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### Review of Ninotchka

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**Ninotchka**  
(Warner Home Video, 9.6.2005)

Perhaps more than any star of the past, Greta Garbo belonged to her era, and many modern viewers may have difficulty understanding what audiences of the twenties and thirties saw in the Swedish star. She is beautiful, but her beauty is far from perfect. There's something mannish, a bit stiff and glum about her. She is not really that sexual in most of her movies. Garbo became one of the biggest stars in Hollywood history by suffering ever so gracefully on the screen. Depression audiences could forget about their troubles while watching Garbo face her impending death so courageously in films like *Camille*.

After seeing Garbo struggle with life's disappointments in *Anna Christie*, *Grand Hotel*, *Queen Christina*, and *Anna Karenina*, 1939 viewers must have been shocked by *Ninotchka*, her first comedy. Director Ernst Lubitsch, working from a screenplay by Charles Brackett, Walter Reisch, and Billy Wilder, masterfully uses Garbo's limitations to create a wonderful romantic comedy.

Three envoys (Felix Bressart, Alexander Granach, and Sig Ruman), have been sent from Moscow to Paris to sell the confiscated jewels of the Grand Duchess Swana (Ina Claire), only to surrender to the capitalist delights of staying in an expensive hotel suite. They are encouraged in their decadence by Count Leon a'Algout (Melvyn Douglas), who at first intends to regain the jewels for his friend Swana. When the envoys fail to make any progress, Moscow sends Sergeant Ivanovna Yakushova, aka Ninotchka (Garbo), to intervene.

Lubitsch toys with the audience's expectations of what to expect from Garbo as a Soviet soldier. The envoys go to the train station looking for a male comrade only to be confronted by the severe-looking Ninotchka, wearing a cross between a peasant costume and a military uniform. The film's ad campaign was the simple yet classic line "Garbo Laughs," so we know that Ninotchka's solemnity will eventually melt away. When it does, as a result of a pratfall by Leon, who has fallen for her romantically as well, the moment is magical. Lubitsch begins by emphasizing Ninotchka's forbidding sternness—some might say masculinity—and slowly peels back the layers to reveal the susceptible woman beneath. The evening gown she buys to go to a nightclub with Leon is far from glamorous, resembling something a teenager might wear to a prom, but its plain awkwardness accentuates Ninotchka's—and Garbo's—vulnerability and humanity.

While Garbo often dominates her films by overwhelming such lightweight co-stars as John Gilbert and Robert Taylor, she is paired well with the marvelous Douglas, whose response to Garbo helps create a sexuality only

hinted at in her previous films. Though he became an annoyingly pompous patriarchal figure in later movies like *Hud*, Douglas was an adept light comedian during this period. Though Garbo did not like the unconventionally handsome Douglas, preferring effeminate pretty boys, they were teamed again in her next and final film, *Two-Faced Woman*. I have never read a kind word about this huge flop that ended Garbo's career, but it has its moments.

While Warner Home Video is renowned for the care it takes in transferring older films such as *The Thin Man* series, the Astaire-Rogers movies, and various films noir to DVD, it fails somewhat with *Ninotchka*. Despite the general clarity of the image definition and the clean soundtrack, there are distracting undulating vertical bands throughout the film. One of the best romantic comedies of Hollywood's Golden Age and the Garbo film probably most accessible for twenty-first-century sensibilities deserves much better.—Michael Adams