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Communist Ninotchka

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e-flux journal #103 — october 2019 Aaron Schuster
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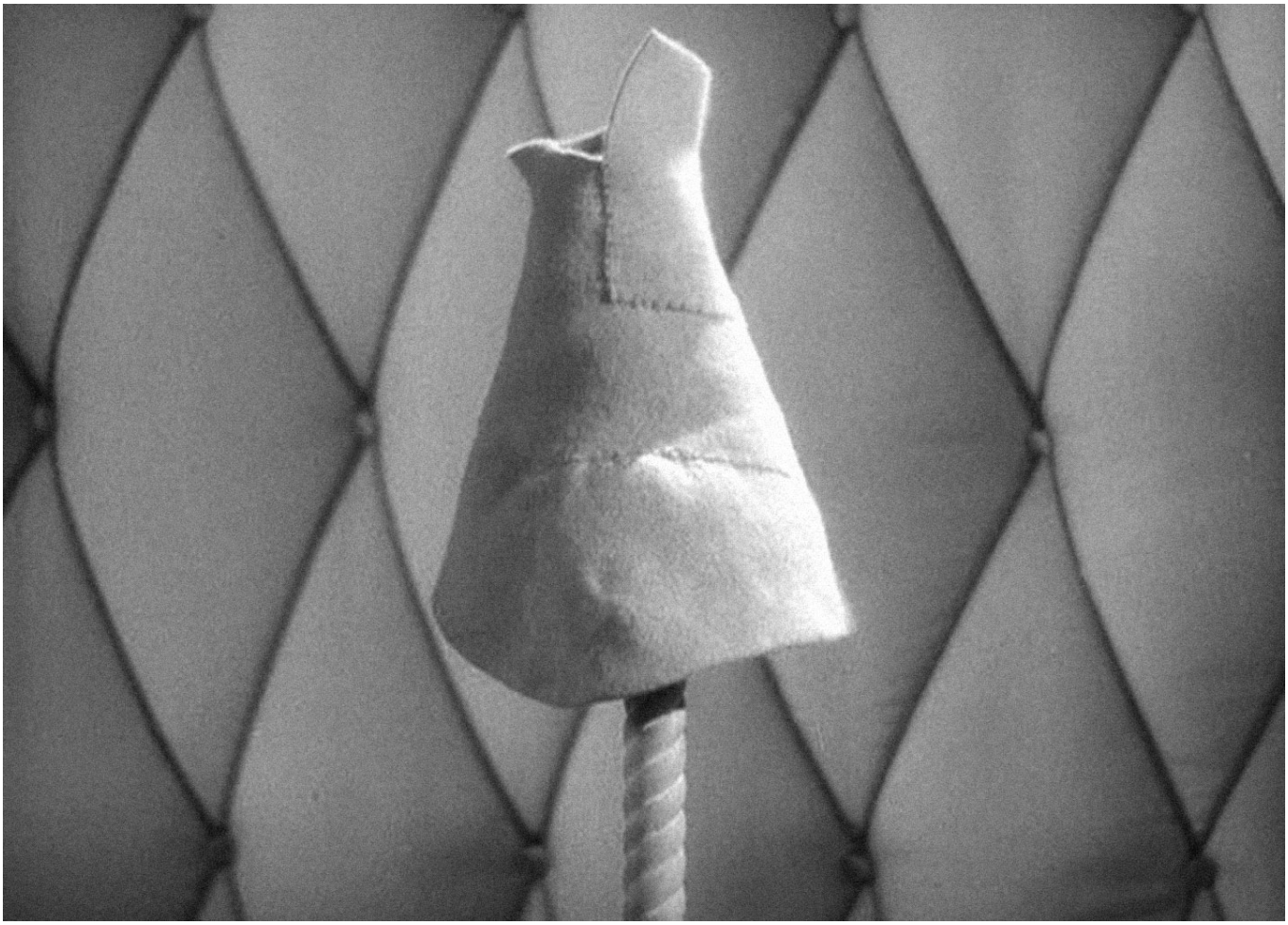
It Won't Be Long Now, Comrades

To start with a story about the 1948 Italian elections:

> Italian communists made several attempts to forestall the showing of *Ninotchka*, including threatening movie-theatre managers if they did not remove it from programmes and stealing copies from cinemas. When Russia's embassy asked the Rome authorities in early April to take *Ninotchka* out of the city's ten theatres in which it had been showing for several weeks, the publicity probably added to the film's nationwide success. "What licked us was *Ninotchka*," one disappointed Communist party functionary is reported to have said when the pro-Soviet left was defeated at the polls, and the main anti-communist party, the Christian Democrats, gained an absolute majority in the new parliament. "Greta Garbo Wins Elections," proclaimed one conservative newspaper.[1]

First released eighty years ago, in 1939, Ernst Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* is a singular romantic comedy, dealing with relations between East and West, communism and capitalism, love and politics – and one particularly momentous laugh. The film certainly doesn't pull any punches in its depiction of the USSR: belying its light, witty atmosphere, the comedy abounds in references to executions, forced confessions, censorship, and the Gulag. While underlining the dire conditions of the Soviet Union, it showcases Western prosperity in the form of glamorous Parisian life. Yet despite its (remarkably effective) anti-communist satire – as the Italian story illustrates, *Ninotchka* was used as a propaganda tool in the Cold War – there is another "red" thread going through the film. Lubitsch's treatment of communism is far more nuanced than Garbo's "election victory" would suggest. Indeed, many of the film's best jokes are directed against capitalists and aristocrats, and Ninotchka, despite the transformation she undergoes, never repudiates her dedication to the communist cause. Far from the Soviet heroine simply abandoning her political ideals after falling for a Western gigolo, and by extension, the West itself, the film proposes – as improbable as this sounds – a kind of screwball communism, which sets Ninotchka's revolutionary commitments in a sympathetic light (James Harvey calls her "the closest thing to a convincing socialist heroine the English-speaking cinema has yet produced").[2] This complex and original depiction of communism – as we shall see, the comedy works on multiple levels – is what makes *Ninotchka* such



Film still from Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 movie *Ninotchka*, starring Greta Garbo, Melvyn Douglas, and Ina Claire.

compelling viewing today. And insofar as the politics of comedy has become a pressing issue, Lubitsch's cinema can again provide a valuable lesson.[3] At a time when power appears more and more as a derisory comedy, an obscene parody of itself, with political satirists hardly able to keep up, aren't we in desperate need of a "Lubitsch touch"?

To briefly recount the plot: *Ninotchka* is the story of the unlikely romance between Comrade Nina Ivanovna Yakushova, a Soviet envoy sent from Moscow to Paris to oversee the sale of precious jewelry in order to raise badly needed money for the state, and Count Leon d'Algout, a charming ne'er-do-well and kept man of the Grand Duchess Swana, an exiled Russian noblewoman who happens to be the previous owner of the jewels. Ninotchka is played by Greta Garbo with her signature distance and feminine mystique. She is intelligent, totally dedicated, and highly capable – unlike her bumbling comrades Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski who nearly botch the sale due to Leon's clever manipulations and the hedonistic attractions of Parisian life. But Ninotchka too is soon thrown off balance by the debonair Westerner and the charmed world he represents; eventually her cold Soviet exterior is cracked and she falls head over heels in love with him. She is not the only one to undergo a change: Leon also acts strangely out of character, his frivolous playboy persona giving way to a newfound sincerity and devotion – and interest in Marxism. Jealous of Leon's affair with the Bolshevik beauty, Swana maneuvers to steal the jewels, and then offers them back to Ninotchka in exchange for her leaving Paris and Leon for good. Though heartbroken, Ninotchka does not hesitate: she dutifully takes the plane to Moscow, then drowns her sorrow in work. The final twist comes when her superior, Commissar Razinin, sends her on a new assignment abroad. Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski, now on a fur-trading mission in Constantinople, are up to their old hijinks, and he wants Ninotchka to investigate. She begs him not to make her go, but his decision is final. Little does she know that the whole affair is Leon's cunning plan to get her out of the USSR, with the help of her three comrades' bad behavior. Ninotchka arrives in Constantinople to discover that Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski have opened a Russian restaurant there and intend to stay, and she is happily reunited with Leon.

In order to get a sense of the film's ideological complexity, let us begin by looking at a few key instances of how it treats capitalism, communism, and aristocracy.

The Hat

After Ninotchka's arrival in Paris, she passes by a shop window display containing a ridiculous funnel-shaped hat. Regarding the odd fashion accessory with disdain, she delivers a damning verdict: "How can such a civilization survive which permits women to put things like that on their heads? It won't be long now, comrades" – the latter line a neat profession of faith in the iron law of History. If the hat is a symbol of the decadence of capitalist civilization and its inevitable doom, later in the film it acquires a very different meaning. After falling for Leon, Ninotchka goes back to the store and purchases the reviled hat, which has now become the symbol of – what? Ninotchka's feminine vanity? Her new taste for Parisian style? An openness to gaiety and romance? Or, in a more socialist vein, has the geometrical headpiece become her comrade object?[4] The hat is a classic Lubitsch touch, portraying Ninotchka's transformation through the vicissitudes of a single object. Yet, when she tries her new purchase on in the mirror, she cannot quite recognize herself in it; it retains its fundamental emptiness. It would be too easy to see in Ninotchka's fashion makeover an embrace of the formerly doomed capitalism. Instead, in a more elusive manner, the hat symbolizes the loss of her rigid bureaucratic socialist identity, without however crowning a new Western consumerist one.

Reading Capital

As much as Ninotchka undergoes a transformation, so too does Leon. Not only does he fall completely under Ninotchka's spell, he starts reading Marx and even confronts his personal butler about relations of economic exploitation. The irony is that the butler is positively repelled by his employer's leftist talk. "May I add, sir, that it was with great amazement that I found a copy of Karl Marx's *Capital* on your night table. That is a socialistic volume which I refuse to so much as dust, sir. I view with alarm, sir, the influence over you of this Bolshevik lady." As a sidenote, this is an interesting sociological observation that runs across Lubitsch's films: servants take more pride in their position and have a stricter sense of class hierarchy than aristocrats. In *Cluny Brown* (1946), for example, it is the domestics, Syrette and Mrs. Maile, who insist on respecting traditions and minding one's proper place, while the upper class are willing to tolerate transgressions and make jokes about their status.

The Leninist Kiss

After a night on the town Leon takes an inebriated Ninotchka back to her hotel room, where they continue the party. Before leaving, he lays her on the bed and gives her a goodnight kiss. Though it is easy to miss, the visual composition of the kiss is very deliberate. In the background, perfectly posed between the lovers'

Page from the periodical *Picturegoer*, (Jan 27, 1940), p. 8. Image: Entertainment Industry Magazine Archive.

Film still from Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 movie *Ninotchka.*

faces, is a framed portrait of Lenin. To paraphrase Jean Genet: "But what exactly is a couple? First of all, how many is it?" Lubitsch's answer is that it takes three to make a couple: Leon, Ninotchka, and Lenin (indeed, this combination is already present on the level of the signifier: *Le*on + *Nin*otchka = *Lenin*. In the American tabloid tradition, if Leon and Ninotchka had a supercouple name, it would definitely be "Lenin"). It is only under the gaze of the "little father," as Ninotchka calls him, that the lovers can enter into a sexual relation. On the other hand, after the kiss the notoriously stern visage of Lenin undergoes its own transformation, softening into a (weird) smile: a hallucinatory cheerful Lenin, ready to bless their screwball love. Again, what the film shows is a double transformation: the Westerner learns to embrace Marxism, while the communist learns about surplus enjoyment (emblematized by the perverse smiling Lenin), beyond the rational management of life and desire. Is there here a possible Lubitschean formula for a "comical" Freudo-Marxism?

The Jewels

It's the next morning. Swana enters Ninotchka's suite, catching her in a compromising situation, hungover in bed and still wearing her dress from the previous evening. But Ninotchka refuses to be embarrassed, and cuts right through the charade of manners. "Madame, what is it you people always say, regardless of what you mean? 'I am delighted to have you here'? I have not reached that stage of civilization." Swana reveals that she is now in possession of the jewels. In the confrontation that follows, Ninotchka decries the crimes of the tsarist aristocracy, pointedly saying of the jewels that "They always belonged to the Russian people. They were paid for with their sweat, their blood, their lives and you will give them back." What is remarkable about this long scene is the complete lack of jokes or satire: Ninotchka is portrayed as dignified, earnest, and committed, and her words are charged with truth. The scene's importance is further underscored by it being the turning point of the film, after which Ninotchka abandons Paris and Leon.

The Politics of Lingerie

Another article of clothing: Ninotchka is back in Moscow, and has brought with her her silk negligée. Left out to dry, her flatmate warns her to not put her Parisian lingerie where others can see it, lest it draw suspicion. Ninotchka sarcastically remarks, "I should hate to see our country endangered by my underwear." Yet her gesture right afterward belies this satire of Soviet paranoia and conformity. Admiring the lingerie, her flatmate asks if she might borrow it for her honeymoon, and Ninotchka immediately gives it to her as a wedding present. Despite its real and sentimental value, Ninotchka easily parts with her property. If communism is equated with informants and state surveillance, it is also associated with the spirit of generosity, a lack of attachment to private ownership.

The Freedom of Complaint

Near the end of the film, Ninotchka is in Constantinople with her old comrades, who have defected. Iranoff proudly illustrates their newfound freedom by throwing open their hotel room door and shouting "The service in this hotel is terrible!" Pause. "See? Nobody comes, nobody pays any attention." *This* is Western freedom: you can complain all you want and nobody reacts or does anything at all. The ultimate proof of freedom is the ability to complain (about the stupidest annoyances of everyday life, especially concerning one's social privileges: bad service) without fear of reprisal or censorship. The flipside of this is that nobody cares or even listens; speech is reduced to the empty cultivation of complaining (there's a direct line from this to *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*: from Lubitsch to David). This shows the subtlety of the anti-communist jokes in *Ninotchka*, which often cut both ways: freedom from censorship entails the society of the complaint.

Your Cornea is Excellent

What does the film have to say about the desire of the Soviet New Woman? Let us focus on the seduction scene between Leon and Ninotchka. Leon has invited Ninotchka to his apartment, where they engage in a sparkling, rapid dialogue.

> LEON: Ninotchka … do you like me just a little bit?
> NINOTCHKA. Your general appearance is not distasteful.
> LEON: Thank you.
> NINOTCHKA. The whites of your eyes are clear. Your cornea is excellent.
> LEON: Your cornea is terrific. Ninotchka, tell me. You're so expert on things. Can it be that I'm falling in love with you?
> NINOTCHKA. Why must you bring in wrong values? Love is a romantic designation for a most ordinary biological … or shall we say "chemical," process. A lot of nonsense is talked and written about it.
> LEON: I see. What do you use instead?
> NINOTCHKA. I acknowledge the existence of a natural impulse common to all.
> LEON: What can I possibly do to encourage such an impulse in you?
> NINOTCHKA. You don't have to do a thing. Chemically, we are already quite sympathetic.

Film still from Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 movie *Ninotchka*.

While Ninotchka is portrayed as cold and unromantic, she is not deprived of sexual feeling. On the contrary, while Leon proceeds elliptically, she cuts right to the point. Ninotchka regards her seducer with scientific detachment: she is studying Leon, just as she studies the engineering marvels of the city of Paris. The Western playboy is a specimen of a doomed culture and an outmoded form of male subjectivity. "You are something we do not have in Russia," she tells him, and after his "Thank you" adds, devastatingly: "That is why I believe in the future of my country." But even though she views his kind as soon-to-be-extinct, she is not unmoved by him. "Chemically, we are already quite sympathetic" she states, as if objectively reporting on a factual situation. Assessing his physical attractiveness, she pays him a compliment whose clinical precision makes it hilariously out of place: "Your cornea is excellent."

Ninotchka regards love as a purely material process, the sexual base stripped of its sentimental-romantic superstructure. Love is a "natural impulse common to all." From this demystified, materialist perspective, Leon's seduction ploys and romantic cooing appear as wasteful and frivolous as a haute couture hat or a sumptuous French meal – later on we see Ninotchka trying to order "raw beets and carrots" at a bistro, to which the proprietor replies, "Madame, this is a restaurant, not a meadow." Sexual desire is about the satisfaction of a natural impulse just as eating is about the proper caloric intake: naturalism is asceticism without prudery. Ninotchka's no-nonsense sexuality recalls a line that was actually reviled by Lenin, the so-called glass of water theory of sexuality: "Make love to a woman as if you were drinking a glass of water" (what is scandalous here is that it is a woman who extols communist "free love").[5] The film pokes fun at communist efficiency as applied to matters of romance, but isn't there something strangely utopian in Ninotchka's attitude toward sex? She is fully in control, uncompromised by her desire, which she treats in a totally pragmatic way, without the usual embarrassment, anxiety, or guilt. Moreover, viewed today, does not the Soviet libidinal materialism satirized by Lubitsch fit perfectly the ideology of late-capitalist consumption, combining scientific expertise and efficient management with health-consciousness and ascetic self-control? Nowadays it is more likely to be a creative professional sipping raw beet and carrot juice at a hipster juice bar, extolling the drink's health benefits in objective chemical terms (vitamins, antioxidants, etc.). In an ironic dialectical reversal, Soviet materialism now appears in the guise of Western excess and luxury, from the molecular connoisseurship of products through to the idea of sex as a matter of biochemistry to be manipulated through pharmacological means. Ninotchka is our contemporary ideal.

Will the obverse of Ninotchka's disenchanted chemical eros be the head-over-heels romantic passion which she discovers thanks to Leon? Things are not quite so simple, as is indicated in a later scene, one of the most ingenious of the film. Ninotchka and Leon have fallen for each other, and not only metaphorically (more on this "falling" soon). They are enjoying a big night on the town, drinking and dancing at a chic nightclub surrounded by *le Tout-Paris*, the Duchess and her entourage included. Lubitsch subverts the rom-com cliché where one of the characters gets drunk and does something embarrassing or transgressive, typically of a sexual nature. After a tense exchange with the Duchess, Leon and Ninotchka take to the floor and start dancing. Overcome with emotion and champagne, Ninotchka turns to her fellow ballroom dancers and addresses them in solidarity, "Comrades, comrades, good people of France," then announces to Leon her desire to make a speech and foment revolution against the Duchess. An embarrassed Leon quickly hushes her up, and sends her off to the ladies' room. But soon after he is informed by the distressed maître d'hôtel that his companion is "spreading communistic propaganda in the powder room" and organizing the attendants. What makes this scene so effective is Lubitsch's substitution of communism for sex. Ninotchka loses control over herself, she is overcome by passion – the desire for communism. Labor organizing and communist propagandizing have the same transgressive punch as what, in a standard romantic comedy, would be achieved by sexually risqué behavior. And here we get a very different image of Lubitsch's heroine: it is not that she's a cold Soviet robot, but deep down there's a carefree Western romantic waiting to break out. On the contrary: totally soused and unable to control herself, it is comradeship-love that comes bubbling to the surface. This is Ninotchka's deepest drive, her truest passion, her most transgressive desire. Freud described the impersonal "id" as "connected with certain forms of expression used by normal people. 'It shot through me,' people say; 'there was something in me at that moment that was stronger than me.' 'C'était plus fort que moi.'"[6] Ninotchka too loses her head, she is overwhelmed by something that is "stronger than her," but hers is a communist id.

Laughter in Search of a Joke

What about Garbo's laugh? The whole idea for the

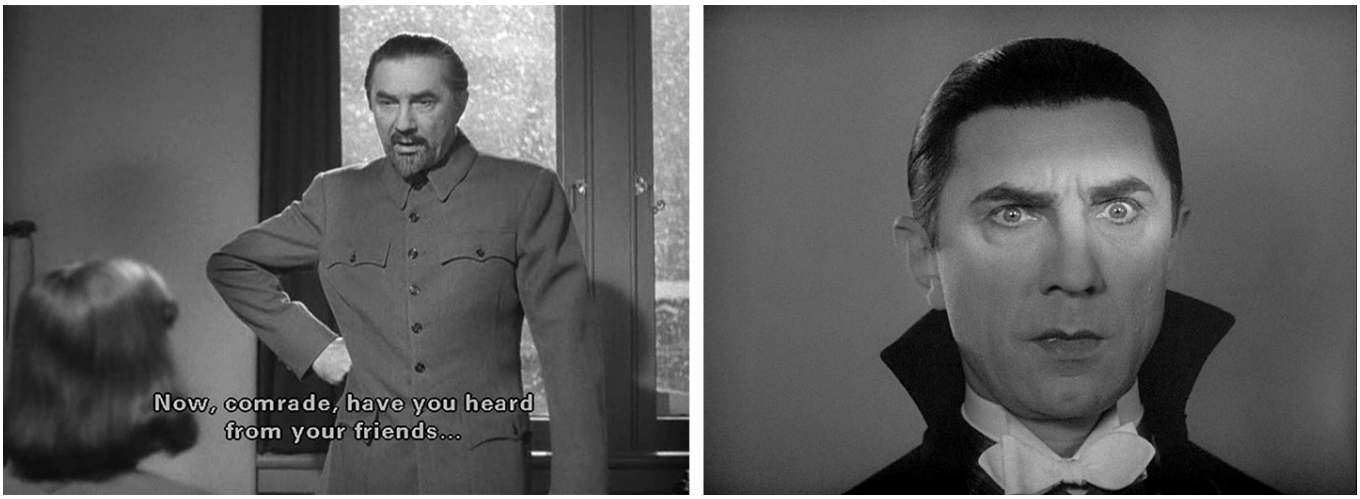
film reportedly started with just two words: "Garbo laughs!" This was the advertising slogan for the movie, echoing the catchphrase for Garbo's first sound feature, *Anna Christie* (1930), "Garbo talks!" In the beginning was the laugh, and then they needed the joke, and eventually the plot, the characters, the setting, the whole world – all to support that inaugural outburst of laughter, the spasm at the origin. Is this something like the Gospel According to Lubitsch? Or a kind of Pirandellian laughter in search of a joke?[7] To use the psychoanalytic term, Garbo's laugh is the ultimate Lubitschean partial object; in a cinema abounding in deft visual touches and singular objects, Garbo's laugh is arguably the most elementary and the most profound, neatly encapsulating the whole problem of comedy.[8] What is at stake in *Ninotchka* is actually a metacomedy; it is a comedy about how to do (and not to do) comedy, its conditions of possibility.

Leon has secretly followed Ninotchka to the working-class restaurant where she is having lunch; he wants to crack Nintochka's ideological shell, to get her to stop taking things so seriously and enjoy herself, and his trick for doing so will be comedy. In a bid to get her to laugh, he tries various anecdotes and jokes, but is unsuccessful. (Indeed, Ninotchka's deadpan remarks about the jokes are much funnier than Leon's pathetic attempts at humor.) Increasingly frustrated, he blames his comedic failure on the audience: "Maybe the trouble isn't with the joke. Maybe it's with you." Leon's smooth manner turns deadly serious, as he gives her one last chance to laugh, a weird comic ultimatum. This is the joke he tells: "A man comes into a restaurant and sits down and says, 'Waiter! Get me a cup of coffee without cream.' After five minutes the waiter comes back and says, 'I'm sorry, sir, we're all out of cream, can it be without milk?'" Ninotchka doesn't react. He tries telling the joke one more time, but, flustered, botches the delivery, then starts up again, only to become even more frustrated and belligerent. The satirical target of this exchange is not Ninotchka's humorless socialism but rather the aggression contained in Western fun-loving ideology: Leon embodies the paradoxical pressure to relax, the superegoic imperative to enjoy. If Ninotchka stands for the command economy, Leon's open society is one of *command comedy*. It would hardly be a stretch to note the sexual subtext here: what Leon desperately wants, but fails, to command is the woman's enjoyment. He suffers from performance anxiety; he cannot produce in her the coveted laughter.

Suddenly everything shifts, thanks to an accident. While scolding Ninotchka for her lack of humor, Leon leans back in his chair, which topples over, sending him crashing to the floor. Everyone in the restaurant, including Ninotchka, laughs uproariously at this pratfall. What could not be produced through cleverness, irony, wit, or even intimidation, is accomplished by the most elementary of gags: it's only with the fortuitous fall that laughter finally finds its joke. There is a metacomedic lesson here: true comedy is about surprise and loss of mastery; it consists in an awkward, "unwanted" satisfaction, a satisfaction one was not looking for yet provides pleasure nonetheless (one could say that it's satisfaction that finds *its* subject, rather than the other way around). Comedy, in other words, belongs to the order of the *event* – it is unpredictable and disorienting, just like love. It thus makes sense that Leon's pratfall corresponds to the magical moment of falling in love. *Ninotchka* proposes an original formula for the miracle of love: the meeting not of two kindred souls but two kindred falls – one person collapses to the ground, and the other falls into spastic laughter. Or as Ivana Novak and Jela Krečič beautifully describe the scene:

> What follows is a whole series of falls: First, there is a fall in the immediate physical sense: Leon falls on his ass in the most embarrassing and clumsy way. But this also signals a fall from his symbolic status as a sophisticated charmer, a fact directly registered by his expression of anger ("What's so funny about this?") – he no longer controls the game of seduction and is momentarily lost. And, as befits true love, Ninotchka does not react to this fall with condescending grace ("don't worry, when you stumble, I love you even more"), but with *her own fall* – the two falls overlap. At the immediate level, she *falls into uncontrollable laughter* – loses control of herself in exactly the same way one loses control when one falls into tears. Her fall, however, goes much deeper, providing an exemplary instance of what Lacan calls "subjective destitution."[9]

As Novak and Krečič argue, the moment of the fall is doubled – it is even doubly doubled – since it involves both Ninotchka and Leon, who undergo both literal and symbolic falls: he falls on his ass, she falls into convulsive laughter; he loses his signature poise and suaveness, his mastery over the game of seduction, she loses her symbolic armor, her identity as an emissary of the Soviet state (with all that implies: coldness, strictness, asceticism, etc.). Ninotchka is not laughing *at* Leon, from a superior position that would confirm her ego; rather she answers his fall with her own: a solidarity of falls.



Actor Bela Lugosi in the movie *Ninotchka* (1939) and *Dracula* (1931).

Subjective destitution is the right term to capture what happens to Ninotchka, as it designates a radical loss of identity, the dissolution of the coordinates of one's self-image. This is a shattering laugh that cuts through her being, marking a before and after. It is significant in this regard that we do not actually see the moment of laughter. "One moment she is deadly serious, the next dissolved in laughter, and there is really no way to bridge the two states."[10] The editing indicates something crucial: that the instant of laughter is an unrepresentable zero point, a *caesura* or pure loss inaccessible to an external gaze. Garbo's laugh is the embodiment of a void.

This is the metacomedy of *Ninotchka*: for the birth of laughter to take place, it must conquer two resistances, or two kinds of anti-comedy: the Soviet dispirit of bureaucracy, and Western compulsory mirth (if anything, the former possesses more wit and is closer to the comic spirit). What results, then, from the magical moment of laughter? Garbo's laugh is usually viewed as the moment of Nintochka's conversion to frivolity, luxury, and romance; that is, her capitulation to the capitalist West. But what if comedy were on the side not of Western hedonism but communism itself? On the one hand, there is Ninotchka's mechanical efficiency and self-sacrifice to the state – this is the repressive apparatus that is shattered with her laughter. On the other, there is her overwhelming passion of ballroom speechifying and powder-room revolts, of authentic devotion to the cause: the "libidinous" communist drive. Two readings of the film thus present themselves: in the official, satirical version, Ninotchka's laughter signals her transformation into a fun-loving "nonideological" Western subject. But there is another, more subversive undercurrent running through the film in which the three transformative events of comedy, love, and revolutionary politics are aligned.

I'm Out of the Omelette

Let us back up a little, and return to the joke itself. Ninotchka does not laugh at Leon's joke. But the irony of Ninotchka's not laughing is that the joke is, quite simply, excellent: it's funny that she doesn't find it funny.[11] To recount it one more time: "A man comes into a restaurant and sits down and says, 'Waiter! Get me a cup of coffee without cream.' After five minutes the waiter comes back and says, 'I'm sorry, sir, we're all out of cream, can it be without milk?'" In fact, the joke is so witty that it lends itself to being abstracted from its context and treated as a metaphysical comedy in its own right – which is precisely how it has been analyzed by Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek, who refers to it often in his work. For Zupančič and Žižek, the joke contains a philosophical lesson; it illustrates, in a Hegelian way, the operation of determinate negation, or from a Lacanian perspective, the conjuration of the object of desire as the positivation of a void.[12] The waiter treats a determinate absence as a real property, so that it is not simply that x (coffee) is without y (milk or cream), but x is *with* without y: the negated or missing element is posited as part of the material reality of the thing itself. While empirically speaking, they are one and the same black coffee, coffee without milk is not the same as coffee without cream: the absent addition insists, through the joke, as a spectral element of positive reality, appearing as its shadowy supplement. This is a key aspect of the magic of comedy, to conjure the void, to make nothing count as (an odd) something.[13] Here I would like to propose a slightly different interpretation, a Marxist twist to this philosophical reading by returning the joke to its original setting, turning Hegel on his head, as it were (although it's by no means my intention to simply oppose a materialist reading to an idealist one: what the joke reveals is the much more interesting and uncanny category of the "materialism of the idea"). The spectral element that the joke conjures turns out to be none other than the specter haunting Europe – that of class struggle. Recall that the joke is told in a working class restaurant, by a déclassé aristocrat who is making a show of his solidarity as part of a ploy to seduce communist Ninotchka – and in fact, the workingmen get the joke and laugh heartily, even if Ninotchka remains unmoved. What the punchline tells us is that not all coffee drinkers are equal. Coffee without cream is a rich man's black coffee; lacking this commodity, the best the waiter can offer is the more proletarian coffee without milk. What is thereby intimated is class struggle as the specter haunting social relations, ironically reduced to a matter of opposing deprivations: without cream versus without milk.

Beyond this punchline, one can trace a chain of associations throughout the film relating to this missing milk. Soon after Ninotchka's arrival in Paris, she castigates Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski for their profligacy, calculating that the cost of their luxurious hotel suite is equivalent to seven cows back home. "Who am I to cost the Russian people seven cows?" she pleads. Later, when Leon and Ninotchka are having their big night on the town, it's revealed that not cow but goat's milk has a special significance for Ninotchka.

> NINOTCHKA: It's funny to look back. I was brought up on goat's milk, I had a ration of

vodka in the army, and now champagne.
LEON: From goats to grapes. That's drinking in the right direction.

Then, during her confrontation with Swana the next morning, a basket of flowers arrives from Leon, with a gift hidden inside: a bottle of goat's milk. A final reference to cream, or lack thereof, near the end of the film makes explicit the political-economic stakes of Leon's "without" joke: after Ninotchka quotes the "Russian saying," "The cat who has cream on his whiskers had better find good excuses," to which Buljanoff replies: "With our cream situation what it is, it is Russia which should apologize to the cats." (Note how Buljanoff's ironic retort twists an implicit threat of state violence into an indictment of the socioeconomic conditions of a Russia "without cream.") If milk stands for the life of the Soviet people, including Nintochka's childhood sustenance, death is intimated through the symbolism of blood, introduced by the brilliant casting choice of Bela Lugosi to play Commissar Razinin: Count Dracula as a Soviet apparatchik. Todd Browning's *Dracula* appeared eight years prior to *Ninotchka*, and Lugosi was already famous as a horror villain. The typecast actor's presence in the film cleverly evokes the Stalinist terror, but, even more subtly (and perhaps unintentionally), it also recalls Marx's line about the vampirism of capital: "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks."[14] Between milk and blood a whole political history is sketched, which provides the dramatic backdrop for the romantic comedy.[15] And if the film ends with the successful formation of the couple, it is politics that has the final word. After Leon and Ninotchka have reunited – the fairy-tale nature of this happy ending is signified by its taking place in a nonexistent "Constantinople"; in 1923, the city had been renamed Istanbul[16] – the very last scene warns of future struggles and continuing class conflict: Kopalski is protesting outside the three comrades' restaurant, wearing a sandwich board that reads "Buljanoff and Iranoff Unfair to Kopalski."

What *Ninotchka* provides is a kind of comedic decomposition of Soviet communism, disentangling three lines which may be understood according to the Freudian division of the psyche: there is a *superego communism* of state bureaucracy, combining efficiency, severity, asceticism, and terror – Razinin's vampire socialism; and an *id communism* of overwhelming passion and subjective engagement, comradely solidarity, and revolutionary struggle. Ninotchka embodies both of these dimensions, and if her superego communism is the object of the film's satire – this is the stern, centrally planned Ninotchka, whose cold exterior is cracked by love – her id communism is afforded a real dignity, and gives rise to another sort of comedy. The three rascally "Marx brothers," Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski, on the other hand, stand for a corrupt and opportunistic *ego communism*, a communism of outward conformity, wily adaptation, ironic detachment, and the pursuit of personal gain, including a labor protest when that is in (one of) their interests. With their clever ironies and frauds, they are already the comedians of the system. One should thus distinguish three levels of comedy in the film: the satire of communism, viewed from a Western perspective (communists don't laugh, they have no humor, they are cold, inhuman robots); the comedy internal to communism, the cynical humor that belongs to everyday life (exemplified by the three comrades' hijinks and wit); and the comedy of communism itself, as irrepressible drive (which, just like Garbo's laugh, pops up eventfully in unexpected and unmasterable contexts: communism in the powder room).[17] There are also many non-comical, pathos-filled moments in the film, where Ninotchka directly speaks the truth – think especially of her dramatic confrontation with Swana. How do these relate to the comedy? Isn't Ninotchka oddly out of place in a comic universe? Ninotchka's seriousness is certainly an object of satire, but the opposite impression also imposes itself: that the pleasure of satire works as a kind of ruse or façade that allows the film to smuggle in a sympathetic portrait of a dedicated communist. Similar to the Freudian tendentious joke, where an innocent, socially acceptable pleasure paves the way for a dirty, repressed one, the film's anticommunist humor is the cover for a "dirty" and "scandalous" drive, the drive for communism.

And to extend our analysis one step further: not only does *Ninotchka* provide a comic dissection of Soviet communism, it also contains a utopian horizon. This relates to the film's double transformation, or double conversion, of the West to Marxism, and of communism to laughter, superfluity, and excess. Is not the real romance of film the romance between communism and surplus enjoyment? This screwball communism is what the (smiling) "Leninist" couple of Leon (the decadent Western reader of Marx) and Ninotchka (the laughing revolutionary militant) represents. "Luxury communism" is a facile phrase, but the more interesting question might be stated as follows: What would it mean to organize a society where surplus enjoyment would neither be ascetically denied nor captured by, and exploited for the production of, capitalist surplus value? How to

avoid the two figures of the superego, the rational-ascetic Soviet command economy, and the fun-loving Western command comedy, which appear as two faces of the same compulsion to enjoy?

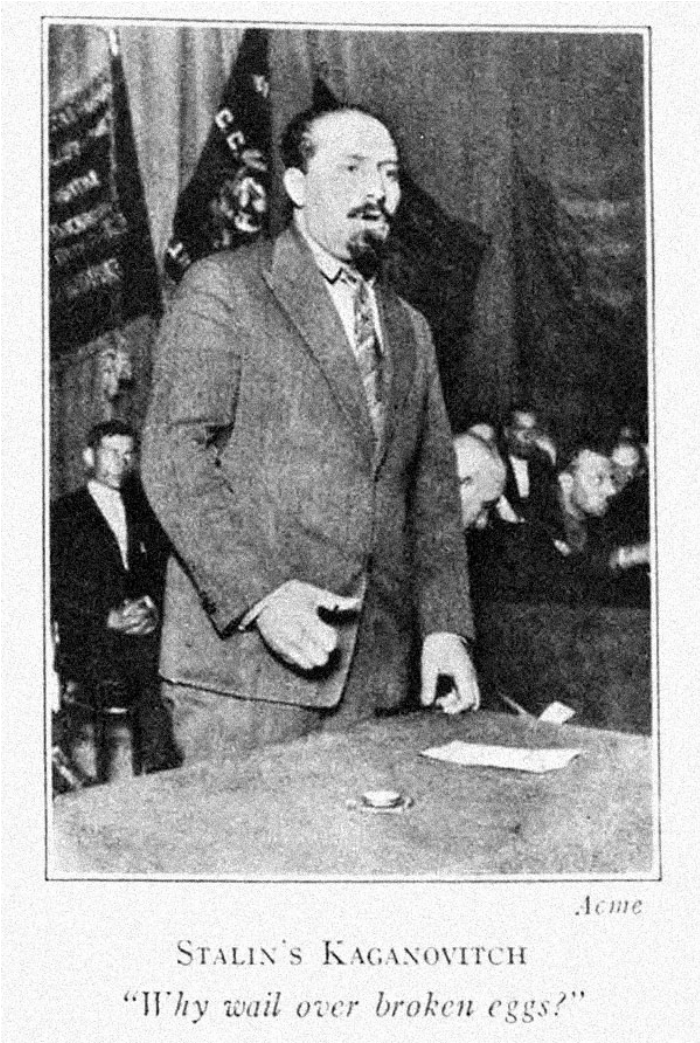


Photo from *Time* magazine (October 24, 1932), p. 19.

But I wish to conclude with another joke – not about milk or cream this time, but another essential farm product: eggs. Ninotchka is back in Moscow, and she has invited her comrades to her communal apartment for a dinner party. In contrast to the Parisian luxury they once enjoyed, Moscow life is poor and hard. But when the trio profess nostalgia for their sojourn in the West, Ninotchka, ever the communist stalwart, calls them to recognize the accomplishments of the Soviet people. "It's great. Think what is was a few years ago and what it is now. It's a tremendous achievement." Even though this is immediately undercut by several jokes, the dignity of Ninotchka's sentiment stands. Here we have another example of the film's comic reversal: it is not simply that Nintochka's socialistic statements serve as an object of parody, but the parody is what permits the genuine expression of her politics. They are making an omelette. Everyone contributes to the collective meal: Iranoff gives an egg, Kopalski gives an egg, Ninotchka has saved two eggs for the occasion; but when it comes to Buljanoff, it turns out that his egg has broken in his coat pocket. "Comrades, I'm out of the omelette," he sadly announces. "Don't worry, there'll be enough," Ninotchka and the others warmly reassure him. Here we have an interesting variation on the old saw, often associated with Stalinism, "In order to make an omelette you have to break some eggs." This line is the height of cynical wisdom; its bloody logic is referenced early on in the film with Nintochka's shockingly nonchalant allusion to the Gulag: "There are going to be fewer but better Russians." (Despite her initial orthodoxy, Ninotchka does not, in the end, inform on her corrupt comrades, but sends a "wonderful report" about them to Razinin; this, in turn, is why he dispatches them on a fur-trading mission to Constantinople, thus setting up a repetition of the original situation and the film's conclusion.) The omelette adage has a curious history. In fact, one of its earliest uses is connected not with communist terror but royalist reaction: François de Charette, a defender of King Louis XVI and one of the leaders of the counterrevolutionary Revolt in the Vendée, justified his crimes at his 1796 trial by saying, "*On ne saurait faire d'omelette sans casser des œufs*" ("You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs"). The proverb eventually switched ideological sides, though the attribution to Stalin is mistaken; it was Lazar Kaganovitch, one of Stalin's lieutenants, who is quoted in a 1932 *Time* magazine article titled "Stalin's Omelette" as saying, "Why wail over broken eggs when we are trying to make an omelette!" – this during a time of mass famine. And is not the Silicon Valley motto "move fast and break things" a shinier, accelerationist version of the same idea? There is a Lacanian variant as well, playing on the words *homme* (man) and *hommelette* ("manlet"), in a way that subverts the proverbial logic: instead of justifying violence and destruction for the sake of the greater good, *hommelette* designates the oddball, the outcast, the remainder that falls out of any such "good"; this brings us back to the problem of the partial object, dear to Lubitsch.[18] The simple gesture of comradeship in Lubitsch's film is a riposte to this cynical wisdom. Against the brutal necessity of egg-breaking in order to construct the new omelette, the lesson of *Ninotchka* could be stated as: You can participate in the omelette even if you don't have an egg – not a bad formula for communism.

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1
Tony Shaw, *Hollywood's Cold War* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 26.

2
James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (Da Capo Press, 1998), 392. Tatjana Jukić observes that "Ninotchka remains dedicated to the revolution even after everybody else's sense of politics has shifted and mutated, and even after she herself has abandoned her initial strict bureaucratic socialism." "The October Garbo: Classical Hollywood and the Revolution," *Studia Litterarum* 2, no. 2 (2017): 58.

3
This essay in intended to contribute to an understanding of Lubitsch as a political filmmaker, examining the relationship between comedy and politics in his work. Lubitsch's great political trilogy, composed by *Trouble in Paradise* (1932), *Ninotchka* (1939), and *To Be or Not To Be* (1942), deals with the biggest shock to the capitalist system the world has yet known, the Great Depression, and the two major historical responses to the deadlocks of capitalism: communism and fascism.

4
As Marjorie Hilton observes, Ninotchka's new Western hat and dress are curiously reminiscent of Soviet avant-garde aesthetics: "Paradoxically, as much as this outfit is meant to convey Western fashion forwardness, it also evokes Russian constructivist experiments in fashion of the revolutionary years." "Gender and Ideological Rivalry in *Ninotchka* and *Circus*: The Capitalist and Communist Make-over," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 8, no. 1 (2014): 13.

5
Lenin comments in his conversations with Clara Zetkin: "You must be aware of the famous theory that in Communist society the satisfaction of sexual desires, of love, will be as simple and unimportant as drinking a glass of water. This glass of water theory has made our young people mad, quite mad." Clara Zetkin, *Reminiscences of Lenin* (1924; Modern Books, 1929), 57–58. Bolshevik feminist Alexandra Kollontai, to whom this theory is often wrongly attributed (including by Lenin himself), is rumored to have been the inspiration for the character of Ninotchka. An outspoken proponent of sexual liberation and the only female member of the Central Committee, she was also sent abroad and eventually became the Soviet Ambassador to Sweden, coincidentally Garbo's homeland. In fact, however, Ninotchka was modeled not on Kollontai but Ingeborg von Wangenheim, wife of Lubitsch's friend and actor Gustav von Wangenheim; the communist couple fled Nazi Germany to Russia in the early 1930s, and Lubitsch visited them during his trip to Moscow in 1936. For more on this connection, see Laura von Wangenheim, *In den Fängen der Geschichte: Inge von Wangenheim Fotografien aus dem sowjetischen Exit 1933–1945* (Rotbuch Verlag, 2013), 12, 17–18.

6
Sigmund Freud, "The Question of Lay Analysis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 20, trans. James Strachey (Hogarth, 1955), 195.

7
Harvey writes: "According to some accounts, the whole project began with 'Garbo laughs!': once they had the slogan, they looked for a movie to go with it. It was Melchior Lengyel, a Hungarian playwright now on the MGM payroll, who came up with the idea of a Soviet in Paris succumbing to capitalist delight." *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood*, 384.

8
For a discussion of another of these Lubitschean partial objects, see my analysis of the jeweled handbag in *Trouble in Paradise*: "Comedy in Times of Austerity," in *Lubitsch Can't Wait: A Theoretical Examination*, eds. Ivana Novak, Jela Krečič, and Mladen Dolar (Slovenian Cinematheque, 2014), 34–38.

9
Ivana Novak and Jela Krečič, "Introduction," in *Lubitsch Can't Wait*, 12; original emphasis. This passage is also discussed by Slavoj Žižek in *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2014), 293–94.

10
William Paul, *Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy* (Columbia University Press, 1983), 219.

11
For a contrary opinion, see Harvey: "He decides to tell her a joke. But this works no better, mainly because the joke is so dumb." *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood*, 383.

12
See Alenka Zupančič, *Why Psychoanalysis?: Three Interventions* (Nordic Summer University Press, 2008), 42–43. For two of Žižek's discussions of the "without milk" joke, see *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (Verso, 2012), 765–68; and *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (MIT Press, 2017), 140.

13
A brilliant example of this is provided by the Russian avant-garde writer and slapstick metaphysician Daniil Kharms: "There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either. He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So, we don't even know who we're talking about. We'd better not talk about him any more." *Today I Wrote Nothing*, trans. Matvei Yankelevich (Ardis, 2009), 45.

14
Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1976), 342.

15
I draw on Jukić's discussion of the symbolism of milk and blood in her excellent "Garbo Laughs: Revolution and Melancholia in Lubitsch's *Ninotchka*," in *Lubitsch Can't Wait*, 86–87.

16
Hilton, "Gender and Ideological Rivalry," 16.

17
This notion of the drive is a key aspect of Lubitsch's comedy. From a formal perspective, one can compare Ninotchka's communist drive with that of the title character of *Cluny Brown*, a working class woman who has a peculiar passion for plumbing. The telltale features of the Lubitschean drive are that it doesn't obey social rules and cannot be assigned its proper place; it emerges in inappropriate contexts and awkward situations (e.g., plumbing in the middle of a formal birthday dinner, communism in the powder room), like a laugh that comes not when commanded but only at the "wrong" moment.

18
For more on the *hommelette* (which Lacan also refers to as the *lamella*), see *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (W. W. Norton, 1981), 197–98; and "Position of the Unconscious," *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (W. W. Norton, 2006), 717–18.