Max Ophuls and the Limits of Virtuosity: On the Aesthetics and Ethics of Camera Movement

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Less than two years after the screening of the first films in December 1895, the moving camera had already become a prominent feature of cinema. Cameras were placed on moving sidewalks and elevators, on the front of trams, boats, and (especially) trains; they constituted one of the main attractions in early cinema. And yet, despite their prominence within the history of cinema, camera movements have remained surprisingly marginal and elusive in critical work. Often discussed within analyses of films and filmmakers, they are rarely the explicit subject of analyses themselves.

Part of the difficulty, I suspect, has to do with the sheer variety of things that camera movements do. Most often, they function to establish a sense of space within a continuous temporal duration, all the while generating an expressiveness that works in conjunction with the events or dialogue taking place. The single shot that comprises the embrace between Cary Grant and Ingrid Bergman in *Notorious* (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1946) is exemplary in this regard, as Hitchcock uses an unbroken and mobile shot

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to create and preserve the mood of intimacy that permeates the scene. Likewise, one could point to the tracking shot that begins Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958), which provides a survey of the border town of Los Robles within the time set by the ticking bomb shown at the outset; the camera reveals the complexities, crossings, and tensions that define this world, yet retains the suspense of the countdown by refusing to cut away to a new shot. If unusually virtuosic, these are examples whose functions are familiar to narrative cinema.²

But camera movements also, and almost naturally, raise a broader set of issues that are more explicitly conceptual in nature. These involve the relation between human perception and the forms of vision the camera affords, as in the tracking shots that repeatedly follow the child on his big wheel in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). Or they involve the nature of the world on-screen and the felt presence of a creative agency involved in showing it to an audience, as in the way Hitchcock uses the moving camera to link together Scottie, Madeleine, and the portrait of Carlotta in *Vertigo* (1958). In Carl Dreyer’s *Vampyr* (1932), camera movements even undo the coherence and stability of space and perspective normally taken for granted within a film. Such considerations are epistemic, ontological, and, at least within a limited sphere, metaphysical.

The challenge for investigations into camera movement lies in bringing the two dimensions together, in locating their place within the narrative or formal economy of the film while being attentive to the broader range of questions they generate. In what follows, I’m going to draw on both dimensions of camera movements in light of a curious but persistent intuition that has attended their use. This is a sense that camera movements are in some way deeply, perhaps inextricably, interwoven with concerns of ethics—that, as Jean-Luc Godard once put it, “tracking shots are matters of morality.”³ I’ll argue that the extended, virtuosic camera movements in the films of Max Ophuls present a way to work through the broad range of

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issues that camera movements raise, especially the way they might bear on matters of ethics.

Although it never really becomes a prominent motif in film history, the connection between camera movement and ethics surfaces at various moments; it is an undercurrent of sorts. In particular, the link seems to have emerged during the *nouvelle vague* period in France. We see it expressed in Jacques Rivette’s recoil from a shot in Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Kapò* (1961) that shows a woman who has killed herself on an electric fence: “the man who decides at this moment to track forward and reframe the dead body in a low-angle shot—carefully positioning the raised hand in the corner of the final frame—deserves only the most profound contempt.” And Godard’s phrase is itself a quotation (or rather, as is so often the case with Godard, a misquotation) of someone else. Several months earlier, Luc Moullet had summarized the approach behind Samuel Fuller’s films with the slightly yet significantly different claim, “Morality is a matter of tracking shots.” Such remarks have the quality of aphorism, evocative and suggestive. It turns out to be difficult to say in convincing detail just how camera movements can bear on ethics, or ethics on camera movements.

Ophuls may seem like a curious choice to address this topic. He has long been considered one of the great filmmakers: Andrew Sarris placed him in the critical pantheon of directors; Robin Wood labeled him one of the cinema’s premier stylists; Jean-Luc Godard saw him as a luminary in the history of cinema, on par with D. W. Griffith. And yet, despite this praise—and often contained within it—a suspicion of formalism has attended Ophuls’s career, a sense that he was too absorbed in the sweeping camera movements that permeate his films. His camera movements have often

5. Luc Moullet, “‘Sam Fuller: In Marlowe’s Footsteps’ (March 1959),” in *Cahiers du cinema*, p. 148; trans. mod. Hillier calls attention to the link between Godard’s remark and Moullet’s article in his editorial notes; see p. 69 n. 1. For a discussion of Moullet, an important but less well-known member of the *nouvelle vague*, see Jonathan Rosenbaum, “À la recherche de Luc Moullet: 25 Propositions,” *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Cultures in Transition* (Chicago, 2010), pp. 31–43.
seemed—to audiences, to studio executives, to critics—to be mere virtuosity, a judgment that is then frequently extended to the films themselves.

When critics have argued that Ophuls’s films do take up ethical concerns, this has generally involved discussions of themes associated with desire and its frustration, in particular the organization of gender roles in a stratified social world. Recently, there has been attention paid to the models of exchange and circulation that run through his work, the intimations of an economic system that underlies the movement and actions of characters. Both approaches, however, struggle to incorporate the virtuosic camera movements, at most seeing them as bearing the excess of emotion that the characters are unable to express—considerations familiar to melodrama. Critics have found it hard to bring aesthetic and ethical considerations together when talking about Ophuls’s use of camera movements.

To a certain extent, this difficulty is connected to longstanding debates about the relation between aesthetic form and ethics, debates that have taken place across various media, especially literature. But film presents its own difficulties in this area, and they bear on the challenge Ophuls’s films pose. Some of these have to do with film’s unique formal features—camera movements are certainly one of them—but they also stem from two critical traditions within film studies. On the one hand, there is a tendency to focus on characters as the source of ethical value, seeing in them exemplary models of action, both positive and negative. Criticism then involves the application of familiar modes of reasoning, analysis, and judgment to characters. This problem is by no means unique to film, but it is exacerbated there; not only do audiences see persons on-screen as fully embodied individuals—they are *there*—but the formal devices employed by classical Hollywood cinema in particular are oriented by an attention to and attun-

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7. See, in particular, Susan M. White, *The Cinema of Max Ophuls: Magisterial Vision and the Figure of Woman* (New York, 1995).


9. I do not mean a reductive version of medium specificity. If film has its own problems, these do not emerge in advance from the physical material of film itself but rather through the way that films have historically made use of their medium.

10. See, for example, Candace Vogler’s arguments about the focus on characters as the source of ethical value in works of literature in “The Moral of the Story,” *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Autumn 2007): 5–35.
element with characters. On the other hand, where formal devices are more explicitly in view, they are often treated as having a built-in and absolute ethical significance. This has ranged from Sergei Eisenstein’s argument that parallel editing in Griffith necessarily expresses a capitalist worldview to Jean-Louis Baudry’s claim that the very apparatus of cinema imposes the terms of a bourgeois ideology on spectators; they hold true regardless of the content of the individual works themselves.11 If seemingly opposed to one another, I think both traditions reflect a similar problem: they isolate one side of the equation as the primary bearer of ethical content. Something is being missed, and Ophuls’s use of camera movements helps us see what that might be.

Ophuls’s camera movements, I will argue, bring aesthetics and ethics together in a compelling, if unusual way, as he uses them to create a complex—and morally complicated—engagement with the worlds of his films. Two features of his films are central to my argument. The prominence of camera movements is one; the second involves what we might describe as the conditions for autonomy and the way they are shown to be absent or lost. This feature requires more effort to discern but, once recognized, follows contours that are relatively familiar to ethical thought. The power of Ophuls’s films lies in the way the two features work off and with one another.

The particular kind of relation this entails, one that takes shape between camera movements and the world of a film, is bound up with the nature of the ethical concerns that structure Ophuls’s films. Rather than focusing on the role of action or the vagaries of moral psychology, Ophuls creates worlds in which the very possibility for moral action is limited, constrained, even absent; he shows worlds defined by forms of ethical failure. My argument will be that the ethical work of the films is done through—their ethical content is expressed by—a specific kind of camera movement, one that responds to both the states of mind of characters and the social world they inhabit. (It does not, that is, create a straightforward identification with characters.) It’s a structure I will call dual attunement, and it enables Ophuls’s camera to articulate the nature of the moral claims and demands that characters make but which are missed or denied by the world they inhabit. In the case of The Earrings of Madame de . . . (dir. Ophuls, 1953), the film I will focus on, the camera movements provide a

moral perspective on the film’s world that the characters themselves are unable to take.

All of this is, to be sure, both abstract and programmatic. To show that Ophuls’s films confirm the intuition that camera movements can involve a matter of ethics, we need to engage the details of the films themselves. It will take patient, fine-grained, and descriptive analysis—a kind of attention that, surprisingly, is rarely given to Ophuls—to see how the camera movements do the work I am claiming for them. In the process, I will court some rather obvious form/content problems, but I’ll argue at the end that we shouldn’t be too worried about this.

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Just about everyone who comes to watch Ophuls’s films notices that they are filled with extravagant and extended tracking shots. They’re almost impossible to avoid—his stylistic signature, so to speak. Lutz Bacher has meticulously detailed the fights Ophuls had with studio executives in Hollywood over them, the terms of which are captured in a short poem (or perhaps doggerel) written by James Mason on the set of Caught (1949).

I think I know the reason why
Producers tend to make him cry.
Inevitably they demand
Some stationary set-ups, and
A shot that does not call for tracks
Is agony for poor dear Max
Who, separated from his dolly,
Is wrapped in deepest melancholy.
Once, when they took away his crane,
I thought he’d never smile again.12

But if it’s obvious that camera movements are important for Ophuls, it is surprisingly difficult to grasp how they work in the films.

In narrative cinema, camera movements tend to be used in three ways. They can show new things, revealing aspects of a scene that have hitherto remained hidden. They can follow a character’s movement. Or they can take a character’s point of view, and so indicate their perspective or subjective state. These three uses can of course occur together.

Many of the camera movements in Ophuls’s films operate in one of these ways, but there is a class of camera movement that does something

different—and it’s these camera movements that present difficulties. A shot from late in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (dir. Ophuls, 1948) can serve as an initial example. At this point in the film, Lisa Berndle (Joan Fontaine) is married to a military officer (Marcel Journet) but has a child fathered years ago by Stefan Brand (Louis Jordan), a womanizing pianist she has loved since childhood but who is unaware of his parenthood. The shot opens a momentous scene at the opera, when Lisa will reencounter Stefan and find that her carefully constructed life starts to crumble around her.

Ophuls has emphasized the stability of the life Lisa has created in the previous scene, where she instructs her son to call her husband “father” rather than “sir.” There is a dissolve from the child’s bedroom to a shot of a poster for *Die Zauberflöte (The Magic Flute)* on a pillar in the middle of a foyer in the opera house, and we hear the sounds of an orchestra warming up. The camera begins to track to the right, picking up a middle-aged couple as they walk out from behind the pillar and move across the foyer. The camera follows them until they disappear behind a group of people, then latches onto two women and an elderly man in military uniform walking to the left in the opposite direction. As the camera comes to a position behind them, two younger officers begin to walk to the right, and it again reverses direction to follow them back across the foyer where they begin to ascend one of the two main staircases. As they do so, two women descend that staircase, moving to the left, and the camera shifts its position, rising up slightly to create a downward angle on them.

Throughout these fluid movements, starting when the camera leaves its position behind the pillar, Lisa has been speaking in voice-over. She says, “The course of our lives can be changed by such little things. So many passing by, each intent on his own problems. So many faces, that one might easily have been lost. I know now: Nothing happens by chance. Every moment is measured; every step is counted.” As she says, “I know now,” the camera circles behind and tracks with the two women as they walk down the staircase, across the foyer, and up the other staircase. As they leave the shot, Lisa’s voice-over stops, and the sounds of the orchestra rise in volume. The camera comes to a brief pause for the first time, waiting

13. Their action is apparently without purpose; they descend one staircase only to climb the other. I think the two women exist mainly to solve a formal problem. Ophuls has to have someone walk back across the foyer so that he can get to the place where Lisa and her husband will appear, but he doesn’t want any figure to block our vision of them. The only place the women can go, then, is up the staircase. It’s a solution that has the added advantage of prefiguring the movement of Lisa and her husband up the same staircase a moment later.
in place to frame Lisa and her husband as they walk into view from behind the staircase and begin to ascend it.

The camera now rises up and to the right to stay level with them, moving parallel to the rising banister. As Lisa and her husband near the top, caught up in their own (inaudible) conversation, we hear the voice of a woman off-screen: “Look, isn’t that Stefan Brand?” The camera reaches the level of the second floor and begins to move backwards, panning slightly to the right as it does so to reveal a cluster of people looking over a railing into the foyer below (a hallway is behind them, presumably leading to the seats). Lisa passes behind them, her head turning as she apparently hears the comment; slowly, she walks over and looks down. Ophuls now introduces a cut for the first time since the sequence began over a minute previously, and a brief shot/reverse-shot pattern shows Lisa looking at Stefan, who is greeting two women on the staircase below. The three shots Ophuls inserts (of Stefan, Lisa, and Stefan again) give us a sense of the effect of her recognition of Stefan, her dismay as she hears the people around her discuss the dissipation of his musical talent into romantic pursuits. Ophuls then returns to the original shot, picking up where it left off, with the camera still moving slightly back and to the right. As the group around Lisa disperses, the empty space they clear out reveals her husband looking at her from a middle distance in the hallway behind her. He says, “Lisa!” holds out his hand, and they walk back towards their seats. A man’s voice says, “Second act! Curtain going up!” confirming the dramatic shift that’s just taken place in the film. The camera ends the scene by tracking slowly to the right, passing behind an ornate candelabra, and then moving slightly upwards to show the couple walking into the background; Lisa turns back once, then they disappear, and the opera begins again.

It’s an extraordinary, virtuosic shot—but it’s not at all evident how we should understand the various movements of the camera. A first pass would simply be to say that the extended tracking shot emphasizes the drama of Stefan’s reentry into Lisa’s life, the combination of the movement of couples and the movement of the camera creating a rhythmic structure that adds to the intensity. Taking the interpretation a step further, we might note that the camera seems to mirror Lisa’s voice-over description of a metaphysics of fate. As we hear her words, the camera performs them: it moves back and forth across the foyer of the opera house, picking out random couples and fragments of conversations (“so many faces”), before settling on Lisa and her husband as they begin to ascend the staircase. The camera appears bound to the terms of Lisa’s enunciative authority.

Several aspects of the shot, however, suggest a different account. The first is that we see more than Lisa’s point of view, more than the things she
notices: after she recognizes Stefan and we feel her absorption in his presence, the camera moves back to show her husband looking on with some consternation. This brief movement of the camera steps away from Lisa’s perspective to emphasize the world in which it’s embedded, to remind the viewer of the social obligations she has (the family we saw in the previous scene). The second aspect involves the voice-over. Ophuls has a tendency—I’ll return to this later on—to have a character ascribe encounters to fate or destiny even as he shows them to be the result of normal social interactions. Is it so unlikely that Lisa would see Stefan again, given that they live in the same city and attend concerts? (Zweig’s novella is explicit that she has seen him at several concerts in the intervening years.) Third, and most importantly, it’s not at all clear that the camera’s movements actually do reflect the terms of Lisa’s statement (her point of view as the ostensible narrator of the film). Rather than fate, we could easily say that the camera demonstrates the chance by which someone is picked out of a crowd, the contingency of discovery. But that’s not right, either; in a sense, the camera knows where to find Lisa, already knows where she’s going to appear. If it’s not an example of a metaphysics of fate, neither is it the revelation of chance. The camera may be buffeted and swept along by the tumult of society, but it acts and moves based on privileged knowledge about Lisa and her husband.

My point is not that the camera fails to identify with Lisa’s point of view but that such a reading is, on its own, incomplete. If the camera suggests the contours of her state of mind—how she understands the situation—it also stands outside her subjective position, incorporating it into a larger perspective. In this way, the camera movement in Letter from an Unknown Woman exhibits the formal structure I’m calling dual attunement, taking account of the subjective states of characters while at the same time revealing their place within a social world—something they seem unable to see or acknowledge.

Along with camera movement, I want to call attention to the second

14. This is roughly George Wilson’s reading, part of his larger argument that the film systematically undermines Lisa’s perspective as narrator; see George Wilson, “Max Ophuls’s Letter from an Unknown Woman,” Narration in Light: Studies in Cinematic Point of View (Baltimore, 1986), pp. 103–25.


16. A more appropriate thing to say is that the form of the camera movement helps us understand the psychological state of the characters in the first place.
feature I described as important to Ophuls’s films. Again and again, Ophuls shows characters who lose autonomy, which we can think of here in a fairly minimal sense as the ability to decide their own actions and to will their own ends. It might be tempting to rephrase this in weaker terms as having to do more simply with agency, and so avoid the stronger claims about the nature of action, will, and desire that the idea of autonomy brings with it. But which account we give matters less than recognizing the diagnosis Ophuls provides, the way he shows the loss of autonomy (or agency) to be the result of supraindividual constraints.

This feature appears in various guises across Ophuls’s films. It’s in *Caught* (1949), where Leonora’s (Barbara Bel Geddes) desires are shaped and defined from the outset by images of consumer culture; in *La signora di tutti* (1934), where Gaby (Isa Miranda) is imprisoned within the social apparatus that produces her as a desirable star; in *The Reckless Moment* (1949), where Lucia (Joan Bennett) is trapped by an ideology of domesticity; in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, where Lisa is locked within her own memory and self-deception; in *La Ronde* (1950), where the prostitute in the opening sequence is hauntingly caught up in the logic of circulation (represented by the carousel); and, most shockingly, in *Lola Montès* (1955), which ends with Lola (Martine Carol) literally caged by the weight of her past—or, rather, by the public perception of that past. We can also discern this feature behind the changes Ophuls makes to the novels and stories he adapts. In three adaptations set in the fin-de-siècle era, he repeatedly takes characters who are civilians in the original text and makes them into military officers. In *Liebelei* (1933), Fritz (Wolfgang Liebeneiner) and Theo (Carl Esmond) are changed from students into cavalry lieutenants, while the gentleman of the Schnitzler novella becomes a baron; in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, the second part is altered to transform Lisa from a successful courtesan to the wife of a military officer; and in *Madame de* . . . , the husband is no longer a businessman but a general. In each case, the modification moves the action of the film into a sphere of society that functions according to rigid and regimented conventions. Much of the tragedy that takes place in these films results from the constraints society imposes on action.

This feature of Ophuls’s work is important to keep in sight. There is a


temptation to think of his films as following a familiar kind of melodrama, in which a female character is oppressed, mistreated, or manipulated by a male character (usually her husband). George Cukor’s *Gaslight* (1944) is a characteristic example of this, and Ophuls’s penchant for showing the harm done by male figures of authority in their domestic relationship might be evidence for such a reading. Yet there is a key and telling difference: in Ophuls’s films, it is rarely the case that individuals have an explicitly malignant presence or bear sole responsibility for the harm done to others. Even though male characters in his films cause harm to others and frequently do so in specifically gendered ways, they are often shown to be themselves caught up in a web of unhappy outcomes, doomed to actions they neither desire nor will; they are part of, and shaped by, a larger structure that creates the problems in the first place.

This distinction reveals an important aspect of the nature of autonomy and its absence in Ophuls’s films. If melodrama tends to operate by working through one type of ethical problem—the control of one individual by another, *akrasia*, and so on—his films suggest something different. The threat to individuals, and to their autonomy, originates with sources that are supraindividual in nature: society, culture, politics. The characters are caught up in a set of rules and practices that explicitly prescribe their possible modes of behavior, deliberation, or action, and the rules and practices themselves are dangerous. In Ophuls’s films, individuals, especially women, repeatedly desire to break out of the structures that enclose them yet prove unable to do so. The reasons for this failure lie with the rigid social order above and beyond the characters, but they also have to do with the way characters have internalized its norms. The failures Ophuls shows involve a world that does not equip individuals with the resources that would allow them to incorporate and work with new facts and values, to successfully negotiate the challenges they face. These resources would be emotional, deliberative, creative...an open-ended list of practical capacities that the films show in action—or, more frequently, not in action—at various points in their narratives.

These two general features of Ophuls’s films that I’ve been describing are bound up with one another; the camera movements that exhibit a dual attunement structure take on ethical significance—in a sense, they gain ethical content—in relation to the problem of autonomy in the films. They provide a moral perspective on the world the film shows, a perspective the characters are themselves unable to achieve, or even to recognize as a possibility in the first place. It’s these camera movements, the central “aesthetic form” of the films, that give a sense of the shape of the ethical de-
mands raised by the characters, demands we would want a world to meet—but such a responsive world may not be possible within these films.

To get at the way this dynamic functions, I’m going to work through several scenes from Ophuls’s penultimate film, *The Earrings of Madame de...*. My goal is to show how Ophuls uses camera movements to negotiate a problem that emerges from within the world of that film, to provide a perspective that characters within it lack. Doing this, I think, will not only tell us something important about the stakes of Ophuls’s style but will also provide a way to productively think about the relation between aesthetics and ethics in film—and the work of camera movement in bringing them together.

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The plot of *Madame de...* has few participants but is fairly convoluted in its entanglements. The film begins when Louise (Danielle Darrieux)—the last name of the family is never filled in—sells a pair of heart-shaped diamond earrings in order to pay a debt, earrings that originally were a wedding present from her husband, André (Charles Boyer). In order to disguise what she has done, Louise pretends to lose the earrings during a trip to the opera. When the loss is made public, the jeweler she sold them to rushes to see André, tells him what happened, and sells the earrings back to him. André subsequently gives them to Lola, his mistress, whom he is sending to Constantinople, where she loses them in a flurry of gambling.

A new series of events begins when Baron Fabrizio Donati (Vittorio De Sica), an Italian diplomat, buys the earrings while on his way to Paris. There he meets Louise and, while André is away on military activities, they fall in love as dancing partners over the course of a series of balls. André, on his return, suggests that Louise leave Paris to hide her increasingly noticeable agitation; right before her departure, Donati unexpectedly visits and presents her with the earrings as a gift. On Louise’s return from a prolonged absence, she and Donati admit their love, the sign of which is her decision to wear the earrings in public. To disguise this, she tells André that she found them in a pair of old gloves, something which he knows of course to be untrue (though she does not know this).

A crisis occurs when André confronts Donati, informing him about the history of the earrings and instructing him—as a way of warding off scandal and embarrassment—to sell them to the jeweler. Donati rejects Louise apparently for having lied to him about this history, and she falls ill out of despair. In the meantime, André again buys the earrings back from the jeweler and orders Louise to present them as a gift to his niece. The niece sells them once more to the jeweler, but André this time refuses to buy
them; Louise, in turn, sells all her possessions in order to get the earrings for herself. Out of a combination of anger and helplessness, André challenges Donati to a duel. Louise, unable to prevent André from killing Donati, collapses and dies.¹⁹ The film ends with a shot of the earrings, now resting as a memorial in a church.

I’m unfortunately glossing over quite a bit of plot. The overall structure is familiar—it follows a template already established in La Princesse de Clèves²⁰—but the film contains an exquisite catalogue of the intricate forms of lies, love, deception, and anguish. My concern, however, is with the specific work done by Ophuls’s camera, and this already takes shape in the opening moments of the film.

Madame de . . . begins in a peculiar manner, with two title cards announcing that there almost was no story to be told, hence no film to be made. Louise, the first card tells us, “was a very elegant, brilliant, and celebrated woman. She seemed destined to a life without histoire”—“histoire” is both “story” and “history”—and that, according to the second card, “probably” nothing would have happened to disturb that state, to create a narrative, were it not for “this jewel.”²¹ The deictic “this” gestures towards the image that is to follow, the first shot of the film; it signals that the objects we’re about to see are central to the very possibility of narrative.

A fade from the title cards brings us to a close-up of a jewel box. A gloved hand enters from the rear and left of the frame, pulling open a drawer to reveal a pair of beautiful earrings. The hand reaches for them, hesitates, then drops down; a woman’s voice says, “If only they weren’t the ones he gave me the morning after our wedding” [le lendemain de notre mariage]. The camera follows the hand as it moves across various objects while the woman asks, almost absentmindedly, “What should I do?” She begins to hum along with the tune being played on the film, which until then had seemed explicitly nondiegetic. As the camera begins to pan and track to the right with her movements, passing by several closets and cupboards, we finally get a sense—first as a shadow, then as a profile, then as a reflection in a mirror—of the person engaged in this activity. For much of the next two minutes, the camera remains over her right shoulder as she reaches into the frame to examine one object, then another.

In a certain sense, the action in the shot is simple. We see an unidentified character—we assume she is Madame de . . .—looking to sell some of

¹⁹. Her cry, “Where’s the second shot?” echoes the end of Liebelei.  
²⁰. See Madame de La Fayette, La Princesse de Clèves (Paris, 1752).  
²¹. The first title card reads, “Madame de . . . était une femme très élégante, très brillante, très fêtée. Elle semblait promise à une jolie vie sans histoire.” The second, “Rien ne serait probablement arrive sans ce bijou . . . ”
her possessions in order to pay off a debt of twenty thousand francs but
having trouble deciding what to sell.\(^{22}\) Having already turned away from
the earrings, she looks to her dresses, then to her furs. She accidentally
knocks over a bible on the top shelf, gasps, and says that “I’ve never needed
it so much”—but it’s not exactly a religious epiphany, as she immediately
wonders which hat will best suit her for the task she has to accomplish. Still
humming along with the music, she walks back to the table and sits down,
at which point we see her face for the first time reflected in a mirror on the
table. She puts a hat on, pulls down its veil, and the camera draws back to
show a full profile of her in medium shot as she considers other jewelry—a
necklace, a cross—before deciding, with a sigh, to sell the earrings. “I like
these the least,” she says, and then reasons: “After all, they’re mine; I can do
with them as I please.” She holds them up to her ears to examine herself in
the mirror, gives a brief exclamation of satisfaction, and then packs them
into a handbag. The camera follows her as she gets up, closes the doors to
a closet, gathers up several items, and goes out the door.

Ophuls’s camera achieves a complex position within the scene. While it
doesn’t create a strict identification with Louise’s point of view, it is care-
fully linked to her movements, following her across the room to track her
activities and deliberations. More generally, it is for the most part respon-
sive to her state of mind and attention, an affinity emphasized by Ophuls’s
wonderful use of music. As Louise hums along with the apparently non-
diegetic melody that’s playing, filling in the gaps it leaves, the music in turn
starts to respond to her. It’s as if she were attuned to the formal logic of the
film itself. Yet Ophuls is careful to keep a degree of distance and separation,
always remaining slightly apart; he never actually creates a genuine point-
of-view shot. The camera is thus introduced as an agent that is neither
wholly bound up with characters in the film nor exactly indifferent to their
perspective. It is, from the start, dually attuned, responsive to social situ-
tations as well as to the state of mind of characters.\(^{23}\)

From this position within the shot, we learn two main things. The first
is that Louise is wealthy, or at least is in a position of wealth. This wealth
does not make money irrelevant to her (or to the film), but it tells us that

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\(^{22}\) Although no reason for the debt is given in the film, Louise de Vilmorin’s novella says
that she has habitually understated her expenses to her husband and now can’t bring herself to
confess the truth (his ability to pay it off is taken for granted); see Lovise de Vilmorin, *Madame
de*, trans. Duff Cooper (Canada, 1998). As a result, she finds herself in the position of having to
sell something of her own.

\(^{23}\) Adrian Danks has also noticed the complex positioning of the camera in this shot
in “‘. . . Only Superficially Superficial’: The Tragedy of Sophistication in *Madame de . . .’”
the way money matters here is not shaped by real necessity. The hesitation she experiences is thus not one of cost—she clearly has many items that would cover the debt—but of value: the different kinds of value invested in her possessions and the difficulty of weighing them against one another. Three kinds of value seem involved. The first is monetary, the simple question of what her various possessions will sell for. The second is social, the relation of the objects to socially defined needs: the value of the furs as a form of conspicuous consumption or of the earrings as a marriage gift from her husband. The third is a little trickier because less frequently discussed in these contexts; it might be called sentimental value, arising out of an individual’s particular desire (whether based on aesthetic or personal grounds) for the object. “I’d rather die than do without it,” Louise says of her necklace.

Internal to this account is the idea that final value is neither absolute nor inherent in the object but rather the result of a specific, individual judgment or valuation. Even where extra-personal factors are involved, the extent to which they matter is a function of Louise’s appraisal of their respective merits. In her situation, the monetary value is obviously the first consideration; the dresses, with which she would gladly part, will not do because their sale will not bring in enough money. And so she is left to decide among the values of the other objects she has, eventually concluding that the social value of the wedding present—more specifically, a present given the morning after, as if for the consummation of their marriage—is less than the sentimental value of the necklace and cross. It’s a judgment.

The second thing we learn from the opening shot has to do with Louise’s deliberations. Ophuls gives us an externalization of her process of valuation, a monologue of sorts that allows us to understand how she judges the value of her possessions. We get, in this, a sense of her position within a broader social world, of the conventions that delineate, but do not strictly define, the terms of her deliberation, and of the forms of “subjective justification” she uses in deciding how and why she should act. We also see where justification slides into rationalization; when she says, “After all, they’re mine. I can do with them as I please,” it feels disingenuous. Ophuls thus presents a general picture of Louise’s “deliberative field,” the range of factors, both moral and nonmoral, that go into the process of deciding a course of action.

25. The terms of this discussion are drawn from Barbara Herman, Moral Literacy (Cambridge, Mass., 2007), pp. 34, 45.
In conjunction with the opening title cards, these two lessons lead into the two main interpretations of the film. The first emphasizes the circulation of the earrings, the way that Louise’s actions—and, ultimately, her unhappy fate—seem a by-product of their movement. Throughout the film, characters make use of the earrings for what they believe will be a singular act, a sale or a gift. Each time, however, the earrings become caught up in a system of transfers that returns them to circulation. From this perspective, the film offers a critique of the possibility of human agency, showing a world in which human actions are subordinate to the larger patterns of social, economic, and even erotic exchange.\footnote{26}

A second interpretation follows a more humanist line. It emphasizes the way that Louise looks at the earrings in the opening scene primarily in terms of their economic value, downplaying their significance as a gift, which carries obligations. The narrative of the film then tells a familiar kind of story. When Louise meets Donati and falls in love with him, she apparently experiences romantic love for the first time. She becomes a better person. She gains, that is, a more genuine or authentic character, and this change is expressed by an ability to properly see and value the earrings as a gift from a lover. The film, in short, is the story of her “spiritual odyssey.”\footnote{27}

While I don’t think either interpretation is right, I’m more interested in an assumption they share: that Louise makes a mistake when she decides to sell the earrings. Either she is ignorant of the nature of the economic system and the vagaries of exchange, or she improperly judges the value of the earrings. In both cases, she fails to see that the earrings in some way embody her marriage (a category mistake of sorts) and that selling them is therefore akin to dissolving that arrangement.\footnote{28}

It’s not hard to see why this assumption gets made. If Louise had never sold the earrings in the first place, Donati would not have been able to give them to her, and perhaps their affair would not have reached the end it did. But if it is true that the sale eventually leads to tragedy, it does not thereby follow that Louise was mistaken in her decision. (G. W. F. Hegel observes that, because we cannot foresee all the effects of our actions, consequences


\footnote{27. White, \textit{The Cinema of Max Ophuls}, pp. 57–58, 62. This is the most common reading of the film.}

\footnote{28. Williams, for example, argues that the earrings “belong to both her and her husband, and represent the contract between them. In selling the earrings, Louise rejects her marriage” (Williams, \textit{Max Ophuls and the Cinema of Desire}, pp. 131–32).}
cannot be the basis for moral responsibility.) 29 It’s crucial for my understand-
ing of Madame de . . . , and of Ophuls’s ambitions more generally, that we understand Louise’s decision differently. I think we can.

It is, first of all, simply incorrect to say that Louise fails to see the ear-
rings as symbolic of her commitment to André. When she says, in the film’s opening lines, “If only he hadn’t give them to me,” the implication is that, were it otherwise, she would have been perfectly free to sell them, because only then would they have solely monetary or sentimental value. She hesitates to sell the earrings precisely because she is aware of their social value, despite the fact that she isn’t terribly fond of them. 30 Nor is it the case, as it is also tempting to think, that her sale of the earrings amount to a rejection of her marriage. As Louise explains to her maid, and later to the jeweler, if she can manufacture a reasonably convincing account of their absence the marriage will not be harmed. She winds up telling André that they must have fallen off on the way to the opera.

Her judgment proves correct. The key here is André, since he does in fact discover the real reason for the sudden “loss” of the earrings. If initially put out, he seems to recognize what Louise has done and why she has done it, and even manages to extract an indirect apology later on. We get an amusing scene in which she pretends to ask forgiveness for losing the earrings but is in fact asking forgiveness for having sold them, and he pretends to accept her apology for having lost the earrings but in fact is forgiving her for selling them. By this time, André has not only bought back the jewels himself but sent them to Constantinople with his (ex-) mistress. 31 And so he gets some pleasure out of Louise’s apology by feigning to be hard of hearing and asking her to repeat herself. But there is no indication that he thinks (that she thinks) their marriage has been invalidated—and Ophuls takes some care to indicate that things in their lives go on as before. 32

I cannot stress this point enough. It means that, rather than a mistaken judgment of the situation, Louise exhibits a deep skill—a literacy—at working within her social world; she is virtuosic in her ability to manipulate its conventions to resolve various crises, to satisfy her needs. (In fact, both she and André are virtuosic in this regard; his abilities become clear in conversations with various men at the opera, especially in his deflection of

30. Indeed, it’s her recognition of the earrings as a gift—something that carries with it certain obligations—that prompts her to see if a better option can be found.
31. Unlike the marquis in Jean Renoir’s La Règle du jeu (1939), André does not say that he has decided to become “worthy of my wife”; he has simply tired of his lover and uses the earrings to smooth over an awkward scene.
32. I do not deny André feels pain at Louise’s actions, especially when he first discovers her deception; my point is that he does not take her to have rejected their marriage.
a question about his own possible impropriety.) If we recognize this fact about her, it changes the understanding of the film. *Madame de* . . . is not a story of Louise’s failure to live within a rigidly stratified society. Far from it. As long as the challenges she faces arise within the normal functioning of that world, she will be fine. Indeed, she is able to use her knowledge of what counts as acceptable forms of lying and deceit to create some space outside the parameters of her own marriage; she can flirt, resolve situations without involving her husband, and so on. The problem that derails her, and that defines the film’s tragic narrative, involves the introduction of a new fact—a new kind of value, in the form of a claim to happiness—that is outside familiar social conventions and that renders inadequate, even dangerous, her virtuosity within them. Louise turns out to be ill-equipped to negotiate the new situations that arise and the demands they place on her.

If we accept this reading of the first part of the film, then Ophuls leaves Louise and André in their enjoyable, if somewhat superficial marriage, what the opening titles called “*une jolie vie sans histoire.*” In that case, the story actually begins when Donati arrives from Constantinople with the earrings in tow. We reencounter the jewels in a close-up inside a suitcase, the camera pulling back to reveal Donati attempting to convince a customs official to delay him so that he can attract the attention of a woman (Louise). Though this attempt fails, he meets her again when their carriages collide in the street. They flirt, but he fails to get her name. What they call fate works for them a second time when they are seated next to each other at a party; Donati learns that Louise is André’s wife, that everyone thinks he and she were made for each other, that she “torture[s]” her suitors, and that he enjoys dancing with her. Over the course of a series of dances, they fall in love.

It’s in this sequence—one of the greatest in any of Ophuls’s films—that we get the most extensive use of dually attuned camera movements to articulate and express a set of ethical claims. On the one hand, the sequence displays the social conventions that delimit the acceptable modes of behavior, along with the forms of justification and action that can take place within it. On the other, it contains a series of camera movements that, I will argue, suggest the ethical contours for an appropriate response to the new emotional and social situation that arises. The beauty and power lie in the way they go together.

33. We later learn that André in fact finds this situation to be quite painful; he plays a role he does not enjoy.
The sequence is divided into two sections, each of which takes up one aspect of this dynamic. I’m going to work through each in detail. In the first, Ophuls sets out the social world that will provide the terms out of which the relationship between Louise and Donati will emerge—and therefore also the terms against which the camera movements in the second section will define themselves.

The first section begins with the third meeting between Louise and Donati. After the scene in which their carriages collide, there is a dissolve to two hands reaching for name cards laid out on a table; they have been seated next to each other at a ball. As Donati reads Louise’s name on the card, Ophuls cuts to a shot from behind them, the camera swiveling around the table and pulling back to pick up André approaching to greet Donati (“My dear friend, I’m delighted to see you. I thought you were still in Constantinople”). Ophuls then introduces an astonishing shot (for him): the camera is positioned in front of Louise and Donati, who sit behind an elegant table, and it remains motionless for over a minute. Behind them is an extraordinarily large mirror (actually composed out of multiple mirrors) that shows a dance in front of them, and so behind us; this is society, their world. André remarks, “I see you’ve already met my wife; you’ll get along very well,” and then walks away. Donati begins to explain to Louise how he knows her husband but is interrupted by a woman who speaks to him in Italian. She leaves, and Donati explains that “the marquise” is upset because she had wanted to introduce them to each other and is planning to throw a party for them “on Thursday”; he adds, “She says that we’re made for each other.” As befits a scene played in front of a mirror, a military officer now enters from the other side of the frame to speak with Louise in Polish. She tells Donati that “the colonel” is upset because he had wanted to introduce them to each other and is planning to throw a party for them “on Friday”; she adds, “He says that we’re made for each other. Of course.”

As in Letter from an Unknown Woman, both Louise and Donati attribute their meeting to something they call fate or destiny. And again, we should be suspicious of this attribution. In part, they appear to regard these terms less seriously than Lisa did in the earlier film; when Louise, at the end of their meeting on the street, says that they should trust fate to bring them together again, Donati replies, running after her, “I’m not so sure.” Moreover, the scene presents an even stronger reason to reject the explanation that fate guides their lives: their meeting is massively overdetermined by the social world they inhabit. Everyone introduces them to each other: the colonel, the mar-
quise—even André wants them to meet. If they are “fated” to meet, this is only because everyone wants them to.\textsuperscript{34}

Why does everyone want this? People say that Louise and Donati are “made for each other,” and we might think this means that they share some inner quality, whether it be moral integrity, aesthetic appreciation, or any of the standard virtues. They will, after all, have a “great affair.” But that seems wrong; these are not particularly deep or virtuous characters. It is probably more accurate to say that people have in mind the fact that both are incorrigible flirts; they enjoy the pleasures of the erotic encounter but are without depth, hence without the danger of actually falling in love. André himself admits as much when he remarks that Donati will be able to amuse Louise while he is away; Donati is not going to be one of the lovestruck suitors.

Ophuls provides an emblem for the social world to which these characters belong in the dance reflected in the mirror behind the table. The dancers we see there are mobile, passing from one partner to another in an endless cycle; they are without history, without depth, without emotion. I take this to be a wonderful bit of play; the mirrors reflect the dance, which in turn reflects the underlying structure of the social world.\textsuperscript{35} All is reflec-

\textsuperscript{34} Ophuls’s dismissal of the category of fate is systematic. In the scene when André comes home from the opera to search for the earrings Louise claims to have lost, he is followed up the stairs by Louise’s maid, who says, “I don’t believe it. What a catastrophe. I predicted it—four diamonds and two black sevens means great loss. . . . At first, I thought the loss would come later. But with diamonds before sevens. . . . ” We know she is lying here, attempting to distract André from thinking too much about what might have actually happened; she is aware that Louise sold the jewels, even wishing her well as she leaves on her errand. Fate, in the form of some supernatural agency, is invoked to serve as a deception or distraction. Two other examples in the film follow this pattern. The first is when the maid announces to Louise that she sees in the cards “a great love... reciprocated,” at which Louise becomes interested in fortune-telling for the first time (she had previously scoffed, as the cards only say that she is about to go away on a voyage, and that there will trouble for her husband because of the king or a foreigner—self-evident facts). The second is when André remarks to Lola that the number thirteen—the number of the berth she occupies on the train to Constantinople—is good luck. While Lola may take this statement seriously, it seems clear that André means to smooth over the difficult fact that he is effectively sending her away and so ending their relationship. In these cases, the categories of fate, luck, and destiny are not things that actually obtain in the world of the film but are speech acts used (somewhat cynically) by various characters to achieve their ends.

\textsuperscript{35} There is a nice expression of the relation between dance and society in a letter Friedrich Schiller wrote, although the terms are different: “I know of no better image for the ideal of a beautiful society than a well executed English dance, composed of many complicated figures and turns. . . . Everything fits so skillfully, yet so spontaneously, that everyone seems to be following his own lead, without ever getting in anyone’s way. Such a dance is the perfect symbol of one’s own individually asserted freedom as well as of one’s respect for the freedom of the other” (quoted in Paul de Man, “Aesthetic Formalization: Kleist’s Über das Marionettentheater,” The Rhetoric of Romanticism [New York, 1984], p. 263).
tion; all is surface; all is play and movement. The dance embodies the socially prescribed form of circulation, the shifting patterns of social life. The fluidity of relations prevents fixity, prevents people from establishing and sealing off a relationship. The dance has its motions, and we soon learn that Louise can play with its patterns, manipulating hopes to provide herself with pleasure.

The growing flirtation between Louise and Donati is interrupted when one of her suitors comes up to ask her for a dance. She leaves, and Ophuls cuts to a shot on the dance floor where the suitor tries to persuade her to allow him to visit “when the general leaves on maneuvers”—to initiate an affair. Louise responds, “I can’t keep you from hoping,” and there is a cut to a shot of André and Donati seated at the table; the framing is different, but we can still see the dance reflected in the mirror behind them. André tells Donati that Louise will find him “tremendously entertaining,” but warns that “she’s an incorrigible flirt.” Donati recognizes the method of “torture through hope,” says that he’s experienced it before, and that it’s terribly painful. They laugh with some worldly pleasure.

At this moment, Ophuls breaks the formal pattern he has built up, cutting to a shot that shows a part of the room we have not yet seen, the camera panning right to follow a man who is hurrying past dancers and musicians. He rushes up to André and asks, somewhat incongruously, “Is it true what they say?” (He is a journalist.) André tries to brush him away with a “no,” and then a “yes” to a following inquiry about whether they are talking about the same thing. During this exchange, Donati has been looking out at the dancers; he now gets up, despite André’s request to stay, and the journalist sits down in his place to talk about “the peace conference.”

It is a familiar kind of dance that Donati intends to join when he rises from the table. But it is not the dance he and Louise have. It’s as if the shot of the man hurrying along the edge of the room—the intrusion that gives Donati the excuse to get up—breaks the rhythm of the scene and so enables a different kind of dancing to begin. It initiates a series of dances in which Louise and Donati will fall in love while dancing or even because they are dancing. Several formal shifts mark the change: the quick tempo of the music becomes a less rigid, more expressive melody; the style of dance shifts from back-and-forth movements to a slow, clockwise circling; and the camera itself begins a counter-clockwise circling. These features work together to create a kind of figure/ground reversal within the frame; Louise and Donati remain still while the background moves around them. They are dancing a dance within a dance; there is no intimation that partners will be changed or that the particular identity of the partner does not matter. The dancers are no longer fungible. Taken together, these features
suggest that the dance effectively isolates Louise and Donati from their surroundings.

The film thus codes the process of falling in love as an increasing removal from the circulatory movement of society.36 “They’re always together,” the admiral’s wife says in the third dance; “they’re always the last to leave,” remarks one of the musicians in the final shot. Later in the film, after they have admitted their love for one another, Donati scrawls his name across all the dances on Louise’s card: “All the dances . . . Donati!” It’s a gesture that undoes the social mechanism that encourages circulation, replacing flirtation with love. And it’s the fact that they thereby fall outside the sanctioned form of behavior and emotion that drives the complications of the rest of the plot, eventually resulting in their deaths at the end of the film.

It’s in the relation between Louise and Donati that the ethical stakes of the film become evident. Put succinctly, they have to do with claims to happiness. It’s not that Louise wasn’t happy before—Ophuls shows the pleasure she takes in life with André—but the film suggests that there is something different in her relationship with Donati. It offers a new, and better, form of happiness, or at least she feels that it does, and the ethical demand she implicitly makes is that this happiness ought to be allowed to exist. To be sure, the content of this understanding of and desire for happiness is not especially deep or unique, mixed as it is with a fairly conventional idea of romantic love. It’s an image of love familiar to nineteenth-century fiction: Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina—characters who are in love with being in love and with the idea of romantic love as a forbidden activity. Even so, Louise and Donati are genuinely captured by it. And it is partly the fact that this feeling seems new for each of them that gives the film its poignancy; though they experience a kind of passion that is almost adolescent in its intensity, they are no longer themselves young—or free to enjoy it.

One of the genuine difficulties—and pleasures—of Madame de . . . lies in tracking the complexity and fluctuations of the relationship between Louise and Donati: when it is socially accepted flirtation, when it crosses into still-familiar forms of transgression, and when it exceeds the conventional forms of affairs. In this, I think at some point we have to take their emotion seriously—as involving a claim to genuine happiness—if we are able to accept the terms of the drama in the latter half of the film. Louise’s quasisuicidal despair, Donati’s despondency and resignation, André’s in-

36. It’s for this reason that I am hesitant to say, as others have, that Ophuls values movement above all else.
creasingly desperate actions (his challenge of Donati to a duel, as several observers note, violates social rules): all these suggest that something more than convention is at stake.

Still, we might wonder: to what extent does it matter that this happiness is, to put it bluntly, based on adultery? We feel sympathy for Louise and Donati, but for André, too (perhaps even more so at times). I think one could reasonably ask how we are to make sense of a world in which it’s acceptable to break marriage vows (or similar obligations) when competing ambitions or desires arise. And so there is a question about whether the kinds of ethical demands at stake in *Madame de* . . . are compelling or worth considering to begin with. The answer, it seems to me, lies in the world the film shows, since it is one in which indulging temptations to break marriage vows is generally allowed; husbands can have mistresses, wives can flirt openly and destructively, and so on. The desire to transgress the terms of the obligations to a partner is allowed, even encouraged, to emerge and develop; “We have been playing with fire, you and I,” André tells Louise late in the film. Indeed, one way to look at *Madame de* . . . is as showing that when the institution of marriage functions primarily as a contract of sorts, love becomes possible only as a fairly conventional form of adultery. The myth of romantic love—and Ophuls is consistent across his films in seeing it as a myth, an unsustainable fantasy that nevertheless guides the actions of characters—is bound up with the deadening of the institution of marriage.37

At this point, it might look like Louise’s discovery of the importance of a kind of real happiness entails a reading of the film that best fits the idea of a “spiritual odyssey.” From being merely concerned with the frivolous pleasures of aristocratic life, she comes to recognize the value of seriousness, of care and commitment. This would be an important discovery. There is a long tradition—from Aristotle to Kant, Mill to Cavell—of thinking that happiness is central to ethics, that it is bound up with the very possibility for moral action and development, for living a full life.38 These values are certainly at stake in *Madame de* . . . But if we think of them in terms of Louise’s or Donati’s state of mind, the discussion is simply being pegged at the wrong level.

*Madame de* . . . does contain an intimation of what would enable Louise and Donati to go beyond their world’s prescribed limits, of what their

37. We might also see *Madame de* . . . as part of a long line of novels and films in which adultery does not constitute in itself a damaging moral act or a reason for the lessening of the claims to happiness of the central characters. In different ways, both *Casablanca* (dir. Michael Curtiz, 1942) and *Hiroshima mon amour* provide examples of this.

demands for happiness mean, and of what would allow them to realize these demands. As we’ll see, it is articulated in and through the film’s aesthetic form, through camera movements that are attuned both to the characters’ needs and to the world around them—the world that subverts their claims to happiness and which they are unable to get beyond. Ophuls provides this intimation despite their blindness to the possibility for more creative action, a blindness even to what their demands actually are. The crisis that emerges and that eventually results in their deaths is not just a result of the social order’s refusal to allow the relationship to exist. Ophuls makes the failure more general, even symptomatic. Louise and Donati have the forms of their deliberation shaped by—are themselves wholly within—a world that does not contain resources that would enable a more successful negotiation of their new emotion, their sense of a new kind of happiness. It turns out that the virtuosic manipulation of stable conventions only goes so far; it is simply inadequate to certain moral problems, problems that require genuine creativity.

Let’s pick up where we left off in the sequence, since it’s in the second section that the camera movements do the work I am claiming for them. I’ve already mentioned the formal shifts that occur as Louise and Donati begin to dance together. The slow pace of the dance, coupled with the corresponding movement of the camera, give the sequence a languorous, almost elegiac feel. The circular movements isolate them from the crowd of dancers, drawing their attention inwards towards one another—and bringing our attention with them.

A cut within this first dance moves to a shot slightly further away, and we see the pair briefly reflected in a mirror in the background. They spin off to the right, away from the mirror and the other couples, caught up in each other and yet reminded of the social world by the promise of future encounters; the marquise says, “Until Thursday,” and the colonel, “Until Friday.” These two initial shots exhibit a dynamic that runs through the sequence; along with Louise and Donati, we become absorbed in and caught up by the dance, only to be brought back into an awareness of the social world in which it takes place. The marquise and the colonel fulfill this function here, as does the mirror, which refers back to the reflected dance in the first section, suggesting that the specialness of this dance is still located within a social context. But when they move off on their own, we are able to forget that. If the promise of future dances brings with it the social world, that world seems to be organizing itself around their desires; they will keep dancing.

An overlapping dissolve reveals Louise and Donati still dancing in a clockwise rotation, a military band continuing the music in an enclosure of
the middle of the room. Donati notes that they have gone four days without seeing each other. “Are there no more dances in Paris?” he says, and the two maintain polite banter. The camera tracks to the right, following them all the way around in an extended circle. Conventions and formalities are still in place—Donati asks, “Do you have good news of your husband?”—but each is more interested in the other than in anything else.

A dissolve to the third dance, two days later, begins with a shot of a large painting of what looks like a military scene placed in the middle of a room. Suddenly, Louise and Donati come together in front of the camera, as if they are invoked by its presence. With fewer and fewer couples around them, they have begun to retreat away from the gaze of society; as Louise makes a mocking comment about the costume worn by “the admiral’s wife,” they dance behind the painting. (Do they now have something to hide, a reason to be hidden?) There is a cut to the admiral and his wife, tripping in from right to left, who remark on the couple’s overt infatuation. They exit in that direction, and, from behind a painting, Louise and Donati swirl out to the right then go back again to the left in front of it. He asks if she has “any good news,” and she replies, “Of whom? Ah, yes. He’s very well, thank you.” They move behind another painting, and there is a dissolve to the fourth dance, a mere twenty-four hours of mutually acknowledged “torture” later. This dance shows a marked change in the relation between Louise and Donati. As they dance, moving to the left, a man dancing with another partner greets Louise, though he has to do so twice before eliciting a response from her. Donati is irked by this intrusion; he says he doesn’t like that man, and Louise accuses him of beginning to hope—and thus to fall in love with her. Donati, smiling, answers in the affirmative, and they dance in silence for almost thirty seconds before Louise draws them back into the social world by repeating the familiar refrain, this time without the prompting questions: “I heard from my husband. He’s very well, thank you.” The hold of conventions is weakening.

The fifth and final dance begins differently, not with Louise and Donati but with an orchestra packing up to leave. The musicians note that this couple is “always the last to leave,” a phrase that evokes the comments of the band in *Letter from an Unknown Woman* who “prefer married people because they have somewhere to go.” Louise and Donati, however, do not have Lisa and Stefan’s excuse. They are not young and single; they are dancing but dressed to leave. These are signs of an attraction that has, and can have, no home.

A musician stands up—“baron or no baron, I’m going home”—and walks to the left, the camera panning and tracking to follow him across the room. He gets a light from a servant underneath a mirror that shows a
reflection of Louise and Donati; they are dancing alone on the other side of
the room, pressed close up against one another. The camera continues to
follow the musician, eventually leaving him as he passes the two dancers.\(^{39}\)

Only a harp is left playing the tune, a piano replacing it as the camera
moves closer to the couple. Louise says, “Aren’t you going to ask me about
my husband?” and when Donati answers, “No,” she continues: “You’re
right [\textit{vous avez raison}]. He’s coming back tomorrow.” They fall silent,
pressing their cheeks together as they circle in the same spot. All pretense
of forward movement is gone, as if they were simply trying to be together
in the realization that the time in which they could ignore the outside
world is coming to an end.

A servant now passes in the background, and the camera leaves Louise
and Donati to follow him while he slowly puts out the candles in the room.
It’s a gesture that seems designed to leave Louise and Donati to themselves,
to permit them some final moments of privacy and intimacy before the
social world returns. Yet even though they are out of sight, we can still hear
their feet shuffling and see them reflected in the mirror when the servant
passes it. The camera continues its movement across the room to the right,
eventually closing in on the harp as a cover is thrown over it, and the image
fades to black.\(^{40}\)

The logic of the dance sequence is both simple and elegant. Ophuls
marks the shift from flirtation to love through the differences in each
dance: Donati’s inquiry (or lack thereof) into André’s well-being; their
interest (or lack thereof) in the social world around them; even the very
tempo of their movement.

But more is going on here than a graceful device for tracking the growth
of their relationship. The form of the shots works to give us a feel for the
emotional tenor of the dances; the circling camera takes an active role in
creating the mood—the flirtation and enchantment, pain and love—that
permeates the scene. Ophuls employs his camera to articulate the form of
the experience sought by Louise and Donati, an aesthetic articulation of
their desire to have a relationship outside social conventions and obliga-
tions.\(^{41}\) Not only is it a demand that cannot be realized within the contours

\(^{39}\) In a sequence filled with mirrors and doublings, we can think of this figure as the
mirror image of the journalist whose movement across a room allowed the dance to begin;
here, the musician brings it to a close.

\(^{40}\) The social world returns in a brutal way; after a moment’s silence, the sound of a
trumpet blares out, announcing the beginning of a hunt.

\(^{41}\) The idea that love—as opposed to passion or desire?—can only flourish outside the
gaze of society receives two other expressions later in the film. One is Louise’s declaration to
Donati, “I only want to be looked at by you.” The other is André’s curious action as he declares
his own love for Louise; he shuts all the windows to her room.
of their world, it is one they cannot bring themselves to express or admit. In their silence, it is the camera that, as it repeatedly circles the pair, encloses them within the private space they implicitly desire. (It seals them off from the world in a way that makes them almost an object of aesthetic contemplation, perhaps even a work of art.) The camera movements give us an intimation of the shape of their experience, the claims for happiness being placed on the world. They effect something like an aesthetic reordering, even a reimagining, of the social world to which Louise and Donati belong.

Our sense of the content of their desire, however, results not only from the camera movements but from the way the sequence disrupts a linear flow of time. It’s not simply a matter of Ophuls showing the series of dances in a succession of unbroken takes, instances of continuous duration. The sequence as a whole is organized so that the length of time between each encounter continually divides in half—two weeks between the customs depot in Basle and the accident on the street, one week until the first party, four days until the next one, two days, then one. And yet, as the number of days between encounters decreases, the encounters themselves get progressively longer, from thirty seconds in the opening dance to almost two minutes in the final shot. The work here is precise and choreographed. Coupled with the camera movements that circle the dancing couple, as if to shield them from the very passage of time they dread, the effect is to create a specific impression of time; it contracts to a point while at the same time opening onto infinity. The formal structure of the film, reinforced by the movements of the camera, creates a sense of time within the sequence that mirrors Louise and Donati’s own experience of time as they dance.

This is not the only film in which Ophuls figures romantic happiness as an escape from historical time. In Liebelei, a film to which Madame de . . . frequently alludes, the two young lovers go for a sleigh ride; Fritz asks Christine how long she will love him, and she replies, “for eternity.” What this means is shown a moment later, when they drive by a graveyard covered in snow; the desire to love forever, Ophuls suggests, is really a wish for death, the only state in which that goal can be realized. Liebelei’s cruel irony lies in their failure to recognize this.

42. Love, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe notes, desires eternity: “an ecstasy that must endure forever! / Forever!—For its end would be despair, / No, without end! No end!” (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Faust, trans. Walter Arndt [New York, 1976], p. 78, ll. 3192–94).

43. At the end of the film, when both Fritz and Christine are dead, Ophuls will reprise the ride; we hear the words they spoke to each other while the camera retraces their earlier route, again coming to rest on the graveyard.
Madame de . . . does something slightly different. Rather than the desire to be together for eternity, for all time, Ophuls shows the desire for there to be no time, since with the passing of time will come André’s return—and the end of their dances. It’s a wish, we might say, for presentness; to be always in the present is to have nothing to do with the flow of time. (Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, “If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present.”)\textsuperscript{44} The transition to the last dance makes this explicit. Unlike the other transitions between encounters, we are not told how much time has passed since the previous dance but simply see the pair still dancing at the end of an evening. Not only has everyone else gone, but they have overcoats on; it’s as if they can’t stop dancing, can’t accept the imminence of their separation. To wish to be in the present is to wish to be outside the flow of time altogether.

Yet they cannot stay in the self-enclosed world of the dance forever; with the recognition of André’s imminent return comes a reminder of the passage of time. And if we are absorbed in a sense of presentness along with them—whether it’s wonder at the beauty of the image, the repetitive intensity of the dances; or even straightforward identification with what we imagine their psychological states to be—we are likewise reminded of the existence of the world that prevents the full realization of their fantasy of insularity. There is a conflict between Louise and Donati’s experience of time in the dances themselves and the onwards movement of the world in which they have this experience.

This tension is brought out in the final dance, when it becomes evident that Louise and Donati have transgressed the boundaries of what they expected to be possible. There, Ophuls introduces two modifications to the pattern built up across the sequence. One is that, for the first time since the initial dance, before they began to fall in love, he places mirrors in the scene. It’s a gesture that evokes the image of social circulation with which the sequence began, at once registering the distinctness of this dance and reminding us of the world that surrounds them. A gesture, in short, that works against the impression of self-enclosure the sequence otherwise generates.

The second modification involves the musicians. While Ophuls shows a band at several points during this sequence, it is only in the last shot that they are individuated. Here he shows the people—the musicians and footmen—

whose work makes possible Louise and Donati’s chance at happiness; their sudden presence at the end undermines the autonomy and isolation of the dance.\textsuperscript{45} It suggests that Louise and Donati are absorbed in each other to the extent that they are unable to see the world around them, are unable to recognize that they have stayed past their time. Ophuls’s genius is that we feel neither anger with the musicians and footmen for disrupting the dance nor contempt at the couple for prolonging the evening.\textsuperscript{46} Each group simply fails to recognize the other’s desires and so cannot allow for their respective satisfaction. Only the camera takes it all in, responding to both desires through its sweeping movements; it not only articulates the contours of Louise and Donati’s experience but shows how it plays out in a broader context. What we have in the sequence is a critique, in the full sense of the term, of Louise and Donati’s desire for presentness, for being outside both time and society. The experience of presentness, despite its promises and pleasures, proves impossible to sustain.\textsuperscript{47}

We might understand Madame de . . . , then, as operating by way of a competition between two kinds of virtuosity (or rather, following a remark by Ophuls, between virtuosity and artistry\textsuperscript{48}—or even, following Immanuel Kant, between virtuosity and genius).\textsuperscript{49} There is the skill Louise deploys as she manipulates the conventions and values of the social order to which she belongs; its value system is an instrument, and she plays it exceedingly well. But if her virtuosity is successful in its own sphere, within set parameters, it fails when it needs to adapt to new kinds of values and to the new demand for happiness that arises. Against this, there is Ophuls’s camera, whose virtuosity is defined by the creative ability to respond to new situations and to acknowledge the demands of the characters: those they express, those they feel but are unable to articulate, even those they fail to recognize but that lurk in the background. The ethical content of the film,

\textsuperscript{45}. This dynamic is of longstanding interest for Ophuls. He talks about “misreading” the sign over the Frankfurt opera house so that, instead of “Dem Wahren, Schönen, Guten” (To Truth, Beauty, Goodness), it becomes “Den schönen, guten Ware” (To beautiful, good wares). See Ophuls, “Thoughts on Film,” in Ophuls, ed. Paul Willemen (London, 1978), pp. 35–36.

\textsuperscript{46}. It’s a posture similar to the use of beauty in Godard’s\textit{ Nouvelle vague} (1990), which, Gilberto Perez argues, “disallows the complacency both of those who would simply enjoy beauty without looking into the conditions that make for it, and of those who would simply dismiss it as the plaything of a privileged few without recognizing its capacity to transcend and even subvert their claim to ownership” (Gilberto Perez, “Self-Illuminated,” \textit{London Review of Books}, 1 Apr. 2004, p. 6).

\textsuperscript{47}. “We are all literalists most or all of our lives. Presentness is grace” (Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” \textit{Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews} [Chicago, 1998], p. 168).

\textsuperscript{48}. See Ophuls, “Thoughts on Film,” p. 42.

its moral imagination, is expressed in and through these dually attuned camera movements.

And yet there are limits. The camera’s aesthetic reimagining of the social world is unable to materially change it; it is unable to alter events. Louise and Donati break apart; André kills Donati; and Louise dies of grief. The camera can only do so much.

I said at the outset of this paper that my argument was going to risk a problem of form and content. Following the analysis of Madame de . . . , we’re now in a position to see what that is. The problem involves an apparently fixed division of labor, with the camera movements taking shape against a stable, independent, and clearly defined content. The distinction I drew between the world shown by the film and the work done by its formal features seems to imply that Ophuls’s camera movements have meaning defined independently of the film’s content. And their meaning, moreover, appears to be the primary work done by the film as a whole.

This reading of Ophuls’s camera movements might seem to be supported by a feature of his films: they are frequently set in the past, often represented by the fin-de-siècle moment in Europe (Vienna is his preferred city). The past is one of the more conspicuous tropes in Ophuls’s work. In La Ronde, the master of ceremonies and directorial stand-in makes it into a principle when he announces, “I adore the past. It’s so much more peaceful than the present, and so much more certain than the future.” The worry this raises is not exactly one of nostalgia but rather that the particular intersection of aesthetics and ethics I’ve been describing may depend on the presence of the older world. After all, Ophuls seems to prefer the fin-de-siècle because its society is governed by strictly defined rules and conventions and thereby furnishes a stable background for the work of the film. It is of no small matter that the social world to which Louise belongs, the world that shapes the contours of her deliberative field, is hostile to the intrusion of new kinds of morally salient facts, as well as to new forms of happiness. It’s hostile enough, in fact, that it readily resorts to duels—socially sanctioned killings that follow a carefully delineated set of rules—to preserve its own sense of order and stability. Against fixed social conventions, the fluid camera movements may all too easily be able to articulate the films’ ethical alternative.

If this way of thinking about the dually attuned camera movements

50. Liebelei, Letter from an Unknown Woman, and Madame de . . . are all set in this period, and each ends with a duel.
were right, it would make Ophuls’s films more schematic and less interesting than I think they are. But I don’t think it is. We can begin to rethink the apparent problem of form and content by taking a closer look at what’s at stake in the idea of the past. The past is important to Ophuls for a variety of reasons, not just for the considerations given above, but I think it matters especially as a way to make explicit and vivid something about film itself. It functions, that is, as a complex metacinematic trope, revealing something about the kind of world a film has, even the kind of thing a film is. This idea may not be immediately intuitive, but it is important for thinking about how Ophuls uses camera movements.

The basic idea, certainly not unique to Ophuls, is that the world of a film is self-sufficient, sealed off from both its maker and its audience. There is a limit to what we can discover about, or do with, such a world; at most, we are able to take up positions towards it, appreciating its beauty while acknowledging its flaws and impossibilities. What happens in Ophuls’s work is that the setting of the action in the past becomes an exemplary figure for this way of thinking, precisely because it places the films in a world shielded from us by the passage of time. The story has already run its course; we cannot intervene in it or change its outcome. (Ophuls is not a director of the counterfactual.) The principle articulated by the master of ceremonies in *La Ronde* makes this explicit, as he describes the past as something fixed and therefore permanently (ontologically) sealed off from the present.\(^\text{51}\)

Two other features of Ophuls’s films support such an interpretation. The first has to do with narrative structure, with Ophuls’s penchant for telling stories through flashbacks. Several major films—*La signora di tutti, Letter from an Unknown Woman, Lola Montès*—start at the end, constructing a narrative whose outcome is foretold: “By the time you read this letter, I may be dead,” begins *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. The second involves Ophuls’s interest in literary adaptations. By one count, twenty of the twenty-five films he made were direct adaptations of literary works; whatever else is involved in this decision, one consequence is that the stories being told are already known.\(^\text{52}\)

In the combination of these features, Ophuls manifests an ontological

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51. One way to think about Ophuls’s line of thought here is as following the form of Cavell’s intuitions about the ontology of a photograph: “the reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see, but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past” (Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* [Cambridge, Mass., 1979], p. 23). Ophuls reverses the direction of Cavell’s chain of reasoning. The sense of a world past, the repeated setting of films in earlier historical periods, is used to evoke the conditions of film.

52. See Mulvey, “Max Ophuls’s Auteurist Adaptations.”
honesty towards the worlds he creates by refusing to interfere in their resolution. He simply allows the stories to run their course, and if the situation does not produce an ideal outcome, the issue is not forced.\textsuperscript{53} This is worth noting. The use of dramatic narrative shifts to bring about a better ending is a well-known principle of narrative cinema, especially in Hollywood cinema. It’s also in Douglas Sirk’s use of impossibly happy endings to suggest the very unreality of any possible happy outcome and in Bertolt Brecht’s avoidance of a tragic ending by the miraculous arrival of the king’s messenger bearing pardons for all.\textsuperscript{54} Whatever we may think of the narratives that result, both Sirk and Brecht allow themselves to interfere in the worlds they create. Ophuls, however, constructs a situation in which he can do nothing. The worlds of his films stand on their own.

If we expand the analysis of Ophuls’s camera movements out from \textit{Madame de\ldots} to look at the way the dual attunement structure functions in other films—even ones set in the present—we’ll be able to see the force of this interpretation. One example is Ophuls’s lone Italian film, \textit{La signora di tutti}, a film organized around the constraints and demands of what it is to be a star, to be “everybody’s woman.” We are first introduced to the heroine, Gaby Doriot, in the context of negotiations over her contract—the terms are debated in her absence—and are repeatedly shown ways in which her life is defined by the economic and social apparatus of stardom. The film’s narrative is an extensive flashback as she lies dying from a suicide attempt, remembering the missed possibilities for happiness during her rise from poverty to stardom. Early in this story, she falls in love with Roberto (Friedrich Benfer), the son of a wealthy banker, a relationship that will prove disastrous in various ways. The scene in which this happens takes place at a ball being thrown by his father, and Ophuls again uses extended tracking shots to trace their developing interest in one another.

The sequence begins as Roberto, standing on a balcony overlooking the ballroom, spots Gaby sitting by herself. As he walks down a set of stairs, Ophuls cuts to a tracking shot that follows him while he greets various people, moves over to Gaby, and asks her to dance; she accepts, rises somewhat awkwardly, and, as they begin to dance, closes her eyes partially as if in a dream. The camera follows the pair through the crowd, moving past other dancing couples and eventually framing them within an open space at the center of the dance; as with \textit{Madame de\ldots}, they are caught up in their own activity, indifferent to the world around them. (Again, dancing is figured as a socially sanctioned mode of intimacy, a way of being to-

\textsuperscript{53} Some of the American films are partial exceptions.

gether without violating codes of propriety. It also leads to deeper emotions or produces them itself.) Roberto whirls Gaby through a series of beads and curtains, and Ophuls cuts 180 degrees to a shot from inside another room, perhaps a library, as they enter through curtains, still dancing. Gaby, now wide-eyed and smiling blissfully, thanks Roberto for the invitation to dance and for taking her away from her loneliness. They circle the room with the camera following them. Gaby says, “I would like always to dance,” breaks away from Roberto, and whirls around in a combination of relief and joy, before tripping over a chair and stumbling to the floor.

At this point, Ophuls does something startling with the camera. Gaby says that her “head is spinning”; taking up the cue, the camera executes a 360-degree pan around the room. We might take the pan to constitute an identification with Gaby’s point of view, that shows her disorientation. But this way of reading the shot ignores the larger economy of the scene, in which the camera’s movements have already given it agency of its own. In this larger context, the pan is less an expression of what Gaby sees than a response to how she feels, an instance of the dual attunement structure. The camera accepts her unmet need to have her desires for happiness acknowledged; if people won’t respond to her half-expressed wishes, the camera will.

The 360-degree pan is coupled with a second gesture a moment later, a strange wipe that goes right to left, pivoting diagonally from the bottom center of the screen very much like a car’s windshield wiper. If we follow cinematic convention, the wipe elides a moment where something happens that cannot be shown—a convention parodied in La Ronde when Ophuls cuts from a romantic encounter to the master of ceremonies “censoring” the film by cutting a large section out of it. Gaby herself seems to suggest something like this herself, saying in wonder: “What did you do there?” But what’s elided is not something sexually illicit but the feeling of a desire impossible to achieve: the moment of falling in love, of recognizing new claims to happiness. This is a moment that can’t be shown, and it is a desire that both Gaby and Roberto will disavow at crucial moments in the film. As with Madame de . . . , Ophuls is clear that the impulse the camera acts upon cannot materially change the world it shows—we know from the outset that Gaby will commit suicide in the end—but we are nonetheless given a sense of the form of an appropriate response and, even more, the content it should respond to.

56. In addition to the camera movements and wipes, other devices such as intrascenic dissolves carry the rhetorical weight of the aesthetic and ethical project in La signora di tutti.
A second example is from *Caught*, one of Ophuls’s American films. When I mentioned the film earlier, I noted that Leonora Ames defines herself by the images in fashion magazines in the first shots of the film, by her status as a consumer. “I want that,” she says, looking through their images. She gets it by marrying a millionaire, Smith Ohlrig (Robert Ryan), all the while convincing herself that she does so for love, thus following the fantasies set up by the magazines even more closely. Ohlrig is, unsurprisingly, something of a brute, and she leaves him to work in the office of two doctors, where she falls in love with one of them, Larry Quinada (James Mason)—and he with her, eventually asking her to marry him. The dilemma is that Leonora is not only still married but pregnant with Ohlrig’s child, which Quinada does not know.

In the midst of these events, Ophuls inserts a curious scene: the two doctors lean against their respective doorjambs across the central room of their office suite, discussing the events of the day. As they do so, Quinada remarks that Leonora has been absent from work and has in fact moved out to Long Island; she had described her previous occupation there as “a paid companion to somebody rich.” The discussion turns to Quinada’s relationship with Leonora, and Hoffman seems to be trying to figure out its extent, namely, whether Quinada could be the father of Leonora’s child. The scene ends with Hoffman suggesting that Quinada go out to Long Island to get Leonora and to see what is going on there.

What stands out in this fairly banal conversation are two camera movements that bookend the scene, the camera twisting around the object between the two men: Leonora’s unoccupied desk. The scene begins with an overhead shot of the desk, as the camera moves down slightly while tilting upwards to come horizontal to the ground, and then tracks and pans to the left to bring Hoffman into view. The camera briefly moves forward past the desk towards Hoffman, and then, while still going forward, begins to pivot back around to the right, eventually coming to frame Quinada over the top of Leonora’s empty desk. From there, the scene plays out in a familiar shot/reverse-shot pattern until the final shot, which begins with the exact framing from the end of the first shot. As Quinada humorously imagines introducing himself to Leonora’s rich companion, the camera tracks forward towards him, then pivots back around to the left to bring Hoffman into the frame (it does so while continuing to move towards Quinada, though it’s now travelling backwards). The camera pauses for a few seconds, then lifts upwards and tilts down to bring Leonora’s desk back

57. This combination of a downward movement with an upward tilt is also found in the first shot of *Lola Montés*, when the camera descends to the floor of the circus.
into the center of the frame from an overhead angle; Ophuls holds the shot before dissolving to the next scene.

At a basic level, the two camera movements remind the viewer of Leonora in spite of, or perhaps because of, her absence, confirming at the level of form that she is the subject of conversation, the point around which everything turns. It’s a curiously structured scene. The camera movements mirror each other in both order and direction. In the first, the camera tilts up and moves down before pivoting to the right to show Quinada off-screen. In the second, the camera pivots to the left to show Hoffman off-screen before moving up and tilting down. They create a perfect enclosure around the scene, a sealed world of sorts. Ophuls’s trademark grace may be here, but the confined space the camera has to operate in puts pressure on it. We feel Leonora’s sense of confinement, her difficulty in being trapped between the reality of her situation and a hope for a new life—and her inability to model a way to escape. In this, Ophuls’s camera is able to provide the perspective on the world of the film that is missing within it.

From these discussions, we can see why a standard model of form and content is inadequate to Ophuls’s films and therefore why we shouldn’t be worried about problems that tend to arise from it. Ophuls in fact uses camera movements in a dynamic interplay with the world of the film, an interplay that generates the films’ ethical content. The critical difficulty is that the terms of this engagement are defined by an ontological condition—one posited by the films themselves—that resembles a form/content divide but that is structured quite differently. Put simply, the terms of form and content are off. The issue has to do with the narrative integrity, or independence, of the film’s world and the way that world is essentially sealed off from the camera. The structural tension that enables and determines the dually attuned camera movements is organized in relation to, and in the space allowed by, this ontological condition that defines the worlds of Ophuls’s films.

The force and distinctiveness of this commitment in Ophuls’s approach becomes striking in a contrast with filmmakers who use virtuosic camera movements to intervene in the worlds of their films. Orson Welles, for example, makes the camera an active agent that reveals things to the audience that are, or are suggested to be, of narrative importance; the revelation of the sled at the end of *Citizen Kane* (1941) is something that only we, the audience of the film, can ever or will ever know (its destruction confirms this). Jean Renoir uses the camera to reframe action, showing the alignment of various characters in ways that foretell narrative events, as when new spaces are repeatedly revealed by the camera in the *danse macabre* sequence in *La Règle du jeu* (1939). And Alfred Hitchcock has a pen-
chant for using the camera to mark characters with guilt, to intrude into
the world he creates so as to impose a clear moral and narrative order on
it.58 The tracking shot at the end of Young and Innocent (1937) goes over
the heads of the dancing crowd to move in on the drummer of the band, the
guilty man the main characters are looking for; the track in to a close-up
reveals the twitch in his eye that confirms his identity as the murderer.59
For these directors, the moving camera discovers things that the characters
in the film ought to see but cannot see, will not see, or are unable to see; it
operates within the world of the film. Ophuls, by contrast, accepts the
independence of the worlds he creates and brings to the screen. He can
work with them, but not on them; it is as if they were wholly autonomous,
as if he never created them in the first place. There are ontological con-
straints to what his camera movements can do, a point at which their
creative virtuosity can do no more; they cannot enter or change the world
of the film.

By this point, we have returned to lines of thought in which it might
easily seem that camera movements are unrelated to matters of ethics, even
if they’re not just ornamental or merely virtuosic. In Ophuls’s films, how-
ever, the ontological, epistemic, even metaphysical concerns that camera
movements raise and negotiate are inseparable from the ethical work they
do. In each of the films I’ve discussed, the camera movements pick up the
need for a world that makes room for the varying (and variable) demands
for happiness by its inhabitants and then show the precise contours of
these demands. Ophuls’s camera, in other words, provides a moral per-
spective on the world, a perspective those inside it are often unable or
incapable of taking. What I’ve been calling its dual attunement is the con-
dition for the expression of the films’ ethical content. If the camera cannot,
on its own, effect the changes implicitly demanded by characters in the
films, it nonetheless functions as a surrogate viewer of sorts, a fine-tuned
way to process the moral status of the world through aesthetic means.60
Ophuls uses camera movements to provide an aesthetic articulation of a
moral attitude for the audience.

Ophuls’s films work with and reveal the limits of virtuosity, the places

58. Godard writes, “With each shot, each transition, each composition, Hitchcock does the
only thing possible for the rather paradoxical but compelling reason that he could do anything
he liked” (Jean-Luc Godard, “The Wrong Man,” Godard on Godard, ed. Jean Narboni and Tom


60. One assistant said while working on Caught: “He makes the camera disappear. It just
happened to be there catching the action—like a silent witness” (quoted in Bacher, Max Ophuls
in the Hollywood Studios, p. 223).
where the skilled manipulation of conventions isn’t sufficient to negotiate the demands of new values, whether moral or not. This happens in various guises and forms; we may even recognize ourselves there. These are places where an approach to ethics and film that focuses primarily on character psychology, or on the dynamics of audience identification, comes to feel inadequate. In the face of such challenges, Ophuls’s films suggest that what matters may be the camera itself, especially when it’s on tracks.