

The Blue Angel (*Der blaue Engel*, 1930)

Lars Nowak

dir. Josef von Sternberg; prod. Erich Pommer; screenplay Carl Zuckmayer, Karl Vollmöller, Robert Liebmann; photography Günther Rittau, Hans Schneeberger; music Friedrich Hollaender. 35mm, black/white, 104 mins. UFA, distrib. UFA/Paramount.



In *Der blaue Engel*, an early sound film, the unworldly grammar school teacher Immanuel Rath (played by Emil Jannings) falls in love with the lascivious nightclub singer Lola Lola (Marlene Dietrich). As his marriage with her forces him to give up his middle class existence, he joins her vaudeville troupe, where he makes himself useful by acting as a clown. Having to appear in this humiliating role in a guest performance in his hometown as well as being sexually betrayed by his wife, he breaks down and returns to his school, where he eventually dies. This story of psychological degradation, social decline, and physical death is predominantly categorized as a tragedy (e.g. Sarris 25, 28; Bronfen 117; Klein 67). Yet McCormick calls this tragedy »rather trite« and »heavy-handed« (125, 201), while Bartl explicitly distinguishes Rath from a »tragic martyr« (46; all translations mine). Consequently, Seeßlen instead classifies the film as »melodrama« (61), which, although sharing commonalities, differs from tragedy in more important respects.

Indeed, Rath's only tragic feature is his moral ambivalence, which primarily results from the fact that he himself brings about his downfall by marrying Lola—an ambivalence that applies to characters in tragedy as well (Nowell-Smith 72; Kappelhoff 250). In contrast, the pathetic character's male identity is *not* a specifically tragic trait, as it also occurs in American melodramas of the 1950s in which young men fail to advance to the paternal position as well as in other cinematic corpora that can be interpreted in terms of the melodramatic mode, such as the film noir or the action film, where men often fall victim to *femmes fatales* or are physically tormented by other men (Elsaesser 79; Kappelhoff 245-62; Mercer and Shingler 89, 98-104).

Instead, several elements of the film indicate that Sternberg converted Heinrich Mann's 1905 novel, *Professor Unrat*—which ends with the title character's transformation into an anarchist rebel (Müller 38-39)—from a satire into a melodrama. To begin with, Rath is a petty bourgeois who, as a bachelor, is already socially marginalized and receives little respect from his students. This limitation of the character's social decline corresponds to the supposedly general human suffering of melodrama's bourgeois protagonists, who, unlike the politically powerful aristocrats of pre-bourgeois tragedy, at best command a family and private property, but not the polity (Nowell-Smith 71). Moreover, Rath's decline shows a melodramatic contingency (Elsaesser 87) as it results from an individual misapprehension of what marriage to a vaudeville singer means. This error arises from the immaturity of Rath, who relates to Lola like a son does to his mother, just as melodrama typically enacts a regressive desire to return to the mother-child dyad (Neale 17-18). Finally, Rath does not bear his fate with tragic composure, but rather indulges in melodramatic self-pity (Elsaesser 87).

Although a teacher representing the social—or, in Lacan's terminology, the symbolic—order, Rath primarily laments his fate nonverbally, due in part to Jannings' attachment to silent film acting. This lack of verbal articulation reaches its climax when Rath, in the role of »Stupid August,« taken from a mute actor, can give only a desperate and inarticulate rooster cry (Klein 66-67). Another nonverbal means of expression is the exuberant décor that characterizes *Der blaue Engel* (and all subsequent films Sternberg realized with Dietrich). This is especially true of the eponymous nightclub, in which a visual excess is combined with an acoustic one, as an overabundance of decoration obscures the camera view just as different sounds cacophonously overlap. Again, these excesses point to melodrama, in which the characters' sufferings find no verbal expression because of their own repressions or textual censorship and instead manifest in physical symptoms or emotionally charged props (Brooks 56-80; Nowell-Smith 73-74; Elsaesser 75-76).

The most interesting melodramatic trait of *Der blaue Engel* is connected to the fact that melodrama can be understood as a masochistic genre, the audience of which voluntarily exposes itself to the empathy generated by the depiction of suffering characters. Like all Sternberg-Dietrich films, *Der blaue Engel* mirrors this performative masochism in a diegetic one (Studlar 1988) which at the same time includes elements of sadism (Koch 63, 65; McCormick 114). This aspect has been discussed by many critics. Bronfen, for instance, has pointed out a sadomasochistic circulation of the gaze that alternately assigns exhibitionist and voyeuristic positions to characters (124-29). Likewise, on the basis of Deleuze's theory of masochism, Lola (like Dietrich's roles in other Sternberg films) can be interpreted as a masochistic mistress (Koch 68) due to her multiple fetishizations and vestimentary and emotional ambiguity (Baxter; Pilipp 96-98, 102).

However, to adequately describe other aspects of the masochism represented in *Der blaue Engel*, especially those related to Rath, a recourse to Lacan's theorization of this »perversion« is necessary (1966, 774-78; 2016, 103-99). This perspective reveals that through his marriage Rath turns from a sadist into a masochist, in the sense of the relation between these two psychic structures as described by Lacan. The phantasmatic staging of both perversions corresponds to the fact that Rath regularly appears on literal and figurative stages in both phases (Koch 69; Bronfen 129, 133; Klein 57, 59, 62).

The reference to the big Other that is also crucial for both perversions (which includes both the will to enjoy and anxiety) presents itself in the sadistic phase through

the way that Rath—as a teacher who is introduced by his name and forbids the pupils to have contact with Lola, in whom he initially sees a daughter—appears as a (ridiculous) father figure, and thus as an embodiment of the law (Baxter 23; Bronfen 114, 117; Pilipp 92, 96). Rath's switch to the masochistic position entails a transition to the roles of disciple and son, which implies a subjection to the big Other, who is now represented not only by the masochistic mistress Lola, but also by the head of the show troupe, the dedicated sadist Kiepert (played by Kurt Gerron), and, eventually, again by the institution of the school (Baxter 22; Bronfen 117-20; McCormick 126; Pilipp 96, 100, 102).

According to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the imaginary self-images of human beings include various partial objects attached to the erogenous zones of their bodies. Since these »objects small a« are cut off by symbolic castration, they are not only the general object-causes of desire but also the reference points of the masochistic and sadistic will to enjoy and anxiety. In the latter case, the anal object plays a particularly important role, which is demonstrated in *Der blaue Engel* through an extensive thematization of impurity and contamination (Bartl). When during the sadistic phase Rath and one of his pupils involuntarily spit at each other while practicing English pronunciation, it becomes obvious that Rath primarily seeks the »object small a« in the body of his victim, but also already identifies himself with it. Rath's move to the masochistic position allows the identification with the »object small a« to come to the fore. From the viewpoint of bourgeois morality, Lola's vulgarity and open sexuality appear as filth (Bartl 37, 41, 43), which then rubs off on Rath—who is already deranged by his first contacts with her, and after the marriage goes to rack and ruin, ending up as a carcass in his old classroom (Klein 64; Bartl 37, 41-48). Yet, in the process, several objects are only transformed into dirt when touching Rath's body. Apart from the fact that, according to Lola, Kiepert drags Rath »durch den Kakao,« he actually smashes eggs on his head, which otherwise serve both oral nourishment and genital reproduction, while Lola herself blows her facial powder, whose proper function is narcissistic beautification, into his face (McCormick 202; Pilipp 93, 99-101; Bartl 45). It is thereby made clear that the vaudeville troupe merely reinforces an impurity that is already inherent in Rath himself (Bartl 43, 47). In fact, he is not only introduced by his name, but also by the waste and stench resulting from his cigar smoking and from the bird he keeps caged and finds dead one morning (Bartl 37, 47). He is furthermore characterized by the repulsive habit of demonstratively blowing his nose and is explicitly associated with filth by his students, who nickname him »Unrat« (a pun on the German word for »debris«). While Pilipp reads Rath's various bodily fluids as ejaculate and his clown act as castration (Pilipp 92-94, 97-99), all above-mentioned elements of the film indicate that an interpretation in terms of the anal »object small a« is more plausible.

Just as this subject matter makes *Der blaue Engel* Sternberg's most brutal film (Sarris 25, 28), it is also his only German production, a fact that is highlighted through its numerous borrowings from Weimar cinema (McCormick 114-22). This is no mere coincidence. Rather, Rath's downfall points just as much to the widespread prevalence of male fears of social descent in the Weimar Republic (McCormick 124) as his sadomasochism betrays an authoritarian character that can be considered, in a more general sense, typically German (Sembach 17).

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