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Ernst Lubitsch**



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## Commodity Fetishism and Female Agency in The Oyster Princess by Ernst Lubitsch

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper sheds light on how the film satirizes capitalist society through the theory of commodity fetishism by Karl Marx, paying particular emphasis to visual motifs and character interactions that reaffirm these commodified relationships. It situates these challenges within the frames of Weimar-era feminist discourse. The paper also explores how the protagonist Ossi, subverts gender norms to capture contemporary debates on women's roles. She evokes the tensions between individual agency and societal constraints. Through the film's intense representation of wealth, class, and gender, this paper reveals Lubitsch's critique of economic relationships and social mobility during a tumultuous historical period.

**Methodology:** This study employs film analysis as its primary method, using textual and discourse analysis to examine the film. The analysis is supported by a theoretical framework drawn from relevant literature and scholarly discussions that align with the topic of commodity fetishism and female agency. This analysis uses Karl Marx's concept of commodity fetishism as a framework to examine the lasting impacts of the film within the context of the economic and social structures of the Weimar Republic. Textual analysis facilitates the identification of the visual motifs and cinematographic techniques used by Lubitsch in relation to his portrayals of relationships and social comment. Each of these interpretative points inspects how the visuals accentuate themes of commodification and capitalist critique. This contextualization establishes the film within the broader socio-political context of Germany in the years following World War 1, addressing the cultural and feminist discourses of the Weimar Republic.

**Findings:** The analysis indicates that Ernst Lubitsch's film *The Oyster Princess* employs humor to critique the social, economic, and gender dynamics pervasive in post-World War I Germany during the Weimar Republic. The film illustrates absurd patterns of commodity fetishism through its depiction of how human interpersonal relationships undergo manipulation. The analysis shows the transformation of human connections into transactions dictated by wealth and social standing, thereby prompting reflection on their convergence in an era of rapid change.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice:** This analysis of *The Oyster Princess* contributes to discussions on commodity fetishism by merging economic theory with visual and narrative elements. It shows how gendered perspectives deepen our understanding of commodification and agency and emphasize the interplay of class, power, and identity. The study promotes critical conversation on social inequalities, gender relations, and commodification. It emphasizes how these problems still impact modern society and how crucial it is to stop the commodification of human values to create a more just society.

**Keywords:** *Weimar Cinema, Commodity Fetishism, Feminism, Ernst Lubitsch, Gender*

## 1. Introduction

*The Oyster Princess* presents a satirical narrative of German cultural landscapes that look into the issues in the Weimar Republic after the First World War. Set against the backdrop of the economic and social turmoil in Germany, the film deals with themes of wealth, power, and human relationships. The film uses humor to uncover the absurdities behind capitalist values and the gender norms framed within them.

This paper analyzes how the work of Lubitsch reflects Marx's concept of commodity fetishism; for that purpose, specific examples of visual motifs incorporated in dialogue in the film will be discussed. By situating the discussion with Weimar Germany's socio-political landscape and feminist discourse, the analysis also puts forward Lubitsch critique against the patriarchal structures and the consequent commodification of relationships. *The Oyster Princess* unveils how wealth and social status warp relationships to commodify human beings within a class-driven society through the opulence of its characters and settings.

Social gender standards in the film are challenged by the opposition of the central character Ossi, whose subversive agency unsettles the accepted feminine ideals. Therefore, it portrays her as a *fluid woman*. However, this independence is complicated by the film's ending, as it suggests a nuanced view of gender roles in the context of post-war capitalism. By analyzing *The Oyster Princess* through Marxist and gendered lenses, this paper aims to reveal how Lubitsch critiques social hierarchies, affluence, and patriarchal norms, encouraging reflection on the intersection of class, power, and identity in a rapidly changing world.

## 2. The Oyster Princess and Marx's Fetishism

Marx's (1976) notion of commodity fetishism, as presented in *Capital*, made clear the strange character that emerges when products of labor are transformed into commodities. As Marx points out, the commodity has "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" when the social relations of labor are masked with the relations between objects. This comes to light in the film, where economic transactions and displays of material wealth mediate the overall character relationship. Exaggerated characters and absurd plotlines reflect capitalist society, where relationships are subordinated to commodification and where an individual's social status and value are gauged based on the individual's material wealth.

Lubitsch's critique against commodity fetishism comes across in elaborate visual motifs that sharpen relationships' commodification. For instance, in the opening sequence of the film (2:10-2:30), Mister Quaker is dictating a post into a room full of secretaries busily and in synchrony typing away. In the same sequence, we also see Mister Quaker assigning mundane tasks to his servant, such as holding up handkerchiefs to blow his nose, combing his hair, and serving him coffee as he sips while placing his pipe in his mouth for him to smoke. The dehumanized image of the staff stands in sharp contrast to Quaker's lavish surroundings, depicting the wealth gap and transformation of human effort into fetishized commodities. This visual commodification reflects what Marx describes as the process where "value, therefore, does not have its description

branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic” (Marx, 1976, p. 167). Lubitsch’s camera work creates precisely such hieroglyphics through its geometric arrangements of servants, its mechanized choreography, and its transformation of human bodies into display objects. The film thus makes visible the usually invisible process by which capitalism transforms human relationships into commodity relations.

Another critical moment is the extravagant wedding procession (30:28-32:30). The synchronization of servants in the procession expresses commodified labor’s alienation, suggesting a factory production line. In an odd manner, this scene reproduces what Marx saw commodities as embodying “social relations between things.” The labor that produces that wealth is concealed from view (Marx, 1976). The grotesque spectacle mocks the fetishistic suppression of human relationships in material displays. Mister Quaker decorates his castle with grand tapestries, elaborate paintings, and intricate marble floors. It acts as a fortress of indulgence, where a fleet of workers caters to his every whim. The ostentation set against vacuous relationships emphasizes Marx’s contention that a capitalist society prioritizes material value over human connection.

The film transforms what Marx calls “social relations between the producers” into “a social relation between objects” (Marx, 1976 p. 165). Herr Seligson, the matchmaker, embodies this view, offering brides as commodities for wealthy clients. The marriage market receives particular attention through the film’s visual system. Seligson’s office is deliberately designed to resemble a shop display, with photographs of potential brides and grooms arranged like product catalogs. Price tags and quality ratings in the background reinforce the commercial nature of matrimonial arrangements. This visualizes a parallel between love and market exchange. This practice echoes Marx’s idea of people being evaluated not as individuals but as bearers of economic value—a concept central to Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1976). Also, Marx argues that commodity fetishism makes social relations appear as “relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly” (Marx, 1976, p. 169). This reveals how romantic relationships become mediated through economic transactions and social status. In scene (5:36-5:48), a client protests her dissatisfaction with a match, and Seligson retorts, “Für den Preis haben Sie alle einen kleinen Fehler” (For this price, they all have a minor flaw), suggesting that people, like commodities, are reduced to their monetary value. This scene makes clear how the commodification of relationships can lead to alienation and a feeling of worthlessness when assessing an individual merely based on economic prospects rather than inherent human worth.

The film is titled *The Oyster Princess*, which gives a satirical tone to the idea of commodity fetishism. The principal character, Ossi, is projected as a desirable “prize” and a human commodity, being the daughter of the affluent oyster businessman, whose identity is fueled by wealth and serves to render her a mere commodity to be traded in the marriage market in an impoverished post-war German society. Lubitsch uses characters like Prince Nucki and Josef, both vying for Ossi’s fortune, to emphasize how capitalist societies reduce human relationships to

financial transactions. Ossi's unique personality and desires are subordinate to her economic values, which reflects how capitalist values permeate even intimate aspects of life.

The film *mise en scène* plays a significant role in the narrative of commodification. The vast rooms create a dwarf human figure's perception as they turn humans into mere decoration because of their displacement in the setting. The repeated architectural elements create a beat that mechanizes the movement of human beings, while servants appear in the same formations, becoming visual commodities in themselves. This is best seen in the choreography of the wedding scene, where the synchronized movement and spatial arrangement transform human beings into units of mass production. McCormick's analysis of the "Foxtrot Epidemic" scene illuminates its transgression of class boundaries, noting how "the crossing of class boundaries is epitomized best by Ossi and a butler, with whom she dances in wild abandon" (McCormick, 2020, pp. 114-115). The sequence (32:33-36:00) uses a montage of feet dancing to contrast social standing: the fancy shoes for Herr Quarker's rich entourage are juxtaposed with the more modest footwear of the servants, creating a visual metaphor for class difference. The dance sequence also represents fraternity or oneness, suggesting the participants move harmoniously and, in concert, transcending social barriers. However, beneath this unified surface, hierarchical distinctions persist through subtle variations in posture and gesture, revealing entrenched social stratification beneath the veneer of collective celebration.

Lubitsch populates the film with archetypes of aristocrats, nouveau riche upstarts, and working-class servants, who each represent a different rung on the capitalist ladder. The characters' behaviors reflect a wealth and status-driven society, sometimes exaggeratedly. For instance, Prince Nucki symbolizes the fading influence of the feudal elite of poor financial resources with social titles reflecting the concept of impoverished affluence.

Ossi's father is fascinated by the aristocracy, promising to buy her a title if she marries a prince. This transaction satirizes both class aspirations and the capitalist commodification of social status. By merging satire with Marx's critique of commodification, Lubitsch's film portrays human relationships as transactions in a wealth and social ambition marketplace.

The film critiques the alienators of capitalist modernity and unveils how materialistic and economic value reshape individuals and their social identities.

### **3. Ossi's Patriarchal Negotiation**

*The Oyster Princess* presents a sophisticated exploration of gender roles, principally through the eyes of its main character, Ossi. Drawing on scholarly analyses by Owen Lyons (2023) in "Finance and the World Economy in Weimar Cinema" and Rick McCormick (2020) in "Sex, Politics, and Comedy: The Transnational Cinema of Ernst Lubitsch," the film reveals how Ossi's character confronts societal norms and female objectification, consequently establishing her agency and challenging patriarchal structures.

In her book chapter about radical reform, Catherine Dollard discusses Helene Stöcker, a prominent feminist during the Weimar period who advocated the for *Neue Ethik*. These modern

ethics aimed to question gender identities, including women's sexuality, women's rights, equality of illegitimate children, and abortion rights in the Weimar Republic. According to Stöcker, the reformation of male and female relationships should give a very good illustration of the modernization spirit of the Weimar period, which opposed traditional ideas on gender and sexuality. Stöcker advocated a more redefined type of relation between partners, premised on mutual respect and equality, as opposed to one governed by patriarchal norms. Thus, Stöcker contributed to personal as well as social and societal reforms, which helped the feminist movement and the discussions of reproductive rights (Dollard, 2009). This legacy, in its questioning of perceptions of gender dynamics, continues to speak to contemporary debates around gender equity and social justice.

Through Ossi's rejection of traditional expectations like child-rearing and male dependency, she demonstrates independence despite her privileged upbringing under a patriarchal father. In his commentary on feminism, Lubitsch uses visual motifs and narrative subversions to critique patriarchal conventions. The most pronounced example is when Ossi meets Prince Nucki's friend Josef. She inspects him (22:35-23:18) as if he were a commodity. The problem of the expected gender roles being reversed to make the man the object scrutinized disturbs the power structure typical of courtship. Emphasizing in her feminist literature, Stöcker suggests that such representation is increasingly evident of a conflict between the liberation of women and the notion of traditional gender roles. (Stöcker, 1905).

Lyons contextualizes the analysis in the socioeconomics of the Weimar Republic, where traditional gender assumptions shaped much of the behavior in financial markets. While the film initially presents Ossi as a commodity within male-dominated systems, her character evolution reveals an emerging financial agent who shapes events through an economic agency (Lyons, 2023). McCormick parallels this interpretation, characterizing Ossi as a rebellious "spoiled American girl" whose portrayal satirizes both the liberated American and German "New Woman" while embodying the "anarchistic small child" archetype in German comedy (McCormick, 2020, p. 110). Ossi's audacious behavior challenges societal constraints on privileged women, effectively dismantling conventional gender expectations. Both scholars, nevertheless, note the transgressive character of Ossi. Lyons draws attention to her skill in financial matters, in addition to her playing of "masculinized" roles, indicating that all these attributes go against traditional notions of gender. This approach recalls sociocritical arguments raised by feminists against the bourgeois standard of domesticity in Weimar, which increasingly hailed the financial and personal independence of women as worthy yet also acknowledged that it was constantly fraught with contradictions. By embracing a fluid, multifaceted gender identity, Ossi emerges as a disruptive force that challenges the established gender binary and opens new possibilities for understanding contemporary gender and sexuality. In sequence (2:10 - 3:00), Mister Quaker dictates his post to some of his workers, and from their attire, it is apparent that they are educated individuals. Their smart, formal outfits contrast with those of his butlers and servants, who are always at his beck and call. The sequence is significant because among the 30 people he was dictating to, only four males were standing, while the rest were females seated at their typewriters. From a broader societal perspective, it

shows that the females of this time were now allowed to take formal employment which is a departure from the responsibilities of women before this era, where they had a fixed role in home-keeping. This sequence emphasizes the theme of female liberation and women's entry into the workforce to earn income for family survival.

Ossi defies matrimonial norms by pursuing a Prince and manipulating Josef, whom she sees as Prince Nicki. She runs the wedding ceremony, from financially arranging everything to table placements, while seating Josef in a remote corner to assert her dominance. Her reluctance to acknowledge Josef as her husband to her father's servants further demonstrates her resistance to societal conventions.

Lyons observes that despite Ossi's economic autonomy and rebellious nature, her eventual marriage to Prince Nucki reinforces patriarchal marriage narratives (Lyons, 2023). The tension here is illustrated in this closing scene (56:59–57:03), preceding Ossi's much-anticipated consummation of marriage. In this sequence, the camera depicts a medium close-up shot showing Ossi's father peering through the keyhole, generating an intense sense of surveillance and control. Behind Ossi and Prince Nucki, one can see a painting of a female figure whose body is objectified. The image reinforces female objectification with the theme of the double-edged nature of femininity that is both veiled and unveiled. It further bolsters the societal expectations of women in that period. Ossi's father's laughter and exclamation, "Das imponiert mir" (Now, that impresses me), reflect his approval of Ossi's submission to patriarchal ideas. This sequence encapsulates the compounded ambiguity of autonomy and traditional norms that define Ossi's journey, in which entrenched societal norms shape her personal choices.

#### **4. Conclusion**

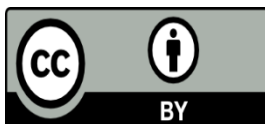
*The Oyster Princess* satirizes wealth, gender roles, and relationships in post-World War 1 Germany amidst the turbulent Weimar era. By linking these critiques to Weimar-era feminist discourse and the broader set of historical challenges, the film expresses anxieties concerning modernization, gender equality, and the alienating aspects of capitalist modernity. Seen through Marx's lens of commodity fetishism, the film shows how often material wealth and social status eclipse meaningful human connections within capitalist societies.

Ossi, the lead character, represents this duality. Initially presented as a commodity for marriage, she rebels against patriarchal conventions by being independent and gender-fluid in her portrayal. Her independence is a direct affront to the patriarchal order of the time. However, her marriage to Prince Nucki represents a creeping reconciliation with those traditional roles, posing thus a direct conflict between that agency and societal normative roles.

The film contrastingly portrays scenes of utopian collectivism through dance against the backdrop of persistent societal divisions as the platform to evoke engagement in social issues. Lubitsch's satirical visual extravagance thereby explores themes of gender and economic power and the consequences of capitalist modernity, which requires further reflection.

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