

# Underworld

USA | 1927 | 81 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Joseph von Sternberg
<b>Screenplay</b>	Charles Furthman, Howard Hawks, Ben Hecht, Robert N. Lee, George Marion Jr., Josef von Sternberg
<b>Photography</b>	Bert Glennon

## Cast

<b>'Bull' Weed 'Feathers'</b>	George Bancroft
<b>McCoy</b>	Evelyn Brent
<b>Rolls Royce Wensel</b>	Clive Brook
<b>'Buck' Mulligan</b>	Fred Kohler

## In Brief

Josef von Sternberg's riveting breakthrough is widely considered the film that launched the American gangster genre as we know it. George Bancroft plays heavy Bull Weed, a criminal kingpin whose jealous devotion to his moll, Feathers, gets him into hot water with a rival hood and, ultimately, the authorities. Further complicating matters is the attraction that blossoms between Feathers and an alcoholic former lawyer.



In a photograph of Josef von Sternberg from 1937, he looks like a character from one of his own films: a turbaned magus with elegantly trimmed beard and mustache, holding a cigarette as he gazes out obliquely, with the hint of an ironic expression too remote to be called a smile. It remains difficult to separate von Sternberg from the mythology that began to form around him early in his career, largely, if not entirely, with his encouragement. The “von,” for instance, was not his by birth but was tacked on to his name to add an extra flourish to the credits of a 1924 film (*By Divine Right*) on which he had assisted director Roy William Neill—it wasn't Sternberg's idea, but he embraced it from the start. The aristocratic moniker helped establish his image as another exotic European import, when in fact his roots as a filmmaker were purely American.

He was born in Vienna in 1894, but his family came to America seven years thereafter, and although he did return to Austria between the ages of ten and fourteen, it was in Fort Lee, New Jersey, that he made his first tentative steps into the film business. He came to film almost randomly, as a repairer of damaged celluloid, an appropriately technical job for someone whose technical mastery was evident from his earliest efforts. He worked, virtually from the start, at all aspects of filmmaking, as cutter, cameraman, and screenwriter, and aspired always to combine those functions and more. Of *The Scarlet Empress* (1934), he would later remark, not untypically: “With one exception, every detail, scenery, paintings, sculptures, costumes, story, photography, every gesture by a player, was dominated by me.”

The first film he directed, *The Salvation Hunters* (1925)—a low-budget independent feature coproduced with the English actor George K. Arthur—caught the attention of Charlie Chaplin and launched von Sternberg into a directorial career that initially seemed to unravel as rapidly as it had taken shape. He signed to M-G-M and made a film, *The Exquisite Sinner*, that was later largely reshot by another director; its follow-up, *The Masked Bride*, was abandoned by von Sternberg (in Andrew Sarris's account, “he turned his camera toward the ceiling and walked off the set”) and finished by someone else. Chaplin then engaged him to make *The Sea Gull* (1926) but, for reasons never fully clarified, suppressed the film after a single public screening (the only print known to survive appears to have been subsequently destroyed for tax reasons). At this early stage, von Sternberg had already acquired his unshakable reputation as a self-vaunting artist and tyrannical taskmaster, driving his actors through endless retakes and striving, as he always would, for a monopoly of creative control. “If Sternberg set out to inspire general dislike,” Kevin Brownlow has written of the filmmaker's relations with his Hollywood colleagues, “he succeeded impressively.” (William Powell, after starring in *The Last Command*, had it written into his contract that he was never again to be directed by von Sternberg; Joel McCrea walked off the set of *The Scarlet Empress* after a single encounter.)

Von Sternberg's technical know-how made him eminently employable, however, and in 1927 he was entrusted with *Underworld*, a scenario about Chicago gangsters concocted by Ben Hecht, who certainly knew something about the subject. Hecht was aghast at what von Sternberg did to his story—only a few elements of the original had been preserved, and Hecht's hard-boiled veneer had given way to a more romantic, not to say operatic, mood—but the film was a massive and unexpected hit, and its success launched an eight-year association with Paramount, by far von Sternberg's most productive period. *Underworld* was followed by the masterpieces *The Last Command* and *The Docks of New York* (both 1928), along with two other silent films now lost (*The Drag Net*, 1928, and *The Case of Lena Smith*, 1929). After his first talkie, *Thunderbolt* (1929), another gangster vehicle with George Bancroft, von Sternberg went to Berlin in 1930, at the invitation of producer Erich Pommer, to make what would become the most famous of all his films, *The Blue*

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Angel. Its worldwide impact was magnified when von Sternberg brought his discovery, Marlene Dietrich, to Hollywood and proceeded to work with her on a series of the most obsessively personal films ever made there. But when the popular triumphs *Morocco* (1930) and *Shanghai Express* (1932) were followed by the formally masterful and commercially disastrous *The Scarlet Empress* and *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), Paramount was through with him. Afterward, he worked only sporadically and never with the budgets—or the freedom to use them to the limits of his imagination—that he had previously enjoyed.

Von Sternberg, later in life, made no great claims for *Underworld*, describing it in his autobiography as “an experiment in photographic violence and montage.” He emphasized the concessions he had made to the mass audience (that “homogeneous herd,” as he characteristically described it, “united on its lowest level”): “I had provided the work with many an incident to placate the public, not ignoring the moss-covered themes of love and sacrifice. Human kindness was demonstrated by showing a murderer feeding a hungry kitten.” Quite aside from his confidently orchestrated central love triangle, the film had other and more innovative ingredients. Presumably, a major part of its appeal was the profusion of then novel images, pouring out at a rapid tempo von Sternberg was never to surpass, that would become part of the common vocabulary of the gangster genre: a bank window exploding, squad cars moving frantically through dark city streets, loose women parading themselves in underworld lairs, the outlaw hero contemplating a neon sign that proclaims “The City Is Yours,” a gangster shot dead in his flower shop, his desperate killer besieged by police in an apartment, the windows shattering from barrages of gunfire as the room fills with smoke.

Rarely again would such images be rendered with the unyielding precision and florid magnificence that von Sternberg brought to them. Charting his characters’ movements through shadowy alleys and subterranean nightspots, he turned drab urban spaces into an ominous labyrinth, a mythic place. Audiences may well have been persuaded that they were getting the hard-boiled lowdown on a big city’s lower depths, but anything like documentary realism was far from von Sternberg’s concerns. It is safe to say that gangsters and Chicago and the literary aspirations of Hecht interested him only to the extent that they could be made part of that imaginary universe he was beginning to formulate, and that would masquerade elsewhere as Russia, North Africa, China, Spain, and the South Pacific. Neither quite European nor quite American, he created, naturally enough, a cinema of exile, taking place everywhere and nowhere. *Underworld* is of a piece with the dream poetry of *Morocco* and *The Saga of Anatahan* (1953) and was received as such by spectators around the world. In France, it was given the resonant title *Les nuits de Chicago*, inspired perhaps by the patch of gorgeous intertitle lyricism that opens the film: “A great city in the dead of night . . . streets lonely, moon-flooded . . . buildings empty as the cliff-dwellings of a forgotten age.”

What is apparent from the outset is the extreme concision of von Sternberg’s cinematic language. Preambles and subsidiary details interest him not at all. A gangster named Bull Weed (George Bancroft) and an intellectual drunk whose claim of trustworthy silence earns him the nickname Rolls Royce (Clive Brook) encounter each other on the street in the wake of a violent bank robbery. They bond in an exchange of glances that conveys everything we need to know about them: Bull is tough, generous, and stupid; Rolls Royce is capable of loyalty yet endowed with infinite irony. The two male leads represent altogether opposed types: Bancroft a raucous, barreling force of nature, brutal yet openhearted; Brook (as the first of many protagonists one might easily take as a surrogate for the director) a tightly controlled embodiment of brooding intellectual detachment masquerading as sardonic humor.

With barely a pause, we find ourselves off the streets and deep in the nocturnal world of the Dreamland Café. There could hardly be a more appropriate name for this early example of the primal Sternbergian locale, the place where time is suspended so that the most elemental human confrontations and transactions can play themselves out as dreamlike ritual: the unconscious as nightclub or brothel or casino. He would return to such an interior again and again, in *The Docks of New York*, *The Blue Angel*, *Morocco*, *Blonde Venus* (1932), *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941). It is, as well, the perfect simulacrum of the film studio, where artifice reigns supreme and reality itself becomes malleable through the deployment of artfully fake decor and carefully manipulated lighting effects. (In his next work, *The Last Command*, the film studio would be the literal setting.)

Following a brief evocation of the scurrying of alley cats, the archetypal woman (never far to seek in his films) enters the visual field—Feathers McCoy, incarnated by Evelyn Brent as a sort of abstract quintessence of the flapper, sheathed in a feather-fringed coat and further adorned with a white feather boa that, in a manner typical of von Sternberg, establishes itself as a primary element of the movie. To identify the character with the garment is not simple fetishism (if fetishism is ever simple) but a means of shifting the spectator to the plane of perception where, for von Sternberg, the real narrative action unfolds: the level where cloth and flesh and glint of eye, texture and curvature and depth of shadow, outweigh the plot points that serve merely to direct us toward those effects. This is not to say that he indulges in meaningless abstraction but that he arrives through abstraction at the deep story, the inward story, for which the outer is camouflage. At the heart of the fake is the real.

As Feathers bends at the top of the stairs to adjust her stocking, a loose feather floating down lands at the feet of the disheveled Rolls Royce, employed at sweeping out the place. The way the movement of a single feather seizes hold of our perception establishes the unique flavor of von Sternberg’s film world. This feather, and nothing else, will be the center of the universe for as long as he decrees. The peculiar undulant beauty of its





movement, the power of its compressed radiance: such things are not incidentals but essence. In his autobiography he writes: “Light can go straight, penetrate and turn back, be reflected and deflected, gathered and spread, bent as by a soap bubble, made to sparkle and be blocked . . . The journey of rays from that central core to the outposts of blackness is the adventure and drama of light.”

The adventure and drama of light is anything but cold. It finds its ultimate expression in those close-ups of faces that are the pivot points of von Sternberg’s films, everything around them serving only to bridge the gaps between one glance and another. If for a time, at least, he managed to be both supremely self-expressive artist and canny manipulator of popular taste, it was because he could combine in a single image the most obvious meanings and the most infinitely variable shades of ambivalence. The dance of desire and resistance in the relationship of Feathers and Rolls Royce is carried out entirely in a language of glances and gestures that has retained its sense of intimate reality. This place where lovers’ eyes

meet, or fail to meet—a place potentially of savage cruelty and abject self-punishment, where all possible contradictions of feeling may come into play—is von Sternberg’s native ground, around which all the rest of his world is constructed out of shadows and nets and paper streamers.

Vision as erotic experience, so basic to how movies work their effect, has rarely been acknowledged so lucidly as in von Sternberg’s films. This is perhaps the secret to their enduring freshness: for all the baroque complication and fine-wire work with which they are put together, his worlds have the liberated mercurialness of free-floating desire, even as they penetrate into undiscovered reaches of the decadent and grotesque. The great centerpiece of *Underworld*, the criminals’ annual ball, is a sodden, bestial mess that is made to seem lighter than air, a delirious carnival of luminosity and exquisitely choreographed chaos. Here as elsewhere in the film, one can become absorbed simply in following the movements of bodies in space, delighting in patterns whose rhythmic beauty exists quite apart from the brutal appetites and uncontrolled rages of the characters.

Of all directors, Josef von Sternberg most completely took charge of the terms in which his work would be discussed, in statements unsurpassed for unapologetic bluntness: “My pictures are acts of arrogance.” “All art is an exploration of an unreal world.” “To reality one should prefer the illusion of reality.” “Actors are material with which one works.” “Marlene is not Marlene, she is me.” As curator of his own legend, he could easily be seen as passing over into self-parody. Fun in a Chinese Laundry (1965), his disdainful, self-aggrandizing autobiography, written in a style that alternates between heavy irony and purple patches of exotic description, manages simultaneously to elaborate his myth and to undercut it. If his is a cinema of masks, the I of this memoir virtually declares itself yet one more mask, and one calculated more to repel than to attract.

It is nonetheless one of the best books about the chaotic circumstances under which films are actually made, and ultimately as clear an enunciation of aesthetic principles as any director has formulated. He speaks again and again of the “loose ends” and “slippery factors” inherent in filmmaking, the random expressiveness of anything that comes within range of the camera and microphone, an expressiveness that must be curtailed rather than encouraged: “The director writes with the camera whether he wishes to do so or not.” His art, finally, was not one of expansion and profusion but of rigorous compression, eliminating everything that did not pertain to the essence of what he wished to show: “To photograph a human being properly, all that surrounds him must definitely add to him, or it will do nothing but subtract.”

Had von Sternberg made only his great silent trilogy—*Underworld*, *The Last Command*, and *The Docks of New York*—he would endure as a supreme example of what it means to write with film. We would miss only the more extreme personal elaborations of the later work: the seven films with Dietrich (which seem more than ever a single film and a central text of the twentieth century) and the final masterpieces, *The Shanghai Gesture* and *The Saga of Anatahan*, along with a handful of unforgettable scenes in the mutilated *Jet Pilot* (1950), a regrettably solitary example of what he could do with color. His high opinion of his own capabilities and his majestic sense of his poetic vocation might indeed seem like intolerable arrogance were they not so undeniably justified.

Geoffrey O’Brien, [www.criterion.com](http://www.criterion.com)

