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.

The discussion brings in elements of Sandor Ferenczi’s psychoanalytic theory on “obscene words” to help explore Lubitsch’s cinematic reflection on the complicity between innuendo couched in elegance and the obscene. This allows for some theoretical refinement of the language of the obscene and its political utilization.

Key words: 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 here some strikingly direct hints that border on, and even transmit vulgarity. In what follows I will attempt to show that there might be good reason for that, and 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 were Maurice Chevalier (as Niki, a Viennese army officer), Claudette Colbert (as Franzi, his lover), and Miriam Hopkins (as his wife, the princess). 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). In what follows, I shall attempt to show that 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 needed 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 asked for his assistance in wooing her, and after a lovely evening spent together 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 Ana (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 a gesture, a smile and a wink of the eye, intended by the lieutenant 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, Ana, thinking he is speaking about her, is flattered, and Niki soon finds himself forced into marrying her. The whole thing is sealed with a kiss on both cheeks from the emperor himself. Dutybound, he obeys, but he has to draw the line somewhere – he will be Princess Ana’s husband in title only, but not in substance – there will be no sexual relationship. When Franzi passes through town (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 Ana, with the advice – and song – jazz up your lingerie. Franzi leaves, assuring Ana that she should not feel bad for her, as Niki was always already lost to her: “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, Ana seems to have lost her innocence and gained the wisdom of sexual experience. As expected, Ana 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 text-book 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 door of our lieutenant (we see the name by the door, Lieutenant Nikolaus von Preyn) to collect payments for clothing services, a shocking amount of debt (1614.25 Austrian Schilling) incurred for a man who dresses only in uniform. The tailor rings the bell. No answer. He repeats. Unsurprisingly, there is, again, no response, and our tailor leaves sluggishly, with empty hands. As he descends a young woman briskly passes him by on her way up, almost sprinting. She’s fashionable and energetic, a blonde. She knocks on the door in a musical pattern, which does the trick, the door opens immediately, and she quickly disappears inside. The camera moves towards the lamp, which darkens, telling us night has come. Daylight and energetic music then announce daybreak, and the blonde opens the door and leaves, a smile on her face quickly fading away into a sigh.

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

We then see Niki (Chevalier) in his room. Trumpets begin to sound, and soldiers around town are hastily saying goodbye to the girls they’ve spent the night with, snatching a quick kiss before hurrying back to duty. Not so our lieutenant. He sits in his Pajamas on his bed, and sings the song that will serve as more than the mere 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 thumb sucking]

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 song could hardly be any more explicit in its obvious sexual innuendo. Chevalier’s performance of it is so strained, so desperately intended on making sure we get it, the pitch of his winks threatening to break the camera’s glass. It is truly disturbing.

There seems to be an insurmountable gap separating the two modes of expression with which Lubitsch chose to open his film, between the subtlety and economy of the first silent sequence of images, and the loud, excessive overabundance of the second. In the first case we seem to enjoy the cleverness of indirectness, how we can get so much by means of indirect suggestion, whereas in the second case, what we enjoy is the direct understanding of what is suggested. In the first case we appreciate the economy of signification, a bonus pleasure which accompanies a bonus signification: with very little said, much is conveyed. We take pleasure in language happening before our eyes, so to speak, arising silently from the arrangement of images. But the sense of familiarity with word of images and things, is soon turned into a disturbing overfamiliarity. In the second case, if there is pleasure to be had, it lies all on the side of the signified, on the side of what is alluded to, and the ease in which we all share in the joke. And while we all know full well what’s it all about, no effort is spared. We enjoy complicitly, at the expanse of an imagined, extremely naïve observer who is still innocent, ignorant of all the abundantly excessive, clearly sexual innuendo. This contrast, right at the beginning, is striking in itself. But its significance comes to full view when we consider, as we shall do in more detail towards the end of this essay, that this tension indeed frames the film: the film ends, as it opened, with an inexplicable transition from nuanced, stylized suggestion to excessive, disturbing winking.

How can this transition be explained? Is this just a mistake, a cinematic slip of the tongue? The sheer contrast between these two modes of expression, the text-book, Lubitsch indirect style and the over-the-top wink at the audience, gives a sense that there is something else going on here. It’s not like Lubitsch all of a sudden forgot what he was capable of. Instead, it seems as if Lubitsch is himself troubled by the text-book definition of his style. It is almost as if Lubitsch is positioning the second, over-the-top wink as the unpleasant truth of the first: while they vary significantly in style, the suspicion arises that they are substantively the same, or rather, that they both ultimately point in the same, rather obvious direction. They are just the shorter and the longer path to the illicit content.

Referring to the repeating trumpet refrain, Harvey notes how it, in a way, 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, the 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’ 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, his strained attempts at enjoyment, are in fact very true to the lyrics he is singing, which portray the sexual rapport as a serious, military duty, a tiring battle taken up for a higher cause. That is, chevalier’s strained enjoyment is quite appropriate once we take the text he is singing at face value; instead of moving from the dignified, dutiful life of soldiers to the promiscuous, hedonistic nightlife of soldiers at leave clearly alluded to, as the hidden, real core of military life, we should pay attention to the literal equation between them, allowing for a much more disturbing message to be conveyed. The obvious innuendo - sexual promiscuity is the hidden truth of the language of duty, covers up for its own reversal – the sexual promiscuity promised between the lines of the official language of duty is itself a sham, there is nothing but duty all the way down. The sexual promiscuity it promises us is itself a most demanding, overbearing duty. The sexual freedom promised between the lines is presented, in the open language of the text and as well as in Chevalier’s stulted performance, as forced and dutybound, and the anxiety of performance failure – “they’ll pension us when we’re too old to fight” - is perfectly conveyed in Chevalier’s anxious overperformance.

The Word-Image: Lubitsch and Ferenczi on the language of the obscene

We encounter here a Lubitsch that is in the process of actively reflecting about just what his ‘touch’ amounts to. But Lubitsch might also be seen as raising here a general challenge to indirectness, the sense that we all know all too well just what is suggested by suggestion, we all know where all this indirectness leads – it all leads to ‘it’, to the sexual act.

Let us take a step back here and consider this. On the face of it, the trouble with indirectness seems to be that it is never quite as indirect as we would have it be. There is always, lurking in the background, the object alluded to. But it might in fact be a little more complicated than that. It might be, that we can’t 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? Aren’t we all adults?[[5]](#footnote-5) can’t we just talk about it 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, well, that we just don’t have the words to talk about it. Not quite. Our words 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 how, 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 an obscene twist on swift’s philosophers of Lagado, the utterance of an obscene word functions much like ‘pulling the cat out the bag’, and displaying the object directly, emphasis put on “pulling it out”, on the act of exhibition. [[8]](#footnote-8) Words that behave like things are far from 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 doesn’t come once and for all and the potential of regression remains, as is evidenced by the “magical power” retained in obscene words.

So much for direct representation then – obscene words do not represent, they rather exhibit, in an immediate fashion, the pre-oedipal, primordial thing which words as such - that is, our normal, discursive use of language, the assumption of linguistic “aboutness” - put at a distance. Obscene words operate, on a mini scale, a regression to infantile sexuality. It’s 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 separating a wish from its fulfillment, or for that matter, a command from its execution.

On one, crucial aspect, however, we need to subtly yet crucially correct 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 intimacy of familiarity to the obscene, to which we shall return, and it seems the opposite of clinical, objective language. But our analysis of the smiling lieutenant so far has put us in the 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 are seemingly three options to (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 have are recognizable precisely by not really being names, by being less than representational. The vulgar expressions precisely fail to achieve the representational distance from the object they name[[10]](#footnote-10), instead coming too 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, injured, by the mere evocation of words. We have here a name that fails to name by functioning too much like the object it is supposed to name. On the other extreme, what can be called the clinical expression, we have 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 – precisely from what they ultimately aim to name, 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 as an impossibility, 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 to know that ‘it’ lies behind all our suggestions?

We are dealing here with an object that fails to be named precisely by being either too close for comfort or constantly – relentlessly, obsessively - held at arm’s length. Is this the unique, defining characteristic of sex? Well, 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 her lies in the obscene, and it can be distinguished as an ‘epistemic thing’[[11]](#footnote-11), precisely 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 utilized rather excessively by Lubitsch’s loading every reference to musical instruments with sexual overtones. The right, or rather, wrong, intonation, can render any content into 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 we see a domain in which 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, a perfect balance. True indirectness would have to be, at the same time, the opposite of both poles, or more precisely, it would have to affect an unexpected decentering of this entire matrix. We will have to encounter indirectness on the side of the object it is meant to allude to. We shall have a chance at the very end of this paper to see an example of how Lubitsch achieves such a reversal in this film.

But before we return to Lubitsch, it is important to note straightaway the political consequences of seeing these two poles as complementary. Recall Freud’s famous dictum: “The Neurosis is, so to say, the negative of the perversion”.[[13]](#footnote-13) Ferenczi comes close to pointing towards the complementarity, if not complicity, of the directly obscene and its obsessive avoidance. Towards the end of his essay, 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 for a further advance, 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 is evident not only from Ferenczi’s example but also from 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 enjoying – or at least acting 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 a crucial one. 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, then to those nodding in approval.

The politics of obscenity: From the Lieutenant’s Smile to the princess Wink

The issue Lubitsch is raising 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 movies’ formal modes of expression. The issue is political, and it appears right at the center of the plot.

Let me explain. We seem to have 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 had it is that at the end “the wrong girl gets the man”.(Eyman 2000: 169).

But from a different angle, the story is also a tale about a princess who learns how to wink, and more importantly, how to get her subject to wink back at her. That is, it is a tale about the modernization of political power, a story about a significant shift in the function of political power that is maybe 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 royal family as they are riding the train from the tiny Flauenthurm 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 fashions himself a big businessman, they complain, and gives priority to matters of income and profit over matters of ceremony. They make this point, just as a cattle train speeds by them, literally getting ahead of them on its way to meet the emperor. The joke seems to be at the expanse of this outdated royal family; they are clearly representatives of yesterday’s world. But what shall be their replacement? Rushing forward, the train of progress is happy to advance even cattle at their expanse.

What’s in a wink?

We see the royal family again as their parade crosses just when Nikki is smiling and winking at Franzi, his lover. Thinking he was winking at the princess, 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 address 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 an equalizing gesture, a gesture between peers, and thus an insult when directed at to those who stand above the masses. 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”, she says, and begins to sob. This - her opting for the ‘real girl’ underneath the princess attire - is the beginning of her downfall, and maybe ours as well.

Summoned before the royal family, Nicky, as always, relies on his charms. His actions were far from mockery. Far from it. He’s a romantic. He was standing at attention, looking at the most beautiful girl, he begins to explain. Seeing the royals misunderstand him to mean the princess, Nicky seizes on the opportunity. “That is my crime”, he exclaims, relived. “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 – the movie’s title itself functions like an archetypical fetish substitution, the last thing we see before the thing that must be disavowed. As we shall presently see, the secret name of the film, the title that would have divulged its secrets would be rather “the Princess Learns to Wink”. The proverbial ‘elephant in the room’, the wink has not yet been mentioned, not once explicitly addressed. But Ana is clearly intrigued, indeed attracted by the gesture, which she doesn’t quite comprehend.

Having assuaged the slanted royals, Nicky is sent outside, as they discuss his fate. After a short while, the princess approaches him. “I want to ask you something”, she intimates. “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 here leave. From across the room, she turns back to him, winks, and closes the door behind her. Realizing what just happened, Nicky is taken a back and drops heavily to his seat, 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 had become, in this very moment, his inescapable fate.

The wink, as Niki explained to Ana, 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 communicate unspoken communication, the gesture always implying ‘we’re in this together’, we’re complicit, we have an unspoken understanding, that is, we understand each other, a bit like criminals - to the exclusion of a third person, who must remain in oblivion.

Ana **is** that third person, she represents the function of the other as the one who doesn’t know, the one from whom secrets are kept and encyclopedias are redacted, the one who must remain ignorant even of the existence of such underground 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 into subjecthood,[[16]](#footnote-16) as it were, a movement from a private person to the public state apparatus, we have the princess – whose function as a symbolic public entity depends on a unique, painstakingly manufactured innocence – is accidently interpellated by the communication seemingly defined by her exclusion from it, the intimate private communication of two lovers.

And indeed, in his ensuing communication with Ana, Niki shall refuse to wink, refuse the entire dimension of subtext and suggestion. This is his cruelty to her, but it is also the way the movie defines a certain space of political freedom, a certain limit to political power, that is soon to disappear.

Good night Dear – The Lieutenant’s last stand

His destiny sealed, the officer is arranged 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, Nicky enters their bedroom and approaches the princess from behind, getting intimately close to her. It’s their weeding 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?

Ana, perturbed, turns to him, and with urgency, addresses him: Nicky.

Niki: Yes, Anna?

Ana, again, more forcefully, looking him straight in the eyes: Nicky!

Niki: Yes, Anna?

Ana 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 turning to a frown, he shakes his head. Oh, no! Oh, no! married people don’t do that!

Ana: They don’t?

Niki: Oh, No!

Ana: Married people don’t wink?

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

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

Niki: All the philosophers, for 3000 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. “That’s as far as I go. That’s my limit. “, and runs up the stairs, like a child running to his room after having told his parents off.

Niki has, for the first time, found room for disobedience, limited as it might be. Recall that in his opening song he presented his sexual activity as a royal duty. But now Niki has reached the limits of enforceable political power, what can be gained by the simple issuing of commands and their enforcement. In his encounter with the king he makes that quite explicit: “you can lead a horse to the well, but you cannot make him drink.” Depriving sex from the princess is his act of civil disobedience, his space of freedom. And indeed, in what follows, Ana 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, that is much more far reaching then the old, as its target is precisely this new-found space of freedom.

There is a link between the separation of winking and marriage, and the limit of enforceable, political power, the limit of the explicit command. Ana’s journey towards the combination of marriage and winking is thus also a move beyond those limitations, a redefinition of political power precisely at the place where it ought to have stopped. While there is no forcing the horse into drinking the water, there is seducing a person into intimate bonds with his rulers. The bonds of complicity.

At this point in the plot, Franzi is summoned to the palace by Ana, and ends up tutoring her in the ways of seduction. With the advice, and song, “Jazz up your Lingerie”. As she leaves the room, in any case, Ana has lost her somewhat rigidized, stilted innocence, and had gained her feminine powers. She now is in a position to seduce Niki. And here, finally, as the movie comes to a close, we rejoin with the Lubitsch touch.

Noticing Ana in her ‘jazzed up’ lingerie, Niki enters their bedroom. “Ana, is this you?” “No, she replies. “This is Mandelbaum&Gruenstein”, throwing away her fur top on 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 draws a checkers board, holding it in front of her body almost like a shield. The checkers board made its first appearance in her father hands, coming to consult, and offer some distraction, after Niki had denied her his marital duties. Now it too, will lose its innocence. Ana approaches Niki with the checkers board in hand, sitting close to him and staring directly in 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 away on 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 for a fitting spot to which to throw the stupid board, 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 Ana, 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 extremely slow in their 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 that steps out of it, in his Pajamas, 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

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

Niki, excited

Toujours l’amour

In the army

The end

The ending scene turns the entire movie into an obscene twist of Cavell’s idea about the Hollywood comedies as comedies of remarriage.[[17]](#footnote-17) The strong female character that characterizes the genre according to Cavell, is here the obstacle to be removed. Recall Wilder’s remark on the superjoke of the film being that it’s the wrong girl who gets the man. It is also only between Niki and Franzi, that one could speak of an oedipal obstacle,[[18]](#footnote-18) and in that case, it is never removed, only internalized by Franzi’s acceptance of her fate. Between Niki and Ana there was no such obstacle, certainly not her father, who seems willing to grant her any wish, and in general quite impotent.[[19]](#footnote-19) The obstacle here was the female competition, which she finally eliminates by imitation. Indeed, the final scene of seduction, in which Ana gains her feminine power, is precisely about the transmutation of obstacles into objects of seduction. The checkers board made its first appearance in Ana’s father’s hands, as he came into her bedroom to offer consolation, and companionship, when Niki first refused to fulfill his marital duties. Now, she puts the object between them, playing a subtle game in which the game, the board, is at once an obstacle to the sexual act, an attempt to shift gears, change the atmosphere – but precisely as such it is itself sexualized, becoming the object around which the ‘sexual negotiations’ can be organized. There is here also a beautifully reflexive point - turning the game board into an object to be playfully improvised with alludes to how the confusion about ‘how to play the game’ that seemed to define Ana’s position in the world - how to learn those seemingly unlearnable, holistic features that form a language game, that make up a life form, etc - itself becomes her game, the object played with. Her innocence, the impossibility to master the game, to be fully in the know, becomes the positive obstacle that enables their sexual union. We are left to assume, 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. But this discomfort is quite right, quite appropriate, when looked at from the political perspective.

For what seems like the ultimate untenable sexual phantasy, the perfect sexual union achieved by the marriage of marriage and indiscretion, of sexual excitement with a stable, proper home life, loses its status as an unattainable ideal, and is revealed rather as a glimpse at our disquieting, political real – what in our private, sexual lives, can only appear as a contradictory desire, is effectively achieved by contemporary politics, celebrating a happy marriage between social order and transgression. Such is, increasingly, our political reality, in which obscenity is no longer even the dirty little secret of social order, its ‘obscene support’, to be kept behind the scenes, alluded to, but more and more directly, and openly, the message itself, and the very core of the social bond. The new rulers rising across the world are those who wink at us directly, shamelessly, and our political homes more and more defined by the transgressions we are made complicit in, 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 yet – make them complicit, intimate partners to the transgression that is the social order, complicit, more importantly, to their – that is, our - subordination to it.

Nudge Nudge, Wink Wink

But is this Lubitsch’s final word in the movie? By way of conclusion, let me single out a hint or two that seem to me to point to where the Lubitsch touch is headed after this film, the way Lubitsch subtly subverts the pervasive sense that we all know all too well what it’s always really about. This is a dimension, incidentally, already present in Freud, and almost noticed by Ferenczi. Ferenczi notes how the infant’s pre-communicative position in language, prior to the separation of word and thing, is apparent perhaps first and foremost in the non-instrumental play with words. When children play with words, he repeats after Freud, they treat words like objects. Witt is in that sense a legitimate inheritor of the capacity to enjoy language as if it was a thing 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, sublimation, as things of play, may yet reveal their own objecthood. On this level, things and words are equalized, readily, and playfully exchangeable. And it is on this plane that Lubitsch’s touch takes it distance from mere innuendo and cynical wisdom. Let us consider just two quick examples. Early on in the film, when Niki and Franzi first meet, we encounter the following exchange: “So you play the piano?” says Franzi to Nikki, flirting with him. “someday we may have” –– “a duet”. “I love chamber music”, Replies the eager Niki. We all know where this is leading. But in the next scene, to our surprise, we find them engaged in, of all things, a duet.

Later on, when Ana catches word about Niki’s indiscretion, she demands that her father explain to her what ‘stepping out’ means. Franzi, she heard, plays the violin, “she plays it in public, too!”, the princess adds, to highlight the shamelessness of the transgression. “Do all women like that play the violin?” she asks her father with dread, – “no, but they play”, he replies. It’s easy to miss that here, precisely, the racy content and the signal alluding to it have switched places. Ana 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! And indeed, to her father’s remark, “no, but they play”, Ana responds with an emboldened – “well I play too”, and she races to the Piano. And when later on Franzi will teach her to change her tune, we see the smiling lieutenant, hovering, with his excessive smile, as if carried by the music. He only leaves, literally and figuratively stepping out, when she takes note of 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, slightly more broadly, that what he’s been after all along is 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 the famous sketch, two gentlemen are sitting next to each other at a pub, as one of them (Eric Idle, author of the sketch) is unrelentingly nudging and winking, seeming quite desperate to lure his unwilling partner to the conversation (Terry Jones) to his plane of suggestion. But his partner seems quite immune to all innuendo, taking all of his questions at face value. “Does your wife take pictures, ay, know what I mean, know what I mean”, asks Idle, annoyingly. The reply – “Well she does, sometimes, at holiday”. “I bet she does, I bet she does”, continues the unrelenting suggestion, and so on. Finally, our straight man seems to catch on, and quite irritated 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 pass through the elbow to the ribs, the nudge and the wink, in order to see how, behind the all-knowing wink, conveying our sense that we know all too well just what lies behind all innuendo – indeed, behind all indirection and refinement, namely, behind culture as such, there remains one ultimate open secret – that we are structurally ignorant about what **it** is like. And I think it might be this unlearnable lesson, of an unshakable, eradicable naivety at the very core of what seems soul crushingly obvious, 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 master piece, 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, what 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 beduetung. 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 as tied to 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 late1920’s, 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 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 a knowledge that is practical in principal, that can only be discovered. Of course, moving outside the context of scientific practice, such a knowledge 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” form 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 for the most perverse of enjoyments, the pleasure of sublimation. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Freud, Three Essay, p.200. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Establishing the structural and historical relation between perversion and neurosis might be the hardest task 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 his *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. Characteristic of ‘New Comedy’. See Northorp Frye, The Argument of Comedy. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ferenczi notes how a turn to the obscene can sometimes be the response towards 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)