

*Billy Wilder, a director between two cultures:  
behind appearances, beneath allusions  
(Part 2)*

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## 6. "Human being" vs "Being human"

"People will do anything for money - except some people who will do almost anything for money" -  
*Billy Wilder (Note 5, p.106)*

*The unveiling of appearances in Wilder's movies does not concern only individuals, but also involves the roles that society often imposes on its members, and the following tension between what one would like to be and what contexts and situations oblige one to be. This conflict is masterly portrayed in *The apartment*, in which the protagonist, C.C.Baxter (Jack Lemmon) is described as a tiny element in a giant mechanism represented by the insurance company where he works. Rarely has the critique of the capitalist ethics of work, and the individual workers' corresponding alienation, been represented with such fierceness under the disguise of comedy.*

### [The apartment \(1960\)](#)

*What is the "small problem about flats" that C.C. Baxter has to face, up to the point that he can't enter his own home before a certain time? It's just that he lends his flat to his bosses to make their extra-marital affairs easier, in exchange for their promises for his professional advancement. Poor C.C.Baxter desperately tries to manage the conflicting requests from his bosses, and thus eventually gets its promotion (which also implies, as an extra benefit, having the key to the managers' toilet!), until he happens to fall in love with an elevator girl, Fran Kubelik (Shirley MacLaine). When his top boss, Mr. Sheldrake (Fred MacMurray) once again asks him to lend his home, where he intends to take Fran, C.C.Baxter must face a terrible conflict: surrender, once again, to his boss's blackmail or refuse his request, thus losing his promotion. At this point his choice is clear: remembering what his German neighbour had once told him, when he had invited him to change his way of life and become a Mensch (i.e. a real man), C.C.Baxter will give his boss a key - but that is the key to the managers' toilet, which will mean definitely losing his long-awaited promotion.*

### [The apartment \(1960\)](#)

*What C.C.Baxter had to endure for such a long time was a form of moral prostitution, imposed upon him by a cynical system where individual relationships are reduced to business deals and imply*

exploitation, blackmail and conformism. C.C.Baxter eventually frees himself from this system, by choosing to exist not just as a mere human being and instead becoming a Mensch (a term which Wilder takes from his mother tongue, thus underlining the values of his European origin which he had never forgotten) - i.e. becoming a human creature and by so doing reasserting the moral integrity on which a person's dignity is based.

## 7. Being and appearing on the Hollywood stage

Within a thirty-year span, Wilder shot two movies set in Hollywood, the setting that most could serve him to expose once again the conflict between "being" and "appearing", between the real person and the role that she/he plays, between private life and public image. At the same time, this setting generates figures of women/actresses obsessed with the passing of time, with their fading fame as stars, and ultimately with the loss of their own identity, which without their presence on the screen gradually fades out until it disappears.

This is the case of silent movie star Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), who, in *Sunset Boulevard*, has been living secluded for years in her decadent villa, after the advent of sound film has led to the end of her career. Norma lives in an imaginary world, insisting that "I am big - it's the pictures that got small!", and in the illusion that soon she will get back to a movie set and become a star again. This illusion is sustained by her faithful and devoted butler, her former husband, who every day sends her lots of false letters from her admirers. Norma even decides to hire a scriptwriter (William Holden), who becomes her gigolo and her lover. When she finds out that he has a girlfriend, first she attempts suicide, and then eventually kills him.

Wilder built a dark, cruel noir-melodrama, which is even more moving thanks to the actors, who are mostly once famous cinema stars: from the real silent movie star Gloria Swanson, playing Norma Desmond, to the director Erich von Stroheim, who had really directed her in several movies, to Buster Keaton (another silent movie star) and Hedda Hopper, a famous journalist specialising in Hollywood gossip

The film portrays Norma's gradual downward spiral to madness. After killing her lover, when the police and photographers arrive at her villa, she believes she has gone back to a studio set, meeting what she thinks is "her" director, Cecil B. DeMille (who had really directed her). The border between reality and fiction, between soundness and madness has broken, and Norma starts descending the stairs for her last great film act.

### Sunset Boulevard (1950)

At the film's première, the cinema tycoon Louis B.Mayer (co-founder of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) protested against the way the Hollywood setting had been portrayed: "This Billy Wilder should be sent back to Germany! He bites the hand that feeds him"! Wilder, who stood nearby, answered, "It's me, Wilder ... why don't you fuck off?".

Nearly thirty years after *Sunset Boulevard*, in 1978 Wilder tells another Hollywood story in *Fedora* (Hildegard Knef), a famous actress who has for a long time confined herself to Corfu, where she lives, secluded in her villa, while apparently (and mysteriously) maintaining her original beauty. When a producer (once again, William Holden) goes to visit her in order to offer her a role in a new film, he will have to face an even more intriguing mystery - he will eventually find out that the

*Fedora who receives from Henry Fonda's (playing himself in the movie) hand a lifetime achievement Academy Award, is actually the daughter of the real Fedora, who retired to private life after a plastic surgical operation which left her disfigured. Her daughter Antonia (Marthe Keller), bound to her mother by a morbid relationship, had decided to replace her in public, up to the point that she is now a slave to her image and can no longer be herself. Fate has in store a tragic end for her, when, having fallen in (unrequited) love with an actor (Michael York, playing himself), she will eventually jump in front of a train (see the English trailer, subtitled in French, [here](#)).*

*Once again, Wilder stages a story made of masquerade and fiction, decadence and glamour, obsession and deceit, which at the same time has clear links with *Sunset Boulevard*, not just for the overall topic, but above all for the bitter comments on Hollywood's star system and production management, as well as on the images of success it creates and how these sink into oblivion (it is not by chance that *Fedora* loses her role when her star face is disfigured). Wilder shot these two movies at particular times in his career - especially *Fedora*, which can be considered, in a way, his spiritual legacy, "thrilling and yet imperfect, a very risky (and for this very reason even more notable) attempt at dealing with a topic so very close to his own situation as a seventy-year-old director" (Note 6).*

*These are two very personal movies, in which Wilder, once again, unveils his ambivalent status as a perpetual "exile", at the same time within and without the Hollywood system. Particularly in *Fedora*, Wilder expresses his sense of being "an outsider" towards a cinema which, with the disappearance of the studio system in the '60s, was now taking different directions: on one side, films like *Jaws* (by Steven Spielberg, USA 1975) and *Star Wars* (by George Lucas, USA 1977) were taking the first steps towards the modern blockbuster; on the other side, the gradual emergence of young directors signalled a new and different vision of society and the way it can be portrayed in film (the "New Hollywood"). Wilder was acutely aware of his own inexorable decline, when he made *Fedora* say, with respect to the European "auteur" cinema, "what is now taken as entertainment - cinema-vérité, naked truth, the uglier the better" , as well as when he made the producer in *Fedora* say, "The bearded kids have now the power ... they don't need a script - just give them a hand-held camera and a zoom" (clearly referring to the "bearded kids" like Martin Scorsese and Francis Ford Coppola).*

## **8. A new and different Sherlock Holmes**

*One of Wilder's last movies, which is also one of the lesser known and maybe even forgotten, is *The private life of Sherlock Holmes* (1970). In this movie, behind the telling of an adventure of the famous detective and his faithful friend Dr. Watson, Wilder is actually revisiting this character and providing an original interpretation, but also using him to reflect, once again, on his vision of sexual and gender identity. With the end of censorship two years earlier, Wilder is now in a position to deal with the question in its deeper implications, while still using his well-defined tools of allusion and appearance. Rarely has Wilder been so explicit in defining his purpose in producing this movie:*

*"I should have been more daring. I have this theory. I wanted to have Holmes homosexual and not admitting it to anyone, including maybe even himself. The burden of keeping it secret was the reason he took dope" - Billy Wilder (Note 7)*

Right from the start we are faced with the question of Holmes (Robert Stephens)'s sexuality: as he is invited to a party (video 1), he is asked to meet a not-so-young Russian ballerina, who wishes to "use" Holmes to have a child (obviously hoping that the child would inherit the father's endowments). Holmes immediately refuses the proposal, although with the proper formalities that the case requires, but, to face the woman's insistence, he finds no better motive than insinuating that he and Dr. Watson (Colin Blakely) are lovers ... and in this way he gets away with it.

However, the rumour of Holmes's "peculiarity" immediately spreads through the party, and Dr. Watson, who had happily started dancing with a group of ballerinas, finds himself, almost without realizing it, that the women are gradually replaced by male dancers ... (video 2).

### [The private life of Sherlock Holmes \(1970\)](#)

#### [Video 1](#)

#### [Video 2](#)

However, the most interesting sequence comes a bit later, in Holmes and Watson's flat, where Watson, furious about the rumours that Holmes has spread around about him, first comes out with, "We could get married", to which Holmes promptly retorts, "Then they'd really talk!". And Watson: "Obviously ... we cannot continue to live under the same roof, we must move apart" - Holmes: "Of course, we could still see each other clandestinely ... on a bench in Hyde Park or in the waiting rooms of suburban railway stations ...". Watson: "Ridiculous! We've got nothing to hide!" - Holmes: "But you've got an enviable record with the fair sex ..." - Watson: "I could get women from three continents to testify for me, and you can get women about you too...". At this point, Watson stops, struck by a sudden suspicion ... we hear romantic music in the background ... and Watson asking, "Can you, Holmes?", which is followed by Holmes wishing him good night. But Watson urges him: "I hope I'm not being presumptuous, but there have been women in your life?" - Holmes: "The answer is yes." Watson's sigh of relief is immediately stifled when Holmes continues, "Yes, you're being presumptuous", thus plunging Watson again into doubt and dismay ...

### [The private life of Sherlock Holmes \(1970\)](#)

Later on in the movie, Holmes has to solve a new case: a mysterious woman (Geneviève Page) asks him to find her husband, who has disappeared. At a certain point, to carry out the investigation they have to move to Scotland, but, in order to conceal their identity, they decide that Holmes and the woman will travel as husband and wife, while poor Watson will act as their butler. Thus Holmes and the woman end up travelling in a sleeping car, in the same compartment ... and in the conversation which follows Holmes admits that he is fiercely misogynous: "The most affectionate woman I've known was a murderer ... Women are all kleptomaniacs, nymphomaniacs, pyromaniacs ... My girlfriend, for example ... We were going to get married, the ceremony arranged ... and just the day before the wedding she died of flu ... This confirms my thesis that women are unpredictable, and that you can never trust them ...".

Once again, we have a sequence set in a sleeping car compartment, in an embarrassing situation (as in *The Major and the Minor* and *Some like it hot*, when the two musicians dressed as women spend the night organizing a party with all the girls of the orchestra, including Marilyn ...). And, once again, Holmes shocks us, leaving us to doubt his true interest for women ...

### [The private life of Sherlock Holmes \(1970\)](#)

*With an irony straddling between amusement and melancholy, Wilder offers us a portrait of Holmes which is mainly meant to unveil appearances, barely concealing the essence of a man who remains, as the director himself said, ambiguous even to himself. But this adventure also challenges the famous detective's false certainties: not only will he fall into the (sentimental?) trap of the mysterious woman (actually a German spy), but he will also fail to solve the case, and his well-known rationality and logical-deductive method will show all their limits. (Watch the full film [here](#)).*

## **9. Conclusion: Billy Wilder's "cinematic philosophy"**

*In his frequent interviews, some of which can be found on the Internet (see the section Want to know more? at the end of this Dossier), Billy Wilder never talked at length about the meanings he wanted to convey in his movies. And yet we have seen that, beneath the light tones which are a feature of most of his films, lie a sometimes fierce criticism of conventions and ambitions of American society, as well as an exposure of the appearances that men and women adopt to hide, from others but also from themselves, their true, intimate identity. However, Wilder himself clearly stated that his main aim has always been a very simple one:*

"You see, I've always tried to speak to the greatest possible number of people. I have never through I would reveal any deep truths, and I have never had the ambition to write a text like *Waiting for Godot*. That wasn't what interested me. I was interested in changing ordinary people's taste, even if in a minor way. We forget many films as soon as we get out of the theatre. If, on the contrary, after seeing one of my movies, people stop to discuss it for fifteen minutes, sitting at a bar or having coffee with their next door neighbour, that is a great satisfaction to me. I don't ask for anything more" (*Note 2, p. 222-223*).

"Among the directors of my time, I mean among the somehow well-known directors, I think I've been the one who has most often changed the settings and tone of one's movies. I've shot both comedies and dramatic films. I've never even tried to reach a style, unless by style we mean the seriousness with which I've dealt with both tragedy and farce. Ah, I nearly forgot. I've often hit the nail on the head. (*Cameron Crowe: But your attraction for characters who pretend to be what they are not ...*) ... Those were necessary narrative devices, but not a rule ... My only rule has been not to bore the audience. If cross-dressing or deceit were useful to develop the plot of a movie I didn't give them up. I've always had one religion, quality" (*Note 2, p. 325-326*).

### **Notes**

- (2) Crowe C. 1999. *Conversations with Wilder*, Random House.
- (5) Horton R. (a cura di/ed.) 2001. *Billy Wilder Interviews*, University of Mississippi Press, Jackson.
- (6) Courson J.P., Tavernier B. 1991. *50 ans de cinéma américain*, Nathan, Paris.



## Want to know more?

- \* From *The Independent* website:
  - [Billy Wilder and his best movies](#) by Graeme Ross
- \* From the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* website:
  - [Billy Wilder](#)
- \* From the *Senses of Cinema* website:
  - [Billy Wilder](#) - filmography, bibliography, articles, web resources
- \* From the *Reel Classics* website:
  - [Billy Wilder](#) - with many further links
- \* From the *indiewire.com* website:
  - [The films of Billy wilder: A retrospective](#) by Oliver Lyttelton
- \* From the *FilMagicians* YouTube channel:
  - [Portrait of a 60% Perfect Man: Billy Wilder interview \(1982\)](#)
- \* From *Kevin Kavanagh's* YouTube channel:
  - [Billy Wilder: His 20 Greatest Films](#)
- \* From the *Writers Guild Foundation* YouTube channel:
  - [The writer speaks: Billy Wilder](#)
- \* From the *midnighttiptoes* YouTube channel:
  - [Jack Lemmon on Billy Wilder](#)
- \* From the *Eyes On Cinema* YouTube channel:
  - [Billy Wilder talks about filmmaking \(audio interview, 1978\)](#)
- \* From *adam20xx* You Tube channel:
  - [Nobody's perfect" - The making of "some like it hot" with Monroe, Curtis and Lemmon](#) - TV documentary
- \* From the *Hillsdale* YouTube channel:
  - Leonard Maltin: [The legacy of Billy Wilder](#)
- \* From *Gill R. Godfrey's* YouTube channel: Billy Wilder Tapes - "*Billy, how did you do it?*", in conversation with Volker Schloendorff:
  - [Tape 1](#)
  - [Tape 2](#)
  - [Tape 3](#)

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