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"GARBO LAUGHS!" said the ads for *Ninotchka* (1939), and everyone understood the message—not only the reference to the star's fabled glumness (she had in fact laughed a lot in *Camille*, but that was a tragic film) but exactly the kind of transformation that was being promised: an event on a par with "Garbo talks!," the 1930 slogan that heralded her talkie debut in *Anna Christie*. Garbo—the paradigm for all stars in her beauty and mystery and final inaccessibility—was now a screwball heroine, too. And the mystery compounded: she was funny.

And she certainly does laugh—with the same alarming wholeheartedness she once made love to John Gilbert with. Count Leon D'Algout (Melvyn Douglas) has pursued her to a restaurant in a working quarter where she is having a solitary lunch. She had found out the night before, after a romantic interlude in his apartment, that he is both the adviser and the lover of the Grand Duchess Swana (Ina Claire) and so the enemy of her mission in Paris. In Russia, she tells him—as she eats her soup and her bread in her grim way, while he sits at her elbow—his "business methods . . . would be punished by death." "Oh, death, death!" he exclaims. "Always so glum! What about *life?*" And what about smiling? he wants to know. At what? she wants to know. At anything—"if you can't think of anything else to laugh at, you can laugh at you and me." "Why?" "Because we're an odd couple." "Then you should go back to your table." He decides to tell her a joke. But this works no better, mainly because the joke is so dumb. "Maybe the trouble isn't with the joke," he says angrily, "maybe it's with *you*." "I don't think so," she says. He tries again, with another joke—no better—then again, getting angrier and angrier and sputtering with each try. Until he leans back in his chair and falls sprawling onto the floor.

She laughs. In fact, she howls, she collapses, she chokes—falling across the table, throwing her head back to let the sound out, collapsing across the table again. Everyone in the restaurant is laughing now—while he looks up from the

on her head with both hands. She stands and looks—hopelessly. Then she sits leaning forward rather tensely with her hands on her knees. Then, still gazing at herself, she puts her chin in her hand—and the scene ends in a dissolve. It's an unmistakable Lubitsch moment. To watch Garbo's grave and gradual acceptance of the "silliness" of the hat, of its subtle but absolute wrongness over such a face as she sees in the mirror, is to experience something like revelation. A rich, funny reminder—a re-experience in a comic mode—of that unrescindable social contract we've all entered into.

There is a story about Garbo that she once seriously expressed a wish to play St. Francis of Assisi.* In some ways she comes as near to that unconventional aim as she could do in *Ninotchka*. Whose heroine—puritan and visionary, humanitarian and ideologic—has some of the qualities we associate with the Christian saint. The St. Francis story is usually offered as evidence of Garbo's eccentricity. But in fact it makes sense. One of the elements of the Garbo mystique was always the degree to which she could make idealism seem as much a felt human need as love or food. So that in *Ninotchka* she can speak of getting "foreign currency to buy tractors" (Lubitsch gives her a full glowing close-up) and be powerfully moving as she does so. Garbo, Lubitsch, and the screwball comedy itself come together in this film in a most astonishing result: the closest thing to a convincing socialist heroine the English-speaking cinema has yet produced. It's a nice payoff to the screwball tradition: that it had the freedom to offer even this surprise.