

Programme

Max Ophüls, Stylist of Cinema

German-born director Max Ophüls (1902–1957) was a consummate auteur active in both Europe and America from the 1930s to the 50s. His ornate style, elaborate mise-en-scène, and scrupulous attention to set and costume earned him a reputation as ‘the Stylist of Cinema’.

Caught (1949) and *Lola Montès* (1955) by Max Ophüls are the latest picks for our ‘Restored Treasures’ series. HKFA Programmer Sam Ho, film critics Joyce Yang and Lau Yam put together a seminar titled ‘Passion and Despair: The Cinema of Max Ophüls’ on 5 June, and critic Fung Ka-ming delivered a talk after the 3 July screening of *Lola Montès*.

Despite his painstaking attention to style and detail which bordered on obsession, Ophüls was a lot more than a mere technician – a point that all the three critics agreed upon. His signature long shots, for one thing, were thoughtfully framed to denote the relationship between characters. *Lola Montès*, as Fung Ka-ming pointed out, was the director’s one and only colour feature shot in Cinemascope. In the film, Ophüls tried out different shots and camera techniques, tapping the full potential of widescreen technology by showing simultaneously the multiple actions during a circus performance and the vast sweep of a snowfield. For intimate scenes, he deliberately darkened the left and right sides of the frame to steer focus towards the middle.

In both films, Ophüls showed sympathy for the heroines’ tragic fate. According to Fung Ka-ming, many Ophüls films were set in 19th-century aristocratic Europe, depicting humanity’s dark side beneath a veneer of respectability. The circus master in *Lola Montès*, among all the heartless characters that peopled the film, was a telling example. Joyce Yang observed that the females in Ophüls’ cinema were far from perfect, just as the heroine in *Caught* who had both upside and downside to her personality. It is fair to say that Ophüls was not a rabid feminist.

Caught was a production from the Hollywood phase of Ophüls’ career. The current print for this programme was restored by the UCLA Film & Television Archive in collaboration with Republic Pictures. *Lola Montès*, his last work, had been edited into several versions before la Cinémathèque française completed this restored cut in 2008 with the support of Technicolor Foundation and the daughter of Pierre Braunberger, the film’s copyright holder. While some of the original footage is yet to be found, the present cut however captures much of the director’s creative intent.

(Translated by Vinci To)