

OPENING CHOICES

Similar means to different ends: *Lola Montès* as a punch in the gut

I admire Max Ophuls for knowing how and for daring to make, on the most conventional subject and under conditions that ordinarily produce the worst kind of academic filmmaking, an avant-garde film.
(André Bazin, quoted in Müller, [1956] 2004: 41)

To understand the kind of film *Lola Montès* (Max Ophuls, 1955) was originally intended to be, one need only look to the pre-production decision-making of its producers at Gamma Films. They had chosen for their subject a biography both salacious and epic: the dramatic rise and fall of a woman famous for the passions she could incite. They hired Cécil Saint-Laurent to pen the script on the basis of his recent success with the risqué *Caroline Chérie* (Richard Pottier, 1951) and, shortly afterwards, they signed Martine Carol, star of *Caroline*, whose sex-symbol status helped to secure international investment. For director, they had originally sought Michael Powell on the strength of his work on *The Red Shoes* (1948), and they planned in advance to shoot in color and CinemaScope. In short, the film's producers had made every effort to ensure their film would be a spectacular international sensation.

As the case of *Lola Montès* makes clear, however, beginnings do not always lead in the direction one may expect. In the event, Gamma Films surely had cause to be disappointed with the work of their director, Max Ophuls. Indeed, *Lola Montès* performed poorly on initial release, and Ophuls was asked to re-edit and redub scenes for international distribution. Unhappy with his work, the producers edited the film again, converting the flashback structure into a more linear narrative, but ticket sales remained poor. What the producers could not have anticipated was that faced with – and perhaps inspired by – the challenge of directing a super-production, Ophuls would instead direct one of cinema's most lavish self-critiques. As Ophuls' himself wrote in his notebooks, 'The audience is expecting a cream cake but instead it gets a punch in the stomach!' (qtd in Müller 2004: 34).

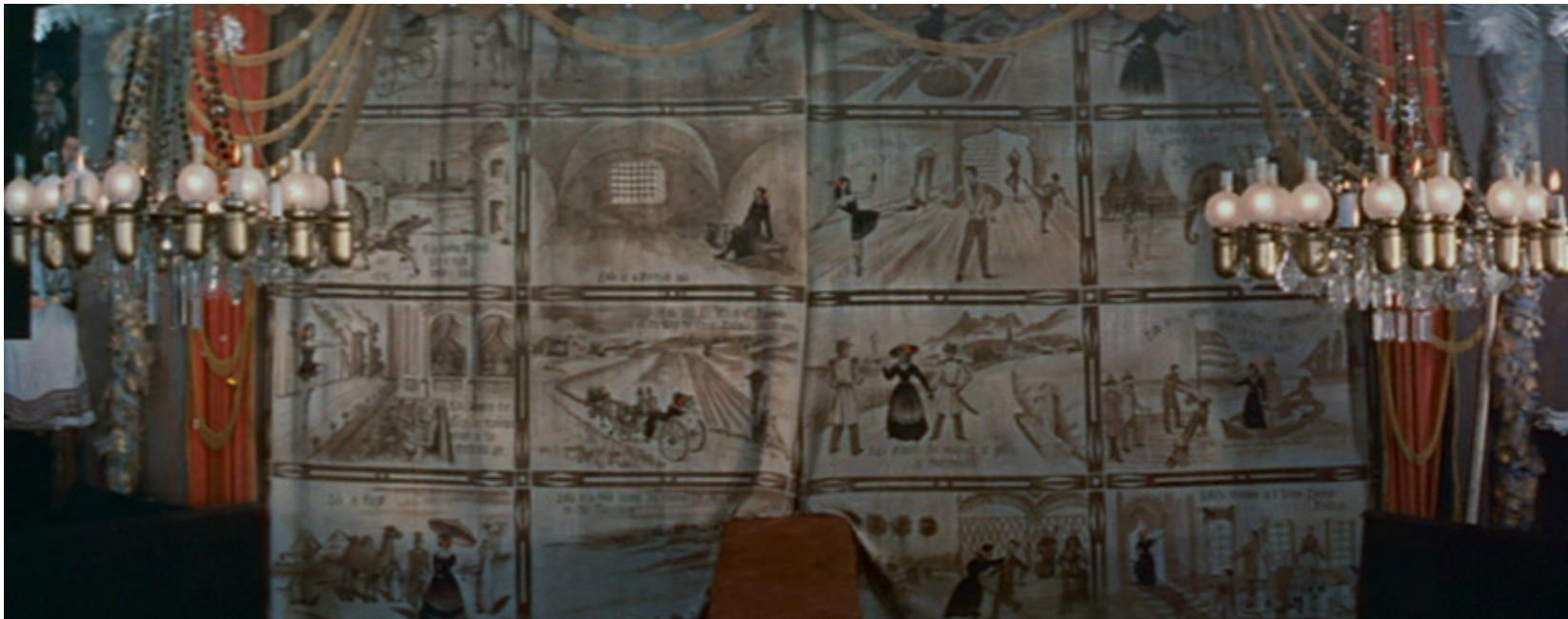
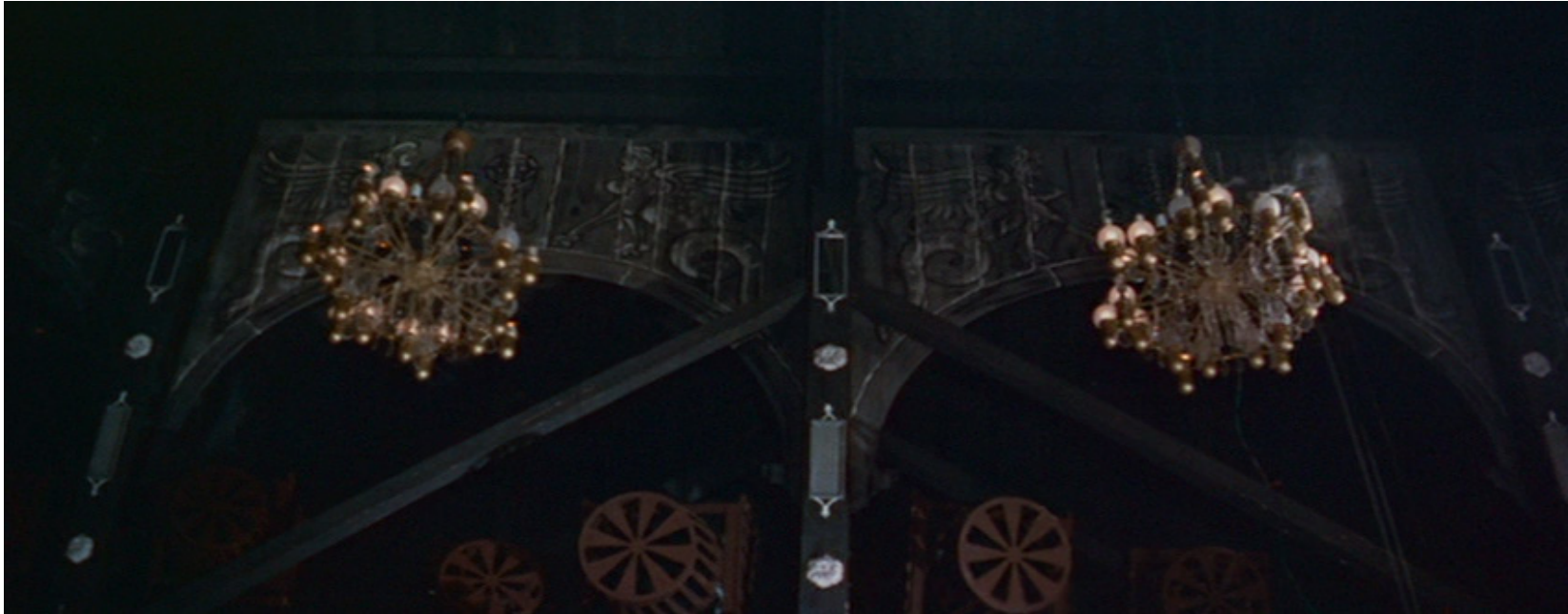
In its opening moments, *Lola* encourages the false sense of cream-cake comfort to which Ophuls referred. An orchestra plays the overture, and, as the stringed instruments swell, the details of cast and crew appear in ornate gold script across the wide, royal-blue frame. At this point the film is interchangeable with any number of other period dramas, and an audience unfamiliar with Ophuls' work could be forgiven for expecting a routine romance to follow. Such expectations are quickly dashed, however, as a sharp whistle from the Ringmaster (Peter Ustinov) brings a sudden end to the titles and marks the beginning of Ophuls' strongest critique of stardom and spectatorship.

The opening sequence plays as a challenge to the viewer rather than as the fulfillment of the implied promise of the title cards. Indeed, the film as a whole turns the spectacle of CinemaScope against itself in an indictment of the kinds of lavish spectatorial pleasures most often associated with the format: the image of a woman reclining across the full width of the frame, the wide open vistas of the American west, the proscenium staging of a tap routine, crowds filling an enormous square. Francois Truffaut praised *Lola Montès* as being the first film to use the CinemaScope process 'to the maximum of its potential', but the film itself suggests this potential is rather different from Darryl Zanuck's marketing claims that CinemaScope would give audiences a thrilling sense of immersion in the picture ([1955] 1994: 225). Indeed,

the first shot of the film demonstrates Ophuls' intent to use CinemaScope in a way that makes both the device itself and our position as spectators frustratingly apparent. Or, in V.F. Perkins' words, these opening moments, and indeed the whole of *Lola Montès*, '[seem] to formulate a wonderfully productive new direction' (Britton et al. 1982: 109).

The first shot of the film opens on two chandeliers hanging symmetrically to the left and right of center frame [see overleaf]. The chandeliers are lowered, and, as the camera follows their descent with a tilt down, the complementary movements split our focus, causing the initial objects of our gaze to escape from us as they move further and further to the extreme edges of the shot. Even when viewing at home, on a screen immensely scaled down from CinemaScope theatrical projections, tracking the chandeliers requires glancing back and forth across the frame [see overleaf]. Ophuls' use of the wide frame here is reflexive; it first directs our attention towards objects moving within the shot and then frustrates our ability to follow them. In this opening shot, therefore, Ophuls derives from the ostensibly immersive CinemaScope format an alienating effect that underscores both the garish qualities of the circus and the inaccessibility of its ostensible subject.

While Ophuls' technique often calls attention to itself, in *Lola Montès* his self-conscious style serves a decidedly different purpose than it had in his previous films. In the 'Le Masque' segment of *Le Plaisir* (1952), for example, the tipsy canted angles, shimmering frames-within-frames, and swirling camera movements all give a breathless energy to the story-within-the-story. Similarly, a lengthy tracking shot early in *La Ronde* (1950) teases with only brief glimpses of Franz (Serge Regianni) and Marie (Simone Simon) as it follows them away from their party, imbuing our view of their dialogue with a flirtatious pleasure. In contrast, Ophuls chooses to open *Lola Montès* with a viewing challenge: two effectively identical objects moving further apart from one another as they fall. The effect is disorienting in part because of the impossibility of holding both chandeliers together in our gaze, but also because, compelled as we are by their displacement to search the frame for significance, we find only the blank space between them.



TOP The establishing shot of the circus rafters.

BOTTOM The final position of the chandeliers in the frame.



ABOVE The Ringmaster (Peter Ustinov) emerges, allowing a glimpse backstage.

Not truly blank, of course, as we see between the chandeliers the infrastructure of the circus: rafters, ropes, and pulleys; a lanky Uncle Sam conducting a blackface band; a make-shift proscenium arch with the Passion of *Lola Montès* drawn in caricature on a canvas curtain. When the Ringmaster emerges from behind this curtain, we glimpse various figures bustling about in front of a bare wall and scaffolding. As the remarkably fluid long take progresses, we see the film's construction, too. Cameraman Alain Douarino recalls that he had warned Ophuls about the plan to follow the Ringmaster's movements in a long take because he knew the camera's tracks would be visible in the shot. In his own words, 'Ophuls simply said, "I don't care"'.¹ In the film we can plainly see the results of a compromise: the tracks covered with rugs.

For Truffaut, these gestures towards the film's production direct it towards 'a more authentic truth' ([1955] 1994: 228), but if the film's truth is authentic, it is also pessimistic. In a CinemaScope super-production ostensibly about a fallen woman reduced to re-enacting her love affairs for a circus audience, Ophuls fills the wide frame with everything, and everything turns out to be a lot more than the magic of the circus. That magic is present, of course. The orchestration of so many jugglers and acrobats, so many props – hearts and

crowns – rising and falling, is a testament to not only the excitement of the circus, but also of the spectacular potential of cinema and of Ophuls' directorial prowess. But Ophuls deliberately refuses to efface the labor of production. We begin in the rafters; we see the ropes from which the props dangle; we see the camera's tracks. If the CinemaScope framing allows us the freedom to hunt for significance, Ophuls' mise-en-scène makes significant the circus' – and even the film's – construction.

Once again, this familiar element of Ophuls' films, the admission of the film as construct, is in *Lola* played to unique effect. Here, it goes further than an interrogation of narrational authority in the abstract, underscoring instead Ophuls' own culpability as the film's director. Douglas Pye has shown how, in his late films, Ophuls establishes a dissonance between the authority of his narrators and the diegetic worlds his viewers encounter. For example, Pye observes that the narrator of *Le Plaisir*, our 'Maupassant' (Jean Servais), is increasingly compromised in the course of the film's three stories, progressing from a disembodied voice to an on-screen narrator, himself 'an obvious part of the film's subject matter and subject to its critical view' (2002: 25). Importantly, however, *Lola* bypasses this progression. Whereas in *Le Plaisir* Maupassant's voice opens the film with teasing whispers from the dark about the stories he has to share with us, the Ringmaster begins *Lola* by barking for our attention. Whereas Anton Walbrook's narrator in *La Ronde* introduces the film's 19th century setting from a soundstage, Peter Ustinov's Ringmaster is unaware of himself as a player in the film. Unlike Walbrook's narrator, who, self-aware, dresses before us, donning a top hat, jacket, and cane while extolling the pleasures of the past ('It's so much more peaceful than the present, and so much more certain than the future'), the Ringmaster emerges from behind the curtain fully dressed in a pompous approximation of a general's uniform, cracking his whip to punctuate his pronouncements. Unlike any of his counterparts in Ophuls' other films, the Ringmaster is boorish (he is here to sell, not to seduce), and his agency is limited from the outset. That he is a disparaging analogue for a film director is made further clear by the casting: Ustinov, a director himself, had at the time of the film's release been recently lauded for his performance of another

despicable character, the Emperor Nero, in *Quo Vadis?* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1951).

Not only is our Ringmaster off-putting in this opening shot, as he snakes his way between performers, making salacious promises to expose Lola's most intimate secrets, the film further makes clear that this show is but one iteration of an inherently exploitive system. In addition to the promised 'beasts of the menagerie,' the circus demeans its performers, especially the little people whose stature is played for comic effect, at times abusively, as well as the acrobats whose stunts are only as valuable as they are dangerous. Lola, of course, is one of the exploited. She takes more risks than just her final death-defying leap, however. Her nightly jump is only one element of her sacrifice to the show, which is at its heart a crass commodification of her life, packaged as a spectacle to meet the demands of an insatiable audience.

Ian Cameron rightly observed that, early in the film, 'the [circus audience's] question asking sets up the idea that the narrative is the product of public demand' (Britton et al. 1982: 109). As the Ringmaster is an analogue for the film director, in *Lola* the circus audience's demands are presented as analogous to our own as movie viewers. Martina Müller quotes Ophüls as telling his costume designer, 'I love the mass of humanity as spectacle, but not as spectators' (2004: 34). If the audience of the circus is any indication, then part of Ophüls' critique is that the audiences' demands are both invasive and inexhaustible. Although the film covers only one performance, it makes clear that Lola must constantly perform her role. Even when the repetitive labor causes her to fall ill, as we soon learn it has, she must perform the kind of sex appeal for which Martine Carol was famous. We see Lola performing this sexuality under duress, not, as we may have expected to see, a sexualised Lola performed by Carol. Truffaut wrote that Ophüls had confided to him 'that he had systematically put into the plot of *Lola Montès* everything that had troubled or disturbed him in the newspapers for the preceding three months: Hollywood divorces, Judy Garland's suicide attempt, Rita Hayworth's adventure, American three-ring circuses, the advent of CinemaScope and Cinerama, the overemphasis on publicity, the exaggerations of modern life' ([1957] 1994: 234). Key here is that Ophüls connects the spectacle of new

film technology to the same audience demands that exact a physical and psychological toll on film actresses who rise to stardom. Rather than make a film about a promiscuous woman, Ophüls takes as his subject the collapse of a woman's life into spectacle.

What better vehicle for a critique of spectacle than a spectacular international super-production? These opening moments are spectacular, if also challenging. The grace of the camera's movement as it tracks is remarkable, as is the variety of performances it observes. When, halfway through the opening shot, with the Ringmaster in the middle distance, a prop crown is suddenly lowered into the extreme foreground, the result is genuine surprise and delight. When, moments later, the camera pauses briefly, looking straight down a line of paired jugglers, the depth of the image is incredible, and it gives the falling crown a 3D effect, perhaps the closest the CinemaScope process ever came to emulating its rival sensation. This sequence, and indeed the film as a whole, has no shortage of cream-cake, but the cream-cake is the vehicle for the film's heaviest blows. The 'honest' display of its own artifice (Truffaut goes so far as to say 'neorealist' ([1955] 1994: 233)) in the wide CinemaScope frame, the pomposity of the ringmaster / director, the pathetic insatiability of the circus-goers'

BELOW The pleasures of the circus and of the CinemaScope process on full display.



demands and their relation to our own viewing position, the damage the circus inflicts on its star: these are the punches, and Ophuls refuses to pull them. When the Ringmaster promises us a ‘revolution authentique,’ the rehearsed echo of the chorus girls’ reply undermines his boast by demonstrating the show’s scripted inauthenticity. Similarly, Ophuls delivers a cinematic spectacle complicated by the displeasures of its spectacular opening sequence.

In the round table discussion in the special issue of *Movie* dedicated to Ophuls, Andrew Britton argued that *Lola Montès* fails to effectively critique its subject because it ‘eternalises what the film is analyzing and locates it in “life itself”’ (1982: 117). In other words, the film treats the collapse of life into spectacle as a given for actresses rather than a historically situated tendency. Elsewhere, Truffaut argues the opposite case. For him, Ophuls’ method of delivering the punch of his critique through the cream cake he was hired to direct makes *Lola Montès* arguably ‘the greatest satirical film ever made’ ([1957] 1994: 234). He clarifies by adding that rather than ‘coming out like a laboratory test case [...] it is a superproduction within everyone’s grasp’ ([1957] 1994: 234). Considering the opening sequence of the film, we can contribute to this debate the observation that, in addition to avoiding an academic treatise, Ophuls’ decision to work through conventional arrangements does in fact situate his film historically: in testing the limits of the CinemaScope format, in his deliberate equating of circus to cinema, in his evocation of the recent plight of famous actresses, and in his presentation of stardom as a damaging submission to an audience’s most base desires, the film does offer a located critique.

Regardless of the degree to which one is swayed by these arguments, we must acknowledge that they are each made from a privileged position, looking back on the film with the benefit of hindsight. In the interim, however, we have evidence that another critic may have held Britton’s view of *Lola Montès*. In his second Franscope film, *Le Mépris / Contempt* (1963), Jean-Luc Godard puts the widescreen anamorphic format through another test of its possibilities. As in *Lola*, this test is a self-reflexive component of a film about stardom and filmmaking. With Brigitte Bardot in Martine Carol’s place as object of desire, with extensive use of red and blue filters, and

with a similarly disparaging view of the director’s economic imperative, it is easy to read *Contempt* as a response to *Lola Montès* that anticipated Britton’s concerns. Godard, of course, takes Ophuls’ model a step further. Richard Brody notes that ‘instead of imagining the film on the sole basis of Moravia’s novel, [Godard] wrote his script in specific relation to the actors who would play the main roles,’ injecting the source material with his own subjective reading of the story and biographical details of his life with *Anna Karina* (2008: 158). If we are to consider Godard’s film as similar in tone but more overt about its subject, we have another revelatory opening to consider. *Contempt*, too, opens with a lengthy tracking shot, but here Godard makes no effort to cover the tracks, choosing instead to display them plainly, eventually bringing the viewer face to face with the camera’s lens. Perhaps we can best understand these decisions as further steps in the wonderful new direction Ophuls had begun to explore in *Lola Montès*.

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¹ Douarino shares this recollection in an interview for ‘Max Ophuls ou le plaisir de tourner,’ a televised documentary on the making of the film. The program originally aired as an episode of *Cinéastes de notre temps* (ORTF, 1964–72) on French television in 1965, and it is included as a special feature on the *Lola Montès* Criterion DVD.