

Some Like It Hot: The Blurring of Gender Limits in a Film of the Fifties¹

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Abstract

The present essay approaches Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959) in the light of the new attitudes towards love, sex and the role of women which became widespread in the United States in the 1950s. From this perspective, the film can be seen as a patriarchal vehicle through which taken-for-granted norms of behaviour concerning heterosexual love are displayed and offered to a basically male-constructed audience. This reading, however, is not the only possible one. Relying on concepts such as *negotiation*, whose value is precisely based on the fact that it allows space for multiple interpretations, my analysis goes on to point out alternative and much more interesting meanings which ultimately question and threaten to subvert the typically patriarchal construction of gender relations and gender difference.

One of the aspects of the theoretical convergence of psychoanalysis and cinema is the relationship that exists between certain features of cinematic spectatorship and textual organization, on the one hand, and the Oedipal psycho-linguistic scenario theorised by Jacques Lacan in which the child simultaneously acquires identity, language and the Unconscious, on the other. The homology between them lies, as Christine Gledhill (1992, 65) points out, in the way in which a surface illusion of unity, plenitude and identity is constructed at the cost of the underlying realities of separation and difference. According to Jacques Lacan, the child's perception of sexual difference as the maternal figure's castration and the consequent repression of this perception are linked to the similarly hidden role of phonological and linguistic difference in the operation of language and production of meaning. This homology between the psychic and the linguistic, it is argued, enables the (male) child both to enter the symbolic order and to master language. However, it also results in the suppression of "difference" which is alienated as "otherness" and repressed (Gledhill 1992, 65). Just as the patriarchal subject is constructed in this way as a unified, consistent but illusory identity, so classic narrative cinema may be approached as a hierarchization of the different aesthetic and ideological discourses which intersect in the text, in order to produce a unifying, authoritative voice and viewpoint.

Yet there is another perspective from which the text can be analysed: one deriving from the moments of ambiguity, contradiction and difference, which threaten to destabilise the closed and unified mainstream narrative. Privileging this mainstream narrative amounts to relying on a complete reading, a reading which ties up whatever enigmatic 'false' trails may have been detected in the text. However, language and cultural forms

are sites in which different subjectivities struggle to impose or question, to confirm or displace, definitions and identities. Consequently, the text cannot but generate different readings, readings which challenge each other and provoke a social negotiation of meanings. For Christine Gledhill, *negotiation* as a model of meaning production conceives cultural exchange as “the intersection of processes of production and reception, in which overlapping but non-matching determinations operate. Meaning ... arises out of a struggle between competing frames of reference, motivation and experience” (Gledhill 1992, 68). Accordingly, the value of ‘negotiation’ as an analytical concept is based precisely on the fact that it allows space for multiple interpretations, thus doing away with the notion of narrative closure which aims to reduce the play of semiotic, and sexual, difference.

One of the aspects of such cultural negotiation affects sexual definitions and gender representation in general. The figure of woman has long served as a powerful and ambivalent patriarchal symbol, heavily overdetermined as the expression of the male psyche. Yet it has also been a site of gendered discourse. Thus gender issues in general and ‘the image of woman’ in particular exist for us as a negotiation between the terms of patriarchal construction and those which derive from alternative gender and sexual definitions which resist or try to find a space within patriarchal domination, that is, between ‘woman’ as patriarchal symbol and ‘woman’ as generator of other, different kinds of discourse. Likewise, the film which I discuss in this essay, *Some Like It Hot* (1959), can be seen, on the one hand, as a patriarchal product, a vehicle through which taken-for-granted norms of behaviour concerning heterosexual love are displayed and offered to a basically male-constructed audience, and, on the other hand, as a generator of alternative and much more interesting meanings which subvert this patriarchal construction of gender relations and gender difference.

Some Like It Hot is a film of the fifties, a fact which provides an interesting point of departure when it comes to analysing the ways in which it deals with subjects like love, sex and the role of women. According to Richard Dyer (1986, 24), sex was seen as perhaps the most important thing in life in fifties America. Taboos were broken and sex, regarded as something natural and guiltless, was presented as the answer to all kinds of dissatisfactions and anxieties. In line with these new attitudes in society, sexuality also became increasingly important in films. Perhaps the most telling manifestations of this explicit concern are to be found in the comedies, romances and musicals of the period, which “no longer define the problems of the hero and the heroine in terms of love and understanding, but starkly in terms of virginity—will she?, won’t she?, should I?, shouldn’t I?” (Dyer 1986, 27). *Some Like It Hot* must be seen, then, as a product of this culturally and historically specific context, in the sense that it articulates the particular ways in which sexuality was thought and felt about in the period. The presence of Marilyn Monroe in the role of Sugar Cane, the female protagonist, constitutes in itself a powerful means of encoding sexual-oriented messages, which the audience of the time was well prepared to decode.

One of the reasons why actors/actresses become stars is because they act out aspects of life which are important to us to the point that they are regarded as not only

individuals but also embodiments of social and ideological categories. Thus Marilyn Monroe was charismatic because she was taken to represent the new attitudes towards sex precisely at a time in which sex mattered as it had never done before. In this light, *Some Like It Hot* can be said to use Marilyn Monroe consciously, openly commenting on what she had come to signify and expecting the audience to see her not only as Sugar Cane, the character she plays in the diegesis but, above all, as Marilyn Monroe, the actress and the public person.

The real hook of the Monroe image lay in the fact that she looked so overtly sexual and, at the same time, so natural. To use Richard Dyer's words, she appeared "natural in her sexiness" (1986, 35), as in answer to a collective frame of mind according to which sex should be lived and experienced without coyness or embarrassment. However, the unstated assumption at the core of all this discourse was that 'sex is for the man'; women were to be desirable and openly sexual not so much in order to enjoy their bodies but, rather, in order to secure a vehicle for male sexuality (Dyer 1986, 41).

As I will show later on, *Some Like It Hot* endorses such a view: the film privileges the heterosexual couple as the 'normal' or 'natural' one and displays a female sexuality subordinated to male pleasure. Yet to leave the matter here would amount to imposing an artificial unity and, consequently, an illusory narrative closure on the film. It is in this sense that an analytical concept such as the already-mentioned notion of negotiation becomes useful. Accordingly, and in spite of its patriarchal standpoint, *Some Like It Hot* allows us to negotiate a different interpretation of the film narrative, one which is arrived at when we focus on a series of individual moments that threaten to deconstruct the overt (patriarchal) discourse of the film. It is on these moments, and on the tensions and ambiguities they produce, that I will centre my analysis.

The story begins in Chicago. Two musicians, Joe and Jerry, get into trouble when they witness a group of men being killed by some members of the mafia. Fearing for their lives, they soon realise that they have to escape from Chicago, so they start searching for a band they can join in order to leave the city. Though this first part of the film is mainly concerned with the explanation of the reasons why Joe and Jerry have to run away, it also contributes to the construction of the male protagonists' characters, crucial to our later understanding of their behaviour.

The roles played by Lemmon and Curtis agree with their respective personae: Jerry is the funny one and the loser, while Joe is the seducer, the one that succeeds with women. Joe's attitude towards them becomes clear at the very beginning of the film, during his conversation with Nelly, a secretary in one of the offices they go to when they start searching for a job. As she gets angry because Joe forgot their date for the previous Saturday night, he tells her a lie about a blood transfusion for Jerry and promises to take her to a nice restaurant. In a medium close-up, her features soften and she looks ready to forgive him. In a sense, this episode foreshadows the way in which Joe will take advantage of Sugar later on. Both she and Nelly seem to be under the spell of a man, Joe, who uses them and, in spite of his lies, succeeds in getting what he wants (Nelly's car and an affair with Sugar). It is Nelly who tells Joe about a possible job in a band, but just to make fun

of him because it is two girls and not two men that are needed. While Jerry does not mind pretending to be a girl if that gets them a job in Florida, Joe laughs at his friend's suggestion of dressing up as women. However, he changes his mind when he realises that there is no other way out, and they end up by taking the jobs which they had previously rejected on account of their sex.

Immediately after we learn about their plans, they are shown already dressed as women, walking along the platform to catch the train that will take them away from Chicago. As the development of the film makes clear, Joe and Jerry's decision to 'be' women has different consequences for each of them. But even at this early stage of the film, the techniques used in their first appearance as Josephine and Daphne seem to invite viewers to compare them, as if the differences that exist between them at this point would pave the way for later and deeper ones. There is an initial close-up of their legs from behind; after that, they are framed together in a medium long shot, and then we see them separately in two medium close-ups. In the first shot, Jerry seems to find it difficult to walk, while Joe has no problem with his shoes. When they are framed together, they first appear to be concentrating on their performance, but Jerry soon starts getting nervous and looking around: he feels as if everybody were staring at him, he says. By contrast, Joe manages to keep up appearances, he has everything under control. His ways are studied and careful, his clothes impeccable. After looking at him, Jerry, more mundane but more natural, tries to adopt his friend's expression and looks straight in front of him, as Joe is doing. It is then that Marilyn Monroe makes her appearance.

Sugar Cane is presented, as could be expected, from a male perspective. A 'false' point-of-view shot shows her in close-up as from Joe and Jerry's position. From the very beginning, then, she is set up as an object of the male sexual gaze. Yet, to some extent, she seems to contribute to such an objectification: her facial expression, her excessively undulating gait, and her tight clothes invite one to concentrate on her body and to consider it as a body 'on show'. Then there is a cut to the two men's awe-stricken expression and, eventually, even the train has to release its steam as she walks past.

Such an image conforms perfectly to the 'White Goddess' symbol of innocent sexuality and 'dumb blonde' femaleness the star embodied. The 'dumb blonde', who combined a disarming sexual innocence, on the one hand, and an overwhelming sexual impact, on the other, constituted a kind of embodiment of male desire. She was invariably attractive but never intelligent. Consequently, the films which featured such a figure endorsed the belief that while brains were not important for women, bodies were all. The role played by the female body can even be seen in relation to the male protagonists of *Some Like It Hot*: the first thing which is shown once they are dressed as women is their legs; the first man they meet, the band manager, gives Daphne a slap on her backside; the main problem Jerry has with his disguise is his breasts, which will not keep in place, and Sugar comments to him/her how flat-breasted s/he is; Joe tells him that, if they are going to be women, they will be on a diet from then on (no pastries⁷, no butter and no S/sugar); when Jerry/Daphne tells Joe that Oswald has tried to take advantage of him/her in spite of the fact that s/he is not even pretty, Joe answers that it does not matter as long as one

is wearing a skirt; etc.

It is in relation to the role of Sugar Cane that such a concentration on the female body reaches its peak. In *Some Like It Hot*, as in most of her films, Marilyn Monroe plays the girl defined solely by age, gender and sexual appeal (Dyer 1986, 21). Her real name is never mentioned and her job is associated with the woman on show, there for the pleasure of men. The contrast between her dumbness and the impact that her devastating sexuality makes on men becomes patent in the above mentioned scene in the railway station, when Joe and Jerry see Sugar for the first time. Once on the train, the 'charms' of her body are exploited even further: Sugar lifts her skirt right before Joe's and Jerry's ogling eyes in order to get the brandy flask that she keeps in her garter and then she titivates her breasts in front of the mirror (the camera will also focus on them a bit later, when she puts on her nightdress). Because these are actions that a woman would not perform in front of a man, Joe and Jerry (and the assumed male audience) are violating both Monroe and women's space (Dyer 1986, 47). Precisely because she thinks she is in the safety of that space and because she is trusting, she does not protect herself and drops her guard once and again throughout the film. Thus she sets up the means for further violation. She tells Jo(e)/sephine that her boyfriends have always treated her badly and that it has been in an attempt to escape men that she has joined an all-woman band. What she would really like, she adds, is to marry one of those rich men wearing glasses. Armed with this new piece of information, Joe changes his disguise to a short-sighted oil millionaire called Junior, and it is as Junior that he succeeds in taking Sugar to 'his' yacht. Just as he has made her believe that he is a woman, so he now fools her into believing that he is impotent. Sugar, feeling as safe as before, commits the same mistake and drops all defence, this time against his sexual harassment. As Richard Dyer (1986, 47) points out, the pleasure we are offered when Sugar/Monroe drapes herself over Junior and kisses him long and langorously consists not only in seeing how she gives herself to a man (a potential surrogate for the audience), but also in the fact that her defences are completely down. In addition, all this contributes to emphasising the way in which the film is using the Monroe persona. One cannot help thinking of Monroe's off-screen life when she tells Jo(e)/sephine that she has gone from one man to another (from saxophone player to saxophone player) and that they have all taken advantage of her in order to, eventually, drop her. She seems to have been as vulnerable in real life as she appears in her films, and also equally used and abused by men. Her unsuccessful marriages, her supposed nymphomania, and her unhappy childhood (Dyer 1986, 48) were as well-known to the audiences of the fifties as they are to us nowadays. For all these reasons, fictional character and actress's persona are always difficult to separate in her films. In *Some Like It Hot*, too, the audience constructs her character as Sugar Cane but, primarily, as Marilyn Monroe, who seems to be consciously playing herself throughout the film.

The image of femininity offered by *Some Like It Hot*, mainly through Marilyn Monroe's part, emerges, then, as a patriarchal construction made up of scenes which focus on her as an object of (male) desire, innocent, harmless and always available (as she seems literally to throw herself into Junior's arms). No matter how immoral the tricks

used by Joe are, he succeeds in getting the girl while we suspect that his will be just one more name to add to the list of saxophone players who have taken advantage of Sugar and then have forgotten her once they have had the fun. Nevertheless, as has been argued at the beginning, there are certain ambiguities in the film which enable us to negotiate the patriarchal construction of femininity and gender relations with other, different approaches to these same questions. Such ambiguities are basically produced by the male characters' recourse to disguise and have to do with the blurring of those gender limits on which the discourse of patriarchy bases 'the most privileged' of human relationships: the heterosexual couple.

When Joe and Jerry see Sugar for the first time, at the railway station, Jerry, who seems to have some problems to behave as a woman, exclaims, "It's an entirely different sex!". However, this statement will be subverted several times throughout the film, and by Jerry himself in the first place. In spite of his initial difficulties, he will eventually manage to get on well as Daphne, so well, in fact, that there will be moments in which the dividing line between him as a man and his role as a woman will almost totally disappear.

Before they meet Sweet Sue and the rest of the band, Joe tells Jerry that they will also have to change their names: he will be Josephine and Jerry, Geraldine. These names are the female version of the ones they have as males, but while Joe introduces himself as Josephine, Jerry surprises his friend by saying: "I'm Daphne". This change is relevant in the light of what happens later in the film. The fact that *Josephine* contains *Joseph* means that, in spite of his disguise, Joe will always be a man and feel like one (a suffix is added but the root remains the same). For his part, Jerry (Gerald) will be able to forget that he is a man and so the name he chooses is not Geraldine but one entirely different from his own, and with no equivalent in the masculine. He will just be Daphne. From this moment on, Jerry will undergo a progressive internalization of his role as a woman.

Once on the train, and having already introduced themselves to everybody, Joe and Jerry have occasion to see their new friends get ready to go to bed. At the sight of so many girls in their nightdresses (notice Sugar in black while all the others are in white) and, above all, at Sugar getting into his own bed, Jerry keeps repeating to himself: "I'm a girl, I'm a girl..." While these words do not prevent him from being embarrassed in Sugar's presence (which somehow is too much for him in contrast with Joe, who at no time appears to be overpowered, not even bothered, by the magnitude of the Monroe figure), they seem to have a sort of transformative effect on him: Jerry, now Daphne, becomes one more member of the group constituted by the girls in the band, s/he hits it off with them and, in addition, s/he appears as a woman not only in their eyes but also in the eyes of other men. Thus Oswald falls for him/her at the very moment of their arrival at the hotel and, in the end, they even get engaged.

While, more than once, Daphne seems to take over Jerry, Joe will always keep Josephine at bay. The kind of distance that exists between the two roles (male and female) played by Curtis and Lemmon can also be seen throughout the film in terms of a real physical distance between them and the girls. Accordingly, Jerry/Daphne is often framed among women while most of the times Jo(e)/sephine prefers being on his/her own (except

when s/he is alone with Sugar). Thus, for instance, when they get on the train, Daphne jokes with the girls and stops to talk to them while Josephine is in a hurry to reach their seats; at night, the whole band is in Daphne's bed with her in the middle, while Josephine is perhaps the only one that does not join the party; on the beach, Daphne is first in the water with the rest and then playing ball on the shore, while Josephine is twice removed now: firstly, in terms of physical distance, and secondly, because she is no longer a she but a he, a rich millionaire called Shell Junior. On all these occasions, the girls are presented together, enjoying themselves, suggesting perhaps a different order of being from heterosexual strife: women together, intimate friendship, pleasure in physical being (illustrated by Daphne and Sugar's conversation on breasts and on how well, in the latter's opinion, her own bust would look on Daphne). If one thinks of this women's space, Jerry/Daphne is hardly seen as an intruder while Jo(e)sephine can easily be considered an outsider, a stranger who does not belong to the community formed by the girls and who, in addition, violates their intimacy and abuses their confidence. On top of that, Joe's presence constitutes a kind of threat in the sense that his success with Sugar necessarily implies the disruption of the (female) group. This is what happens on the beach when Sugar runs after the ball and, instead of going back with the girls, she stays with Junior. There starts a relationship that has its counterpart in the 'affair' between Oswald and Daphne, which provides the story with some of its most remarkable comic moments. Yet this comicity is used by the film to subvert or, at least, question established notions of 'normal' (understood as heterosexual) love.

The scene in which Junior seduces Sugar is simultaneously presented with that of Oswald and Daphne's tango dancing, by means of crosscutting. As Sugar passionately kisses Junior, so Daphne leads Oswald in the dance, which thus becomes a surrogate for sex. With regard to the night's outcome, Sugar falls in love with Junior and Daphne gets engaged to Oswald. As soon as Joe learns about Jerry's intended "future marriage", he tries to persuade his friend (completely overtaken now by his female role) into forgetting "all that nonsense" about getting married to another man: "there are laws, conventions. It's just not being done", Joe says.

A person's anatomical sex creates certain expectations in the rest of society as to the way that person is going to behave. Since Joe is the only one in the diegesis who knows that Daphne is anatomically a man, he can be seen as voicing such expectations with regard to Jerry's behaviour: Joe tries to keep him in his place or, rather, in the place allotted him by patriarchal society. Joe's reference to certain "laws" and "conventions" which Jerry seems to have broken by taking his relationship with Oswald seriously draws attention to a transgression which cannot be overlooked even if the film does not develop this hint of transsexuality any further. Jerry/Daphne's final "I'm a boy, I'm a boy..." in the hotel room apparently serves to close the period of transgression previously opened up on the train by his "I'm a girl, I'm a girl..." Yet it is the fact that such a period of transgression does exist that ultimately can be used to question the patriarchal framework of the film. What is more, Jerry is not the only one to break the patriarchal norms of behaviour, in as far as love and sex are concerned. In order to explain this point, I will

analyse one of the last scenes of the film: Jo(e)/sephine's farewell kiss to Sugar.

When Joe and Jerry see Spats and his band in the hotel, they realise that it is time to run away. Joe phones Sugar; he tells her that it is Junior and that he calls to say "goodbye" because he has to make an unexpected journey. Sugar's heart is broken, but she has to go on the stage and sing as if nothing had happened. Perhaps more than ever, we see her as Marilyn Monroe and not as Sugar Cane. Hurt and disappointed at having been abandoned, once more, by a man she had trusted, she sings a sad song while she openly displays her sexuality on the stage. The dress she is wearing and the way in which the light falls on her make her look as if she were naked. Joe, who wants to have a last look at her before leaving, succumbs to that sight: he goes down to Sugar and kisses her passionately, still in his disguise as Josephine. We do not see much of the audience's reaction at seeing two women kissing each other. Yet we have a full view of Sugar: Jo(e)/sephine is framed with her back towards the camera, so Sugar's face can be clearly seen. Two things should be mentioned in relation to Sugar's reaction. In the first place, the person who starts kissing her, as far as she knows, is Josephine and, in spite of this, she closes her eyes and goes on with the kiss. Then, when she can speak, there is surprise in her voice and in her expression when she says: "Josephine!". The fact that she calls Josephine's name can be taken as a proof that she has not recognised Junior in Josephine during or, rather, through the kiss. It is clear that she is surprised. Yet the important thing is that she is surprised not only because another woman has kissed her, but also, perhaps, because she has enjoyed that kiss.

As happens in relation to Jerry and his 'affair' with Oswald, the film does not take long to erase Sugar's transgression. She soon realises that she has been kissed by a man and, without thinking about it twice, she runs after him. However, as has been argued before with regard to Jerry's transgression, Sugar's moment of homoerotic desire is there, even though the film narrative does not give it a full expression or a further development. The fact that Sugar lets Josephine kiss her may be interpreted as the emergence, however temporary, of a repressed homoerotic impulse. Her reaction to the kiss would amount, then, to the discovery of a sexual pleasure other than the one which can be obtained in a heteroerotic relationship. Accordingly, the farewell kiss scene can be seen as highlighting the existence of a female sexuality completely independent of male sexuality, an idea which does stand in clear opposition to the Monroe image as constructed by patriarchy and, consequently, to any reading of the film exclusively based on what that image was made to signify in the fifties.

As Richard Dyer (1986, 65) has pointed out, the further we get from Monroe and the fifties, the more malleable her image becomes. In this sense, he comments on the fact that both Molly Haskell (1974) and Brandon French (1978), in their discussions of *Some Like It Hot*, see Monroe as androgynous, a view of her which is something else again from Monroe as the most womanly of women. Likewise, the contemporary women's movement has regarded her as, at worst, the ultimate example of woman as victim, as sex object, and, at best, as in rebellion against her objectification (Dyer 1986, 60). The 'dumb blonde' image which she offers throughout the film, the concentration on her body, her

availability and her running after the very same man that has used all kinds of tricks to take advantage of her surely contribute to Sugar/Marilyn being regarded as a male object of sexual pleasure. Yet the kissing scene places her outside this discourse, which privileges her as an image of female sexuality for men, since it raises the question of female sexuality for women, a female sexuality which is neither a response to male sexuality nor an experience that can only be had in heterosexual intercourse.

Monroe's unexplored sexual inclination towards another woman in the film forms part of the continuum of gender identity confusions provoked by the already mentioned recourse to disguise, on the part of the two male protagonists. The fact that the device of cross-dressing involves the suggestion of homoeroticism (Traub 1991, 96) takes the film to extremes (men marrying men, women kissing women...) which suggest new possibilities as far as gender relations are concerned. As has been pointed out, the blurring of gender limits is related to very concrete moments and it is ultimately disavowed by the development of the film narrative: the 'woman' that kisses Sugar is revealed to be a man; Jerry does not take long to 'come to himself' after he manifests his intentions to marry Oswald; etc. Yet Oswald's reaction when he learns that Daphne is a man somehow keeps all the previous possibilities of transgression open. The often quoted closing line of the film, "Nobody is perfect", which is Oswald's reply to Jerry/Daphne's "I'm a man", may be just read as a joke intended to make viewers laugh at the end of a film which belongs to the realm of comedy. But, simultaneously, Oswald's words are voicing the same idea that lies behind the transgressive moments of the film, that is, the fact that a heterosexual relationship is not the only possible one. Thus, even though 'order' is always re-established after those scenes in which the film runs wild (a 'running wild' that the first song Sugar sings on the train seems to announce), Oswald's reply keeps alive all the ambiguities which the narrative has tried to suppress and, at the same time, it reminds us that the meanings activated through disguise and sex reversal should not be forgotten or silenced in the mind of the spectator.

It is only by focusing on the tension between the patriarchal framework of the film, on the one hand, and those moments in which the narrative flouts or subverts the very same conventions on which the film is based, on the other, that we can understand the ways in which comedy may lead audiences to reflect on (serious) themes which are crucial to human existence. In the case of *Some Like It Hot*, these themes relate to the set of norms and modes of behaviour concerning heterosexual love, and also to the construction of women and gender difference. In this sense, it can be concluded that even though the film presents and, to a very large extent, endorses a certain image of femininity and of sexuality according to which women are seen as 'an entirely different sex', something for men to look at and enjoy, it also offers us the possibility to negotiate between alternative ways of dealing with the same concerns, thus leaving space for approaches which help us discover different and challenging meanings. The fact that Marilyn Monroe is at the core of all this tension and ambiguity increases the film's complexity and, in addition, it also presents both stars and (film) narratives as affected by a 'malleability' that leaves no room for fixed notions or closed analyses.

NOTES

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