The Conceit of Class

While gender is the most common way of reading Alfred Hitchcock’s psychological drama, *Vertigo* (1958), and Billy Wilder’s romantic comedy *Some Like It Hot* (1959), the vital role that social and economic class plays is often overlooked. Class is the motivating, dividing factor for character motivations and plot advancements in both films. Jonathan Wolf writes, “According to Marx, in any society the ruling ideas are those of the ruling class; the core of the theory of ideology.” Therefore, the aspiration of the other classes to break into the niche of the upper class to gain positions of power and influence on ideology is the crux of the ideological class struggle that takes place in both movies. Aspiration and hope are both base human qualities, and it is this that Hitchcock and Wilder exploit in their cross-dressing. This is most seen in the cross-dressing through class of characters in both films.

In *Vertigo*, the character of Gavin Elster is symbolic of the greedy bourgeoisie, who already controls the means of production, and still wants more. For Marx, it is these people who will eventually trigger a Communist revolution. Scottie and Gavin went to college together, and Scottie reveals this through a question posed to Midge in the opening scene set in Midge’s apartment, “Say Midge, do you remember a guy at college named Gavin Elster?” Midge’s response is the only information we have about his social status in the pre-war period, when they were in college. She replies, “Gavin? Gavin Elster? You'd think I'd would. No.” The repetition of Gavin’s name, and the rhetorical question in which the response is framed suggests that Midge did not remember Elster. Coupled with a facial expression of doubt, Midge portrays Elster as far from charismatic.

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and popular, a non-descript entity. The way that Scottie and Midge go back and forth about him is essential in mapping their own social class, and the biases that they come with.

“SCOTTIE: I got a call from him today. Funny. He dropped out of sight during the war, and I'd heard he'd gone East. I guess he's back.

…

MIDGE: He's probably on the bum and wants to touch you for the price of a drink.

SCOTTIE: Well, I'm on the bum; I'll buy him a couple of drinks and tell him my troubles. But not tonight.”

Scottie’s description of Gavin’s activities during the war implies that Gavin’s activities during the war were of questionable merit. The tone of disdain that marks the ensuing conversation between Scottie and Midge suggests that Elster was not born into the upper class, while Scottie and Midge were born into privileged backgrounds. This is further supported by Scottie’s finely tailored three-piece suit, and his ability to dabble around after retiring from the police force without worrying about the financial repercussions of such a lifestyle. Midge, too, is dabbling in the arts and in product design, but with no concrete job, coupled with the financial freedom of being a relatively older woman with no earning spouse, would therefore hail from a family with means. The tension between Gavin and Scottie, in the following scene, therefore stems from an inter-class conflict between the nouveau riche that Gavin symbolises, and the old money that Scottie represents. Scottie’s status as a well-off individual who is part of the upper class is further cemented when he says, “a man of independent means,” indicating an ambivalence about his finances despite being out of a job. While Randall Spink’s analysis of the movie is one of the few academic pieces that

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2 Spinks, Randall. “The Hallucinatory (Cultural) Logic of Hitchcock's Vertigo”. Quarterly Review of Film and Video. 2016. In this essay, Spinks argues that class is a valuable, if slightly outmoded, lens to look at Vertigo with. He explores class distinctions in the movie, and phrases the film in class conflict, placing Scottie and Midge in the upper-middle class and Elster in the “Ruling” upper class.
deal with class, and mirrors certain views that this essay professes on Elster, his classification of Scottie and Midge as upper-middle class citizens is the sole point of divergence.

When Gavin and Scottie do meet at the former’s office in a shipbuilding yard, the conversation that ensues reinforces the relatively new status of Gavin’s status as in industrialist, setting up the main reason for his wife’s murder, and therefore the entire story.

“SCOTTIE: How'd you get into the shipbuilding business, Gavin?
(GAVIN) ELSTER: I married into it.
Scottie shoots him a small surprised smile of approval at his frankness, then looks out the window again.
SCOTTIE: Interesting business.
ELSTER: No, to be honest, I find it dull.
SCOTTIE: You don't have to do it for a living.
ELSTER: No. But one assumes obligations. My wife's family is all gone; someone has to look after her interest. Her father's partner runs the company yard in the East -- Baltimore -- so I decided as long as I had to work at it, I'd come back here. I've always liked it here.”

Hitchcock decided not to include any introduction between the two, and Scottie begins his conversation with Elster in perceived position of power, and shock, which manifests itself in the form of the question. Even Scottie’s visual language is that of power, and scorn of the nouveau riche that Elster is, especially because he keeps standing powerfully and questioning Elster, without bothering with any pleasantries. His facial expression, too, is that of hidden disdain, From Hitchcock’s screenplay of Vertigo, it can be discerned that the “small surprised smile of approval at his frankness.” Despite Elster’s expensive tastes, he gives away his non-upper class origins with his outright admission of marrying up into the upper class. Hitchcock also implicitly

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3 Spinks suggests that “his well-appointed office, his upscale Ernie’s Restaurant, his Nob Hill residence, his trophy wife decked out at Ransohoff’s—represents a sublime but soulless lifestyle.” Elster’s “soulless” lifestyle, therefore is emblematic of low birth but high means, and he is unable to truly appreciate it for fear of being left out of the upper-class society that he craves to be a part of. Spinks, Randall. “The Hallucinatory (Cultural) Logic of Hitchcock's Vertigo”. Quarterly Review of Film and Video. 2016.
recognises that one must be born into the upper class, and can never arrive into it. Elster cross-
dresses, for he can never let go of his lower-class upbringing,⁴ and his attempt to conceal this cross-
dressing is the primary motivation for the murder of Madeline. He fulfils his bourgeoisie
aspirations,⁵ but is unable to elevate himself to the upper class. She is the means through which
his aspirations of wealth are fulfilled, and her existence jeopardises his control over her inheritance.

The threat of divorce, and therefore the risk of losing control of the vast empire that he has now
come to own, is too high for Elster to not hedge himself against. Elster’s hedge, however, is no
pre-nuptial agreement. It is the murder of Mrs. Elster, which is central to the advancement of the
plot. Elster’s insecurity over his wealth, and his aspiration to be a member of the upper class, is
symbolic of the trope of the class climber.

To cover up his cross-dressing, Elster engages the services of Judy Barton (portrayed by
Kim Novak), a working-class woman⁶ from Salina, Kansas, who shares an uncanny resemblance
to his wife, who he intends to murder. While Judy engages in cross-class-dressing, her motives for
this as purely monetary, for it is assumed that she will be rewarded handsomely for acting as a
decoy while Elster cements his control over the means of production. Judy, unlike Elster, manages
this transition rather well when she is not under the duress of her emotions, for when she falls in
love with Scottie, she is unable to mask her true working class origins. After Scottie jumps into
the Bay after her to save her from drowning, and takes her to his apartment to dry off and

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⁴ My use of the term “lower-class” does not imply the bottom-most class in the hierarchy of classes, but rather any
class other than the Upper Class.
⁵ For Marx, the only discriminating factor between class in the Communist Manifesto seemed to be based on the
economics of it. The bourgeoisie controlled the means of production. However, I intend to draw a line here, for money
does not secure with it the advantages of a good birth, and class is acquired through it, not by the aggregation of wealth
by one generation of a family.
⁶ While Spinks choses to classify Judy as middle-class, an argument can be made for counting her in amongst the
members of the working class. She is an economic immigrant, for she moves to San Francisco to make money and get
a job, and she works as a seamstress in a factory, straddling the lower middle class & working class divide.
recuperate, Judy, playing Madeline, says, “Why am I here?” However, due to the upper-class accent that is part of acting like Madeline, it sounds like “What am I doing heah?” Spinks argues that the “high-cultured, throaty round tones” that Judy speaks this in is aristocratic in nature, and therefore a true reflection of what Madeline might have sounded like. While Spinks addresses the issue of class cross-dressing in his paper, he nevertheless goes into a discussion of it with Judy at the centre of it, choosing to dismiss any notion of reading into Elster’s life despite Hitchcock providing us with an abundance of clues. However, as Spinks suggests, Judy’s class cross-dressing breaks down under duress, when she is under emotional stress. She says, “Look, it’s not fair; it wasn’t supposed to happen this way,” in an accent that reflects her true working class origins.

When Judy first meets Scottie as herself, she is fearful of being unmasked as Madeline, and therefore ends her cross-dressing for her own safety. She is an accessory to murder, and does not intend to be caught for her crime. As she falls in love with Scottie, and he realises that Judy and Madeline are the same woman, “the discovery that the woman with whom he fell in love was not part Mexican but working class is more horrifying than his simultaneous discovery that she is an accomplice to a murder.” I find this comment by Corber, a film critic, rather insightful, for its frank discussion of social structures within with the film was situated. Being Mexican was worse than being working class, and in the 1950s it was hard for a Mexican to belong to the upper class. Scottie, as a member of the upper class, is unable to reconcile with the class difference, as it

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10 Madeline’s Hispanic origins are revealed to the reader when Carlota Valdez is shown to be her great-grandmother. Race, too, is an important lens to view Hitchcock’s Vertigo with. However, I will not be going into such a discussion for fear of detracting from the perspective of class, and class cross-dressing.
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is immediately apparent that Judy is a substitute for Madeline.\textsuperscript{11} He later finds out that Judy & Madeline are the same person, but until then, his attempts to mould Judy back into Madeline is his way of dealing with the shock of finding someone who looks exactly like the woman he fell in love with, but made the mistake of being from the working class. Therefore, Judy in the initial part of the movie cross-dresses for financial motivations, and in the latter part of the movie cross-dresses because of her love for Scottie and her attempt to cover up her initial cross-dressing.

The attempt to cover up her initial cross-dressing leads to what I speculate as Judy’s suicide. Scottie does find out about Judy’s deceit, and unravels the entire plot to cover up Madeline’s murder, curing his acrophobia on his visit to the Mission with Judy. Judy tells Scottie, “The trouble is, I’m gone now. For you. And I can't do anything about it.” Judy is clearly in love with Scottie, but Scottie is in love with Judy dressed up to reflect Madeline, who truly is Judy. The elaborate web of lies that Judy spins, is too much for her to keep up with, and therefore I believe that she wants to end it for once and for all, and therefore jumps off the tower. Hitchcock does not specify whether it was a genuine accident or a suicide attempt, but he does give this the appearance of an accident, especially since he removed the alternate ending which shows Scottie with Midge, in her apartment, listening to the radio.\textsuperscript{12} Judy loved Scottie, and would not want him to face any consequences for her death, and therefore jumped while making it look like a freak accident. Hitchcock uses death from the tower as a motif to signal the end of the class cross-dressing, for the first-time Madeline dies at the tower, Judy can give up her guise as the upper-class Madeline.

\textsuperscript{11} In the entire movie, we only see Judy acting as a live Madeline, and Madeline’s corpse after Elster pushes her from the Mission’s tower. When I say that Scottie was in love with Madeline, I suggest that he was in love with the idea of Madeline, as played by Judy Barton for Gavin Elster, as he had no contact with the true Mrs. Elster, who was murdered.

\textsuperscript{12} The alternate ending that Hitchcock filmed, but did not include in the final cut of the film can be seen here: \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJBSSkn0Ldw}. The ending suggested that Scottie did not relapse into the state that he was in post Madeline’s death, for this time he received closure, and that Gavin Elster was to be extradited from Switzerland to face the courts for his murder.
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decoy. The second time that Judy jumps off the tower, for real this time, she wanted to end her cross-dressing she does because she is in love with Scottie.\footnote{This, too, is speculation on my part. We do not know for sure whether Judy had any agency in her death, and Hitchcock does not elucidate further in any of his interviews.} Therefore, class cross-dressing forms the crux of the plot in \textit{Vertigo}, and causes the rising action, climax, and anti-climax.

Like \textit{Vertigo}, in \textit{Some Like It Hot}, the cross-dressing that Tony Curtiss’ character undertakes in his transformation from Joe to Junior is across classes. Unlike in \textit{Vertigo}, the cross-dressing also traverses the boundaries of gender, when Joe transforms into Josephine, and Jack into Daphne. In order to understand how gender works in \textit{Some Like It Hot}, it is important to situate it within socio-political discourse of the late 1950s. In \textit{Sex, Gender & Heteronormativity}, Carver writes that when the movie was released, gender was not a part of mainstream political discourse.\footnote{Carver, Terrell. "Sex, Gender and Heteronormativity: Seeing 'some Like it Hot' as a Heterosexual Dystopia." Contemporary Political Theory, vol. 8, no. 2, 2009, pp. 125-151 ProQuest Central; Social Science Premium Collection.} He introduces the approach of Judith Butler’s heteronormativity to his reading of \textit{Some Like It Hot}, interpreting it as “the normative and normalizing power of heterosexuality in representation, subjectivity, legality and discipline.”\footnote{Carver, Terrell. "Sex, Gender and Heteronormativity: Seeing 'some Like it Hot' as a Heterosexual Dystopia." Contemporary Political Theory, vol. 8, no. 2, 2009, pp. 125-151 ProQuest Central; Social Science Premium Collection.} The paper argues that \textit{Some Like It Hot} contextualises its cross-dressing as a comedic device, intended to create an ‘otherness’ for people who did not conform to heteronormative social and sexual structures. It is therefore suggested, by Gemunden, that the “central metaphor of counterfeit and camouflage and the binary opposition of being and appearance ("Sein" and "Schein") provides the central structuring device of the film.”\footnote{In this chapter, Prof. Gemunden talks about “Trading in counterfeits” in \textit{Some Like It Hot}. He grounds his critique of power and class in the vision of the roaring twenties that Wilder constructs, serving as a parallel and a tool of critique for the Eisenhower Era. The notion of “modernity gone wild” is used to look at the film’s transgressions from heteronormativity and established class structures. Gemünden, Gerd. A Foreign Affair: Billy Wilder's American films. New York: Berghahn , 2008. Print. Chapter 5: All Dressed Up and Running Wild (\textit{Some Like It Hot}, 1959)} If the
movie were to be seen in terms of counterfeit and camouflage, it would be safe to say that Joe’s transformation to Junior (a striking image of Hollywood actor Cary Grant, and supposed heir to Shell Oil) would be the central motivator for most of the action in the movie.

Class and cross-dressing interact in a rather different way in Some Like It Hot, for the movie offers us the ability to contextualise Joe’s Junior as a foil for Osgood, the authentic millionaire. The first introduction of cross-class-dressing is when Junior’s conversation to Sugar takes place on the beach.

“JOE: Oh, I'm terribly sorry.
SUGAR: My fault.
JOE (helping her up): You're not hurt, are you?
SUGAR: I don't think so.
JOE: I wish you'd make sure.
SUGAR: Why?
JOE: Because usually, when people find out who I am, they get themselves a wheel chair and a shyster lawyer, and sue me for a quarter of a million dollars.
...
SUGAR: Well -- a group of us are appearing at the hotel. Sweet Sue and Her Society Syncopators.
JOE: You're society girls?
SUGAR: Oh, yes. Quite. You know -- Vassar, Bryn Mawr -- we're only doing this for a lark.
...
SUGAR: So do I. As a matter of fact, I spent three years at the Sheboygan Conservatory of Music.
...
JOE: (taking a handful of shells from the pail) Yes. So did my father and my grandfather - - we've all had this passion for shells -- that's why we named the oil company after it.
SUGAR: (wide-eyed) Shell Oil?”

Both Sugar and Joe attempt to cross the boundaries of class. Joe augments his physical makeover from Josephine to a Cary Grant-esque character, \(^\text{17}\) Junior, who is heir to Shell Oil. Sugar, too, attempts to make herself over as a classically trained musician who goes to an elite Women’s

\(^{17}\) In Billy Wilder’s original screenplay for Some Like It Hot, he introduces Junior as a Cary Grant-like character.
College.\textsuperscript{18} The classically trained musician, who also happens to be educated at one of the most elite institutions for women in the country, is a guise to position herself for marriage with one of the most eligible bachelors (supposedly) in the entire nation, who is apparently heir to Shell Oil, one of the largest oil companies in the world. The counterfeit that Sugar creates feeds into the counterfeit that Junior envisages, for the screenplay explicitly mentions that this is what Joe had hoped for. To maintain the illusion that he is upper class, Joe convinces Daphne to go on a date with Osgood so that he can make use of Osgood’s yacht. The plebeian Joe, however manages to master the manners of the upper class, especially the aristocratic accent, and lexis. The underlying tension in the movie, too, arises from this cross-dressing.

This cross-dressing that transcends class takes place in both Some Like It Hot and Vertigo. The aspiration that defines class cross-dressing in both movie reflects a fundamental human quality: the hope of a better life. Growing up in a society that was highly delineated by class, there was an implicit understanding that attempting to climb the social class ladder was always a futile exercise. Being a part of the bourgeoisie is different from being part of the upper class, for the former is an economic class, the latter a social class, and while both might be inextricably tied together, they are in many ways mutually exclusive.\textsuperscript{19} The movies express a recognition of this, giving rise to the class cross-dressing that define Some Like It Hot and Vertigo.

\textsuperscript{18} At the time the movie was released, in 1959, women were not admitted to any of the Ivy League colleges. Dartmouth first admitted women in 1972. Yale and Princeton initially admitted women in 1969, the first to do so, \textit{de facto}. This prompted the creation of a group of Elite Women’s Colleges, including Vassar, Smith, & Bryn Mawr.

\textsuperscript{19} Case in point: Donald J. Trump.
In this paper, James Vest argues that Kim Novak’s dual role in Vertigo is the manifestation of Hitchcock’s love for Hamlet, and that the duality of Novak’s character is a reflection of Ophelia from Hamlet. Vest also draws parallels between the Jamie Stewart’s portrayal of Detective Scottie and Hamlet. In comparing Judy and Ophelia’s off screen deaths, Vest concludes that Hitchcock, in the ending, too, was inspired by Shakespeare’s Hamlet.

In this article, Ross explores the soundtrack of Vertigo post its restoration. Crafted by Bernard Herrmann, who also scored Citizen Kane and Taxi Driver, Ross suggests that Vertigo was the maestro’s peak. Ross discusses how Herrmann’s revolutionary score for Vertigo was a radical departure from the descriptive mode that dominated earlier Hollywood filmmaking. He puts Herrmann in conversation with Hitchcock and the director’s vision for Vertigo. Ross also talks about Herrmann’s classical allusions in the score for Vertigo, especially Wagner, and culminates with the restoration of the soundtrack.

French director Francois Truffaut, in preparation for a book on Hitchcock, interviewed the latter for a book that he was writing on Hitchcock and his films. In this taped interview, Hitchcock talks about Vertigo, and about his thoughts on the film. He talks about Kim Novak and his dissatisfaction with her, about the poetic nature of the film that Truffaut loved but Hitchcock derided.

Deborah’s reading of Vertigo is a Freudian psychoanalytical one. She anchors this in rampant belief of psychoanalysis during the late 1950s, and quotes Freud’s theory on infantile sexuality and symbolic substitution to interpret the movie. She argues that the viewer is “deliberately set up as an agent of misrecognition for two-thirds of the movie”, suggesting that until Judy reveals the letter, the viewer is left in the dark about the true nature of the movie, and the intentionality of actions. The author further writes on the effeminate nature of Scottie, which takes centre stage after his necrophilia is revealed to the viewer through the “dramaturgy of Judy’s fetishized transformation.”

Spinks’ viewing of Vertigo rests on class and class symbols. He defines class as “a social dynamic brought on by that late modern political economy under which … classism remain(s) in human history, yet styled anew as a particular lack of social safety and solidarity.” Through class symbols such as Carlota Valdes’ necklace, Spinks explores the symbology and iconography of Hitchcock’s world.


Carver uses Judith Butler’s reading of heteronormativity as a framework to analyse Some Like It Hot. He contextualises gender discourse in the political discussions of the 1950s, suggesting that no political gender struggle “overtly” manifests itself in the movie. Carver explains Butler’s heteronormativity as the “normative and normalising power of heterosexuality in representation”, a “natural truth” for the audiences of the late 1950s. He further analyses power relationships, the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, and class using film theory, and extends this to modern notions of homosexuality and homonormativity.


In this chapter, Prof. Gemunden talks about “Trading in counterfeits” in Some Like It Hot. He grounds his critique of power and class in the vision of the rolling twenties that Wilder constructs, serving as a parallel and a tool of critique for the Eisenhower Era. The notion of “modernity gone wild” is used to look at the film’s transgressions from heteronormativity and established class structures.