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Caught

Directed by Max Ophuls
Screenplay by Arthur Laurents, from the novel "Wild Calendar" by Libbie Block
Photography: Lee Garmes
Editing: Robert Parrish
Sets: Frank Sylos
Music: Frederick Hollander (Friedrich Holländer)
Produced by Wolfgang Reinhardt.
An Enterprise Studios production, released by MGM
1949. 88 minutes. US 16mm distribution by Ivy Films.
CAST: Barbara Bel Geddes (Leonora Eames)
Robert Ryan (Smith Ohlrig)
James Mason (Larry Quinada)
Ruth Brady (Maxine)
Frank Ferguson (Dr. Hoffman)
Curt Bois (Franzi)
Art Smith (psychiatrist)
Marcia Mae Jones (Leonora's sister)
Natalie Schaefer (Dorothy Dale)

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Francois Truffaut and Jacques Rivette published a long interview with Max Ophuls, which had taken place a few months before his death in March, 1957, in Cahiers du Cinema #72:

FT & JR: After LETTER FROM AN UNKNOWN WOMAN you left Universal?

MO: Yes, and I went to work for MGM. I made CAUGHT, which I like quite a bit. But I had difficulties with the producers over the script, and the film goes off the rails toward the end; yes, the end is really almost impossible, but until the last 10 minutes, it's not bad. Yesterday I received a letter from James Mason, who wrote that he'd seen the film again on TV and that he found it quite perfect, except for him, except for his performance. He's now producing a film which a great friend of mine is directing, Nick Ray, who was discovered by John Houseman. (This is a reference to BIGGER THAN LIFE - p.s.) Mason wanted to make a film in France; I recommended Jacques Becker to him as a director. Mason told me that he'd shoot in France on condition his scenes be shot very quickly, that he be very well paid, and that, as he summed it up: "being paid in cash, that is, not by participating, through my salary, in the financing of the film. This is on the slim chance that there still exists in Europe a company which hasn't been bankrupted by you, and which is rich enough to hand over the exorbitant sum I'd demand."

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Gary Carey's article appeared in *FILM COMMENT*, Summer, 1971:

CAUGHT has been called the most American of Max Ophuls' American films because the spine of its plot—the Cinderella marriage of a poor girl to a multi-millionaire tycoon—touches upon an ever-popular American folk myth, played out against a contemporary New York setting. In outline, CAUGHT may not seem very promising material, but Ophuls frequently worked with even more novelettish material; and the script, as developed by Arthur Laurents, plays into the director's major preoccupation. (It happens to be one of Laurents' major preoccupations, also.)

Asking himself "What are Ophuls' subjects?" Richard Roud answers (in his monograph, *Max Ophuls: An Index*), "The simple answer is: women in love. Most often, women who are unhappily in love or to whom love brings misfortune of one kind or another."

CAUGHT's woman in love is Leonora Eames, former car-hop, charm school graduate, who marries Smith Ohlrig, millionaire. (Barbara Bel Geddes, who plays Leonora, is photographed in a way that gives her an amusing resemblance to Bobo Sears Rockefeller, though this could not have been intended at the time.) Leonora is a simple, not-too-bright girl (in his American years, Ophuls seemed to have an affection for dumb heroines) with a desperate need for affection. This drive is misdirected by her friends into a craving for wealth and attention. Leonora also has the kind of simplistic but rigid morality that can result from a small-town upbringing. She is a "good girl," unable to manoeuvre her morals into the free-and-easy patterns the movies ascribe to the rich and beautiful. Leonora accepts an invitation to a yachting party from a sleazy worm obviously pimping for his boss, but she won't sleep with the boss. She marries Ohlrig presumably because of his billions but soon finds that his billions mean nothing without his love.

As Ohlrig lies on the analyst's couch early in the film, Laurents generously bares his character's whole psyche for us. His analyst tells Ohlrig that his frequent heart attacks are a psychosomatic ploy for sympathy, that he has a power mania, that consequently he cannot love because he fears being dependent upon another person. Ohlrig denies everything the doctor says and,

to prove him wrong, promptly marries Leonora and quickly proves him right.

Even as one is yawning over the facile Freudianisms which mar Laurents' motivation, one is drawn into the scene, partially because of the vehemence of Robert Ryan's performance as Ohlrig but mainly by the abrasive tension and vicious atmosphere which Ophuls gives it. At this point, the film comes to life with a kind of dark violence that is, I think, unique in the pastel-tinted universe Ophuls usually paints.

A case could be made that this new tone in Ophuls' work results from his reaction to the vitality inherent in his typically American subject. But the acidulous tone, which gives CAUGHT its singularity and its strength, is missing, alas, from his other *film noir*, *THE RECKLESS MOMENT*. The explanation must lie elsewhere, and the clue is given by Pauline Kael who (seemingly alone among all those who have written on the film) has suggested that Ohlrig might possibly be a portrait of Howard Hughes.

Miss Kael's suggestion is bolstered by a knowledge of what happened to Ophuls during the first years of his unhappy stay in Hollywood. Ophuls first came to America in 1941 but remained out of work until 1946 when Preston Sturges saw LIEBELEI and "discovered" the Viennese director. At this time Sturges had recently been put under contract by Howard Hughes to produce a film for Faith Domergue, the latest Hughes *protégée*. Hughes had met Miss Domergue several years earlier when, as Faith Dorn, she was under contract to Warner Brothers. He bought her contract and promised to make her a star, but years went by without Miss Domergue facing a camera. Finally she accused Hughes of not being interested in her "career," with the result of Hughes signing Sturges and giving him carte blanche to develop a property.

Sturges contracted Ophuls as collaborator on the Domergue vehicle, *VENDETTA*, based on a story by Prosper Mérimée, which Miss Domergue had chosen herself. When Ophuls arrived on the set, Hughes was in the hospital recovering from an airplane crash. For six weeks Ophuls and Sturges shot without interference, managing to spend \$1,000,000 before Hughes recovered sufficiently to leave the hospital.

(over)

Apparently, Hughes took an immediate dislike to Ophuls. There is a Hollywood rumor that Hughes never referred to Ophuls on the set as anything but "The Oaf." After studying the footage that Sturges and Ophuls had shot, Hughes took Sturges to task. (Faith Domergue has been quoted as saying that she spent most of the six weeks marching "for days and nights through an ammonia fog. It was supposed to be mist, rising from the swamps"; a wag retorted that the mist really rose from the script.) Sturges reportedly passed the buck, placing all the blame on Ophuls. A few days later, the director was once again at liberty.

Certainly Ophuls had every reason for taking his acid-tipped revenge on Hughes through "Smith Ohlrig." Looking through John Keats' "unauthorized" biography of Hughes, I found this account of Hughes' first meeting with Faith Domergue:

One day actress Susan Peters invited Faith to a yachting party at Balboa where at dockside Faith was introduced to Howard Hughes—a tall, slender man with a several day's growth of beard and a yachting costume topped off by a sea captain's visored hat. Hughes had rented a yacht, the Sea Ellen, which was moored offshore; he suggested that while the others in the party take one boat out to the ship, he would take Faith out with him in a sailing dinghy.

In CAUGHT, Leonora is invited to the yachting party not by a girl-friend but by Ohlrig's pimp. (She is, however, encouraged to attend the party by a girl-friend/roommate.) Leonora is late for the party, waits alone on the dock until a man, in yachting outfit and captain's hat (no beard) appears in a dinghy, supposedly to pick her up. Even with these minor alterations taken into consideration, the resemblance between fact and fiction is too striking to put down to mere coincidence.

There are other similarities, also. Ohlrig's desertion of Leonora for long periods of time, both before and after their marriage, is a well-chronicled trait of the Hughes mating pattern, once he had wooed and won a woman. Franzi, the factotum and pimp whom Ohlrig has cajoled away from his job as headwaiter, might be a Europeanized and below-the-belt portrait of Eddie, the barber whose shop Hughes bought out in order to have a professional at the beck and call of his beard. The script even forecasts events which did not surface in Hughes' life until later. The way Leonora becomes a virtual recluse in Ohlrig's mansion presages the paranoid seclusion that enveloped Jean Peters after she became Mrs. Howard Hughes (in 1957). Though Ohlrig's heart attacks seem to have no parallel in Hughes' life, it is intriguing to discover that the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, founded in 1953, specializes in research on cardiovascular diseases. Could Ophuls have been privy to some private knowledge about Hughes which the world is yet to learn? Or was he using the heart attacks as a mundane metaphor for the way in which Hughes played dangerous games with his life via his airplane antics? Or, in *this* case, is it just a matter of coincidence?

The casting of the film also gains a fillip of extracurricular interest in the light of the Hughes perplex. Robert Ryan looks remarkably like a younger Hughes; one is hard put to think of an actor who might resemble him more. Since Barbara Bel Geddes does not in any way suggest any of the women in Hughes' life, it is amusing to discover that she had a real-life, not very pleasant, connection with Hughes. Miss Bel Geddes was being groomed for stardom by RKO when Hughes bought the studio in 1948. One of his first moves as studio-head was to strike Miss Bel Geddes, whom he did not consider to be star potential, from RKO's roster. Her appearance in CAUGHT could again be only a case of coincidence, but it is quite pleasing to imagine Ophuls aligning himself with the support of an equally aggrieved party in his game of revenge.

All of this may seem like muck-raking, but I think it is pertinent to the film. If Ophuls' experience with Hughes is wrapped up in the way in which he handles Ohlrig—as I believe it was—then this experience is central to the film's successes. It is those scenes in which Ohlrig appears (either physically or as an almost palpable *éminence grise*) which break almost brutally through the cellophane kitsch of the rest of the story, gain an independent life, and make CAUGHT easily the most fascinating and complex of Ophuls' American films. Here there is an aggressiveness about Ophuls' involvement with the story not only missing from his other American films but antipodal to the faded, nostalgic moral sensibility of his later French work.

Two scenes in particular are worth noting. In one, poor, bemused Leonora, swooning prettily on a couch, bemoans her fate while Franzi plays a Strauss waltz (brilliantly) on the piano, reassuring her with a drawled "darling" this and that. The scene drips with a decay much more fetid than the moral malaise the director attractively invokes in his Schnitzleresque romances.

Later, during a moment of stress, Ohlrig slams into a pinball machine which is the main attraction in the game room of his Jay Gatsby estate. As handled by Ryan, this is a sublime meeting between actor and prop, and one is caught short by the violence of the encounter. It seems, at the time, to be one of those glorious, extraneous little touches that in movies often have more life than the story they are meant to decorate. Later, however, when Ohlrig, while suffering his final heart failure, dies practically on top of it, one has a terrible feeling that the pinball machine is meant to be Ohlrig's Rosebud. But I still like it because it works very nicely as a put-down upon the stunted, adolescent concept of manliness propagated by the action and the "B" film (whose conventions Ophuls and Laurents just skirt in depicting Ohlrig). It is also perhaps the most pertinent comment made on Hughes in any of the films that have supposedly based their stories on the billionaire's life—for what else is Hughes except the living embodiment of those bankrupt manly values apotheosized in the films of Howard Hawks and his less talented colleagues?

Ophuls' famous predilection for the dolly and the

tracking shot proves quite sufficient to those sequences which place Leonora and Ohlrig in melodramatic confrontation on the Long Island estate. The Ophuls style, usually so graceful and elegant and pretty-pretty, here take on a weightier inference: the movements become full of predatory menace. As the camera tracks after her or spins about her, Leonora becomes a woman encaged, metaphorically speaking but to much more chilling effect than the final, clinically explicit image of Lola Montès.

Unfortunately, Leonora flies the coop before the film is half over, and Ophuls abandons Ohlrig with her to revert to his major preoccupation. He likes his heroines to suffer as atonement for the frivolity of their youth, but the purgatory chosen for Leonora is charted less by Ophuls' typical romantic *angst* than by American do-goodism. She leaves the mansion, installs herself in a cold water flat, gets a job in a doctor's office and falls in love with Doctor Quinada while they are treating a case of botulism. Her troubles, however, are not over because she discovers that she is pregnant by Ohlrig and her sense of morality makes her return to her husband. Quinada argues ethics with her, but the moral crisis is circumvented when Ohlrig, finally managing to prove his analyst wrong, dies of an honest-to-God coronary.

Although James Mason brings a velvety presence and his impeccable, brandy-mellowed English accent to the rôle of Quinada, the character as written is little more than a tenement Doctor Kildare. The scenes between Quinada and Leonora maintain interest only because of the charm and warmth of the actors' playing. Ophuls himself observed that the film "goes off the rails towards the end"—evidently the Production Code demanded Ohlrig's death as well as the miscarriage of Leonora's child—and James Mason has said (in an interview in *Focus in Film*, #2): "It was the kind of story, unfortunately, which according to the rules of censorship of the day, you couldn't make sensibly. It was about a divorce situation and the rules in America said that divorce was something which could be suggested only by a bad person."

One wonders, however, whether Leonora's divorcing Ohlrig and living happily ever after with Quinada would have produced an ending even as dramatically effective as the one finally given CAUGHT. The script keeps hinting that the baby might have been sired by the doctor and, though the suggestion is immediately erased, it is possible that this was the way in which the story had originally been conceived. If so, then this greater complication might well have given a badly needed fillip to the second part of the film.

When Leonora returns to Ohlrig, the film does perk up some, but in the final scenes Ohlrig is too sketchily drawn and too much the "heavy." (The sketchiness of Ohlrig's characterization in this part of the film might well have been caused by the bowdlerization of the script.) In these scenes CAUGHT begins to look like an inferior version of Hitchcock's NOTORIOUS, with the same emphasis on a great, baronial staircase—but with a

garage standing in for Hitchcock's wine cellar. Both directors also pare down the huge dimensions of the mansions which serve as the films' central settings, thus underlining the imprisonment of their respective heroines. A striking example of this occurs in the second half of CAUGHT, and it is one of the most impressive scenes in the film: Leonora, several months pregnant, has locked herself in her enormous, platformed bedroom; Franzi (brilliantly played by Curt Bois) is sent to fetch her and, as she opens the door and speaks to him, Ophuls' tailgating camera-movements and Lee Garmes' superb low-keyed lighting create an engulfing feeling of claustrophobia and illness.

Even in its weaker scenes, CAUGHT remains an engrossing film. Laurents has supplied excellent dialogue—literate without being either literary or stagey. He has also provided several minor characters, all nicely nasty, and all appropriately cast. The principals are excellent. Though Howard Hughes was probably right about Barbara Bel Geddes—she never *would* have been a major star—she is a polished actress whose manner, crisp and alert, neutralizes some of the stupidity inherent in Leonora's character. Her work in CAUGHT is by far the best she has done in film. Robert Ryan is superb: uptight, belligerent, repulsive, he skates on stiletto blades across the icy surface of Ohlrig's personality, while managing to suggest that the façade is more than skin-deep. The smoothness of Ophuls' camera movement and editing, the elegance of his compositions, the inventiveness of P. Frank Sylos' set design—all propel one through the film with ease and interest if not utter involvement.

And yet, one wishes that Ophuls had maintained firmer footing on the new terrain offered by his villainous hero, instead of tracking his sensibility down those tried-and-true paths traveled by his innumerable women in love.

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