

## ROMANTIC COMEDY

### Laughter and Culture

#### Comedy, Repression, and Cultural Dreamwork

Sigmund Freud jokes function a form of liberation; whatever a society represses frequently returns in the form of comedy to taunt it. This often occurs quite literally in the figure of the Shakespearean-like fool who tells a truth that others dare not utter.

Several likely prospects on the street but does a double take and hurries away when one of this would-be brides turns out to be black and another Jewish.

For the Marx Brothers, nothing is sacred.

#### From Racism to Social Integration

##### Immigrants: Chaplin to Depardieu

Chaplin, whose "Tramp" character embodies an essential ambivalence toward society. Thus, Chaplin comedies often play against the genre's expectations, striking a note of pathos.

The film's attack on phoniness and its celebration of authentic feeling moves it, however, toward Chaplinesque pathos rather than comic triumph: Depardieu's rediscovered integrity forces him to abandon his initial, self-centered goal of getting citizenship by whatever means possible.

#### Integration and the Regeneration of Society

Hundreds of other comedies in which an individual struggles to enter society. Through the theme of comic integration, American screen comedies demonstrate the flexibility of our democracy social structure through its ability to absorb new members and integrate them into a new social order, whose unity and diversity exceeds that of the old order.

It Happened One Night (1934) , for example, begins with a "bad" marriage between an heiress (Claudette Colbert) and a playboy-socialite.

The final marriage is "right" not only because Colbert and Gable really love one another but also because it heals the divisions within society, establishing a new order through the symbolic marriage of representatives of different social classes.

#### Reforming the Workplace

9 to 5 (1980)

Working Girl (1988)

#### Rites of Passage: Boys to Men

Big (1988)

Big features a double integration, focusing primarily upon Hanks' trials and tribulations in becoming an adult but framing this within the anxieties surrounding the character's struggles with adolescence at the beginning and ending of the film.

#### Comic Disintegration and Disorder

##### Men to Boys: The Marx Brothers

Comedy dares to disrupt the orderly processes of society by unleashing the forces of chaos and disorders.

The Marx Brothers, for example, assault the very foundations of bourgeois society.

##### Horse Feathers (1932)

As the president of a small European country in *Duck Soup*, Groucho literally reduces the operations of government to child's play (a game of jacks) and plunges the nation into war over an insult that never occurred.

Once the genius of the Marx Brothers is uncorked, there is no putting it (or them) back into the bottle again; the brothers follow absurdist logic to its "logical" conclusion.

##### The Release of the Repressed" Bringing up Baby

Few comedies reach the riotous peaks hit by those of the Marx Brothers. More often not, American comedy regulates and gives order to the forces of chaos.

##### Bringing Up Baby (1938)

You can be sure that they will somehow get it into its cage (or convenient jail cell) before the film is over. Ironically, in order for comedy to achieve its goal of social cohesion, integration, and regeneration, it must first unleash the leopard. *Baby*, unlike a Marx Brothers comedy, carefully charts a course between dangerous extremes, never quite losing control of the forces of disturbance with which it plays. The wild leopard ends up back in a cage.

#### Containing Chaos

##### Capitalism Works: Trading Places

Comedy functions as a kind of cultural safety valve. Impose order on the disorderly.

Duke's scheme does inadvertently expose the source of poverty, which is seen to stem neither from environmental nor hereditary factors but rather from the whimsical nature of capitalism.

Poverty emerges as the direct result of the Duckes' selfishness and comes from their willful abuse of their economic power and class privilege. Yet this potentially radical critique of capitalism gets deflected in Murphy's and Ackroyd's rush to get even with their meddling tormentors.

Their victory over the Dukes suggests that the system works.

At the same time, poverty, in the form of the Dukes, is banished from the screen, along with the class conflicts and economic extremes that characterize the urban jungle in which the film is earlier set.

Reforming Prostitution: *Pretty Woman*

Defuses by means of a tried-and-true, conventional comic resolution.

By falling in love with her and asking her to marry him, Gere snuffs the fuse on the dynamite. He redeems their relationship from the sordid realm of crass commercialism and rewrites its scandalous origins in the more proper language of middle-class morality.

Romantic fiction replaces the 'reality' of class difference and bourgeois morality.

Comedy, Class, and Democracy

In Latin, it would be called *vulgus* i.e., vulgar signifying that it belongs to the crowd.

In the book on realism and representation, *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach distinguishes ancient tragedy, which concerns the affairs of nobles and the fate of kingdoms, from ancient comedy.

Its vitality depends upon the egalitarian nature of American society (or at least upon the common belief that America has no class system).

The Discreet Charms of the Working Class

Depression audiences love it when Claudette Colbert's heiress in *It Happened One Night* learns to live by her wits on the road.

Celebrating Change

American comedy remains profoundly social.

Narratives not only possess a structure which implies change - that is, they feature beginnings, middles, and ends - but they regularly begin with some literal change, with a disruption of events or with a disturbance of an equilibrium that is eventually restored.

Not only does comedy undermine the status quo, but it also endorses change as a positive feature of history, unlike tragedy, which conceives of change negatively.

Essentially a subversive form, comedy celebrates change. It applauds flexibility - the ability of character to adapt themselves to changing circumstances.

A Short History of American Screen Comedy

In the 1920's, change takes place on several levels in American screen comedies. On the most superficial level, silent comedy comes of age as a format for feature-length films. Comedies expand in length from two-reel (ca.18-25 minutes) shorts to feature-length film, running from 45 to 85 minutes in length.

Slapstick

Two-reel comedies by Mack Sennett at Keystone.

This action, in turn, frequently leads to an extended chase sequence, often featuring the Keystone cops. This brand of broad physical comedy is known as 'Slapstick," a term that refers to the flat stick clowns use to strike one another in the more physical forms of theatrical pantomime.

The major comic stars of the 1920s, such slapstick into a form of self-expression, tailoring their comic routines to the unique nature for their screen characters.

Sherlock Jr (1924)

Much as Chaplin's slapstick is often aimed at others, Keaton's is just as frequently directed at himself.

Charles Chaplin

Chaplin's Tramp character is rooted in nineteenth-century values. Based on the archetypical American hobo. It retains the somewhat melodramatic, rigid moral outlook of Victorianism.

Buster Keaton

While Chaplin rejects the modern world, Keaton embraces it. The Cameraman (1928), it is a motion picture newsreel camera. Buster's relationships with machines often prove more harmonious than those with human costars, especially his love interests, whom he can never quite understand as well as he can the workings of the machine.

Relying upon the uniquely American virtues of common sense, ingenuity, and know-how, Buster overcomes whatever human-made or natural obstacles are placed in this path. Unlike Chaplin's homeless Tramp, who resists change and who is forever at odds with modernity, Keaton adroitly adapts himself to the ever-changing rules of the world around him, demonstrating a comic flexibility that enables him to move to the pace of modern times.

Keaton is a millionaire (The Navigator) or a projectionist in a movie theater (Sherlock Jr), he never seems to become obsessed with his class status.

Harold Lloyd

Generally White-Collar  
Girls Shy (1924)  
Safety Last (1923)  
Mad Wednesday (1947)

As the anxiety-ridden Harold Lamb in The Freshman (1925), Lloyd's rivets his desires on becoming popular in college, which he attempts to do by spending his money on lavish parties and winning a position on the football team.

In Safety Last in the scaling of a skyscraper, a feat that became identified with Lloyd through his repetition of it in subsequent films.

## The 1920s: Three Comic Visions

Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd translate into comic terms the social and economic upheavals of 1920s America, in which industrialization, urbanization, and the growth of new, white-collar middle transform traditional social customs and behaviors.

But the end of 1920s, the machines of the motion picture industry develop a new technology - sound which, in turn, changes the nature of screen comedy.

### Early sound comedy

#### The Clowns Speak

Within a few years, he was playing supporting roles to Jimmy Durante, by 1934, he had returned to making shorts.

The Clown tradition continues to flourish in the persons of W.C. Fields, Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy (all of whom had appeared in silent films), Mae West, the Marx Brothers, Joe E. Brown, Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey, and others.

### Romantic Comedies

Sound draws upon other theatrical traditions as well. Romantic comedies, in which the central dramatic action involves the comic (as opposed to melodramatic) vicissitudes of a heterosexual love affair and which had been a staple of the silent screen, enjoy a new lease on film in films that combine romance with the comedy of manners.

The Smiling Lieutenant (1927)

One Hour with You (1932)

Trouble in Paradise (1932), which were directed by Ernst Lubitsch and written by Samson Raphaelson.

Hollywood begins to extend its own comic range, featuring comic performers from radio such as Jack Benny, Bob Hope, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, George Burns and Gracie Allen, and others. At around the same time, the career of Will Rogers, the nationally known humorist, who had already established himself in the motion pictures, in radio, and in weekly newspaper columns, reaches new heights when the actor begins to make sound comedies. Thus, Hollywood ransacks a variety of media for comic performers who bring with them the various styles and formats of different comic traditions, adding multiple and varied strains of popular comedy to the expanding field of comic styles that find a common home in 1930s American cinema.

"Low" slapstick routines remain carefully segregated from "high" romantic comedy.

### Screwball Comedy

But in the 1930s, all this begins to change. "high" and "Low" comedy begin to be mixed together with greater and greater disregard for sexual difference.

Various strains and styles of comedy find their way into a single hybrid form, which is known as the screwball comedy. The screwball

comedy combines "high" comedy, such as romantic comedy and comedy of manners, with "low" slapstick comedy.

#### Under Restraints: Comedy and the Code

Not every screwball comedy indulges in such overt sexual play; indeed, most of them do not, but the majority of them tend to be covertly about sexual matters. In an essay entitled "sex Comedy without the Sex," critic Andrew Sarris suggests that the screwball comedy is about the repression of sex, which then becomes the genre's chief subtext. Sarris argues that the genre was produced, in part, by the tightening of restrictions in the Production Code in July 1934.

Changes in the Code took place in response to a campaign by the Catholic Legion of Decency to ensure the 'sanctity of the institution of marriage' by banning from the screen depictions of "adultery and illicit sex," scenes of passion, 'seduction or rape'. "sex perversion', "white slavery', "miscegenation', "vulgarity", "obscenity,' and other acts. This campaign was prompted, in part, by the increasing sexualization of film comedy (and other genres) that took place in the early 1930s; chief target of the censors was, of course, Mae West, as well as Hollywood's original platinum blonde, Jean Harlow. Perhaps the most audacious of the Pre-Code comedies is Lubitsch's *Design for Living* (1933) in which both Gary Cooper and Frederic March live out of wedlock with Miriam Hopkins in the bohemian world of Paris.

Men and women still wanted one another, but their desire was denied. In *It Happened One Night*, Clark Gable, plays a character who seems to have internalized the Code - who censors his own sexual desires. When they share a motel room for the night, it is Gable who erects a curtain (which he calls "the walls of Jericho") that separates their beds.

Gable's refusal to "topple" them until the last scene, when the couple are (finally) legally man and wife, demonstrates his own sexual restraint and sets up a tension that can only be resolved by the consummation of their relationship.

The heroine's kicking of the hero serves as a sign of sexual intimacy, which 1930s audiences learned to read as clearly as they had the cutaway from the lovers' kiss to the outside of the closed bedroom door.

But, in screwball comedy, the cutaway which symbolizes the consummation of a romantic relationship virtually never takes place. As if the characters themselves are somehow aware that, because of the Code, any final union between them will be perpetually frustrated.

#### Screwball Slapstick

Sexual desire in the screwball comedy follows a similarly Freudian path, revealing itself in terms not only of conflict but of combat. Lovers love inflicting pain upon one another.

Stanwyck quite literally "strikes" up a relationship with Fonda in *The Lady Eve* (1941).

The "battle" of the sexes becomes an unending succession of "combat" sequences that conclude with an uneasy truce.

#### Love, War, and Unresolved Endings

A screwball comedy of manners, for the remainder of the film, the couple continue to spar, waging both physical and psychological warfare with one another until the final scene when they achieve a stalemate of sorts.

Themes of comedy is that of integration.

Much as screwball narratives often begin with a couple on the verge of breaking up, so they just as frequently end with a tenuous reconciliation.

The hug is a much an acknowledgment of surrender as it is a declaration of love.

#### The Politics of Screwball

Andrew Bergamn argues that screwball comedies bridge class differences, solving the social problems of the Depression era.

It Happened One Night You can't take it with you (1938)

The Lady Eve by Preston Sturges.

Howard Hawks (Twentieth Century, Bringing Up Baby, His Girl Friday)

Leo McCarey (The Awful Truth, 1937)

Sidney Buchman (Theodora Goes Wild, 1936)

Ben Hecht (Nothing Sacred, 1937)

Ignore Capra's populist rhetoric, subordinating overt political issues, such as class difference, to covert sexual issues, such as the threats posed to the male order by the sexually aggressive female, the instability of sexual relations, or simple sexual liberation.

To the political and social concerns, screwball comedy is politically conservative, if not reactionary.

A rebellious turn in the romantic comedy in response to anarchic comedy in response to anarchic comedy, such as that of the Marx Brothers or Wheeler and Woolsey.

It reflects the reshuffling of the delicate balance of sexual power. The 1930s, women began to take a more aggressive role in economic affairs, becoming the breadwinners of the Depression-era family by working as unskilled help.

Class hostility finds full expression as basic social conflicts. The majority of the films tend to side with the lower- or middle-class protagonist.

The Lady Eve, the socially inferior heroine proves to possess a spirit and integrity that reveals her to be superior to the upper class.

#### After the Screwball

Ernst Lubtsch's playful, apparently frivolous comedies of manners.

#### War Comedies

Abbott and Costello

Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour

Sex and Neurosis: The Postwar Era

