Chapter 11

Lola and Motherhood

It is not obvious that Lola has a mother or that she has ever been a mother herself. Not as Lola. The home of Dietrich’s Lola Lola is the stage. Motherhood may be part of some backstory, but to the extent that we do not know Lola Lola’s original name, we also know nothing about her mother and her childhood. The closest we come to motherhood in The Blue Angel—and this is in itself an indication of how distant the idea of motherhood is from the film—are her clucking like a hen on the occasion of her wedding to Professor Rath and the eggs later broken against his head during his final humiliation on the Blue Angel stage. It stands to reason that Lola’s claim to pleasure rules out any connection with the cycles of reproduction. Or does it?

Two international films featuring Lola—and even called Lola—take up positions at the beginning and end of motherhood. Bertrand Tavernier’s Holy Lola (2004) is about a French couple and the lengths to which they and other couples will go in order to obtain an adoptive baby in Cambodia. When at last they succeed, they learn that the baby’s name is Lola. She is named after her orphanage, the Holy Lola, as is customary in Cambodia. Her arrival brings joy, but the film never loses sight of the moral dilemmas and indignities associated with the international trade in babies. On the other end we have Brillante Mendoza’s Lola (2009), which plays on the fact that the Filipino word for grandmother is lola. Living in the slum barrios of Manila, she also goes to great lengths, though with more dignity, in her quest to arrange for a proper funeral for her murdered grandson. A second grandmother faces a similarly difficult task: raising the money to purchase the release of her grandson, who is behind bars for the murder of the grandson of the first lola. I do not want to argue that

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Tavernier’s and Mendoza’s films are Lola films in the strict sense. I do, however, believe that in giving their films the name, scrawling it across the film poster and the trailer, both directors provocatively forged a connection to the Lola brand, challenging it with issues of international poverty and motherhood. There is small room for pleasure in either film, but each Lola, young and old, is splendidly resilient.

Despite the evident disconnect between Lola Lola and motherhood in The Blue Angel, directors and screenwriters were inevitably drawn to the question and explored its possibilities. In Chapter 8 we discussed Fleming’s attempt to domesticate Dietrich’s Lola for the American public in his film Bombshell. Jean Harlow’s Lola has her own ideas about domestication. At the prompt of a reporter’s question, she fancies she hears “the call of motherhood.” When old flame Jim Brogan, the director of her most recent film, does not seem interested in helping her respond to the call, Lola takes steps to begin the process of adopting a child from the local orphanage. A home visit by two matrons from the orphanage to determine the suitability of Lola as adoptive mother presents her agent Space with all he needs to scuttle her plans in grand style. Space has no interest in seeing his bombshell “turned into a rubber nipple.” Everyone converges on her home: her drunken father and her brother in the company of a moll, Jim Brogan and her pugnacious gigolo, and a raft of newspaper photographers, with Space directing the fiasco from behind the scenes. All claims to domesticity and maternal bliss are rendered void.

As the first director of a Lola film to make lavish use of the flashback, Max Ophuls takes Lola back to two scenes from her youth. Insofar as the biography of Lola Montez is known, there really is a backstory for Ophuls to make use of. But Ophuls ignores the fact that the historical young Lola was known as Eliza and only took the name after she had extracted herself from her mother and her own marriage. While Ustinov and the American circus represent a caricature of her happy childhood, Lola remembers the moment when she and her mother board a ship to return from India to Europe. Requiring the freedom of a private cabin for her dalliance with Lieutenant James, Lola’s mother booked a bed for her teenaged daughter in an overcrowded children’s dormitory. Questioning the steward who shows her the way, she discovers that her mother lied to her about the availability of two-person cabins. Expelled from the dining room when the dancing begins, Lola feels the full ignominy of her mother’s treatment. The second flashback follows almost immediately. Lola, her mother, and James have arrived in Paris and visit the opera. During intermission, Lola is to be presented to an old banker for a marriage arranged by