delicately, almost like a ballet dancer—notice how he saves Mae at the wharf; he does not jump from the pier with a splash, but only after tossing his cigarette and taking off his jacket, he quietly and slowly lets himself into the water.

The Sandbar doesn’t exactly welcome Bill; instead, he is greeted there with testosterone rivalry. It takes him to decisively and quickly overpower an array of aggressive types to establish his machismo—then it is finally time to show off muscles in front of the mirror and let Mae appreciate his many tattoos from exotic lands. Actor George Bancroft (*Stagecoach*, *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*)

played tough guys many times; he made four films with von Sternberg (*Underworld*, *Thunderbolt*—Bancroft nominated for an Oscar, *The Drag Net*—a lost film).

Illustrative moments

Swaggering Drifter. Bill works hard and parties hard. The tramp ship's boiler room is his home, except for the occasional respite when the cargo reaches the destination port. The raunchy seaman has girlfriends at several ports—he has their names etched on his arm, which is full of tattoos. Bill is cheerful and always ready for a good brawl. His arrival to the Sandbar is marked by jostling and tussling with about half a dozen individuals; ultimately, the foreman Andy earns a punch from Bill for bothering Mae. She likes this boisterous, amusing, and larger-than-life character.

Narcissistic. Bill likes partying, but he is self-centered. When he is with Mae at the Sandbar, he takes a moment to spend time in front of the mirror. Mae has put on the nice evening dress he stole from the pawn shop and her beauty makes her the center of attention at the Sandbar—where hell is breaking loose anytime—but Bill is mainly concerned about his own appearance; checking out his hair; flexing biceps and showing off his tattoos.

Virile. Bill and fellow stokers at the boiler room of the steamer stand in front of graffiti scribbled on the wall—a collage of chalked female names and associated nude figures. The men are covered in coal dust and sweat; there is steam all around. Deep shadows contrast sharply with bright light coming from the opening to the deck, as well as flames occasionally bursting out from the furnaces. The heavily stylized representation of men's bodies contrasts with the chalked and simplistic outlines on the wall. This machismo aesthetics is cinematographically not unlike von Sternberg's glamorous portrayal of female leads Evelyn Brent, Marlene Dietrich, Gene Tierney, and others. In *The Docks of New York*, Betty Compson as Mae is as beautiful and alluring as any of von Sternberg's other female leads, but the focus on hyper-masculinity is exclusive to this 1928 film.

Affectionate. Bill may be vulgar, but he eventually reveals his sensitive side. The sewing scene is climactic because of the tension—is Bill going to leave Mae for good or is there a chance that he might choose to end his seafaring and settle down? When she fails to thread the needle because of her watery eyes, Bill does it for her; he can no longer pretend to ignore her sorrow and his mannerism shows how affectionate and confused he is. If it was not for the corrosive influence of Steve pulling him, perhaps Bill's decision to unite with Mae would not have to wait for the denouement at the night court.

Ductile and Resilient. In his 1934 assessment, Rudolf Arnheim called Bill "Herculean" and a "sinewy Parcifal" (Arnheim, 137). Arnheim thought that the unyielding character of Bill reflected Joseph von Sternberg's own standing in Hollywood and his resilience. Bill can adapt, but his core remains unchanged. Although physically unlike the formidable George Bancroft, like Bill, von Sternberg was "ductile and as strong as a bar of steel."

MAE

Mae is presumably a prostitute who has lost her desire to live. She is introduced as a silhouette reflected on the dark and still water of the harbor. If Bill did not happen to be passing that spot on the pier, her suicide attempt would have been a success. It is only later, when he takes her to the shack and after she is resuscitated, that we get to see her face. The happy-go-lucky stoker is baffled that she would want to quit life. Bill's zest for living and his various antics uplift her mood and she decides to try once again.

Illustrative moments

World Weary and Vulnerable. Mae is disillusioned and suicidal; even after she recovers from her near drowning at the wharf, she is sullen. When she recuperates and laments her failure to die, Bill's immediate and uncalculated reply is "all right. Make believe you died—make believe you're starting all over again." This line proves to be effective. Bill's buffoonery and optimism counterbalances her lassitude. He boastfully claims that if she would only give him a chance and accompany him for the night, she would

change her mind about suicide. He raises her spirits and she gradually comes to think of a new life with him as a way out of her despondency.

Remorseful and Bitter."Georgette, Tava, Chiquita…" etched on Bill's forearm as tattoos, are some of the names of Bill's past girlfriends from exotic lands. When he jokingly says that he is not bragging about his long list of paramours, Mae regretfully says that she does not brag about hers either. What makes Bill proud is shameful for her. She is troubled by the society labeling her as indecent. Another remorseful character, the more experienced Lou, compassionately supports her as a younger version of herself. Andy's estranged wife Lou doesn't believe marriage is the way out—"I was decent until I married"—but she hopes that Mae would have a better experience.

Sensual and Shrewd. The Sandbar scenes, just before the wedding ceremony, are visually pleasing and full of details, with the lively crowd providing a dynamic background to Bill and Mae's chat. At the edge of the frame, Andy, who is jealous of Bill, is lecherously staring at Mae the whole time. When he finally feels confident enough, he attempts to intimidate Bill; reminding him that he is the foreman to snatch Mae from him. A one-sided fist fight ensues and the other customers scramble to stop Bill from battering the third engineer. A tracking shot shows Mae watching the altercation, initially indifferently, then deciding to intervene and calmly walking towards Bill. She holds his arm affectionately and quite effortlessly drags him back to his seat. Lou is very satisfied with the pounding her obnoxious husband Andy receives; Mae is equally pleased with her influence on the brute that a roomful of people can't control.

Hopeful. The wedding is a high-point in *The Docks of New York*—chairs are rearranged, space is made for a make-shift lectern for Hymn-Book Harry, and finally the unruly crowd of the Sandbar suddenly behave themselves. What starts as a joke, turns quite serious and Mae gradually warms to the idea. Throughout the ceremony, she is contemplating and unsure, but is serious when Pastor Harry asks her for her wedding vow.

THEMES

Society – (Gentrification and Modernity, Social Values and Religion)
Relationship – (Love, Conformity and Marriage, Female Bonding, Male Bonding)

SOCIETY

Gentrification and Modernity. "The Sandbar, a cable's length from the wharf, has vanished now—wiped out by commerce and reform. But that night, it was wide awake and roaring." Thus, one of the opening title cards introduces the center of social life at the docks as a setting from a bygone era. It is a victim of the urban development processes referred to as gentrification after the 1960s. With its non-stop brawls, prostitution, unruly crowd, and dilapidated shacks, the Sandbar is not romanticized and the transformation of the harbor is not lamented. Yet it stands there, so spirited and vibrant—consequently, strangely attractive. Perhaps it offers a testimony to what is missing in the modern experience of space—intimacy, connection, improbable and exciting encounters between different social identities. With its hectic tavern, the dock is a site of fleeting moments and transience of experiences. As an imagined real space (shot entirely in the studio), it evokes the concept of ambivalent places Michel Foucault refers to as heterotopias.

Social Values and Religion. The story takes place in the pre-Prohibition era—sometime in the early years of the twentieth century, when steam was still the predominant source of power. A likely timeframe is roughly about a decade prior to the film's release. Yet, *The Docks of New York* is a product of the Roaring Twenties—the Jazz Age. The boisterous crowd of the Sandbar—whose clientele includes flappers—does not care about social norms and authority. Religion is incorporated into daily life as a useful and amusing convenience—"save your soul and money; come to Hymn-Book Harry," reads a flyer advertising the services of the local pastor from the harbor mission. Pastor Harry can be called in, even at short notice, to quickly officiate marriages. The dignified looking and self-important man is probably not a charlatan, he seems to take his function seriously. He is in rapport with the secular crowd of the Sandbar.

In a world where everything is turning into a commodity, Hymn-Book Harry has a particular conception about the role of religion.

RELATIONSHIP

Love. *The Docks of New York* is a sensual film; the moment that best exemplifies this quality is the sewing scene. In the morning, Bill is confused and hesitant; he is urged by his friend to leave Mae and report to the ship. She, on the other hand, is already quietly lamenting his imminent departure; but also trying to prolong their final moment together. Steve keeps pulling Bill, whose shirt pocket gets torn during the hassle. The narcissistic stoker is disturbed about the ding to his appearance; his anger subdues Steve, while Mae offers to solve his problem. She takes her kit in order to sew the torn fabric—but she can't, because of the tears in her eyes. At this point, the blurry needle is shown as her point of view. Bill grabs the needle and threads it. Now, he can no longer pretend to ignore her tenderness, and he has just revealed a bit of his affectionate side. So did he actually 'thread the needle'? Apparently not, because Steve makes another move and finally manages to get Bill away from Mae. Not before long, Bill will make up his mind and jump overboard to unite with her. Von Sternberg pointed out that, for this specific scene, he was inspired by *The Miracle Man* (1919) and Lubitsch's *Montmartre*/*Die Flamme* (1923) (48).

Conformity and Marriage. Mae is presumably a prostitute and she is all of a sudden enlivened by the idea of marriage—she seems to believe that it may redeem her past. The concept of 'decency' is frequently brought up. Mae and Bill bring up their sexual histories, he proudly, while she is in remorse. Mae thinks that her decency is tarnished, yet Lou is skeptical that marriage would be the solution to her problems. Not due to—as Mae believes—her checkered past, but because Lou views marriage itself as the problem; she points to her own marriage as the decisively corrupting influence on her own life. "Hope you have better luck—but I doubt it" she shouts at Mae, before she is arrested for shooting her estranged husband Andy.

Female bonding. From the get-go, Andy's bitter wife Lou approaches Mae as a supportive older sister; she is the one who helps her recuperate from her near-drowning at the harbor, and then watches out for her, keeping an eye on her own husband, who is eager to enter the vulnerable younger woman's room. Lou initially reacts with sarcasm to the wedding idea; but it seems that she has a change of heart and wholeheartedly endeavors to make it a happy occasion for the bride. Although her own marriage—still officially in effect—turned sour, she sincerely wishes and hopes that it would be different for Mae. The scene is a powerful turning point in the film, with Mae coming out of her depression and looking optimistic for the future. Lou plays a key role in the reversal and almost steals the show by passionately kissing Mae—a scene that would be unthinkable within a couple of years. The pre-Code era was just around the corner; filmmakers were still relatively unencumbered by the moral criteria to be set forth in 1929 and to be enforced from 1934 onwards.

Male bonding. The climactic scene prior to Bill's departure, with him restlessly spending a few more minutes in the room with Mae, is charged with tension—not only because of the conflicting motivations of the couple, but also due to the intervention of Bill's friend Steve. "His pal"—as the credits refers to him—keeps trying to pull him away from Mae, to the safety of the boiler room of the steamer where there are only men. Bill and Steve's relationship is unlike the bond between the two women. While the solidarity between Lou and Mae is admirable and strong, Steve acts like a pest with his annoying attempts at manipulation. An example is when the latter offers to light cigarettes while Mae is sewing the torn pocket back to its place. Steve lights his cigarette, then Bill's, and proceeds to light Mae's with the same match. Irked and wary, she knocks his hand away and asks him if he is trying to bring bad luck to her. This is related to 'three on a match,' a superstition that dated back to the battlefields of the 19th Century—other cinematic references can be found in *Scarlet Street* (1945, Fritz Lang) and *Dive Bomber* (1941, Michael Curtiz).

Steve is good natured and well intentioned; he also provides some comic relief—but Bill ultimately has to break free from his influence to be really independent. For an example of a similar character—and to see how far it can go towards a toxic portrayal—see *Moontide* (1942, Archie Mayo) with Jean Gabin's Bobo

struggling with his supposedly protective and extremely annoying friend Tiny (Thomas Mitchell), who ultimately comes to be perceived as a despicable nuisance.

Discussion questions

In his memoirs, von Sternberg refers to the sewing scene—Mae fixing Bill's torn pocket—as a "shrewd feminine maneuver (48). Do you agree?

Is Steve a positive character? What motivates him? Are there parallels to this character in contemporary cinema?

How would you compare Hymn-Book Harry with other cinematic representations of men of religion?

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