



# Madame de...

**SPOILER WARNING** The following notes give away some of the plot.

Opulence exudes from every frame of this tale of adultery and deception, sparked by the debt-induced sale of earrings in 19th-century Paris. Ophuls' sweeping camera dances with the characters in a world of illicit meetings, loaded glances and double entendre. But there is tragedy lurking beneath each slow dissolve and tightly cinched corset – the perfect example of style reflecting substance.

**Ruby McGuigan, [bfi.org.uk](http://bfi.org.uk)**

*Madame de...* is almost completely studio-bound, the story for the most part acted out within elaborate interiors. Shooting began on 8 April 1953 in the Studios de Boulogne on the Seine. The story was based on a novel by Louise de Vilmorin about a pair of earrings causing a woman's downfall. Georges Annenkov, the costume designer, recalled Ophuls telling him that the jewels were the only thing which really interested him. They provided the axis around which the action constantly turned, like a carousel. A small accessory of a woman's wardrobe which imposes its presence, and comes to dominate the destinies of the characters, leading them finally to their tragic end.

The story hangs heavily on coincidence and chance, but by this device, Ophuls emphasises the small world of privilege, the gilded cage. There are nineteen transfers of the jewels, and each exchange adds depth and builds another layer of symbolic significance. Ophuls' style is one of rich visual impact, honed to perfection with his team of close collaborators, including Annenkov, photographer Christian Matras and art director Jean d'Eaubonne. And *Madame de...* is one of their polished essays about the dominance of objects; the decor, material surroundings and accessories of the characters forming the narrative drive and becoming the *raison d'être* of the story.

The film begins with a long tracking shot devoted to careful exploration of Louise's boudoir. In an extraordinary single-take, a woman is introduced through her possessions. All that is seen of her is a gloved hand searching through jewels, furs and dresses as she ponders what to sell. She knocks a bible to the floor, regrets aloud the absence of her mother, and finally settles on the earrings her husband gave her, on the grounds that 'I can do with them as I please.' She holds them up, and only then is her face glimpsed framed, or rather imprisoned, within an ornate mirror.

*Madame de...* is about questions of social status. Ophuls chose to place Vilmorin's contemporary story within the *fin de siècle* period, because society at that time still conformed to a set of rules, a code of honour. A society in which every social position was still clearly defined and interconnected, but was on the brink of upheaval. A perennial theme in Ophuls' work was glittering, decadent societies in decline, and his camera relentlessly pursues elegant creatures up and down palatial staircases; momentarily frames them against pillars or views them through windows, through mists of lace, or just catches their reflection in ornamental mirrors.

The restless movement betrays the transience of this *belle époque*, the fleeting nature of pleasure and happiness and the pain beneath the surface

gaiety and glamour. The monochrome look of the film emphasises both the elegance and the determinedly old-fashioned nature of this world. It is rococo rather than Art Nouveau. Bernhardt is mentioned as a new phenomenon and then dismissed. A society which clings to the past, to a rose-tinted view of the *ancien régime*, deeply suspicious of the present, let alone the future.

*Madame de...* portrays the *beau monde*, the respectable world of married society where flirtation is an accepted game, but passion is not. A world which still holds the view that if a wife does not abide by the social code, she will pay the price, however beautiful, admired and seemingly secure in her position. A brilliant society that functions to music – at balls, the opera, smart restaurants and soirées – and the illicit love between Donati and Louise (Vittorio De Sica and Danielle Darrieux) develops through a series of repeated gallantries exchanged through a continuous waltz.

They begin to dance, the camera tracking them round the floor. There is a dissolve and they are dancing at another ball, then another and another. Their costumes change, but they turn ceaselessly, past pillars, paintings, sculpture, fountains, displays of ferns and palms, by tall draped windows, beneath massive chandeliers... the room gradually empties, the full orchestra dwindles to a quartet. It gets later. At the end, they dance alone, in their overcoats and gloves, to a single piano. A footman walks around extinguishing the lights and the scene ends in total eclipse.

In this stylised sequence; a journey is taken from frivolity to solemnity, from extravagance to simplicity, from light to dark. In fact, the whole film marks a journey away from gaiety, from the lavish boudoir to the austere church where the earrings eventually rest. The transience of this society, and the passion blossoming briefly within it, is most aptly demonstrated in a particularly breath-taking example of Ophuls' technique, in which the torn pieces of Louise's love letter from Donati turn into falling snowflakes. Nothing is permanent; these beautiful creatures are victims of chance, fate and the passage of time.

**Caroline Dunant, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1990-91**

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**MADAME DE...**

*Director:* Max Ophuls

*Production Companies:* Franco London Film (Paris), Indusfilm, Rizzoli Editore

*Unit Production Manager:* André Hoss

*Production Managers:* H. Baum, R. Baum

*1st Assistant Directors:* Marc Maurette, Willy Picard

*Script Supervisor:* Francine Corteggiani

*Screen Adaptation by:* Marcel Achard, Max Ophuls, Annette Wademant

*Dialogue:* Marcel Achard

*Based on the novel by:* Louise de Vilморin

*Director of Photography:* Christian Matras

*Camera Operator:* Alain Douarinou

*Art Director:* A.J. D'Eaubonne

*Set Decorator:* Maurice Barnathan

*Costumes:* Georges Annenkov, Rosine Delamare

*Wardrobe:* Georgette Fillon

*Make-up Supervisor:* Carmen Brel

*Music:* Oscar Straus, Georges Van Parys

*Sound:* Antoine Petitjean

*Studio:* Studios de Boulogne

*uncredited*

*Producer:* Henry Deutschmeister

*Assistant Unit Manager:* Jean Pieuchot

*Production Administrator:* Fritz Kretschmer

*Location Manager:* Charles Chieusse

*Production Secretary:* Simone Bouvet

*Technical Collaborator:* René Moulin

*Technician:* Henri Chenu

*2nd Assistant Director:* Tony Aboyantz

*Trainee Assistant Director:* Alain Jessua

*Camera Assistants:* Ernest Bourreaud, Henri Champion

*Stills:* Raymond Voinquel

*Portrait Stills:* Sam Levin

*Special Effects:* François Sune

*Editor:* Boris Lewin

*Assistant Editor:* Laure Cassau

*Assistant Art Directors:* Jacques Gut, Marc Frédéric

*Set Dresser:* Robert Christidès

*Props:* Louis Boussaroque, Albert Arnou

*Tapestries:* Maurice Bourbotte

*Costumers:* Mado Chaucha, Josette Laurier, Lucienne Magot

*Make-up Assistant:* Janine Cassé

*Hairdresser:* Jean Lalaurette

*Wigs:* Jules Chanteau

*Musical Themes:* Giacomo Meyerbeer

*Lyrics:* Louis Ducreux

*Sound Technician:* Fernand Janisse

*Boom Operator:* Gaston Ancessi

*Publicity:* Georges Cravenne

**Cast**

Charles Boyer (*General André de...*)

Danielle Darrieux (*Countess Louise de...*)

Vittorio De Sica (*Baron Fabrizio Donati*)

Jean Debucourt (*M Rémy, the jeweller*)

Jean Galland (*M de Bernac*)

Mireille Perrey (*Louise's maid*)

Paul Azais (*first coachman*)

Josselin

Hubert Noël (*Henri de Malleville*)

Lia Di Leo (*Lola, André's mistress*)

*uncredited*

Serge Lecointe (*Jérôme Rémy, the jeweller's son*)

Jean Degrave (*club patron*)

Madeleine Barbulée (*Louise's friend*)

Georges Vitray (*old journalist*)

Léon Walther (*theatre manager*)

Guy Favières (*Julien, André's servant*)

Jean Toulout (*ambassador*)

Germaine Stainval (*ambassador's wife*)

Jacques Beauvais (*majordomo*)

Robert Moor (*diplomat*)

Claire Duhamel (*maid*)

Emile Genevois (*guard*)

Colette Régis (*candle seller*)

Albert Michel (*second coachman*)

Georges Paulais (*first duel second*)

Michel Salina (*second duel second*)

Gérard Buhr (*customs officer*)

Léon Pauléon (*doorman*)

Roger Vincent

Charles Bayard

René Worms

Max Mégy

France/Italy 1953

100 mins

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**Black Girl (La Noire de...)** Tue 3 Jan 20:30; Thu 12 Jan 18:15 (+ intro)

**Ugetsu Monogatari** Tue 3 Jan 20:50; Tue 17 Jan 20:30

**Madame de...** Wed 4 Jan 14:30; Fri 20 Jan 18:10 (+ intro by Ruby McGuigan, Cultural Programme Manager)

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Fri 27 Jan 20:50

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