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**ERNST LUBITSCH**

**Film Internationality**

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Ernst Lubitsch wrote this essay in Hollywood, where he had moved in December 1922. There is a backstory to his emigration that sheds light on this text—and on the specter of Hollywood in the Weimar Republic. Flush with the major success of *Madame Dubarry* (1919) in Europe and the United States, Lubitsch decided to switch from Ufa to EFA (European Film Alliance), sensing the advantages of an American-owned production company in helping German films reach the U.S. market. (See the previous texts by Joe May, no. 129, and Georg Jacoby, no. 131.) The best-known German director at the time, Lubitsch was lured to Hollywood by a contract to direct a film with Mary Pickford for United Artists (*Rosita*, 1923). He subsequently worked with Warner Brothers on *The Marriage Circle*, which premiered in 1924—the same year this article was published. In it, he shares his insights from making films in both industries and advances his conception of film as a “popular art” with the potential to transcend national and linguistic boundaries. See also his text in chapter 6, no. 89.

If I today set out to write down ideas that I already formulated years ago, this is because these ideas have now gained in authority by virtue of my experience working in Germany and America, the world’s leading countries in the struggle for dominance in film production.

Supremacy on the world film market: this is a catchphrase that neither represents nor grasps the situation as it really stands. Superiority of German or American films: this is a pointless contest, as if one wished to decide whether Shakespeare or Goethe were the greater thinker.

Film is an art, more precisely a popular art; it is open to intellectuals and the masses alike; it results from creative activity; and it can be called successful only when it receives international applause and worldwide recognition.

A film is good when the movie theaters in New York are just as sold out as those in Barcelona or Frankfurt. This is the basic principle from which all filmmaking and all advancement of motion pictures must begin.

If I may believe the press and the distribution companies, my biggest films succeeded enormously in precisely this sense, and they succeeded without any specific efforts to create an international style; they succeeded because—and I say this without arrogance—I do not make German or American films, but rather Lubitsch films; because in each case, I attempted to present, embedded in an effective visual decor, a human story in a human way; because I could rely on actors who were capable of clearly expressing love, hate, passion, and rage in the sense I had in mind, so that everyone—regardless of linguistic and political borders—could understand.

Every good film is by nature international; every good film observes a few minor guidelines, even if these have nothing to do with the plot of the film itself.

These minor guidelines include the avoidance of highlighting one’s own specific national particularities unless absolutely necessary. Of course, this principle should not be understood as a call to focus on the morals and customs of other countries where this does not follow naturally from the plot. Certainly, Spanish people in films should behave like Spanish people, Americans like Americans, and Germans like Germans, but no film has ever failed internationally because the form of the collar worn by an extra was incongruent. Filmmakers should take such factors into consideration, but they should neither overestimate nor underestimate them.

Whoever continues to strive toward the loftiest heights, whoever creates with his works ever clearer and purer expressions of his own artistic nature will find the path to international success and fame; in so doing, he will gain the world’s respect not only for himself but also for his country and his people. But this cultural and political side effect

must remain just that: a side effect. At the moment at which we subsume the artistic film under politics, we rob ourselves of all artistic opportunities.

One cannot achieve international success through sentimentality but only through artistic achievement. German film will gain world significance only when its creators become true artists, film artists, men who have the most innate feeling for film in their fingertips and who can create images no less apt to provoke fear and pity than the classical works of the German theater.

In the end, then, the internationality of film is a truly national matter. For the successful reel of film, movie houses all over the world stand waiting with wide-open doors. No politics can stop the triumphal march of a perfect work of film art. It will gain acceptance no less than the successful creations of other artistic genres.

For this reason, film's internationality is not an economic matter but an artistic one, even if politico-economic stupidities undeniably make the work of artists difficult or nearly impossible at times.