

*Billy Wilder, a director between two cultures:
behind appearances, beneath allusions
(Part 1)*

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"I am a mélange"
Billy Wilder

1. Introduction

[The seventh year itch \(1955\)](#)

[Some like it hot \(1959\)](#)

*A breeze from the subway passing below lifts Marilyn's skirt: this image has become a 20th century icon, and "Nobody's perfect" one of the best-known final punchlines of a movie. And yet, probably most of us would not be able to remember the name of the director of these films - Billy Wilder. Unlike other directors, whose name is extremely popular (Alfred Hitchcock, Woody Allen, Stanley Kubrick ...), Billy Wilder's name is almost forgotten, also because, unlike many of his colleagues, his films have not received a great deal of critical attention, and the available bibliography is relatively scarce (Note 1)(while there are several biographical works as well as interviews, among which Cameron Crowe's basic one - Note 2). And yet, Billy Wilder has authored enormously popular comedies, noir masterpieces like *Double indemnity* (1945) and powerful dramas like *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), and his career has spanned fifty years of "classical" Hollywood cinema, bringing him twelve Academy Award nominations as screenwriter and eight nominations as director, six actual Academy Awards, four of his films included in the list of the greatest American movies created by the American Film Institute, and a number of movies considered as "worthy of preservation" by the National Historic Register greater than any other director (Note 3).*

All this can partly be explained by Wilder's indifference, if not open contempt, for a vision of the director as "auteur" (which was typical of several film movements associated with the French Nouvelle Vague) and for the very work of movie critics. Despite this, and while contesting and even mocking the self-centredness of "auteurs" like Godard, who (he thought) with their stylistic virtuosity seemed to leave the importance of the plot and the psychological development of characters in the background, maybe no director like Wilder can be considered as the "author" of his movies, considering that he never directed a movie which he had not written - and this also accounts for the relative greater importance of the script than the actual shooting of the film.

2. A director between two cultures

*Despite being born in a town in Galicia, now in Poland but then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, thus bringing with him the legacy of the "old mittel-european world", the American influence was an important factor for Wilder since his childhood (his mother had lived in the USA as a girl, an elder brother had emigrated to the States). It was his knowledge of American culture that opened the way to journalism, taking him soon to Berlin, where he could fully share the lively, if not frantic, atmosphere of the Weimar Republic: a cultural climate which was strongly influenced by such features as jazz, charleston, and, more generally, the American movies of the '20s. Wilder's experience as a journalist, which would later be reflected in such movies as *The big carnival* - *Ace in the hole* (1951) and *The front page* (1974), would be crucial for developing his typical ability to observe human behaviour and his realistic portrayal of situations which are a constant feature of his movies.*

*In Berlin Wilder started getting involved with cinema and collaborating on scriptwriting, until, with Hitler's advent, in 1934 he decided to move, first to Paris (where he shot his first movie, *Mauvaise Graine* (1933), then to the USA (his mother, stepfather and grandmother all died in Auschwitz). His condition as an "exile" always affected his vision of life and of cinema in particular, although he did not find it difficult to adapt to American culture, and especially to the Hollywood production system and to the then prevailing "star system". As we shall see, if on the one hand Wilder fully shared his new country's values, on the other hand he always felt as an "outsider", which allowed him to observe and describe American society with a detached eye - a peculiar position, a never-ending "exile's" condition, hovering between two very different cultures, which allowed him to live to the full the intercultural confrontation: seeing "the different as familiar, and the familiar as different".*

3. At the crossroads of different influences

“We who had our roots in the European past, I think, brought with us a fresh attitude towards America, a new eye with which to examine this country on film, as opposed to the eye of native-born movie makers who were accustomed to everything around them” - *Billy Wilder (Note 3)*

Wilder's arrival in the USA happened at a particular time in the history of cinema. With the end of the expressionist season of German cinema, which in the '20s had been second only to American cinema, and with the advent of Nazism, many moviemakers, scriptwriters, technicians and actors had already moved to Hollywood, among whom celebrities like Peter Lorre, Marlene Dietrich, Ernst Lubitsch, F.W.Murnau, Emil Jannings, Conrad Veidt, Wilhelm Dieterle and Edgar G. Ulmer, who would deeply affect American cinema in the following years.

The early '30s had also seen the final exploit of sound films, which for Wilder (then a scriptwriter rather than a director) meant the opportunity to play extensively with witty dialogues, understatements and allusions and with the description of situations and characters, all of which would not have been possible by using the "intertitles", which in silent movies were inserted so as to clarify the plot and the content of dialogues for the audience. Ernst Lubitsch, the master of romantic comedies featuring formal elegance, pungent dialogues and refined sexual allusions (what was later called "the Lubitsch touch") would be, together with Erich von Stroheim, one of the most influential figures in Wilder's career - he often declared that when he did not know how to stage a

situation, he would ask himself, "How would Lubitsch do it?".

Wilder easily entered the Hollywood production system, then in its highlight, and within the limits, but also with the support, of such a system, he produced the best of his work, making himself more and more independent but at the same time carefully choosing his collaborators, first of all his co-screenwriters, Charles Brackett (who wrote thirteen movies with him) and later I.A.L. Diamond (his favourite partner in eleven movies).

Paradoxically, Wilder worked mainly during the time when the censorship code known as Production Code (or Hays Code, Hays being the name of the president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) was strictly enforced. Through this code (which was enforced from 1934 to 1968) Hollywood studios self-imposed very strict limits to what could be shown in movies, especially in the realms of violence and sexuality. This prohibition to "show" things directly and explicitly obliged (but at the same time allowed) directors like Wilder to express their creativity, by playing around, as we shall see, with understatements, double entendre, and allusions.

However, the peculiarity of Wilder's work is also due to the fact that, despite working within the limits of the Hollywood system, as an "exile", "expatriate" and "outsider" he could use his European sensibility to describe, better than many other American directors, the anxieties, frustrations and obsessions of a society which throughout his life he accepted with a sense of non-belonging and "foreignness" - this was the source of his "double perspective", through which he was able to consider this society with differing, and sometimes contrasting, sensibilities. And this was what led him to create a "middle" cinema, almost an intermediary between two cultures:

"While Wilder's films are always positioned in the mainstream of Hollywood entertainment cinema, what makes them special and audacious is a form of social criticism that works within, and yet pressures against, the studio system, always threatening to become darker, more disturbing, more sexual, and more political than the system allows" (Note 4)

4. Between cross-dressing and masquerading

"Whatever meaning you will find in my pictures, it's all put in kind of contraband, you know - sort of smuggled in." - *Billy Wilder (Note 5, p. 68)*

At a more direct and explicit level, Wilder's interest for the conflict between being and appearing, between the real person and its embodiment, between reality and fiction, and between authenticity and deceit, is often expressed through cross-dressing and masquerading - themes which often appear in his movies, no matter which "genres" they seem to belong to, and is strictly linked to his condition as an "exile":

"Wilder's penchant for masquerade and impersonation has also to be seen in terms of his experience of exile. The loss of political and economic security and of social and personal identity is a fundamental part of being a refugee, and strategies of impersonation, drag, shape shifting, and cultural mimicry are central to the exile's efforts to survive forced displacement, economic hardship, and social ostracism ... Thus even when in the service of entertainment, impersonation and masquerade always entail a political dimension" (Note 4, p. 118-119)

Starting from the title of his American *début* film as a director, *The Major and the Minor*, ambiguity is a central theme, since Major and Minor are also the two main characters, an army major (Ray Milland) and a girl (Ginger Rogers), who, in order to buy a reduced fare train ticket, pretends to be a minor, a twelve-year-old girl. This causes a series of comic but also embarrassing situations, since the major soon falls in love with the girl, a fact which he obviously cannot accept ... This masquerade is kept "on a tightrope" for most of the movie, and the "girl" ends up spending the night in the major's compartment - he will even read a fairy tale to her (as we shall see, this scene of night encounters aboard a train will appear in other Wilder movies). Behind a façade of light comedy lurks the taboo of sexual desire for a minor (which today we would call paedophilia).

[The Major and the Minor \(1942\)](#)

In his second film ([Five graves to Cairo](#)), too, set in Egypt during the War War II, we return to masquerade: an English soldier (Franchot Tone) pretends to be a waiter in a hotel in order to get access to Rommel's General Staff and discover where the Germans have buried some war supplies - thus mixing comedy and suspense in what is basically a war movie. Note that to play Rommel's role Wilder called Erich von Stroheim (later to appear in *Sunset Boulevard* too), who had been one of the first directors to choose to expatriate to America at the advent of Nazism.

Even in a movie set in a Nazi prisoner-of-war camp, *Stalag 17* (watch the full film [here](#)), Wilder manages to introduce touches of comedy, thus mixing the genres (which was harshly criticized when first screened). In the prisoners' barracks, the soldiers plan to escape, but suspect that one of them (William Holden) may be a spy, given that he does some small business with the Germans. Even in their tragic situation, the prisoners manage to organize a party and start dancing, and some of them even cross-dress as women (video 1). And they also stage a session of "indoctrination" (video 2), with one of them who, posing as Hitler, lectures to the others: and when the commanding officer of the camp orders them to stop this masquerade, the prisoners (whom we have so far seen only from behind), suddenly turn ... and we discover that they are all camouflaged as Hitler! Which prompts the commander (a role played by the director Otto Preminger, a German exile in America) to blurt out, "One Hitler is enough!".

[Stalag 17 \(1953\)](#)

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

Obviously, cross-dressing is brought to the highest levels of comic effect and ambiguity in *Some like it hot*, where two penniless musicians (Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon), having unintentionally witnessed the St. Valentine's massacre, in order to get away from the gangsters chasing them, dress up as women and become part of a female orchestra, where the singer (Marilyn Monroe) will unleash their sexual desire. However, through this role reversal, the two of them will go through new experiences, since, now dressed up as women, they will draw the males' rough attention ... making them realize what it means to be a woman in a world dominated by the male gaze ...

[Some like it hot \(1959\)](#)

Cross-dressing generates much more than a superficial misunderstanding in this movie, but manages to deal with deeper implications, including sexual and gender identity and questioning the false values and hypocrisy of a whole society. As Curtis dresses up (once again!) as a millionaire to seduce Marilyn, Lemmon is obliged to suffer the advances of a real old millionaire, with whom he

ends up dancing the tango all night long. And when they return to their room (video 1), Curtis finds Lemmon all excited because he has just ... got engaged with the millionaire! And when Curtis remarks, "But you're a man, why should a man want to marry another man?", Lemmon innocently replies, "To settle down!". And Curtis retorts, "But there are laws, conventions, these are things that can't be done! ... Repeat to yourself: I'm a man, I'm a man!". Here we go well beyond role reversal and masquerading for fun: what is at stake is the essence of one's own sexual identity ... but the conflict between "being" and "appearing" is never solved in the movie, given that, as we saw in the opening video of this Dossier, Lemmon will not be able to escape from his new social role as a woman, and his suitor will accept anything from him, up to the final punch line, "Nobody's perfect!".

[Some like it hot \(1959\)](#)

We should not forget that in 1959 the Hays Code was still enforced: "With its allusions, double entendres, and blue jokes referencing homosexuality, oral sex, castration, impotence, and transsexuality, *Some like it hot* can claim to have pushed up against censorship more than most of its American predecessors" (Note 4, p. 103)(A marginal note: several years later, actor Michael (Dustin Hoffman), too, will be obliged to cross-dress as a woman in *Tootsie* (by Sidney Pollack, USA 1982), will fall in love with a female colleague (who therefore will take him as a lesbian ...) and will also get the colleague's father to fall in love with him ... How not to think of what Billy Wilder had anticipated in his movies?)

Cross-dressing is such a central theme in Wilder's movies that even in a thriller like *Witness for the prosecution* it plays a crucial role. Leonard Vole (Tyrone Power), accused of murder, is defended by a skilful lawyer (Charles Laughton), although his wife, Christine Helm (Marlene Dietrich) does not intend to confirm her husband's alibi. During the trial, things take a turn for the worse for Vole, when suddenly, the night before the final hearing in court, the lawyer gets a strange phone call for a woman (video 1), who invites him to meet her, telling him that she will sell him some letters written by Christine to a lover of hers - letters which prove that the same Christine has planned to frame her husband to shake him off. By showing these letters during the hearing in court, the lawyer manages to make Christine fly into a rage - she then admits her intention, and the jury consequently acquits her husband.

But there is a final surprise ... At the end of the hearing (video 2), Christine reveals her plan: her husband is actually guilty, and the woman who sold the letters is ... herself, properly disguised to prevent the lawyer from recognizing her. Through such letters the jury would recognize her vile character and, therefore, would acquit her husband - which is what actually happened. A final dramatic turn: Vole enters the court with a lover of his and makes fun of Christine, who, brandishing the knife which is still on a table as circumstantial evidence, kills him ... And eventually, the lawyer, moved by this woman's courage, will end up defending her in the new trial in which she will be the defendant ... Once again, this is a thriller full of deceit, deception, duplicity and falsehood, which even the skilful, experienced lawyer cannot master. And truth remains an ambiguous concept which can easily make anybody fall into the trap. ... It is not by chance that Agatha Christie said that Wilder's movie has been the best filmic adaptation of one of her novels.

[Witness for the prosecution \(1957\)](#)

[Video 1](#) [Video 2](#)

5. Identity roles and social roles

"I had always played fair with censorship. There is sex in my movies, but is either dramatic or comic. For example, the sequence on the yacht between Tony Curtis and Marilyn Monroe is something to laugh at, and that's why I got away with it, I mean with the censorship. Once I saw a movie in which a guy was supposed to say to another guy: "Son of a bitch", a phrase which was obviously prohibited. To bypass censorship, they had made him say: "If you had a mother, she would bark". You see, if you bring in a touch of comedy, you get away with it. I had always been very cautious with those ones, the censorship. But I had always been loyal to them, too, and they had done the same with me, except on a couple of occasions, one of which was Kiss me, stupid!" (Note 2, p. 156).

Billy Wilder made most of his movies in the '40s and '50s, when the strict Hays Code was still in full swing, and in the '60s and '70s, when it had been cancelled (or was about to be). We have mentioned how skilful he was at bypassing censorship with a subtle, constant game of allusions, understatements, double entendres. However, the sexual aspect in his movies is also tightly linked with the roles that men and women play in society and with the rules and conventions that they have to be obey, which often constrain them within tight identities, both individual and social ones. Breaking these conventions, exposing pretensions, unveiling appearances is a crucial theme of all Wilder's movies.

Kiss me, stupid!, for example, the film which Wilder mentions above, was an easy target for censorship just because it very clearly made fun of marriage as well as of extra-marital affairs, exposing how even sexual relationships can be turned into business and reduced to morally ambiguous games. In this movie a famous singer-womanizer, Dino (Dean Martin) happens to pass through a small town in Nevada (by the allusive name of "Climax" ...)(video 1; see the whole film in Video 2). Here he meets a composer, Orville (Ray Walston), who, together with a friend, would go to any lengths to make him accept one of his songs: he causes a breakdown in Dino's car and leads him to believe that a prostitute, Polly the Pistol (Kim Novak) is actually his wife (Felicia Farr), pushing him into her arms. However, Orville, in a fit of jealousy, stops the game and ... takes Polly to bed, while his wife will really end up in Dino's bed ... This is a cynical, bitter, and somehow sad comedy full of misunderstanding and ambiguity, which makes funs of social conventions and adulterous relations: wives can become prostitutes for a night, and viceversa. "There were battles with censorship for Kim Novak's décolleté, and a love scene between Farr and Dean Martin had to be cut to placate the Catholic church; who, however, attacked the movie when it was screened. Here Wilder and Diamond [his favourite screenwriter] forced the barriers and the barriers bounced off. It was the first serious setback for the director" (Note 2, p. 349).

Kiss me, stupid! (1964)

[Video 1](#)

[Video 2](#)

Only the year before Wilder had directed Irma la Douce, again with Jack Lemmon and Shirley MacLaine, which is the happy-ending story of a "golden heart" prostitute (MacLaine), who is a mixture of naiveté and shrewdness, as she shows in the sequence below, "depicting Irma's way of getting more money out of her customers. First, she tells a man how a piano lid ruined her concert career; the customer, obviously moved, drops an extra bill in her purse. [Then] Irma [tells] another

customer a story about her missionary parents and her sister who requires three blood transfusions a day ... Finally, a Texan comes along who thinks Irma is only worth five dollars. Thereupon, she reminds him that her orphanage was bombed by American planes ..." (Note 6, p. 102). *In this introductory sequence we find the preliminary touch of Wilder's recurring themes, which are crucial in this movie too, starting from telling lies (although "sweetened"), deceiving people and the need to wear a masque in order to survive in a hard world where social conventions are the norm.*

Irma la douce (1963)

Irma's fate leads her to meet a policeman (Lemmon) of the utmost integrity as well as naive, as he shows in this sequence (below left), where he talks with the barman of the brasserie facing the Hotel Casanova, where love meetings take place. The policeman is shocked when the barman describes what happens in that street and in that hotel: "But it's illegal!", which prompts Wilder's first witty remark: "Shows the kind of world we live in - love is illegal, but not hate!". The barman goes on to say how a man's search for a bit of warmth and tenderness is a natural thing, since it's all part of a cycle of human (and economic) relationships, in which even (corrupt) policemen play a role ... On hearing this, the disgusted policeman cries out, "I don't believe there are policemen who take money ... Well, there is a policeman round here who isn't corrupt!". The story's progression will put his rigidity to the test ...

Irma la douce (1963)

The policeman ends up falling in love with the sweet Irma, and at this point not only do his initial certainties seem to waver, but, trying to ensure her "services" exclusively for him (while also trying to persuade her to return his feelings), he will decide to dress up as an English gentleman, Lord X (video below). Once again, Wilder's world is dominated by the roles that society imposes on us, and people have to adopt all kinds of deception (deceit, masquerade, ambiguities and make-believe) in order to make explicit true feelings and authentic relationships. This movie is both a truly "classical" comedy and a personal and social drama. "At the start of the '70s [Wilder] anticipates the crisis of Hollywood cinema (of which he is certainly one of the masters), introducing that particular genre contamination which is not yet explicit here, but can be perceived as its ultimate result" (Note 7).

Irma la douce (1963)

In one of his last movies, Avanti! (the title refers to the Italian expression that the characters use to invite people knocking at the door of their hotel room to come in), Wilder once again describes the transformation of a person, this time probing deeper into his personality. A rich American businessman, Wendell Armbruster III (Jack Lemmon) arrives in Ischia, Italy to arrange the funeral of his father and discovers that he died while staying with his lover, whom he used to meet in Italy once a year, during his usual Italian holiday. In Ischia, however, he meets the daughter of his father's lover, the London lady Pamela Piggott (Juliet Mills), who is unaware, as he is, of what happened. The "children" reactions are very different: while Armbruster initially shows a rigid moral judgment, Pamela is much more flexible and full of human understanding ... they will gradually get to know each other better, and this will teach Armbruster to enjoy life in a less frantic way.

Avanti! (1972)

"To portray the growing love between Armbruster and Pamela, Wilder uses one of his favourite devices - transformation - but as a means of humanizing the characters, not of disguising them.

Armbruster starts wearing his father's coat; Pamela, her mother's dress. Then they start using the same nicknames their parents had for each other - Willie and Kate. Interestingly, *Avanti!* is Wilder's only film in which an act of deception is expected to last a lifetime because it is founded on love" (Note 6, p. 97-98). *Social conventions are not really cancelled: Armbruster and Pamela will decide to meet, as their parents did, in Ischia once a year, paying with eleven months of a "normal bourgeois life" that other month when they will live their real selves.*

In this case, too, as in Irma la Douce, the comedy takes on tones which, if not truly dramatic, stimulate a serious reflection at different levels: the Manichean moralism through which Americans look at Europe, and Italy in particular, compared with the sense of humanity and enjoyment of life of the old continent; adultery as a way to catch up with the value of passing time and a more humane relationship with people and things; the irony and satire, tinged with both tenderness and cynicism, through which Wilder looks at several aspects of American society. Certainly, times have changed: after the abolition of the Hays Code, which only a few years earlier had caused the harsh reactions to Kiss me, stupid!, Wilder can now deal more explicitly with hot subjects: "After so many years in which he bypassed censorship through double (and triple!) entendres, this is the first of Wilder's movies to display disrespectful touches and even some nudity. Everything is toned-down and never gratuitous, but it's a bit like hearing daddy use swearwords" (Note 2, p. 351).

Notes

- (1) *One of the most recent and exhaustive critical contributions is McNally K. (ed.) 2011. Billy Wilder, movie-maker: Critical essays on the films, McFarland.*
- (2) Crowe C. 1999. *Conversations with Wilder*, Random House.
- (3) Giannetti L. 1981. *Masters of the American Cinema*, Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, p. 315.
- (4) Gemuenden G. 2008. [A foreign affair: Billy Wilder's American films](#), Berghahn Books, New York and Oxford.
- (5) Horton R. (a cura di/ed.) 2001. *Billy Wilder Interviews*, University of Mississippi Press, Jackson.
- (6) Dick B.F. 1980. *Billy Wilder*, Twayne Publishers, Boston.
- (7) *Il Mereghetti. Dizionario dei film*, B.C.Dalai Editore, Milano.



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:
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- * 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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