

## Viewing Guide for *Lola Montès* and *Aftersun*

Though perhaps not as well-known as the French New Wave directors he influenced, Max Ophüls has inspired filmmaker practice and critical and academic dialogues for decades. He is considered by many to be one of the great directors of classical cinema, with a career that spanned German Expressionism, Hollywood's Golden Age, and French poetic realism.

Unlike most major directors, his films often feature female protagonists, and his cinematic style has been described as "feminine," despite its coolly objective and detached sensibility and a tendency towards the masculine control of narration (who tells the story, how the story is told).

He is perhaps best known for:

- Gliding camera movement that sweeps over the mise-en-scène with a subtly penetrating gaze
- Elaborate and communicative mise-en-scène (esp. décor and lighting) and use of color
- Precise performances, with voice, gesture, and movement all conveying meaning
- Drawing attention to narration, often giving a character a storytelling role

These formal elements work together to create a productive tension. While they generate spectacular romantic illusions, they also point out details that hint at the cynical and hypocritical dynamics that support these illusory, fairy-tale surfaces. By making storytelling explicit, Ophüls also invites viewers to consider the power dynamics inherent in all forms of narrative, including cinematic. Who has control over a story and how it's told? And what happens when your story is told by someone else?

*Lola Montès*, based on the legendary Lola Montez, features a very precise and meaningful use of narration and flashback to weave a double-stranded portrait of a "fallen woman." One strand comes from the narrator-ringmaster (Peter Ustinov) and the other via flashbacks, which represent Lola's memories. In this way, Ophüls creates a character portrait from inside and out, past and present, and by doing so explores the double-edged sword of a woman's erotic capital. Lola is an ambitious woman who works the system, seeking out and attaining a measure of power by leveraging her sexual attractiveness, which also becomes the source of her downfall.

In her debut feature film, *Aftersun*, Scottish filmmaker Charlotte Wells similarly constructs a portrait of a woman, Sophie, from the inside out and by interweaving past and present. Sophie's memories and old video tapes shot during a holiday with her father in Turkey supply most of the film's scenes and narrative arc. But interwoven within these is a recurring dance-club motif and "snapshots" of Sophie's present life as she contemplates the past and her relationship with her father. Though this is a melancholy and challenging film, it's a joyous watch for cinephiles, since much of the film's communicative power comes through its formal elements (e.g., framing, editing, sound, and music) rather than its dialogue. You "feel" what the film is about as much as (or perhaps more than) you are told by the film what it's about.

If you want to know more about how I think the film works, check out my YouTube video: <https://youtu.be/fSPx-wtfCx0> Best viewed after watching the film. Enjoy!