



**JUST WATCH!**

**STERNBERG,  
PARAMOUNT  
AND  
AMERICA**

**PETER BAXTER**

---

# Just Watch!

STERNBERG, PARAMOUNT AND AMERICA

Peter Baxter



BFI PUBLISHING

---

First published in 1993 by the  
British Film Institute  
21 Stephen Street  
London W1P 1PL

The British Film Institute exists to encourage the development of film, television and video in the United Kingdom, and to promote knowledge, understanding and enjoyment of the culture of the moving image. Its activities include the National Film and Television Archive; the National Film Theatre; the Museum of the Moving Image; the London Film Festival; the production and distribution of film and video; funding and support for regional activities; Library and Information Services; Stills, Posters and Designs; Research; Publishing and Education; and the monthly *Sight and Sound* magazine.

Copyright © Peter Baxter 1993

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data.  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the  
British Library.

ISBN: 0-85170-386-0  
0-85170-387-9 pbk

Cover by Cinamon Designs  
Cover photograph: Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*

Set in 10.5/11.5 pt Bodoni by  
Fakenham Photosetting Ltd  
Fakenham, Norfolk  
and printed in Great Britain by  
Page Bros Ltd, Norwich



Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus* (Josef von Sternberg, 1932)

---

---

## Acknowledgments

---

---

Over the years, a good many people took time to respond to my letters, to talk to me in person or over the telephone, and were kind enough to share their own research and insights. They couldn't always keep me from wandering into guesswork and speculation, but their guidance toward solid ground is greatly appreciated.

I have had financial support from the Advisory Research Committee of Queen's University, allowing me to travel and spend precious time in libraries and archives. Bits and pieces of information from facilities in three cities provided factual details. In Los Angeles: the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; the Louis B. Mayer Library of the American Film Institute; the Doheny Library, University of Southern California; Special Collections and the Theater Arts Library at the Research Library, UCLA, as well as the Architecture Library, and the Fine Arts Library. In New York City: the Film Study Center at the Museum of Modern Art, and the Billy Rose Theater Collection at the New York Public Library, Lincoln Center. In London: the British Library; the University of London Library; the British Film Institute; the Library of the Royal Institute of British Architects. The pleasant hours I spent in these places made work on this book seem less like labour than a voyage through countries rich and strange, where I was welcomed everywhere by sympathetic hosts. In particular, I would like to thank Ned Comstock at the Doheny Library, and Howard Prouty at the Margaret Herrick Library, for the surprises they came up with. Howard urged me to get things straight, and I hope I haven't let him down. Jackie Morris arranged screenings at the BFI, where I had my eyes opened more than once. Cathy Keen at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, sent copies of illuminating documents about the Stendhal Galleries and David Alfaro Siqueiros's visit to Los Angeles. Julie Klein, intern at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, provided me with a catalogue of the Museum's 1943 show of Sternberg's art collection. William S. Kenly, formerly Chief Publicist for the Motion Picture Group at Paramount Pictures Corporation, very kindly went on his own search to provide me with information absolutely ungettable elsewhere, along with his own anecdote about working with a sometimes difficult film-maker.

Dr Shifra M. Goldman gave me great help in piecing together the activities of David Alfaro Siqueiros in Los Angeles; she dug into her files and came up with conversations and recollections of people who were there, testimony I would never have found elsewhere. Brian Taves knew how to retrieve material

documenting Paul Ivano's work with Sternberg. Steven Bach dropped in out of the blue one day, helped put things in perspective, and has been generous with advice and encouragement ever since. Sam Jaffe – 'not the actor', but film producer and gentleman – kindly invited me over one spring day to talk about Oxford, Virginia Woolf, Paramount Pictures, and Jo. I talked by telephone with Meri von Sternberg and Nicholas von Sternberg about what I was planning to do, and I hope they will not be displeased with the result. The late Marlene Dietrich advised me that everything I wanted to know was to be found in *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*. In a way, she was right.

I appreciate, and want to acknowledge with gratitude, the encouragement I had at different stages of the work from Peter Harcourt, Raymond Bellour, Marc Vernet, Jean Durançon and Scott MacDonald. They may not have realised how important their comments were. Early drafts of the book – which I had thought would be much later drafts than they turned out to be – were read by Richard Maltby at Exeter University, and by colleagues at Queen's University: Blaine Allan, Frank Burke, and Bryan Palmer. I owe them thanks for their criticism and constructive comments, indeed as I owe thanks to students in my classes at Queen's University, and in classes that I visited at the Universities of Glasgow, Warwick, Kent, East Anglia, Stockholm and Cracow. They all had to listen to me at various times, and never failed to turn me around to listen to myself.

I wish also to record my great thanks to Robert Macmillan, whose knowledge of Sternberg's career, and generosity in sharing that knowledge, were of central consequence for this work.

That this work appears with a BFI imprint I owe to Ed Buscombe's interest and encouragement. That its bits and pieces have come together so well I owe to the input of Dawn King and – especially – David Wilson.

Sandra has been close to this work and encouraged me for a long, long time. Leilan has spent her lifetime with it. They are the ones I come home to, from the dream factory in 1932.

Peter Baxter  
Kingston, Ontario  
23 September 1992

---

---

# Contents

---

---

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<b>The Temple of Daydreams</b>	
The Anchor and the Chain	15
Mass Production and Mass Consumption	20
Immigration and Urbanisation	23
Class and Audience	26
The Structure of Film Consumption	29
Sternberg in America	32
<b>Paramount at the Brink</b>	
Executive Warfare	39
A Project for Sternberg	46
Preparing the Script	53
From Script to Film	69
<b>Sternberg, Immigration and Authorship</b>	
The Sternberg Gag	85
The Image of Desire	98
Super Revue	105
The Waves	110
Her Name in Lights	118
In the Language of Men	126
<b>America in 1932</b>	
Lindbergh Business	133
The Imagery of Anxiety	140
A Family Matter	156
The Stages of Desire	159
<b>The Dialectics of Class and Culture</b>	
Critics and the Paying Public	173
Power Unadorned	178
Bringing the Hurricane Home	185

<i>Appendix: Credits/Synopsis</i>	195
<i>Sources, References and Works Consulted</i>	199
<i>Index</i>	209



---

---

# Introduction

---

---

Representations may seem to have a kind of floating life of their own but they need always to be anchored back in the realities that produce them.

Edward Said<sup>1</sup>

On 12 September 1932 Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt of New York left Albany to open his autumn campaign for the American presidency. Roosevelt's train travelled through the western states for the better part of two weeks, stopping in city after city from Missouri to the Pacific, often just so the candidate could throw out platform greetings, sometimes long enough to deliver a major address. Along with making proclamations about the need for farm relief or the regulation of public utilities, Roosevelt was not above advertising his support for local pork-barrel projects or promising a quick end to Prohibition. One of his most remarkable speeches, given on 23 September before an audience of some 2,000 business leaders at the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, was a high-flown reappraisal of American history, providing a rationale for the change in leadership and direction offered by the Democrats.

Roosevelt reviewed the growth of the United States in the century and a half since the War of Independence, ranging over the foundations of Jeffersonian democracy and the ensuing era of westward expansion. The construction of the railways in the nineteenth century, the rise of America's industrial corporations, and the concentration of corporate ownership, had allowed power to be amassed by 'a group of financial titans . . . always ruthless, often wasteful and frequently corrupt'. In the twentieth century, the country moved ever deeper into an era from which there was no route back to its original conditions. In the autumn of 1932, the United States faced the profound problems of the Great Depression:

A glance at the situation today only too clearly indicates that equality of opportunity no longer exists. Our industrial plant is built; the problem just now is whether under existing conditions it is not overbuilt. Our last frontier has long since been reached, and there is practically no more free land. More than half of our people do not live on the farms or on lands and cannot derive a living by cultivating their own property. There is no safety valve in the form of a Western prairie to which those thrown out of work by the Eastern economic machines can go for a new start. We are not able to invite

the immigration from Europe to share our endless plenty. We are now providing a drab living for our own people.<sup>2</sup>

From early in the year, Roosevelt's electoral ambitions had been dogged by criticism that although he was an amiable man and a competent state governor he offered no credible alternative to Herbert Hoover's professed confidence that market forces would propel the United States into recovery. As the election drew near, however, Roosevelt increasingly positioned himself as the visionary advocate of new – if vaguely defined – approaches to a social reality seemingly ungrasped by the regime in Washington. The Democratic candidate's pronouncements in San Francisco were couched in radically different terms from those employed by his opponent. They suggested the coming election would turn on much more than a question of which would be the better administrator of established institutions and policies. The economic morass in which the United States had been struggling since 1929 was proving to be disastrous out of all proportion to the periodic depressions of the past. More forcefully than the celebrated prosperity of the Jazz Age, the Great Depression's dreadful spectacles of breadlines and shanty-towns, of mass demonstrations and jobless workers shot down in the streets demonstrated that the American system of production and consumption had evolved into something beyond the ability of federal authorities to control or contain. Not only was economic power highly concentrated, but in little more than the youngest voters' lifetime innovations in technology and productive techniques had drastically transformed industrial organisation and practices, and deeply affected the social dynamics of the American people. By 1932, it was clear that the attitudes of the incumbent president – self-made millionaire though he was – were hopelessly inadequate to deal with the problems that had mounted over the course of his administration. By November, many voters believed that to choose between Hoover and Roosevelt meant more than deciding, as the former put it, between 'two philosophies of government'.<sup>3</sup> It meant voting on what 'America' was to be, what compound of goals and expectations, realities and images was to hold sway in the United States.

On the other side of the continent on the day Roosevelt gave his speech in San Francisco, Josef von Sternberg's latest film, *Blonde Venus*, opened in New York City at the Manhattan and Brooklyn Paramount theatres. Marlene Dietrich was the star, and for months Paramount's publicity department had been preparing the public for her first film role as an American and a mother. Exhibitors had been primed to make the most of what was promised to be one of the most provocative and profitable films of the fall season. An eight-page advertising insert in the *Hollywood Reporter* for 2 September 1932 announced its imminent release. The last page of the insert is almost a parody of Hollywood ballyhoo. On the right side of the page, in a vertical column, are portraits of Dietrich in the four roles she had played under Sternberg's direction at Paramount: Amy Jolly in *Morocco*, the spy X-27 in *Dishonored*, Madelaine in *Shanghai Express*, and Helen Faraday in *Blonde Venus*. These are topped by a portrait of the director himself. To the left, in a framed column, is this declaration:

HAIL  
VON STERNBERG

as a painter pours his soul onto canvas – as a sculptor breathes life into cold marble . . . so does Von Sternberg – the genius – create on the screen . . . his masterpiece of life – The exotic beauty of the girl in ‘MOROCCO’ . . . the tragic heroine of ‘DISHONORED’ . . . the lovely derelict of ‘THE SHANGHAI EXPRESS’ – Now . . . a more entrancing . . . gloriously luscious beauty – a girl who played with love –

Marlene DIETRICH  
in Paramount’s dramatic romance  
‘BLONDE VENUS’

Roosevelt’s speech was given and Sternberg’s film released not only on opposite seaboard of the United States, but in what were normally considered to be wholly distinct spheres of social activity. The first took place in the arena of electoral politics, in accord with constitutional forms and party traditions that dated back a hundred years and more. The second was an event in the relatively new phenomenon of commercial mass entertainment, which had come to occupy an important place in American life since the turn of the century. If electioneering was often treated as part of the noble heritage of American democracy, and entertainment disdained as a means of profiting from the masses’ taste for distraction, they had long since begun to coincide in their forms and social functions. From early in their history Americans had made electing their leaders into carnivals of a highly participatory kind: Walter Lippman described the delegates to the Democratic convention that nominated Roosevelt in July 1932 as ‘stupefied by oratory, brass bands, bad air, perspiration, sleeplessness, and soft drinks’.<sup>4</sup> And the political dimension of movie-going had long been an issue to those concerned with the structure and stability of social authority in the United States. As early as 1908, New York City reformers, alarmed at the potential effect of wide-open, unregulated entertainment on a swelling class of immigrant workers, had pressured Mayor McClellan to close the city’s nickelodeons on Christmas Day.<sup>5</sup> The event initiated wide public discussion about civic order, newcomers to the American shore, and the effect of this commercial attraction on public morals.

Twenty years after the Christmastime closing of the New York nickelodeons, the film industry had matured into a vertically integrated oligopoly, with eight major companies controlling the vast bulk of film production, distribution and exhibition in the United States, and wielding the most powerful influence in international film commerce. Organised opposition to that entertainment, centred in church groups, social improvement associations and civic

authorities, had itself become national in scope. In 1922, there were censorship bills on the legislative agendas of thirty states before William H. Hays, promising industry self-regulation, was appointed president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. Through the 1920s, as the Hollywood studio system took shape, the MPPDA was a vehicle for pursuing the long-term interests of the whole industry, and for securing the precedence of those interests over any particular studio's lunge for quick profits.<sup>6</sup> It was, in other words, a way for industry leaders to manage competition among themselves and to protect the eminence they had fought tooth and nail to achieve.

Lea Jacobs has shown that from the beginning 'self-regulation' had been a means by which Hollywood sought to maximise its commercial prospects. It 'functioned as a sort of machine for registering and internalizing social conflict' in a way that would allow it to put films on the screen with the least possible interference from institutionalised and self-appointed censors.<sup>7</sup> By 1932, the industry was hearing a renewed and vehement cry against its portrayals of criminal violence and sexual immorality.<sup>8</sup> The pressure to conform to regulatory guidelines was growing, while the need to produce reliable, profit-making films had never been higher. For *Blonde Venus*, this meant that production was deeply affected at every stage, from the writing of its scenario to the eventual release of a final print, by Paramount's perceived need to make a film that would meet market demand and at the same time take account of active pro-censorship sentiment which could interfere with profits.

The Hollywood film industry was locked in a protracted, bizarrely symbiotic struggle with organised groups intent upon curtailing the products and attitudes it marketed. The course of that struggle in 1932, arguably the most significant year in the twentieth-century history of the United States, is almost as richly documented as the course of the country's presidential politics. Roosevelt's speeches, the dismissive, increasingly angry ripostes they evoked from Hoover, and the entertainments that flowed from Hollywood in a current that national politics did not significantly divert or economic crisis impede, all 'belong to' the same historical moment – a highly charged conjuncture of economic, technological and political forces – and to a single cultural complex. There were films on American screens in 1932 which acknowledged – like Roosevelt – that the frontier, in its geographical, historical or ideological dimension, was a thing of the past. Only a few days after the presidential election in November, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* appeared in New York City. It follows its protagonist James Allen from his hopeful return to the United States on a troopship after serving in France, along the dusty roads and railway lines that he tramps in search of work, into the prison camp to which he is wrongfully sentenced, to the night of despair that swallows him at the conclusion. He is explicitly referred to as a 'forgotten man', the phrase that Roosevelt had made current in a radio speech the previous April. Similarly, some of the most memorable scenes of *Blonde Venus*, which was in production at Paramount while *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* was being shot at Warner Bros, are those which follow the heroine as she wanders from town to town, seeking to support herself and her son, until finally – with child and hope given up – she sinks into a shelter for vagrant women, lost and forgotten.

Events occurred, choices were made and courses were set during 1932 that affected the American economy, the country's political agenda and its social relations for decades thereafter. It was a year in which the film industry, in particular the Hollywood studios and the chains of theatres operated by the majors, faced the problem of reconciling production and exhibition capacities expanded in the 1920s with audience numbers that had been plummeting throughout 1931 and continued to fall in the succeeding year as the Depression took its toll on spending power. Hollywood was loath to confront its audiences or tempt demand with films that reflected the crisis gripping the country. The year 1932 saw no screen dramatisation of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's July rout of the Bonus Army in Washington, no exposé of the Alabama courts' shameful treatment of the Scottsboro Boys, no sagas of oppression and heroic resistance set in the coal country of Kentucky or West Virginia. Few films risked portraying the experiences – dismissal, unemployment, exhaustion of savings, eviction, hunger – that millions lived through in reality and that newspapers headlined virtually every day of the year. Those that did tended to transform and romanticise them. The element of fantasy is obvious in the very title of Paramount's anthology of sketches, *If I Had a Million*, released in the autumn as the economy slid towards its wintry bottom. In *American Madness*, Frank Capra coupled his portrayal of a bank failure with an exemplary fable of human decency and trust, in the first full-scale exposition of the populist theme that would drive the greatest of his films over the next fifteen years. More allusively, but perhaps more powerfully because of the exoticism of its setting and the erotic, racially charged implications of its story, Capra's *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* sets its American heroine down in revolutionary China, has her knocked unconscious in a scene of urban panic and abducted by a powerful warlord, and follows her struggle to free herself from a confinement for which nothing in her background has prepared her. Although, in common with Sternberg's *Shanghai Express*, Capra's film was made in the context of news about civil war and Japanese aggression in China, its narrative can be construed as an extended metaphor for the disorientation felt by American audiences following the economic crisis that had befallen them. Even *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, the crowning achievement of Darryl F. Zanuck's policy of adapting 'topical' subjects to the screen, referred to the present crisis only by way of a story set largely in the 1920s, and it put its overt emphasis on judicial and bureaucratic oppression rather than economic struggle.

Implicitly, however, one cannot help but see that film after film in 1932 conveys the anxious doubt of film-makers and audiences alike about the resilience of their social institutions. Incapable though Hollywood was – having become an industry for producing and marketing unthreatening fantasy – of presenting the Depression head-on with images and stories that would directly contribute to public debate, it could not attempt simply to impose blind optimism on its audiences or to disavow completely the realities they confronted every day in the streets of their cities. A variety of film cycles remodelled the broad economic conflicts and contradictions of society in terms of symbolically resonant settings and personal struggles that could be concretely presented and plausibly resolved. 'Shyster' films, such as *The Mouthpiece*,



Dietrich as wife and mother

portrayed corruption in the legal system. Prison films, such as *Twenty Thousand Years in Sing Sing*, surrounded their protagonists with stone walls and iron bars. Whether belonging to a cycle or not, many films turned on the entrapment of their characters in circumstances – historical, economic, familial – beyond their control, with which they had no choice but to cope, and in which they sought some measure of success or security, however limited or temporary.

In important respects *Blonde Venus* belongs to the pattern of film cycles deployed by the studios in the first years of the decade. To use terms coined by later film historians, it is both a ‘fallen woman’ film and a ‘maternal melodrama’. In January 1932, Benjamin Percival Schulberg, boss of Paramount’s Hollywood studio, first heard the original story from Sternberg and the screenwriter Jules Furthman. He wired New York with a synopsis, enthusiastically comparing the story with MGM’s recent releases *The Sin of Madelon Claudet* and *Susan Lenox, Her Fall and Rise*, whose very titles indicate their heroine-centred, melodramatic contents. From its inception as a project, then, *Blonde Venus* was intended to be a commodity that potential consumers could identify in terms of the thematic features it shared with films from other studios: a family in crisis, and a woman attempting to reconcile the contradictory demands of economics, morality and desire.<sup>9</sup>

*Blonde Venus* is as significant in its uniqueness as in its conformity to common patterns. Simply by casting Marlene Dietrich as a wife and mother, and by situating the film largely in the United States, Sternberg set *Blonde*

*Venus* apart from the three previous films he made with her at Paramount. Moreover, *Blonde Venus* differs profoundly from the two films that succeed it. Domestic, family-centred, tightly contained melodrama was followed in 1934 and 1935 by the delirious, exotic extravaganzas of *The Scarlet Empress* and *The Devil is a Woman*, the last films Sternberg and Dietrich made together. *Blonde Venus* is thus a unique film among the seven (including the German-made *The Blue Angel*) that are most memorably and significantly attached to the name of either the director or the actress. Unlike those that came before and after, it portrays in direct terms some attitudes and issues that had taken shape in American society during the decades-long phase of rising middle-class prosperity, which the Great Depression plunged into sudden crisis. After making *Blonde Venus* in the social climate of 1932, in a studio that was riddled with executive dissension, and after seeing it greeted by popular indifference and critical dismissal, Sternberg turned towards the creation of unreal worlds where his fascination with power and eroticism could be deployed in virtually mythic terms.

This book attempts to describe some relations of particular text and particular history. It conceives of a text as on the one hand a discrete, symbolic object, exhibiting its own coherence – material, formal and semantic – along with its own internal contradictions, and on the other as an event in the discursive process of mass entertainment, itself a primary constituent of American social being in the twentieth century. If that process is so vast and complex as to be irrecoverable in its totality, some of its component sub-structures can be mapped, and something of its vast intricacy can be glimpsed from the entry point that a single film provides.

In all its attributes, mass entertainment is highly overdetermined. What is produced and consumed depends on the complex interactions of often contentious interests and rapidly changing technologies. No single determinant is for long indisputably dominant or even clearly defined. One aspect of what shapes a text may best be observed in terms of the individuals directly concerned or of incidents occurring in its production, while another is more strikingly revealed against broad historical horizons.

By the time Josef von Sternberg gained his footing as a director in the mid-1920s, the dominant mode of film production in the United States had crystallised as the ‘Hollywood studio system’, which existed to serve a market of national and international dimensions. Individual creativity, studio organisation and industrial practices, and the appetites of an immense potential audience, each bore on the film that was produced, but none existed in isolation from the others. Even at the level of consumption, the simple act of ‘going to the movies’ took place in terms that can be seen from a number of distinct but finally inseparable perspectives: as shaped by the centrally controlled exhibition circuits linked to the major studios; in terms of how urban infrastructures reflected and enforced distinctions among economic activities, ethnic groups and social classes; in respect of the indeterminate borderline between the diverse cultures of major American cities and the homogeneous culture of American consumerism. Within these several frames of reference,

moviegoers took part in a continuing engagement with the key values and attitudes, fears and expectations of American mass culture. In that, they encountered what Robert Warshaw called, with succinct comprehension, 'the screen through which we see reality and the mirror in which we see ourselves'.<sup>10</sup>

*Blonde Venus* is one of Sternberg's most beautiful, ambiguous and intriguing films, and one of nine among his twenty-four completed features to be set in the United States. The Marxist critic Harry Alan Potamkin had praised his earlier silent films for exhibiting 'the honest American idiom of the open attack'. With the inception of the Dietrich cycle, however, as Sternberg's evolving artistry found a new focus for its image-making, Potamkin could grasp what Sternberg was doing only in terms of 'fancy play, chiefly upon the legs in silk, and buttocks in lace, of Dietrich, of whom he has made a paramount slut'.<sup>11</sup> As we shall see, he was not alone in such an estimation. *Blonde Venus* is the film in which the American and exotic lines of Sternberg's work are most complexly intertwined. It is clearly a work of deeply personal investment, drawing on his own childhood as well as his obsessive involvement with the star he had discovered in Germany in 1929. At the same time, it is a film where some of the inherent tensions of American experience – in the particular terms that Sternberg lived it – are drawn out to their fullest extent.

*Blonde Venus* was made and released at a time when many Americans were desperate to make sense of economic, technological and social changes that had affected their country, and that had been the condition in which younger Americans had grown to adulthood. With the inception of the Great Depression, a host of voices began arguing that the country had somehow 'come through' a historical passage, and was now poised before an uncertain future. Among widely read books in those years were works such as *Only Yesterday* by Fredrick Lewis Allen, *The Years of the Locust* by Gilbert Seldes, and *America as Americans See It*, a collection of essays by writers including Sherwood Anderson, W. E. B. Du Bois and Upton Sinclair. The title of Edmund Wilson's anthology of observations and anecdotes, *The American Jitters*, is indicative of a mood that was becoming widely shared. *Seeds of Revolt* by Mauritz Hallgren, editor of the liberal weekly *The Nation*, strikes an even more ominous note.<sup>12</sup> The historian Charles Beard, co-author of *The Rise of American Civilization*, edited a volume of essays entitled *America Faces the Future* that was an attempt to encourage debate about what many perceived to be 'drastic changes in the economy, ethics, institutions and spirit of American democracy'.<sup>13</sup> Robert and Helen Lynd's *Middletown*, the great sociological study of how one American town evolved in a few decades from rural isolation into modern, 'go-ahead' dependence on mass manufacturing and national markets, had already appeared at the end of the 1920s. All these works – along with more specialised, policy-driven studies initiated by the federal government, such as *Recent Economic Changes in the United States* and *Recent Social Trends in the United States* – represented attempts (with different ends in view) to comprehend widely perceived historical change.<sup>14</sup> The complexity of that change was particularly well summarised in a less well-known study undertaken at the high-water mark of late-1920s prosperity by a home economist at the University of



North Carolina. In her 1931 introduction to *The Family in the Present Social Order*, Ruth Lindquist lists the material, social and ideological changes that her generation had experienced:

They include the development of power machinery accompanied by the factory system and large-scale, specialized production; the use of machinery in agriculture, and production in rural areas for exchange rather than for use; the system of indirect distribution of economic goods; the acceptance of the profit motive in industry and commerce as the controlling one; the expansion of facilities for rapid and inexpensive communication and transportation; the system of free public education and the enduring belief in education as a remedy for many of the social ills; the changed position of women; the new status of the child; the freedom of movement from class to class as contrasted with a caste system; the emerging standards for health; new attitudes toward sex and marriage; the political and social philosophy of the nation with its emphasis upon individual rights and the laissez-faire doctrine, coupled with an increasing appreciation of the need for social control; the shift from religious orthodoxy to liberalism and unbelief among a larger percentage of the population; and, finally, the newer knowledge regarding both physical and mental health. In brief, through science and invention the old order has been replaced, and with the new order has come an American home life which has but few characteristics of the type from which it has developed.<sup>15</sup>

Unmentioned in this list, though perhaps implicit in the phrase 'expansion of facilities for rapid and inexpensive communication and transportation', are the movies and Hollywood. Josef von Sternberg participated in the film industry's industrial growth and its entry into the fibre of American society. A wonderfully vivid paragraph in his memoir, *Fun in a Chinese Laundry*, recalls Sternberg's early career at the World Film Company in New Jersey, in the years between 1914 and 1917. The kind of work Sternberg did and the conditions in which he worked emblemise the historical process that was overtaking American life and thought:

Shortly after graduation from the bench where sprocket holes were mended, I was made head of the shipping department centered in a film laboratory, and entrusted with the task of seeing to it that the theatres promptly received their copies. As films are usually completed barely in time to reach a theatre, this meant that not only had I to watch the films being hauled out of the developing tanks to be dried on giant drums but I also had to mount them swiftly on metal reels, pile them into an old battered Ford, and then drive them through a storm-lashed New Jersey coast road to a Hoboken express office to make certain that the films would reach their destination in time.<sup>16</sup>

The film laboratory and the Ford, the coastal road and the express office, were components of the new production and distribution systems that liberated and