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MADAME DUBARRY

(GERMANY, 1919)

DIRECTED BY ERNST LUBITSCH. PRODUCED BY UNION-UFA. SCREENPLAY BY HANS KRALY AND FRED ORBING. PHOTOGRAPHED BY THEODOR SPARKUHL. WITH POLA NEGRI (JEANETTE BECU, LATER MME. DUBARRY), EMIL JANNINGS (LOUIS XV), EDUARD VON WINTERSTEIN (JEAN DUBARRY), AND REINHOLD SCHUNZEL (DUC DE CHOISEUL). 9 REELS.

This pre-Expressionist German film was a milestone achievement for an industry just recovering from the deprivations of a wartime economy and the even more severe fiscal traumas of the post-Armistice collapse. MADAME DUBARRY brought the German Cinema, particularly the producing company UFA, world recognition: it also established Ernst Lubitsch as the foremost European director of the period. Seen historically (i.e., compared to other contemporary films of its sort), it is not hard to appreciate the advances in narrative technique and nuanced direction (especially of actors) marked by this splendidly mounted, but always intimate spectacle film. "Intimate spectacle" seems contradictory, but it encapsulates perhaps the most important achievement of MADAME DUBARRY, the scaling down of historical drama to human terms. This Lubitsch achieved by steadfastly maintaining the ironic viewpoint which holds that great movements in history are more often decided in the boudoir than in the stateroom. Lubitsch was the first to grant participants in mass spectacles individual personalities, and to observe them in action with a degree of psychological subtlety. He was also skilled at modulating the gestures of actors for his radical new cinema of close-up observation, of counterpoint between one kind of appearance—the pomp and spectacle of the court, the mass scenes of the French Revolution—and one kind of reality—the jealousies of lovers, the intrigues of jilted suitors. Lubitsch had the good fortune to work with actors who understood the need to balance the expressive gestures required of a non-speaking medium with complex character revelations which could be communicated quickly to a close-in camera. Both Emil Jannings and Pola Negri give bravura performances in MADAME DUBARRY, but all parts are skillfully acted. For this and subsequent period films, Lubitsch was hailed "the great humanizer of history" (it hardly mattered that he grossly distorted the facts). MADAME DUBARRY was a great success, causing critics in

particular to bemoan the failure of American films to present similarly intelligent entertainment. Because of anti-German feeling, PASSION was presented as a "European spectacle" with Pola Negri "the famous Continental star." Hence the *New York Times* critic whose review is excerpted below, to suggest how this film looked in 1920, was able to identify only the Polish actress Pola Negri in praising the entire cast:

It is in building this story of pre-revolutionary France, reaching its peak in the revolution, that Mr. Lubitsch has done something notable. The affairs of Mme. Dubarry, Louis and Armand by themselves are simply sordid, with Armand's part in them dignified by a touch of tragedy, and any director who let them stand out from their background would have had merely a sordid tale to tell. But Mr. Lubitsch has had the skill to weave them into their setting, make them part of all that is going on, and, while keeping them in the center as objects of focused interest, he has never permitted them to hold the interest exclusively. So his picture has dramatic sweep as well as localized intensity; it lives as a human document; and it satisfies historic curiosity.

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Later critics, noticing Lubitsch's mastery increase picture-by-picture and his irony develop its sharpness against the grain of contemporary melodrama, came to consider the "Lubitsch touch" as virtually synonymous with visual wit and deft elegance. While MADAME DUBARRY bears witness to the famed "Lubitsch touch" in many scenes, and over-all as the original *Times* reviewer well suggests, it will not strike viewers today as it did in 1920, nor does it remain as fresh as Lubitsch's still surprising American satires of the 1920's—THE MARRIAGE CIRCLE, THREE WOMEN, LADY WINDEMERE'S FAN, SO THIS IS PARIS. There is a certain dryness to the elaborate but too-studied decors, some stiffness and a few creaks have affected the film's once-rapid pacing, camera movements are more restricted than they would have been only a few years later. Still, in this beautiful original print, much impressive spectacle remains, as do the wonderfully physical performances of Jannings and Negri. So long as allowances are made for the many "innovations" of 1919 that were rapidly assimilated into the technique of all first-class film-making, and then surpassed (if only superficially), MADAME DUBARRY can be enjoyed as a classic that is "live" to the point of sensual exuberance.

SILENT (20 FPS) 35mm

EMIL JANNINGS AS LOUIS XV IN MADAME DUBARRY

