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“Max Ophüls”

By Walter Metz

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There’s a stunning scene in the middle of Max Ophüls’ *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) in which a lothario, Stefan Brand (Louis Jourdan), woos one of many lovers, Lisa Berndle (Joan Fontaine). He brings her to a restaurant where a machine operated by the proprietor rotates backdrops next to a table inside a fake train car, such that it appears the diners are speeding through the European landscape. Brand explains that this way, they can see all of Europe—from the beaches of Spain to the wintery Alps—while enjoying their dinner, and without moving. The film is narrated in flashback by Lisa via a letter she has written to an aged Brand, whose insatiable lust has caused him to forget her (twice!). After his mute manservant indicates that only he could be such a cad as to forget the darling Lisa, Brand leaves to surely die in the duel with Lisa’s husband. *Letter from an Unknown Woman* offers a meta-cinematic meditation on the relationship between Eros and Thanatos, between love and death.

Part of a tetralogy of late 1940s Hollywood films by German exile filmmaker Max Ophüls, *Letter from an Unknown Woman* laments the destruction of Europe at the hands of the Nazis. The irony of Ophüls’ American films is that they depict a European world that can only exist in the Hollywood cinema, as the real version lay in rubble. To return to *Letter from an Unknown Woman* at our moment in time serves two useful purposes. First, we can understand how important Ophüls is to contemporary American cinema.

In his triumphant new film, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014), Wes Anderson indicates that his script was “inspired by the writings of Stefan Zweig.” The work of a nearly

forgotten Austrian writer who committed suicide in Brazil in 1942 lamenting the Nazi destruction of European civilization is an odd choice for the quirky American comedian Anderson. And yet, via Zweig, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* features the same thematic obsessions as an Ophüls film—the human sexual drive for connection is set amidst the destruction of Europe. The hotel in Anderson’s film is filled with sex-obsessed patrons, oblivious to the Nazi destruction of their world.

Letter From an Unknown Woman was based on a 1922 novella by Zweig, an Austrian writer part of a group of Viennese intellectuals obsessed with sex and death, including Sigmund Freud and Arthur Schnitzler, the latter of whom was the source for Ophüls’ crowning achievement, the 1950 European art film, *La Ronde*, in which a series of ten sexual encounters connect a lowly prostitute to a prince, again set in a fantasy studio holding at bay the fact that the Europe depicted in reality lay in ashes.

Despite the glorious box office failures of all four of his American films, Ophüls has had a profound effect on contemporary Hollywood filmmaking. Paul Thomas Anderson, director of such films as *There Will Be Blood* (2007) and *The Master* (2012) comments lovingly on the moving camera on the commentary track of the Criterion Collection’s release of *The Earrings of Madame de...* (1953), one of Ophüls’ French art films. Stanley Kubrick, whose favourite film was reportedly *Le Plaisir* (1952), the previous year’s French art film, emulated Ophüls’ roaming camera in films ranging from *Paths of Glory* (1957) to *The Shining* (1980). Kubrick explained that Ophüls camera “went through every wall and every floor.” In his final work, *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999), Kubrick exposes not only the aesthetic debt to Ophüls, but also a thematic one. Adapting Arthur Schnitzler’s *Traumnovelle* (1926), Kubrick’s film adapts Ophüls’ depiction of morally decayed Vienna as a trance-like New

York City, shot on a soundstage in England. *Eyes Wide Shut* is the *La Ronde* of the post-Cold War era.

Secondly, and more interesting for the vicissitudes of the study of film, a return to Max Ophüls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman* provides an opportunity for re-assessing the psychological importance of the 20th century's most important art form for our 21st century's future. In the 1980s, feminist film criticism rightfully and necessarily shifted the study of film away from a Romantic, auteurist celebration of the greatness of male film artists toward a genre-based understanding of how film engages in a complex representation of the human subject's desires. The melodramas of Max Ophüls, particularly the American ones, such as *Caught* (1949), *The Reckless Moment* (1949), and especially *Letter from an Unknown Woman* served as the perfect nexus for academic feminism's project. Built on a radical re-reading of Sigmund Freud via Jacques Lacan, Ophüls was understood as activating cinema as a desiring machine, capable of unearthing the female subjectivity otherwise censored by patriarchal culture. The all-consuming desire of Lisa for Stefan in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* served as the terrain over which questions of gender politics could be productively discussed: Was Lisa's foolish desire for Stefan merely patriarchal hero-worship, reinforcing men's power over women? Or, conversely, was Lisa's desire uncontainable by the forces of the Hollywood film industry, by male directors, and by the generic constraints of its stories? Was Ophüls' cinema finally able to visualize what Freud was not, the actively sexual woman?

Now that some thirty years has passed, and the academic study of Ophüls has nearly completely abated, it seems possible to re-group. Paul Thomas Anderson leads us in the direction of Ophüls' undeniable aesthetic importance. Ophüls' intricate mise-en-scene (the rooms in *La Ronde* are loaded with statues, candlesticks, paintings, and much of the material objects of Europe at the turn of the 19th into the 20th centuries) and camera movements (every

time Lisa runs after Stefan in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, Ophüls camera surries on dollies, tracks and cranes to be right there with her) are undeniably beautiful and influential. However, Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut* and Wes Anderson's *The Grand Budapest Hotel* lead us more toward the thematic obsessions of Ophüls' work. They indicate that our fixation with Eros leads inexorably to Thanatos, our inability to keep our productive love and creativity in check against the dark nature of our animalistic souls. We are inexorably drawn like Stefan to the carriages awaiting us to take us to the duel with death that shall end us all.

But, unlike what a Freudian feminist psychoanalysis would have us believe, Ophüls' work does not reveal a timeless encounter with men and women's desires. Instead, his work is distinctly biographical, historical and political in a very different sense. Indeed, the best of feminist criticism has led in a similar direction. In her elegant BFI book on *Citizen Kane*, Laura Mulvey moves beyond her 1970s psychoanalytical feminism toward a complex amalgam of those methods and an historical understanding. She argues that Orson Welles' 1941 film pits an American history of Charles Foster Kane's childhood (he was born in a log cabin, like Lincoln!) with a Europe now in cinders (and thus, the crematorium which burns all of European civilization that Kane has accumulated in his failed Xanadu).¹

This tension between America and Europe was lived by Max Ophüls, and it shows up in profound ways in his films, ways that have been occluded by prior analytical methods. As one example, in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, the elegant yet very American Joan Fontaine plays Lisa as a smitten teenager, obsessed with the European artist Stefan (played by the highly accented Louis Jourdan). In order to impress him, Lisa studies dance to become more graceful. Lisa's teenage friend out in the courtyard responds completely differently to Stefan's piano playing, screeching with an annoying American accent, "I wish he'd stop that

¹ Mulvey, Laura. *Citizen Kane*. London: BFI, 2012.

playing.” Lisa discards her American identity, enamoured by the culture and civility of Europe, not seeing its dark side, of decadence and violence, as Stefan sleeps with every available woman who presents herself to him.

Ophüls’ image is filled with pregnant images that allegorize the decaying history of the 20th century. To further improve herself, Lisa goes to a record library to listen to the works of the great composers whom Stefan plays on his piano. In a stunning image, Lisa puts away a Wagner record to seek out the next higher shelf, labelled Mozart. In allegorical form, Lisa chooses the good German over the anti-Semitic one, all the time not seeing that this choice is of little consequence: her American identity will be forever destroyed by her choice, not of Romantic or classical opera, but of Stefan.

For his part, Stefan gives up his musical career after a disastrous run in America, while Lisa ruins her life by leaving her husband for the cad Stefan late in the film, when she sees him at a performance of Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*. Alas, there’s no magical music in an Ophüls film! Lisa and her illegitimate son with Stefan, eponymously named, both die of typhus contracted in a quarantined train car. The spectre of Auschwitz looms large over those Ophüls images purportedly set in Vienna in 1900. Like his other German emigrés, such as Bertolt Brecht or Douglas Sirk, Ophüls defines a Europe in ruins, protected only by a capitalist America that might save the people, but will seal the fate of the culture that once thrived there.

I have engaged the history of feminist readings of Ophüls not to ridicule their significant accomplishments, but instead to unearth the need to return to Ophüls in a different context. In the 1980s, Freudian psychoanalytic methods were presumed the only ones available for understanding the cinema as a dream machine. Now that we live in an age of cognitive and neurobiological science, it would behove us to consider what state of mind

Ophüls invokes via Anton Walbrook's narrator, directing the flow of lovers from one to another in a film studio in *La Ronde*. Clearly, as part of the Vienesse circle of intellectuals, including not only Freud but also Schnitzler, Ophüls cannot be completely disengaged from the dominant psychoanalytic tradition of the 20th century. But perhaps we could give the late, sociological Freud, of *Civilization and its Discontents* its rightful place as just as important as the failed project of the Oedipal description of the unconscious. Ophüls' films are just as amenable to a reading that focuses on the sociological and historical significance of Eros and Thanatos as they are to theories of subjectivity and desire.

In *The Reckless Moment* (1947), Ophüls' last American film, the post-war housewife, Lucia Harper (Joan Bennett) defends her teenage daughter from ruin at the hands of shady European blackmailers. In the course of events, Lucia falls in love with Martin Donnelly, a heavily accented Irish hoodlum played by James Mason. Martin too has fallen in love with America, and thus kills himself sacrificing to keep danger away from his beloved. Recoiling from Ophüls' swirl of Thanatos around Eros, Lucia staggers back to her American suburban home. In the film's final moments, her absent husband calls from Berlin, where he is building bridges. It is a brutal Ophüls irony: the Europe of evil is not quite destroyed, coming to roost in America, but despite that, the Marshall Plan rebuilds the infrastructure of Germany, hoping that the next generation will pull its records from the Mozart shelf instead of the Wagner one.

Ophüls, for his part, is building different bridges than the physical ones in 1949 Berlin. His films, by obsessively returning to Vienna in 1900, build a bridge to the past, hoping desperately to unearth the scene of the crime. How did the promise of 19th century Romanticism turn so deadly? With the Andersons—Paul Thomas and Wes—we might be able to retrace Ophüls' tracks and find for ourselves the answers that this great German filmmaker died seeking.

Biography

Born in Saarbrücken, Germany in 1902 as Maximilian Oppenheimer, the filmmaker we know as Max Ophüls, the son of Jewish textile merchants, decided as a teenager to pursue the theatrical arts.² At first merely an unsuccessful actor, Ophüls then directed his first play at age 21, sparking a career that led to the Vienna theatre world, where he embarked on a career-long symbiotic relationship with playwright Arthur Schnitzler. In the early 1930s, Ophüls moved to UFA, the German film studio in Berlin, where he first apprenticed under Anatole Litvak. Later in the 1930s, Ophüls directed films throughout Europe, settling in France in 1938. In an all-too-common German-Jewish exile's tale of that ill-fated decade, and as German military aggression mounted, Ophüls fled first to Switzerland and then to Hollywood. From 1941-1947, Ophüls found few defenders of his artistic mastery of mise-en-scène and the German flowing camera for which he is now famous. Finally, in 1947, Robert Siodmak was able to ensure that Ophüls direct a Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. vehicle, *The Exile*, after which Ophüls, in the span of 24 months, made three exquisite, though financially unsuccessful American melodramas—*Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Caught* (1949), and *The Reckless Moment* (1949). Afterward, Ophüls returned to France where he completed a string of international art house masterpieces, including *La Ronde* (1950), an adaptation of Schnitzler's play; *Le Plaisir* (1952), an omnibus film of Guy de Maupassant short story adaptations; and *Lola Montes* (1955), a grandiose color film shot in widescreen Cinemascope. The film stands as one of the great monuments to art cinema, but was a

² I have sculpted this biographical sketch from the excellent one at the beginning of Susan M. White's *The Cinema of Max Ophüls*, the best book on Ophüls in the academic literature.

commercial failure at the box office. Deeply wounded, Ophüls retreated to the theatre, and died of heart failure in Hamburg, Germany in 1957 without having completed another film.

Selected Filmography

Die verkaufte Braut [*The Bartered Bride*] (Germany, 1932)

Liebelei (Germany, 1933)

La Signora di Tutti [*Everybody's Woman*] (Italy, 1934)

Komedie om geld [*The Trouble With Money*] (The Netherlands, 1936)

Yoshiwara (France, 1937)

Werther (France, 1938)

De Mayerling à Sarajevo (France, 1940)

The Exile (United States, 1947)

Letter from an Unknown Woman (United States, 1948)

Caught (United States, 1949)

The Reckless Moment (United States, 1949)

La Ronde (France, 1950)

Le Plaisir (France, 1952)

Madame de... [*The Earrings of Madame de...*] (France, 1953)

Lola Montès (France 1955)

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