

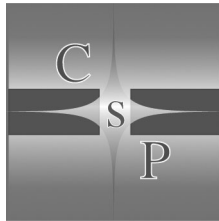
# Literary Readings of Billy Wilder



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Edited by

Georges-Claude Guilbert



CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING

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

This book first published 2007 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN 1-84718-315-8; ISBN 13: 9781847183156

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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.

Vietnam War, which the United States experienced in 1972, which were necessarily referenced by any glimmer of “topicalism,” since the nation was obsessed by this war (or “conflict”) and the mixed reactions and massive protest it inspired. Billy Wilder was really “aiming higher,” and his target was not just bureaucracy. In 1972, it was clear that America was not winning in Vietnam and that the whole operation had been a failure: troop levels had wound down, but bombing of the North still continued, even as peace proposals and preparations were made. The French reviewer Pascal Kané understood the obsessive nature of the consciousness of the war, which during the late 1960s and early 1970s was always in the background as a source of both fear and dishonor, inflecting American spectatorship sometimes in a way similar to his own. Kané considers that *Avanti!* reveals

the real interference of the United States in a country which it controls economically and where one finds, as in the United States, a certain corruption of institutions (Southern Italy is a country from which many inhabitants emigrated to the USA, which gets most of its income from tourists, and is a rather good metonymy for the Third World...). Showing the action of the State Department in a “colonized” country, the conception and the Capitalist way of using women: this represents a social reality which we cannot easily put out of our minds, even when the fiction has ceased to find it interesting.<sup>28</sup>

Obviously Southeast Asia must be considered part of the Third World, and the implicit comment on American foreign policy, when read as Kané does, must be considered continuous with an evaluation of the Vietnam policies. Of course, in the film, Americans are shown to have dubious solutions, but also to be blunders, poor analysts of situations, blinkered. While rejecting the Marxist orientation of Kané’s analysis, it seems to me apparent, as it does to him, that *Avanti!* carries within it heavy political comment struggling to dominate the screwball-type surface.

For Kané, the image of colonialism and capitalism are ghosts that haunt the film: the Vietnam War is another, heavy and obsessive ghost.

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<sup>28</sup> Pascal Kané, “Sur *Avanti!*”, pp. 45-48, in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, # 248, 1973. L’ingérence réelle des Etats Unis dans un pays qu’il contrôle économiquement et où se reproduit un même pourrissement des institutions (l’Italie du Sud, pays d’émigrants, vivant principalement du tourisme, renvoie métonymiquement assez bien au tiers monde. Montrer l’action du State Department dans un pays “colonisé”, la conception et l’utilisation capitaliste de la femme, cela met en scène une réalité sociale dont on ne se débarrasse pas si facilement, une fois que la fiction s’en débarrasse”, p. 46.

All through the film, Americans are conscious of anti-Americanism, and at the time, the biggest reason for such hatred was the Vietnam War, never mentioned, but always present as a co-text for the film.

The related concept of the “Ugly American” is another ghost, and this theme emerges when we analyze the gloze on Beauty (and its antithesis Ugliness) contained in the film. Compared to the Taylor original, the film script is most glaringly loaded with human “ugliness” or at least serious imperfection defacing the stunningly beautiful landscape. The temptress Miss Piggott, is attractive, but thinks she is ugly because she is overweight, has self-destructive tendencies (she tends to choose the wrong man, her latest ex, Bertram, being a good example) and tried to kill herself after a break-up: yet even before she has met him, she seems entranced with the rude and vulgar Wendell Armbruster Jr., clearly a sign that she really does chronically fall in love with bad bets and does perhaps need to consult a practitioner of the talking cure. Wendell Armbruster Jr., in his total lack of grace, humor, courtesy, as played by Jack Lemmon is an American stereotype, the brash provincial incapable of adapting to foreign ways. (This is not the case with the James Cagney character in *One, Two, Three* who perfectly understands the Germany in which he lives. Although he tries to change the heel-clicking behavior of his underlings, he has totally adapted to the long lunch hours which he uses for a fling with his secretary – exactly the kind of behavior which Carlucci says is typical of Italy.) Other characters added by Wilder and Diamond have more than their share of ugliness: the blackmailing valet, his mustachioed Sicilian mistress, the abovementioned Ugly Italians, the Trotta family of grotesques including a dwarf and a giant with short arms and an enormous square jaw clearly produced by the Make Up Department, more like an animated cartoon character than a human being, and an almost handsome brother with a dashing though dilapidated felt fedora, a crumpled trench coat and a glass eye—a kind of rustic variation on Bogartiana. Rounding out the collection, is another addition to the arrangement imagined by Samuel Taylor, the counterpart of these local banditti: the shambling, overweight Jojo Blodgett, the American diplomat from Paris who arrives in a helicopter, a *deus ex machina* who expedites the dispatch of a coffin supposed to contain Armbruster Sr., by creating him a diplomat (and also revealing his status as a CIA agent) and therefore waiving administrative rules. As a final twist—the trickster tricked—the coffin taken to Baltimore actually contains the murdered blackmailer, while the two late lovers are, buried together on Ischian soil, under a discreet inscription reading “Willie and Kate.” The Ugly American, Blodgett, devious and powerful, is nevertheless outpaced by the even

greater ruse of Europeans (Carlucci).

The plot is changed in other interesting ways. Wilder and Diamond create circumstances which throw Armbruster and Miss Piggott together, relieving the Jack Lemmon character from the necessity of taking any initiative. True, when he first meets her in the Hovercraft carrying them over from the mainland, he does seem a bit dreamy when looking at her, as if perhaps attracted. This is a film in which the relaxation of Hollywood rules on propriety allows a nude scene, and profanity. But the protagonist is relieved of the responsibility for initiating adultery, perhaps because of Lemmon's limited acting range.

Pamela Piggott is in fact the huntress, or at least so willing to be hunted and caught that she precipitates events and inspires Armbruster with the idea that he must make love to her. When he issues an invitation and has dinner with Miss Piggott, it is only the better to weasel out of her the truth about the secret location of the parental cadavers which have gone missing (since Armbruster believes that, being slightly mad, a "kook," she has perpetrated their disappearance, in order to inter them, together, on the island. After a day of tourist joyriding (punctuated with an interlude in which she selfishly buys four ice cream cones for herself as several hungry *ragazzi* look on), Miss Piggott returns to the hotel and finds that her luggage has been moved into the Armbruster suite: despite the anti-American and semi-feminist discourse she pronounces when she arrives,

I must say Mr. Armbruster, you have some cheek [...] just what made you think I'd have the slightest interest in this arrangement (as she is unpacking) Not that I expected the slightest subtlety from you, after all you are American and you're accustomed to having everything your own way [...] you see something you want and you just grab it [...] such conceit, such arrogance, you act as if you owned the world, playing golf on the moon<sup>29</sup> [...] and then you wonder why people don't like you, you're like spoiled children, no manners, no consideration, you don't just pick up the phone and say move that bird in here from one twenty six [...] If I'm having an affair with someone I'd like to know about it first, and not hear about it from the concierge [...] a girl likes to be asked, to be given a chance to say no [...] not that I'm willing to leave or anything, I don't mind being treated as a sex object, but it's like any other game, you have to play according to the rules, or it takes all the fun out of it [...].<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> This happened during the 1971 Apollo 14 lunar mission commanded by Astronaut Alan B. Shepard.

<sup>30</sup> She also mentions the oceanliner Queen Mary II, turned into a casino and moored in California in 1969, and London Bridge, sold to a town in Arizona where

Even though she characterizes the mistaken scenario as a kind of imperialistic takeover of foreign territory, Pamela Piggott is willing to accept this and even elated. Clearing up the misunderstanding, informing her that she has been made to vacate her room only for as long as it takes for removing the body of the dead valet (killed by his pregnant lover, a dark Sicilian with a stereotyped moustache, not pretty at all), she is so disappointed and feels so rejected that he seems to need to make advances to her almost to cheer her up, out of charity, to allay her self-conscious sensitivity to her own (relative) heft.

One might think that Miss Piggott is something of a gold-digger, since she does seem to want Armbruster even before she meets him, and has read the article in *Newsweek* which has presumably inventoried his assets and perks (corporate jet and so on). But she refuses any gift from him—as did her mother, a manicurist at the Savoy hotel, to whom a dozen annual roses were delivered—and who never mentioned the humble nature of her job and the unglamorous explanation for her elegant address. “Because she loved him!” says Miss Piggott, seemingly unaware of the fact that a single dozen of roses is unimaginative, and insufficient as a gift from even a less prosperous lover. Her expectations are not high.

One is at first tempted to read this film in terms of literary works showing Anglo Saxons in contact with the sunny South, waking to Love and sensuality, crass materialists put face to face with deeper realities and primal forces. E.M. Forster’s *A Room with a View* (1908) is the archetype of such approaches. Indeed Wilder’s comment about Armbruster, Jr.—that he has reached some kind of watershed because he is now able to have an affair with a woman he cares about—would seem to foster such an interpretation. Yet Armbruster never mentions the word love, which is pronounced only by Pamela Piggott. Although apparently deeply moved, she herself refrains from using the word about herself and Armbruster, and only pronounces it in referring to their parents, as if it were a thing of the past. She uses it to describe her mother’s hiding of her working-class job and refusal to accept monetary help: love is here equivalent to maintaining an illusion, treating the affaire as a kind of *mise en scène*. The annual excursion to Ischia is a kind of escapist romance, a dream interlude, a film-in-the-film of life, if you will. But the outcome of *Avanti!*, though it perpetuates the performance, using new actors, is not really happy: the film confirms that Pamela Piggott is indeed attracted to the wrong kind of man and ready to settle for less. She is fed up with modernity metaphorized in the person of her latest Mr. Wrong: Bertram, who left her and stole the television and various other goods, pushing her into a suicide

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it was rebuilt, and opened to the public in 1971.

attempt made by feverish overeating. Leader of a rock band, author of a rock opera, *Splash*, about the sinking of the Titanic, this Bertram, shown on a photo as a bearded hippy, symbolizes the Modern, that Pamela wishes to eschew, preferring a more traditional kind of man, Wendell Armbruster, Jr. whom she is all too ready to love. But would her shrink approve? Armbruster will provide a back street relationship, one month a year, in Ischia. Is this enough? Has she really moved forward, or is she mired down in yet another doomed relationship. Armbruster seems to offer reassurance that her full figure is no obstacle to a sexual relationship, but as for “love”—this seems to be equated with something small-scale forever divorced from the ordinary and the every day. Although Miss Piggott is presented as something of a swinging Londoner (she works in a boutique on the King’s Road, she drives a Mini Morris)<sup>31</sup>, her deep desire is to regress and to live in the past, where her mother and Armbruster Sr. danced until dawn and swam nude in the sea. It is as if, faced with a crisis situation (the year 1972) she wanted nothing more than to seek refuge in the past, and, rather than to find a new *modus vivendi*, in fact wishes to become her mother, taking on the role that had been developed in the past, thereby preserving herself in a state of infantile attachment to this maternal imago made permanent by imitation / repetition.

A key scene in the film is that in which Pamela dances alone, champagne glass in hand, wearing her mother’s dress, to the music of the orchestra staying up all night (and getting overtime pay) as they did when her mother had holidays with Armbruster’s Dad. This is analogous to the ballroom settings used to stage seductions and *coups de foudre* in *Sunset Boulevard* and in *Fedora*, and also recalls the “ghost dancing” of Native Americans at the end of the nineteenth century<sup>32</sup>. With whom is she dancing? Her trance-like states, the nightlong vigil, the ritualistic nude swim in the ocean, connote some semi-religious initiation rite. She is repeating the gestures, the mythos of her mother, and in fact becoming her mother who must be considered either as her true dance partner, or as the identity she mimics, in some way dancing with the ghost of Armbruster Sr., her mother’s beau. She is in love with love, and ready to seduce Junior who has not so far, and will not until the very last minute, show any trace

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<sup>31</sup> The Taylor character, Alison Ames, has lost count of her numerous lovers.

<sup>32</sup> “The Ghost Dance arose in 1889, when the Paiute prophet-dreamer Wewoka announced the imminent return of the dead (hence “ghost”), the ousting of the whites, and the restoration of Indian lands, food supplies, and way of life, all of which would be hastened by dances and songs revealed in Wewoka’s spiritual visions.” “Ghost Dance.” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2007. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 16 Mar. 2007 <<http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9365552>>

of romantic interest in her, seeing her at this point only as one more obstacle to his return to Baltimore. True, she tempts him out to the sea, and convinces him to sun himself on a rock “like a baby seal,” which for him is transgressive—and dangerous, since the blackmailing valet Bruno is already awake and armed with his Polaroid. At the end of the scene in which Bruno produces his photos of the nude swim, asking for a quid pro quo (help in getting back to the USA from which he had been deported), Armbruster cuts up the snaps, then tries to piece them back together, perhaps to admire Miss Piggott: the medium shot protects Lemmon from the necessity of having to mime erotic interest, and he seems more like someone myopic puzzled by a Rubik’s cube than a lover hungry to see.

That the elements of fantasy and self-destructiveness loom large in Miss Piggott’s personality is pointed out by the total unattractiveness of the Armbruster Jr. character as played by Jack Lemmon. Blustering, blurting out commands, devoid of politeness, totally self-absorbed and intolerant of another culture, to spectators familiar with romantic comedy and the rules of aptitude and value which it embodies, he does not seem to “deserve” her love. A sort of basic humanity—not wishing to destroy Miss Piggott who feels insulted and rejected when he confesses that he had no intention of seducing her, impels him to begin their affair—almost out of a kind of courtesy, his only real evidence of such an impulse. This apparent generosity is also a kind of machismo—he is sure that he has the power of life and death, or at least great distress, over Pamela Piggott. And he says he is really attracted. But the situation is organized so that he doesn’t have to take the initiative, a narrative specificity which attests to the deep hypocrisy in the Armbruster character, clearly, as Jack Lemmon parts usually are, some kind of comment on the American male. As Wilder said to Cameron Crowe, “He was my Everyman.”<sup>33</sup> But in a statement most relevant to this particular film, he commented on Lemmon’s genius:

And he could do everything. Except carry a love interest to the extreme, to kissing and the precoital thing. That is very difficult, because people could then laugh.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps the narrative in *Avanti!* is geared to this lacuna in Lemmon’s palette of colorings for characterization. Not only does he not utter sweet nothings, his approach is rather pragmatic: he calls the diminutive Miss Piggott to stand on a scales, to make it easier to kiss her.

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<sup>33</sup> Cameron Crowe, *Conversations with Wilder*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Publishers, 2001, p. 109.

<sup>34</sup> Crowe, *Op cit* pp. 109-110.

This is perhaps designed to figure forth some mellow acceptance on his part of her supposedly overblown figure—the scales are transformed from a tool of torture, reminding Pamela Piggott of her weight problem, to a kind of erotic accessory, taking part in a sexual opening gambit. The corny vulgarity of the dialogue (He says *permesso* / may I come in, she says *Avanti!* / yes you may), inherited from Taylor, is unique in expressing no compliment and no affection: the exchange is worthy only of lovers who never read books or see good films. (And yet in the Taylor play, true love is sworn to, and the stakes are therefore high). True, the affectless Armbruster is hiding from emotion: we see no proof of any love he may have felt for his father, whom he keeps on calling “son of a bitch” as he realizes that he had a double life. Wilder said he thought of his story as a kind of coming of age, as we have already mentioned. Yet even if this could be made to seem true, the fact remains the character is never really able to say that he cares, and beginning of their affair almost seems to be more the result of narrative manipulation (a push from Pamela Piggott) rather than psychological maturation, or even strong desire. Pamela can also be said to be “liberated”: she finds that in Ischia, she can eat as she pleases without gaining weight.

Armbruster, the first of Lemmon’s midlife-crisis roles is something of a monster, roughly comparable to the avid, hypocritical characters in comedies like *The Merry Widow*, an operetta which opened in Vienna in 1905 and remains a popular show to which French people consistently take children, who should instead be protected from its placid acceptance of the supposed role of money at the heart of sexual politics. Watching *Avanti!* thirty-five years after its release, the Armbruster character is rather shocking. Did men like this exist, was it possible?<sup>35</sup> To be fair, Armbruster, Jr. is trying to deal with a changing world that he doesn’t understand: the 1960s have clearly been too much for him: he is trying to keep up with changing times and, like Pamela Piggott, faced with a “crisis of modernity.”

And “modernity” is not just a question of sexual liberation, but seems also to be metaphorized in the character of Jojo Blodgett, the ugliest American in the film. Alerted by Helen in Baltimore, he grabs a helicopter from the Sixth Fleet and quizzing the rather blank-looking pilot asks if they are on the right flight plan:

Blodgett: Maybe this is one of those Greek islands

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<sup>35</sup> Let me point out that I am not young, and should be in the know, but perhaps I have erased as being traumatic memories an actual, historical referent for this character.

Pilot: No sir, Greece is way down there to the left

Blodgett: Not as long as I'm in the State Department

A key scene in the film is the arrival of Jojo Blodgett in Armbruster's suite where he has been enjoying the companionship of his new lover. Their cover story consists of a *mise en scène* recalling an 1938 Lubitsch film with script co-written by Billy Wilder, *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*: in this old classic, the couple "meet cute" in a haberdashery—each one wants only half of a pair of pajamas. In *Avanti!*, Wendell and Pamela share a pair of pajamas, he wears the bottoms with a terry cloth robe, she has the top, tastefully accessorized with a curtain pull. She is playing the role of an Italian manicurist, who speaks no English. They are enacting a scene in which their parents' relationship merges with a screwball comedy of the golden age—this is clearly the mode targeted by Wilder in *Avanti!*, perhaps with an ironic spin. But here, the lovers' eccentricity is rather unpleasant: Armbruster, Jr. himself is a kind of robot, more cartoonish than "original," remote controlled by bourgeois stereotypes—he takes the sentimental Miss Piggott for a kook. As for her, she seems to see through his jagged personality to some lovable core which has a lot to do with her own wishful thinking. Blodgett, witnessing the manicure event, is not suspicious of any hanky-panky—or at least he pushes this thought away, saying

Wendell, if I didn't know how strait-laced you are, and in mourning, and if that dame were about twenty pounds lighter, I'd say that something was going on...

Miss Piggott's shape is presented as a kind of sword in the stone, a mystical key to knowledge and happiness, that only a few know how to seize.

The crucial transcending of bourgeois hypocrisy is seen to be the bending of a rigid aesthetic code based on bodies made slim by active sports: being plump means standing outside the group. Thus Armbruster's affair with Pamela Piggott is presented as a breakthrough, a crossing over to some wilder shore of feeling, as is her blithe indifference to the monetary contributions that Junior feels should be made. He is shown up as a classist hypocrite, and his strait-lacedness as being conformist and even undemocratic. Yet despite this epiphany, he still cannot mention Love.

Still ungenerous but softened, he is called back to Baltimore and the hard cruel world outside of Ischia, by Jojo Blodgett, the counterpart of the Trottas, those ugly Italians who refused to take a dollar ransom for the

kidnapped cadavers. Blodgett, the ultimate trickster and hypocrite, dubs the dead tycoon a diplomat, rationalizing this solution by saying “It just proves that we don’t discriminate against anybody for reasons of race, creed, color or state of health.” His objection to Italian lunchtime echoes that of Wendell, Jr., but goes further: “Oh that goddamn lunchtime again. We pour in millions of dollars of foreign aid just so they can sit on their butts.”

He is clearly akin to the obtuse, misguided diplomats in Lederer and Burdick’s *The Ugly American*, and it is important to notice that, instead of the overbearing but perfect wife, Helen Claiborne, who precipitates the denouement in Samuel A Taylor’s play, Wilder and Diamond have used as *deus ex machina* a State Department official, supposed to be an expert in foreign policy and diplomacy. In the play, the protagonist is brought back in line by his wife Helen’s orchestration of his business future in such a way as to suit his dream: he will have full executive power over the business he inherits. But Wilder and Diamond add political overtones: Wendell’s wife Emily calls on a social acquaintance, Blodgett—they go to the same parties, at one of which, Blodgett has chosen to wear a Batman costume (the location of the Claiborne/Armbruster business having been changed from the Midwest, to Maryland, near Washington, D.C.). Batman of course is a comic book superhero, and Blodgett’s line, “It’s me, Batman!” reveals the ironic contrast between the fictional masked avenger and the shambling crisis manager who touches down in a chopper manned by a plodding pilot.

The two Americans in the Wilder/Diamond story are thus representatives of Big Business and Government. The ultimate solution to plot problems (what to do with three corpses, how to get one of them to Maryland on time for a funeral next Tuesday) is collaborative, aligning Ugly Italians and Ugly Americans in an array of covert operations. Armbruster has the idea of using a third coffin mistakenly sent to Ischia, to contain Bruno, the blackmailing Italian valet who links the two lineups because of his love of the country that deported him and his desire to return: he will stand in (or lie in) for the dead Armbruster, Sr. at the funeral ceremony, and forever after. Carlucci, the hotel manager, makes good on his offer to lend a bit of his family plot to the dead lovers, who are discreetly interred as “Willie and Kate” on Ischia. Blodgett, the diplomat, is made to look all the more foolish as he is unaware of these ancillary projects and sincerely believes in his own (and by extension national) problem-solving genius, as he cuts through red tape and transforms the dead body of Armbruster/ Bruno into a fellow diplomat eligible for departure through an administratively simple operation

compared to a “diplomatic pouch.” Blodgett stages a fake ceremony, a little ghost play in a play, a metonymic variation on the theme of the ghost-ridden affair between Junior and Miss Piggott.

The flag-covered coffin of Armbruster/Bruno, perceived in the shadow of the ending War, still producing full body bags and flag-covered coffins with dead American soldiers inside, must have seemed repulsive in 1972. The fatuous self-satisfaction of the diplomat, Blodgett, unaware of the wheeling and dealing that underlie and undercut his ingenious action, could have seemed like a parody in bad taste when most Americans felt that their State Department, and by extension the military, were not doing well.

*Avanti!* was a flop and lost about \$700,000. The “political topicalism” noticed by critics was probably a contributing factor. The collective national ego of audiences, sorely taxed by the news, cannot have got any boost from *Avanti!*, which could have appeared as anti-American (and not just to Kané, the critic from *Cahiers du cinéma*). Hypocritical, ungenerous, self-centered, and yet blundering, Armbruster and Blodgett are Ugly Americans no more beautiful than the ugly Italians they encounter. Armbruster/Blodgett are themselves two sides of a ghost, an American self-image—proud, self-assured, self-righteous—doomed to extinction. Blodgett, an outcrop of the same class, represents everything that Armbruster, Jr. has tried to forget in his days on Ischia, but remains glued to him, the darkest (and political) side of a two-person portrait, and finally forces him to go home.

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