HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Dishonored 1931

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

OVERVIEW

> *Dishonored* is to cinema what Ravel's *La Valse* is to music.
> —Hermann G. Weinberg, *Josef von Sternberg*

"An Austrian Mata Hari" was the title of a contemporary review of *Dishonored* (1931) in *The New York Times* (Hall, 1931). In fact, the infamous spy and exotic dancer would be portrayed in the following year's *Mata Hari* with Greta Garbo as the titular character—inspired by the rising star Marlene Dietrich's success in *Dishonored*. A romantic espionage story about the exploits of a Viennese prostitute-turned-spy during the Great War, *Dishonored* would be the third of seven films von Sternberg and Dietrich made together. Their work was all the rage in 1930-1931 following the two films in which she had played cabaret performers: Germany's UFA produced *The Blue Angel* and Dietrich's first Hollywood film *Morocco*, for which von Sternberg and Dietrich were both nominated for the 1931 Academy Awards.

War and Interwar Years. *Dishonored* was released in March 1931. The stock market crash of 1929 continued to be the defining event; poverty and unemployment were important social problems in the new decade, which would culminate in the rise of totalitarianism and ultimately another global war. At the dawn of the 1930s, the memory of the Great War was still strong. In 1931, German films that dealt with the subject were *Hell on Earth, The Other Side*, and *Yorck*. In Hollywood, among films with a World War I setting were *The Dawn Patrol* (1930), *Hell's Angels* (1930), *The Eagle and the Hawk* (1933), and later *The Road to Glory* (1936). 1930's Best Picture Oscar Award had gone to Lewis Milestone for *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Although its battlefield scene takes less than a minute, *Dishonored* at times projects a similarly strong anti-war sentiment.

Gender, Power, the Code. Von Sternberg's *The Blue Angel* was the first film to be reviewed for its adherence to The Motion Pictures Association Code. Until 1934, the Hays Office did not have the authority to enforce the Code; *Dishonored* demonstrates the relative artistic freedom directors had in dealing with issues related to sexuality. Marlene Dietrich's character progresses from a prostitute to a spy and temptress; she is not only an alluring woman, but also strong and intelligent. It is important to consider this role in light of the achievements of the women's rights movement. The women's suffrage was granted a decade ago in the country where *Dishonored* was shot—and just a couple of years earlier in the one it was set. Marlene Dietrich's character is sensual and irresistible; she is also patriotic and brave in the face of death. This second American film of the Dietrich-von Sternberg duo adds an interesting layer to this complex screen persona, which offers more than glamour (Travis Banton, prime mover of the 'Dietrich look', designed her costumes).

Themes and Abstraction. As mentioned, anti-militarism is one of the themes of *Dishonored*. Others are death, desire, identity, deception, patriotism, and masquerade. Towering above these themes are the film's abstractness and von Sternberg's formal explorations. Visually, these include movements of characters, their gestures and posturing. The masked ball scene which takes just a couple of lines in the screenplay (itself quite short) takes quite a while, as Dietrich's character deals with two suitors amidst an abundance of confetti—a von Sternberg favorite. Aurally (the film received the 1931 Oscar Award for sound recording), von Sternberg's fourth sound film makes extensive use of diegetic sound. Ion Ivanovici's "Waves of the Danube" waltz is played several times; each time providing insight into the main character or others interacting with her.

Looking Back. An opening title card states that "strange figures emerge from the dust of the fallen Austrian Empire." The director is one of them, having spent his childhood in the turn-of-the-century Vienna and his late teens in New York; subsequently, serving in the US army in the WWI. Von Sternberg was still on fire in the early 1930s; he had yet to deliver a few more brilliant films, increasingly sporadically, until his career somehow came to an abrupt halt. One of Jean Luc Godard's top ten American films, *Dishonored* is a relatively less studied von Sternberg film.

CHARACTERS

X-27. Marie Kolverer is the widow of a fallen soldier; she is recruited to the Secret Service as an agent.
H-14. Colonel Kranau is X-27's adversary and love interest. He is a Russian colonel and a notorious spy.
The Chief of the Secret Service. The Chief personally recruits X-27. When she is convicted of treason and sentenced to death, he remains passive. Played by Gustav von Seyffertitz, who appeared in von Sternberg's *The Case of Lena Smith* (lost film), *The Docks of New York*, and *Shanghai Express*.
Colonel von Hindau. The traitor exposed by X-27 is a secondary part. Many times, Warner Oland played Chinese and Chinese-American characters such as Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan.
Young Lieutenant. Another minor role with a young officer who admires X-27. Kind and reverential to the very end, the junior officer delivers a strong anti-war diatribe and refuses to order the firing squad to shoot at X-27.

SYNOPSIS

A war widow is recruited to the Secret Service as agent X-27. She uncovers the identity of a traitor in the headquarters and is tasked with tackling a Russian colonel and spymaster, who is considered to be the single most important cause of high casualties. As the two agents vie and scheme for the upper hand, romance ensues between the two. The showdown takes place near the frontlines and X-27 gets hold of top secret plans of the expected Russian attack. Thanks to her success, Russian troops suffer a heavy defeat and Colonel Kranau is among the prisoners of war. The colonel is scheduled to be executed for being a spy; her love for him leads her to help him escape. Consequently—and despite her crowning espionage achievement—X-27 is sentenced to death for treason. A young lieutenant protests the execution, which, nonetheless, is duly carried out.

SCENES



Vienna, 1915. A resident's corpse is taken out of her apartment where she has just committed suicide. A fellow neighbor and streetwalker, who is among the onlookers, comments that she is not afraid of facing a similar end. Her defiance of death piques the attention of the Chief of the Secret Service, who happens to be in the crowd. He approaches her and the two go up to her place. He then tests her by asking about her willingness to make money by working against the interests of Austria—to which she responds by fetching a constable right away. Very impressed by her patriotism, the Chief arranges a meeting with her at his office the following day. What follows is a ballet-like scene at the majestic Secret Service Headquarters—(Art Director Hans Dreier).



Operatic grandeur and army top brass—the generals comfortably decide on strategy and approach war as an abstraction—an intellectual exercise. Eventually, they will see to it that X-27 is punished for her actions.



Masquerade. The Chief reveals that he plans to employ her as an agent—in situations that call for "a woman's charm where a man's brain is not enough." Vital information is routinely being compromised, costing high casualties. A brief sequence shows the horrors of modern war: tank, machine gun, barbed wire, and warplane. This is nothing like the scene featuring the top brass.

The Chief tasks Marie Kolverer—now codenamed X-27—to identify the source of the leak. X-27 tails the suspect, a staff officer named Colonel von Hindau, to a masked ball and easily manages to catch his attention. The centerpiece of *Dishonored* is the lavish masked ball scene with costumes by Travis Banton.



A third figure, a handicapped man disguised as a clown, also seems to be interested in communicating with the colonel. Von Hindau is exhilarated at the prospect of spending the evening with X-27, so the two men cut their interaction short.



The masked stranger is given a ride home; before leaving them alone, he hands von Hindau a cigarette. At the mansion, X-27 finds out that von Hindau is a non-smoker and the cigarette was a prop to deliver him top-secret information. Von Hindau realizes that she has read the message written on the cigarette paper; before the Secret Service agents positioned outside can arrest him, he commits suicide.

Battle of Wits. Following her swift success, X-27 takes the initiative and goes "after the other man," the clown at the masquerade ball—who is identified as Russian Colonel Kranau. She finds him at a casino playing the roulette and the two begin to flirt. Kranau gets suspicious; when the Secret Service agents shadowing X-27 make their move, they find that he has evaded them.



Budding Romance. Even though the chief is annoyed by the failure of the self-confident fresh recruit, he gives her a new assignment. She is to infiltrate a provincial enemy garrison and steal the plans of an expected Russian attack. Prior to her departure, Colonel Kranau pays her a surprise visit. Breaking into her apartment, he finds out about her orders to go to the Polish border. Not realizing that her adversary has found out about her mission, X-27 tries to seduce and trap him**.** Unlike the previous colonel, Kranau is not foiled by her attempts; despite being enamored by her, he hastily leaves. The two spies have now recognized each other for what they are; and vow to get the better of each other—while their romance is in full swing. Von Sternberg shows his mastery of light and composition as the two spies battle wits.



Borislav H.Q. At the frontier garrison, it doesn't take long before X-27 expertly snatches the secret military plans of the imminent Russian onslaught from an unsuspecting adjutant. She ingeniously copies the plans, encrypting them as a musical composition. However, Kranau dashes to the scene, apprehends her and destroys the note sheets. X-27 then offers to spend the night together—Kranau is easily persuaded. She drugs him and gets away with the—melodic—memory of her code. At the Austrian H.Q., she is able to decrypt the code by playing the tune. "Waves of the Danube" being played several times with variations is an example of the diegetic use of sound.



Compassionate and Defiant. Once decrypted, the contents of the document prove invaluable and the Russians suffer a heavy defeat. Kranau is among the captured Russian officers. He is sentenced to be executed for espionage, X-27 steps forward to request permission to personally interrogate him. Her love for him makes her let him escape; consequently, X-27 is court-martialed. Army's top brass—after briefly questioning her motivation—sentence her to death. She spends the evening playing the piano—"Waves of the Danube", for the last time.



Drum beats signaling the execution is another example of the diegetic use of sound.



Von Sternberg considered abstraction to be a quality in all of his films. Here, his exploration in visual and aural form is evident with a focus on gestures, posturing, gazing, and movement.



Just before she is executed by a firing squad, a young lieutenant (a former admirer) protests the sentence—"murder!" he cries—refuses to order the execution and goes on to denounce war. He is removed from the command and the order is duly executed by a replacement.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

X-27

Her real name—Marie Kolverer—is uttered only once in the film. Not much is known about her background, except that she is a Great War-widow and works as a streetwalker. These reveal little about her personality; more insight is provided by the dangling and bouncing sewn dolls in her room, her piano playing, cutouts from magazines on her walls, and above all, her black cat that follows her everywhere.

Illustrative moments

Stoic and Ambivalent. X-27 hardly reveals her emotions. She is stoic in the face of danger and reserved during moments of emotional intensity. Even her voice sounds more or less similar in diverse contexts; e.g. "what appeals to me is the chance to serve my country" has a similar intonation to "will you take off my gloves?" Her apathy and sphinx-like demeanor pose a difficulty for the men who interact with her, not just her admirers, but also someone like the Chief of the Secret Service. She seems to enjoy flirting with Kranau, but the next moment she doesn't hesitate to kill him by pulling the trigger of her pistol (previously—wisely—unloaded by him). It appears that this particular mannerism and ambivalence is a key aspect of the iconic Marlene Dietrich image, just as important as her allure and the Travis Banton costumes.

Diligent Patriot. "You are a clever woman and a very loyal one," the stiff Chief of Secret Service remarks, displaying restraint as a man who gives the impression that he rarely extends praise to underlings—judging by his attitude, even less so to women. She repeatedly proves that she is indeed a very competent spy and devoted to her country. X-27 comes up with an ingenious way to copy the Russian battle plans which directly leads to a major battlefield victory; also, she isn't fooled for a moment when the Chief tests her by pretending to recruit her for an enemy intelligence service.

Trickster Vamp. "You are a cheat and a liar" says Kranau, realizing that X-27 is asking him to stay longer so that she can get him captured. It is a little unclear at what point her love for him prevails; ultimately, she sacrifices herself to let him live. Up until that climactic moment, her feelings are possibly ambiguous; she is infatuated with him and yet also focused on getting the better of him as an adversary. Kranau is confused by the danger she poses and says he detests it—"you bring something into war that doesn't belong in it; you trick men into death with your body." Yet, he also adds that her dangerous side makes her "even more exciting." The lethal quality of X-27 prefigures the femme fatales of film noir in the following decade.

Sensual. In the casino scene, X-27 is greeted warmly by all the women at the bar. As she moves towards Kranau, she affectionately embraces an unidentified woman sitting on a stool. A less subtle signifier of her sensuality is her black cat, which is seen in many scenes. Her interaction with the cat contributes to the story by hinting at her feelings and mood. The feline theme goes even further; in a later scene, she plays a game of cat and mouse with a randy Russian adjutant in Borislav. When the man is thoroughly intoxicated and excited, she impersonates a cat and meows—just before she steals the precious secret document from him.

Compassionate. X-27 may be a patriotic and tough operative prepared to shoot rivals and willing to send traitors to death, but she is also compassionate. She makes the ultimate sacrifice to save the man she loves.

Dishonored. This point is open to debate: is X-27 dishonored? If so, at what point exactly? Is it related to her past as a streetwalker? Referring to the ending, von Sternberg didn't think it made her dishonored, and hence, the title wasn't appropriate, he felt. She is subjected to a method of capital punishment—execution by the firing squad—which is deemed soldierly. On the other hand, the generals of the high command state that she has dishonored her country by letting Kranau escape.

Defiant and Triumphant. X-27 is unwavering and resilient. The extraordinary situations she finds herself in hardly transform her. She is what she is, and when this means letting the enemy spy escape death because of her love, she shows no hesitation to do so. When it comes to paying the price, she shows no regrets. Her court-martial by a roomful of senior military officers displays her resolve. She defies authority, makes no attempt to offer a justification for her action, and is sentenced to death; but in the end, she is triumphant.

Colonel Kranau

Big and burly, Colonel Kranau (spy designation H-14, although not as frequently used as Marie Kolverer's X-27) is a very adept spy with a commanding presence. Reportedly, McLaglen was not the first choice for the part that was offered to Gary Cooper. While some may consider the chemistry between the leads inferior in *Dishonored*, the character effectively underscores the strengths of the leading woman.

Illustrative moments

Slick and Exuberant. Kranau is seen swinging a grin most of the time. His peculiar expression signifies delight and admiration in his exchanges with X-27. It is rather exaggerated and has a cartoonish quality, but one may speculate that it is the actor's way of letting Marlene Dietrich's character to receive the spotlight.

Male Bravado. As a regular of John Ford's films, Victor McLaglen was no stranger to playing tough characters. In *Dishonored*, the boisterous and extrovert Kranau manages to impress X-27. However, it is arguably not so much his swagger that draws her to the colonel. The outwardly masculine character is curiously seen in moments of incapacitation. This dual nature of the character, his boyish assertiveness and need for protection may be what she finds attractive.

In their first encounter at the masquerade ball, Kranau's walking sticks are part of his disguise as he pretends to be a handicapped clown. X-27 feels bad for cautioning him to stand up when the national anthem is played. Colonel von Hindau is there to conduct spy business with Kranau, but he is also ecstatic at the prospect of spending the evening with X-27. Von Hindau obviously wants to get rid of Kranau quickly; he also feels obliged to offer the handicapped man a ride home. The tension naturally continues in the car with the trio's (still wearing masks) wacky interaction; Kranau attempting to assert his virility, slightly bothering von Hindau and only amusing X-27. Later in the film, Kranau and X-27 spend the evening together at the Borislav garrison; he is obviously gratified and feels that he has finally achieved the 'conquest'. It is at this moment, when he has dropped his guard that X-27 turns the tables; she drugs him and easily gets away after he helplessly falls asleep.

While appearing shallow and one-dimensional, McLaglen's Kranau, with his inconsistencies and weaknesses, serves to highlight the strong will of Marlene Dietrich's X-27. This quality is in line with the previous characters she played in *The Blue Angel* and *Morocco*; and the persona she is going to continue to cultivate with the upcoming *Shanghai Express, Blonde Venus, The Scarlet Empress*, and *The Devil is a Woman*.

THEMES

Society -- Identity
Politics – Modern War and Anti-militarism
Relationship – Desire
Quest – Formalism
Life Stage – Death
Appearance – Deception, Masquerade and Carnival
Ethics – Patriotism

SOCIETY

Identity. Marie Kolverer is referred to as X-27 except in one instance. It seems that she also prefers her new designation. Prior to acquiring it, when she visits the Chief of the Secret Service, she declines to provide a name to the young lieutenant (her first meeting with this character, whose anti-war diatribe would shape the film's denouement). The code name is apt, since she assumes disparate identities (street walker, masked adventuress, illiterate maid at rural Russian inn, leather-clad aviator and spy). Similarly, when Colonel Kranau (handicapped clown, officer) becomes a prisoner of war, he refuses to give out his name to the Austrian officers. Names are less relevant as characters adopt different identities, pointing to an emancipatory potential.

POLITICS

Modern war and Anti-militarism. After X-27 masterfully snatches the top-secret plans of the Russian attack and manages to convey it to the Austrian H.Q., a decisive battlefield victory is ensured; all the enemy officers are captured. With its focus on the romance and espionage, *Dishonored* recaps this particular battle in the form a very brief segment. The clip showcases modern weapons of destruction, with infantrymen attacking the trenches; they get mowed down by heavy machine guns positioned behind barbed wire, while tanks and warplanes play their parts in the obliteration. We learn that one side has won, but the visual representation makes the nature and cost of the victory obvious.

Just before the climactic ending, the young lieutenant in command of the execution squad tosses his ceremonial sword and fiercely yells: "I will not kill a woman. I will not kill any more men, either. Do you call this war? I call it butchery! You call this serving your country? You call this patriotism? I call it murder!" The execution is duly (and solemnly) carried out, but his protest leaves a deep mark. As a 1930s film that looks back at the Great War, *Dishonored* is hardly sentimental about it (or war in general). Surely, there are instances of heroism, and patriotism is praised, but war itself is not glorified. Taken together, the WWI sequence and the young officer's protest are strong reminders of the destruction of war.

RELATIONSHIP

Desire. In *Dishonored*, death is associated with desire. "You trick men into death with your body," Kranau happily reproaches her, as a consequence of being infatuated with his very competent adversary. He views his own predicament as a choice between desire and life. When the irresistible temptress urges him to stay longer—so that she could get him captured—he resists the urge—"If you kept me here for another minute, I'd not only be in danger of losing my life, but of falling in love with you." Kranau's confusion is not at all groundless; prior to him, X-27 swiftly gets the better of two foes—the treacherous Colonel von Hindau and the haplessly lustful Russian adjutant. With the latter, she laterally plays a game of cat and mouse, meowing at him just before he is thoroughly intoxicated and passes out. This deadly

temptation signifies the allure of Marlene Dietrich's screen persona, so meticulously crafted by her and von Sternberg.

QUEST

Formalism. *Dishonored* has a gripping plot based on a treatment written by von Sternberg himself. However, towering above all the themes of the script is his preoccupation with the formal qualities of the film. In his interview with Peter Bogdanovich, responding to a question about *Morocco* (1930), von Sternberg asserts that abstraction is a quality of all of his films (Bogdanovich, 1997: 241). In his memoirs, he granted that *Dishonored* "contained some interesting experiments in visual and tonal effects" (von Sternberg, 1965: 258); it can be considered one of his most abstract films.

Von Sternberg's exploration in formalism in *Dishonored* is most evident in key scenes such as Marlene Dietrich's X-27's recruitment by the Chief of the Secret Service (both their first interaction and the subsequent interview at his office) and the masked ball where there is very little dialogue. In fact, the plot can be considered to function as a binder for such scenes that obviously interested von Sternberg more.

Visually, movement of characters, their posturing and gestures all contribute to the unique style of the film. Aurally, as von Sternberg's fourth sound film, *Dishonored* makes interesting use of diegetic sound with music played by characters in the film (often X-27 playing the piano). Iosif Ivanovici's "Waves of the Danube" plays a special part in the plot, it is performed in variations; these signify the main character's mood or her sophistication compared to others (such as the Chief). Also, a melody is used as a cipher to convey the secret agent's report.

LIFE STAGES

Death. "I am not afraid of life," Marie Kolverer (before she becomes X-27) responds to the building manager, who sardonically remarks that she is likely to die soon—just like her neighbor, also a streetwalker, who committed suicide. She adds that "I am not afraid of death" either—this second bit alerts the Chief of Secret Service, who happens to be standing by. Her statement triggers him to consider her as the female agent he had been searching for. Indeed, at the end, when faced with the priest's question, "you have no fear of this death?" she answers that "it's only another exciting adventure. A perfect end to an imperfect life." X-27 keeps bringing up the subject of death with an attitude of defiance. It seems that espionage work appeals to her for the possibility of qualifying death with meaning. She explains it as a form of redemption: "I've had an inglorious life. It may become my good fortune to have a glorious death." Perhaps this explains why von Sternberg wasn't happy with the title of the film—according to his perspective, the ending brings X-27 honor. X-27's counterpart, adversary, and love interest H-14 (Colonel Kranau) has a comparably nonchalant attitude in relation to death, he associates it with his specialty, as aviators "fly or are killed." Compared to X-27, his conception is more poetic. He describes "death as a beautiful young woman wearing flowers."

ETHICS

Patriotism. Is Marie Kolverer patriotic? It seems that she is very much so. She says that she regards espionage work as "a chance to serve my country." Even when the risk of death or the ignoble natures of the tasks are implied, her patriotism does not waver. This gets her to pass the recruitment test of the Chief of the Secret Service; when he pretends to be an agent of Austria's enemy, she reports him to the police right away. He observes that even though "Austria may not care for what happens to you," you certainly care for what happens to Austria." Then again, does *Dishonored* promote patriotism? Perhaps more ambivalently. When asked about her last wishes before the execution, X-27 requests her regular clothes, "any dress I wore when I served my countrymen, instead of my country." There is also the character of the young lietunant, who becomes the focus of a dramatic scene by equating patriotism with murder. *Dishonored* does not glorify patriotism and it makes sure to point to the devastation of war.

APPEARANCE

Deception. Names, words, texts, in short, anything in writing has a dubious relation to reality in *Dishonored*. A curious character is seen making chemistry experiments in the office of the Chief of the Secret Service. The unidentified man is evidently a senior associate of the Chief (perhaps a doppelganger), who is busy working on a formula to make text invisible. This theme comes up time and again; Colonel Kranau tries to discover invisible ink in the paper that X-27 has used to jot down the secret plan in the form of a musical composition. The invisible ink is just an amusing oddity, von Sternberg suggests that it is pointless to search for such novelties as a gateway to reality—which is often hidden in plain sight and accessible via gaze and intuition.

Masquerade and Carnival. The approximately seven minutes long masked ball scene (which has very little dialogue) is not central to the plot, but one could argue that shooting scenes such as this one would be the main motivation for Josef von Sternberg to make this romantic spy film. Aesthetically, some of his favorite visual devices are there: steamers, balloons, and an abundance of confetti fill the frame. Conceptually, the dreamy masked ball, where a woman and two men interact peculiarly (via semi-irritating party horns and popping balloons) exemplifies von Sternberg working with the notion of the carnival. At this point, it is useful to refer to Russian philosopher Mikail Bakhtin's concept of carnivalesque to understand the function of crowds in von Sternberg's films. Focusing on François Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin points to the disruptive and potentially emancipatory practices embedded in a carnival setting. In *Dishonored*, the carnival is the moment that the strong female character asserts herself.

Von Sternberg's *Underworld*, *Devil is a Woman*, and *The Scarlet Empress* also feature carnivalesque moments. Especially *Devil is a Woman* is remarkable for suggesting how the carnival can potentially turn subversive—the plot took place in Spain and the film was banned there (prior to and during the Franco regime). Spanish government also successfully halted the international distribution of the film and even came close to getting the film stock destroyed.

Discussion questions

Why would the film be titled *Dishonored*? Von Sternberg disagreed with the naming (57), yet the producers deemed it appropriate. How does the title relate to the film?

Does *Dishonored* promote patriotism? How is it so? How is it different from contemporary films that cater to patriotic sentiments?

Provide examples to the effective use of diegetic sound in *Dishonored*.

X-27 tells the Chief of the Secret Service that being killed in action as a spy is "better than gas or the river." What could she have meant?

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