



Alexander Horwath, Michael Omasta, eds. *Josef von Sternberg: "The Case of Lena Smith"*. FilmmuseumSynemaPublikationen. Vienna: Österreichisches Filmmuseum / SYNEMA - Gesellschaft für Film und Medien, 2007. 304 pp. \$32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-3-901644-22-1.

Reviewed by Katherine Arens (Department of Germanic Studies, University of Texas at Austin)

Published on H-German (August, 2009)

Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

Reconstructing a Lost Masterpiece

This volume (also available through Wallflower Press/Columbia University Press) is the fifth in an ongoing series of documentation volumes presented by the Austrian Film Museum in Vienna and SYNEMA, The Society for Film and Media in that city. Offering a catalogue of materials and texts to introduce and situate individual films and directors, these exemplary bilingual texts (German-English) address audiences ranging from film devotees to professionals and scholars. With this contribution, the editors turn their attention to Josef von Sternberg's *The Case of Lena Smith* (1929), a Hollywood film about a woman battling Vienna's class system. In the film, Lena Smith secretly marries a young officer with whom she has a child. After her husband's parents insist on raising the child, the officer kills himself and Lena's suit for custody is rejected by a Viennese court. Lena spirits her son away from his grandparents, only to see him go to war in 1914. Although it was acclaimed at the time, the film now survives only in a short fragment.

The volume opens with a letter from Meri von Sternberg (the director's wife), sent from Valencia, California, to support the film museum's retrospective of Sternberg films. It recalled their 1960 visit to the city when he was writing his memoirs, and sets the tone for the volume by stressing the many connections between Hollywood and the Austrian culture industries—connections all too often usurped by the master narrative of German film

and UFA. The bulk of the work is taken up by a set of individual contributions (typeset in parallel German/English columns) that help to document, reconstruct, and situate the lost film, each copiously illustrated with stills and reproductions of documents.

The first, Alexander Horwath's "Working with Spirits," picks up gracefully from that letter to segue into Sternberg's biography, stressing his connections with and early experiences in Vienna, where he was born in 1894 and lived, with only a three-year interruption, until 1908. Horwath situates Sternberg's experience of the city and the film's theme in its historical context, with the film's Lena representing a generation of immigrants to the city from the provinces. The essay brings up important issues for the early history of Hollywood: cross-over source materials and scenes (source material resembling Arthur Schnitzler's stories; set pieces from places like the Prater or other European amusement parks); the role of early emigrants in co-work (in this case, Sternberg and Erich von Stroheim); and the emigrant experience itself, as Jewish filmmakers in Hollywood themselves learned new ways of life. The social critique presented in *Lena Smith*, which is developed through the female protagonist's growing awareness of the futility of her struggles against class and social convention, was very progressive to Hollywood audiences, although it was more familiar to Europe's literary public. Horwath finishes this

introduction by summarizing the film's reception, including reports by the last people able to see the film before Paramount destroyed all prints. Overall, he makes a compelling case for the Austrian dimensions of this film, and also for its eclipse in popularity in comparison to *The Blue Angel* (1930).

The second essay in the volume, by Janet Bergstrom, concentrates on the paradox in Sternberg's career: on the one hand he worked in a totally commercial context, while on the other, he often chose to work with challenging material that was almost guaranteed not to be commercially viable. *Lena Smith* was clearly one of the latter. Bergstrom traces the genesis of the film from the original story purchase, Samuel Ornitz's three scenarios, and the script development, stressing the difficulties in making this material work for an audience. The filmmaker and his team struggled to tell the story of an unacknowledged wife—or unwed mother, or prostitute—from the provinces whose child could not be acknowledged because of social prejudice. The material stays dark to the very end of the film: Lena is unjustly imprisoned in a workhouse on a morals charge. Though she escapes and steals her own child, the film's coda suggests that he will be destroyed by the war.

The bulk of the volume is devoted to reconstructing the film, using all available sources. The linear reconstruction is based on four documents (two sets of intertitles submitted to censors, a Japanese shot-by-shot commentary on the finished film, and excerpts from a script that was close to the final version). This linear reconstruction is supplemented by film stills and frame enlargements from the surviving film fragment (now archived in the Theater Museum of Waseda University, Tokyo), set designs and sequence breakdowns from the Paramount archives, and other materials (often autobiographical) from Sternberg's circle. This exemplary work

models ways in which surviving information on lost films can be deployed.

The last section of the volume, "On the Reception of *Lena Smith* and One of Its Precursors," is comprised of several short essays. The first, by Komatsu Hiroshi, who discovered the surviving segment of the film in China in 2003, details the general evaluation and reception of the film. Gero Fandert follows with "Auch er hat den blick" on the film's reception in Weimar; Franz Graftl's "Lena X" adds material about the film's French reception (and is interesting in its own right for its method, which compares plot summaries from film magazines). Michael Omasta's "Vienna Gals" takes up the idea of reception in another way, analyzing how *Töchter* (1914), a short novel by Karl Adolph, was freely translated/adapted by Jo Sternberg as *Daughters of Vienna* (1922). The essay discusses the treatment of a story of lower-class girls who were essentially sold into prostitution, material with a close parallel to *Lena Smith*. Such parallels are perhaps broader than the essays in this volume can detail; for instance, I noticed clear similarities between the *Lena Smith* material and Arthur Schnitzler's late social-critical novel *Therese: Chronicle of a Woman's Life* (1928), which also stresses the social costs of being a single mother at the mercy of the upper classes. Finally, the volume's appendix reproduces contemporaneous reviews and biographies of major production figures.

To be sure, this volume aims to stress Sternberg's Austrian roots. Yet, it opens up our vision to the major contributions made to Hollywood film by Austro-Hungarian film professionals and actors well in advance of those of the World War II exiles, and to the very real cultural continuities between central Europe and the United States before World War II. The volume is a must for any serious film library or film aficionado.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Katherine Arens. Review of Horwath, Alexander; Omasta, Michael, eds., *Josef von Sternberg: "The Case of Lena Smith"*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. August, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25195>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.