Institute of Art Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire,
Faculty of Creative Technologies

Billy Wilder: The Sweet and The Sour

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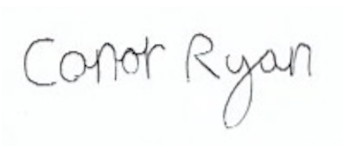
Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Hons) in Film and Television Production. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

Signed: 

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Introduction

> I would like to believe in God in order to thank him,
> but I just believe in Billy Wilder. So, thank you, Mr. Wilder. [1]
> - Fernando Trueba, the 66th Academy Awards, 1994

As I write this thesis, it is nearly twenty years since Billy Wilder passed away at the age of 95. The émigré auteur, whose films dealt with an elusive mix of the sweet and the sour, has remained a popular figure. As a director he believed in the primacy of story. Alongside his collaborators, he created complex screenplays filled to the brim with witty dialogue, suspenseful twists, and fabulous characters. I am currently writing a screenplay myself as part of my degree. It is a romantic comedy. As I embark upon this project, I believe there is nobody better to learn from than Wilder. In an effort to study his craft and to examine how he used popular genre fiction to explore difficult subject matter, I will be diving deep into a trio of political features co-written by the filmmaker; *'Ninotchka'* (1939), *'A Foreign Affair'* (1948) and *'One, Two, Three'* (1961).

Here we have three satirically-charged romcoms. Each film is deeply rooted in the era in which it was made, with Wilder placing his characters in extreme circumstances, where the individual's convictions are measured up against those of the society around them. Their morals are tested, their ideals are bent - all while the audience at home is presented with a pragmatic vision of love in the 20th Century.

The romantic comedy is often derided by film critics as saccharine and unrealistic, *"fueled by an idealized version of love"*[2]. Comedian Mindy Kaling argues that *"the genre has been so degraded in the past 20 years that saying you like romantic comedies is essentially an admission of mild stupidity."*[3] However, in this thesis I will prove that the genre is a

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[1] "Belle Epoque" Wins Foreign Language Film: 1994 Oscars. *Youtube*, uploaded by Oscars, March 25, 1994. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iqjx6rWQ4Yg
[2] Emily Yahr, *'The rom-com is dead. Good.'* (Washington D.C., The Washington Post, October 8, 2016)
[3] Ibid.

suitable vehicle for serious social commentary, a melting pot for culture both high and low alike. I aim to investigate how Wilder's films simultaneously meet and subvert our expectations of the genre.

In Chapter One, I will examine how Wilder used the classic 'meet cute' plot device in *'Ninotchka'* in order to set up the relationship at the heart of the film. I will also demonstrate that the filmmaker effectively satirised both the stern moralism of the USSR and the hideous excess of the old Russian aristocracy.

In Chapter Two, I will examine how Wilder created a high-stakes love triangle in *'A Foreign Affair'*. I will then look at how the filmmaker satirised both the fallen Nazi Germany and the burgeoning American occupation of Berlin.

In Chapter Three, I will examine how Wilder crafted a happy ending in an effort to make a difficult subject matter more palatable in *'One, Two, Three'*. I will also look at how the filmmaker satirised the culture clash at the heart of the Cold War.

By analysing each feature, we will discover that the mechanics of the romcom provided Wilder with plenty of fertile ground for interesting character arcs, narratives of metamorphosis which could reflect the changes of a wider zeitgeist. We will see how form and content co-exist in his work, as we deal with various archetypes and conventions.

Wilder's work stands as testimony to the versatile nature of the romcom. For example, *'The Emperor Waltz'* (1948), *'Sabrina'* (1954), *'The Apartment'* (1960) and *'Avanti!'* (1972), use the framework of the romantic comedy to explore class dynamics in the contexts of aristocracy and business. Others still, like *'The Seven Year Itch'* (1955), *'Love in the Afternoon'* (1957), *'Kiss Me Stupid'* (1964) and *'Irma La Douce'* (1963), investigate the very concept of love, examining fidelity, seduction, promiscuity and prostitution. Harder to categorise within a wider social context are the films *'The Major and the Minor'* (1942) and

'Some Like it Hot' (1959), features which are arguably the most transgressive works in all of Wilder's cinematography - the former having been compared to *'Lolita' (1962),* and the latter considered the final nail in the coffin of Hollywood's infamous production code censorship. Clearly, Wilder was not afraid to push the boundaries of the romantic comedy. Our three case studies in particular are as provocative and enjoyable as any romcom that I have ever seen. To turn the genre loose against a variety of volatile backdrops allowed Wilder to place his characters in high stakes situations, bringing disparate figures together in a world where compromise is a dirty word [4]. These films are dramatic and exciting. However, they remain largely unknown to the general public. In the face of obscurity, they demand reevaluation.

Wilder always brought to his films the riches of his own experiences. His stories demonstrate a very particular view of the world, that of the emigrant, the outsider. Like his characters, Wilder was always at odds with his surroundings. He spent much of his youth travelling across his native Austria, visiting his father's railway station cafés and his grandmother's hotel. Then, as a young journalist, he moved to Germany, enchanted by the bohemian hub of civilisation that was Weimar Berlin. However, when the Nazis came to power he was forced to flee persecution, as many Jews of his generation were. First he took shelter in Paris, and then finally settled down in Hollywood, which would remain his home for the rest of his life as he climbed the ranks of the studio system, from writer, to writer-director, to writer-director-producer. His was a celluloid sensibility that took equal joy in cynicism and romantic banter. His permanent fish-out-of-water status enabled him to scrutinise principles and beliefs of all kinds. He poked fun at peoples and places across the globe, with the keen eye of a roving reporter. Furthermore, he was able to do all of this through the deceptively simple lens of the romcom. He did more than just make difficult subjects accessible - he made them entertaining.

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[4] Wilder would employ a similar approach in his contributions to the screenplay for *'Arise My Love'* (1940), a romantic comedy that takes place between the end of the Spanish Civil War and the start of the Second World War. However, the tone of that film is very different from that of our case studies - less satirical and more melodramatic.

If we look at the purpose of satire then we see that it allows us to dramatise the disparity between the ideal and the reality. Surprisingly, the romantic comedy works in a similar fashion. As Cyris Henry Hoy writes, it *"presents the conflict between the ideal shape of things as hero or heroine could wish them to be and the hard realities with which they are confronted"*[5]. The biggest difference between these two comedic forms is that the romcom usually concludes with "*a reinforcement of the ideal"*[6]*,* no matter what difficulties have taken place in reality. So, in bringing the optimistic form of the romantic comedy to the pessimistic subject matter of the satire, Billy Wilder evokes hope, finding light in the darkness.

Ultimately, in contrast to the more dogmatic approach of a divisive feature like *'Don't Look Up'* (2021), I believe that my three case studies are essentially humanistic endeavours, crowd-pleasers at heart. In the following chapters, I am going to demonstrate that romantic comedy is an empathetic mode of storytelling. As it is often centred on the possibilities of human growth and mutual compromise, it is an inspiring form with which to lay bare the follies of society at large, while offering an optimistic outlook on the future. To a young filmmaker like me, the genre is uncharted territory - who better to lead the way forward than Mr. Wilder?

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[5] Cyrus Henry Hoy, *Comedy, satire and romance*, Gloria Lotha, Surabhi Sinha, Kathleen Kuiper, Deepti Mahajan, The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, version no. 6, (Britannica, Chicago, USA)
[6] Ibid.

Chapter One:

French Maids, Bolsheviks and The Lubitsch Touch

In 1939, the Second World War broke out. The USA and the USSR would soon become unlikely allies but, in spite of their common enemies, the countries could not have been more different. They were symbols of incompatible ideologies; capitalism and communism. To any budding satirists who looked, it would have been clear that, somewhere between the American dream and that special brand of Soviet socialism, there was a tension rife for parody. Perhaps more importantly, here was an opportunity for the hopeless romantics of Hollywood to prove the age old adage that 'opposites attract'. And so it was that the film 'Ninotchka' was born into the world, a Greta Garbo vehicle like no other. The feature was written by Billy Wilder, his frequent collaborator Charles Brackett, and Walter Reisch, from a story by Melchior Lengyel. It was directed by Ernst Lubitsch, a master of the romantic comedy genre - the man behind such classics as *'Trouble in Paradise'* (1932) and *'The Shop Around the Corner'* (1940). Wilder, who at this point had not yet directed a Hollywood feature himself, looked up to the older man, inspired by his mentorship and by his keen eye for detail. Both filmmakers were European Jews who had emigrated to work in 'Tinsel Town'. They brought with them to America their distinctly continental experiences. For example, the young Wilder had briefly lived hand to mouth in Paris, the so-called city of love, and it is here that the story of *'Ninotchka'* plays out. Set during the interwar period, we follow the title character, a beautiful Bolshevik woman who finds her loyalty tested as she is seduced by a handsome French aristocrat - *and by the glamorous allure of capitalism.*

If the subtext of this story is political then the fundamental mechanics of the plot are strictly human. Indeed, the satirical themes are ultimately secondary to the development of the central couple, Ninotchka Yakushova (*Greta Garbo)* and Léon d'Algout (*Melvyn Douglas)*. Here, we find the improbable combination of a sombre radical and a charming nobleman. For this inherently contradictory relationship to begin, a convincing meeting

must be contrived by the filmmakers, a chance encounter that believably brings together two polar opposites, setting the stage for the love to come. Such a fortuitous rendezvous is a classic convention of the romantic comedy, *"that suspended moment in time where the stars seem to perfectly align in order to bring two romantics together"*.[7] Commonly known as a 'meet cute', the device is perfected here by Wilder and company.

Fig.1. Still from Lubitsch, *Ninotchka* (0:26:03)

When we are first introduced to our titular heroine, she is the strictest adherent of the Soviet principles, a stone-faced Russian whose beliefs are harsh and rigid. To her, the rules and regulations of the Communist state supersede even her own happiness. However, her meeting with Léon, whose flirtations are *"typical of the local morale",* will set our heroine on a personal journey towards free will and true love. In three successive scenes, this central romance is sparked. The meet cute is cleverly constructed, as the pair encounter each other on a traffic island, Léon making his way to the Hotel Clarence as our protagonist leaves it. Ninotchka is beginning a tour of Paris, seeking to inspect the city's public utilities and make note of any outstanding technical achievements, while Léon is to meet with the other Soviet envoys on behalf of his benefactor, the Grand Duchess Swana. Each of them is following their principles, serving their convictions in some way. It is almost unthinkable that two such polar opposites should meet but, here, through sheer chance and circumstance, trapped between lanes of traffic, they do. Strangers to each other, neither of them is aware that they are on opposing sides of a political conflict. Ninotchka

[7] Karis Stephen, *I WANT A MEET CUTE AND I WANT IT NOW* (Auckland, New Zealand) Goodness Magazine, 2020)

quickly becomes the object of Léon's affections and, as cars continue to whizz by, she is unable to escape his pursuit.

Unfortunately for the aristocrat, our protagonist is not looking for romance and she only engages with the man because she is seeking *"some information"*. At first, she wants to know when the traffic police will allow them to cross the road. Then, she wants directions. It is clear that, to her, their conversation is purely utilitarian, even as her new acquaintance continues to flirt with her. The dialogue in this scene is transactional, taking shape as a series of questions and answers. The humour found therein gives the audience an immediate understanding of the differences between our characters and their respective worldviews. For example, Léon assumes that this stern woman is interested in the view from the Eiffel Tower, when, really, she is only interested in the landmark *"from a technical standpoint"*. Naturally, the characters are soon standing on the viewing platform of the Tower, looking out at their surroundings. From this vantage point, even Ninotchka, who considers the glittering city a mere *"waste of electricity"*, admits that she cannot *"deny its beauty"*. Here, as Mark Cousins observes, our protagonist mirrors the character of Dorothy Gale in *'The Wizard of Oz'*, a film that was released the same year. Both women leave behind *"the grey realities of home and (find) a land of apparent pleasure"*[8]. In this moment, Paris is clearly recognisable as the archetypal city of love, a bubbling metropolitan hub of romance. More than that though, it is a sanctuary, a place of refuge, as it must have been for Billy Wilder when he fled Nazi Germany. The city would go on to become a heavily recurring setting in the filmmaker's work, serving as the setting of films like *'Love in the Afternoon'* (1957) and *'Irma la Douce'* (1963).

If this meet cute is the beginning of the protagonists' romance, then it is a contentious one. At first, Ninotchka considers Léon *"arrogant"* and surmises that he and his capitalistic breed will soon be *"extinct"*. In return, the Parisian remains enamoured, even while he pokes fun at the Communists, sarcastically noting that he has been fascinated by

[8] Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film* (London, UK, Pavillion, 2011) p.168 - 169.

their Five-Year Plan *"for the past fifteen years"*. They are seemingly at odds with one another but in truth there is already a crackling chemistry between them - largely unspoken but still quite apparent in the innuendo and implication that is scattered throughout their dialogue. Indeed, after their visit to the Eiffel Tower, Léon invites Ninotchka to go with him to his apartment, which he dubs the city's *"greatest attraction"*. Surprisingly, our protagonist agrees to the prospect, stumbling upon a double entendre as she remarks that the aristocrat is *"an interesting subject of study".* However, her puritanical attitude does not immediately lend itself well to romance - offering Léon a backhanded compliment when she finally admits that his *"general appearance is not distasteful"*.

In spite of it all, the pair end up embracing each other and kissing but the night is ruined when they discover that they are both pursuing ownership of Grand Duchess Swana's jewels, their differences made tangible before them[9]. Léon is undeterred and continues in his courtship, but Ninotchka resists his advances, staying loyal to her state. While we are already more than thirty minutes into the film, this is where the central conflict truly takes shape, the internal struggle that will have our protagonist torn between her doctrine and her lover. It is the perfect set up from Wilder and company. As an audience we find ourselves wondering what will happen next. Will Ninotchka and Léon fall in love? And how might their forbidden romance affect their respective missions? For now, we can only guess the final outcome of the plot but, even still, we are safe and secure in the trappings of the romantic comedy genre. No matter how serious the situation becomes, we always feel free to laugh. But just who exactly are we laughing at?

Throughout this film, the primary object of ridicule is Soviet Russia, with all of its associated rhetoric and ideals. It is depicted as a cold place, both physically and emotionally; *rigid, cruel, conservative and corrupt.* If Paris serves as a symbol of glamour, capitalism and simple fun - an urban expression of Léon's most seductive qualities - then

[9] This external conflict - as established in the previous sequences - pits the lovers against each other, as they vie for the custody of a 14 piece necklace on opposite ends of an ideological battle.

Moscow comes to represent an inflexible, imposing, inhuman ideology. The hard, unfeeling nature of the Soviet state is summed up best by Ninotchka when she notes that, in winter, the swallows migrate to Paris. She suggests that the Russians have "*the high ideal"* but that the French "*have the climate"*. Her sentiment reflects the notion that the citizens of the USSR might be a principled people but they are certainly not a happy one. Indeed, at one point in the film, a May Day parade takes place but, despite ostensibly being a day of celebration for the working class, everyone who takes part walks the street with a stern face, looking decidedly less than happy. Meanwhile, Ninotchka's apartment building is stuffy and overcrowded, her room sequestered by curtains, with zero privacy and no room to make jokes about the state. Moscow is depicted as a place where three people sharing one small room is considered a luxury, where a swallow, spoiled by the glamour of Paris, is apt to reject a measly crumb of black bread, and where a neighbour can report you to the authorities for any indiscretion at any moment. It is a place where there is no music on the radio and even a love letter is censored. For Ninotchka and her comrades, when they arrive home from their mission, the city is not enough. They miss Paris but they take solace in the fact that nobody can *"censor their memories"*.

Throughout the film, Soviet Russia is a place we love to hate. And yet, here, we find ourselves identifying primarily with our title character - *who appears at first to be the perfect manifestation of this moral hellscape.* Robotic in her manner, restrained in her tastes, she is the very opposite of a classic leading lady. However, despite her cautious attitude, our protagonist is no match for Léon's charms. Under his spell, she begins to compromise her values, unable to resist the temptation before her. The character even begins to appreciate the value of laughter, learning to put aside matters of state and to simply enjoy herself for once in her life. She grows closer to Léon, joining him for a chic dinner date, drinking champagne and dancing. Ultimately, she is seduced by the nobleman and by the glamour of capitalistic Paris. Her transformation is reflected by her physical appearance, her choice of clothing becoming more and more stylish, starting with the purchase of an extravagant hat - *the very same hat which she had earlier derided as*

a symbol of Western decadence. Following this, she quickly leaves behind the moral armour of that she had initially worn, abandoning her usual coat, wearing a stylish dress and even trying on the Grand Duchess' jewels. The woman gets drunk on the joys of capitalism, gulping down champagne and enjoying the frivolity of her new lifestyle. The humour here is both personal and political, derived from the character's 'fish out of water' experience, through which we see the differences between communism and capitalism.[10]

Surprisingly, the Tsarist Russians are sometimes subjected to the same satirical treatment as the Soviets, with the filmmakers highlighting their pompous entitlement. In fact, taking this into account, it's clear that the USSR is not treated entirely unsympathetically in the feature. When Ninotchka and the Grand Duchess Swana confront each other face to face for the first time, our protagonist alludes to the failed Russian Revolution that took place in 1905. She recalls the brutal Cossack forces who had served under the Tsarist Empire, terrifying paramilitary soldiers who had whipped striking labourers, *"the most feared defenders of the throne"*[11]. In response, the Duchess does not show any remorse, and instead she glibly suggests that these men were wasting their time with whips when they had *"such reliable guns"*. As an audience member, it becomes increasingly difficult to side with the disdainful noblewoman, whose privilege is so apparent even after much of her wealth has been taken from her by the Bolsheviks. We can suppose then that the filmmakers sought to bring an even-handed satirical touch to this story. As outsiders, they were able to critique both ideologies. Thus, the film portrays capitalism as an imperfect system. If Léon represents the carefree gaieties of a capitalist

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[10] In *'A Foreign Affair'* and *'One, Two, Three'*, Billy Wilder would again exploit the 'fish out of water' archetype for satirical purposes. He would take a character and place them in unfamiliar territory, testing their beliefs. Like Ninotchka, the characters of Phoebe Frost (a prudish American congresswoman in the former film) and Otto Ludwig Piffl (a dogmatic communist from East Berlin in the latter film) undergo both internal and external transformations, their new clothes revealing their new ideals. Abandoning their rigid principles, they find more pragmatic ways to live. To Wilder, these characters are all the same. American and Soviet alike, all three are moralists at heart.

[11] Shane O'Rourke, *The Don Cossacks during the 1905 Revolution: The Revolt of Ust-Medveditskaia Stanitsa* (New Jersey, USA, Wiley, 1998) p.1

society, then the Duchess is a symbol of the cruel decadence that can flourish amidst such prosperity - and her jewels, so central to the plot, symbolic of her toxic heritage.

Now, in order to fully appreciate the political content in *'Ninotchka'*, it is worth referring to a more conventional satire, Stanley Kubrick's *'Doctor Strangeglove'* (1964), a comparatively vicious and pessimistic feature. Unlike that film, where the threat of nuclear annihilation takes centre stage, *'Ninotchka'* is more concerned with the smaller day-to-day conflicts that exist between two rival societies. Billy Wilder and Ernst Lubitsch choose to highlight a hilarious clash of cultures. Rather than a war room, much of the story takes place in the Hotel Clarence. This choice in setting is functional - *the rooms and corridors serving as transient locations where people of all sorts dwell and meet, while attentive staff pry from afar* - but it is also thematic. It is a place of temptation, embodying the best that Paris has to offer, a far cry from Ninotchka's humble Moscow abode. Here, a photograph of Lenin, on display like a religious icon, appears more than a little inappropriate. And yet, this is where we find Ninotchka's colleagues, three Soviet envoys who have been sent to Paris to sell the Grand Duchess' jewels. In an act of blatant hypocrisy, these characters are happy to use the resources of their socialist nation to fund their stay in the glamorous hotel. By the end of the film, these corrupt envoys have defected to Constantinople and it is clear to us then that they are not idealists. No, they are neither capitalists nor communists. Rather, they are opportunists. We see their greed, their incompetence, their duplicity, all of it funny and all of it undeniably human.

In conclusion, while the subject matter of *'Ninotchka'* is inflammatory, its execution is light-hearted in tone, adhering carefully to established conventions. It is actually the feature's crowd-pleasing qualities which actually allow us to digest it's political humour, *"the first of Lubitsch's films to burden weightless fantasy with the weight of the world.*[12]*"* This is the combination that would come to define Billy Wilder's work in film, a subversive marriage of form and content which I.A.L. Diamond would refer to as *"the sweet and the*

[12] Saul Austerlitz, *Another Fine Mess: A History of American Film Comedy* (Chicago Review Press, Chicago, USA) p.94

sour"[13]. In this chapter, we examined the 'meet cute', the device that allows filmmakers to establish contrasts and conflicts between a central couple. These problems must be overcome if the protagonists are to consummate their love. Such diametrically opposed figures present lots of opportunity for humour – jokes which arise from the differences and contradictions that exist between them. Better still, this comedy actually works in service of the story, as opposed to the pure satire that exists in a film like *'Duck Soup'* (1933), where the Marx Brothers' anarchic gags take precedence over plot. The narrative and the resulting farce therefore work in tandem to enforce the larger political implications of the film. Put simply, from character arises story, from story arises humour, and from humour arises theme. Naturally, this loose formula does not guarantee success, but nonetheless it is one which Billy Wilder adhered to closely.

[13] Cameron Crowe, *Conversations with Wilder* (Alfred A. Knopf, New York City, USA, 1999) P.143

Chapter Two:

Rubble, Romance and American Cigarettes

In the aftermath of the Second World War, Germany continued to be a battleground for ideological conflict. Berlin was changed forever with the arrival of the black market, the beginning of the Cold War and the enactment of denazification. It is against this backdrop that *'A Foreign Affair'* (1948) takes place.[14] Wilder conceived the project as an overt piece of propaganda, but one which would still prioritise entertainment in the telling of its tale. At that moment, storytellers across the world were left reeling from the losses and changes that had come about as a result of the war. Filmmakers, like the Italian neorealists, were breaking away from the narrative traditions that had been cemented by the men and women of Hollywood. One such director was Roberto Rossellini, whose film *'Germany, Year Zero'* (1948) told the story of a young boy in war-torn Berlin, a capital city left ravaged by bombing and fighting - *its citizens dejected and confused, forced to find a new national identity for themselves.* While Rosselini eschewed cinematic tradition, imbuing his film with a stark and heavy naturalism, Billy Wilder took the opposite approach, finding strength and comfort in the reliability of genre conventions. Here Wilder, a Jewish man, is punching up against the Nazis, kicking his former oppressors while they are down, with great justification. However, at the same time, he takes a pragmatic view of the Allies' activities, bringing an outsider's perspective to the American occupation of Berlin, critiquing it where he sees fit.

At the centre of *'A Foreign Affair'* is a love triangle, a standard but timeless plot device, where two characters compete for the affections of a third. Indeed, the film is never more

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[14] Just prior to this production, Billy Wilder had written and directed *'The Emperor Waltz'* (1948), a more nostalgic feature, set against the aristocratic backdrop of the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was a romantic comedy, a musical, that doubled as a farewell to pre-war European values. It was the only film that the émigré auteur ever set in his own native homeland. In the end, the filmmaker viewed it as an artistic failure. He had latched onto the story as a piece of escapism, something to distract himself and his audience from the recent horrors of the Holocaust. In contrast, *'A Foreign Affair'* would address the zeitgeist head on.

potent than when its three leading characters, Captain John Pringle, Ms. Erika von Schlütow and Congresswoman Phoebe Frost, are in conflict with each other, both personally and politically. When we first meet her, Frost (*Jean Arthur*) is keen to investigate the immoral goings-on in Berlin. Meanwhile, Pringle (*John Lund*) is placing his career on the line by conducting an affair with Schlütow (*Marlene Dietrich*), a German citizen. Schlütow herself is keen to maintain the relationship because of the many precious gifts she receives from Pringle, which are scarce in poverty-stricken Berlin, and because he is helping to obscure her suspicious past from the military.

Fig. 2. Still from Wilder, *A Foreign Affair* (0:52:54)

It is clear right away that both Pringle and Schlütow are potential targets of Frost's moralistic crusade. In order to throw the congresswoman off of their scent, Pringle decides to seduce her. It is here then that the filmmakers employ the love triangle, a mechanism that is often used to juxtapose two opposing characters. Here, we have a conservative politician facing off against a Nazi seductress, a satirical set-up if ever there was one. Wilder remarked later that the two characters *"don't belong in the same picture"*[15]. Indeed, the differences between Phoebe Frost and Erika von Schlütow are instantly noticeable, obvious from the very beginning, establishing a moral dilemma for John Pringle. Right away, we have a more complex situation than we would normally expect from a romcom.[16]

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[15]Crowe, op.cit., p. 80

[16] In *'The Apartment'* (1960), Wilder created a more traditional love triangle. The protagonist of that film, Bud Baxter, competes with his boss, Mr. Sheldrake, for the affections of Fran Kubelik, the elevator operator in their office building. Baxter and Sheldrake are, on the surface, quite similar - both men are keen climbers of the corporate ladder, quintessentially aspirational in a manner that has become synonymous with the American Dream. However, by the end of the film, we see that Sheldrake is a cruel philanderer, whereas Baxter is a hopeless romantic, unwilling to compromise his own integrity for the benefit of others.

Further complicating this totalitarian love triangle is another key element of the classic romantic comedy: *a conflict of interest*. Central to this dynamic is the necessity that drives each of John Pringle's relationships; *Pringle needs to distract Frost in order to save his own skin, while Schlütow needs to be with Pringle in order to avoid imprisonment in a labour camp*. That these two relationships cannot coexist in the long term, leads to inner turmoil for Pringle, after he finds himself falling in love with Frost for real and ends up torn between both women, leading a double life. The Captain does his best to maintain a clean persona when he is with Frost, masquerading under a pretension of formality and loyalty, while hiding from her the truth about his illicit affair. With Schlütow, he presents his 'real' self, a flawed man who is willing to bend the rules for his own gain. Both personally and politically, Pringle finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile his emotions with his actions. Things then escalate further when he is ordered by his superior, Colonel Plummer, to continue his relationship with Schlütow. He is compelled to act as bait in a military scheme to draw out Schlütow's former lover, Hans Otto Birgel - *a dangerous Gestapo officer, who has gone into hiding.* On the surface, Pringle's circumstances have changed very little. In reality though, the filmmakers have employed a very clever reversal, raising the stakes while demonstrating how our protagonist has grown as a person thus far.

When we first met the good captain, he was a simple opportunist. He was seeing a mysterious German - a beautiful woman who may or may not have Nazi allegiances. In spite of Schlütow's dubious politics, Pringle was happy to look the other way, embracing his own cognitive dissonance in his search for a good time. He was even prepared to seduce a congresswoman, the priggish and naive Frost, in order to hide his illicit affair. However, Pringle later discovers the full extent of Schlütow's past, her *"party affiliations"* made tangible by old newsreel footage. He finally sees past Schlütow's charms, her past sins impossible to ignore. Meanwhile, he has discovered the hidden allure beneath Frost's frigid exterior, unexpectedly falling for her. If the choice was solely his, Pringle would be happy at this point to stop seeing Schlütow and to continue his romance with Frost but

he is trapped by his loyalty to the army. To put it simply, once he had seduced a moral woman (*Frost*) for immoral reasons, but now he must ensnare an immoral woman (*Schlütow*) for moral reasons. Pringle sees the errors of his ways, recognising that he had been led astray by blatant self-interest. For the time being, he must put his own interests aside, rendezvousing with Schlütow even though it may cost him his future with Frost. Worse still, he is unable to tell Frost the truth of the matter without compromising his new mission. Like Rick Blaine in *'Casablanca'* (1942), he is now prepared to sacrifice his own happiness for the greater good, a changed man - *a moral man.*[17]

There is an old aphorism that tragedy plus time equals comedy. Nowadays, audiences have accepted the Nazis as perfect targets of satire - a status cemented by Mel Brooks, with his classic feature *'The Producers'* (1967), and reaffirmed by more recent fare like Taika Waititi's *'Jojo Rabbit'* (2019). However, back in 1948 the moviegoing public could be forgiven for finding such comedy distasteful in the wake of an atrocity like the Holocaust. To base a film on a subject as topical as denazification was a bold choice, if not an unprecedented one. Six years earlier, Ernst Lubitsch had directed *'To Be or Not To Be'* (1942), a romantic comedy that took place during the German invasion of Poland. Hot on the heels of that feature, Wilder was ready to bring his own acerbic wit into battle - taking aim at the regime that had wiped out his own family in Europe just a few years previously. In the end, *'A Foreign Affair'* is unique because it does not satirise the Nazis while they were at the height of their powers. Rather, it pokes fun at the chaos that they had left in their wake - the guilt, the rubble, and the rotten smell of indoctrination that hung in the air.[18] That the film was generally well-received at the time of release was no mean feat, as

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[17] Later still, his mission complete, Pringle finally ends his relationship with Schlütow and reconciles with the woman he truly loves, just as C.R. MacNamara ends his own illicit affair in order to reunite with his wife in *'One, Two, Three'*.

[18] Importantly, Wilder was careful not to minimise the tragedies that took place at the Nazis' hands. Even while the fascists are the targets of the audience's laughter, they are still taken seriously as a threat, one that is best represented by Hans Otto Birgel. Wilder maintains a careful balance between irreverence and respect, approaching his subject matter even handedly.

initially the aforementioned *'To Be or Not to Be' "was seen as a serious lapse"*[19] in Ernst Lubitsch's judgement, despite now being considered a classic.

Whereas a film like Charlie Chaplin's *'The Great Dictator' (1940)* parodied the right-wing threat through iconoclastic means - *directly caricaturing figures like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels, while poking fun at symbols like the swastika* - Wilder's feature takes a more measured approach, the filmmaker favouring to explore the complicity of the ordinary German in relation to the evils that had been enacted in their name. One man, Herr Maier, is brought before Captain Pringle to be reprimanded for his son's actions. It appears that the boy, Gerhard, has been graffiting swastikas all around his neighbourhood. Of course, Gerhard's father is all too eager to scold him in front of the Americans, keen to obey the new administration in town, but his brutal attitude still reminds Pringle of the Gestapo. Even the punishments that Maier proposes administering to his son bring to mind a concentration camp, a comparison that our protagonist is quick to make. Clearly, Denazification is not an easy process, not for the Americans, and certainly not for the citizens of Germany - who are desperately in need of a little less "*heel-clicking*".

If the spectre of the Third Reich were not apparent enough in Herr Maier's behaviour, the man also sports a toothbrush moustache in the style of his dead Führer. Indeed, though they are physically absent from the film, the men who had ruled the old facist regime are present throughout, their ideas hanging in the air, dying a slow death in the face of democracy. Hitler in particular is, naturally, mocked by characters throughout. His suicide, following his marraige to Eva Braun, is referred to as "*the perfect honeymoon*". He is even depicted briefly through old film footage, delicately kissing Erika von Schlütow's hand - filmic evidence of the cabaret singer's sins, which shocks Captain Pringle. In the end though, there is hope for the German people of the future. Young boys have abandoned their Hitler Youth uniforms and are now flocking, not to rallies, but to

[19] John Mundy, Glyn White, *Laughing matters: Understanding Film, Television and Radio Comedy* (Manchester, UK, Manchester University Press, 2012) p.208

baseball games, where they can enjoy their childhood again thanks to a classic American pastime. Colonel Plummer even remarks that he knew his army had won the war when he heard that one young child had been christened *'DiMaggio Schultz'*.

If Billy Wilder was taking his revenge on the Nazis, then he was also biting the hand that fed him, poking fun at his American benefactors, utilising his outsider's perspective to great effect. Here, he examined *"dollar diplomacy"* and American imperialism, while assessing the frisky conduct of the GIs who remained stationed in Berlin. This interrogation of US foreign policy begins with our protagonists, one an elected government official, the other a lowly military man. There is a clear contrast between Phoebe Frost and John Pringle, the former pursuing a congressional puritanism that is as neat as her mousy hair, while the latter follows his own promiscuous inclinations down into the rowdy rabbit hole of the Lorelei nightclub. There, we encounter all manner of American soldiers, fraternising with ally and enemy alike. Two men in particular, Mike and Joe, serve to illustrate the unscrupulous behaviour of the occupying force as they tour the burnt out city like a theme park. Prowling around on their bicycle, they mistake Frost for a German "*Fräulein*" and dangle their chocolate rations over her head in an effort to seduce her. Seeing these characters now, It is hard not to be reminded of similar figures from Wilder's *'Stalag 17'* (1953): Stanislas *"Animal"* Kuzawa and Harry Shapiro. These POWs approach the horrors of war with the same lusty attitude as their counterparts in *'A Foreign Affair'*, leering after some Russian women who have been interred in the same compound.

Wilder's approach in both cases is telling, betraying a topsy turvy sense of *joie de vivre*. Mike and Joe, little more than tourists amongst the ruins of Berlin, have been painted in a humorous light, highlighting their vice in an honest but endearing manner. Their activities are frowned upon, yes, but they are not totally immoral, certainly not to the same degree as Captain Pringle's affairs. They are human, weak-willed perhaps. They are men who rushed to the front lines, seeking the spoils of war - *women, drink, blackmarket*

goods and underground parties. After the fighting they have been through, all of the American soldiers feel they deserve a reward. If this sentiment is misguided, it is also, at least, understandable. The comradery amongst the troops, between them and their Russian colleagues even, is evident in their sing-alongs at the Lorelei. Ironically, it is the elected officials, the visiting representatives of the US Congress, who argue amongst each other. With the exception of Phoebe Frost, they chase their own agendas, pursuing political ends, bickering before their plane has even landed in Germany. They are not really concerned with the task before them, an investigation into the *"moral malaria"* infecting their occupying force, preferring to think of how their little visit to Berlin can be used to their advantage come election time. Their high status may grant these men power over the soldiers down below but their squabbling proves that they are as flawed as anyone else, Nazis notwithstanding. Clearly, Wilder is interested in exploring where foreign aid ends and colonialism begins. In the film's opening scene, one left-wing congressman remarks: "*if you give a hungry man a loaf of bread, that's democracy - if you leave the wrapper on, that's imperialism*".

Ultimately, the darkly comic setting of *'A Foreign Affair'* is unusual, but purposefully so. In one scene, Colonel Plummer suggests that the principal romance could be chronicled in a glossy magazine piece under the heavy handed title of 'The Love Commando'. Wilder would later comment that his characters had to *"fuck on the bare floor"*[20], doing their best to ignore their grim surroundings. Clearly, the filmmaker was aware of the surreal contrasts that are at play throughout the story, between love and war. While *'Ninotchka'* dealt with political themes in the traditionally romantic setting of Paris, *'A Foreign Affair'* goes one step further in its subversion of expectations by showing us that love can blossom in the most unexpected of places - *even amidst the black markets and crumbling buildings of post-war Berlin.* The film readily depicts the search for a new Germany in the aftermath of the Third Reich. We are presented with numerous possibilities as to what is in store for the country, as international forces take hold of the capital and exert their

[20]Crowe, op.cit., p. 76

foreign influence upon it. Most interesting of all is the possibility that there is valuable culture to be rescued from the sunken depths of pre-Hitler Weimar Germany. The strongest evidence of this is the film's musical sequences, which are presented as diegetic pieces. The songs are performed by Marlene Dietrich, evoking her work in *'The Blue Angel'* (1930), a classic Weimar production which launched her career. Of course, musical numbers are standard fare for romantic comedies but here the songs are elegiac, not uproarious. They function as declarations of intent. Critic Bosley Crowther once opined that the songs contained *"not only the essence of the picture's romantic allure, but also its vagrant cynicism and its unmistakable point"*[21]. No song illustrates Crowther's observation better than 'Black Market', in which Berlin is presented as a place filled with vice, where you can sell your soul for a packet of Lucky Strikes cigarettes. This choice, between abstract belief and tangible pleasure, is the driving force behind the entire story. In the end, no matter their actions, it is difficult to judge the film's characters without offering up a healthy combination of both sympathy and shame, such is the strength of Billy Wilder's bittersweet approach.

[21] Bosley Crowther, *"Jean Arthur, Marlene Dietrich and John Lund a Triangle in 'A Foreign Affair"* (New York City, US, The New York Times, July 1st 1948)

Chapter Three:

Yankees, Russkis and Soft Drink Secretariats

In the aftermath of the Second World War came the Cold War, a period of geopolitical tension between the USA and the USSR. Once more, Berlin was a key battleground in an important international conflict. With the Nazis gone, there was little left to unite the former Russian and American allies. The world was quickly divided between East and West. While Stalin, and later Kruschev, consolidated their interests, another entity set its sights on the world: *Coca Cola.* Here, Billy Wilder found the perfect vehicle for another off-the-wall romantic comedy, *'One Two Three'* (1961), a satiric masterpiece, which contains all the best qualities of both *'Ninotchka'* and *'A Foreign Affair'*. The feature captured the zeitgeist of the era perfectly, but the whole affair would turn out to be almost *too* timely, as the Berlin Wall was built in the middle of production, interrupting progress on the shoot. Nevertheless, the film gleefully pokes fun at both capitalism and communism, taking no prisoners. With a zany tone and a manic pace, it appears that Wilder wanted to "*reanimate the corpse of the 1930s screwball comedy*"[22], a subgenre that had previously helped to define that never-ending cinematic battle of the sexes we all call the romcom.

Once more, the filmmaker sets out to prove that opposites attract. Here we have Scarlett Hazeltine (*Pamela Tiffin*), the daughter of an American Coca-Cola executive, and her Soviet husband, Otto Ludwig Piffl (*Horst Buchholz*). Newly-wed in a time of great divide, they are forbidden lovers like Romeo and Juliet, separated by social strata and political ideology. Intriguingly, their first meeting takes place offscreen. We only hear after the fact that Otto had called the wealthy Scarlett *"a bourgeois parasite"*, and so, naturally, she fell in love with him. We discover their relationship through the eyes of our true protagonist, C.R. "Mac" MacNamara (*James Cagney)*, a high-level employee of the Coke organisation. Scarlett's father has tasked Mac, another American, with the job of protecting the young

[22] Austerlitz, op.cit., p.147

Southern Belle during her trip to West Berlin. Of course, when Mac finds out that she has married a communist, he panics, fearing that his career is in jeopardy. Throughout the film, he plays the role of an inverse Cupid, trying to break up the *"happy socialist marriage"*, eager to keep his boss from finding out what has happened. This clever set-up presents us, the audience, with plenty of great comedy, spread across a variety of fantastic sequences. But, released amidst political turmoil, the film was essentially a commercial failure, losing $1.6 million[23] at the box office. Its content was all too real for the viewing public. So, what was the problem? Was the film too dark? Too depressing? Well, actually, no. In spite of the subversive subject matter, the whole thing culminates in that most precious of romantic comedy conventions, perhaps the epicentre of the entire genre: *the happy ending.*

Fig.3. Still from Wilder, *One, Two, Three* (0:03:32)

Key to the traditional 'happily-ever-after' scenario is the resolution of a story's central conflicts. In this film, we have the impossible conundrum of the central relationship. Our oddball couple had initially planned to elope to Moscow, friends and family be damned. Unfortunately for them, Mac has meddled in their affairs, resulting in Otto's exile from the Eastern bloc. Now, the pair must remain in the West, much to the Soviet's frustration. Thus begins the transformation of *"the Kremlin kid"*, from hard-nosed activist to practical family man. A die-hard Marxist, at first he refuses to become a part of the capitalist system, promising to lead factory workers in a revolt against Coca-Cola. It seems that not even torture and banishment at the hands of his comrades can tear him from his ideological roots. No, in the end, it is love that forces his hand. By now, we know that Scarlett is pregnant and that this is no mere fling. This couple will soon have

[23] Tino T. Bali, *United Artists: The Company that Changed the Film Industry Volume 2, 1951 - 1978* (The University of Wisconsin Press, Wisconsin, USA, 2009) p.170

responsibilities. They will have to provide for their child. It is clear that, if Scarlett is to secure her inheritance, they need to impress her father, to fool him into believing that Otto is the perfect son-in-law. With their baby's future at stake, they must act quickly. But the upstart Communist cannot stand to bend his ideals. In an outburst of anger, he says that *"nobody should bring children into a world like this"*. His wife, upset by the radical rhetoric which had attracted her to him in the first place, begins to cry. Even Otto cannot put his politics over his wife's happiness and so he makes up with her. Thinking of his family, he finally concedes defeat, and he compromises his beliefs. Ultimately, he imagines a time when his child will live in *"a world where men are created equal, and there's liberty and justice for all"* - inadvertently quoting Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and the pledge of allegiance to the US flag. So, reluctantly, our Soviet turns into a capitalist, a change made physical by a fancy new suit, courtesy of Mac. He has quickly learned " *which wine to drink, which fork to use for fish"* and "*which knife to stab the proletariat in the back with".* He is even 'adopted' by an old aristocrat, assuming the title of a high-class gentleman. Incredibly, Otto has become a Count, and his wife, a countess. They have assumed the very opposite of the squalid lifestyle he had dreamed they would live in Moscow. The ruse a success, Mac has transformed *"a Communist firebrand into a capitalist extraordinaire in a matter of hours"*[24].

But Otto is not the only character with a personal conflict to resolve. Mac, in his race to the top of the food chain, or in his case the drinks chain, almost loses his wife and kids. Foolishly, he has an affair with his secretary, cancels a family holiday to prioritise work, and generally puts more effort into his career than anything else. Exasperated by his latest shenanigans, his wife, Phyllis (*Arlene Francis*), walks out on him. She plans to return home to the USA with their children. It becomes clear to us that MacNamara needs a little *"remodelling"* himself. He needs to change, to stop prioritising his career and to start thinking of his family. His transformation, from greedy capitalist to appreciative family man, begins with some disappointing news regarding his career. In an ironic turn of

[24] Bali, op.cit., p.148

events, Otto, now a Coca-Cola employee, has gotten the promotion that Mac has been dreaming of all along. Despite Mac's best efforts, he is faced with crushing defeat. Realising the error of his ways, he rejoins his family as they are about to board their plane back home. Unlike Otto, who undergoes a drastic ideological change, Mac's personal growth is relatively mild. Still, it is not inconsequential. On the surface, yes, he remains a capitalist - but his career is no longer his primary focus in life. Upon his return, MacNamara's family huddles together for a conference, mirroring the behaviour of some Soviet officials from an earlier scene. Finally, they regroup, toasting to their trip back home with three ice cold bottles of Coca-Cola and, much to Mac's anger, a single bottle of Pepsi - his adversary in the consumerist conflict that would later become known as the 'Cola Wars'.

In an archetypal 'Cinderella story', the romantic lead is transformed in an overt, arguably superficial, manner. In her eponymous fairytale, the character of Cinderella rises above her station after years of servitude and marries a prince. Her transformation follows a clear arc from a bad situation to a good situation, with her own morals and personality intact. In Wilder's films, however, there are no such tidy resolutions. Transformations are not so clear cut. Throughout the writer-director's filmography, ideals and beliefs are tested, bent and abandoned. In *'The Apartment'*, it is only when C.C. Baxter decides *not* to rise above his station - *to turn down a promotion, quit his job, and walk away from an unfulfilling career* - that he finally 'gets the girl'. In order to resolve the established conflicts, Wilder's characters must have a change of heart. They must compromise and grow as people if they are to live together. Thus here, Otto concedes his political ideals for a chance to live a life with his pregnant beau. He sacrifices his beliefs for love. Unlike Cinderella, he doesn't end up as royalty but, with a shiny new executive job at Coca Cola and a borrowed aristocratic heritage, he may as well have. This happy ending falls in line with a comforting and reassuring storytelling tradition. However, here it is employed in a realistic manner. Transformations and resolutions are reached through compromise, not through magic or fate or divine intervention. The characters don't get what they *want*,

they get what they *need*. The compromise between Mac and his wife actually recalls a romcom trope defined by Wesley Morris as the 'drawbridge' - *"two even halves lowering themselves toward each other - by making admissions, revealing vulnerabilities, giving in to magnetism - until both sides meet in the middle, ready to go somewhere deeper together, somewhere the audience won't see."*[25] It is impossible to deny the fairy tale quality of this resolution. Remarkably, this film provides the Cold War with the 'happily-ever-after' it has always needed.

However, in the lead-up to this finale, Billy Wilder takes no prisoners. He parodies the Communist Russians, best embodied here by three corrupt Commissars, the spiritual descendants of the envoys from *'Ninotchka'*. These bumbling fellows meet with Mac to discuss importing Coca-Cola into the USSR but, upon their arrival, they are more interested in his secretary than in making any real deal. Then, they mention a recent trade agreement with Cuba, an exchange of some *"crummy cigars"* for some *"crummy rockets"*. Amazingly, this joke predicted the Cuban Missile Crisis, which was still about a year away at the time of the film's release. Later, one of the Commissars, Peripetchikoff, will defect to the West, betraying his nation. He sees nothing wrong with this, arguing that his backstabbing is no different than what Stalin did to Trosky. To him, treachery is as much a part of Soviet tradition as any Leninist principle. In his dealings with Mac, Peripetchikoff also offers us proof of the USSR's inefficiency. He proposes that Mac trade him his secretary in exchange for a brand new *"Russian hotrod"*, an exact copy of a *"1937 Nash"*. What seems like an attractive vehicle to a Communist customer, is more than 20 years out of date for an American. The satire of the Eastern bloc continues elsewhere in the feature, as the filmmakers reference the poverty and lack of dignity in Russian state housing. Otto, oblivious to the Soviet state's shortcomings, brags that he and his wife have been assigned *"a magnificent apartment - just a short walk from the bathroom"*. Meanwhile, East Berlin is depicted as a police state, with armed guards at the Brandenburg Gate, intent on capturing American spies. It is clear that totalitarianism lives on in the paranoia

[25] Cristopher Orr, *Why Are Romantic Comedies So Bad?* (The Atlantic, Emerson Collective, Washington D.C., USA, March 2013)

of the German Democratic Republic. Wilder would later compare Russian Communism to Nazism -*"one party, no other parties are permitted"*[26].

The film presents the Cold War as the culture clash to end all culture clashes, with ideological conflict taking precedence in the story over nuclear tensions. Commust propaganda plays a key role throughout. At the very beginning of the movie, we see a parade through East Berlin, a crowd of marching Soviets. They carry banners with depictions of Kruschev and Castro on them. On other placards, they criticise the Americans, condemning U2 spy planes and the Little Rock Crisis. Then, they release into the sky a huge amount of little balloons, plastered with the slogan *'Yankee Go Home'*. Of course, the Communist state is happy to spread their own political publicity, but when they find Western advocacy on their territory, they are decidedly unhappy. Even Otto, he himself a Soviet, is arrested for carrying American propaganda by the East German police. In fact, he is forced to sign a false confession, which damns him as a US spy. With Mac's help, he escapes his dire situation, but he is then unable to return to the East, despite his strong convictions. As he says, *"to the Communist I'm an American spy, to the Americans, I'm a Communist"*. He is a pawn caught hopelessly in the gears of a maniacal ideological race. Furthermore, if Otto tries to go home, he'll be going against traffic, as people flee West. Having defected himself, Peripetchikoff approves of this migration, citing an 'old Russian proverb' - *"go West young man"*.

If Communism is condemned in *'One, Two, Three'*, then capitalism does not escape unschated. Billy Wilder, once again assuming the role of the outsider, uses his non-partisan sensibilities to take aim at 'Coca-Colonisation', the spread of American imperialism through consumer products. When we first meet him, Mac eyes the Eastern territories like a military commander, virgin territory to conquer. He leads an individualistic lifestyle, almost greedy, never satisfied with his lot in life, at home or at work. He claims to his wife that he is "*studying German'*, but this is a euphemism. The

[26] Crowe, op.cit., p.181

truth is that he is sleeping with his secretary. With all of this in mind, we could consider Mac as the essential Western man, always striving for the American Dream, no matter the cost: *he wants it all.* Elsewhere in the film, we see the results of this capitalist ideology as Billy Wilder depicts American culture as lacking in artistic merit. For example, Otto is tortured by East German Police, who drive him mad by playing the terrible rock n' roll record *'Itsy Bitsy Teenie Weenie Yellow Polka Dot Bikini'*, by pop singer Brian Hylan. Then, in Mac's office, we see a tacky cuckoo clock that plays the traditional American song *'Yankee Doodle'* once every hour, on the dot. Ultimately, the depiction here of the Western powers is brutal. Otto sums up the American system by presenting very real issues, which continue to plague the country to this day: *"unemployment, discrimination, gangsterism, juvenile delinquency"*. Still, it is inarguable that capitalism has also contributed a great deal to our lives. In the end, Mac believes that *"any world that can produce the Taj Mahal, William Shakespeare and striped toothpaste, can't be all bad"*.

Berlin is used here as once it was in *'A Foreign Affair'*, a tumultuous setting for a very funny story. The city's Nazis past remains hidden just beneath the surface of everyday life. Mac is sickened to no end by his heel-clicking employees, unable to escape their *"old gestapo training"*. Later though, McNamara will actually use their German efficiency to turn Otto into a full fledged capitalist, making use of skills that had been honed by a facist state. Our Soviet lover boy is put through a whirlwind makeover, beset upon by an army of dutiful workers who seem to miss *"the good old days"*, undaunted by the sins of their past. Ultimately, the division of the Cold War only heightens our sense of Berlin as a city condemned to forever be a conflict zone. Indeed, the East is still largely in ruins, even in the area surrounding the prestigious Brandenburg Gate. In contrast, the Western sector has steadily been rebuilt, with foreign aid and investment from America. As our narrative takes place in the 1960s, this divide is at the centre of the international media's attention. Unfortunately, Scarlett mistakenly thinks that Berlin is *"swinging"*. She says that it is the *"hottest spot in the world"*, naively misunderstanding the newspaper headlines of the period. Tensions are so high that there is no direct phone line between Western and

Eastern sectors. Still, as Otto says, tripping up over his own words, the situation is *"hopeless but not serious"*.

In conclusion, *'One, Two, Three'* is perhaps 60% satire, 40% romcom, with less emphasis on the development of the film's two couples than we have come to expect from Billy Wilder. This is a fact best demonstrated by the story's focus on Mac, an exterior figure, who enacts his schemes against Scarlett and the Soviet, and whose own relationship remains underdeveloped in comparison. However, the comedy remains brilliant, driven very effectively by character and plot. Wilder pokes fun at political jargons and *isms*, finding humour in the inherent confusion, as different terms mean different things to different people. At one point Scarlett insists that her husband is not a Communist, but a Republican, because *"he comes from the Republic of East Germany"*. Throughout the film, the filmmakers depict a city where manicures are a symbol of Western decadence, while in the East everyone is so "*secure*" that they chew their nails off with anxiety. The opposing systems of capitalism and communism are each depicted as flawed, crippled by hypocrisy. Otto cannot help but wonder: "*Is everybody in this world corrupt?*" It is a question posed not just by the character but by his creator, Billy Wilder himself, the well-travelled social critic. Ultimately, with its careful mix of satire and romantic comedy, *'One, Two, Three'* proves that Hollywood can always find a happy ending, even amidst the chaos of the Cold War.

Conclusion

As we have seen in our three case studies, the romantic comedy (the sweet), is a suitable vehicle for serious political satire (the sour). With these films, Billy Wilder successfully used the genre to parody the rigid morals of Bolshevism, the decadence of capitalism, the difficulties of denazification, the might of American imperialism, and the high-stakes hypocrisy of the Cold War. Each film depicts a *'Kulturkampf'*, a conflict between two deeply opposing values, mirrored in the trials and tribulations of the central romance.

Key to the success of each feature was the filmmaker's personal perspective, that of an outside figure who could deliver fresh observations on age-old conflicts, tapping into the zeitgeist of each era that his stories covered. With every joke and jibe, we find the émigré auteur grabbing his cinematic thermometer and gauging the political temperature of the 20th century. Most importantly, Wilder portrayed his characters sympathetically, using the reliable conventions of the romcom to strip back any idealistic posturing and to find the common humanity amongst them all.

Ninotchka Yakushova, Phoebe Frost, Otto Ludwig Piffl - each is a moralistic figure, a stone-faced purveyor of ethics, transformed, bent by compromise, lured into a new life by love, as symbolised by a drastic change of outfit. In the end, principles are proven ineffectual in and of themselves, rendered meaningless by sheer human fallibility. Pragmatism and opportunism prove the only '*isms*' that make sense in a world where *"nobody's perfect"*[27]. Surrounded by towering political forces, bureaucratic and corrupt, our characters take comfort in their blossoming relationships, finding meaning in a potential future with their partner.

Throughout the films, outside forces attempt to meddle in our romantic leads' relationships. Characters like C.R. MacNamara, Erika von Schlütow and the Grand Duchess Swana each

[27] *Some Like It Hot.* Directed by Billy Wilder, performances by Jack Lemmon and Joe E. Brown, United Artists, 1959

serve their own interests. They seek to further their own position in a tumultuous world but in the end they fail. Love prospers and the audience can move on with a happy ending in their heads, reassured that there is hope for humanity.

I believe that these case studies disprove any notion of the romcom as just a trivial genre with little or no content beneath its repetitive form. I believe that I have shown the strengths of the romantic comedy formula, demonstrating how it provides a valuable framework through which an audience can glean genuine insight into difficult subject matters - while still receiving the entertainment value they pay for.

Comedy can often be seen as "*a challenge to narrative*"[28], as a mode which resists constraints. As they work within their own precise rhythms, "*jokes, gags, and comic moments tend to resist integration into larger structures*"[29]. Indeed many film comedies, like *'Airplane!' (1980)* and *'Monty Python's The Meaning of Life'* (1984), place emphasis on successive scenes as individual opportunities for humour, rather than as moments which emphasise character or plot development. However, Billy Wilder proved with his own comedies that story is more important than any one punchline. He showed that comedy and narrative can co-exist. In his mixture of the sweet and the sour, of the amorous and the political, he demonstrates a profound understanding of human nature.

'Ninotchka', 'A Foreign Affair', and *'One, Two, Three'* - at the time of their initial release, these features were hilarious and provocative works of social satire. Looking at them in retrospect, they have also become valuable historical documents. Viewing our three case studies in their proper context *"allows us to see not only how humour entertained, but also how it worked as a cultural practice that both organized social order and revealed shared assumptions about society and politics."*[30]

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[28] Celestino Deleyto, "Humor and Erotic Utopia: The Intimate Scenarios of Romantic Comedy" *A Companion to Film Comedy,* ed. Andrew Horton, Joanna E. Rapf (UK, John Wiley & Sons, 2013) p.180
[29] Ibid.
[30] Martina Kessel, *The Politics of Humour: Laughter, Inclusion, and Exclusion in the Twentieth Century* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2012) p. 14

Ultimately, whether or not filmmakers will ever resurrect the romcom's satiric potential remains to be seen, but nonetheless Wilder's work should stand as testimony to the genre's lasting power. As he said himself not long before his death in 2002: *"You make pictures based on truth. You make pictures based on the way you feel. Of course romantic comedy is still alive."*

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