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Carnival of Soullessness: A Biographical-Cultural Analysis of Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole*

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Abstract

Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951) marks the emergence of media-driven scandal culture in American society. The film, shaped by Wilder's transcontinental life experiences and wartime observations, critiques the commodification of human tragedy. Wilder, a former gigolo and Hollywood success, returned to post-war Europe and confronted the atrocities of the Nazi death camps, which profoundly influenced his storytelling (Madsen 23, 25, 13-14). These experiences materialized in the character of Chuck Tatum, a ruthless tabloid journalist—played by Kirk Douglas—who manipulates a mining accident for personal gain. Tatum's actions reflect what Hunter S. Thompson termed 'the main nerve of the American dream' (191). The film's narrative also echoes America's history of exploitation, particularly in its New Mexico setting, subtly evoking the nation's Indian Wars. By paralleling Tatum's ambition with Leo Minosa's innocence, Wilder constructs a cultural and psychological dialectic. The film's exploration of media ethics remains relevant today, particularly in the context of war reporting, as seen in coverage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Keywords: Media Scandal, Commodification of Tragedy, American Dream, Cultural Syllogism, War Critique

Thesis

Ace in the Hole (1951) pings the dawn of the media scandal age on the radar of the American cultural landscape. A product of the raw mind of Billy Wilder, whose life story up to that time spanned two continents and two world wars, the film satirizes and weeps over the human tendency to commodify tragedy. Wilder, an ex-gigolo who returned to Europe after success as a comedic screenwriter and director at Paramount Pictures, found his old-world cynicism bolstered by the discovery of the Nazi death camps where his fellow Jews died en masse (Madsen 23, 25, 13-14). He funneled his post-war experiences producing Allied propaganda films like *Death Mills* (1945) into the narrative of the mad tabloid journalist Chuck Tatum, willing to do anything for a shot at career redemption. Tatum, embodied by the volcanic Kirk Douglas, and the media frenzy he constructs around a man trapped in a mine shaft fit what Hunter S. Thompson called 'the main nerve of the American dream' (191). This mythical 'big carnival' of American greed and sentimentality also echoes the genocide of its New Mexico landscape, with Wilder using the character of Leo Minosa as a morally good mirror to the

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complicated, self-selling Tatum. The cultural syllogisms within the film itself – Germany opposite America, Tatum opposite Minosa – reflect the biographical-psychological syllogism Wilder creates between himself and the bombastic showman Tatum. Though Wilder's film does not explicitly deal with race, its critique of the war opens doors to a critique of America's Indian Wars and provides a lens on genocidal spectacles to come; I briefly touch on this in a concluding discussion of Wilderian media tactics in this year's Russia-Ukraine War.

Tatum And Wilder on The Beat

Arriving in Albuquerque, New Mexico with no money and a broken car, Charles "Chuck" Tatum offers his services to Mr. Boot, the editor of the *Sun-Bulletin*. Tatum is a big city journalist whose alcoholism leads him into fights, womanizing, and general chaos. He has come west to find work and considers Albuquerque a better place to pan for scoops than major markets like Los Angeles. After a painfully boring (to him) year on the job, Tatum and his assistant, the young Herbie, luck upon a cave-in at a nearby mineshaft while on a beat. Tatum, smelling blood, takes charge of the operation to rescue the innocent yokel Leo Minosa, trapped during an expedition to find native pottery.

This involves the forced cooperation of Minosa's wife, Lorraine, a former "dollar-a-dance girl" brought west after World War II with the lure of Minosa's gas station and land. "Look at it. We sell eight hamburgers a week and a case of soda pop. And once in a while, a Navajo rug maybe" (Wilder, 1951). While Leo mistakenly considers Tatum a friend and an honest man, Lorraine senses the "hard-boiled egg" underneath Tatum's skin. Choosing to stay by Leo's side and sell an image of herself as a faithful wife, Lorraine and Tatum develop Leo's entrapment into a media carnival. With the aim of securing a Pulitzer Prize and a big-city job for Tatum and a financial future for Lorraine, their plot soon encompasses the local sheriff and a menage of vendors and roadside hucksters. Tatum, urging the rescue team to use a tactic that extends Minosa's entrapment to a whole week, ends up killing the man. Tatum gets his own comeuppance via a fatal stab wound from Lorraine but tries to redeem himself and atone for Leo's death by decrying the carnival of onlookers and offering the 'big scoop' of his collaboration with the sheriff. He dies on the floor of the *Sun-Bulletin* after ordering Boot and Herbie to give his last will and testament, an admittance to Leo's de facto murder (Wilder, 1945).

Wilder, born in 1906 in Vienna, was himself a former journalist forced to sell himself in the perilous economy of post-war Europe (Seidman 2). His first significant job, as a reporter for the Viennese paper *Die Stunde*, led to a relocation to Weimar-era Berlin and its fertile, intellectual stomping grounds (Madsen 22). The young auteur divided his time between working as a gigolo – what we would consider the middle ground between an escort and a prostitute – and writing screenplays to become a filmmaker (Madsen 23). This was a dual self-pimping – of body, to middle-aged spinsters of a postwar era marked by the deaths of thirteen percent of the men born from 1870 to 1899 (Keegan 7), and of mind, to a burgeoning film industry associated with luminaries like F.W. Murnau and Fritz Lang, but on the verge of Nazi takeover (Seidman 3-7). It is easy to see how Wilder's prostitution of writing skills in Vienna and Berlin gave him insight into Kirk Douglas' mad tabloid writer Chuck Tatum, while his "ballroom-dancer" career showed him the inner workings of Lorraine Minosa's exploitation

by Tatum as a 'faithful wife' who wants nothing more than to no longer be a Minosa (Madsen 22-24).

This life of self-prostitution continued after Wilder's breakthrough collaborative work *People on Sunday* (1930), as he and other Jews and intellectuals (though sadly, not enough of them) fled the country following Hitler's establishment of Nazi dictatorship in the first three months of 1933 (Seidman 7). After a period in Paris, Wilder left for the new world of Hollywood despite knowing almost no English (Madsen 24-25). Attached to Paramount Pictures, he studied English intensively and became a script writer of repute following his pairing with the upper-class American Charles Brackett (Seidman 9-10). Brackett's collaborative partnership continued up till *Ace in the Hole*, and though Wilder worked with two co-writers on the 1951 film, Neil Sinyard notes that they played a secondary role to the director coming off his acclaimed hit *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). *Boulevard* followed *A Foreign Affair* (1948), his first commercial film in Berlin since the rise of Hitler, though it was not his first post-war German film (Madsen 13-14).

As part of the Psychological Warfare Division of the U.S. Army, Colonel Wilder made a now forgotten but essential film called *Death Mills*. Originally intended only for German audiences, it edits together the countless film records of the liberation of Nazi concentration camps to convey to the complicit German public the scale of atrocities committed in the name of *lebensraum*. The tragedies in the film committed by a 'master race' against the supposed 'degenerates' are the 'usual' vileness – emaciated women and children, endless bodies, gold teeth and children's shoes hoarded like a serial killer's stash of keepsakes (Wilder, 1945). One scene, though, is significant in connection to *Ace in the Hole*. The U.S. Army forces the population of a German village to walk through one of the camps at gunpoint; what begins as a lovely "walk in the country" turns into a witnessing of war crimes committed by their friends and neighbors against 'social deviants' out of ideological hate and a sick sense of 'fun' (Wilder, 1945).

The Viennese Esthete Gone American

This belief that death is "instructive," as put by the first man to arrive at Leo Minosa's gas station after Tatum puts out the word that Minosa is trapped in the mine shaft, is something Wilder deeply disagrees with (Wilder, 1951). Wilder's family was killed at Auschwitz-Birkenau (Madsen 13). It is quite possible that his family and friends' personal artifacts were among those filmed in the endless perversity witnessed by the liberators of the camps. Death is never anything but death to Wilder, the totalizing end of life, and the exploitation of it for shock value and media sensation is as sick as the creation of it. Chuck Tatum's murder of Leo Minosa by delaying his rescue to elongate the sensation around it is a mirror put up to Tatum's face, and his denouncement of his 'big carnival' and attempt to redeem himself by outing his murderous actions to his media connections is the film's equivalent to the German people's eternal need to grapple with the ramifications of their genocide (Wilder, 1951). That Minosa becomes trapped because he goes looking for Native American pottery in the mine implies an equivalence between Nazi race war and the American race war against the natives of this continent. This equivalence, though shocking even for discourse in 2022, is an equivalence I will return to later.

Douglas, now a figure of great contention for his various connections to Hollywood machismo (Wood, 2021), the quest to redeem Hollywood Blacklist screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, and the pro-Israel movement, plays Tatum as a man at the crossroads of both his own iconic characters and Wilder's iconic leading men. For most of the film, Chuck Tatum is as hard-boiled and vile as Douglas' early character in Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947), the gangster Whit Sterling. His final attempt at some form of heroic decency is akin to Douglas' future roles as the forgiving WWI officer Colonel Dax in Stanley Kubrick's *Paths of Glory* (1957), the rebellious slave Spartacus in Kubrick's *Spartacus* (1960), and the loyal patriot Colonel Casey in John Frankenheimer's *Seven Days in May* (1964). Tatum before his realization of the reality of his atrocity is an avaricious man common to early Douglas roles, while his fatal shot at redemption is textbook later Douglas, a staunchly masculine antihero attempting to fix a disastrous situation.

Wilder's depiction of his antihero is likewise a complex zone of past and future masculine lead characters. Michel Ciment notes three types of Wilderian man that were personified by his most frequent lead actors – likeable like Jack Lemmon, strong and masculine like William Holden, and funny and devious like Walter Matthau (Tresgot, 1980). The 'con man' archetype Matthau often portrayed in films like *The Fortune Cookie* (1966) is most like Tatum's slithery persona, with Douglas' trademark virility standing in for Holden's gruff honor in *Stalag 17* (1953). The tiny bit of perverse joy the audience experiences in watching Tatum turn his gears, however, is nothing like the laughs Lemmon offers as a crossdressing musician in *Some Like It Hot* (1959), or as a working stiff cuckold in *The Apartment* (1960). Tatum is the refined Continental journalist of Wilder's youth in the body of a wily, scheming all-American antihero, a re-envisioning of the sort of European who compromised to survive the world wars as an endlessly ambitious Hollywood noir protagonist. He is also an early filmed example of two peculiarly Southwestern antiheroes – the hardboiled Southwestern criminals that novelist Jim Thompson specialized in, and the morally ambiguous men of Sergio Leone and Sam Peckinpah's revisionist Westerns. Douglas-as-Tatum's "single-minded dynamism" (Maddin 4) is the vital energy at the heart of Wilder's film, the mad id gesticulating under Wilder's luxurious superego of classic Hollywood mise-en-scene.

The psychological reservoir of life experiences Wilder drew on for this film – his life as a reporter, his gigolo career, his associations with the war – blend in ways not often isolated and studied by many critics. In the two essays that come with the deluxe Criterion Collection edition of *Ace in the Hole,* Molly Haskell notes in "Noir in Broad Daylight" that "the survivor's guilt of a man whose family died in Auschwitz" characterizes the "angst" of Tatum and Lorraine's moneygrubbing tango (3), whereas Guy Maddin plays up the campiness of Douglas' performance as wild man Tatum in "Chin Up for Mother". The dual nature of the film – the sordid and the kitschy – harkens back to the experiences of the Germans out for a country walk in *Death Mills*. Wilder's film, though it whistles past the graveyard at times, is even more shocking for how banal and cornpone the witnesses to Minosa's death are in the glimpses we see of their personal lives. Mr. Federber sells his insurance business when put on the air by a radio reporter, while Sheriff Kretzer seems more concerned with his pet rattlesnake than winning re-election. The only New Mexican characters who have a gauge on the sickness of the 'big carnival' of Leo's exploitation are not 'New Mexican', but from back east: Tatum and Lorraine.

Blurred Roles: Wilder Reborn as Tatum

But is anyone in this work truly 'New Mexican'? As I mentioned earlier, this work stands in the shadow of two genocides. Leo Minosa, playing blind man's bluff with ghosts who know the score of eldritch horrors of yesteryear, goes hunting for native American pottery in the local mine. When Leo is buried alive, Tatum capitalizes on the "King Tut in New Mexico" nature of his story by publicizing the "Curse of the Seven Vultures" the ancient inhabitants of the area (assumedly Puebloans) laid upon the mountain. Wilder almost never touched on race issues in his films; only *The Fortune Cookie*, released in a November 1966 atmosphere that was soon to see the civil rights movement become the Black power struggle, contains a major character of color.

Ace in the Hole, however, is the closest he came to making a Western, and all Westerns require an explicit or implicit discussion of the founding genocide of the West. It is also a noir "in broad daylight" and points towards a general trend of 1950s noirs taking place in non-urban, non-nighttime locales (Haskell 1). Though a few Western noirs existed before *Ace in the Hole*, most notably Raoul Walsh's *High Sierra* (1941), few dealt with the racial implications of the West in a liberal way. Tatum is not explicitly Jewish, but an early scene shows him bemoaning the lack of chopped liver and pickles in Albuquerque. Haskell notes this reference to Douglas and Wilder's Jewishness on page 2 of her essay, but avoids differentiating between the 'tough', streetwise Jewishness associated with Douglas' screen persona and the intelligent, decadent Jewishness of Wilder's crumbling postwar Berlin. Wilder worked with a few other Jewish male actors, Erich von Stroheim, Edward G. Robinson, Walter Matthau, and Tony Curtis among them. Yet, Douglas' role as Tatum in *Ace in the Hole* and von Stroheim's role as Max von Mayerling in *Sunset Boulevard* were the only times a Jewish male actor played a man with the same profession as Wilder. Von Mayerling also functions as a de facto gigolo to his ex-wife, Gloria Swanson's silent film star Norma Desmond.

It is arguable that *Ace in the Hole*, following immediately after *Sunset Boulevard* and being another noir, is an attempt to reimagine the decaying von Mayerling as a young American macho man. Under this interpretation, both von Mayerling and Tatum are crypto-Jewish characters based on the newly Americanized Colonel Wilder. Von Mayerling, faithful to his ex-wife despite her fading image and sanity, does not have a post-Holocaust element to his Jewishness but fits the type of the Berlin gigolo that Wilder was before the war. This makes him a dry run for the constantly self-selling character of Tatum, who represents the man who sold his body in Berlin and his writing skills in four cities across two continents.

Tatum pimps his writing skills to Boot. Lorraine pimps her faithfulness, first to Leo and later to Tatum. But what does Leo pimp? Forced to sell the spirit-protected crafts of his homeland at his barren gas station, Minosa is also a Wilderian man. Though the 'full-blooded' Pueblo people refuse to touch the Mountain of the Seven Vultures, the mestizo Minosa acts out a hybrid life – white while native, modern while ancient – for a handful of sales a week. The 'big carnival' of his entrapment mostly exists without his knowledge, but profits entirely off his back. The longer he is trapped in the mine without dying, the more of a profit Tatum and Lorraine make from his "human interest story." Yet this exploitation rests on the deceit of Leo, who can only know bits and pieces of the world outside his mine shaft – deceits like Lorraine's 'faithfulness' and the community's 'rescue' efforts. These deceits function to

elongate his life and spirit, yet they will not ensure his physical survival, only the increase of Tatum and Lorraine's wealth. Chin up for mother. *Arbeit Macht Frei.*

We can now see Leo Minosa's role in this drama more clearly. Leo is a product available for a limited time only, yet his profit margin and potential revenue are still affected by his survival. He is no different than a forced laborer at Ravensbruck or Auschwitz-Birkenau, not even from the pottery he digs for to sell to braindead tourists looking for the 'authentic' native experience. Yet he is not explicitly depicted as a subjugated and exploited symbol for two subjugated and exploited groups, and that is what keeps his struggle from a stale preachiness. He only appears onscreen in his final incarnation as a "human interest story" for the worst sort of human, not as a lifelong toiler and commoner. Indeed, Lorraine says he refuses to let her leave or divorce him, a pattern of behavior considered domestic abuse as early as 1970.

Wilder's film, innovative in this subtle blend of political commentary on the Nazi Holocaust and the American Holocaust, acts as a precursor to temporally shifting Southwestern works like Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977) and John Sayles' film *Lone Star* (1996). Leo Minosa's mine shaft is a dark public zone of violence, plastered over front pages like a concentration camp in a newsreel. However, this zone of violence is the totalizing end of the film, unlike Silko's Bataan Death March and Sayles' roadside bar. Silko's protagonist Tayo, just down the road from Albuquerque in Laguna Pueblo, is redeemed through a native ceremony. Sayles' hero, Sam Deeds, reconciles with his late father's legacy when learning he killed a corrupt sheriff to save a Black man's life. The desperate flail at self-redemption Chuck Tatum makes after killing Leo and being stabbed by Lorraine is unsuccessful. Tatum's version of events is not believed in life, and it is left to doubt as to whether he will be taken seriously in death. Lorraine and the sheriff, like so many of the Nazi class, may go free or get a mild reprimand when Tatum's deceit is discovered. Moral ambiguity, so often tokenized in contemporary cinema, finds its ugly consequences exposed in Wilder's melodrama.

A New War, A New Wilder Age

The toxic ambiguity I speak of still exists in media depictions of cruel violence and the common people's reaction to it. This year's invasion of Ukraine by Russia, both countries that suffered Jewish casualties in Wilder's world war, has become a hot potato of understandable moral outrage from the side of pro-Ukrainian demonstrators and callous moral equivalizing from pro-Russian commentators. The popularization of pro-Ukrainian memes like "Russian warship go fuck yourself" and the endlessly parodied propaganda piece "Ghost of Kyiv" come from a concept of psychological warfare as black ops that Wilder formed a part of during his time in the U.S. Army. Their funniness also derives from the Continental sense of decadent humor Wilder's generation of Hollywood and European directors drew upon during the last world war, as Slate's Charles Shaw noted in his article "Ukraine's Caustic Wartime Humor Has Surprising Soviet Roots" (2022). While these memes have the unfortunate side effect of supporting a wider American policy of imperialism and military aggression, they bring aid to an unjustly attacked nation and act as a post-Wilderian form of gallows satire. The screenwriter behind *Ninotchka* (1939) would be proud of the creativity Generation Z has shown in taking the optimistic cynicism of his gentler works to advocate against modern-day fascists in countries all over the world.

However, the priggish face of the pro-Russia brigade comes across as Chuck Tatum vileness with delusions of moral superiority. A quick peruse of the hashtags #IStandWithRussia and #IStandWithPutin on Twitter shows a sad spectacle of conspiracy theorists and emotional incels who support a glorified mob boss out of a fear of minority groups and Western decadence (Twitter, 2022). If the pro-Ukrainian media spectacle is a light comedy like *Some Like It Hot,* the pro-Russian spectacle is a Norma Desmond paranoia episode shot through with Tatumesque realpolitik. One can mock the global implications of Americans supporting an anti-Kremlin policy of post-Soviet containment. One also cannot help but compare Putin's manipulation of the sort of cynicism *Ace in the Hole* contains to be its own form of Tatum-style Machiavellianism, with a last-minute redemption act on his part extremely unlikely.

Conclusion

The Wilder who fled from Berlin in desperation, who found a new life in Hollywood alongside Berliner expatriates Peter Lorre and Bertold Brecht, could have easily used the image reservoir of the West to recast himself as some sort of *High Noon* cowboy-hero avenging the nightmares of Chelmno. Instead, he chose to make his only 'Western' a modern film examining the moral compromises and concessions common to all times, but most notable during the war Hitler waged against his fellow Jews. *Ace in the Hole's* three major juxtapositions - of Chuck Tatum and Leo Minosa, Tatum and Billy Wilder, and the Nazi Holocaust and the genocide of the native Americans – form a complex web of insights about the nature of self-prostitution. This self-prostitution exists in *Ace in the Hole* under the explicit guise of a media critique, but subtly as a critique of the Second World War. It contains an even subtler critique of Wilder's new *heimat* and its legacy of genocide, told through a sunbaked noir melodrama plot that fuses two of the prime genres of postwar American cinema. There is much in Wilder's film that harkens to later media spectacles. Though I hope my discussion of the still-raging war in Ukraine is not an unnecessary tangent, I do think it is worth examining Wilder's insights through the lens of the tragic spectacle we see every day on our phones and televisions.

Wilder's commentary on the spectacle of violence, though unrelentingly cynical and bleak, should be seen in context of the gentleness and optimism he exhibited in interviews and life (Tresgot, 1980). Though Tatum's carnival of avarice is his downfall, his attempt at redemption reflects the perverse desire of the Wilderian hero to somehow make the best out of the nightmares of modern life. Expurgating the "survivor's guilt" Haskell accurately diagnoses him with through the character of Tatum, Wilder is freed of the hell of Auschwitz (4). He only made one film as brazenly dark as *Ace in the Hole* after 1951, the lascivious sex comedy *Kiss Me, Stupid* (1964), and is still known as one of the great satiric directors of Hollywood cinema.

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