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The Lubitsch Legend*

by William K. Everson. *A distinguished cinema historian reviews the latest book on the film maker Ernst Lubitsch.*

ERNST LUBITSCH WAS INDISPUTABLY ONE OF OUR MAJOR DIRECTORS, and in Herman G. Weinberg he has a worthy and devoted chronicler. His career and films are covered in detail, sometimes with repetition. Apart from his own devotion to the subject, Weinberg has the advantage of having known Lubitsch, and he has reproduced letters and comments from him, as well as (and these are some of the best elements of the book) interviews with many of his collaborators. If all of this devotion were lavished on Lubitsch alone, one could have no cause for complaint, but no film maker can be studied in isolation. Lubitsch's career spans some forty years and two continents, and unfortunately in making the most of that career, Mr. Weinberg minimizes the rest of film history. Von Stroheim and Von Sternberg are spared—over-frequent cross-references make it plain that they share Lubitsch's pedestal; and Griffith, Chaplin, Murnau and Lang get kindly nods every so often. The several outright factual errors aren't too important, and don't invalidate the basic material on Lubitsch. What is far more disconcerting are all the convenient oversights and sweeping generalizations designed to establish Lubitsch as the innovator and the others as imitators.

Thus Weinberg hails the 1918 *Gypsy Blood* as the "first distinctive German film." Now it may well have been the most accomplished or most profitable, but certainly from 1913 on many German directors had been making highly "distinctive" movies. On the same page, DeMille's *Carmen* (made three years earlier) is dismissed sarcastically. DeMille's later work certainly justifies much of the scorn heaped on him by historians, but his pre-1920 films are strong and often creative. If nothing else, his *Carmen* is superior to Lubitsch's in a pictorial sense. Further toeing the fashionable line. Weinberg slips in a footnote that Chaplin's *Burlesque of Carmen* (also 1915) was "much better" than DeMille's. Actually it was a clumsy hodge-podge, shot by Chaplin in two reels, and padded and pasted-up by the studio to run twice that length. A few pages later, we find that ". . . excepting Griffith, there was nothing in America to match Lubitsch". Since the date now is 1919, where, one might ask, were Chaplin, Tourneur, DeMille and von Stroheim? On page 40, we find that "German film equalled Hollywood in brilliance of photography". Possibly Mr. Weinberg really meant to use the term "lighting",

**The Lubitsch Touch* by Herman G. Weinberg. Dutton (paperback) 344 p. $2.45

which was certainly a strongpoint of German films, but the photography itself was usually static and unimaginative, well behind Hollywood standards, and behind Scandinavian standards too. In dealing with Lubitsch's unsuccessful collaboration with Mary Pickford, the many delightful and often starkly dramatic Pickford vehicles are casually dismissed as "childish effusions", while the stylish (if not top standard) *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* is doomed as being "mercifully forgotten". (Happily, it isn't). *Rosita,* the film that Ernst and Mary made together, *was* a mistake, emerging as neither a Pickford nor a Lubitsch film. If it had a star, it was the cameraman Charles Rosher, who gave it whatever style it had. Mr. Weinberg justifiably praises the subtlety of Lubitsch's handling of Pauline Frederick as an aging woman in *Three Women*—but implies that all this was radically new. Clarence Brown's handling of the same actress in a like situation in that same year's *Smouldering Fires* was even more poignant.

Too often Mr. Weinberg tends to make a mountain range out of a landmark. There is no disputing the tremendous influence of his first sophisticated U.S. comedy, *The Marriage Circle* (1924). It started a new trend, and opened a floodgate of light marital comedies by directors like Monta Bell, Mal St. Clair and Erle C. Kenton. But these were not directors who plagiarized and imitated; they were talented film makers who had merely never been given a chance because prior to Lubitsch there had been no market for that kind of comedy. The market established they plunged in—and indeed overtook Lubitsch for a while. Many of their "imitations" had a sparkle and a lightness that were still eluding Lubitsch, not yet thoroughly familiar with either Hollywood methods or American mores. That he *was* the master of that genre there was no doubt of course; his talent soared upward, reaching its zenith in such early talkies as *Trouble in Paradise*—surely one of the most elegant films of all time—and by then Bell, Kenton and St. Clair were fading out as major directors. Weinberg's lack of sympathy (and familiarity) with the work of the non-parthenon directors of the twenties is emphasized by his rather cavalier dismissal of the non-Lubitsch work of Irene Rich and Monte Blue, and in his comments on 1925's *Are Parents People?* He refers to it as a vehicle for the debuts of Andre Beranger (who had been working furiously at least for ten years) and Betty Bronson (whose prior films included her most famous one, *Peter Pan*) and as the initial "silken comedy" of Mal St. Clair, who had been making "dog epics" at Warners. Quite apart from the fact that the Rin Tin Tins were good movies, St. Clair made one of the best of them—*Lighthouse by the Sea*—and his earlier career as a director of high-class 2-reel comedies included a charming Mr. & Mrs. Carter DeHaven family frolic called *Christmas,* while Ben Turpin had once had him fired from a Sennet comedy for being *too* silken and sophisticated!

Lubitsch worked much like Hitchcock in that the real work was done at script conferences and on story-boards. Camera movements, cuts, dialogue, all were pre-planned before the cameras rolled, and the very elegance of Lubitsch's films more than made up for the absence of those moments of obvious spontaneity that were often highlights in the work of Ford or Griffith. Weinberg spends a good deal of time establishing these working methods of Lubitsch, and backing them up with comments from Lubitsch's co-workers. But given this method, it follows that the nominal directorial contribution during physical shooting is more a mat-

ter of efficiency than inspiration. However, *Desire*—a charming and thoroughly "Lubitsch" film in every sense of the word, is by-passed because while Lubitsch prepared and produced it, the physical direction was in the hands of Frank Borzage. Likewise *A Royal Scandal*, disappointing admittedly, but still very funny and if anything a notch above the average Lubitsch standing in those last years at Fox, is considered a film by Otto Preminger—a director Mr. Weinberg clearly dislikes. Similarly, the implication always is that a film "influenced" by one director must run second-best to the original. Surely the fallacy of this line of thought is proven in Rouben Mamoulian's *Love Me Tonight*—possibly (if one were foolish enough to make any such generalization) the most lyrical musical of all. It unquestionably has its roots in Lubitsch; unquestionably too, (and this goes beyond a matter of mere opinion) it takes the best elements of such similar Lubitsch films as *The Love Parade* and *Monte Carlo* and develops them far more subtly and successfully. *To Be Or Not To Be* is certainly one of Lubitsch's best films and his last great one; it gets better and fresher every year. It was undoubtedly much misunderstood at the time, but it doesn't need to be bolstered by being termed an innovational "black comedy". The phrase wasn't in use in the forties, but the genre, though never prolific or popular, was well established. 1937's *Nothing Sacred* was certainly a "black" comedy, and so were the much earlier *Blessed Event* and *The Front Page*.

One of the major problems facing any film historian concerns critical criteria. Obviously one cannot re-see every film under discussion. Yet those first impressions can be wrong as often as they can be right. Inevitably the end result is the same: one re-sees some films, and writes about *remembered* impressions as though they were contemporary ones. We all do it, and it is no criticism of Mr. Weinberg that he has fallen into the same trap. Page 149 offers a case in point. I happen to think *Angel* is one of Lubitsch's weakest and dullest films, and *Ninotchka* one of his most over-rated. It has always seemed to me that the latter owed more to its script (Brackett & Wilder) than to its direction, and that its continued success is at least partially due to the heresy of knocking the Garbo legend, and because it's increasingly reassuring to be able to laugh at the human failings of the Communists. No matter. Mr. Weinberg has obviously seen them recently and still likes them and all power to him. But he uses them as a kind of counterpoint to prove how "innately unfunny" *Comrade X* is. I wonder if he has seen that in the past twenty years? Values do change over the years, and *Comrade X* is one that has gained—possibly because we can now appreciate far more the inventive sight gags that Buster Keaton created for it, although the contributions of King Vidor and Ben Hecht are still valid too. Obviously there's no solution to this problem—but it's a problem that is one of the key flaws of *The Lubitsch Touch*.

If it were not such a good book otherwise, there would be no need to enumerate these historical weaknesses. It may be rather more of a Valentine to Lubitsch than an objective analysis, but it is still the definitive Lubitsch work, good enough, honest enough (as applied to the films themselves, if not to their relationship to their times and other films) and detailed enough so that there need never be another. As such it certainly belongs in the film-book section of every library, with the provision that its use is most recommended to Lubitsch students, or in film courses which include Lubitsch films.

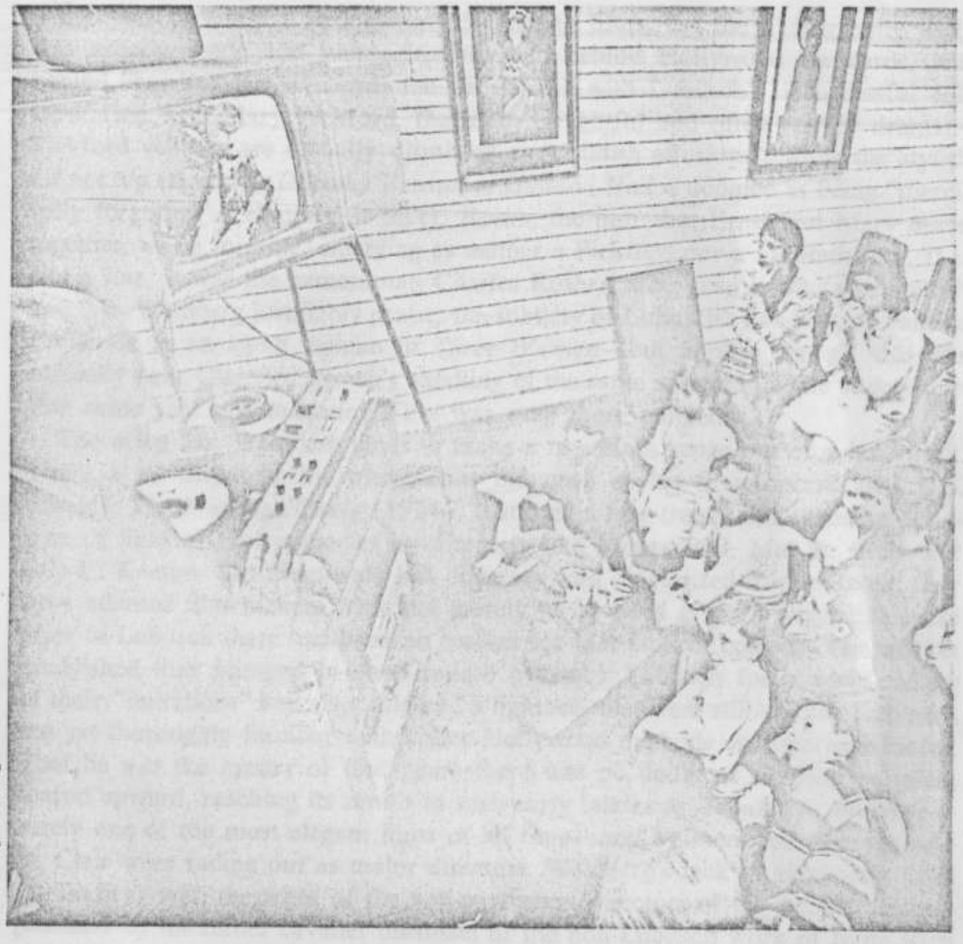

Photo by Halling

TV as a Library Medium

by Sieglinde Stieda, Memorial Library,
University of Newfoundland

For 300,000 Canadians in a Toronto suburb the action is at the Cedarbrae Regional Branch of the Scarborough Public Library, where since December 1966 twenty-one thousand square feet, filled with materials and ideas in all media, have been at their disposal. The action begins with the browsing section, where the library user of the electronic age meets the book in its *cool* version: the paperback. And popular paperbacks may also be purchased from a vending machine—as may coffee and sandwiches. In the lounge areas one may smoke as well as read. In the Audio-Visual Department the action continues with films, recordings, tapes and television under the direction of Mary Louise Werner.