

## Garbo Laughs!

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Ninotchka, the titular protagonist of Ernst Lubitsch's 1939 romantic comedy, does not mean to be witty. "The last mass trials were a great success," she informs Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski, the three Soviet stooges who have been sent to Paris to sell the Grand Duchess Swana's jewels, "there are going to be fewer but better Russians."<sup>i</sup> The irony registers, but no irony is intended. Unlike her comrades – unlike, in fact, virtually every other Stalinist in the movie – Ninotchka is a True Believer. Žižek argues that an ideology is "really 'holding us' only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality – that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself."<sup>ii</sup> Yet if Ninotchka qualifies as one of the "really held," Stalinism never quite manages to determine the mode of Buljanoff's, Iranoff's, or Kopalski's everyday experience of either Paris or Moscow. Official ideology, for example, dictates that the three occupy a modest, working-class hotel while conducting their business in Paris. Creature comfort, however, demands something grander, and creature comfort carries the day. Granted, ideological correctness is not thereby compromised. "What would Lenin do?" the three ask themselves while deciding on which hotel to occupy, only to conclude, ingeniously, that fidelity to ideals requires the more luxurious accommodation: "What he [Lenin] would say is, 'Buljanoff, you can't afford to live in a cheap hotel. Doesn't the prestige of the Bolsheviks mean anything to you?'" (21). And so, as good Bolsheviks, the three have no choice but to occupy the grand hotel.

No choice, moreover, but to occupy the most ideologically problematic rooms within an ideologically problematic hotel: the only suite that can safely accommodate the Grand Duchess's jewels is the Royal Suite, which, the manager informs them, may suit their "convenience" if not their "convictions" (24). But again, convictions and convenience prove perfectly compatible: the safety of the jewels must outweigh any merely "personal" qualms about occupying so politically retrograde a suite. Buljanoff does have an "idea," which, if acted upon, would fracture this happy merger of ideological correctness and self-interest: "But, of course, we could take out the pieces and distribute them in three or four boxes in the vault and take a small room. That's an idea, isn't it?" But he adds: "Who said we had to have an idea?" (25). The wit is intentional. Totalitarian regimes do not normally require or encourage their citizens to have "ideas," and here the idea of not having an idea is the best idea of all.

The idea of not having an idea does not, however, threaten the regime that would squash all dissident ideas: the cynicism that is at the heart of Buljanoff's, Iranoff's, and Kopalski's relation to State Truth is already, as it were, anticipated by that Truth. Žižek argues that totalitarian ideology is not meant, "even by its authors, to be taken seriously – its status is just that of a means of manipulation, purely external and instrumental: its rule is secured not by its truth-value but by simple extra-ideological violence and promise of gain" (30). There is, then, nothing innately subversive or anti-totalitarian in the force of Buljanoff's, Iranoff's, and Kopalski's laughter: totalitarianism itself reverberates with it. Ninotchka is a True Believer, but she is the exception that proves the rule, and it is, in any case, the True Believer that is potentially the most troublesome to the system. *Ninotchka* openly acknowledges communism as an ideology. The Soviet system has its theoreticians – Lenin is explicitly invoked and discussed – and it places its citizens under obligations that are at least theoretically irreducible to self-interest. For that reason alone, however, it never quite succeeds in exercising a "totalizing" or "totalitarian" control over the hearts and minds of its citizens. Fear, not belief, secures the Stalinism of *Ninotchka*.

And fear has its limits: not even the oft-repeated threat of Siberia, for example, can determine Buljanoff's, Iranoff's, and Kopalski's experience of everyday reality. Lubitsch is not, of course, an apologist for Stalinism, and if the Soviet state fails to exercise totalitarian control over its citizens, it

isn't for want of trying. A repressive state apparatus is everywhere operable. The one letter from Leon that does reach Ninotchka in Moscow is totally censored, and as Anna, Ninotchka's friend and flat-mate observes, it is impossible to distinguish neighbor from spy: "Ah, that Gurganov! You never know whether he's on his way to the washroom or the Secret Police" (220). Even underwear is subject to state scrutiny. The lingerie that Ninotchka brings back with her from Paris – she happens to be wearing it at the time – provokes intense ideological debate:

Anna: Some said it's what we all ought to wear. Others said it's like hanging foreign ideas on our clothesline. It undermines our whole cause. (221)

To which Ninotchka replies:

You know how it is today. All you have to do is wear a pair of silk stockings and they suspect you of counter revolution. Thank you, Anna. I'll dry it up here when I wash it next. I would hate to see our country endangered by my underwear. (222)

Here the wit is intentional, and it bespeaks Ninotchka's growing detachment from official state truth. Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski bring their own eggs with them to the modest dinner party Ninotchka throws in her apartment, which Anna construes as a microcosm of the communist project: "Just goes to prove the theory of our State. If you stand alone, it means a boiled egg, but if you're true to the collective spirit and stick together, you've got an omelet" (219). The exercise in collective dining serves, however, only to exacerbate the psychic distance separating Moscow from Paris, and try as they might, the four comrades cannot transform the former into the latter. "Let's talk ourselves into it" (230), Iranoff encourages the others, but to talk oneself into an ideologically appropriate experience of everyday reality is necessarily to measure one's distance from it. The volitional internalization of state truth is not internalization at all.

Communism has no ideological counterpart in *Ninotchka*. The Soviets consider themselves locked in a death struggle with the capitalist West (and vice versa), but capitalism is never acknowledged as an ideology as such: the very system that prides itself on promoting a marketplace of ideas paradoxically refuses to meet idea with idea. Only communists ever utter the word "capitalist" – Iranoff: "Capitalistic methods." Buljanoff: "Hmmm. They accumulate millions by taking loss after loss" (38) – and Lenin is never refuted by, say, Adam Smith. The Count does concede to being "bourgeois" (he isn't), but capitalism apparently has no theoreticians, and no explicit defense of it is ever mounted. Quite the contrary. Leon seeks to convince Ninotchka of his working class credentials, and he lectures his own butler, who is disturbed to find a copy of *Capital* in the apartment, on the class injustice of their arrangement. *Ninotchka* does not stage capitalism as one ideology among others, to be debated, refuted, or embraced, and it is manifestly not the symmetrical opposite of communism. It is, rather, the universal logic of the somatic. So long as an ideology remains a consciously held position – to rehearse an earlier point – the subject enjoys at least a minimal distance from it. Insinuate that ideology in and as the body's naturally given imperatives, however, and its authority is unimpeachable.

Hence the significance of the famous promotional phrase that launched the movie: "Garbo laughs!" And it is capitalist laughter. "Totalitarian laughter" might be better termed, at least in this context, "totalitarian wit"; it is cerebral, ironic, distanced, very much "of the head." When Ninotchka laughs, however, her entire body convulses – were it not that Garbo's figure renders the phrase singularly inappropriate, one might almost call it a "belly laugh."



**Still from *Ninotchka* (1939)**

Totalitarian wit frequently takes as its object the denial of the body's appetites:

Ninotchka: . . . there is an old Russian saying "The cat who has cream on his whiskers had better find good excuses."

Buljanoff: With our cream situation as it is, it's Russian that should apologize to the cats. (249)

Buljanoff's witticism about the cream (or lack thereof) recalls Leon's earlier joke in the restaurant:

Leon: A man comes into a restaurant. He sits down at the table and he says, "Waiter, bring me a cup of coffee without cream." Five minutes later the waiter comes back and says, "I'm sorry, sir, we have no cream. Can it be without milk?" (126)

The joke fails to elicit from Ninotchka the desired response. What does get a laugh – a deep, uncontrolled and uncontrollable laugh – is Leon's unintended tumble from his chair. The joke exacerbates the division between communist and capitalist: although the working class diners prove an appreciative audience, Ninotchka remains impassive. The unexpected humiliation of the body natural, however, elicits a universal response. There is no distinction between capitalist and communist in the hilarity that ensues, and even Leon eventually joins in the laughter. The Count does not, of course, mean to tumble. Ninotchka does not mean to laugh. Yet both do, and it is precisely the failure of the will that produces a community predicated on common somatic reflexes. Language divides; the body natural unites.

The divisive power of language was a source of considerable anxiety in the early days of film: the coming of sound (both Lubitsch and Garbo were, of course, veterans of the silent screen) threatened to restrict the popular new medium, particularly in the immigrant rich new world, to English-language speakers only. The silent screen celebrated the universal legibility of the body; talkies displaced somatic intelligibility (or so it was feared) with an arbitrary order of signs. The event that issues in the world-historical guffaw is, however, physical comedy, a staple of the silent screen. *Ninotchka* is among the most literate of Hollywood products – Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, and Walter Reisch collaborated on the script – yet it too is invested in the mute intelligibility of the somatic. Even the debonair Count is subject to the body's frailties; even the dour Stalinist finds those frailties wildly amusing. *Ninotchka*'s laughing body defects, as it were, long before her recalcitrant mind, for the body always knows better than the subject who occupies it. When *Ninotchka* is told by Comrade Razin of Iranoff's, Buljanoff's and Kopalski's antics in Constantinople (they throw a carpet out a hotel window and complain to management when it doesn't fly) she has to suppress a smile. Earlier, when she is consulting with a lawyer over the disposition of the jewels, the smile wins out. The laughter leaves, as it were, its residue, and the impossible-to-suppress smile bespeaks *Ninotchka*'s awakening from her dogmatic slumber. Here is not a matter of an ideology "really holding" the subject, for ideology is experienced not as an imposition from without, but a spontaneous eruption from within. The totalitarian state may fail to exercise totalizing control over the hearts and minds of its citizens, but not its liberal-democratic counterpart. The body natural is naturally capitalist.

Adorno considered the culture industry in general, and film in particular, agents of a well-nigh totalizing control: "The film has succeeded in transforming subjects so indistinguishably into social functions, that those wholly encompassed, no longer aware of any conflict, enjoy their own dehumanization as something human, as the joy of warmth. The total interconnectedness of the culture industry, omitting nothing, is one with total social delusion. Which is why it makes such light work of counter-arguments."<sup>iii</sup> The "transformation" is fully corporeal. High culture may promote the disinterested contemplation of beauty, but "the experience of watching film," as Steven Shaviro styles it, "remains stubbornly concrete, immanent, and prereflective . . . . Sitting in the dark, watching the play of images across a screen, any detachment from 'raw phenomena,' from the immediacy of sensation, or from the speeds and delays of temporal duration, is radically impossible. Cinema invites me, or forces me, to stay within the orbit of the senses."<sup>iv</sup> Adorno would say "force," not "invite," and he acknowledges no practical opposition whatsoever between "the materiality of [filmic] sensation" and "the ideality of signification." True, film promotes the illusion of their opposition – the illusion, that is, of its own pre- or non-ideological immediacy – but only to insinuate its agenda in and as the somatic. "To stay within the orbit of the senses" is, then, to experience ideological colonization at its most effective, if only because it is not experienced as colonization at all: the subject embraces the principle of its own dehumanization, its reduction to its social functioning, in all "the joy of warmth." The degraded products of the culture industry seize the body.

*Ninotchka* is one such product, and it is fully subject to Adorno's critique: it too is invested in reconciling the subject to things-as-they-are. But if here the body natural is naturally capitalist, it is also our best check – or so Lubitsch suggests – against the political excesses of high modernism, at least to the extent that modernism can be construed as a rejection, from the perspective of the left or right, of the bourgeois settlement. Adorno fears the colonization of the body by the totalizing grasp of the culture industry; *Ninotchka* advances the body as the last bulwark against totalitarianism proper. (I say totalitarianism "proper," but Lubitsch actually acknowledges no meaningful difference between extremities of the left and right. Stalinism is but National Socialism by another name, and both are subsumable under the rubric of "totalitarianism." Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* provided an intellectual justification for the position, which obviously served the interests of Cold War ideology. And it is still very much – I would say too much – with us.) *To Be Or Not To Be* (1942), Lubitsch's comic take on the histrionics of Nazism, is deeply suspicious of the politics of self-denial: "You can't trust a man who doesn't drink, smoke, or eat meat." The man in question is Colonel Schultz, a relatively minor Nazi official, but the caution applies with equal force to the famously

abstemious Führer. In the opening moments of the movie, an unattended Hitler – as it turns out, it is an actor playing the role of Hitler – wanders the streets of Warsaw. A disembodied voice over speculates: “Is he by any chance interested in Mr. Maslowski’s delicatessen? That’s impossible. He’s a vegetarian, and yet he doesn’t always stick to his diet. Sometimes he swallows up whole countries. Does he want to eat up Poland too?” Better a Polish sausage than Poland itself: had Hitler been less abstemious, the movie seems to suggest, the history of the twentieth century might not have been what it was. *To Be Or Not To Be* satirizes a totalitarianism of the right; *Ninotchka* mocks a totalitarianism of the left, but it is six of one, half a dozen of the other: the same ideologically motivated denial or distortion of the body’s naturally given imperatives (as if the body were not itself “always already” ideological) informs them both. Ninotchka, unlike Colonel Schultz, does indulge in the occasional cigarette, but she is otherwise a teetotaling ideologue, utterly out of touch with the body that she so awkwardly occupies. Only when she returns to her senses – under the Count’s tutelage, she learns to eat and drink with gusto, which is to say, she unlearns how not to eat and drink with gusto – does she come to her senses. And the senses, good sense itself, are/is capitalist. Adorno thought that the somatic colonization of the subject by film was so absolute as to admit of no “counter arguments.” *Ninotchka* ups the ante: it advances, as it were, only counter arguments, only apologies for communism. Its defense of capitalism literally goes-without-saying.

Ninotchka’s implicit defection occurs in a restaurant; Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski defect in order to open a restaurant:

Ninotchka: You mean you’re deserting Russia?

Iranoff: Hmm!

Kopalski: Oh, Ninotchka, don’t call it desertion. Our little restaurant – that is our Russia. The Russia of borscht, the Russia of boeuf stroganoff, of blinis and sour cream.

Iranoff: The Russia of perishoka . . . people will eat it and love it.

Buljanoff: Ah, and we are not only serving good food, we are serving our country. (250-51)

*Ninotchka* concludes with a celebration of an anachronism, the Russia of borscht and boeuf stroganoff. Its plot is motivated, however, by the threat of mass starvation in the Soviet Union:

Ninotchka: Why are we peddling our precious possessions to the world at this time? Our next years [sic] crop is in danger and you know it! Unless we can get foreign currency to buy foreign tractors, there’ll not be enough bread for our people. (71)

If food is a biological imperative, it is also a politics, and Ninotchka’s own appetite is clearly ideologically determined. She orders “raw beets and carrots” at Pere Mathieu’s, the working-class restaurant that is the site of Leon’s memorable tumble – “Madame,” the proprietor informs her, “this is a restaurant, not a meadow” (115) – and she consistently speaks of food in terms of need rather than pleasure. Yet if class consciousness initially determines Ninotchka’s appetite (and it is very much class consciousness, a thoroughly erroneous idea of working-class appetite), she soon finds herself dining in an altogether different establishment, resplendent in a Parisian gown, and sipping (or, more accurately, chugging) champagne for the first time.<sup>v</sup> Between the two intervenes the laugh, the release from the ideological deformation of the body. *Ninotchka* demonizes communism not as an evil ideology, but as the evil that is ideology. Its redeemed counterpart is thus not another ideology, but the pre- or anti-ideological sanctity of the body’s naturally given imperatives. Leon proposes to build Ninotchka a “white house,” to which she objects. He then proposes to build her a “red house,” to which she also objects: “No, let’s not have any color. No color. Just a house house. Let’s form our own party” (181).

Neither white nor red, neither reactionary nor revolutionary: the party-that-is-not-one, that is knowable only in its resistance to definition, is, by (non)definition, bourgeois.<sup>vii</sup>

**"Hello, Sister!"**

It is Garbo, not simply Ninotchka, who laughs, which is to say, *Ninotchka* is in a complex intertextual relation to the Garbo myth. (Literally so: the movie features a number of variations on "I want to be alone," Garbo's signature line. As late as March 1939, moreover, its working title *We Want to Be Alone*.) This is not in itself, of course, remarkable. Hollywood stars always play a double part: the role of star and the role any given script demands of them (Shaviro, 223). In *Ninotchka*, however, the latter virtually parodies the former. By 1939, Garbo's box-office appeal was on the decline, and to cast the star of, say, *Camille* or *Anna Karenina* in a romantic comedy was a calculated risk. "Garbo laughs!" echoes "Garbo talks!," the 1930 promotional phrase that accompanied *Anna Christie*, Garbo's first talkie. The coming of sound was the end for many a star, and although Garbo was one of the few to negotiate the transition successfully, her acting style never escaped – happily, in my opinion – the grand theatrics of its origins. (Garbo's disregard for the conventions of "natural" expressivity is nothing short of sublime – so sublime, in fact, that the question "can Garbo really act?" remains, even to this day, a much discussed and worried about issue.) If there were those who thought the coming of sound would restrict the popular new medium to English-language speakers only, there were also those who feared that the introduction of dialogue – resistance to sound was in fact resistance to dialogue – would reduce film to "canned" theater, "famous players in famous plays." The decades following the introduction of sound were, however, among the most profitable in Hollywood history, and with the coming of dialogue, it was the silent screen that retroactively seemed "theatrical," in the pejorative sense of the term. *Ninotchka* is the promise of a new, improved Garbo, a pared-down star for a medium increasingly given to the maxim that less is more. (Is less never just less?) It thus schools its star in a thoroughly modern economy of gestures:

Ninotchka: No, let's not have any color. No color. Just a house house. Let's form our own party.

Leon: Right. Lovers of the world unite.

Ninotchka: And we won't stretch up our arms.

Leon: No! No! No!

Ninotchka: And we won't clench our fist.

Leon: No! No!

Ninotchka: Our salute will be a kiss.

Leon: Yes, a kiss. Salute! (181)

Here Lubitsch's celebrated "light" touch satirizes Garbo's "heavy" style of acting: the rejection of the ideological deformation of the body, the purely mechanical gestures of Stalinism, is also, by implication, the rejection of empty theatrics tout court. Bergson argues that "we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing," when "something mechanical [is] encrusted on the living."<sup>viii</sup> *Ninotchka* locates that "encrustation" both in the political convictions of its protagonist and the grand histrionics of its star.

A salute is a purely conventional gesture, the body openly and consciously declaring its ideological

affinities. The Ninotchka who would live in a “house house,” however, abandons the ideological in favor of the world-transcending, world-denying, ideology of love. The mechanical operation of the spirit that is the salute proper is thus superseded by the salute that is the kiss, the allegedly unproblematic expression of the body’s naturally given imperatives. *To Be Or Not To Be* exactly reverses the procedure: Madame Tura (Carole Lombard) kisses Professor Siletsky (Stanley Ridges), a Nazi collaborator, and the two immediately give the fascist salute. But for a kiss to issue in a “Heil Hitler!” is itself proof that it is no kiss at all: Tura works for the resistance, and the kiss is an ideologically motivated act of deception. “Don’t make an issue of my womanhood.” (62), Ninotchka tells her compatriots when they first meet, but Garbo’s “womanhood” – read: her heterosexuality – always was an issue, always is at issue. The signature line, “I want to be alone,” suggests an active resistance to the hegemony of the couple (Garbo herself never married, although she is rumored to have left John Gilbert at the altar), and the drag that she so magnificently sports in *Queen Christina* (not to mention the same-sex kiss) works against the heterosexual credentials that the movie might otherwise seem to establish. True, nobody rivals Garbo at grand, tragic, heterosexual passion. By 1939, however, the passion seemed altogether too grand, too exotic. (In the words of Norma Desmond, the faded diva of Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard*: “I am big. It’s the pictures that got small.”) Ninotchka’s rival for Leon’s affections is, after all, the non-guffawing Grand Duchess, a role that, at least at one time, Garbo might have been expected to play. (Although one can only be grateful for *Ninotchka*, the attempt to revamp Garbo’s image was really the death knell for her career. Plato thought that the depiction of gods doubled up in laughter was unseemly, as it promoted disrespect for the divine. *Ninotchka* confirms the wisdom of his observation. Small wonder that Garbo’s next movie, *Two-Faced Woman* [1941], was to be her last.) The pictures could hardly get smaller: “The Face of the Century” is now content to occupy a “house house.”

#### **“There just aren’t faces like that anymore”**

The Grand Duchess Swana advances conflicting ideologies of the face:

Swana: Oh, it’s really a wretched morning – wretched! I can’t get myself right. I wanted to look mellow, and I look brittle. My face doesn’t compose well. It’s all highlights! How can I dim myself down, Leon? Suggest something. Oh, I’m so bored with this face! I wish I had someone else’s face. Whose face would you have if you had your choice? Oh, well, I guess one gets the face one deserves. (30-31)

A “composed” face is an admirable aesthetic object. A face “one deserves,” by contrast, is a somatic judgement on the state of one’s soul. Both the aristocrat and the (would-be) proletarian – Ninotchka was actually born a “petty bourgeois” (97) – are of the party of “composition.” Both prepare faces to meet the faces that they meet. *Ninotchka* itself, however, is invested in the psychological transparency, the moral intelligibility, of the face. The Garbo myth is the Garbo face, and in seeking to render its Sphinx-like enigma universally legible, *Ninotchka* does gentle violence to it.

Norma Desmond knows of what she speaks: “There just aren’t any faces like that any more. Well, maybe one – Garbo.” Norma’s condemnation of the contemporary cinema is just shy of absolute: only Garbo’s face escapes the generalized censure. Adorno and Horkheimer make precisely the same exception: “By stopping at nothing to ensure that all the characters are essentially alike, with the exception of the villain, and by excluding non-conforming faces (for example, those which, like Garbo’s, do not look as if you could say ‘Hello Sister!’ to them), life is made easier for moviegoers.”<sup>viii</sup> That Garbo’s face should prove the exception is hardly surprising: even at the height of its fame, its sculptural density, its sublime inaccessibility, was already considered anachronistic. Roland Barthes assigns it “to that moment in cinema when capturing the human face still plunged audiences into the deepest ecstasy, when one literally lost oneself in a human image as one would in a philtre . . .

It is . . . an admirable face-object" (Barthes, 56). Certainly H.D. experienced is as such: "Greta Garbo, as I first saw her, gave me a clue, a new angle, and a new sensation of elation."<sup>x</sup> The age demanded, however, an intelligible face-subject, a window unto the soul that plunges audiences into the business of interpretation-as-usual. In Garbo's first American movie, *The Temptress* (1926), she is introduced in a party scene literally wearing a mask; in her last movie, *Two-Faced Woman*, she literally plays a double role: a distant, cool ski instructor (the "icy" Garbo) and the vampish, good-time sister she invents (a "Modern Glamour Girl," as the publicity campaign for the film styled it).<sup>x</sup> Here too the script virtually parodies the persona of its star. "The Face of the Century" is informed, in no uncertain terms, that her days are numbered: "I see. Miss Borg's stock-in-trade [that is, Garbo's stock-in-trade] is mystery. We don't do that anymore. Frankness is our motto. We let the boys see the wheels go round. It seems to interest them." But once the boys demanded to "see the wheels go round," once they felt free to address even Garbo as "Hello, Sister," Garbo effectively ceased to be.

The phrase "admirable face object" suggests, of course, objectification, which is conventionally held to be the fate of women in all scopical economies, very much including film. Woman connotes "to-be-looked-at-ness" in Laura Mulvey's influential formulation.<sup>xi</sup> But the unhappy fate of "The Face of the Century" – which withdrew from public visibility at the age of thirty-six – suggests otherwise. Bourgeois subjectivity is guaranteed through "subjectification," which, in Foucault's memorable formulation, renders "the soul . . . the prison of the body."<sup>xii</sup> Or, to quote the Grand Duchess: the bourgeois subject has the face he or she deserves. It is, then, hardly surprising that what is sometimes called "the democratization" of Garbo's image – I would say "normalization" – begins with a movie that is an implicit apology for the bourgeois settlement.

An implicit apology, that is, for Leon and Ninotchka's "house house," a world neither "red" nor "white," a world that in fact recognizes no meaningful distinction between "red" and "white." Leon encourages Swana, the "white" Russian, to publish a tell-all memoir: "darling, we won't have to worry about our future if you're willing to raffle off your past" (33). "Red" Russia is engaged in an analogous activity: in "raffling off" the Grand Duchess's jewels, its pre-revolutionary past, the Soviet government hopes to secure the nation's economic future. Buljanoff, Iranoff, and Kopalski are not told that Moscow is sending a "lady Comrade" (62) and when waiting for Ninotchka they initially mistake a Nazi for a Bolshevik. "No that's not him," Iranoff tells the others when he sees the man give the fascist salute. "Positively not," Buljanoff responds (58). The liberal West does not, however, share Buljanoff's sense of the positive differences between "totalitarianisms" of the left and right. (Ninotchka was filmed prior to the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 1939, but not released until after it.)<sup>xiii</sup> And as with the liberal settlement, so too with Leon: he is caught between the erotic pull of the mask-like inexpressivity of the "high Other," the aristocratic Swana, and the mask-like inexpressivity of the "low Other," the would-be proletariat Ninotchka.<sup>xiv</sup> Comfortably nestled between the two is the "house house" to which the lovers aspire, the material manifestation of the bourgeois settlement. For her part, Ninotchka must relax into laughter if she is "to rise" to the level of bourgeois subjectivity. For his part, Leon must abandon wit if he is "to descend" to the same. Ninotchka readily concedes her rival's wit:

Ninotchka: She's very attractive. She has great elegance. She's what you call a – woman of the world, isn't she?

Leon: Ninotchka. I love you.

Ninotchka: I suppose she's very entertaining. It must be lots of fun to be with a woman like that, so witty and – . . . (157)

Ninotchka does not mean to be catty, but nothing could be more damning, at least in terms of the moral economy of the film, than calling one's rival "witty." (The Grand Duchess is many things, including witty and entertaining, but "lots of fun" she isn't. And it would be singularly inappropriate to

address her as “Hello, Sister.”) Swana’s conversation is like her face – “composed,” calculated, artificial – but Ninotchka will have none of it: “What is it you people always say regardless of what you mean: ‘I am delighted to have you here?’ I haven’t reached that state of civilization, therefore I must ask you to leave” (194). Yet if Ninotchka does not speak the language of the “High Other,” her comprehension is impeccable. At the Café de Lucesse, Swana tells her rival an elaborate story about her pet dog, which, of course, is anything but a story about her pet dog:

Swana: You see, Count d’Algout gave me Punch for my birthday. You must have searched for weeks before you found anything as divine as Punchy, didn’t you Leon?

Leon: Months, Swana.

Swana: Oh, poor Madame Yakushova – here we are talking in mysteries. I’m sure you wonder what it’s all about.

Ninotchka: Not at all. I understand perfectly. Count d’Algout gave you a dog. You made it very clear, Madame.

Swana: Oh, dear me. I must be losing my finesse. If I’m not careful I’ll be understood by everybody. (168-69)

Swana is speaking of her hold over an altogether different pet, which Ninotchka knows perfectly well. And Swana knows that she knows. But universal legibility is hardly an aristocratic ideal, and on the whole, Swana neither practices it nor promotes it in others:

Leon: I know you hate the obvious, but do you mind if, for the moment, I am not the least subtle?

Swana: Brutal frankness if you insist.

Leon: There are a hundred ways of approaching it, but I feel it can best be said in one simple phrase. I’m in love, Swana.

Swana: Oh, I thought it was something serious! How could you frighten me so?

Leon: It must be serious. Not so long ago I’d have considered such a statement juvenile and rather middle class. Now I can say it without a stammer, without a blush. I’m in love, Swana.

Swana: But Leon, this has the ugly sound of regeneration! (207)

Swana labors mightily (if lightly) to prevent Leon from descending into bourgeois intelligibility, but to not avail. She knows, of course, that Leon loves Ninotchka, and Leon knows that she knows. But she also knows that if Leon ever utters the words, all is lost. Swana herself clearly experiences the emotion that she will not name: she sacrifices the possibility of recovering her jewels, and hence her economic security, in order to rid herself of her rival. She is not, however, willing to sacrifice her linguistic dignity. In uttering the words that he would have hitherto considered “juvenile and rather middle class,” Leon transforms himself into a proper bourgeois subject. (A proper bourgeois man, one is tempted to add. A witty man is always a sexually suspect man. A straight talker isn’t.) Ninotchka cannot reciprocate: “Leon, I want to tell you something which I thought I would never say. Which I thought nobody ever should say, because I didn’t think it existed. And, Leon – I can’t say it” (152). But the body speaks more eloquently than words ever can, and Ninotchka’s body bears testimony to what her Bolshevik mind would deny: in not uttering the words that she would have hitherto

considered a mystification, love transforms her into a proper bourgeois subject. (A proper bourgeois woman, one is tempted to add. After melting into Leon's arms, Ninotchka rises, opens a compact, and conspicuously applies lipstick. Leon considers it a strange "gesture for a sergeant" (155), but it is entirely appropriate to a movie intent on normalizing the always sexually suspect Garbo image.) The application of lipstick gestures toward the Duchess and civilization, and Ninotchka, for the first time, "composes" her face in the conventional manner. But paint is here only truth in advertising: the conventional markers of femininity are consciously inscribed on the flesh only after an innate femininity has emerged spontaneously from within.

### "Hat Hat"

Ninotchka the Bolshevik has no problem uttering the "L" word:

Leon: Ninotchka, tell me – you're so expert on things – can it be that I am falling in love with you?

Ninotchka: Why must you bring in wrong values? Love is a romantic designation for a most ordinary biological, or shall we say, chemical process. A lot of nonsense is talked and written about it. (96)

Convention has it that women require such nonsense, which men only reluctantly supply. Ninotchka the Bolshevik, however, can do without it. Leon the capitalist cannot:

Leon: Oh, you analyze everything out of existence. You'd analyze me out of existence, but I won't let you. Love isn't so simple Ninotchka. Ninotchka, why do doves bill and coo? Why do snails, the coldest of all creatures, circle interminably around each other? Why do moths fly hundreds of miles to find their mates? Why do flowers slowly open their petals? Oh, Ninotchka – Ninotchka, surely you feel some slight symptom of the divine passion? A general warmth in the palms of your hand – a strange heaviness in your limbs. A burning of the lips that isn't thirst but something a thousand times more tantalizing, more exalting, than thirst?

Ninotchka: You are very talkative. (101)

Leon's exercise in the poetics of bourgeois spiritualization assumes the seemingly paradoxical form of a biological imperative: however "divine" the passion, its symptoms remain grounded in the somatic, in the alleged self-evidence of sweaty palms and parched lips. That a capitalist should lecture a communist on the primacy of matter might seem counterintuitive, but as Fredric Jameson argues, "the grounding of materialism in matter rather than production belongs to a tradition of bourgeois ideology that extends from eighteenth-century materialism through nineteenth-century positivism."<sup>xv</sup> It is to this tradition – and not, say, anything arising out of Marx's *German Ideology* – that Leon's celebration of the spirituality of the biological, or the biology of the spiritual, belongs. Ninotchka is a materialist. Leon is a fetishist of matter.

Leon accuses Ninotchka of murdering to dissect: "Oh, you would analyze everything out of existence. You'd analyze me out of existence, but I won't let you." She is guilty, however, only of denying the unproblematic naturalness, the material self-evidence, of people and things:

Ninotchka: What's that?

Kopalski: It's a hat, Comrade. A woman's hat.

Ninotchka: How can such a civilization survive which permits their woman to put things like that on their heads? It won't be long now, Comrades. (65)

The meaning of the hat resides not in itself, but in the system of production and consumption of which it is part. Ninotchka's tourism is conducted, as it were, on the level of the base rather than the superstructure. "I want to use my spare time," she tells Buljanoff, "to inspect public utilities. And to make a study of all outstanding technical achievements in the city" (73). "Can you tell me the exact width of the foundation on which these piers are resting," she asks the attendant at the Eiffel Tower, "and the depth?" (83). When she does tour the site, moreover, it is not its material immediacy that holds her interest: Leon reads to her from a guide book about the Tower's construction and structural "base." The visual consumption of objects, the movie paradoxically suggests, tells us virtually nothing. Or, as Christian Metz observes, the visual consumption of objects *in* movies paradoxically tells us too much: "One reassembles [in film] a duplicate of the original object, a duplicate which is perfectly grasped by the mind, since it is a pure product of the mind. It is the intelligibility of the object that is itself made into an object."<sup>xvi</sup> What Wilde said of Wordsworth – he found in nature the sermons he had already hidden there – applies with equal force to film: the principle of intelligibility that is imposed on objects masquerades for them. Ninotchka, however, meets matter with materialism, which is to say, she reverses the terms of a mystification that is at once bourgeois and filmic. The materialist dissolves the specious solidity of things and concepts back into the system of production that *lends* them meaning.

Consider, for example, food. Ninotchka the Bolshevik thinks only of calories, food evacuated of its sensuous immediacy and material plenitude. Ninotchka the bourgeois, however, celebrates champagne as a good in itself.

Leon: It's always good luck to launch something with champagne – a battleship – or an evening.

Ninotchka: It's funny to look back. I was brought up on goat's milk. I had a ration of vodka in the army – and now champagne.

Leon: From goats to grapes. That's drinking in the right direction.

Ninotchka: It's good.

Leon: Um hm. (164-65)

The meaning of champagne is bound up with Ninotchka's personal history, but here the personal is allegedly not the political. Or, consider that memorable hat, which initially portended the downfall of the capitalist West: Ninotchka purchases it, places it on her head, and admires herself in the mirror.



Still from *Ninotchka* (1939)

The meaning of the object becomes contained in the closed circuit of self-reflection. Woman is naturally to be found before the mirror, not behind the barracks, and the hat becomes the outward expression of an innate, if newly discovered, femininity. It becomes, as it were, a "hat hat," the sartorial equivalent of a "house house." Ninotchka the Bolshevik understands gender as a social construct, not a biological dispensation. "I have heard of the arrogant male in capitalist society," she tells Leon when they first meet. "It is having a superior earning power that makes you that way" (82). "You are something we do not have in Russia," she informs him when she first visits his apartment. "That's why I believe in the future of my country" (95). Ninotchka the Bolshevik does not accept "nature" as alibi or excuse:

Ninotchka: Must you flirt?

Leon: Well I don't have to but I find it natural.

Ninotchka: Suppress it. (81)

Ninotchka the bourgeois does: she cannot suppress her own smiles; she is hardly in a position to ask Leon to suppress his own natural inclinations. Again, the body always knows better than the subject who occupies it, and the body will out. There is, then, no need to explain or justify the capitalist state or subject; like death and taxes – itself a combination of the biological and the socio-political – it just is.

**“Drinking in the right direction”**

Leon congratulates Ninotchka on the direction her drinking habits are taking: “From goats to grapes. That’s drinking in the right direction” (164). But if from goats to grapes is indeed progress – and it is – the trajectory never fully parts company with its origins. Ninotchka’s life begins with goat’s milk, and it is to goat’s milk that she returns: Leon sends her a bottle, hidden within an extravagant bouquet of flowers, the proverbial “morning after.” (Leon actually sends his servant to fetch the milk, which hardly troubles the newly love-struck, and thus de-radicalized, Ninotchka.) No one, of course, would ever consider doing the same for Swana. The Grand Duchess’s taste for the airy nothingness that is champagne bears no relation to bodily needs. At the Café Lucesse, her party orders only bubbly, as if the consumption of grosser matter were best left to her social inferiors. Ninotchka’s drinking habits are initially circumscribed by bodily need. “May I offer you a drink?” Leon asks her when she first visits his apartment. “Thank you. I’m not thirsty” (92-93). Yet if “drinking in the right direction” means drinking beyond biological imperatives, it never fully severs the connection. Kant argues that the acquisition of taste presupposes the disconnect: “to people with a healthy appetite anything is tasty provided it is edible . . . Only when their need has been satisfied can we tell who in a multitude of people has taste and who does not.”<sup>xvii</sup> *Ninotchka* relegates the world of necessity to the Soviet Union – hunger is an endemic problem there, never here – and it provides access, if in image only, to a glittering world of aristocratic privilege. But if the movie is thus pleased to measure its distance from “mere” necessity, it is equally anxious to preserve and promote “healthy appetites,” in every sense of the term. Hence the centrality of laughter, which Kant considered a virtual parody of the disinterested contemplation of beauty:

it is readily intelligible how . . . shifting the mind now to one standpoint and now to the other, to enable it to contemplate its object, may involve a corresponding and reciprocal straining and slackening of the elastic parts of the intestines, which communicates itself to the diaphragm (and resembles that felt by ticklish people), in the course of which the lungs expel the air with rapidly succeeding interruptions resulting in a movement conducive to health. This alone, and not what goes on in the mind, is the proper cause of the gratification in a thought that at bottom represents nothing. (Kant, 201)

Laughter may be too mired in the physiological to satisfy Kant, but it is, he concedes, “conducive to health,” and bourgeois aesthetics acknowledge no higher goal. Bourdieu notes that the Kantian transcendence of natural appetite is always haunted by its perverse double: “The negation of nature leads as much to the perversion of ‘unnecessary inclinations’ as to the pure morality of aesthetic pleasure: ‘Reason has this peculiarity that, aided by the imagination, it can create artificial desires which are not only unsupported by natural instinct but actually contrary to it. These desires, in the beginning called concupiscence, gradually generate a whole host of unnecessary and indeed unnatural inclinations called luxuriousness’” (Bourdieu, 492).<sup>xviii</sup> *Ninotchka* distances itself from the world of necessity, but it does not thereby promote or embrace any transcendence of natural appetite. The glittering world of aristocratic wit and privilege is radically non-productive, and it is never quite clear who is paying the bills. (If anyone: Leon hasn’t paid his butler in two months.) Its seductive “luxuriousness,” moreover, always threatens to generate “unnatural” gender relations and sexual identities.

Leon functions as the Grand Duchess’s “representative” in her negotiations with the Soviet government. There are, however, other, less charitable words to characterize their relationship:

Leon: You remember the platinum watch with the diamond numbers? You’ll be in a position to give it to me.

Swana: Oh, darling, you're so good to me.

Leon: We could be rich, if you say the word. I had dinner with the Guizots last night. (33)

Leon is effectively acting as Swana's pimp: he is willing to sell off her sexual past for the price of some bling. Ninotchka inquires – quite reasonably – after his profession:

Leon: My profession? Mmmm – keeping my body fit, keeping my mind alert and keeping the landlord appeased. That's a full time job.

Ninotchka: And what do you do for mankind?

Leon: For mankind? Yes, a . . . Not so much for mankind, but for womankind, my record isn't quite so bleak. (94)

Bourgeois ambition is made of sterner stuff. The Count clearly takes pride in his record with "womankind," and his philandering might logically seem to exempt him from the charge of harboring instincts "contrary to nature." The "luxuriousness" to which he is given, however, renders him sexually suspect, which his interest in "composing" his body – keeping fit – only exacerbates. Normative man does not "work" at his physique; rather, he engages in productive work, of which a fit body is but an incidental (if happy) by-product. Only perverse man transforms his flesh into a "job," which is to say, only the pervert de-naturalizes masculinity. The Count's physique does serve him well when he tries to pursue Ninotchka back to her homeland: he punches a recalcitrant bureaucrat, who refuses to issue him a visa, in the nose. Action, a properly masculine violence, displaces a feminine and feminizing luxuriousness. Leon awakens Ninotchka to her nascent femininity; the pursuit of Ninotchka, in turn, awakens Leon to his innate masculinity.

It is paradoxically Leon who affords Ninotchka an opportunity "for doing something for mankind," which, conveniently, is also something for Leon and Ninotchka:

Leon: . . . if you don't stay with me then I'll have to continue my fight. I'll travel wherever there are Russian commissions. I'll turn them all into Iranoffs, Buljanoffs and Kopalskis. The world will be crowded with Russian restaurants. I'll depopulate Russia! Comrade, once you saved your country by going back. This time you can only save it by staying here.

Ninotchka: Well, if it is a choice between my personal interest and the good of my country, how can I waver? No one shall say Ninotchka was a bad Russian. Darling! (255)

Leon's ironic threat to depopulate Russia recalls Ninotchka's earlier, non-ironic celebration of the Stalinist purges: "The last mass trials were a great success. There are going to be fewer but better Russians!" (64). Ninotchka's ironic response to Leon's ironic threat recalls, in its turn, the earlier irony of Iranoff's, Buljanoff's and Kopalski's "What would Lenin do?" Ninotchka's own version of the question, her disingenuous justification for what she is about to do, is a conspicuous instance of "totalitarian wit," and it evinces her absolute distance from the hold of official state truth – so absolute, in fact, that it might be better characterized as "capitalist wit." True, Ninotchka falls into Leon's arms in the name of Russian ideals – and it is significant that they are Russian, not Soviet – but the happy marriage of social responsibility and self-interest that allegedly motivates the defection is really an article of capitalist faith. As good Bolsheviks, Kopalski, Buljanoff, and Iranoff claim that they have no choice but to stay in the Royal Suite. As a good Russian, Ninotchka claims that she has no choice but to capitulate to Leon's blackmail. The ideologue learns what three Soviet stooges have known all along: the mind can always be relied upon to justify the decisions the body has already made. The

body's decisions, in turn, can always be relied upon to be capitalist.

No one, of course, need believe the mind's reasons (not even *Ninotchka*), for capitalism, unlike communism, is not "of" the mind. *Ninotchka*'s defection, her cynical articulation of the happy marriage of self-interest and social responsibility, risks, of course, reducing capitalism to one ideology among others, which might thus be debated, embraced, or refuted. But it is not finally reason that makes one commit to capitalism, and the movie ends, tellingly, not with the articulation of any ideal that distinguishes *Ninotchka*'s brave new world, but with the mute illustration of a problem endemic to it: the final shot is of Kapolski picketing what is now only Buljanoff's and Iranoff's restaurant. The three are comrades no longer. Labor unrest might seem a curious conclusion to a movie intent on validating the wisdom of their defection – a movie made, moreover, not long after America's emergence from the Great Depression – but if Lubitsch's apology for capitalism is thus indistinguishable from a critique of it, so much the better: the worst possible system glories in its imperfections, in its resistance to the myth of perfectibility. Leon "works" at his body, but it nevertheless remains subject to the usual humiliations and mortifications. And as Leon himself comes to learn, the only sensible response is to laugh. So too with capitalism. Kapolski, Buljanoff, and Iranoff do not defect to the best of all possible worlds – far from it – but any attempt to devise a better world inevitably founders on the bedrock of natural imperfectibility. And the only sensible response is to laugh. Gloomy theoreticians of laughter – and their number is legion – tend to follow Hobbes in arguing that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but the sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly." Laughter is thus incompatible with "sympathy, helpfulness, and identification of the self with others."<sup>xix</sup> But *Ninotchka* suggests otherwise. We are encouraged to laugh at the communist project because it purports to see some "eminence" in itself, and the possibility of some "eminence" in others, that is fundamentally at odds with the universal "infirmity" that is human nature. We are encouraged to laugh with the capitalist project, however, because it celebrates the "eminence" of what is no better than it should be. In *To Be Or Not To Be*, Professor Siletsky characterizes Nazism, simply and chillingly, as an attempt "to create a happy world." The totalitarianisms of the left and right that flank the liberal settlement seek to deny natural imperfection, with disastrous results. *Ninotchka* thus guards against the descent into barbarism – "The greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being, of a New Man without antagonistic tension" – through a willful impoverishment of the utopian imagination (Žižek, 5). Leon's "fall" inaugurates community; it is not, as it were, a fall from it. The Biblical fall, however fortunate, is a falling "away" or "from"; it is predicated on a prelapsarian state of perfection, which potentially fuels utopian longings. Leon's fall is absolute, primal, and to construe it as anything less is to risk a totalitarianism of either the left or right. The blithe self-assurance of Churchill's apology for the liberal settlement exactly captures the logic: "Democracy is the worst of all possible systems. The problem is that no other system is better." It is by, not despite, "the heavy curse of its blemishes" that capitalism insinuates itself as the best of the bad (Barthes, 41). Adorno considered the laughter generated by the culture industry a "fraud practised on happiness" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 140). *Ninotchka* construes marxism as a fraud practised on laughter. (Only feminists rival marxists in their reputation for joylessness.) Both the critic of the culture industry and the product of it are in fundamental agreement: the social function of mass-marketed laughter is to reconcile the subject to things-as-they-are. The difference is simply this: *Ninotchka* celebrates the capitulation; Adorno rails against it.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder, and Walter Reisch, *Ninotchka*, ed. Richard J. Anobile (New York: Darien House, 1975), 64; hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

- <sup>ii</sup> Slavoy Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 49.
- <sup>iii</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections On a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1974), 206.
- <sup>iv</sup> Steven Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 32.
- <sup>v</sup> The working-class patrons at Pere Mathieu's eat and drink with gusto; if anything, Ninotchka's abstemiousness registers (at least today) as haute bourgeois. On food as an index of cultural capital, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 194-199.
- <sup>vi</sup> On bourgeois "ex-nomination," see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973), 138.
- <sup>vii</sup> Henri Bergson, "Laughter," in *Comedy*, ed. Wylie Sypher (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 73, 97.
- <sup>viii</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993), 146.
- <sup>ix</sup> H. D., "The Cinema and the Classics," *Close-Up*, 1 July 1927. Cited in Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 67.
- <sup>x</sup> Cited in Richard Lippe, "Garbo and Cukor," *Cineaction!* 35. 1 (1994): 52. Lippe also notes that *Two-Faced Woman* was the first Garbo film since *Anna Christie* to be set exclusively in modern America.
- <sup>xi</sup> Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader In Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 27.
- <sup>xii</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 30.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Jeremy Mindich, "Re-Reading *Ninotchka*: A Misread Commentary on Social and Economic Systems," *Film and History*, 20. 1 (1990): 22.
- <sup>xiv</sup> I take the terms "high" and "low Other" from William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 220-234.
- <sup>xv</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 45-46.
- <sup>xvi</sup> "Rosebud," perhaps the paradigmatic cinematic "object," neatly illustrates a variation on Metz's thesis. The search for the meaning of Kane's dying utterance is conducted under the mandate of "a bounty hunter's cliché": "Rosebud dead or alive." And rosebud comes to us, as it were, dead (or at least dying): as the signified is made manifest, the "objecthood" or "thingness" of the signifier

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dissolves into ash. See Garrett Stewart, *Between Film and Screen: Modernism's Photo Synthesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 169-70. Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema*, trans. Michael Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 36.

<sup>xvii</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Walter S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1985), 52.

<sup>xviii</sup> Bourdieu is quoting from Kant, "Conjectural Beginnings of Human History," in *On History*, ed. L. W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobb-Merill, 1963), 55-56. See also Joseph Litvak, *Strange Gourmets: Sophistication, Theory, and the Novel* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 6-7.

<sup>xix</sup> Arthur Koestler, *Insight and Outlook: An Inquiry into the Common Foundations of Science, Art, and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 56.