

## Sydney Film Festival

# “The pleasure of seeing should be the moving force”

## A selection of Max Ophuls films

**Richard Phillips**  
**14 August 2000**

One of the highlights of the Sydney Film Festival was the screening of five classic films—*La Signora di Tutti* (1934), *The Reckless Moment* (1949), *Le Plaisir* (1951), *Madame de...* (1953) and *Lola Montès* (1955)—by German born director Max Ophuls, one of the more significant European filmmakers of his era.

While Ophuls is regarded as a great artist and widely studied today, some contemporaneous critics claimed that his elegant films, which mainly centred on the lives and loves of aristocratic or bourgeois figures from turn-of-the-century Europe, were unserious and escapist. Others argued that Ophuls was simply preoccupied with elaborate stage settings and complex camera movements to the exclusion of inner content.

Such assessments miss the underlying social critique in all Ophuls' work, that the wealthy and privileged characters in his films are trapped in societies that stifle the human spirit and make it impossible to attain true love and fulfillment.

These critics also miss the inherent lyrical power of his imagery. In fact, Ophuls' audacious cinematography, with 360-degree panning shots, long tracks and intricate crane work up and down staircases and around lavish ballrooms filled with scores of extras—all before the era of steady-cams and digital image-making—give his films tremendous intimacy and beauty.

For Ophuls the image, or as he often described it, the “pleasure of seeing” was everything. He once said that he would not begin a film until its story, as a “succession of images,” created an “almost physical desire to bring this sequence of images onto the screen.” It is this acute sense of cinema as visual poetry that constitutes the genius of Ophuls' work.

Max Ophuls was born Max Oppenheimer in Saarbrücken in 1902, to a respectable bourgeois German-Jewish family of textile merchants and, contrary to his family's wishes, took up stage acting in 1919. In 1923, in the politically charged atmosphere of the Weimar Republic, the talented young man began directing plays and within two years had produced more than 200 theatrical works. Three years later he was appointed the creative director of Vienna's Burgtheater, the youngest director in the theatre's history, before returning to Germany where he wrote radio plays and staged avant-garde theatre and classics by Shakespeare, Molière and Schiller.

In 1929, with the emergence of talkies, Ophuls became an assistant translator to film director Anatole Litvak and in 1930 directed his first film, *Dans schon lieber Levertran* (*Rather Cod Liver Oil*). He followed this with *Die Verliebte Firma* (1931) and in 1932 directed *Die Verkaufte Braut* (*The Bartered Bride*), *Lachende Erben* and *Liebelei*. The latter work was an antimilitaristic film adapted from a play set in late 19th century Vienna by Arthur Schnitzler.

Alarmed by the rise of Hitler's Nazis, Ophuls and his family left

Germany and settled in France the day after the Reichstag fire in 1933. Up until the outbreak of World War II he directed films in France, Italy and Holland and in 1936 was invited to the Soviet Union, where he was offered a two-year filmmaking contract. Ophuls declined the offer and returned to France where he resumed filmmaking and made a number of anti-Nazi radio broadcasts.

When the Nazis took over France in 1940, Ophuls relocated with his wife and son to Hollywood. But he was not immediately accepted in America's film capital. In fact, the talented director was unemployed for six years before Preston Sturges, a long time admirer, intervened on his behalf. Ophuls was hired briefly to work on *Vendetta* in 1946 for Howard Hughes' production company, and then went on to direct *The Exile*, *A Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Caught* and *The Reckless Moment*, the last two films starring James Mason.

An admirer of the studio system, or at least the ready supply of highly skilled technicians, Ophuls, however, was deeply distrustful of the commercial pressures dominating the industry.

“[T]he public scarcely exists any more,” he said in an interview some years later. “They're a mass of consumers, that's all... In America, you start at 12-years-old, you watch films then ‘till you're 20 and that is how you become a consumer. Consumers watch films the way they stick a cigarette in their mouths; they're no longer aware that they are smoking, they keep it in while they talk... They are no longer individuals ready to receive, they're just people who come and consume, and destroy what they have just consumed. How quickly it happens! Between their seats and the exit they've discussed the whole thing. It's quite finished. They never refer to it again. As a result of this continuous mass production of dramas, with people to consume them who see six or eight such works every month, it's impossible to appreciate a really ‘dynamic’ film.”

In 1950 Ophuls returned to France to work on a film version of *La Duchesse de Langeais* by Honoré de Balzac, one of his favourite writers. While the production never went ahead due to lack of funds, Ophuls decided to remain in Paris and over the next five years produced some of his best work—*La Ronde*, *Le Plaisir*, *Madame de...* and *Lola Montès*.

Some regard *Lola Montès*, produced in France in 1954, as Ophuls' greatest film, although my choice would be *Madame de*. Shot in colour and the new Cinemascope format *Lola Montès*, the story of a humble Irish girl who became one of Europe's most celebrated courtesans, was Ophuls' most lavish and expensive productions. His producers, however, failed to anticipate or appreciate the complex and at times surrealist style and cut 30 minutes from the 140-minute film. *Lola Montès*, which was a commercial failure, was also reedited to reduce the circus scenes and change the flashback order.

Ophuls, who opposed the changes, never made another film and was still fighting the producers over the cuts before his premature death at the age of 54. Before he died, Ophuls returned to Germany where he wrote plays, directed adaptations of classic theatre for radio, lectured and published critical reviews. He collapsed and was hospitalised after a heart attack hours before the premiere of his stage production of Beaumarchais' *Marriage of Figaro* in Hamburg. He died in hospital three months later on March 26, 1957.

#### European and Hollywood films

*La Signora di Tutti* (*Everybody's Lady*), the only film screened at the festival from his pre-World War II period, is an interesting early work about the tragic quest for love by Gaby Doriot (Isa Miranda), a glamorous movie star. Doriot's story is told through a series of complex flashbacks from her hospital bed, following an attempted suicide.

Doriot first discovers her hypnotic attraction to men as a teenager, and while she begins to understand that her beauty can open many doors, her restless search for affection is an attempt to replace the love she never received as a child. All the men smitten by Doriot are emotionally scarred and never recover. *La Signora* contains some extraordinary moments, its themes and techniques—tragic love affairs, lengthy flashback sequences and graceful camera tracking shots—later trademarks of Ophuls' cinema.

Ophuls completed four films during his American residency. Unfortunately only one, *The Reckless Moment*, his last Hollywood production, was screened at the festival. Set in southern California, *The Reckless Moment* is a dark melodramatic thriller, adapted from a *Ladies Home Journal* short story, and a wry comment on middle-class life in post-World War II America.

The film centres on Mrs Lucia Harper (Joan Bennett), a happily married woman with all the trappings of comfortable upper middle class life. Harper, whose husband is overseas, has discovered that Bea, her 17-year-old daughter, has struck up a relationship with an unsavoury art dealer in Los Angeles. Lucia travels to the city to warn off the dealer from her daughter. The art dealer says he will only end the relationship if Lucia pays him. She refuses and later that night he visits the daughter at the family's lavish beachfront home. Bea, who has been told about the art dealer's demand for money, accidentally kills him outside the house after they quarrel. Lucia Harper, when told about the accident by her daughter decides to dump the body. But this attempt to protect her daughter comes unstuck when the police find the corpse and Donnelly (James Mason), a standover man, arrives at the house with Bea's love letters to the art dealer. He threatens to tell the press unless Lucia gives him \$5,000.

Lucia cannot get this kind of cash without notifying her husband and tries stalling Donnelly. Meanwhile Donnelly, who is under pressure from Nagle (another gangster) to collect the money, becomes obsessed with Lucia and decides to help her. Donnelly kills Nagle when he arrives at the family home but is fatally injured in a car accident after he tries to dispose of the body. The dying Donnelly tells Lucia she will be safe: he will "confess" to killing Nagle and the art dealer.

The film's remarkable final scene has Lucia taking an overseas phone call from her husband pleasantly discussing the niceties of the forthcoming Christmas season. As family members gather round the phone, life appears to continue as before, the murders unknown to Lucia's husband, friends and neighbours. Excellent cinematography contrasting the low-life existence of the Los Angeles gangsters and the spotless interiors of the family home, gives the film a shadowy, threatening quality.

#### Post-war French films

*Le Plaisir* (*House of Pleasure*), made in France in 1951, consists of three short stories written by Guy de Maupassant. The first, "Le Masque," is set in 1890s Paris and is about an old man who disguises himself in order to dance with young girls at the Palais de la Danse. The film, which begins in the spectacular dance hall, concludes in the dark and oppressive

poverty of a Parisian tenement. The second, "La Maison Telier", which also opens with astonishing camera work, is a delightful story about a group of prostitutes who visit the country to attend one of their young relatives' first communion at a village church. The brothel's patrons—local politicians and businessmen—are distressed over the one-day closure; the prostitutes are deeply moved by the church service; and the young girl's father is transfixed by one of the whores. While life resumes its normal routine when the prostitutes return to the town, all feel a sense of melancholy for the love they cannot attain.

The last of the *Le Plaisir* trilogy, "The Model", deals with a tempestuous affair between an artist and his model and explores the fragility of love and beauty. The painter, who falls passionately in love with his model, eventually grows tired of the beautiful young woman and tries to end the relationship. When he dares the distressed girl to commit suicide, she leaps out of his upper-storey window and is permanently crippled. She then forces the guilt-stricken painter to marry and care for her. As the narrator sardonically comments in a voiceover at the end of the film, "Love is gay, love is sad."

Ophuls next film, *Madame de...*, is another tragic love story, this time about a countess unhappily married to a cold and rigid military general (Charles Boyer). The complex, almost circular story centres on a pair of valuable earrings given to Madame de (Danielle Darrieux). The countess, like all the film's protagonists, leads a double life and decides to sell the earrings to pay a personal debt. Madame de pretends she has lost them but the jeweller sells them back to her husband, who says nothing and gives them to his mistress. She sells them to a jeweller in Turkey where a handsome diplomat (Vittorio de Sica) buys them. He returns to Paris, falls in love with Madame de and gives her the earrings, inadvertently revealing their love affair to her husband. The general challenges the diplomat to a duel and kills him, thus depriving the countess of the only thing she ever loved.

As possession of the earrings changes, in total 19 times throughout the film, each transfer heightens the jewellery's symbolic significance and the emptiness of the characters' opulent lives. The earrings become a harbinger of tragedy and a mirage-like promise of true love and fulfillment.

Like most of Ophuls' work the dialogue is deceptively simple, sometimes almost bland, but as the film evolves the director creates an absorbing and ironic portrait of people trapped in a heartless society, their tremendous wealth, mannered behaviour and superficial pleasures only substitutes for real happiness.

To superficial observers Ophuls' films appear as rather frivolous and insubstantial romances about wealthy, but rather stupid people. As one particularly crass Ophuls detractor, Roy Armes, a film historian, wrote: "For those whose concern is purely visual and whose ideal is an abstract symphony of images, Ophuls has the status of one of the very great directors. For spectators and critics who demand in addition to the images the sort of human insight and moral depth that a play or a novel can give, he is merely a minor master, a maker of exquisite but rather empty films."

But to dismiss Ophuls' "symphony of images" ignores the essential dynamic and poetry of cinema, a relatively new artistic medium in the 1940s and 50s. Perhaps the best response to this somewhat shallow approach is by Max Ophuls himself:

"The masters of our profession... transcend both dramatic structure and dialogue, and create a new kind of tension which, I believe, has never existed before in any of the other forms of dramatic expression; the tension of pictorial atmosphere and of shifting images. They have the same impetus and produce the same beauty and excitement that can be found in the pure procession of words in the classical theatre, where logic is thrown overboard, over the footlights, so that it is the sound and rhythm of the words alone which inspire and maintain the spectators' belief in the action. Just as in the theatre the lighting, the set, faithfulness to nature and

other incidentals must play a subordinate role to the word, so in films the words, the technology and the technique and the logic of the visible must be secondary to the image, subordinate to the vision containing the untold wonders within it, which, in the cinema can be the bearer of artistic truth.”

[*The Pleasure of Seeing: Thoughts on the Subject Matter of Film* (1954)]

Ophuls possessed remarkable talents and aesthetic insights. For those prepared to immerse themselves in his work, there are many rewards.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**