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**When Someone's Death Makes Someone Else Blossom:  
How Hitchcock and Wilder Successfully Combine Corpses and *Joie de Vivre* in  
*The Trouble with Harry* and *Avanti!***

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Detective Mulligan (Pat O'Brien): Better bring a check in case the joint is raided.

Speakeasy waiter (John Indrisano): Who's gonna raid a funeral?

Mulligan: Some people got no respect for the dead.

*Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder, 1959).

Cemetery caretaker (John Steadman): None left. Bad business, that.

George Lumley (Bruce Dern): You mean the fire?

Caretaker: Never liked them multiple funerals. Too much work involved all at one time.

*Family Plot* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1976).

“Blood and jokes do not mix” (Zolotow 203): that is how David O. Selznick famously predicted the failure of *Some Like It Hot* (1959), a film which turned out to be one of Billy Wilder's most successful. Building a comedy around the Saint Valentine's Day Massacre; having gangsters use coffins to hide smuggled bottles of whiskey; or transforming a funeral parlor into a speakeasy was indeed rather daring, especially in the United States of the 1950s. But *Some Like It Hot* takes place in 1929 Chicago and the initial killing is neither surprising in such a context, nor poignant for the spectators. After all, Toothpick Charlie (George E. Stone) and his henchmen got what they deserved for having betrayed Spats Colombo (George Raft)—it is the hard law of the mob. Moreover, the massacre is just the starting point of the movie whose main interest for the public is to see the male protagonists struggle with their new “female” identities, wondering how they will get away with their lies.

The case of *Avanti!* (1972), another comedy by Wilder, is different: the film's plot is contemporary of its shooting; there are not so many crazy characters or situations; and the story revolves around the tragic end of two lovers who happen to be the father and mother of the hero and heroine. In *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), Alfred Hitchcock also puts death at the heart of the picture though his film is anything but a drama. It is not unusual for Hitchcock to do so. In *Rope* (1948), the corpse is hidden in a chest in the very first scene. While “there's no body in the family plot,” according to some original posters of the eponymous movie, the late Harry (Philip Truex) is physically present all through *The Trouble with Harry*; in fact, the movie is rhythmized by the dead man who is regularly dug up and buried again. In the same way, Wilder's *Avanti!* features numerous and complicated formalities for the repatriation of the corpses, and also their snatching by local Mafiosi at one point. The dead are thus full-fledged protagonists. Yet, both films could be considered as hymns to life: whether in *Avanti!* or *The Trouble with Harry*, the *mise-en-scène* enhances the beauty of the landscapes while good food and drinks as well as art—whether painting or music—are vital ingredients, too. If death is an integral part of life, then the newly-formed couples in the two movies do more than simply cope: they learn how to live better and are reborn emotionally when other characters, sometimes their loved ones, pass away.

By analyzing the nature of dialogues as well as the role of props and the types of shots used, this paper aims at revealing the methods and tricks used by Hitchcock and Wilder in *The*

*Trouble with Harry* and *Avanti!* to turn what could be grim or even sordid stories into films that are not only funny but also imbued with poetry. In doing so, the second purpose of this article is to highlight the close connections between Wilder and Hitchcock's art.

## LAUGHING AT DEATH?

Although *The Trouble with Harry* and *Avanti!* are different in their style and screenplays, both Hitchcock and Wilder take up the challenge of using death and dead people as the driving force behind their comedy films. As Kevin Lally wonders in his 1996 biography of Wilder, "how many romantic comedies revolve around the retrieval of two parental corpses and include murder among their subplots?" (380). The original American posters set the tone. That of *Avanti!* features a group of smiling pallbearers wearing suits of diverse colors—none of which black—carrying a coffin in an unorthodox manner; they are surrounded by various characters, including a maid with a roll of toilet paper, and all are rushing forward. The focal point of the poster for *The Trouble with Harry* is Captain Wiles (Edmund Gwenn) dragging a man's corpse; but only the legs are visible, and they are drowned in autumn leaves, as if to familiarize the spectators with the omnipresence of death in the movie. Hitchcock's film is adapted from the novel of the same name written in 1949 by Jack Trevor Story; interestingly, the cover design of the 1970 Penguin edition, by Alan Aldridge, is a runaway coffin—technically, the coffin has legs and this image announces the posters for *Avanti!* which will come out two years later. The publicity material makes it clear that neither movie will equate death with sorrow, dignity, or utter contemplation, which could make a western audience feel uncomfortable right away.

Two key elements in enabling the spectators to accept death as a subject for comedy are characterization and dialogues. In *The Trouble with Harry*, none of the characters seem to be sorry for whatever happened to the dead man. This detachment and carefree mood are inevitably communicated to the public. As Lesley Brill notes in *The Hitchcock Romance: Love and Irony in Hitchcock's Films*, "no event or person in *The Trouble with Harry* is allowed to cause or suffer real pain. Nor do they seriously threaten to do so. The comic mode of the film finally results from its obsessive repetition of the theme of rebirth; for if time and death have no power to injure, what terrors can remain?" (290). Early into the film, Jennifer Rogers (Shirley MacLaine), upon recognizing her husband, could not be happier: Harry "is in a deep sleep, a deep, wonderful sleep," she says, suggesting that his death will have fantastic consequences for her and possibly for him, too. Actually, the public will later learn that Harry was a complicated and tormented man and that he was not particularly likeable—he was "horribly good," as Jennifer will put it. Harry insisted on replacing his late brother by marrying his pregnant widow, Jennifer, but only out of family loyalty. The fact that he stood her up "on [her] second wedding night" on account of an unfavorable horoscope is something Jennifer could never forgive. Harry is found dead in the woods after having come to his wife's house because he wanted her back. He passes away soon after Jennifer hits him on the head with a milk bottle, but the thought that she may be the one who killed him gives her no remorse; quite unexpectedly, it makes her laugh. As Lesley Brill writes, "Hitchcock's pastoral comedy takes place in a New England countryside that appears prelapsarian; the knowledge of sin and of death is excluded" (284). This lack is why all the protagonists—and not only Jennifer—never hesitate to say what they think straightforwardly, as a child would.

If Jennifer is not at all upset when seeing the dead Harry, it is also because there is absolutely no difference between the corpse and the man he used to be: she confirms that "he looked exactly the same when he was alive, except he was vertical." Beyond the irony of the line, Jennifer gives crucial information: Harry was definitely not a funny guy and so, he never was truly "alive," as opposed to his sparkling young wife. It seems that Harry died the way he lived: insignificantly. Neither the spectators nor the other characters can really judge for

themselves since Harry is already dead when the film starts, and those who live in the small village barely knew him or never met him at all. Therefore, Harry will not be missed by any of the characters, and the public hardly has sympathy for him. “Some people are better off dead,” a vehement Bruno (Robert Walker) tells Guy (Farley Granger) in *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951). Jennifer implies this very conviction when she talks about Harry but the choice of words is different. There is no violence in her attitude and, above all, she never intended to murder her husband. Arnie (Jerry Mathers), her little boy, looks at the corpse and asks, “Will it get better?” and Jennifer’s answer is unequivocal: “Not if we’re lucky.” Later on, she will also tell Miss Gravely (Mildred Natwick), “I don’t care what you do with Harry, just as long as you don’t bring him back to life.” The young woman’s frankness is disarming and endearing: her second husband was “too good to live,” she believes. If she said that Harry was “born to be dead,” the spectators would probably not be shocked either.

The fact Jennifer does not shed a tear on discovering she is widowed for the second time is thus rather logical. What is more surprising is her reaction to the death of Robert, her first husband and Arnie’s father, with whom she was madly in love. Soon after their marriage, Robert “got killed”; although no detail is given, it must have been a violent and sudden death. While any loving wife would be devastated in such circumstances, Jennifer only briefly comments: “I was heartbroken... for six weeks.” Consequently, in *The Trouble with Harry*, it appears that not even the death of a loved one is a tragic event. One line by Pamela Piggott (Juliet Mills) in *Avanti!* gives the impression that the characters of this Wilder film are also taking death lightly. Pamela explains that when her boyfriend inelegantly left her, she attempted suicide: “I . . . bought myself a suitcase full of fish and chips and a dozen bottles of Guinness stout and tried to eat myself to death. Took them hours to pump my stomach out. It was stupid, but I’ve learned my lesson: no more fish and chips.” The moral of the story might as well come out of Jennifer’s mouth in *The Trouble with Harry*.

Nevertheless, basically, the relationship to death and corpses is not the same in *Avanti!* In Wilder’s film, there is more than just one body and the emotional link between the dead and the living is much stronger. Wendell Armbruster, Jr. (Jack Lemmon) is an American executive travelling to Ischia to claim the body of his father who died in a car crash. He learns upon arrival that Wendell Armbruster, Sr. had an affair with a woman for ten years, and that the woman in question was also killed in the accident. Pamela, an English young lady he met on his way to Naples, happens to be her daughter. Wendell’s attitude is often dictated by anger more than by sorrow, and his comments on the first draft of his father’s eulogy, which he recorded on a Dictaphone before he learnt the truth, are a source of laughter: “He died suddenly and tragically far from his loved ones alone in a distant land where he used to go to rest his mind and heal his body. *Bullshit*. He was a philanthropist, a pillar of the church, a tireless crusader for all that is decent. . . . *Dirty old man. That’s what he was.*” But there are also tears in *Avanti!*, notably during the scene at the morgue, when Wendell and Pamela are asked to identify their parents’ bodies—the non-diegetic music arranged by Carlo Rustichelli heightens the poignancy of the passage.<sup>1</sup>

Wilder’s framing is all but weepy: there are several long shots and no close-ups or subjective cameras, which minimizes the public’s identification with the characters, and in particular with Pamela, who is the more afflicted of the two: the spectators will only be able to see one tear rolling down the young woman’s cheek. The way sunlight filters through the few windows is also essential in giving the scene its nuances and poetic atmosphere: sunshine commonly symbolizes life and this element of *mise-en-scène* is fundamental in making the passage neither oppressive nor depressing for the audience (Fig. 1). This, once more, underscores the dialectics of life and death present throughout the film. After Wendell has left the place, Pamela stays there alone with the two bodies. In their 1979 monograph, British authors Neil Sinyard and Adrian Turner provide an insightful analysis of the scene:

With the romantic theme music heard softly on the soundtrack and with a gesture which surely recalls Sabrina's when hearing "La Vie en Rose" outside her Paris apartment, Pamela moves to the window and opens it. And for the first time in the scene the screen suddenly becomes suffused with sunlight. It is a magical, cathartic moment—an infusion of light and life into a scene of darkness and death and a strangely beautiful pointer to the way the example of the dead lovers is to irradiate the lives of their descendants. (53)



Fig. 1: By eschewing close-ups in the scene at the morgue, Wilder avoids voyeuristic filming and whimpering, 42:47. MGM, 2006.

Another important point is that the corpses are never shown as such, contrary to what happens in *The Trouble with Harry*. The audiences of *Avanti!* only “know” the dead illegitimate couple through what the other characters say about them, and not even their picture is produced. Thus, in spite of the physical and central presence of the sheet-covered bodies in the long scene at the mortuary, a certain distance is kept, adding to the detachment already achieved through the eschewal of close-ups. The other infallible technique of Wilder is the comic relief provided by the coroner (Pippo Franco) just after Wendell and Pamela have sworn that the bodies are those of their parents: he takes all the supplies he needs from his many pockets and rhythmically stamps forms of different colors with the utmost professionalism, under Wendell's reproving eye.<sup>2</sup>

All along *Avanti!*, the spectators' attention is also diverted from the inevitable character of death by the practical realities associated with the repatriation of the bodies, and in particular by the necessity of using appropriate caskets. This diversion even becomes a running gag: the director of the hotel, Carlo Carlucci (Clive Revill), is supposed to provide the coffins, which proves difficult. When Wendell tells him: “Come on, you can dig up a couple of coffins,” Carlucci takes it literally: “You want second-hand coffins?”<sup>3</sup> Later, Wendell tells his wife, who is in Baltimore, that it is not easy to find “two zinc-lined coffins,” which could betray the fact his father had a double life. When the coffins are finally secured, there are three of them and “there is no refund, no exchange.” The same holds true for *The Trouble with Harry* in which the repartee of most characters tends to downplay the seriousness of the issue. One striking example is that of Miss Gravely, the spinster, who calmly asks Captain Wiles: “What seems to be the trouble?” when she finds him in the woods dragging Harry's body. Interestingly, this character appears to crystallize the conflict—or harmony (?)—between life and death: she is upset by Harry's body but not because she is confronted with death; instead, she sees the body as an unfortunate hiccup. Furthermore, as Brill notes, “Miss Gravely's first name, ‘Ivy,’ balances her funeral surname” (285). Later on, while the captain is having coffee at her house, Miss Gravely says, “Let's get back to our *little* (emphasis added) problem” to allude to Harry, whose body they have yet to get rid of.

Another salient feature of the two films is that the dead—Harry on the one hand, and Wendell’s father and Pamela’s mother on the other—are some kind of cumbersome “objects,” with Hitchcock’s title being quite explicit in that respect. When interviewing Hitchcock in 1966, François Truffaut remarked, “The whole humor of the picture hinges on a single device: an attitude of disconcerting nonchalance. The characters discuss the corpse as casually as if they were talking about a pack of cigarettes,” to which Hitchcock answered: “That’s the idea. Nothing amuses me so much as understatement” (227). In a 2007 book, Anne-Marie Baron explains that

Understatement . . . is a stylistic device in literature, defined for the cinema by Alfred Hitchcock. . . . It consists in saying little to suggest a great deal, expressing all emotions with restraint, toning down all effects and rejecting tragedy and pathos. This is the speciality of humor, which arises from the asymmetry between signifier and the signified, and between the method of expression and the reality expressed, with systematic underrating of serious events while exaggerating the insignificant to the point of scandal. (16-17)

The absurdity resulting from this euphemistic approach and from this continuous mix of comic and macabre elements allows the spectators to remain even more distanced from the story. Another short scene from Hitchcock’s movie is never commented upon by scholars or critics; yet, its symbolism and visual impact is compelling. The passage in which the two men carry Harry’s burdensome body out of the woods and back to Jennifer’s house, accompanied by the two women with a shovel on their shoulders, poses similarities to the ending of a Walt Disney cartoon, *Peter and the Wolf* (Clyde Geronimi, 1946), where the hunters bring back the proud little boy’s catch (Fig. 2). While this element of *mise-en-scène* gives the shot a sense of misplaced triumph—a final solution seems to have been found, and Harry (or his body) will not bother or threaten the protagonists anymore—it definitely downplays the solemnity of the moment in particular, and the ineluctability of death in general. After all, no one dies in Disney’s child-friendly adaptation of Sergei Prokofiev’s musical tale, not even the big bad wolf.







Fig. 2: The irreverent way of carrying Harry's body parallels *Peter and the Wolf* by Disney, highlighting the childlike and playful atmosphere of Hitchcock's movie, 1:24:42/13:29. Universal Pictures, 2001.

In *The Trouble with Harry* as well as in *Avanti!*, Harry, Wendell's father and Pamela's mother really are dead, but they are also characters in their own right, for they "go on living," especially thanks to the way members of the burial party behave and look to the future.

#### HARRY'S SOCKS AND JACK LEMMON'S UNDERPANTS

The most famous still from *The Trouble with Harry*—and certainly one of its only visual effects—is that of Arnie discovering his dead stepfather. The camera is placed at ground level; only the (oversized) feet and legs of the man are visible, in the foreground, and little Arnie's body, seen from the waist up, is "completing" the dead man's. This vantage point gives the image a grotesque character—all the more so as Arnie is holding a toy space gun—and the spectators thus tend to forget that a child is in fact observing a corpse in vivid detail (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: A living child with a dead man's legs and feet, 03:45. Universal Pictures, 2001.

After a tramp (Barry Macollum) has stolen Harry's shoes, Hitchcock uses the same short focal-length shot, this time without the little boy, but it still looks incongruous since the dead man's socks are red and blue (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: How to turn a body into an oddity with a single (colorful) shot, 14:01. Universal Pictures, 2001.

Harry is buried (without any coffin or shroud) and dug up several times until Jennifer, Sam Marlowe (John Forsythe), Miss Gravely, and Captain Wiles decide that they should put Harry back where Arnie found him. Thus, his clothes have to be washed and ironed in Jennifer's home where she remarks, "Isn't it odd? After refusing for so long, here I am finally doing Harry's laundry." Of course, Jennifer's attitude is mostly selfish since she thinks of her own future before anything else: she wants to avoid being suspected by the police. But although Harry's body is often "blamed" for being such a nuisance, he is sometimes treated with care, as if his comfort did matter. On one occasion, Captain Wiles insists that Harry should be buried "facing west so that [he] can watch the setting sun"; the place will be "cozy in winter" (Sam) and "cool in the summer" (Captain Wiles). Harry is even addressed by the captain who says, "You're a lucky fellow, Harry Worp," before digging a hole in this chosen spot. Earlier on, not knowing that he is dead, Sam talks to Harry bluntly because his socks are an anomaly in the lovely landscape he draws. But even after taking the man's pulse, Sam decides to complete his portrait rather than tell the police. He, too, has a purely selfish interest in Harry and is irreverent enough to put his box of pastels on the dead man's stomach, which leads to the idea of the corpse being a simple object or "piece of furniture" (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: "You never know when a dead rabbit might come in handy," Arnie says. Likewise, Harry's body acts as a convenient drafting table for Sam, 27:19. Universal Pictures, 2001.

In *Avanti!*, the characters also talk to the dead. For instance, because an export license cannot be obtained in time, Jo Jo Blodgett (Edward Andrews), from the State Department, appoints Wendell Armbruster, Sr. as "commercial attaché to the embassy in Rome," so that he will have diplomatic immunity. The ceremony is carried out in an official way, as if the man were alive, with Blodgett addressing a coffin, and inviting it/him to swear, "rais[ing] [its/his] right hand and repeat[ing] after [him]." When it comes to their burial place, the "well-being"



of the deceased is also taken into account in *Avanti!* After realizing that administrative procedures are inextricable, Pamela thinks of a solution that would not only save her and Wendell a lot of hassle but that would, above all, have pleased the two lovers: “Why subject them to that? Why don’t we bury them here? There’s a lovely old cemetery up on the hill. They could be there together. They’d like that.” Later, Pamela mentions the weather, as Sam and Captain Wiles do in Hitchcock’s film, and she compares the climate of Ischia to that of Baltimore or England: “Here you have the sun twelve months a year. There’s no need to lie in a damp grave. It gets so cold and . . . so lonely.” Although Wendell initially determines to take his father’s corpse back to the USA, he will finally surrender and there will be a double funeral in the Carlucci family plot at the end of the movie. Wendell will be thoughtful enough to have his father’s coffin placed on the left side of the grave, on account of “his good ear,” and another important point is that the orchestra of the hotel will play the dead couple’s favorite tune during their burial—the poetic quality of the film also comes from the *live* music filling the air at all times.<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that even Bruno (Gianfranco Barra), the blackmailing valet who has been shot dead by Anna (Giselda Castrini), the Sicilian maid, will see his dream come true since his body will pass for that of Wendell’s father and he will thus “go back to America.” Of course, this situation is arranged by Wendell, with the complicity of Carlucci, not to “please” the late Bruno but to take advantage of his death so that the body of Armbruster, Sr. will remain in Ischia. Thus, as Neil Sinyard and Adrian Turner point out, not only does Bruno unintentionally bring Wendell and Pamela together (because of his murder in Pamela’s room, the young woman’s luggage is moved to Wendell’s suite) but “like the dead lovers, Bruno has more effect dead than he had when alive” (56) for the parents will rest side by side in their dream island thanks to his murder. Remarkably, Pamela manages to see the good side of the cruel accident that took the lives of her mother and Wendell’s father despite her sorrow: she goes as far as using the adjective “ideal” to describe its romantic context: “Warm night, full moon, island in the Mediterranean.”

As a matter of fact, in both films, the gorgeous landscapes make death less unbearable, whether for the heroes or for the public. Many authors have already highlighted the care with which Hitchcock had his sets designed for *The Trouble with Harry*.<sup>5</sup> The autumnal Vermont scenery in the opening shots could be a perfectly bucolic locale if a body were not revealed lying among the dead leaves: “[Harry’s] inopportune body mars the Vermont fall,” as Dominique Sipièrè puts it (151). Hitchcock himself explained: “Where did I lay the dead body? Among the most beautiful colors I could find. . . . We did it in counterpoint. I wanted to take a nasty taste away by making the setting beautiful” (Gottlieb 312). The director told François Truffaut, “It’s as if I had set up a murder alongside a rustling brook and spilled a drop of blood in the clear water” (Truffaut 227). The yellow, red, and orange foliage gives the film its visual quality. If this period of the year is synonymous with decay, it also announces the renewal of nature a few months later, which perfectly fits the central theme of the movie: “death’s fertility and life’s indefatigable rebirth” (Brill 288). In the same way, the blue skies of the Bay of Naples in Billy Wilder’s *Avanti!* would be quite idyllic should the movie not deal with the loss of the protagonists’ parents.

But in spite of its rather melancholic mood, *Avanti!* is a predominantly optimistic film. In her 2007 chapter on the film, Trudy Bolter considers that it “is very black and grim, and rather caustic. It is neither romantic nor in any deep sense comic” (8). She also writes that the movie’s ending “is not really happy” (18), which indeed is undeniable, with Pamela having fallen in love with a man who is the outright antithesis of her former boyfriend but who is nonetheless married and lives on the other side of the Atlantic (19). *Avanti!* is not a screwball comedy in the vein of *Some Like It Hot*, and a wholly happy ending, Hollywood style, would have been inadequate. Despite its conclusion and a few scenes like the one at the morgue, I argue that the film is mostly a comedy, owing to the fact that sad scenes are never too long, like

in any movie of the genre. Additionally, comedic value arises due to the resilience and optimism of the protagonists themselves, and to the way they handle certain situations (the Trotta brothers going from blackmailers to undertakers; the attitude of Pamela when she unexpectedly enters Wendell's bathroom as he is naked; Blodgett's reaction on finding "half a herring" in Wendell's bathtub in the middle of a serious conversation; or the same Blodgett finally deciding to take a mud bath "to have the acidity of a man of twenty"). Another notable example is the scene in which Pamela tours Ischia alone in a horse-drawn cart. Although she has just lost her mother, she is radiant and amazed by everything she sees. The way Wilder films the passage is in total opposition with the aesthetics of the scene at the morgue. In it, the young woman is framed in close-ups exclusively (lasting as much as 10 seconds on average), and shots/reverse shots alternate to show the public what she discovers in subjective camera: the architecture or the lifestyle of Mediterranean people (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6: Now that Pamela is happy again, Wilder indulges in close shots on her face also showing, in reserve shots, several generations of Italians enjoying life and nuns unexpectedly filling a cinema screening a romantic drama, 1:37:23/1:37:34/1:37:58. MGM, 2006.

Poetry is also omnipresent in both films: in *Avanti!*, Pamela delights in hearing the Italians speak and she repeatedly compares their language to “music,” even when waiting to enter the morgue. Relatedly in *The Trouble with Harry*, Dr. Greenbow (Dwight Marfield) is so absorbed by his book of poetry that he stumbles on Harry’s body without realizing that he is dead. As for Sam, his singing voice fills the air. Above all, he is a painter who places art above anything else and lives in a world of his own where only creativity and imagination matter. In spite of the circumstances, he often insists he wants Jennifer to pose for him. On meeting her, he declares, “I’d like to paint you nude.” Jennifer answers, “Some other time,” which is exactly what Captain Wiles tells Sam when the latter proposes to dig a double grave, the captain having said that Harry was “lucky.” This exchange is another way of sharing positive emotions with the audience, establishing one more link between love/sex and death, and confirming that these Hitchcockian characters should not worry about anything, not even about their own deaths. If art is inventiveness, then Sam’s most valuable contribution to Jennifer’s situation is when he alters one of his pastels to “resurrect” the dead man, thus destroying a significant piece of “legal evidence” all the while “mystifying Calvin [Wiggs (Royal Dano), the deputy sheriff,] with a mock-learned discourse on art” (Walker 334). This graceful way of confounding Wiggs offers an extra touch of humor, and the other characters cannot help laughing. Such passage is typical of Hitchcock who lost no opportunity to ridicule policemen or anybody supposed to enforce the law.

What also makes death less dramatic is that Harry’s body is “restless” in the sense that his many burials are never definitive, and every time the problem seems to be solved once and for all, another one comes up. In the last scene of the film, Harry has been exhumed again. He still does not rest in peace because, oddly enough, it appears that it is more convenient for the characters that he should be found exactly where he dropped dead. Similarly, in *Avanti!*, the “anecdote” about the “disappearing” corpses is another way to soften the implacability of death. The long scene in which Wendell awkwardly tries to haggle over the amount of the ransom and finally has to give the (caricatured) mafia family what they asked for, allows Wilder to make fun of his (caricatured) American businessman who may, for the first time in his life, realize that he cannot control everything. Interestingly, Hitchcock’s film clearly “positions a corpse as an object of trade” (Pomerance 39), which also happens in Wilder’s movie although in a much more down-to-earth manner.

Because Harry is never interred for good, and because the parents’ bodies in *Avanti!* are temporarily snatched, it is as if, in the two films, the three corpses refused to let themselves be buried and thumbed their noses at death: the dead almost have a life of their own, and they have a symbolic role to play by breathing new life into the other characters. In *Avanti!*, the children follow in their hedonistic parents’ footsteps and become “Willie and Kate” for one night,<sup>6</sup> which leads them to start a love story—or, rather, to re-enact the story of their parents. In fact, Pamela and Wendell are literally in their parents’ shoes since they wear their clothes, and they also swim in the nude to sunbathe on a rock at sunrise as their mother and father would always do. As Neil Sinyard and Adrian Turner note,

It is not enough that Wendell should wear his father’s clothes and assume his role. He must assume his father’s values if he is to become human. . . . the sunbathing in the nude is an important stage in Wendell’s search for his true identity. . . . The process is to be completed later when he appears naked before Pamela in the bathroom. If Wilder’s characters are nearly always hiding something . . . it is appropriate that Wendell’s moments of illumination occur when, quite literally, he has nothing to conceal. (54)

If the dead man's socks are discordant in *The Trouble with Harry*, so is Wendell's attire when he jumps into the sea having kept his white underpants and black socks on. He takes off his socks to use them as an illusory bulwark against Pamela's assumed nudity when a boat full of fishermen passes by (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Wendell's unwillingness to appear naked in front of Pamela is consistent with the way he sees life and love, 1:23:42. MGM DVD, 2006.

As for his shorts, he loses them while swimming to reach the rock; later on, Bruno, who has witnessed the whole scene and taken photographs, produces the underpants in a theatrical manner as an exhibit when trying to blackmail Wendell (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: The sly Bruno ceremoniously presenting Wendell with his "fatal weapon," 1:29:17. MGM DVD, 2006.

After Bruno's death, Carlucci finds the photos and gives them back to Wendell. Carlucci is not shocked by the nature of the pictures but must confess that he is "puzzled" by the black socks. He cannot help asking Wendell in the most serious way, "Is it because you are in mourning?"

Wendell's reluctance to be completely naked reveals his artificial frame of mind and lack of spontaneity; it also means that he is attached to social conventions and is never quite himself. Thanks to his father's death, and with the help of Pamela, the American executive understands that life should be lived to the fullest. Wilder himself declared: "He starts to understand a father whom he'd barely thought about. . . . He's closer to his dead father than to the living one" (Sikov 535). It does not take Pamela long to indulge in the Italian way of life, and Wendell ends up being seduced, both by Pamela and her philosophy which she shared with his father. "Wendell and Pamela, in re-enacting the past, are reviving dead people and reviving themselves" (Sinyard and Turner 60), which is the antithesis of what happens in a later Wilder film, *Fedora* (1978), where a young woman takes the place of her disfigured mother to pursue her acting career, eventually losing her own identity and committing suicide. In Ischia, as well as in the rest of the country, the lunch break is sacred. Being overweight and on a very strict



diet (three apples and a teaspoonful of honey is all she is supposed to have in one day), Pamela surprisingly discovers that eating a pasta and dessert, and so being happy, will make her lose three pounds. A short scene perfectly illustrates this correlation between food and life: when Pamela visits the island on her own, she buys four ice creams at a time just after having seen three street kids. The spectators (and the kids) imagine that only one ice cream will be for her; but Pamela starts eating all four of them greedily as she walks away, ignoring the children's complaints (Fig. 9). Ed Sikov explains:

Billy [Wilder] commented once on the sense of sybaritic regeneration he meant to suggest in [this] scene . . . : "It's a montage where I tried to evoke the magic of a countryside inundated with sun, the way it touches a young woman who lived all her life in a humid and cold country. We are preparing for her evolution—but without transforming the sequence into 'Debbie Reynolds Goes to Ischia,' since it has a certain bite. It's the girl who provides it when she buys four ice creams in front of three kids and she eats them all herself" (538).



Fig. 9: Life has won: a smiling Pamela passes by a wall of funeral notices just before she gormandizes the four ice creams, 1:38:17. MGM, 2006.

Food is also essential in *The Trouble with Harry*, and it is often contrasted with death. Jennifer's reaction after Arnie has shown her the corpse involves telling her son that she is going to "make [him] some lemonade." When Miss Gravely comes upon Captain Wiles dragging Harry's body, she is far from being unsettled; she even takes this opportunity to invite him "for some blueberry muffins and coffee." Thus, they are becoming romantically involved while standing next to a corpse—even though, during most of the scene, no part of Harry's body is visible, except for his feet, while the two characters are filmed in an American shot (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Although mostly off-screen, Harry's corpse "attends" a seduction scene, 06:57. Universal Pictures, 2001.



Moreover, their first date is marked by a conversation continuously mixing food and death. A compliment from the captain about the blueberry muffins leads Miss Gravely to say that she picked up the fruit “near where [he] shot that unfortunate man.” Trying to change the subject, Captain Wiles admires the cup he drinks from, and Miss Gravely comments that it belonged to her father who died “caught in a threshing machine.” Arnie’s arrival makes no real difference: there is nothing innocent about the child who proudly carries a dead rabbit, and Hitchcock uses the young boy “as a lens for viewers to gauge a collective passivity toward death” (McEntee 39). Although Arnie says the rabbit belongs to the captain because he shot it, he swaps the dead animal for two muffins (Fig. 11).



Fig. 11: A still life with living people in it? Arnie’s dead rabbit plays intruders at tea time, 45:39. Universal Pictures, 2001.

In the same manner, after Miss Gravely tells Captain Wiles that she killed Harry, she promises to “make [him] some hot chocolate” if he helps her dig up “[her] body.” Whether in Hitchcock’s film or in Wilder’s, none of the characters lose their appetites because others have died, or because of the proximity of a corpse. On the contrary, it seems that, in such circumstances, eating increases in importance, as if this activity keeps them alive. In *The Trouble with Harry*, when the millionaire (Parker Fennelly) asks Sam how much he wants for his paintings, Sam invites his friends to divulge “what . . . [they] like most in the whole world.” Jennifer’s answer is “strawberries,” and so she will receive “two boxes of fresh strawberries first of each month, in season and out of season.” Sam and his friends are not asking for money and they do not request anything expensive either. The simple pleasures of life are priceless.

In *Avanti!* too, money does not count, at least by the end of the movie. Initially, Wendell is so accustomed to buying people off that to him, being wealthy equals being happy. Pamela proves him wrong and she also tells him that her mother would never let her lover know that she was not a rich woman: “She loved him. She didn’t want any tips.” The reaction shot of Wendell shows him speechless; the businessman has just discovered what real love is. Similarly, in Hitchcock’s film, the four protagonists find love thanks to their common adventures around Harry’s dead body. Sam proposes to Jennifer, and Miss Gravely the spinster happily lets a man “cross her threshold” for the first time. Among the many sexual innuendos pervading the story, one in particular reveals the strong link between love, food, and life. “She’s a well-preserved woman. . . . And preserves have to be opened someday,” the captain tells Sam about Miss Gravely. Not surprisingly, the last word of the film is “double bed,” a piece of furniture that is the mysterious payment Sam asked for his paintings.

The parents’ death in *Avanti!* offers the heroes a revelation, that of Harry being a practical liberation for Jennifer who is now a (merry) widow and can remarry. Early in the movie, Harry was concretely “in the way” when his socks stuck out of a bush and spoiled the drawing Sam was making of the glorious countryside. At the end of the narrative, the fact that

Harry's body is going to be found by the deputy sheriff will, on the contrary, allow the heroes to enjoy life, just as the late parents have shown their children the way in *Avanti!*

## CONCLUSION

In Western cultures, death is mainly seen as a point of no return and a source of constant questioning. The originality of the two films is that they gleefully celebrate life by transcending death. In *Avanti!*, Wendell's elderly father did not visit Ischia's health resort to take mud baths; still, his stays were rejuvenating. In *The Trouble with Harry*, the presence of the older couple shows that it is never too late and that death alone is irrevocable. In both movies, the protagonists are confronted with corpses but start life anew—it is especially true of Pamela who had tried to kill herself. Maybe the clearest indication of this renewal is the relationship to time. In Hitchcock's film, the fruit Jennifer asks for are a healthy food symbolizing more than life because strawberries are normally harvested in spring, so the fact they will be delivered to Jennifer's house all year round means that the order of the seasons and nature is somewhat overlooked and that time is challenged. Jean Douchet goes as far as writing that the characters take the place of God (194). In Wilder's story, there is a stark contrast between Wendell's mindset at the beginning and at the end. When he gets to Italy, Wendell epitomizes the stressed businessman obsessed with efficiency; eventually, he becomes aware that the best way to live is to suspend time and enjoy terrestrial foods. The two movies come full circle, but progress has been made. *Avanti!*'s opening and closing credits are filmed in aerial shots with the infinity of the sky as a backdrop; most importantly, the soundtrack is *Senza Fine*, a song whose title suggests some kind of immortality, or at least continuity. Moreover, Wendell and Pamela plan to perpetuate the tradition by occupying their parents' suite every summer on the same dates. Once again, a simple line of dialogue tells it all: while Wendell was reluctant to speak any Italian, he leaves Ischia saying "Arrivederci Carlo," and those are the last words of the film. Arnie "rediscovering" the corpse in the closing scene of *The Trouble with Harry* offers the ultimate solution to the problem, for the little boy has no sense of time, mistaking today for yesterday or tomorrow; thus, the deputy sheriff will not pay much attention to his testimony because Arnie is known to be whimsical. Beyond Hitchcock's (English) humor, the characterization of Arnie is meant to prove that time is not necessarily an enemy and that death can be deceived. As for the title of Wilder's movie, *Avanti!*, it is in itself a strong statement: life is beautiful and it will go on, whatever happens.

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the mood of Hitchcock’s film is strengthened by Bernard Herrmann’s score which Adrian Schober rightly describes as being “by turns playful, whimsical, and sinister” (127).

<sup>2</sup> Wendell will have exactly the same kind of look when he has dinner with Pamela at the hotel and the orchestra plays a romantic tune just for them.

<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of *Some Like It Hot*, the double meaning of this verb is also exploited when Spats Colombo tells Mulligan that he will really have to “dig up” the two witnesses.

<sup>4</sup> See Michot 44-45.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Adair 104 or Duncan 145.

<sup>6</sup> Pamela will also pretend to be a manicurist—which was her mother’s job—when Blodgett arrives uninvited.