

Shanghai Express

USA 1932

Directed by Josef von Sternberg

With Marlene Dietrich, Clive Brook, Anna May Wong

Of all the delirious exoticisms created by Marlene Dietrich and Josef von Sternberg during their white-hot period in the 1930s at Paramount, *Shanghai Express* remains the favourite for many. It's a riotous exercise in excess in every area: the visuals are overpowering and sumptuous; the costumes ornate and extravagant; the sets a riot of fabrics, light and space; and all of it captured in the most delectable black-and-white photography. The film seems to exist entirely in zones of light that transfix the protagonists. There's a nominal plot, of course, none of which is remotely believable, and that's precisely the point. *Shanghai Express* is part of Sternberg's world – not the real world - created for our visual and sensual delectation. We're just visiting, for the duration of the film, and we're not allowed to escape from the insularity and hermetic compactness of Sternberg's vision; this is a dream, and we're part of it. Within this context, the film is surprisingly feminist: Wong's Chinese character is seen as Dietrich's equal and, although they are both ladies of ill repute, they are presented almost as sisters, displaying equal contempt for the film's men, who are seen as either prigs or fools.

Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Senses of Cinema*

The picture opens in a virtuoso display of atmospherics at the Peking station. The evocation of an imaginary China is dense with detail, elaborately layered, festooned with flags, cages, calligraphy and blank-faced livestock. Through warrens of detail we board the Shanghai Express with its passengers, experts of deception all, except – oh, irony! - Shanghai Lily and her prostitute travelling companion. This is the perfection of the streamlined, dangerous Dietrich, the exquisitely beautiful temptress half hidden behind veils that give away nothing but her mocking smile. She is decked out in costumes of no

period that became as notorious as her dialogue: black egret feathers, black veils, black chiffon, black marabou. She looks like the Angel of Death.

Shanghai Express can be taken as adventure story, love story or perverse pilgrims' tale. However, although the China atmosphere is persuasive it is also patronising and, indeed, the picture was banned in China. What holds it together is Dietrich, whose mystery is dramatically strategic, not a static series of lighting experiments.

Steven Bach, *Marlene Dietrich: Life and Legend*

Sternberg's flair for impulsive fatalism found more play in *Shanghai Express* than elsewhere. Dietrich and Brook carry the heart of the drama, and a beating heart it is despite all the gloss of intrigue and illusion. That love can be unconditional is a hard truth, and American audiences found it particularly difficult to appreciate Sternberg's Empire of Desire ruled by Dietrich. Opposite her, Brook's performance is deeply felt, and the last ten minutes of the film are as emotionally profound as anything Sternberg ever attempted.

Andrew Sarris, *Josef von Sternberg*

Shanghai Express is literally a film of black on white: Shanghai Lily dresses in no other shades. In the vital first meeting with her old lover, the pennants that frame them in the window are, on his side, white and grey but, for her, black boldly scrawled with white lettering. The film's opening titles prefigure a second *motif* – of signs, printing, letters, and notes. Calligraphy weaves through the story; we face a blizzard of newspapers, telegrams, passports, visas and the omnipresent *hanzi* ideograms, spattered over almost every flat surface, cryptic and alien like the faces revealed in a carriage window in the opening scenes. Even more effective is the film's sense of onward motion, a theme repeated in the cutting and shooting, particularly in the use of left-hand tracking shots in the scenes at the station.

The central conflict of the film is the confrontation between destroyer and victim, the two bound together by an interlocking and unexpressed desire for immolation. Beside this, the mocking humour, the multiple deceptions that motivate the film and, most of all, the enigmatic character of Dietrich's Shanghai Lily are quintessentially Sternberg.

John Baxter, *The Cinema of Josef von Sternberg*

