

# SILENT NOIR



A prescient image of Lya de Putti as the enigmatic *femme fatale* in E. A. Dupont's 1925 proto-noir. A bone in the throat would later lead to her demise in real life

## Femme Fatality: *Variété* (1925)

Monica Nolan



What makes a film noir is not its plot, but how the basic black dress of a story is cut and draped. *Variété* is pure Victorian melodrama, a dated tea-dress of a tale filled with lust, betrayal, and punishment. A carny abandons his wife and kid for a hoochie-coochie dancer who cheats on him with the first guy who comes along, driving him to murderous revenge. But, *oh*, the way director E.A. Dupont and his team of German expressionist technicians cut and drape this fabric! Throw in Emil Jannings

as the thuggish sap and Lya de Putti as an enigmatic *femme fatale* and you've got another slinky black proto-noir from Weimar Germany.

The film opens with a forgettable framing device, an aged prisoner confessing to the warden how he came to commit his crime. It's the kind of moralizing moment filmmakers threw in to appease the censors and get a pass for all the juicy sex and violence that follow. The real story begins at night, in a seedy carnival in Hamburg



**Berta-Marie (Lya de Putti) shows Boss Huller (Emil Jannings) that she needs new stockings; the black-haired waif is "a noir version of Aphrodite"**

where has-been acrobat Boss Huller (Emil Jannings) and his wife eke out a living. The movie starts where *Nightmare Alley* ends, at the bottom. The dancing girls who Boss hawks as young and beautiful look like streetwalkers on their last legs, and the audience matches the performers. The camera keeps returning to one fat, leering drunk in particular, his shirt open to his waist as he chews on a stogie. This is Boss' clientele.

An exotic siren drops into this milieu, like a tropical bird landing in a beer garden. She's an orphaned girl brought to Boss' tent by a sailor pal, who explains that his ship picked up her and her mother, but Mom died on the voyage. The girl (Hungarian actress Lya de Putti) is both vulnerable and vampy, with huge black-rimmed eyes, bee-stung lips, and long streaming black hair. She's wrapped in a blanket, like a foundling; underneath she's wearing a skimpy bikini. We don't know where she comes from or even what her name is. Like a noir version of Aphrodite, she rises out of the sea, more elemental than human. The sailor tells Boss that since the girl's name is unpronounceable, the crew called her Berta-Marie, after the ship. A ship he then mentions is "cursed"—foreshadowing that is absolutely unnecessary.

Against his wife's wishes, Boss hires Berta-Marie as a dancer and gives her a place to sleep, otherwise leaving her alone. But the siren's very presence is a force field that disturbs the status quo. Boss has already been chafing at his circumstances, wanting to have another go at his trapeze

act. "What, and break your legs again?" says his wife. She doesn't want to rock the boat, but Boss, like Icarus, needs to fly. The film keeps intertitles to a minimum; all we need to know is on Boss' face as he looks at Berta-Marie dancing, and then looks at the crowd. The close-up captures his turmoil; how fed-up he is and how that feeds his reluctant attraction to Berta-Marie.

**Variété was Dupont's biggest success, and one of the few foreign films of the 1920s to succeed in the U.S.**

Emil Jannings is terrific in this role, even if he is too stout to be believable as a trapeze artist. He's shed the whiskers he wore for his star turn in *The Last Laugh* (1924) and sheds some of the hamminess and sentimentality, too. His Boss is a tough guy who's a softy on the inside, the kind of guy who gets up to rock his crying son while his wife continues eating dinner. He brings to the movie the same quality Edmund O'Brien brought to noir—believability as an ordinary guy who feels trapped by his life. Unlike O'Brien, however, Jannings' glower hints at an inner violence—this is not a man to be pushed too far. When a drunk stumbles on stage to grope Berta-Marie, it's the final straw. Boss shuts down the show and decamps with the exotic waif to Berlin and a better life.

Once there, director Dupont briefly abandons his adulterous couple to dwell on the musclemen, midgets, and plate-twirlers at Berlin's Winter Garden theatre, which plays itself in the film (and where de Putti had once performed as a dancer). Shortly before making *Variété*, Dupont worked for a year at a music hall in Mannheim and this experience fueled his subsequent cycle of showbiz



films, beginning with *Variété*. In the Berlin scenes, *Variété* lives up to its name, providing a vaudeville spectacle at the same time as the backstage story. Here we wander into a meta-narrative of the type film theorists love—we’re watching a movie about vaudeville, but we’re also watching a series of vaudeville acts, as well as the audience, who are training their opera glasses on us. In one shot, we’re looking at three pairs of opera glasses, in which are reflected six miniaturized acrobats. I’m betting a lot of academic ink has been spilled over this shot.

When we finally see Boss and Berta-Marie again, the pair look spruced up, as if Berlin agrees with them. Berta-Marie has gotten her hair bobbed, and Boss has a new wardrobe. They’re still working the carnival circuit, but with a trapeze act this time, and living in a cute gypsy wagon instead of a seedy tent. There’s even a bit of sunshine, as Boss makes breakfast the morning after the show. But wait—something’s wrong with this picture; Boss is not only doing the cooking but also darning Berta-Marie’s stockings. She pokes out a shapely leg so he can dress her, and the camera fades out on a close up of him embracing her leg in a pose that’s half erotic fetishism, half enslavement. When the suave trapeze star Artinelli invites the pair to join his act and move up in the world, Boss has his doubts, but Berta-Marie puts her arms around his neck and says, “You must say yes,” and Boss does. Berta-Marie’s the boss now.

“A marvelous portrayal of a deceitful little minx,” Mordaunt Hall described Lya de Putti’s performance in 1926. That’s not the half of it. De Putti’s Berta-Marie is a *femme fatale* without any mid-century psychology. Later *femmes fatales* always had a surface motive—greed, jealousy, revenge—even if their films hinted that there was something deeper, something fundamentally *bad* about them that was the real reason for the havoc they wreaked. Berta-Marie is the reverse: there’s absolutely no explanation of what makes her tick; she exists as pure destructive force, a classic example of the deep unease newly unleashed female sexuality provoked in the twenties.

Of particular interest is the start of Berta-Marie’s affair with Artinelli. Warwick Ward as Artinelli plays this scene like a Victorian villain, practically twirling a nonexistent mustache as he telegraphs his evil intentions. He tricks Berta-Marie into entering his room and then turns the key in the lock. It’s a disturbing bit of business, Berta-Marie strenuously resisting as Artinelli demands “thanks” for the fame and riches he’s brought to her and Boss. In his *New York Times* review, Hall describes this as “Artinelli’s surrender to the attractive

girl.” Put the blame on Mame, boys! In the film’s universe, it doesn’t matter who seduces whom (or even if force is involved). Female sexuality is just plain dangerous.

*Variété* was Dupont’s biggest success, and one of the few foreign films of the 1920s to succeed in the U.S., where it won the annual film critics poll in 1926. Audiences adored the showy camera work—the trapeze scenes in the Winter Garden Theatre with the camera swinging dizzily above the audience. Karl Freund was the cinematographer, and his fingerprints are on more than a few Hollywood noirs, including *Key Largo*. But despite the fantastic lighting, *mise-en-scène*, and camera work—including a dazzling fantasy shot of Jannings dropping Artinelli from the trapeze into the audience below—the performances are what push this film into the noir universe. That and the relentless doom that stalks Jannings, the sense that things only get better so they can get worse again.

It was an arc that played out for the film’s principles. Lya de Putti died a grotesque death in 1931, the victim of an infection after a chicken bone got stuck in her throat. Emil Jannings threw himself a tad too enthusiastically into making propaganda films for the Nazis, and his career ended with their defeat. Meanwhile, his Jewish former director Dupont ended up, like many of his fellow UFA filmmakers, an émigré in Hollywood. There, Dupont eked out a living much like Boss, wandering from studio to studio, making B-films like *The Neanderthal Man* (1953), and the oddball noir *The Scarf* (1951), but never again flying as high as he had with *Variété*. ■

