

Ninotchka

USA | 1939 | 110 minutes

Credits

Director	Ernst Lubitsch
Screenplay	Charles Brackett, Billy Wilder & Walter Reisch (story by Melchior Lengyel)
Photography	William H. Daniels
Music	Werner R. Heymann

Cast

Ninotchka	Greta Garbo
Leon	Melvyn Douglas
Swana	Ina Claire
Razinin	Bela Lugosi

In Brief

This was the first time since 1934 that Garbo had been seen in the 20th century, and the first time ever that her material was predominantly comic (though it was hardly the first time she'd laughed, as the ads insisted). But her character still had an icy aura, at least at the outset - she plays a Russian comrade staying in Paris on government business, a situation providing writers Wilder, Brackett and Walter Reisch with rich material for impish political jokes ('The last mass trials were a great success. There are going to be fewer but better Russians'). Then she meets the acceptable face of Capitalism in the form of Melvyn Douglas, and like many a lesser MGM star before her, succumbs completely to his suave looks and honeyed voice. The film's not quite the delight history says it is - by the late '30s, the famed Lubitsch touch was resembling a heavy blow, the elegant sophistication turning crude and cynical. Yet it's still consistently amusing, and Garbo throws herself into the fray with engaging vigour.

Time Out

"This picture takes place in Paris in those wonderful days when a siren was a brunette and not an alarm --- and if a Frenchman turned out the light it was not on account of an air raid!"

-Opening title card, *Ninotchka*

If I have found one clear through-line connecting most of the films I've studied from the great year 1939, it's that in some way or another, they all treat on the immediate coming of World War II: some with nostalgia for the past, some by stressing the wonders and strength of America, or glancing sideways or directly at the European indulgences that permitted the rise of that conflict in the first place. But of all these films, none has had quite as intriguing a relationship to tonight's subject, one of the most politically intriguing American films of the 1930s. It is a satire of the tense relationship between two ideological enemies who for reasons of good tactical sense were clearly going to end up as allies in the fight against Nazi Germany; a document of pre-Cold War tensions like none that I've ever seen. It is also one of the most frothy and luxurious romantic comedies in cinema history.

It boggles my mind that I've been operating this blog for so many years, and I've never managed to review a single film directed by Ernst Lubitsch. Ah, Lubitsch! Lubitsch, of the Lubitsch Touch, a preternatural gift for romantic comedy and sexual farce so perfect that it defies both description and duplication! I must confess that although *Ninotchka* was the first of his movies I ever saw, it is not at all my favorite, nor do I think it his most typical or successful. In all three cases, I think that honor would go to *Trouble in Paradise*, or perhaps *The Merry Widow* if one should be in the mood for a musical (as one should always be. Like a great many directors, Lubitsch didn't survive the beginning of the Hayes Code era intact, although he did a much better job of it than a lot of people. And conceding that as his earlier films are more ribald and thus necessarily funnier, I think it's absolutely the case that *Ninotchka* is the masterpiece among his later films (though I have admittedly not seen them all).



The story goes that the director was forced into taking a screenplay that he didn't especially like by MGM - the studio had commissioned it for the most mercenary of reasons, looking to put the great melodrama star Greta Garbo into a comedy - and hoping to get something worthwhile out of it, he tossed it to three screenwriters, two of whom he'd worked with before: a pair of relative nobodies called Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett. Walter Reisch filled out the trio, and with Lubitsch himself providing enough notes and ideas that he ought to count as a fourth writer, they produced a screenplay that- well, let us just note that the three nobodies became three very significant somebodies as a direct result of *Ninotchka*, and no nobodies have ever deserved it more.

As these four men put it, the story of *Ninotchka* first concerns three Soviet emissaries, Iranoff (Sig Ruman), Buljanoff (Felix Bressart), and Kopalski (Alexander Granach), who have been sent to Paris to sell a cache of extremely valuable jewels to free up

Americans in Paris: The Eternal City and the Upstart Nation



To that end, the film milks a great deal of comedy out of the knowns of Soviet Communism - it's godless, unemotional, lots of people die or are disappeared, it's woefully inefficient - but carefully skirts around actually implying that these things are bad - that's just the way those Russians are, y'know. Yes, the joke depends on our knowledge that Stalin killed innocents by the truckload - but once we laugh at it, we're no longer invested in the terror of that fact. Ninotchka is absolutely not a dark comedy, and insofar as we're invited to dislike anything about Ninotchka at all, it's that she's so stern and mirthless that she deprives herself of the basic joys of being a human in Paris, not that she's a willing and eager representative of a murderous regime.

If I'm being completely honest, I don't actually have a concrete idea what all this is building to, exactly. I'm tempted to read into the later career of Billy Wilder, and suppose that he intrinsically found the idea of mess death so tragic that it's hilarious, but Lubitsch's treatment of the material doesn't square with it. So I can only raise possibilities: perhaps it's a reflection of American nervousness about striding onto the world stage? A good-natured piss-taking of our dear friends the Commies? A cynical attempt to use real-world situations to add some unearned heft to an otherwise standard scenario about a goofy horndog and an ice princess? Probably none of these, or some combination. I do not know, I only observe the intriguing peculiarity of it all.

What I do know is this: Ninotchka is a deliriously grand thing, full of gorgeous sets, gorgeous costumes, and of course the gorgeous Garbo, who proved herself quite adept at a comic line in her second-to-last film (her last was another comedy with Melvyn Douglas, *Two-Faced Woman*; I haven't seen it, and I hear it's pretty mediocre). And most importantly, it is hilarious: not wall-to-wall funny, in fact it builds up rather deliberately, but the gags all hit home with the effortless brilliance of several geniuses; and as a bonus, there's even a "theory of comedy" scene that quite effectively proves that a man falling

off a chair is the funniest thing in the world. Politics or not, WWII or not, there's no taking away Ninotchka's triumph as one of the comedies that everyone must see, and if you've already seen it, see it again: its charms and bubbling spirit are perhaps even more precious in these days of degraded romantic comedies than they were at the moment of its premiere.

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