



Letter from an unknown woman

Director: Max Ophüls

Country: USA

Date: 1948

*A review by Matthew Pink of **Little White Lies**:*

An age-old story of unrequited love turned into a dazzlingly ambiguous, abyss-like tale of love's inherently fleeting nature and human fallibility. Max Ophüls is one of those directors who is so revered he has had his surname adjectivised. *Letter From an Unknown Woman* is one of a handful of genuinely definitive Ophülsian films dating from the '40s and '50s (notable others include *Lola Montès* and *La Ronde*) replete with his extensive visual vocabulary and unique way with expressive gesture.

All these films are beautifully ornate, minutely detailed and move with a grace that has inspired key directors down the ages from Douglas Sirk to Stanley Kubrick and more recently Michel Gondry. *Letter From an Unknown Woman*, now re-released on a shimmering new print from the BFI, takes an age-old simplistic story of unrequited love and turns it into a dazzlingly ambiguous, abyss-like tale of love's inherently fleeting nature and human fallibility.

A spook-white Joan Fontaine is Lisa, the naïve gamine who is entranced by the elder, louche concert pianist Stefan Brand, played by the vulpine Louis Jourdan (who has a touch of the Billy Zanes about him). Lisa's obsessive and mostly unrequited love for Stefan underpins the way the film plays out. It is she the unidentified sender of the titular letter; a letter which Stefan receives just as he is about to depart to face a duel from which he is likely not to return.

The letter's contents, which he reads to himself as night sets in, subsequently serve as the flashback narrative which forms the film's core and from which we only surface a further few times. Stefan's lifelong problem (as Lisa sees it and tells him so) is his irreversibly evanescent memory which means that he never knew how Lisa 'became his when he didn't know who she was or even that she existed.'



This extended flashback, covering some 15 to 20 years, tells the ruinous story of Lisa's pining for Brand; it tells of her persistent attempts to catch his eye in turn of the century Vienna – a place of narcotic illusions. It shows a deeply unsuccessful stint in priggish Linz, her failed marriage, her one night stand with Brand which resulted in a child (which Stefan has of course forgotten) and their brief, flawed reunion at a Mozart opera performance which leads them both into the Second Act and towards doom.

Ophüls' authorial and recondite irony could be compared to that of Hitchcock in *Vertigo*. Like that film, Ophüls achieves a sort of structural serenity where every facet – rhyming shots, echoing viewpoints, sly reversals of positioning, linguistic articulation and telling costume – all combine in extraordinary coherence to serve the story. And for that there can be no higher praise.

From: <http://www.littlewhitelies.co.uk/theatrical-reviews/letter-from-an-unknown-woman-9889>