

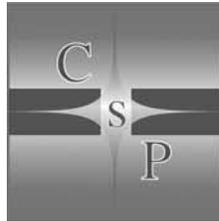
# Literary Readings of Billy Wilder



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Edited by

Georges-Claude Guilbert



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Literary Readings of Billy Wilder, edited by Georges-Claude Guilbert

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# LITERARY READINGS OF BILLY WILDER: AN INTRODUCTION

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Billy Wilder questioned the art of filmmaking throughout his career. He rarely took anything for granted and was always prepared to learn from the best. Ernst Lubitsch's influence on his treatment of ellipsis and use of *non-dit* is particularly notable, although he did not go as far as Lubitsch and remained more "classical" in his directing. When they are not about cinema (*Sunset Boulevard*, *Fedora*), his films are filled with cinematographic allusions, be it spoof (*From Here to Eternity* parodied in *The Seven Year Itch*) or witty intertext (*Scarface* revisited in *Some Like It Hot*).

In many ways, though, Wilder was also—if not mainly—a man of letters, notably when it came to dialogue. It should be noted that he was a former journalist. As James Friel writes: "Wilder favored dialogue over visuals in his films. Wilder presented himself as a writer." Indeed he often considered himself primarily as a writer. Trudy Bolter, for her part, writes: "His text-based films emphasizing plot and dialogue are especially apt subjects for literary readings: images obey the words in these works of which the auteur is also an author in the most ancient sense of the word." In fact, sometimes Wilder's pictures mostly illustrated his words—radiantly or dully, depending on inspiration. Words matter more than the rest in his films and indeed one may find great pleasure in *reading* his scripts. He liked words and he liked appropriating those of others. He wrote with novelists, for example Raymond Chandler and Charles Brackett. He adapted many plays, stories and novels, such as James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*, Charles Jackson's *The Lost Weekend*, *Love in the Afternoon* (from Claude Anet's *Ariane*), and Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution*.

In *Billy Wilder*, Bernard F. Dick points out Wilder's literary sources. He compares the opening of *The Lost Weekend* with the

beginning of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: "Like Flaubert at the beginning of *Madame Bovary*, [Wilder] is moving from the general to the particular; from the milieu to the man"<sup>1</sup>. Some motifs of Wilder's films are clearly derived from literature, often from classics: the bed trick in *Kiss Me Stupid* echoes Shakespeare, among others; the body switch motif in *Avanti!* "derives notably from 'The Widow of Epheus' in Petronius's *Satyricon*, where the widow allows her lover to substitute her husband's corpse for the stolen body of a crucified slave."<sup>2</sup>

Wilder made frequent references to literature—when he spoke of *The Major and the Minor*, he "always prided himself on making a *Lolita* sixteen years before Nabokov"<sup>3</sup>—so, of course, a literary reading of his work is legitimate; that is one of the reasons why we decided to compile a book that looks at Wilder's work without constraints. Every contributor was free to use her/his background (often mostly literary) to examine one particular film, without having to obey any of the more rigid "intellectual" rules of film studies.

Trudy Bolter went for an auteurist analysis of *Avanti!*. That romantic/sexual comedy is connected to politics. Her chapter underscores the anti-Americanism of the film through the concept of the "Ugly American" and images of colonialism and capitalism.

James Friel chose to deliver an analysis of *Sunset Boulevard* as a combination of different worlds intertwined. The film is about filmmaking and everyone involved in filmmaking (intertextuality, connections between Charles Brackett's life and the film, etc.); it plays in the most fascinating way with reality and fiction.

In his analysis of nine shots taken from *Sabrina* and Lubitsch's *Cluny Brown*, Robert F. Gross evokes the hybrid genre of the film (a fairy tale tainted with disillusion), but he also tackles gender, class, Hollywood and Audrey Hepburn's iconic figure, in the specific context of the 1950s.

Georges-Claude Guilbert and Nicolas Magenham have concentrated on a description of the different masquerades at work in *Some Like It Hot*, a film that brings out in a liberating manner both the social construction of gender and that of sexual orientation, as well as highlighting the masculinity crisis of the 1950s.

Ariane Hudelet has studied the notion of truth in *Witness for the Prosecution*, through the theatricality of the setting, the characters' masks (Wilder plays for instance with the stereotype of the two-faced woman) and intertextuality (cf. Hitchcock's *The Paradine Case*).

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<sup>1</sup> Dick, Bernard F. *Billy Wilder*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Dick, p. 97.

<sup>3</sup> Dick, p. 34.

Nicolas Magenham has looked at *Kiss Me, Stupid* as a critique of the myth of the success story in the United States, emphasized by images of diseases that are disseminated in the film (echoing William James's description of the mythical success story as a "national disease").

Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris shows how a common American man faces an oppressive socioeconomic system in *The Apartment*, evoking the elaborate sets and, above all, Wilder's clever narrative.

Nathalie Saudo shows how, on the one hand, Wilder uses Arthur Conan Doyle's techniques and aesthetics in his Sherlock Holmes adaptation (such as his visual symbols), and on the other hand, how he amuses himself (and the viewer) with conventions, subverting and transgressing the myth through parodies, or the representation of Holmes and Watson in a homosocial setting.

Shannon Wells-Lassagne treats the theme of voyeurism in *Double Indemnity*, and how the public sphere intrudes on the private sphere through the evocation of the insurance sector, the media, or the hybrid genre of the film.

Again, we were free to stray away from established cinematographic criticism, but that in no way means we should forget the auteur as defined by François Truffaut and the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the 1960s: Wilder not only participated in the writing of his films, he had recurrent premises (one of the marks of the auteur): the masquerade, the constant redefinition of cinematographic genres, the mixture of cynicism and sentimentalism...

Famously, Truffaut deplored the excessively literary aspect of French cinema before the advent of the New Wave (often unexciting illustrations of "important" novels by metteurs en scène, as opposed to auteurs). In a way, Wilder combines those two tendencies, seemingly opposed (just as Truffaut finally did at the end of his career with *Le Dernier Métro*, a de facto renunciation of some of his convictions as a young critic). Wilder is an auteur (like Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock, the two principal *Cahiers du Cinéma* heroes) but he is also respectful of a certain literary tradition in films. Within a faithful adaptation of Agatha Christie material (*Witness for the Prosecution*), he emphasizes Wilderean elements, like the subterfuge of Christine Helm (Marlene Dietrich) or the cynical humor of the judge (Charles Laughton).

The success among cinema researchers of Peter Brooks's *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* prompted Brooks to observe: "If literary criticism and theory have been useful to students of film, the debt now goes the other way as well: literary scholars have much to learn from the theoretical and

critical work carried forward in film studies. One of the heartening characteristics of our moment in intellectual and scholarly life is that we are all reading one another—to the extent that we are able—across disciplinary boundaries, with a sense of recognition, and a sense that the aesthetics and cultural stakes are the same.”<sup>4</sup> This book, as much a tribute to the talent of Billy Wilder as anything else, modestly hopes to further consolidate the useful bridges that increasingly connect literary criticism and cinematographic criticism. Maybe that is what Cultural Studies is all about.

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<sup>4</sup> Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995, p. xii.

# GOING BACKWARDS WITH BILLY WILDER: *AVANTI!*, A GHOST PLAY

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Billy Wilder was the author or co-author of the scripts of most of his films, including many adaptations of more traditional “books,” novels or stage plays. His text-based films emphasizing plot and dialogue are especially apt subjects for literary readings: images obey the words in these works of which the auteur is also an author in the most ancient sense of the word.

This “literary reading” of *Avanti!*, (1972), as a “ghost play” (with a distant nod to Strindberg’s *Spook Sonata*)<sup>1</sup>, will be conducted in auteurist terms of matching up recursive themes and metaphors encountered elsewhere in Wilder’s oeuvre, with reference to the source, Samuel Taylor’s play, *Avanti!*<sup>2</sup>, very different from the Wilder/ Diamond version. Unlike Wilder’s other two “ghost plays,” *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and *Fedora* (1978), firmly ensconced in a Hollywood/Cinema frame, *Avanti!* hitches its love/sex story to a an allegorical plot with

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<sup>1</sup> *The Spook Sonata* (1907) an expressionistic “chamber play” by August Strindberg, critical of bourgeois families: ghosts mingle with the living characters. Especially remarkable in connection with *Avanti!* is the second scene of Strindberg’s play, *The Ghost Supper*. Only produced once in New York City, briefly, in 1924, by the Provincetown Playhouse, but this play had a strong influence on Eugene O’Neill and was produced by Max Reinhardt, in Vienna, in 1914: it is difficult to imagine that Billy Wilder as a young Viennese journalist writing theater reviews among other materials, could have been ignorant about this play, an important source for German Expressionism then at its peak. I shall be exploring this link in a further article.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Taylor, *Avanti! or A Very Uncomplicated Girl*, New York, Random House, 1968 (date of New York production). The play was produced in London in 1974 under the title, *A Touch of Spring*.

political connotations. The basic subject of this pseudo screwball comedy: a retreat into the past by an adulterous couple gripped by a “crisis of modernity,”<sup>3</sup> unable to find a creative solution to the jumbled world left behind by the onward advance of the 1960’s. *Avanti!*: the title is rather a misnomer: it could also and would perhaps be better called *Indietro!*, backwards, and nothing really indicates that Wilder considers that this is the right way to go. On the contrary, one can suppose that his taste for irony and antithetical surfaces inflect the title: we must take *Avanti!* as a wry comment on the misperception of his characters, true reactionaries, who consider the past as a remedy for the future,

*The Ugly American*, by William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick<sup>4</sup>, made into a film with Marlon Brando,<sup>5</sup> is also relevant as a co-text suggested in part by the crucial emphasis on themes of beauty and ugliness as related to nationality. The title of the book has passed into the language where it denotes a hybrid of a bull in a china shop, a vainglorious provincial, and a vulgarian insensitive to foreign mores and values: Jack Lemmon’s role is conceived of and often received<sup>6</sup> in these terms. His expressionistic performance, as a hissing, choleric marionette recalling Arlecchino in the *commedia dell’arte* tradition, centers a group of comparisons of national types—ugly Italians and ugly Americans—which, given the deliberate specific positioning of the film in the year 1972, the last and decisively losing year in the Vietnam War, makes it impossible to overlook the presence of political themes.

*Avanti!* concerns an American executive—indeed a kind of tycoon—who goes to an Italian island to collect the dead body of his even more eminent father, killed in an a car crash: Armbruster Sr. was topmost

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<sup>3</sup> The “crisis of modernity” is the sense that modernity is a problem, that traditional ways of life have been replaced with uncontrollable change and unmanageable alternatives. The crisis itself is merely the sense that the present is a transitional point not focused on a clear goal in the future but simply changing through forces outside our control (this idea that the present is characterized by directionless change we call the “postmodern”).

<<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/GLOSSARY/MODERN.HTM>>

(Washington State University, USA, “Modernity” site)

<sup>4</sup> William J. Lederer and Eugene Burdick, *The Ugly American*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1959.

<sup>5</sup> *The Ugly American* (George Englund, 1963).

<sup>6</sup> Non professional (or masked) critics writing on websites like IMDB or Amazon frequently use these words to describe the Lemmon character. In fact the term is wrong in terms of Lederer’s book, where the unbeautiful American is an altruistic innovator who understands the needs of an underdeveloped country, quite the contrary of the ordinary uses of the term.

dog in the business empire of which Junior is second in command. A big funeral has been planned for the following Tuesday, and is meant to take place in Baltimore. Wendell Armbruster, Jr. is confronted with a series of obstacles that interfere with his plans: Italian lunch hours and red tape, and the remoteness of the death scene, the island paradise, Ischia. He also discovers that his father, reputed to need an annual therapeutic month taking mud baths in the subtropical spa, has for the past ten years been spending a recreational four weeks in the company of his mistress, mother of a young woman, Pamela Piggott, who has, like Armbruster, come to collect parental remains. The sentimental young woman opens the morgue window to let a bit of sunshine filter in upon the dead lovers, allowing a clan of local winemakers-cum-Mafiosi to kidnap the cadavers they finally exchange for ransom, or “damages” they want to collect because the car crashed on their land, bringing bad luck. Following in the footsteps—and wearing the wardrobe—of his adulterous papa, Wendell Jr. begins an affair with the plumpish Miss Piggott. At the end of the film it seems we can assume that they will carry on their conjoined family traditions, meeting every summer in Ischia, for a month of nude bathing, rainbow pasta, and mandolins.

This is a film about family resemblance, and it bears a likeness to certain important relatives in the Wilder canon. Like *One, Two, Three* (1961) it is a story of an American’s encounter with Europe, and questions of victory/ defeat involved with the competition set up between these cultures. In *One, Two, Three*, MacNamara, the Jimmy Cagney character is sure that his American pragmatism will prevail over the resistance of his boss’s daughter’s Marxist husband, needing transformation in order to please his father-in-law, the Big Boss of Coca Cola: in the end, outdoing his mentor. The young man obtains the London job that MacNamara covets. In *Avanti!*, Armbruster is convinced that his American efficiency is the essence of high civilization, but he is overcome by European dolce vita—Ischia is close to Naples, the site of successful Italian sex comedies of the sixties, like Germi’s 1962 *Divorce, Italian Style*—and seduced into subscribing to its pleasures.

Above all, *Avanti!* evokes *Fedora*, Wilder’s next to last film, which also begins with a trip to a remote and sunny European island, contains an important funeral, and deals with the hidden relationship between two generations of the same family. In this film and *Avanti!*, as in *Sunset Boulevard*, the past is a strong element, one that dominates the present. In *Fedora*, an unimportant producer who once had a brief affaire with a famous movie star hopes to get her to act in a new film project. He travels to her retreat in Corfu and finds that, mysteriously young-looking and

beautiful despite her age (67), she is unstable and paranoid or perhaps as she claims the prisoner of her entourage. Several weeks after his visit she commits suicide. At her funeral he discovers the truth: the star, Fedora, now paralyzed, disfigured and posing as her husband's mother, has in fact been played for the last fifteen years by her own daughter, slightly altered by plastic surgery and trained up to be a convincing double (she wears white gloves 24/7 to hide the fact that her hands are really young-looking, not old), Fedora Mark Two (really called Antonia), at first a willing impersonator, has been deeply traumatized by falling in love with a youngish actor, Michael York, to whom she cannot confess her true age (quite appropriate to his own), for fear of harming her mother's reputation and, presumably, the family stock in trade. She becomes a drug addict. A final act of tyranny and betrayal on the part of the "Fedora" support system pushes her to her death (the plastic surgeon impersonates Michael on the phone, sending her love and promising reunion, in an attempt to reduce her drug-taking). She has been swallowed up by her parent, a neglectful and unloving woman, wholly focused on her stardom, in a manner comparable to that in which Norma Desmond, in *Sunset Boulevard*, is completely dominated and destroyed by the image of her young self, the past that she cannot leave behind.

These two strongly psychological and philosophical films have thematic links to *Avanti!*, which, although not encompassed by the Hollywood / Cinema frame, does, like them, deal in a crucial rather obsessive way not only with Time, but with the theme of Beauty since, as I shall suggest later, practically every character—except perhaps the hotel director Carlucci, and of course the graceful, elegant and amorous dead couple<sup>7</sup>—suffers from some kind of significant "ugliness," either physical or spiritual: vulgarity, ridiculousness, masochism, overweight, or amorality. For a romantic comedy, *Avanti!*—as is often noted—is very black and grim, and rather caustic. It is neither romantic nor in any deep sense comic, describing lost and uncreative people obsessed by the past and unable to move on. They are undergoing a "crisis of modernity" and of the group of three films just mentioned, *Avanti!* is the most political; as I have already suggested above, it is this innate politicity (an adaptation in English of the French neologism *politicit *) or connotation of political relevance, that significantly undercuts the "charm" of this moving picture.

*Avanti!* was adapted from a play of the same name that opened in

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<sup>7</sup> We assume that they were beautiful people partly because they had beautiful clothes, and hedonistic habits, and from other characters' descriptions, such as that of Bruno the valet's portraying the blonde Catherine Piggott's "vanilla cream skin").

New York in 1968, flopped and then, slightly revamped and renamed, six years later became a hit in London's West End.<sup>8</sup> The work of Samuel Taylor, who was also the author of the play that became Wilder's *Sabrina* (1954)<sup>9</sup>, the play is very different from the adaptation made by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond, and their alterations are important to an analysis of the implicit aims of the film. Taylor's *Avanti!* is set in Rome, not Ischia, and the two cadavers go missing in a different way: the farmer who owns the land into which the crashing car fell, is suing the rich American for seven olive trees from the time of Leonardo da Vinci that were destroyed: a lien is placed on the dead bodies, moved away from the non-fee-paying city mortuary to a private establishment in Parioli, so that somebody can make money; lawyers play a role, and corruption goes no farther, though red tape creates a thick wall. The change in subplot allows Wilder and Diamond to insert the Trotta family, owners of the vine bearing land on which the lovers' car, hurtling to its fatal explosion, landed as a wreck causing (they say) damage requiring compensation: hence the kidnapping. These literally "ugly Italians" are an integral part of this island community taken by the ugly Americans, Armbruster and Blodgett, to be backward because inefficient (they also do duty as gravediggers when the narrative requires them to do so), yet they are hip to the global economy and take marks or yen, among other currencies, eschewing greenbacks because "with your economy sick like a dog, no dollars."

The biggest difference however, between the Taylor and Wilder-Diamond versions, is that in the stage play, the characters are young and physically attractive: Taylor's male lead, called Alexander "Sandy" Ben Claiborne, is a younger, better-looking man than Jack Lemmon<sup>10</sup>. Taylor's stage directions describe him thus:

[N]ot handsome, but good-looking in a rather rough way, and he moves well [...] He is intelligent, he has humor, he is courteous and attentive. He is essentially a kind and gentle man, but he has been trained to toughness in the wars of the business world, and he can be fiercely impatient.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> I have not been able to consult reception of this spin-off play, *A Touch of Spring*, to see whether the intervening appearance of the Wilder film had any effect on the changed result.

<sup>9</sup> He was also one of the screenwriters working on Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, adapted from a Boileau/Narcejac novel)

<sup>10</sup> Claiborne is "in his early thirties," Armbruster, Jr. is forty-two: In 1972, Jack Lemmon was 47.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Avanti!*, p. 4.

The daughter of his father's inamorata is not the plumpish, neurotic (or at least analysand) Miss Piggott, but a talented though not yet successful young actress, Alison Ames, presumably slender.

This is a girl of honest appetites, an uncomplicated girl with a great darting interest in the world and a felicity for living.<sup>12</sup>

She does not idealize and even envy her mother's role as part time mistress to a big wig, but considers her mother as having been exploited and cheated out of fuller romance. There is also no mention of a class difference between the two lovers, the mother, a widow, is not a manicurist, there is no comment about her working anywhere, much less in the Savoy Hotel: we only know that she was a "dish," had many beaux and could have married again if not monopolized by Claiborne père. Bruno, the blackmailing valet, does not exist in the Taylor play, and neither does Carlucci, the hotel manager and narrative Mr. Fixit. His equivalent—more imaginative, more excessive, more eccentric, is the "professional assistant," Baldassare Pantaleone, a freelance Roman trouble-shooter sometimes hired by the Embassy for tricky issues. He is a "cheerful, laughing young Italian in his twenties."<sup>13</sup> The young, exuberant, affectionate, free-living Baldo character is a pansexual—indeed a Pan figure, sometimes characterized as the serpent in the Eden in which the two lovers are as Adam and Eve. He leads Sandy down the primrose path, trying at first to be his fellow traveler, but, failing to seduce the strait-laced American, finally pushes the actress into his arms, and then removes her—perhaps temporarily—by introducing her to a film director who invites both Alison and Baldo to Spain. Sandy and Alison, in love, make a date for a month of traveling in the near future, but despite his pledge, she doubts that he will appear. The dead couple are separated: Alison's mother will be buried in the English cemetery near Keats and Shelley, Sandy's father is sure to go home.

The biggest change is the driving narrative force contained in the character of the Wife. As written by Taylor, Helen Claiborne is not the nagging, conventional harpy one perceives at the end of the telephone connection in the film, boring old Emily from Baltimore:

She is the quintessence, the paradigm, the desideratum of the rich young American married woman—intelligent, and witty, aware, sharp,

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<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Op cit*, p. 35.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

knowledgeable.<sup>14</sup>

Taylor's star quality spouse appears in Rome with her husband at the beginning of the play, but returns home to Saint Louis for a family wedding, but at the end of the play comes back to Rome to collect her husband. The Jojo Blodgett character is absent: but a twenty-six year old diplomat, John Wesley, "slim, fair [...] scholarly looking"<sup>15</sup>, attached to the Embassy, is trying to help the Claibornes find the lost body of Claiborne père, killed in a crash in the hills. Sandy, rather perplexed by the ins and outs of Rome, seems overshadowed and even dominated by his wife who embodies "the arrogance of power"<sup>16</sup> and the "affluent American"<sup>17</sup> and despite her good looks resembles both the Wendell Armbruster Jr. and the Jojo Blodgett, the ugly Americans of the film. Engineering the return of Sandy, she sets up the reorganization of the family business, his dream come true, giving Sandy the starring role, and making it impossible for him to leave St Louis: her script for the rest of his life opposes the love affair which finally comes to follow the track of his father's part-time dalliance, even though he at first envisions a total break, and re-marriage.

The Taylor version provides three good parts for charming young actors who together recall (distantly, it's true) the configuration of Noël Coward's *Design for Living* and clown and wisecrack together, loading the premises (only one set, a suite in a Grand Hotel in Rome) with flowers, drinking gallons of wine and bourbon, comically re-enacting a soap commercial which figures in the résumé of Alison Ames, and singing Christmas carols (in May). In this atmosphere, no thought of a mid-life crisis sullies the romance, and the *coup de foudre* seems more real. As a final comment on this rather wistful but not bleak romantic comedy about the conflicting pulls exerted by creativity and conformity, it must be said that the period markers present in the film are almost totally absent—with Taylor, we could be in the 1920s as well as in the 1970s.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> Taylor goes even farther than Wilder/Diamond in the corny vulgarity of the language used in the seduction scene: not only do Sandy and Alison pronounce the Pernesio/Avanti sesame dialogue of the film, but Alison says "Est Est! Est! Est!" after their first and conclusive kiss, recalling the name of a wine from Montefiascone which has figured in their conversation: "the unusual name of the DOC comes from Martin, the cupbearer of Bishop Johan Defuk in the year 1000 who on entering the village of Montefiascone wrote 'Est! Est! Est!' on the door of

Wilder and Diamond however, load their script with a certain number of period-linked details. Armbruster Sr. had been reading the Alvin Toffler book, *Future Shock* (first edition 1970)—this is of course a jokey reference to the surprises held in store by the plot, and especially his own death in a car crash, but it also situates the action very precisely in historical time as well as suggesting that for these regressive characters the future will indeed prove to be a bit too much to take. Mention is made of both Henry Kissinger and Billy Graham—to the emaciated model Twiggy, an anti-Pamela Piggott. Armbruster Industries, the family business, is being heckled by Ralph Nader, whose watchdog NGO, “Public Citizen” was founded in 1971. The film opens with a private jet discharging its passenger into a 747, a plane which only went into service in 1970; the dead lovers were listening when they died to *Hello, Dolly*—presumably the music from the Barbra Streisand film of 1969, rather than the musical comedy of 1964. Other references to the culture of around 1970 situate the film in its specific period, and emphasize the remoteness (as well as the beauty) of the parental past: a ninety-year-old German baron, who exhausts his juvenile companions, has been coming to the Grand Hotel Excelsior, a kind of fountain of youth, since before the First World War.

Jack Lemmon’s character is clearly trying to come to terms with the Sixties, adapting them to his macho instincts, and to his sense of bourgeois propriety—or hypocrisy. He dines with Pamela on the terrace of their hotel: bartender, maître d’, waiters and musicians recognize them as being the image of their parents and given them the same drinks, wine and dishes, and play the same music: they are both wearing their parents’ clothes (this dinner scene, totally absent from the Taylor play, is somewhat reminiscent of the Ghost Supper scene in Strindberg’s *Spook Sonata*, though, as opposed to the Expressionist play, the Wilder/Diamond scene is written in an ostensibly comic mode). Wendell describes himself at length to Pamela, as a trendy modernist, in dialogue that calls for study:

I don’t want you to think I’m stuffy or uptight or anything like that, you know, I’m considered a pretty groovy cat, you know, like, when I’m in business in Los Angeles, I always have lunch in a topless place [...] just because I haven’t got long sideburns, you know, that doesn’t mean [...] Did you ever hear of *Oh! Calcutta!*?<sup>19</sup> I’ve seen it twice, and *Carnal*

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the inn (instead of the usual sign of ‘Est!’, meaning ‘a good place to stay’) as he thought the wines of the area were exceptionally good.”

<<http://www.winesearcher.com/regions/est+est+est+di+montefiascone/1>>

This dialogue looks dodgy on the page: perhaps the actors made it cute and chic.

<sup>19</sup> Wikipedia: *Oh! Calcutta!* was a “long-running avant-garde theatrical revue, created by British drama critic Kenneth Tynan. The show, consisting of various

*Knowledge*, too.<sup>20</sup> [...] It's true, you know, the Permissive Society, the Age of Aquarius, the Sexual Revolution, I'm into all of that [...] like the secretaries in the home office, always wearing those hot pants<sup>21</sup>, and there's nothing wrong with that, as long as it's done by consenting adults [...] Miss Piggott, I have nothing against sex, premarital, extramarital, you name it, I'm for it. I mean, just because a man's married, that doesn't mean he can't have a thing, you know, with a secretary, an airline stewardess- let's say that you are at a convention in Hawaii, you meet some chick, you can swing for couple of nights, but then, "Aloha."

Comparing his values with those of his father, whom he has kept on calling "sonofabitch" or "dirty old man," Miss Piggott criticizes this behavior: "You can swing with ten chicks a year, but if you're in love with the same woman for ten years, that makes you a sonofabitch."

For Billy Wilder, the Jack Lemmon character reaches some kind of epiphany in this film and emerges from the stereotyped and rather cruel definition of "liberated" that he has used in his self-portrait: anxious about not being "with it," confusing "liberation" with turnover, emphasizing the disparity in social status between his idea of a sexy man and his sexual objects, Armbruster is mentally a mess: obsessed, but at the same time totally constricted by an ironclad and ice cold code. As he replies to Pamela Piggott about his father, the "sonofabitch":

"Love, Miss Piggott, is for filing clerks, but not for the head of a conglomerate." The screwball comedy tradition, democratically affirming the possibility of true love between the all-American equivalent of a shepherd (a reporter, perhaps, or a museum curator) and a princess (a millionaire's kooky daughter), has been rejected by or has never penetrated the hard head of Wendell Jr.

Says Ed Sikov, the point about *Avanti!* is that Armbruster finally sleeps with someone he cares about, and it changes his life in a small but meaningful way.<sup>22</sup> This gives a different meaning to "sexual liberation" than the practice he describes in his dinner table rant, and this release is similar to Pamela's, getting free of the shrink-mandated strictures on her diet and schedule (she is to replace a meal with one apple, use self-

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sketches on sex-related topics, debuted in Off-Broadway in 1969."

<sup>20</sup> *Carnal Knowledge*, a controversial film by Mike Nichols (1971), scenario by Jules Feiffer, dealing with the sex lives of two college roommates, over twenty-five years, censored in some localities.

<sup>21</sup> Short shorts, no longer limited to active sportswear, a fashion new and popular in the early 1970s.

<sup>22</sup> Sikov, p. 535.

hypnosis and sleep a lot to avoid and suppress her urge to eat).

But it is possible that the main thrust of the film was not the love story, whether a father/son, mother/daughter psychic affaire, or the one about an international fling, but something more general and political. Wilder said to Ed Sikov:

It's a re-evaluation of the Americans, of their errors, of what counts and doesn't count. But of course, that sounds pompous, and it's not how I pitched the film to get \$3 million. All that is the sauce and the vegetables: the meat is an affair between an American and a girl who is a bit too fat but who has a nice chest.<sup>23</sup>

One wonders how Wilder would have made this film if he hadn't had to "pitch it to get \$3 million." Especially in its context—the year 1972—the film is deeply political. In the opening pages of the screenplay, as this is presented by Ed Sikov, Armbruster is described as being right-wing:

"He went to Cornell, he's a young Republican, he occasionally plays a game of squash with S. Agnew.<sup>24</sup> To him, W. Cronkite<sup>25</sup> is a Maoist, and R. Nader is a pain in the ass."<sup>26</sup> Although only one of the French reviewers of this film when it was first released, Pascal Kane, was sensitive to the political nature of the film, according to Sikov, the American reviewers (who panned it) were alert to such themes.

*Avanti!* was widely slammed by American reviewers upon its release in December 1972. Most critics were unable to see beyond a failed attempt at political topicalism. *Avanti!*'s admirers surfaced later in film journals, but at the time, the film's few current event jokes—references to Kissinger and Nader—were said to fall flat, as if Billy were aiming much higher. For Wilder, America in 1972 was itself flat and thudding, a pleasureless country administered by bureaucrats. That is why the film is set elsewhere—a gorgeous European spa.<sup>27</sup>

What is remarkable in Sikov's analysis, published in 1998, is the total obliviousness to the grave political problems, most notably the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Nixon's first Vice-President, replaced by Gerald Ford when Agnew resigned after pleading *nolo contendere* to charges of corruption during his term as Governor of Maryland. He was an outspoken critic of opponents to the Vietnam War, using vivid even strong language against them. (*vide* Wikipedia).

<sup>25</sup> A television news presenter trusted by the American public, who after the Tet Offensive (1968) publicly expressed his feeling that the war was unwinnable.

<sup>26</sup> Idem.

<sup>27</sup> Sikov, 539.