Abstract

The Princess Learns to Wink: Lubitsch and the Politics of the Obscene

The films of Ernst Lubitsch are characterized by his famous “touch”: a singular elegance and incomparable mastery of indirect communication. This paper examines what seems to be a flawed movie from this perspective, the musical *The Smiling Lieutenant*, which could be regarded as an almost vulgar depiction of the sexual prowess of a Viennese officer. Interpreted against its historical background, however, the film is shown to be a most rewarding artistic meditation on the shift towards the rise of modern mass politics, viewed as intrinsically obscene, and fascism in particular.

Bringing into conversation Sandor Ferenczi’s psychoanalytic theory of “Obscene Words” and Lubitsch’s cinematic reflection on the complicity between innuendo (couched in elegance) and the obscene, this paper aims at a theoretical reflection on and refinement of the language of the obscene and its political utilization.

Keywords: Lubitsch, Ferenczi, Freud, obscene, indirect communication, representation, performativity, psychoanalysis, political theory, film, comedy.

The Princess Learns to Wink: Lubitsch and the Politics of the Obscene

Lubitsch’s musical *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931) is very rarely shown, and this is not entirely surprising. This is not one of the director’s masterpieces, and there is something quite disturbing about it. Viewers accustomed to identifying Lubitsch with subtlety and nuance may be quite shocked to encounter some strikingly direct hints that border on, and even transmit, vulgarity. However, there may be good reason for it, and in what follows it will be shown that Lubitsch, even when not at his best, is at his best; that an apparently flawed Lubitsch film has in fact much to teach us about our contemporary political reality.

The films of Lubitsch are famous for having his distinct “touch,” often, and quite justly, associated with his incomparable capacity for indirect expression, a quality beautifully encapsulated in a formula offered by Aaron Schuster: “Never say anything directly when a good metaphor will do.” (2014: 19-20)

There is a singular elegance and economy in Lubitsch’s style, whereby more is said by saying less. And yet, as others have remarked, there is also something in Lubitsch that seems to pull in the opposite direction; there is the presence of something disturbing, something that flirts not only with the uncanny[[1]](#footnote-1) and the odd[[2]](#footnote-2) but also with the downright vulgar or obscene. Sometimes, Lubitsch seems to wink at the audience a little too forcefully, and his indirectness is about as subtle as an elbow to the ribs, as James Harvey puts it, apropos of *The Smiling Lieutenant*.[[3]](#footnote-3) How should such tendencies in Lubitsch be understood? Are these simple artistic failures? Or do they represent a form of aesthetic “slip of the tongue,” revealing something fundamental about Lubitsch’s work?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Lubitsch’s *The Smiling Lieutenant* serves as a rather revealing test case. As we shall see, what might at first seem like an artistic failure, is much more profitably read as Lubitsch’s own process of “working through” the relation between style and content in his work. *The Smiling Lieutenant* is a cinematic mediation on the troubling intimacy between elegance and obscenity, and the integration of the transgressive into the heart of political culture. In the guise of a lighthearted romantic triangle, Lubitsch offers his viewers a startling political tale, which accounts for much of the film’s disagreeableness.

*The Smiling Lieutenant* is a film adaption of the operetta *Ein Walzertraum* (The Waltz Dream), by Leopold Jacobson and Felix Dörmann, itself an adaptation of the novel *Nux Der Prinzgemahl* by Hans Müller. The music was arranged by Oscar Strauss, and the leading roles were played by Maurice Chevalier (as Niki, a Viennese army officer), Claudette Colbert (as Franzi, his lover), and Miriam Hopkins (as his wife, Princess Anna). It was Lubitsch’s third film operetta, following *The Love Parade* and *Monte Carlo*. James Harvey draws an interesting and unflattering comparison between the movie and its predecessors, noting that all three are characterized by a “mixture of formality and leering, operetta swank and strip-show prurience.” (1998: 13) Yet Lubitsch’s fondness for the obscure Hungarian plays of the well-made school was marked by a sort of “knowing all, underlying cynicism.” The haut bourgeois swank that was characteristic of the continental theatrical tradition is transformed by Lubitsch and revealed as “having to do more with daydreams of elegance than with the real thing.” (1998: 7) In any case, in the early operettas Lubitsch’s cynicism towards the bourgeois phantasy is not overbearing.

“Lubitsch’s style has a moral grace that undercuts the scripts’ often complacent cynicism, the chortling naughtiness of some of the jokes. Lubitsch has put on the screen a world where people live in a more or less continuous state of mild astonishment... He is in full, happy command of a movie style that not only portrays but tends to induce the habit of wonder.” (Harvey 1998: 15)

In *The Smiling Lieutenant*, as Harvey detects, Lubitsch’s formal elegance no longer compensates for the cynicism it depicts. It seems instead to have given into it. In *The Smiling Lieutenant*, “the propensity to motions of surprise and wonder that transfigures the obsessive ‘naughtiness’ of the other films is mostly missing... We are left with the naughtiness, and a certain sourness too” (Harvey 1998: 24). As the following discussion will reveal, the fraught relationship between style and (obscene, cynical) content is quite deliberately at play in the movie. However a brief summary of the plot is necessary first.

The titular smiling lieutenant is Niki, a Viennese army officer, played by Maurice Chevalier, who is dutifully dedicated to a life of philandering. After the movie’s exposition, to which we shall turn shortly, Niki begins a passionate affair with Franzi (Claudette Colbert), the leader of an all-female orchestra (“The Viennese Swallows”). Devoted above all else to sexual conquests, Niki steals Franzi from a friend who had previously asked for his assistance in wooing her, and after a pleasurable evening together spent playing music, Franzi stays for breakfast—and it is suggested that this is an exception not only for her, but also for him. This might just be “the real thing.”

The plot thickens when Anna (Miriam Hopkins), the only daughter of the king of a tiny (made up) European country (Flausenthurm, with an H!) and a distant cousin of the Emperor Franz Josef, intercepts the lieutenant’s smile and a wink of the eye, intended for his girl, Franzi. This inappropriate gesture becomes a public scandal, and Niki is summoned to the palace to face the offended parties, the king and his daughter. When Niki explains that he smiled and winked because he could not resist the beauty of “the girl” he had been looking at, Anna, presuming that he is speaking about her, is flattered, and Niki soon finds himself forced into marrying her and moving to Flausenthurm. The whole thing is sealed with a kiss on both cheeks from the emperor himself. Duty bound, he obeys, but he has to draw the line somewhere: he will be Princess Anna’s husband in title only and there will be no sexual relationship.

When Franzi visits town (wherever this may be in Flausenthurm) with her orchestra, Niki manages to find a way of discreetly rekindling their affair: each time he wishes to see her, he sends a police officer to “arrest” her and bring her to him. One day, Franzi is escorted by a police officer to the palace, but instead of finding her lover there, she is instead confronted by his embittered wife. The unavoidable confrontation soon turns into an apprenticeship of sorts, in which Franzi shares her carnal knowledge with Anna, with the advice—and song—jazz up your lingerie. Franzi leaves, assuring Anna that she should not feel bad for her, as Niki would never have stayed with her in the long term: “Girls who start with breakfast don’t usually stay for supper,” she says, in bitter acceptance of her fate.

With this departure, and the elimination of Franzi from the picture, Anna seems to have lost her innocence and gained the wisdom of sexual experience. As expected, Anna then puts this recently acquired knowledge to work, seducing her husband and finally consummating their marriage. After a nuanced scene of subtle seduction, the movie ends with Chevalier singing a second version of his opening song, which we will now examine.

What is in the frame? The Lubitsch touch between elegance and vulgarity

The film opens with a textbook Lubitsch exposition. As the Paramount Pictures logo appears, we hear military trumpets, calling us to order. After the opening credits, punctuated by the very same trumpet, ra-ta-ta-ta, ta-ta, ta-ta, a sequence of images shows us the city, Vienna, then the staircase of an apartment building. A tailor arrives at the lieutenant’s door (we see the name displayed, Lieutenant Nikolaus von Preyn) to collect payments for clothing services, a shocking amount of debt (1614.25 Austrian schillings) incurred by a man who dresses only in uniform. The tailor rings the bell. No answer. He rings again. Unsurprisingly, there is still no response, and the tailor leaves sluggishly, with empty hands. As he descends the stairs, a young woman briskly passes him on her way up, almost sprinting. She is blonde, fashionable and energetic. She knocks on the door with a musical rhythm, which does the trick: the door opens immediately, and she quickly disappears inside. The camera moves towards the lamp, which dims, telling us night has come. Daylight and lively music then announce daybreak, and the blonde opens the door and leaves, a smile on her face quickly fading away into a satisfied sigh.

We have here, in short, a textbook exemplar of the famous Lubitsch touch. Without seeing the titular lieutenant, we know the protagonist is quite elegant in thwarting his debtors, that he likes to dress nicely and expansively, and that his door opens only with a code from the right lady—who tends to spend the night and leave satisfied, albeit with the knowledge that the affair is not meant to last. All of this without a single word uttered.

We then see Niki (Chevalier) in his room. Trumpets begin to sound, and soldiers around town are hastily saying goodbye to the girls they have spent the night with, snatching a quick kiss before hurrying back to duty. The lieutenant, on the other hand, sits in his pyjamas on his bed, and sings the song, heavy with significance, that will serve as the leitmotif of the film.

Boudoir Brigadiers

A soldier’s work is never done

And though we never use a gun

We’re still on active service

Though we’re through with fighting

For when a lady takes the field

She knows the guards will always yield

And every man deserves a medal every night

[Stands up, puts his hat on]

To arms, to arms

We’re used to night alarms

We’re always facing powder

The girls give in

We weaken, but we win

And march home

Feeling prouder

We’re on a parade

Each evening in the park

We’re not afraid to skirmish in the dark

We’re famous near and far

For our

[Puts his thumb in his mouth creepily, as if mimicking a trumpet, but rather resembling a grown man sucking his thumb]

Rata, ta-ta-ta, ta-ta

Toujours l’amour

In the army

We give the girls

A rata-ta, ta-ta-ta-ta

When we go out campaigning

And they give us

A rata, ta-ta-ta-ta-ta

And so, we are not complaining

For years and years

We’ve battled every night

They’ll pension us

When we’re too old to fight

We’re the boudoir brigadiers

With a rata-ta-ta-ta, ta-ta

Toujours l’amour

in the army

[Salutes]

Rata ta-ta, ta-ta-ta, ta- ta

The sexual innuendos of the song could hardly be more explicit, and Chevalier’s performance comes across as terribly strained, as though there is a desperate intention to make absolutely sure that the spectator understands the “hidden” messages. Indeed, the intensity of his winks threatens to break the camera’s lens. It is truly disturbing.

Consequently, an insurmountable gap separates the two modes of expression used to open the film: on the one hand, there is the subtlety and economy of the first silent sequence of images, and on the other, the loud, excessive overabundance of the second. In the first case, the spectator enjoys the clever way in which messages are indirectly communicated and appreciates how much can be conveyed by means of subtle suggestion; an economy of signification is brought into play, and this gives rise to a certain unexpected pleasure because so much can be understood even though not a single word is spoken. Rather, what is said comes silently from the arrangement of images (and the accompanying music). In the second case, however, if there is pleasure to be had, it lies in the ease with which we all share the joke and in the direct understanding of what is being obviously suggested. And while we all know full well what it is all about, no effort is spared in the lyrics of the song or in the actor’s delivery to reiterate the message and drive the point home. We enjoy the song complicity, at the expense of an imagined, extremely naïve observer who is ignorant of the abundantly excessive, clearly sexual innuendo. This contrast, which comes right at the beginning, is striking in itself. But its significance comes into full view when we consider, as we shall do so in more detail later, that this tension indeed frames the film: the film ends, as it opens, with an inexplicable transition from nuanced, stylized suggestion to excessive, disturbing winking.

How can this transition be explained? Is this just a mistake, akin to a cinematic slip of the tongue? The sheer contrast between these two modes of expression—the textbook, Lubitsch indirect style and the over-the-top winking at the audience—gives the impression that there is something else going on. It is highly unlikely that Lubitsch all of a sudden forgot what he was capable of. Instead, it seems as if the director himself is troubled by the textbook definition of his style. It is almost as though Lubitsch positions the second, over-the-top mode of expression over the top of the first, to reinforce the unpleasant truth that both contain: while they vary significantly in style, it could be said that they both ultimately point to the same, rather obvious direction. They are paths to the same illicit content, but one is simply shorter than the other.

With regard to the repetitive trumpet refrain, Harvey notes that it somehow haunts the entire film. “What’s unsettling is that each time he comes to this refrain—chortling and grimacing and rolling his eyes—he seems determined to outdo the last time. It’s unnerving because, for all the leering, there is no suggestion of real carnality... the more excited he gets, the less he suggests passion or erotic life of any kind—the more he suggests impotence and the effort to “get it up,” joking and grimacing to the bitter, hopeless, soul shattering end... That affliction seems to trouble the whole film—at times like a madness. Lubitsch’s method is as unrelenting as his star’s. Every reference to a musical instrument, (and there are many), carries the same charge of ribald meaning... You begin to feel that the real Lubitsch touch is an elbow in the ribs—tirelessly, even maniacally reapplied.” (1998: 25)

Harvey here is at his penetrating best. We should add, however, that Chevalier’s forced performance, and his strained attempts to enjoy his assigned tasks are in fact very true to the lyrics he sings, which portray the sexual rapport as a serious, military duty, a tiring battle taken up for a higher cause. In other words, if we take the lyrics at face value, the allusion to the real, hidden core of military life seems to shift in order to convey a much more disturbing message: instead of there being a swinging movement between the dignified life of soldiers on duty and their promiscuous, hedonistic nightlife when on leave, we can detect a literal equation between them. The more obvious innuendo —that sexual promiscuity is the hidden truth of the language of duty—covers up an alternative, reversed truth, namely that the sexual promiscuity promised between the lines is itself a sham, and there is nothing but duty all the way down. The soldier’s sexual freedom is in fact a most demanding, overbearing duty, spelled out in the open language of the text and in Chevalier’s disturbingly exaggerated delivery. Furthermore, the anxiety of performance failure—“they’ll pension us when we’re too old to fight”—is perfectly conveyed in Chevalier’s over performance.

The word-image: Lubitsch and Ferenczi on the language of the obscene

We encounter here a Lubitsch who is in the process of considering just what his “touch” amounts to. Is the director challenging indirectness? Is he questioning the sense that we all know all too well just what is suggested by suggestion, that we all know where all this indirectness leads—it all leads to “it,” the sexual act.

On the face of it, the trouble with indirectness seems to be that it is never quite as indirect as we would like it to be. There is always, lurking in the background, the object alluded to. However, it might in fact be a little more complicated than that. It might be that we cannot even be direct about it. Let us suppose for a moment that, indeed, we are always talking about sex here. What’s the fuss? What’s the big deal? After all, we are all adults.[[5]](#footnote-5) Can we not just talk about sex straightforwardly? Remember, this is before the Hays code, there are no codified restrictions, nor is there any reason to believe Lubitsch has become, overnight, a moralist about sex. The problem is that we simply lack the words to talk about it; and the words we do have at our disposal always fail to signify the sexual object, because with sexuality we are dealing with the fundamental failure of signification.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In his work on obscene words, Sandor Ferenczi notes that, in his clinical practice, patients avoid certain words, having to do with sexual or excremental objects and processes, preferring to use other, cleaner terms instead. “How is it,” Ferenczi wonders, “that it is so much harder to designate the same thing with one term than with another?” (2002:135) The reason, as he goes on to speculate, has to do with the special status of the obscene words, which he also calls word-images. Drawing on a line of argument from Freud’s work on obscene jokes,[[7]](#footnote-7) Ferenczi comes to the following, generalized conclusion: “An obscene word has a peculiar power of compelling the hearer to imagine the object it denotes, the sexual organ or function, *in substantial actuality*.” (2002:137)

The obscene word does not represent the object; rather, it functions as if it were, directly, the object, in all its carnality. In a twist on Swift’s philosophers of Lagado, the utterance of an obscene word functions much like “pulling the cat out of the bag,” and displaying the object directly, with the emphasis put on “pulling it out,” that is to say on the act of exhibition.[[8]](#footnote-8) Words that behave like things are far from being convenient modes of communication, as they are imagined to be by Swift’s philosophers. They belong to a pre-communicative dimension of language. Ferenczi’s obscene words are what contemporary philosophers would call “performatives.” Ferenczi points to oaths[[9]](#footnote-9) as refined sublimations of obscene words, and notes that they “do not at all belong... to conceptual speech; they do not serve the needs of conscious communication but represent reactions to a stimulus which are nearly related to gestures.” (2002:151) These are words that function like acts or objects, fully materialized.

For Ferenczi, obscene words carry the traces of “attributes that have belonged to all words in some early stage of psychical development.” (2002:138) At this stage, before the interference of and gradual compromise with the reality principle, which, in imposing limitations on the child’s will, teaches him to distinguish the wish-idea from real gratification, “the idea is... treated as equivalent to reality.” (ibid) The capacity for abstract thought and representation is coeval with the separation of wish and reality, word and image, but it does not come once and for all and the potential of regression remains, as is evidenced by the “magical power” retained in obscene words.

So much, then, for direct representation: obscene words do not represent, but rather exhibit, in an immediate fashion, the pre-Oedipal, primordial thing which words (that is to say, our normal, discursive use of language, and the assumption of linguistic “aboutness”) put at a distance. Obscene words operate, on a miniature scale, a regression to infantile sexuality. It is not only the specific object that comes to view with the utterance of the obscene word, but the very murky background, the pre-ontological void to which it belongs, in which reality itself, as an objective limit and a world, has not yet been established. The pleasure—and horror—of the obscene has to do with the collapse of the gap that separates a wish from its fulfillment, or, for that matter, a command from its execution.

Regarding one, crucial aspect, however, we need to revise Ferenczi’s account. Ferenczi argues that “delicate allusions to sexual processes and scientific or foreign designations for them, do not have this effect, or at least not to the same extent as the words taken from the original, popular, erotic Vocabulary of one’s mother’s tongue.” (2002:137)

The distinction Ferenczi draws is sound: there is an intimate familiarity with the obscene, to which we shall return, unlike clinical, objective language that seems more distant, or further removed. However, our analysis of *The Smiling Lieutenant* has so far put us in a position to see the avoidance of obscene language as a continuation of the same problematic. Lubitsch’s juxtaposition of his clever indirect aesthetics with obscene innuendo, calls into question the neat separation of the two. We may instead propose that both linguistic strategies fail to signify their object, albeit, in different, opposite, yet complementary ways.

There seem to be three options which (fail to) designate the sexual object: the vulgar, the clinical, and the euphemistic, all part of one and the same matrix. The vulgar or profane names we use are recognizable precisely by not really being names, and by being less than representational. A vulgar expression fails to achieve the representational distance from the object it names,[[10]](#footnote-10) and instead comes very close to putting it on display. Instead of a word we have a quasi-thing, or a quasi-act—hence the tendency these days to be offended or hurt by the mere evocation of words. A name that fails to name functions too much like the object it is supposed to designate. At the other extreme, in the use of clinical expressions, we witness an act of naming that, in its very clinical precision seems to entirely fail to touch upon what matters to us in the object named. Its scientific objectivity is thus immediately stained by the suspicion of an underlying obsessive compulsion for cleansing our terms—distancing them precisely from what they ultimately aim to name, and what they mean for us. Lastly, our euphemisms—and this might be the reason for their comical potential—always hover in an unstable region, threatening to collapse into either pole.

Considering this unique problem of representation, indirectness appears to be impossible, twice over, as there is no direct approach to which it defers. How can we offer a metaphor for “it” when we cannot even name it directly, but all the while seem constantly aware that “it” lies behind all our suggestions?

We are dealing here with an object that fails to be named by being either too close for comfort or constantly—relentlessly, obsessively—held at arm’s length. Is this the unique, defining characteristic of sex? While sex is not meant here as an “innocent” example, neither should it be understood that this is the unique feature of talking about “it.” Our interest here lies in the obscene, and it can be distinguished as an “epistemic thing”[[11]](#footnote-11) in its unique relation to knowledge: while we all know it when we see it, it seems impossible to define. There are no pre-existing criteria for what would count as obscene[[12]](#footnote-12)—a point Lubitsch makes rather excessively by loading every reference to musical instruments with sexual overtones. The right, or rather, wrong, intonation, can render any content an innuendo. Thus, our formulations here should not be taken as definitions of what is unique to our speech about sex, but as a rule of thumb to identify a sexualized area of discourse. If the terms seem to oscillate between obscene presentation and clinical representation, we know we are dealing with a libidinally charged domain of discourse.

Of course, this talk about extreme poles should not lead us to imagine there is some kind of a middle point, or a perfect balance. True indirectness would have to affect an unexpected decentering of this entire matrix. We would have to encounter indirectness on the side of the object it is meant to allude to. We shall have the opportunity at the very end of this paper to observe an example of how Lubitsch achieves such a reversal in this film.

Before we return to Lubitsch, it is important to note the political consequences of seeing these two poles as complementary. As Freud’s famous dictum goes: “Neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Ferenczi comes close to pointing towards the complementarity, if not complicity, of the directly obscene and its obsessive avoidance. As we shall later discuss, Ferenczi notes a difference in the neurotic and perverse enjoyment strategies in relation to the obscene. The pervert “will take possession of this source of pleasure also, and become cynical in his speech, or perhaps content himself merely with reading coarse obscenities. There exists, indeed, a perversity of its own that consists in the uttering aloud of obscene words.” (2002:150) Ferenczi here refers to what today would be called the sexual harassment of many of his female patients who “have been insulted in the streets by well-dressed men, who whispered obscene words to them in passing by, without any other sexual advances.” (ibid) There is no need to make any further advances, for the utterance itself **is** the sexual act. These are perverts who “content themselves with an act that has been weakened into a form of speech, and who in doing so select those words that (through their being forbidden, as through their motor and plastic attributes), are especially calculated to evoke the reaction of shame.” (ibid) The true neurotic, by contrast, “turns his attention away from obscene words, either completely or almost completely. Wherever possible he passes them by without thinking of them, and when he cannot avoid them, he responds with an exaggerated reaction of shame and disgust.” (Ferenczi, 2002: 151)

The neurotic’s excessive shame and disgust are inseparable from the pervert’s enjoyment in evoking shame, and displaying “shamelessness,” as shown not only by Ferenczi’s example but also by the success of contemporary “anti-politically correct” politicians. The more certain words and expressions appear forbidden and shameful, the more power is attached to those who enjoy—or at least act out—the violation.[[14]](#footnote-14) In violating these unspoken taboos, a political leader like Donald Trump shows himself to be “taking possession” of a pleasure forbidden for the rest of us, and thus making a claim to the role of “crowd leader.”[[15]](#footnote-15) The lesson as to the codependency of perverse and neurotic modes of enjoyment—the neurotic drive for inhibitions and the perverse violation of them—is crucial. For it serves to remind us that the political forces currently on the rise, characterized to a large extent by their ability to shamelessly transgress societal norms, owe their power in equal measure, if not more, to those shocked and appalled by their transgression, than to those nodding in approval.

The politics of obscenity: From the lieutenant’s smile to the princess’ wink

The issue Lubitsch raises in this film regarding the slip of innuendo into obscenity is not confined to aesthetic and semiotic concerns, and does not only appear at the level of the movie’s formal modes of expression. The issue is political, and it appears right at the center of the plot.

There seems to be a classic Lubitsch love triangle, with all the usual tension between passionate, free love and marriage, between the illicit and the proper. The superjoke of the film, as Billy Wilder observed, is that at the end “the wrong girl gets the man.”(Eyman 2000: 169).

Yet from a different angle, the story is also a tale about a princess who learns how to wink, and more importantly, how to compel her subject to wink back at her. That is to say, it is a tale about the modernization of political power and the significant shift in its function that is perhaps only now coming into full view.

Let us now return to the film, now read from the point of view of the intercepted gesture as a political allegory of sorts. We first meet the two members of the royal family as they are travelling by train from the tiny country of Flausenthurm to Vienna, to meet the emperor, a distant cousin. They receive a telegram, notifying them that the emperor will not be there to receive them at the train station, as he has to attend the opening of a cattle show. They are naturally quite insulted, but what is at stake is a wider shift in priority and etiquette. The emperor fancies himself as a big businessman, they complain, and gives priority to making profit over matters of ceremony. They make this point just as a cattle train speeds past, literally overtaking them on its way to meet the emperor. The joke seems to be at the expense of this outdated royal family; they are clearly representatives of yesterday’s world. What, then, shall come to replace them? Rushing forward, the train of progress is happy to put cattle first.

What is in a wink?

We see the royal family members again in an official parade that passes through Vienna. Niki stands at attention in his role as lieutenant, but sees his lover, Franzi, in the crowd and loses concentration. Returning her flirtatious smiles, he winks at her, just at the moment when Princess Anna happens to look his way. Intercepting the gesture, she thinks that Niki is winking at her. The royal family is shocked and chagrined, and Niki is soon summoned to the palace to account for his actions. While they seem either too naïve or embarrassed to mention the wink directly, they view the gesture as an act of mockery. “Royalty Insulted: Lieutenant Laughs at Princess” run the headlines of the *Wiener Journal*. Whatever else a wink might mean, it seems to be a teasing gesture that is used between peers, and thus an insult when directed at those who hold a much higher social status. As the princess puts it, “I know a princess cannot be insulted by a common lieutenant, I should be far above that, but besides being a princess, I’m a girl,” and as soon as she utters these words she begins to sob. This—her opting for the “real girl” underneath the royal attire—is the beginning of her downfall, and maybe ours as well.

Summoned before the royal family, Niki, as always, relies on his charms. His intentions were not at all inspired by mockery. On the contrary, he claims to be a romantic. He was standing at attention, looking at the most beautiful girl, he begins to explain. Seeing that the king and his daughter misunderstand him, assuming that he is referring to the princess, Niki seizes the opportunity. “That is my crime,” he exclaims, relieved. “Thank you. I confess it. When I saw Her Highness, so young, so charming, so beautiful, I forgot everything—my rank, my duty—I smiled.”

The wink is the film’s open secret, and the movie’s title itself functions like a substitution that covers up and disavows the central gesture. As we shall presently see, the secret name of the film, the title that would have divulged its secrets, could have been “The Princess Learns to Wink.” The proverbial “elephant in the room,” the wink, has not yet been mentioned explicitly. Yet Anna is clearly intrigued, indeed attracted by the gesture, which she does not quite comprehend.

Having assuaged the displeased royals, Niki is sent outside, so that they can discuss his fate. After a short while, the princess approaches him. “I want to ask you something,” she states. “You see, I don’t know very much about life. I got all my knowledge out of the royal encyclopedia. A special edition arranged for Flausenthurm—with all the interesting things left out. Now, when you smiled at me, you also did something else. Something with your eye.”

Confused for a second, Nicky replies:

“Oh, yes! Yes. This.” He winks. She giggles. She may not yet know what it means, but she knows she’s not supposed to. She knows this is naughty, forbidden knowledge.

Ana: What’s that?

Nicky: A wink.

Ana: A wink. What does it mean?

Nicky: When—when we like somebody, we smile. But when we want to do something about it—we wink.

Ana: (gasps). Thank you, that’s enough for today

She then takes leave of him. From across the room, she turns back to him, winks, and closes the door behind her. Realizing what has just happened, Niki is taken aback and drops heavily to his seat, with a worried look on his face. “Ta-ta-rata, ta-ta-ta, ta-ta”, he slowly sings, now ominously, staring ahead with a deadened gaze, foreshadowing the forced marriage that has just become his inescapable fate.

The wink, as Niki explains to Anna, is more than a sign; it is an advance. It has implications, and it implicates the receiver. The gesture is the message—what the wink communicates to us about gestures in general is the manner in which they convey unspoken communication, the gesture always implying that “we’re in this together, we’re complicit,” as if engaged in a conspiring activity, to the exclusion of a third person, who must remain oblivious.

Anna **is** that third person; she represents the function of “the other” as the one who is unaware, the one from whom secrets are kept and for whom encyclopedias are redacted, the one who must remain ignorant even of the existence of such secret communication. What we have here, as she intercepts the gesture, is a kind of reverse interpellation: instead of the Althusserian police officer hailing a person as a subject,[[16]](#footnote-16) as it were, rendering the private individual a subject of the public state apparatus, we observe that the princess—whose function as a symbolic public entity depends on a unique, painstakingly manufactured innocence—is accidently interpellated by a type of communication that excludes her, namely the intimate private communication between two lovers.

In the communication that ensues between Anna and Niki, the latter refuses to wink, thus denying the entire dimension of subtext and suggestion. This is his cruelty towards her, but it is also the way the movie defines a certain space of political freedom, a certain limit to political power, that will soon disappear.

Good night, dear – the lieutenant’s last stand

His destiny sealed, it is arranged for the officer to be married to the young princess. They are married in Flausenthurm. On their wedding night, with all the expected pomp and ceremony now behind them, Niki enters their bedroom and approaches the princess from behind, moving intimately close to her. It is their wedding night, after all. He then politely bows, and says: “Good night, dear.”

Ana: What?

Niki: Aren’t we married? Aren’t you my wife? Am I not your husband?

Ana (excited): Yes!

Niki: Now, can’t I call you “dear,” when I say goodnight?

Ana: Well, you may call me “dear,” but you shouldn’t say goodnight.

Niki (looking at his watch): But it’s—it’s 9:30. And at this hour, “good night” is the only proper thing to say.

Ana: Oh. You don’t understand.

Niki: What?

Anna, perturbed, turns to him, and with urgency, addresses him: Niki.

Niki: Yes, Anna?

Anna, again, more forcefully, looking him straight in the eye: Niki!

Niki: Yes, Anna?

Anna sighs. Frustrated, she takes a few steps away from him, and then, very awkwardly, and very intently, winks at him.

Niki (with a knowing smile): Oh. Oh!

His smile turns into a frown, and he shakes his head: Oh, no! Oh, no! Married people don’t do that!

Anna: They don’t?

Niki: Oh, no!

Anna: Married people don’t wink?

Niki: Ye-yes, they wink... but not at each other.

Anna: Well, what’s the use of getting married?

Niki: All the philosophers, for 3,000 years, have tried to find that out. And they failed. And I don’t think we’ll solve that problem tonight. Good night.

Niki leaves the room triumphantly, only to run into his new father-in-law, the king. Defiantly, he confronts him: “Let me tell you something. You can lead a horse to water... but you can’t make him drink!” He kisses the king on the cheek, saying, “That’s as far as I go. That’s my limit.” He then runs up the stairs, like a child running to his room after having told his parents off.

Niki has, for the first time, found scope for disobedience, limited as it may be. We can recall that in his opening song he presented his sexual activity as a royal duty. However, he has now reached the limits of enforceable political power, restricting what can be gained by the simple issue of commands and their enforcement. In his encounter with the king he makes that quite explicit: “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” Depriving the princess of a sexual relationship represents his act of civil disobedience, his space of freedom. Indeed, in what follows, Anna will have to learn how to act in the realm of unwritten, unenforceable laws—a dimension of “soft” power, the power of suggestion and seduction, which is much more far-reaching, precisely because its target is this new-found space of freedom.

The separation of winking from marriage can be seen as a metaphor for the limits of enforceable, political power and explicit command. Therefore, Anna’s journey towards the combination of marriage and winking is also a move beyond those limitations, a redefinition of political power precisely where it ought to have stopped. While there is no forcing the horse into drinking the water, there is the seduction of individuals into intimate bonds with their rulers. The bonds of complicity.

At this point in the plot, Franzi is summoned to the palace by Anna, and ends up tutoring her in the ways of seduction, with the advice, and song, “jazz up your lingerie.” When she leaves the room, in any case, the spectator understands that Anna has lost her somewhat rigid, stilted innocence, and has gained her feminine powers. She is now in a position to seduce Niki. And here, finally, as the movie comes to a close, we reconnect with the Lubitsch touch.

Noticing Anna in her “jazzed up” lingerie, Niki enters their bedroom. “Anna, is this you?” “No” she replies. “This is Mandelbaum & Gruenstein,” throwing her fur top over the chair. The lesson of her new underwear is clearly the flesh underneath them. She then leans in forcefully and kisses Niki. “That’s me.” She kisses him again. “And that’s me again.”

Niki is stunned. She steps away from him and sits on a chair. He stares at her, clearly aroused, as she takes a checkers board, holding it in front of her body almost like a shield. The checkers board made its first appearance in her father’s hands, when he went to console her and offer some distraction after Niki had refused to fulfill his marital duties. Now this object, too, will lose its innocence. Anna approaches Niki with the checkers board in hand, sitting close to him and staring directly into his eyes. But, as he tries to embrace her, she positions the checkers board between them. He shakes his head and pushes the board to the side. She takes it up again, he throws it onto the floor. She follows the board, and sits next to it, ready to play. He takes it away from her, holds it in his hand, surveying the room to find a fitting place to throw it, and then, in a classic Lubitsch reversal, he smiles in reaction to something off camera. He throws the board, and our eyes follow it as it lands on the bed.

Now we are back with the married couple. Niki, in clear violation of the rules he pronounced on their wedding night, now winks at Anna, and smiles. She turns away, smiling to herself, and then stands up. The camera is back to the checkers board placed on the bed, advancing towards it slowly. A familiar trumpet sounds gently in the background, a final nudge for those who may be extremely slow on the uptake. With this we move to the final scene of the film. A door is opened, just as it did in the opening sequence. This time, it is Niki who steps out of it, in his pyjamas, full of joy. He sings a second, “domesticated” version of the opening song.

I’ve found at home

My ratata, ta-ta-ta-ta

There’ll be no more campaigning

And she’ll find me

Oh, rata-ta, ta-ta-ta-ta

And so I’m not complaining

I found a new commander to obey

I must report for duty right away

She’ll never pension me

Anna, from the bedroom: rata, ta-ta-ta, ta-ta-ta-ta

Niki, excited:

Toujours l’amour

In the army

The end

The final scene turns the entire movie into an obscene twist on Cavell’s idea of Hollywood comedies as comedies of remarriage.[[17]](#footnote-17) The strong female character that characterizes the genre, according to Cavell, is the obstacle to be removed in this film. As previously mentioned, Wilder observed that the superjoke of the film is that the wrong girl gets the man. Furthermore, the Oedipal obstacle characteristic of “new comedy”[[18]](#footnote-18) can only be said to exist between Niki and Franzi, and in this case, it is never removed, only internalized by Franzi’s acceptance of her fate.

There is no such obstacle between Niki and Anna, certainly not in her father, who seems willing to grant her any wish, and is in general quite impotent.[[19]](#footnote-19) The obstacle here is female competition, which Anna finally eliminates by imitation. Indeed, the final scene of seduction, in which she gains her feminine power, is precisely about the transmutation of obstacles into objects of seduction. The checkers board was originally a token of comfort and companionship, in her father’s hands. Now, she puts the object between herself and her husband, playing a subtle game in which the board is at once an obstacle to the sexual act and an attempt to shift gears and change the atmosphere. As such, it becomes sexualized, as the object around which the “sexual negotiations” can be organized.

There is also a beautifully reflexive point: turning the checkers board into an object of playful improvisation alludes to Anna’s confusion about “how to play the game” which seemed in the past to define her position in the world. Her innocence (the very fact that she has not learned to master those seemingly unlearnable rules of language and life) becomes the positive obstacle that she turns into her own game, enabling their sexual union. We are left to make assumptions, of course; but not for long. Just like the opening, Lubitsch presents us here again, at the very end, with a second version of the “dirty” song, over-explaining everything and making everybody feel quite uncomfortable. Nevertheless, this discomfort is right and appropriate, when viewed from a political perspective.

For what seems like the ultimate untenable sexual phantasy, the perfect sexual union achieved between marriage and indiscretion (the combination of sexual excitement with a stable, proper home life), loses its status as an unattainable ideal, and is revealed instead as a glimpse into our disquieting political reality. What in our private, sexual lives can only appear as a contradictory desire, is effectively achieved in contemporary politics, celebrating a happy marriage between social order and transgression. Obscenity is no longer even the dirty little secret of social order, its “obscene support,” to be kept behind the scenes and only alluded to. In our political reality today, the message itself, and the very core of the social bond, is conveyed more and more directly and openly. New rulers emerging across the world wink at us directly, shamelessly, and our political homes become increasingly defined by the transgressions in which we are made complicit, by means of the winks we exchange with the powers that rule us.

We see here the contours of a form of power that is born with a wink, that needs to seduce its subjects, to solicit their devotion, or, better still, make them complicit, intimate partners in the transgression that is the social order; complicit, more importantly, in their—that is, our—subordination to it.

Nudge nudge, wink wink

What, then, is Lubitsch’s final word in the movie? An indication can be found in the way that Lubitsch subtly subverts the pervasive sense that we all know only too well what “it” is really about. This dimension, incidentally, is already present in Freud, and suggested by Ferenczi. Ferenczi notes that the infant’s pre-communicative position in language, prior to the separation of word from thing, is apparent first and foremost in the non-instrumental play with words. When children play with words, he repeats after Freud, they treat words like objects. In that sense, the attribute of wit is a legitimate inheritor of the capacity to enjoy language as an instrument of play. There is pleasure to be had not only in the direct invocation of the thing, the collapse of the word-object representational distance, but also in the object-like dimension of the word itself. And perhaps by extension, language, culture, and sublimation, as things of play, may yet reveal their own objecthood. On this level, things and words are equalized, readily, and playfully exchangeable. It is on this plane that Lubitsch’s touch goes beyond mere innuendo and cynical wisdom.

This can be illustrated briefly by two notable examples. First, early on in the film, when Niki and Franzi first meet, the spectator witnesses the following exchange: “So you play the piano?” Franzi asks Niki, flirting with him. “Someday we may have—a duet.” “I love chamber music,” replies the eager Niki. We all know where this is leading. However, in the next scene, to our surprise, we find them engaged in an actual duet, of all things.

Later, when Anna learns about Niki’s indiscretion, she demands that her father explain to her what “stepping out” means. Franzi, she heard, plays the violin, “And in public!” the princess adds, to highlight the shamelessness of the transgression. “Do all girls like that play the violin?” she asks her father with dread. “No, but they play,” he replies.

It is possible here to miss the fact that the racy content and the allusion to it have switched places. Anna should have asked: Are all girls who play the violin like that? But instead, she voices the worry that being promiscuous might be a sign of violin playing! Indeed, Anna responds to her father’s remark with an emboldened “Well, I can play too,” and she races to the piano. We see the smiling lieutenant, hovering, with a broad smile, as if carried away by the music. He only leaves, literally and figuratively stepping out, when she notices him, and her playing changes as it comes to be directed at him. Could it be that his passion, unbeknownst even to him, was actually music? Or, more broadly, that what he had craved all along was a woman true to her passion, devoted to her sublimation?

This dimension of the Lubitsch touch is actually best summed up by a very famous Monty Python sketch in which two gentlemen are sitting next to each other in a pub. One of them (Eric Idle, author of the sketch) seems quite desperate to lure his unwilling partner (Terry Jones) into a playful conversation that centers on the joke of suggestion. But his partner seems quite immune to any innuendo, taking all of his questions at face value. “Does your wife take pictures, eh, know what I mean, know what I mean,” asks Idle, annoyingly. The reply: “Well she does, sometimes, on holiday.” “I bet she does, I bet she does,” Idle replies, the unrelenting suggestions continue. Finally, the straight man seems to catch on, and becomes quite irritated. He confronts his inquisitor. “Are you trying to insinuate something?” he asks him straightforwardly. “No, no... yes. You’re a man of the world right, you’ve been around... you’ve slept with a lady, right? What’s it like?”

It is sometimes necessary to get poked with an elbow, with a nudge and a wink, to see how, behind the all-knowing wink, which conveys the sense that we know all too well just what lies behind the innuendo, there remains one ultimate open secret: that we are structurally ignorant about what **it** is like. This wink, or innuendo, could be anything indirect or sublimated; it could even be culture itself. Ultimately, it might be this unlearnable lesson, that there is an unshakable, eradicable naivety at the very core of what seems soul crushingly obvious and obscenely familiar, that keeps us coming back to Lubitsch.

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1. See Mladen Dolar’s analysis of *Die Puppe* in this volume. Lubitsch’s *Die Puppe* is based on ETA Hoffman’s classical story, “The Sand Man,” so central to Freud’s development of the psychoanalytic concept of the “uncanny.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Alenka Zupančič, 'Squirrels to the Nuts, or, How Many Does It Take to not Give up on Your Desire?' in *Lubitsch Can't Wait*. Pp. 165-180. Lubitsch’s final masterpiece, *Cluny Brown*, is about a girl’s passion for plumbing. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In his superb *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood: From Lubitsch to Sturges (New York, 1998). P.25.* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Slavoj Žižek “Lubitsch, the Poet of Cynical Wisdom? In *Lubitsch Can’t wait,* pp. 181-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Or are we? See Robert Pfaller’s *Adult Language: On its disappearance from Politics and Culture*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Freud’s lesson is not that sex is the undignified truth behind all sublimations, which ultimately explains all human behavior, but the fundamental mystery, the point where meaning falters. See Alenka Zupanćić *What is Sex?* (MIT 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “…through the mentioning of the obscene word the ribald jest forces the assailed person to imagine the part of the of the body or the function in question.” Der Witz und seine Beziehung. S.80. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Compare with Swift: “Since all words are only names for things, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them, such things as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on, and this invention would certainly have taken place, to the great ease as well as health of the Subject, if the women in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate, had not threatened to raise a rebellion, unless they might be allowed the liberty to speak with their tongues, after the manner of their forefathers: such constant irreconcilable enemies to science are the common people.” Jonathan Swift, Gulliver’s Travels, Oxford World’s Classics. (Oxford, 2005). P. 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the oath as paradigmatic of the symbolic efficacy, or “magic” of language, see Giorigio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language* (Stanford, 2008). For a very different take on the magic of symbolic efficacy in connection with the perverse mode, see Robert Pfaller *On the Pleasure Principle in Culture: Illusions Without Owners*. (Verso, 2014). Pp. ??? [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On the collapse of proper distance, compare with Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the demise of the critical standpoint, written in the late 1920s, and published in his *One way Street* in 1928: “Fools lament the decay of criticism for its day is long past. Criticism is a matter of correct distancing. It was at home in a world where perspectives and prospects counted and where it was still possible to take a standpoint. Now things press too closely on human society. The ‘unclouded,’ ‘innocent’ eye has become a lie, perhaps the whole naïve mode of expression is sheer incompetence. Today the most real, the mercantile gaze into the heart of things is the advertisement.” Walter Benjamin, *One way Street* (Harvard, 2016). P. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. In borrowing Hans-Jörg Rheinberger’s term “epistemic things,” I mean to invoke the notion of knowledge that is practical in principle, that can only be discovered. Of course, moving outside the context of scientific practice, such as knowledge that arises in social experience, in particular, in the mode of transgression of unwritten laws. “Epistemic Things,” writes Rheinberger, “are what one does not yet know, things contained within the arrangements of technical conditions in the experimental system.” Replacing the “technical conditions of the experimental system” with the social conditions of the experiential system would be the beginning of such a “translation” from the limited context of scientific activity to society writ large. On Epistemic Things, see Hans-Jörg Rheinberger*, Toward a History of epistemic Things: Synthesizing Proteins in The Test Tube (Stanford 1997), and An Epistemology of the Concrete: Twentieth-Century Histories of Life (Duke 2010).* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. I owe the point about obscenity as a form of knowledge resisting definition to a conversation with Noam Yuran. Our conversations about the politics of the obscene have been a continuous source of the pleasure of sublimation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Freud, Three Essays, p.200. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Establishing the structural and historical relation between perversion and neurosis is perhaps one of the hardest tasks of psychoanalytic theory. Considering the perverse core of neurosis, the “polymorphic perverse” state of early infancy, makes a neat separation between the two incredibly difficult to theorize, clinical experience notwithstanding. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of The Ego. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In Althusser’s *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards and Investigation)* (1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Stanley Cavell, Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See Northorp Frye, The Argument of Comedy. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ferenczi notes how a turn to the obscene can sometimes be the response to the loss of a father figure. See *Obscene Words*, p. 152. *The Smiling Lieutenant*’s flirtation with the obscene takes place against the demise of traditional, patriarchal power. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)