HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Blue Angel 1930

Josef von Sternberg (1894-1969)

OVERVIEW

> It's pure cinema, there is nothing theatrical in it
> —Ihering on *The Blue Angel* (1930) (Ihering, 1980: 25)

Following the release of his first talkie *Thunderbolt* (1929), Josef von Sternberg was selected to direct Germany's first major sound film. Paramount Pictures loaned its contract director to Germany's UFA production house; producer Erich Pommel (*The Last Laugh* [Murnau, 1924]; *Variete* [Dupont, 1925]; *Jamaica Inn* [Hitchcock, 1939]) was assigned to the project. Eminent German stage and film actor Emil Jannings was cast as the leading man.

Producer and the Star. Pommel was back from a stint in Hollywood; he had resigned from UFA following the financial failure of Fritz Lang's costly *Metropolis* (1927). The prime mover of the decision to place von Sternberg at the helm of Germany's first feature-length talkie was Emil Jannings. Like producer Pommel, Jannings was recently in the USA; he made a number of silent films in Hollywood (some of these were lost). He won the first ever Academy Award in 1929 for his performance in von Sternberg's *The Last Command* (and *The Way of All Flesh* since that year's competition allowed multiple performances to be awarded). Both von Sternberg and Jannings had a reputation for being difficult on the set; not surprisingly, their collaboration in *The Last Command* had ended with a mutual wow to never work together again (von Sternberg, 1965: 150). Evidently, Jannings thought highly of von Sternberg's ability to meet the demands of the ambitious project and changed his mind.

Novel. Initially, shooting a story about Rasputin was considered, which had no appeal to von Sternberg and was dismissed (Baxter, 2010: 89). Instead, he was drawn to the idea of an adaptation of a novel written by Heinrich Mann. The 1905 novel titled *Professor Unrat* (translated as *Small Town Tyrant*) centered on a middle-aged small-town teacher and his infatuation with a revue dancer.

Financier. UFA studio's owner Alfred Hugenberg was a wealthy businessman and conservative politician; he was wary of the idea of making a film based on Heinrich Mann's mockery of bourgeois values. At the beginning, it looked like the Vienna born Josef von Sternberg, apolitical and a stranger to German society—would pose no threat to Hugenberg's right-wing agenda. He would feel differently once the film was finished (von Sternberg, 242).

Script. Collaborating with three scriptwriters, von Sternberg made a number of major revisions to the novel with the consent of the author. Among these was changing the title to *Der Blaue Engel*, which signaled a shift of focus from the prim and boring teacher to the sleazy tavern The Blue Angel—ultimately to its seductive chanteuse, who would be played by the not-yet-famous Marlene Dietrich.

Historical Context. Shooting of *The Blue Angel* began in November 1929 and was completed in January 1929; the film was released on the first of April in 1930. While filming took place, the New York Stock Exchange had crashed in October 1929, leading to the Great Depression. In Germany, the worldwide downturn precipitated the end of the relative economic stability of the late 1920s, which had followed the hyperinflation early in the decade. American loans were vital for Germany's economy and its war reparation payments; with these coming to a halt, unemployment soared. The already fragile political order was further destabilized by the economic collapse. Polarization contributed to the increasing power of the Nazi Party—Day of Composure was the name given to Nazi's Nurnberg Rally in held in August 1929. Later in 1930, the federal elections for the Reichstag proved that the Nazis could now be positioned

as the chief alternative to the Social Democratic Party. The days of the Weimar Republic were running out.

Period. While economic and political turmoil shaped its real life background, *The Blue Angel*'s story takes place in an unspecified German town, which provides a 19th Century setting. There is electrification, but lanterns and gas lamp posts are prevalent. Even though references are made in the film to specific years—1925 and 1929—complete absence of modern transport and communications technologies suggest a pre-World War One era.

Design. Art Director Otto Hunte, who had contributed nearly to all of Fritz Lang's 1920s films, created a studio set with narrow streets and slanted walls; he also endeared himself to von Sternberg by sculpting the grotesque apostle figures of the town's clock tower (138)—high praise coming from a director, who, in his memoirs, very rarely commended past collaborators. Cinematographer Günther Rittau's (*Metropolis* [Fritz Lang, 1927]; *Asphalt* [Joe May, 1929]) camera follows Professor Rath, amidst deep shadows, on his fateful evening excursions to the shabby nightclub. Tihamer Varady designed the raucous costumes of The Blue Angel's star attraction Lola Lola; make-up artist Waldemar Jabs created the haunting image of Professor Rath as he turned into a tormented and ghastly Auguste clown.

Sound. Von Sternberg's approach to sound technology playfully highlighted diegetic sound. Songs are either sang at the cabaret or they are heard coming from elsewhere (such as the church). Background music (and clamor) gets louder when doors and windows are opened; silence ensues when they are shut. Various noises contribute to the ambiance; the lack of noise often creates an equally powerful effect (e.g. The professor's bird's death was foreshadowed by Rath's whistling emanating no response from the cage; the Auguste clown who is frequently seen but never utters a single word). *The Blue Angel*'s cabaret setting showcases human voices charmingly, then again, the finale does the opposite with a subhuman sound—a shockingly horrible cock-a-doodle-do emanating from a now insane Professor Rath.

Soundtrack. Rath is bewitched the moment he steps into The Blue Angel—by Lulu Lulu's sensuality and her singing; the songs were composed by Friedrich Hollaender (*A Foreign Affair* [Billy Wilder, 1948]; *The 5000 Fingers of Dr. T* [Dr. Seuss – Roy Rowland, 1953]). A scene in the film shows Hollaender playing the piano at Der Blaue Engel, together with members of the jazz band Die Weintraubs Syncopators, providing live music for the show. Die Weintraubs Syncopators were a premiere Berlin band which performed on stage for prominent theater director Max Reinhardt and with Josephine Baker. They also appeared in *Das Kabinett des Dr. Larifari* (1930) a parody of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). Hollaender's score for *The Blue Angel* was orchestrated by Franz Waxman (*Frankenstein* [James Whale, 1940]; *Sunset Boulevard* [Billy Wilder, 1950]; *Rear Window* [Hitchcock, 1954]). The songs have been covered many times; the most famous of them, "Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt" – **"Falling in Love Again (Can't Help It)"** was sang by artists ranging from Billy Holliday to Christina Aguilera.

Language. Emil Jannings' Hollywood career was short-lived, mainly because his thick English accent presented a problem for audiences. Indeed, with the introduction of sound technology, language became a potential barrier facing successful international distribution of films. To overcome this issue, *The Blue Angel* was shot simultaneously in German and English. The English version has Emil Jannings and Marlene Dietrich conversing in English, while some of the secondary characters speak in German.

Emil Jannings. A character that tries to cope with falling from grace was no stranger to Emil Jennings. He had played an aristocratic and senior Russian general—turned traumatized and impoverished Hollywood extra—in von Sternberg's *The Last Command* (1928) and a proud doorman trying to cope with the humiliation of demotion—and loss of his majestic uniform—in *Der Letzte Mann – The Last Laugh* (Murnau, 1924).

Inspirations. Von Sternberg was visually influenced by the symbolist work of Félicien Rops, the Belgian painter, illustrator, caricaturist, eroticist, and print maker. As another inspiration from the world of painting, he also pointed out to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. When he first met Marlene Dietrich, he thought she was perfect for the part of Lola Lola, so much so that "Toulouse-Lautrec would have turned a

couple of handsprings had he laid eyes on her" (254). The name of the main character Lola Lola, recalled Lulu from Frank Wedekind's play *Pandora's Box* (1904)—which was adapted into film by G.W. Pabst with the same title in 1929.

Marlene Dietrich. For Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, an American actress, Louise Brooks, was cast as Lulu. Brooks was one of several actresses considered for the part of Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*. Among these were Lucie Mannheim (Annabella Smith in Alfred Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* [1935]) and *Metropolis* star Brigit Helm. Eventually, von Sternberg personally picked Marlene Dietrich, cabaret performer and actress; how he did so is told differently in various accounts. Dietrich's decade-long previous career in motion pictures included *Café Electric* (1927, Ucicky); *Die Frau, nach der man sich sehnt – The Women Men Yearn For* (1929, Bernhardt); *Das Schiff der verlorenen Menschen – The Ship of Lost Men* (1929, Maurice Tourneur). At the time of her casting, she was performing at a cabaret titled *Zwei Kravatten – Two Bow Ties*. *The Blue Angel* was not her first leading role, but it was definitely her breakthrough.

Iconic. *The Blue Angel* is an iconic film which has been referenced many times in film history. Among the examples are *Cabaret* (Fosse, 1972) and *The Damned* (Visconti, 1969—with Helmut Berger in drag as Marlene Dietrich). A 1959 remake by Edward Dmytryk became the subject of a legal battle between its producers and von Sternberg. Lola's risqué show has been parodied in comedy films such as *On the Double* (1961) with Danny Kaye as Fraulein Lilly and Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles* (1974). Among the later film adaptations of Heinrich mann's novel are *Lola* (Fassbinder, 1999) and an Indian production titled *Pinjara* (Shantaram, 1972). There have also been stage and musical adaptations of *Der Blaue Engel*.

Von Sternberg and Dietrich. Just before the release of *The Blue Angel*, Marlene Dietrich signed a contract with Paramount Pictures; she left for the USA on the evening of the film's premiere. Release of *The Blue Angel* in the United States was intentionally deferred to coincide with Dietrich's first American film, the eagerly awaited *Morocco*—which featured her in a similar role, donning a top hat and tuxedo. *Morocco* was the first of six films she would make with von Sternberg; it would be followed by *Dishonored, Shanghai Express, The Devil is a Woman, Blonde Venus*, and *The Scarlet Empress*. Together with *The Blue Angel*, these seven films constitute one of the most creative and successful collaborations in the history of motion pictures.

Rise of Nazism. Siegfried Kracauer's immediate reaction to *The Blue Angel* in a 1930 review was negative: he thought it lacked substance (Kracauer, 1980: 21). In his *From Hitler to Caligari*, Kracauer acknowledged that the film did not exist in "a vacuum" (22) and "pre-Hitler" years' politics was very much present in it; he suggested that Professor Rath's mischievous pupils—with their "sadistic cruelty"—were prime candidates for the ranks of the Hitler Youth (Kracauer, 2004: 241).

End of Weimar. *The Blue Angel* would be banned by the Nazis in 1933. It marks a unique moment in history; von Sternberg's first and last German film is an intercultural dialogue between an Austrian-American director with craftsmen and artists who were important contributors to 1920s German cinema. Some of these people continued their careers in Hollywood, while some, like Emil Jannings, served Nazi propaganda. Two members of the cast of *The Blue Angel*, Kurt Gerron (the manager of the troupe) and the Hungarian Károly Huszár (proprietor of the tavern), would become victims of the Holocaust. In 1930, there were still a couple of years to the end of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi take-over of power, but it was already crumbling. *The Blue Angel* offers a masterful snapshot of its demise.

CHARACTERS

Professor Immanuel Rath. Respectable professor at the high school is intrigued by the artist featured in the postcards.
Lola Lola. An "artiste" in the troupe performing a variety show at the Blue Angel club.
Kiepert the Magician. Kiepert performs tricks as a conjurer; he is also the manager of the troupe and the employer of Lola Lola and others. The actor Kurt Gerron was murdered at a concentration camp in the Holocaust.

Guste, "his wife". Actress and cabaret performer Rosa Valetti portrays Kiepert's wife, who is one of the performers in the troupe.

The Proprietor. The Blue Angel is a sleazy and shabby nightclub which routinely hosts Kiepert's troupe. Its proprietor is played by the Budapest-born actor Károly Huszár. The slapstick star was also known as Charles Puffy; he was another victim of the Holocaust (the other *The Blue Angel* cast member being Kurt Gerron).

Mazeppa the Strong Man. Lola Lola's lover. At the end, Lola Lola does not feel the need hide her affair with Mazeppa from Rath.

Angst, Favorite pupil of the Professor. Angst is the obedient and docile one in the classroom; he gets bullied by the others for snitching.

Ertzum, Lohmann, and Goldstaub. The high school students are mischievous adolescents who like to prank their professor and spend their evenings drinking beer and courting Lola Lola at The Blue Angel Club.

SCENES



1924. Professor Immanuel Rath is a prim and upright English teacher at a high school in an unspecified German town, which doesn't feature many distinctive traits. The clock tower is an exception—(von Sternberg was fond of the apostle figures of the clock tower sculpted by Otto Hunte.



Rath's awkward pedagogy and despotism in the classroom is challenged by his students, particularly Lohmann, Ertzum, and Goldstaub; on the other hand, he feels he count on the docile snitch Angst. The strict-disciplinarian discovers that his mischievous students clandestinely covet the photos of a cabaret performer—Lola Lola—from the local nightclub The Blue Angel.





There is electricity and photography in the world of *The Blue Angel*, otherwise most modern advances do not exist. Lola Lola's photos are clandestinely circulated among young men and cause a stir—not just in the classroom, apparently in the town as well. The show's posters are on display at many points. A maid mimics Lola Lola's pose as is illustrated in an advertisement for her show at The Blue Angel; a watchful policeman stands in front of a similar poster.



That evening, Rath embarks on a mission to locate—ostensibly to eradicate—the corrupting influence on his students.

(Otto Hunte's expressionist set design, with its deep shadows and slanted angles, nods to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [Robert Wiene, 1920]: Professor Rath, on his fateful visit to The Blue Angel, presumably to tell Lola Lola to stop seducing his pupils; Rath's favorite pupil Angst gets punished by the other boys for snitching.)

The Blue Angel. The Blue Angel is a sleazy and shabby joint; it is hosting a travelling troupe managed by Kiepert the magician.



Victims of the Holocaust: Kurt Gerron and Károly Huszár (Charles Puffy) respectively portray the manager of the troupe (doubling as the magician) and the proprietor of Der Blaue Engel.

Passing narrow and shadowy streets, Professor Rath makes it to what is basically a beer hall. Lola Lola is the main attraction of the variety show; she happens to be singing as Rath walks in bewildered.



Lola Lola's risqué show embodies masculine traits and gestures. The tavern's decoration has a nautical flair, the stage is packed with seagulls, anchors, and other sea-themed props all around—with a wooden ship's figurehead serving as a column. Rosa Valetti plays Lola Lola's coworker, a Der Blaue Engel artiste.



Valetti was a fixture of the Berlin Kabarett scene during the Weimar Republic.

Composer F. Hollaender plays the piano at Der Blaue Engel and the jazz band Die Weintraubs Syncopators provide live music for the show.



Right away, Rath spots his students, who flee to the backstage. He dashes after them furiously but the boys manage to evade him (not before a prankster plants Lola Lola's panties in his jacket's pocket). The professor gets to meet Lola Lola, who is amused by Rath's clumsiness.

Back at the dormitory, Angst gets viciously spanked by his classmates for telling the professor about their nightly excursions to The Blue Angel.

Otto Hunte's expressionist set design, with its deep shadows and slanted angles, nods to *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [Robert Wiene, 1920]—Rath's favorite pupil Angst gets punished by the other boys for snitching.



Rath makes a Scene. Next day, to the surprise of the students, Rath does not bring up their encounter at the sleazy joint. In the evening, he heads out to the nightclub once again, under the pretense of returning Lola Lola's belongings. This time, the professor is bolder, so much so that he kicks out a sea captain who is bothering Lola Lola. The policeman who is called to the scene is awed by encountering the respectable professor. Rath finally catches the students, who evidently feel empowered by knowing very well what is bringing him there. They defy him arrogantly and get away. Rath is too enamored (and intoxicated) to care; he is over the moon by Lola Lola's interest in him. He spends the night at The Blue Angel with her.

New Life. The following morning, a mutiny awaits Rath at the classroom. The loud booing of the students only stops with the arrival of the headmaster. He urges Rath to put an end to the scandalous affair. Rath firmly rejects and is consequently fired; he has made up his mind to marry Lola Lola.

1929. Rath is now working at the nightclub, selling Lola Lola's photo postcards. Five years pass; he is routinely mobbed by Kiepert, while Lola Lola acts indifferently. Kiepert decides to take the troupe to Rath's old town and have the former professor perform there as an Auguste clown—he expects the residents would pay well to see him on the stage. Even though the idea of humiliation terrifies Rath, he has no choice but to prepare for the act.

Clown's last Act. The troupe's return to The Blue Angel causes quite a stir and the townsfolk flock to watch the professor. Meanwhile, Lola Lola is openly having an affair with Mazeppa the Strong Man. Rath puts on his Auguste clown costume and hesitantly takes to the stage. To appease the crowd, Kiepert smashes a couple of eggs on the clown's head. At one point, Rath glimpses Mazeppa and Lola Lola passionately fondling each other; he freaks out and goes



berserk. It takes many men and a straight jacket to subdue him.

Respectable but unpopular professor has turned into a grotesque and tormented Auguste clown.



Death of the Professor. A few hours later, Rath is released. He leaves The Blue Angel—on the stage, Lola Lola is singing assertively, as if nothing has happened. Rath trudges to his old school, enters his former classroom and collapses on the chair. He dies with his hands firmly clutching the desk.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

IMMANUEL RATH

"Prof. Dr. Immanuel Rath" (as per his door sign) is a bachelor who teaches English literature. Prior to his fateful encounter with Lola Lola, Rath seems to have little life outside the school.

Illustrative moments

Man of Routine. Rath's idle life is secure and offers no chance of a surprise. His room is a bit messy but he is prompt and predictable—signified by him regularly waking up with the chimes of the town's clock tower. It all changes from the moment he sees Lola Lola's suggestive photos.

Tyrant. The self-important petit-tyrant enjoys power games in the classroom. He is domineering and strikes fear in the hearts of the students with his tiny black book, in which he carefully evaluates their conduct and class performance.

Introvert. Rath is an antisocial whose clumsiness amuses Lola Lola. He spends his time alone in his lodging and is totally out of his habitat in the back streets of the town and The Blue Angel.

Infatuated. The tension in the story builds upon Rath's infatuation with Lola Lola, for whom he steps out of his secure existence. He gives up his position at the high school, which meant for him not only a job, but an opportunity to be masterful. His infatuation leads to total loss of power.

Clown. Rath is coerced and coaxed to accept the ultimate humiliation and appear on stage in his home town as a clown—specifically an Auguste clown. At the end, Emil Jannings comes up with an unsettling and memorable portrayal of insanity, perhaps one of the greatest in the history of film. Can you think of comparable examples?

LOLA LOLA

No information is given about the background of the chanteuse. The English language version of *The Blue Angel* presents her as a foreigner whose native tongue is English.

Illustrative moments

Weary. Lola Lola performs with a disinterested look; she doesn't care about her audience and she makes no effort to hide the fact that they mean little to her. She is experienced and is used to the attention. Her world-weary demeanor contrasts with Rath's boyish excitement—not unlike that of his pupils.

Assertive. Lola Lola's performance as well as her gestures are self-confident and assertive, almost contemptuous. This is most striking at the end; when Rath walks away ruined, Lola Lola sings indifferently—almost cruelly.

Sensuous Seducer. The German songs sang by Lola Lola stress her sensuality: “I am, head to toe, ready for love”. The English version changes the tone with “falling in love again, can’t help it.” The latter downplays the overt sexuality of the German songs, but still, Lola Lola has a sexually charged presence.

Promiscuous. Lola Lola’s songs hint at her inclination for infidelity. Still, it is a devastating blow for Rath when he sees her openly having an affair. She simply fancies Mazeppa the Strongman and decides to flirt with him.

THEMES

Modern Woman. *The Blue Angel* offers a provocative reconsideration of traditional gender roles. The film opens with the scene of a female janitor glimpsing at a poster announcing the show at The Blue Angel. The poster features Lola Lola standing in her typically defiant pose, with her legs spread apart. The woman stops cleaning for a moment and mimics the pose. Lola Lola is a disruptive influence in the small town, but she is also a refreshing and subversive role model. During her cabaret performance, she continues in a similar vein, sitting with legs crossed, looking indifferent, and gesturing assertively. The self-confident and world weary character is too complex to be reduced to being categorized simply as either a flapper or a vamp—as was the case with female characters in many films of the period.

Exoticity. In Pabst’s *Pandora’s Box*, the innocently wanton protagonist—the flapper Lulu—was played by the American Actress Louise Brooks. Somewhat similarly, Lola Lola’s background is ambiguous and at least in the context of the German small town, she has a foreign quality. The English language version of *The Blue Angel* identifies Lola Lola as a person who communicates better (or only) in English. That distinction makes her a foreigner visiting a small town; she is not necessarily bound by norms and expectations about German women.

Masculinity. Rath may be a despot in the classroom, but in his interactions with women he is initially submissive; he watches passively—with just a hint of indignation—as the housekeeper tosses his dead bird into the stove. Lola Lola excites Rath by giving him an opportunity to project an idealized image of masculinity. He kicks out the sea captain, eliminating a rival and impressing Lola Lola. During their wedding dinner, Rath delightfully crows like a rooster—he celebrates his new-found masculinity while the others cheer him. In the end, Rath crows once again, but this time it is a distorted and terrifying sound. He has become a caricature of the former masculine image and now everyone laughs at him.

Social Values and Hypocrisy. *The Blue Angel*’s financier Hugenberg was annoyed with the film, because of its depiction of moral hypocrisy. The Blue Angel, with its traveling troupe, is the pot stirrer in the seemingly peaceful small town—where individuals (teacher, headmaster, policeman, captain, etc.) are shown respect because of their professional titles). The cabaret shows that the townsfolk’s prudishness was just a façade. In the finale, the residents flock to the tavern to taunt the educator they once superficially respected. Similarly, on the surface, the students respect their teacher; in fact, they despise him and do everything they can to destroy him at the first opportunity.

Entertainment Industry. Various artistic talents are commodities showcased for a price at The Blue Angel. The story takes place in late 19th Century, so the troupe represents an early form of showbiz. When the members of the troupe discuss their work as being art, it is intended to be hilarious. Similarly, Lola Lola and other chanteuses remind Kiepert that they are “artistes”. He is a businessman (he doubles as a magician) who cares little about art and mocks his employees. Then again, when Professor Rath appears in the backstage, Kiepert hails it as an encounter between art—represented by himself—and science, which Rath stands for.

Modernity. The small town has gas lit lamp posts and sometimes lanterns are used. On the other hand, the beer hall is electrically lit and there is even a powerful spotlight, used by the artistes to single out patrons. There is also an electrical doorbell that buzzes. There are no automobiles or phones. Lola Lola’s suggestive photos are obviously amply copied, so photography is quite advanced. The early modern setting is eclectic rather than realistic.

Discussion Questions.

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

Theorist Patricia Mellencamp maintains that "von Sternberg's films do not celebrate the containment of potentially disruptive sexuality, but the release of it." How would you respond in the context of *The Blue Angel*? (Studlar, 1988: 112)

According to Gaylyn Studlar, *The Blue Angel*'s Rath is one of the most masochistic among von Sternberg characters (61). Do you agree that Rath is a masochist? Why?

According to Siegfried Kracauer, Lola Lola kills Professor Rath (Kracauer, 2004: 214). On the other hand, Josef von Sternberg thinks that Rath destroys himself (Bogdanovich, 1997: 241). What do you think?

Does Lola Lola have some of the characteristics associated with a flapper? Is she a vamp? How is she similar to and different from well-known vamps of cinema?

Is there any significance of Rath performing—specifically—as an Auguste clown?

What do you make of the clown in the troupe who never speaks? What is that character's contribution to the plot?

Von Sternberg does not show Rath's final delirium: as he attacks Lola Lola in a rage, the camera pulls away from him and focuses on others (who are watching him). This decision of the director didn't please the actor Emil Jannings. How about the character? What is the resulting viewing experience?

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