

Chapter 1

AN ACCENTED CINEMA

“An accent is the tell-tale scar left by the unfinished struggle to acquire a new language.”

—André Aciman¹

“[When I came to the US], it was too late for me to lose my accent, but not to appreciate this country.”

—Billy Wilder²

Modernity and “Amerikanismus”: Two Tales of Mass Culture

In the mid-1940s, when Billy Wilder had established himself as a major director in Hollywood after the success of *Double Indemnity* and *The Lost Weekend*, only a few miles away, his fellow exiles Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer were setting forth their take on the US film industry in their now famous essay, “The Culture Industry.” In it, they described Hollywood as part of a system of mass entertainment that exemplified a modernity gone awry. They understood the culture industry to be a centrally controlled force that produces standardized and homogenizing cultural commodities, that negates individuality and style, and that turns its receivers into a mass of duped consumers. Even though Adorno stressed elsewhere that what he saw in Hollywood he had already seen prefigured at the Ufa studios in Berlin in the early 1930s, it is clear that his dark view about American popular culture was shaped in no small measure by his experience of dislocation during his southern California exile.

In many ways, Billy Wilder’s view about Hollywood could not have been further apart from that of Adorno and Horkheimer. A central player within the studio system and the beneficiary of its professionalism and proficiency, Wilder was an eloquent defender of its classic era and mourned its demise in the 1950s. Even if there were stabs at studio bosses or producers, Wilder took pride in the films he and others wrote, directed, and

produced, and he valued the intelligence of his audience. As Ed Sikov, the most thorough and astute of Wilder's many biographers, wrote: "At an early age he learned to work the system, in middle age he became it, and he hung on as long as he could, to his own enormous benefit."³

Drawing on the writings of Theodor W. Adorno may be an unusual way to introduce the films of Billy Wilder, as there is little common ground between the forbiddingly difficult philosopher and the creator of some of the most entertaining films of the 20th century. If I do bring up Adorno, then it is not only because his inability and unwillingness to adapt to the American way of life provides a contrasting experience of exile to Wilder's achievement in Hollywood, but more importantly because his thoughts on the culture industry permit us to better understand the contested role of mass culture in 1920s Vienna and Berlin, which shaped both Adorno's and Wilder's career. In fact, Adorno and Wilder's very different success stories in southern California were prefigured in the aesthetic views and professional skills they developed during the 1920s. In important ways, Adorno's writings and Wilder's scripts and films can be seen to articulate different responses to the *same* historical experience, namely the belated and furious modernization of Germany and Austria after 1900 and the rise of fascism. They offer opposite, but not unrelated assessments of the role of mass culture for the process of modernization, and what role modernism, understood as a discourse articulating and responding to modernity, should play vis-à-vis the increasing commodification of culture. To understand these different assessments, a historical digression is in order.

Germany and Austria's military defeat in World War I brought about the end both of the Austro-Hungarian Empire as well as the rule of the German Kaiser. The demise of the Austrian monarchy was in fact foreshadowed by the death of the Emperor Franz Josef in 1916, whose ostentatious funeral the ten-year-old Wilder witnessed in Vienna. After 1918, in both Germany and Austria all traditional and aristocratic notions of culture became subject to heated public debate, and a central issue in these debates was the influence of American culture. While the postwar economic and political presence of the United States in Germany and Austria was more or less accepted, culture, many people thought, had survived without casualties. Thus discussions about Americanization were mapped onto discussions of German culture per se, and about the relationship between high culture and popular or mass culture.

Germany and Austria, as well as other European countries and Russia, experienced after the war an unprecedented onslaught of what was dubbed 'Amerikanismus,' a buzzword that implied both peril and promise. This onslaught was felt on the level of both economics and culture. American loans provided the backbone for postwar recovery. The Model T became a symbol of middle-class prosperity, the autobiography of Henry Ford became a German bestseller, and Fordism and Taylorism became widely discussed and influential modes of production and consumption.

The Austrian writer Karl Kraus, a dominating figure in the Vienna publishing world into which Wilder would enter in 1925, invented the term "Fordschritt," a pun that underscored that Fordism had become synonymous with "Fortschritt," the German word for progress. American dance, whether in the form of the Charleston or the performances of Josephine Baker, as well as boxing and other spectator sports became widely popular among Germans and Austrians. While for some American mass culture foreshadowed a homogenization of the world, for others it became a force that could subvert the pretentiousness of traditional elite culture. The import of jazz, for example, provoked a heated debate that showed that more than a mere form of entertainment was at stake here. For the critic Hans Siemsen, jazz became an agent for democracy: "Had only the Emperor danced jazz. All that happened would never have occurred. But oh! He would have never learned it. To be the Emperor of Germany is easier than to dance jazz."⁴ In a similar vein, young Billie Wilder saw jazz as an agent for a cultural rebirth, concluding a review of a performance of Paul Whiteman's jazz orchestra in Berlin with the words: "For jazz? Against jazz? The most modern music? Kitsch? Art? Necessity! The exigent rejuvenation of a fossilized Europe!"⁵

For the broad mass of Europeans, the main agent of Americanization was the moving picture. Parallel with America's rise to global importance, it emerged as the dominant form of entertainment. As a vehicle for exporting the American way of life and stimulating demand for American products it proved unrivaled. Combining leisure with commercialism, Hollywood became the strongest promoter of the American dream and the primary instrument for selling American culture in Europe. Cinema thus assumed a central position for the Americanization of Weimar Germany, and particularly Berlin, a city so close in spirit to the American metropolis that Mark Twain dubbed it "Spree-Chicago." At the intersection of commerce and art, of industry and craft, Hollywood cinema became representative of the erosion of traditional distinctions between culture and commodity, art and artifice, personal creativity and assembly-line production, the fusion of high and low culture, and a catalyst for the formation of a homogenized mass culture. Cheaply produced and easily exported, film became a truly international medium and art form, which easily transcended geographic, cultural, and, until the introduction of sound, linguistic barriers. For the German film industry that emerged after World War I, Hollywood became the role model for its own rise to international significance as well as its strongest competitor in its domestic market. As I will show in more detail below, it was precisely the competitiveness between the world's two biggest film industries at that time that would also guarantee their compatibility, making it possible for many German film directors, stars, cameramen, set designers, technicians, and writers (including Wilder) to enjoy a successful transition from Berlin to Hollywood (and sometimes back).

For Billy Wilder, as for so many of his contemporaries, the cinema was the institution, medium, and art form that became the very engine of modernization. Even more than other forms of American-influenced mass culture it promised a break from stifling traditions, an alternative to 18th and 19th century notions of *Kultur*, which often excluded the less educated and the less wealthy. Having grown up in the outer provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the American-influenced metropolis of Berlin gave Wilder the opportunity to reinvent himself. Only a few years later, the experience of exile would force Wilder to square an imaginary America with the real thing, but even though that process entailed personal hardship and disillusionment, it did not change his belief in the cinema as a vehicle for modernization and the democratization of society.

For Theodor W. Adorno, however, mass culture was not an agent of democratization but of repression. His exile in Hollywood amplified his already existing skepticism toward mass culture into a dark and pessimistic account of the overall project of modernity. Writing from an immediate postwar perspective, Adorno saw a close relationship between the Nazi's use of mass culture in the service of mass deception and the role of the culture industry in capitalist America, a triangulation, in fact, of mass production, mass consumption, and mass murder. Adorno concluded that what had begun in the Enlightenment as a process of liberation had turned on itself; the glorification of reason had itself become the myth it had set out to shatter, leading to an instrumentalization of reason that served to dominate the self, and that eventually led to Auschwitz.

Adorno and Wilder's very different assessment of mass culture led also to their contrary understandings of modernism. For Adorno, the value of modernist literature lay precisely in its resistance to the increasing commodification of culture. The prose Adorno favored (Beckett, Proust, Kafka) eschewed mimetic forms of representation, thereby insisting on the autonomy of the work of art. Art for him was the negation of the negativity of reality, a negation through which the work of art preserved its claim to truth. He therefore relegated to an inferior realm of art all that which compromised this autonomy—realism, naturalism, reportage literature, and political art. If Adorno is *the* critic of the Great Divide, Wilder, in contrast, is indebted to a version of modernism that tries to overcome or undo that divide. Wilder's cinema follows an aesthetic that challenges that divide by blending high and popular culture, art and artifact. His films strive to articulate and mediate the experience of modernity as it manifested itself in journalism, fashion, advertising, architecture, photography, radio, and of course the cinema itself. Miriam Hansen has called this a vernacular modernism, "because the term vernacular combines the dimension of the quotidian, of everyday usage, with connotations of discourse, idiom, and dialect, with circulation, promiscuity, and translatability."⁶ Wilder's scripts and films can indeed be seen as an extended commentary on the multiple and rivaling forces of modernism, depicting with nuance and wit

its ambivalent and often paradoxical repercussions. Thus next to celebrating its innovations, its challenge to tradition, and its rejuvenating power, Wilder's films also tally its negative impact—the alienation and isolation of the individual, and the cynicism and hypocrisy of society.

From the Shtetl to the Studio

The preceding discussion of 1920s modernity puts us in a better position to understand Wilder's early career, which is shaped by the influx of American popular culture in Vienna and Berlin, as well as a good dose of self-styled Americanization. Born as Samuel Wilder in 1906 in Sucha, a small town in the province of Galicia in the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (now Poland), he was the son of assimilated Jewish parents who had little in common with the more orthodox communities in which they lived. His father, Max Wilder, owned a chain of train station restaurants and later a hotel in Kraków. His mother, Eugenia Baldinger, came from a Polish family of hotel owners; as a young girl she had spent some time with relatives in New York, and her enthusiasm for all things American led her to change the names of her sons Samuel and the two-years older Wilhelm into Billie and Willie. The latter would eventually also go on to work in Hollywood, producing and sometimes directing B-pictures under the name W. Lee Wilder.

If Billie's name was inspired by the Wild West show of Buffalo Bill which his mother saw at Madison Square Garden, his and his brother's imaginations were shaped by their mother's tales of cowboys and Indians, New York skyscrapers, the wealth and wholesomeness of the American people, and the speed and excitement of the lifestyle in the United States. It is not surprising, therefore, that Billy Wilder's professional interests would be nurtured by a heavy dose of Americanization. After his family moved to Vienna in 1916, Wilder got interested in the world of theater and entertainment. Upon graduating from high school in 1924, he enrolled at



Figure 1.1. Billie as Racing Reporter

the university to study law, but quickly abandoned that pursuit to take a job as a reporter for *Die Stunde*, a sensationalist daily newspaper. His role model and later mentor was the star journalist Egon Erwin Kisch who was known for his fast and furious investigation style, calling himself a 'rasender Reporter' (racing reporter) in a widely-read 1924 collection of his writings. Kisch himself consciously

imitated the American newspapermen he had observed during a stay in the US a few years earlier.

In 1926, Wilder's enthusiasm for American jazz led him to quit his Viennese reporting job in order to accompany the band leader Paul Whiteman to Berlin, and Wilder fell in love with the capital of the Weimar Republic—theater, film, the arts, architecture, cafés, night clubs, sports, speed, decadence, it was all happening here. Berlin in the 1920s was the most Americanized of German cities, and Billie Wilder was one of its most Americanized inhabitants. The journalist Hans Sahl described Wilder's appearance as "a slender young man who wore his hat slanted, buried his hands in his pockets, and played the American long before we had even discovered America."⁷⁷ At the Romanisches Café and other venues, high and low culture mingled. Here Wilder made the acquaintance of writers such as Paul Erich Marcus—known as Pem—Hans Lustig, Max Kolpe, Oskar Maria Graf, Kurt Pinthus, Erich Maria Remarque, Klabund, and Kisch, but also of show business people such as Peter Lorre, Felix Joachimson, Friedrich Hollaender, Carola Neher, and Marlene Dietrich, with many of whom he would work again as part of the community of exiles that flocked to Hollywood after Hitler's rise to power.

In the mid 1920s, when Wilder arrived in Berlin, the Weimar Republic had finally emerged from the severe political and financial crises that had marred the first years of the nascent German democracy, entering into a phase of relative economic and political stability that would last until the stock market crash on Wall Street in October 1929. The vibrancy and vitality of this recovery was perhaps nowhere more visible than in the expansion of Germany's press, which at that time could boast over four thousand titles, including daily newspapers, weeklies, tabloids, special interest magazines, many of them part of the increasingly popular illustrated press. In Berlin alone, there were forty-five morning papers, two lunchtime papers, and fourteen evening papers. A significant number of them were owned by the immensely influential Ullstein Press, which had become the largest publishing house in Europe and probably the most diversified in the world. Through the help of Kisch, Wilder found work as a freelance writer with the popular *B.Z.*, *B.Z. am Mittag*, *Berliner Nachtausgabe*, and most notably *Tempo*, writing short tabloid pieces on film and entertainment, celebrities, and all aspects of daily life in the metropolis. He continued writing more feuilletonistic pieces for the Viennese *Die Stunde* and *Die Bühne*, but eventually succeeded in also placing longer articles in the upscale *Berliner Börsen Courier* and *Der Querschnitt*. The latter was a literary and artistic review that can be best described as Ullstein's answer to *The New Yorker*, featuring a broad mix of celebrated contemporary writers, photography, and popular culture, and promoting a new cosmopolitan outlook and sophisticated lifestyle.

Not only *Der Querschnitt*, but also the development of the Berlin press in general has to be seen as a creative reaction to what was happening in

the newspaper metropolises of New York and Chicago. The figure of the “racing reporter,” which Kisch emulated so successfully, stands for a form of journalism driven by the hectic beat of the big, multifaceted American city and its endless stream of events and news. In the jungle of the city, the reporter becomes the figure who detects, captures, unearths, and gives shape to the many stories the masses generate, multitasking by revealing secrets, indicting or defending certain causes or developments, lending a face to the individual in the crowd for a reading public with a subscription for a daily dose of sensationalism. A central figure of the modern metropolis, the reporter supercedes the *flâneur* of the turn of the century who strolled through the city, drawing portraits rather than taking snapshots, registering ripples rather than eruptions, looking to preserve the traces of a rapidly disappearing present. Driven by curiosity, the reporter in contrast chases events in a round-the-clock effort, turning them into bite-sized stories that a restless reading public can devour on the run.

Wilder’s own freelance writings from his Vienna and Berlin years are typical of this new professional profile. They consist of an eclectic mix of film and theater reviews, interviews with famous and would-be famous people, and short glosses on the life of the metropolis, but his tasks also included covering the crime beat and concocting crossword puzzles. Most celebrated is his “Aus dem Leben eines Eintänzers,” an undercover report of sorts in which he describes his experience as a hired dancer at an elegant Berlin café, dancing with single women or women whose husbands are not up to the task. For *Tempo*, Wilder even posed as a woman—sometimes as “Billie,” (of course a woman’s name in the Anglo-American world), sometimes as the Parisian “Raymonde Latour”—to answer in a Dear Abby-like column the letters of predominantly female readers.

Wilder’s multifaceted experience as a reporter had a lasting influence on his writing style. This profession trained his attention to details; his ability to sketch a situation, a chain of events, or a character; to capture in the everyday a sense of rhythm, urgency, and drama; to register a diverse repertoire of figures, with their own dialect and physiognomy; and for the formative power of dialogue and language. It was Wilder’s background as a newspaperman that would guide his career from ghostwriter, and then credited screenwriter for Ufa, to his Hollywood career as writer and then writer-director. Wilder’s first credited script, *Der Teufelsreporter*, celebrates speedy American reporting practices, and in fact stars Eddie Polo, a minor American film star, as the racing reporter working for the newspaper *Rapid*. The reporter is a figure central to Wilder’s work, and recurs most strongly in *Arise, My Love*, *Ace in the Hole*, and *The Front Page*. In a broader sense, investigative journalism provides the framework or plot dynamics of many of the major films, including *Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Hold Back the Dawn*, *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, and *Fedora*. Hallmarks of journalism often dominate his films—an ability to quickly size up a person or a situation, a sense for the strongly paced narrative and the

key dramatic moments, a love for gritty realism and a frankness about the baser motives for action, often combined with the urge for a strong finish and a concluding punchline.

The transition from reporter to screenwriter was facilitated by the coffeehouse connections, which Wilder carefully cultivated. Ironically, it was his work on the avantgarde, noncommercial *Menschen am Sonntag* that opened the doors to the highly commercial Ufa studios. Made on a shoestring, the film brought together a number of then largely unknown film professionals who would go on to have remarkable careers in Weimar Germany and Hollywood: Robert and Kurt Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer, Fred Zinnemann, and Eugen Schüfftan, who had gained recognition in the industry for his special effects for Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.⁸ Focusing on a day of rest in the life of four young Berliners, the film shows the flipside of the fast and furious life in the big city—the Sunday escape of the city dwellers to a nearby lake for swimming and picnicking. Wilder's script, based on an exposé by Kurt Siodmak, takes an ironic look at the dialectics of leisure. On their one day off, all of Berlin treks to the sites of relaxation, leaving the city virtually empty. The escape from the masses proves to be impossible because the desire for that escape is the effect of post-Wilhelminian modernity. Modernization creates both the time and the need for leisure, which in turn leads to a rapid commercialization and expanding of the leisure industry. The four protagonists have to find out that there is no outside of modernity.

Menschen am Sonntag is also the first of many Wilder films that makes reference to the cinema, the film industry, and its stars. When a planned evening at the movies falls through, a couple gets into a fight that culminates with each partner taking a turn in tearing up a photo of the other's favorite film star. Filmed with lay actors and on location, and presenting many documentary-style shots of the metropolis and its bucolic surroundings, the film embraces a cinema vérité style that stands in distinct contrast to the high production values and carefully scripted storylines of the contemporary studio production. In two newspaper articles, Wilder cleverly promoted the film by turning its monetary limitations into a virtue, presenting the filmmakers as the "Group from the Film Studio 29"—alluding to the year of the film's making—whose unique artistic vision is to convey "truth" in representation (a PR strategy successfully imitated by the Danish Dogma filmmakers of the late 1990s). Yet neither the Siodmak brothers nor Wilder had any problems switching to mainstream cinema once the popular success of *Menschen am Sonntag* made such a move possible.

Wilder's ability to make a seamless transition from an artistically ambitious and innovative film to working in an industry that produced highly commercial, genre- and star-driven films is emblematic of his approach to modernism.⁹ High and low are for Wilder not two mutually exclusive concepts but opposite poles between which he moved effortlessly throughout his career. Of all Wilder's subsequent films as writer or director, only



Figure 1.2. Lover's quarrel over film stars in *Menschen am Sonntag*

Mauvaise Graine would entertain certain aesthetic similarities with *Menschen am Sonntag*, most certainly because it was made under equally difficult professional circumstances. While many other subsequent works would also stake a claim as serious, thought-provoking entertainment, innovative on both a formal and narrative level, the many credited and uncredited film scripts and exposés Wilder would write in Germany between 1929 and 1933 can hardly be counted among those.

When Wilder signed on with Ufa in 1929, the German film industry was undergoing radical transformations. The transition to sound, which took until 1931 to be completed, posed a tremendous challenge to the industry and permanently changed its face. Coming on the heels of the world economic crisis, this costly revamping of film production and exhibition forced the industry to streamline its operations, to redefine its artistic profile along more commercial lines, and to seek closer contact with the German state in order to avoid domination by the American majors. These dramatic changes played into the hands of Alfred Hugenberg, a rightwing media mogul and early supporter of Hitler, who was seeking increased political influence through expansion of his media empire. A partowner of Ufa since his 1927 bailout of the company after Lang's *Metropolis* nearly

bankrupted it, Hugenberg promoted escapist fare with wide popular appeal—most notably spectacular musical comedies but also nationalistic Prussian films—which were symptomatic of his distinct conservatism in artistic matters. The increased influence of nationalist groups in the film industry led to a rise of anti-Semitism, which became glaringly obvious with the dismissal of influential producer Erich Pommer in 1933. Thus, in many ways the end of silent film also proved to be the end of the golden era of German filmmaking, leading to a demise of its international reputation and reach, its artistic stature, and its economic competitiveness. It also led to a second wave of emigration, with stars like Marlene Dietrich, directors such as Wilhelm (later William) Dieterle and Edgar G. Ulmer, screenwriters such as Vicki Baum, and cameramen like Karl Freund seeking career opportunities in Hollywood, following in the path of such accomplished professionals as Ernst Lubitsch, F.W. Murnau, E.A. Dupont, Emil Jannings, and Conrad Veidt.¹⁰ The third wave of talent drain, only three years later, would be a tidal wave, caused by Joseph Goebbels' "Aryanization" of the German film industry.

The timing of Wilder's entry into the German film industry would prove doubly ironic. Even though the classic era of German cinema was now over, in Hollywood Wilder would be associated with German expressionism and Weimar art cinema, cleverly cashing in on a cultural capital to the accumulation of which he had contributed absolutely nothing. Just as every actor in exile would claim to have been trained by Max Reinhardt, every film professional would be eager to be seen as an active player during an era when the German film industry had been commercial and artistically a close second to the Hollywood studios. The second irony lay in the fact that even though Wilder's breakthrough as a screenwriter was with a silent film, the advent of sound was tremendously important for his career. Here he could use his talent for witty, fast-paced dialogue and double entendres, and for sketching characters and situations that in their complexity could not have been conveyed by intertitles or purely visual means.

The scripts Wilder wrote for the next three years at Ufa would squarely fit in Hugenberg's aesthetic agenda. His main genres would become film operetta or comedy with strong musical elements, and their stories would often revolve around couples that have real or imagined adulterous affairs, or where cases of mistaken identity occur. Paired with Walter Reisch or Max Kolpe, Wilder also wrote Vienna-inspired fantasies, which would prove to be just as profitable, and just as little inflected with contemporary reality, when recreated only a few years later on the Hollywood lots. A notable exception is Wilder's adaptation of Erich Kästner's famous children's novel, *Emil und die Detektive* for Gerhard Lamprecht's 1931 film of that title, which turned out to be one of the most popular films of the late Weimar Republic. Throughout his Hollywood career, Wilder would follow this example, repeatedly adapting sources that had proven popu-

lar with audiences and readers. The thirteen credits Wilder garnered for either script or original idea during these short years have to be seen as an impressive statement about his work ethic, creativity, versatility, and adaptability within the Berlin film industry. The stories and ideas Wilder wrote or collected during this period contain a remarkable reservoir of plot elements, situations, characters, and themes that would be tapped time and again, in ever-changing variations, in his American work.

Even though writers at Ufa did not work at the studio compound, the position of the writer within the studio system, the demand the system made on being fluent in a variety of genres, and for creating roles and dialogue with certain stars in mind, the ability to work in a team, and the acceptance of the overall low status of the writer within the studio hierarchy proved to be a training that guaranteed Wilder's swift adaptation to the Hollywood system, once he had overcome the initial language barrier. The Ufa at which Wilder worked was a highly commercialized production system in which the star and the starvehicle assumed a pivotal role. As Wilder told an interviewer, he saw no difference between the American and the German use of the star system: "Just think of the Willy Forst, Willy Fritsch, and Lilian Harvey films. Pommer's Ufa differed in no way from Hollywood. As Ufa boss, he had exactly the same goals as Samuel Goldwyn—let the audience escape their everyday worries for a few hours and lead them to a beautiful dream world."¹¹

Interestingly, Wilder's only film to feature these three leading stars of the Weimar sound film provides a most interesting commentary on precisely this issue—the significance of Hollywood for the contemporary German imagination and the rivalry of the two national film industries. *Ein blonder Traum* is a typical Ufa "Tonfilmoperette" that revolves around the attraction of two window cleaners—Willy I (Fritsch) and Willy II (Forst)—to the small-time circus performer Jou-Jou (Harvey), who has come to Berlin because she thinks the city will be a springboard to stardom in Hollywood. The first of Wilder's many buddy movies, the lighthearted story follows the rivalry, nearbetrayal and reconciliation between the two men as they vie for Jou-Jou's attention, concluding with the inevitable happy ending when Willy II retreats so that Willy I can marry Jou-Jou. Peppered with upbeat songs, constant diegetic and nondiegetic music, and Jou-Jou's dance numbers, the film's most startling element is a seven-minute dream sequence in which Jou-Jou travels to America by train, traversing mountain tops and the bottom of the ocean, to be greeted by the Statue of Liberty, and welcomed enthusiastically by waiting fans in Hollywood. Yet the dream turns to nightmare when she has to audition in front of an imposing studio boss and his many underlings. During a dance number, Chaplin-style shoes appear on her feet and immobilize her, and her voice deepens to a bass in the midst of a song, much to the *schadenfreude* of the onlookers. When she abruptly awakes from her nightmare, she has (for now) been cured of her desire to become an American star. This debunk-



Figure 1.3. Jou-Jou's Home Sweet Hollywood in Berlin

ing of Hollywood is reinforced during the resolution of the film when Willy II pleads with Mr. Merryman, Hollywood's representative in Berlin, not to take Jou-Jou with him, saying: "Film! That's no profession for adults." Instead, Jou-Jou is to become a good housewife and supportive partner for her working husband.

Clearly, the message is that it is dangerous for the little shop girls who go to the movies to confuse illusion and reality. Rather than striving for stardom or independence, they are to assume traditional domestic roles. Hollywood, the film suggests, is a place where dangerous illusions are created, which when not recognized as such can have detrimental effects on the viewing public, especially young women. The irony of this stern warning lies in the fact that it was conveyed in a genre that borrowed heavily from contemporary Hollywood sights and American sounds. Even though the musical comedy drew on the traditions of the European operetta, its combination of hit songs and elaborate dance numbers was inspired by Hollywood. The high production value, first-rate cast and staff, extraordinary cinematography, and the simultaneous release of French and English language versions indicated that *Ein blonder Traum*, as so many other films in this genre, was meant to rival American competitors in various international markets by beating them at their own game. Despite the anti-Hollywood message, the film celebrated the same virtues that American films in this genre would often do, especially when set in the depression

era—an upbeat, optimistic outlook on life, a healthy pragmatism, self-confidence, good looks, and the proverbial bit of luck. References to current political or social problems are kept at a minimum and never provide insurmountable obstacles. Thus, *Ein blonder Traum*, which premiered in 1932 at the height of the economic crisis in Germany, is devoid of even the most remote allusions to a contemporary reality—no unemployment, no political battles in the streets of Berlin, no dirt. As the Republic became more and more politically divided, Ufa churned out evermore harmonious fare. With Hugenberg at the helm, Ufa had become a studio largely at the service of diversion and distraction. No wonder, then, that when Theodor W. Adorno wrote about the US culture industry he was reminded of the last years of Weimar cinema.

Writer, Director, Producer, but no Auteur

Billy Wilder is one of the most admired and successful directors of the classical period, with a fifty-plus-year career that has garnered him six Academy Awards, four films on the American Film Institute's list of 100 greatest American films, and more films on the National Historic Register of classic films deemed worthy of preservation than any other director. His life and career have attracted the attention of numerous critics, interviewers, and biographers, not to mention that of fellow directors and writers. His life has been scrutinized, and his films have been celebrated in monographs by Hellmuth Karasek, Kevin Lally, Maurice Zolotow, Axel Madsen, Bernard Dick, Claudius Seidl, and Tom Wood, to mention only the most important ones. What is surprising, however, is that critical work on Wilder has lagged behind considerably, with virtually no booklength contribution since the late 1970s. Steven Seidman's 1977 *The Film Career of Billy Wilder* was the first—and still sole—overall assessment of critical writings about Wilder, while the most comprehensive analytic study to date remains Neil Sinyard and Adrian Turner's 1979 *Journey Down Sunset Boulevard*, which appeared a year later in Germany in an extended version in conjunction with a retrospective of Wilder's films for the 30th Berlin Film Festival. While certain individual films have enjoyed significant critical attention in essays and book chapters, there exists no current comprehensive analytic study of Wilder's films. Compared with the "industry" that has sprung up around Hitchcock or Lang, scholarly work on Wilder has been truly negligible. Whatever the reasons for this may be—chief among them, I suspect, is the still lasting influence of auteurist criticism I address below—the time is ripe for a critical reassessment of Wilder.¹²

Among the existing works on Wilder, two types of books predominate—the interview book and the biography (with the latter often relying heavily on the former). The reasons for this are Wilder's fascinating life in politically tumultuous times in four countries and his central and

long-lasting status in the US film industry, as well as his unmatched talent as an interview partner, who could always be counted on to say something witty, learned, or naughty. Given this publication record, it becomes particularly important to stress the limitations of using what he or others had to say about his life as an interpretive framework for his films. While Wilder's prolific and eloquent responses to interviewers are certainly too important a resource to be ignored, we must be careful not to attribute to them an explanatory function that would exceed that of his films. Instead, we must realize that the sharp-tongued interview partner Billy Wilder is as much a creation as the characters of his screenplays and in fact often adheres to the same demands of entertaining an audience—to be witty, original, and unpredictable. His credo never to be boring has also led him never to tell the same tale twice, thereby modifying or embellishing his life story in rather startling dimensions and giving rise to all kinds of myths and misperceptions.

Closely related to the question of biographic criticism and of even greater relevance for understanding the films of Billy Wilder is the question of auteurism. Before turning to Wilder proper, it will be helpful to briefly rehearse the main tenets of auteurist criticism. The term itself was coined by Andrew Sarris in the 1960s as an attempt to render into English the notion of *politiques des auteurs*, propagated by the 1950s French critics associated with the journal *Cahiers du cinéma*, which encouraged viewers to look at films in terms of authors.¹³ Given the division of labor within the Fordist American studio system, as well as the strict studio hierarchy, which puts control over original story, script, editing, casting, and final cut in the hands of the producer, a director's creativity is usually limited to controlling the actual filming of scenes. Given these restrictions, critics such as Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, and Jacques Rivette (who would all soon go on to make their own films) argued that the preoccupation of a Hollywood auteur was revealed most clearly in his use of *mise-en-scène*. By that term they meant the attitude of the director towards his subject as conveyed in all formal means at his disposal—cutting, camera movement, pacing, blocking of players, and profilmic events. Since within the conventions of the studio system a personal and distinctive style would be discernible only in privileged moments, it became important, these young French critics believed, to watch the entire output (or *oeuvre*) of a certain director (something which in France was possible only because of the extensive archive amassed at the *Cinématèque* under its proprietor Henri Langlois).¹⁴

Going beyond the canon of already famed directors such as Charlie Chaplin, John Ford, or Orson Welles, the French critics went on to discover auteurs where previously there had been none, most notably Douglas Sirk, Sam Fuller, Nicholas Ray, Anthony Mann, and Howard Hawks. On these they lavished praise in extensive reviews that tended toward the ocular and iconoclastic, with the overall goal to treat these filmmakers as seri-

ous and legitimate artists whose films are centrally concerned with truth and beauty and therefore transcend the escapist and purely entertaining fare of most Hollywood directors. The strongest American advocate of this neo-Romantic celebration of the artist was the above-mentioned Andrew Sarris whose influential book, *The American Cinema* (1968), ranked 200 directors (most of them from Hollywood) in one-page assessments of their predominant thematic and stylistic concerns. In this comprehensive taking stock of forty years of filmmaking, Wilder was discussed under the rubric "Less Than Meets the Eye," and taken to task for films that are "cynical," "tasteless," and "irresponsible," and for having "a penchant for gross caricature," as well as "visual and structural deficiencies."¹⁵ A decade later, Sarris began revising his take, and in a self-important 1991 essay belatedly elevated Wilder into the Pantheon previously reserved for the likes of Ford, Griffith, Lubitsch, and Renoir, calling his indictment from 1968 premature and blaming it on his overdependence on the famous French critics who had also ignored Wilder, most likely, Sarris surmised, because their lack of mastery of (American) English had not allowed them to fully appreciate the fast, witty, and pun-ridden dialogue of Wilder's screenplays.¹⁶

Strictly speaking, only Sarris's critique of Wilder's alleged visual deficiencies can be blamed on the influence of French critics as they cared very little about questions of morality or taste. (One of them, Fereydown Hoveyda, famously began a review by stating: "The subject of *Party Girl* is idiotic. So what?") Wilder cared little either about Sarris's 1968 indictment or his about-face, but he has certainly been outspoken throughout his career about his dislike both for auteurist filmmaking and film criticism.¹⁷ Ridiculing the subjectivism of the *Nouvelle vague* and their "Santa Claus aesthetic,"¹⁸ Wilder has derided not only the films of Godard but any kind of filmmaking that indulges in the use of what he calls gimmicks—a self-referential style of filmmaking that sacrifices classic plot structure and psychological motivation of characters for a formalism that draws attention to its own virtuosity. Thus elaborate camerawork, for example, that stuns the viewer yet fails to be motivated by the plot or a character's point of view is not commensurable with Wilder's notion of realism. A firm believer in the star system, Wilder is equally critical of making the auteur the true star of the film, which was so central for the self-understanding and self-promotion of the *Nouvelle vague* and also the New German Cinema. Yet in a more concrete sense, Wilder can indeed be called the author of his films: He never filmed a script he had not written himself, a rare achievement among Hollywood directors, and unmatched by any other émigré of the period. As he has underscored time and again, the script is for him the most important building block for creating a successful film, and the completion of a shooting script is the most time-consuming part of preproduction, with few changes to the script allowed under his direction. If Wilder's own account can be believed, his desire to direct films was based less on altercations with the producer (the most common cause for

confrontation in the studio system), nor for seeking to climb up the studio hierarchy, but primarily to protect his script from a director's improvisations and alterations.¹⁹

At the same time it must be emphasized—again against any auteurist notion—that Wilder does not see himself as the sole creator of the script. From his days at Ufa, he always collaborated with at least one other writer, insisting that the quality of the finished script stemmed from the fusion of creative forces, and reluctant later to attribute certain scenes or lines to the effort of an individual. I have already stressed how his journalistic background had profoundly shaped his writing style and plots (not just the films that revolve around journalists). It is important to add here that this training also conditioned him to better accept the role of the writer within the studio system. Even more than at Ufa, where writers wrote at home without access to the film studio, in Hollywood a strict set of studio rules governed the attendance and output of writers. It was the story department, not the screenwriters, which bore the responsibility of supplying producers with properties that could be filmed. The job of the writers was primarily to prepare and adapt the properties acquired. That also implied having as little ego as possible invested in one's script, and accepting that one's copy would be changed by other writers and editors (often several). Not surprisingly, therefore, it was not the famed East Coast novelists and playwrights who were most successful in Hollywood, but journalists like Ben Hecht and Robert Benchley. They "were accustomed to deadlines and copy editors and writing for an anonymous public that liked its information meted out in economical and dramatic doses. (...) [Journalists] shared with veteran screenwriters a tendency to think of their work more as a craft than as an art. They rarely considered what they wrote their own, and put little stock in creative control and individual autonomy. Like any other writer, journalists bitched about having their copy mutilated and having to write down to the masses, but they understood the movie business—and that it was a business."²⁰

As was common at Paramount, Ufa and elsewhere, as the basis of their scripts, screenwriters would usually use successful novels, stories, plays, musicals, even Broadway shows, and Wilder was no exception. Notions of fidelity were secondary to adapting the basic structure of the text for the medium of film. Because of Hollywood's emphasis on the three act structure, the play became Wilder's favorite genre for adaptation and was the source for such notable films as *Scampolo*; *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*; *What a Life*; *Five Graves to Cairo*; *Stalag 17*; *Sabrina*; *The Seven Year Itch*; *One, Two, Three*; *Irma La Douce*; *Kiss Me, Stupid*; *Witness for the Prosecution*; *Avanti!*; and *The Front Page*.²¹

While Wilder repeatedly had confrontations with moguls such as Adolph Zukor or Louis B. Mayer, he never saw himself in opposition to the studio system, as auteurist criticism likes to claim about certain directors. On the contrary, he was a studio player who excelled within the system,

working at Paramount from 1937 to 1954 and with United Artists/Mirisch Company from 1957 onwards. There and elsewhere he worked with a steady ensemble of professionals who shaped his films in decisive ways. Most important, of course, was his teaming up with Charles Brackett with whom he wrote thirteen screenplays, debuting on Ernst Lubitsch's *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1938) and splitting up after *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), as well as his second long-time cowriter, I. A. L. Diamond, with whom he completed eleven scripts. Other long-time collaborators at Paramount and elsewhere include editor (and later producer) Doane Harrison, cinematographer John Seitz, art directors Hans Dreier and Alexander Trauner, composers Miklós Rózsa, Franz Waxman, and Friedrich Hollaender, and costume designer Edith Head. As Wilder worked his way up from writer to director and then producer, he greatly enlarged his artistic control and became one of the first directors to have right of final cut, but most critics agree that he produced his best work within the confines and support of the classic studio system, when the Production Code and censorship laws, as well as negotiations with producers, forced him to be at his most creative and inventive.

The "Wilder Touch"

While it would certainly be a misnomer to label Billy Wilder an auteur—especially in the sense of the 1950s French writers—critics have often invoked a "Wilder Touch" to describe the uniqueness of his films. The phrase alludes, of course, to the famed Lubitsch touch, and Ernst Lubitsch was, besides Erich von Stroheim, a chief source of Wilder's cinema. An unlikely pairing, as Wilder himself called it, both von Stroheim and Lubitsch belong to a generation of earlier European émigrés. The opportunity to become a major screenwriter came through Lubitsch who hired him and Brackett to cowrite *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* and *Ninotchka*. Lubitsch's Hollywood fame rested on a series of highly sophisticated and formally inventive comedies, most often about adultery. These comedies are celebrated for the Lubitsch touch, a special form of visual or verbal cleverness that implied more than it showed, and that encapsulated the essence of a situation in a gesture, an object, or a funny line. What Wilder admired in these films was their wit, their formal elegance, and their respect for the viewers' intelligence. Lubitsch pointed the way, showing how to maintain a unique style within the Hollywood system and be professionally successful. (Apparently, Wilder was not familiar with Lubitsch's early German films, mostly comedies about Jewish social climbers in which Lubitsch often starred in the main role such as *Der Stolz der Firma* [1914], *Schuhpalast Pinkus* [1916], or *Meyer aus Berlin* [1918]).²² Von Stroheim, in contrast, was marked by darker, satiric impulses, often aimed at the decadence of Old Europe in films that violated both sexual taboos of Hollywood as well as

requirements of length and budget. In his emphasis on the grotesque, his harsher social criticism, and portrayals of sexual deviation, von Stroheim wrote himself out of the Hollywood system. Yet it is these very features which remained a major influence on Wilder, who, as a young reporter, was captivated by von Stroheim's films before he began writing scripts himself. Von Stroheim's excesses are tempered in Wilder by Lubitsch's respect for classical form, his humanity, and his optimism, which allowed Wilder a similar commercial success. The romantic comic form modeled on Lubitsch provided Wilder with a solid generic and institutional base from which he could foray into more realistic, von Stroheim-like territories.

Unlike Lubitsch, who had little interest in addressing contemporary American society in his films, Wilder's keen awareness of America's latest obsessions, fads and fashions, sports, of the coverage in local and international news, and of events in the film industry itself frequently entered his films. His personal take on what surrounded him was shaped in no small measure by a rarely mentioned source—the modernist writings of Upton Sinclair (a favorite of Kisch's) and Sinclair Lewis. Lewis' 1922 novel *Babbitt*, in particular, a classic commentary on middle-class society, can be seen as a central influence on many Wilder films, which focus on the average American male trying to get ahead of the game at the price of moral integrity (for example *The Apartment*). Wilder's critical eye on society was thus cast from a unique perspective—that of a (self-) Americanized Austrian Jew whose actual immigration to the US was facilitated by an encounter with the writings of American insiders with pronounced outsider perspectives. This perspective makes Wilder stand out among the many European émigrés who associated high culture with the Old World and lamented the shallowness of American culture. Both in Europe and in America, Wilder was committed to straddling the divide between high and low, and his penchant for Viennese schmaltz, which formed the ingredient of many of his Ufa scripts, did not contradict his interest in the Bauhaus or the writings of Arthur Schnitzler.

The tension between insider and outsider is indeed central for Wilder's work, not only in the biographical terms outlined in the previous section, but in his professional selfunderstanding. The outsider Wilder gained insider status only because he had the training and work ethic to contribute to the American film industry. As stated above, Wilder is unique among Hollywood directors for never filming a script he had not written himself, which gave him unusual artistic control, but that control was only bestowed on him because his scripts were in compliance with the studio conventions of the time. That is why the process of narration in his films is usually consonant with the norms of classical Hollywood cinema regarding plot development, character motivation, and closure. If there is, then, a certain trademark quality to Wilder's films, it lies less in their innovative formal aspects—even though *Double Indemnity* or *Sunset Boulevard* certainly broke new ground in their use of voice-over—than in how

Wilder's scripts and films are invariably marked by a sarcastic humor, a biting cynicism, and a clever wit. The typical Wilder script will feature crisp dialogue, careful balance of ribaldry and compassion, perfect timing, and uncluttered plots. Also typical for Wilder's films is their rich canvas of American types ranging from low-life conmen and prostitutes, to the average working guy and gal, to upper-class sophisticates. Unlike a celebrated auteur like Hitchcock, Wilder's films cover a wide range of genres, and many famous titles stand next to rather forgettable features. Apart from the Western and science fiction, there is hardly a genre in which he did not dabble. Like other first-rate studio directors, Wilder was able to work with many of the major stars of the classic Hollywood era, including Marilyn Monroe, Marlene Dietrich, Audrey Hepburn, Shirley MacLaine, Ginger Rogers, Barbara Stanwyck, William Holden, Ray Milland, Humphrey Bogart, Gary Cooper, Fred MacMurray, James Cagney, Tony Curtis, Walter Matthau, and Jack Lemmon, many of whom gave their most memorable performances in a Billy Wilder film. Since Wilder relied less on startling devices of editing and camerawork, the vitality and suggestiveness of his actors' performances gained greater significance. What is especially unique is how Wilder often cast them against the grain—Stanwyck, for example, was a Frank Capra heroine before Wilder turned her into a femme fatale in *Double Indemnity*, and her co-conspirator MacMurray had been a likable light comedian in a string of Paramount pictures. It is also striking that Wilder liked to work at least twice with so many of his stars, building not only on the existing star persona but the unique articulation of that persona in a previous Wilder film. Even though Monroe, Hepburn, MacLaine, Dietrich, or MacMurray may have had very different roles in their respective second Wilder films, their new characters often played off against their previous incarnation. Holden and Lemmon are the only two long-time Wilder stars and therefore occupy a crucial role in his overall work. The subsequent chapters will explore in more detail Wilder's use of stars and their relevance for specific genres.

While Wilder's films are always positioned in the mainstream of Hollywood entertainment cinema, what makes them special and audacious is a form of social criticism that works within, and yet pressures against, the studio system, always threatening to become darker, more disturbing, more sexual, and more political than the system allows. From his very beginnings as a Paramount writer, his scripts with Brackett begin breaking the mold. Working in the comedy tradition of Lubitsch, Frank Capra, Howard Hawks, and Preston Sturges (the latter showing Wilder the way by also making the successful switch from writer to writer-director), Brackett and Wilder ridiculed Hollywood's views on love, sex, and success. Going beyond these famous predecessors, Brackett and Wilder's 1930s scripts infuse romance and screwball with themes of imminent World War II, the Spanish Civil War, and Communism. As soon as Wilder directs, he breaks sexual taboos in *The Major and the Minor* and *Double Indemnity*, where he

almost finds the *film noir*. He also tackles taboo themes of alcoholism and the seedy underbelly of Hollywood in *The Lost Weekend* and *Sunset Boulevard*. *A Foreign Affair* mocks not only Nazi Germany but also American occupation and Puritan morals, while *One, Two, Three* lashes out against all types of Cold War warriors—the American Coca-Colonizers, the Russian apparatchiks, the unreformed West German Hitlerites, and the East German salon socialists. The sexual element is further intensified in the comedies with I.A.L. Diamond—gender-bending in *Some Like It Hot*, wife-swapping in *Kiss Me, Stupid*, prostitution in *Irma La Douce*, and adultery in *Avanti!* A central pleasure of all these films is the highly controlled audacity that has accounted for their longevity; they still excite and irritate today.

Reading for Exile

Billy Wilder has been regarded primarily an American director, and not without justification. He gained his international reputation as a screenwriter and director in Hollywood, and with the single exception of *Mauvaise Graine*, he wrote and directed all his films in English, primarily as Hollywood productions. Like many exiles who arrived after 1933, he was eager to make it in the US film industry, which meant mastering English quickly and assimilating fully to the new culture. In interviews he has remembered his life in Vienna and Berlin with little nostalgia, describing it as a different world that has disappeared. Yet the European traditions which shaped Wilder's formative years—*fin-de-siècle* and post-World War I Austria, Weimar Germany, as well as his particular brand of Jewishness—have clearly left a mark on his work, as well as on his views on sexuality, politics, morals, and art. The past has traveled with him as an invisible baggage of beliefs, convictions, tastes, and concerns.²³ The films of Wilder are therefore much more complex than often claimed—especially by himself. Indebted to, and articulating, different and rivaling cultural sensibilities and traditions, his is a “cinema of in-between,” which highlights the dialectics of insider and outsider, of the liminal, fluid, and temporary, of upward and downward mobility, of high brow and low brow. This particular trait has its origins both in Wilder's biographical background and in the historical constellation of European modernity in the decades leading up to German fascism and the Second World War. Wilder's repeated geographical displacement—from Galicia to Vienna, to Berlin, to Paris, to Los Angeles—is both an individual fate and a common experience for European Jews of his generation. That Wilder's interest in the avantgarde of his time—writers, musicians, composers, painters—did not deter him from reveling in the vernacular is equally typical for how the relation between *Kultur* and popular culture was revolutionized in the 1920s.

Wilder's films reveal their in-between status in complex and layered ways. Their precarious position between Europe and the New World is a

major creative tension shaping the themes, style, and form of his films. It is dramatized in the films' story lines and characters, and often informs the circumstances of their respective production and very different reception at home and abroad. As noted earlier, a fascination with the economic and cultural exchange between the US and Europe preceded Wilder's arrival in the US, while his postwar films return to Europe with increasing urgency. But even his truly American films—set in the US and featuring clearly identifiable American characters such as the insurance salesman or the aggressive journalist—have the perspective of an outsider.

The tension between insider and outsider is also crucial for Wilder's notion of Jewishness. To be Jewish had vastly different meanings in the respective cultures in which Wilder lived, making the experience of anti-Semitism anything from a daily nuisance one could ridicule or ignore, to a major stumbling block for a professional career, to a life-threatening situation. Having escaped the Nazis, Hollywood provided a haven for German-Jewish exiles, where they formed a community with the many American and international Jewish and non-Jewish professionals. At the same time, Wilder took issue with Hollywood's practices of self-censorship, largely enforced by Jewish moguls, which curtailed the depiction of Jews onscreen and impeded the effort to articulate the urgency to fight Hitler. The questions of Jewishness and the Holocaust are indeed central to the films of Billy Wilder, but they enter in circuitous and contradictory fashion. While there are few characters in Wilder's films clearly marked as Jewish, there are many who possess attributes often associated specifically with Jewishness, especially the many Schlemiel figures embodied by Jack Lemmon as the habitual bungler and dolt. In others, particularly those embodied by Walter Matthau, we see Wilder's own restlessness and power of gab.

While Wilder has been reluctant to talk about the Holocaust, in which his mother, stepfather, and grandmother perished, his films as a director are haunted by the specter of Auschwitz, even if mostly in very roundabout ways. While *Witness for the Prosecution*, *A Foreign Affair*, and *One, Two, Three* deal with the legacy of Nazi Germany in complex and unprecedented ways (the latter two actually offending audiences at their time of release), references to Hitler pepper even his most romantic films. Consider, for example, the scene in *Love in the Afternoon* when millionaire Frank Flannagan unsuccessfully tries to guess Ariane's name, of which he only knows the first letter, and finally surmises: "Is it Adolf?" His first film as director, *The Major and the Minor*, opens with the title card: "The Dutch bought New York from the Indians in 1626 and by May 1941 there wasn't an Indian left who regretted it." A typical Wilder joke, the line works on more than one level. It implies that the Native Americans cut a good deal by getting rid of an island that would turn out to be the cesspool of civilization; this reading is suggested by subsequent plot development, which revolves around the efforts of the Ginger Rogers character, Susan Apple-

gate, to escape the hell-hole of New York and return to her native Iowa. The darker ramifications of this line stem from that the fact that there is not only “not an Indian left” to regret this sale, but that there is no “Indian left,” period. By 1942, the American Holocaust, as historian David Stannard has called it, had led to the almost complete annihilation of native tribes in the United States, a historical tragedy of then-unprecedented proportions about to be repeated in Central and Eastern Europe. The only film Wilder ever set in his native Austria, the fluffy Bing Crosby musical *The Emperor Waltz*, alludes to the same phenomenon from a postwar perspective and is even more clear in its indictment. Revolving around the verboten mixing of breeds among dogs and humans, it is an only thinly disguised and stinging satire on the Nuremberg Laws and the Holocaust.²⁴ In a 1950 interview, Wilder summed up his life as “from Adolph [sic] Hitler to Adolph Zukor,” ironically underscoring the dictatorial style of the then-chairman of the Paramount board.²⁵ The strategy that underlies these implicit and explicit comparisons between the US and Nazi Germany is a refusal to paint the latter regime in such pitch-black colors that the former can easily feel morally superior. There is the temptation, Wilder’s films claim, that the fervor that drove Hitler may surface also at any moment in an open society like the US. The one film Wilder most regretted not being able to make was *Schindler’s List*; presumably, it would have given him the chance to reckon in a more personal way with the fate of his family.²⁶ Late in life, Wilder began emphasizing the exilic dimension of his life in the US. Reversing earlier statements from interviews in which he had underscored that he would have come to this country with or without Nazism, in 1999 he told director Cameron Crowe that he came here “because I did not want to be in an oven.”²⁷

Wilder’s statement encapsulates both the assertiveness and the guilt of the survivor, a tale both of victory and defeat, and so do his films. They attest to a transformation of the experience of exile, commonly associated with victimhood and anguish, into a subtle and productive interrogation of the American host country. Sensitized by the rise of fascism in Europe, Wilder’s films present the American way of life in a new and often critical light; startled by uncanny similarities, they slyly comment on Nazi Germany while ostensibly dealing with American issues. Yet the point bears repetition that none of Wilder’s films is exclusively the result of an individual “creativity;” instead, they are constituted objects arising out of concrete circumstances, serving particular functions, involving often complicated relationships to institutions, especially the studio system. The European film professionals of the 1930s had very limited possibilities to create films that could draw attention to the political cause of their displacement—both *from* Germany and *within* the US—and articulate strategies for overcoming it. The highly regulated system of film production in the Hollywood studio system of the 1930s and 1940s, as well as the Production Code Administration (PCA) guidelines and restrictions regarding the repre-

sentation of sexuality, religion, and politics (including the politics of foreign countries), posed major hurdles for filmmakers engaged in political filmmaking. Any direct cinematic representation of the plight of refugees is rare (and *Hold Back the Dawn* is the exception that confirms the rule). Wilder himself quipped that in the 1930s exile had simply lost its attractiveness as dramatic plot device: “The tale of a refugee was a sensation when Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo told it, but now, when I tell my tale, everybody just yawns.”²⁸ The above concerns have clearly shaped the selection of the seven films I will discuss in more detail. Subsequent chapters will address how the exile’s inherently double perspective informs and structures a film, and how the exile’s experience of not belonging translates into a film’s narrative and visual language.

Notes

1. André Aciman, *Letters of Transit* (New York: New Press, 1999), 11.
2. Wilder quoted in *Billy Wilder Interviews*, ed. Robert Horton (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), 167.
3. Ed Sikov, *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), ix.
4. Hans Siemsen, “Jazz-band,” *Die Weltbühne* 10 (March 1921): 287–288; here 288. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
5. Quoted in *Billie Wilder: Eine europäische Karriere*, Andreas Hutter and Klaus Kamolz (Vienna: Böhlau, 1998), 93.
6. Miriam Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism,” in *Reinventing Film Studies*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (London: Arnold, 2000), 332–350; here 333.
7. Hans Sahl, *Memoiren eines Moralisten* (Munich: Dtv, 1990), 100.
8. *Menschen am Sonntag* is best considered a collaborative effort. It has been difficult to decide who contributed what to the film; the people involved have made contradictory statements in their respective memoirs and interviews. The credits given in the filmography follow the 1997/98 restoration of the film by the Filmmuseum Berlin under the leadership of Martin Koerber.
9. It should be added here that the avantgarde *Menschen am Sonntag* followed Wilder’s eminently forgettable debut as credited screenwriter for the aforementioned farce *Der Teufelsreporter* (1929).
10. The advent of sound actually brought Veidt and Jannings back to Berlin, with Veidt leaving for good in 1933, while Jannings continued his career under the Nazis.
11. Hellmuth Karasek, *Billy Wilder: Eine Nahaufnahme* (Munich: Heine, revised edition 1995) 77.
12. The only recent longer scholarly assessment of Wilder, Richard Armstrong’s *Billy Wilder, American Film Realist*, provides few new insights. Wilder’s death in 2002 has occasioned the publication of several new books, along the same lines. Charlotte Chandler’s “personal biography” *Nobody’s Perfect* recounts some new and many previously known Wilder anecdotes, while Glenn Hopp’s glossy *Billy Wilder: The Complete Films* provides a richly illustrated coffee table overview of Wilder. The recent slew of Wilder books is rounded out by Robert Horton’s collection of Wilder interviews. Only three volumes of the last decade can claim to have advanced new insights into Wilder: Andreas Hutter and Klaus Kamolz’s analysis of Wilder’s European career, largely based on original archival research; Ed Sikov’s meticulous and definitive Wilder biography *On Sunset Bou-*

- levard, and film director Cameron Crowe's interview book *Conversations with Wilder*, who probes much deeper than any of his many predecessors. For complete references please consult the bibliography.
13. See François Truffaut, "Politique des auteurs," *Cahiers du cinéma* 31 (1954).
 14. Two American critics who consider Wilder an auteur in the above sense are Axel Madsen and Gene Phillips.
 15. *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 166.
 16. See Andrew Sarris, "Why Billy Wilder Belongs in the Pantheon," *Film Comment* (July/August): 1991: 9–14. Yet already in the 1970s, Sarris had reversed his opinion of Wilder somewhat in a very favorable review of *Fedora*.
 17. Wilder carefully noted what critics wrote about him, but rarely ever responded to them publicly or in interviews. On his opinion about Sarris, see his 1979 interview with Joseph McBride and Todd McCarthy, "Going for Extra Innings," reprinted in *Billy Wilder Interviews*. About Godard, he stated: "I'm looking back with great nostalgia to the well-made picture—not the Godard-type pictures which bore me totally, no matter how many *Village Voice* Andrew Sarris tell me that this is indeed the new art form. I think it's baloney." Quoted in Noël Berggren, "Arsenic and Old Directors," *Esquire* 77.4 (1972): 132–35; here 135.
 18. As he told Cameron Crowe in an interview: "I am not arty. I never make a setup that is obviously wrong. I never shoot through the flames of the fireplace in the foreground, because that is from the point of Santa Claus." In: Cameron Crowe, *Conversations with Wilder*, 119.
 19. The lack of status accorded to writers in the studio system can be gleaned from Jack Warner's infamous *bon mot* in which he called them "schmucks with typewriters." Quoted in Thomas Doherty, "Billy Wilder: Ready for a Close-Up," *Chronicle of Higher Education* November 3, 2000, B18.
 20. Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), 104–5.
 21. Wilder's films have been turned into musicals—*Sunset Boulevard*, *Promises, Promises* (based on *The Apartment*), *Sugar* (based on *Some Like It Hot*), and *Silk Stockings* (based on *Ninotchka*).
 22. This becomes apparent in Wilder's conversation with Crowe, where he claims: "Lubitsch didn't do any comedies in Germany." (*Conversations with Wilder*, 18.)
 23. I take the term "invisible baggage" from historian Leo Spitzer's study of Jewish refugees from Hitler in Bolivia, *Hotel Bolivia: The Culture of Memory in a Refuge From Nazism* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998).
 24. See my essay "Gained in Translation: Exile Cinema and the Case of Billy Wilder" in *The Cosmopolitan Screen: German Cinema and the Global Imaginary, 1945 to the Present*, ed. Stephan K. Schindler and Lutz Koepnick (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007): 25–38.
 25. Philip K. Scheurer, "Wilder Seeks Films 'With Bite' to Satisfy 'Nation of Hecklers'"; reprinted in *Billy Wilder Interviews*, ed. Robert Horton, 17.
 26. See Billy Wilder, "Man sah überall nur Taschentücher," (*Magazin*) 18 February 1994.
 27. Cameron Crowe, *Conversations with Wilder* 19.
 28. Quoted in: Volker Kühn, "Nachwort," in *Menschliches Treibgut*, Friedrich Hollaender, , trans. Stefan Weidle (Bonn: Weidle, 1995), 348.