

Le Plaisir

A Film by
Max Ophüls





CLAUDE DAUPHIN
GABY MORLAY

MADELINE RENAUD
GINETTE LECLERC
MILA PARELY
DANIELLE DARRIEUX
PIERRE BRASSEUR
JEAN GABIN
PAULETTE DUBOST

JEAN SERVAIS
DANIEL GELIN
SIMONE SIMON

a film by MAX OPHÜLS

LE PLAISIR

Several orange water droplets of various sizes are scattered across the page, some appearing to fall from the top and others rising from the bottom.

CONTENTS

Cast and Crew ... 4

Pleasure and Pain (2017)
by Alexander Jacoby ... 5

Le Plaisir, or Desire for the Absolute (2017)
by Philippe Roger ... 15

About the Transfer ... 31

Several orange water droplets of various sizes are scattered across the page, some appearing to fall from the top and others rising from the bottom.

CAST AND CREW

LA MASQUE

Claude Dauphin
Gaby Morlay

LA MAISON TELLIER

Madeleine Renaud
Ginette Leclerc
Mila Parély
Danielle Darrieux
Pierre Brasseur
Jean Gabin

LE MODÈLE

Jean Servais
Daniel Gélin
Simone Simon

Based on three stories by **Guy de Maupassant**

Adaptation by **Jacques Natanson** and **Max Ophuls**

Dialogue by **Jacques Natanson**

Music by **Joe Hayos**

Directors of Photography **Christan Matras** and **Philippe Agostini**

Production Design **D'Eaubonne**

Directed by **Max Ophuls**

PLEASURE AND PAIN

by Alexander Jacoby

Le Plaisir (1952) at first sight might seem an incongruous title in Max Ophuls' filmography. His films tend to focus more on the pains than on the pleasures of love. *Liebelei* (1933), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), and *Madame de...* (1953), three films made in three different countries (Austria, the United States, France) which nevertheless form a clear thematic trilogy, are devastating accounts of the destructive power of passion. *La signora di tutti* (1934) and *Lola Montès* (1955), plus the lesser known *Yoshiwara* (1937) and *Le Roman de Werther* (1938), are also tragedies. In *Le Plaisir*, tragedy is replaced by a mixture of warm humanity and sombre irony, and it is this bittersweet quality which is the film's most remarkable characteristic. It is a film about pleasure, certainly, but it is, as Robin Wood observes, "a pleasure deeply disturbed by undercurrents, by a sense of loss in the midst of *jouissance*, by intimations of mortality." For Ophuls, pleasure is not always wholly pleasant, just as, in the film's famous last line, "*Le bonheur n'est pas gai*," or, in the most common of several unsatisfactory translations, "Happiness is no lark."

That closing line typifies the wry wisdom of Ophuls' vision of life, inflected in *Le Plaisir* in a variety of moods – ironic, affirmative, bitter – rather than in a tragic vein, but consistent with the attitudes and values expressed elsewhere in the director's work. And indeed, the film shares various narrative and stylistic traits with the rest of Ophuls' oeuvre. Like *La Ronde* (another film characterised more by irony and humour than by tragedy), *Le Plaisir* tells several stories; in this case, a 'main' central tale, as long in itself as a short feature film, flanked by two brief, but supremely telling, vignettes. As V.F. Perkins notes, this "convention-defying" structure (one would expect the central story to come last) resembles a triptych, and the religious connection is emphasised by the fact that the middle story pivots around a visit to church to celebrate a first communion, which thus becomes the film's central event.

The three stories both complement and contrast with each other, offering different perspectives on the central theme. Like *Liebelei*, *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *La*





Ronde and *Madame de...*, the film is set in the past, which Anton Walbrook's master of ceremonies (in *La Ronde*) judges "more restful than the present and more sure than the future": to be precise, that portion of the past which, in the mid-20th century, was sufficiently far to seem remote, but still within living memory. Several of Ophuls' films are set in Vienna, 1900, separated from the 1950s by two world wars and the breakup of the vast European empire of which it was the capital. *Le Plaisir*, made in 1952, is set another decade or two in the past, in the France of the 1880s, a period which would then have been close to the limits of living or at least of adult memory (and roughly as far away from Ophuls' film as the film itself is from today's spectators; at the time of writing, the film's lead actress, Danielle Darrieux, is still alive at the age of 100). The distance in time is crucial to the effect of the films; it allows them to be reflective but not detached, to engage with the characters as individuals while also seeing them as elements in a social system. As with his great near-contemporary Kenji Mizoguchi, Ophuls' personal sympathy with his characters is the flip side of his understanding of their place in their world.

Le Plaisir also exemplifies another feature shared with *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *La Ronde* and *Lola Montès*: what Douglas Pye calls the "elaborate use of narrators who are, in varying ways, both storytellers and characters within the fictional worlds". This tactic too has the potential both to involve us in and to distance us from the films: in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, the heroine is the narrator, and her status as such aligns the viewer with her experience; by contrast, the Master of Ceremonies in *La Ronde* and the Ringmaster in *Lola Montès* offer a more detached perspective on events. In *Le Plaisir*, the narrator, voiced by Jean Servais, is Guy de Maupassant (1850-93), author of the original stories on which Ophuls based his narratives; for *Le Plaisir*, like *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (based on Stefan Zweig) and *La Ronde* (based on Arthur Schnitzler), is an adaptation of canonical literature. But Maupassant is the only one of these authors who is literally present within the film, initially on the soundtrack and, arguably, in the last story, as an onscreen character (V.F. Perkins argues that this cannot be the historical Maupassant, since Servais plays an old man and Maupassant died at the age of 42; however, within the film, the character certainly claims to be the author of the stories; metaphorically he is Maupassant, even if not literally so).

In part, the author's presence serves further to emphasise the gap between then and now: "You can imagine my anxiety," he tells the audience in his opening commentary, "because these are old stories for your modern times." In part, it again creates a certain distance between spectator and narrative: we receive the stories as tales told by an author, rather than directly as drama. Yet at the same time, the authority of the author is strikingly undermined: Maupassant is no longer a controlling intelligence, but one among many characters, with a viewpoint and position no less partial and provisional than theirs. Challenging Maupassant's right to set the agenda, Ophuls is able to stamp events with his own authorial personality, characterised by a more sympathetic engagement with the experience of his characters. As Robin Wood writes: "Ophuls is scrupulously faithful to Maupassant's texts, yet one always senses a subtle difference in sensibility that can be summed up in one word: cynicism, pervasive in Maupassant, almost totally absent in Ophuls. Maupassant's cynicism is his way of looking down on his characters, establishing his man-of-the-world superiority. Ophuls substitutes tenderness and never sets himself apart." If Maupassant's presence as narrator distances us from the drama, Ophuls' presence as director brings us closer.

Stylistically, again, the film is both distinct from and of a piece with Ophuls' other work. Viewers accustomed to the meticulous studio recreation of *Letter from an Unknown Woman* or *La Ronde* will feel at home in the outer stories, with their elegant studio recreations of late-nineteenth-century Paris, and in the opening scene of the middle story, 'La Maison Tellier', set in an atmospherically designed port town in Normandy. On the other hand, the subject of 'La Maison Tellier' is a trip to the countryside, and this is exquisitely shot on location: Robin Wood suggests the influence of Jean Renoir here (a link cemented by the fact that the cast includes Renoir's regular star, Jean Gabin). The departure from studio to location is a departure from Ophuls' characteristic filmmaking practice consistent with the theme of the holiday which the episode depicts; the gap between studio and location footage helps to cement the film's delicate mixture of moods.

The properties of Ophuls' camera style, on the other hand, are consistent with his wider work: a preference (though not an exclusive or prescriptive one) for group shots over close-ups; a preference (though not an exclusive or prescriptive one) for camera

movement over static images or montage. These features were not unusual at the time in European cinema (this was the decade of Roberto Rossellini and the early Michelangelo Antonioni, as well as of critics André Bazin, a champion of staging in depth, and Alexandre Astruc, who formulated the theory of *le caméra stylo*). But Ophüls arguably took them further than anyone else, to the extent that he was obliged to defend them against adverse criticism. "I'm not ready to concede that the close-up is obligatory," he wrote. "I attach great importance, for instance, to the ability to show the five girls *en famille*, "like a bouquet of flowers" (Maupassant). So I did not pick them out one by one by putting them in separate shots. Besides, I think that very often actors express themselves better with their whole bodies. Gabin could entrance us from a mile away."

At times Ophüls' camera style achieves a magnificent simplicity. Consider, for instance, the scene in which a noisy travelling salesman (Pierre Brasseur) flirts with the prostitutes on the train; a thoughtfully composed group shot simply observes the characters in their confined compartment, allowing expression and gesture to speak volumes. This scene is filmed through a camera that is largely static, except for a simple reframing. But Ophüls, who claimed that "Life is movement", also ranks alongside F.W. Murnau and Mizoguchi as one of the masters of the moving camera, and *Le Plaisir* is famous from the bravura crane shot which opens the second story, carrying us through the streets of a town towards a brothel, before rising to peer through its windows at the madame's activity. Successive shots, all filmed through the windows, then depict the apparently convivial nightlife of the house. At the end of this flamboyant sequence, the camera finally shows us the lit lantern which indicates the place's status as a "house of pleasure". In another moment of wry self-consciousness, the narrator's voice comments that "It will now be turned off because it must be dark for the story to commence." For a cinematic audience, this comment evokes the darkness inside the theatre which heralds the beginning of a film and the visual pleasure it is expected to provide. But for the onscreen characters – the patrons of the brothel – the extinguished light signals the absence of an expected pleasure: the brothel is closed.

And indeed, Ophüls' film consistently focuses on the impediments to pleasure. The narrator announces that these are stories respectively about pleasure and love, pleasure

and purity, pleasure and death; more precisely, the outer stories are about pleasure undermined respectively by age and by selfishness (and, in the final event, disability). Both end ambivalently, with lessons that seem not to have been learned, or to have been learned too late. Yet the observation is never less than sympathetic and understanding, as another famous shot – the point-of-view shot that carries the viewer with Joséphine (Simone Simon) as she attempts suicide – makes clear.

It is in the central story that that sympathetic, understanding approach is at its most generous and most affirmative. 'Le Maison Tellier' is a portrait of a world in which the erotic and the chaste, the profane and the sacred are held in an engrossing, non-judgemental tension. The moment in which the prostitutes burst into tears during the first communion service is very moving, suggesting their inevitable marginalisation (a situation complicated by the fact that they are, in a sense, pillars of their community!) and their yearning for the purity symbolised by a child's participation in a sacred rite. For a moment it seems that religion has put pleasure in its place, but a little later in the scene, pleasure places religion; the hymns sung in church are contrasted with the gently blasphemous song that Madame Rosa (Darrieux) later sings in the fields while gathering flowers. Ophuls paints a world in which both religion and sexuality have a part to play.

The complexity of the film may be represented by the scene (one possible choice among many) in which Madame Rosa comforts the frightened daughter of Joseph Rivet (Gabin), and invites her to sleep beside her in her bed. The girl brings a doll with her, and as woman and child settle into bed, we see a statue of the Virgin Mary with the infant Christ on the bedside table. The five human figures (woman, girl, doll, Virgin and child) enact a remarkable set of complex parallels and oppositions: whore versus virgin, son versus daughter, divine child versus human child, prostitute as (surrogate) mother, child as potential mother, human likeness as toy versus human likeness as object of worship, graven image versus filmed image.

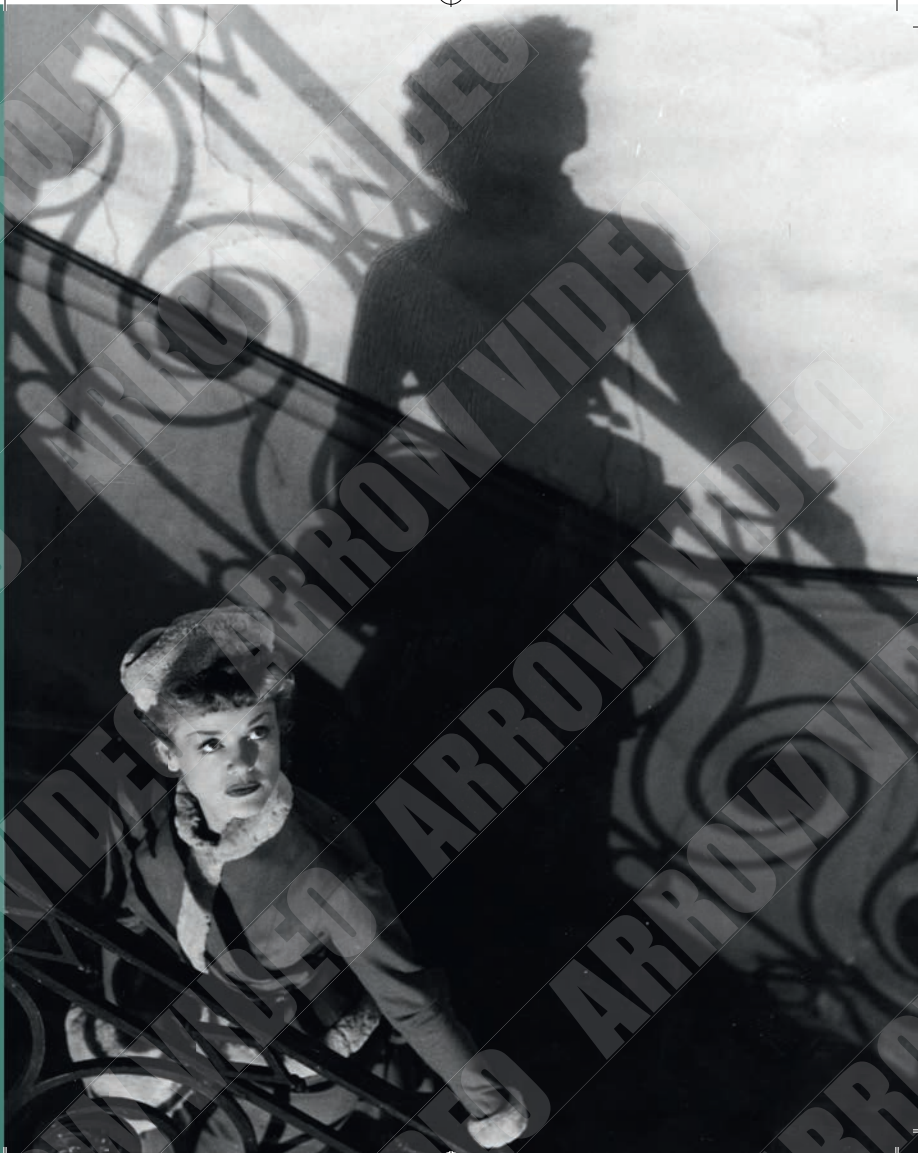
And the complexity is further deepened by the parallels Ophuls establishes with other aspects of this story and of the other stories. The presence of the doll, an object in human form, reminds us that Madame Rosa is also, in a sense, an object, a body for sale; the

focus on representations of the female body (doll and Virgin) relates to the film's third story, where heroine Joséphine is an artist's model, and where the line, "You've sold, darling" again implies the commodification of the female body. Meanwhile, Madame Rosa's kindness to the girl mirrors the unselfish care shown by the resigned wife of the first story to her feckless husband, and the more equivocal attention paid by the husband of the third story to his wheelchair-bound wife. Each recurrence of a pattern or a situation revises, complicates and deepens it.

Le Plaisir is a French film; Max Ophuls was born in Saarbrücken in Western Germany (in 1952, in fact, the town and the surrounding Saarland were under temporary French control), and had taken French citizenship before the war. But it is with Vienna that he is most associated, and in thinking of Ophuls I am reminded of the "Austrian attitude" which David Thomson ascribed to Erich von Stroheim, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger, and television filmmaker Axel Corti (all of whom bar Corti were, like Ophuls, Jewish or of Jewish descent). This attitude, Thomson wrote, was "amused, wary, hopeful, sad, but strong". Those adjectives seem a fair summary of Ophuls' own attitudes, and they go some way to describing the complexities of *Le Plaisir*, which ranks alongside several other of the director's films among the great achievements of European and world cinema.

Alexander Jacoby lectures at Oxford Brookes University on Japanese film and manga.







LE PLAISIR, OR DESIRE FOR THE ABSOLUTE

by Philippe Roger

Like Ernst Lubitsch, Max Ophuls was a filmmaker whose career began in the world of theatre. Born Maximilian Oppenheimer in Saarbrücken in 1902, the young Ophuls (for that became his pseudonym) built a name for himself in the 1920s through his stage productions in Germany, as well as his work in radio. With the advent of the talkies, he made the move to cinema and shot a number of films within a very short time, including one hit (an adaptation of *The Bartered Bride* in 1932) and one masterpiece (his 1933 adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's melodrama *Liebelei*), before being forced to leave Berlin due to Nazi antisemitism. He would spend the 1930s travelling around: although he lived in Paris and was able to work there when circumstances allowed, he also made films in Italy and the Netherlands, and even ventured as far as the Soviet Union. Far from being minor works, the films he was able to direct in these conditions bear witness to his developing style; most notably *La signora di tutti* (1934), as well as *La Tendre ennemie* (1936) or even *Sans lendemain* (1939). After naturalising as a French citizen in 1938 (the same year he made the magnificent *Le Roman de Werther*), he was drafted into the armed forces when war broke out, interrupting his historical melodrama *De Mayerling à Sarajevo*. A barely-begun shoot in Switzerland (*L'École des femmes*) and a handful of theatre productions in Zürich delayed his escape from Europe; not until the summer of 1941 would he finally reach the United States. As all the jobs in Hollywood had already been snapped up by his colleagues in misfortune, he spent several long years seeking employment, followed by a brief flurry of activity after the war ended, making four films, including another masterpiece, based on Stefan Zweig's *Lettre d'une inconnue* (*Letter from an Unknown Woman*) in 1948. In 1950, when he directed *La Ronde* (another Schnitzler adaptation) in Paris and the film proved to be a great success, he settled once more in France, where throughout the 1950s he would work with the studios four times, creating four extraordinary films that propelled him to the peak of his powers; after *La Ronde* and *Le Plaisir* (in 1951-52), there came *Madame de...* in 1953 and *Loïa Montès* in 1955. The painful failure of the latter film, a sumptuous European co-production that Ophuls transformed into a visionary critique of consumer society and the very notion of

the spectacle, compromised his career for a time, but he was preparing to return to the studios to make a film about Modigliani (*Les Amants de Montparnasse* aka *Montparnasse 19*) in 1957 when heart disease cut short his life, at almost the same age as Lubitsch.

While Ophuls is now justly recognised as one of cinema's great creators, as a genius distinguished by his exceptional productivity and depth, it should be noted that this wasn't always the case. During his lifetime, he was at best considered a pretentious dandy with a limited range, even a vain, stateless formalist. And since the subject of this brief essay is his superb *Le Plaisir*, let us hear what the intellectual authority on French cinema, the great critic André Bazin, wrote about the film's creator upon its release: "With *Le Plaisir*, Mr Max Ophuls, whose *La Ronde* met with a triumphal reception abroad, will no doubt continue to raise his Austrian hand and hold high the torch of French cinema." Here, Bazin's casual ignorance (Ophuls is not Austrian!) is laced with implicit contempt (the supposedly lurid eroticism of *La Ronde* would mostly have been appreciated outside France), or even latent racism (the foreigner coming to seize possession of French culture). Bazin goes further still: "The director's Viennese origins are discernible not only generally, in a certain penchant for expressionism which brings a leaden quality to the film, but also specifically, in incongruous details: in 'La Maison Tellier', for instance, the little Norman church is decorated with cherubim and curling spirals that seem to have escaped from some Bavarian chapel. And finally, there's nothing wrong with skilled manipulation of the camera, as long as it's not limited to an obsession with tracking shots." This unfair indictment combines two criticisms: the alleged leadenness and self-indulgence of the visual language. The leadenness is supposedly a Germanic quality, while the self-indulgence (Bazin speaks of acrobatics and exercises in style) is deemed immoral: "There is a certain immorality in displays of luxury during times of poverty, in the cinema and elsewhere, when luxury is not justified by the subject matter." This critique takes into account neither the stylistic function of beautiful scenery nor the moral imperative to control the camera with dexterity; worse still, it declares the whole thing leaden because it is, quite simply, Austrian. How are we to understand the labelling as "Austrian" of a filmmaker who was born in Saarland and became naturalised as a French citizen? It is because the films that most cemented Ophuls' reputation are all set in Vienna around

1900: *Liebelei* (shot in Berlin), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (shot in Hollywood) and *La Ronde* (shot in Paris). In post-war France, Austrian was also a euphemistic substitute for the pejorative term German. It may seem surprising that a critic such as Bazin could fall back on the cliché of German “leadenness” to discredit Ophuls’ style, especially as the argument he presents testifies more than anything to his ignorance of French religious architecture: it so happens that the church at La Chapelle-Engerbold, which served as inspiration for the church interior in ‘La Maison Tellier’, contains a rood screen adorned with cherubim. When making these cutting remarks, France’s most illustrious film critic of the time appears to have been blinded by prejudice. The same cannot be said of François Truffaut who, despite his close connection with Bazin, was not so blinkered and recognised Ophuls’ genius, following in the footsteps of Jacques Rivette who showered praise upon his next film (*Madame de...*) in *Cahiers du cinéma*. The first filmmakers to be influenced by Ophuls only began to appear after his death: namely Jacques Demy and Paul Vecchiali, as well as Jean-Luc Godard and Stanley Kubrick. Ophulsian auteurs have been few and far between, though always great: today, America’s Todd Haynes carries the mantle – what could be more Ophulsian than his 2015 melodrama *Carol*?

Le Plaisir is Ophuls’ crowning creative achievement, the work where he pursues his preoccupations to the greatest depth (those in *Lola Montès* are more immediately obvious, but less sure-footed), and also the film where his personal form of poetry visibly coalesces. Like Jean Grémillon, Ophuls applies musical thinking to cinema, or — better still — reveals the musicality inherent in cinematic language. He achieves this by constructing his film in an unusual way, breaking away from conventional narrative progression in favour of a rigorously symmetrical structure: *Le Plaisir* does not progress from start to finish, but revolves around its mid-point, with the second section’s precise centre of gravity giving shape to the parts on either side; the third section working in dialogue with the first. While the film’s ending remains unforgettable, its maximum intensity has already been reached by the mid-point. It may have been that the public did not notice the film’s unusual, episodic palindrome structure, did not notice the reverse trajectory of its mirror-image musical form, were wrong-footed by the apparent anticlimax of the final part, and that this is why they shunned it upon its release; in an attempt

to shoehorn Ophuls' narrative daring into the strictures of traditional dramaturgy, the American distributor went so far as to change the order of the sections: in this absurd version, the third part comes after the first, and the second part concludes the story.

The film's musical structure (based on a polyphonic mirror-image, but also on the sonata's threefold form of exposition, development and recapitulation) is echoed in pictorial form, whereby the structure of *Le Plaisir* — a short film at the start ('Le Masque', lasting roughly a quarter of an hour) and another at the end ('Le Modèle', lasting around 20 minutes), bookending a more expansive medium-length film ('La Maison Tellier', lasting around an hour) — calls to mind a mediaeval triptych, with two images flanking and reflecting upon an imposing central panel. This allusion to mediaeval art is no accident, given that Ophuls' most powerful pictorial experience as a young future cineaste was, aged 16, discovering Mathias Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* in Colmar (this event has been confirmed for us by his sister). The pictorial aspect is implicitly present in the first two sections (expressionism followed by impressionism), and then overtly in the final section, where Ophuls is careful to leave valuable clues to this effect. It's also worth noting the admirable extent to which the filmmaker was able to make the best of unforeseen complications during production: in fact, the version of *Le Plaisir* that ended up being filmed was even more rigorous than his initial version. Rather than shooting 'La Femme de Paul' as originally planned, Ophuls instead used 'Le Modèle' to reinforce the symmetry. Due to an inexperienced first-time producer, the film ran out of money just as filming for the second section was almost complete, meaning the shoot was temporarily put on hold; when filming began afresh with a new short story, this paradoxically brought about a deepening of Ophuls' project.

Le Plaisir's title sequence, a masterpiece of composition, tells you almost everything you need to know in order to understand the film. Visually, an explanation is offered in the form of a picture frame, inside which, in elegant English script, appear the credits for production, cast (listed by section) and technical crew. This is the only time that the three sections' titles are mentioned. As for the title of the film itself, there is one relatively unnoticed detail: it is written inside inverted commas. We must not, therefore, take it at face value: this 'plaisir' in inverted commas invites other meanings, of which the viewer

cannot be aware at this stage. The frame, meanwhile, refers to the pictorial world, which as we know is present in various guises, and the title cards are elegantly lit, with softly alternating light and shadow creating a sense of warmth and intimacy.

But the most crucial element of the title sequence is its soundtrack. We hear an operatic overture, outlining the major themes in the proper manner, and although the listener may not be fully aware of it, they are listening in sequence to the main orchestral themes from the film's three sections: first Audran's quadrille from 'Le Masque', then Béranger's song from 'La Maison Tellier', and finally the 'Cloches de Corneville' melody from 'Le Modèle'. With these three pieces, one for each section, the music positions the film within a threefold structure. But Ophuls further livens things up by placing an additional piece before them: a piece of contemplative music, roughly the same length as the others. In this symmetrical title sequence, each part lasts around half a minute, and within the space of two minutes, no fewer than four pieces of music — one plus three — are played. The enigmatic first piece does not refer to a particular section of the film, but supports the triptych structure of the work: we hear it three times, first at the beginning of the title sequence, then near the midpoint of the second section, and finally at the end of the third part, thus concluding the entire film. Such strategic deployment could lead us to believe that this separate piece of music communicates the deeper — if not secret then at least concealed — meaning of Ophuls' film. Created for the film by the talented Joe Hayos, who had also worked on *La Ronde*, it is a dual arrangement for strings (one with harp, the other with harmonium) of one of Mozart's last vocal compositions: the motet *Ave verum corpus* (K. 618). It stands in counterpoint to the three other pieces: while they soundtrack the three sections in an active, eventful way (the emphatic, diabolical vigour of the first piece, the palpable drive of the dreamy second, the repeating melody of the unfortunate third), the Mozart motet contrasts with its meditative mood, its suggestion of serenity, its vague tranquillity, its ability to evoke immobility with a slowness that borders on the eternal. It's as if this sacred music does not belong to the material world, and expresses the presence of the spiritual. *Le Plaisir* is a metaphysical film.

As the motet reappears in the course of the second and third sections, we are able to gauge the key role that it plays. At the centre of *Le Plaisir*, it emerges shortly after the

central line of symmetry marked, during the church communion, by the hymn 'Nearer, My God, to Thee'. As a whole, the film is balanced and centred around the communion in 'La Maison Tellier'. During the sequence in the church, the filmmaker's predilection for symmetry — dating back to his theatrical productions of the 1920s — finds a unique opportunity to express itself. First, the prostitutes sit down, attracting the attention of the congregation before the communicants enter with candles in hand. Then comes the communion, beginning with the bracing 'Kyrie' (from the *Mass of the Angels*) sung by the white-robed cantors, then carried by the more youthful voices of the young boys and girls. The third part of the scene shows Rosa's emotion gradually spreading, until everyone present is affected. Over a shot of Rosa's face, *Ave verum corpus* plays on the soundtrack, performed by the same invisible ensemble (strings and harmonium) as the hymn 'Nearer, My God, to Thee', which accompanied the entrance of the communicants. During the communion, after the brief 'Kyrie', the *a capella* choir of children sings the hymn as the camera rises, following a ray of light beaming through the circular stained-glass window as well as a host of upward-facing sculpted cherubim. A clear sky and sunlit clouds appear in the static shot that follows, in a low-angle view of the church's triangular steeple and the adjacent stone cross; this shot constitutes the film's axis, its centre of gravity. The hymn continues in the subsequent shot, back inside the church once more, but the trajectory is now a falling one: the camera follows the cherubim facing downward, in a movement ending on the face of Madame Rosa (Danielle Darrieux). Overcome with heart-rending emotion, Rosa begins to weep. Her tearful face triggers the *Ave verum corpus*, marking her out as the central section's principal female character. To find the reason for her tears we must look to the previous night in her room at Rivet's farm, where, unable to sleep amid the silence of the countryside, she lets the little girl and future communicant into her bed, as the girl cries for her mother. Rosa is affected by this as it reminds her of her own childhood. Furthermore, the camera's dynamic movement up toward the heavens during the communion, following the ray of light to the immaculate clouds as the hymn plays, is not an appeal to some hypothetical deity, but rather a sudden pang of longing to escape the strictures of time; the real transcendence at work in this inspired sequence is linked to the timelessness of an eternity that will heal the traumas of ageing. The only god this world recognises is Chronos. When the camera returns inside

the church, tilting downward and coming to rest on Rosa as she cries, it signals a painful awareness of the utopian nature of dreams of eternity; through its timeless perfection, *Ave verum corpus* gently underscores the acute anguish of a soul in distress.

The Mozart motet's third appearance is crueller still, and more revealing about the meaning of its first occurrence during the overture. The orchestration of the final motet is in fact the same as the opening titles, using strings and harp, whereas the version during communion uses strings and harmonium. The motet is the only piece of music in *Le Plaisir* that is not diegetically linked to the events on screen, which highlights its unique role. The harmonium would evoke a gap, a sort of partial presence in the church, whereas the harp's presence in the motet is entirely justified; the harp only connects with the disembodied voice of the narrator, the arch-manipulator who presents himself as the author of the three stories. The final *Ave verum corpus* follows the sound of shattering as Joséphine's fall breaks the glass roof, itself an echo of the shattered mirrors on the walls of the artist's studio. The start of the motet, which lasts for the same length of time as the part that plays over the titles, is accompanied by these words from the narrator: "There you are. When she was found with broken legs, I thought he'd go mad with remorse. Whether he wanted to make amends or was touched by her crazy act... He married her. Because his life was over, all he could do was work. That's the whole story." As the motet draws to a close, there follows a philosophical exchange between the two men, watching as the listless couple pass by: "Won't you say hello? / He never forgave me for interfering. He was wrong; he found love, glory and fortune. Isn't that happiness? / Still, it's very sad. / But, my friend, happiness is not a joyful thing." The final, unforgettable words of a timeless film.

We know that during the communion in 'La Maison Tellier', the *Ave verum corpus* follows the voices of the children singing the hymn 'Nearer, My God, to Thee' over a radiant sky. The fervent yet measured prayer of *Ave verum corpus* — and this intrinsically oxymoronic piece of music must be close to Ophuls' heart, as he first used it, transcribed for organ, in *Le Roman de Werther*, during Charlotte's scene at the confessional — draws our attention to Rosa's painful realisation, as she senses the distance that separates her from her childhood, and simultaneously longs to return there. Time is her destiny, hence the refrain





that she constantly hums: "*Combien je regrette [...] le temps perdu.*" ("How I miss [...] the times gone by.") For the elderly couple in 'Le Modèle', passing by on the chilly beach as the painter pushes his wife in her wheelchair, the *Ave verum corpus* has an even more bitter taste; it makes striking use of contrast — between the lavish music and the chilly setting, and also within the score itself: Ophuls had Hayos arrange the motet so that it combines the past of earthly existence with the present of spiritual yearning — to evoke the death of desire. The painter and his disabled model now exist without desire, which for Ophuls amounts to an emotional death, the ultimate human hardship. Hence the only truly 'flat' shot in the entire film: a long and gloomy sandy beach, practically empty. Because Ophuls ceaselessly depicts desire through his lively sets, serving as ever-shifting backdrops to the innately linked actions of rising and falling — or the growth and dissipation of desire — the beach at the end of *Le Plaisir*, by differing so starkly to his favoured setting, illustrates the loss of desire. With this epilogue, we finally understand the meaning of the inverted commas around *Le Plaisir*'s title card: the word it concealed was desire; the film's secret title is Desire.

In contrast to the bright sky of the communion scene, with its immaculate, drifting clouds, the sky over the beach is dull and lifeless, the couple walk mechanically, and the clouds are dark and still, closing off the horizon. For all that, the *Ave verum corpus* that accompanies this final "funeral of emotion" is not a funereal march, but an intimate hymn to life. For this, we can thank the harp accompaniment, which replaces the harmonium from the church. It was this version, with harp, that opened the title sequence, announcing that, despite the struggles that the film was about to depict, if we aspire to an aesthetic form of transcendence — one more sacred than religious — it will not be in vain. This harp-as-philosopher, which has been associated with the narrator's voice since the story's brilliant opening over a black screen, remains a symbol of hope, despite the unfortunate events of Maupassant's three tales. As proof, we can look to the quintessentially Ophulsiian backdrop, behind the passing wheelchair. What do we see beyond the bearded painter and his poor model as the narrator concludes the film with his 17th-century moralist's slogan "Happiness is not a joyful thing"? Three pairs of children playing on the beach. Two boys are play-fighting around a boat that is stuck in the sand; a primal way to refuse the

immobility of life. Not far from them, a young girl repeatedly rocks a rocking chair with a boy sitting in it: this static yet unceasing movement is, in its own way, symbolic of a life lived with energy to spare. The key children's game, which Ophuls places directly behind the morose couple, embodies the filmmaker's vision of existence, with its perpetual tug-of-war between rise and fall and thwarted longing that might end at any moment (longing is his definition of desire: as physical as it is metaphysical, desire is a constant yearning, all the more intense when it finds itself obstructed): the kite. Two children are playing with it on the beach. One runs ahead, unrolling the cord, while the other throws the kite into the air when the wind is right; and as Ophulsian logic dictates, the kite flies up, spins for a brief moment in the air, then nose-dives back into the sand.

Does this not precisely mirror the trajectory of the Masked Man in the astonishing first section? The old man behind a young man's mask — who is chasing his youth: his dance partner is called Frimousse, which means "childlike face" — embodies the human desire to escape the clutches of time. It is worth noting the exact route that the masked man takes before he enters the Palais de la Danse; the path he chooses is the very same one that Ophuls sent the camera along in the film's opening shot, where the usher at the Palais calls in the passers-by: a sort of launching-ramp, a slope that propels us irresistibly toward the ball. One might say that the Masked Man is us, the viewer, sharing the human condition and seeking intoxication through movement as a way to escape our shared fate. The implacable tracking shot that opens the chapter, rolling down the sloping walkway, then, shortly afterwards, the panning shot that follows the man taking the same route, both express in their own way the same emotion — that unique feeling that only the best cinema can elicit, and which is Ophuls' trademark. A view of existence that is simultaneously tragic and generous, an appetite for life, seasoned with a sprinkling of melancholy. Something inexpressible, impalpable, weighed down by a secret burden; in other words, the same worldview as Mozart's. The miracle here is that Ophuls' cinematic language, which invents itself from shot to shot, is not the result of cold calculation, but stems from an intuition that the creative spirit — which is more than mere intelligence — does its best to channel in order to accomplish its goal. For Ophuls, camera movement creates the natural rhythm of the scene; it is never gratuitous, always purposeful. Fusing

emotion with thought, Ophulsian camera movement gains its power by simultaneously embodying the drama and maintaining a contemplative distance. A good example of this can be found in the subtle symmetry that Ophuls sets up between two passionate desires in chapters one and three, each leading to a downfall with potentially fatal consequences: the Masked Man breathlessly climbs the steps of the Palais de la Danse and finally finds himself on the dancefloor, where he collapses among the dancers; meanwhile, pushed to the limit, Joséphine hurries up the narrow staircase from which she throws herself out of the window, smashing a glass roof as she falls, and making herself disabled in the process. To highlight their parallel fates, Ophuls uses the same music: the storyteller deploys a solo piano version of the quadrille from 'Le Masque' to soundtrack the model's failed suicide. But Ophuls does not, however, repeat the *mise en scène* to depict the shattering of desire. In the man's case, his camera carefully follows the dancer and his doomed efforts to follow a rhythm that is no longer his own; in the case of the woman, the camera suddenly takes her place, showing the suicide from a violently subjective point of view, in a moment of intensity that leaves the viewer stunned. For Ophuls, this is a way of stepping into the shoes of his favoured, fundamentally tragic female protagonists; a variation on the key scene in *Liebelei* where Christine throws herself from a window. In *Sans Lendemain*, Evelyn disappears into the fog, concealing her plunge into the Seine. In *Madame de...*, the general's wife climbs, exhausted, up the forest pathway to where the duel is taking place, only to die at the foot of a tree. In *Lola Montès*, the brief subjective view of the leap into the void leads, as in *Le Plaisir*, to a loss of mobility: Lola in her cage, forced to endure the long line of people waiting to approach her. 'La Maison Tellier' also contains a great moment of climbing-and-descending stairs, but here Ophuls uses a different tone, since the comedic dimension takes precedence. With vest unbuttoned and an unsteady gait, the farmer bustles past the women and up the labyrinthine stairway to fetch Rosa, whom he drunkenly intends to "thank". The most powerful thing about this is that his attempt at rape does not end in vulgarity: Ophuls leaves us outside the closed door until Rivet comes out again, shamefaced, chased by women, and retraces the same route downstairs before finding his wife waiting for him, sharp tongue at the ready. The descent becomes comical, as Gabin goes out into the yard to sober up by putting his head under the water pump: a scene which drew fits of raucous laughter from the director when the rushes were screened.

Another key technique that can be observed in the three sections of *Le Plaisir* is the forward-tracking shot, leading up to a face. For Ophuls this is a way to create isolated introspective moments. The first of these movements is chilling: in the wings at the ball, the doctor pulls off the old man's mask; the camera moves closer to the dishevelled and ravaged face, different in every way from the featureless beauty of his mask. It's a movement that reveals, that unveils the inner character. Getting close to people's secrets can elicit terror, too: for instance, in the background of the shot, behind the wrinkled face of Ambroise, Ophuls places the young Frimousse, hiding her face in shock as the mask is removed. The film's second chapter reveals a more agreeable inner life, that of Rosa. In the train that's taking the women out to the countryside, Darrieux begins idly fantasising about her ideal partner, "the Viscount". There follows one of the film's most beautiful moments: the camera begins on a wide shot of the compartment and its occupants, with an elderly farmer and her basket of eggs sitting in the foreground, and moves in, gradually re-framing Rosa. The movement is very different to the one in 'Le Masque': with infinite care, the camera slowly approaches Rosa, until only her face is framed. The music (the orchestral arrangement of the Béranger song) matches this delicate tone. It's a shot that is both comical (the farmer's astonished response to Rosa's poetic words) and intensely melancholy, because it is only a dream, brought brusquely to an end as we return to reality: Darrieux's close-up is cut short as we return to the initial wide shot of the group. The reverie has only lasted for the length of the tracking shot. As with the first tracking shot (in 'Le Masque'), the face is at the centre of everything. Ophuls links this type of forward tracking shot to the face, and what it reveals about the character's soul (the *joissance* of the ageing man, or the inner nobility of the woman of easy virtue).

In the final section, these two forward-tracking shots (of Ambroise and Rosa) are reprised, once again using faces to reveal deeper information. On the beach at the opening of the final tale, the camera approaches the narrator. It is his voice that has accompanied us, unseen yet omnipresent, during the two preceding chapters. We are therefore witnessing a partial visual revelation of the author-storyteller, whose hand has thus far guided the audience through the film; only in part, because just as the *Ave verum corpus* was not so much inside the church as 'near' it, so the voiceover takes pains to state that it is lending

its voice to the teller of the final tale; just as Ophuls' role as director is distinct from the guiding force that propels his films, *Le Plaisir* remains separate from its narrator. This was shown more explicitly in the screenplay, which had the author of the past conversing with the filmmaker of the present: a role that Fernand Gravey would have played, following his appearance in *La Ronde*. In any case, this new forward-track finds itself, as in 'Le Masque', moving toward an aged face, only this time the face has a certain nobility; the acerbic storyteller is attractive, with a cigar in his mouth and grey hair blowing in the wind. This last section presents the film's ultimate truth, artistically speaking. For if there is no other god than Time, as 'Le Masque' and 'La Maison Tellier' attest, it is still possible for mankind to escape its condition and occasionally attain a state of serene lucidity: in other words, through art. Even as it speaks of blindness, 'Le Modèle' examines the world of art. Incidentally, the third section's second tracking shot — and its most curious — is devoted to Joséphine, the model; while it echoes the previous dolly-in on Rosa's face, its content is diametrically opposed: where Darrieux's face was open, emanating grace and beauty in the train compartment, Simone Simon's expression remains opaque, closed, absorbed in thoughts that we cannot know. True, the situation is not the same: Rosa is with her friends, dreaming of a happy life, while Joséphine has just read the break-up letter from Jean, the painter who seduced her. It's impossible to decipher anything in her expression as the camera approaches. The most appropriate way to understand a shot like this could be to compare it with another sequence in 'Le Modèle', set in the art gallery, where we see a face that is triply infused with mystery. Among the many paintings on display in the gallery, there are three similar paintings, three versions of the same painting in different sizes: one large and two small. This is the strangest detail in the entire film. Under a pallid light, the enigmatic painting shows the bust of a woman, hair in a bun, facing left, her face lacking any clear expression but emanating a silent melancholy. What drove Ophuls to show the same painting three times in the gallery that Jean visits? We see the three portraits just before the scene with the break-up letter. Jean is talking to the gallery director, and Ophuls takes care to position the painter beside the largest of the three mysterious paintings; he then makes the two men pass the second, smaller iteration of the painting, masking it behind a pillar as the camera moves onto the third canvas on the left of the frame. In the third scene at the art gallery (after the letter,

when Joséphine is searching for Jean in vain), we see once more the largest painting of the unknown woman, as Ophuls carefully slows Simon's pace in order to give the viewer time to notice the painting. Why show this picture three times? Of course, the obsession with threes that rules over the film is reasserted here (and there are three scenes in the gallery). But there is more. We do not know if the painting is by Jean, but either way, it is the perfect crystallisation of Ophuls' art. In its own way, is not this inscrutable face also a kind of mask? The mask of femininity toward which all Ophuls' films are drawn. Could this somewhat distraught face perhaps be the eternal feminine that obsessed Ophuls throughout his life? Not, as with Lubitsch, to observe upon it the thrill of inhabiting the world, but instead as an attempt to decipher its melancholy response to the trials of life. There can be nothing more serious than the cinema of Ophuls, and one might even say that the creator of *Le Plaisir* is as akin to Schubert as he is to Mozart.

Philippe Roger is a Senior Lecturer in Film Studies at Lumière University Lyon 2. He is also the author of Lettre d'une Inconnue de Max Ophuls, published by Yellow Now, and the director of the documentary Les Chemins du Plaisir, sur les traces de Max Ophuls (A Journey Through Le Plaisir), which can also be found on this release.



ABOUT THE TRANSFER

Le Plaisir was digitally restored by Gaumont from original film elements, and is presented in its original theatrical aspect ratio of 1.37:1 with original mono sound.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Discs and Booklet Produced by **Anthony Nield**

Executive Producers **Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni**

Technical Producer **James White**

QC Manager **Nora Mehenni**

Authoring and Subtitling **The Engine House**

Design **Oink**

Artwork **Jennifer Dionisio**

SPECIAL THANKS

**Alex Agran, David Buchanan, Claude-Pierre Chavanon, Alexander Jacoby,
Sigrid Larsen, Philippe Roger**

ARROW
ACADEMY
FCD1595