***Die Austernprinzessin* (*The Oyster Princess*, Ernst Lubitsch, 1919)**

Curated by Molly Harrabin

Born at the height of Weimar-era whimsy, *The Oyster Princess* emerged during a fleeting but fertile moment in post-First World War German cinema, before the trauma and psychological scars of the War found fuller expression in the darker tones of Expressionist films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920) or the haunting dystopian future depicted in *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927). With the cultural mood in 1919 still buoyed by anarchic energy and artistic experimentation, the film embodies the flamboyant spirit that characterized Berlin's popular entertainment scene in the early Weimar years. Newly (albeit temporarily) liberated from censorship regulations, filmmakers began pushing the boundaries of form and tone with a feverish inventiveness and irreverence, epitomized by *The Oyster Princess*. Extravagant, ironic, and gleefully stylized, it satirizes American consumerism and European aristocratic pretension through an eccentric story told with maximalist set design, mechanized choreography, and absurd visual gags. In this sense, the film is not only a comedy, but also a product of its moment, a cinematic expression of the Weimar Republic's dizzying embrace of modernity before darker currents took hold.

Nowhere is this embrace more deliriously literal than in the film's foxtrot epidemic sequence, in which dinner guests and servants alike are overtaken by a spontaneous, near-mechanical outbreak of dance. The scene parodies the real-life dance craze sweeping Germany at the time, and the foxtrot's popularity speaks to the complex interplay between cultural liberation, American influence, and modernist desire in Weimar Germany. The dance functioned as a symbol of the new in a country reckoning with the collapse of its old order, and, with its syncopated rhythms and fluid movements, was both celebrated as a

symbol of modern vitality and derided as a harbinger of cultural decay. Lubitsch inflates this social phenomenon to comic absurdity in *The Oyster Princess*, staging the foxtrot as a form of contagious hysteria, a rhythmic compulsion that overtakes individuals and dissolves hierarchy.

In doing so, the film also aligns with the spirit of the Dada cultural movement, which similarly revelled in chaos, disruption, and the dismantling of bourgeois pretensions. Much like a Dada performance, the foxtrot scene is a form of choregraphed anarchy, a moment where logic is suspended and social roles blur in a whirlwind of automated movement. With its manic energy and choreographed chaos, the scene doubles as a satire not only bourgeois leisure culture, but also the unsettling automation of social life in the modern age, reflecting Dada's deep scepticism toward rationalism, conformity, and cultural commodification. The foxtrot scene is therefore a moment that crystallizes the film's satire, not just of the upper-class, but of a society giddily dancing itself into the future without fully understanding the steps.

The Oyster Princess is not only a whimsical satire of excess but also a poignant commentary on the pitiful decline of the aristocracy. By 1919, the old social orders were unravelling across Europe, and in Germany, this unravelling was particularly acute. Defeat in the First World War had shattered its imperial political structure and let its people in a state of economic and social turmoil. Lubitsch portrays this moment of transition with biting irony. The film's caricatured nobility, embodied in the hapless Prince Nucki (Harry Liedtke) and his faded court, represents a class clinging desperately to outdated prestige and privilege. Nucki and his friend Josef (Julius Falkenstein) live in a state of comical destitution, eating a diet of pickled herring and washing their socks in a basin. Yet despite his poverty, Nucki clings onto his princely status with a mix of pride and self-awareness. When Seligson (Max Kronert), the matchmaker,

arrives with a proposal from the American millionaire, Nucki and Josef set up a shabby armchair as a makeshift throne in an attempt to maintain appearances that is underpinned by a subtle mockery of their situation. Meanwhile, Ossi's father (Victor Janson), Mr. Quaker, the American "Oyster King", Mr. Quaker, embodies the relentless advance of industrial wealth and the excesses of mass consumption. In one scene, a long shot reveals dozens of servants, arranged in a perfectly choreographed, machine-like formation, attending to his every need: a butler to hold his cigar, another holding his ashtray, and several domestic workers helping him to enjoy a comfortable nap. The scene satirizes industrial efficiency and suggests that wealth has become so immense and routine that it requires a whole system to manage it. The film therefore marks the start of a new era defined by abandonment of traditional values in favor of conspicuous consumption and spectacle. Ossi's demand for a prince and her father's promise to 'buy her one' further shows how social standing has become a commodity, a mere accessory to be acquired. Through these two opposing worlds, *The Oyster Princess* highlights the social and cultural chasm of the era. On one side, the powerless nobility clings to a meaningless past; on the other, the vulgar nouveau riche revels in a shallow, consumerist present. The film humorously critiques both, suggesting that while the old social order of the Imperial past was corrupt, the new one, built on mindless materialism and superficiality, is equally hollow. In this way, Lubitsch perfectly captures the chaotic transitionary moment of postwar Germany.

An intriguing subtext in *The Oyster Princess* lies in the Quaker family name. On one level, the name Quaker refers to the popular American brand, Quaker Oats, in a direct nod to the industrial and consumer power of the United States in the early twentieth century. Yet the film also makes use of a subtle play with Quaker imagery and stereotypes, employing the name not just as a reference to American capitalism and branding, but also as an ironic commentary on moral

and cultural values. Traditionally, Quakers are associated with simplicity and modesty, values that stand in stark contrast to the film's depiction of extravagant consumerism, vanity, and social climbing, epitomised by the caricatured American heiress (Ossi Oswalda) and her lavish world. The Quaker name thus satirizes the incongruity between the family's supposed moral standing and their actual behavior. Both Ossi and her father are fabulously wealthy and obsessed with status, hosting elaborate parties that brim with excess. This dissonance creates a layer of comic irony, suggesting that the Quaker name has become an empty label, much like a brand logo, devoid of its original ethical substance. Lubitsch thereby injects subtle political and cultural commentary into his slapstick farce and deepens his satire of consumer culture and aristocratic decadence, suggesting that beneath the glittering surface of modern wealth lies a loss of genuine humanity.

The film also marks a turning point in Ernst Lubitsch's development as a filmmaker, as he moved away from his so-called 'Jewish comedies' that launched his career in Berlin. Earlier films such as *Schupalast Pinkus* (1916) and *Meyer aus Berlin* (1919) featured Lubitsch himself in the lead roles, playing socially ambitious Jewish characters, often coded through costume, gesture, and dialect. While these comedies satirized their protagonists' pretensions, they also reflected a distinctively Jewish perspective on social mobility and assimilation in Wilhelmine society. The humor often hinged on the paradoxes and anxieties of cultural hybridity, offering both affectionate and critical portrayals of upwardly mobile Jews negotiating their place in a predominantly bourgeois, often antisemitic, world. *The Oyster Princess* abandons this overtly ethnic framing. Nobody in the film, except Seligsohn, is explicitly characterized as Jewish, although McCormick (2020) argues that the Oyster King and his princess "must be seen in relation to German stereotypes about Jewish new money." This suggests that Lubitsch's treatment of Jewishness becomes more

oblique and embedded in broader tropes of capitalist excess and social pretension. The Oyster King, with his brash manners and nouveau riche sensibilities, echoes contemporary caricatures of Jewish financiers, but without the explicit ethnic markers that defined Lubitsch's earlier characters. In this sense, Lubitsch adopts a more universal mode of satire to comically critique class ambition and transatlantic consumer culture. The fact that Lubitsch sets the film in an imaginary, hyper-American world of industrial tycoons and fabricated royalty is also telling, a departure from the Berlin-centric, urban, Jewish milieu of his earlier works. This shift speaks to Lubitsch's growing ambition to transcend local theatrical traditions and ethnic caricature, moving towards a more international mode of filmmaking, one that privileges visual wit, choreographed movement, and ironic juxtapositions over the specificity of character type. The film therefore lays the groundwork for the sophisticated social comedies that Lubitsch would later refine in Hollywood, such as *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940).

The Oyster Princess thus stands as an early example of Lubitsch's burgeoning genius, a riotous silent farce that offers a glimpse into the sophisticated comedy style that would later become the director's trademark in Hollywood. Indeed, Hake (1992) contends that this is 'the first Lubitsch comedy that shows a distinct filmic style', an observation echoed by Hungarian film theorist Béla Balázs, who, in 1923, remarked on Lubitsch's innovative use of "the self-irony of film." This irony, both playful and reflexive, signals the emergence of cinema as a unique expressive medium in Lubitsch's hands. *The Oyster Princess* is considered to be the film where the famed 'Lubitsch Touch' begins to take shape. The term, later coined by critics to describe the director's signature blend of elegance, wit, and narrative restraint, finds its early expression in this film through staging, the use of visual rhythm in place of spoken dialogue, and the sharp satirical gaze turned on the absurdities of wealth and aristocratic

pretension. Lubitsch's direction here is bold and stylized, blending slapstick choreography with operetta-like rhythm. His penchant for visual geometry and narrative economy creates a sense of order within chaos, as extravagant set pieces and absurd scenarios unfold with effortless charm

Long before he would become a defining voice in American romantic comedy, Lubitsch was already constructing a cinematic language of subtlety beneath spectacle. Yet within this tightly controlled, comedic world, much of the film's vitality springs from its lead actress, Ossi Oswalda. A frequent collaborator of Lubitsch's during his German years, the actress referred to as the "German Mary Pickford" infuses the film with irreverent energy and comic precision. She delivers a performance of extraordinary physical energy and charisma, imbuing the spoiled heiress with a mix of petulance, innocence, and anarchic charm. Her comic brilliance lies in her physical expressiveness: wild gestures, elastic facial expressions, and a childlike impulsiveness that electrifies the screen. Oswalda's contribution was central not only to the film's success but to Lubitsch's development as a director attuned to rhythm, movement, and gesture. She was, in many ways, his muse during this formative phase of his career. Nevertheless, in the decades since, as Lubitsch's international stature has grown, Oswalda has too often been relegated to a footnote in his career.

Notably, Oswalda credits Lubitsch for recognizing her aptitude for film acting in a 1928 collection of first-person profiles of prominent individuals in the German filmmaking industry. In contrast, Lubitsch makes no mention of Oswalda in his own entry in the same volume. This omission, whether accidental or deliberate, is emblematic of a broader pattern in both contemporary and retrospective accounts of Weimar cinema, where actresses like Oswalda are frequently marginalized in favor of the auteur narrative. Reclaiming Oswalda's role in shaping the tone and success of *The Oyster*

Princess is not only a corrective to film history but also a reminder of the how collaborative early filmmaking truly was. Behind the elegance of the "Lubitsch Touch" lies the irrepressible energy of Oswalda, its first and most vibrant expression. *The Oyster Princess* reminds us that while Lubitsch was undoubtedly the architect of this cinematic confection, it was Oswalda who animated it.

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Select Filmography

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