

【論文】

How Max Ophüls' Worst Film, *Yoshiwara*, Fits within His Oeuvre

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オフュルス作品における『ヨシワラ』の位置づけ

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要旨：フランス映画『ヨシワラ』はドイツ人映画監督マックス・オフュルス（1902-1957）の作品であるが、彼のもっとも出来の悪い作品として挙げられることが多い。本稿では、作家主義の監督として有名なオフュルスの作品であるという観点から、この作品を通して、我々はどうのような彼の主張を受け取ることができるかを考察したい。

まず第一に、この作品がどのような経緯を経て製作されたのか—どのように俳優たちを集め、どのように脚本が決定されたかの製作過程につき検証する。ここから脚本の弱点が浮かび上がってくる。次にオフュルスの他の作品に描かれる要素を抽出し、『ヨシワラ』との比較検討を行う。また、この作品のフランスと日本における評価を取り上げることで、作家主義監督としての彼の主張が、後の彼の作品と比べて、どのような形で表現されているのか、またいないのか明らかにしたい。

1. Introduction

Max Ophüls as an *auteur*

***Yoshiwara*.... Max Ophüls worst film**

How Ophüls came to make *Yoshiwara*

In a previous paper, “Max Ophüls and the Film as Literature,” I wrote that (1) film is the art form which best expresses the sense of life today, (2) that the *auteur* theory places the director of a film in the position of being most re-

sponsible for the creation of the film, and (3) Max Ophüls is worth consideration as one of the most important *auteurs* in world film.¹⁾

If there should be any doubt of the worth of Ophüls to world cinema, I need only mention that Andrew Sarris, America's most important *auteur* critic, placed Ophüls in his pantheon, among the fourteen best directors who have produced a substantial amount of their work in the United States.²⁾

In another paper, "Fritz Lang and *Harakiri*, Destiny of *Madame Butterfly* in Germany" I wrote that, "according to the *auteur* theory, one can learn more from an inferior film by a great director than one can learn from a superior film by an insignificant director."³⁾

When one must consider which film is considered Ophüls' worst, Susan White declares: "*Yoshiwara* (1937) is generally considered Ophüls' worst film (even Ophüls himself agreed).⁴⁾ Claude Beylie makes the comment "several unsuccessful films in a row forced Ophüls to accept something less ambitious and more degrading.... That was *Yoshiwara*.⁵⁾

Max Ophüls' last movie in Germany was *The Laughing Heirs* (*Lachende Erben* 1933). He left Germany when the Nazis took power, almost at the same time as Fritz Lang. Ophüls' first movie in France was *A Man Stolen* (*On a volé un homme*) in 1934. Ophüls made a film in Italy (*La Signora di Tutti* 1934) two in France (*Divine* 1935 and *La Tendre Ennemi* 1936) and another in Holland (*Komedie om Geld* 1936)⁶⁾ before the German producer Hermann Millakowsky approached him and asked him to direct another film in France.

Millakowsky hired the excellent actors Michiko Tanaka, Sessue Hayakawa and Pierre Richard-Willm for the main acting roles. He was careful about the sets, and hired the film and theater architect brothers André and Leon Barsacq, who were just starting their careers. Ophüls himself hired Eugen Schüfftan,⁷⁾ with whom he had worked on three films before *Yoshiwara*.⁸⁾

2. The scenario... the weak point of the film

So where did the film go wrong?

Millakowsky got the idea for the film from the novel by Maurice Dekobra. Dekobra was a popular French novelist, who published some fifty-one novels by the time he died (in 1973)...⁹⁾ As Asper explains,

The story was described in a friendly review as 'picturesque,' but by a few other reviews as 'idiotic.' And neither renowned scenario writer Jacques Companeéz nor the author or director could save it.¹⁰⁾

Millakowsky decided to film this particular novel because of its mix of adventure and the exotic. As a producer, Millakowsky had had a certain amount of experience with such stories.¹¹⁾

The story begins with a Japanese girl, Kohana, forced to sell herself to a brothel in the Yoshiwara district in Tokyo in order to do what she can for her brother after her father commits ritual suicide. The jinrikisha driver who takes her to the brothel falls in love with her, but does not have enough money to redeem her.

A Russian officer, Sergei Polenoff, saves her from rape, and falls in love with her.

While the affair between Sergei and Kohana proceeds, he is involved with spying on the Japanese government and gets her involved as well. He is ambushed, is wounded in the ambush, and when he hears that Kohana is to be executed, rushes from his ship back to her but dies in a Russian Orthodox Church. She dies in front of a firing squad.

Ophüls' biographer, Hermann Asper, tries to work out the elements of the plot, and comes up with the following:

“There is the Butterfly story, the love affair between a Japanese geisha and a Russian military officer. But the geisha is from a good house and only sells her body for the sake of her family, for her younger brother’s education.

Then there is the coolie, who is her inferior in class, but who still loves her and wants to buy her freedom. He becomes a thief, and the police blackmail him to become an informer.

Then there is the Russian officer, who is carrying out a mysterious secret mission in Japan. He receives a secret message from a Chinese spy, and must pass it along. Not even the scriptwriters who knew the plot of the film completely understood the contents in detail.”¹²⁾

According to the written prologue of the film, the action takes place in 1860, at a time when Japan was just coming out of isolation and was opening her harbors to foreign ships.¹³⁾ Beylie thought the story more likely took place in 1890 (during the Sino-Japanese war), and described it as “an unbelievable Russian salad.”¹⁴⁾ Those who know their Japanese history will not take the chronology too seriously.... It is absurd to try to imagine the Russians spying for the Chinese in Japan in 1860, just as Japan emerges from isolation. Even in 1895 this would have been unlikely, even before the Sino-Japanese War.

3. Other weak elements

Peter W. Janson quotes Claude Beylie describing the film as “camp,”¹⁵⁾ and discusses the clumsiness with the sliding doors and the line put into Sergei Polenoff’s mouth, “all white men are not savages!”

Perhaps the most absurd moment in the film is where Sergei is dying in the Orthodox Church and his eyes see an icon of the Virgin Mary, and the scene dissolves into the image of Kohana. Does this mean that Kohana is some sort of Virgin Mary? Asper goes out of his way to explain that Ophüls and the screen-

writers are trying to make some sort of argument that the German authorities in pre-World War II Germany ought to be more tolerant of foreign religion, such as Russian Orthodox Christianity or Japanese Buddhism. "In this advertisement for understanding of foreign culture, traditions and religion lay the actual political message of the film."¹⁶⁾

Asper adds (from the same page), "Kohana sacrifices herself twice: first she sacrifices herself out of love and duty for her brother; second, she dies for her beloved. Only the women of Ophüls are capable of this function." So from this do we have the political message of Ophüls tied to the psychological message of Ophüls?

4. Elements common to Ophüls' films in *Yoshiwara*

There are a few things that show up in most Ophüls films that are worthy of mention.

When Kohana arrives at the brothel in *Yoshiwara*, the other prostitutes seem to be in shadow. The bars of the doors seem to cast the shadows of bars over them, as if they are in prison. This is less interesting than the fact that the women in most of Ophüls films are confined, either in prisons made by other people or by themselves. Such films include *Sans Lendermain* (1939), *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), *Caught* (1949), *The Reckless Moment* (1949), *The Earrings of Madame de ...* (1953) and *Lola Montez* (1955).

A visit to the opera occurs in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, *Liebelei* (1932) and *Yoshiwara*. In all of these films, the opera is emblematic of the high culture of the upper class, which the heroine dreams of entering.

In *Yoshiwara* and in *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, there is a picture-story-show where the hero tries to show the heroine the life of cultured Europe. In *Yoshiwara*, the picture-story-show is stylized, almost animated. In *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, it is more realistic, as if the hero had drawn the pictures

with a pencil. The picture-story-show doesn't work as well in *Yoshiwara*, because one knows that Sergei has made no plans for Kohana at all. Kohana seems to be getting involved with the make believe, but Sergei seems to have forgotten that he has been ordered to leave Kohana behind and to be involved with the spy plot.

The scene of the horse drawn sleigh occurs both in *Yoshiwara* and in *Liebelei*... as if the happiest a human being can be is on a sleigh ride in a winter wonderland.

Ophüls seems to like to use a shooting (with guns) as a punctuation mark in his films. Shootings occur in *Leibelei*, *Yoshiwara*, *de Mayerling à Sarajevo* (1940), *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, and *The Earrings of Madame de...* In all of these films, the death is only really obvious in *Yoshiwara*.... And hence it is the least satisfying death. Even in *de Mayerling à Sarajevo*, the victims are in a closed carriage.... Perhaps the horror is less horrible if it is easier to see it.

One of the reasons why *Yoshiwara* was less than successful among critics is the preponderance of the action plot. The film breaks into two pieces. One piece is the love story between Kohana, Sergei and Isamo. The other piece begins when Sergei's captain tells him about the espionage plot. That whole plot seems incomprehensible. While there are some interesting scenes in the second half of the movie, the second half of the movie seems to have been tacked on in order to give the movie a plausible ending. Ophüls seemed as little interested in the action plot in *Yoshiwara* as he was in the action plot of *The Exile* (1948), where he didn't even direct the sword fighting scenes.¹⁷⁾

5. Reaction to the film

Before the film was released in France, the Japanese Embassy lodged a protest.¹⁸⁾ The Japanese embassy also lodged similar complaints against Cecil B. DeMille's *The Cheat* (1915) which I have discussed elsewhere.¹⁹⁾

Strangely enough, the film was popular in France, where the exoticism drew

audiences in. After the war, the film was shown in Japan where there was much unintentional laughter where the filmmakers had failed to understand Japanese culture. Marcel Ophüls, son of the director, Max Ophüls, was in the American military and managed to see the film while stationed in Japan.²⁰⁾

6. Conclusion

An authentic auteur made this film

I don't believe the first half of the movie deserves disdainful laughter. Ophüls and his cinematographer, Eugen Schüfftan, have done marvels with editing and lighting, and have created a Japan one can believe in. When the suicide of Kohana's father is announced at the beginning of the film, the sword seems to take up the screen. When Kohana enters the brothel, the screen lights up as if the director is contemplating a white out. When Isamo tries to redeem Kohana, the camera looks down at him from far above... as if commenting on his lowly status.

The acting is universally excellent... Hayakawa plays a far different character than the one he played in *The Cheat*... he is still a proud man, but he is fully aware of his lowly status. His painting skill is used against him, as when Sergei sees Isamo's portrait of Kohana and falls in love with her. Isamo's resentment is palpable.

Asper seems to have little respect for the talent of Willm, but Willm seems competent in the role. One doesn't long for another actor to play the role of Sergei. Ophüls used Willm in his next film, *Werther*, so he must have been satisfied with Willm's abilities.

Michiko Tanaka is a big surprise. While one cannot imagine her as a prostitute, her inability to comprehend her fall in status makes her love for Sergei logical. It also makes her imagination take off during the picture-story show with Sergei. Of course she can imagine Leningrad in the snow! She was a highborn noblewoman just a few weeks ago...

Perhaps the only real disappointment for those who study Ophüls is the lack of the moving camera. The camera pans a lot, and the editing is confident and expert, but the camera does not take over the storytelling. The first half of the film is proof (if any is lacking!) that Ophüls can tell a story as well as anybody can. We will simply have to wait until *The Reckless Moment* for Ophüls to transform film into a medium that would be transcendent.

〈註〉

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