



***Lola Montès* :**

Le désir dans l'abyme

"Desire is a matter of performance and of spectator response . . . never direct, but rather is a response to a representation."¹ *Lola Montès*, the last film directed by Max Ophüls, seeks to undermine this conventional interpretation of the spectator/spectacle relationship. Ophüls, in this piece of cinematic virtuosity, presents the audience and, specifically, its capacity to desire as the *agents provocateurs* of representation. By employing baroque theatrical philosophy, which stresses the reflectiveness of art and life, Ophüls also addresses mediations between the life of *Lola Montès* and its circus representation. These mediations are achieved primarily through cinematic techniques. Finally, a *mise-en-abyme* construction projects the film back into the hands of the audience with an uncanny and disquieting confrontation between the film's spectators and Lola, our object of desire.

If one perceives the circus spectacle as the sphere where the life of Lola Montès meets its spectators, then it is correct to work backwards on either side of this median to the origins of desire that later forge this central representation. Max Ophüls illustrates the power of desire over representation in the life of the courtesan as well as in the indulgences of the public-funded circus. Lola creates her own persona by presenting herself as a Spanish dancer to a Bavarian opera house. Likewise, she re-creates the same spectacle before the king of Bavaria. The king, with lustful intent, imposes this same representation of Lola on the Bavarian opera, and goes so far as to commission a painting of his desire. The circus spectators are equally responsible for the

creation of a Lola representation. By attending the circus, they endorse the revision, reorganization, and glamorization of Lola's past. The desires of the public select the events in Lola's life that will eventually represent her to the community.

For Ophüls, "film was a spectacle, not a document of life," therefore his fascination with the selective representation of life is understandable.² "*Lola Montès* n'est pas une histoire racontée mais un poème, une succession d'états d'âme, un portrait de femme éclaté en plusieurs morceaux, ou encore une fresque baroque."³ The baroque notion of seeing "the world as a theatre" adapted well to Ophüls's thematic objectives in *Lola Montès*.⁴ "Le baroque, disait Eugenio d'Ors, est l'art où les lignes s'entrecroisent, se tordent ou se brise . . . où surtout le mouvement s'oppose à l'équilibre, l'harmonie et la stabilité."⁵ The real events of Lola's life, as witnessed in the flashback sequences, are controlled and ordered by the circus representation. Temporal reality is deconstructed as well as the ability of reality to interject spontaneity. Indeed, the choosing of rooms in the Bavarian inn is of no consequence to the circus spectacle; therefore, this fresh activity is perceived as superfluous filler.

The life of Lola is most symbolically placed under the control of the spectators' desire in the tightrope acts. Like a trained animal, she is forced to "relive her life every night" by walking an obstacle course of international capitals, presumably *les lieux des liaisons*. Ophüls's *mise-en-scène* establishes the control of desire over Lola's life experiences. The many, expansive

long shots and moving-camera sequences simulate the obscene, perusing eye of the spectator as he digs into Lola's past. "[Ophüls] n'intègre pas ses personnages dans un cadre fixe, selon des lois relevant de la plastique picturale; il les laisse vivre devant son objectif, agir comme sur une scène de théâtre, et les accompagne dans leur trajectoire, colle à eux comme leur ombre."⁶ The color schemes used in the flashbacks serve as seasonal guides to the audience, and even the "garments . . . function not as clothing but as costumes, as elements of performance."⁷

At this point, one questions the role of Lola in Ophüls's film. The entire piece is seemingly constructed in a complex *mise-en-abyme* of desire: the circus spectators desire a scandalous spectacle; the ringmaster desires a successful show; the circus itself desires an ordered, thematic representation of Lola's love adventures. Max Ophüls clarifies the matter: "Lola is merely an axis around which the drama unfolds She is the one who provokes the dramas that interest us; she is their trigger."⁸ George Annenkov, the film's designer, describes the circus as "a myth, a whirling allegory,"⁹ and, indeed, "Lola is transformed . . . into a mythical figure" through her repetitive participation in the circus spectacle.¹⁰ Is she only a myth? The conclusion seems to differ.

Throughout the particular circus performance that we (the film audience) participate in, Lola asserts her own version of reality outside of the mythic façade. Her failing health injects an ever-present potential to overthrow the representation with the represented. Lola's fall brings this potential to a peak. A moving-camera shot simulates Lola's vertigo. It also simulates the subjective fears of the audience that perhaps the representation will not live up to its desire.

"Ophüls appears to have been aware of the nature of circus as the space of encounter between nature/culture, periphery/centre, inside/outside."¹¹ The notion of inescapable duality, in a baroque sense, permeates the relationship Lola has with her image as well as the bond between the will of the audience and the spectacle at hand. "Ophüls's object was to create complicity between actor and audience . . . in a critical, even polemical way."¹² Lola becomes more than just a mythic figure as her life is deconstructed and reconstructed at her expense. As she stretches out her hands across the *abyme* in the last frame, she forces us to accept the role our own desires have played in the assembling of representation—in assembling her.

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¹ Alan Larson Williams, *Max Ophüls and the Cinema of Desire: Style and Spectacle in Four Films, 1948–1955* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 153.

² Paul Willemen, *Ophüls* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), 52.

³ Claude Beylie, *Max Ophüls* (Paris: L'Herminier, 1984), 103.

⁴ Willemen, *Ophüls*, 69.

⁵ Victor-Lucien Tapie, *Le Baroque* (Paris: Press Universitaires de France, 1963), 11–12.

⁶ Beylie, *Max Ophüls*, 115.

⁷ Williams, *Max Ophüls and the Cinema of Desire*, 160.

⁸ Willemen, 65.

⁹ Willemen, 65.

¹⁰ Willemen, 65.

¹¹ Willemen, 65.

¹² Willemen, 52.