LUBITSCH, Ernst (b. 29 January, 1892 Berlin, German Empire; d.30 November, 1947, Los Angeles, California, USA)

Ernst Lubitsch was a German-Jewish film director, producer and actor. He is a key figure in interwar screen comedy, making silent, sound and musical comedies in Berlin and Hollywood. He worked for most of the important studios of the day including PAGU, Deutsche Bioscop and Warner Bros, and was the chief of production of Paramount from 1935-1936. His films starred many of the period’s most celebrated actors, amongst them Emil Jannings, Pola Negri, Herbert Marshall and Claudette Colbert. He is best known for his sophisticated romantic comedies, including *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *Design for Living* (1933), Ur-films of the screwball comedy genre, *Ninotchka* (1939), in which, as the publicity declared, ‘Garbo laughs’, *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940), and *To Be or Not to Be* (1942), which features Carole Lombard's final screen appearance.

Lubitsch’s significance to filmic modernism can be summed up thus: he helped internationalize American cinema. His big budget historical dramas *Carmen* (1918) and *Madame Dubarry* (1919) brought German cinema to the attention of U.S. audiences for the first time. He was also the first of the major European directors to make a successful transition to the Hollywood system. Lubitsch moved to Hollywood permanently in 1923 when Mary Pickford contracted him as director for her film *Rosita* (1923). An unprecedented six-picture deal with Warner Bros followed granting Lubitsch complete control and final cut, after which he made four successful musical comedies for Paramount in as many years beginning with *The Love Parade* (1929) and ending with *One Hour With You* (1932), a remake of his *The Marriage Circle* (1924), all starring Maurice Chevalier. These films, and the ones that followed, were comedies of manners about love, sex and money with an imaginary European setting – ‘Paramount Paris,’ Lubitsch called it. This is another aspect of Lubitsch’s internationalising of Hollywood: he invented the cosmopolitan milieu that would be common to so many of the comedies and dramas of this period.

Lubitsch’s exceptionality is generally explained by the phrase ‘the Lubitsch touch’, which has been in use, according to Kristin Thompson, since the mid-1920s. While no one is prepared to repudiate the term there is little consensus on what it actually means. For some critics (e.g. Weinberg) it highlights Lubitsch’s visual wit or shorthand, his ability to compress or crystallize his subject or theme succinctly and subtly and in a way nobody else would through an image. For other critics (e.g. Thompson) the term denotes the nonchalant urbanity of Lubitsch’s treatment of sexuality, his ability to be frank but never rude or coarse. As David Thomson has said, the effect of this treatment is ‘enchanting and flattering, for it makes the audience feel worldly’. Still other critics (e.g. Paul) think the phrase stands for Lubitsch’s unique ability to shift mood sharply without striking a false note, ‘to signify the conjunction of lightness and seriousness, of gaiety and gravity’. Finally, the Lubitsch touch is a ‘vision’ (e.g. Rosenbaum) that makes us feel kindly towards flawed characters and wholly content with scenarios and resolutions that should be impossible to accept.

**References and Further Reading**:

Carringer, R. and Sabath, B. (1978) *Ernst Lubitsch: A Guide to References and Resources*, Boston: G. K. Hall & Co.

Eyman, S. (2000) *Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter In Paradise*, Baltimore MA: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Hake, S. (1992) *Passions and Deceptions: The Early Films of Ernst Lubitsch*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kaplan, E. A. (1981) ‘Lubitsch Reconsidered’, *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, 6:3, 305-312.

Paul, W. (1983) *Ernst Lubitsch’s American Comedy*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Poague, L. A. (1978) *The Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch*, Dundee MI: Gazelle.

# Rosenbaum, J. (2004) ‘Sweet and Sour: Lubitsch and Wilder in Old Hollywood’, *Goodbye Cinema, Hello Cinephilia: Film Culture in Transition*, Chicago University Press, 114-122.

Thomson, D. (2003) ‘Ernst Lubitsch’, *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film*, London: Little, Brown.

Thompson, K. (2006) *Herr Lubitsch Goes to Hollywood: German and American Film After World War I*, Amsterdam University Press.

Truffaut, F. (1994) ‘Lubitsch was a Prince’, *The Films in My Life*, Cambridge MA: Da Capo, 50-53.

Weinberg, H. G. (1977), *The Lubitsch Touch: A Critical Study*, New York: Dover.

**Selected Filmography:**

*Madame Dubarry* (1919)

*The Marriage Circle* (1924)

*Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1925)

*The Love Parade* (1929)

*Trouble in Paradise* (1932)

*One Hour With You* (1932)

*Design for Living* (1933)

*The Merry Widow* (1934)

*Angel* (1937)

*Ninotchka* (1939)

*The Shop Around the Corner* (1940)

*To Be or Not to Be* (1942)

Contributor: Melinda Harvey