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# *The Docks of New York*

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“Miles of docks wait day and night for strange cargo – and stranger men”, reads the initial intertitle of Josef von Sternberg’s masterfully constructed late silent film *The Docks of New York* (1928). Sternberg utilises the milieu of the waterfront in New York City to study his characters, illuminating different aspects of humanity. The film’s main players are Bill Roberts (George Bancroft), a stoker, and Mae (Betty Compson), a “tough cookie” prostitute. Through their petty hopes, dreams and rivalries, Sternberg channels human flaws and desires such as greed, lust, love and recklessness, as well as the idealism and heroism of a humanity manifesting itself inside a dark, gritty world of flophouses, gin-mills and seedy docks.

There is a great tradition of films wherein the actual setting of New York becomes a key character. New York is a melting pot and it represents many different classes, ethnicities, ages, cultures and traditions. There has been an evolution in the New York film, and *The Docks of New York* is a formative link in this chain. From its smoky harbours to its rowdy gin-mills, from its flophouses to its back-alleys, *The Docks of New York* presents the working class of the New York waterfront through vivid imagery.

*Docks of New York* is partially based on [John Monk Saunders](#)’ story “The Dock Walloper”. The plot contains a relatively standard melodrama and concludes preposterously. It is arguable whether it is a type of pulp: in its setting, melodramatic plotting, and the lower class aspirations of its characters. It nevertheless becomes evident that the film is more an exercise in style than

content. Harold Rosson's elegant cinematography, seamlessly passing from scene to scene, and Sternberg's aesthetic delight in light and shadow, register the film more as a visually breathtaking spectacle than an achievement of narrative. The film is full of evocative images such as the close-up of muddied dock waters clearly reflecting a mirror image of the moonlit harbour. This image is rippled and shattered by the traumatic incident of a woman jumping into the water, the camera pulling back to reveal the heroic, bulky stoker who jumps in to rescue her. The film's use of water, light and reflection as key motifs is striking, even if somewhat old hat over 80 years later.

The impossibility of marriage for the seaman – due to his occupational hazard of not sticking around in one place long enough to put down roots – and the heartbreaking devotion of Mae, creates tension and comments on the “impossibilities” of human nature. Is the stoker sincere? Can Mae become an appropriate wife? What will be the couple's end? These elements and questions drive the basic plot. Yet, such complications are obviously secondary to the style in which Sternberg presents this material.

The ships, “Tarrying in an endless journey from port to port” as an opening titlecard states, feel almost existential. The stoker's work is a Sisyphusian task that is never complete and suggests no possibility of advancement. His work leads him from one sordid event to the next. Such may be the reality of life for many seamen, which, in a sense, is what this film is really about. This emphasis may recall Hiroshi Teshigahara's *Suna no onna* (*Woman in the Dunes*, 1964), a film in which a woman is cruelly tasked to shovel an ever-encroaching layer of sand away from her hovel. In a sense, Bill, the stoker only gets a reprieve from this shoveling when he is brawling or drinking, a state that is equally true of his co-workers. The dockworker's meaningless labour to achieve simple subsistence is, in a way, a comment on the nature of all labour. At the beginning of the film, Bill, with his cap, cigar, coal blackened face and cutoff sleeves, almost resembles a figure on a Soviet workers' revolutionary poster (a somewhat apt connection, though the film seems more concerned with emotion than ideology).

The wedding scene is perhaps the most memorable in the film, after Bill has agreed to marry Mae as a dare. In the crowded bar, a preacher is dragged in to issue the vows. Bill takes his vows knowing that he cannot keep them, and Mae earnestly accepts hers while others mock. The sharp contrast between the barroom setting and the solemnity of the wedding vows makes for an interesting paradox; one that runs throughout the film and focuses upon doomed companionship amidst the canvas of the docks of New York.

Sternberg is best known for his work with Marlene Dietrich, and for his use of striking close-ups in films such as *Der blaue Engel* (1930) and *Shanghai Express* (1932). “He built his career, and Marlene Dietrich's too, on what could be achieved with the perfect combination of lenses and lighting in a close-up. Her cheekbones became world-famous, but only because von Sternberg, the premier camera-artist of his age, knew how to sink the cheeks below them in ravishing shadow”, explains Tim Robey (1). He was also an important practitioner of late silent cinema. In his silent films, Sternberg utilised close-ups and shadowy, chiaroscuro-filled cinematography and *mise en scène* whose compositions closely resembled German expressionist cinema. Although the film is predominantly realist, Sternberg also harnesses aspects of expressionism and creates images that are as strangely haunting as anything seen in *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (Robert

Wiene, 1920) and F. W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922). As Michael Atkinson states: "There's no getting around von Sternberg's lavish achievements with *mise en scène*; either his shadowy urbanscapes feel genuine, with depths and dimensions we cannot see, or they're as crazily expressionistic as a Caligari doorway" (2). Take, for example, the opening sequence combining the flames of the furnace and the illuminated, grizzled faces of the workers. These initial images set up a paradigm for the rest of the film that alternates between characters drifting in and out of the light. This stylised approach to cinematography makes every composition a work of considerable aesthetic pleasure. The images are not traditionally beautiful, but are instead foreboding, dark, shadowy, meditations on the relationship of the composition of an image with a subject that moves from shadow and into light; a staple formal aspect of expressionist filmmaking. Sternberg is a precursor to Orson Welles in his adeptness at semi-constructed experiments with deep focus cinematography, varying the depth-of-field of each shot.

*The Docks of New York*, a compelling and heartfelt exercise in style over content, is one of the best films of its era. Sternberg's obsession with light and shadow, his considerable artistry with *mise en scène*, and his ability to use the New York cityscape as a canvas to tell his tale of love, heartbreak and squalor, demonstrate his talents as a filmmaker. Some may argue that his work did not mature until the talkies and his collaboration with Marlene Dietrich, while others may choose to identify *Docks of New York* as a film by director at the peak of his powers.

## Endnotes

1. Tim Robey, "Josef von Sternberg: The Man Who Made Marlene Sparkle", *The Daily Telegraph* 5 December 2009:  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/6711095/Josef-von-Sternberg-the-man-who-made-Marlene-sparkle.html>. ↑
2. Michael Atkinson, "In the Magic Hour: 3 Silent Classics by Josef von Sternberg", *Sight and Sound* vol. 20, no. 10, October 2010:  
<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/5636/>. ↑

*The Docks of New York* (1928 USA 76 mins)

**Prod Co:** Paramount **Prod, Dir:** Josef von Sternberg **Scr:** Jules Furthman, suggested by the story "The Dock Walloper" by John Monk Saunders **Phot:** Harold Rosson **Ed:** Helen Lewis **Art Dir:** Hans Dreier

**Cast:** George Bancroft, Betty Compson, Olga Baclanova, Clyde Cook, Mitchell Lewis, Gustav von Seyffertitz