It would be difficult to imagine a more breathtaking endorsement for a comedy than that bestowed on Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner* (1940) by Pauline Kael. She considered it 'as close to perfection as a movie made by mortals is ever likely to be' (Raphaelson, 1983: 17). It is an 'airy wonder', she goes on to say, with 'steel underpinnings'. My own sense of the film's tricky brilliance is captured by Kael's striking juxtaposition of airiness and steel. Lubitsch manages to imbue an agreeably light story with remarkable complexity and elegance of feeling. The movie is not simply touched with heartbreak, it is at times nearly drenched in it, yet Lubitsch conducts his exploration of garden variety mishaps and misunderstanding in a Budapest leather goods store with a sublime poise. Only in retrospect are we free to marvel at how much painful struggle has been incorporated in the narrative without souring its delight or vanquishing its core tranquillity. Samson Raphaelson's screenplay is everywhere concerned with the contest between theatrical impulses and 'unwanted' ordinariness in the characters' self-inflating performance of their lives. Ordinariness in this film is at once a condition that the characters legitimately fear (what they may be condemned to) and an unlikely source of consolation. Ordinariness finally rescues the film's romantic couple (James Stewart's Alfred Kralik and Margaret Sullavan's Klara Novak) from the restrictions of a solipsistic, theatrical mode of existence. The actors in their performances of their roles also face the challenge of attaining authentic ordinariness within a stylised realm where the temptation of a grander, more star-befitting style is always present. Perhaps because Lubitsch shares his characters' sharp awareness of the debilitating dimensions of ordinariness, he is the ideal director to reclaim its balancing attractions without overvaluing them. My primary emphasis in this essay will be the performers' artful methods of disavowing theatricality, and its many artificial connotations, within a theatrical mode of presentation.

The Shop Around the Corner includes a shadow line in its chosen territory, one that connects the unusually vulnerable realm of comedy in this narrative with the menacing prospect of tragedy. The film's plot includes a suicide attempt, a sombre revelation of adultery, several episodes of acute, painful betrayal and shame, and a persistent atmosphere of loneliness, whose ache is only fitfully relieved. Lubitsch supplies us with frequent, vivid, window and doorway glimpses of authentic darkness lying just beyond *Shop*'s comfortable, warmly lit settings. These brief, startling crossings of the shadow line place the entire action of the film within arm's length of the kind of suffering for which there is no comic remedy, and perhaps no available speech. Set in a Central Europe (lit by childhood memory) from which Lubitsch is in exile, *Shop* combines a sense of nostalgic pre-war togetherness – reminiscent of Capra's 'fantasies of good will' – with the dread that the little community Lubitsch enshrines is poised to crumble. 'Natural' isolation seems like a stronger force, through much of the narrative, than the countervailing need for connectedness. The community of the store is the most reliable source of protection for the film's easily broken characters, and they anxiously look to it for whatever emotional sustenance and continuity it can provide. Nonetheless, this public space (with its bright promise of

mutual regard and acceptance) feels almost as fragile as the frayed, troubled inhabitants who gather in the shop each workday. The possibility of a European war, which is never mentioned, nibbles around the edges of the Matuschek and Company sanctuary. To be cast out from its sheltering walls means one is facing something more distressing than mere unemployment. It is as though one's entire social identity is removed at a stroke. One suddenly belongs nowhere, left to wander in the fog, like a refugee when his homeland is under attack. (In Lubitsch's next major film, *To Be or Not to Be* [1942], settings almost identical to those lovingly commemorated in *Shop* appear as bombed out ruins in the horror-farce opening.) I find it remarkable that *Shop* so strongly and effectively evokes an Old World milieu, in spite of the fact that none of its American actors (including Stewart, Sullavan, and Frank Morgan) make the slightest attempt to modify their distinctively American speech patterns. A certain mode of civility mixed with a lightly worn sophistication and tact serves the actors as a persuasive Old World disguise. The viewer's sense of American attitudes, values, and prerogatives, that is to say, quickly fades away.

To Be or Not to Be focuses on a company of actors, and it foregrounds theatre (and its myriad associations with politics) directly. *Shop*'s leather goods emporium is not so overtly theatrical, but the film is keenly aware of the performance element in each salesperson's relationship with both customers and fellow employees. The characters understand not only their precise status in the shop's hierarchy, but also the type of theatrical role that goes with it. They accept their type casting, yet also chafe against the confinement and limitations of their assigned parts. James Harvey has accurately noted that 'there is so much touchiness in the air [throughout the movie], so many hurt feelings, feeling slighted or dumped on or simply unappreciated' (1988: 394). This touchiness provides a rich challenge for the actors, since so much of their aggravation, and experience of humiliation, takes place in the presence of witnesses who will *not* forget. They are members of one's work family, after all, and every affront seems to become instantly a matter of collective memory and discussion.

Humiliation carries over to the public spaces one frequents outside of work. When Klara Novak sits in a crowded café awaiting the arrival of her unknown romantic correspondent, a general recognition seems to circulate among the other customers that she has been stood up on a first date. All eyes seem secretly directed to the fretfully waiting party's lonely table. Klara Novak receives a wound, but must conceal (or try to) the expression of pain until later. Before her rejection has become a certainty, a kindly waiter turns up and asks her if she will be needing the unoccupied chair at her table. He then goes on to tell her an 'amusing' anecdote about another lady in similar circumstances who was stood up, after her 'blind' date took his first good look at her from a distance. When Klara tries to suppress her agitation, he warmly assures her that one so attractive as she is has nothing to worry about. He smilingly leaves her, confident that he has relieved her distress, when in fact every word or action in his friendly exchange with her has compounded it. I cannot remember a comedy in which so much attention is devoted to characters anxiously striving to hide unmanageable feelings away 'for a safer time' in little psychic compartments. Lubitsch enjoys framing the impact of aloneness in public spaces. Aloneness is intensified when others attempt, as in the case of the amiable waiter, to alleviate hurt with their sympathetic claims of understanding another person's situation. The understanding can rarely be phrased or communicated in such a way that it reduces the isolated figure's sense of helplessness. The woman or man in a pitiable predicament has no access to the strength of the person in a position to comfort. *Shop* is a benevolent film that deeply intuits how often and easily benevolence can increase pain.

In the enforced daily contact with fellow workers, opportunities are rife for acts of an injury-inflicting withholding in the midst of surface courtesy. What makes the withholding mysterious in *Shop* is that the person who is guilty of denying others relief by a saving word or two frequently suffers as much as his intended victim. Margaret Sullavan's Klara and Frank Morgan's Matuschek are highly capable of making those around them wince, tremble, or become wrought up with uncertainty, yet both dwell in close inner proximity to a hysteria of their own for much of the film's length. And James Stewart's Kralik yields to abject shame and uncomprehending explosion in several of his major scenes. The three central characters in *Shop* share a predicament with all of those who work with them at Matuschek and Company: they feel trapped in an identity that they may have outgrown, that seems to cramp them or that is no longer feasible but that they cannot easily replace.

Hugo Matuschek, the shop's proprietor, has been deceived and emotionally abandoned by a wife unprepared to 'grow old' with him, and he tries to make his work life expand in value to compensate for his startling arrival in a companionless state. His realisation that he does not know his wife any longer contaminates all the knowing he has previously been confident about in his workplace family. The surrogate 'son' he most honoured and relied on is mentally transformed into the foremost traitor. Frank Morgan made a career of playing flustered, kindly souls with ample distraction resources to see them through any crisis. In the role of Matuschek, his bravado and self-salesmanship give way, exposing a desolate range of plaintive timidity. He is the boss whose compass and purpose have gone missing, and who shrinks a little each day that he keeps his domestic crisis bottled up inside him.

Alfred Kralik and Klara Novak, in their search for love, resort to disabling fantasy images of who they are and what they have a right to expect from the ideal soulmates they have met in the magical guise of correspondence, but fear to meet in person. The selves that both project in their writing attest to their own feelings of insufficiency about what inwardly belongs to them. They fear that they come across to others as small and dismissible beings, and they are trying to evade this verdict of smallness in their private reflections. But they suspect that their efforts to make a correspondent regard them as figures of consequence are perilous, since they aren't at all sure of what their 'real' worth might be. Smallness may indeed be the label that fits them, though they are certain it does not suit them. Of course, unbeknownst to them, they are actually writing love letters to one another. Neither can find any recognisable signs of the indispensable beloved in the fellow employee they spar with and are irritated by every day. Their love letter writing is not conducted in the spirit of wilful deception. Kralik and Miss Novak assume that they are offering heartfelt, challenging revelations about who they secretly are and what they daringly seek from another 'like-minded person'. Writing, as it does for so many of us, offers a desperately needed emotional supplement, an imaginative alternative to piercing glimpses of inner impoverishment – or the threat of it.

The performance miracle of James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan is that the protective aura of stardom entitlement

vanishes as they inhabit the shop milieu together. The stardom that they actually possess constitutes the laughable fantasy space both of them are vainly reaching for and attempting to give life to. Paradoxically, what we believe about them as we watch their struggle for heroic self-enlargement is that they 'naturally' can't reach it, and are better off dwelling in more confined (cheerfully confined) circumstances. They become luminous as they credibly divest themselves of the properties of specialness, and release the power of the ordinary life with which they are no longer at odds. The ordinary is transfigured, as it is in Capra films, by the recognition that it is difficult to arrive at, difficult to value properly, and that it entails no necessary loss of what is idiosyncratic or precious. This is an odd destination for Lubitsch himself to arrive at, since nearly all of his films are enthralled with artifice and glamour. The director has famously said of images of ordinary women and ordinary toil in movies: who wants that?

One of the film's most brilliantly orchestrated acting encounters is the scene in which Matuschek fires Kralik, on the mistaken assumption that Kralik is having an affair with Matuschek's wife. The segment begins with a shot which signposts theatricality, but in a manner that suggests a temporary cessation of it. We are given an exterior view of the shop at dusk, with curtains being rolled down to conceal the display windows. This unusual measure is taken to veil the efforts of the employees inside, who are dressing the windows and making dispirited preparations for the pre-Christmas rush. The general mood in the shop is listless and glum. Matuschek and his workers all seem preoccupied as they proceed with their tasks, adrift in private worries. Behind the curtain in the main shop window, Kralik and Miss Novak are decorating a small Christmas tree that visibly trembles with each ornament they attach to it. The two have nothing to say to one another and are scarcely aware of the other's presence as they attend to their strictly apportioned sections of the modest tree. It's remarkable how close to each other they stand in this customarily friendly ritual without attaining the slightest benefit of connection.

The fragile ornaments, the quivering tree, and the dazed decorators doing their best to keep out of each other's way and not give fresh offence establish the tone for the action that follows. A shocking, hurtful incident takes place but all of the distress unfolds in a dreamy stupor, and with an incongruous delicacy. The employer, who delivers the main blow, and the employee who receives it both handle their difficult roles in the exchange as though the principal concern was to spare the other's feelings. The newly estranged 'father' and 'son' avoid overt indications that anything which transpires is other than it should be. Their mutual tact shivers like the Christmas tree.

Before Matuschek summons Kralik to his office for a meeting, he restlessly paces the floor of the main selling area, brandishing a cigar. The cigar, which only appears (as a Matuschek indulgence) in this episode, carries an aura of aborted celebration, like the Christmas decorations surrounding him. Without looking at Kralik, Matuschek requests that they have an immediate talk, in a voice that mingles embarrassment and perhaps a darker discomposure. The first-time spectator is unaware of both the gravity of Matuschek's state of mind and the magnitude of his suspicions. His conduct throughout the day has made it clear that something is preying on him (quite possibly to do with his wife). Kralik and he have had a troubling argument that morning, which led to Kralik rashly threatening to resign his position. In the course of the quarrel, Kralik asserted, with bewilderment, that he has been a source of aggravation for his boss for an entire week – unable to do anything that meets with his approval. Since that dangerous moment of near-quitting, Matuschek's ill-temper has shown no signs of abating. The viewer, however, might well suppose that some relief of the onerous tone of bickering and rancour that has prevailed on-screen for many minutes must be at hand. The film is, after all, a comedy, and the proportions of comedy, as we near the narrative mid-point, would seem to guarantee a partial restoration of lightness and a gesture toward equilibrium.

Two of Frank Morgan's angry outbursts in the scene just prior to this one have sanctioned laughter, as Morgan demonstrates how adroitly he can shift from exaggerated courtesy when customers are in earshot to exaggerated bluster as soon as they leave the store. The ability to divide himself up in this fashion implies that there is a mechanical, theatrical component to Morgan's agitation, and further signals that his rant is not meant to reveal a man disturbingly out of control. Because Morgan is an actor who specialises in benign disgruntlement, his performance on this occasion of a boss erupting on cue interrupts our consideration of the possible genuine basis for his unhappiness. We return here to the presence of what I earlier termed the 'shadow line' in this comedy. What is it that establishes select figures in a comic world as elastic and resilient purveyors of amusement? We decide very quickly when watching most comic films (as well as some dramatic ones) that certain characters will be nearly exempt from the consequences and demands of real, sharp-edged feeling. They will suffer no lasting emotional injury, but they must forfeit, for this very reason, the viewer's attentive engagement with their plight. Such secondary personages dwell on the margins of full-force experience. We encounter them, at well-timed intervals, inhabiting this periphery, and we take pleasure in their manifestations of reliable quirks, attitudes, and ailments. They can make difficulties for those around them, but the difficulties which they themselves are obliged to undergo affect them less intensely than such circumstances would affect the main characters. They don't quite *live through* their ordeals; their response to them, therefore, doesn't really count for much.

E.M. Forster famously characterised characters of this type as 'flat', and celebrated their liveliness and enterprising sameness while noting their lack of whatever grounding and substance they might require to achieve more 'round-ed' (often more tedious) human status. We become confident, after brief acquaintance, that we know 'flat' characters thoroughly, yet contemplating them from another

angle we might conclude with equal justification – in ways Forster didn't take up – that we scarcely know them at all. The surface fun they offer proceeds as if there is no accompanying strain, or unknowability. Perfect consistency need not be a mask for a fictional character, but then again it might be. What would prompt us to inquire more deeply into the life of a being who seems assembled solely for purposes of light, extroverted display? When does it become feasible, or indeed necessary, to probe for a withheld interior dimension? With respect to Matuschek, Lubitsch introduces the shadow line – the suddenly stark boundary between comic and tragic realms of experience – quite late in the narrative. There could well be a serious risk attending too long a delay in the disclosure of a more demanding character psychology. Audiences are inclined to resent severe disruptions of tone that early episodes have not adequately prepared them for.

I think we can pinpoint the exact moment when Lubitsch chooses to lay bare the extremity of his story's investment in Matuschek's pain, and by extension, the pain of his two main characters. James Stewart and the film cross the shadow line as Kralik walks without trepidation across the public area of the shop to Matuschek's office. Our feelings are joined with his: a blend of tranquil assurance and keyed-up anticipation. We have, in fact, visited this office before in Stewart's company and have encountered nothing there that proved remotely threatening or that set us off balance. Besides, when Stewart passes through its open door, we are certain that he will have only Frank Morgan to deal with. Finally, we likely feel that it is time for a shift back to a more buoyant form of comic collision, after the long build-up of ill will in this singularly fretful workday.

Kralik, like the viewer, knows that some sort of apology to Matuschek will be necessary to clear the air if things still aren't quite right, but we share Kralik's assumption that Matuschek is secretly as eager to effect a reconciliation as his employee is. This weightless, ultimately well-meaning type of secret is the only kind we presently believe Frank Morgan's character capable of possessing. While it is unlikely that Kralik will gain the promotion he is primed to ask for, it is even more unlikely that he will experience an absolute repudiation. The stage is set for further complications, but of a genial, comically energised variety.

Lubitsch devises an elaborate tracking shot to cover James Stewart's walk to the office – a shot not specified in the published screenplay, where there are numerous other camera notes – and a highly unusual display of camera virtuosity in this stylistically self-effacing film. The shot begins with Kralik near the display window Christmas tree, where he pauses just long enough to whisk some dust from his shoes, and accompanies him on his brief, but somehow momentous journey to the open door of Matuschek's office sanctuary. In the course of this closely observed action, Kralik manages to rid himself completely of the morose mood that has enveloped him and the film for the preceding several scenes. We grant him (since we scarcely have time to think about the matter) the power to take the action in the emotional direction that he and we wish it to go. As he straightens his tie and jacket and basks in the visible encouragement of his well-wishing fellow employees, he faces the potential challenge of the 'hurt feelings' office talk with pluck, and a fearless elation. Regardless of Matuschek's possibly lingering pique, Kralik is attractively determined to ask for a raise.

David Denby, writing about MGM studio director Victor Fleming, discusses the often ignored directorial skill of knowing 'how to position a performer within the frame and time his performance [of an action so that the camera brings out] his temperament and strength' (2009: 75). In this 'staking out' the shadow line passage, Lubitsch displays in abundance his own talent for actor positioning and for the release of a star's qualities and strength. We behold, almost as a feat of magic, James Stewart expanding within the frame to his full height and claiming the prerogatives of star magnetism and amplified focus with every step he takes. His lanky stride here epitomises civilized grace and poise: an enviable collectedness. As he advances directly toward the camera (and us) he seems to draw all the best parts of his physical personality together in pursuit of a single worthy aim. How might such a beautifully enlivened presence be turned down for anything, one might wonder in passing, yet such a thought can switch on the instant to an intuition that lofty sureness is often (in drama) headed for a fall. Then again, Stewart is merely going in for a chat with Frank Morgan. Morgan, whose temperament is an open book – with no terra incognita in reserve – is, as I've noted, equally inconceivable as one who could suffer authentic harm or inflict it. His type is, above all, malleable, even in its upsets. We trust in this man's rich capacity to make amends.

The almost hushed exchange that transpires once Stewart is inside the office presents us, as its most unsettling surprise, with a Morgan who is intractable – and intractable about a decision of a drastic nature that we had not foreseen. Matuschek offers no explanation to Kralik or the viewer for his actions, and Lubitsch has as yet furnished us with no clear sign of Matuschek's wife's infidelity. Matuschek has become sealed off, unapproachable, beyond the reach of Kralik's appeal. The viewer is in no better position than Kralik is to solve the mystery of his new reserve. If he is in pain about the firing, it is not apparent in his behaviour. His main attention seems devoted to severing Kralik's ties with the company as efficiently and briskly as possible. Kralik is expected to leave the store within the hour and never come back: that is Matuschek's unvoiced but unmistakable message. There are flickering intimations of Morgan's familiar distractedness in the scene, which we somehow count on to move the conversation (eventually) in a friendlier direction, or to make him lose touch with the firmness of his enigmatic resolve. However, Morgan *uses* the notes of distraction tactically in his performance, so that they reinforce our slow dawning sense of an unwavering hand. His slight hesitancy, in other words, is calculated to deceive us rather than to restore us to familiar character terrain.

This lacerating scene is structured (however incongruously) as a series of seeming mutual concessions by each man to the other's wishes, which do nothing to alleviate the woe but only extend the unnavigable distance between them. Seldom in any movie episode devoted to conflict has so much hurt been administered by such gentle means. Matuschek launches the train of concessions by indicating, reassuringly, that he has been thinking over Kralik's declaration of dissatisfaction, uttered during their morning quarrel. He makes the observation almost deferentially, with no trace of rebuke or festering animosity. Kralik has every reason to believe that his way will soon be clear for his request, and he responds to his boss's conciliatory tone with an immediate, forceful apology. He is so quick to issue it that he unintentionally interrupts Matuschek before he is quite finished speaking. ('I'm very sorry, Mr. Matuschek. I'm afraid I lost my temper'.) His confidence, mingled with relief that the matter to be discussed isn't more serious, causes him to raise his voice a

notch, in a commanding fashion; it is the only line that breaks out of the softness enforced through the rest of their encounter. Kralik is so certain that his apology concession will make things right that he gives a 'you know how I get sometimes' chuckle while admitting that his temper got the better of him.

What follows is a brilliantly timed further concession from Matuschek that seems – up to the moment when he arrives at his final words – to strengthen Kralik's position still more. The effectiveness of the line is greatly enhanced by the fact that there is not a trace of manipulativeness or cunning in Morgan's delivery. He is simply saying what needs to be said if he is to be plainly understood. ('No, no – I think you were right. I really believe you'd be happier somewhere else'.) The two sentences contain a pair of sly reversals, neither of which Morgan mines for slyness. The 'No, no' gently removes any requirement or expectation of the apology that Kralik has already tendered. 'I think you were right' initially seems to refer to Kralik's earlier claim to have been unjustly treated. Morgan's eyes are lowered, conveying the impression that he is embarrassed to look at Stewart directly, presumably because he finds it uncomfortable to admit he has been in error and thus to have his authority as boss slightly diminished. Without ever getting ahead of his soothing tone or positive words, Morgan leads us to imagine that the words 'believe' and 'happier' are still pointing to a favourable outcome for Stewart. When Morgan arrives at the last phrase, 'somewhere else', quietly but with no alteration of direction or mood, the viewer is nearly as floored as Stewart.

Here Lubitsch cuts to an over the shoulder medium close-up of Stewart absorbing the impact of Morgan's words. Stewart has no peer as a movie actor in his ability to shift from an artless sincerity (a face that puts up no defences) to a baffled, stricken vulnerability. His stunned response is timed with our own, and it is disconcerting to be thrust up against this face as we try to sort out our surprise – not only at Morgan's hidden purpose but at the level of pain that is instantly, stingingly in play. Kralik attempts, for the brief time it takes to read Matuschek's expression (the boss's back is turned to us, imposingly) to consider the words he is processing as a possible joke, and involuntarily forms the most tentative of half-smiles to mark the violent switching of mental tracks. Something in what he sees stops this faint hope that Matuschek is toying with him from being pursued any further. What he knows about his boss permits him to grasp the terrible fact confronting him all at once, with minimal doubt. His subdued rejoinder, 'You think so, Mr. Matuschek?' deflects any incipient protest into courtesy, a cowed, childlike respect in the presence of undeniable, grown-up authority. It is not as though he is choosing to act submissive in order to improve his bargaining position. His expression tells us that he is concerned only to get his head around the inconceivable truth of the matter: his full future of a minute ago has become a blank future. All he can think to do now is to concede more ground (gently) to Matuschek's settled will and try to mask, as well as possible, the heartsickness that overwhelms him.

Morgan's next line has no ambiguity and affords no relief. 'Yes, I'm sure of it'. He is now in close-up himself (a camera distance that approximates Stewart's intense, hopeless scrutiny). His eyes evade rather than return Stewart's can't-break-away look, but his sense of purpose is not weakened. Morgan maintains the soft tone that has been set at the outset of the exchange. His line could almost be taken to mean that he is watching out in a fatherly way for Kralik's best interests. 'Believe me, I've given the matter thought, and I know this change is the right one, with respect to your happiness'. What blocks this implication from flowering is Morgan's shifting eye movement, which tells us that he is *unsure* about Kralik's prospects, though sure about the necessity of letting him go. We return to a two-shot as Kralik unconsciously places his hand on an ornate cigar box at the edge of Matuschek's desk, and leans upon it for support. Kralik yields yet again in his reply to his superior, removing himself from the field as one entitled to speak even a little on his own behalf. 'Well – I guess there's nothing more to be said'. There is not a whisper of retaliatory coldness in Stewart's delivery. He is helping Morgan to expedite this unpleasant task, and finalise the terms of his discharge. He cedes every scrap of power he might once have laid claim to, suspending (as he has had great difficulty doing earlier) his easily roused testiness.

I think we are nearly as surprised by Stewart's capitulating stillness as we are by Morgan's fixed determination here. Although Stewart's passivity might be construed as weak, his comportment achieves a lovely dignity because of the force of the large grief that he holds in. We read the stillness and the considerateness as palpable evidence that he is losing a cherished relationship. That loss matters just as much to him as the loss of his job. His conduct persuades us, more than anything we have observed previously, that the father and son connection that these two men shared had an unusual depth and value. (This value is perhaps beyond the reach of comedy. It feels real because most of the time it is kept invisible. We are wisely restricted to a few glimpses of what it signifies for Kralik, and they ironically appear in a scene that may well mark the *end* of relationship.)

Kralik's hand pressing against the support-providing cigar box turns the scene all at once into an object centred one. Lubitsch is as resourceful as William Wyler in discovering objects within every major scene through which the feelings of the participants can be effortlessly be channelled, or to which thwarted feeling can be deflected.[1] Much has been written about the so-called Lubitsch touch, which is perhaps most frequently associated with the director's fondness for hiding action (action that can nonetheless be inferred and vividly imagined) behind closed doors. I would argue that we might reasonably regard all of Lubitsch's communicative objects as versions of his artful doors. The objects are typically presented to us first in a 'closed', neutral, business-as-usual state. Then, after closer inspection or intricate handling by a Lubitsch character

(often the character is prompted to muse aloud about this 'thing' in connection with some predicament) objects begin to acquire a 'half-open door' mystique. For a short while – the length of time that a character communes or otherwise engages with them – the objects are bathed in a clarifying light. They open up, if you will, to the light of the characters' feelings.

In the firing scene, Matuschek is himself, as we have seen, a closed door, having moved from a comic transparency to a locked-up state. We observe him at this juncture handling a number of objects in rapid succession. We study his mode of interacting with them in search of clues for what blocks his feelings for Kralik. Morgan turns to these objects – his wallet; the formal receipt for a salary payment; his already completed letter of reference for Kralik – and busies himself expertly with each in turn, maintaining focus on each small duty in preference to engaging further (in a direct or personal manner) with Stewart. All the objects, however, have some immediate connection with the severing of remaining ties, so all object paths lead us back to Stewart's patiently receptive figure. We marvel at how impressively assured Morgan appears in his performance of these regrettable 'wrap up' tasks. He has never filled out the role of fully informed boss more convincingly than in this crisis. He is magisterially competent: no more bumbling, fussing, or waste motion. He strikes us at this point as the sort of father (obscurely yet forbiddingly disappointed) to whom a son would do anything to make restitution. Until now Kralik has had Matuschek's love and support as rather lazy possessions. He didn't have to exert himself in any special way to preserve them. Now Kralik watches Matuschek retreat into his customary relationship with the implements of his trade. In his demonstration of casual mastery, this disowning father makes the son desire even more keenly to win back his favour. Yet Kralik has no sense at all of what he might do or say to slow down the endgame. Father is but a few feet away, yet he is already gone – absorbed in the self-sufficient harmony of his work arrangements. Alain de Botton speaks, in *The Architecture of Happiness*, about the 'sadness' and 'feeling of tremendous void' which 'beauty may provide'. 'So often the sight of it exacerbates a feeling of deprivation, and a 'yearning for the life denied us' (2008: 149). I don't think I overstate matters when I describe Morgan – involved with the objects on his desk and on his person – as beautiful in this saddening way. He stands apart from Stewart in a time-nimbus: 'Observe me a little while longer attending to these things that represent me, and then I will disappear – from your sight and from your world'.

Matuschek, taking Kralik at his word that there is 'nothing more to be said' about his departure from the company, hastens to bring their meeting to a close, as though the value of the fired employee's time were a vital concern. The first object to appear in the ensuing little parade of objects is Matuschek's wallet, removed in what has the appearance of a kindly gesture from the inside of his suit jacket. He makes sure that Kralik immediately receives the full month's salary (of two hundred pengos) that he is entitled to. The opening of the boss's own wallet takes us back to Kralik's earlier discussion with Pirovich (Felix Bressart) about the magic of bonus envelopes. 'The boss hands it to you in an envelope and you don't want to open it. You wonder how much it is. As long as that envelope isn't opened, you're a millionaire. You keep postponing the moment … But you can't postpone it *forever*'. There is a sparkle of largesse in the sight of Matuschek removing numerous bills for Kralik from the wallet he keeps tucked (warmly) in an inside breast pocket of his coat. The amount is computed exactly – not a bonus, to be sure, but any money received in quantity on a day one wasn't expecting it could be confused (by a person in a daze) with a windfall. ('*Actually*, you're entitled to a full month's pay'.) On this occasion, no postponing of the bonus moment is possible. Matuschek names the amount and hands it over with alacrity. The image of generosity and the sense of something personal being bestowed is cancelled out by the competing image of a wealthy man doling out a tip when he is in a hurry to be off.

Once more Lubitsch emphasises Matuschek being outwardly obliging, in the patented Frank Morgan way. He asks Kralik to confirm that the sum he has arrived at is the 'correct' amount, though there could hardly be any room for doubt on this issue. Stewart softly replies 'Yes', which continues the rhythm of gracious concessions, on both sides. Morgan sets aside his nearly burned down cigar (associated with Christmas festivities run aground and the extinguished warmth of the men's friendship), then produces a large receipt for Stewart to sign and hands over a dainty pen from his desk penholder to facilitate the task. Stewart leans over the desk and does what he has been asked to do without an instant's hesitation. His air of trancelike cooperativeness becomes more heartbreaking at each stage of the exchange. Enormous tension is generated out of Morgan's mystifying inability to recognise and acknowledge the unmistakable decency of the man he's dealing with.

We feel a potential interruption of the downward spiral when Matuschek unexpectedly produces a letter of reference for Kralik in a sealed envelope, and assures him that the testimonial he has composed 'certainly won't handicap you in seeking employment'. As Kralik takes the letter and thanks him for it, we might well ask ourselves why the letter's as yet unrevealed words of commendation aren't able to make a reasonable case for not letting Kralik go. How can Matuschek, on his own writing initiative, review the many merits of his most valued employee without lessening the force of estrangement? Since the scene has unfolded with neither character giving the other the slightest additional cause for ill will, perhaps the logic of repeated, honourable concession may permit a final turn toward relenting, especially when the source of discord is so obscure to us. But no further discussion of the letter is forthcoming.

The prospect of a mood-lightening action arises for the last time when Matuschek initiates a farewell, complete with handshake. We are once more placed on the brink of communion, where a generous outflow of feeling (attesting

to a lengthy shared history and closeness) would seem almost unavoidable. We look at Frank Morgan and recall that this is a person supremely equipped for effusively sentimental goodbyes. Yet again Morgan anticipates what we count on from him, intimates that he may be headed in that direction, and then outmanoeuvres us. Lubitsch authorises Morgan's alteration of screenwriter Samson Raphaelson's original line ('Well, we might as well say goodbye') to 'I guess we might just as well say goodbye'. The extra few words allow Morgan to stretch the build-up to an anticipated show of feeling that, distressingly, fails to materialise. Because the emotion never loosens, the impersonal formality of Morgan's proffered handshake and goodbye acquires an added measure of chilliness. Nothing spontaneous comes forth from Matuschek, so Kralik is thwarted from offering anything more ample (whether positive or negative) on his side. 'Goodbye, Mr. Matuschek' is handled by Stewart in such a way (defeated offhandedness) that he might well be expressing disappointment with *himself*. In his continued muddle, he appears to be thinking: 'I should be rising to the occasion here, but I'm sorry – it just isn't in me right now to do so'. His firing completed, Kralik does not race from the office, but he completes his lengthy trip to the door almost as briskly as he performed his earlier, victory-claiming entrance. The scene is ended. All of these shifting, delicately modulated revelations and withholdings have transpired in less than a minute of screen time.

The letter of reference is destined for a somewhat longer life in the narrative. When Kralik returns to the shop after parting company with Matuschek, nearly all of his fellow employees are looking at him expectantly, confident that he will be bearing good news. Pirovich's and Ilona's (Inez Courtney) expressions rise, then fall while a decorated wire strung above their heads quivers, as the Christmas tree did at the beginning of the segment. The wire becomes the primary conductor of the unvoiced consternation in the room: 'Oh, no'. We next see Klara still standing by the Christmas tree, which she continues to decorate, alone – a discreet image of a social solitude, mirroring Kralik's. The tree's vibration rhymes with the strung wire in the previous shot. Finally, the camera locates Flora (Sara Haden), another lone figure, who nervously fingers a piece of sparkling jewellery. The signs of fragility are everywhere. Stewart appears to be slowly taking in his feelings about what has happened to him. He doesn't look despondent so much as troublingly becalmed, as he did in the office: the composure that follows shock. Felix Bressart's Pirovich, Kralik's closest friend in the store, joins Stewart in a two-shot and raises the obvious question emanating from the whole silent group: 'What happened?'. By way of answer, Stewart with slow carefulness opens his employer's letter, removes it from the envelope and unfolds it. He handles it throughout his ensuing public reading as if it were a precious, easily damaged gift.

Stewart does not give himself time to scan the contents of the letter for unpleasant surprises before beginning to deliver, in a thrillingly quiet, emotionally restrained voice, its message to Bressart. The letter is the only evidence available to Kralik which might give him some sense of the mystery he has just experienced. Reading the letter is the sole conceivable means of taking up Pirovich's question. *The Shop Around the Corner* includes numerous episodes which involve the exchange of letters and the partial sharing of their intimate declarations. Most of the other letters we encounter are written by the two deceived correspondents (Alfred and Klara), auditioning without knowing it for the love of a despised co-worker. Both pen pals consistently resort to fantasy and pretence to bolster their case. Their misrepresentations are pardonable, not so much lies as ego-ratified enhancement of the selves that are almost within reach. Matuschek's letter, like theirs, is a tangled expression of feeling. It was no doubt composed when Matuschek was tormented with a fresh sense of the young man's betrayal of him, and a deep hurt that his own trust and love have counted for so little. Kralik had simply taken what he wanted. The words he finds to praise Kralik are clear and without apparent reservation. Yet the recommendation has no colour, no personal details, no spark of attachment. It does manage to review their time together at the shop without sounding a note of reproach, and perhaps it took all of Matuschek's strength to make simple statements that carried only assertions of good will.

Somehow Stewart's manner of reading Matuschek's circumspect letter of reference becomes an astonishing feat of revelation – one of the fullest releases of feeling in the film. The performance here is untouched by ironic inflection, though both irony and shame hover in the vicinity of the reading, and considerable tension accrues from their nearness. Kralik has, after all, just been sacked, and he had let all his fellow workers in on the fact that he was requesting a raise. He did this in part because he was so secure in his standing as the shop's 'first salesman'. In the short interval that he has been sequestered from the group's observation of him, he has not merely been denied his salary increase, but stripped of all status and further responsibilities. That is to say, his firing amounts to an immediate eviction. 'As of this moment, I want you out of my sight. For our mutual benefit, let us have nothing further to do with one another'. Even if Kralik is aware that several of his co-workers care deeply about him, and are miserable on his behalf, deciding to share Matuschek's letter with them right after his stunning defeat holds the prospect of immense, needless further humiliation. Whatever pleasant sentiments this document contains, it is also the epitaph of a longstanding relationship.

How can Stewart avoid the spectacle of *too much* exposure in the act of reading, exposure that he and his auditors would be served best by being spared? The feeling that is generated in Stewart's unself-pitying, absolutely unbitter 'speaking aloud' of Matuschek's written words concerning him is hard to identify – but it is powerfully resistant to humiliation. Throughout his reading, he seems to be communing with the letter itself, largely unmindful of the three figures (Pirovich, Ilona, and Flora) who have

drawn close to him to listen. Stewart is not attempting, in other words, to demonstrate something to others about what his boss has done or about the psychic injury (or material loss) he himself has suffered. Strangely, Stewart conveys no impression of seeking an answer in the letter for Matuschek's incomprehensible decision. What then is the substance of Stewart's affecting performance here? I always sense, while watching this segment, that there is an ineffable dimension at work, a force akin to grace. Let me concede then that the most important quality on display here may be beyond the rational categories of acting intention. What I *can* approach with a measure of understanding is Stewart's counter-intuitive tracking of Matuschek's one-time love for him in his five sentence evaluation of Kralik for prospective future employers. Stewart's voice nurtures every parsimonious bit of constrained praise as though Matuschek's language were trying (with some difficulty) to hold back a flood of pure affection. To describe the effect this way makes Kralik sound almost delusional, but there is no suggestion that Stewart fails to grasp the letter's manifest aim. He is, in effect, collaborating with the letter's author to make its statements expressive at least of his own feeling for the man who has unfathomably turned away from him. 'I cannot help speaking the words in a voice of love because my love for Hugo Matuschek persists, in spite of this rupture. I haven't had time yet to find my way to other, colder sentiments'.

The warmth that seems to emanate from the letter as Stewart slowly makes his way through it does, in point of fact, belong to Matuschek as well as Kralik, and attests to a mercurial component at work in its composition. Yes, the letter – on the face of it – is dispassionate, and clenched in its caution. Further, as I observed earlier, the message was no doubt drafted in a stormy mood, so that any direct acknowledgement of emotion would prove dangerous. Matuschek was well-advised to batten down the hatches and withhold expressions of feeling altogether. Beneath the withholding, however, Matuschek has not yet rid himself of his former love, however clouded by poisonous suspicion and a rage that he himself later admits felt like 'hate'. One might suppose that this layer of unextinguished attachment, since it lies below the hard-hearted present tense of 'writing time', would gain no access to Matuschek's written communication. I would contend, quite to the contrary, that Stewart finds the vein of suppressed tenderness in each of the sentences as he reads, and brings it out for the film's viewer to hear and credit. This discovery seems to take place without the involvement of Kralik's conscious awareness.

So, in answer to Pirovich's query, 'What happened?' we get an enrichment of the mystery. In addition to the letter's guarded endorsement of Kralik, we experience a voice that supplements at every moment what is missing from the phrases themselves: the sentiment that might complete the text in its proper spirit. This spirit does not feel like something grafted on but rather seems part of the letter's content, elusive yet vital. If things could only be known to their fullest extent, the letter seems to 'say' when Stewart speaks it, everything one could hope for would find inclusion; nothing in either man's heart need be taken the wrong way. Even so, at the close of his reading, Kralik as well as his sympathetic listeners imagine, not altogether mistakenly, that he has come up empty. 'That's it, then. I'm out, and it's final'.

One of the film's most haunting shots (occurring in a later scene) is of Klara Novak's gloved hand reaching into a cramped post office box and feeling about for a letter that is not there. Her face then appears at the far end of this empty little square and she confirms its emptiness. The post office box at that instant is able to identify and concretise a poignant constriction of inward and outward mobility. The shot also is one of the very few places in *The Shop Around the Corner* – Kralik's cross to Matuschek's office, as we have already seen, is another – where Lubitsch breaks out of the self-effacing style he has devised for the film. The camera, and the director in control of it, unquestionably declare their presence to us from behind the mailbox – at the heart of loneliness and desolation, as it were. (Interestingly, the camera route leading to this picture of destitution takes us across a bustling mailroom. Lubitsch seldom, as we have already seen, allows his characters to experience their loneliness in private.) A third announcement of the camera's presence takes place when Kralik finally completes what he believes are his final goodbyes to his friends in the shop and goes out by the front door. Lubitsch arranges a theatrical tableau of the employees witnessing the exit to mark the moment. Everyone in the group stands still as a statue, and every person's back is to the camera. I suggested at the beginning of my analysis of the firing scene that the bringing down of the curtains in the shop windows at the start of the segment signalled a temporary cessation of theatricality. Let's be a bit more specific about what this theatricality entails: treating the self as a role to be played, somewhat artificially and disingenuously, for another's benefit. Lubitsch greets such activity, often, with a delicate theatrical 'knowingness' of his own, and this attitude fosters the emergence of comedy. The conspicuous tableau serves the intriguing double function of building Kralik's departure from the store to a beautifully ritualised, affecting finish, and of bringing theatricality back into play at the same stroke. The pain-suffused intermission from theatricality has come to an end; but when theatricality returns, it is weighted down, at least for a time, with a new sombreness of its own.

The turned away quality of the actors in the tableau allows them a convincing sense of non-theatrical absorption in watching Kralik go off into the night. They are not 'acting out' regret, or choosing, for the sake of making an impression, a stylised group pose. They are not aware that anyone is watching them. Art critic Michael Fried would call this unawareness of audience the signature effect of absorption when figures are depicted in, say, a Chardin painting. The shop's main schemer and scoundrel, Ferencz Vadas (Joseph Schildkraut), has introduced studied poses of theatricality of exactly the opposite sort when miming his

own regret about Kralik's misfortune shortly before Kralik leaves, and again when bidding him a showy, rhetorical farewell. There is always an audience present, in Vadas's mind; even when he is alone, Vadas is onstage. The group

goodbye chastens and corrects Vadas's spurious theatricality without directly acknowledging it. The intensely theatrical device of the tableau takes Vadas's mode of theatre – in his case restricted to hollow gestures – and unself-consciously purifies it, making a form of visible artifice real, and expressive of genuine loss.

Lubitsch and the audience both occupy a space behind the group – behind the theatrical frame, that is, where the illusion is not being 'aimed' at an implied spectator. Because it is not aimed, it seems deprived of any calculating or manipulative force. From our vantage point, we can see a valiant, easily breakable solidarity formed (unbeknownst to the participants) to ward off an impending sense of emptiness. Kralik is no longer one of them. Is there enough life left over in the store after his vanishing for members of the group to fall back on? Though the group doesn't perceive, and thus grasp the value of, its own togetherness at this juncture, the viewer can. We feel, for the moment, that more world is left inside the shop than in the isolating street where Kralik is obliged to make his way, with no companion or clear destination.

After examining the letter reading episode, I introduced the issue of camera consciousness – the foregrounding of cinema apparatus – with a reference to Klara checking in vain for a letter in the tight, empty post office box. The phrase 'coming up empty', which I think aptly characterises Kralik's mood after he finishes reading the letter put me instantly in mind of Miss Novak peering forlornly into the vacant cubby-hole where her 'dear friend's' letters used to arrive punctually. They have become the way she measures and believes in real time, time that truly happens to her, makes an opening for her, incorporates her. As she feels around for the envelope and follows her unrewarded hand search with a superfluous, vanquished look into the box – where the camera briefly probes her expression with searing intimacy – she, like Kralik with his 'used up' letter from Matuschek, seems cast out, separated from her place in time. The time that is adduced here is the time that imagination makes real, a vital supplement to the onerous tick-tock of a present tense that drives you forward without opening you up. The psyche is not often enough greeted by answering signs in whatever little world it is obliged to inhabit. Thus, the imagination (the psyche's divining rod), confronted with so much real world resistance to its needs, can easily turn its gaze too far inward and fester.

Perhaps Lubitsch chooses the post office box (with the stricken gaze at the end of its little tunnel) as the place in the film to make his own presence most strongly felt because the box in its somewhat misleading emptiness is emblematic of all the poetic objects in the film. It furnishes the most memorable instance of a character's futile, though disarming interaction with an object. At the same time, it illuminates the need behind so many of the film's characters' efforts to make objects speak on their behalf. In a story centrally concerned with selecting and arranging objects attractively in order to beguile customers, it is not surprising that so many pretexts are found for characters to seize upon object surrogates for self. These temporary 'replacements' both enlarge and reduce a character's sense of her own space – and the degree of life available within it.

Consider the musical cigarette box which plays Otchi Tchornya. In effect, this somewhat tawdry item is 'trying out' for Matuschek's acceptance at the beginning of the film in much the same way Klara Novak is. Matuschek is debating whether to order a large quantity of them, which he will then be obliged to sell in his shop. Matuschek initially regards the tune that tinkles melodiously every time the box is opened as a selling point. Kralik, making a sterner assessment, argues that a single melody afflicting one's ears 'twenty times a day' would become maddening. He further notes the box's shoddy workmanship and cheap materials, predicting it would quickly fall apart. Klara, who enters the film almost at the same moment as the cigarette box, is embarked on a dispiriting job search. One could easily view Margaret Sullavan's hard done by look and quietly desperate manner in the same displeasing light that Kralik has shone on the cigarette box. She seems 'put together' with flimsy material and in danger of falling apart. Sullavan's voice – which Louise Brooks indelibly characterised as 'like a voice singing in the snow' – has a beseeching, prepossessing quaver when she first presents herself. Lubitsch mischievously rhymes her mode of address with the high, gentle, perhaps over-insistent music in the cigarette box.

Klara's final ploy to get herself hired is to act the role of a store employee and to sell one of these already rejected boxes to a customer who pays mild, browser's attention to it. Taking the box in hand, Sullavan transforms the devalued thing into a vessel of latent magic, beauty, opportunity. She weaves a spell over it, closely akin to that performed by Stewart in his reading of Matuschek's letter. When Klara had been asked, a bit earlier, to express her opinion of the cigarette box by her prospective employer, she honestly assigns it a 'romantic' disposition, similar to her own. Pressed further, she goes on to colour her description, bathing the unassuming object in a wash of moonlight, where the cigarettes and music could amiably pursue a flirtation. When the female customer inquires of Klara whether the item is, in fact, a candy box, she instantly agrees and transforms her sense of its poetry (and her own delight in it) to fit the new reality. The customer balks at the thought of the music's wearying repetitiveness, so Klara in a trice remoulds the melody into the tenderest of warnings. Here Sullavan unself-consciously personifies the tune, acting out its function as candy-conscience with a wagging finger and sweetly chiding reminder: 'Ah, ah, ah. Too much candy – now be careful'. Sullavan invests the box as she holds it with so much of her own care and elfish vivacity that her customer eagerly purchases it, at an exorbitant

price. She has nearly been convinced that the spirit of Klara herself can be acquired along with it.

Klara's successful sale of the box manages to gain her a position in the store. The cigarette box is briefly exalted as the instrument of her unlikely triumph. But in the very next scene, which comes right on the heels of Klara's success, a mass of unsold cigarette boxes is shown piled in the display window, reduced for quick clearance. The linkage of character and object allows then both for a giddy rise, through self-projection, to fantasy fullness (made real by others entering into it), and an equally swift fall, to an embarrassing kinship with unwanted merchandise. Lubitsch does not permit the shop window reduction of the cigarette box's worth to reflect too harshly on Klara (she is a valued, highly competent employee, we soon learn). Nor does the fate of the box undo the value of Sullavan's lovely improvisation on it. Yet this object extends no further opportunities for self-enhancement, any more than Matuschek's letter does after Stewart's exquisitely empathetic reading of it. (Klara does stubbornly decide, late in the film, to set aside the only box that still works as the ideal Christmas gift for 'dear friend'. But she is talked out of her horrible miscalculation by a suddenly cunning Pirovich.) The hungry imagination cannot return to either of these drained objects (letter, cigarette box) for additional hints of one's strengths or good qualities. The objects have turned their beneficence into taunts. The cigarette box, part of a discard heap, feels as devoid of comfort as the empty post office box. It is now a loud reminder of failure – the dashing of misplaced hopes.

Before Kralik leaves Matuschek and Co. on the evening of his dismissal, he is granted two more fraught encounters with poetic objects. The first of them focuses on a red carnation, set in a glass of water in his locker. He discovers when he opens his locker to clear it out that the flower is wholly bereft of the romantic mystique and beckoning promise that it has maintained throughout the day. The second encounter involves a small cluster of objects which all stand for Kralik's lost position at Matuschek's: a pocket-sized salesbook with the company name modestly embossed on it; two humble-looking pencils; and an equally prosaic key to his storeroom locker. The four items gathered together ceremonially in a little collection, and granted the glowing treatment of a silent, lingering close-up, acquire an unanticipated grand meaningfulness (for both Kralik and the viewer) through Kralik's act of relinquishing them.

We react to Kralik throwing away the carnation and deliberately crushing it underfoot through the protesting, reactive gaze of Pirovich. The flower painfully reminds Kralik of how he has 'exaggerated' his status in his letters to 'dear friend'. 'The carnation was the proud insignia I was to wear tonight when we met. It would let my guileless beloved know who I was. But I am clearly not the man that I claimed to be. I was operating under false pretences from the start. I see that now. I am in truth a wholly unremarkable, jobless individual who has no right to trifle with romantic meetings and secret pledges. Like the flower, I deserve to be trodden underfoot'. Stewart manages, in so many of his performances, to elicit at least a pinch of shock from viewers when he engages in casually brutal behaviour. As he tramples the carnation he conveys, with an air of lightness, the abandonment of hope and the near embrace of what he views as a contemptible insignificance.

In his surrender of the salesbook, pencils and key shortly afterward, Kralik connects the objects to the employees waiting in troubled silence to say goodbye to him. Before he allows himself to face them, for a handshake or a final few words, he feels obliged to perform in their presence an act of divesting. He takes his time with the objects, not only because he is reluctant to part with them, but to give those watching him a chance to see that he no longer claims any vestige of his former standing in their midst. 'Behold me as the figure I now am, shorn of my authority and the responsibilities I cherished. The book, pencils and key loom large, emotionally, and I diminish by an act of will – as I acknowledge that they rest now beyond my grasp'. He performs, as with the Matuschek letter, a second, public cutting-down-to-size, which he regards as an essential prelude to meeting each employee he cares about eye to eye, possibly for the last time in this setting. His gesture could be seen as a continuation of the concessions he acted out, like an abashed young son, in Matuschek's presence. Although he feels that the worthiness he had imaginatively possessed only minutes ago has been obliterated, he makes a point of telling Ilona, who cries out that she 'doesn't understand', that there's 'nothing *to* understand': 'It happens every day … Someone gets fired'. The fact that it is his turn now accords him no special distinction. He is willing to disappear into the crowd of other mundane casualties of circumstance. The ordinariness that is his remaining badge (his new identity or the one he'd always had, before puffing himself up with unreasonable dreams) covers him over. It's better, he concludes with frightening acquiescence, to regard his misfortune in such a light, and to place himself in that same drab light for public scrutiny.

Typically, and thankfully, Klara cannot get through her own conditional apology to Stewart and 'clearing the air' speech without entangling them both in a brief resumption of tension. She replies to his magnanimous, 'I'll go first' apology to her by mirroring its 'if … then' construction exactly. (Kralik's opening: 'If I had anything to do with your not getting the evening off – [then] I'm very sorry'.) What she finds herself saying back to him is that she's sorry *if* indeed she had helped bring about his firing. That is not quite the same as saying, simply, 'I'm sorry this has happened to you'. To make her expression of regret for his dismissal sound more sincere (which it is, in spite of her self-consciousness), she adds to it a candid reminder that they 'fought a lot' and didn't get along. The viewer is perhaps annoyed with her for interfering with Kralik's smooth, perfectly conciliatory, submissive-to-the-last exit. She almost spoils his moving performance of the 'man who expects nothing' role: 'observe how quickly I have arrived at a stoic peace about my adversity'. Perhaps there is a faint touch of theatre in Kralik's touching glance around the dear

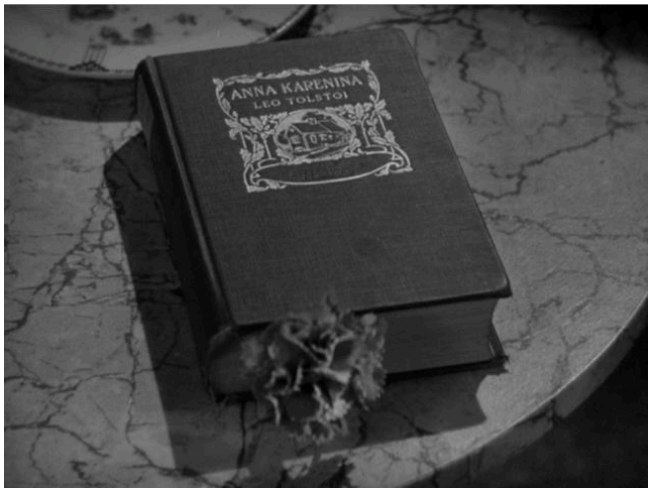
old workplace before reaching Klara. He is forgivably entering a phase of playing the unencumbered man for effect – prolonging the gratifying sensation that attends noble renunciation while making amends to someone who irritates him. Maybe he hopes to impress Klara just a little with his courtesy and bravery.

In any event, her nearly blurted out description of him as 'her worst enemy', which he catches and completes for her with forbearance, yanks him for a short beat out of the passivity he has settled into. Klara knocks him a trifle off course and gets a small rise out of him that the viewer belatedly welcomes. Why shouldn't he be stirred up, after all? If he is to continue living with force and expressiveness, he must become re-embroiled in aggravation. Much of his distinctiveness, surely, comes from his pride and sharpness. Kralik's premature burial of his craving for romantic privileges and exceptional qualities can best be interrupted by a comic thrust from Klara at his *too* dormant pride. The *almost* perfect exit – had it not been for that one nettling reminder of ego – supplies a key to Lubitsch's way of conceiving most of Stewart's and Sullavan's encounters in the film. They spend most of their time onscreen together, as well as their time apart, recovering from their disconcerting bouts, hovering awkwardly in the condition of 'almost'.

They are trying to find imaginative openings for a less constrained self, and 'almost' succeed. As I have noted, Kralik and Klara Novak are trying to make themselves present to each other as figures who escape the pinched conditions of the grubbily commonplace. When they write to their beloved, their language 'almost' lifts them to the large romantic alternatives they yearn to possess; they are 'almost' convinced that they can be worthily viewed in the light their fantasies propose as their *true* situation. They 'almost' see one another without vexing distortion [repeatedly], 'almost' avoid exacerbating small disagreements until they become major ones, 'almost' improve each other's capacities for generosity and inventiveness. The two lovers display borrowed and imitated desires 'almost' with the pride of ownership. They touchingly deck themselves out in these desires, like rented evening wear for a party to which they have 'almost' been invited. In the closing minutes of the film, Kralik invites 'Miss Novak' to try on a necklace he has purchased for his serious 'girlfriend'. Klara is about to discover that she is the intended recipient. Awed by the pendant's beauty, she asks Kralik if it contains real diamonds. He replies, with a show of pride untouched by awkwardness (in Stewart's perfectly judged rendering), 'Pretty near', thus comically – and movingly – bridging the gulf between real jewels and a pleasing, inexpensive imitation. Sullavan's expression as she looks in the mirror and sees herself adorned with necklace, reveals that she accepts his estimate of the gift's worth unreservedly. 'Almost' is finally exactly right. What Stewart and Sullavan's scenes together dramatise most formidably (and the other performers take up in a usually milder key) is the demanding search for the right 'Cinderella slipper' size of sociable selfhood. How can one be 'merely' human, but at the right size, in one's dealings with others? One oscillates so readily between the too vainly large size and the too painfully small. Stewart and Sullavan remind us of why we feel the need to live too grandly in our continuing performance for others' acceptance. We similarly resort to large-as-we-can-get-away-with gestures in our continuing bid for *our own* belief in how we appear.

Their most remarkable and demanding meeting in the film occurs the same evening that Kralik loses his position. Klara is eagerly and apprehensively awaiting the arrival of her mystery admirer in a café – the pre-arranged location for their first face to face exchange. She has no inkling, of course, that Kralik is the exalted, poetic 'friend' with whom she has been corresponding. Kralik, who stands outside the café in Pirovich's company, intends to have him deliver a note to her apologising for his not keeping their rendezvous. He receives his second major shock of the day when he learns from his spying confederate that his flawless beloved is, in fact, the acrimonious, unsympathetic Miss Novak. He responds to the news by putting away the note that would have spared Klara the agony of prolonged waiting. (The fact that he does not crumple or tear up the note gives us a hint of his double-minded reaction to this fresh blow.) However, when Pirovich reminds him that she had written the precious letters (letters that, more than anything else in his circumscribed life, have confirmed his sense of the person he aspires to be), he convincingly surrenders to bitterness. He retorts 'That's my misfortune', and stalks off.

For reasons we are left to guess at, he thinks better of his decision, and returns a short while later, resolved to test the waters of this embarrassingly transformed situation. Perhaps he is no longer so concerned about his correspondent's expectation of 'meeting a pretty important man'. After all, she is herself just Klara Novak, though what that fact really signifies remains to be seen. Perhaps he wishes to be more generous to her than Matuschek has been to him; he will bring proof of his magnanimity to a person strongly inclined to doubt it. Kralik appears at her table, burdened with his unwelcome new knowledge, and somehow having come to terms with it in a way that has revived his spirits, even his romantic hope. He has chosen to present himself to Klara as a less disagreeable and quarrelsome version of himself. He plans to lead her by slow degrees beneath the onerously familiar surface of his character, so she will be surprised (pleasantly) by the 'inner truth'. If things go well, he will be agreeably surprised by her 'inner truth' in turn. What he registers initially as part of *her* familiar surface are the unflattering dotted blouse that he had urged her *not* to wear to work (it makes her look 'like a circus pony'), the memory of her 'red hands' and her still fiercely intact old maid's bearing. He will find occasion to mention all of these irritants during their conversation, once it has degenerated into another, particularly nasty round of their running dispute at the shop.



What mitigates his impression of bothersome surface familiarity are the gladdening red carnation (matching the one he had crushed and left behind) and her copy of

Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. His new information about her 'secret identity' also makes it easy for him to grasp the reason for the fretful vulnerability she displays as soon as she catches sight of him. He tells himself that she is, regardless of her disappointed look, on some level waiting for *him* to appear and make things right. The selection of *Anna Karenina* as the telltale sign which will allow the lovers to recognise each other is – as always with Lubitsch's poetic objects – instructive in several distinct ways. Klara has chosen it primarily for its association with impeccable literary taste, refinement, and monumental, earth-rattling romantic passion. She is no doubt aware that it ends tragically, but for her the tragedy of Anna is likely overshadowed by the extravagant romantic pitch of the storytelling. Tolstoy's supreme gift, appropriately for the themes of this film, is his limitless interest in the ordinary stuff of life in the *present tense* (few of his characters spend time dwelling on the past, and the novel's narrator doesn't either). Tolstoy transfigures ordinary passing moments by the quality of his attention. Klara may well misread Tolstoy as a writer fundamentally committed to grandeur, life lived on a scale far removed from the mundane sorrows and humiliations she knows first-hand. She distinguishes between lofty suffering, reserved for tempestuous great ladies like Tolstoy's Anna, and the ground level variety available to everyone. Tolstoy, closer to Lubitsch's than to Klara's sense of art, is concerned to bring the two spheres together. The viewer is also invited to note the heaviness of this book (its imposing, weighty thickness) in relation to the slight, high-strung woman who stations herself behind it, hoping no doubt to borrow some of its lustre and amplitude. 'I am a volume, like Tolstoy's, worth reading slowly. It could take the right man a happy lifetime to complete the task'.

Klara's position throughout the scene thwarts easy viewer identification, in large part because she is deprived of crucial knowledge that Kralik and the viewer possess. Her willingness to go too far in her assault on Kralik is to some degree fear-based. Even before he appears she is agitated that her expected suitor will take one disdainfully appraising glance at her and flee. Her insults are nowhere held in check by the challenging double awareness that Kralik is privileged to work with. While Kralik endeavours for most of the scene to release his letter-writing soulmate from her captivity inside snippy, defensive 'Miss Novak', and thus bring her into a richer emotional focus, Klara is stuck with her fixed idea of the demeaning enemy, Kralik, 'from the store', who is incapable of thinking well of her. Because she is waiting for someone else, someone in every respect preferable to Kralik, Klara persists in not looking at him. To be more accurate, she looks past him whenever she makes eye contact, past and through him; there is nothing she must search for in this face, or re-imagine. He is an old, devalued obstacle, blocking her view of everything that matters, everything that might free her from her only half-comprehended present dilemma. Returning to the image of Klara at the Post Office box – that form of bereft looking – we might take this definitive *Shop* moment as a metaphor for how she sees here. Kralik is the *empty* box she stares into. Her hand and eyes futilely extend the act of looking for something that isn't there. Naturally the box itself holds no interest. It is visible only as a source of deprivation. Klara regards Kralik throughout their conversation with what might be termed the 'talons' of perception. Her eyes try to shred his claims that there are visible similarities between them. She sees his suggestion of discernible ties as a threat of contamination. She expends great energy clawing at potential signs of attractiveness, effacing him. She announces proudly and dismissively that there is no need to scratch *his* surface because she knows 'exactly what [she] would find. Instead of a heart, a handbag; instead of a soul, a suitcase; and instead of an intellect, a cigarette lighter – that doesn't work'. She barricades him inside the paraphernalia of their shared work world. He is inseparable from the monotonous merchandise of his trade; he has no identity or imagination apart from them. She, in contrast, can make cutting metaphors out of the shop goods, and thus rise above them, entering another plane of life, her true domain. Kralik, alas, can only acquiesce, dully, to the suitcase world picture of savourless sufficiency. A turning point in Klara's way of thinking about him occurs, in a later scene, when he shows her, metaphorically, how the gift of a wallet can express love more powerfully than it expresses the banality of commerce.

Though Sullavan seems rather merciless and unappeasable throughout her performance of the scene, she is able to engage at the same time in what I can only describe as unconscious flirtation. It is Klara who introduces the loaded word 'love' into their dispute, sending it like a dart into her building accusation that he must hate her, given his delight in causing her harm. Sullavan can make the word 'love' sound at once like a bite and a quavery caress. When Kralik denies feeling hate, Klara swiftly changes tack and challenges him with the sparkling sarcastic retort, 'I suppose you love me!'. Sullavan's voice issues the faintest seductive opening here, without sacrificing any of her impatience or distrust. She wants to hear what he has to say about love before dismantling his skimpy claims to positive feelings. (Directly behind Stewart throughout this exchange, we notice Klara's worn-out, cheap fur jacket hanging on a hook, one arm extended in his direction with a faint hint of warmth.) Stewart, who is trying to discover what his potential for romantic attachment to this barbed creature might be, erupts with the fascinating question: 'What have you ever done to make me love you?'. Lubitsch would have us entertain the notion that all of the astringency that this pair partakes in is part of the 'doing' that makes love real, and inescapable. Love is the sum of their effects on each other, including every refusal, misunderstanding, and affront. 'What have you done to make me love you?'. The action of love is well – and bafflingly – underway from the outset. Love arises from the total energy of their responsiveness to one another, whether that energy is warm and affirming, or malign. Of course, actors can show us how, even when the malign is dominant, the mere fact of intensity can excite.

Sullavan is able to conjoin razor-sharp anger and ardour in her delivery: there is a hungry vibrato in her voice that suggests ardour is at the root of everything. 'I will make it extremely difficult for you to release the warming force of this ardour, but, ah, if you should ever succeed, the reward will be great'. No sooner do Stewart and Sullavan declare that they have no desire for the other's love and no intention to love, than the café orchestra breaks into their silence with a fervent refrain of 'Otchi Tchornya'. The song both argues with the couple's attempt to turn away from each other, and reminds them of their first meeting clash over the nature and worth of cigarette boxes with hidden melodies. All of their subsequent discord was piled on top of this troublesome original object of contention. We return again to the film's central 'What's inside the box?' riddle. The orchestra's intervention also makes us mindful of the public nature of their wrangling. Up to this point, they have always been obliged to converse in public settings, with other people nearby. Their possible wish to shift occasionally to private communication has never been granted. Their sparse efforts to find opportunities to be alone together are repeatedly foiled by an ever intrusive social context. Yet this social context obstacle also nourishes, as they later concede to one another, fantasies and unaccountable desires.

From the beginning of the cafe scene, Kralik's intention is to find the 'something more' in his familiar adversary, despite her own resistance and the threat of humiliation in a crowded, distracting social setting. The air is thick with provocation and wretchedness, yet he persists in his search. How seldom do any of our quarrels with those we have some regard for accommodate our *need* (often forgotten) to hold onto the person that lives separate from the coldness and injury being inflicted. The other person that Kralik seeks to locate in 'Miss Novak' is well fortified. Blocking his view of 'her' are all the 'blinds' to saving awareness that rise up in so many of our own conflicts. Kralik engages with Klara as though her letter writing persona is not simply make-believe or a ruse. It has to correspond to something real in her, he powerfully elects to believe, that might become visible and estimable at any moment, even in the midst of deep strife. He must keep looking; he cannot afford to miss even the smallest intimation.

Klara refers at one point to a set of letters in her possession that would 'open' Kralik's eyes to her beauty and praiseworthy spirit. She considers the words that honour her in the letters her strongest certification of personal value, but her own eyes are shut, as she speaks of the letters' exalted tributes to her, to the possibility that the man in front of her could have written them. Sullavan, with great boldness, shows Klara settling into a blazingly narcissistic euphoria, 'hugging herself' in a glassy-eyed fashion while warding off the hurt feelings that are also in play. Klara ventures as far in her levelling of insults as she does because she feels backed by the judgment of this other someone – the secret suitor who divines the truth of things, even better than she does. Klara speaks on behalf of her couple-in-the-making, out of the hope that she has been picked by 'one who knows' for this better life, and out of an accompanying fear (he is so late in arriving!) that she has been passed over, rejected. She must self-protectively tear down in Kralik whatever her 'dream' partner might find inadequate or disappointing in *herself*. She will not be condemned by association (or affiliation) with his streaks of ordinariness. Kralik compliments her on her considerable ability to mix poetry and meanness in her assessment of him (heart for a handbag, etc.). He conveys, in luminous Stewart fashion, that he would like to envision the poetry in her as divorceable from the meanness that so often animates her. (Maybe though her poetry would be limply sentimental without a saving dash of meanness.)

Through most of the scene Kralik attempts to locate Klara's *enticing* poetry in her real, down-to-earth circumstances rather than the ethereal other world he has previously favoured in his own letters. This grounding effort allows Stewart's performance to escape from a limiting theatrical mode. Remember that he enters the café under somewhat false pretences, which oblige him to play himself as though he were taking on a tricky new role. If Klara accepts him in this performance of self, he will try to make an authentic identity home in this melding of his somehow 'stale' habitual manner with a freshly revealed potential. Klara's contrasting refusal of the world that is ready-to-hand, which Kralik generously embodies (when he isn't trying too hard to impress her) obliges Sullavan's acting to stay within a theatrical frame. She is posturing in Stewart's presence for the sake of her imagined audience (the absent 'dear friend'), and has no need to confront Kralik as a *person* in order to satisfy that audience. Sullavan reveals Klara falling back on her customary defences, and as a result presenting an imperious theatrical manner to Stewart. Klara thinks she has no choice but to perform a haughty version of herself and hold her better attributes, which Kralik cannot properly imagine, and certainly cannot appreciate, in reserve.

The sensitive girl in need of a job that, as Klara sees it, Kralik treated high-handedly on her first trip to Matuschek's must not risk an eager openness with him a second time. She bridled at what she assumed was his first condescending appraisal of her, but perhaps also took it to heart. Klara finally drives Kralik out of the café by calling him a 'little, insignificant clerk', appalling him by attaching to him the identity badge that she feels he has *always* made her wear in his presence. (He endlessly corrects her, and rejects all of her ideas for the shop, many of which she knows are good.) The truth of his uneasy way of wielding authority around her has more to do with his suspicion that she has never granted him *any* authority in her mind. 'Miss Novak has, from the first day in the shop, contemptuously seen me as nothing more than an 'insignificant clerk' putting on airs, which I have often worried may be an all too accurate, though still unbearable judgment. Now that I have been fired and can no longer lay claim to even a clerk's status, she finally pronounces out loud the judgment she has always held in secret'.

The 'almost' quality in this great scene of escalating hurt comes from Stewart's dogged persistence in attempting to break through the theatrical artifice of Sullavan's animosity and estrangement. She plays hide-and-seek with us and Stewart, employing the equivalent of a gaudy theatrical fan. Though her manner is recognisably unreal (in its *way* of withholding) most of the time, the artifice she resorts to has the ability to draw blood. Kralik makes two large attempts to overcome his disappointment that it is Klara, and not someone else, who piningly, frantically awaits his correspondent self. After being defeated in his first round of attempted peacemaking, Kralik seats himself again at a table behind her and we sense, as misleadingly as in the Matuschek firing scene, that comedy and the natural grace of their temperaments will somehow unite to dispel the discordant mood. Since Kralik has made a number of concessions already, as he did with Matuschek, there should be some balancing concession from her side, if Klara is to align herself with the good will that we sense is an important part of her nature. (Given Sullavan's steady

emphasis of Klara's prideful intransigence, good will does not seem to us the paramount feature of her disposition. But it is not negligible.) And yet, at the same time, we can feel Kralik's decision to occupy another seat directly behind her (without her consent) from Klara's perspective. He seems, viscerally, to be crowding her, and perhaps basking a little in his superior knowledge of what is actually going on. Just as he seeks to impress her one more time with how much he knows, he misidentifies Zola as the author of *Madame Bovary*, and Klara wearily corrects him while noting that there is no getting rid of his 'taunting' presence. We would like Klara to be more forbearing than we would probably be in her place. In any event, we can't quite believe that Kralik's efforts to spare her an evening of insupportable loneliness and rejection will miscarry completely, especially since he appears – for much of the scene – to be placing a concern for her well-being ahead of his own.

Before Kralik makes his delayed entrance into the café, we are given a chance to observe at extended close range Klara's level of timid fearfulness and her acute vulnerability. The sudden, unexpected appearance of Stewart's face outside the café window, coinciding in an 'answered prayer' way with her moment of greatest need, seems an 'almost' binding promise of gloom alleviation. We can scarcely imagine that his decision to come back, when he didn't have to, will not bring about a partial remedy. It *can't* make matters worse. We tell ourselves that Klara does not deserve to suffer needlessly, and that Kralik is well overdue for a turn of luck. The 'almost' slowly gives way, confronting us with the starkest emotional impasse in the entire film. From this squabble turned ghastly, we perhaps gain a better understanding of Yukio Mishima's view that each moment of life marks an annihilation, not just of itself but of the world that gave rise to it (1972: 372). In this warm little café, containing two well-matched, would-be lovers, we are led to feel how foundationless the world can seem, as it is annihilated, then replaced, moment by moment. Stewart and Sullavan do not, as a result of this gruelling ordeal, cause us to relinquish our hope for or involvement with them as a romantic couple. Their chemistry is so strong that it can even draw sustenance from their need to eviscerate one another. All of the happiness that this story can make palpable lives in the land of discomposure. Think of happiness as a needle to be threaded. It can sometimes be managed when one is feeling flustered or under siege, but just barely.

Shop concludes with a flurry of plausible and satisfying restorations and unmaskings. The repellently theatrical Vadas is exposed as Mrs. Matuschek's seducer and comically evicted from the store (amid a cacophonous mix of Otchi Tchornyas from a pile of toppled cigarette boxes). Matuschek's suicide attempt is averted and he is granted the reprieve of companionship on Christmas Eve with a newly hired young employee (who has no family in Budapest). Kralik is not only reinstated in his job, but promoted to the position of manager. And most importantly, Klara relinquishes her dream of a proposal from 'dear friend' at the very instant it becomes possible. Taking Kralik into her confidence at last, she allows him destroy her idea of happiness with her fantasy beloved. As he submits all of the correspondent's 'irresistible' qualities to a devastating ironic critique (in the guise of supportive praise), Klara lets go of this tenacious fantasy image, and allows herself to see Kralik as her beloved for the first time. Through Stewart's and Sullavan's incomparably delicate final 'duet', we witness the delicious double annihilation of Kralik's and Klara's fantasy pretenders to the internal throne of the self.

As the ending draws near, Kralik is allowed to exchange his prior authorial role as earnest romantic for a little spree as romantic satirist. His conversion of his romantic surrogate into a predatory, plagiarising knave is about the necessity of the imagination turning benignly adversarial in order to defeat self-deception. The imagination's final task in the film is to cut Alfred Kralik and Klara Novak down to size for the sake of their romantic happiness. But in so doing the imagination honours the quality of their dreamy natures, and doesn't leave them bereft of workable illusions. As the actors perform the final unmasking of their genuine desires, we giddily participate in the comic deflation of the figures they aspired to be, perhaps needed to be, until now. They sequestered a space in their minds for boldly romantic stand-ins who were in touch with freedom, stand-ins they depended on to make their outward lives seem more colourful, and endurable. These fantasy replacements – by comically malicious sleight of hand – are revealed to be 'more limited' in their make-up than the ordinary persons who gave voice to them. So much of the clerks' yearning, in the final reckoning, was gussied up in absurd, high-flown airs, airs that made their authentic tenderness faintly disingenuous, even hammy. By contrast, once the pretenders' wings have been clipped, the 'almost' acceptable small life that both clerks for so long regretted being confined in seems suddenly ample enough and real enough to claim their grateful allegiance. (It helps that Kralik's job in the shop has significantly enlarged.) One can show *this* person and *this* life to another as a blessed, charming alternative to the elaborate pretence of a sterile dream. Never in my experience of film has self-exposure been

more delightfully managed, with the successful overthrow of imprisoning fancy, and the embrace of a life whose limitations no longer chafe.

Yet Lubitsch allows us to question, glancingly, the advisability of killing off too many of our immoderate, unjustifiable poetic impulses. The goal, of course, is a restored sanity, which permits secure self-acceptance and the simultaneous envisioning of the fellow employee who has been there to be grasped – as a sufficient gift and challenge – all along. Balance and clear-sightedness are not trifling attainments, but even as we celebrate their triumph we note that there is a cost to be reckoned. Given the ways that Stewart, Sullavan, and Frank Morgan have revealed themselves to us throughout the film in terms of their extravagant, dreaming selves, one might argue that it is precisely those 'defeated' tendencies that have made the characters matter to us. Surely it is their fractiousness, their persistent rivalry, their holding of so much in reserve, their melancholy and antic improvisations that have given texture to their experience and a painful depth to their ardour.

The key to the Lubitsch ending, in performance terms, is that Stewart's imagination is never more brilliantly active and far-reaching, or Sullavan's more shimmeringly responsive than when Stewart demolishes the figure who stands for his 'poetic dream' of a larger soul. Lubitsch employs elaborate artifice, in other words, to commemorate the victory in love of no-frills ordinariness. Ordinariness deprived of glittering, self-aggrandising embellishment is the value that Lubitsch holds up in 1940 as most worth cherishing and fighting to preserve in the coming war. The performance issues in *The Shop Around the Corner* have to do with making a resourceful ordinariness artful as well – a means of conveying style *authentically* in a milieu where unrestrained flights of fancy are suspect, and promote a worrisome, debilitating solipsism. 1940, recall, was also the year in which Chaplin's great dictator elegantly and with mesmerising self-enchantment performed his private dance with a docile, near-weightless globe, before it explodes in his hands.

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George Toles is Distinguished Professor of Film and Literature at the University of Manitoba. For twenty five years he has been the screenwriting collaborator of Canadian filmmaker, Guy Maddin. He has recently written the original screenplay for Guy's new feature film, *Keyhole*.

[1] For a discussion of Wyler's handling of objects in film, see my essay 'Eloquent Objects, Mesmerizing Commodities in William Wyler's *The Heiress*' (2006).