

# The Hidden and the Unspeakable: On Theatrical Culture, Oscar Wilde and Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan*

## • Charles Musser

I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet, at the same time that I widened its range and enriched its characterization . . .

Oscar Wilde (1897)

The activity of reading has on the contrary all the characteristics of a silent production . . . [The reader] insinuates into another person's text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in it like the internal rumblings of one's body. Ruse, metaphor, arrangement, this production is also an "invention" of the memory. Words become the outlet or product of silent histories. The readable transforms itself into the memorable.

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion. It is not he who is revealed by the painter; it is rather the painter who reveals himself.

Oscar Wilde

The celebrated "Lubitsch touch" is everywhere to be discerned.

*New York Evening Post*

Dear Mr. Lubitsch,

Do I owe you apologies or do you owe me thanks for exposing your little secret? I only wish you were around so we could discuss this question face to face. In any case, those little

cans of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1916), which you and Warner Brothers put under lock and key over 75 years ago, are now out of the vault and safely preserved. In fact, they have been shown on special occasions for more than half a decade and now have been released on video by the British Film Institute. So it was only a matter of time before someone would stumble across what you had so carefully hidden. Of course, you were always aware of this possibility, and I suspect you might have savoured the prospect of exposure, scandal, and justification. For, as you well know, the discovery of this little secret only makes your film that much more interesting – that much more of a *tour de force*. Your secret survived some fifty years after your death. In this respect you were far more fortunate than Wilde, whose secret came out while he was alive – and cost him his life. In any case, it is time to see your film from a fresh perspective.

Your fan,  
Charles Musser

If Cinema Studies has increasingly become Media Studies and Theatre Studies has moved toward Performance Studies, these developments have something in common: both disciplines have decentred the place of the theatre in their respective fields of scholarly investigation.<sup>1</sup> This essay, in contrast, is sustained by an alternate configuration that reasserts both the central role of theatre in Western culture throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries *and* the commonalities of stage and screen. We cannot forget that the cinema is just as much a

theatrical form of entertainment as live performance on the stage – a fact that is crucial to a full appreciation of Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Warner Brothers, 1925). Particularly in the cinema's silent era (1895–1925), when motion picture exhibition relied on numerous performance elements, theatrical performance and film exhibition interpenetrated.<sup>2</sup> This underscores a basic conundrum: cinema has been both integral to and an extension of theatrical culture, even

though it has also been something quite different – a new art form. Indeed, the underlying unity of stage and screen was so well established that critics, theorists, historians and artists expended large amounts of intellectual energy distinguishing the two forms of artistic practice while paying little attention to what they have held in common.

What constitutes an artistic or cultural practice? We think of stage and screen as two different media and so different practices. Yet



• 'A smooth and finished product' or secret *tour de force*? *Lady Windermere's Fan*, adapted by Lubitsch.

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even as scholars question the value of media-specificity from a theoretical perspective, the very concept of media studies – of studying different media – re-inscribes this valorisation.<sup>3</sup> Likewise the idea of intermediality – of studying the interaction between two or more media – frames the question of cultural dynamism in quite similar terms.<sup>4</sup> However, motion pictures and live theatre were not single practices but consisted of highly fragmented if overlapping sub-practices. Vaudeville (featuring everything from jugglers, lightning sketch artists and one-act playlets to lantern shows and technological demonstrations), burlesque, melodrama, opera and legitimate theatre were different forms of stage performance in the first decades of the 1900s. At the same time, the motion picture industry embraced news films, animation, illustrated lectures, serials, scenics, science subjects, and slapstick comedies as well as feature films. All of these found ready audiences in theatres. It may be that affinities between various subpractices and genres – for instance, melodrama on stage and screen or more specifically the stage western and the motion picture western – had much more in common with each other than with other practices within the same medium. We might ask whether they should first be understood as examples of stage and screen (along media specific lines) and then related on an intermedial basis – or treated as generic unities with media-specific differences within that framework. Media-based differences may often have been in some sense secondary. For Buster Keaton to move from theatre to film in the late 1910s was not the same as a musician suddenly becoming a sculptor. Screen and stage had many potential commonalities other than the space of reception.

One fundamental feature of theatrical practice that carried over into many areas of filmmaking was adaptation. Of course, playwrights frequently adapted stories to the stage (from *The Count of Monte Cristo* to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Klansman*); while British and American playwrights often adapted European plays so they would be acceptable to domestic audiences (for example, the numerous versions of *Camille*

[*La Dame aux Camélias*, Alexandre Dumas fils, 1849/1852]).<sup>5</sup> More broadly, any given production involved the adaptation of a specific script to the artistic aspirations and commercial needs of those involved.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, every theatrical company had to constantly adapt to changing audiences, changing personnel, and the different demands of specific theatres as they toured the country. For theatre professionals, the process of adapting to a new kind of theatrical culture – to the movies – was a radical act no doubt, but a remarkably common one. Like Sergei Eisenstein, D. W. Griffith, Cecil B. DeMille, Germaine Dulac, and Orson Welles and many others, Lubitsch left the stage and 'dropped into cinema'.<sup>7</sup> For him, perhaps even more than the others, this world of theatrical culture remained a central and inseparable phenomenon in his creative imaginary.<sup>8</sup> Many of his pictures – for instance, *Romeo and Juliet in the Snow* (1920), *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1925), and *Design for Living* (1933) – can be understood and enjoyed as radical adaptations or subversive engagements with important plays. *To Be or Not to Be* (1944) may not be a theatrical adaptation in the narrow sense (though it does appropriate elements of Ferenc Molnar's *The Guardsman* [1910]), but Lubitsch took the world of live theatre as its subject and translated it onto the screen in a manner that was simultaneously loving and irreverent. In short, Lubitsch can be understood (as he perhaps understood himself) as a figure both completely immersed in theatrical culture broadly conceived, and someone deeply interested in the differences between live theatre and film. Certainly Lubitsch often saw himself as an artist involved in a triangle that had the stage and the screen as its two other points. And he often imagined this triangle in very human terms. Was cinema the wife and live performance the mistress (the guilty pleasure)? Or was the stage the mother and cinema the lover? In truth, Lubitsch articulated the nature of these triangles in anthropomorphic form, using individual films to express the nature of these relationships.

For Lubitsch, adaptation was a central fact of his artistic practice. *Lady Windermere's Fan* was

one of ten silent films that he made in the United States between 1923 and 1929, and all ten were adaptations: seven of plays, two of novels, and one a combination of novel, film and operetta.<sup>9</sup> No doubt he would have happily embraced Wilde's assertion that

The originality, . . . which we ask from the artist, is originality of treatment, not of subject. It is only the unimaginative who ever invents. The true artist is known by the use he makes of what he annexes, and he annexes everything.<sup>10</sup>

As theatre historian Sos Eltis explains Wilde's approach to artistic production:

the genius of the artist lies not in invention but in adaptation. The critic is therefore the supreme artist, superior to the original creator; the critic refashions the work of others, using them as raw material for his own creative imagination. In writing *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1892), Wilde was therefore both creator and critic. For his first successful play Wilde appropriated the plots and conventions of numerous popular contemporary dramas, reshaping them and subverting their material to criticize the social principles on which they were founded.<sup>11</sup>

Sharing this preference for appropriation and radical adaptation, Lubitsch must have felt a strong affinity with Oscar Wilde, to whom he had more than once been compared.<sup>12</sup> As we shall see, Lubitsch offered a radical treatment of not only Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* but of a previous 1916 film version adapted by Benedict James and Fred Paul and the Ideal Film Company in Britain. Here Lubitsch's 'genius' lay not in his faithful translation of a great work but in the radical creativity and discerning judgment of his transformation.

Writing in late 1925 as his *Lady Windermere's Fan* was opening, Lubitsch broached the topic of adaptation in a widely disseminated article. In order to explain his approach to the public, he argued that the director must 'burrow under words [that] clothe their purpose in different guises' and 'clutch the purpose that motivates a play or novel'.<sup>13</sup> The art of adaptation, he argued, begins as an aggressive reading of the work in question. Lubitsch then offered an extensive

explication of the process of reading and creative response in relationship to his current release:

As a play '*Lady Windermere's Fan*' is an unforgettable piece of brilliant writing furnished very daringly with Wilde's famous epigrams, the like of which are always delightful. Yet in transposing the play to the screen I have made no use of those selfsame scintillating witticisms, and in some minds it has caused wonder. Let me say from the first I sought the underlying thought that gave birth to each of these terse gems and tried to show in action and motion the very identical reaction.

. . . Motion pictures are essentially words translated into human action. They should flow smoothly from start to finish, developing each step in the story easily, naturally and without in any way inconveniencing the mind of the movie-goer, so that he has to wait for written titles in order to understand what is going on. The more complicated the plot the clearer and more decisive the photoplay should be, not the more profuse the subtitles and captions to explain the action.

. . . Realizing the futility of such a course and the poor, vitiated photoplay that would result if the literal letters of his epigram were used, I tried to stalk and bag the game hiding under his words and translate that, via Miss Rich, Mr. Colman, Miss McAvoy and the other players into a moving picture.

The finished picture, of course, now awaits the verdict of the public. Only the public can tell me whether my understanding and reproduction of Oscar Wilde's play is true and sincere. I have always tried to combine artistry with entertainment in my directorial efforts, and in '*Lady's Windermere's Fan*' I think I have succeeded in creating a vivacious, refreshing piece of entertainment which is sophisticated, amusing and Wilde-ish in spirit. Personally, I feel that it is the best picture of that type I have ever made.<sup>14</sup>

This statement rewards scrutiny. Did Lubitsch see himself as a perfectly constructed conduit (a magical lens, perhaps) through which a play might pass and achieve its ideal motion picture form? Of course, the elegance of his images and his complete control over his mise-en-scene make this idea appealing. Yet this elegance can

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be deceptive. To be faithful to the spirit of Wilde on the level of treatment may mean being transgressive and irreverent towards the play itself.

Critics in the 1920s and before generally believed that in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Wilde 'did not care how ancient or stage-worn a situation might be; what his characters did was of little moment. What they said was everything'.<sup>15</sup> Little value was assigned to the drama itself. And yet if, as Lubitsch claimed, 'motion pictures are essentially words translated into human action,' Wilde's epigrams – his 'terse, sage, witty often paradoxical saying[s]'<sup>16</sup> – are particularly ill-suited for simple translation into action. To find equivalents was an elusive undertaking that Lubitsch apparently enjoyed. As he told Herman Weinberg in 1928, 'The camera should comment, insinuate, make an epigram or a *bon mot*, as well as tell a story. We're telling stories with pictures so we must try to make the picture as expressive as we can.'<sup>17</sup> He understood the 'spoken drama' as the 'sister art' of the motion picture, and yet 'to produce a perfect photoplay one must first of all realize that the art of the screen is wholly visual'.<sup>18</sup> Wilde presented Lubitsch with an extreme case, the ultimate challenge. Certainly the filmmaker saw points of potential congruence between the spoken and visual drama:

Even on the stage, where the spoken word reigns supreme, the greatest and most intense moments are those of silence. When the great climax comes, the characters become speechless, words fail them. Deepest sorrow and highest joy are devoid of words, and the most subtle emotions cannot be conveyed by words – silence is more expressive than language.<sup>19</sup>

Yet here again, subject matter and British upper-class restraint impeded Lubitsch's ability to take these parallels too far in the case of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Convinced that his adaptation was Wilde-ish in spirit, Lubitsch looked beneath the words to what was not spoken. Perhaps in the process he came to an understanding of the play that has eluded commentators and critics before and since.

### Notes for a History of *Lady Windermere's Fan*

What then is the history of *Lady Windermere's Fan*? The Wilde play had its premiere on 20 February 1892 at the St. James Theatre in London. George Alexander (1858–1918), the producer-actor who had commissioned the play, staged it and played in the role of Lord Windermere. Marion Terry received particular praise for her performance as Mrs. Erlynne. The play debuted in the United States on 23 January 1893 at the Columbia Theatre in Boston, followed shortly by a New York engagement, which began on 6 February at Palmer's Theatre.<sup>20</sup> Following Wilde's trials and conviction for homosexuality, the rights to the play were sold at a bankruptcy sale and purchased by George Alexander. It was staged in London, several times in the decade after Wilde's death (1901, 1904, 1911), with Marion Terry each time reprising the role of Mrs. Erlynne. The play virtually disappeared for almost two decades in the United States, although it was performed occasionally in stock theatre, until the highly respected actress Margaret Anglin took a break from her Shakespeare repertoire and staged it at New York's Hudson Theatre in March 1914.<sup>21</sup> In keeping with a well-established critical tradition, the *New York Times* reviewer praised the play's dialogue as well as the performances while dismissing the plot as having been 'worn and threadbare' even when it was first produced. Headlines declared that 'The Revival of "Lady



• George Alexander, first producer and star of Wilde's play, who sold the rights to Ideal.

Windermere's Fan" Is in the Nature of a Triumph'.<sup>22</sup> By the beginning of 1915, *Lady Windermere's Fan* had become accepted as a classic and appeared in a collection of plays edited by Thomas H. Dickinson, *Chief Contemporary Dramatists*.<sup>23</sup>

Ideal's film adaptation of *Lady Windermere's Fan* was certainly part of a general revival of interest in Wilde at home and abroad (which included, apparently, a 1913 film version made in Russia).<sup>24</sup> The Ideal Film Renting Company was a prominent London-based distributor, which was formed in 1911 and had moved into production by early 1916. In his insightful study of the Ideal Company, Jon Burrows has noted that its productions represented 'a sustained attempt to marry the worlds of stage and screen'.<sup>25</sup> Many of Ideal's films were adaptations of well-known stage plays, beginning with *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* in February 1916, scripted by Benedict James (1871–1957) with the evident approval of the play's author, Sir Arthur Pinero and directed by Fred Paul. This starred Sir George Alexander (as he had become) in the role he had created on stage, that of Aubrey Tanqueray. According to a report in *The Bioscope*, Alexander 'took the keenest interest in the work, even though there were dreary pauses and unfamiliar surroundings'.<sup>26</sup> Soon thereafter, Ideal acquired the film rights to *Lady Windermere's Fan* from Alexander.

Ideal's *Lady Windermere's Fan* was well into production by April 1916, when it was said to be generating 'a great deal of discussion' in the British motion picture world, with people asking, 'How can you film Oscar Wilde's epigrams?'<sup>27</sup> Fred Paul, a veteran film man who had worked for the Barker Motion Photography Company, again directed from a Benedict James script. The film starred the husband and wife team of Milton Rosmer (1881–1971) as Lord Windermere and Irene Rooke (1878–1958) as Mrs. Erylne.<sup>28</sup> They had worked together in Miss Horniman's repertory company at the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester in 1910.<sup>29</sup> Rosmer became more or less actively involved in theatrical management, but in early 1916 was about to join to British army.<sup>30</sup> Filming this play may have been an effort to give lasting

expression to his personal and professional relationship with Rooke, in view of this prospect.

Ideal held trade screenings for *Lady Windermere's Fan* in London in late May, and repeated them across England over the next five or six weeks. The film garnered enthusiastic reviews, with the *Bioscope* remarking 'Mr. Fred Paul and the Ideal Company have added a brilliant feather to the cap of the British producer'.<sup>31</sup> After noting that the play 'was certainly not the style which seems to lend itself readily to film adaptation,' *The Bioscope's* anonymous critic characterized the film as 'an unqualified success' and praised its 'introductory scenes' as 'particularly interesting'. Even before its official release on August 28th, the picture was booked into 173 theatres – more than any of Ideal's other films then awaiting release.<sup>32</sup>

Ideal copyrighted *Lady Windermere's Fan* in the United States on 23 January 1917, but it was not released there until after the war. This was done by the rapidly failing Triangle Distributing Corporation, which had had strong ties with the Ideal company – providing it with films during the war. Triangle released the film without any cast list or credits, as is evident from the surviving print, on 15 June 1919.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps because the actors were completely unknown in the United States, Triangle chose to evoke instead the names of those stars associated with earlier stage versions (Ada Rehan, Lillian Russell, and Margaret Anglin).<sup>34</sup> *Variety* found this frustrating and characterized the film as 'a cold, lifeless thing without a spark of vitality and personal interest in it to comfort the picture "fan"'.<sup>35</sup> *Moving Picture World* was more positive; declaring that 'the story is presented truthfully and attractively' and praising the acting.<sup>36</sup>

How Lubitsch decided to make his version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* is unclear. The play had its German premiere at Breslau's Lobe Theatre in 1902.<sup>37</sup> According to one of the playwright's admirers, Wilde had a tremendous influence in Germany. Store windows in Berlin 'were plastered with Wilde literature' and Wilde was 'the mainspring of the curious movement of some years ago that sought to give to the

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German music-hall the dignity of actual art'.<sup>38</sup> During the early part of 1921, five of Wilde's plays were being successfully performed in Berlin, where Lubitsch was based: *The Ideal Husband*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Salomé*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and *Lady Windermere's Fan*.<sup>39</sup> Whether or not Ideal was able to place the film in the German market after the war still needs to be determined. Lubitsch may have seen it there or he may have seen it in the United States. In any case, it was available for him to view after the war and it has long been common practice in the film industry that filmmakers view earlier and related versions of a story to generate ideas, or to see what to avoid.<sup>40</sup> The debt to the Ideal film is, however, far greater than an informational viewing would have produced. Lubitsch was not just inspired by the Ideal film; he must have made his film version after close and repeated inspections of it, through the scripting phase and possibly beyond. Clearly Lubitsch was as familiar with the Ideal film as with the Wilde play script. One suspects that he must have rather enjoyed the idea of improving on an Ideal film. And to press a point, the name of the film's American distributor – Triangle – was humorously pertinent as well.

One thing is certain: Ernst Lubitsch was in complete control of the making of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. After his stormy relationship with Mary Pickford on his first American production, *Rosita* (1923), he was determined to retain unquestioned authority. When he entered into an agreement on 7 August 1923 with Warner Brothers (a co-partnership involving the four brothers – Harry M., Albert, Jack L., and Samuel L. Warner) for the production of six features photoplays, it was agreed that he 'shall have the sole, complete and absolute charge of the production of each such photoplay, except in all matters involving the expenditure of money'.<sup>41</sup> Contractually, Warner Brothers was to choose the story, though Lubitsch had right of reasonable refusal and in practice exercised total control over story selection.<sup>42</sup> Lest there be any question of his authority, the contract reiterated that

Warner agrees and it is the essence of this agreement that from the time of the purchase of the work upon which such photoplay shall be based until the completion of the working print by Lubitsch and delivery thereof to Warner, there shall be no interference of any kind whatsoever from any source, with Lubitsch, with respect to any matter or thing connected with the production, direction, cutting and final completion of such photoplays. Warner agrees to in every way aid and facilitate Lubitsch and render all aid and assistance to him to enable him to complete each such photoplay within the respective periods hereinafter in this contract specified.<sup>43</sup>

Lubitsch contracted to make two pictures a year at a salary of \$60,000 per picture; he was also paid 'one-third (1/3) of the net profits realized by Warner from each of said photoplays' with half his salary treated as an advance against royalties.

*Lady Windermere's Fan* was Lubitsch's fourth film for Warner Brothers, and he would make only one more before terminating his contract with the company. Warner Brothers was making inquiries about the rights to Wilde's play by the beginning of May 1925. As they quickly realized, the US copyright for *Lady Windermere's Fan* had expired on 12 September 1921, when it was not renewed.<sup>44</sup> Subsequent performances in the United States were in the public domain (including Broadway revivals and various amateur theatrics). Of course, Warner Brothers needed worldwide motion-picture rights for international distribution, but it also needed to control whatever remaining rights existed to discourage rivals from making a quick rip-off. Warners also needed to make sure the Ideal film would not find its way back onto the market. When announcing *Lady Windermere's Fan* as Lubitsch's forthcoming production in June 1925, the press releases maintained:

It was only after great difficulties that the Warners succeed in procuring the screen rights to this masterpiece, for the executors of Oscar Wilde's estate were violently opposed to a transfer of the play to the films. Consent was obtained only when the executors learned that 'Lady Windermere's Fan'

would be placed in the hands of Ernst Lubitsch, whose 'The Marriage Circle' had been highly acclaimed in London as well as throughout the United States.<sup>45</sup>

Such a statement was not only premature, it was deceptive – concealing the existence of the original British version. Warners had reached an understanding to purchase the rights to the play for £3,000 with the Ideal Film Company by July 1925, though the actual execution of the contract proved convoluted.<sup>46</sup> Ideal's film rights to *Lady Windermere's Fan* were about to expire, and the company had to acquire additional movie rights from Wilde's son, Vyvyan Beresford Holland (for £1,080), who had regained the rights to the play from George Alexander. Contrary to Warner Brothers publicity to the trade, this was not handled directly but through Ideal, with money the overriding issue. Ideal Films executed its contract with Holland on 27 September 1925 and with Warner Brothers on the following day.

In Warner Brothers' announcement entitled '40 Warner Bros. Classics of the Screen Season of 1925–1926,' published in late July 1925, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was mentioned but there was no cast attached.<sup>47</sup> Irene Rich, one of Warner's top stars, was assigned the role of Mrs. Eryllyn – a reinvention or reversal of her established screen persona. According to company publicity, "she is the most truly feminine of stars, representing the highest type of American womanhood."<sup>48</sup> But Lubitsch had her play an amoral, somewhat dissolute European sophisticate. According to *Hollywood News* of 22 April 1925, 'Irene long ago won the title of "the screen's most neglected wife," because she is constantly being placed in the parts of wives whose husbands desert or ignore them'.<sup>49</sup> Now it was Rich's character who had left her husband. The casting of Ronald Colman as Lord Darlington involved a similar shift. From playing the suave hero, Colman now played the 'sweet, sweet thing,' the other man who was 'Naughty, O yes – but nice'.<sup>50</sup> In fact, Colman replaced Clive Brook, who left after the first few days of shooting.<sup>51</sup> These kinds of casting decisions worked against type

and gave the characters greater complexity (and helped the actors escape from their professional prisons of stereotypic roles).

Officially the film went into production as the ink was still drying on the rights contract.<sup>52</sup> Given the timing of these announcements, we can only assume Warners had been forced to start even before the rights were officially acquired due to logistical constraints. All but the racetrack scenes were completed by September 29th when the cast and crew left Los Angeles for Toronto where they spent several days at the Woodbine race track.<sup>53</sup> By mid-October, Lubitsch and Rich were in New York City as she prepared for her October 17th departure for Europe.<sup>54</sup> Before she left, they apparently did a few retakes at the old Vitagraph studio in Brooklyn.<sup>55</sup>

As part of its agreement with Warner Brothers, Ideal Films granted Warner 'world motion picture rights' and the 'right to make any alterations in theme, story or title it may desire'.<sup>56</sup> It also agreed to 'deliver to Warner by November 1, 1925, all existing positive prints of a motion picture, based on "Lady Windemere's [sic] Fan," made by it'.<sup>57</sup> The removal of an earlier film version from the market place had already become common practice; and this suppression also prevented critics from learning that Lubitsch was heavily indebted to the earlier adaptation for many things, including his 'daring' and 'brilliant' refusal to use Wilde's epigrams. As one favourably disposed critic remarked, 'there are amazingly few sub-titles in the film, and not one of them is epigrammatic. Who but Lubitsch would have had sense enough to know that Oscar Wilde's lines were meant to be spoken on the stage and not printed on the screen!'<sup>58</sup> The answer to that last question is simple: Benedict James and Fred Paul. Might such a revelation have tarnished Lubitsch's reputation? We cannot know how he would have responded to the revelation of a British antecedent, although he could have easily written another article on the art of the remake and the necessary role of deception in his film's stylistic structure.

*Lady Windermere's Fan* had its world premiere (or was it only the world preview?) on December 1, 1925 at the Casa Lopez in New York City.<sup>59</sup> The

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- Colouring the Lily: advertisement for the US release of Lubitsch's film.

event was carried live on radio WMCA, including the introduction of Irene Rich (who was hosting the premiere) and other movie stars as well as music from Vincent Lopez's orchestra. The film then began its 'official release' (with an official world premiere also hosted by Irene Rich) at Warners' Theatre in New York City on December 26th. The picture was introduced by a 'particularly artistic prologue,' entitled 'The Spirit of the Fan,' conceived by Lina Basquette, formerly premiere danseuse of the Ziegfeld Follies:

When the curtain rises a huge fan is seen on the stage. As this opens, there emerges from each of its panels a dance, until seven, recruited from

Broadway shows, appear. The girls, garbed in flimsy costumes, execute an attractive dance.<sup>60</sup>

Evoking Salomé's dance of the seven veils, the prologue linked the fan to the veil and perhaps linked Lubitsch's film to Alla Nazimova's recent adaptation of another Wilde play, *Salomé*.

New York reviews for *Lady Windermere's Fan* were generally very enthusiastic. According to the *New York American*,

Warner Brothers latest production, now playing in their theatres, is brilliant with little darting shafts of wit, almost as piercing as the words of Oscar Wilde.

... Lubitsch has taken Wilde's play and made it his

own. And he has done this not by changing story characters, but by bringing them to life in an entirely different form of expression. What subtitles he uses seem almost unnecessary. The film's the thing with Lubitsch.

All evening we tingled with delight at the delicacy, the originality, the precision of the directing. The picture is filled with new ideas. . . . Irene Rich, May McAvoy, and Bert Lytell . . . were touched by Lubitsch's magic.<sup>61</sup>

Considering it 'unquestionably one of the directorial triumphs of the year,' the *New York Sun* declared, 'Here is a cinema with a style, with an air. It is high comedy-drama directed in the quiet, aristocratic vein which runs only through Lubitsch.'<sup>62</sup> Critical enthusiasm was matched by heavy initial attendance. *Moving Picture World* reported that despite bitterly cold weather, 'the crowd was so large as to make the attendance record for the two consecutive days the greatest on record'.<sup>63</sup>

### The Public Comedy of Adaptation

Let us begin with what is not hidden: Lubitsch's film itself. With its dazzling elegance and visual wit, Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* could be appreciated simply as a sophisticated film comedy. For most moviegoers, the film was the first time that they encountered any version of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Some audience members had not even known of the play's existence until they saw the film. This was the nature of a mass entertainment form such as motion pictures: the film had to be intelligible and attractive to audiences that possessed different degrees and kinds of intertextual knowledge. Many moviegoers would appreciate the film within established movie conventions rather than in relationship to the play. Of course, some of Lubitsch's American silent films such as *The Marriage Circle* (1924), based on Lothar Schmidt's *Nur ein Traum* (Only a Dream, 1909), were adaptations of plays that were essentially unknown in North America. Lubitsch may have found his reworking of that play to be rewarding in and of itself, but such rewards were largely

hidden from the film's spectators. A scholar may discover these deft engagements with the antecedent text someday, but Lubitsch clearly could not expect American audiences to be familiar with the original play.

As Lubitsch's newspaper article quoted above clearly indicates, the director wanted moviegoers to approach his version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* not as a self-sufficient text but in relation to the play itself. Advertisements for the film reinforced this expectation. As *Exhibitor's Herald* declared,

Thirty years ago, Broadway was riding in hansom cabs to gasp and thrill at Oscar Wilde's play, 'Lady Windermere's Fan.' It was clever. It was scintillating. It was daring.

Now LUBITSCH has given it new life. He brings it scintillating, sparkling, fascinating, to the screen. He has painted the lily. He has coloured Oscar Wilde's genius with LUBITSCH screen mastery.

You will find 'Lady Windermere's Fan' produced and directed in the LUBITSCH way; and acted by a cast of stars in the LUBITSCH way.<sup>64</sup>

Or, as another advertisement in the daily press put it, 'Ernst Lubitsch's master picture from Oscar Wilde's master drama'.<sup>65</sup>

Critics, perhaps taking their cues from such publicity, consistently noted the importance of seeing Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* in relation to Wilde's play. As Harriette Underhill wrote for the *New York Herald Tribune*, 'Although we never saw the Oscar Wilde play save as done by the old Proctor Stock Company, on 125th Street, it seems to us that the screen play improves on the original'.<sup>66</sup> Mae Tinée of the *Chicago Tribune* asserted, 'This picture is a smooth and finished product that, though modernized, clings as closely as one could reasonably expect to the original play by Oscar Wilde'.<sup>67</sup> Both these comments, though favourable to Lubitsch's effort, did not really understand what he sought to achieve in emphasizing the play as an intertext. *New York Times* critic Mordaunt Hall, in contrast, was less patient and more revealing of his own critical blinders. He was deeply disappointed by the film, noting that

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Lubitsch's screen translation of Oscar Wilde's play . . . shrinks in importance beside the original effort, for even though it is endowed with astute direction it lacks the Wildean wit and satire. Those who have seen or read the play will be disappointed in the pictorial results.<sup>68</sup>

In comparing the film to the play script, Hall found that their many differences created a type of creative interference that made it difficult for him to enjoy the film. He longed for a transparent rendering of the play, one in which the filmmaker's creative input was in the opening up of the play and the rendering of its text in cinematic form.

We might conclude that Underhill and Tinée did not fully understand the interpretive task that Lubitsch asked of moviegoers, while Hall simply rejected it. These critics failed to adequately appreciate the film because they lacked either sufficient familiarity with the play or the imagination and playfulness needed for proper interpretation. Lubitsch's picture was not a dutiful engagement with a classic. It was neither Wilde for beginners nor a respectful revival that sought a mass audience while making necessary if always more or less unfortunate commercial compromises. The film was meant to be seen in another register, as the play's equal and even rival. It went beyond a more or less faithful rendering to become something else – something that stood in relationship to the play as the play now stood in relationship to it. It was the play's visual doppelgänger.

A surprising number of critics recognized this equality as they compared the visual wit of Lubitsch's film with Wilde's play and its verbal wit, savouring the difference. As one *Los Angeles Times* critic remarked,

Nothing more daring from a technical standpoint could be imagined than an attempt to picturize a play like "Lady Windermere's Fan." Primarily Wilde plays are works not of plot and action, but of brilliant and fascinating dialogue. The plot is incidental and to a degree negligible. The dialogue is filled with epigrams that have retained their magnetic sparkle even today, though the plays themselves were written before the close of the

Victorian era.

In considering the Lubitsch treatment of 'Lady Windermere's Fan,' I know of nothing more to be desired than a scanning at least of the written version in advance of seeing the production. Instead of detracting, as is usually the case with film versions of stage plays, this procedure will probably enhance the pleasure of the picture.<sup>69</sup>

Robert E. Sherwood echoed these sentiments, asserting that 'it is actually the most nearly perfect example of intelligent direction that the motion picture has offered'.<sup>70</sup> As Sherwood explained,

In transplanting 'Lady Windermere's Fan' to the screen, any director but Lubitsch would have loaded the picture with sub-titles culled from dialogue of the play. But Lubitsch knew better. He realized two important facts: first, that a motion picture should be pictorial, rather than verbal, and second, that Wilde's epigrams are now hackneyed and stale, having been used over and over again in various ways by less gifted writers.

So Lubitsch filtered Wilde's manuscript through his own exceptionally sensitive mind, and then formed the resultant precipitation into the continuity for his picture.<sup>71</sup>

A reviewer for the *National Board of Review Magazine* likewise applauded Lubitsch's reconceptualization of the play:

adhering closely to the structure of the original, this picturization of *Lady Windermere's Fan* avoids the Wildian cleverness, supplanting it with the Lubitsch ingenuity, at once recognizable from its manner of glowing narrative, rich, imaginative and perfectly translated in the language of the screen.<sup>72</sup>

Lubitsch pursued his principles of adaptation to their breaking point, offering a theory of cinema's expressive potential in contrast to that of the spoken drama (or published text), which Wilde's stage play had come to represent. He displayed

a thorough understanding of what the screen should and can do as distinguished from what it should not and cannot do. And for the additional reason that when it does this, it is doing what is beyond the

**power of the written word in books and the spoken word on the stage.<sup>73</sup>**

For sophisticated audiences knowledgeable about both stage and screen aspects of theatrical culture, Lubitsch's film achieved much of its depth and brilliance through its comic aggression toward the play. A faithful realization on some levels (the characters as performed by Rich, Colman and some others are certainly consistent with Wilde's play), the movie is transgressive on most others. This aggression toward the play becomes a comic duel of sorts, with Lubitsch producing a peculiarly Bergsonian comedy – a comedy of adaptation. In his systematic refusal to use Wilde's epigrams and his substitution of them, just as systematically, with his visual wit, the filmmaker creates 'the vision of one stubborn force, counteracted by another, equally pertinacious'.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, Lubitsch's film alternates between fidelity to the play's essence and a systematic refusal of that essence – its epigrams. The result is a comic contradiction – 'a duel between two opposing feelings' – an oscillation that appears entirely mechanical.<sup>75</sup>

Lubitsch countered verbal wit with visual wit. But these were not merely surface equivalents (or rivals). Their affinities lie much deeper. Wilde's dialogue and epigrams offer an acerbic judgment about society and how it operates, its rules and hypocrisies. Their witty or comic form concealed Wilde's aggression, his pointed way of undercutting convention wisdom. As Freud might have observed, these jokes were not innocent but hostile. Although their wit enabled audiences to stay on the surface, 'only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them'.<sup>76</sup> As Mrs. Erlynne observes about Lord Augustus in Act III, he possessed 'a great deal of good. Fortunately it is all on the surface. Just where good qualities should be.' One could say much the same of Lubitsch's visual wit: it dazzles with its surface brilliance. And yet just below that surface his picture maintains critical bite. Lubitsch offers a visual equivalent to the cruel and endless (albeit endlessly witty) judgments of

people that run through the play. These are evident in the film's many point-of-view structures and careful framings. Particularly at the racetrack, people are looking at Mrs. Erlynne, searching out every potential fault and judging her. The power of this judgment is shown repeatedly in Lubitsch's three crowd scenes: the way the men watch her at the racetrack, swarm around her at Lady Windermere's party, and then turn away from her at Lord Darlington's apartments. This reflexive rush to judge is also evident when Lord Augustus becomes suspicious of the cigar in Mrs. Erlynne's ashtray – which turns out to be one left by him rather than by an imagined rival. This sense of people as social puppets who move according to the dictates of society is evident in the oversized sets, which dwarf the actors and turn their characters into doll-like figures. Aided by the spare décor and dialogue, this cinematic world is largely emptied of human connection and empathy.

As an adaptation, Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* often appears to be transgressive, contradictory and even perverse. The filmmaker adapted a brilliant play but refused to use its language. In this respect Lubitsch took a very different tack from the respectful and faithful adaptation of another Wilde play that had recently been completed by prominent émigrés in Hollywood: Alla Nazimova's *Salomé* (1923). Nazimova's rigorous example of filmed theatre excerpts dialogue from Wilde's *Salomé* (1892/1896) for its intertitles. Its mise en scene is highly theatrical, with a campy, gay sensibility, and its two adjoining sets were inspired by Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for the published play text.<sup>77</sup> Respectful of the text and the play's surface, Nazimova's adaptation is the antithesis of Lubitsch's undertaking. *Salomé* however is not a comedy, and it would be wrong to compare it with Lubitsch's comedy drama and feel compelled to endorse Lubitsch and condemn Nazimova. Lubitsch must have known Nazimova's film quite well and at least respected it, since he used Nazimova's cameraman – Charles van Enger – on this and previous Warner Brothers pictures. Both pictures express different kinds of stage-screen equivalents. Lubitsch's film,

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however, works comically on two levels. First its visual wit functions as an equivalent to the Wilde's spoken words. Second, because the film and play are radical equivalents, Lubitsch also doubles his own wit (and arguably redoubles and revives Wilde's) by staging a comic duel. The challenge, as Lubitsch reminded his readers, is to look at what is underneath.

### Another Lubitsch Triangle: Film, Painting, Theatre

So far I have examined the process of adaptation and intertextual engagement that has been often noted by admirers of the film.<sup>78</sup> Now I want to illuminate the film's underlying structure in a way that has hitherto been overlooked by exploring what has remained hidden. Oscillating between remake and adaptation, Lubitsch's picture creates a triangle (each variant of *Lady Windermere's Fan* serving as a vertex), in which the secret relationship between his work and the Ideal film is not only as crucial as its relationship to the play, but arguably closer to the filmmaker's heart. And yet to better understand the process of annexation and treatment, we must temporarily shift perspectives and follow the urging of Brigitte Peucker not to dwell too narrowly on the issue of adaptation but rather look at 'the problematic space that film occupies between the established arts of painting and literature'. For, as she suggests, 'an agonistic dynamic governs the relation of film to these sister arts, as cinema struggles for self-legitimization through the appropriation, revision, and subversion of literary and painterly tropes.'<sup>79</sup>

*Design for Living* (1933) is the comic twin of Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan*: a philosophical and historical reconsideration of cinema's potential in the sound era. Here again Lubitsch provides us with a film that radically engages and reworks a stage play – this time Noel Coward's comedy of the same name, first staged at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York, where it opened on January 24, 1933, while Lubitsch's film version was out by the end of the year. This is not the place to dwell on this process of adaptation, which William Paul has

written about so perceptively in *Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy*,<sup>80</sup> but there is one statement or refusal that seems crucial for our understanding. In Coward's play, a journalist asks the playwright, 'Do you believe the talkies will kill the theatre?' He responds, 'No, I think they'll kill the talkies'.<sup>81</sup> For Coward, theatre and film exist in separate, unrelated worlds, and film is so crass a form that it will destroy itself. Lubitsch countered this wishful thinking by quite literally killing the play, or at least its words, leaving virtually none of the playwright's dialogue intact. Coward named his playwright 'Leo', but Lubitsch gleefully dethrones the theatre's lion king, turning him into plain old Tom. If Lubitsch puts Coward's playwright in his place, he also expresses his own more complex and subtle feelings on film's relationship to theatre – and to painting – starting with a scene that is essentially a silent film. Rather than Coward's dismissive one liner, Lubitsch devotes his entire film to the question of the film's relationship to theatre. The duel that Coward quickly dismisses (the movies won't kill the theatre, they will kill themselves instead), Lubitsch recognizes as a triangle.

In Lubitsch's *Design for Living*, the relationship among the arts is suggested by the interplay between the film's three romantic leads. The film opens as Tom (Frederick March) and George (Gary Cooper) are seated next to each other in a European-style railway carriage, sound asleep. Gilda (Miriam Hopkins) enters and sits down opposite the two. Unaware of her presence and seeking greater comfort, they put their feet up on her seat, trapping her in the car and confining her to a particular portion of the bench. She responds by putting her feet on their seat, dividing the men. They remain asleep; and without their knowledge, she begins to draw them. Considered retrospectively by the spectator, this proves an extraordinarily rich scene. George (Cooper) is a painter in Paris, still trying to find his place in the art world. Tom is a writer, an as yet unproduced playwright. Gilda (whose first name shares the same first letter with George, suggesting their affinity) is a commercial artist whose work displays a bawdy sense of humour. In her succession of sketches,

Napoleon is gradually undressed until he is reduced to his underwear and she must, for decency and purposes of commerce stop.<sup>82</sup> Though her drawings of Napoleon are a series of successive images and so like cinema, she finds it much more difficult to capture George's frequently changing expressions. She must resort to eraser several times as he smiles and then smirks. While she struggles to deal with her subject, the motion picture camera captures his shifting mood with the greatest of ease (both work in medium close up).

Sabine Hake has noted that after Lubitsch retired from acting, a blonde woman often functions as his alter ego in his own films.<sup>83</sup> Certainly this seems true in *Design for Living*, where Gilda serves as a stand-in for the filmmaker. *Design for Living* offers an intriguing allegory, exploring film's relationship to image and word, and the motion picture industry's relationship to painting/visual arts and drama/live theatre. As we have seen, the story begins with the two established arts only gradually becoming aware of her (the cinema's) presence. Her short sequence of drawings is not unlike those brief films made by the American Mutoscope & Biograph Company in the late 1890s, in which women frequently undress to their underwear. Painter and playwright find her comic sketches of Napoleon charming, but when they see how she has appropriated *their* likeness and so annexed their identities, they become visibly annoyed and try to give her a lesson in etiquette, reproductive accuracy, and art. With unexpected brashness, she turns the tables: George's canvases are ridiculed as adolescent, while Tom's plays are soon dismissed as rubbish. The cinema displays a self-confidence that might recall the Lubitsch persona of *Pinkus's Shoe Palace* (1916).

The allegorical interactions between the three principal characters – and Gilda's employer, Max Plunkett, the head of an advertising firm – are sustained and rich, covering the entire history of film's relationship to image making and writing, up to the moment that *Design for Living* was made (1933). As the trio begin to co-habit, Gilda describes herself as the mother of the arts and takes both painter and the playwright under her

wing. To keep this triangle from falling apart as she whips their art into shape, they have a 'gentlemen's agreement' and renounce sex. Ultimately the playwright prospers in the London theatre, and she begins an intense sexual relationship with the painter. Film aligns with the visual arts; and the wordsmith is left on the outside – a proper mapping of film in the silent period where film theorists such as Hugo Munsterberg and Rudolph Arnheim saw intertitles as an appendage to film's essence and, as we have seen, Lubitsch understood film as fundamentally visual.<sup>84</sup> At the very height of George's success as a painter – paralleling cinema's achievements of the mid to late 1920s – Gilda leaves George for Tom. Does this not correspond to the moment when talking pictures arrived? George is apparently left behind, but really Gilda runs off and marries Max Plunkett instead: film thus abandons both visual art (image) and theatrical art (words) and aligns itself with money making. It is only when George and Tom reconcile and return to Gilda that she can leave behind crass commercialism and embrace both the verbal *and* visual arts. This is how we might characterize *Design for Living*: a film that combines the art of framing, of silence, of cutting – the achievements of the silent period – with brilliant dialogue, the strengths of verbal theatre. This now happy triangle – with the advertising executive in complacent exile – may be utopian, but Lubitsch enjoyed carte blanche in Hollywood of this period. His scripts might violate the production code, but even MPPDA administrators were confident that his 'touch' would transform the unacceptable into the acceptable.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, the film's still tentative conclusion can be said to anticipate Lubitsch's tenure as head of production at Paramount Pictures. There was every reason why Lubitsch might believe that a new era in cinema's development was beginning.

Read along a particular trajectory, *Design for Living* offers Lubitsch's personal but by no means eccentric version of cinema history up to 1933: the point at which the transition to sound has been completed and filmmakers have begun to synthesize techniques of the silent era with the

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technological possibilities and constraints of sound. *Design for Living* is also Lubitsch's own account of his 'design for working' and a history of his relationship to cinema. Eight years earlier, *Lady Windermere's Fan* was made at a moment when Lubitsch felt his relationship to the visual arts was most intense. And yet the mid-1920s was the very period that he was most frequently adapting theatrical works, creating a tension, a comic contradiction, or a triangle. The theatre-film relationship is more obvious, declared in advertisements and a film's opening credits, but for Lubitsch cinema's visual or painterly quality is often closer to his heart. Of course, as Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs emphasise, the theatre has a strong pictorial tradition, out of which Lubitsch came via Max Reinhardt.<sup>86</sup> Even theatre may be caught between the words of the playwright and the pictorial potential of the stage. Not unlike Gilda, Lubitsch is caught between the visual artists (Benedict James and Fred Paul – and their silent film) and the playwright himself (Wilde). Like Gilda, he intended to whip them both into shape.

### That which is Secret, Hidden, and Unseen

Lubitsch's adaptation of *Lady Windermere's Fan* did not merely turn words into actions or what was spoken into what was seen. The filmmaker also took what could not be openly spoken – that Margaret Windermere was Mrs. Erlynne's daughter; that Lady Windermere visited Lord Darlington's apartments for amorous purposes – and showed how such secrets are concealed. Lord Windermere's cancelled cheques to Mrs. Erlynne are kept locked in a drawer, as is Mrs. Erlynne's portrait of her daughter. This emphasis on concealment is paired with a heavy emphasis on looking and repeated point-of-view structures. The film, like the play, is about what must be hidden from society's view. As *Lady Windermere's Fan* begins, Lady Windermere is the paragon of social virtue. Because of her intolerance, many things must be hidden. By the conclusion, she is hiding things from others.

If the Wilde play and Lubitsch film are about secrets, then it is hardly surprising that these

occur on various levels. Wilde 'borrowed,' stole, and plagiarized from different theatrical sources, including C. Haddon Chambers' *The Idler* (1891), G. R. Sims and Sydney Grundy's *The Glass of Fashion* (1883) and Victorien Sardou's *Odette* (1881).<sup>87</sup> While the derivative nature of the play's plot was frequently noted (though critics often evoked more distant relatives, such as Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal*), it was also glossed over because critics and theatregoers were focused on the witty surface of words. Likewise, moviegoers and movie critics seem not to have noticed Lubitsch's debt to the Ideal film, which had premiered in the United States just six years before. Not only was this effectively concealed by Warners, it was forgotten by critics and spectators, focused on both Lubitsch's visual wit and his comic duel with Wilde.

We might begin to explore the intertextual triangle that Lubitsch constructed through comparisons of the dialogue in all three works. The James-Paul film ignores Wilde's epigrams, using his more mundane dialogue only rarely and even then loosely or in attenuated form. Their 1916 adaptation contains only one substantive exception: the first three title cards that appear before the enacted drama begins. The first two cards are drawn from the play's dialogue, spoken by Lady Windermere as one continuous statement to her husband, near the final act of the play (Act IV):

Titlecard 1: There is the same world for all of us – and good and evil, sin and innocence, go through it hand in hand.

Titlecard 2: To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely, is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice.

Oscar Wilde

The third title card is taken from a statement made by Lord Windermere to his wife near the end of Act I, as he asks her to invite Mrs. Erlynne to their party that evening.

Titlecard 3: Mrs. Erlynne was once honoured, loved, respected, she was well born, she had position—she lost everything—threw it away if you like.

Both quotations are extracted from the play, though severed from the individuals who speak these lines and the dramatic context in which they appear. The first two are ascribed to Wilde, as if he was now acting as the film's omniscient narrator. As commentary, these intertitles offer up what could be understood as the film's (and so the play's) moral statement, placed outside the text to evoke how Wilde had himself 'lost everything'. The third title card is used as a transition from the moralizing opening statement to the body of the Ideal film.

Lubitsch took James-Paul's refusal of Wilde's epigrammatic wit to its ultimate conclusion: not only avoiding epigrams in the body of the film but their use as introductory quotations (they were also banned from advertising). This formed a triangle of difference. There is the 'obvious' or faithful adaptation (à la Nazimova), retaining Wilde's epigrams in distilled form, which interestingly does not exist. James and Paul rejected this approach but then hesitated and took a modest step backwards: their opening titles were perhaps done for commercial considerations, to appease literate viewers and authenticate the film's ties to its source. Lubitsch offers a third, more radical solution by rejecting such dialogue altogether, one in keeping with his (and many of his contemporaries') theories of the cinema's particularity.

Lubitsch's treatment of epigrams is symptomatic of a triangle of difference that can only be understood through a sustained exploration of his film's relationship to the two other artworks. Lubitsch, for example, appropriated and reconfigured the larger narrative components of the Ideal film as well as the play. In a move that characterizes most cinematic adaptations of plays, Paul and James took elements of the backstory in the play script and used this information to introduce scenes occurring prior to the time when the play begins. Such 'opening up' of a play has been a fundamental, time-honoured strategy in the process of play-to-screen adaptation, at least since Edwin S. Porter turned the one-act play *No. 973* into *The Ex-Convict* (1904), a film with eight different scenes. The 1916 version of *Lady*

*Windermere's Fan* likewise introduces numerous locations and scenes that are not present in the four-act, three-set play. As Jon Burrows notes, it is 'not until one-third of the film's running time has passed that the narrative actually reaches the first scene of the source text'.<sup>88</sup> The film begins, not with Lord Darlington's meeting with Lady Windermere on the morning she turns twenty-one, but with Mrs. Erlynne's decision to relocate from her beloved Paris to London, so as to be closer to her daughter at a moment when she fears for her vulnerability. Here are the film's first fourteen scenes.



- A triangular relationship?

**Scene 1** begins in Mrs. Erlynne's Paris boudoir as she awakes. Mrs. Erlynne opens her mail – some bills and a journal with an article about Lady Windermere's forthcoming birthday celebration. She takes a locket out of the drawer, examines it, kisses it and compares the portrait to the photo of Lady Windermere in the journal. Title: 'My baby – My little Margaret – Lady Windermere! How the years have flown!' Mrs. Erlynne recalls her own misfortune at just this stage in her life; her past is made explicit as she reviews her diary from the time she was twenty-one. She then decides to return to England to be near her daughter.

**Scene 2** is introduced by the intertitle 'Next morning: The home of the Windermers where happiness reigns supreme.' Lord Windermere is in the morning room. Lady Windermere is in the adjoining porch area, picking flowers. He calls

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her and she comes into the morning room. In the course of this scene, Windermere gives her the crucial fan, with her name on it, as a birthday present.

**Scene 3** is introduced by the intertitle 'To meet the notorious Mrs. Erlynne anywhere but in Paris arouses the curiosity of one of her old "flames".' Mrs. Erlynne arrives in a London hotel lobby, her appearance noted by a youthful rake who leaves without her recognizing him.

**Scene 4** is introduced by the intertitle 'The lives Mrs. Erlynne has the power to ruin.' It is set in the Windermere's home but a different room from scene 2, perhaps the drawing room. The entire family is present, including the Windermere's baby.

**Scene 5** is introduced by the intertitle: 'The favorite club of "Tuppy" Lorton, whose ardent love for Mrs. Erlynne is a joke of long standing among his fellow members.' Lord Augustus 'Tuppy' Lorton sits in the lounge area where the 'old flame' comes in and teases him about Mrs. Erlynne.

**Scene 6** begins as Mrs. Erlynne sits at a desk writing a letter. It reads:

Dear Lord Windermere –  
We have never met before but I am very desirous of an interview with you. You will find my reason for troubling you sufficient.  
Yours Sincerely,  
Margaret Erlynne

**Scene 7** returns to the club lounge (same as scene 5). A member tells Lord Windermere that Tuppy Lorton is off trying to find Mrs. Erlynne. Windermere asks, 'Who is Mrs. Erlynne?'

**Scene 8** is introduced by the intertitle: 'Familiar scenes revive bitter longings.' Mrs. Erlynne is in her apartment (same room as scene 6 but a more distant view), looking out the window. Title: 'If I could only see her – even at a distance.' Lorton then enters as if totally at home. He holds her hand.

**Scene 9** returns to the club (scenes 5 and 7). Windermere opens the letter from Margaret Erlynne, reads it, starts to tear it up but stops. He thinks and then goes off.

**Scene 10** returns to Mrs. Erlynne's apartment (same as scene 8). Lorton is still with Mrs. E. He shakes her hand and starts to leave.

**Scene 11** occurs in the hotel lobby (same as scene 3). As Lorton leaves he encounters Lord Windermere on his way up to see Mrs. Erlynne. Lorton is puzzled; 'I wonder what Windermere is doing here. But she'd explain – she can explain anything – Wonderful woman!'

**Scene 12** returns to Mrs. Erlynne's room (same as scene 10). Mrs. Erlynne looks out the window as Lord Windermere confronts her about the letter. She reveals her relationship to Lady W: 'I am Margaret's mother.' When he refuses to believe her, she shows him the small locket with her daughter's portrait and other documents. He denounces her: 'You have no right to claim her as your daughter. You left her, abandoned her when she was but a baby!' He then asks: 'You abandoned her for your lover who abandoned you in turn. What do you want with her now?' Mrs. E tells him, 'Nothing.' But he, Lord Windermere, is a rich man. He can help her financially. He agrees: 'I will help you on one condition – that you spare your daughter all knowledge of her mother.' He writes her a cheque, bows coolly and leaves. She picks up the cheque and looks at it.

**Scene 13** is introduced by the intertitle 'Windermere's generosity enables Mrs. Erlynne to live in her accustomed style.' In Mrs. Erlynne's new, more spacious apartments, Lorton is present. He asks her, 'Let me take you to the dog show and I'll promise not to propose to you again today.' They leave together.

**Scene 14** is introduced by the intertitle 'Where unexpected meetings are frequent.' Lorton and Mrs. Erlynne are at a dog show, passing by Lord and Lady Windermere.

These first fourteen scenes of this film essentially 'open up' the play. The scenes can be broken down into two basic temporal groupings. Scenes 1 to 12 occur quite closely together. Mrs. Erlynne leaves Paris, and the next day is her daughter's birthday, when she receives the fan from Lord Windermere. Scenes 3 to 12 are almost continuous, though the cross-cutting allows for substantial condensations of time. Scenes 13 and 14 are linked temporally but occur significantly later than the previous scenes – months have presumably passed.

It is possible to argue that the James-Paul film is itself 'Wilde-ish in spirit'. It pursues a sufficient number of reversals or inversions that it is hard to dismiss these as mere chance, or simple efforts to make a more credible film. Although these reversals are often clever, there is one important shift in the temporal organization of the storyline that creates problems. If none of these fourteen scenes occurs within the time frame of the play, Lord Windermere gives his wife the fan on her birthday in scene two of the Ideal film. In Wilde's play this presentation happens just before the first scene, which is to say if the time line had not been changed, after scene 14 in the Ideal film. Instead, Lady Windermere's birthday now occurs in the opening stages of the fourteen scene prologue, several months before the events surrounding the catastrophic party, which is the twenty-four hour time frame of the play. Perhaps this was another conscious reversal tied to differences between theatre and film. Or it may have been an effort to get rid of excessive coincidence: the coming of legal age on her birthday and the coming of psychic age in events surrounding the party are thus separated. This decision, however, has the unfortunate effect of undermining the temporal logic of the film in relation to the play.<sup>99</sup> The film makes light of her birthday, virtually throwing it away. For a spectator familiar with the play, this shift not only dispenses with Wilde's stylised narrative construction in favour of a doubtful realism, but is confusing in terms of temporal and narrative logic.

There are other problems with the opening fourteen scenes of the Ideal film in terms of narrative logic and, in some instances fidelity to the spirit of the play. First, Mrs. Erlynne is not now a woman of mystery. Everyone knows her – except apparently Lord and Lady Windermere! – and has known her for a long time. If this were the case, presumably people would also know that she is Lady Windermere's mother. In another reversal, Lord Augustus Lorton has been made into a comic buffoon who has been dying to marry Mrs. Erlynne for years, a man who constantly proposes and will take her as his wife under any circumstances. The high stakes riding

on Mrs. Erlynne's game of social poker in Wilde's play are lost in the Ideal film.

Lubitsch was not opposed to the opening up of a play. He did so in *Design for Living* as the trio meets on the train in the sequence discussed earlier. He did so for *Lady Windermere's Fan*, by annexing and reworking the Ideal film's opening fourteen scenes. In the process Lubitsch corrected the prologue's timeline and reaffirmed the Wilde-ish spirit of the play. The initial fourteen scenes of the James-Paul adaptation were reduced to approximately seven. The ratio of these is surely significant: Lubitsch playfully split the difference between the Ideal film and Wilde play, triangulating *his* film equidistant between the two.<sup>90</sup> In Lubitsch's version:

**Scene 1** unfolds in the morning room of Lord Windermere's house. This is an extensive scene, quite play-like in its development. Lady Margaret Windermere is laying out the seating arrangement for a dinner party – not for her birthday party, but a more modest affair. Lord Darlington comes to pay his respects to Lady Windermere. Meanwhile, Lord Windermere receives a letter from Edith Erlynne, which he reads:

Lord Windermere,  
This letter from a total stranger may surprise you, but it is important that you see me at once if you would avoid certain unpleasant disclosures.

Yours, EE

Lady Windermere, unnerved by Darlington's attention, sends him to her husband. Lord Windermere tries to conceal Edith Erlynne's letter, and Darlington – always a man of the world – assists him. Lord Windermere then departs and Darlington, concluding that Lord Windermere is having an affair, tells Margaret that he loves her.

Although the correspondence between the two films is attenuated at this point, this opening scene includes elements of scenes 2, 4 and 9 in the James-Paul film. However, this is not Lady W's birthday and she receives no fan: Lubitsch has this happen much later, consistent with the play. Nor do we see the Windermeres' baby – here or at any other point in the film. In

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fact, while (1) Wilde's play refers to the baby but keeps it off stage, and (2) the Ideal film also shows the baby, (3) Lubitsch has provided a *third* alternative, by eliminating the baby entirely. Certainly, the excessive symmetry (and coincidence) of *Lady Windermere* literally repeating the same mistake as her mother (down to the child and the day) is excessive. History need not repeat itself so literally: the parallels are already compelling without them becoming absurd. In this respect, Lubitsch and the Ideal filmmakers move in the same direction but make different choices. James and Paul try to reduce the play's excessive coincidence by disconnecting *Lady W's* birthday from the disastrous soirée attended by Mrs. Erylne. Lubitsch does the same by eliminating her baby. Moreover, Lubitsch's choice subtly updates the play (as his film does throughout), by situating the film closer to the 'comedy of remarriage,' which it resembles in its narrative trajectory.<sup>91</sup> (The comedy of remarriage only emerged as a popular genre after World War I; one of its conventions being that the couple never has children.)

Lubitsch retains the letter from the Ideal film, but uses it in a more restrained fashion. There the text of the letter is shown twice: first as Mrs. Erylne writes it (scene 6) and then as Lord Windermere reads it (scene 9). Lubitsch does not show her writing it; instead spectators encounter the letter only once, when they read it with Lord Windermere (scene 1). The letter, of course, has no place in the Wilde play. Here Lubitsch again situates his film between the 1916 adaptation and the play. However, by having Lord W read the missive at home rather than the club, the letter's awkward intrusion into the Windermere's domestic space foreshadows the even more disruptive appearance of its sender later in the film. Although not tied to the limited number of spaces and scenes of the play, Lubitsch does not proliferate his locations to the extent of the Ideal film. There are two locales that Wilde's play evokes but never shows: Mrs. Erylne's living quarters and the club. Both appear in the Ideal film, but only one – Mrs. Erylne apartment – is shown by Lubitsch.

Lubitsch also reduces, though he does not eliminate, the cross cutting between locations, which is a key cinematic device in the James-Paul version. Rather, from this opening scene, his film develops what is largely inchoate in the Paul picture: the point-of-view constructions that are now tied to concealment, dissembling and social games (again a triangle of difference in representational technique).<sup>92</sup> Because *Lady Windermere* is charmed by Lord Darlington, she knows she cannot sit him next to her. This would encourage him and be misconstrued. But the opposite choice – not to sit him next to her is already a small act of dissembling as well. She rather enjoys his company. Likewise, Lord Windermere, though never having met Mrs. Erylne and completely innocent of illicit intentions, tries to sneak her letter into his pocket without his wife becoming aware of its presence. And Mrs. Erylne has not only changed her last name (hardly unusual in a patriarchal society), but has concealed her identity with a different first name – Edith – as well. Here again the Lubitsch film differs from the James-Paul one and from the play. In the play, Mrs. Erylne only reveals her first name – Margaret – in the final act, and it comes as a surprise (but not a revelation) to her daughter, who shares the same name. In the Ideal film, Mrs. Erylne uses this first name throughout, expressing no concern for what her first name might reveal. Lubitsch, in contrast, assigns her a different first name in the prologue, which emphasizes her mystery, and the extremes to which she has gone to conceal her past. Only in the end does she divulge her real name as Margaret. Here once again we have a third choice, one that is consistent with but more radical than Wilde's, and moves in the opposite direction from the Ideal film. Clearly Lubitsch has insisted on the centrality of the secret – of things being hidden, which is largely lost in the Ideal film. Thus as Lubitsch's picture begins, all three of the principal characters are hiding something (and in certain respects so is the fourth – Darlington).

Despite important differences between the two films, Lubitsch retained many key elements that originated with the Ideal picture, such as

Mrs. Erlynne's letter. Difference, of course, depends on underlying similarities. Lubitsch appropriates Ideal's opening up of the stage play, but transforms it through treatment. Yet this transformation moves his film back toward Wilde: triangulation is manifest in its spatial-temporal articulations. Consistent with the play, the Lubitsch film opens in the Windermere home, with the focus on the Windermeres and their household into which Mrs. Erlynne is interjected (through her letter). Spatially, though not temporally, it begins where the play begins. The Ideal film begins earlier in time and in a quite different locale. It follows Mrs. Erlynne's trajectory, from Paris to London, then into the Windermere mansion. Temporally, if not spatially, Lubitsch starts at a point in time that is closer to the James-Paul film than the Wilde play. Here again Lubitsch situates himself between Wilde and Paul, for he significantly expands the role of Mrs. Erlynne compared to the play, though not quite to the extent of James and Paul. This expansion becomes evident in the second scene of Lubitsch's picture, which corresponds very closely to scene 12 in the Ideal film, though there are also some transpositions from the opening scene.

**Scene 2** is introduced by the title 'After a life of adventure abroad, Mrs. Erlynne had drifted to London – her social standing a thing of the past.' In her London apartment, Mrs. Erlynne looks at a picture of her daughter Margaret in a magazine. She tears it out and stands it up on her desk. Lord W. enters and they shake hands. He confronts her with the letter. She claims Margaret as her daughter and when challenged offers him various proofs. Lord W. tells her 'She worships her dead mother. The truth would kill her.' It is at this point that her maid hands an unpaid bill to Mrs. Erlynne. Lord W writes her a cheque, initially for £500, but when she sighs in a worldly way, he adds a 1 before it to make it £1500. Mrs. Erlynne is pleased. He looks at the photo of his wife/her daughter on the desk. She offers it to him. He starts to take it and then gives it back. She puts it in a drawer and locks the drawer.

There are important differences between Lubitsch's second scene and the 1916 adaptation. In that earlier version Lord Windermere refuses to shake Mrs. Erlynne's hand. But why should Lord W offend or slight someone who has done nothing yet to harm him? Lubitsch's handshake seems more appropriate, more calculated and nuanced. Lubitsch thus reverses the action of the James-Paul film. Again, in response to Lord Windermere's queries, Mrs. Erlynne responds, 'I am Margaret's mother' in the 1916 version and 'I am the mother of your wife' in the 1925 version. Although we might be immediately struck by the similarities of these statements, Lubitsch's variant offers a subtle and significant difference, one that clearly lays out the three sides of the triangle.

Lubitsch had only recently complained that 'a photoplay today is often nothing else but the narration of a story told in subtitles and interrupted by a series of moving pictures.'<sup>93</sup> He wanted

the scenarist to invent little pieces of business that are so characteristic and give so deep an insight into his creatures, that their personalities clearly and organically unfold before the eyes of the audience so that the latter feel that the actions of these people are contingent upon their characters, that there exists some kind of logical fate, and that nothing is left to mere accident or coincidence of irrelative happenings.<sup>94</sup>

These were goals he rigorously pursued in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. In this second scene, both Lord Windermere's agreement to support Mrs. Erlynne and the scale of his support are shown visually rather than through subtitles. Moreover, the director's choice of actions are more logical, consistent and perceptive than those offered by Fred Paul. And yet, as already suggested, for those few cognoscenti (Lubitsch and who else besides us?), his different choices also retain a game-like quality. Lubitsch's brilliance lies in his ability to pursue these dual goals, which would seem to be at odds with each other, systematically and simultaneously. This is particularly evident in this first section of his film,

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where the relationship between the two films (the hidden duel) once recognized, is strongly felt. Moreover, once again, Lubitsch shows visually the act of concealment: the magazine illustration of her daughter that Mrs. Erlynne will keep locked in the drawer. The relationship that is closest to her heart cannot be revealed: she cannot call Lady Windermere 'daughter'.

Lubitsch's reworking of the James-Paul film is further evidenced in his picture's third scene.

**Scene 3a** begins with a transitional title worth noting in Lubitsch's film: 'Thanks to Windermere's cheques, Mrs. Erlynne lived in an extravagant style, not accepted by society but the subject of its gossip.' (This reworks a title at the beginning of scene 13 in the 1916 version: 'Windermere's generosity enables Mrs. Erlynne to live in her accustomed style.') This is the first of nine intertitles, which are organized in three groups of three. The first three are descriptive, introducing and commenting on different characters: Mrs. Erlynne, Lord Augustus Lorton ('London's most eligible bachelor'), and finally the three gossips (the Duchess of Berwick, Lady Plymdale, and Mrs. Cowper-Cowper). This scene takes place at the racetrack. Mrs. Erlynne is the subject of endless looks. She is surrounded by a sea of men who look at her one at a time. She moves and the male heads follow her. Many look at her through binoculars, though she is only able to look back using a monocle. The Duchess of Berwick and her spinster friends examine her ruthlessly for any sign of age – and find some greying hair. The imbalance of power relations is made clear through these looking relations. There is also a circuit of looks. When Mrs. E tries to catch a glimpse of her daughter, Lord Darlington thinks she is looking at Lord Windermere, confirming his suspicion that they are having an affair. Lord Lorton, however, thinks Mrs. Erlynne is looking at him. Eventually Lorton leaves and it turns out that Mrs. E has left as well. While others watch the race, the six in the Windermere's box focus on their race cards.

**Scene 3b** unfolds along the exterior wall of the race track. There are numerous advertising signs. Using a moving matte, Lord Lorton is

shown walking behind Mrs. Erlynne. He overtakes her and they meet.

It is no exaggeration to say that Scene 3 is one of the most brilliant in cinema. It is also a scene that, in the Wilde tradition, was not merely invented but has an immediate antecedent in the dog show scene of the British adaptation. In the Ideal film, Lord Lorton takes Mrs. Erlynne to the dog show. A lady looks after them with eyeglasses. People look at, and we are shown, numerous dogs in medium close-ups. The principal characters come with their dogs: Lady Windermere with a Springer, Mrs. Erlynne with a white terrier. Lubitsch, of course, does not waste his time (or ours) merely on animals. This scene may start off with people looking at the horses, but soon all eyes are on Mrs. Erlynne. They look at her out of curiosity, judging her as if she were a fine or rare animal; in short, the looks in the earlier version are redistributed from many show dogs to one woman. Although James and Paul provide a circuit of looks, Lubitsch understands the true potential of this scene and so redirects and develops the point of view structures.

Looking, spying, intruding, judging are the heart of this scene. The Duchess of Berwick triumphantly discovers a few strands of grey hair that Mrs. Erlynne failed to conceal. In a trio of lines, she first tells her two fellow gossips, 'She is getting grey . . .', and they are delighted. She then tells Lady Windermere, 'She is quite grey'. Lady W politely nods but is uninterested. Finally she tells her brother Augustus Lorton, 'she is perfectly grey'. Lorton, whose hair favours the whiter shade of grey, unexpectedly finds this fact quite charming. Since this long scene has remarkably few intertitles, when people talk we rarely know exactly what they are saying. Those conversations that are reported, however, are entirely about Mrs. Erlynne. She, in contrast, says nothing and is therefore given no intertitles. She is a subject of gossip as well as of other people's looks. Vision and speech are linked.

This study of social voyeurism underscores the importance of concealment, which the Windermeres and Mrs. Erlynne have practiced during the previous two scenes, and which Lord

W, Mrs. E, and Lord Darlington continue to practice in this one. In the 1916 film, Lord W acknowledges Mrs. Erlynne at the dog show. According to the intertitles:

**Title: To the daughter: It meant merely that her husband met an acquaintance – a woman known as Mrs. Erlynne.**

**Title: To the Mother: a flood of emotions suppressed for twenty long years.**

Lubitsch undoes this exchange of looks. We must remember that Mrs. Erlynne is at the racetrack alone, unescorted and vulnerable. Under these circumstances, Lord Windermere cannot afford to acknowledge her, since society (including Lord Darlington) is watching his every gesture like a hawk. And so Lord W does not nod. (This reversal of the Ideal film mirrors Lubitsch's earlier handling of Lord Windermere's first meeting with Mrs. Erlynne, when they shake hands in the Lubitsch film but not in the Ideal one.) Likewise, if Lorton can happily take Mrs. E to the dog show, it would seem that she already is in society. Lubitsch has them meet at the racetrack – and even then outside the walls of this social event. The collapsing matte used to track their meeting – one of the film's 'clever' uses of framing – functions on several levels. It mimes the race going on inside, as Lorton overtakes Mrs. Erlynne in the stretch, before the finish line. The collapsing matte thus measures the distance between the two and marks the pace at which it shrinks, as a mark of Lubitsch's wit on display. But underneath this jest, the empty scene and collapsing matte quietly reveal that there is no one to witness their encounter. It is both a secretive and magical moment. The matte closes off our vision, like a drawer being shut, leaving the frame reduced to black. Because she is not in society, their encounter is a secret to the outside world. Finally, if Lorton and Mrs. Erlynne are together from beginning to end of Ideal's dog show scene, at Lubitsch's horse race the moment at which they finally come together is the moment the scene goes to black. Although we see *how* they come together, they are never *actually* 'together' in Lubitsch's scene.

This scene at the horse race demonstrates the full potential of Lubitsch's stylish, elegant filmmaking. Its meditation on looking and the social outcast through an array of point of view shots is a *tour de force* – and quite different from the Paul film where the characters are busy looking at the dogs. Lubitsch shows that the events are not important in themselves but as meeting places for society. The 1916 version foregrounds the dog show: the set is covered with advertisements for Spratt's Dog Cakes, which look very much as if Ideal was engaged in an early exercise in product placement from the heavy-handed and intrusive manner of their display. Advertisements also appear in Lubitsch's sequence at the track, but each sign is different and they are restricted to the final shot, for which the camera dollies alongside the stadium wall covered with a burst of billboards. Here, as Lord Augustus slowly overtakes Mrs. Erlynne and starts their romance, love and consumption are playfully linked. Lubitsch not only uses this scene to give powerful insights into the operations of society, he gives the entire racetrack scene a much greater dramatic function than Paul did for his adaptation, for it is here that Lord Augustus meets Mrs. Erlynne.

If there is a comic duel between Lubitsch and Wilde, at once exhibitionistic and Wilde-ish in spirit, this public sparring cannot take place during the prologue since these opening scenes obviously have no equivalent in the play. In the backstory, Lubitsch pursues his own private engagement with Paul and the 'Ideal' film version. Lubitsch is correcting throughout: correcting the time line, correcting the characterisations, and correcting the actions and gestures. Although Bert Lytell as Lord Windermere (1925) bears a more than passing resemblance to Milton Rosmer in the same role (1916), Lord Augustus Lorton is a radically different type of character. In the 1916 version he is a one-dimensional comic character who knows Mrs. Erlynne from Paris and is eager to marry her from the his first scene to the film's end, undercutting the subtle play of social forces and Mrs. Erlynne's sense of quiet desperation. Lubitsch reinstates that desperation. He also

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adds two brief scenes or sequences (nos. 4a through 5b) that loosely evoke Scene 13 of the Ideal film. Lubitsch places these scenes of Lorton in Mrs. Erlynne's apartment after the animal show, not before as Paul had done. These two scenes take an approach that was commonly used by Cecil B. DeMille in his comedies of remarriage. The narration maintains a cool distance and comments ironically on the character's behaviour in a way that pretends scientific observation.

**Scene 4a** begins with the intertitle "A gentleman's relation to a lady is indicated by the manner in which he rings her doorbell." The following shot shows Lorton hesitating at Mrs. Erlynne's front door as he preens and finally gets up the courage to ring the bell.

**Scene 4b.** Lord Windermere hands his hat to the maid and then meets Mrs. Erlynne. They shake hands and sit down. She asks for a cigarette and he gives it to her.

**Scene 5a** begins with the intertitle "But when the relation becomes more friendly." Same doorbell. Lorton quickly and casually rings the bell and goes into the apartment.

**Scene 5b.** The interior of Mrs. Erlynne's apartment. Mrs. E smokes a cigarette and Lord Lorton tries to stop her – then discovers an unfinished cigar in the ashtray. He becomes jealous and she challenges his right to be jealous when he doesn't love her enough to marry her. Then she shows him that the cigar wrapper matches those in his pocket – that he is jealous only of himself. She then slaps him lightly on the face, he smiles, and things are OK.

Among their various achievements, these scenes provide an elegant temporal transition of some months. The Ideal film signals the passage of time by Mrs. Erlynne's move from a hotel to her new, more spacious accommodation. In the Lubitsch variation, Mrs. E does not change residences. Rather the shift in time is shown through Lorton's change in behavior. These scenes also efficiently develop Mrs. Erlynne's changing relation to Lorton: first offering her a cigarette as a gesture of friendship, then trying to get her to stop for the same reasons.

Scene 5b is remarkably efficient and original, demonstrating (as Wilde would indicate) that Mrs. Erlynne can 'explain anything,' including Lorton to himself. The comparison of cigars – the discarded stub and the new one from Lorton's cigar case – matches the comparison of Scene 5 to Scene 4 and decisively aligns the sensibility of the fictional narrator with Mrs. E. Lorton, in fact, embarrasses himself and so becomes more susceptible to her explanation of events, setting up the final reversal and resolution of the narrative at the end of the film. The scene also establishes Lorton's clueless, endearingly befuddled powers of observation (part of Lorton's charm – what Mrs. E in the play would call his good qualities – is his comparative lack of a sadistic, judgmental gaze). This scene thus shows the dynamic between Erlynne and Lorton visually, in a way that is only suggested in the play and merely asserted in the Ideal film. The ringing of the apartment door will also resonate later when Lady Windermere and then Mrs. Erlynne ring Lord Darlington's doorbell, commenting on their relations (again a triangle of difference).

Lubitsch ended his prologue with two more scenes before beginning the treatment of the play proper.

**Scene 6** begins with the title 'Lady Windermere's Birthday dawned radiantly'. Events unfold in the 'Morning Room' of the Windermere house as Lord Windermere lays out his numerous birthday presents and then gives them to his wife. Most of the gifts are radiant with diamonds. As Lady Windermere opens each present, she gives her husband a kiss. The fan comes last and for that he receives two kisses.

**Scene 7** takes place at Mrs. Erlynne apartment. She stares off into space, contemplating her situation, then reads a newspaper announcement of Lady Windermere's birthday party.

Once again, we cannot ignore the 'playful' engagement with the Ideal film. Erlynne reads the newspaper announcing her daughter's birthday in the last scene of Lubitsch's prologue – rather than the first scene of the Ideal film. Likewise,

Lord Windermere's presentation of his birthday gifts comes in the second to last rather than the second scene. Lubitsch practices here a self-conscious, calculated inversion: the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. Lady Windermere's birthday now appears in its proper place *vis a vis* the timeframe of the play. Lubitsch, moreover, spectacularly enlarges the scale and the extravagance of the drama. In both the play and the Ideal film, Lady Windermere receives only a fan from her husband (though the actual gift-giving is not shown in the play). Surely her twenty-first birthday should be recognized with many gifts, particularly since Lord Windermere must be feeling guilty over the amount of money he is giving Mrs. Erlynne. Lubitsch's film shows more than the play (and that 'more' is more than just the backstory) and shows it on a grander scale.<sup>95</sup> The plenitude of gifts is consistent with the oversized sets. Scene 7 is very brief and has subtle, even oblique functions: pacing, and perhaps a reminder of how outside society Mrs. Erlynne truly is if, living in London and on intimate terms with Lorton, she has to hear about her daughter's birthday party through the papers.

Now both films conclude their extended prologues and begin to cover the same ground as the play. The Ideal film begins its treatment of the actual play with the intertitle 'In spite of many rebuffs for his persistent attentions and elaborate compliments, Tom Darlington is a frequent visitor at the Windermere home'. Although the fan is prominent in the *mis en scène*, it is not Lady Windermere's birthday. Lord Darlington comes to the Windermeres' household at this point in the Lubitsch film as well – just as Lord Windermere is leaving. In fact, he appears quite early in the morning, rather than the afternoon as specified in the play. Lubitsch is also correcting Wilde's unfolding of the narrative. Darlington's early morning visit, timed seemingly to Lord Windermere's departure, is more aggressive and also gives more time for the day's events to unfold.

Lady Windermere's discovery of what appears to be her husband's affair with Mrs. Erlynne is a crucial turning point in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and the differences between the three versions



• Irene Rich (Mrs. Erlynne) and Ronald Coleman (Windermere) with the eponymous fan.

merit careful consideration. Wilde provokes Lady Windermere's suspicions in two stages: first Darlington hints at a liaison with his story of a young married couple in which the husband strays; then the Duchess of Berwick arrives and describes Lord Windermere's frequent visits to Mrs. Erlynne, witnessed by her nieces. Paul and Lubitsch both simplify Lady Windermere's process of discovery: in each case, one proves enough to disrupt the Windermere's marital bliss: Lubitsch has Darlington do the dirty work, while James and Paul leave to the Duchess of Berwick.

Here as elsewhere the Ideal adaptation maintains an ambivalent relationship to Wilde's dialogue, avoiding the epigrams while evoking the more banal lines that move the narrative forward. Overall it shows little respect for Wilde's language in view of the playwright's literary reputation. In the scene under consideration, when the Duchess of Berwick sends her daughter out to the terrace before telling Lady Windermere of her husband's apparent indiscretions, the dialogue goes:

Duchess of Berwick: . . . Agatha darling!

Lady Agatha: Yes, mamma.

Duchess of Berwick: Will you go out on the terrace and look at the sunset?

Lady Agatha: Yes, mamma.

Duchess of Berwick: Sweet girl! So devoted to sunsets!

One of the wittier aspects of Wilde's play is that Lady Agatha says nothing throughout except these two words: 'Yes, mamma'. Wilde's

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use of dialogue here is not just entertaining. Theatregoers may laugh, but they are also confronted with the price paid by a dutiful, naïve child who places her happiness in the hands of her parents and society. Recognizing that to distil this exchange would only weaken it, James and Paul avoid Lady Agatha's 'Yes, mamma' entirely.

**Intertitle in the 1916 film (Duchess of Berwick):**  
 Agatha! Go out and look at the sunset – sweet girl!  
 She is so devoted to sunsets.

We learn that Lady Agatha can speak (and say 'yes') only indirectly, when Mr. Hopper informs the Duchess that she has said 'yes' to his proposal of marriage. In effect, Lubitsch took the Ideal refusal to its logical next step by eliminating Lady Agatha altogether – not just her words but her image, her physical presence.

In Lubitsch's version of this scene, Lady W shows Darlington not only the fan but her husband's many additional gifts as well. Taking one of the gifts to the window so that it will sparkle in the light, she sees her husband entering a cab. During the film, Lubitsch shows three different scenes of high-angle window shots, POV structures in which a character sees a person or persons entering or leaving cabs – again making triangles integral to its structure. Darlington points out this action and suggests its significance: her husband is involved in an amorous deception (a secret triangle). Here Lubitsch finds a visual counterpart to Wilde's dialogue (Darlington's story of the unfaithful husband) that would not be easily achieved on stage. To understand the contrast with the Ideal film, Lubitsch has the Duchess of Berwick engage in gossipy behaviour somewhat earlier, at the racetrack. After being chastised by Lord Windermere at the races, the Duchess prides herself in having said nothing bad about Mrs. Eryllyne ever since! And she tells Lord W of this fact as he re-enters his home to confront his wife who has just located the cancelled cheques – a triangle of difference indeed.

Lubitsch's originality in treatment (as opposed to subject matter) is shown in his systematic use of alternatives to both play and earlier film. The triangular nature of Lubitsch's adaptation

becomes even clearer if we consider a particularly important piece of dialogue. Used to promote the 1916 film, it appears in the play as well as both films, with appropriate modifications.<sup>96</sup> The scene occurs very near the end of Act I in Wilde's play, after Lady Windermere has found the cancelled cheques and her husband is trying nonetheless to get Mrs. Eryllyne invited to her birthday party.

**Line in the play (Lady Windermere to Lord Windermere):** Yes, you gave me this fan to-day; it was your birthday present. If that woman crosses my threshold, I shall strike her across the face with it.

**Intertitle in 1916 film (Lady W to Lord W):** If that woman crosses my threshold, I will strike her across the face with this fan.

**Intertitle in 1925 film (Lady W to Lord W):** If she dares to come here – I will strike her across the face with this fan!

The film intertitles are more concise than the play script, but all three final sentences are quite similar. We see that James and Paul kept the first clause of Wilde's sentence intact but revised the second or independent clause. Lubitsch annexed Ideal's sentence (not Wilde's) and kept the second clause but revised the first. In the end, Lubitsch's sentence revises one clause in the movie and both clauses in the play (though all three works contain the phrase 'strike her across the face'). Lubitsch thus annexes or 'quotes' the 1916 intertitle more accurately than he does the original play. This careful and precise use of language exemplifies the processes of transformation – including the pathway of historical succession among the three works. Lubitsch recognizes what the Ideal film has done and takes the initial impulse to a more radical and 'ideal completion. His film is not only "Wilde-ish" but often Ideal-ish in spirit.

The thorough nature of Lubitsch's reworkings can be explicated with numerous examples, although three may suffice here. The first involves the fate of Mrs. Eryllyne's invitation in the scene examined above. In the play, when Lady Windermere refuses to send Mrs. E an invitation, Lord Windermere pleads with her then

finally does so himself. Such a move in the face of Lady Windermere's discovery of the hidden cheque stubs and her husband's inadequate explanations seems callous to the point of lacking credibility. In the Ideal film, Lord Windermere has visited Mrs. Erlynne and extended an invitation, which he now simply refuses to withdraw. Lubitsch, however, finds an even more effective solution. Lord Windermere bows to his wife and writes to Mrs. Erlynne withdrawing his invitation. Thinking it is the formal invitation and eager to get to the party, she doesn't bother to read the note before arriving at the Windermere's. Denied entry, she is about to leave when Lord Lorton arrives and, assuming she is invited, escorts her inside. Such moments of misrecognition proliferate in the party scene, as they do throughout Lubitsch's film. In this respect, Lubitsch's picture is about vision and interpreting what we see, based on assumptions and cues that are consistently inaccurate – with accumulating consequences.

A second such moment involves the letter that Lady Windermere wrote to her husband, telling him that she was leaving him for Darlington.<sup>97</sup> Mrs. Erlynne intercepts it, reads it, and then follows her to Darlington's apartment. There she confronts her daughter with the letter. In the play Mrs. Erlynne quickly burns the letter and there is a lengthy argument, seemingly unnecessary, about whether the letter was actually her letter or not. In the Paul film, the same thing happens, but Lady Windermere does not contest the letter's authenticity. In Lubitsch's version, Mrs. Erlynne shows her daughter the letter to establish its authenticity and then burns it. In a world where nothing is as it appears to be, Lubitsch's solution seems the most logical and appropriate.

The third example of a third way involves the story's end. Play, Ideal picture, and Lubitsch film all end at the same point. The 1916 film and the play end with the same two lines, though once again neither line is quite identical:

**Lord W (play):** Well, you are certainly marrying a very clever woman.

**Lord W (1916 film):** Tuppy, you are marrying a very clever woman.

**Lady W (play):** Ah! You're marrying a very good woman.

**Lady W (1916 film):** You are marrying a very good woman.

Nonetheless, in the play Mrs. Erlynne arrives to bid her daughter good-bye on her way to the continent. As she prepares to leave the Windermere's home, she encounters Lord Lorton by chance and has him escort her to her cab. Outside (off-stage) she quickly retrieves the situation with a skilful explanation and Lorton enters with the announcement that they are to be married. In the 1916 film, this coincidence is avoided. Mrs. Erlynne shows up with Lorton, having already explained everything (in fact Lorton escorts Mrs. Erlynne from Darlington's apartment at what would be the end of Act III.) Mrs. Erlynne's devastating sacrifice of her reputation the night before is adumbrated. She has easily retrieved it, because Tuppy has always been eager to marry her. In this respect the stakes are never very high in the 1916 adaptation. The Ideal film moves smoothly, though none too elegantly, to its conclusion, in which Mrs. Erlynne fails to find her way into society and so, implicitly defeated, marries Lorton.

Lubitsch, of course, found a quite different solution, since her goal was always that of marrying Lorton (rather than getting back into society). As Mrs. Erlynne leaves the Windermere house, she encounters Lord Lorton outside. Refusing to play the victim and be snubbed or rejected, she tells him: 'Your conduct last night was outrageous – I've decided not to marry you'. Since Lorton no doubt assumed that the proposal was moot, given her conduct of the previous night, he is taken aback, and needs an explanation. He never enters the Windermere home, but instead steps into Mrs. Erlynne's car. She closes the car door and the taxi heads down the street, so that we are not shown the exchange between them, which remains hidden, like their initial exchange at the race track. Audiences familiar with the play can imagine the conversation that follows – that she came to offer her acceptance to his proposal of marriage

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– but Lubitsch has dispensed with the 'clever' versus 'good' woman lines altogether, in an ending that subtly emphasises what has run through the film: the importance of what is hidden (kept in closed drawers, sealed in envelopes and so forth). Obviously Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* is a *tour de force* in its sustained ability to construct a triangle of treatment – but a secret *tour de force* in that the Ideal intertext remains a hidden but constant referent. His film impressively synthesises this game-like quality with compelling insight into the actions and motivations of characters and society.

### Lady Windermere's Fan

This explication of Lubitsch's film in relationship to the play and the Ideal film adaptation prepares the way for a deeper understanding of both Wilde's play and Lubitsch's film. As a first step, it may be helpful to consider the significance of Lady Windermere's fan itself, to which surprisingly little critical attention has been devoted. Of course, one can accept its use in the narrative on a superficial level: it is a convenient possession for a woman to carry, to forget, and so leave behind – particularly when she is distressed and the fan is brand new and not yet a familiar extension of her being. In this respect, Wilde could have chosen a glove or a scarf as the forgotten object, although Lady Windermere's fan has the advantage of being a much more distinctive and cherished gift. Nonetheless, we may assume the fan has also deeper meanings. Wilde's recent biographer John Sloan finds the fan to be 'the stuff of melodrama, a far from subtle symbol of wayward femininity'.<sup>98</sup> And yet if this were strictly true, why would her husband give Lady Windermere such a present? Is Lord Windermere clueless, or is Sloan's conclusion too mechanical? Patricia Flanagan Behrendt suggests that the fan traditionally plays 'a significant role in flirtatious scenes'; although it is associated with female desire, Lady Windermere does not employ her fan 'for the language for which it was intended'.<sup>99</sup> But perhaps it is Wilde who is hiding behind *Lady Windermere's Fan*, flirting with his audience? And so, to summarise:

**1.** The fan is a discerning choice as an object of flirtation. A fan conceals and yet in the act of concealing it draws attention to what is hidden. The play – and certainly Lubitsch's film – works like a fan. Like Wilde's epigrams or Lubitsch's famed "touches," the fan distracts the spectator from what is underneath, what the fan's manipulator does not want the viewer to see – or rather see well. And yet perversely the fan – like the Salomé's seven veils – draw attention to what is hidden. In this respect a fan works the way comic wit works. Jokes hide their purpose even as this concealment is an essential step in the power of joke work. As Freud suggests, the joking envelope often conceals the substance of a serious thought, but it is the combination of the two that determines its ultimate effectiveness.<sup>100</sup>

**2.** The forgotten fan (and much more) is something that Wilde annexed from a number of now forgotten plays, notably *The Idler* by C. Haddon Chambers. According to Kerry Powell:

In Chambers's play, as in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, a young wife visits the room of a raffish man who wants her to run away with him. In both plays the husband calls at the critical moment; the wife hides behind a curtain, but gives herself away by forgetting to take her fan with her.<sup>101</sup>

A debt was also owed to G. R. Sims and Sydney Grundy's play *The Glass of Fashion* (1883), though here the forgotten object is a glove rather than a fan.<sup>102</sup> In this respect, one could accuse Wilde of plagiarism, as Grundy did. But the point is this: by leaving the fan in his play, Wilde chose to leave evidence of his 'plagiarism' in plain sight so he could be 'discovered'. At the same time the transgression was concealed behind the fan-like quality of his wit. Wilde uses the fan to flirt with his audience in a game of concealment and exposure that demonstrates his artistic theories: that treatment, not invention is the mark of an artist. Lubitsch acts much in the same way. The film's title seems to designate the play as his source, so audiences look no further, leaving the earlier film adaptation hidden from view.

**3.** If the fan is used to flirt, it is also used to conceal. Again *Lady Windermere's Fan* is very

much about what cannot be shown (or said) overtly. As Peter Raby has noted, 'Wilde's handling of the narrative elevates the art of concealment'.<sup>103</sup> Though this was not Lord Windermere's intention, the fan turns out to be a particularly appropriate object for a twenty-first birthday present. For Lady Windermere not only gains a fan – she gains a nexus of secrets that must stay hidden (her visit to Lord Darlington's apartments, the basis for her new relationship with Mrs. Erlynne). Coming of age, Wilde seems to suggest, involves possessing a life that has secrets, in which no one is totally innocent and life cannot divide simply into good and bad.

**4.** The fan takes the form of a triangle, with three vertexes. One side may be bowed, but this only makes the allusion more discrete (it is a flirtatious triangle). The fan thus brings together at least two key elements of the play – concealment and the triangle – in one object. Indeed, we should remember that the fan is passed to all three points of the human triangle: from Lord Windermere to Lady Windermere, and from Lady Windermere to Mrs. Erlynne. In each case, it is given as a gesture of love. And yet in this journey it gains new meanings. Why did Lord Windermere give it to his wife, when her attitude toward life and society was such that she did not need it? Perhaps believing that she had nothing to hide, Lord Windermere gave it to her as a symbol of his trust. Perhaps she was given the fan to hint at the feminine mystery that she lacked or might acquire. The fan was meant to serve as a symbol of her coming of age: a gesture toward the complex social world that she was now entering and about which she had very simplistic views.

Having gained a set of secrets and a richer understanding of human life, Lady Windermere gives it as a gesture of friendship and coded gratitude to Mrs. Erlynne. It links them together. Before Mrs. Erlynne has asked favors only of the husband, now she asks them only of the wife (her daughter). Lady Windermere gives it to Mrs. Erlynne as a gift – rather than using it to deliver a blow as she had once threatened. Because she has learned the necessity as well as the art of concealment, Lady Windermere no longer needs

the fan. She has internalised its skills and so can part with it. The fan was the source and symbol of her education, of her coming of age in a society where openness and transparency does not exist.

**5.** Wilde's decision to call his play 'Lady Windermere's Fan' raises a number of self-reflexive questions. What purposes does he hide behind this fan? What does the title hide yet draw attention to? It conceals other triangles and even Wilde's play on words. For example, the play's title is three words, echoing the triangular quality of the object it describes. Windermere can also be construed as a mararonic of three words in different languages: Win (in English), der ('the' in German) and mere ('mother' in French) – the mother's win. And, indeed, Mrs. Erlynne, Lady Windermere's mother, does win in many respects: wins her daughter's love, a new husband, and a fortune.

**6.** A fan, like a portable screen, not only conceals, it is able to conceal itself: both its triangular shape and its screen-like function. This 'feminine' fan of flirtation can turn into a phallic rod, a weapon – an object of masculine force.

**7.** For a select few, the fan in its phallic form may well allude to a crucial element of the play, which has not – so far as I can tell – been discussed despite the fact that there is a substantial body of Wilde criticism from a queer perspective. The fan, like the green carnation that Cecil Graham wore on the play's opening night, may well have had a symbolic place in the gay subculture of *fin de siècle* Europe. Or it may have been used in a more mainstream colloquialism alluding to homosexuality. It may be sufficient to mention a passage that Eve Sedgwick quotes from Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, in a quite different context. The novel's homosexual, John Claggart, is described as 'a man so unimpeachably respectable that against him nothing was ever openly said though among the few something was whispered, "Yes X — is a nut not to be cracked by the tap of a lady's fan"'.<sup>104</sup> Lord Windermere's wife, of course, threatens to tap Mrs. Erlynne with her lady's fan almost as soon as she receives it.

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8. If Wilde's play has the fan as its central object, there is also its counterpart: the locket. By its nature the locket conceals the image (and so potentially the identity) of the beloved. In Wilde's play, *Lady Windermere* has a locket of her beloved mother as a child. In the Paul film, this has been reversed. Instead, Mrs. Erlynne has a locket of her daughter; this is kept in a miniature cabinet on her nightstand and examined with deep, secret affection. What is most dear to Mrs. Erlynne remains hidden, examined only in secrecy. In the Lubitsch film, there is no locket but a newspaper illustration of *Lady Windermere*, which Mrs. Erlynne keeps hidden in a locked desk drawer. This trope – of the hidden being the most valued – is central to *Lady Windermere's Fan*. There are three secrets shared by all three vertices of the intertextual triangle that revolve around the triangle of Lord Windermere, *Lady Windermere* and Mrs. Erlynne. The first, Mrs. Erlynne's motherhood, is symbolized by the two lockets and the hidden journal illustration. This generates another secret: that Lord Windermere is supporting his mother-in-law, Mrs. Erlynne. Thus Lord Windermere's financial statements (his cancelled cheques) are kept in a locked desk drawer.<sup>105</sup> When *Lady Windermere* pries open the desk and discovers the contents, she jumps to an obvious but wrong conclusion, and all hell breaks loose. This leads to her rash visit to Lord Darlington's apartment. To the men entering Lord Darlington's apartment, particularly Lord Windermere, the meaning of the fan left on Darlington's sofa seems obvious: *Lady Windermere* is or has been there. Mrs. Erlynne sacrifices her reputation to ensure a different conclusion, that is, to create (or maintain) a secret. Fan, financial statements, and locket are talismans of terrible secrets—their meaning misconstrued by society's unforgiving moral vision.

9. The fan functions in ways similar to the veil in Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* and Nazimova's film adaptation of it.<sup>106</sup>

### A Play About the Closet?

A significant amount of critical work has been done on Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Kerry

Powell and Sos Eltis have focused first on Wilde's artistic methods: the way he annexed earlier plays and deformed or inverted key elements as a form of genre criticism. Eltis, in particular, demonstrates how this enables us to understand Wilde's critical commentary on society. Much scholarship has relied on an investigation of types, on image-based analysis. Some critics have emphasised Wilde's progressive credentials by focusing on Mrs. Erlynne as an important reworking of the fallen woman character: she becomes the play's heroine, who refuses to do penance or admit she is bad.<sup>107</sup> Others have seen both Mrs. Erlynne and the play as affirmations of Individualism and a condemnation of over-rigid moral systems.<sup>108</sup> A number of critics focus on Wilde's dandies as providing 'a commentary on a society he despised in the form of wit at its expense'.<sup>109</sup>

Although a significant number of literary scholars have examined Wilde's literary output from a queer perspective, less attention has been paid to *Lady Windermere's Fan* and the social comedies, than to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), *Salomé* (1892/1896) or *De Profundis* (1897).<sup>110</sup> There are exceptions. Several analyses suggest that Wilde's stylish dandies, like Cecil Graham, who wore a green carnation on opening night, at least allude to homosexual life for those in the know. Alan Sinfield has argued that

**Wilde's principal male characters do look and sound like the mid-twentieth century stereotype of the queer man (I am using 'queer' to evoke this historical figure). They are effete, camp, leisured or aspiring to be, aesthetic, amoral, witty, insouciant, charming, spiteful, dandified. If these characters are not offered as homosexual (and generally they are pursuing women characters), the whole ambience reeks, none the less, of queerness.<sup>111</sup>**

Patricia Flanagan Behrendt has likewise argued that 'a distinctly homosexual Eros characterizes the dandies' of Wilde's earlier work and can be seen in the dandies of his later comedies as well.<sup>112</sup> While Wilde's dandified men no doubt possess sexualities that can be ambiguous (though the stereotyping of both heterosexual

and homosexual men in Sinfield's remarks is striking), they turn their back on Mrs. Erlynne rather than protect or sympathize with her. They may wittily comment on the way society functions, but they make use of the double standard and their own comparative freedom. Though Wilde's presence is felt in many aspects of the text, his affinities with Mrs. Erlynne are the most powerful, trumping all others.

Jeff Nunokawa has considered Wilde's social comedies, particularly *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), and convincingly argues that

**the symptoms of the homosexual are all over the whole category of desire that opposes what, in certain circles, now goes by the name of 'heterosexual normativity'. These symptoms are thus masked by a cultural censorship . . . that requires that any expression of such desire that passes into general circulation . . . does so as always deniable subtext.**<sup>113</sup>

Or, as Wilde himself described his method shortly after the premiere of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, 'I would like to protest against the statement that I have ever called a spade a spade. The man who did so should be condemned to use one.'<sup>114</sup> Despite Nunokawa's significant gesture in this direction, Wilde scholars have paid little attention to Mrs. Erlynne's secret – the facts surrounding her motherhood. They have tended to accept this as a somewhat threadbare theatrical convention found in such plays as Sardou's *Odette* (1881).<sup>115</sup> Yet Wilde used these conventions for his own quite different purposes, annexing this trope because it resonated so profoundly with his own circumstances. Indeed, it was to prove painfully prescient of his own future predicament. Once the secret of his homosexuality was exposed, he was unable even to visit his children.

By running off with another man, Mrs. Erlynne fundamentally violated the codes of heterosexual normativity. As a result, her relationship to her daughter cannot be acknowledged; it is nothing less than a 'Love that dare not speak its name', to evoke the phrase that Lord Alfred Douglas used to characterize his relationship with Wilde a short time later.<sup>116</sup> Putting aside this precise

formulation, which can only be applied to this play somewhat anachronistically, Eve Sedgwick and others have pointed out that sexual relations between men have 'been famous among those who knew about it at all precisely for having no name – "unspeakable," "Unmentionable," "Not to be named among Christian men".'<sup>117</sup> This convergence – Mrs. Erlynne's infidelity and Wilde's homosexuality – would seem a crucial starting point for breaking open the play (and in key respects the film).

Wilde's epigrammatic exchanges in smart society were hailed for their witty cleverness with little attention to what they actually revealed about that society. In the play and the film, human interactions generally disclose very little of personal substance, for a character (or author) who reveals too much of him/herself may be condemned for those transgressions and expelled from society: one ill-placed fan, one ill-advised letter, one unprotected strand of grey hair, or one forbidden love could have devastating results. This is why Lord Darlington's remark that 'Life is far too important a thing ever to talk seriously about' is so telling: a perfect façade of propriety provided the necessary screen that men used to conceal their private passions and social transgressions. Women did not possess even that luxury. In this society, it is evident that for a respectable woman to have sex outside of marriage has only one counterpart: for a respectable man to have sex with another man. They are equivalents. In this regard, Mrs. Erlynne's transgressions function in two ways. First, her circumstances have their own weight and substance. But second, they act as a screen, hiding even as they hint at Wilde's own homosexuality (just as Mrs. E hides but also hints at her motherhood to Lady Windermere). This is why Wilde found his play as personal and intimate as a sonnet (and sonnets are generally about love). Wilde's homosexuality was an open secret that he was hiding behind the metaphoric fan of his wit.

There is then a meeting point between these two strands of Wilde scholarship. One strand (Eltis, Powell) focuses on his textual appropriation, which can be seen as plagiarism –

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the ultimate sin of the writer. Such an account, if sustained in the courts and the newspapers, destroys one's artistic reputation and professional career. It was the professional equivalent for Wilde of this second strand, his homosexuality. Wilde seems to have found tremendous excitement in playing very close to the edge in both instances. The collective possibility of being caught provided him with the necessary frisson that kept pleasure and thought alive in a repressive society.

If Lubitsch was the cinema's modern day answer to Wilde, what did the filmmaker see in this play that compelled such loving attention? Here again, we can interpret his engagement along two lines that resonate with the two strands of Wilde scholarship cited above. First, Lubitsch shared with Wilde the emphasis on the importance of treatment. Both were not simply 'adapters,' they secretly annexed other works. Lubitsch's secret remake was an affirmation of Wilde's methods and the dangerous pleasures of transgression. Second, Lubitsch must have identified and sympathised with Wilde's vulnerability as an Irishman and homosexual. What did it mean for Lubitsch to be locked into playing comic, often stereotypical roles as a Jewish buffoon in Germany before and immediately after the First World War? And then to come to the United States and be greeted by protesters opposed to Hollywood's employment of a German national, regardless of religious or ethnic background? Lubitsch must have felt he was playing a dangerous game where the stakes were high.<sup>118</sup> His social comedies of upper class, genteel life – *The Marriage Circle*, *Kiss Me Again*, and *Lady Windermere's Fan* – were faultless, elegant renderings of worlds to which he would never have been admitted. As an artist and socially liminal figure, Lubitsch could see himself in Wilde and Mrs. Erlynne.

It seems probable, however, that Wilde's play was not in itself sufficient impetus for Lubitsch to make his version of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. The picture succeeds in its full elegance only if one recognizes the triangulation that is created through the active annexation of the Ideal film. This poses serious questions. What is the cost of

deception – of keeping crucial facts of one's identity, or of a film's artistic integrity – hidden? What is the cost of being in the closet? Of course, Lubitsch was aware that Wilde was a homosexual and that the public revelation of this secret did 'kill him'. And his picture suggests that Wilde's concealment of this secret was as painful as Mrs. Erlynne's concealment of her maternal connection. It is to conceal a central element of the self. Wilde's play and the Ideal film are the parents of Lubitsch's picture. But one side of this genealogy must be kept secret, for if society discovered, it would be shocked that the brilliant idea of renouncing Wilde's epigrams was not his. The comic duel between Lubitsch and Wilde was the necessary basis for concealing the film's real maternity. Critics thought the play's narrative trite and irrelevant. They paid it little attention; and this was important because if they looked below the surface and took *Lady Windermere's* lines about her mother to heart – 'To shut one's eyes to half of life that one may live securely is as though one blinded oneself that one might walk with more safety in a land of pit and precipice' – then they might have seen that the narrative, the story of the closet, is what was really important. Here at the end, Wilde uses language to talk about vision, while Lubitsch has used vision to find pictorial equivalents to words.

Beyond these convergences, which mount an assault on normative artistic practice and normative sexuality, Lubitsch's films and Wilde's social comedies yearn for a utopian reconciliation that is part of the comic tradition. In both cases their visual and verbal wit became forms of play. Living on a tightrope, in which profound anxiety was mixed with the exhilaration of professional (and personal?) success, this utopian optimism was everywhere articulated. In terms of the narrative, Mrs. Erlynne is reconciled with her daughter, even though the precise nature of their relationship is never revealed. And Mrs. Erlynne is to marry Lord Lorton. Even if she does not get back into society, she is to live in Paris where the weather and the food are superior. And although Lord Windermere no longer sees Mrs. Erlynne as good, he acknowledges that she is clever. The new, young Windermere family stays together in

the way that the previous generation had not. In Lubitsch's film, Mrs. Erlynne is an instant success at her daughter's twenty-first birthday party. First the men and then the women swarm around her. On more than one occasion, Lord Lorton magically appears. And her most judgmental adversary (other than her daughter) melts in the face of one well-directed line of flattery. The theatre world becomes a dream world, although nightmare is never far away.

The utopian reconciliation of stage and screen is another crucial element of Lubitsch's comedic vision. Annexing both stage play and the Ideal film for his treatment, he engages in game-play. It is a game performed with complete seriousness: a game that is based on treating a forgotten film and a theatrical masterpiece as radical equivalents. To the extent that the upstart art of cinema is treated as if it were the theatre's equal, Lubitsch proposes a democratic levelling of genres, forms and hierarchies. The arts are not rivals but sisters. There is comedic harmony and co-existence rather than rivalry (this despite the comic duel). In short, *Lady Windermere's Fan* looks forward to the utopian triangle of *Design for Living*, in which the rival arts coexist in marital bliss. But in 1925, it imagines a unity of the high and low arts, treating two different forms of theatrical culture as if they were one.

## Notes

This article was first presented as a paper at the annual Society for Cinema Studies Conference (Dallas, Texas), 8 March 1996 as part of a panel on 'Film and the Neighbouring Arts'. I was fortunate enough to see the Ideal Film Company's version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* at 'Celebrating 1895: An International Conference on Cinema Before 1920,' National Museum of Photography, Film and Television, Bradford, UK, 18 June 1995. Thanks to Maureen Nappi, Edward Ziter, Wayne Koestenbaum, Jonathan Katz, the Larry Kramer Initiative in Gay and Lesbian Studies, Yale University and members of my class on Film and the Transformation of Theatrical Culture (particularly Ann Kern and Miriam Posner). Special thanks also to Ian Christie for his editorial expertise and patience as I struggled to give this article coherent form.

1 Not all movies and live performances occurred in the 'empty space' evoked by Peter Brook (*The Empty Space*, Atheneum, 1968). Exceptions included

peephole kinetoscopes and mutoscopes, home movies, educational films in classrooms, parades and public pageants, the circus, sports, religious rituals and so forth.

- 2 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon*, Harvard, 1991: 93–100; Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Film, 1915–1928*, Scribners, 1990: 40–61.
- 3 Noël Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory*, Princeton, 1988.
- 4 André Gaudreault, 'The diversity of cinematographic connections in the intermedial context of the turn of the 20th century,' in Simon Popple and Vanessa Toulmin, eds., *Visual Delights: Essays on the Popular and Projected Image in the 19th Century*, Flicks Books, 2000: 8–15.
- 5 See, for example: 'Adaptations of Plays: One of The Distinctive Stage Arts,' *New York Herald Tribune*, 3 January 1926, 2E.
- 6 In an email exchange, Ian Christie wrote that "I don't agree that a production is an adaptation: it's a realization or instantiation" (6 November 2003). While I agree that a production is a realization or instantiation, the process inevitably involves a dimension of adaptation. Translation, for instance, is also a form of adaptation. In this respect it is important to recognize a broad and a more narrow meaning of the term. The broad one encompasses the narrower one of literary and filmic adaptation. Adaptation has come to be an area of increasing interest in cultural studies, related as it is to the increasing interest in intertextuality. See: Mikhail Lampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film*, University of California Press, 1998; James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation*, Rutgers, 2000; Deborah Cartmell, I.Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye, and Imelda Whelehan, eds., *Classics in Film and Fiction*, Pluto Press, 2000; Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema: Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film*, Oxford, 1997; and the previous issue of *Film Studies*, in particular Carol Watt, 'Adapting Affect: The Melodramatic Economy of *Broken Blossoms*,' *Film Studies* 3, 2002.
- 7 Sergei Eisenstein, 'Through Theatre to Cinema,' in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, edited and translated by Jay Leyda, Harcourt Brace, 1949: 8.
- 8 As Neil D. Isaacs notes, 'Of all the great movie directors in anyone's pantheon, Lubitsch is the most thoroughly theatre-oriented.' Isaacs, 'Lubitsch and the Filmed-Play Syndrome,' *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 3, no 4, Fall 1975: 300.
- 9 Robert Carringer and Barry Sabath, *Ernest Lubitsch: A guide to references and resources*, G. K. Hall, 1978: 72–98.
- 10 Oscar Wilde, review of *Olivia* at the Lyceum, *Dramatic Review*, 1 (30 May 1885) 17:278 cited in Sos Elitis, *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*, Clarendon Press, 1996: 55.

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- See also, Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, Cambridge, 1990.
- 11 Eltis, *Revising Wilde*: 55.
  - 12 Richard Watts, Jr., "'Lady Windermere's Fan' and The Problems It Suggests," *New York Tribune*, 13 December 1925, 3E.
  - 13 Ernst Lubitsch, 'Lubitsch Talks of Epigrams On Screen,' *New York Herald Tribune*, 27 December 1925, 3E.
  - 14 Ibid.
  - 15 W. Graham Robertson, 'Of Oscar Wilde,' in E. H. Mikhail, *Oscar Wilde: Interviews and Recollections*, Macmillan, 1979:1:211.
  - 16 *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, G & C Merriam, 1981: 763.
  - 17 Herman Weinberg, *The Lubitsch Touch: A Critical Study*, E.P. Dutton, 1968: 259.
  - 18 Ernst Lubitsch, "The Motion Picture Art is the Youngest of All the Muses," in Laurence A. Hughes, editor, *The Truth About the Movies by the Stars* (Hollywood, Ca.: Hollywood Publishers, Inc, 1924), 347.
  - 19 Lubitsch, 'The Motion Picture Art is the Youngest of All the Muses,' 351.
  - 20 Ligon Johnson, Attorney at Law, to Warner Bros Pictures, Inc. Att: Mr. Ebenstein, 19 March 1935, Warner Bothers Archive, USC; Robert Tanitch, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, Methuen, 1999: 93–107. For an account of the rehearsal and premiere of *Lady Windermere's Fan* see also Richard Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1988: 361–369.
  - 21 "Certain Marginalia on 'Lady Windermere's Fan,'" *New York Times*, 29 March 1914, X6.
  - 22 "Wilde's Play Very Well Acted," *New York Times*, 9 March 1914, 11. The revival of *Lady Windermere's Fan* in 1914 can be tied to a wave of feminist activism in the performing arts at this time.
  - 23 Thomas H. Dickinson, ed., *Chief Contemporary Dramatists: Twenty Plays from the Recent Drama of England, Ireland, American, Germany, France, Belgium, Norway, Sweden, and Russia*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915.
  - 24 Tanitch, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, 105.
  - 25 Jon Burrows, *Legitimate Cinema: Theatre Stars in Silent British Films, 1908–1918*, University of Exeter, 2003: 183. Burrows's chapter on the Ideal Company, its films and its personnel offers an extremely helpful historical framework for appreciating the Benedict James-Fred Paul film version of *Lady Windermere's Fan* (see also review of Burrows in this issue: 119–20).
  - 26 'An "Ideal" Day,' *The Bioscope*, 24 February 1916: 805.
  - 27 *Bioscope*, 20 April 1916: 360.
  - 28 British Film Institute, personality summaries. Netta Westcott played *Lady Windermere* and Nigel Playfair assumed the role of Lord Augustus Lorton.
  - 29 Editors' note: On Annie Horniman's Gaiety Theatre, see Amy Sargeant, 'Popular Modernism: The Case of *Hindle Wakes*', *Film Studies* no. 3, 2002: 48ff.
  - 30 Obituaries, *Daily Telegraph*, 7 December 1971; *The Times*, 9 December 1971 and 15 December 1971. There are significant inconsistencies as to dates and activities of Rosmer's career in this period, though all agree he was in Miss Horniman's repertory company at the Gaiety Theatre in Manchester from 1910. They also agree he went to war in 1916, a fact also noted in the trade press ("We Hear, *Pictures and Picturegoers*, 18 March 1916: 583). Rosmer would establish himself in London after World War I, but in the period before the war he worked almost exclusively in the provinces. See also Burrows, *Legitimate Cinema*, 195.
  - 31 'Lady Windermere's Fan,' *The Bioscope*, 25 May 1916: 887.
  - 32 Advertisement, *Bioscope*, 6 July 1916: 34–35.
  - 33 'Lady Windermere's Fan,' *Variety*, 6 June 1919. Although the print was preserved by the MPRS Division at the Library of Congress, a 35mm print is also at the British Film Institute. For trade advertising and release date see *Moving Picture World (MPW)*, 7 June 1919: 1422 and 14 June 1919: 583–5.
  - 34 Advertisement, *MPW*, 14 June 1919, 584. The role of Mrs. Erlynne was often said to have been written for Lillian Russell, though she refused to play it. The relationship of Ada Rehan to the play is more elusive. She never seems to have appeared in a Wilde play. Her closest role was as Lady Teazle in Richard Sheridan's *School for Scandal* – a play to which Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* had been compared. She was one of several theatrical figures who purchased an agreement for the rights to Wilde's play in progress, *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry*, on 7 February 1900 (Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*, 579).
  - 35 "Lady Windermere's Fan," *Variety*, 6 June 1919.
  - 36 "Lady Windermere's Fan," *MPW*, 14 June 1919: 1689.
  - 37 Tanitch, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*, 103.
  - 38 Ernest La Jeunesse, André Gide, and Franz Blei, *In Memoriam: Oscar Wilde* (Greenwich, Ct: Literary Collector Press, 1905), Translation and introduction by Percival Pollard, 14–15.
  - 39 *New York Times*, 6 March 1921, 1F. Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was adapted to the British stage in 1913 by G. Constant Lounsbery, with Lou-Tellegen directing and playing the role of Dorian Gray (Tanitch, *Oscar Wilde on Stage and Screen*: 372).
  - 40 When I was working as head of research on Milos Forman's *Ragtime* (1981), one of my tasks was to locate various film versions of the White-Thaw tragedy, including Lubin's *The Unwritten Law* (1906) and *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* (Richard Lester, 1955). On *Hearts and Minds* (1974),

- Peter Davis made a point of seeing every documentary on Vietnam early in the production process. If stock footage in *Hearts and Minds* appears in some earlier documentary, one can assume that the filmmakers knew it had already been used. One of the duties for the researchers on *Zelig* (1983) was to provide Woody Allen with documentaries on many of the subjects he planned to cover in the film.
- 41 Agreement between Warner Brothers and Ernst Lubitsch, 7 August 1923, 1, Warner Bothers Archive, USC.
  - 42 See various undated telegrams, notably Harry [Warner] to L.C.D. Wahewar, Los Angeles, [1926], Warner Brothers Archive, USC.
  - 43 Agreement between Warner Brothers and Ernst Lubitsch, 7 August 1923, 2–3.
  - 44 Fulton Brylawski to Thmas & Friedman, 8 May 1925, Warner Bothers Archive, USC. Brylawski's dates in this letter are not, however, always reliable.
  - 45 "'Lady Windermere's Fan' Is Lubitsch's New Warner Film,' *MPW*, 27 June 1925: 992.
  - 46 Harry Warner to George H. Smith, 28 July 1925, and G. H. Smith to Mr. Albert Warner, 17 August 1925, Warner Brothers Archive, USC.
  - 47 '40 Warner Bros. Classics of the Screen Season of 1925–1926,' *MPW*, 25 July 1925: 367.
  - 48 '40 Warner Bros. Classics of the Screen Season of 1925–1926,' *MPW*, 25 July 1925: 347.
  - 49 Clipping, scrapbook 5, Irene Rich Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (MHL, AMPAS). According to Scott Eyman, Irene Rich was having an affair with Jack Warner at about this time. See Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch: Laughter in Paradise*, Simon and Schuster, 1993: 97.
  - 50 Mae Tinée, 'Wilde Play Makes Fine, Smooth Film,' *Chicago Tribune*, 5 January 1926: 19.
  - 51 Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*, 113. Colman's attachment to the production was not announced until 26 September. ("Lubitsch Completes Cast of 'Lady Windermere's Fan'," *MPW*, 26 September 1925, 340.) Both Irene Rich and Colman are compelling examples of off-casting in *Lady Windermere's Fan*. When it works, off-casting is a tribute to the producer-director's vision. But when it fails, the attempt can become an embarrassment. One way Lubitsch and other directors (e.g. Howard Hawks) established their reputations was through their successful efforts at off-casting.
  - 52 'New Lubitsch and Chaplin Get Underway at Warners,' *MPW*, 3 October 1925: 416.
  - 53 Will C. Murphy to Editor, *Canadian Moving Picture Digest*, 29 September 1925, and "– Off for Canada to Take Race Track Scenes," *Los Angeles Times*, 30 September 1925, both in scrapbook 5, Irene Rich Collection, MHL, AMPAS.
  - 54 'Star and Director Guests of the Warners in New York,' *MPW*, 24 October 1925: 634.
  - 55 Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*: 114.
  - 56 Synopsis of Agreement between Ideal Films Limited and Warner Bros. Pictures, Inc., 28 September 1925, Warner Brothers Archive, USC.
  - 57 Ibid.
  - 58 Robert E. Sherwood, 'Lady Windermere's Fan,' *Life*, ca. January 1926, 24, miscellaneous clipping, scrapbook 5, Irene Rich Collection, MHL, AMPAS. The absence of epigrams continues to be seen as one of Lubitsch's most notably and brilliant innovations. See, for example, Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*: 114.
  - 59 'Lady Windermere's Fan,' *MPW*, 5 December 1925: 443; 'Warner's "Lady Windermere's Fan" in Brilliant Premiere at Casa Lopez,' *MPW*, 12 December 1925: 554.
  - 60 "'Lady Windermere's Fan" Smashes Records at Its New York Premiere,' *MPW*, 9 January 1926: 161.
  - 61 "'Lady Windermere's Fan" at the Warner,' *New York American*, 28 December 1925: 7.
  - 62 'Picture Plays and Players,' *New York Sun*, 28 December 1925: 25.
  - 63 "'Lady Windermere's Fan" Smashes Records at Its New York Premiere,' *MPW*, 9 January 1926: 161.
  - 64 Advertisement, *Exhibitor's Herald*, 26 December 1925: 16–17.
  - 65 Advertisement, *New York Herald Tribune*, 26 December 1925: 8. Another large newspaper advertisement boasted 'An Ernst Lubitsch production "LADY WINDERMERE'S FAN" from the Stage Play by OSCAR WILDE', *Chicago Tribune*, 3 January 1926: 3H.
  - 66 Harriette Underhill, 'On the Screen,' *New York Herald Tribune*, 28 December 1925: 12.
  - 67 Mae Tinée, 'Wilde Play Makes Fine, Smooth Film,' *Chicago Tribune*, 5 January 1926: 5.
  - 68 Mordaunt Hall, "The Screen," *New York Times*, 28 December 1925, 19.
  - 69 *Los Angeles Times*, clipping, Irene Rich Collection, MHL, AMPAS. My search in the microfilm edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, while by no means exhaustive, failed to turn up this article. I did, however, find a somewhat similar one by Katherine Lipke, who might, indeed, yet prove to be the author of the above cited clipping. According to the discerning Lipke, "The director, famous for subtle situations and clever ideas, has so turned and woven the original play, even while keeping it intact, that it will probably amaze those who were never amazed before." ("Famous Oscar Wilde Play of English Life Transferred to Celluloid," *Los Angeles Sunday Times*, 27 December 1925, 27C). Interestingly this latter article appeared the day after the New York opening of *Lady Windermere's Fan* and more than a month in advance of the Los Angeles premiere which did not occur until January 30th.

- On Theatrical Culture, Oscar Wilde and Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan*

- 70 Robert E. Sherwood, "The Film of the Month," *McCall's Magazine*, April 1926, clipping, Irene Rich Collection, MHL, AMPAS.
- 71 Ibid.
- 72 'Exceptional Photoplays,' *National Board of Review Magazine*, March–April 1926: 11.
- 73 Ibid.
- 74 Henri Bergson, 'Laughter,' in Wylie Sypher, ed., *Comedy*, Johns Hopkins, 1956: 106.
- 75 Bergson, 'Laughter': 110.
- 76 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Hogarth Press, 1960: 90.
- 77 Patricia White, 'Nazimova's Veil's: *Salome at the Intersection of Film Histories*,' in Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra, eds., *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, Duke University Press, 2002:60–87.
- 78 David Davidson, 'The Importance of Being Ernst: Lubitsch and *Lady Windermere's Fan*,' *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1983:120–131; Linda Costanzo Cahir, 'A Shared Impulse: The Significance of Language in Oscar Wilde's and Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan*,' *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 19:1, 1991: 7–11. Ms. Cahir was a student in my 'American Theatre/American Film' class, which I was then teaching at NYU and Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* was one of the focal points of the course.
- 79 Brigitte Peucker, *Incorporating Images: Film and the Rival Arts*, Princeton, 1995: 3.
- 80 William Paul, *Ernest Lubitsch's American Comedy*, Columbia, 1983. As Paul notes, 'It was a talkie which kept only one line from the play, not a particularly witty line at that, and furthermore economically truncated from the original': 68.
- 81 Noel Coward, *Design for Living* in Coward, *Play Parade*, Garden City Publishing, 1933: 42.
- 82 Gilda can undress Napoleon no further than his underwear without violating the Hays code. Eventually we also learn that to go further than this would also violate the purposes of commerce, since the sketches are used to sell union suits.
- 83 Sabine Hake, *Passions and Deceptions: The Early Films of Ernst Lubitsch*, Princeton, 1992: 39.
- 84 Hugo Munsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, D. Appleton, 1916; Lubitsch, 'The Motion Picture Art is the Youngest of All the Muses,' 347–351.
- 85 James Wingate to Will H. Hayes, 26 June 1933, *Design for Living* file, Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association Collection, MHL, AMPAS.
- 86 Brewster and Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema*: 3–15, esp n 13.
- 87 Eltis, *Revising Wilde*: 59–65.
- 88 Burrows, *Legitimate Cinema*: 196.
- 89 However much one dislikes historical interpretation that judges a film for its 'failures', in this instance, the problem is so severe that it cannot be overlooked. More importantly, such awkwardness caught Lubitsch's attention.
- 90 My analysis of scenes in the Lubitsch film is schematic and could be rendered in greater detail. For instance, the first scene unfolds in a number of contiguous yet separate spaces. In scenes 4 and 5, Mrs. Erlynne's apartment has a foyer, which could be broken out separately. One could argue that these 'scenes' are actually 'sequences.' The goal here is not to provide a perfect shot-by-shot analysis but illuminate the respective structures of the prologues in the two films.
- 91 Although there are no literal divorces or remarriages during the course of *Lady Windermere's Fan*, Lady W leaves her husband for another man, realizes her mistake, and returns to her husband. Although not a comedy of remarriage, the film bears a family resemblance to it. *Lady Windermere's Fan* is, like the comedy of remarriage, a sophisticated comedy about marriage. See Charles Musser, 'DeMille, Divorce and the Comedy of Remarriage,' in Henry Jenkins and Kristine Karnick, eds., *Classical Film Comedy: Narrative/Performance/ Ideology*, Routledge/AFI, 1994): 282–313. It was Stanley Cavell who first articulated the 'comedy of remarriage' paradigm, though from a frustratingly narrow perspective – limiting it to a small group of films from the 1930s. See: Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard: 1981. This gesture is one of the many small ways Lubitsch avoids making his film a period piece.
- 92 Whether the third vertex of this triangle is imagined as the filmed theatre of Nazimova's *Salomé* or some antecedent live performance, the triangle of representational difference is palpable.
- 93 Lubitsch, 'The Motion Picture Art is the Youngest of All the Muses,' 349.
- 94 Ibid: 347.
- 95 The 'more' of the film includes an elaboration of space associated with each of the play's sets: the gardens, the upstairs bedroom, the front entrance of the Windermere's home, the hallway as well as several interior spaces of Darlington's apartments. There are also more extras in the crowd scenes and, as we see, more gifts. The film sets are also, as already noted, larger.
- 96 In Triangle's advertisement, the line that crosses the two-page spread reads, 'If that woman crosses my threshold, I will strike her across the face with this fan', *MPW*, 14 June 1919: 1584–5.
- 97 There are in fact three letters: the one Mrs. Erlynne writes to Lord Windermere, the one Lord Windermere writes to Mrs. Erlynne and the one that Lady Windermere writes to her husband.
- 98 John Sloan, *Oscar Wilde*, Oxford, 2003: 107.
- 99 Patricia Flanagan Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde: Eros and Aesthetics*, Macmillan, 1991: 129, 136.

- 100 Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: 92. Elsewhere he remarks, 'A whole class of obscene jokes allows one to infer the presence of a concealed inclination to exhibitionism in their inventors' (143).
- 101 Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*, Cambridge, 1990: 17.
- 102 Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s*: 17.
- 103 Peter Raby, "Wilde's comedies of Society" in Peter Raby, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997: 147.
- 104 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, University of California, 1990: 98.
- 105 In Lubitsch's film the cheques are kept in a locked desk drawer; in the play they are in a private, locked bank book in an open drawer; while in the Ideal film the bank book is unlocked and in an open cupboard.
- 106 See White, 'Nazimova's Veils: *Salome* at the Intersection of Film Histories,' 66.
- 107 Sol Eltis, *Revising Wilde*: 92.
- 108 Jody Price, 'A Map with Utopia': *Oscar Wilde's Theory for Social Transformation*, Peter Lang, 1996: 175.
- 109 Regenia Gagnier, 'Introduction,' in Gagnier, ed., *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*: 3.
- 110 For an overview of recent Wilde criticism see Ian Small, *Oscar Wilde: Recent Research* (Greensboro, North Carolina: ELT Press, 2000). See also Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Toward a Genealogy of Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993); various essays in Regenia Gagnier, ed., *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde* (New York: G.K. Hall, 1991); Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Between Men*, and many of the books in the subsequent footnotes.
- 111 Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde, and the Queer Moment*, Columbia, 1994: vi.
- 112 Behrendt, *Oscar Wilde*: 120.
- 113 Jeff Nunokawa, *Tame Passions of Wilde: The Styles of Manageable Desire*, Princeton, 2003: 21–22.
- 114 Royal General Theatrical Fund, report of speech, 26 May 1892, George Alexander in the chair, quoted in Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*: 368.
- 115 Eltis, *Revising Wilde*: 59–65.
- 116 Lord Alfred Douglas, 'Two Loves,' *The Chameleon* 1, 1894: 28.
- 117 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, Columbia, 1985: 94.
- 118 For the ways in which Lubitsch experienced his own situation as one at risk, see Eyman, *Ernst Lubitsch*: 82.