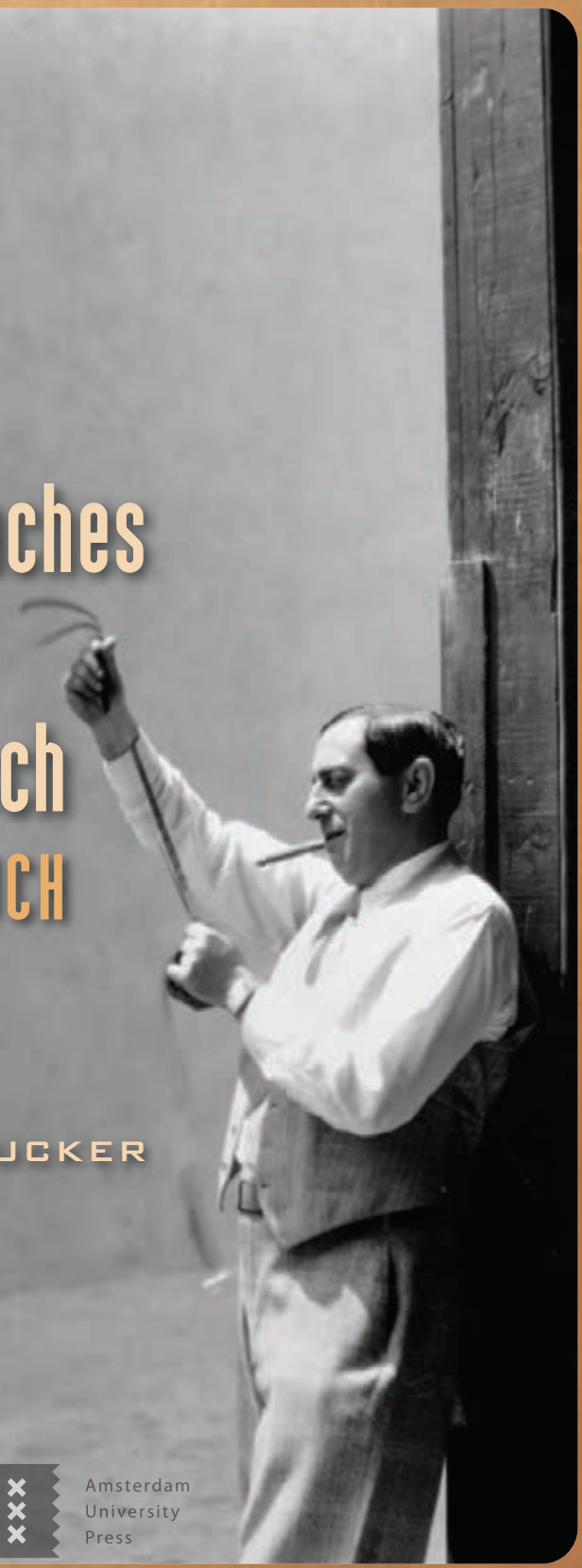
FILM CULTURE

IN TRANSITION

New Approaches to Ernst Lubitsch

A LIGHT TOUCH



EDITED BY

BRIGITTE PEUCKER

IDO LEWIT

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Edited by
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Brigitte Peucker and Ido Lewit, Guilford, CT and Tel Aviv, Israel, August 2023

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Introduction

Brigitte Peucker and Ido Lewit

"No man is a genius unless he can deliver honest entertainment."
– Ernst Lubitsch.[1]

1968 was an important year for the cinema of Ernst Lubitsch. In February, *Cahiers du Cinéma* published a special issue on Lubitsch, which included French translations of existing essays and a filmography, as well as new essays by François Truffaut and Jean Domarchi. Later that year saw the publication of Herman G. Weinberg's *The Lubitsch Touch: A Critical Study*, the earliest book-length work on Lubitsch in English. Then, late in 1968, the Museum of Modern Art in New York held what was at that time a complete retrospective of the director's films. In a review of this retrospective Kirk Bond wrote:

> At last we have had a chance to see what Lubitsch really did as an artist, and we are now able to understand that he was an artist in the highest sense, that he was probably the equal of Murnau and Lang, but that this is all for quite different reasons than we have ever known.[2]

But the expected wave of scholarship on Lubitsch failed to arrive, and, in any event, the critical response to Lubitsch was far from equal to that generated by the films of F. W. Murnau and Fritz Lang. Of course, Lubitsch's success and fame are undeniable, even recognized: Lubitsch was commended by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his outstanding contributions to the art of the motion picture. Yet the scholarly investment in his work remained relatively meager. The director whose films exerted an influence on film pioneers such as Buster Keaton and Sergei Eisenstein and was admired by Charlie Chaplin, Alfred Hitchcock, Orson Welles, John Ford,

1 Qtd. in Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 228.
2 Bond, "Ernst Lubitsch," 139.

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Billy Wilder, Jean Renoir, and Truffaut, has received less critical attention than the masters of cinema who acknowledged his work's importance. Lubitsch's American films (1922–1948) remain an under-populated terrain; scholarly engagement with his German work in film (1913–1923) is sparse, his works understudied. The director's place in the history of the Hollywood musical and the romantic comedy also requires elaboration. This holds true as well for the history of early German cinema, where popular cinema has received short shrift.

Why is this the case? In the context of German film history, the director's significance was marginalized by Siegfried Kracauer, who affords little room to the director's whimsical cinematic approach in his historiography—or "demonology," as Christian Rogowski puts it—of German cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler*.[3] In Lotte Eisner's canonical work, *The Haunted Screen*, she remarks that "the best German directors limited themselves to tragic films,"[4] and dismissively associates Lubitsch's movies with vulgarity and "the vainglory of the *nouveau riche*."[5] These two influential studies promoted a discourse on German pre-World War II cinema associated with trauma, romanticism, fatalism, and arthouse Expressionism. Lubitsch's "escapist" movies, be they slapstick comedies or extravagant costume dramas, simply did not fit the narrative.

E. Ann Kaplan commented on the neglect of Lubitsch's Hollywood films more than forty years ago, when two books on Lubitsch appeared in an otherwise scholarly wasteland.[6] According to Kaplan, one reason for Lubitsch's near absence in then-contemporary film scholarship is the above-mentioned critical essay by Domarchi, which presented the director as all too willing to accept Hollywood's capitalist film production methods. Another is that his approach to sexuality made him of "little interest to feminists" (a claim that some of the essays in the current volume belie). For Kaplan, a third factor is that light comedy in the tradition of continental theater—the genre with which Lubitsch became most closely associated—was not one of the genres that critics of the 1960s and 1970s linked with the American myth and its potential cinematic subversions.[7] Since these progressive sentiments shaped the formative years of Film Studies as a distinct discipline, a particular

3 Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*. That said, Kracauer does provide an interesting account of Lubitsch's handling of crowds in his films (*From Caligari to Hitler*, 48–55). For Rogowski's critique of Kracauer, see Rogowski "From Ernst Lubitsch to Joe May," 1–23.

4 Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 310.

5 Eisner, *The Haunted Screen*, 79; see also 75–82, 310.

6 Poague, *The Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch*; Carringer and Sabath, *Ernst Lubitsch*.

7 Kaplan, "Lubitsch Reconsidered," 306.

state of mind at a particular historical moment seems to have colored the disciplinary legacy and reception of Lubitsch's cinema, highlighting the blind spots of what David Bordwell acrimoniously refers to as "SLAB theory."[8] Indeed, we can detect a correlation between the gradual increasing interest in Lubitsch and the dissolution of Grand Theory as the dominant paradigm of Film Studies. Works in English—still few and far between—included William Paul's groundbreaking *Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy* (1983), Sabine Hake's magisterial *Passions and Deceptions: The Early Films of Ernst Lubitsch* (1992), Scott Eyman's engaging *Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise* (1993), and Kristin Thompson's important *Herr Lubitsch Goes to Hollywood* (2005). By contrast, the recent decade produced a number of notable studies, including *Lubitsch Can't Wait: A Theoretical Examination* (eds. Ivana Novak et al., 2014), Mason Kamana Allred's *Weimar Cinema, Embodiment and Historicity: Cultural Memory and the Historical Films of Ernst Lubitsch* (2017), Joseph McBride's *How Did Lubitsch Do It?* (2018), and Rick McCormick's *Sex, Politics and Comedy: The Transnational Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch* (2020).

So, why Lubitsch now? If, for a variety of reasons, Lubitsch has not yet fully had his "moment," it may now have arrived. Donna Kornhaber, one of the contributors to this volume writes that, "the study of Hollywood, and of the directors who have defined its output remains one of the most vital areas of research in film studies today."[9] Indeed, the revival of interest in film auteurs and authorship, especially in connection with issues of identity and representation, has prompted work by Kornhaber herself (on Chaplin as well as on Wes Anderson), by David Gerstner, Seung-hoon Jeong, Noah Isenberg, and Ian Brookes, as well as Charles Silver's *An Auteurist History of Film*. Joe McElhaney, another contributor, concurs, pointing to recently published titles on Hollywood directors such as Kelly Reichardt, Wes Anderson, Francis Ford Coppola, David Lynch, and others.[10]

A subsidiary answer to the question of "why Lubitsch now?" is that our project was conceived during the pandemic, when watching films by Lubitsch provided a welcome respite from anxiety, if not despair. A benign love for the human comedy pervades his work, whether it be the early silent films, the musicals, or the romantic comedies. The director emerges as a generous presence who amuses and engages his audience—while nevertheless inviting them to think and rethink ideological and political

8 The acronym stands for Saussurean semiotics, Lacanian psychoanalysis, Althusserian Marxism, and Barthesian textual theory. See Bordwell, "Historical Poetics of Cinema," 369–398.

9 Kornhaber, in a note to the editors.

10 McElhaney, in a note to the editors.

issues. Lubitsch's generosity of spirit does not for a minute undercut his incisive wit or the self-reflexive artifice of his films. Slavoj Žižek offers a less personal perspective on the question, arguing that, more than seventy years after his passing, Lubitsch's work resonates with contemporary cultural debates, from the #MeToo movement through PC moralism to Trumpism.[11] For Žižek, even more importantly, Lubitsch's famed indirectness is essential to understanding—and counteracting—the dominant ideological tendencies of the present:

> The cunning of (neo)liberal ideology resides in its claim that the "yes, yes, yes" of contractual consent frees us from domination and guilt—and that the statement of the exception can remove the state of exception. But as Lubitsch so well understood, the apparent dropping of the masks is often the most deceptive. When fully under the power of ideology, we "act ourselves" because this ostensible directness represses that which can be expressed only indirectly.[12]

In other words, the Lubitsch Touch thrives on ellipses.

New Approaches to Ernst Lubitsch: A Light Touch seeks to address the gaps in scholarly and critical engagements with the director, while pushing interest in his art of the cinema into still-uncharted terrain. The film historians, archivists, and theorists who contribute to this volume examine Lubitsch's work from several perspectives, including issues of theater and performance, and questions of influence—not to mention the centrality to his work of love, desire, and form.

While addressing gaps in the existing Lubitsch scholarship is a central motivation of this volume, some remain uncovered. Lubitsch's impact on cinematic luminaries such as Billy Wilder and Wes Anderson, Orientalism in the German dramas, his films receptivity to queer theory, the significance of dance, and the role of race in his oeuvre are some of the topics that should be taken up by future research.

Lubitsch's early German films shed light on Jewish culture in Germany as well as on the relation of comedy to gender and the influence of theater on his filmmaking. In addition to filming loose adaptations of Noël Coward and Oscar Wilde, Lubitsch borrowed plots freely from Central European playwrights throughout his career, among them the three Hungarian Lászlos:

11 Žižek, "Ernst Lubitsch, Censorship, and Political Correctness," 78–97. On Lubitsch and the #MeToo movement, see also McCormick, *Sex, Politics, and Comedy*, 2.

12 Žižek, "Ernst Lubitsch, Censorship, and Political Correctness," 97.

Miklós, Aladár, and Fodor László.[13] The director's historical epics brought him worldwide fame and an invitation to Hollywood, which he accepted in 1922. There, Lubitsch confronted the problems of early sound films by developing the film musical and helping to shape Hollywood romantic comedy. The director's approach to stars as well as his connections to other directors and members of the émigré community are also addressed in this volume, as are some matters concerning the censorship of his films. With these diverse issues in mind, we have divided our volume into four parts: 1. Identity and History, 2. Theatricality and Performance, 3. Objects and Spaces, and 4. An Elusive Cinema.

Part I. Identity and History

Watching Lubitsch's early 1930s musicals and romantic comedies, which form some of the director's most recognized works, one might be left with the impression that Lubitsch was a formulaic filmmaker, employing similar routines from one movie to the next. But the fact is that Lubitsch's filmmaking career, spanning more than seventy films over four decades, encompasses an astonishingly varied spectrum, from ethnic comedy and grand historical drama in his German output to sophisticated comedy, whimsical musicals, and witty-yet-penetrating political movies in Hollywood. For Leo Braudy in 1983, Lubitsch was a filmmaker whose art is "beyond nation, national cultures, and national politics entirely—a truly international artist."[14] Forty years later we might say that Lubitsch is a *transnational* director, as McCormick does in his recent book.[15] The director's oeuvre spans two world wars, waves of mass emigration, world economic crises, and major cultural, aesthetic, and political shifts—a compelling case for the study of identity, nation, and history through cinema.

The director's early Jewish milieu films are an illustrative example. These films, in which Lubitsch starred and which he also soon directed, were exceedingly popular just before and during World War I. Lubitsch often played "a bumptious outsider"[16] whose schemes enabled upward social mobility, usually by marrying the boss's daughter. While these films never explicitly identified Lubitsch's characters as Jewish, their names, association with the clothing industry, and their exaggerated physical and

13 See J.-C. Horak's essay in this volume.
14 Braudy, "The Double Detachment of Ernst Lubitsch," 1072.
15 McCormick, *Sex, Politics, and Comedy*, 1–30.
16 Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 64.

behavioral stereotypes left little doubt as to their intended ethnic affiliation. While these hyperbolic depictions helped contemporary audiences decode Lubitsch's figures as Jewish,[17] they were also termed anti-Semitic by later critics,[18] who claimed that they may well have contributed to Nazi propaganda. In his biography of Lubitsch, Eyman notes that the director "was a pet hate of Hitler's, who reputedly demanded that a large blowup of his face be mounted in the Berlin train station over the words 'The Archetypal Jew'."[19] Recent scholarship presents a nuanced image of Lubitsch's early movies, suggesting that their representations of Judaism and Jews can be read in various, even subversive, ways.[20]

In this volume, **Rick McCormick's** essay "Jewishness in Lubitsch's Milieu Films: *The Pride of the Firm* and *Shoe Palace Pinkus*," contributes to that debate. McCormick explores the director's relationship to Jewishness through the issues of anti-Semitism and Jewish assimilation in two milieu films, *The Pride of the Firm* (*Der Stolz der Firma*, Wilhelm, 1914), in which Lubitsch stars, and *Shoe Palace Pinkus* (*Schuhpalast Pinkus*, Lubitsch, 1916), in which he also acted. McCormick reads his performance in *The Pride of the Firm* as a humorous depiction of Jewish assimilation and desire for upward mobility, which nevertheless conceals a conflicted identity. The discussion of *Shoe Salon Pinkus*, on which the essay is primarily focused, stresses the ambiguous identity of the title character, Sally Pinkus, who emerges both as a positive figure of identification and an unlikable rascal. This ambiguity offers a critique of the Jewish drive to assimilate, but nevertheless evades a possible skid toward anti-Semitism. In addition to its focus on Jewish assimilation, McCormick argues, the film serves as a critique of Wilhelmine mainstream society, "its phony virtues and its vices—including antisemitism," for hypocritically condemning Sally's behavior while rewarding it financially.

Just after World War I, Lubitsch began expanding his cinematic output. Between 1918 and 1922—the year Mary Pickford invited him to Hollywood—Lubitsch directed over twenty films. These feature a change of direction, whereby the milieu stories of Jewish integration give way to anarchic slapstick comedies, on the one hand, and to lavish historical dramas, on

17 See McCormick's essay in this volume.

18 Jean-Louis Comolli, for example, claims that one could consider Lubitsch's milieu films "the most antisemitic body of work ever to be produced, if … Ernst Lubitsch had not been Jewish himself!" (Comolli, "*Der Stolz der Firma*," 31).

19 Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 15. In 1935, Nazi-oriented film critic Oskar Kalbus denounced Lubitsch for displaying "a pertness entirely alien from our true being" (quoted in Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler*, 24).

20 See for example, Weinstein, "Anti-Semitism or Jewish 'Camp'?" 101–21.

the other. Interestingly, this generic shift was accompanied by a shift in gender, as the male-centered coming-of-age narratives were replaced by female-centered spectacles, dominated by the volatile characters portrayed by Ossi Oswalda in the slapstick comedies and by the tragic-erotic characters portrayed by Pola Negri in the dramas. One is inclined to draw a line from these strong-willed female characters in the German films through those of Jeanette McDonald and Miriam Hopkins in the Hollywood films to Greta Garbo and Carole Lombard's iconic roles in *Ninotchka* (1939) and *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), and finally to Jennifer Jones's female plumber in Lubitsch's last film, *Cluny Brown* (1946). From a biographical angle, we might mention the role Pickford played in initiating his Hollywood career—Lubitsch never worked in Germany again after 1922—and the fact that Lubitsch was surrounded by resolute, strong-willed women from an early age.[21]

An overarching feminist perspective on Lubitsch's oeuvre deserves a separate study. But a starting point for such an investigation is provided here by **Valerie Weinstein**, whose essay "The Mirror and the Mother-In-Law: Bourgeois Jewish Femininity in *The Pride of the Firm*, *The Blouse King*, and *When I Was Dead*," discusses Jewishness in Lubitsch's early films through the overlooked prism of how these films code bourgeois Jewish women. The essay examines performances by comediennes in case studies of Ressel Orla as the boss's daughter in *The Pride of the Firm* and *The Blouse King* (*Der Blusenkönig*, 1917), and of Helene Voss's mother-in-law in *When I Was Dead* (*Als ich tot war*, 1916). Weinstein finds an ironic doubling of Lubitsch's male lead performances in Orla's characters, thus criticizing gendered stereotypes and double standards, while Voss's mother-in-law figure conversely mocks the stereotypical Jewish mother and celebrates her humiliation. Weinstein suggests that "ethnic humor can simultaneously resist dominant cultures and create boundaries and hierarchies within marginalized communities." She argues that the portrayals of these Jewish women resist stereotypes less consistently than Lubitsch's own performances, a stance consonant with his films' gendered upward mobility.

Lubitsch's milieu comedies are likewise addressed by **Jan-Christopher Horak** in "Lubitsch Revisits the *Schmatta* Trade: *The Shop Around the Corner*," which explores this late Hollywood comedy's indebtedness to Lubitsch's early movies. Horak discusses the film with reference to its source text, the Hungarian Jewish writer Miklós László's 1937 play *Parfumerie*, while providing a detailed historical account of Hungarian Jewry before and through World War II. The influence of the Central European theater on

21 Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 23–24.

Lubitsch is evident in many of the director's films, whose sources are often plays and operettas from that region but not necessarily interested in realistic portrayals of regionality: take, for example the fictional Flausenthurm in Lubitsch's *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931), which Maria DiBattista calls "one of those quaint principalities that exist nowhere else but in the never-never land of Mittel European musicals."[22] But the realistic urban environment of *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) must be read differently, as Horak's essay demonstrates. Horak presents one of Lubitsch's most well-loved films both as an homage to the director's own youth in Berlin's garment district and a reflection of the Hungarian Jewish community under the looming threat of anti-Semitic fascism. Stressing the film's potential for multiple forms of reception, Horak's essay argues that the film appeals to mainstream audiences while allowing those in the know to understand it as reflecting the pressing reality of Jewish life in contemporary Budapest.

Read in this light, *The Shop Around the Corner* emerges as the second installment in what could be labeled "Lubitsch's Political Trilogy," including *Ninotchka* and *To Be or Not To Be*.[23] The latter—probably Lubitsch's most famous film—forms the center of **Claire Demoulin's** essay, "*To Be or Not to Be*: Revising History in Light of Migrant Interactions." Jewishness is called up once more, as Demoulin explores the relation between migration—with particular respect to émigré social circles in Hollywood—and the anti-fascist style and aesthetics of Lubitsch's 1942 film. The essay reveals the networks of migrants involved in the film's making, stressing their impact not only on transnational circulation at a time when traditional forms of communication are threatened, but on fiction-making as well. Reading the film from the perspective of migration, Demoulin focuses on its dramatization of instability and dislocation. Providing an "observation point for the experience of constant on-going movements in-between countries, milieus, and identities," she writes, this "aesthetic of passage" is presented as anti-fascist.

Part II. Theatricality and Performance

In *The Haunted Screen*, Eisner affirms that famed German theater director Max Reinhardt exerted an influence on early German and Weimar

22 See DiBattista's essay in this volume.

23 For Aaron Schuster Lubitsch's political trilogy rather includes *Trouble in Paradise* along with *Ninotchka* and *To Be or Not To Be*. For Schuster, the three films deal with "the crisis of capitalism" (Schuster, "Comedy in Times of Austerity," 27–28).

period cinema, but her scant remarks about the nature of that influence leave her readers wanting more. During his acting years with Reinhardt, 1911–1916, the minor parts Lubitsch played enabled a simultaneous apprenticeship in staging and directing. Not a formal one, of course, but it is clear from Lubitsch's films of 1917 onward that his famous emphasis on *mise-en-scène* was developing even then. The set designer with whom he most frequently collaborated was Kurt Richter, but he also worked with Ernst Stern, Reinhardt's set and costume designer from 1906 into the late 1920s. Stern's stagings and costume designs were transposed to cinema in the film fantasy *The Wildcat* (*Die Bergkatze*, 1921) and in *The Loves of Pharaoh* (*Das Weib des Pharao*, 1922), the costume drama by which Lubitsch hoped to win over American audiences. In both of these films, settings and costumes recall strategies developed for Reinhardt by Stern, whose style was versatile, embracing both the impressionism with which Reinhardt is generally associated and the expressionist style he also practiced. Lubitsch's *One Arabian Night* (*Sumurun*, 1920) borrows from the set designs Stern created for Reinhardt's production of that eponymous pantomime, of which Reinhardt was particularly fond. Unsurprisingly, Lubitsch's *Sumurun* owes a great deal to Reinhardt productions in which Lubitsch played bit parts.

In "'Done!': Kurt Richter's Perspectival Set Design in Lubitsch's German Films," **Janelle Blankenship** analyzes the "creative scaffolding of cinematic art," arguing that the magnificent sets constructed for Lubitsch's early historical epics and costume films as well as Lubitsch's Ossi-films became major attractions in themselves, generating what Blankenship calls "film flaneurs." Like Stern's, Richter's film sets were influenced by the pictorial compositions of Reinhardt's theater sets—even by their colors, a peculiar choice for a film art only available in black and white. Trained as a theater set designer, Richter constructed sets for the peep box stage and, like Reinhardt, was interested in creating layered images and plastic image effects. After delineating the background of Richter's collaboration with Lubitsch, Blankenship's essay focuses on Richter's integrated set designs for two early Ossi films, *The Doll* (*Die Puppe*, 1919) and *The Oyster Princess* (*Die Austernprinzessin*, 1919), examining their self-reflexivity, perspectival design, and the influence of the Viennese Secession on Richter's work.

Adaptations from the stage feature prominently in the director's films. In "Lubitsch's May McAvoy Trilogy: Threesomes, Triangles, Allegories," **Charles Musser** takes up the structural and thematic principle of three in Lubitsch films, asking whether this repeated configuration is an aspect of the Lubitsch Touch. The essay elaborates on the love triangles typical of comedy—both theatrical and filmic—and ubiquitous in Lubitsch's May McAvoy trilogy. For

Musser, this includes *Three Women* (1924), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925), and *The Jazz Singer* (1927) directed by Alan Crosland, but, according to Musser, heavily influenced by Lubitsch. Musser asks whether Lubitsch's creative process might have been triadic, arguing persuasively that a suppressed film text informs *Lady Windermere's Fan*, which is openly an adaptation of Oscar Wilde's play but, at the same time, a "secret remake" of an earlier adaptation of the play, Fred Paul's film of 1916. Musser takes up the influence of Lubitsch on *The Jazz Singer*, another adaptation from theater, made after Lubitsch left Warner Brothers. Do Lubitsch's films with Warner Brothers contain allegories of filmmaking, Musser asks, allegories that function as critiques of Hollywood?

The title of **Michael Slowik's** contribution, "Theatrical Yet Deeply Cinematic: Situating Lubitsch's Musicals Within the Early Sound Era," exactly describes Slowik's project, which presents the director as a pioneer of the film musical. The essay begins by locating the early musicals with respect to the German silent films that precede them, reminding us as well that Lubitsch himself was musical—he danced and sang in a Berlin cabaret and played the piano. Max Reinhardt again enters the picture: Slowik suggests that the director's experiences as a player of bit parts in Reinhardt's theater stood Lubitsch in good stead. In Reinhardt's *Sumurun*, a pantomime that was set to music, character movement and musical accompaniment were skillfully linked, providing a model for their coordination that was emulated by Lubitsch in his films. In addition, Slowik points to Reinhardt's musical experiments in his Shakespeare productions as a source for the director. He notes that both "visualizations of music and its rhythms" and dancing are staged in Lubitsch's early silent films: the famous "foxtrot epidemic" in *The Oyster Princess* is a case in point. Slowik emphasizes that theatrical and filmic modes were cleverly balanced in Lubitsch from the start. One innovative aspect of the director's early musical *The Love Parade* (1929), he argues, is the creation of an intimate space by way of musical numbers presented as private encounters. Interestingly, Slowik notes that in his second film musical, *Monte Carlo* (1930), Lubitsch drops the proscenium approach to staging and uses cinematic means to insert multiple spaces into the numbers, another innovation. The artifice of such shots is stressed, an artifice that points to the films' self-reflexivity.

In a piece whose wit echoes that of the Lubitsch characters she is discussing, **Maria DiBattista** examines the roles played by Miriam Hopkins in three films by Lubitsch: *The Smiling Lieutenant*, *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), and *Design for Living* (1933). Titled "Miriam Hopkins Learns to Wink," the essay demonstrates that Hopkins's role in *The Smiling Lieutenant* effects a

transition from the gestural language of silent cinema to the "vociferous ideologies" of the talkies and, in particular, to the sexual frankness of the modern woman. It is the wink that does the trick. As always in Lubitsch, ideology is given a light touch in these films: the modern woman who depicts and initiates "new social attitudes" is a comic figure, a "jazz baby" writes DiBattista. In all three films, the Hopkins character is implicated in a sexual triangle—not so classical in *Design for Living*, however, where the woman is involved with two men. As DiBattista puts it, these films wink at the "vaunted traditions of the past"—at virginity before marriage, fidelity, monogamy, marriage, and exclusive relationships. The mild, mocking laughter of these Lubitsch films could be fairly open until the Production Code was enforced in earnest in 1934. But it did not disappear entirely from his films, it merely disguised itself more thoroughly.

Part III. Objects and Spaces

Lubitsch films confer a heightened significance on the world of objects, a tendency that was both a stylistic remnant of German expressionist cinema and a feature that Alfred Hitchcock would notably adopt. The emphasis on *mise-en-scène*, décor, and on glittering, light-reflecting surfaces is characteristic of Lubitsch, surely one aspect of the Lubitsch Touch. But he makes the glitter do some work: think of Lombard's exquisite dress in *To Be or Not to Be*, which stands in macabre and satirical contrast to the film scene in which her actor character wants to wear it—a scene in a concentration camp. And then there are doors: in an intended put-down, Pickford may have been the first to point to Lubitsch's tendency to direct them.[24] But doors are prominent in all of the films, often deployed in the sound films to produce the famous temporal ellipses in which the camera travels up to a closed door but is unable to penetrate into the space behind—unable to witness what might be going on there. The spectator, of course, has a good idea what that might be. This technique is pointed to by critics such as Frieda Grafe and Eyman, for whom these ellipses are central to the famous Lubitsch Touch.[25]

24 Weinberg, *The Lubitsch Touch*, 49.

25 Grafe, "Was Lubitsch beruehrt," 81–87. With reference to "The Lubitsch Touch," Grafe writes: "Der LubitschTouch ist das Unausgesprochene … Seine beruehmten Auslassungen, sein Ellipsen, die ihren vollendeten Ausdruck in der Funktion der Tueren in seinen Filmen finden" ("The Lubitsch Touch is the unspoken … his famous omissions, his ellipses, find their consummate

In "Regulating the Gaze and the Voice for a Cinema in Transition: *The Merry Jail* and *So This Is Paris*," **Ido Lewit** discusses two recurrent objects in Lubitsch's films—doors and windows—along with the technological media that can accompany them. In the earlier, silent Lubitsch comedies, such as *The Merry Jail* (*Das fidele Gefängnis*, 1917), Lewit argues for the prevalence of letters as an escape mechanism for the husband, one that allows him to exit the domestic space. In both of these films, doors enable the flow and obstruction of knowledge, complicating their spaces. Of course, written communication in the form of letters flourishes in silent films: the silents necessarily engage the sense of sight, engendering the point-of-view (POV) shot as an important stylistic feature of the film medium. But letters easily become a means of miscommunication, since they may reach an unintended recipient, making them likely to produce narrative complications. In *So This Is Paris* (1926), a silent film on the brink of sound, Lubitsch substitutes the window, an emblem of cinema, for the omnipresent door of the earlier films. Lewit links this substitution and the increasing narrative role of technologies of voice—the telephone and the radio—to the diminished status of written communication in Lubitsch's later films as well as to Hollywood's imminent shift to sound.

Joe McElhaney takes us "In and Out of Bed" in a wide spectrum of Lubitsch films, from the German period to Hollywood, from *Meyer from Berlin* (*Meyer aus Berlin*, 1919) and *The Oyster Princess* to *Cluny Brown* in 1946. In the films under discussion, beds function as both objects and spaces: a bed is the "space of calculation" for Madame DuBarry in the eponymous film (1919), while an eighteenth-century bed is both a valuable antique and the space of (implied) sexuality in *Trouble in Paradise*. There are sickbeds (*The Shop Around the Corner*) and there are deathbeds (*Heaven Can Wait*, 1943)—it is not simply the bed as space or object, but the human figure in it that is at issue. Empty beds may signify the absence of a person desired, such as in *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg* (1927), or of a person mourned, as in *The Man I Killed* (1932). The physical body is central to comedy, and McElhaney examines the body in Lubitsch films in the context of bodies featured by other directors of comedies—by Georges Feydeau, Chaplin, and Frank Capra.

Susan Felleman's and **Catherine Walworth's** "*Ninotchka*: Pleasure and Politics Objectified" pays a great deal of attention to the political valences of material objects. Felleman's and Walworth's meticulous research produced new

expression in the function of doors in his films." "Was Lubitsch beruehrt," 87). For Eyman, "visual metaphor [forms] the basis of the Lubitsch Touch …" (*Ernst Lubitsch*, 342).

insights into their historical accuracy in this film of 1939. As they argue, décor has a good deal to say about the film's central characters and their spaces: the Rococo Hotel Clarence, what Felleman and Walworth call the "neoclassical ambiance" of the Grand Duchess's suite, the modernist furnishings of the lover-for-hire Leon, and Ninotchka's overcrowded and spartan quarters in Moscow. The essay stresses the place of objects in the struggle between communism and capitalism, which the film plays out over Garbo's character, a sober and devoted Marxist converted to pleasure by her Parisian lover, Leon. Leon and Ninotchka stage the beginning of their love affair against the background of a large mural representing a naked couple in his apartment, against a new Adam and Eve, we might say. Politically, the film seems to come down on the side of capitalism, the authors suggest, but it also effects a compromise between Soviet and European attitudes by way of our laughter at both.

IV. An Elusive Cinema

While it is a recurrent touchstone in studies of the director's work, there is no consensus about the Lubitsch Touch: it eludes both the casual viewer and the critic. A definition seems unthinkable, even if we enumerate the characteristics of his mature style—the minute attention to detail, for instance, the focus on objects, and the comic body through which his narratives play out. Moreover, the elements of Lubitsch's style interact in ever-changing configurations, as in a kaleidoscope. Perhaps this very ineffability makes Lubitsch's style such a potent draw for those critically engaged with his filmmaking. Call it ambiguity or call it indirectness, call it an elliptical style or the "destabilization of the truth" (Bukatman), it is this elusiveness that intrigues. But how does such elusiveness interact with the ideological projects of Lubitsch's films? Are there such projects? Yes, of course there are—even if they are multivalent and not fully systematic. William Paul analyzes what he calls "censorship strategies" in the director's filmmaking, arguing that they are visual and aural, as well as narrative—and designed to elude the censors. Which censors? The anti-Semitic viewers in Germany prior to 1922, the false morality censors of the Hollywood Code, of course, as well as the viewers and critics who do not watch these works closely enough to discern the issues of "surface and essence" (Merkin), of plot and politics, embedded in and put forward—lightly—by these entrancing films.

Noa Merkin's essay, "*That Uncertain Feeling* and the Symptoms of Married Life," focuses attention on Lubitsch's little-studied film of 1941, moving at once deeply into the film and extrapolating from it to generate an analysis of

the director's methods that have more general significance for his work. As Merkin points out, it is one of the few Lubitsch films to take place in America, which may account for some of its concerns: it is a comedy of remarriage, it is perhaps his only film to examine psychoanalysis—from a humorous point of view, of course— and it satirizes modern art. (Clearly Hitchcock learned a lot from this film.) Merkin's essay pays close attention to Lubitsch's method of indirect storytelling, concentrating on his focus on details and the metaphorical approach to signification that mark his later work. But the film does not leave the comic body behind: the humorous detail here is the wife's repeated case of the hiccups, which are the symptom that something is amiss in the marriage. This visceral symptom, along with the pokes delivered with a "Keeks" on the part of the husband, and the lover's repeated "phooey," are all "gestures and tics" that make latent content manifest, Merkin argues. They indicate the tactile nature of Lubitsch's Touch, which never ceases to be comical, even while it plays to the problem of essence and surface in his filmmaking.

Angel (1937) is one of the director's most often overlooked and dismissed Hollywood efforts. In "Ernst Lubitsch: Censored and Censoring," **William Paul** shows this attitude to be unjustified. Having consulted relevant Production Code Administration (PCA) files and having meticulously studied the scripts of several of Lubitsch's Hollywood films, Paul focuses on types of censorship strategies—visual, aural, and narrative—manifested by *Angel* and other Lubitsch films of the 1930s. Far from being simply a means of evading censorship enforced by the Production Code (PC), Paul argues, those strategies emerge as a constant stylistic feature in Lubitsch films and involve a play between information withheld, information implied, and information concealed—surely aspects of the famed ellipses. Paul also identifies a repeated trope wherein a scene disallows access to a character's thoughts and feelings by presenting the character from behind in essential dramatic moments. This trope, he suggests, tends to be employed in films that have an ambiguous double ending. Returning to *Angel* and its cryptic concluding scene, Paul argues that the deployment of this trope in *Angel* pushes the ambiguity of the double ending to an extreme, thus creating perceptual uncertainty in its spectators.

In her essay on two-way influence between Charlie Chaplin and Lubitsch, "Chaplin/Lubitsch/Chaplin: Influence and Counter-Influence," **Donna Kornhaber** takes a different stance toward uncertainty in the two directors, referring specifically to the relationships among Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* (1923), Lubitsch's *The Marriage Circle* (1924), and Chaplin's *The Countess from Hong Kong* (1967). The impact of Chaplin's *A Woman of Paris* on Lubitsch was "transformative," she points out: Lubitsch claims that he would have

returned to Germany had he not seen Chaplin's film, in which he recognized an instance of genuine "film art." In Chaplin's films, Kornhaber reads a serious instability that can never be resolved, whereas in Lubitsch films, "it is always the less portentous understanding of the facts that proves true." In Lubitsch, she argues, "ambiguity is resolvable" and "uncertainty brief." While Lubitsch borrows from Chaplin in *The Marriage Circle*, it is suggested, Chaplin borrows from this film for the much later *A Countess from Hong Kong*. While watching a Lubitsch film, the viewer is almost always aware of what the diegetic "truth" may be, but for audiences of Chaplin's films, Kornhaber writes, this is not the case. For Chaplin, the point of the uncertainty thus generated may lie in causing the audience to experience the "misguided" and unresolvable perceptions of his characters. But can not this be said for Lubitsch films, as well?

The uncertainty invoked by Lubitsch's methods is also at the center of **Scott Bukatman's** "Films in Which Nothing Very Much Happens: Unstable Knowledge in Lubitsch's Late Silent Work," which takes on three of the director's films for Warner Brothers: *The Marriage Circle*, *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *So This Is Paris*. Bukatman argues that the pace of these films, their editing, attention to details, and their use of the close-up make them particularly well-suited to reading alongside Jean Epstein's writings on cinema, especially Epstein's discussion of cinema's potential to generate unstable knowledge. These films engage in a "destabilization of truth" in their engagement with "other minds," as when characters repeatedly attempt to decipher what other characters think and to see themselves through the eyes of another. Under Lubitsch's masterful hand, Bukatman suggests, their comic situations produce a humanistic, deeply empathic cinema as they demand "that we acknowledge the subject-ness of these human objects that cross our paths." Lubitsch's cinema, writes Bukatman, remains "a deeply social cinema."

The elusiveness of Lubitsch's style and its connection to the ideological projects of his films bring us back, full circle, to our initial question—"why Lubitsch now?" As mentioned above, Žižek argues for their relevance in coming to terms with contemporary issues by way of indirect expression as a strategy for counteracting dominant ideology. The refusal to show directly that which one desires to see creates resistance to the "fundamental gesture of ideology," according to another Lacanian film theorist—Todd McGowan.[26] McGowan's prime cinematic example for this scopic refusal is Steven Spielberg's 1971 debut *Duel*. (Interestingly, when Spielberg was awarded an Honorary Golden Bear for his life's work in Berlin in 2023, he

26 McGowan, "Looking for the Gaze," 37.

mentioned Lubitsch among the German directors who had influenced him.) The allure of Lubitsch's cinema is tied to its perpetuation of desire—primarily a desire to see intensified by the denial of its satisfaction, a gesture that leads us once again to Lubitsch's famous doors. But the "director of doors" (as Pickford referred to him) did not always use them for withholding sights. Actually, in his earlier work, Lubitsch's doors and their keyholes repeatedly function as viewing apparatuses that serve invasive gazes. By means of the POV shot, these keyholes also align diegetic Peeping Toms with the nondiegetic voyeurs in the theater. But, in the mid-1920s, Lubitsch abandons the through-the-keyhole POV shot wholesale and soon thereafter, with the rise of talkies, his doors become permeable to sound. Thus, from an instrument of optical surveillance, Lubitsch's door turns into a surface that conceals as much as it reveals, an audiovisual, playful Fort-Da device for the projection of one's desires on the cinema screen. That uncertainty in Lubitsch should lead us back to the basic elements of cinema is hardly surprising.

Lubitsch's ingenuity has always been contingent on the recognition of cinema as a distinct medium and art form. For Lubitsch, the "film artist" is someone who has "the most innate feeling for film in [one's] finger tips."[27] In a 1920 article, Lubitsch writes that it would be "very sad if there weren't a few filmmakers who were seriously trying to bring art into film."[28] His cinema undoes that hypothetical "very sad" plight. Our volume applauds this achievement.

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27 Lubitsch, "Film Internationality," 300.

28 Lubitsch, "We Lack Film Poetry," 209.

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