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Lola Montès: Max Ophüls's Final Dive into Circularity and Repetition

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on the testamentary dimension of Max Ophüls' last feature film, *Lola Montès*, from a research context that seeks to understand the thematic, narrative, and stylistic traits of film directors' last films. Through a mobilisation of Gilles Deleuze's concept of crystal image, and a film analysis of the work and comparison with other important Ophüls films, this paper argues that the constant movement of the characters and the filmmaker's camera throughout his body of work is, in this testament film, transformed into an infernal circularity in which its protagonist is imprisoned. This movement without escape, based on the circularity of the circus arena in which Lola is held captive, is ultimately a way of portraying the decadence and exploitation of mass entertainment culture in its logic of capture, exploitation and commodification of its "human products." The culmination of circularity and repetition in this capture is associated with the degradation of both the living performative body of Lola and the figure of its director Max Ophüls, given that *Lola Montès* was not only a very difficult film to direct but also very poorly received at the time of its release.

Keywords: testament film; Ophüls; Deleuze; crystal image; Mulvey

1. Introduction

Lola Montès (1955), Max Ophüls' last film, is not only one of the best of his career but also an important film in the history of cinema. This essay will look back at his work, positing the possibility of its being considered a testament film. Although it was not intentionally conceived as a final or closing work, this paper explores its legacy as a totality or summary of his work. It also examines the evolution of its themes and formal traits, culminating in this adaptation of the life of Lola Montès.

This analysis of the film, drawing on Deleuze's concepts of the crystal image and the perfect crystal in Ophüls' cinema, seeks to understand the dynamics of movement in his work, namely the relationship between present and past, circular movement and repetition. This essay will argue that the testamentary dimension of *Lola Montès* consists of a transition from the vitality of the characters and the director's constant camera movement, as seen in previous films, into denied movement: an eternal, hellish circularity in which the protagonist finds herself trapped. Adding to this circularity without progress, this eternal repetition, is the fact that the film can be seen as a final commentary on the decadence and exploitation of mass entertainment culture in its logic of capture, exploitation and commodification. This can be attested by drawing a symbolic parallel between the degradation of the performative body of its protagonist and that of the director himself, grappling with a tumultuous production.

Academic Editors: Vasco Baptista Marques and Susana Viegas

Received: 5 August 2025
Revised: 6 January 2026
Accepted: 14 January 2026
Published: 16 January 2026

To answer this question, we will begin by analysing the production of *Lola Montès*. We will then seek to determine whether *Lola* can be viewed as a testament film. In the following section, we will address the notion of the crystal image and the crystalline regime that Gilles Deleuze saw in Max Ophüls' cinema. This will be followed by a thematic and formal trajectory to understand which aspects are refined or concluded in *Lola Montès* in terms of continuity and closure in relation to the director's other work. Here, we will pay special attention to the presence of female characters and their relationship with love, as well as to movement associated with life, especially considering the circulation of characters (obstacles notwithstanding) through the décor. In the final segments, we will seek to understand the testamentary dimension of *Lola Montès* as the culmination of this movement associated with life and how it is replaced by the movement of circular repetition, portrayed in the figure of Lola, captured in the circularity of the circus arena.

2. Max Ophüls's Last Challenge

On 23 December 1955, the final film completed by Franco-German director Max Ophüls premiered in Paris: *Lola Montès*, his 24th feature film, purportedly an adaptation of the novel *The Extraordinary Life of Lola Montès*[1], by French writer Jacques Laurent-Cély (who wrote under the pseudonym Cecil Saint-Laurent). This literary work portrayed the life of Eliza Rosanna Gilbert (1821–1861), better known by her stage name, Lola Montez, an Irish-born dancer and actress who became a renowned exotic dancer and courtesan and the mistress of King Ludwig I of Bavaria, who appointed her Countess of Landsfeld.

A few days after the French premiere, on 12 January of the following year, the German version premiered in Munich, followed by the English version, although all three were filmed simultaneously. Upon his return to France in 1950, having fled to the United States in 1941 to escape World War II, Ophüls was asked to direct a big Franco-German production. There was a big budget attached (around eight million marks), and the idea was to capitalise on one of the filmmaker's cinematic trademarks—his ability to recreate historical settings—and to place one of the great sex symbols of the time, French actress Martine Carol, at the centre of this tragic and romantic narrative, in the role of Lola Montès. The use of 35 mm CinemaScope (one of the first films to use it in France), together with the use of colour (in the Eastmancolor process) and four-track magnetic sound recording, completed the technical excellence of a project that set out to test in practice the theory of elegance and quality of European cinema. It is interesting to note that Ophüls resisted the use of colour. After planning the film in black and white, the producers, enthusiastic about the use of the circus space, pressured the filmmaker to shoot in colour. Only after extensive testing and adaptations of the script to incorporate the logic of colour into the film did the director agree. This film is, after all, the first (and last) time he experimented with colour, as if the ending of Ophüls' body of work had also been the harbinger of a beginning of another work yet to be realised, in which colour would expand on his baroque and ornate style.

The film was poorly received not only commercially but also critically. Portuguese critic João Bénard da Costa, in his 2006 notes on the film, quotes Max Ophüls' diary entry at the time: "The audience expected cream cake. Instead of cake, they got a punch in the stomach" (Costa 2006). The producers decided to withdraw both films from circulation, claiming that they were merely "international versions," which ought to be followed by the real French and German versions. Against the director's wishes, the aforementioned more "economical" versions premiered in 1956, with cuts in several sequences. Subsequently, an English version premiered in London, only lasting 90 min (50 min less than the version imagined by Ophüls). About a month before his death, while Ophüls was working on *Les amants de Montparnasse* (1958) (which would be completed by Jacques Becker), a new

adulterated version would premiere in February 1957 in Monte Carlo, this time completely separating the sequences set in the circus and the flashbacks to the ballerina's life, with an epilogue and voice-over commentary read by Martine Carol. As Martina Müller and Susan White ironically write in their article *The Making of Max Ophuls' Lola Montès/Lola Montez*, "*Lola* never had one original: it started with three and ended with none" (p. 25).

3. Is Lola Montès a Testament Film?

In light of this brief introduction, the first question worth posing emerges: is *Lola Montès* a testament film?

In the Online Etymology Dictionary (Harper 2025), we read that the word testament originated in the 13th century, in the field of law, to define a "last will, expressing the final disposition of one's property." This word comes from the Latin *testamentum*, meaning "a last will; publication of a will." In turn, *testamentum* comes from the verb *testari*, to "make a will, be witness to," and from *testis*, to "witness". In the biblical reference to the Old and New Testaments, it is important to note the Greek word *diathēkē*, which means both "covenant, dispensation" and "will, testament." In this religious sense, the testament is both a "covenant between God and mankind" and the "last will" of Christ.

What seems to emerge from this genealogical trail is that the notion of a testament implies the manifestation of a final will, a disposition of something one owns to be passed on, a pact with a subsequent historical reality. In the introductory text to this Special Issue, "Swan Songs: Philosophical Reflections on Death, Time, and Memory in Testament Films", one of the pertinent questions is "How does an artist's awareness of mortality shape their final works?" (Viegas and Marques 2024). Also in this text, we can read that artists "approaching end of life can lead to a self-reflective interrogation of one's own (philosophical and artistic) work" (Viegas and Marques 2024).

With these notions in mind, it would be tempting to argue that, since Max Ophüls died suddenly at the age of 54 from rheumatic heart disease, *Lola Montès* would not fit perfectly into this notion of a testament film. Although this work is Ophüls' involuntary testament, it was not deliberately conceived as a testament film in the sense that he did not intend to film an ending, closure or transmission. On the contrary: one could speculate whether it was the difficulties—both in the dimension and realisation of the project and in the way the desired version was poorly received and then edited—that contributed to anticipating his death. Laura Mulvey, in a 2016 article (Mulvey 2016) to which we will refer throughout this essay, writes:

> Because of the brutal stupidity of certain critics . . . the general public were scared away. Ophüls was mortally wounded by this blow. With a sad smile, he said: 'I'll get my revenge in twenty years in the cine-clubs!' And then, retrieving his ability to laugh, he added: 'Unfortunately, I'll be dead in twenty years'.

Despite his sudden death and his premonition of his own end, this does not mean we should not consider one of the filmmaker's greatest films as a creative conclusion to his body of work. In this sense, *Lola Montès* is a testament film in its own right, from which we can speculate on various issues. For example, how does the film prolong (and culminate) the central theme of his cinema? How does the narrative of this film intertwine with the centrality of his signature in terms of *mise en scène*, both moving towards an ending? How does Ophüls imagine this conclusion and what does this outcome tell us about the filmmaker's possible legacy?

Before proceeding with the analysis of these issues, it is important to briefly define *Lola Montès* as a narrative project and its presentation device. The film seeks to address some of the episodes in the life of the protagonist, defined as a *femme fatale* who had a record number of lovers, and whose relationships were associated with several scandals in society

at the time (however, at one point, Lola rejects this label: "I'm not a scandal machine. I always do what I like. That's all!"). Among these moments are her affair with composer Franz Liszt (Will Quadflieg), her marriage to Lieutenant Thomas James (Ivan Desny) and her relationship with the King of Bavaria, Ludwig I (Anton Walbrook). This story of the rise and fall of an irresistible woman is presented to us from the viewpoint of the present, from which Lola recreates episodes from her past in the centre of a circus arena, led by the ringmaster (Peter Ustinov) and in front of an enthusiastic audience. These episodes are interspersed with flashbacks of her past, through a constant circulatory movement that Ophüls operates between the present and the past, which corresponds to another oscillation that takes place between the spaces of the circus and the real spaces of these evoked memories.

4. Gilles Deleuze's Crystal Image

To better understand the nature of this articulation between times and spaces in the context of Max Ophüls' film, it is important to revisit the concept of the "crystal image" developed by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his book *Cinéma 2—L'image-temps* (1985). This book, published two years after the first volume, *Cinéma 1—L'image-mouvement*, seeks to understand how modern cinema—especially with the post-World War II period as its historical axis—relegated an organic regime of the image, which centred on an idea of action, movement and causality (generally associated with the moment of classical cinema) to the background, and moved on to a philosophical, audiovisual inquiry into questions of time. It is in this context that Deleuze proposes the crystal image as one of these modalities of the time-image.

The crystal image, explored in *Cinéma 2*'s chapter 4, "The Crystals of Time", is for Deleuze a way of conceiving a contracted circuit that relates current images to virtual images associated with memory, dreams, and the world.

For Deleuze, the crystal, which emerges in his "plane of immanence", is a place in which there is a perpetual exchange between the actual and the virtual, a coexistence that will render them indistinguishable. This corresponds to a specific type of relation between these two elements. In general terms, the actual relates to the actualisation of the present and perception, while the virtual presupposes a set of images or elements that relate to and surround the actual. While the actual relates to the passing of the present, the virtual is the ephemeral that also preserves the past. As the author states in the article *The Actual and the Virtual* (first published in 1996, in the second edition of the book *Dialogues*), philosophy is a "theory of multiplicities" which are composed by the relationship between these actual and virtual elements (Deleuze and Pernet 2007, p. 148).

Deleuze distinguishes two possibilities of circuit in this actual–virtual relationship. In extensive circuits, the actual is surrounded by an extensive cloud of brief, uncertain and indeterminate virtual images. Actual perception surrounds itself with these virtual images, distributed in wide, remote, and moving circuits. Here, the actual refers to its virtuals, which are actualised (Deleuze and Pernet 2007, p. 152). In this relationship, the virtual is actualised as a singularity, while the actual is individuality constituted (Deleuze and Pernet 2007, p. 149).

In the second circuit, the movement is one of contraction rather than extension. Thus, the virtual approaches the actual, becoming less and less distinct from it. In this inner circuit, there is only a connection between the actual object and its virtual image. As Deleuze points out, it is as if the actual perception had its memory as a kind of "immediate, consecutive or even simultaneous double" (Deleuze and Pernet 2007, p. 150).

The crystal is this contracted circuit in which the actual and the virtual coexist, existing in a circuit that is constantly being retraced. Singularisation is replaced by individuation

as a process between the actual and its virtual. Actualisation gives way to crystallisation in which pure virtuality no longer needs to become actualised, as it is already part of the actual. The actual crystallises with the virtual.

In more extensive regimes, the actual image of the "passing of the present" and the virtual image that "preserves the past" are distinguished in the process of actualization. In crystallisation, the exchange between them makes them indiscernible, each occupying the place of the other (Deleuze and Pernet 2007, p. 151).

In the case of cinema and the crystal image, the image possesses this double, reflective nature, acquiring these two reversible sides, the actual and the virtual. Deleuze says it is as if the image of a mirror, photograph or postcard came to life, "assumed independence" and passed into the actual, returning afterwards to its original place (Deleuze 2013, p. 72).

In the case of the crystal image, its small circuit makes it possible to reach a point of indiscernibility between perception and recollection, the real and the imaginary, the physical and the mental (Deleuze 2013, p. 73). This small circuit allows for the coalescence between the actual image and the virtual image, an image with two sides. The distinction between these two sides does not disappear in the crystal image; rather, as Deleuze states, the indistinguishability between them (only a perceptual phenomenon) makes this distinction "unattributable" because each side of the image relates to the other in a relationship of "reciprocal presupposition, or reversibility." (Deleuze 2013, p. 72).

In *Lola Montès*, Ophüls precisely manipulates these crystal images, allowing the viewer to understand this constant movement between the present of reality (in the circus space) and the past of the virtual (evoked through flashbacks). With the help of Ustinov's voiceover—the circus ringmaster and third-person narrator—the editing, together with the prevalence of dissolves (Figures 1 and 2), build the relationship that allows the viewer to perceive this indistinguishability between the actual and the virtual. This is done without this "objective illusion", as Deleuze calls it, preventing an understanding of the distinction between these two temporal regimes.

Figure 1. The use of dissolves to connect present and past in *Lola Montès* (1955).

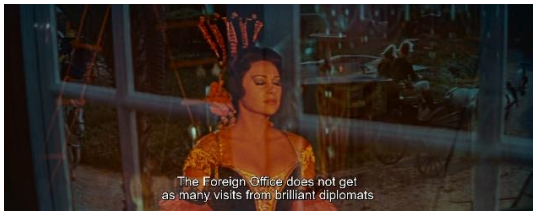

Figure 2. The use of dissolves to connect present and past in *Lola Montès* (1955).

Still regarding the temporal dimension of the crystal image, Deleuze clarifies that in it time is divided in two, at once present and past at any given moment, or dividing the present into two "heterogeneous directions", one launched towards the future and the other falling into the past. This separation allows for all the present to pass while, at the same time, preserving the whole past. As Deleuze explains,

> time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that we see in the crystal. The crystal-image was not time, but we see time in the crystal. We see in the crystal the perpetual foundation of time, non-chronological time, Cronos and not Chronos. (Deleuze 2013, p. 84)

In this sense, it is particularly challenging to think about this testamentary mode of a work—which is left in time *and for a time*—when it is constructed along a non-chronological temporality because, as the philosopher points out, "what we see in the crystal is time itself, a bit of time in the pure state, the very distinction between the two images [the actual and the virtual] which keeps on reconstituting itself" (Deleuze 2013, p. 85). How, then, is it possible to bequeath time in its pure state as a legacy? Naturally, this question is more ironic than real, because what is at stake—and is generally applicable to all filmmakers who have worked with the crystal images—has to do with the reproduction a posteriori (as a legacy) of this cinematic dynamic through which it is possible to operate in these crystalline circuits.

5. The State of the Crystal in Max Ophüls

In addition to the crystal elements, Deleuze distinguishes crystalline states according to the stages in their formation and what can be seen in them. In this context, he glimpses, in Luchino Visconti, for example, the crystal in the process of decomposition (p. 97); in Jean Renoir, the crystal with a point of flight, a flaw, through which something can escape from the background, in depth (p. 88), and come to life (p. 93); or in Federico Fellini, the crystal is always in the process of formation and expansion, crystallising anything it touches, in a life as spectacle (Deleuze 2013, p. 93). And lastly, the regime that interests us here: the philosopher sees in Max Ophüls' cinema the crystal in a perfect and complete state. His images are perfect crystals, in which his characters are somehow imprisoned, representing and being represented, the circularity of the circus arena in *Lola Montès* being, according to Deleuze, an eloquent example of this imprisonment. The perfect crystal captures life and crystallises it within itself (p. 93).

> One can only just turn in the crystal: hence the round of episodes, and also of colours (*Lola Montez*), of waltzes and also of earrings (*Madame de*...), of the master of ceremonies' visions in the round in *La ronde*. Crystalline perfection lets no outside subsist: there is no outside of the mirror or the film set (...). (Deleuze 2013, p. 87)

Regarding Lola Montès' private seclusion, Deleuze points out that neither the "theatrical" images of the circus nor those of cinema serve to actualise the same virtual image. Nor does this circus spectacle seek, as a virtual image, to expand the actual images. Both images, the actual (from the circus) and the virtual (from cinema, in flashback), coexist and crystallise, referring to each other, forming "one and the same 'scene' where the characters belong to the real and yet play a role" (Deleuze 2013, p. 87). As we will see below, Ophüls' maturity in this film achieves this perfect imprisonment within the crystal, as a proposition that embodies the "fall" of his work as well as that of his protagonist.

For Deleuze, the purpose of flashbacks in the Franco-German filmmaker's final film is not so much to establish this connection between the miserable present of the circus and the images and memories of the magnificent past, but rather to divide time into two parts, "which makes all the presents pass and makes them tend towards the circus as if towards their future, but also preserves all the pasts and puts them into the circus as so many virtual images in pure recollections" (Deleuze 2013, p. 87). However, for Deleuze, this division of time operates in Ophüls as a constant referral which, unlike filmmakers like Renoir, does not conceive of an escape from reality: that would imply the possibility of a future.

6. Unhappy Women and the Absence of a Future

We will now analyse some aspects of *Lola Montès* in terms of their continuity and closure in relation to some of his other films. Richard Roud argues in *Max Ophuls—An Index* (1958) that the main theme of the Franco-German filmmaker's cinema is the portrayal of women, usually experiencing passion and for whom love is synonymous with unhappiness (Roud 1958). After *Die verliebte Firma* (1932) and *Die verkaufte Braut* (1932), an operetta and a comedy in which love triumphs, in *Liebelei* (1933)—the last film made in Germany before the war—as in *Lola*, Ophüls will film love as a downfall. In *Liebelei*, it is the young Christine who commits suicide (throwing herself out of a window, just as Lola will let go of the trapeze) after learning of her lover's death in a duel. This film forms a triptych together with *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948) and *Madame de. . .* (1953). These are films made several years apart, in different cinema systems and languages. However, as Portuguese critic António Rodrigues explains in the Cinemateca Portuguesa notes for *Liebelei*:

> [they] are, in a way, the same film or three sides of a single film, woven together by the thread of romantic representation, the constant fluctuation between playfulness and seriousness, between flirtation and deep love, in a journey that ends in death in all three films, through a duel, a expiatory social ritual. (Rodrigues 2008)

To this, Laura Mulvey adds, in the article *Compulsion to Repeat: Max Ophüls's Lola Montès* (2016), that the image of women in Ophüls' films is also seen as a reflection on the idea of female stars as spectacle and commodity, as images that circulate and must be consumed in an entertainment system. According to the author, despite the fact that Lola is the most eloquent example of this figure, this could already be seen in *La Signora di Tutti* (1934) and *Caught* (1949). The first film in particular has several points of contact with *Lola Montès*, despite the more than 20 years that separate them. Gaby Doriot (Isa Miranda), like Lola, is also an irresistible woman, loved by many men whom she will lead to ruin (Figures 3 and 4). As in the 1955 film, here too a flashback device is used to reveal the protagonist's past, but while Lola recalls her life from the circus, transformed into a fairground attraction, Gaby's past is evoked from the anaesthesia she is given in the operating room where they are trying to save her after a suicide attempt (Figures 5 and 6). Both characters, Lola and Gaby, a dancer and an actress, respectively, come from the world of entertainment, which reduces them to puppets manipulated by producers and agents. As Manuel Cintra Ferreira points out, Gaby's film producer is an ancestor of the ringmaster character in Lola. But if, in 1943, we are *already* in the cinema, and in 1955 we are *still* in the circus and in the *tableaux vivants*, *La Signora di Tutti* is "ahead of its time" (Ferreira 2002). It could be said, then, in relation to Lola, that a future emerges from the past.

Figure 3. The irresistible appeal of Gaby Doriot (Isa Miranda) in *La Signora di Tutti* (1934).

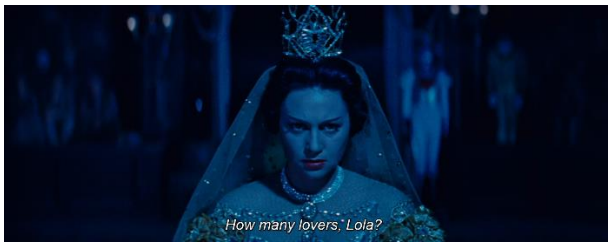

Figure 4. The irresistible appeal of Lola Montès (Martine Carol) in *Lola Montès* (1955).

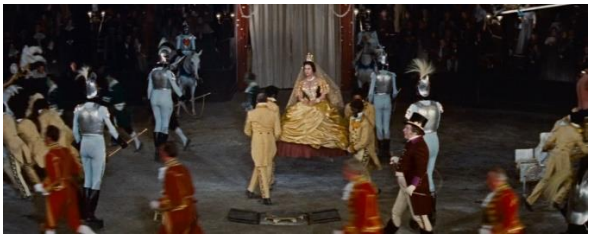

Figure 5. Lola's conjuring of the past from the circus ring. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

Figure 6. Gaby Doriot recalls her past from the operating table. Still from *La Signora di Tutti* (1934).

Still on the subject of the relationship between the two films, it should be noted that, like Lola, Gaby will arrive too late for true love, which therefore becomes impossible. Towards the end of the film, Lola even tells the young student, who dreams of building a future with her, that "something has broken inside her". Gaby, on the other hand, will forever remain trapped in the sleep of death, in a flashback from which she will not return.

> Regarding this idea of downfall, of absence of a future, let us remember that Deleuze believes that it is possible to glimpse time in the perfect crystal, in its double movement that makes the "presents pass", replacing one with the next, while travelling in the direction of a future, but also preserving the past in its entirety. In fact, Deleuze argues that, in Ophüls, the future appears to be blocked because the differentiation between the two movements is not complete; time rolls itself up inside Ophüls's perfect crystal, always relaunched in his two different aspects in the crystalline circuit. (Deleuze 2013, pp. 90–91)

In other words, within Ophüls' crystal, Deleuze does not see how this possibility of escape and future can exist. In the case of these two femme fatales, escape would mean interrupting this imprisoning circularity of division and constant return of time. Only by leaving the crystal can a possibility of future be glimpsed.

> It is by leaving it that time gives itself a future. Hence the importance of the question: where does life begin? Time in the crystal is differentiated into two movements, but one of them takes charge of the future and freedom, provided that it leaves the crystal. Then the real will be created; at the same time as it

> escapes the eternal referral back of the actual and the virtual, the present and the past. (Deleuze 2013, p. 91)

In this sense, the last of Ophüls' works, his cinematic testament, assumes that a closure will materialise and that the only admissible movement is that of oscillating circulation within the crystal images, symbolically embodied by the circularity of the circus arena.

7. Life (and Cinema) Are Movement

Still on the subject of love and downfall in Ophüls, it is important to consider *La Ronde* (1950). The film is an adaptation of a play by Arthur Schnitzler, to which the director adds a narrator (the actor Anton Walbrook, who played King Ludwig I in *Lola*), a character missing from the original. The narrator serves as a sort of alter ego for the director, in that his role is to turn the wheel of the carousel of love and relationships between characters such as soldiers, poets, aristocrats, artists and prostitutes. In addition to once again presenting the world of entertainment and fairground attractions, here the intertwining of a conceptual and a technical idea takes centre stage. Very eloquently, Ophüls' trademark image—the camera always in motion, circulating through space and between characters—is eloquently echoed by something else that is always in motion: love and the fleeting nature of relationships.

This brings us to a central notion in Max Ophüls' universe and *mise en scène*: movement and its association with life. In the introduction to the famous interview that the director gave to François Truffaut and Jacques Rivette in 1957, for *Cahiers du Cinéma*, this was highlighted precisely: "'Life for me is movement' says Lola Montès at one point in her journey, and Max Ophüls, like his characters, like his camera, never stayed in the same place (. . .)" (Truffaut and Rivette 1957, p. 7) (Figure 7). In an essay from Sarris (1986), Andrew Sarris, who considered *Lola Montès* to be the greatest film of all time, also notes this connection:

> The key to what has been called the Ophulsian 'mise-en-scene' is Ophüls's restless camera. Properly speaking, the Ophulsian 'mise-en-scene' does not transcend its subject; the 'mise-en-scene' is the subject. As Lola herself says, life is movement. The moving camera of Ophüls does not therefore so much comment on life as constitute it.

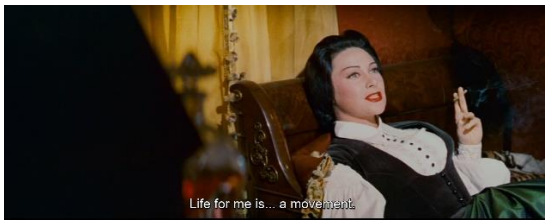

Figure 7. Life associated with movement in *Lola Montès* (1955).

In our view, grasping the fate of Lola and her creator together helps to understand the legacy nature of his last film. Namely, their message represents the ultimate fate, the concept of movement associated with life which is omnipresent in the filmmaker's work. Thus, it can be said that what is at stake in *Lola*'s ending—and, by extension, in Max Ophüls' body of work—is the way they both recognise the end, as a halt to that movement that has always been associated with the fictional and real lives of both.

When elaborating on the idea of the perfect crystalline state around his cinema, Deleuze understands that this circulating movement can only occur within certain limits and is not a movement between an inside and an outside. To this we can add the tension that exists between the crystalline transparency of his universes and the opacity of his compositions. Max Ophüls' typical shot is a sequence shot in which the characters often appear

embedded in a universe of railings, doors, stairs, curtains and other props, sometimes in the foreground, other times in the background. In our view, the primary function of this relationship between the character and the décor is to somewhat restrict and limit this circulating movement of life in Ophüls' cinema. Movement becomes possible only within these cluttered spaces, and the characters often have to navigate these labyrinthine décors, with the camera mimicking their paths. Additionally, the materiality of the objects and structures surrounding the characters is also a symbol of the obstacles that are confronted by the narrative. Obstacles to the characters' journeys[2], but also, and often, to the viewer's full visibility.

In *Lola Montès*, this tension between clarity and opacity is present and made even more visible by the use of colour and camera effects. Let us look at some examples.

The characters often appear behind bars or metal patterns, symbolising the prison in which they find themselves. This happens, for example, when Lola is lying on the bed and Liszt walks over to kiss her (Figure 8); when Lola, as a young teenager, walks around the boat on which she is travelling with her mother (Figure 9); or when the ringmaster visits her to invite her to his show (Figure 10). In this regard, perhaps the most eloquent image is the cage in which she will end up, to be observed and touched for a dollar (Figure 11).

Figure 8. Martine Carol and Will Quadflieg enclosed in Ophüls' composition. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

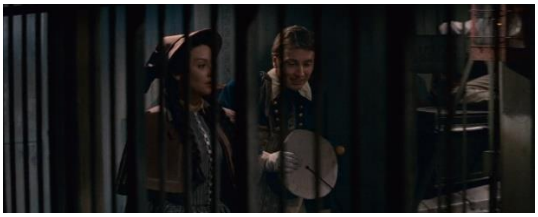

Figure 9. Compositions in *Lola Montès* (1955) often use bars to imprison characters.

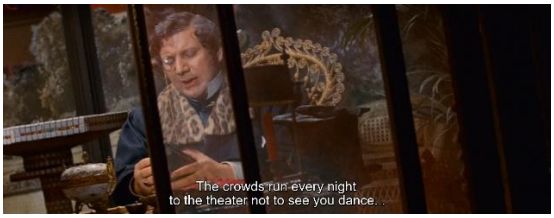

Figure 10. The circus master (Peter Ustinov) framed with bars. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

Figure 11. Lola Montès (Martine Carol) caged at the end of *Lola Montès* (1955).

In other cases, different elements create a distance in relation to the characters: veils (Figure 12), wall friezes (Figure 13), spiral staircases (Figure 14) or other décor details (Figure 15). Sometimes, it is the lack of lighting that ostensibly reduces the visible space, so that the characters compete with the blackness of the frame. Ophüls makes use of this in moments of narrative tension—for example, during Lola's argument with her alcoholic husband, James (Figure 16), and her subsequent escape from their home, framed at the edge of visibility (Figure 17)—or in the imminence of a catastrophe, when Lola is about to jump from the trapeze (Figure 18). At other times, the filmmaker reduces the visible space in the frame, adding black bars to the sides, especially in moments of greater intimacy between Lola and her lovers, to pique the viewer's voyeuristic curiosity (Figure 19). Another example of this difficulty of movement is when the characters have to move across the sets, usually filmed at a considerable distance from the camera (Figure 20).

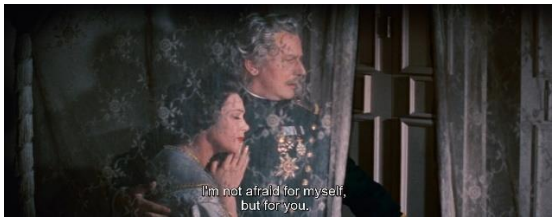

Figure 12. Veils used to create a distance from the characters. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

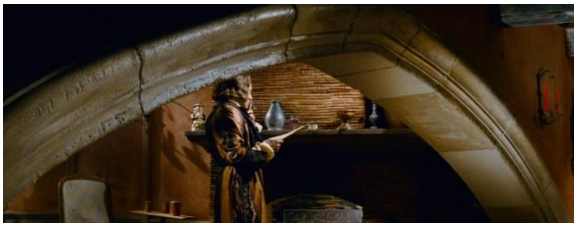

Figure 13. A wall frieze frames Franz Liszt (Will Quadflieg). Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

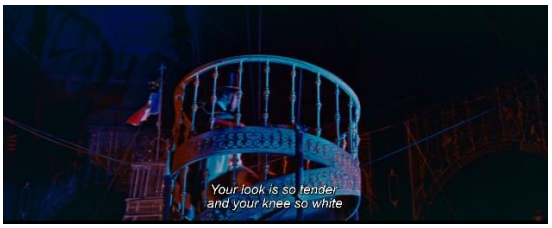

Figure 14. Peter Ustinov in a spiral staircase. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

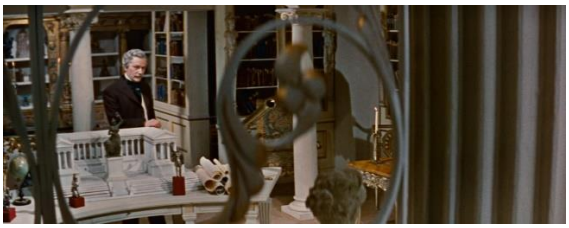

Figure 15. Details in décor used to create a distance. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

Figure 16. Reducing the visible space in moments of tension. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

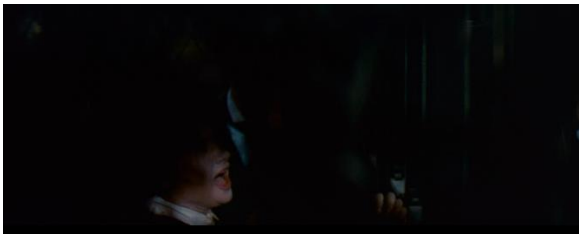

Figure 17. Martine Carol framed on the edge of visibility. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

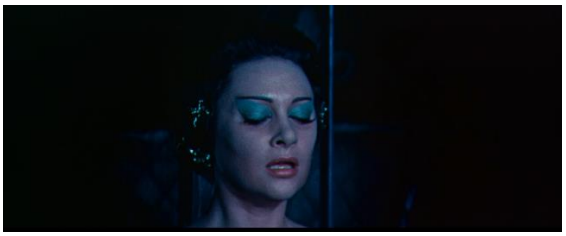

Figure 18. Reducing the visible space in moments of tension. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

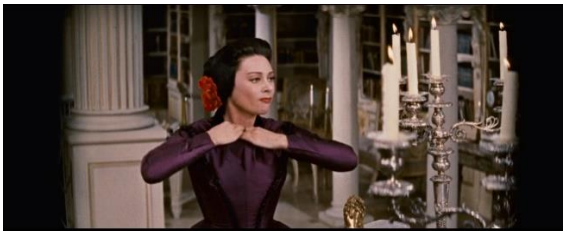

Figure 19. Black bars in the frame reinforce a sense of intimacy. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

Figure 20. Distance and movement in framing. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

8. The End of a Body of Work, a Limit to the Possibility of Movement

As we have seen, there is a paradoxical aspect to this crystalline structure between the circular movement as a prototype of cinema and a sign of life in Ophüls, and the closure of the perfect crystal, which sets limits to movement, providing an internal circularity, in something that goes beyond an ambition for realism. As a thesis, this essay aims to assert that this circular movement reaches a peak, its limit of possibility, with *Lola Montès*, Max Ophüls' testament film. And it does so through the concrete figuration, inscribed in the narrative, of Lola's enclosure in the circular circus arena, in which she will be condemned

to oscillate between the evocation of a past that has passed and a present spent within this contained, caged space.

The staged movement is twofold, and each of the dimensions is interrelated.

Firstly, there is the duality of rise and fall. Towards the end of the show, the ringmaster urges Lola to climb higher and higher. This request has two objectives: on the one hand, to work on the symbolism between the physical climb in the circus and the "climb" in Lola's romantic aspirations, which will only reach their "summit" when she wins the heart of the man at the top: Ludwig I, the King of Bavaria; on the other hand, by climbing higher and higher in the circus tent, the final act becomes more and more dangerous: a magnificent climb means a magnificent jump (and a possible fall).

In this regard, we can add another layer of meaning: *Lola Montès* was also the peak of Ophüls' career, at least in terms of the financial scale of the project and the technical challenges posed by the use of colour, the scope format, and the various languages involved. As with Lola, it was also at this moment of extreme ascent that a sudden fall occurred. Lola experienced the revolution of 1848, which separated her from the only man she loved, while the director had to face the great commercial failure of his work, the unwilling fragmentation of various versions of the film and, ultimately, his own death. Interestingly, Ophüls admitted in an interview that his inexperience with technical issues worked in his favour and that when he looked "through the camera viewfinder, it was as if he had been born the day before" (Truffaut and Rivette 1957, p. 19). And he added, with irony:

> *Lola Montés* instilled in me the desire to tell stories by taming them. Even if I'm guilty, I like the path I'm on, so much that I want to continue at all costs; but people will be wary. No one is going to entrust me with a second film of this kind. I have to make a very wise film now, and then another. . . less wise. In fact, right now, I'm saying to the producers: 'I advise you to make my next film, but not the one after that!'. (p. 20)

But let us return to the question of duality in *Lola Montès*. In addition to the connection between rise and fall, the film also presents a duality between the present and the past, corresponding to the circus arena and the different locations in which the flashbacks take place. At the beginning, the present from which Lola speaks to her audience is very enlightening: as a freak, a trained animal, the dancer is sold as an attraction, a scandal machine stuck in the repetition of the narration of her past for entertainment purposes. To use Deleuze's idea, the film never allows us to escape this crystal image of the circus and its arena. However, the flashbacks, while explaining part of Lola's seductive power over men, also allow us to understand how we arrived at the arena and the final cage in the last shot.

During the initial question and answer session between the audience and Lola, someone asks "Why did you never decide to stay with your lovers?" And the ringmaster answers for her: "Because a femme fatale never stays." In each of the sequences presented from Lola's past, attached to the adage "life is movement", she always escapes: she leaves the inn after her relationship with Liszt cools down; on the boat, she leaves the cabin and heads to the deck; when her mother tries to marry her off to a powerful older man, she leaves the room where the arrangement is being made and "escapes" from the first act; later, she leaves the castle in Scotland where her alcoholic and abusive husband is keeping her; for the first time against her will, the revolt against the king of Bavaria forces to leave the monarch's palace; and (although we do not see it but it is implied in the dialogue), she also leaves the carriage where the young student is planning a future with her. Although she escapes the first time, it is only the circus and its ringmaster that she cannot escape, as she is sent back to the arena and the final cage.

In a very interesting essay, entitled *Woman/Road/America/Cinema* (2004), David Lugoswki argues that *Lola Montès* is, in fact, one of the greatest ever "road movies" (Lugowski 2004, p. 159). And this label can be applied not only because of the film's episodic structure, which visits the various geographies in which Lola's romantic moments take place, but also precisely because of the protagonist's desire to escape, to leave. Lugowski explains why he sees the film as a road movie:

> Despite some difficulty in categorizing *Lola Montès* as such, it is a road movie because it does represent extensive physical journeying, travels that allow the possibility of escape and rebellion, that afford the opportunity for self-reflection, transition, new means of self-expression and even the creation of a new self. (Lugowski 2004, p. 162)

However, it is revealing of a certain misogynistic perspective that, in *Lola Montès*, the status of femme fatale, "she who never stays", is measured by her resistance to the attempts made by men to trap her, that is, the heroine's freedom is relation to male power. It would be tempting, in fact, to see Lola's desire to escape precisely as an attempt to rebel against this paradigm of misogyny, a paradigm that relates to the female universe only through a desire for possession. When the king seeks a very slow painter to paint Lola's portrait, he is, ironically, trying to keep her with him as long as possible. But there is a particularly revealing moment in the film about this idea. When the ringmaster visits Lola for the first time to invite her to his show, the habitual black side bars appear when he kisses her, and only disappear once he leaves. As Mulvey (2016) points out about this temporary new "ratio" "imposed" on CinemaScope:

> the constricted space also represents the ringmaster's future hold over Lola; it follows him as he leaves the room, and the image only expands back to the CinemaScope format once Lola stands alone on the screen. This scene functions as a premonition of Lola's future.

In short, when it comes to these constraints imposed on women, we are not that far from the popular female gothic films of 1940s American cinema, in which the female protagonists were locked away in huge houses or castles, which they sought to escape when they realised they had married a stranger who wanted to keep them confined.

According to this logic of rise and fall and back-and-forth between present and past, it is also possible to establish a connection between this rise in the past and the vital movement of the protagonist. Conversely, the fall will mean the end of this movement, a submission to the confinement to the imprisoning machine. In this way, Ophüls ends his career with this meditation on movement and time. Lola is no longer able to escape, finally trapped in that circular space of the arena: the only possible movement is in there, in a logic of circularity and repetition of herself. In turn, with Ophüls' death, his own movement—both in front of and behind the camera—comes to an end, as does his career, during which he was able to film in five different countries. His work, now closed, can also only move, as a legacy, in a time of eternity and testamentary circularity.

In the press kit for the film, published in *Cahiers du Cinéma* in 1956, critic France Roche points out that "the story begins, stops, resumes, but never ends. It has the logic of nightmares, or perhaps of the memories of the dying" (Truffaut et al. 1956, p. 56). And Jean de Baroncelli, critic for *Le Monde*, highlights that "the circus scenes are surprising. Max Ophüls directed them with a kind of cruel refinement, of diabolical excess. This circus is truly hell" (Truffaut and Rivette 1957, p. 57). Giddins (2010) reinforces this idea of closure:

> the circus is Ophuls's inspired tour de force, its skull-like claustrophobia heightened by the absence of a single shot to place it in the larger world. We enter the big top at the start, and exit when the camera forces us backward, away from the arena, at which point a curtain shuts us out. There is no outside, no reality beyond the tent and Lola's memory.

The circular movement of repetition inside the arena, inside her cage, thus has a connotation of infernal eternity, which is the meditation on time shown by Deleuze's perfect crystal. And never as in *Lola Montès* has this logic of crystal without an outside achieved such perfection in the representation of its own functioning structure. The movement of life in Lola is transformed, without an outside, into a movement of quasi-eternity (quasi because this circularity may not be absolute: perhaps it is only broken by the hypothetical death of the protagonist, whom the viewer knows from the outset to be debilitated and ill). Lola, in the arena, stars in a motionless movement, in the same place, in which life is only virtualised without that space of escape that allows us to glimpse a future. Giddings writes "If *Lola Montès* is a film infatuated with motion, its heroine is often a study in motion denied" (Giddins 2010). The same applies to Ophüls and this testamentary ending to a work that closes in on itself. This circularity without escape is close to the logic of a will: something that is passed on from the whole of a life that has ended and which, as a tense totality, is transmitted to the next lives that will integrate that totality into their own experiential circuits.

9. The Culmination of Circularity and Repetition as Degradation of the Living Performative Body

The movement associated with Ophüls is often circular, which by definition presupposes repetition. As we have seen, *La Ronde* is the film that embodies this thesis of circulation. The camera movement, with its frenetic sequence shots in works such as *Madame De* or *Le Plaisir*, also attests to this movement. The circulation of the characters through the décor, where the spiral staircases and rounded Baroque-style structures both welcome and obstruct people, also confirms this idea. In *Lola Montès*, the whirl, the vortex that operates between the present and the past, is a sign of this closure to the future and of a sick confinement. At one point, Lola even says "My life is spinning in my head." (Ophüls 1955). And, as Mulvey points out, through "successive re-enactments in the circus, visual motifs set up repeated patterns that weave their way across the film. Repetition is choreographed into the tableaux, so that formal devices parallel the ringmaster's narrative" (Mulvey 2016).

At a certain point, this circular repetition makes Lola spin at the centre of the arena with another circle of characters spinning around her in the opposite direction, accentuating this kaleidoscopic dimension (Figure 21) and culminating in a final vertigo (Figure 22).

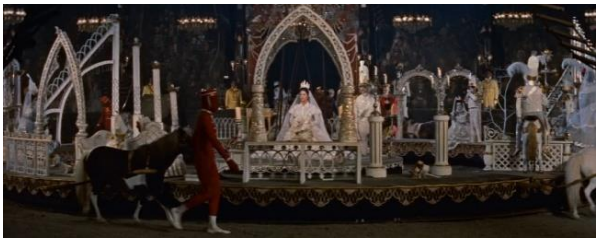

Figure 21. Martine Carol framed at the centre of two opposite movements. Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

Figure 22. The final vertigo of Lola (Martine Carol). Still from *Lola Montès* (1955).

All this whirlwind, reflected in the protagonist's growing sickness, serves as the culmination of this circularity and repetition as the degradation of the performer's living body. This repetition is demanded by the entertainment industry in which Lola is exploited. This connection is highlighted by Mulvey: "If celebrity depends on the repetition of sex, scandal and gossip, its value as a commodity depends on its repetition within a system of circulation and the production of a paying public" (Mulvey 2016). It is also important to note that, in *Lola Montès*, the degradation by this "machine of repetition" is twofold: it operates simultaneously on the body of the performer and on that of the filmmaker. Let us recall here the difficulties experienced by Ophüls during the filming process. This duality extends to the entertainment apparatus itself: the circus still presupposes a circulation and commodified pre-industrial form of entertainment, but the film viewer understands that this repetition and circulation also extends to cinema itself, as Lola's memories are integrated into this exploration of an emotional life and scandal through flashbacks used as cinematic devices. This implies that his testament film is also, ultimately, a critical commentary on the exploitative nature of entertainment cinema.

Part of this exploratory dimension of the performative body is evident beyond the narrative, in the film as an object of production. Actress Martine Carol was chosen by the production company in order to make it easier to obtain more funding for the film's budget, given her popularity in France at the time following her daring roles in *Caroline Chérie* (1951), *Madame du Barry* (1954) and *Lucrèce Borgia* (1953). Martina Müller and Susan White mention that part of the film's commercial failure had to do with the audience's unfulfilled expectation of seeing the actress in more daring poses as *Lola* (Müller and White 2004, p. 34).

In a chapter entitled *Le Femme et L'Horizon*, dedicated to the analysis of *Lola Montès*, included in a monograph published in 1988 by *Cahiers du Cinéma*, William Karl Guérin sees the director's portrayal of the circus as a manifestation of its circular limitation. The author says that the ultimate lesson of *Lola Montès* is that these images are worthless; "they are just images, quickly created, quickly consumed, quickly forgotten and replaced by others according to a process of accumulation" (Guérin 1988). He continues, "This is the supreme irony of an artist rebelling against the universe of animated images that he feels emerging around him and that refer back to colour and CinemaScope with the primitive function of creating superb vignettes charged with belittling the purpose of a vulgar illusionist" (Guérin 1988, p. 161).

As Mulvey (2016) writes,

> Ophüls, at the end of his life, used *Lola Montès* to reflect obliquely on the exploitative, squalid, financial infrastructure of the cinema he loved so much, the subordination of its stars to the mechanisms of the industry and market that produced them. Ultimately, perhaps, he was also reflecting on his own cinematic compulsion to repeat.

Perhaps the film's ending is the most eloquent image of this decadence and exploitation of mass entertainment culture in its logic of capturing, exploiting and commodifying its "human products." In the final shot of Ophüls' testament film, the camera slowly pulls back from Lola's cage, revealing the long line of men who have come to watch and touch her for a dollar. Ophüls' camera moves away, but, after him, the show would have to go on.

Funding: This article was funded by National Funds through FCT—Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia under project UID/622/2025.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data is contained within the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] Professor Hill (2006) argues that no such book existed, and that Ophüls did not work with Jacques Laurent. His pseudonym in the credits and this supposed literary basis served only to lend the film and the project an aura of literary quality. However, in the 1970s, Laurent did, in fact, publish a book about Lola Montès.

[2] In an introductory text to a special edition of *Arizona Quarterly* magazine dedicated to Max Ophüls, published in 2004, Susan White refers to his camera movement, his use of layered compositions, and the relationship between the movement of objects and characters as traits defining his cinematographic technique. For her, his "cinematic technique works as a metaphor for the kinds of societal apparatuses by which human beings are propelled" (White 2004, p. 7). The circus and the star system are part of this "machinery of spectacle", appealing to men and women in different ways, but with the same ferocity.

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