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Minor Billy, Major Ernst: Ideology, Utopia, and the Wilder-Lubitsch Schism

Speaking about his mentor, the legendary filmmaker Ernst Lubitsch, Billy Wilder once said: “You don’t just sit down and write, “Lubitsch does this.” You come up with twenty suggestions, and he picks the one that makes the Lubitsch touch. The way his mind works, everything is by indirection. He is not the kind of director who hits you over the head and says, “I have two and two. And two and two makes four. And also, three and one makes four.” He just says, “Here is two, and here is two.” And then he lets the audience add it up. The audience is the co-writer. And that’s where the laugh comes in” (Sikov 136). This was one of the many filmmaking lessons Wilder would lovingly attribute to Lubitsch. Despite his often-documented protectiveness over his own writing, Wilder’s two screenplays (with then-co-writer Charles Brackett) for Lubitsch pictures — *Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife* (1938) and *Ninotchka* (1939) — were the results of close collaboration with, and even deference to, Lubitsch (Sikov 135). However, when Wilder went off on his own to direct for the first time, a curious split between these two filmmakers, mentor and mentee, emerges. What exactly causes this split? Looking comparatively at Wilder’s 1942 debut, *The Major and the Minor*, and Lubitsch’s final feature, 1946’s *Cluny Brown*, the answer boils down to three key factors: how Wilder and Lubitsch modify their styles (in relation to their respective career trajectories), how they approach characterization, and how they approach the conclusions to their respective films. These schisms

of style, structure, and story point to an inevitable ideological split between these two cross-pollinating titans of early Hollywood comedy: Lubitsch ended his career concerned with a utopian, collective point-of-view, while Wilder began his career by confirming the American status quo.

In order to explain these schisms, in particular that of style, one must first look at the contexts of both filmmakers' careers — though their split has an ideological dimension, parts of it are, without a doubt, influenced by the different circumstances Wilder and Lubitsch faced during these points in their working lives. William Paul, in his book *Ernst Lubitsch's American Comedy*, points out that, despite the fact that Lubitsch's films were rarely mega-sized blockbusters, his films were “as free from the pressures of the marketplace as he was able to operate” (4). Though this could have, arguably, led to a relaxation of effort, Paul is privy to point out a significant, risky shift in Lubitsch's art at the end of his career: the conscious move from a decidedly individualistic point-of-view to a collectivist one. “As the social vision expands, there is a fascinating contrary movement that that endows individual characters with greater emotional weight, a change that is partly the result of increased psychological refinement in an artist who continued to grow through his last work, partly a result of his decreasingly ironic view of human personality” (Paul 13). As *Cluny Brown* will thoroughly illustrate, this shift is completely visible by the end of Lubitsch's career. Therefore, a connection between Lubitsch's relative creative freedom (afforded to him by both his critical standing and age/reputation) and his ability to make such a subtly dramatic shift in perspective by his final film could easily be made here.

By contrast, Wilder, riding the waves of a number of successful scripts with Brackett (including *Ninotchka*), was not in the same position of freedom as Lubitsch. Neil Sinyard and

Adrian Turner, in their chapter on *The Major and the Minor*, quote Wilder as saying “When I was writing scripts with Charles Brackett, we were never allowed on the set when the film was being shot. First of all, directors didn’t want writers on the set; and second, we were off writing another picture. I decided to assert myself because I wanted some control over my scripts. So I started to raise hell, and Paramount finally let me direct a picture. Actually, it was no big deal because at that time Paramount was turning out fifty pictures a year. They said, ‘Let Wilder make a picture and then he’ll go back to writing.’ Everyone expected me to make something ‘fancy-schmancy.’ Yet I made something commercial. I brought back the most saleable hunk of celluloid I could — *The Major and the Minor*” (198). As Ed Sikov points out, the production was incredibly smooth, coming “within spitting distance of the budget” (180), and the film’s immediate success became clear when, after five weeks of steady play in New York City, the film “cracked the opening-night box office records at the Paramount theaters in both Hollywood and Los Angeles” (183). In this case, Wilder’s decision to make a polished, commercially-viable film — which is undoubtedly reflected in *The Major and the Minor*’s style and ideology, especially compared to *Cluny Brown* — was a successful one. Even though *The Major* was Wilder’s first film, and a compromised one at that, this was entirely by design: Wilder confirmed his status as a director on-the-rise by strategically playing into the hands of the studio suits.

So, where does the schism, in terms of style, begin, in this case? Though Wilder was never *as* explicitly keen on suggestion than Lubitsch, his admiration of that quality in this paper’s introductory quote is evident in *The Major and the Minor*’s comedy. As Sinyard and Turner correctly point out, Wilder even plays with suggestion in the film’s opening sequence, in which the wealthy Albert Osbourne (Robert Benchley) shoots off a number of suggestive flirts at

the film's exhausted protagonist, the barbershop employee Susan Applegate (Ginger Rogers) (201). Naturally, Lubitsch masterfully employs suggestion throughout *Cluny Brown*, most notably through the titular Cluny's (Jennifer Jones) obsession with plumbing and, in particular, fixing clogged pipes. In her essay on the film, Siri Hustvedt writes that "Lubitsch loved to evoke that missing sensual element by suggestion — especially the play and pleasure of human sexuality. In *Cluny Brown*, the sex role is taken by plumbing" (Hustvedt). This continues throughout the film, and the genesis of Cluny's relationship with Czech refugee Adam Belinski (Charles Boyer) is even jokingly consummated by the successful unclogging of a sink (Zupancic 176). If the split does not occur, then, along the lines of Wilder and Lubitsch's senses of humor, where *does* it occur?

The answer to that question is in each director's visual style. Sinyard and Turner, in discussing *The Major and the Minor*'s climactic ballroom sequence, in which Susan's deception comes to a bitter end, even compare Wilder's visual style to Lubitsch: "Wilder shoots the glittering scene as if it were one of Lubitsch's mythical kingdoms, his camera craning down majestically from the high-angle establishing shot and then tracking gracefully across the dance floor" (207). These sorts of Lubitschean flourishes are visible in the film, though most of it plays out in fairly standard coverage — take, for example, a key scene late in the film, in which Phillip Kirby (Ray Milland) talks with Susan (disguised as her mother), which plays out in a wider two-shot and shot-reverse-shot close-ups. Whether Wilder was quoting Lubitsch's earlier stylistic flourishes or downplaying his own authorial hand, these conscious stylistic choices reflect Wilder's goals of trying to establish himself as a director on-the-rise (through the

occasional grand gesture) and make as commercial a film as possible (through more generic choices).

Meanwhile, the visual style that Lubitsch employs in *Cluny Brown* is decidedly different from those earlier grand, sweeping gestures that Wilder quoted in his own direction. As Paul points out, “*Cluny Brown* reveals changes in Lubitsch’s style that are congruent with the direction his films had been taking up to then... put most simply, Lubitsch’s camera, one of the most actively complementing in Hollywood, had become one of the most self-effacing. In *Cluny Brown* Lubitsch’s style achieved a severe simplicity that is at odds with the more elaborate approaches of the earlier films” (315). *Cluny Brown* mostly plays out over longer takes, with much of Lubitsch’s direction focused on blocking within the frame. For instance, take a later scene in this film, in which Andrew Carmel (Peter Lawford) confronts Belinski about entering his wife Betty’s (Helen Walker) room the night before. The two men engage in a very stilted scuffle, and Lubitsch’s camera always keeps the two of them in-frame from the waist-up, opposite each other, with as few cuts as possible. Paul makes a compelling narrative case for this style, pointing out that Lubitsch’s less intrusive camera reflects Belinski’s own patient observation of the world around him (317), but it is equally likely that this style is informed by 1) Lubitsch’s effort to level his characters’ playing field within a collectivist perspective and 2) a late-career distilling of his style down to its barest essence. Unlike Wilder, Lubitsch had nothing left to prove, and his freedom most likely granted him this level of formal self-reflexivity.

The next level of schism between the filmmakers, on the level of characterization, equally reflects their career circumstances and ideological leanings. Firstly, it is crucial to look at the broader plots of each of these films. In *The Major and the Minor*, Rogers’ down-on-her-luck

Susan has spent the past year in New York barely scraping by. When she cannot afford a train ticket back home to Stevenson, Iowa, Susan makes the gametime decision to pose as a 12-year-old, in order to get a half-fare ticket. Her masquerade works, but she is soon discovered by train guards when they spot her smoking a cigarette. She quickly ducks into an open room, discovering Phillip, a major in the army heading back to the academy he teaches at. He believes her to be a child and, despite his fiancée Pamela's (Rita Johnson) initial belief that he had been cheating on her, decides to let her stay with him until her parents can retrieve her. This film being a romantic comedy, Susan inevitably falls for him, raising the stakes of her masquerade. *Cluny Brown*, also a romantic comedy but of a decidedly different vein, follows the titular plumbing-obsessed, working-class Englishwoman as she's shipped off by her uncle to work as a domestic for the Carmels, a family of landed gentry in the countryside. There, she bumps back into Belinski and forms a close friendship with him, and they agree not to fall for each other (though he already has). In the town, she falls under the spell of the relentlessly boring pharmacist Jonathan Wilson (Richard Haydn), who wishes to marry her. Thus, a triangle between the similarly lower-class Cluny and Belinski, as well as the wealthy Wilson, forms.

The key difference in characterization, between these two films, is in the number of characters their respective directors structure the plots around. *The Major and the Minor*, despite referencing both Rogers and Milland in the title, is clearly built around Susan. Going back to the film's opening sequence, Susan's rejection of Albert — cracking an egg over his head, wiping it on his face, and walking out on her job — establishes her individual agency in the narrative from the get-go, setting the plot into motion. From there, in classic Wilder fashion, she is hammer-locked into her own masquerade, and, when she eventually shuts that masquerade,

she is the one to tell Phillip. There is rarely a scene in the film that does not feature Susan, and she figures prominently in most of the film's other conflicts. For example, when Phillip's younger sister Lucy (Diana Lynn) — who is aware of Susan's masquerade — asks Susan to go behind Pamela's back and request Phillip's deployment in Europe, she does so, further instigating conflict between Phillip and Pamela. Susan's agency becomes far more complicated (and compromised) in the film's ending, but that will be discussed shortly. In any case, Wilder clearly structures his film around a single character and her fantasies and desires, which reflects both the individualism of American ideology and Wilder's own professional strivings.

Cluny Brown, on the other hand, is a complete structural reversal of Wilder's film. Despite literally titling the film after Cluny, and her status as the film's lead, Lubitsch directs the film as an ensemble piece — in keeping with his shift towards a collective point-of-view. As Paul points out, “a singular element new to Lubitsch is the range of classes covered here... As the classes expanded, the secondary characters are given a much fuller treatment than in any other Lubitsch film” (305). This is especially evident in the characters of Syrette (Ernest Cossart) and Mrs. Maile (Sara Allgood) — the Carmels' heads of domestic staff, and comic observers towards Cluny and Belinski's transgressions within the rigidly class-bound space of the Carmel mansion. Towards the end of the film, the two characters are given a scene in which they reflect on their relationship, completely divorced from any of the film's lead characters. Syrette tells her, “fifteen years ago, when I saw you for the first time, you were removing the crumbs from Lady Carmel's bed, with such earnestness, crumb by crumb, I knew instantly you had the spark.” The spark in question here is the capacity to exist as a lower-class individual within such an upper-class space, adhering completely to the arbitrary rules of the household. As Ivana Novak

and Jela Krecic point out, this reflects Lubitsch's collectivist ideology by pointing out how all of his characters, lead or supporting, are bound together by how capitalism makes them "contingent and ignorant hostages of the situation in which they find themselves" (11). Paul points out how this reaches backward all the way to Belinski and Cluny's initial anti-romantic pact as being "the result of external circumstances that place constraints of differing natures on both Cluny and Belinski: they are both poor, which makes them dependent on others" (306). This equalizing attitude, felt from Lubitsch's visual style to his ideology, informs the way his film is structured around an ensemble's fantasies and desires, even with a central character, since they all share the same base source of conflict that is out of their control.

At this point, the film's endings crystallize Wilder and Lubitsch's ideological schism, which is especially tied to how their contrasting characterization strategies resolve. The final sequence of *The Major and the Minor* and the penultimate scene of *Cluny Brown* (which is, essentially, the ending, followed by a brief epilogue) both take place at train stations, as the final couples form. In *The Major*, Phillip leaves Susan's home and heads to the train station, where he sees a woman waiting by the tracks alone. It is Susan, and Phillip clearly knows at this point that she was an adult masquerading as a child. She admits the truth to him and asks him to marry her, and the two leave together, presumably getting married in Nevada right before he is to be shipped out for combat. In this ending, Susan maintains her agency by revealing her scheme to Phillip and, in effect, winning him over, but something is off too. Even though this is the logical conclusion of an individualistic narrative structure, it affirms Susan's place as the one who must follow Phillip, and it affirms his place as beholden to the desires of the military. In this case, is either character really free, in the end, if their futures — whether as individuals or as a unit —

are, essentially, not up to them? *Cluny Brown* raises the opposite question as the film's main theme, "which sounds as loudly as honking, belching pipes: human freedom" (Hustvedt).

In *Cluny Brown*'s penultimate scene, Cluny runs down Belinski as he prepares to board a train. She explains her falling-out with Wilson and that she hopes to change her ways to be accepted by his family. Belinski replies with a simple: "get in." They both enter the train, and he tells her that "if I were rich, I would build you the most beautiful mansion, with the most exquisite and complicated plumbing." They choose to be together, no matter the struggle, but compromise to always help each other. As Paul deftly describes, "Where the characters in the earlier films sought to retrieve a lost past, Cluny and Belinski are specifically and expectantly oriented towards the future. The future itself is magically realized, as it remains unknown in the earlier films, through a brief, wordless epilogue that shows Belinski's success as a popular author and the fulfillment of the marriage in Cluny's pregnancy." (330). This fulfills an ideal that Richard Dyer points out in his essay "Entertainment and Utopia": "Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes — these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized" (177). Though Wilder's ending, one in which individual agency is both structuring and, ultimately, ambiguous, is likely the more *realistic* and *marketable* of the two for an American public, there is a real value in how the equalizing fantasy of Lubitsch's provides an escape from unjust realities — and only a self-reflexive, truly free Lubitsch could have pulled that off.

As Alenka Zupancic points out, the ending of *Cluny Brown* is particularly subversive in that Cluny's enraptured fantasy with Wilson is shattered when she realizes that her true passion

— plumbing — would be lost within the rigid family structure he would impose, she simply enters into a new fantasy with Belinski (177). Zupancic elaborates: “In comedy... it is clear that to “not give up on your desire” is something more objective than subjective. It involves an interruption of the subject, her “absentness” triggered precisely by an unexpected emergence of this “IT” (as the impossible object). At the same time, and precisely because of this interruption, this discontinuity of the subject, it cannot be a solitary business, something that a subject can carry out all by herself. We could say: to not give up on your desire takes (at least) two. We need a little help with this — from, for instance, someone who helps us get on the train at the right moment” (179). This is the logical conclusion of Lubitsch’s equalizing, collectivist ideological approach to characterization: Cluny is not a passive player in the decision to be with Belinski, even though he gives the “orders.” In the end, “the only “sameness” in Cluny before and after she boards the train is the sameness of her unusual passion, of the object which has also caused her fantasy to fall apart; but the subject is not “the same, only transformed,” and there is no continuity leading from one to another” (178). Therefore, Cluny and Belinski end up with such a beautifully-realized future because they made the choice as a unit, to abruptly free themselves from the fantasy of fitting into a capitalist world in which neither truly belonged.

In conclusion, comparing *The Major and the Minor* and *Cluny Brown* has revealed a split between Wilder and Lubitsch, along the lines of consciously commercial vs. self-reflexive visual styles, individual vs. collective characterization, and affirming vs. challenging the dominant Hollywood ideology of capitalism. While their different standings in the industry, especially considering Wilder’s effort to secure the kind of down-the-line directorial freedom that Lubitsch enjoyed, undoubtedly informed these decisions, they reflect the unseen gulf between these two

filmmakers, often celebrated together. From his first film, Wilder illustrates a distanced engagement with ideology, complete with the kind of “tacked-on” happy ending his later films would be criticized for. Though both *The Major* and *Cluny Brown*, broadly speaking, have been considered minor works in Wilder and Lubitsch’s bodies of work, *Cluny Brown* in particular is receiving a due reappraisal (Hustvedt). What makes it such an extraordinary achievement, within the context of Lubitsch’s entire career, is the way in which the “Lubitsch touch” — as deliberately walked-back as it is — makes the collective move towards a utopia, one built on individual liberty, go down so smooth. As Dyer points out, “To be effective, the utopian sensibility has to take off from the real experiences of the audience. Yet to do this, to draw attention to the gap between what is and what could be, is, ideologically speaking, playing with fire... [what films must do] is to work through these contradictions at all levels in such a way as to ‘manage’ them, to make them seem to disappear” (185). By distilling his all of his characterizations down to a shared, root conflict — the structural inability to pursue one’s own desires in a class-bound, capitalist society — and equalizing the formal playing field between characters, Lubitsch pulls this “playing with fire” off by allowing the audience to conclude that “the problem of the crisis indicated by the phrase “in times like these” is a systemic one” (Novak and Krecic 11). This is the heart of Lubitsch’s utopian vision, as expressed by his last work as an artist, and it’s also what Wilder admired most about him: the audience is *his* equal. In *Cluny Brown*, Lubitsch presents us with the realities of our shared oppression, then allows us to put the pieces together and construct a better future for ourselves up on the screen, which is something that the stubbornly individualistic Wilder could not achieve.

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