

Retouching Lubitsch

David Weir

Professor Emeritus of Comparative
Literature
The Cooper Union

Joseph McBride, *How Did Lubitsch Do It?*
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THE TITLE OF JOSEPH MCBRIDE'S new book on the German-American film director Ernst Lubitsch (1892–1947) alludes to the sign that the Lubitsch protégé Billy Wilder had the New Yorker cartoonist Saul Steinberg make for him: “How would Lubitsch do it?” Both Wilder and McBride are asking how Lubitsch managed the cinematic magic of making sophisticated, understated films that somehow satisfy the demands of high art and popular entertainment all at once, but the answer remains elusive. Or, one could say, the answer *is* elusive, meaning that there is something deliberately elusive about what is usually called, vaguely, “the Lubitsch touch.” Whenever he was faced with a cinematic problem, Lubitsch seems to have asked himself: “How can I avoid the obvious? How can I do this in a way that is different from the way it is usually done?” But by asking how Lubitsch did it, McBride is interested in a still larger question: “Why can’t it be done today?” Indeed, McBride harbors the “quixotic hope” that both filmmakers and audiences might recover the Lubitsch magic in our own day.

More admiring historian than critical biographer, McBride covers the full range of Lubitsch’s career, which can be divided into five segments: the German silent films; the American silents; the musical comedies; the pre-code, comic romances of the 1930s; and the romantic comedies of the 1940s. Here, we will examine a single representative film from each of these categories, beginning with *The Doll* (*Die Puppe*), which Lubitsch himself named his favorite film of the German period. Released on December 5, 1919, *The Doll* is the last film Lubitsch made that features himself as a performer—sort of. In fact, he appears not as an actor in the film but as the director—the puppet master, really—of the film. We see Lubitsch constructing a miniature cardboard set consisting of a stylized house, a winding path leading down a hill to a pond, and some highly geometric trees bordering the path. Lubitsch lifts the roof of the house and inserts two dolls into it; then, after an imperceptible dissolve transforms the toy set into the full-sized version of the house, the two dolls come to life as a man and a woman who emerge from the front door. The man promptly trips, rolls down the hill, and into the pond, the woman running frantically after him. She hauls him out of the water, whereupon he petitions the sun to dry him out. A smiling, cardboard sun obliges, as the man smiles gratefully, steam rising from his jacket and trousers. Thus are we introduced to our hero, Lancelot (Hermann Thimig), and his doting, over-protective nanny (Josefine Dora). Lancelot is the nephew and sole heir of Baron von Chanterelle (Max Kronert), who issues a proclamation ordering the maidens of the village to present themselves before Lancelot so he can choose one to marry, thereby ensuring continuation of the royal lineage. When Lancelot learns of the plan, he is horrified at the prospect of marriage and runs off to a monastery. When the monks see a notice in the newspaper



Figure 1 Ossi (Ossi Oswalda) delights in the full-size, doll-version of herself created by her father, Dr. Hilarius (Victor Janson), a master doll-maker. From *The Doll (Die Puppe)*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch (Berlin: Projektions-AG Union [PAGU], 1919, DVD Kino Lorber 2007).

announcing that the Baron will give his nephew 300,000 francs if he will return to the palace and marry, the monks, strapped for cash, see an opportunity: they know an expert doll-maker who can make a life-like, full-sized doll-woman that Lancelot can marry, provided he give the monks the 300,000 francs. Agreed; everybody wins.

Dr. Hilarius (Victor Janson), the doll-maker, is just putting the finishing touches on his latest creation, a doll modeled on his daughter, Ossi (Ossi Oswalda; Figure 1). The doll has a crank mechanism on its back, and a series of buttons that make it perform various functions. The doll-maker's mischievous apprentice punches "dance" and off they go, but he stumbles and breaks

the doll's arm just as Lancelot arrives at the shop to make his selection. The apprentice is in a panic until Ossi assumes the role of the doll. Sure enough, Lancelot, insisting on a doll of "good character," chooses Ossi and goes off to marry the "doll." Ossi maintains the subterfuge, stepping in and out of doll mode in the blink of an eye, successfully fooling Lancelot into believing that he has indeed married an actual doll. But Lancelot starts to have second thoughts about his misogyny, and, on his wedding night, dreams of a woman who looks just like the doll he has married. At that moment he is awakened by Ossi, who has leapt on the bed after seeing a mouse. That's when Lancelot happily realizes that the doll is, in fact,

a real woman, and Ossi is happy that he has. Once again, everybody wins: Lancelot gets Ossi, Ossi gets Lancelot, the Baron gets an heir (eventually), and the monks get the money.

But the crazy plot is the least of the film's delights. Indeed, with its painted cardboard sets, pantomime acting, and trick shots à la Georges Méliès (involving stop-action animation), *The Doll* appears to belong to the early, primitive era of cinema as a fairground entertainment. At the same time, it also combines traditional elements of German Romanticism (e.g., the automatons of E. T. A. Hoffmann) with contemporary social developments, notably the liberating feminism of *Girlkultur*. In fact, it's easy to read the doll-version of Ossi as a representation of the "pre-programmed" way that young women are supposed to act in society, and the behavior of the real Ossi as a reaction to the sense of women as social automatons. Lubitsch's film now seems like a comic counter to the more oppressive *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, released a couple months after *The Doll*. Both films involve somnambulism, and both set the action in a fantasy world of expressionistically painted sets. Small wonder, then, that Lubitsch himself accounted the film "the most imaginative" of his German period.

Thanks to clever sex comedies like *The Doll* and the other specialty of his German period—lavishly costumed historical dramas—Lubitsch saw his fame spread to Hollywood, where he came in 1922 at the request of no less a mega-star than Mary Pickford, who was looking to shift her career away from the sentimental roles that had branded her "America's Sweetheart." Their collaboration resulted in *Rosita* (1923), a forgettable film that reflected the difficulties between a star accustomed to one system of making films and a director used to another. In Germany, Lubitsch had broad control over every aspect of the films he

made, but in Hollywood he had to submit to Pickford. Happily for Lubitsch, the three Warner brothers—Harry, Jack, and Sam—were looking to introduce an element of Continental sophistication into their Hollywood products, and who better than Lubitsch to do that? The Warners granted him the creative control he needed with a contract to do five pictures for them, all of which were sophisticated romantic comedies about innocent and worldly wives, conniving and naïve girlfriends, philandering and cuckolded husbands—the basic stuff of modern marriage, in other words. Of these films, the best may be Lubitsch's 1925 adaptation of Oscar Wilde's 1892 play, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, the story of a ruined woman who uses her tarnished reputation to blackmail her daughter's husband (Figure 2). When the daughter finds evidence of the blackmail payments to the glamorous and mysterious Mrs. Erlynne (Irene Rich), she assumes her husband is having an affair and resolves revenge by having an affair of her own with the dashing Lord Darlington (Ronald Firbank). But her mother intervenes at the last minute, saving her from the social shame she herself has been forced to endure for her entire adult life.

What makes Lubitsch's silent screen adaptation so remarkable is the mere fact that what he adapts is a work by Oscar Wilde, whose plays are known, above all, for the playwright's brilliant displays of verbal wit. *Lady Windermere's Fan* contains many of Wilde's memorable epigrams, including "I can resist everything except temptation" and, perhaps most memorably, "we are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." Somehow, Lubitsch manages to use the medium of silent cinema to capture the kind of wit and worldliness that Wilde achieved by means of language. The challenge of bringing Wilde's verbal flourishes to the silent screen was one that Lubitsch was eager to meet because, even



Figure 2 Lady Windermere (May McAvoy) fans the twin flames of love and suspicion. From *Lady Windermere's Fan*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch (Hollywood: Warner Bros., 1925, DVD National Film Preservation Foundation, 2004).



Figure 3 Queen Louise (Jeanette MacDonald) and Count Alfred (Maurice Chevalier) work through problems of royalty and romance. From *The Love Parade* (1929), dir. Ernst Lubitsch (Hollywood: Famous Players-Lasky/Paramount, 1929, DVD Criterion, 2007).

before he came to the Wilde project, he had long thought that audiences spent too much time reading title cards, and believed cinema should be able to tell stories through images alone. The great French director Jean Renoir once said that Lubitsch was the man who invented Hollywood, and what he meant was that Lubitsch was chiefly responsible for inventing the classic Hollywood technique of “invisible” editing, of making the technique of cinema so subordinate to the narrative that the audience could just settle into the story without noticing how the film was put together.

Lady Windermere’s Fan is a foundational illustration of this classic method. The audience is drawn into the story again and again by means of point-of-view shots, impeccable eye-line matches (when a character looks at another character out of the frame, the line of sight matches perfectly when the character looks back at the first character), and off-screen action that puts the audience in the position of making inferences—sometimes mistaken—about what that action is. For example, at her birthday party Lady Windermere (May McAvoy) is upset that her husband, Lord Windermere (Bert Lytell), has invited Mrs. Erlynne and storms out of the ballroom for the terrace. Lord Windermere does not see his wife leave and starts looking for her, exiting the frame screen right. Next, we see Lady Windermere on the terrace when the hand of a man out of the frame reaches for hers. Having just seen her husband move in the same screen direction where earlier we saw Lady Windermere move, we assume that the man reaching out to her is Lord Windermere. But then Lady Windermere looks at the man (still out of frame) and registers surprise; a cut reveals that the man is in fact Lord Darlington, who then goes out into the formal garden with Lady Windermere. He finally cajoles her to run away with him after she sees Mrs. Erlynne,

now on the terrace she has just left, hold out her hand to be kissed by an unseen man. Lady Windermere assumes that unseen man is her husband, but a shot from Mrs. Erlynne’s point of view reveals the man to be Lord Augustus (Edward Martindel), a wealthy bachelor who has fallen in love with Mrs. Erlynne. This pattern whereby the audience receives visual information that a character does not—or vice versa—is repeated many times, sustaining audience involvement in the narrative to an extraordinary degree: classic Hollywood filmmaking, in short.

Lady Windermere’s Fan and the other Warner films established Lubitsch as one of the premier directors of the silent era. His films were less popular than those of Charlie Chaplin, certainly, but Lubitsch was much more of a prestige director whose films were subtle and indirect—and replete with sexual innuendo. That combination, one could argue, can be realized more readily in silent cinema, so what did Lubitsch do when sound technology became available to filmmakers after the success of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927? He invented a new genre—the movie musical. A lover of operetta and cabaret, Lubitsch combined those two European forms with romantic comedy to make musical comedies. While it is true that other films included musical interludes and singing stars, Lubitsch made the music part of the story: when someone sang a song, he or she was singing in character and advancing the plot.

Lubitsch’s first talking picture was *The Love Parade* (1929), starring Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald (Figure 3). This is the film that made Chevalier an international star for his combination of Continental stylishness and beguiling rakishness. He plays Count Alfred Reynard, the military attaché of the ambassador to Paris from the imaginary kingdom of Sylvania, ruled by Queen Louise (MacDonald),

whose advisers are anxious for her to marry and produce an heir to the kingdom. Reynard is recalled from duty because his many affairs with Parisian women are a scandal to the nation of Sylvania. Before he leaves, he goes out on the balcony to sing his goodbyes to his many female admirers. Likewise, his servant Jacques (Lupino Lane) sings farewell to the maids of his master's mistresses—and so does Jacques's dog, barking out the tune to the ladies' poodles and pugs. Once in Sylvania, Reynard comes before the queen to accept his punishment, which he insists should be that he never be allowed to leave the queen's side. The arrangement leads to matrimony for the queen at last, but also disappointment for Reynard, who is relegated to the role of Prince consort—a househusband with nothing to do all day. While Chevalier and MacDonald sing their way through this operetta plot, Jacques and the queen's maid Lulu (Lilian Roth) carry the cabaret plot in hilarious upstairs-downstairs fashion, with both performers' remarkable gifts for singing, dancing, and physical comedy on spectacular display in the duet, "Let's Be Common." After Reynard threatens to return to Paris, Queen Louise admits that she has treated him unfairly and demands that he punish her—by insisting that she never leave his side. She calls him "my King" and the musical ends happily.

The ending of *The Love Parade* unfortunately includes a few sexist stereotypes (like Ossi in *The Doll*, Queen Louise is afraid of mice), but Lubitsch became increasingly sophisticated—and equitable—in his representations of women as his Hollywood career progressed. Putting on the screen sophisticated, confident women whose sexual desires were as open and frank as those of any man became one of the hallmarks of a Lubitsch film—one that eventually ran afoul of that program of Hollywood self-censorship known as the

Motion Picture Production Code. In general, the Code meant to "maintain social and community values" in the production of motion pictures and, more specifically, to uphold "the sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home." Today, it is conventional to divide films from the golden age of Hollywood into those made before the code and those made after. If you want to know how a pre-code sequence plays, take a look at the last five minutes of another Lubitsch musical, *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931). The formerly prim and repressed princess Anna (Miriam Hopkins) twirls about in her see-through negligée and casts a come-hither look at Lieutenant Niki (Chevalier). When he goes thither Anna offers Niki a game of checkers, and, after an exchange of highly suggestive glances, he consents to play the game—in bed.

Lubitsch's first non-musical talking picture, *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), is an even better example of a pre-code film. The plot involves two jewel thieves, the notorious Gaston Monescu (Herbert Marshall) and Lily (Hopkins), whose wildly improbable pickpocketing skills endear them to each other so much that they fall in love (Figure 4). The couple have a private dinner in the hotel where Gaston has just pulled off a heist, each pretending to be royalty and fishing for clues to the other's identity. Lily has certain suspicions, and having gotten news of the robbery, says, "I have a confession to make to you. Baron, you are a crook." The "Baron" returns the compliment by telling her, "with love in my heart; Countess, you are a thief"—because he knows she has picked his pocket and taken the wallet stuffed with cash from the recent heist: "In fact, you tickled me. But your embrace was so sweet." As suspenseful music swells, Gaston locks the hotel room door and shakes Lily about like a rag doll until the wallet falls to the floor. The couple then continue their dinner in the most



Figure 4 The stars of *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), Herbert Marshall and Miriam Hopkins, in a Paramount Studio publicity still. Courtesy George Eastman Museum, Rochester, NY.

polite and decorous way imaginable. As a sign of his affection, Gaston returns the jeweled pin he has pilfered from Lily. She asks Gaston for the time, and when he can't find his watch she returns it to him, having regulated it for him (it was five minutes slow). Doing her one better, Gaston asks if he can keep her garter, which he has somehow pilfered from her leg without her knowing it (Figure 5). By now, the "Countess" is dying to know the "Baron's" true identity and throws herself into his arms, asking, "Who are you?" He says, simply (!), "You remember the man who walked *into* the Bank of Constantinople and walked out *with* the Bank of Constantinople?" She responds, with delight, "Gaston Monescu!" A series of understated "Lubitsch touches" follow that make clear

that the couple spend the night together, making love.

Time passes, and the couple fall on hard times—in Paris. It is the Great Depression, after all, so even cosmopolitan jewel thieves have to struggle to make a living. "Prosperity is just around the corner," Gaston says, quoting the maxim often attributed to Herbert Hoover, President at the time. It turns out that he is right, because the couple soon target the wealthy widow Madame Mariette Colet (Kay Francis), who has taken over the management of her dead husband's perfume factory, Colet & Co. The plan to rob her safe of cash and jewelry begins to falter when Gaston falls in love with Madame Colet, but the attraction of the criminal life with Lily (whom he still loves, also) asserts itself,



Figure 5 Gaston Monescu (Marshall) shows off his pickpocketing skills to Lily (Hopkins) by lifting her garter without her noticing. From *Trouble in Paradise*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch (Hollywood: Paramount Publix, 1932, DVD Criterion, 2003).

and the two thieves are reunited at the end. What makes the film such an excellent example of pre-code Hollywood mores is the remarkably open attitude the three principals share toward their mutual attraction to each other—what we see on the screen hints at a *ménage à trois*—combined with the clever cosmopolitan plot that makes the audience feel respect and admiration for the elegant pair of thieves, whose crimes go unpunished. To be clear, The Motion Picture Production Code had been established in 1930, before the release of Lubitsch's film in 1932, but the Code was not strictly enforced until 1934, when the Production Code Association mandated that all films obtain a certificate of approval before release. The Code specifically indicated that criminal

behavior “shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice”—which is precisely what Lubitsch did in *Trouble in Paradise*. The Code also called for films to refrain from implying that “low forms of sex relationship [i.e., outside marriage] are the accepted or common thing”—a requirement that is so far removed from Lubitsch's film as to be laughable. Unfortunately, the full weight of the Code came down on *Trouble in Paradise* in 1935 when an application for re-issue was refused. It was not seen again until 1968, after Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)—featuring another pair of sympathetic criminals—blew apart (almost literally) the old prohibitions kept in place so long by the Production Code. Incredibly, *Trouble in*

Paradise was never released on videocassette, and only became widely available when Criterion published a DVD version in 2003.

Lubitsch said of *Trouble in Paradise* that he had done nothing better “as to pure style,” but in one of his last interviews he named *The Shop around the Corner* (1940) “the best picture I ever made in my life.” It is easy to see why Lubitsch held the film in such high regard: this is the one film that is “most like him,” as Lubitsch’s niece observed: “It’s so European; it contains the most of what he was, all the types, the people that were his friends, the people he loved.” Clearly, the autobiographical subtext of *The Shop around the Corner* runs deep. Matuschek and Company, the leather goods shop in interwar Budapest (a city that Lubitsch loved deeply—the site of his honeymoon and frequent vacations), almost certainly echoes the Berlin establishment run by Lubitsch’s parents, a tailoring concern specializing in coats for “large women.” The family shop experience lies behind two of Lubitsch’s earliest successes in cinema, *Der Stoltz der Firma* (*The Pride of the Firm* [1914]), directed by Carl Wilhelm, and *Schuhpalast Pinkus* (*Shoe Palace Pinkus* [1916]), in which Lubitsch directed himself as Sally (pronounced “Solly,” short for Solomon) Pinkus, a lowly clerk who through a comic combination of luck and chutzpah becomes the head of a stylish fashion emporium (McBride describes the film as “more or less a remake of *The Pride of the Firm*”).

The “Solly” type appears in *The Shop around the Corner* as Pepi (William Tracy), the guileful errand boy who rises to the position of salesclerk by the end of the film. But the main story concerns the relationship of the head salesman Alfred Kralic (James Stewart) and the salesgirl Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan), who bicker and argue at work while engaging in a romantic correspondence with each other, neither knowing that each is the other’s idealized soul-mate. By the time they decide to meet in

person, Kralic is too ashamed to follow through, having lost his job when Mr. Matuschek (Frank Morgan) fires him on suspicion of adultery with his wife. But Kralic goes to the restaurant rendezvous anyway, just to get a look at the woman whose letters have made him fall in love. When he discovers that the woman in the letters and the woman in the shop are the same person, he begins the warmly ironic process of helping Klara realize that the man she loves in the letters is none other than himself. After a private detective informs Mr. Matuschek that it is not Kralic but another employee, the smarmy Vadas (Joseph Schildkraut), who is the adulterer, he attempts suicide but is prevented from doing so in an off-screen struggle with Pepi. Understandably, Mr. Matuschek needs to take some time off, so he re-hires Kralic and promotes him to manager. His position now secure, Kralic finally reveals himself to Klara as her romantic correspondent. Stunned, she says, “Psychologically, I’m very confused, but personally, I don’t feel bad at all.” She has, however, heard a rumor that Kralic is bow-legged, so she asks to see his legs, and when he obligingly pulls up his trousers to reveal a normal pair, they seal their love with a kiss (Figure 6).

Given Lubitsch’s fondness for this film and its biographical resonance, it is hard not to see the little shop in Budapest as a metaphor for the Lubitsch “shop” in Hollywood. After his suicide attempt, Mr. Matuschek realizes that the shop is really his home, the place where, he says, “I have spent most of my life.” So too was Lubitsch, a workaholic who neglected home life for the studio. Also, the shopkeeper’s discovery that his wife is having an affair with one of his employees echoes a detail from the filmmaker’s life—in 1930 Lubitsch found out that his first wife, Leni, had been unfaithful to him with his longtime screenwriter, Hans Kräly. McBride suggests that Lubitsch’s personal experience of betrayal helps to



Figure 6 In a reversal of conventional gender roles, Alfred Kralic (James Stewart) shows off his legs to Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan). From *The Shop around the Corner*, dir. Ernst Lubitsch (Hollywood: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1940, DVD, Warner Home Video, 2012).

account for the director's remarkable sensitivity to the situation in the film, making the audience feel deep empathy for the kindly Mr. Matuschek. At the very least, that character's lonely generosity and sad dignity make him a more likely Lubitsch alter-ego than the cigar-chomping, wise-cracking family man Pirovich (Felix Bressart), whose off-screen happiness seems like a wish-fulfillment fantasy of the life that Lubitsch wanted but could never have.

In this delightfully informative book McBride is unabashedly nostalgic for the urbane art of concealing art that Lubitsch mastered in *The Shop around the Corner* and

in so many of his other films. He is also nostalgic for the kind of sophisticated American audience that would accept and revere Lubitsch as the master of stylish, sophisticated cinema. Often, nostalgia masks ideological impulses that are conservative, even reactionary. But the longing for a return to the kind of warm, gentle romance and humanism we see in these films by a German immigrant who adopted Hollywood as his home reveals a different kind of nostalgia altogether: the wish to recover not so much a time when America was great, but rather, when it was so much more than that. ㄱ