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LE PLAISIR: “THE MASK” AND “THE MODEL”

Max Ophüls’s *Le Plaisir* (1952) has been out of circulation for much too long. It has at last reemerged on DVD, a fine release from Criterion now joining Second Sight’s U.K. edition. Its appearance ends a deprivation and is an occasion of joy.

Inspired by three stories by Guy de Maupassant, *Le Plaisir* belongs to a genre that was still new in 1952. The anthology picture had been invented in 1948 in England by the producer Sydney Box of Gainsborough Pictures when *Quartet* presented a sequence of four short stories by W. Somerset Maugham. *Quartet* knew such success that it was followed, to Maugham’s great profit, by *Trio* (1950) and *Encore* (1952). Elsewhere Fox assembled five tales to make up *O. Henry’s Full House* (1952). Maupassant’s work was so inviting that in the year of *Le Plaisir* France saw also *Trois Femmes*, a film directed by André Michel presenting “Mouche” alongside two less celebrated stories.

The portmanteau movie that juggled a number of narratives was something else. Dating back at latest to 1916, with *Intolerance*, it was neither new nor done with in 1948. *Tales of Manhattan* (1942) and *Dead of Night* (1945) were recent examples. The novelty with *Quartet* and its followers was that the common authorship of the original stories provided the one, loudly asserted, connection between self-contained dramas. The Maugham pictures all start by having the aged writer address the camera about the methods and aims of his work. As the series progressed the on-screen Maugham associated himself ever more closely with the films, speaking as one of the “we” of the production company.

André Hakim at Fox evidently wished to copy the format of *Quartet* in producing the O. Henry picture, but was faced with the unavailability of the author (d. 1910). As the next best thing, John Steinbeck was filmed in a library setting to pay tribute to a fellow storyteller and to be seen as if choosing for us five from O. Henry’s 270 tales. When Steinbeck begins by declaring O. Henry “the real star of this picture” he borrows the thought from the start of *Quartet*. Claiming the status of tributes to great writers, these movies ascribe authorship to Maugham and O. Henry. In sum the Maugham trilogy credited six screenwriters and seven directors. The five segments of *O. Henry’s Full House* seem to have been made by five quite distinct units.

Le Plaisir is offered differently, as “Un Film de Max Ophüls.” The filmmaker’s name comes before and Maupassant’s after the main title. It is not “Guy de Maupassant’s *Le Plaisir*,” only “based on three tales by . . .,” but the writer’s name comes back in surprising form when the final credit reads: “And the voice of Guy de Maupassant: Jean Servais.” An iris effect darkens the screen, music ends, and from the silence speaks the soft, confiding voice. It tells of the various options that have been considered “for bringing you three of my tales” and claims to have reached the view that “it would be simplest if I tell them to you myself.” This author, then, is a movie character—not the film’s creator but its creation.



Speaking for the author

Top: *Quartet*. © 1948 Gainsborough Films Ltd. DVD: Network (U.K.). Bottom: *O. Henry’s Full House*. © 1952 Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation. DVD: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment.

He does not present himself as a ghost, which would be an identity of sorts, but his words are backed by the gentle strains of a harp and he does recognize his difference from us in the audience who, being alive, may have a modern disdain for his old stories. He says how much he has always liked the dark, and suggests that he might be sitting alongside us in the cinema. With this suggestion the voice makes a claim upon our talent for fantasy, placing itself as completely a figure of the imagination. Ophuls refuses the solidity that the template movies sought.¹ He pictures no source for the voice from the blackness. Nowhere does Servais claim the name of Maupassant, but he makes us hear an author's savoring of language and his relish for storytelling. The voice falls on our ears as the spirit of the writing, not as a phantom but as what lives on in the work of fiction after the death of its creator.

It undertakes to tell us the stories. Tell, not read. Maupassant's prose is not always the source for the words spoken or even of the thoughts expressed. A further mark of Ophuls's originality is that the texts are never presented to our eyes. Elsewhere a familiar formula served to boost the literary prestige of a movie's source: a library edition of the book, never some well-thumbed paperback, would be brought into close-up as pages turned to reveal the start of the story just before an off-screen voice pronounced the title and began reading the first lines. The black screen that follows *Le Plaisir's* opening titles serves to put a space between our reading of the credits and the start of the narration, having us sit in the dark with nothing to look at as Servais speaks. (This effect, vital at key moments in the film, is weakened when one's eyes are engaged with subtitles. It is worth getting to know the movie well enough to do without them.)

Withholding the words on the page is a further move against solidity, implying that Maupassant's work transcends the material form of printed merchandise. That is a deeper mark of respect than the conventional tropes can yield, and it is very Max to have paid tribute with an absence rather than a flourish. Asking us to listen, only to listen, the film begins by establishing the overspoken word and the overspeaking voice as elements vital to its form. In the template movies narration is a convenience. Once it has nodded to Maugham's opening lines and done a little setting of scene or character it fades out, to return—if at all—only between sequences as an aid to continuity. *Le Plaisir* gives us Servais's voice and the narrator's words throughout, within scenes as well as between them and at the completion of each tale as well as at its start. It invites us to delight in the language of the stories no less than their invention of character and incident.

The first tale is "The Mask." At its start the scene-setting is shared between narration, image, and sound so that each

element complements and punctuates the others. As the darkness of the screen gives way to the darkness of depicted night, the first image is of a word. Servais begins the description of a Montmartre dance hall and hits the word *bal*. At the same moment the camera holds its glance up to the shining letters "BAL," vertical on-screen, before dipping and drawing back to present an intricate survey of the life, human and animal, drawn up to and into the palais. The music of the dance band within, its rhythms brashly beaten out, becomes the constant background to the sounds of other comings and goings in the street. The camera discovers so much of fascination that it cannot rest for more than a few beats on any one group or action, but must keep changing the direction of its gaze and movement as it falls upon a new aspect of the human spectacle.

In these first moments the film embraces a range of relationships between literary modes of depiction and those of the cinema. As soon as we cut to the inside of the dance hall, the shots are timed to the rhythm of the narrator's account, a new image entering—young beauties, rich women of a certain age, tailcoated gallants—as each new phrase begins. A cut for each comma. Information from the camera and information from the storyteller can be brought like this into marked coincidence. But the doubling stops well short of the point where the human figures might become puppets of the description. They have not been made to show in their action the roles and purposes that the teller asserts: we see no pimping, for instance, from the men described as pimps.

The rush of activity and the surfeit of detail in the image offset the calmly itemized description and the dry delivery that asserts detachment while it hints at distaste. The speaker develops a metaphor of rainstorms and floodwaters, likening the flow of pleasure seekers into the palais to a torrent pouring through a sluice. In scripting the storyteller's role Ophuls and Jacques Natanson strategically retain prose imagery that both repeats and counterpoints the sights and sounds of the film.

They do this most expansively in the second story, "La Maison Tellier," in the passage which depicts a journey in a hay cart along country lanes by a group of prostitutes on an excursion from their small-town Normandy brothel. Ophuls's camera occupies the fixed vantage point of the narrator to show us, in time with the description, how "the cart rolled along behind the white horse . . . disappeared behind tall trees . . . reappeared beyond the foliage . . . and continued on its sunlit way." The emphatic matching here forms the ground for pronounced and repeated contrast. In the tobacco-saturated picture palace we are teased over and over with remarks on the smells of the countryside—as whole-

IN SEARCH OF YOUTH



Le Plaisir. © 1952 Gaumont-Stere Films. DVD: Criterion Collection.

some, strong, penetrating, sweet—and a verbal rainbow plays against our monochrome image: “green pastures . . . yellow rape . . . green and gold crops, speckled with red and blue.”

Through doubling and difference *Le Plaisir* becomes an essay on the shared and unique values of telling and showing. The overspeech both describes what is in plain view and incorporates what resists translation. It puts on display the peculiar ways in which language deals with time, and its subjection to sequence, as well as its freedom to articulate the invisible—meanings, thoughts, emotions, concepts. Weaving these elaborately crafted threads into the film’s texture Ophuls pays homage to Maupassant and to the literary tradition that his work adorns.

All the sadder, then, that *Le Plaisir* was reviled on its French premiere as a Germanic travesty of a great national writer. André Bazin was particularly obtuse. Preferring competence to genius, he used the appearance of *Trois Femmes* as an occasion to restate his disapproval for the extravagant intricacy of Ophuls’s approach. More sensitive appreciations came later, from Claude Beylie, François Truffaut, and most notably Jean-Luc Godard, who lost no occasion to laud the film and in 1963 offered an elegant rebuff to cultural chauvinism by placing *Le Plaisir* at the head of his nominations for “Best French Film since the Liberation.” Ophuls himself made an answer to his critics in a letter to Jean-Jacques Gautier. This document is sadly omitted from Criterion’s otherwise splendid array of extras. With its clear and impassioned unfolding of a complex design it proclaims Ophuls’s pride in the film’s achievement.

One aspect of his ambition is declared in the title. *Le Plaisir* uniquely announces a theme, and says that it is all one movie where *Quartet* and its fellows insist on variety rather than unity. Ophuls’s three tales are “The Mask,” “The Maison Tellier,” and “The Model” in that order, but the titles are withheld, the better for us to receive each as a variation on the central theme—*Pleasure: Parts One, Two, and Three*. A triptych structure, defying convention, puts the longest and most fully dramatized narrative in the middle, flanked by two much slighter anecdotes, each less than twenty minutes long.

Le Plaisir’s unlikely triumph is to develop a formal design that spans its three sections while realizing to the full the particularities of mood and incident that give each story its own completeness as well as its place in the triptych. The recurrence of Servais’s voice throughout is a major resource brilliantly deployed. Hardly less vital are the musical themes, limited in number and not originating with the film, that weave through the tales, their repetitions sometimes startling but always eloquent. In architecture, Ophuls and his designer Jean d’Eaubonne contrived without forcing to have

bridge-like structures return to govern the composition of image and action. Sets and locations allow stagings that repeatedly carry the action upward, across, and down again, providing also for a change of register with rarer but marked movements along the level.

These patterns of movement carry thematic weight and are linked to motifs in performance of running, rushing, chasing, and (by contrast) steadiness and stillness. The motif is established with the appearance of the key figure in the first story, the masked dancer at the ball (Jean Galland). He enters the image in a high-stepping run which already has a dance aspect, his momentum scarcely checked by the crowd as he hastens to the palais up the steps at its entrance, and up the stairs and across the galleries within, to descend onto the dance floor at a speed only a little broken by the shedding of his cane, scarf, and tailcoat. The camera shares in the delirium of his ungainly movement, and thereby keeps us from fixed scrutiny of his strange features until the moment when he collapses in the middle of the floor.

What a gamble it was to begin with this story, a parable of regret for lost youth and beauty—a man’s lost youth and beauty, and lost prowess. Behind the mask is an old man clinging to his place in the dance, obsessively performing the remembered motions of display and seduction. It’s an unlikely tale, with more than a hint of doppelgänger Gothic. Catastrophe threatens if this figure looks too much or too little like the others at the ball. Ophuls doubled the risk with the decision not to make it, as in Maupassant, a fancy-dress ball with all the dancers masked. The visual impact of the contrast he sought could have been lost in absurdity if the mask itself had let him down.

Georges Annenkov was responsible for the design of costume and make-up. If you want an easy check on the brilliance of his art, just survey the hats in any of the crowd scenes. The particular touch of genius in the construction of the mask is to have fixed a Charlie McCarthy monocle in its eye, a token of dandyism that also betrays the inhuman rigidity of its features. The skin, too, is beardlessly smooth, shining waxy. With a wiry moustache and coal-black curls, the face models that of a youth aspiring to pass for a grown-up. Double dislocation: the fake youth is also a fake adult.

The masked dancer is the pivotal figure but not the main character in the story. The active principals are the doctor (Claude Dauphin) who releases him from the disguise and the wife (Gaby Morlay) who is discovered when curiosity about the wizened creature beneath the mask pushes the medic to escort the old man back to his cramped and shabby apartment. What the doctor learns about the dancer’s past as a Lothario, he learns from the wife. She is something like the

TRANSITION, EXCURSION, PURSUIT



Le Plaisir. © 1952 Gaumont-Stere Films. DVD: Criterion Collection.

widow of her husband's obsession, though complicit in his masquerade. Her words tell of the misery she has endured first as the victim of his promiscuities, and lately as the witness and aide to his haunting the sites of others' pleasure. But her actions and her manner tell him something else—of a lifetime of tender and generous devotion to an object that we are not allowed to see as worthy, a life of service rewarded only if tenderness and devotion are their own rewards.

The doctor seems to see the wife's lot as preferable to the husband's; she is less driven, more clear-sighted. He laments his own enslavement to a chase that will carry him, unable to act upon the precious lesson he has been offered, back to the exertions of the palais. As the witness to a drama of betrayals and constancy the doctor here foreshadows the role of the third figure in the final tale, that of "The Model" and her artist lover.

Foreshadows but also contrasts. Ophuls always destabilizes the position of his narrator figures. The voice that has come to us from no location enters at last into the body of an elderly bystander, played by Jean Servais, a man wasted by his own cynicism. He claims to know the truth of the relationship between a married couple approaching along a wind-swept promenade. We do not see them, but we see that he cannot take his eyes off them. He sucks on a spit-soaked cigar and begins his account with remarks upon the folly of marriage (for a man) and the unfathomability (to all men) of the actions and motives of women. This is the introduction to a tale about a young man certain that life is unbearable without and, after less than a summer, unbearable with the woman that he has taken as his model and mistress.

The nameless "chronicler" tells how he witnessed the first meeting between the artist, Jean (Daniel Gélin) and the model Josephine (Simone Simon). On this we dissolve to a flashback in which on a sudden whim Jean quits his work and his friend to chase up a steep flight of steps (at the *École des Beaux Arts*) in a pursuit which is revealed to be that of a young woman, seen only distantly from below and behind. It is an image that is all about Jean's appetite and his abandonment of his friend. It does nothing to particularize the woman and her attractions.

As the tale develops the chronicler plays an active and troubling but never acknowledged part in the events that propel Josephine to disaster. She will remark that he has always loathed her, and this insight gains support from one of Ophuls's boldest devices. In something like a present-tense flashback-within-flashback, the voiceover passes to Jean as he contemplates the beauties and graces of his beloved. Matching Jean's words to a run of visual fragments—a gesture, a movement, a pose—Ophuls takes us to share a vision in-

formed rather than blinded by desire. The words of enchantment pronounced here (over scenes unwitnessed by our witness) challenge the surrounding dry commentary on infatuation's quick decay.

At the denouement Jean has abandoned his mistress and gone back to share his crony's garret lodgings. When she bursts in upon the pair refusing to be paid off like a tart, Jean feigns to concentrate on hammering out a woodcut, defies her threat of suicide. He derides fidelity and offers a bitter parody of marriage vows by demanding to know if she intends to stick to him until he dies. Does he take his cue from his chum? He hands her over to his friend, who mocks the drama of love forsaken and strums the piano all through the final argument, beating out the themes of dance and gaiety to bolster Jean's callous challenge to the woman's pleas. The playing persists as the background to the climactic instance of the film's pattern of ascents and descents, an amazing image which shares in the momentum of Josephine's run upstairs to throw herself through a window and plunge down to crash through a glass roof below.

On the sight and sound of the crash a direct cut raps us back to the narrating present, and now we see the prospect that the chronicler was contemplating at the start. From the deserted end of the wintry beach Jean—it must be Jean, much older—is walking steadily forward, pushing his crippled wife in a wheelchair. The camera glides with them up to and past, without acknowledging, the erstwhile friend whose voice continues the attempt to account for the stupidity of Jean's marriage.

A simple shot can be just as intricately structured as a complex one. The flatness of the scene and the evenness of the camera's motion reverse the frenzy of the climb and crash. The calm horizontality of the beachscape is echoed in the camera's lateral process, but the groundedness of the action is offset by the background play of kids with kites as well as by the upright shapes of beach chairs, lamp posts, and bathing huts. These mark out the stages of the couple's direct and steady progress up to the moment when, beyond sight of the chronicler, Jean stops to remove the mantle from his own shoulders and place it protectively round those of his wife before continuing on their way. Again and finally we see what the storyteller does not. The film's variations on word and image climax here.

The chronicler's vision is of frustration and enslavement. When he recalls his own "intervention," and laments Jean's refusal to pardon it, he seems at the edge of an acknowledgment of the homosexual rivalry that is a subtext of Ophuls's but not Maupassant's treatment of the anecdote. In "The Model" the writer had the invalid chair pushed by a servant,

“LE BONHEUR N’EST PAS GAI”



Le Plaisir. © 1952 Gaumont-Sterra Films. DVD: Criterion Collection.



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with Jean walking alongside unresponsively. The change that removed the manservant has allowed a physical connection between Jean and his wife, and created an image of the responsibility he now accepts. Then the gesture of care for Josephine's comfort, showing intuitive concern for her warmth, takes us beyond obligation into a zone of more generous feeling.

Another salient change put a thirty-year gap between the framing story and the flashback. Converting the end couple into figures of lost youth and agility heightens the correspondence between the film's first and final episodes. In "The Mask" a long marriage makes the wife the pained but loving servant of her man's obsession. In "The Model" a husband devotes himself through the years to the service of a woman he had loved and wronged. *Amour fou*? Or simply *amour*? Or something else altogether? The film leaves these questions with us. It refuses the insert shot closing in on the couple to show their faces that could so easily have resolved matters: devotion (eye contact, words, smiles) or bondage (none of those). It is Ophuls's way to create possibilities, not to close them down. Keeping his distance, he leaves it open to us to see the wife and the artist as having found rest from strenuous submission to appetite, and a measure of fulfillment in companionship.

A film organized round topics of pleasure culminates in a question about happiness. The chronicler comments acidly that Jean, his life over, has buried himself in his work and so found love, glory, and wealth. (He spares no thought for Josephine and his tongue passes over the word *love*, giving it no greater weight than fame or riches.) He asks if that doesn't mean happiness. He finishes with the now famous and almost untranslatable observation that "Le bonheur n'est pas gai." The Criterion subtitle offers "There's no joy in happiness," but that really won't do. English offers happiness as an emotion and has difficulty with the sense that the *bonheur* that matters would not be a feeling made visible by merriment, but a condition of the soul too inward for display.

That such a state of being is attainable is nowhere proclaimed. That it is imaginable is brought before us in another breathtaking gesture. As Jean's cry of horror and the sound of

shattering glass put an end to the noises of strife—the tinkling piano, the hammer blows on Jean's chisel merged with the clatter of Josephine's heels on the stairs—the soundtrack is calmed and uplifted by the music with which the film began. It is an arrangement of the melody, without words, of Mozart's KV618 "Ave Verum Corpus," and it is timed to reach its completion after the fade-out on the receding image of Jean and Josephine and the bleak world that surrounds them. This music, grave and tender, brings a beauty that puts pleasure and the merely pleasurable into relief.

Mozart's is the one composition that has no point of origin within the world of the stories. It frames the whole film and it occurs at the dramatic centre of the middle episode. At the start, having made its impression, it gives way to a pot-pourri of the themes of song and dance that will lace through the stories. These themes can charm and seduce—tribute should be paid to Joe Hayos's fine arrangements—but they can also become insistent to the point of riot. Music can become noise. Movement, which some commentators see as an unqualified value in Ophuls's work, can become frenzy and futile agitation. The enslaved movement of exploited puppets is often put before us. In "The Mask" the energy and athleticism of the quadrille is seen behind later action to have given way to a joyless, near grotesque, routine of bobbing up and down. Josephine's leap into destruction is shared by the camera as horror, not as exhilaration.

Her paralysis at the end is a dreadful price to pay for a marriage, and it can be seen as a savage fate's extension of her role as a model—fixed in place to serve the urges of an artist's image-making. We could also share the chronicler's view that, on the man's side, a lifelong commitment is a dreadful price to pay for a brief romance, or for two broken legs. But in the first story the doctor was hoping to find with marriage a relief from the compulsions of the sex chase. And in this final one Mozart works with the calm that the image has at last discovered to indicate the possibility—not more—of a progress from servitude to service.

†Ophuls would certainly have known of, and probably seen, *Quartet* and *Trio*. He could not have seen *Full House*. As inspiration or influence are more welcome than coincidence, it is a sadness for criticism that Ophuls could not have seen *Encore*; that film's final story, like *Le Plaisir*'s, climaxes in a woman's fall from a great height, subjectively filmed. But where Simone Simon in "The Model" ends her days in a wheelchair, Glynis Johns's high-diver in "Gigolo and Gigolette" is like Ophuls's Lola Montès; she survives to jump another day.

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