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Review of Lola Montes

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Lola Montès (Blu-ray)

(Criterion, 2.16.2010)

Max Ophüls is one of the greatest film directors, creator of at least two masterpieces: *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *The Earrings of Madame de*. Legend has it that his final film, *Lola Montès*, is also a masterpiece, but it has been difficult to verify the claim. After a disastrous Paris premiere in 1955, the film's producers decided to increase its commercial possibilities by making such changes as cutting out some scenes and remixing the sound. At the end of 1956, it was cut further and re-edited in chronological order, changes that may have hastened the director's death in 1957. In 1968 producer Pierre Braunberger bought the rights and re-edited *Lola Montès* into something approximating the original version, though with washed-out visuals. Using digital technology, the Cinémathèque française created a completely restored version, now released on Blu-ray by Criterion. Was the 55-year wait worth it? Certainly. Is *Lola Montès* another Ophüls masterpiece? Perhaps not.

Based on the life of the Irish-born dancer (1821-1861) famous for her affairs with Franz Liszt, King Ludwig I of Bavaria, and many others, *Lola Montès* rearranges the events of her life, intercutting them with the appearance of Lola (Martine Carol) as the main attraction in a circus presided over by a sympathetic ringmaster (Peter Ustinov). The points being made by Ophüls and screenwriter Annette Wademant about celebrity and exploitation are probably more obvious now than in the fifties. As Lola's affairs, primarily those with Liszt (Will Quadflieg), Ludwig (Anton Walbrook), and a Bavarian student (Oskar Werner), are unveiled, *Lola Montès* alternately admires her fiery spirit and bemoans her reliance upon men, the mistreatment of women by their lovers being a major Ophüls concern.

So what is all the fuss about? Because Ophüls is a master stylist, it is interesting to see what he could do in his only experiment with color and with CinemaScope. The director eschews close-ups, so he has a good time cramming information into the frame, whether in long shots, as with the arrival of the Lola-Liszt coach at an Italian inn and many of the circus scenes, or in two-shots, in which he often places obstacles like candles in front of the actors to break up the characters' intimacy. Although *Lola Montès* has been restored through a Technicolor process, it was shot in Eastman color so that reds predominate, a fitting motif for a film ostensibly about passion.

A major complaint against *Lola Montès* is the inadequacy of Carol. As we learn in the typically splendid Criterion extras, she, a major French star, was forced upon Ophüls, and he tried to use her blankness to his advantage. Except for a carriage scene with Werner, her Lola seems lifeless, and since the film depends upon every man who sees her falling in love, that's a big negative.

The other major complaint is that *Lola Montès* is a technical exercise that fails to engage the emotions in the way Ophüls' best films do. *Letter from an Unknown Woman* and *The Earrings of Madame de* rest comfortably on the list of my favorite one hundred

films, and I'm also quite fond of *The Reckless Moment* and *Le Plaisir*. *Lola Montès* is pretty to look at, especially when a blue filter is used to make Lola otherworldly, and Ophüls' constantly moving camera (boy, does he love staircases) is a delight, but it doesn't have enough to say about love, loss, and regret, as his best films do.

In her commentary, Susan White, author of *The Cinema of Max Ophüls*, admits *Lola Montès* is "not a film for everyone," suggesting that filmmakers may appreciate it the most. White says that Stanley Kubrick, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Todd Haynes resemble Ophüls in their attention to detail. *Lola Montès* is decidedly pre-Kubrickian, almost a foreshadowing of *Barry Lyndon*. It also suggests the Fellini of *8½* and *Juliet of the Spirits*.

White is good at recounting the history of the most expensive European production to that point. *Cinéastes de Notre Temps*, a 53-minute French television program from 1965, includes interviews with Carol, Ustinov, other collaborators, and several who worked elsewhere with Ophüls, including Danielle Darrieux and Vittorio De Sica. Some of this footage is repeated in *Max par Marcel*, a 33-minute 2009 film featuring Marcel Ophüls, his father's assistant on *Lola Montès*. Marcel offers several insightful anecdotes, including the time he tried to advise his father only to be told "I don't need your help." Following the film's premiere, Ophüls wrote a moving letter to François Truffaut, which Marcel reads. The younger Ophüls is happy his father's vision has finally triumphed over time and the "imbeciles" who tried to ruin it.

Despite its weaknesses, *Lola Montès* is definitely worth seeing for anyone who loves Ophüls, French films in general, early CinemaScope, and experiments with color.—
Michael Adams