

How Did Lubitsch Do It?: Joseph McBride's engaging study of filmmaker Ernst Lubitsch

By David Walsh
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Film historian, critic and biographer Joseph McBride's critical study of German American filmmaker Ernst Lubitsch (1892-1947) is a remarkable book about a remarkable figure. McBride, Professor of Cinema at San Francisco State University, is also the author of biographies / studies of filmmakers John Ford, Orson Welles, Frank Capra, Howard Hawks and Steven Spielberg, among other works.

Lubitsch, born in Berlin, first directed silent films in Germany and, after his move to Hollywood in 1922, directed silent and then sound films in the US. He is best known today for his American movies, including *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Design for Living* (1933), *The Merry Widow* (1934), *Ninotchka* (1939), *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), *To Be or Not to Be* (1942) and *Heaven Can Wait* (1943).

His subtle and tolerant attitude toward human weaknesses, especially those of the "flesh," his concrete and expressive treatment of varying social and psychological conditions, and his specifically Central European grace and wit, all of which came to be known collectively as the "Lubitsch Touch," had a considerable influence on cinema as a whole. French filmmaker Jean Renoir credited Lubitsch with having "invented the modern Hollywood." The title of McBride's work refers to a sign on the wall of the Beverly Hills office where writer-director Billy Wilder, a Lubitsch protégé and admirer, did his film writing and preparation: "How would Lubitsch do it?"

That Lubitsch is not currently more of a "household name," even among those who may consider themselves generally familiar with film history, is a reality that McBride discusses at length in his book—and, perhaps "quixotically," hopes to remedy.

In the accompanying interview, McBride acknowledges that he knew he "was being somewhat defiant in taking up Lubitsch."

In fact, to its author's credit, *How Did Lubitsch Do It?*—in the first place—is a slap in the face of contemporary academic cultural studies in general. It is unapologetically and militantly well-researched, meticulously factual and highly opinionated.

It is not necessary to share every one of the author's evaluations or historical judgments, or assessment of this or that individual work, to recognize the seriousness and substantive character of *How Did Lubitsch Do It?*

McBride's study impelled me to view—or re-view—some 30 of Lubitsch's 48 surviving films (nearly all of which are available online). Not everything is scintillating, there are shortcomings and succumbings to various pressures, and when it came to the great questions of revolution and counterrevolution the artist was often out of his depth, but there is great insight, sensitivity to the human situation and pleasure to be found in Lubitsch's work.

Lubitsch was born in Berlin's garment district. "The family," McBride writes, "were assimilated Jews and not especially observant." His German-born mother, Anna, and father, Simcha, a Russian who had fled

czarist oppression, ran a women's clothing shop.

In 1911, Lubitsch began his artistic apprenticeship as an aspiring actor with the famed Berlin theater director Max Reinhardt. His rebellion, "not the kind that carried banners in the streets" took the form of a more personal revolt against "the authoritarian nature of German education and the expectation of his middle-class family that he would grow up to join in their clothing trade." Like many others "who grow up as outsiders ... Lubitsch turned naturally to comedy," McBride observes. The future filmmaker "gravitated to Berlin's fertile artistic scene to pursue his eccentric, nonconformist ambition for a livelier life."

Lubitsch did not enjoy great success as a stage actor, but he had the opportunity to work alongside some of the most remarkable German performers of the day and to appear in many classic works, including numerous plays by Shakespeare, Goethe and Schiller. At night, during the difficult days of World War I (he was exempt from military service because he was a Russian citizen), he worked as a film actor. He directed his first film, *Miss Soapsuds*, a short, in 1914.

In the lively *Shoe Palace Pinkus* (1916), which he also directed, Lubitsch plays a young Berlin shoe salesman, Sally Pinkus, characterized by considerable ineptitude and irrepressible self-confidence. He flirts with the attractive female customers and finally gets ahead by flattering a woman into thinking her feet are smaller than they are. His resilience and cleverness translate into success in the shoe business.

Lubitsch plays a similar, socially and psychologically related character in *Meyer from Berlin* (1919), a Berliner who pretends to be ill for the benefit of his wife so he can go chase other women, badly and unsuccessfully for the most part, in the Bavarian Alps.

Such films later drew accusations of "anti-Semitism," which, like McBride, I find absurd. The character is a variation on one that countless male comic performers of various ethnicities have relied on in the 20th century, the restless, energetic, slightly opportunistic and lecherous, somewhat too-clever-for-his-own-good city dweller, who usually turns out to have a good heart. Lubitsch creates other youthful characters along the same lines, who are not Jewish, in films such as *The Doll* (1919) and *The Shop Around the Corner*.

I Don't Want to Be a Man (1918), *The Doll* and *The Oyster Princess* (1919) all feature Ossi Oswalda, "The German Mary Pickford" as she was known—except that Oswalda may be livelier. In the first film, the actress plays a high-spirited young woman, unhappy with her guardian's restrictions, who decides to go out on the town dressed as a man. She discovers there are drawbacks to being male too. It's a vigorous, suggestive work.

In *The Doll*, a romantic fantasy comedy, a shy, wealthy youth terrified of women is urged to marry a mechanical doll (Oswalda) instead, so he can come into his inheritance. When the lifelike mechanism breaks down, the dollmaker's daughter (Oswalda too) steps in and takes her place. The actress wonderfully, memorably mimics a doll's movements.

Oswalda is the daughter of an ultra-phlegmatic American millionaire

businessman, the “oyster king,” in *The Oyster Princess* impressed” is his recurring refrain). We first see Ossi after she has thrown everything on the floor of her room, apparently the result of pent-up emotions and sexual feelings. She wants a husband “in five minutes” and her father promises to procure her a titled one. He finds her a heavily indebted German prince and all sorts of misadventures unfold. The opening sequences of this film in particular are splendid, exuberant. *Kohlhiesel’s Daughters* (1920), loosely inspired by Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*, with Emil Jannings and Henny Porten (as both “daughters”) is another lively effort.

Lubitsch left for America in 1922. The promise of greater cinematic resources and opportunities in Hollywood was one factor. The instability and political convulsions in Germany were clearly other pieces of the puzzle. No admirer of the high and mighty, much less kings and queens, Lubitsch was no revolutionary either.

McBride discusses the filmmaker’s contradictory and changing attitudes toward contemporary society at some length. He points to a revealing anecdote recounted by actress Pola Negri about a preview for Lubitsch’s Spanish spectacle *Carmen*—in which the Polish-born Negri featured—held on the night of November 8, 1918, in the midst of revolutionary upheavals across Germany. When Negri anxiously asked Lubitsch whether he had heard the gunfire, he replied, “Yes, shh! There’s nothing anybody can do. Watch the picture.” McBride legitimately suggests it would be “hard to imagine a more ostrichlike response to epochal events” and adds this “was not an isolated incident with Lubitsch.”

He later argues, however, that even if Lubitsch “did not make overtly topical films,” the director’s “mostly comic sensibility always reflects on the reality of human interactions and society in acutely insightful and universal ways.” Moreover, under the pressure of events, McBride contends that “Lubitsch did evolve toward more over social consciousness to some extent in his American work, especially when his films were set in the present day, such as *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *To Be or Not to Be* (1942).” There’s undoubtedly truth in this comment, although it would also be an error to overestimate the “social consciousness” expressed in those films.

Lubitsch’s silent films of the mid-1920s made in Hollywood represent a considerable advance not only over his German comedies, as charming as they are, but his spectacles of the late 1910s and early 20s—*Madame DuBarry* (1919), *Anna Boleyn* (1920) and *The Wife of Pharaoh* (1922).

Political turmoil, emigration, varied directorial experience and life itself had no doubt taught Lubitsch a good deal. He also paid attention to what other film artists were doing and saying. One of the works that impressed itself upon him was Charlie Chaplin’s feature-length silent drama *A Woman of Paris* (1923). Lubitsch told the *New York Times* he thought the film was “a marvelous production. I liked it because I feel that an intelligent man speaks to me, and nobody’s intelligence is insulted in that picture.”

A shrewd comment—and shouldn’t that still be one of our criteria in judging an artistic work, that an intelligent man or woman speaks to us and that no one’s intelligence is insulted?

In any event, Lubitsch’s *The Marriage Circle* (1924), set in Vienna, is a more mature, complex work. The “circle” in the title refers to a chain of marital infidelities or perceived marital infidelities.

McBride, who writes extensively and fluently about the work, describes *The Marriage Circle* (1924) “as the principal model for the romantic comedy genre. Seldom has a film been so influential. This is the film that, as Renoir put it, ‘invented the modern Hollywood.’ It represented a quantum jump in sophistication from the clumsy blend of titillation and heavy-handed, preachy moralizing seen in Cecil B. DeMille’s marital comedy-dramas and from the Victorian idealization in D. W. Griffith’s romances.”

In a prominent tribute, actress Marie Prevost (who, in another of Hollywood’s innumerable tragic personal stories, was to die horribly of acute alcoholism in 1937 aged 40) told a reporter about her experience on *The Marriage Circle*: “I never realized what acting really meant until I began to hear Mr. Lubitsch’s voice coming to me from behind the camera. He deals in subtleties that I never dreamed of before. His marvelous technique consists of elements and effects that I never heard of before.”

In my view, Lubitsch’s artistic maturation only deepened in *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1925), based on Oscar Wilde’s 1893 play. Wilde’s drama concerns a woman of “terrible reputation,” Mrs. Erlynne, whose daughter, Lady Windermere, believes her mother to be dead and reveres her memory. Mrs. Erlynne, heavily in debt, essentially extorts her daughter’s husband, Lord Windermere, into paying her handsomely in return for *not* reappearing in her daughter’s life and crushing the latter psychologically and, presumably, socially. It is a devastating picture of official moral hypocrisy and its crippling social and psychological effects.

The play contains some of Wilde’s best-known epigrams. Remarkably, Lubitsch and his collaborators capture the essence of Wilde’s play in their silent film without making use of a single one of those quips. In fact, there are very few intertitles altogether and those few are all straightforward. Yet the tragedy of human beings at the mercy of repressive codes of behavior, rooted in socio-economic relationships, that have nothing to do with their real feelings and needs is indelibly communicated. Irene Rich’s performance as Mrs. Erlynne is especially moving.

Edmund Wilson, the leading American literary critic of the 1920s and 30s, took admiring note of Lubitsch’s film adaptation of Wilde’s play, finding the work to be “a very attractive film” visually, in Lubitsch’s “most distinguished manner.” Wilson praised the filmmaker’s “theatrical ingenuity” and called his subtle shooting style “as effective as ever.”

Lubitsch’s final silent work, *The Student Prince in Old Heidelberg* (1927, based on the same source as Sigmund Romberg’s 1924 popular operetta *The Student Prince*), is another important and perceptive film, with a theme that links it to the Wilde adaptation.

Lubitsch’s film centers on the relationship between Crown Prince Karl Heinrich (the Mexican-born silent film star Ramón Novarro, whose life also ended appallingly), a student at the university in Heidelberg, and the daughter of Karl’s landlord, Kathi (Norma Shearer), a “commoner.” Karl and Kathi fall genuinely and deeply in love, but the crown prince is recalled to court when his uncle, the king, falls incurably ill and simultaneously forced into an arranged marriage with a princess he has never met. Karl is doubly devastated. In the final scene, as the newly crowned king, utterly desolate, rides through the streets in a carriage, an onlooker observes, “It must be wonderful to be a king!”

With the arrival of sound filmmaking, Lubitsch also helped invent the musical genre. His musical comedies of the late 1920s and early 30s—*The Love Parade* (1929), *Monte Carlo* (1930), *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931), *One Hour with You* (1932) and *The Merry Widow*—may not be everyone’s cup of tea, but they have their undoubted charms, often including the presence of singer and actress Jeanette MacDonald, who reveals acting depths and considerable sensuality under Lubitsch’s direction.

In line with Lubitsch’s serious concerns, *The Merry Widow*, based on the 1905 Franz Lehár operetta, includes a striking and unlooked-for moment that subverts the presumed light-hearted premises of the genre.

In an extended sequence set in a fashionable Parisian restaurant, MacDonald as Madame Sonia—the wealthy “merry widow” of the title—has pretended to be the “glamorous but common ‘Fifi,’” and played along with Maurice Chevalier’s Captain Danilo, a hopeless womanizer, and his “smug, well-practiced seduction routine” (McBride).

After Danilo tells her complacently he doesn’t like “ladies” because “they take love too seriously” and “can’t enjoy it without bothering about

tomorrow,” Sonia cuts in sharply, “You mean, they’re hard to get rid of ... And then you have to lie.” She reveals herself to be “one of those women who ask silly questions, and then you have to lie.” MacDonald-Sonia continues with withering contempt, “You ‘great lover.’ Oh, please. You don’t even know what love is.”

McBride describes the moment well, explaining that the “frolicking” in *The Merry Widow* “comes to a sudden halt” when Chevalier-Danilo “is given the emotional equivalent of a rough [and well-deserved] slap in the face by both MacDonald and the director.”

Lubitsch’s sound films from the 1930s are better known and often show up on television. McBride provides a comprehensive analysis of their merits and defects.

Briefly: In *Trouble in Paradise*, a thief masquerading as a baron, Gaston (Herbert Marshall), encounters a thief and pickpocket passing herself off as a countess, Lily (Miriam Hopkins), and, of course, they fall in love. In Paris, they set about to fleece the wealthy owner of a perfume manufacturing company, Mariette (Kay Francis). Mariette hires Gaston as her secretary and the pair begin to have feelings for one another. “I came here to rob you,” he tells her at one point, “but unfortunately I fell in love with you.”

Ultimately, Gaston has to choose between the equally enticing Lily and Mariette, although his criminal activities clearly push him down one path as opposed to the other. He also reveals to the wealthy woman that the greatest thief around is the head of her board of directors, who has robbed her firm of millions over the years.

In *Design for Living*, based on the Noël Coward play, Lubitsch sets up the opposite amorous configuration: two men, Fredric March as Tom Chambers, a playwright, and Gary Cooper as George Curtis, a painter, in love with a woman—Hopkins as commercial artist Gilda Farrell. This time, *she* can’t decide which of the *men* to select.

Or, rather, she chooses both, as the film ultimately comes down on the side of an “unabashed ménage à trois” (McBride). Lubitsch at the time explained, “The woman in our triangle contends that her sex is entitled to a liberty that only men have enjoyed in the past. And when you say that, you say something that is as entertaining as it is provocative.” The film is both.

Our author asserts that Lubitsch’s *Ninotchka* “is one of the rare Hollywood anticommunist films that can be watched today not with embarrassment but delight.” My own reaction is neither embarrassment nor delight. Greta Garbo is a Soviet official who travels to Paris to involve herself in the sale of jewelry confiscated from a Russian noble family following the 1917 revolution. The central conceit of the film, in whose writing Billy Wilder had a hand, is that Garbo’s Ninotchka is a humorless “Bolshevik girl” who learns how to have a good time in sparkling, sunny, pleasure-loving Paris, the “City of Light.”

Lubitsch and Wilder knew better, or should have. They took the easier path in *Ninotchka* and the result is rather banal. Obviously, the conditions in Hollywood were not ideal for an objective depiction of the Soviet Union or social conditions in France. Here, as we noted before, is one of the instances where Lubitsch, confronted with issues of international revolution and counterrevolution, was clearly in over his head.

Lubitsch knew something about Stalinism. He made a trip to the USSR in the 1936 and, in McBride’s words, developed a “revulsion toward Stalinism after seeing it up close.” He refused to associate with those “Popular Front” liberal-left elements in the film world who concealed the real situation in the USSR. To Lubitsch’s credit, near the very end of his life, when the subject of the anti-communist House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) came up, an acquaintance later recounted that the “mad-dog committee infuriated him, and he took a strong unequivocal stand against it.”

Actress and screenwriter Salka Viertel also details in her autobiography that when Leon Trotsky was attacked in August 1940, before the fatal

outcome was known, and “his adherents tried sending a famous Los Angeles brain surgeon to Mexico,” Lubitsch responded, along with actor Edward G. Robinson, to an appeal for funds to finance the proposed trip.

Lubitsch’s *The Shop Around the Corner* is a comic film set in a leather goods shop in Budapest, with a stellar cast, including James Stewart, Margaret Sullavan, Frank Morgan, Joseph Schildkraut and Felix Bressart. Two of the shop’s employees, Alfred Kralik (Stewart) and Klara Novak (Sullavan), who don’t get along *at all* at work, become involved in an anonymous and intimate romantic correspondence after Klara places a notice in a newspaper. Meanwhile, the volatile, emotionally fragile shop-owner, Mr. Matuschek (Morgan), has found out his wife is having an affair and mistakenly believes his most valuable employee, Kralik, to be the guilty party. It is difficult to imagine the film being improved upon.

McBride comments that the relatively humble milieu makes *The Shop Around the Corner* “pointedly unlike the ritzy settings of most of Lubitsch’s 1930s films.” He writes later that the “strained atmosphere” in the little shop “is heightened by the film’s keen awareness of the economic anxieties of the workers, their fears of losing their jobs and their need to placate their unstable boss in a marginal business at a time when, as one of them points out, ‘millions of people are out of work.’”

To Be or Not to Be, released in February 1942, involves a troupe of actors in Warsaw, at the time of Nazi Germany’s invasion of Poland, who resist the occupying troops using their theater skills. Jack Benny and Carole Lombard play the stars of the company, which has its share of “hams” (one Jewish actor jabs at an over-acting colleague, “Mr. Rawitch, what you are, I wouldn’t eat”). One of the film’s most amusing bits has Lombard’s would-be lover (Robert Stack) disruptively walk out every time Benny begins the “To be or not to be” soliloquy from *Hamlet* to visit Lombard in her dressing room, driving the egocentric and insecure actor nearly mad.

McBride praises the film highly and it is very cleverly put together. The problem with *To Be or Not to Be*, in my view, does not lie with the film or the filmmaker but with the history of the 20th century. In Chaplin’s autobiography, McBride himself notes, the comic giant wrote, “Had I known of the actual horrors of the German concentration camps, I could not have made *The Great Dictator* [his satire about Hitler and the Nazis]; I could not have made fun of the homicidal insanity of the Nazis.” I tend to think the same holds true for Lubitsch and *To Be or Not to Be*, which appeared before the mass exterminations of 1942-44. The horrors are certainly a legitimate subject for art, but not for comedy.

All in all, *How Did Lubitsch Do It?* is a book well worth recommending. It is enjoyable, provocative and thorough. It raises and to a certain extent answers a host of questions about the historical and social development of cinema, and particularly popular and Hollywood cinema.

In the introduction to his book, McBride makes clear that in writing about Lubitsch he is also criticizing contemporary filmmaking. He asserts, for example, that Lubitsch’s films “are far more sophisticated and mature than most anything currently on American screens,” and that they put to shame “the largely puerile approach to sexuality in most Hollywood comedies and dramas in recent years.” He also writes, “Under the influence of financial and demographic pressures and a general coarsening and dumbing-down of the culture, Hollywood filmmaking has become increasingly crude and violent.”

The “general regression” McBride’s introduction refers to and the decline in historical knowledge he spoke about in our interview are critical problems of our time. Such a polemic against the existing cultural state of affairs is entirely welcome. But understanding the ultimate social and historical source of this condition is vital: the decay and degeneration of bourgeois society and its wholesale repudiation of its own progressive political and cultural traditions, its instinctive and deeply felt fear of anything that might educate and illuminate masses of people.

The character of art and aesthetic thought is bound up with the character

of their epoch. For example, whether he was aware of it or not, Lubitsch could only have made the following intriguing pronouncement (cited by McBride), in 1924, in the conditions created by the October Revolution, which “shook the world” and generated titanic hopes and plans for global culture: “Film is an art, more precisely a popular art; it is open to intellectuals and the masses alike; it results from creative activity; and it can be called successful only when it receives international applause and worldwide recognition.”

The rediscovery and reassimilation of innumerable artistic figures, schools and works, and an overall cultural resurgence, will only come about, in our view, as part of the growth of revolutionary-critical thought and action, the sharp heightening in consciousness, within wide layers of the population.

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