



ABOVE Frame: *Letter from an Unknown Woman*
Frau Berndl (Mady Christians) about to announce the move to Linz.

V.F. PERKINS 1936–2016

Letter from an Unknown Woman

Have you any idea what [a woman's] life is like in a little garrison town?

Letter from an Unknown Woman is unusual, among the great movies, for the volume and quality of discussion it has received. In particular, Robin Wood's essay in his book *Personal Views* (1976) gives a finely argued reading that I would wish to contest in very few matters of substance. Writing in that context, I thought it might be useful to examine one quite brief section of the film in more detail than an overview allows. I chose the Linz sequence partly because it enters very little into the already published discussion.

It seemed also to be characteristic and highly effective without being astonishing. Where other episodes in the film are of immediately striking brilliance, the Linz sequence appeared to be excellent in a straightforward and rather marginal way. That seemed to set up a test case for the impression the film creates of extraordinary unity and coherence. My examination of the sequence is therefore centred on, first, the relevance of its details to the overall structure of the film and, second, the interlock within its *mise-en-scène* between choices related to film craft (that contribute to its dramatic effectiveness) and those which inflect its story material thematically.

For the purposes of my discussion, the sequence consists of two scenes. In the first of them, Lisa (Joan Fontaine) is taken by her mother and stepfather, the Kastners, to be introduced to a young lieutenant, Leopold, and his uncle, a colonel. A some-time-later dissolve takes us in to the second scene, in which Leopold walks Lisa round the town square during a band concert. The pair are clearly established as a couple, and recognised as such by the parents, whose open air café table they pass on the way to the public garden where Leopold begins to propose. The negotiations are broken off when Lisa claims to be engaged to a musician in Vienna.

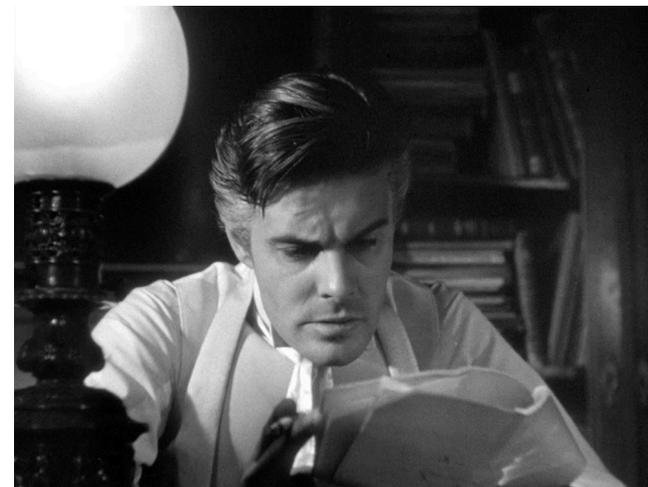
The Linz sequence breaks with one of the main lines of the film's construction: that whereby Lisa's presentation of her life (which 'can be measured in the moments I've spent with you and our son') is also a drastic re-presentation, an overhaul, of Stefan's. In reviewing the crucial episodes of her life, Lisa's letter asserts, at last persuasively, that Stefan's life – his 'vivid and real' life – must as well be measured by their moments of meeting, parting or tantalising proximity. The film's narrative is shaped by Stefan's presence. But the Linz episode is defined by his absence.

'There was nothing left for me. I went to Linz.' The words which open the sequence contrast bleakly with the promises of renewal, re-birth, in the introductions of the other episodes: Lisa's first contact with Stefan is the second of her 'two birthdays ... the beginning of conscious life'; her return to Vienna is 'a new beginning' and the final episode opens as she receives a birthday gift from her husband. The stress on emptiness, lifelessness is associated with the confinements of provincial life. In the original Stefan Zweig story, the episode is covered in a few paragraphs generalising Lisa's state of mind across a period of two years. The burden of the passage is that throughout that time Lisa did nothing of interest, refused to do anything of interest and retreated from society into a morbid nourishment of her passion. The episode thus presents in miniature the problems of dramatisation inherent in the whole project of filming Zweig's tale: apart from its value as an exercise in literary style, its main point of interest, and the thing that distinguishes its plot from the standard saga of unrequited obsession, is the motif of non-recognition. But that is also, from the filmmaker's viewpoint, its most

treacherous feature. It hazards credibility since the audience, itself performing the act of recognition throughout (of Lisa and of Joan Fontaine), is more likely than the reader to gag on Stefan's failure. Moreover, it gives the plot a negative centre. The focus is on an event which (repeatedly) does not occur and which thus threatens to resist expression within the specific times and spaces of the film frame.

At the general, structural level, some of the problems are solved by a double dramatisation: first of the act of narration (writing) through the use of flashback with Lisa's voice-over – a bold move against logic that responds to, but goes beyond, the extreme subjectivism of Zweig's narrative; then of Stefan's act of reading, through the invention of a framing story which makes the time of reading crucial. Thus the Linz episode is framed by images of Stefan which register not so much the passage of time (no clocks, chimes or overfilled ashtrays) as the growth of involvement and perhaps commitment. The reading began casually as Stefan stood over his desk, the curiosity roused by the letter's opening not strong enough to absorb him completely; with the pages open at arm's length before him, he could still attend to the lamp, to cigarettes and matches. Now, in counterpoint to 'You who have always lived so freely ...', tightly framed by the image and with a slow minor variant of the Liszt theme to darken the tone, he sits at the desk with the letter held closely and does not notice even his own act of turning the page. At the close of the Linz episode, the camera will react, as he will not, to his servant's arrival with coffee and cognac. The passage of hours in Stefan's night is transferred from the passage of days, months and years in Lisa's story – whose very deliberate pacing enacts the erosion of the time Stefan needs to make good his flight. But the cognac will speak differently, perhaps of his intention: if time is what is needed to escape the duel, 'no more cognac' has been prescribed as a condition of surviving it. But perhaps, too, at *that* moment, Stefan's main concern will be for his own reappearance at the centre of Lisa's tale. For Stefan at this point it may really feel as if 'all the clocks in the world have stopped'.

Within the Linz sequence, the problem of dramatising inaction is allied to the problem of creating a distinct character for the episode, so as to evoke Lisa's sense of the



absolute separateness of her existence without Stefan from her life with, or within reach of, him. The first problem is one that Howard Koch in a valuable essay published in *The Hollywood Screenwriters* (1972: 125-132) characterised as the need to provide actable situations for Joan Fontaine. It is met by dramatising, not the renunciation of the world that Zweig evokes, but the effort and the failure of Lisa to ignore her 'destiny' and take her place in society. The screenplay succeeds in 'carrying the emotional progression of Zweig's story' at this point by reversing its specific content: inaction is pictured as action advanced and undone in Lisa's near-submission to Linz and her parents' plans for an advantageous marriage.

That pattern of action yields the elaborated build up to an abrupt and definitive reversal (culminating in a comic play between parental excitement and the suitor's disappointment) and it shapes the incident as a self-contained, diversionary chapter in Lisa's life. The enclosure is furthered by a presentation that is overtly humorous. At this point alone is the film's irony matched in the phrasing and delivery of Lisa's commentary: 'twice a month that summer we listened, the lieutenant and I.'

The isolation of the sequence results, too, from its setting. The most important thing about Linz is that it is not Vienna, but it is given a variety of ways in which not to be Vienna. It is seen only as an exterior, a public setting with none of the delicate (and delicately erotic) play between public and private spaces that characterises Vienna. Where Lisa's Vienna is mainly nocturnal, Linz is entirely a daylight world, and a summer world. It is enclosed within its season like the spring of Lisa's girlhood, the winter of romance and the autumn of the denouement – a further dimension of the play with time.

It might have been the Mozartian connection of Linz that occasioned the change of locale from Zweig's Innsbruck. At least, to think of Linz as the recipient of the Symphony No 36 does sharpen the irony in the use of music. Lisa's eager lieutenant is clumsy enough to compare Linz's music with Vienna's; her mocking affirmation of the town's musicality comes after a military band has pumped out four bars of effortful waltz-time. Vienna, too, has musicians who can play that way, with the emphatic beat that flattens and unsprings a three-quarter rhythm: most obviously, the disgruntled quintet in the Prater

ballroom. But they are marginal elements in the flow of music around the life of the city. The sense that this is Linz's best and only music is given not just by the dialogue and situation but by a use of sound specific to this episode. Apart from Lisa's narration, which exists in a different space, the only sounds we hear are the sounds of Linz itself. They are again insistently public sounds, beginning with the cathedral bells that summon the community to its Sunday obligations. 'Background music' is customarily intimate in that its reference is to the interior life of the characters, or to the feelings that we should have about their situation. But there is no intimacy here. The music, like the decor, is entirely exterior and ostentatiously irrelevant to Lisa's emotion. The insistence and the irrelevance are equally important: the music provides backgrounds appropriate to the scenes that society expects Lisa to enact. The slow, wistful waltz could encourage her in a shy exchange of tender sentiment. To these strains she, as well as her Lieutenant, might play out the role of respectfully ardent young lover. Then, the razzmattaz of the Radetzky march at the concert's end would supply a perfect, if cliché celebration of the outcome. The Radetzky is the ultimate display piece, polka as much as march, and exuberantly ceremonial rather than warlike. This most fitting herald of the general joy sets the wrong pace for the disarrayed return of an offended suitor and his confusedly resistant intended.

The eruption of disharmony at this point has been implicit in Lisa's appearance throughout. For once she is dressed with more effort than success: she carries the costume of a miscast, impossible role. High-waisted and full-bodied to give an impression of adolescent puppy fat, it engulfs her in ribbons, frills, flowers and bows, and it suggests (or fails to disguise) that the star has round shoulders. If that makes the design a Hollywood catastrophe, the effect is carefully judged. While the lines and proportions are all wrong, at odds with the human figure caught within and below, they are only just so – enough to enforce Lisa's sense of the ridiculous and demeaning in her situation without making her a grotesque. The outfit can be read as defining her mother's sense that this is as far as expense and ornament can sensibly go to overcome unpromising material. Lisa's dejected submission is pictured not just in the costume – with a hat that seems to be wearing





her – but in the awkwardness of Fontaine's movement. Her parasol is held as an unwieldy prop, endangering the lieutenant so that they have difficulty in synchronising their steps to parade as a couple. In the stroll round the town square, Lisa is made to negotiate the hazards of puddles and pigeons as well as the greetings of Leopold's friends, to one side then the other. The camera is set back far enough to show the effort invested in the (only partial) achievement of grace.

In almost every particular, Lisa's introduction to Leopold reverses the characteristic shape of her contacts with Stefan. The Viennese pattern is that Lisa detaches herself from society and hastens to an isolated spot where, as a silent, still and solitary figure, she can await Stefan's approach. (If he *does* approach, that will count as Destiny.) While this shape dwells on what is willed and calculated in Lisa's 'submission' to her Fate, Stefan's experience of the meeting as fortuitous is marked in the way that Lisa is discovered to one side (in the margin) of his chosen path. Lisa's appearances are diversions from the course of Stefan's life (a life lost in diversion). Like the letter itself, they cut across and distract him from some other action or intention.

By contrast, the rendezvous in Linz is prearranged on both sides and presided over by parents and society. Its movement is into, rather than away from, the flow of surrounding life. Lisa is conducted to the appointed place, flanked by her parents, at a regulated pace which suggests the importance of arriving neither before nor after the appointed time. There is no period of silent waiting before the Colonel is discovered, in charge of his nephew Leopold, facing Lisa's party from immediately in front. The camera pans away from Lisa's group but continues its line of movement to reveal the two soldiers already in place. That they are also above, at the top of a flight of steps, and must descend for the introductions, makes its own comment on the social opportunity in prospect. The shot develops as a track that charts the progress of Lisa and Leopold in the wake of the parental group until they arrive in the town square and become part of the general stream of movement into the cathedral. The couple's actions are enclosed within parental direction by the way in which shot and scene begin and end with comment from Frau Kastner, begin with parents in the lead and end with parents shepherding from the rear.

The distinctness of the Linz episode is, perhaps, summarised in Ophuls' muting, for this period, one of the film's most marked visual effects: the presentation of Lisa's face as a globe of radiance, lit from within (because from no material point in the film's world) to shine in the surrounding darkness. The elements that heighten the contrast are removed from Linz by dressing Fontaine all in white and providing a rational source, the sun, to cast light (almost) evenly across the objects and figures around her. The radiance of the Viennese Lisa is one of the main resources through which Ophuls balances the recognition that his heroine, in her stubborn fidelity, is also a fixated adolescent. It images the intensity of the private vision which she asserts against material, psychological and social reality and makes of it, even or especially in its folly, the source of an extraordinary glamour.

The effect is appropriately muted in Linz because it is there that we see Lisa most nearly accommodating herself to society and suppressing her romantic conviction of the impossibility of a life not centred on Stefan. Indeed, one of the episode's most important functions is to offer a portrait of that life, so as to anticipate the conditions of Lisa's marriage to Johann Stauffer and thus remove the need, at that point, for fresh exposition (or for the more extended presentation of Stauffer that would detract from our awareness of Stefan Jnr as the new centre of Lisa's world).

The Linz that is defined by its difference from Vienna, defined as the non-Vienna, is the one seen and experienced by Lisa. The contrasts are with a Vienna perceived, very selectively, as Stefan's world. There is another Linz that she floats through like a sleepwalker, an exigent social world that anticipates the pattern of life in the other, and ultimately more powerful, Vienna. In music, for instance, Lisa measures the sounds of Linz against the private efforts, furtively appropriated, of a soloist. The 'music of Vienna' is that music with which she feeds her fantasy of romance. The music of Linz is band music, emphatically regulated by a conductor whose uniform is redolent of the official, the dutiful and the public. The bandmaster is a military grotesque, one that you could chuckle over all the way to the firing-post. What he is grotesque in is a pompous and unyielding propriety that emphasises hierarchy: his leadership (only ceremonial, yet threatening) consists

in ensuring that those under his command are, or adequately pretend to be, as completely responsive to external direction as he is himself. He is a master of uniformity, thus its slave, and the uniformity he imposes is particularly a matter of time and movement.

The power of this public world of enforced regularities is asserted, rather against Lisa, by Ophuls' decision to begin the proposal scene with the bandmaster's image at the moment of his first command, and then to orchestrate the complex movements of characters and camera (and even the delivery of Lisa's narration) to the bandmaster's tempo. Foreshadowed here is that other occasion of public music-making disrupted by Lisa's pursuit of her destiny: the opera. The episodes are similarly structured, and in each case we see society as a performance, a show, with Lisa alone unable to carry through her allotted role. The Linz concert and the Viennese opera are alike musical pretexts for the display of solidarity at the top level of society.

In each of them the dutiful leisure of the upper classes is visibly maintained on the work of others. In Linz the bandmaster drills his cadets in the *labour* of music-making. His unsmiling grunts of command do not even hint at the possibility of enjoyment. The stiffness of the actor's baton movements emphasises subjection, as does the framing of the image, which places a faceless horn player in the left foreground so as to present the weight to be lifted as he raises his instrument on the beat of order. Meanly-dressed, the players have no share in their leader's splendour and they are marched away, at the scene's end, like a convict squad.

The foregrounding of servitude and menial labour (often explicitly alienated) as the condition and cost of 'splendour' is a constant of Ophuls' later work, but it has a particular role in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. As the disregarded support for an often dazzling way of life, servitude is the skull-beneath-the-skin: both of elegance (achieved or attempted) and of romance. For if the bandsmen are conscripted into Leopold's attempt to pass off a parental scheme as his heart's vocation, Lisa, too, will avoid recognising the mechanics that construct and maintain the fabric of her idyll with Stefan – for example, the tired 'railway' workers and, most notably, the bandswomen of the Prater whose mock-military garb stresses



their correspondence to the Linz cadets. What Lisa cannot see, and this relates to her misreading of Stefan himself, is the substructure of routine on which she elaborates her fantasy of the unique and ordained.

The peasant cart which interrupts our view of the introduction of Leopold to Lisa rumbles across the screen to submerge formality in graceless racket. It is forcibly presented to us as an element in the life of Linz that conducts itself without reference to the schemes and protocols of the bourgeoisie; its direction of travel down the street and across the screen opposes the flow of Society's movement towards the Cathedral. While its lumbering progress does comment, in bathos, on the effusive attempt at etiquette by Lisa's stepfather (Herr Kastner), its unscheduled eruption in the midst of a carefully drilled ritual is significant largely for the notice it



fails to receive from the characters on the screen. They pay it the attention only of avoidance.

The effect here is echoed in that at the end of the sequence, after Lisa's desperate declaration that she is not free to marry Leopold. The couple have to cross the line of the departing bandsmen in order to make their way to their parents' cafe table. The camera's movement is interrupted so that the image stays on this side of the procession while Leopold and his uncle withdraw from the scene in abrupt propriety. Our access to the action is again restricted by the passage across the foreground not just of the band but also of the following rag-tag of peasants, children and old people. We hear no word of what is spoken between Leopold, his uncle and the Kastner family.

Considerations of craft are involved here: for instance, the effort so to deploy limited resources of set and cast as to create the sense of an extensive and fully-populated world. More immediately relevant is the avoidance of redundant action. In dumb show, Leopold's exchange with his uncle can be abbreviated; we no more need to be told its content than we needed to hear Leopold's third repetition of 'I'm very honoured to make your acquaintance.' But beyond that, Ophuls' treatment is a means of telling us that we don't need to be told, of stressing protocol: the curt civilities of renunciation are referred back to the elaborate forms of introduction, while controlled outrage and baffled dismay are set in the frame of exuberance and simple pleasure.

Summarised here is the imperviousness of this world to any but its own orders. Immersed in its performance of itself, the official world of bourgeois propriety – on its journey from Mayerling to Sarajevo – has as little perspective on its goals as Lisa has on hers. Her romantic hallucination is compared with, and preferred to, its social blindness. She is trapped in fantasy: 'He writes music,' she tells Leopold of Stefan, with a mixture of apology and pride, as if even the Stefan of her inflated vision needed some further push towards grandeur. But Linz is trapped in pretence, the extent of its entrapment being conveyed through the barely containable ecstasy of Frau Kastner at the prospect of her daughter's engagement. Lisa may need to construct the man of her dreams, but the parents

have an equal need to see the triumph of young love in the convenient transactions of the marriage market.

Linz is the site, then, for a preliminary confrontation between the strength of inner conviction and the power of social institutions. Everything external is on Leopold's side. The breeze which ruffles Lisa's dress during his monologue opposes the flimsiness of her exterior to the unyielding stiffness of Leopold's, as the hard vertical sheen of his helmet tyrannises the fruit-salad frivolity of her hat. This stiffness of dress unites Leopold with the bandmaster and with his uncle but also with the non-military figures of Frau Kastner and, later, Johann Stauffer; Herr Kastner's bearing indicates, comically, his aspiration to the same condition. (Compare the looser, softer stuff of which Stefan's clothes and movement are made.) Leopold's uniform, too, is as strikingly 'black' as Lisa's is 'white' – and this relationship anticipates the distribution of costume-tone between Lisa and her husband.

Lisa is trapped by the setting chosen (by Leopold, by Ophuls) for the proposal. The corner of the public garden to which he leads her is encircled by railings, shrubs, benches and statuary. It is a hard little alcove which offers no means of evasion or convenient distraction, small and private enough to enforce the intimacy that Leopold needs and Lisa fears. Yet its enclosure is not so complete as to put the pair on equal terms. It is under the eye of the parental group: an effect achieved partly in the cutting, against spatial logic, but also produced by their position as distant guardians of the only exit. A couple with a baby carriage is present within the gates to ward off any suggestion that the park is a place of romantic assignments. It is continuously open (through the railings) to the sights and sounds of the surrounding community – sufficiently public, then, to stifle any strong move towards resistance.

Leopold's speech is a juggernaut of long sentences like 'It may be unnecessary for me to mention that ever since you came to my attention I have been most favourably impressed.' Their cunning accumulation of heavy vocabulary and staggered syntax would not normally be inflicted on an actor, but here the resultant awkwardness in performance can be absorbed into the characterisation. The task of holding on to these lines is complicated by Ophuls' filming the bulk of them within one shot; but the actor's concentration becomes





Leopold's effort in delivering himself of a speech to which he has given long and careful, if scarcely inspired, thought. Against the weight of his words, in their continuity and their preparedness, Lisa is given – by the writer and the situation – only frantic spasms of improvisation.

Her sense of being cornered, and Leopold's of having cornered her, are acted out in the use of eyeline. The lieutenant's courtesy obliges Lisa to be the first to sit and so allows him to take up a position that both places her under his inspection and puts a strain on any effort of hers to reciprocate. His scrutiny is interrupted in several moments of anxiety and embarrassment, but his gaze has its point of rest on her face. Conversely Lisa's glance flits up and across to him by moments, in appeal or to acknowledge his presence and her obligations, but her eyes return constantly to look forward and down, away from his stare. To have allowed her to meet his look steadily would have been to offer her in either submission or defiance, and while she is never quite ready to submit, she certainly has not the power to defy.

The effect of Leopold's dominance is amplified by images whose framing takes his height as a pretext to diminish Lisa's presence. The top of the picture consistently crops close to, or across, the lieutenant's helmet but just as consistently it leaves space (and most of the time a lot of it) above Lisa's hat. Even in her close-up, Joan Fontaine's figure does not fill the frame. The effect is particularly pronounced in the matched pair of shots covering the speech and Lisa's intervention. The shot that favours Leopold has Lisa in, but far from dominating, its foreground. In the answering shot of Lisa, Leopold is the foreground.

It would be possible to read these procedures as a registration of male authority as against the natural frailty of women. But such a reading would need to ignore much that Ophuls emphasises, in particular his pervasive insistence on the playing-out of social roles and on the bonding of manners to social structure. (Similarly, interpretation of the motifs of stiffness as phallic should be at least restrained by the recognition that these motifs regularly surround characters who are symbolically impotent and/or sterile. It is as if too firm a devotion to the tokens of male authority were either cause or consequence of emasculation.)

These points are borne out in a further element in the film's gestural vocabulary: the use of hands. It embodies the invisible fact that the power of action has been given to Leopold, leaving to Lisa only the responsibility of re-action. (This might be the gestural correlative of Frau Kastner's injunction to 'Let him do the talking – but not all the talking.')

From the beginning of the proposal scene, in the progress round the town square, Leopold has free use of his hands to guide, to salute and to give emphasis to his conversation. Lisa's meanwhile are fully engaged in the management of her parasol, handbag and skirt. On the park bench, Lisa's hands never leave her lap, at most twisting there in resourceless agitation at the neck of her handbag, but Leopold again has command of his gestures, to such an extent that he can silence Lisa's first attempt to arrest the flow of his speech by peremptorily raising his stiffly gloved arm. This abruptly commanding movement is combined with the (albeit reproving) courtesy of 'Oh, please allow me to finish.' The gesture inflects that apparent request as an order, a reminder – where none should be needed – that it is her place to listen and not, yet, to speak.

The sense of Leopold's having command over her movements is climaxed at the end of the interview, after he has accepted the disintegration of his prospects. He terminates the conversation by rising (in one movement, like a released Jack-in-the-box) to salute her and then extending his right arm to her with a disjointed 'Oh ... then ... please!' as his sense of correct procedure asserts itself over his confusion. Ophuls chooses this moment to cut away to the parental group: misreading, it seems, the distant (and in fact unavailable) sight of Leopold's movement Herr Kastner predicts that 'It won't be long now' and bustles to order the celebratory wine. When we return to the park, the couple are already on the move with Lisa on the lieutenant's arm, which makes her having risen to his side to accept his support a simple result of his having offered it. They are both, but not equally, prisoners of form.

Leopold need not have offered her his arm; he had not done so for the walk to the park. Gallantry is his to employ for the imposition of his will, even in defeat. He sets an uncomfortable pace that leaves Lisa to grab for her parasol. When their route back to the parental group is obstructed by the band parade, he uses his arm and authority to direct her



through the line of bandsmen, but chivalry ('Make way for the lady') again covers the pursuit of his own desire, for speedy relief from a now profitless responsibility.

The sense that the forms of gentlemanliness give access to the structures of male dominance emerges with all the more force because Leopold 'in himself (fresh of face, light of voice and making a youthfully awkward assumption of the role placed upon him) is far from being a commanding figure. Leopold is his uncle's puppet, and the Colonel – in his relaxed and condescending certainty of his place in the social chain and in his sense of crime when thwarted – is what Leopold will become once the authority of his sex and rank has been so internalised as to emerge as 'innate' confidence and steely poise. Thus it is the older man (as containing Leopold) rather than Leopold himself that Lisa ends up by marrying in Johann Stauffer. The explicit link between the two figures is the cigarette smoked in the white-gloved hand. But it's worth noting that the Colonel, too, displayed his control over movement, in the scene of introductions, when he signalled the Kastner party to proceed towards the church with a 'Shall we walk?' arm gesture. At any rate, this gesture re-emerges with Stauffer, in the full strength of its imperiously protective ambiguity, at the Opera, when he summons Lisa back to her place at his side from her contemplation of Stefan. Then, in his surprise appearance in the carriage after the rendezvous on the Opera steps, what might be a considerate reluctance to let Lisa take her 'headache' off home alone is quite blatantly a form for the demand that she stay within his sphere of movement.

To this extent, Lisa's disarrayed return to the carriage (the confined space provided for her within the social circuit) is parallel to her return, in Linz, to her parents' cafe table where – before and after the proposal – we see two chairs reserved for the happy couple. But Lisa's place at the table, unlike her place in the carriage, does not *have* to be taken up. It can be avoided at only a moderate cost in embarrassment and disapproval: she sinks into the Colonel's vacated chair to meet her mother's demands for explanation. Lisa's crime in Vienna is like but not like her quiet demolition of the schemes of Linz; there, even in resistance, she submitted her will to that of her protector by accepting to be led everywhere at his side. At the Opera, acting 'the pursued', she reverses the course laid down for her

by Johann. And when Stauffer looks out from the carriage on the act that seals her fate, it is certainly crucial to the intrigue that he has seen her entering the gates of Stefan's apartment but it is equally important, within the scheme of images, that what he has witnessed is her gentle, reluctant, and inadmissible seizure of the power of independent movement.

The vastly escalated cost of Lisa's pursuit of her destiny in Vienna is pictured in the crossed sabres on the wall behind Johann as he urges her, in effect, to spare him the executioner's role. In Linz, the armoury of social power lies in reserve as decoration, posing its sanctions, certainly, but not activating them: thus in the panning shot as Leopold leads his miscreant out of the park they pass between a 'cross-fire' of cannon (to the right, then the left of the screen) which have been incidentally visible in the backgrounds of earlier shots but which are now brought to prominence. Their threat is however *only* symbolic and their ammunition is stacked ornamentally beside them. Lisa may *feel* that she is being taken to the firing squad, but only blanks will be exploded. It is a lightly humorous effect, almost a gag, in keeping with the mood of the sequence.

The crucial distinction when we get to Stauffer's Vienna (a difference that fissures the continuities of situation, structure and image and that underwrites the drastic contrast in tone) is that Lisa is now accountable, not to her parents, but to her husband. What alters everything – to a life-and-death matter – is the change in Lisa's *social* role, brought about by marriage, not in her 'nature as a woman'; for instance, neither her natural nor her social role as a mother weighs much in the course of events, however great the surrounding emotion. There is certainly no change in her psychology.

When she tells Johann that she can't help herself, that she's 'had no hope but [Stefan's] ever,' this Romantic Nonsense is no more than a re-phrasing of her statements to Leopold. It is surely by one of the master-strokes in the design of the Linz sequence that Lisa is made not to *refuse* marriage but to declare it impossible, not to reject Leopold but to improvise the truthful lie of her engagement. This presents an exact definition of her feelings and character. It does not occur to her that her will is involved in her inability to accept Leopold. Despite making what from her point of view is every effort to take the place in society desired for her by her parents, she is





finally brought up against the desperate fact that she is already and irrevocably spoken for.

Lisa's enslavement is directly contrasted with the subjection to the social order that is evident in Leopold's struggle to comprehend: 'You mean you're engaged to a man and your parents don't even know him?' These two kinds of unfreedom, romantic and institutional, are closed around Lisa by marriage. It is Stauffer who emphasises choice and responsibility, both for Lisa and for himself: committing himself to act out the role of the injured husband, he still sees himself as *deciding* his course. When he says that he will do everything in his power to oppose Lisa's folly, he is deliberately not claiming (as he could readily have been made to claim and as seems to be true) that his actions will be the simple and inevitable consequence of hers. By contrast Lisa, accepting but not seeking the role of social outcast, shows no more thought of defiance in going to Stefan than in refusing Leopold. Johann can take the initiative simply by acting out the male role; Lisa can take it only by contradicting the female one.

Lisa's tragedy is that, being morally the product of Linz and fully a member of Stauffer's world, she has nonetheless fixed her affections on a man who is a stranger to that world's commitments. As a complete daughter of this bourgeoisie, Lisa shows in romance the punctiliousness that Leopold and Johann display towards form.

In both respects, these nicenesses of observance are directly contrasted with the tissue of broken engagements in the life of Stefan who, as he says, almost never gets to the place he starts out for. The Linz sequence is immediately set in the context of that life and of the world which supports it – preceded by a demonstration of the manners of Stefan's promiscuity (witnessed by Lisa from the staircase outside his apartment) and followed by a sketch of the life that revolves around Madame Spitzer's dress shop. It is a world where 'Congratulations, my dear' will echo cheerfully round a conquest that promises pleasure and profit, a regime every bit as meticulously constructed and serviced as Johann's for its own purposes of sophisticated hedonism. In that world Stefan is as available to Lisa as he is to any other beautiful woman, and with impunity even from censure. Its particular terms – the terms of its difference from 'Linz' – are the acknowledgement

of the mutability of appetite and affection. If the bandmaster is Linz's extension into grotesquerie of what Leopold and Johann represent, the equivalent figure in Stefan's Vienna is the drunken soldier who offers to take Lisa 'anywhere [because] it makes no difference': his eruption on the scene is so placed, immediately after Lisa's final disillusionment with Stefan, that his words must be taken to represent the most appalling notion that she could be asked to confront. Her recoil from his proposition (as distinct from his somewhat repulsive person) merely confirms that she has only, ever, been as missionary in Stefan's world. Her most un-Spitzerian refusal to tell Stefan of her pregnancy is explicitly the result of her wish to distance herself from all the other women in his life, that is, to enact the most complete rejection of the ways of his world.

Lisa believes in the recklessness of her passion. She believes that she must have Stefan come what may. But she does not, in fact, want him on any terms. She wants him on very strict terms indeed. He must freely recognise their meetings as brought about not under the stars of a particular time and place, but in eternity's grand design.

Herein lies the profundity of the invention which makes reflections on freedom open and close the Linz sequence. 'You who have always lived so freely,' she addresses Stefan at the start; then, within the action at the end of the sequence, responding to her mother's demand to know what caused the collapse of Leopold's proposal, 'I only told him the truth ... I told him I wasn't free.'

Lisa, like her husband, like 'responsible' society – but unlike Stefan and his circle – insists on living in a world of binding, life-and-death commitments. She demands a stability that is to be secured not by 'such things as honour, decency' – not by dutiful submission to social ties – but by the common and spontaneous recognition of asocial romantic destiny. A bond sealed, outside society, by Fate must surely subdue the randomness of appetite and opportunity, uniting Stefan's freedom with the steadfastness of a Stauffer.

But nothing human is ever outside society, as is manifest in the stream of sideline comment, gossip and inquisitive witness that runs through the film. Lisa's position is quite incoherent. When her letter asserts the inevitability of the encounter at the Opera and says that nothing happens by

chance, could she thoughtfully mean that it was Stefan's destiny – to miss his destiny? And what, concretely, does she hope will follow from her visiting Stefan to offer him her life? Its one certain result, after all, must be to make him the target of Johann's fury. (Lisa's devotion here is every bit as murderous as her husband's.) Stefan's forgetfulness, which Lisa represents as the cruellest blow of fate, at least spares her the possibility that he might recognise her, say thanks for the memory and nonetheless send her packing. The fine irrationality of 'If only you could have found what was never lost' shows her at last reduced to using 'what might have been' to protect her vision of destiny against the press of reality. Her letter itself, a final attempt at vindication, is pointless except as an invitation to suicide, persuading Stefan to let death prove what life could not.

There is a danger of misrepresenting the film, though, in stressing what is morbid in Lisa's attitude as if this were the (individual, moral) flaw that propelled her tragedy. It is certainly established that Lisa is locked into a particular moment of her adolescence, but if she were broken mainly on her perversity, the film would surely not be entitled to pass her off as a figure of nobility and purity. Also involved, however, is a desperate struggle to live authentically and not to give her life to a convenient denial of her inmost conviction and deepest feeling. It is that which makes the success of her resistance to Linz a kind of triumph, even in its confusion and its comicality. But the struggle dooms her, too, by trapping her in the determined acting-out of her role as a woman (in that society) at a point when its conflicting elements have been split apart.

The correspondence of 'You who have always lived so freely' and 'I told him I wasn't free' is constructed by the film and not observed by Lisa. What the film sees, and she doesn't, is the conflict between a man's freedom and a woman's lack of it. (Lisa sees herself and Stefan as complementary; the film presents as different.) While the rigidities of Linz are set against the amenability of Madame Spitzer's, the transition offers Lisa no release from the frame of decorative compliance. The price of a woman's entry to Stefan's world of freedom is a place in the higher reaches of prostitution. Already explicit here is the theme developed most fully in *Lola Montès*: that the typical result of a woman's seizure of freedom in matters of the heart

is confinement within the role of Woman of Scandal. 'The mutability of appetite and affection' has very specific consequences for a woman, and Lisa presumably discovers that offering herself autonomously in the Spitzer market is no more rewarding – as it is certainly not more authentic – than offering herself under contract to Johann Stauffer. Her world has, after all, a less brutal way with ageing wives than with ageing courtesans. It is important that Lisa does not enter into marriage solely for the sake of her son; it was 'as much for his sake as for mine'. But Stauffer's Vienna repeats the pattern of Linz in this: that Lisa reacts to Stefan's indifference by embarking on an accommodation with society (arranged marriage/marriage of convenience) only to rediscover the depth of her prior commitment; and it's her passion's *integrity* that disorders the social mechanism, interrupting the musical performance.

Marriage is the given site for the expression of a woman's incorruptibility. When it functions as it's supposed to do, love 'covers' the woman's submission to an unequal contract so that the moment of her subjection to a tightly constrained role is dissolved into the moment when she freely acknowledges the choice of her heart. Thus she is invited to believe that her fulfilment and her servitude are the same thing because they are accomplished in the same act of her will. So long as this belief can be sustained, she has a means of reconciling the conflicting imperatives of love (emotional integrity) and duty (subordination). Her unfreedom becomes what she freely desires. But Lisa's role explodes in her face: married to Johann, she comes to see herself as his mistress while society identifies her still as a wife. She is fully persuaded that love and duty go together, and cannot but insist on their unity, even when society is brought to assert the priority of the contract. Lisa's offence is the 'excessive' enactment of those qualities which are held out as being woman's nature and woman's glory. It's when she defies marriage that she is being true to the self that her world has offered her, first in the absoluteness of her commitment (her uncompromising fidelity makes her unfaithful) and then in the emotional honesty which refuses the discreet indulgence of an affair.

Here again it might be claimed that the film offers not a *presentation* of Lisa's role, but an indulgence of the stereotyped opposition of emotional woman (a slave to her feelings) and

rational man. Yet it is surely clear that Ophuls' irony embraces *all* the film's characters and that the behaviour of the men is by no means remarkable for its rationality. More importantly, Lisa is articulated as an *exceptional* figure rather than a typical one: throughout the film she is systematically contrasted with a range of other women. All of them – from the coyly opportunist friend of her girlhood onwards – are shown to have made quite different kinds of accommodations to their roles and circumstances. None of them manifests the purity, emotionality and commitment of 'essential womanhood'.

Unable to follow their complaisant or resigned acceptance of the best available bargain, Lisa seeks to live out, in purity, the meaning of a woman's life as a thing to be given. Her insistence on awaiting Stefan's approach and recognition (like her refusal to exploit her pregnancy) holds her free from the predatory taint on a woman who actively acknowledges her needs and desires. That this leaves her with only her passivity to exploit is articulated in Stefan's hideously acute observation on her flight from the Opera: 'where there is a pursued there must be a pursuer'. The letter, after her acceptance of defeat, is the one place where she can tell Stefan of the depth of her need without accusing herself of shamelessness.

Living as a woman, Lisa can dedicate herself to others or she can function for them in a social role which is essentially a thing of gestures and of show. She is incapacitated from living for herself because no terms are available, beyond these, in which to grasp what that might mean. Her fulfilment is to be discovered in submission; if it can't be, there is something wrong with her (with her soul or with her luck). Her nature – as *that* society has defined it for her – will find its highest expression as a Madonna. But that selflessness produces the cult of sacrifice which makes Lisa obsessive, egocentric and ultimately, like Lucia Harper or Madame de ..., a killer: her stubborn purity is one agent of Stefan's death.

If Ophuls' film is nonetheless in love with her, it thereby acknowledges the madness of a role in which the exercise of her integrity propels her and those around her to catastrophe. Ophuls' delight in Lisa and his sympathy for her surely derive from her construction as a heroine who lives her role, in impossible circumstances, as fully and finely as that role allows. Anything more would require the lucidity that would

challenge the role and make her a rebel. It is equally a part of her charm and a source of her deadliness that she is so locked into her role as to preclude her achieving the perspective on her predicament that the film gives us. (We should not pretend that the achievement would necessarily have done her much good.) Her innocence is inseparable from her blindness.

Lisa never sees, never approaches the insight, that her predicament is related to the definitions and constraints that her society imposes on womanhood. Instead she rationalises her servitude and naturalises her passivity through her submission to Fate. The myth of destiny is generally available both to give misfortune the comfort of cosmic meaning, and as a magical resolution of the conflict between an experience of unfreedom and the conviction (however derived) of individual liberty: one's fate is one's own, just like one's actions. But the myth has a particular significance for a woman faced, like Lisa, with society's insistence that she must hold herself accountable for her actions and simultaneously accept her subordination to men as a product of her nature. Beyond that, since marriage will be the free act that ratifies her inequality, there is discomfort in any suggestion of contingency in her choice of partner. Destiny romanticises the contract by presenting submission to Heaven's Plan as the only true freedom. Fulfilment lies in the discovery of 'the mate that fate had me created for'. Having made the discovery and missed the fulfilment, Lisa has to shift the terms of her commitment. Destiny becomes Malign Fate, through the obscurity – 'If only ...' – of Stefan's vision. Thus when Fortune crushes, it is still someone's fault. Lisa can embrace her unfreedom in its metaphysical guise, she can recognise her misfortune as the product of a moral failure, but (or because) she can never see her predicament in its social dimensions. To do so would be to break the unity between her role and her perceptions. Passivity and blindness are laid down as the terms of her account at its very start: 'What happened to us had its own reason beyond our poor understanding.' What is at stake is Lisa's attempt to give coherent shape to her experience.

In this sense, the *notion* of Destiny governs her life, and, perhaps more than anything else, it wrecks her life. To be worthy of her great love, she cannot present herself to it impurely, as a clever deceiver. To enact her conviction of destiny, she has

to wait until Stefan's recognition freely responds to hers; she cannot do any of the 'practical' things that might break the deadlock without compromising her life's foundation. Thus the same commitment that lets her feel her life's integrity propels it to disintegration. In this she is not typical, but she might be exemplary.

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