

Document Citation

Title	Drop hearts
Author(s)	Matt Sussman
Source	<i>San Francisco Bay Guardian</i>
Date	2007 Aug 15
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	58
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Madame de... (The earrings of Madame de...), Ophüls, Max, 1953

Drop hearts

Diamonds aren't *Madame de ...*'s best friend

By Matt Sussman

> a&eletters@sfbg.com

Is there a more beloved film among critics than Max Ophüls's *The Earrings of Madame de ...* (1953), the penultimate presentation in the Pacific Film Archive's retrospective "Max Ophüls: Motion and Emotion"? Yes, there are other films (*Citizen Kane*, *L'Avventura*, *The Seventh Seal*) that routinely top critics' all-time lists. But rarely has a movie so routinely enchanted cineastes as Ophüls's glittering belle époque love story that swathes its brutal emotional core in sumptuous period finery, mirrors, diamonds, and the dizzying virtuosity of the director's constantly moving camera. Only Ophüls, in a bit of borrowed Kabuki stagecraft, would have the shreds of unsent letters tossed from the window of a speeding train become a flurry of snowflakes.

As *Village Voice* film critic J. Hoberman observed in a recent appraisal, fellow critics "Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris didn't agree on much, but they did find common ground when it came to [*Earrings*]." Kael characterized the film as "perfection," while Sarris named it his candidate for "the greatest film of all time."

Hyperbole is the form of praise most befitting Ophüls, given the director's penchant for cinematic grand gestures — namely, the impossibly complex tracking shots for which he is most famous, which follow characters up and down staircases, through walls, and across stretches of time — and his consistent return to the dazzling surfaces of 19th-century high society, as in *La Ronde* (1950) and *Lola Montès* (1955).

The faceted surfaces that dazzle in *Earrings* belong to the eponymous heroine, Comtesse Louise de ... (the incomparable Danielle Darrieux), a wholly narcissistic and equally charming beauty, who sells a pair of drop diamond hearts given to her by her husband, General André de ... (Charles Boyer), in order to pay off her debts. The earrings wind up back in the hands of the general, who — going along with Louise's white lie that she lost them at the

opera — then gives them to a mistress en route to Constantinople, where they wind up being purchased in a pawn shop by Baron Fabrizio Donati (Vittorio de Sica). The diamonds' peregrinations

ing camera follows his paramours in a seemingly endless embrace across several ballrooms and months. It is a beautiful trick, one that predates Alfred Hitchcock's "uninterrupted" takes in *Rope* and to which many directors have since paid homage. But Ophüls's suspended dance also gives Louise and the baron the space they so hopelessly pine for, which they can never find in the hothouse confines of their world. The scene is cinematic in that such a space



All that glitters is likely to cause heartbreak in *The Earrings of Madame de ...* (featuring Danielle Darrieux, above), just one of director Max Ophüls's dazzling visions of love lost and found — and lost again.

trace a circuit of desire that comes full circle, completing its inevitably tragic course when the baron and Louise strike up a passionate affair.

To borrow the general's characterization of his and Louise's marriage, the diamonds — if not the whole of Ophüls's seemingly bottomless bag of spectacular effects — are only "superficially superficial." With every change of hands, the jewels become more transparent as an index of each suitor's investment in Louise, until they are symbols of tarnished honor and, finally, a memento mori of Louise herself.

In one of the film's most celebrated sequences, Ophüls's waltz-

can only exist in the movies. But it could also be argued that such scenes are why film — in its most romantic capacity — exists. Ophüls's much-celebrated masterpiece, as brilliant and sharp as the diamonds at its center, provides no better example. **SFBG**

THE EARRINGS OF MADAME DE ...

Fri/17, 7 p.m., \$4-\$8

Pacific Film Archive

2575 Bancroft Way, Berk.

(510) 642-5249

www.bampfa.org