

## The Art of Indirection in *Trouble in Paradise*



*At almost every point [Ernst] Lubitsch and [Samson] Raphaelson find some new and surprising way of narrating a scene or telling a joke or even just conveying information. It's as if they had set out to test the expressive limits of indirection.*

(Harvey 1998: 49)

The worry about *Trouble in Paradise* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1932), for those who admire the film as well as for those who do not, is that for all its skill and craft, it is ultimately a shallow conjuring trick. Exquisite and elegant it may be, but it is superficial and frivolous, merely stylish, and lacks heart and significance. Even the screenwriter of the film, Samson Raphaelson, said that for him the film was

just another job [...]. I much more enjoyed and had more respect for *Heaven Can Wait* [Lubitsch 1943] and *The Shop Around the Corner* [Lubitsch 1940] which dealt with sentiment, with emotions, with backgrounds, romance on a level that I felt and respected. That had more body to me. I cared more about those people than I did about the people in *Trouble in Paradise*. I thought the people in *Trouble in Paradise* were puppets' (Eyman 2003).

In order to counter the accusation of superficiality some of the more extended commentaries on the film have endeavoured to make earnest claims of weight and import. Leland Poague's sentimental, and rather moralistic, account seems perverse, writing that the film achieves an 'unexpected depth of emotional involvement', and desperately tries to

transform it into something endearing. Despite one or two poignant moments that are themselves muted, the film is not 'emotional' in the way that, for example, *The Shop Around the Corner* is. Poague also celebrates the film's 'satiric touches' which are 'marvellous and numerous' writing that 'the trouble in paradise is that glaring poverty and luxurious wealth exist side by side' (1978: 80-81). Similarly, Gerald Mast, after offering some perspicacious general remarks, argues that the film's superficial façade conceals a trenchant analysis of capitalism where 'Lubitsch, in the most Marxist way, equates property with theft' ([1973] 1979: 212). Yet, as early as the credit sequence the film establishes that the trouble in paradise to which it refers is not social but sexual.



The words 'Trouble in' appear over a dark sky with clouds and there is a delay before the word 'Paradise' completes the title. Before this, an antique double bed is pictured for this is where Paradise will be found – and where it will be lost. Indeed, before 'Paradise' appears the title card looks to be saying 'Trouble in Bed'. Picture substitutes for word, although the bed's illustrated story-book depiction might detract from the adult implications. The accompanying song confirms:

Most any place can seem to be a paradise  
While you embrace just the one that you adore.  
There needn't be an apple tree with magic powers  
You need no garden filled with flowers  
To taste the thrill of sweet, sweet hours.

Gentle perfume and cushions that are silk and soft  
Two in the gloom that is silent but for sighs.  
That's paradise while arms entwine and lips are kissing  
But if there's something missing  
That signifies Trouble in Paradise.

Sabine Hake takes Mast and Poague, and others, to task for trying to reclaim the director and the film for a 'socially conscious project', for example, interpreting the film as a comment on the Depression and its devastating impact on American society (confusing ironic references to the social conditions with actual social criticism) (1992: 183). More appropriately, her reading emphasises the film's reflexivity, and its ambiguous play with surfaces. Nevertheless, she tends to see the film as offering some sort of political critique. For example, she writes that, 'Using the motif of theft as a central metaphor of filmic representation, the film is [...] a game with free floating signifiers where "trouble in paradise" also means the crisis of commodity fetishism and of the sign as such' (1992: 20). I do not recognise the film, or the film's achievement, in these accounts. I think they are distorted by a not uncommon tendency to ascribe significance by way of ideological conception, and in doing so misrepresent the film's personality. I do not even think the much broader ascription of 'ironic' captures the film's approach or attitude to its material. I would prefer to say that the film is witty in the sense that my dictionary describes wit as 'the talent or quality of using unexpected associations between contrasting or disparate [elements] or ideas to make a clever humorous effect' (Collins English Dictionary).

The film is not, however, devoid of significance. It does dramatise aspects of heterosexual desire and compatibility but within an amoral framework and through sex, sensuality and hedonism; and although it is not indifferent, it avoids sentimentality and conviction, and is sympathetic to aestheticism. Mast recognises that the film, by and large, evades moral categories such as good and bad and substitutes them with intellectual values such as clever or foolish ([1973] 1979: 208). This has led to accusations of cynicism in a few quarters and for Andrew Bergman it exhibits a 'facile nihilism about personal relations' (quoted in Braudy 1983: 1074). William Paul, in one of the best essays on the film, challenges the idea that the film is cynical, preferring to describe its sensibility as dialectical, always positing the opposite of what it sees (1983: 48). This is shown, for example, by the film not favouring either of the two contrasting women – played by Miriam Hopkins and Kay Francis – admiring and appreciating both for different reasons. If there is cynicism, Raymond Durnat sees it as inflected or complicated: '[Lubitsch's] films while pointedly indifferent towards social egalitarianism point to a hedonistic

magnanimity whose cynicism is not unkindly' (1969: 118). In the oxymoronic construction 'cynicism is not unkindly' – given that a cynic is supposed to believe the worst about people – Durnat captures some of that dialectical sensibility that Paul suggests.

The film uses contraries in a number of ways, setting up elements that pull in different directions (cynicism / kindly), and this forms part of a more overarching strategy of indirection. By indirection, I mean – once again turning to my dictionary – exhibiting a quality of indirectness or lack of straightforwardness, deviating from a direct course, perhaps being devious or evasive. (The example the dictionary provides is: 'his love of intrigue and sly indirection'.) The purpose of this essay therefore is to expand on the introductory quotation by James Harvey, and show how indirection operates in a variety of witty ways in *Trouble in Paradise*. This structuring principle is in operation throughout the film, in almost every scene, and I examine a range of instances in order to draw out the specificity of the variations. This is not to suggest that the film, dramatically speaking, lacks direction, or, narratively speaking, lacks a direction, that it is aimless, or meandering. On the contrary, its 83 minutes are a model of economy, crisp, cogent, and condensed. Indeed, condensation is another feature of the film that will be examined because it works in tandem with indirection.

In the spirit of the film, therefore, the essay is organised around the modifications of the theme, highlighting a series of indirections, contraries, and condensations. I hope to show that the film has a coherent design – as Andrew Sarris rightly claimed but did not demonstrate – and is not simply a series of intermittent flourishes or 'Lubitsch touches' (1980: 645). Rather than affecting with sentiment or impressing with significance, moral, political or otherwise, the design offers the pleasures of ingenious modulations of style and meaning, and the appreciation of their achievement.

### The droll incongruity

The film begins in Venice with a rubbish collector loading rubbish on to a gondola, and is an example of a scene that has solicited a few earnest readings. Mast thinks it shows that beneath the elegant veneer lives are rotten ([1973] 1979: 218). Paul considers that the perfume that permeates the whole film is not that produced by Colet & Co. but the faint odour of decay as corruption permeates society (1983: 46). There is little in the film, however, to suggest that it dislikes elegant veneers or sweet perfume; on the contrary, it appears to be rather attracted to them, to say the least. Therefore, the film is unlikely to set itself up, in its opening moments, to be viewed from a moralistic perspective, and the evidence, as it progresses, is that it would be as likely to satirise this social critique as endorse it. There is a droll, even mischievous, unseating of expectations in the opening scene, with the beloved romantic gondola piled high with the waste, and a rubbish collector exhibiting a fine operatic voice (supposedly that of Italian operatic tenor Enrico Caruso). The moral lesson here, if there is one, warns against snobbery for even the man who collects the rubbish may have a quite marvellous talent. Dare we presume from which mouths beautiful music shall emerge, and from which ugly dump? It is also crucial, but not remarked upon in the commentaries, *when* he begins to sing. Only after replacing the bin on the step by the waterside, and straightening himself and walking away calmly, does he begin. Perhaps this indicates some satisfaction after completing this part of his job, but whatever the reason, rather than having the character indiscriminately singing throughout the



opening, he commences at a precise instant. The rubbish collector not only sings like a professional tenor, he comes in on a cue (of his own making). A filthy job receives an immaculate accompaniment, and the broad incongruities of the comedy are refined by his artful punctiliousness.

### The obtrusively discreet camera

The film now shows what appears to be a darkened room with a figure escaping, followed by the shadowy profile of the intruder removing his fake facial hair. Although we soon learn this is a robbery, the action is difficult to discern because of the darkness, and our lack of knowledge about people and place. The dulcet tones of the rubbish collecting tenor waft in and out of the windows – as does the thief – and compete with an insistent loud buzzing. This is a simple, preliminary instance of the film condensing, here in the form of overlap, and producing a dissonance (a declaration of intent, perhaps, more raucous than the subtle variations to follow). Unclear openings to intrigue are common in films but *Trouble in Paradise* might be more interested in using the convention of the enigmatic beginning to obscure its sexual insinuations. The buzzing is created by a doorbell that is repeatedly pressed by two irate and exasperated women of the night – yes two – shouting in Italian and waiting to be let in by the man who has been robbed. Sadly, he is in no fit state. The camera watches from outside a window as he tries to lift himself from the floor only to collapse noisily, bringing the champagne bottle and bucket crashing down with him, while the creeping suspenseful thriller music comes to a sudden halt. The robbed man will turn out to be François Filiba (Edward Everett Horton), one of two men in the film, the other being ‘The Major’ (Charlie Ruggles), who represent a dull and boring masculinity. The robbery produces a situation that exacerbates Filiba’s clumsiness, and externalises, largely through the presence of the prostitutes – their confusion and cacophony substituting for congress – his sexual inadequacy and impotence. He is humiliated by the robbery and, emasculated, fails to rise. However, the sorry sexual implications are more indirect than they sound, or than I make them sound, because this is the start of the film and we are in the dark about the characteristics of this man, his role and situation.

The camera starts moving to the right laterally, and as it does so a flowing and lilting refrain of the *Trouble in Paradise* theme accompanies it on the soundtrack. After waiting around to view Filiba’s final collapse, the camera, disdainfully, superciliously perhaps, leaves the man’s clumsiness behind (and a clumsier type of comedy). Indeed, the discord of the robbery seems, in hindsight, to be constructed

to contrast with the camera’s movement which exhibits an ease, and a confident intent. It appears not simply to move, or even to start moving, but to *set off*, towards a more admirable destination. It elegantly goes its own way, gleefully tangential to the hapless victim, gliding past the nearby facades of the buildings, carried buoyantly by the music. Perhaps it has taken on the personality of the protagonist, the thief, Gaston Monescu (Herbert Marshall), who is masquerading as a Baron, and whom it finds as it finally comes to rest at a balcony. Furthermore, its weightless travels might represent his uncomplicated escape from the scene of the crime, symbolising the myth of the dexterous and untroubled gentleman thief, not fleeing but magically sliding away while the buildings it skirts, which are seemingly models, add a touch of childlike enchantment. (A short while later, when Gaston reveals his identity, he describes himself as ‘the man who walked in to the Bank of Constantinople and walked out with the Bank of Constantinople’, and the epigrammatic concision of the dialogue captures the effortlessness of the feat. Suitably enough, the ‘Bank of Constantinople’ shifts from a building to its contents, in just the time it takes to walk in and walk out, and this evokes the sleight-of-hand, and fleet foot, of the thief-cum-magician. The feat of the robbery is achieved through a satisfying balance of the line not through a description of the act itself, which is effaced.) The camera movement here appears as one continuous take, but there do seem to be some cuts discernible despite the darkness, a couple of jerks interrupting the glide, hinting at ellipsis. For the camera finds him, remarkably, already dressed for dinner, just slightly leaning to one side, looking down waiting for his dinnertime companion, tranquil, unruffled, his right hand slipped in his pocket, his left with cigarette slowly rising from waist to mouth. There is not a hint of criminal intrusion or physical exertion. The indirect, the condensed and the contrary are combined in the camera movement: tangentially moving *away*, easing over, erasing even, jumps in time, and finally stopping to behold the Baron’s improbably impeccable appearance.

### The pertinent non-sequitur

The waiter (George Humbert) comes from inside to join the Baron on the balcony and asks, ‘What shall we start with Baron?’ to which he replies, ‘Oh yes. That’s not so easy. Beginnings are always difficult.’ After the somewhat peculiar opening to the film – the operatic rubbish collector, the elliptical robbery, and the flying carpet camera – there is more than a suggestion in his statement of meta-filmic reflexivity. This is where we first hear the extraordinary voice and delivery of Herbert Marshall, smooth, cadenced,



decorous, seductive, and important for creating and controlling the film's mood. Like the film, it has seemingly incompatible aspects which are blended gracefully to deny contradiction: haughty yet soothing, almost enhancing; commanding yet full of longing, almost mournful. The musicality of his pronunciation turns Samson Raphaelson's guileful dialogue into a libretto – which is apt given the director's love of operetta – while never becoming superficially sing-songy. (Supposedly, Raphaelson was responsible for most of the dialogue, but the overall screenplay and structure was constructed in collaboration with Lubitsch.) The Baron says, 'If Casanova suddenly turned out to be Romeo having supper with Juliet who might become Cleopatra – *how would you start?*' His delivery is at first dreamily pensive – with a marked pause after 'Juliet' suitably representing (or ellipsing?) the period of sexual maturation – before asking the question curtly. Marshall's fluent handling eases the transformations from seasoned lover to figure of young love, from figure of young love to seasoned lover. The answer the waiter gives, after a few comic hesitations, in Hollywood European accent is 'I would start with cocktails'. The crisp reply simultaneously evades and settles the issue. The suggestion is apparently, and perhaps necessarily, bathetic, almost a non-sequitur, after the Baron's extravagantly cast drama. It seemingly undercuts the grandeur by reverting to the waiter's – a waiter's – customary recommendation. Yet, it may also be curiously apposite, and wise, tapping into something eternally befitting about the cocktail, its age-old capacity to lubricate the glamorous and alter character. Its pithiness, after the convoluted riddle-like conundrum, unpretentiously contains its wisdom. The Baron clearly thinks so, nodding in approval while declaring robustly and this time succinctly – 'Very good'.

### The cultivated implication

In *Trouble in Paradise* in order to mean what they say, the characters can rarely say what they mean. The measure of the man, and the woman, is the sophistication of the deflection. As Lily (Miriam Hopkins) is arriving on a Gondola, the Baron instructs the waiter, 'It must be the most marvellous supper. We may not eat it ... but it must be marvellous ...'. Tremendously decadent, this implies that the marvellousness of the supper will be inversely related to the need to eat it (that the better it is the less likely it will be eaten). Its marvellous presence will be essential in providing the occasion for their lovemaking, thus making it inessential to consume. In addition, the sight of Lily prompts the line, and the marvellousness refers to her as much as the dinner (and so the dinner must be equal to her, even though he would sooner devour her). Marshall is shown in profile, leaning slightly over the balcony, holding his cigarette still at his waist, sexually desirous and intensified, yet stately. His delivery matches the posture, deepening his voice on the second 'marvellous', relishing it, letting it resonate with desire while impressing a matter of great import. Marshall's achievement is to flatter the anomaly in Raphaelson's line of dialogue. He expresses the relishing thought of eating the 'marvellous' supper *and* the regretful thought that he may not. He also fuses her marvellousness with the supper's marvellousness, and even though the former may be at the expense of the latter, he sincerely commits to the marvellousness of both.

### The contained ecstatic

Lily is pretending to be a Countess who fears the assignation with the Baron will be discovered and exposed. She therefore puts on a hammy performance of anxiety at

the prospect of gossip and embarrassment. This crude comic register is interrupted by delicate behaviour and has the effect of producing an intimate frisson. The Baron removes the Countess's gold lamé shawl (with fur attached), first lifting it off her near shoulder, letting it loosely drop down, then reaching across her chest to find its other corner,



sweeping it gently away, all the time taking care not to touch her. She appears to be in a state of disconcerted arousal during his agile undressing, looking nervously at a loss, and finally enacting a becalmed swoon, leaning back ever so slightly against the table while staring up at him. It is difficult to know whether her behaviour indicates a crack in the act, as she is taken aback, or is feigned, because it contains a subdued version of her prevailing exaggerations, or both, with the latter used to mask the former. Either way, because she quickly resumes the exaggerated version of her character, the moment of rapture is restrained and pocketed.

She eventually collapses with faux exasperation into an armchair, hand against head, and the Baron, sitting on the arm beside her, says sympathetically, 'Don't stop, keep right on complaining, it's beautiful.' The dialogue, relishing in its perversity, allows the Baron to find allure in her grievances. When the Baron turns out not to be an American but only 'one of us', he asks whether she is disappointed, to which she replies, on the contrary, 'No, proud ...', unexpectedly, and obligingly, turning the disappointment on its head, discarding her posture of mock misery, and taking the opportunity to express admiration. Hopkins is adept at lackadaisically sexualising the Countess' slump: her arms flop by her side, conveniently revealing the rotund shape of her breasts

which, despite her ungracefully (and disgracefully) relaxed body, are enhanced further as they indent the lamé during an acquiescent sigh. She then extends and tightens her neck as she looks up at him and continues, '... Very proud', where her pointed pronunciation of the 'p' (in 'proud') licenses her to point her lips in his direction thereby also augustly inviting a kiss. Suitably flaunting her submissiveness, her sexual invitation embeds itself in an expression of honour and esteem: a most distinguished come-on.



### The roundabout reference

After sitting down for that 'marvelous' supper which they have indeed taken the time to eat, the Countess announces that she has a confession to make, and her sincere and apologetic tone makes the announcement, which is about *him*, not her, unexpected. She says he is a 'crook' and he has robbed the 'gentleman' in 'Room 253, 5, 7 and 9'. The referencing of the suite in this extended way is the film's signature joke, and, repeated several times throughout it, a running one, a declaration of its concern with a comedy of circumlocution and a comedy of signifiers (one thing standing in for another). There is, typically, for Lubitsch, also a concern with doors and especially closed doors, or closing doors, in order to play with the hidden (sometimes for sexual purposes). Mary Pickford supposedly exclaimed with frustration that the director was more interested in doors than actors. With 'Room 253, 5, 7 and 9', we are at *another* remove, with the recitation of the numbers standing in for the actual doors. Furthermore, the 'gentleman' is not individuated, or spoken of directly, but is referred to by association, even defined by, 'Room 253, 5, 7 and 9'. Each number is not repeated in full (Room 253, 255, 257, and 259), and the contraction, and the highlighting of the odd numbers, evokes the joining of separate, adjacent rooms to construct the one suite. Despite its formality, it can be recited with a familiarity, in the way that unfamiliar names or phrases, announced in the media for instance, quickly become the accepted thing to say and are routinely repeated. The contraction also allows the phrase, when spoken, to accumulate a momentum so it sounds like one entity stretched out, rather than a list enumerated. In this way, the phrase's shorthand and elongated qualities comeingle. The requirement to list the four numbers *every* time emphasises the extravagance of the suite (that it takes up four rooms), the aggrandisement, and the phallic expansion. It also suggests the absurd and the farcical (all those doors) which is contrary to the rationality, regularity, and neutrality of the notation, and to the fact that it is always expressed straightforwardly, as accepted parlance, without comic intent.

### The suggestive concision

Earlier, a tiny leaf is lightly attached to the Baron's dinner jacket and represents the intrusion, disruption, and noise of the robbery. It is an airy trace. Picked up during his illicit travels, it is carefully picked off the suit by the waiter, and returned – gently rolling it through his fingers as he hands it back to the Baron – with a 'beg your pardon', a polite bow and a sheepish withdrawal which insinuate, but barely. The Baron who returns a muted 'Thank you' upholds the hushed good manners. The waiter's 'Beg your Pardon' and the Baron's 'Thank you' are the laconic formal responses which acknowledge and withhold. When later the Countess says that at first sight she thought the Baron was, and hoped he was, an American, injecting new world excitement into the jaded old, he says, simply, 'Thank you', naturally assuming this to be complimentary. There are layers of pretence all playing against each other. Hopkins, the American actress, is playing a lower-class, but high quality, European thief who is playing a European Countess who is playing at being jaded with the upper class (even though the pretence only commenced this evening). She addresses Marshall, an English actor, who is playing a higher-class European thief who is playing a European Baron and both of them are playing in an American film (written by an American screenwriter) directed by a European director. The terseness of the 'Thank you' comically condenses this complicated layering so it is difficult to know whether the film is suggesting congratulation or sarcasm.

In both cases, the meanings are encased in common expressions of politeness – 'Beg your pardon', 'Thank you'. Despite the Countess' revelation that the Baron is a crook, she brusquely picks up her knife and fork to continue eating, and asks him for the salt. His response is even more surprising: not only does he pass it, but he offers the pepper too (which she declines). Behaviour and dialogue seem to be at odds although the characters' behaviour has a dramatic logic: for this working woman without luxury, no revelation



should cause her to miss the opportunity to eat good food, and for this man preoccupied with style, no exposure is worth dispensing with courtesy. There is also a performance of nonchalance so despite her dramatic unveiling 'May I have the salt' translates as 'It wasn't very difficult for me to work out and it is certainly not so important as to prevent me enjoying my dinner' and his 'Pepper too?' translates as 'You haven't knocked me off my stride'. The diversion through table manners after her revelation – 'May I have the salt?' – 'Please' – 'Thank you' – 'Pepper too?' – 'No thank you' – 'You're very welcome' – is enacted in a slightly



hurried manner that indicates their desire to return to the matter in hand while nevertheless having to see out, and happily seeing out, the required ceremonial exchange.

The Baron does seem to lose his cool, however, in an odd and alarming eruption just following his announcement that he knows the Countess has taken his wallet. The film goes into pastiche thriller mode: the 'Gaston' refrain starts up on the soundtrack but on this occasion is given a tense, tremulous suspension ... he stands up ... there is a whip pan to the door ... the strings reach a heightened crescendo ... he locks the door and pockets the key, purses his lips threateningly and pulls his dinner jacket straight ... some curtains close (but we don't see him closing them) ... he lifts her by the hands, then places his hands on her upper arms and shakes her violently. She rocks back and forth, her head lurching, and gives out a strenuous gasp; the film then cuts to her feet, whereupon the wallet drops out from underneath



her dress and the music calms. The purpose behind the shift to aggression is hard to glean. Perhaps it is to reveal an imperious and menacing aspect behind Gaston's smooth façade, although the pastiche presentation seemingly delights in his violence against her. Similarly, there are sexual connotations – violation? rough sex? an orgasmic gasp? an expulsion between the legs? – although the concision here may have resulted in confusion rather than productive suggestion. Lubitsch's work famously made it difficult for the Hays Office to specify the offence, and here, especially, there is the baffling experience of signification that is indecent *and* dormant. Nevertheless, the punch line has clarity: the unperturbed and dispassionate reaction to the Baron's deviant disruption, the abrupt return to propriety. He

replaces the wallet in his inside jacket pocket with a lordly expression, and says 'Countess', politely beckoning her to sit down. Naturally, she says a calm 'Thank you', and, after positioning their napkins on their lap, they start eating again.

### **The abstinent foreplay and the ethereal copulation**

The film uses thievery as an elaborate sexual metaphor. Paul writes about robbery as a developing intimacy, about the physical closeness the pickpocket must have with his victim, and about the safely guarded areas the thief uncovers (1983: 58). When the Baron declares 'With love in [his] heart' that the Countess is a thief he says that he knows this because she tickled him when she pickpocketed his wallet. He did not mind though because her embrace was so sweet. Thus begins the foreplay where their touching of each other is implied but not shown. Each reveals that they have stolen



an item belonging to the other, and what is more they have had the time to observe the item or tamper with it! Not only does he remove the pin from between her breasts but he also has the time to learn that 'There is one very good stone it'. Not only does she remove his watch but she also has the time, because it was five minutes slow, to *regulate* it. Even taking account of pickpocketing genius, these activities are impossible, and the film is happy to leave their accomplishment to our imagination. The inconceivable is crucial to conjuring the illicit, and envisaging the fondling encourages the erotic thought. Moreover, the film encourages us to feel the sensation on their behalf, or imagine feeling it on their behalf, because although he is tickled on the removal of his wallet, she did not feel the removal of her garter. 'I hope you don't mind if I keep your garter,' the Baron says, pulling it out of his pocket and kissing it (instead of her thigh), and elated by his ability to slip this accessory down her leg without her realising, she jumps into his lap and hugs him. The 'pickpocketing' scenario achieves a censorship-evading perfection in that a scene about the necessity of *not* feeling the touch of the other person is absolutely about it. Similarly, the scene does not simply avoid showing something, but is predicated on an elusive activity where not seeing is endemic. It is not only avoiding censorship, or using censorship's restrictions to be creative, as is common, but rather appears to be teasing censorship, exposing its paradoxes. At the same time, the withholding of all the pilfering establishes a super human dexterity and skill – quite literally out of this world – as well as a connoisseurship and expertise – the judgement of the pin's value, the regulation of the watch – which dignifies the salaciousness.



The film does not merely omit the physical details of their sexual intercourse, as it must, but as with their foreplay, plays on invisibility. As they hug each other vigorously, the scene dissolves, joining them again on the chaise longue, with the sort of bewitching trill on the soundtrack that should accompany the appearance of a ghost. She lies on her back while he looks over her, declares his love, and leans slowly in to kiss her. As they kiss, their bodies slowly dissolve like apparitions, leaving behind the empty piece of furniture upon which they once lay. The scene then closes by riffing on their absent presence. The room goes dark as if someone had turned off a light (before the image itself fades to black), presumably either Gaston or Lily, perhaps the waiter, but it is mysterious as everything is so still and there are no sounds of activity. The film then cuts to a close-up of curtains opening, seemingly of their own accord (the same curtains that Gaston earlier closed before he shook Lily). Who opens the curtains, if anyone, when and why (and as this is bedtime shouldn't they be closing)? This seems to be contrived for flagrantly symbolic effect – unmoored from situational and spatial-temporal coordinates – the drawing back of fabric a metaphor for the opening up of the woman's genitalia in readiness for sex, perhaps, a female centric representation of intercourse, an alternative to the phallic train hurtling through a tunnel. Regardless of its specific meaning, it adds to the general effect of the sequence which, through the slow disappearance of their bodies, the folding together of time and space, and incidents without agency, is to present carnality, typically contrarily, in intangible and impalpable terms. This is not to conceive of sex as elevated or unworldly because one suspects that this film would hardly be patient with such an immaculate conception. Lily's rousing leap into Gaston's lap and her proud kiss is surely evidence enough of that. Rather, the sequence cheekily appropriates the celestial on behalf of the libidinous (while, of course, presenting an angelic face to the censors).

#### A transgressive love

The final shot of the scene presents, relatively prosaically, that classic inscription of amorous goings-on: a 'Do Not Disturb' sign placed upon the hotel door by a male arm reaching round from inside. I imagine some would have felt this to be hackneyed even in 1932 but perhaps the mini-montage is mixing and matching its euphemisms – from the opaque to the obvious or from the sublime to the ridiculous – for mischievous effect. Nevertheless, in case there was doubt, this is a sex comedy rather than a romantic comedy (although some romantic comedies are also sex comedies, for example, *Bringing Up Baby* [Howard Hawks, 1938]). In *Trouble in Paradise*, love is conceived as sexual, and sexual relationships are conceived in transgression: contravening proprietary and class boundaries. Gaston is amorous as he says to Lily, 'I love you. I loved you the moment I saw you.

I'm mad about you .... My darling', but between 'mad about you' and 'My darling' he addresses her as 'My little shoplifter ... my sweet little pickpocket', with a censuring and lustful growl. (Yet another aspect to Gaston's voice is the wickedly scolding strain that emerges from time to time). Sexual desire, laced with crime and punishment, is injected into the virtuous sentiment of love. Sex and robbery are at one in Gaston and Lily's relationship, after all their initial affection for each other is expressed through competitive pickpocketing, and the film uses the crime metaphor as a way of tracking sexual interaction. Thus, *Trouble in Paradise* is more than a film littered with some double meanings; the foreplay scene shows that the analogy is satisfyingly part of the dramatic fabric. An understated variation is a scene which takes place a year or so later after their meeting in Venice. They have stolen Madame Colet's expensive handbag, but are down on their luck. Lily recalls Gaston taking a Chinese vase from the royal palace and making it into a lamp for her night table. He moves to sit beside her, and says, 'I remember the lamp, I remember the night table, and I remember the night.' Once again, thievery is elided into an act of love and also lovemaking. Marshall halts after 'night table', the memory giving Gaston pause for a deeply pleasurable thought, before delivering the final clause that hums with ardour. He then kisses her tenderly on the lips, but as he withdraws, he assures her that 'Everything will be alright again. Prosperity is just around the corner'. Before he says the line, he pats her on her right shoulder and a little later pats her on the left one as he is removing himself. There is something condescending about these pats, treating her now like a child, consoling at bedtime, and one cannot imagine him touching her like this on their first date in Venice. This treatment of her (and perhaps the relishing of the memory) suggests that their sex life is somewhat less exciting than it once was. Yet, it is situated within the context of a downturn in the fortunes of thievery and so his



patting of her, already recessive in significance and following a tender kiss, means that the film only alludes to the worrying sexual implications.

### The chastising seduction

One of the challenges the filmmakers seem to have set themselves is to devise a variety of cunning scenarios to dramatise sexual rapport. The introduction of Kay Francis as Madame Mariette Colet enables different affinities especially those based on submission and domination (which are flirted with in the Lily / Gaston relationship but subsumed within their more equal dynamic). Lily and Gaston decide to return the luxurious handbag they have stolen from Madame Colet in order to claim the 10,000 francs reward. This initiates a sequence where Gaston, pretending now to be Monsieur LaValle, persuades Madame Colet to trust him, and even employ him as her personal secretary so constructing a scenario where professional and sexual seduction coalesce. He is itemising each of the objects in the bag – ‘One purse’, ‘One vanity case’ and so on – and she says such a procedure is not necessary, but he replies militaristically, ‘I believe in doing things correctly .... Shall we continue?’ The film then sets up a characteristic disparity with Gaston alternating an adulatory charm with an arrogant imposition of his authority. With some irritation, he pulls out the letter from the Major, and she says, ‘You didn’t read it?’ and he responds with offhand assurance, ‘*Naturally* I did.’ Gaston leans in to her, a typical posture of his; J. Hoberman describes Marshall in the film as ‘stiff yet soigné [...] lean[ing] forward to inhale his irresistible co-stars’ (2003).



He quickly reassures her with smothering flattery: ‘You needn’t be embarrassed Madam. A lady as charming as you, would, and should, get love letters’, only to quickly shift tone again with a stern, ‘But one suggestion ...’. He then advises against the Major because the letter has ‘No mystery, no bouquet’, hypnotising her with his enticing delivery (more of which below), and by looking deep into her eyes. Then, equally lulled, he drops his own eyelids at the thought of that aroma while taking in hers, and after holding his position for a moment breaks the spell: he snatches his body away and returns to his blunt, regimental itemising – ‘And one lipstick’.

Gaston is infuriated with her make-up choices, and although she argues with him, he is vigorous and persistent. A short while later, after she mislays her cheque-book, he says that she deserves ‘A good scolding’, and it is yet another opportunity, mirroring the earlier pickpocketing scene between Gaston and Lily, to indulge in some role-play. On this



occasion, the sub-dom dialogue, including a father-daughter scenario, is surprisingly frank. Even though the film was made before the hardening of censorship in 1934, one wonders quite how it got away with this exchange. Perhaps because it is rendered as rhythmic repartee, as if they were singing lines to each other, so that the abuse, suggested by the ‘scolding’ and ‘spanking’, is not only pleasurable to them but may be satisfying, and strangely comforting, for the viewer. For example:

Gaston: Madame, I think you deserve a good scolding.  
First you lose your bag –  
Madame Colet: Then I mislay my cheque book –  
Gaston: Then you use the wrong lipstick –  
Madame Colet: And now I mishandle my money –  
Gaston: It’s disgraceful!

In a way, this tightly interlocking exchange is true of the arrangement of the whole film where aspects, and not simply dialogue, are counterpointed to create a musical comedy without songs. (The title of Harvey’s chapter on this period of Lubistch films is entitled ‘Comedies Without Music’.) When Gaston says, ‘If I was your father’, he follows his strict proposition with a pointed delay and then delivers, ‘Which fortunately I am not’ with a temperate delight. His delivery is luxuriating, savouring the lucky truth from within the perverted thought and almost tender, indicating his romantic interest in her by gladly rejecting the incestuous fantasy (that has nevertheless been lasciviously entertained). She responds by giving a smile, proudly turning her head and oddly flexing her neck, but this response could be interpreted as self-satisfied or indecent so it is unclear which inference is causing the evident delight. He goes on to say that if she ‘Made any attempt to handle her own business affairs, [he] would give [her] a good spanking’, and she turns in shock to look at him as he spits out ‘spanking’. More shocking, however, is that she does not articulate dismay, but on the contrary, asks what he would do if he were her secretary, and when he answers ‘The same thing’, she leans back with deep satisfaction and announces – ‘You’re hired’.

Both the women in the film are, as Molly Haskell writes, in her bountifully insightful chapter on women in 1930s Hollywood films, ‘sensualists without guilt’ (1974: 91). Francis’ body and her behaviour track, moment-by-moment, the undulations of pleasure and desire. This behaviour is so much a part of her character and being that it never feels as if, even in her most explicit moments, the film has contrived it for easy sexual effect. Nor does she simply crack sex jokes or become the object of them for the filmmakers’, or



viewer's, adolescent gratification. Nor is her sexualisation of the cartoon type one sometimes finds in comedies with Marilyn Monroe or Jayne Mansfield – regardless of the skills and qualities their performances bring – which, it might be argued, want to ironise their vulgar cake and eat it. Earlier in the scene, when Gaston insisted on doing things correctly, Madame Colet stands corrected, fingers pressed into the table, and Francis produces a series of precise responses in a subtle register (easy to miss) which communicate the first feelings of satisfaction that his authoritative address elicits. She looks taken aback, dropping her facial features into a slight sulk, but happily gives an obedient nod, and then, as he continues the roll call of items, she stares at him with motherly amusement. A little later, her



hand slips down slightly from her cheek, where it landed in a gesture of shock at the invasion of her privacy, to touching her neck and jaw, coyly ladylike and, in its feathery fingering, erotically suspended. When he says ‘ – And one lip-



stick’, she is startled out of her trance, her palm shifting to her chest, just below her neck. She also catches her breath, and gives a miniscule gulp, steadying herself after beginning to drift sensually away .... Despite the highlighting description, her movements are quiet and restrained and Francis, in her performance throughout the film, suggests an ardent sexual yearning whilst (just) maintaining the proper composure. She balances self-possession with the craving for surrender.

She is also languorous and assertive. Earlier in Paris, when we first encounter her in the film, she is sitting on an armchair, holding a martini glass, dressed in a black dress

with large bands of white fur over her shoulders, leaning back, and looking off into the distance. She then says the Oscar Wilde-ish line: ‘You see, François, marriage is a beautiful mistake that two people make together.’ She appears to be sexually stimulated by this ‘beautiful mistake’: as she says ‘make together’ she closes her eyes, and takes an ecstatic sigh, her chest rising. In the middle of her reverie, she catches her breath with a tiny choke, not unlike her gulp during Gaston’s itemising of her handbag, as though the arousing thought had caught in her throat and had to be cleared. Moving then from sensual daydream to forthright address, she turns to Filiba, and says, resolutely, ‘But with you François I think it would be a mistake!’ The actress’ lisp, which lets her ‘r’s sound like ‘w’s, is particularly at



home in this film with its insinuating discordances: it pointedly disturbs her languor, and her smooth, flawless surface; it gives her an edge, and hints at deviancy.

Paul notes the masochistic colouration to Madame Colet’s character and says she ‘luxuriates in a helpless passivity’ (1983: 57). For him, her leaning back indicates her submission, and that she is a willing victim, and yet he also suggests that it is a challenge, a provocation and a dare for Gaston to join her. He goes on to argue that her passivity becomes a power over Gaston, a temptation to stop, and not be on the move; the quieting lure of this apparently helpless siren makes him abide a while (1983: 65). Even near the end of the film when the game is up, and Gaston knows he must catch a train that evening with Lily, he finds it painful to leave the enchanted atmosphere of the house. During their initial meeting, as she says, ‘You’re hired’, the *Trouble in Paradise* music erupts on the soundtrack and as the scene is fading out, Gaston’s upright posture relaxes, and he too leans back .... Their relationship is one where they pull and push each other, sometimes simultaneously. Near the end of the film, Gaston declares his love for Madame Colet and compels her not to leave him. She refuses saying that she ‘Wants to make it tough’ for him nonchalantly accepting his declaration as she gets on with tightening her gloves around her fingers. She asserts her playful sadism, pushing her face up to his as she grins and gloats – Francis and Marshall often hold their faces in close proximity – but in holding her face so close to his and not withdrawing, her gleeful withholding becomes, almost imperceptibly, a hopeful invitation (see main image on p. 1). This is one of those moments of perfect timing where because one state slips into another the film shows the connection in an apparent contradiction. Held too long, with Francis clearly indicating a change, the two states, of prevarication and solicitation, would separate, and not be as mutually informing.

### A feminised virility

Marshall also uses his body, and his voice, to complicate his address, creating a sexual identity where a seeming ambivalence is advantageously resolved. When he says of the Major, 'I don't mind his grammatical mistakes. I will overlook his bad punctuation. But the letter has *no mystery, no bouquet*', he exhibits severe schoolmasterly standards of judgement while, at the same time, appearing to dismiss them in favour of a fragrantly evocative reason. 'Bouquet' suggests, suitably for Gaston's confidently equivocal persona, both a feminine smelling of flowers and a masculine smelling of wine. The lines are stern and reprimanding but, masquerading as magnanimous, they are delivered with a lilting élan and swaying posture, turning his upper body away on 'I don't mind his grammatical mistakes', and then turning back on 'I will overlook his bad ...', and finally resting in front of Madame Colet's face on, 'punctuation'. Similarly, when he says the letter has '*no mystery, no bouquet*', he slows his speech such that the words emerge with a pleading and plaintive gorgeousness. (It seems that he pronounces 'mystery' slightly irregularly – 'mystwy' – as though he were moulding his speech to complement, and implicitly compliment, Madame Colet's speech impediment.)

In a precise and vivid essay, Drew Todd discusses Herbert Marshall's Gaston as the quintessential 1930s Dandy figure (2005). This figure contrasts to the modernist Dandy of the late nineteenth century who was openly associated with homosexuality, and in films often portrayed as a deviant, an egoistic villain, or a social misfit. According to Todd, the 1930s were unusual for popularising the dandy figure as a masculine ideal (thus, in this sense, returning it to the Georgian version). In film, the western or war hero, the outdoor type, or the film noir male are more obvious masculine ideals. These characteristics would be associated with the Wild West, the jungle, the desert, the grimy cityscape, or the office. For the 1930s dandy the characteristic places were the ballroom, nightclub and penthouse. His appearance and behaviour correspond to the sleek Art Deco designs. He is a sophisticate: he has refined taste, elegant dress, high British accent and droll charm. He manages to have it both ways: he exploits all the trappings of upper class conventions and elegance while mocking stuffy manners and regulations. Rather than a man of character or moral vision, he is a man of personality who attends to self-presentation endearing him to women and aligning him with post-Victorian values. He is performative but at no loss to his authority (think also of Fred Astaire). Filiba and the Major represent the inadequate males in the film, thus bolstering Gaston's heterosexual appeal.

Gaston's interest in women's make-up might diminish his masculinity were this interest not presented as knowledgeable, expert, and professional. Furthermore, his views on the subject are intensely serious, and critically, rather than sentimentally, motivated. Gaston is astonished, even a touch contemptuous, as he reads the label of the lipstick, that Madame Colet uses 'Scarlet No.4'. He says, with furrowed brow as he peruses her face, that he would prefer 'Crimson' with her complexion. As he peruses, he uses a monitoring finger to gauge her facial skin precisely, and its movements are nimble and undemonstrative showing that he has the experience to make a swift assessment. Equally, instead of affected mannerisms that might be regarded as camp, Gaston deploys vigorous gesture: she says that there is 'Too much blue in crimson', and he impatiently shouts back, adamantly bringing down his fist, 'But that's what you need!' Strong-minded and determined assertions of

finessed good taste banish any thoughts that an interest in cosmetics may be merely a girlish preoccupation. Her shade of powder is 'Peaches and cream' and he irately exclaims, looking away in frustration, 'That's too dark.' She pleads, leaning into him, hand on heart, 'But do you realise I have *light eyes*?', and he matches her delivery and leans back into her, reciprocating, with tight, pent-up exasperation, 'But Madame Colet that is a question of eye shading.' As he emphasises 'eye shading', he clenches his fists with a snap.

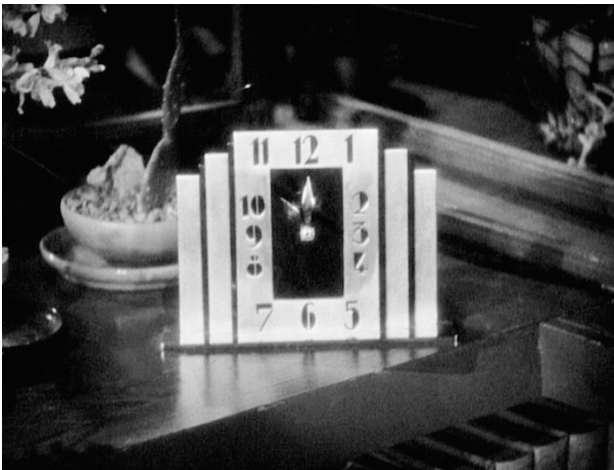


### The displaced evening

In a celebrated sequence, the narrative of an evening spent between Gaston and Madam Colet is told via clocks. The characters are heard but not shown until the end of the evening, and even then a clock remains important to the arrangement. There is a strategy of deviation, but also of compression, the sequence streamlined like the Art Deco clocks it foregrounds. The evening begins with a round clock, sitting on a table, showing 5 p.m., and the tinkling chimes denote the hour and mark the commencement of the sequence. Lily declares, off screen, in another of the film's



humorous statements based on apparent paradox, 'I leave you alone with that lady, but if you behave like a gentleman I'll break your neck.' There is then a quick dissolve – the same clock now shows 5.12 p.m. – and a knock on the door. (Sounds come across as distinct and individuated, like special effects in a radio play, or noises off in a theatrical production.) Madame Colet speaks and her roundabout request adds to the oblique presentation of the action: 'I wanted to ask Mademoiselle Vautier [Lily] to ask you if you would be



good enough to go out for dinner with me tonight.' They laugh in relay, manically and artificially, and this would perhaps look awkward or inept if the actors were shown directly, so while the laughing achieves a peculiarity, it is less disturbing to the film's elegance in this abstracted aural form. The film dissolves, the same clock shows 9.05 p.m., and a phone is ringing. This is surely Lily ringing to speak to Gaston, and now the deviation – she is not shown – and the condensation – her worries distilled into the ring of a phone – work together to express her exclusion and isolation. There is a poignancy with regard to Lily here and later, in the same sequence, with regard to Madame Colet which is unusual for the film and is even more affecting for being unexpected, incorporated, minimal, and indirect (not showing Lily). It is also fleeting: time, and the sequence, quickly moves on so the point about her being easily disregarded is made *because* the film does not dwell upon it (although the sentiment of the moment is underscored by an adagio version of the *Trouble in Paradise* theme). The light fades in the room and the gloom masks the dissolve that lets the clock hands shift barely perceptibly to 10.50 p.m.: time blithely passes by for them, but not for her.

In the distance, Gaston and Madame Colet are laughing, and we know that they open the door because the light from outside the room wipes across the clock. They delightedly disagree about which of them is responsible for their successful dancing ('It's the way you lead', 'No Madam, it's the way you follow'); their relationship rests in an elated antagonism. She suggests that because the evening is still young they should go down to the living room, and this is the signal for the film to dissolve to a different table clock, made up of rectangular planes, chiming 11 p.m. So far, the unmoving camera has been important to the sequence, its sedate concentration in contrast to the human movement and development beyond the frame. Now the camera pans away across the table to rest on a bucket of champagne. The film dissolves again, this time to a view through a window into the dark night, and it might appear that clocks have been relinquished as an organisational feature, but no: the church in the distance has a clock on its tower! Amusingly, although the camera stays nearby, the sequence has managed to extend its conceit, craftily displaying range within its constraints. This goes along with the film taking pleasure in punctilious succession so, for example, at exactly at the moment that the film dissolves from the champagne, the high ding-ding chimes of the indoor clock are replaced by the deeper and distant bong-bong of the outdoor clock in an aural equivalent of a graphic match. This aural matching continues (after another pan to a window through which the moon can be seen) as the film dissolves again, this time to a tall-case floor clock (an Art Deco grandfather clock), also chiming, in a similar rhythm but with its own distinct tone, to signal 2 a.m. The clocks seem to speak to each other across the dissolves, in time, even as they omit time. Like the film's hero, Gaston, the sequence is fastidious in its construction of the mysterious.

Although, we might wonder whether there is any real mystery. The evening is no longer young, the champagne has been drunk, and presumably, given there are no voices, Madame Colet and Gaston are no longer merely dancing. However, the camera pans, once again to the left, away from the standing clock, and finally finds a human figure: Madame Colet, standing outside her bedroom door in her white evening dress. It is exactly at the point when the clock stops sounding that she says, looking off-screen right, 'Goodnight Monsieur LaValle.' The methodical chimes add to the suspense surrounding their whereabouts and now end





as we are shown that they have not yet gone to bed (together). After a shot of Gaston standing by his door, he says 'Goodnight, Madame Colet' and the film cuts to show them both by their respective doors, in the upper hallway, on either side of the clock. At the same time, this cut initiates the slow, lamenting version of the *Trouble in Paradise* theme on the soundtrack against which their drift away from having sex, towards their separate rooms, takes place.

Throughout the sequence, transitions are meticulously synchronised with the aural *and* related to shifts in lighting (for example, the light dropping and flooding over the original circular clock). Near the end of the sequence, after Madame Colet has left the scene, Gaston pulls a chord that switches off a light *at just the moment* the music pauses at the end of a phrase (a slower phrase then accompanies his approach to the door and concludes as he shuts it). A short while before, Madame Colet switches off the hallway light, also by pulling a chord. She says 'Goodnight' once again, and rather than any questioning intonation, the soft seductiveness of her voice wills it to be disregarded. She also leaves a short delay after switching off the light and before saying 'Goodnight', and stands waiting a moment *after* saying it, hoping perhaps that the lack of exposure by the light might help his abandonment to her darkness. She also taries just a second or two at the door, which is ajar, and which she does not adjust, so that she may impalpably slip through it sideways. This allows her body, even in retreat, to turn towards him for a final invitation, and then, with the trail of her dress sliding away behind the door, withdraw regrettably like the ghost of a beloved into the gloom. (The rarefied implicitness of her invitations have a quiet dignity.) The landing area is now darkened but there remain two sources of light. There are shafts, most probably moonlight, from an off-screen window which cast a muted light across the clock, the curtain behind, and just reach and touch Gaston's front, as he stands frozen staring at her room; and there is a light from within the clock that illuminates its face. They perhaps represent the last chance to prolong his evening. He moves forward towards her room, setting off quite decisively, but after only a few steps, he stops and pulls the chord to switch off the light. Still facing in the direction of her room, he waits for a second, but then turns away. It is unclear at which point he makes his decision to retire but, in the context of the sequence, it feels as if the darkening of the clock signals that his time is up. The sequence shows masterful handling of form and design (without the achievement being simply of the formalist kind).

Nevertheless, its coherence appears to be disrupted when, at its close, it suddenly switches from the graceful



and wistful to something cruder. Gaston enters his room, shuts the door, and from the outside, we hear it lock. This prompts the camera to hurriedly pan left to Madame Colet's door with that same urgent, escalating thriller music that sometimes accompanies camera movement in the film (for example, during Gaston's speedy ascents and descents of Madame Colet's staircase which were in fact an in-joke, made possible by movie trickery, because Herbert Marshall only had one fully functioning leg). Now her door locks. The film is still communicating at one remove, implying her behaviour, via sound, without showing it: she was waiting with hope behind the door, and only now does she lock it on hearing his lock, the pan representing the inevitable cause and effect. The device is in keeping therefore with this overall strategy of concealment but the tone conflicts. Perhaps it is another burst of roguish contrariness (such as the occasion when Gaston violently shakes Lily, or the use of the 'Do Not Disturb' sign). Perhaps the exalted atmosphere is broken for good reason if one sees the sequence as a reduced version of the film's overall narrative structure. After Lily is set up as Gaston's ideal partner in work and play, she is marginalised and desexualised through the secretary role. Madame Colet is then proposed as a persuasive partner for Gaston, and her presence dominates the film. Yet, Gaston and Madame Colet are, for each other, impossible objects of desire. The sequence brings us ever so close, but it does not happen. The stylistic rupture, the deterioration in comic register, dampens the arousal – a sudden buttoning-up – and perhaps is a way of insisting upon the impossibility. It also denies the aesthetic satisfactions that an even tone would bring, thus matching the frustrating lack of sexual fulfilment in their relationship.

Despite the earlier consistency of style, it is difficult to grasp the attitude of the sequence (as a whole), or assess its character, because it can be taken one way and then another, like the gestalt figure of the duck-rabbit: romantic and sexual, tactful and conceited, tender and aloof, sincere and winking, organic and contrived. It is obvious and subtle: for example, it flagrantly displays its play with time while it also involves undemonstratively exquisite timing (of movement, sound and light). It is clever-clever and self-effacing: it declares its ingenuity with its reflexive dig at narrative laboriousness while it unassertively, almost inconspicuously, moves from suggesting the isolation of Lily, through an enchanted evening, somewhere beyond time, to the isolation of Madame Colet. (This effortless development was pointed out to me by one of my graduate students Thomas Toles.)



### A mediated passion

Ambivalence also characterises another sequence of shots where Gaston and Madame Colet's embrace is diverted through reflection and shadow. Gaston pulls Madame Colet vigorously around into a kissing embrace, and just after he does so the film makes a striking edit to show a large circular mirror above the bed with the reflection of them kissing in it. This is not a coy deviation, a shying away, because the edit comes not as they kiss, but during it. We are shown the kiss directly and *then* redirected, and we are shown it in its entirety even though it is interrupted. Moreover, they had kissed before without such a response; perhaps the difference is that then she requested and initiated the kiss and Gaston remained relatively restrained whereas now he cannot control himself. Indeed, the film removes us sharply from Gaston's passionate physicality so that the participants are relatively distanced, framed, suspended above the bed and surrounded by silence. The physicality, at least for the viewer, is *removed*, mediated through an image, contained, and absorbed into the décor. The purpose and meaning of the effect is opaque. The kiss is held and held up, artfully displayed, but this is balanced by breakage and separation. Does the jolt signify a transformation into a thing of beauty or a worrying dislocation? Is the silence a spiritual hush or is it eerie? Is this a love that is uplifting and transcendent or one that must be displaced?

Is it wondrous or hopeless? As they separate from the kiss, Madame Colet says that that have a long time together ahead of them, and she begins to list 'Weeks', 'Months' and 'Years'. As she says 'Weeks' the film cuts, this time to show them in the round dressing table mirror, their image standing amongst bottles of perfume. The shot lasts barely a second for as she says 'Months' the film cuts again to a shot looking down on the bed and showing their figures, chest up, silhouetted, on the shiny bedspread. She now says, 'Years' and the shadow figures kiss again, before the film returns to show them directly. Madame Colet thinks she is spreading out time, and yet the presentation abbreviates and curtails. The whole lifespan of their relationship has been compressed, started and finished within a few short shots, each betokening lengthy periods. Hoberman perspicaciously writes that this sequence renders their desire as 'ephemeral and eternal' (2003). In addition, once again, this kiss sequence is attitudinally inconclusive: on one view serious and intense on another lightly and surreptitiously witty (for example in the way that it appears to withdraw from the embrace but actually draws it out while the lifetime of their relationship is minimised).

### The wordless soliloquy

Hake says that the romantic image cannot be presented directly but must be incorporated within the world of beautiful consumer objects (1992: 191). Indeed, Gaston's relationship with Madame Colet was formed around a luxurious handbag and its contents and existed through her wealth, property and belongings. Paradoxically, despite this commodification, this sequence of shots suggests that the relationship itself, unlike the one that Gaston has with Lily, can only exist in a state of dematerialised abstraction. Indirection through abstraction is also in play in the final scene I wish to highlight where Lily sings (without words) her worries about the whereabouts of Gaston on the night they have agreed to flee, and about his clandestine activities with Madame Colet. The progression of her thoughts is expressed through the variations in her singing as she packs up her clothes and belongings. At first, as she pulls a whole range of outfits out of the wardrobe, excited by the thought



of her departure, she boldly and gleefully belts out her tune. Then the film cuts to a period with Gaston and Madame Colet that culminates with them kissing. Lily rings and is told by Jacques, Madame Colet's butler (Robert Greig), that they are both 'Busy'. Putting down the phone, she expresses her concern by resuming her 'Tra-la-la-la'ing with much more deliberation. Then she pauses for a moment before changing to a more hurried 'Diddle-li-dee-dee-dee', less tuneful, and indicative of a mind racing. As she moves and picks up more clothes, squeezing them anxiously, her song becomes more broken-backed, more rat-te-tat-tat – 'De-de-de' – as if each syllable represented a different thought popping into her head. Yet, her singing is not simply an ex-



pression of her thoughts but a fight with them: dismissing her disquiet, she tries to reassure herself, continuing her packing by effortfully trying to be brisk and by forcing a greater continuity and vigour in her singing. Despite the effort, her singing halts a couple of times, punctured by the gravity of her worry, and the scene finishes with her on the floor, aggressively trying to banish her anxiety by more insistently 'La-la-la'ing and thrusting her clothes into the



drawer. The sequence, like many of the scenes in the film, is built around the absent – here absence of words – and the insubstantial. Equally, the immaterial is in tension with the material. There was the prestidigitation during the eating of the 'marvelous' supper; the enchanted, yet anti-climactic, evening taking place beyond the framed elegance of the Art Deco clocks; the passionate kiss, travelling through and across mirrors, perfume bottles, and bed sheets, becoming

reflection and shadow; and now an inarticulate-articulate syllabification troubles the packing of clothes.

The scene is an amusing solution to the problem of how a character might express her thoughts and feelings to the viewer when there is no other character present to whom they can express them. As in the scene structured around the clocks, the idea provides focus and generates inventive variation. Quite a lot of comedy works in this way, from slapstick to wordplay, getting mileage from spinning out an idea, often pushing it further than one thought it could go (and, indeed, the whole film spins out the idea of indirection). Unlike the concreteness of word play and slapstick, the comedy here depends on inchoate utterances. Nevertheless, at the same time it is precise and controlled, and therefore also unlike the comedy of buffoonish inarticulacy. Despite its indistinctness, her singing truthfully expresses her feelings, and although the conceit intends to amuse it does not make a joke of them. By not verbalising, the scene remains faithful to private anxiety, yet it is typical of the film's use of indirection, contrariness and abbreviation that the fears of infidelity are communicated by a 'tra-la-la'.

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