

# BENNINGTON REVIEW

birds, not birdcages

BENNINGTON REVIEW

POETRY | FICTION | NONFICTION | FILM



Family Gathering  
ISSUE THIRTEEN

**Gustavo Pérez Firmat**

**TROUBLE IN PARADISE: ANOTHER LOOK INTO *THE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER***

*The whole of anything is never told.*

—Henry James

Lubitsch scholars have often remarked on the simplicity of *The Shop Around the Corner*. This is true in a technical sense. There are no trick angles, long shots, travelings, flashbacks, elaborate sets. The story was filmed sequentially in less than a month. In an interview in the *New York Sun*, Lubitsch called it “a quiet little story that seemed to have some charm.” His remark alludes to the comical, error-ridden romance between two shop employees. But there is a second storyline, less discussed, whose protagonist is Matuschek (Frank Morgan), the owner of the shop. If one watches through his eyes, one sees a different movie than the romantic comedy that it’s universally taken to be. From this perspective, there is nothing funny or romantic about the film. Pauline Kael distinguished between the plays and the screenplays of Samson Raphaelson, who wrote the script, by noting that the former are not lighthearted: “They aspired to be more than comedies; there was always a serious kernel.” His screenplay for *The Shop*

*Around the Corner* is an exception to Kael's rule, for the Matuschek material contains a kernel of seriousness buried inside a comedy.

The contentious relationship between Alfred Kralik (Jimmy Stewart) and Klara Novak (Margaret Sullavan) takes up the largest part of the movie. Kralik, the senior clerk, snipes at Klara, a recent hire, and she snipes back. Both have anonymous pen pals with whom they have fallen in love. What they do not know is that they are each other's "Dear Friend." About two-thirds of the way into the movie Kralik discovers that Klara is the "modern girl" with whom he has been corresponding. He leaves Klara in the dark until the final scene. Together in an empty store, Kralik pretends that he has met Klara's fiancé, whom she believes to be an "intelligent, sympathetic young man." Kralik disabuses her of this notion by telling her he is bald, middle-aged, and worst of all, unemployed. As payback for the insults that Klara has thrown his way, he carries on the charade until he has brought her to tears. Finally, Kralik reveals that *he* is the author of all those heartfelt letters. At first stunned, Klara is soon relieved, since she confesses to Kralik that she had harbored a secret crush on him since the day they met. Before the final embrace and kiss, Lubitsch interjects one of the "touches" he was famous for. Klara asks Kralik to pull up his pants to make sure that he is not bow-legged. In an ingenious variation on Lubitsch's favorite two-shot, the camera shifts from two faces in profile to two pairs of legs: Klara's shapely calves and Kralik's bony shins, not quite covered by black socks held up with garters. Klara looks down, smiles, and falls into his arms.

So much for the romantic comedy. In the same interview in the *New York Sun*, Lubitsch states that Mrs. Matuschek, whom we never see or hear, is "almost the most important character in the picture." If so, the movie may not be as simple as it seems. Mrs. Matuschek's invisible presence points to the drama inside the comedy, to the kernel of seriousness that Raphaelson put into this screenplay. Suspecting his wife of infidelity, Matuschek hires a detective. His fears are confirmed, except that he had assumed that his wife's lover was Kralik, his oldest and most trusted employee, someone who's like a son to him, rather than another clerk, Vadas (Joseph Schildkraut). Distraught, Matuschek goes into his office and is putting a pistol to his head as the errand boy, Pepi (William Tracy), walks in. Matuschek misfires, but the trauma lands him in the hospital, where the doctors tell him that he has to give up the reins of the store. His poignant explanation of his wife's behavior: "Twenty-two years we've been married. Twenty-two years I was proud of my wife. Well, she just didn't want to grow old with me."

The two storylines play off one another. Both involve love triangles and mistaken identities. In the Matuschek plot, the third person is Mrs. Matuschek's lover, whom Matuschek misidentifies as Kralik. In the Klara-Kralik plot, the third person happens to be the same as persons one and two. The former is a story of love lost; the latter, of love found. As the movie builds a life for Klara and Kralik, it dismantles Matuschek's. To highlight the contrast, the tale of adultery intrudes on the love story at a crucial moment. Kralik and Klara make a dinner date with their unmet correspondents. To recognize one another, he will be wearing a carnation on his lapel and she will have a copy of *Anna Karenina* with a carnation as bookmark. Before going into the Cafe Nizza, Kralik looks through the restaurant window to discover that his "Dear Friend" is none other than Klara. He enters and pretends to run into her by accident, never disclosing that he is her date. When he sees Tolstoy's novel, he asks whether she has read "Zola's" *Madame Bovary*, another tale of adultery (and another instance of misidentification). While Klara and Kralik exchange cross words, back in the shop, Matuschek, having gotten proof that his wife is deceiving him, tries to kill himself. His wife's name is Emma, like that of Flaubert's protagonist.

The two storylines embody two fundamentally different types of narrative. The Klara-Kralik storyline adheres to the three-act structure of countless movies and plays. They meet, complications ensue, are resolved. The Matuschek material, on the other hand, develops what one can call a “brink” narrative. A brink narrative has a beginning and a middle, but it lacks an ending. Perhaps the paradigmatic example of a brink narrative is the Old Testament, with its multiple prefigurations of the coming of the Messiah. The first few minutes in war and disaster movies are brink narratives—the calm before the storm—as are the endings of each installment (except the last) of serial fiction, whatever its medium. Since prequels take the audience up to the beginning of the story that the prequel sets up, they are retrospectively conceived brink narratives.

The movie opens with two sentences superimposed on the silhouette of the MGM lion: “This is the story of Matuschek and Company—of Mr. Matuschek and the people who work for him. It is just around the corner from Andrassy Street—on Balta Street, in Budapest, Hungary.” Next is an establishing shot of a busy street as people head for work in the morning. The camera then follows Pepi, who parks the delivery bicycle in front of the shop. Pirovitch (Felix Bressart), one of the clerks, is already standing on the sidewalk. One by one the other employees arrive: Flora (Sara Haden), the middle-aged cashier; Ilona (Inez Courtney), the pretty bookkeeper, wearing a silver-fox stole, apparently the gift of an admirer; Kralik, who asks Pepi to get him some bicarbonate of soda; and the foppish Vadas, the Beau Brummell of Balta Street. Soon Mr. Matuschek will also arrive.

The one member of the “company”—the opening suggests that the term is used not only in its commercial but in its theatrical sense—Klara is not part of this scene, since she does not yet work at the store. Before Matuschek’s arrival, the conversation centers on Kralik’s dinner at the boss’s home the previous evening, which has left him with a sour stomach, and Mrs. Matuschek’s attempts to appear youthful. When Ilona asks Kralik whether it’s true that Mrs. Matuschek had a facelift, Vadas interjects that Mrs. Matuschek is a “very charming woman.” Finally Matuschek steps out of a taxi, greets his employees and opens the door to the store.

Moments later, putting away boxes in the stockroom, Kralik confesses to Pirovitch that he has been writing to a young woman. Although he has never met her, he can tell by her letters that she’s “no ordinary girl.” A few moments later, Klara enters the store. Kralik takes her for a customer and tries to interest her in several items. After listening to his pitches, she finally admits that what she’s looking for is a job. “That wasn’t very nice,” he says, “letting me go through the whole routine.” Just then Matuschek emerges from his office and assumes that Klara and Kralik are haggling over the price of an item. He intervenes to tell Klara that “the word ‘impossible’ is not in the vocabulary of Matuschek and Company.” As soon as she tells him that she wants a job, he huffs, “That’s impossible! That’s out of the question!”

Before Klara’s entrance, Matuschek and Kralik had been arguing about stocking a cigarette box that plays music. Matuschek liked the box, but Kralik thought that it wouldn’t sell. Seeing Klara in the store, Matuschek asks her opinion of the box. Klara doesn’t quite know what to say, but she notices a heavy-set lady interested in what she thinks is a candy box. When the lady complains that it’s annoying to listen to a song every time one wants a piece of candy, quick-thinking, fast-talking Klara explains that Matuschek and Company designed the box to make women with a sweet tooth “candy-conscious”: “Every time you open it, this tinkling little song is a message to you: ‘Too much candy—now be careful!’” Klara knows that the box is intended for cigarettes, not candy, and that the tinkling little tune is “Ochi Chyornye.” The woman agrees to buy the box for an inflated price. Impressed, Matuschek hires Klara.

A comedy of errors, this sequence sets the stage for Klara and Kralik's misunderstandings, as it does for Matuschek's misidentification of his wife's lover. But nothing in the Klara and Kralik storyline is specific to the shop. The "super" has told us that the subject of the movie is Matuschek and Company, yet Klara and Kralik's romance could have unfolded anywhere. The Matuschek storyline, however, is inseparable from the shop that bears his name. The Klara-Kralik narrative runs from the tenth minute to the end of the movie; the Matuschek narrative runs from the first minute until ten minutes before the end. Klara has not yet appeared when Matuschek arrives at the store; Matuschek disappears into the night before Klara realizes that Kralik is her correspondent. The asynchrony of the two storylines underscores their distinctness. In fact, Matuschek exits without having the slightest idea about his two clerks' romantic involvement, a further indication of the irrelevance of the principal storyline to his situation.

On Christmas Eve, leaving the hospital against doctors' orders, Matuschek visits the shop for the first time in several weeks. After giving his employees their bonuses, he invites Kralik to dine at an expensive restaurant. Kralik declines, since he intends to stay behind to reveal himself to Klara. Matuschek rejoins: "I just wanted to be sure that you weren't alone." But in truth Matuschek wants to be sure that *he* is not alone. His next target is Pirovitch, a family man. As they walk out of the shop together, Matuschek tries to finagle an invitation by guessing that Pirovitch is having "a nice little party" with guests. "Oh, no, Mr. Matuschek," Pirovitch replies: "Just my wife, my boy, my little baby and myself. That's all we want—and we are very happy." Pirovitch doesn't know it, but his response is devastating. Everything he has, Matuschek lacks: a home, a loving wife and children. Hearing Pirovitch's reply, Matuschek looks down and winces. It's not much of a gesture, but it conveys the depth of Matuschek's anguish. To underscore the moment, Lubitsch keeps the camera on Matuschek for several seconds before Flora, the cashier, emerges. She is in such a hurry to get home to her mother that she gives him no chance to squirrel an invitation.

When Pepi emerges from the store, Matuschek tries again. He tells Pepi that must be having dinner with his mother and father. The implication is that Matuschek would be happy to join them. Pepi is impervious to the hint. He asks Matuschek to look across the street, points out a woman, and says: "I'm her Santa Claus." He tips his hat and walks off. Everyone in Matuschek and Company has company except Matuschek. Lastly the new errand boy, Rudy, comes out of the store. When Matuschek tells him to make sure to give his Christmas bonus to his mother, Rudy responds that his "people" don't live in Budapest. Matuschek acts surprised: "You mean you are all alone in Budapest on Christmas Eve?" "That's right," answers Rudy. Finally Matuschek has found someone in a similar predicament, with the crucial difference that Rudy is seventeen years old and new in town, whereas Matuschek is a married man in late middle age and a Budapest resident. What for Rudy is a welcome accident is, for Matuschek, a last resort. Matuschek then offers Rudy a sumptuous dinner of roast goose stuffed with baked apples and a double serving of apple strudel with vanilla sauce. But its most important component is the first course. Raphaelson, who collaborated with Lubitsch on several films, including *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) and *Heaven Can Wait* (1943), notes that for Lubitsch, chicken noodle soup and dumplings were "lumpen metaphors for domestic felicity." About to tender the invitation, Matuschek asks: "Do you like chicken noodle soup?" Rudy perks up and says, "I certainly do." That's all Matuschek needs to hear.

The scene is filmed in two takes. The repeated opening and closing of the front door establishes the tempo. The employees who have someplace to go occupy the first shot; Matuschek's conversation with Rudy occupies the second one. The scene ends when Matuschek and Rudy leave the frame and the camera settles on the door of the shop for the last time. The only company Matuschek can find on

Christmas Eve is that of an errand boy whose name he cannot remember. What's more, by the time the door closes for the last time, the shop is Matuschek's in name only, since at the hospital he handed the keys to the store to Kralik. No wonder Matuschek and Rudy's conversation takes place outside the store.

I mentioned earlier the relevance of the theatrical meaning of "company." Equally pertinent is the word's etymological meaning: to break bread together (*com-pain*). Sharing a meal is an occasion repeatedly evoked: when Kralik confirms having had a seven-course dinner at Matuschek's home; when Kralik and Klara arrange for a blind dinner date; when Pirovitch and his wife plan to go to a friend's house to dine; when Vadas congratulates Matuschek on his new dining room set. These references to the literal sense of "company" culminate with unaccompanied Matuschek's failed invitations to dinner on Christmas Eve.

Believing that Matuschek's kindness accounts for the invitation, Rudy doesn't realize that Matuschek needs him more than he needs Matuschek. Not only has Matuschek lost his wife, he has also lost the shop, his real home, as he says, the place where he has spent most of his life. In the screenplay, when Matuschek tells his employees how much they mean to him, he says that he feels closer to them than to his "relations—nephews, cousins." Whether inadvertent or not, the omission of this line in the actual film stresses his isolation. The same point is made by one crucial departure from *Illatszertár* (known in English as *Parfumerie*), the Hungarian play upon which the script is based. In the play the Matuschek character (his name is Hammerschmidt) reconciles with his wife and invites the errand boy to dinner with his wife and his daughters. Unlike the movie, the play doesn't close with Klara and Kralik (here named Amalia and Horvath) declaring their love for each other, but with an image of domestic felicity: Hammerschmidt returning home on Christmas Eve for a "special supper."

Unlike the play, the film underscores Matuschek's homelessness. According to Scott Eyman, at the end of the movie, "dreams meld with reality, and harmony is once again restored to Matuschek and Company." This applies to Klara and Kralik, who have indeed achieved harmony, but not to Matuschek. His dreams don't meld with reality; they're busted by it. According to Kent Jones, "This is one of those rare films that allows us to see a future for its characters, whose dreams of three-room apartments and petit-bourgeois happiness will be realized and replaced by grander dreams many times over as they make their way through a life at work." But what is Matuschek's future? Before the movie begins, he had already realized the dream of petit-bourgeois happiness: a successful business that allowed him to provide generously for himself and his wife. But as the movie progresses, his happiness unravels. When Rudy accepts Matuschek's invitation, the stage direction states that "[Matuschek's] Christmas is saved." Even if Matuschek's Christmas is saved for the evening, what happens after the last mouthful of strudel? He will have to go back to the hospital. And where will he go after he is released from the hospital? Truer to his situation is the stage direction as Matuschek gets ready to leave the shop for the last time: "Matuschek moves reluctantly to the door. He has no destination." Once he is outside, another stage direction drives home the point: "There is a snowy Christmas Eve atmosphere as people all hurry to destinations." The contrast is stark. Untethered from wife and shop, he is set adrift.

The two final scenes both involve coupling, the physical analogue of the two-shot of which Lubitsch was so fond. Matuschek puts his arm around Rudy and hails a taxi. Klara and Kralik embrace and kiss. The latter is a gestural postscript, a conventional sign of closure, while the former is a point of departure. Klara and Kralik have found the love of their lives. Matuschek is off to dinner with a teenager he barely knows. The movie that opens as a celebration of community, of "company," concludes as an allegory of dispossession. That the shop and his home occupy the same street, Balta, highlights Matuschek's

removal from both. When I think of his predicament, the word *desamparo*, which designates a condition of material and spiritual unhousedness, comes to mind. I imagine him walking by the store time and again, looking in the display window with hope that Klara will see him and bring him inside. Once inside, he will make apologies. He was only passing by, he will say, and he happened to notice the stack of cigarette-music boxes. He takes one, opens it, and no music comes out.

In the musical remake, *In the Good Old Summertime* (1949), with Judy Garland and Van Johnson, the Matuschek story is replaced by something like its opposite. The owner of the shop, Oberkugen (S. Z. Sakall), marries his secretary, Nellie Burke (Spring Byington). Instead of an aging husband betrayed by his wife, Oberkugen is a senescent bachelor finding marital bliss at last. It's as if Matuschek and Flora, the spinster cashier, had fallen in love. The title already tells us that the musical lacks the original's emotional depth, its juxtaposition of love and betrayal, company and isolation. *She Loves Me* (1979), a made-for-TV BBC movie based on a 1963 Broadway musical, follows the plot of Lubitsch's movie more closely, even including the cigarette box. The difference is that Maraczek (the Matuschek character) seems not to mind his wife's infidelity. Lying on his hospital bed, he cracks jokes about his wife's behavior. Maraczek is buffoonish; Matuschek, anything but.

In the last remake I'm aware of, *You've Got Mail* (1998), with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan, emails replace letters as the vehicle for the correspondence. This version distances itself from the original not only by splitting the Matuschek character into Tom Hanks's father and grandfather, but by shifting the viewer's attention from a shop to a neighborhood, New York City's Upper West Side. That the shop (here a bookstore) has to close emphasizes the difference between this version and Lubitsch's. Without the shop, there is no *The Shop Around the Corner*. All three recreations miss what is most powerful in the original picture. Look away from Matuschek's anguish, and what you have is a frothy comedy of errors, a film "as sweet and light as an Esterhazy honey ball." Stay on his anguish, and the comedy turns dark and disquieting. As screenwriter George Toles has pointed out, Lubitsch melds comedy with "the menacing prospect of tragedy."

The uncertainty that Matuschek faces as he heads off into the night reflects the world in which the movie is set, Mitteleuropa in the late 1930s. By the time the movie was filmed in November 1939, Hungary had allied itself with Germany, which had just invaded Poland. A few months later, when it premiered in New York, war was raging in Europe. During World War II, Hungary suffered nearly a million military and civilian casualties, among them countless Kraliks and Klaras. None of this is anticipated in the movie, of course, since it is not an "end-determined narrative," as Frank Kermode terms fictions that acquire shape and significance from their endings. In disaster movies, as in Greek tragedy, the catastrophe is part of the plot, while in brink narratives it takes place outside and beyond them. It is our knowledge of what the future holds that turns trivial occasions into life-changing events. If you're having dinner on the Titanic on the evening of April 14, 1912, you have no idea that in a few hours the unsinkable ship will hit an iceberg. But we know. That poached salmon with mousseline sauce will be your last meal. What's true of the ship is true of the shop. Klara and Kralik dream, but it's hard to imagine that the war will not disturb their dreaming.

Some brink narratives do anticipate what lies beyond the brink. Perhaps the best-known example is the ending of *Casablanca*, when Humphrey Bogart's character says to Captain Renault: "Louis, I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship." Another familiar example that shares a historical context with *Casablanca* and *The Shop Around the Corner* is *The Sound of Music* (1965). Like Matuschek's

story, the musical ends when the von Trapp family leaves Austria. But the movie has warned its viewers about what the future holds: the Anschluss that will lead to the German occupation. A different kind of caveat appears in Lubitsch's *Ninotchka* (1939). The film opens with a long shot of the Place de la Concorde and this superimposed explanation: "This picture takes place in Paris in those wonderful days when a siren was a brunette and not an alarm—and if a Frenchman turned out a light, it was not on account of an air raid!" Lubitsch wanted to make sure that his audience knew that *Ninotchka* did not take place in the militarized capital of France, at the time at war with Germany, but in the old City of Lights, whose iconic location was a plaza called "Concorde." Had Budapest been as familiar as Paris to an American public, a similar statement might have been appended to the opening of *The Shop Around the Corner*.

Unlike these films, *The Shop Around the Corner* does not alert the viewer that the action transpires in a different world than the one that existed in 1940. Given that the author of the original play, Miklós László (born Nicholas Leitner), had emigrated to the United States in 1938 (a year after the premiere of the play), fearful of the persecution of Jews, this omission is surprising. There is one detail, however, that is indeed anticipatory: the movie ends on an eve. The yearly eves—Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve—are the brink days in the calendar. For the most part, they have become ceremonial. Yet there are also consequential eves (election eves, for example). Such a one is the Christmas Eve in *The Shop Around the Corner*, which leaves Matuschek on the brink of an uncertain future and his country and continent on the brink of war. I can't help thinking that, consciously or not, Raphaelson and Lubitsch changed the heartwarming ending of László's play in response to the crisis in Europe.

On a personal level, another consequential eve was New Year's Eve, 1958, when my own world (mittel-Caribbean) crashed. Having been a minor (in both senses) player in this brink narrative, I can't say that I remember that night as if it was yesterday, but I do recall the main outlines: our home in the Marianao section of Havana, friends and family gathered at the bar in the corner of the living room, loud Cuban music and loud Cubans talking. Less than two years later, we'd be living in a duplex in Miami, my family's "shop," a food wholesaling business having been confiscated by the Castro regime. We planned to return, but we never did. As the years and the decades have gone by, that night has continued to grow in significance. It's a before-and-after moment, a New Year's Eve unlike any other in Cuban history. Before: the maraca-musical fantasy of Old Cuba. After: the disaster movie known as Revolutionary Cuba.

It took me a long time to realize that what drew me to *The Shop Around the Corner* was its portrayal of a man and a world on the brink. Old Europe and Old Cuba. Mr. Matuschek and... Not me, certainly, since I was nine years old in 1958, but many of the men I grew up around. Matuschek's not an exile, not literally, but his situation mirrors that of the exile: his world has collapsed and he has to start anew. When I see Matuschek leave the shop for the last time, I'm reminded of several generations of Cubans who also had to leave their "shops." Like Mr. Matuschek, they had no idea about their destination.

I will end by returning to the "Ochi Chyornye" cigarette box. At first it seems no more than a McGuffin, a device to get Klara into the shop, but it continues to resurface. A window display with stacks of the boxes forms the backdrop of the long scene outside the store where Kralik and Klara have their first big quarrel. Later, the stack of boxes, placed on a low table near the entrance, appears in the background of almost every scene inside the store. The boxes are evoked in the Cafe Nizza when the band begins to play "Ochi Chyornye" and Klara mentions the "two thousand unsold cigarette boxes." And they are evoked again when Klara tells Kralik that she is going to give her anonymous friend one of those boxes for Christmas—

a prospect that Kralik finds unappealing. Finally, as Kralik pushes two-faced Vadas out of the store, Vadas crashes into the stack of boxes and they spill on the floor.

The “Ochi Chyornye” cigarette case embodies the equivocal nature of the film: it seems to be one thing, but turns out to be another, or rather, it is both things at once. It is probably not a coincidence that the firm that created the boxes, Miklós Brothers, shares a name with the author of the original play, Miklós László. In the Raphaelson’s adaptation, László’s parfumerie turns into a leather-goods shop, but the source of the boxes, as of the movie, is Miklós. It has been said that *The Shop Around the Corner* is one of Lubitsch’s “most conventional films.” But the darkness of the Matuschek material—the darkness inside the box—sets it apart from other romantic comedies. This is one film where the Lubitsch touch not only charms, but stings.

---

**GUSTAVO PÉREZ FIRMAT** is the David Feinson Professor Emeritus of Humanities at Columbia University. His books of literary and cultural criticism include *Life on the Hyphen*, *The Havana Habit*, *Tongue Ties*, and *The Cuban Condition*.