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Film Subjects	

Ernst Lubitsch (1892-1947), b. Berlin
 1914 - *Blinde Kuh*; *Fraulein Seifenwasser*
Meyer als Soldat; 1915 - *Auf Eis Gehen*
Zucker und Zimt; 1916 - *Als Ich Tante war*
Der Gemischte Frauenchor; *Der Erste*
Patient; *Der Gmbh Tenor*; *Leutnant im*
Befehl; *Schuhpalast Pinkus*; *Der Student*
Moritz; *Wo Ist Mein Schatz?*; 1917 - *Der*
Blusenkonig; *Ein Fideles Gefangen*
Kraftmeyer; *Ossis Tagebuch*; *Prinz*
Der Letzte Anzug; *Wenn Vier Da*
Tun; 1918 - *Die Augen der Mona Lisa*
Carmen; *Der Fall Rosentopf*; *Fraulein*
Henschel; *Das Madel vom Ballet*
Frau, die Filmschauspielerin; *Der*
kavalier; 1919 - *Die Austernprinzessin*
Nochte Kein Mann Sein; *Der Letzte*
Ehemann; *Madame Dubarry*; *Meyer*
Berlin; *Die Puppe*; *Rausch*; *Schneek*
madle; 1920 - *Anna Boleyn*; *König*
Tochter; *Medea*; *Romeo und Julia*
Schnee; *Sumurun*; *Die Tolle Rikito*
 - *Die Bergkatze*; *Vendetta*; *Der*
Pharao; 1922 - *Die Flamme*; 1923 - *Die*
 1924 - *The Marriage Circle*; *Three Women*
Forbidden Paradise; 1925 - *König*
Lady Windermere's Fan; 1926 - *So This*
is Paris; 1927 - *The Student Prince*
Old Heidelberg; 1928 - *The Eternal*
Love; 1929 - *The Love Parade*
 1930 - an episode from *Parade*
Parade; *Monte Carlo*; 1931 - *The*
Smiling Lieutenant; 1932 - *The Man*
Killed; *One Hour With You*
 and planned by Lubitsch, but directed by
 George Cukor); *Trouble in Paradise*
Clerk', episode from *If I Had a*
 1933 - *Design for Living*; 1934 - *The*
 1935 - *The*
 1936 - *The*
 1937 - *Angel*; 1938 - *Bluebeard's*
Eight Wife; 1939 - *Ninotchka*; 1940 - *The*
Man Around the Corner; 1941 - *That*
Certain Feeling; 1942 - *To Be Or Not To*
 1943 - *Heaven Can Wait*; 1946 - *Cluny*
 1947 - *That Lady in Ermine* (com-
 pleted after Lubitsch's death by Otto
 Preminger)

The regular placing of Lubitsch among the
 greatest directors seems increasingly
 obvious. But as Hollywood recedes,
 Lubitsch's role as a creative entrepreneur
 and as the germ of European sophistication
 becomes more fascinating. Considering the
 way he was rebuffed by Mary Pickford on
 his first American film, *Rosita*, and so
 widely mocked for his Teutonic stub-
 bornness, it is remarkable that he achieved
 his eminence in Hollywood and that his
 reputation rested on the supposed delicacy
 of his 'touch'. It seems to me still questionable
 whether that touch was a matter of cine-
 matic fluency - the sort of unerring visual
 sureness evident in directors as varied as
 John Minnelli or Preminger and in films as
 diverse as *The Return of Frank James*,
Casablanca and *the Thief or River of No*
Return.

Or did Lubitsch possess a fine, if
 calculating, sense of a special kind of per-
 forming wit, the daring with which one
 character in a stage farce briefly shares his
 moral superiority with the audience? Lotte
 Eisner has described the Lubitsch of the
 German period as the epitome of the ser-
 vant to whom no man is a hero. And there
 is something of a droll Figaro who abets his
 master's adultery, hurrying on his trousers
 in a bold exposure, and boldly winking at
 the audience as he does so. The effect is
 seducing and flattering, for it makes the
 audience think themselves worldly. But the
 touch has a clear artistic limit: it puts the
 character in a smug position from which he is
 never likely to be caught out himself. In
 other words, is Lubitsch's touch restricted
 to a cynical commentary on a comedy of
 manners? The tragic feeling that Ophüls or
 Lubitsch admit to the same form rarely dark-
 ens Lubitsch's consciousness.

In any case, Lubitsch had himself been an
 actor. From 1911 to 1918, he was a member
 of Max Reinhardt's company, and from
 1919 onwards he acted in films, usually
 as comic old men. Until 1917 he acted
 in many of his own films, but after the war
 he developed the German historical
 genre with great success. He had a vivid,
 geometrical sense of composition and
 a strong, an equal mastery of large crowds

and star players, and a clever if rather
 obvious way of inventing mundane,
 intimate business for noble characters -
 again, this is the servant's knowledge that a
 Casanova has piles. As humour it was more
 sly than penetrating, but even in his
 German films Lubitsch had a way of under-
 stating his ploys so that they flattered per-
 ception. His most notable historical pic-
 tures were *Madame Dubarry*, *Anna Boleyn*
 and *Sumurun*, in which he played the part
 of a dwarf - a typically grotesque and
 inventive performance. Pola Negri and Emil
 Jannings added to their fame with appear-
 ances in Lubitsch's films.

He went to America in 1923, when the
 country and Hollywood were still hostile to
 foreign talent. As Lotte Eisner has said, in
 America Lubitsch's style refined itself,
 abandoning slapstick for 'nonchalance'. He
 worked for Warners and then went to
 Paramount for *Forbidden Paradise*, from a
 play by Lajos Biro. Starring Pola Negri and
 Adolphe Menjou, it transposed a continen-
 tal and aristocratic setting to the American
 studios and introduced the idea of the
 comic under-pinnings to pompous dignity.
 He stayed at Warners for *Lady*
Windermere's Fan and Myrna Loy in *So*
This is Paris. By now his success was over-
 coming xenophobia. *The Student Prince*,
 made at MGM with Ramon Novarro and
 Norma Shearer, was a huge box office hit.
 Apart from *Eternal Love*, made for United
 Artists, from *The Patriot* to *Bluebeard's*
Eighth Wife saw Lubitsch at Paramount.

In time, he became director of produc-
 tion at that studio, with results that von
 Sternberg described and suffered from:
 '[he] held himself responsible for the work
 of other directors. This, of course, helps to
 impair a man's eyesight.' In Sternberg's
 case, Lubitsch harried him the more for
 alleged extravagance in making *The Scarlet*
Empress; in fact, Sternberg had only used
 spare footage from *The Patriot*, so
 evidently shot at silent speed it is incredible
 that Lubitsch did not realise what had hap-
 pened. But there was something of a feud
 between the two men, perhaps because
 Sternberg had exactly the gravity beneath
 bitterness that Lubitsch scared off the
 more resolutely he tried to lay hands on
 it. As Sternberg said, 'When Lubitsch was
 serious, not trying to indulge in little
 drolleries, he could make something un-
 believably bad, like *The Man I Killed*.' And
 terrible that film is, just as *Ninotchka* and
Heaven Can Wait are a good deal less funny
 than reputation would have us believe.

Lubitsch, cont'd

Lubitsch's sound comedies vary enormously. *The Love Parade*, *Monte Carlo*, *The Smiling Lieutenant* and *The Merry Widow* are smart, gay and urbane, but is it possible for a great comedy to star Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald? *Design for Living* and *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* are stagy, ill-cast and formal, but wonderfully inventive for all that. The best films Lubitsch made in America are the truly amoral *Trouble in Paradise*, in which the cynicism is so indulged that it becomes energetic and liberating; *Angel*, which could be Lubitsch's tribute to Sternberg and Dietrich; *The Shop Around the Corner*, which recreates Budapest in America and inhabits it with James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan is a beguiling romantic comedy of pretence and cross purposes, as sweet and light as an Esterhazy honey ball; and, above all, *To Be Or Not To Be*.

That film, made during the war, transcends cynicism and, for the only time, allowed Lubitsch to see the actor as a representative of humanity. 'Touch' really means something here because we are made to laugh while in sight of outrageous situations. Tact is central to the style and the tangible proof of a sane mind observing the dangerous farce. It is his funniest film because it is the most serious. American cinema has still hardly digested such startlingly brutal comedy; the model for that style is Buñuel, which reflects on the caution in so much of Lubitsch's work as in the films of Billy Wilder, Lubitsch's heir.

Only persistent viewing can test the theory that Lubitsch does not have too strong a visual imagination. His talent was always theatrical, literary and to do with performance. Cukor has told how far Lubitsch worked out everything in advance, and the rigidity that came from that. And if the achievement is more modest than some claim, it may be because the quality of measured performance stemmed so much from Lubitsch and from the reputation he had in his own lifetime for 'touch'.

That sort of sophistication cannot be copied; it is either shared with actors or it seems contrived. Carole Lombard and Jack Benny seem in charge of *To Be Or Not To Be*, while in, say, *Design for Living*, Gary Cooper, Fredric March and Miriam Hopkins look awed by some monstrous ham behind the camera. Just as Chaplin has sometimes frozen good players with his unmanageable exhibitionism, so, according to Clarence Brown, '[Lubitsch] used to

show them how to do everything, right down to the minutest detail. He would hold a cape, and show the star how to put it on. He supplied all the little movements. He was magnificent because he knew his art better than anybody. But his actors followed his performance. They had no chance to give one of their own.'

see Maurice Chevalier, Mitchell Leiser, Jeanette MacDonald, Rouben Mamoulian, William Menjou, Pola Negri, Josef von Sternberg, Herman G. Weinberg, *The Lubitsch Touch* (New York, 1968)