

Turn-of-the-Century Vienna on Film: An International Legacy

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DISSERTATION

The Melodramatic Unconscious: The Cinematic Afterlife of *Fin-de-Siècle* Vienna

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation centers on four *auteurs* who turned to the artistic, intellectual, and cultural history of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna in order to reimagine classical Hollywood melodrama for the art cinema genre. Drawing on art history, aesthetic philosophy, literary theory, and film studies, the dissertation intervenes in an ongoing discourse about the relationship between modernism and melodrama, and develops the concept of the “melodramatic unconscious,” the aesthetic and erotic impulses that undergird melodrama’s manifest moral polarities. At the heart of the project are four films which chart turn-of-the-century Vienna’s *Nachleben* throughout the Cold War and post-Soviet period, when the concept of “Vienna 1900” gained purchase on the international imaginary: Max Ophuls’s *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948), Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974), Nicolas Roeg’s *Bad Timing* (1980), and Stanley Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999). Detailed stylistic and narrative analyses of these key films are situated within a constellation of other Vienna-based films, and contextualized within the broader cultural reception of “Vienna 1900” in academia, the art world, and the popular press from the 1930s to the present.



PLOT SYNOPSES

Dishonored (1931, dir. Josef von Sternberg)

In 1915 Vienna, one year into the Great War, streetwalker and war widow Marie Kolverer (Marlene Dietrich) enlists in the Austrian Secret Service as Agent X-27 and is sent to Russia on a mission to acquire information about an imminent military offensive. Successfully thwarting the offensive and helping Austria capture thousands of Russian troops, X-27 unfortunately falls in love with the Russian agent Colonel Kranau (Victor McLaglen), and is sentenced to death for allowing him to escape his own execution. In this scene, X-27 attends a masquerade in order to seduce Colonel von Hindau (Walter Oland) who is suspected of colluding with Russian spies.

The Smiling Lieutenant (1931, dir. Ernst Lubitsch)

In this early scene, Lieutenant Nikolaus "Niki" von Preyn (Maurice Chevalier) meets Franzi (Claudette Colbert), the leader of the all-female-orchestra, at an outdoor concert. Their relationship is interrupted when Niki is ordered to marry Princess Anna of Flausenthurm (Miriam Hopkins) and leave Vienna. While Franzi and Niki carry on an extra-marital affair, eventually Franzi helps the old-fashioned princess to modernize her persona and win Niki's true affection.

Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948, dir. Max Ophuls)

Lisa Berndle (Joan Fontaine), a young woman in turn-of-the-century Vienna, becomes obsessed with her concert pianist neighbor, Stefan Brand (Louis Jourdan). After admiring him from afar for a decade, they spend one fateful night together before the womanizing Stefan abandons the pregnant Lisa. After marrying the military officer Johann Stauffer (Marcel Journet), Lisa reunites with Stefan who has no memory of their earlier dalliance. Devastated by Stefan's failure to recognize her, Lisa reunites with her son. Sadly, both Lisa and her son succumb to typhus which they contracted from a quarantined train car. This scene shows a montage of Stefan's memories of Lisa once he discovers her identity from the eponymous letter.



La ronde (1950, dir. Max Ophuls)

This adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler's *Reigen* (1897) opens with the Raconteur (Anton Walbrook) wandering through a stage set of "Vienna 1900." Over the course of the film, he narrates a series of interlocked pairings of Viennese stock characters: the prostitute, the soldier, the chambermaid, the young man, the wife, the husband, the *süße Mädel*, the poet, the actress, and the count.

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968, dir. Stanley Kubrick)

Stretching from the Dawn of Man to the twenty-first century, this epic sci-fi film traces the evolution of human technology culminating in the threatening computer, HAL 9000. In this scene, we are introduced to Space Station V, where astronaut Heywood Floyd (William Sylvester) makes a stop *en route* to the lunar outpost Clavius.

The Night Porter (1974, dir. Liliana Cavani)



In 1957 Vienna, Max Aldorfer (Dirk Bogarde), a former SS guard in a Hungarian concentration camp, is working as a night porter at a hotel attached to the *Volksoper*. During a traveling production of *The Magic Flute*, Max is reunited with the conductor's wife Lucia Atherton (Charlotte

Rampling), a former prisoner of the *Lager* whom Max sexually abused. Pursued by a cabal of local ex-Nazis who fear exposure for their war crimes, Lucia abandons her husband and Max retires his post in order to sequester themselves in the Karl-Marx-Hof where they develop a sadomasochistic relationship. Eventually denied access to food and electricity by the ex-Nazis and their accomplices, Max and Lucia leave the apartment only to be shot down on the Florisdorfer Bridge. This opening credit sequence follows Max's morning walk to work through some of Vienna's most iconic locations.

Bad Timing (1980, dir. Nicolas Roeg)



Several months into a tumultuous on-again, off-again affair with research psychoanalyst Alex Linden (Art Garfunkel), party girl Milena Flaherty (Theresa Russell) is rushed to the hospital for an emergency tracheotomy after having overdosed on

amphetamines. Inspector Friedrich Netusil (Harvey Keitel) suspects, correctly, that Alex raped Milena while she was unconscious, neglecting to call for an ambulance until it was almost too late. But in true melodramatic fashion, Netusil discovers that Milena has survived her operation before he can wring a confession out of Alex. This opening credit sequence is a flashback to one of Alex and Milena's first dates at the Belvedere.

Eyes Wide Shut (1999, dir. Stanley Kubrick)

After his wife Alice (Nicole Kidman) confesses to an instance of near-infidelity, Dr. Bill Harford (Tom Cruise) sets off on a night of near-erotic encounters. Retracing his steps the following day, he discovers that one of his patients, Victor Ziegler (Sydney Pollack), may have been implicated in the murder of a prostitute. Ultimately, Bill discloses his misadventures to Alice, and they reiterate their mutual commitment to honesty and fidelity. In this scene, Bill and Alice attend a Christmas party at Ziegler's mansion, where Alice is pursued by the Hungarian playboy Sandor Szavost (Sky du Mont).

A Dangerous Method (2011, dir. David Cronenberg)

This biographical film follows the unraveling of Sigmund Freud (Viggo Mortensen) and Carl Jung's (Michael Fassbender) professional relationship after Jung begins an affair with his patient, Sabina Spielrein (Keira Knightly). In this scene, set in the Café Sperl, Freud enlightens Jung about the anti-Semitic resistance to psychoanalysis from the turn-of-the-century medical establishment.



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- The Affairs of Anatol* (1921, dir. Cecil B. DeMille)
- Merry-Go-Round* (1923, dir. Rupert Julian and Erich von Stroheim)
- Die Nibelungen: Siegfried* (1924, dir. Fritz Lang)
- Die freudlose Gasse/The Joyless Street* (1925, dir. G.W. Pabst)
- Ein Walzertraum* (1925, dir. Ludwig Berger)
- The Wedding March* (1928, dir. Erich von Stroheim)
- The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931, dir. Ernst Lubitsch)
- Dishonored* (1931, dir. Josef von Sternberg)
- Grand Hotel* (1932, dir. Edmund Goulding)
- Leise flehen meine Lieder/Gently My Songs Entreat* (1933, dir. Willi Forst)

Liebelei (1933, dir. Max Ophüls)
Maskerade/Masquerade in Vienna (1934, dir. Willi Forst)
Waltzes from Vienna (1934, dir. Alfred Hitchcock)
Episode (1935, dir. Walter Reisch)
Mayerling (1936, dir. Anatole Litvak)
The Great Waltz (1938, dir. Julien Duvivier, Victor Fleming,
 and Josef von Sternberg)
Operette (1940, dir. Willi Forst)
De Mayerling à Sarajevo (1940, dir. Max Ophüls)
The Emperor Waltz (1948, dir. Billy Wilder)
Letter from an Unknown Woman (1948, dir. Max Ophüls)
The Third Man (1949, dir. Carol Reed)
La Ronde (1950, dir. Max Ophüls)
Oh...Rosalinda!! (1955, dir. Michael Powell and Emeric
 Pressburger)
A Breath of Scandal (1960, dir. Michael Curtiz)
Freud: The Secret Passion (1962, dir. John Huston)
The Waltz King (1963, dir. Steve Previn)



La ronde (1964, dir. Roger Vadim)
Mayerling (1968, dir. Terence Young)
2001: A Space Odyssey (1968, dir. Stanley
 Kubrick)
Traumnovelle (1969, dir. Wolfgang Glück)
The Great Waltz (1972, dir. Andrew L. Stone)
Il portiere di notte/The Night Porter (1974, dir.
 Liliana Cavani)
Mahler (1975, dir. Ken Russell)
Young Dr. Freud (1976, dir. Axel Corti)
The Seven-per-cent Solution (1976, dir. Herbert
 Ross)
Vienna, the Mask of Gold (1977, dir. Michael
 Frayn)
The Boys from Brazil (1978, dir. Franklin J.
 Schaffner)
*Sigmund Freud's Dora: A Case of Mistaken
 Identity* (1979, dir. Anthony McCall, Claire

Pajaczkowska, Andrew Tyndall, Jane Weinstock)

Bad Timing (1980, dir. Nicolas Roeg)

Egon Schiele: Excess and Punishment (1980, dir.
Herbert Vesely)

Freud (1984, dir. Moira Armstrong)

Wittgenstein (1993, dir. Derek Jarman)

Before Sunrise (1995, dir. Richard Linklater)

Eyes Wide Shut (1999, dir. Stanley Kubrick)

La Pianiste (2001, dir. Michael Haneke)

Bride of the Wind (2001, dir. Bruce Beresford)

Klimt (2006, dir. Raúl Ruiz)

A Dangerous Method (2011, dir. David
Cronenberg)

Egon Schiele: Tod und Mädchen (2016, dir. Dieter
Berner)

Woman in Gold (2015, dir. Simon Curtis)

Stefan Zweig: Farewell to Europe (2016, dir. Maria
Schrader)

Freud (2020, dir. Marvin Kren)



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