

INTRODUCTION

In a scene from *Hold Back the Dawn* (1941), the Romanian immigrant Georges Iscovescu (Charles Boyer) is lying on his hotel bed in a Mexican border town, unshaven and sloppy, and observing a cockroach. As the insect crawls on the wall toward the mirror, Georges impedes him with his cane and asks: “Where do you think you are going? You’re not a citizen, are you? Where’s *your* quota number?”¹ The scene reverses an earlier one in which Georges had been interrogated by US custom officials about his intentions to cross into the United States. Georges’ identification with the cockroach illustrates the abject nature of the immigrant who is constantly harassed while waiting for a visa to enter the United States—for Romanians, Georges had been told, the quota is so tight that the projected wait is five to eight years.

The cockroach scene was written by Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett but omitted from the film Mitchell Leisen directed because actor Charles Boyer felt it below him to speak to an insect. In interviews, Wilder has repeatedly voiced his dismay for Boyer and Leisen’s butchering of his script, and various biographers of Billy Wilder have given this anecdote special weight for Wilder’s subsequent decision to become a director in order to gain more control over his work.² Wilder’s anger was fueled by what he perceived to be Boyer and Leisen’s ignorance, but there are other reasons, both personal and political, that come into play. Although based on a novel by Ketti Frings, the script for *Hold Back the Dawn* was Wilder’s most autobiographical work to date. The story of how Iscovescu charms a naïve US schoolteacher named Emmy (Olivia de Havilland) into marrying him, so he can become a US citizen and resume his career dancing professionally with his ex-partner Anita, had much in common with Wilder’s own open-ended stay in Mexicali in 1934 when he had to leave the United States in order to renew his visa. It also recalls his subsequent struggles to make a living in Hollywood when poverty forced him to reside in the antechamber to the ladies’ room at the Chateau Marmont Hotel. Furthermore, Wilder, a Central European, shared the Romanian’s background as a gigolo: as a young man, Wilder had been an “Eintänzer,” a hired dancer for single women in an exclusive Berlin café. But more important than these autobiographical suggestions are the structural implications of the scene. By explicitly likening the immigrant to a helpless insect, the cock-

roach scene was to steer the audience toward seeing Iscovescu more as a victim of political circumstances and less as a manipulative con artist; its omission, therefore, casts the immigrant in a much less sympathetic light, while the ending of the film, with Georges's change of heart regarding his exploitation of Emmy's emotions, remains rather implausible. Thus, when Wilder objected to the tinkering with his and Brackett's script, it may not only have been a perceived disrespect for his professionalism, but the feeling of being censored from showing US immigration practices through a foreign, and more critical perspective.

This perspective of the exile, and of the outsider more generally, is indeed central to the films and scripts of Billy Wilder, as it is to his life. Often celebrated as a master of Hollywood entertainment, his fluency in the language of classic Hollywood film always retained a strong accent. His overwhelming commercial and critical success—which includes six Academy Awards—shows that he understood what the American public wanted, and yet his insights into their minds are clearly those of an outsider. Films such as *Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Boulevard*, or *The Apartment* belong in the pantheon of American film, but they also attest to the plurality of vision of the foreign-born artist. There is a decidedly transcultural dimension to Billy Wilder's work, a status of being in-between nations, and drawing on very distinct cultural sensibilities.

Although Billy Wilder had his eye on America from the very beginning of his career, the European baggage he carried with him would always be present; America was a completion of Wilder's character, but it also remained an alien culture. Throughout his career in the United States, Wilder would draw on his German and Austro-Hungarian background, frequently rewriting his own earlier work, adapting European plays, or simply infusing his American material with generous helpings of Jewish humor, Viennese fin-de-siècle decadence, or Weimar Germany modernism. If his early scripts at Ufa, Berlin's biggest and most commercial film studio, attest to his fascination with things American—including speed, gangsters, Hollywood stardom, and a general fascination with life in the modern metropolis—his American films revisit Germany and Europe from the perspective of a thoroughly Americanized artist and US citizen, confronting the traditions of the Old World with the achievements of the New.

It needs to be emphasized that Wilder's experience of displacement, with its implied sense *both* of nonbelonging and belonging to more than one culture, did not begin with his arrival in America. It is prefigured in his growing up in the province of Galicia, then part of the vast Austro-Hungarian Empire, where his father, Max, managed a chain of small cafés for the passengers on the train line that connected Vienna and Lemberg. A frequent traveler, Max later took his family to nearby Kraków where he purchased a railroad hotel, but when World War I broke out the family moved on to Vienna. Here the son apprenticed as reporter for some yellow

journalism papers. In 1926 he moved on to Berlin, continuing his work as a reporter but also ghost-writing scripts for the burgeoning German film industry. Hitler's rise to power cut short a promising career at Ufa and Wilder fled to Paris where he directed his first feature before boarding a ship to the United States with a contract for Columbia Pictures.

Wilder's sense of not being one of the natives thus goes as far back as his upbringing as a German-speaking Jew in a Polish peasant country, only to be reinforced time and again wherever he moved. For the Viennese, he was a Polack from the province; for the Berliners of the Weimar Republic, he was an Austrian; for the Nazis, he was a Jew; for the Parisians, he was a *mèteque*; and in Hollywood, he was a Central European refugee from a faraway continent. When he returned to Germany after the war, it was as an American citizen in US uniform, an *Emigrant* who had sided with the enemy. Even after having established himself as a major screenwriter and director in the US, Wilder would feel the sting of being considered an intruder; after a screening of *Sunset Boulevard*, Louis B. Mayer attacked the director as a foreigner who had bitten the hand that fed him and who "should be tarred and feathered and run out of town."³

The films of Billy Wilder register exile with all its complexities and contradictions. They often revolve around experiences of nonbelonging and loss, frequently told from the perspective of an outsider or underachiever—an insurance salesman turned criminal (*Double Indemnity*), a mediocre screenwriter prostituting himself to an aged star (*Sunset Boulevard*), a drunk betraying his friends and family (*The Lost Weekend*), a clerk advancing his career by renting his apartment to his superiors for their extramarital affairs (*The Apartment*). Because of Wilder's disenchanting views of sordid human frailty, his films have been called cynical, bitter, and misanthropic. I would argue that they simply tell the truth about unpleasant areas of human behavior. No one is comfortable coming out of a Wilder film; ideologically unpredictable, Wilder spares no one and nothing. This harshness and refusal to betray sympathy has been read as contempt for audiences. Yet this refusal of hypocrisy reflects the bitter lessons of exile. Chuck Tatum (Kirk Douglas) in *Ace in the Hole* and Sefton (William Holden) in *Stalag 17* may be cynics, but their cynicism shows off a society morally far inferior, attributing to these antiheroes a sense of courage and integrity. Many of Wilder's films celebrate the humanism of the survivor, no matter how scarred.

Unlike so many writers who found refuge from Hitler in Los Angeles, Billy Wilder was not silenced by the experience of being uprooted from one's home, nor did exile translate into longing portrayals of by-gone times and lost places. Nothing could be further from Wilder's acerbic wit than self-indulgence, self-pity, or an unchecked nostalgia (except for the extremely kitschy *The Emperor Waltz*). Though remarkably successful within the studio system, Wilder's experience of exile did not lead to over-assimilation but to an innate, bristling independence, which increased as

he moved from writing to directing and producing. Also, unlike other successful exile directors such as Fritz Lang, Douglas Sirk, Robert Siodmak, or William Dieterle, Wilder never made any attempts to find permanent employment in the German film industry after the war. He felt thoroughly at home in Hollywood, which had made him rich and famous. Yet he never forgot where he had come from and how he had gotten there.

Even though Wilder may attack the American way of life in his films, he remains aware that the possibility of such a critique attests to the existence of an open society. The very process of Americanization is ultimately one of enrichment and creativity, which he celebrates, even though he never tires of satirizing it. It must also be emphasized that this process began long before he left Europe. Americanized in Vienna and Berlin during the 1920s, once in Hollywood, Wilder had to square his imaginary America with lived experiences. This is one reason why a central theme in almost all of Wilder's film is a confrontation with the American way of life—its myths, its ideologies, and its double standards in the realm of sexuality, the family, and the culture industry.

To study Wilder's work, therefore, is to examine the reworking of several rich and varied cultural sensibilities. Rather than providing the last word on Wilder, I hope to underscore complexities, unpacking underlying contradictions where previous commentators routinely smoothed them out. In this portrait, Wilder emerges as an artist with roots in sensationalist journalism and the world of entertainment as well as an awareness of literary culture and the avantgarde, leading to productive and often highly original confrontations of high and low. His work in three national film industries exemplifies a wide generic spectrum, ranging from light romantic comedy to dark satire, and a sophisticated, unpredictable use of stars.

It is commonly assumed that in the process of translating one language or culture into another, something is lost. In her moving memoir, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*, Eva Hoffmann chronicles her experience of life as an immigrant in Canada and the United States.⁴ Like Wilder, Hoffmann grew up in Kraków, where she spent the first thirteen years of her life before immigrating with her family to Vancouver, British Columbia in 1959. Having to leave her beloved home was a traumatic experience that, as the chapter titles of her book have it, disrupted a blissful childhood through a sudden expulsion from "paradise," casting her into a Canadian "exile." Edward Said has similarly described exile as the "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home." Like Hoffmann, he understands exile as a "condition of terminal loss," but he also calls attention to the contrapuntal dimension of exile—the way in which the experience of abandonment forces exiles to be inventive, creative, mobile, and resourceful.⁵ Despite a deeply pessimistic assessment of exile, Said therefore celebrates the plurality of vision that comes through the negotiation of two cultures. For writer Salman Rushdie, the challenge of translating the self from one culture into another may

provide the very seed of creativity: “The word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across.’ Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained.”⁶

The central premise of this book is that the films of Billy Wilder tally with great accuracy the losses and gains of translating oneself into another culture. To better understand the mechanisms of this translation, the following chapter provides a commentary on a number of important aspects—the director’s cultural roots in Vienna and Berlin; the central role of writing and reporting in his work; his position in the various film industries in which he worked; the critical discourse surrounding his career; and the generic and stylistic quality of his films. This chapter develops the argument that informs the analyses of the six subsequent chapters devoted to individual films. It is my intention that these observations go beyond the films of Billy Wilder and tell us something about the relationship between classical Hollywood cinema and the experience of exile.

Notes

1. *Hold Back the Dawn*, unpublished script, Academy of Motion Pictures Library, 21. There is no evidence that Wilder actually ever read Frings’ novel.
2. Not prone to forget an insult, Wilder “got even” with Boyer in his first film as director, *The Major and The Minor*, where he inserts a newspaper headline, “Why I Hate Women—By Charles Boyer.”
3. Quoted in: Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986): 421.
4. Eva Hoffmann, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language* (New York: Penguin, 1990).
5. Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990): 357–366; here 357.
6. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (New York: Penguin, 1991): 9–21; here 17.