HOLLYWOOD SCREWBALL COMEDY 1934–1945

Sex, Love, and Democratic Ideals

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TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH BY ALIZA KREFETZ

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Preface

There are some books that leave their mark on you forever. Stanley Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness* has had an overwhelming and long-lasting influence on my life.

I bought the book in Paris in 1986, almost by accident, just as I was beginning to research classic Hollywood comedies for a graduate degree in film studies. These films were enjoying a renaissance in France, the country of cinephilia, thanks to their re-distribution by French "Indie" movie theaters (*cinémas d'art et d'essai*), while the field of film studies in France was also developing. At a certain point, I set aside my academic pursuits to embark on a career in the media industry, working with major American entertainment companies. And then, ten years ago in a twist of fate, I decided to complete my film studies degree, which led to a book, *Hollywood Screwball Comedy 1943–1945: Sex, Love, and Democratic Ideals*, now appearing for the first time in its English translation.

Mainstream cultural products have played a pivotal role in my professional and academic life. And Cavell's book stands as the common thread in my journey from academia to the business world and then back to academia a few years ago. Because Cavell's work is fundamentally engaged with mainstream cinema and culture, his writings helped to pave the way for a transdisciplinary approach to cinema—which is the essence of film studies.

I would like to express my extreme gratitude for the richness and the generosity of Cavell's work. It is with great pleasure that I present this attempt to build upon his philosophical observations on the Hollywood comedy of remarriage, in a study of a Hollywood subgenre that set the standards for romantic comedy for decades to come.

Author's Acknowledgments

My warmest thanks go, first of all, to Katie Gallof, a patient and caring editor; without her, this project would never have come to fruition. I am deeply grateful to my translator, Aliza Krefetz, who has marvelously interpreted and worded my work and has managed to keep the initial spirit while adapting it for English-speaking readers. Her analytical skills and her sense of nuance have allowed her to render in a most effective way the metaphorical terminology used in the section on Hollywood's internal censorship. May she be commended for the subtlety of her work and for her responsiveness.

I would never have had the audacity to resume this work, after a long professional hiatus, without the encouragement and support of Nicole Masson, professor of French literature. We were students together, and it is thanks to her that I met my dissertation advisor, Claude Murcia of the University of Paris, and Brigitte Buffard-Moret, professor of French literature at the University of Artois (France), who played an essential role in its French publication.

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I owe a great debt to Barbara Hall, the guardian angel of classical Hollywood scholars, as well as the archivists and librarians of the Margaret Herrick Library: Louise Hilton and Kristine Krueger. Their help was vital to this research project and this book.

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I would also like to take this moment to remember departed friends, dear companions on the path of life: Frédérique Brandon, Sharon Hamer, and Monique Mémet. I would have loved to have shared this achievement with you.

Finally, I feel the deepest heartfelt gratitude to Philippe Valon. Without his unconditional support, none of this could have happened. He stood by me throughout the working process. He gave me invaluable feedback, helped me clarify my train of thought on many occasions, and contributed his intellectual input to this project. He has been by my side for more than twenty-five years. I look forward to the next screwball chapter in our life.

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Introduction

Being Happy

The United States of America was founded on an ambitious and complex idea: the pursuit of happiness. In this New World, which has been constantly reinventing itself for more than four centuries while remaining faithful to its universal vocation, it promises unconditional entitlement to inalienable rights, guaranteeing free speech, freedom of religion, and free enterprise.[1] What is undoubtedly most remarkable is the longevity and persistence of these ideals. Since the ratification of the American Constitution in 1787, the democratic ideal and the project of democracy have weathered many storms. Yet, the same energy has endured, and from crisis to crisis, the same rhetoric has persisted. In his 1932 address to the Commonwealth Club, Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke of the "apparent Utopia which Jefferson imagined for us in 1776" and the importance of a convergence of interests within the commonwealth, which would provide "to everyone an avenue to possess himself of a portion of that plenty sufficient for his needs, through his own work."[2] Eighty years later, in 2009, Barack Obama—voted into office in the midst of an economic crisis the likes of which America had not seen since the time of Roosevelt's speech—used similar language in his first inaugural address:

> The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve to pursue their fair measure of happiness.[3]

He invoked that fundamental tenet of the American social contract that underpins the "happiness economy" characteristic of Anglo-Saxon utilitarian thought: leading the greatest number to the greatest happiness by means of a work-based economy, without sacrificing individual values for the sake of community.[4]

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[1] The Declaration of Independence of 1776 states: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness."

[2] *The Commonwealth Club Address* (September 23, 1932), Samuel I. Rosenman (ed.), *Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, 13 vols. (New York: Random House, 1938–50), 1:742–56. Cited by Daniel Royot, in Daniel Royot, Jean-Loup Bourget, and Jean-Pierre Martin, *Histoire de la culture américaine* (Paris: Puf, 1993), 283.

[3] Barack Obama, first inaugural address, Washington DC, January 20, 2009.

[4] André Cluzelaud, *Vers une économie du bonheur. Influence de l'utilitarisme anglo-saxon de Francis Bacon à John Stuart Mill* (Paris: Éditions L'Harmattan, 2014), 11.

In an allegedly classless society, this ideal and these fundamental rights animate American discourse in all its forms, especially its cultural expressions. Cinema had its role to play in the implementation of this grand design. Hollywood in its golden age, with its industrial organization, its studios, its stars, and its winning formulas, orchestrated the cinematic representation of America's fantasies and its ideological dreams. It has been noted countless times that the United States invented mass culture, starting in the late nineteenth century. As Daniel Royot has shown with regards to American popular fiction, the point was to communicate "a discourse that met an expectation … and to reach the maximum number of people [by applying] a formula." On this topic, he cites the definition put forth by John Cawelti: "The formula for the popular narrative establishes a symbolic network as a function of the behaviors observed in the readers' social group."[5] This observation is equally applicable to the adjacent storytelling apparatus of Hollywood cinema, targeted at general audiences. Lured into a movie theater, the consumer of 1930s-era cultural products became a spectator subject to the effectiveness of film genre. Among these genre formulas was a particular type of comedy, now generally classified as "screwball" in film studies. This madcap genre starts with realistic situations and characters, but applies a parodic treatment that flirts with eccentricity. It met with considerable success and helped to make "American comedy," as a whole, one of the greatest expressions of 1930s Hollywood. Between 1933 (*Three-Cornered Moon*, Nugent) and 1945 (*She Wouldn't Say Yes*, Hall), some 130 screwball comedies concluded, more or less, with a fairytale-like: "And they lived happily ever after." Everything in these films is presented through the lens of urban American couples of that decade. First encounters, break-ups, reconciliations, marriages, divorces, remarriages, arguments, hand-to-hand combat, and verbal jousting are carried along by a flood of words and a frenetic pace, which convey in cinematic terms the momentum toward a fulfilling outcome promised by a happy ending. The hope and the frantic quest for happiness, as long as they align with a country's socio-historic reality and reflect the aspirations of the citizen-spectators, provide universal, endlessly recyclable fodder for stories. Especially when the setting is America, ever tempted to portray itself as a promised land, having identified this idea of happiness as one of the objectives of humanity's presence on this earth and its societal organization.

What, then, do these screwball comedies have to say to us? In an atmosphere of celebration for the senses and the spirit, they present a surprising cocktail: a quest to find love, work, and money, an impetus to redefine the foundations of conjugal unions. Questions arise from their characteristic use of repetition and the identification of narrative and visual stereotypes. As early as the 1940s, and especially during the 1970s, researchers into American comedy made a connection between a 1930s America in crisis and these screwball confections, comedies of optimism and the myth of crossing class boundaries.[6] The innovative approach of American philosopher Stanley Cavell brought fresh insight to Hollywood film studies. His lectures on classic comedy, collected in *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*,[7] identified the theme of

[5] Royot, *Histoire de la culture américaine*, 325.

[6] We refer here in particular to the work of Lewis Jacobs, Duane Byrge and Robert Milton Miller, Wes Gehring, James Harvey, Brian Henderson, Andrew Sarris, Ted Sennett, and William Thomaier. See Part One and the Bibliography.

[7] Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981).

remarriage as an essential narrative motif of screwball comedy. He also made a point of situating his reflections within the socioeconomic context of the 1930s. His analyses adopt the same political and societal mindset that inspired the Founding Fathers' Declaration of Independence in 1776 and their Constitution in 1787. He follows in the footsteps of that constitutional quest, that secular drive toward success and happiness, identifying the objective of this "conversation" between man and woman, this "struggle for mutual freedom"[8] as "the pursuit of happiness." Reaffirming America's exceptional destiny, the mission of its fictional representation becomes clear. Along with countless other expressions of American popular culture, Hollywood's screwball stories are tangled up in this problem. Through these conversations and confrontations, they relay this rumination on the fragment of contentment to which all are allegedly entitled, and participate in the discussion about the pursuit of happiness.

Screwball comedy prospered in a time of economic crisis and social upheaval, marked by a loss of confidence in the elites and in the system. At this moment in its history, American society was questioning the place of the individual and the share of the "commonwealth" they might hope to receive. If prosperity, now in peril, was the guarantor of the individual's well-being, those hopes were slim, and the solution might be found through withdrawal into the private space of the conjugal unit, rather than in the illusion of collective action. The context of profound crisis that our liberal or semi-liberal system faces today resonates directly with that of the 1930s. The issues in play particularly concern individual and conjugal liberties and, in the specific context of the interwar period, the emancipation of private life. Indeed, the 1930s in Hollywood were marked by the clash between the restrictions on intimacy insisted upon by the ecclesiastical hierarchy and certain provincial elites, and the openness aspired to by the majority of viewers, who could discern in these onscreen comedies a promise of confidence in the social community. In screwball films, they undoubtedly found a breath of fresh air and an astonishingly permissive social model.

In this combat, the comedies engage in a discourse structured around the American conjugal unit at a specific moment in the nation's history. At the same time, this speech is presented to us as a charming illusion. This is precisely the interest of a cross-sectional study of Hollywood screwball comedies: its function is not to measure the supposed effectiveness of a piece of propaganda, but to understand, by analyzing these films, why and how, at this precise moment in America's cultural history, these "cinematic formulas" found a receptive audience.

This ritual of collective comfort was part of the reaffirmation of an American democracy based on ideals. The notion of idealism is thus a legitimate part of a reflection on classic Hollywood. Through these romantic ideals, we can grasp the symbolic power of these films for audiences of the 1930s–1940s, observing their quest for an improvable world to conform with their vision of an exemplary democracy. Filmmakers and audiences were united in this idea that the world was improvable through film. In their own way, the movies waged their own battle against the social reality and economic difficulties.

[8] Ibid., 17. Cavell also mentions the "reciprocity or equality of consciousness between a woman and a man."

Line of Descent: From Remarriage Comedy to Screwball Film

This work is inspired by the film analyses of Stanley Cavell. His philosophical approach, focusing on seven Hollywood comedies from 1934 to 1949, his examination of the structure of film sequences, the repetition of narrative motifs, and the role of actors embodying the screwball genre, strip away any presumption of its innocence. Far from comprising a collection of "fairy tales for the Depression,"[9] the comedies of remarriage engage in a politico-philosophical discourse—its objectives disguised, but convincingly argued—in favor of a reflection on the couple in its private and public aspects: what is a man and what is a woman in "modern" society? How do they each gain awareness of their sexual identities? In short, they offer a meditation on the status and signification of marriage in 1930s America. From these slapstick stories with elaborate dialogues, the image emerges of a storybook couple who realize that having fun and playing games reveals their compatibility and lays the ground for a successful marriage. Cavell's foundational work provides an exceptional springboard for an extended film study of this Hollywood genre, confirming the concept of remarriage as a recurring storyline motif and the central objective of the genre's social function. Our task is to progress from a philosophical reading of a group of films to a study of an entire film genre. What, then, are we to do with the theme of remarriage, which Cavell applies to romantic comedy in general, distinguishing it from the notion of screwball comedy?[10]

It was the exclusively philosophical nature of his approach that allowed Stanley Cavell to make light of the classification and labeling constraints characteristic of film studies. He breaks free of categories, focusing single-mindedly on his topic of interest, a "conversation" between a man and a woman, at the risk of obscuring the necessary genre reference points and creating confusion with somewhat imprecise intertextual references. In addition, the links established between remarriage comedy and new comedy raise questions. For Jean-Loup Bourget, this conflation of the two disregards certain lines of descent important to an understanding of the genre, which arguably owes more of a debt to the ancient satirical comedies of Aristophanes by way of Ben Jonson (*Volpone*), than to Shakespeare.[11] Cavell thus allows himself to take liberties with the structuring of the genre by plot category[12] and ignores the second characteristic theme of screwball comedy: *new love* the "first encounter," as opposed to *old love* ("remarriage" or "reconciliation"). In fact, he is uninterested in delineating genre categories, especially within the particularly nebulous context of comedy. He poses two questions to which he provides no answers: When and why did the genre emerge? How do we define the remarriage genre

[9] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 2.

[10] Cavell affirms: "Remarriage comedies are a specific, limited genre, habitually included in hasty journalistic reports of films within the massive (differently conceived) genre familiarly known as 'screwball comedy,'" *Cities of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 382.

[11] Jean-Loup Bourget, *Hollywood, la norme et la marge* (Paris: Nathan, 1998), 19. He refers in particular to Preston Sturges' film *Sullivan's Travels* (1942) "which makes explicit allusion to *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift, master of satire."

[12] Likewise, in her global study of classic romantic comedies, Kathrina Glitre chooses to identify the periods in terms of their thematic cycles: "remarriage and screwball comedy" (1930s and early 1940s), the "career woman comedy" (1940s and early 1950s), and the "sex comedy" (1950s and early 1960s). Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union, 1934–1965 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006). This distribution tends to identify screwball comedy with comedies of remarriage.

and its scope? By way of excuse, he affirms that he "[is] not writing history."[13] There is room, then, to expand upon this work, which remains seminal. Stanley Cavell limits his analysis to seven films, and the evidence suggests that their selection was informed by an "auteurist" vision: Frank Capra, George Cukor, Howard Hawks, Leo McCarey, and Preston Sturges. A study based on an expanded corpus gives us the opportunity to make note of recurring and repetitive elements in the dialogues, as well as their evolution over ten years. Considering the institutional context, admittedly mentioned by Cavell in his analysis of *It Happened One Night* (Capra, 1934), allows us to explore more deeply the interactions between the film and its environment, under the weight of Hollywood's internal censorship and its consequences for the final film content. Finally, it is important to situate these comedies in a wider context of film history, identifying their place within the history of popular humor in the West, and in America specifically. Their social function takes on greater significance when these films are considered together in terms of their functional and ritual dimensions, put in perspective within the context of the reception they received at the time and widely debated reflections on the family, the couple, and marriage.

Deploying a New Approach to an Indeterminate and Unstable Genre

Disregarded by Cavell, the historical approach to Hollywood cinema often stops short at a description of plot forms and character typology, or else proceeds to an appreciation of the quality of the films and their pertinence to the genre. To this end, a heterogeneous collection of standard, static criteria is mobilized: the recurrence and the range of narrative themes, the substance of the characters, and psychological realism. This approach runs the risk of subjectivity, particularly when it comes to opinions about the directors' style and the actors' performances. It tends also to favor notions like "masterpiece" and "auteur" which become highly subjective where Hollywood is concerned; the studios' industrial model makes any attempt at a binary "auteur film vs. genre film" approach questionable.

This book is presented as a genre study, at the nexus of the different textual and structural approaches within film genre theory, drawing on the seminal work of Wes Gehring[14] and Stanley Cavell, who contributed to the recognition of screwball comedy as a genre. With an emphasis on new "genre rules,"[15] the characterization of these films can, indeed, be developed further. For Francesco Casetti, who references the observations of John Cawelti, the idea of genre allows us to understand film as a cultural product that transcends the opposition between elite art and popular art, between the work of an auteur and an industry product.[16] He refers as well to the work of Thomas Schatz,[17] who posits that genre is to

[13] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 27.

[14] Wes Gehring, *Screwball Comedy. Defining a Film Genre* (Muncie, IN: Ball State University, 1983) and *Screwball Comedy: A Genre of Madcap Romance* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

[15] Raphaëlle Moine, *Les Genres du cinéma* (Paris: Nathan, 2002), 30: an overview of the textual and structural definitions of genres, as well as their social functions.

[16] Francesco Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945–1995* (Austin: University of Texas Press, [1991] 1999), 262.

[17] Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

film as grammar is to a particular instance of speech: a shared, internalized system of rules with a diversity of applications, all of them conforming to a canonical standard. He also discusses the "relevance of cinema to cultural, artistic, and intellectual processes."[18] An inclusive reading, taking into consideration the work of French researchers on classic Hollywood films, also opens up interesting perspectives on a genre about which much has been written, but which has been described in a fragmentary, scattered way. Such openness proves all the more useful when dealing with comedy, an all-consuming category with minimal structure, associated with the classic Hollywood canon, itself multifaceted. Indeed, few notions could be more ambiguous. For Jean-Loup Bourget, Hollywood productions cannot be reduced to a series of tropes.

> Hollywood's classicism, like any classicism, is characterized by exclusion, censorship and self-censorship, repression, ellipsis and omission. ... But [it] also functions in the mode of inclusion, and even as a catch-all: there is a melting-pot aspect to this classicism which gives a Hollywood flavor to anything it touches.[19]

Equally insufficient are attempts to identify a genre based exclusively on its stylistic characteristics. Jacqueline Nacache points out that "wide shots, dictated by bright, open spaces, are just as ubiquitous in Westerns as they are in historical epics."[20] For her part, Raphaëlle Moine notes that genres, considered solely in terms of categorization, are not easily defined. The situation is compounded for comedy, which cannot, by general consensus, be reduced to a system:

> If all of classic Hollywood cinema falls under the heading of genre cinema, … this remains less clear for comedy, despite the many sub-genres it begat, and its spectacular evolution during the studio era.[21]

There is a tendency to circle around the notion of genre without quite managing to pin it down. It is a paradox of classic Hollywood cinema that derives its creativity, effectiveness, and power from the standardization of the studio system. A troublesome and unruly genre, comedy, "weakly defined, amorphous, yet universal,"[22] seems to have driven Brian Henderson to the point of renunciation:

> We have chased the notion of screwball around the clock of filmic elements. We went in one door and came out another without encountering an iota of certainty or consistency, not even a vector between two points that pointed in a definite direction.[23]

Comedy, then, is a matter of inflection. Its "narrative structure cannot be considered separately from [its] style" because, in the stories under discussion, what determines their association with one genre rather than another "is a question of accent."[24] The term "comedy"

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[18] Casetti, *Theories of Cinema, 1945–1995*, 274–5.
[19] Bourget, *Hollywood*, *la norme et la marge*, 5.
[20] Jacqueline Nacache, *Le Film hollywoodien classique* (Paris: Nathan, 1995), 16.
[21] Ibid., 18.
[22] Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie, *Dictionnaire théorique et critique du cinéma* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2007), 38.
[23] Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible?" *Film Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (summer 1978), 13.
[24] Bourget, *Hollywood*, *la norme et la marge*, 176–7.

is almost more akin to a musical mode than a genre, the expression of a *mood* and a tone that crops up here and there throughout the Hollywood opus, as genre borrowings dictate. It follows that if comedy is an accent or tone that particularly lends itself to hybridization, a diversified theoretical framework is needed to delve into the roughly 130 screwball films in this corpus, to reveal the richness and complexity of its semantic features and the power of its social and cultural significance. Establishing the expression *screwball* as a film "genre" calls for an approach grounded in contextualization—cultural and political, within the institutional and professional cinematographic environment—and demands that we pull together an extensive corpus of genre examples.

Three methods of analysis have been used here. The first, an intertextual approach, focuses on identifying the genre's internal repetitions, on its reflexivity and on the connections between screwball films and the discussions taking place alongside them, such as Hollywood's internal censorship and the debate over marriage in America that raged from the 1910s to the 1940s. This is complemented by a structurally inspired analysis of specific themes, plotlines, and cinematic codes. It tends to reveal a thematic community, narrative tropes, whose very redundancy conveys meaning, defining the ritual of a rendez-vous with an audience already well-acquainted with these conventions. A third, functional approach endeavors to identify the genre's "other personality," considered this time as a tool of communication and a means of cultural, ideological, and social mediation. This latter aspect requires special scrutiny, since it is undoubtedly the social function of its love stories that brings the greatest precision to our understanding of, and engagement with, the genre. This amalgam of approaches provides a comprehensive synchronic, diachronic, and aesthetic perspective on a historically distinctive form of movie comedy.

To proceed with this endeavor of classification and analysis, we must be able to draw upon a streamlined, and inevitably arbitrary, assortment of source materials … The research of Duane Byrge and Robert Milton Miller, Wes Gehring, James Harvey, and Ted Sennett provided a starting point. Three criteria guided the selection. First, including the old-love–new-love dyad covers courtship, conflict, divorce, and remarriage with public reconciliation, and avoids the pitfall of thematic biases. Next, an emphasis on playfulness and eccentricity (physical comedy and verbal comedy) helps us to identify the signature style characteristic of screwball expression. Finally, the compilation of this roster of films was guided primarily by the pragmatic dimension of genre theorized by Rick Altman[25]: its emergence as a label, birth, and signs of its recognition. The references that link screwball comedies to other films considered members of the same category constitute a first set of indicators. These stories repeatedly mention or quote from contemporaneous works. They capitalize on type casting and star personas to establish genre continuity. These citations, whether explicit or implicit, establish a network of intertextual relationships that facilitate the work of association and alignment. In turn, the paratextual elements, efficiently provided by the discourse promoting each film, serve as reminders, offering clarifications about the movie's genre affiliation. They feature in the arsenal of marketing materials that includes posters, press kits, and movie trailers. Moreover, the movie reviews and commentaries supplied by the popular and trade press contributed to the emergence of the designation *screwball* to identify recurring narrative structures or elements borrowed from one studio by another.

[25] Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999).

The corpus of screwball films was organized into three groups, to reflect our approach to the genre.[26] The first one, a comprehensive corpus of 136 films, takes into account the genre's complexity. Too much or not enough? The seven films selected by Stanley Cavell are insufficient to represent a genre whose internal variations prove to be just as important as the unifying elements of standardization. Not all films define the genre to the same extent. Some participate actively in constructing its grammar, while others more or less freely reproduce the genre's usual constitutive elements. Thus, of the films selected, thirty or so occupy "the periphery," having only a secondary affiliation with the screwball style. The choice in favor of inclusion stems from the desire to emphasize the incidence of repetition and the serial effect, to illustrate the genre's polymorphic, hybrid nature. Certain films might be lacking in stylistic "purity" or topical relevance. But these works present interesting manifestations of reflexivity (self-reference), higher incidence of intertextual quotations and explicit examinations of social attitudes, such as reflections on marriage—*The Ex-Mrs. Bradford* (Roberts, 1936), *They All Kissed the Bride* (Hall, 1942)—or the responsibility assigned to social elites (*Cafe Society*, Griffith, 1939).

The second, consisting of forty films, will be drawn upon throughout this study, allowing us to focus in depth on a restricted range of titles while consolidating references and limiting the need for contextualization. These films were identified for their similarities (in style, rhetoric, plot structure, narrative process, social representativeness of the screwball couple) and their variations (genre mixing, featured actors, comedic revelations, breaking of the fourth wall). They provide a baseline for genre norms: narrative focus on stories of couples, a respectable showing of "foreign" thematic or stylistic framings (fantasy, drama, criminal investigation), action punctuated by slapstick episodes, and clearly identifiable expressions of sexuality and interactions between the characters couched in metaphor. This selection attempts to take into account the key players who particularly contributed to screwball films: studios, directors, actors. The storylines, almost without exception, play out on American soil, in American English. The abundant dialogue most often revolves around wordplay and innuendo, designed to evade Hollywood's internal censorship system. They employ colloquial or slang expressions aimed at 1930s audiences. These characteristic linguistic features anchor the story in a specific context, both in terms of history and civilization.

The third, and smallest, corpus is limited to fourteen films; it is specific to our investigation of Hollywood's internal censorship and its impact on screwball style.

This three-tiered corpus confines itself to a clearly circumscribed time period. At one end, 1934, the year the genre came into being with *It Happened One Night*, the economic crisis, the New Deal, and the enforcement of the Hays Code; at the other end, America's declaration of war prompts us to push the date to 1945 in order to encompass the genre's full range, despite Hollywood's reorientation toward the war effort. Screwball comedy is here considered as a function of the time period that dates and defines it, and not from a transhistorical angle, in spite of the endless remakes produced from the late 1940s

[26] See the Filmography for a complete list of the films. This approach is inspired by that of Rick Altman, who proposes a series of six steps for "establishing a corpus": 1. The Hollywood term and its usage; 2. The broadest possible corpus implied by the industrial/journalistic term; 3. The analysis of this broad corpus through the location and the presentation of the shared structures and functions; 4. The constitution of a revised corpus; 5. The writing of genre history; 6. The social and cultural function of film genre. *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 12–15.

onward. Thus, subsequent forms of American comedy, with the revival of the late 1940s, the formula films of the 1950s, and the resurgence of plotlines inspired by the classics over the last two decades of the twentieth century, have not been considered. In its initial form, screwball comedy was defined by problems, language, mindsets, and social issues characteristic of Roosevelt-era America. This puts into perspective its (historically dated) approach toward critique of the social construction of masculine and feminine models and fictional experimentation with gender equality. The United States' entrance into the war radically altered the situation. The historical and social contexts seem too pronounced to allow us to draw clear connections between different eras and the transferals from one filmmaking process to another.

The risk of falling into the subjective appreciation and fetishism of the collector has, hopefully, been circumvented. Notions of major versus minor works do not come into play, despite the temptation of hierarchical categorization, because they correspond to categories that are hard to compare: the stereotypical formula picture and the auteur film. The concept of a masterpiece emphasizes the critical evaluation of films at the expense of examining narrative structures, repetitions, and historical causality—for example, what made audiences laugh at a particular point in time. How, under these conditions, could we compare works valorized by the importance, weight, and legitimacy bestowed on their directors by critics and historians—*My Man Godfrey* (LaCava, 1936), *The Awful Truth* (McCarey, 1937), *His Girl Friday* (Hawks, 1939), *Bluebeard's Eighth's Wife* (Lubitsch, 1939)—and films like *Theodora Goes Wild* (Boleslawski, 1936), *Cafe Metropole* (Griffith, 1937), and *Cafe Society*? A filmography inevitably includes some "duds," which raise a stir because we do not know where to classify them. But it is precisely by looking at the margins that we redefine the core of a style, and especially through hybridized films: *Arise My Love* (Leisen, 1940) or *A Girl, a Guy, and a Gob* (Wallace, 1941).

Oscar-winning (*It Happened One Night*), commercially successful (*Cafe Metropole*), or long-forgotten (*No Time for Love*, 1943), screwball comedy is a discourse that succeeded in reaching its audience, despite all the middlemen. Our objective is to explain this phenomenon.

A Social and Political Reading of a Typically American Genre

First encounter, hesitations, disputes and fistfights, quarrels and separations, reconciliation … screwball comedy brings questions of intimacy out into the open and turns love and sex into topics for public discussion. The genre established itself, in New Deal America, as a production site for the promise of a renewed social contract. Here was a new conception of male–female relationships and marriage that sought expression as part of a narrative compromise in which no one, Modern or Ancient, was obliged to lose face. An observation of this narrative enterprise sheds light on a particular manifestation of the political debate through the depiction of an idealized American couple, the incarnation of a hope for democratic renewal.

The 1930s represent an era of uncertainty for the American political organization, torn apart by the ascendency of opposing forces: reinforcements of federal power and

local resistance, and extremist excesses and individual power. These films, which propel romantic banter into the public discourse, take part in this reflection and put a modern twist on the democratic exercise by negotiating the terms of private life. In their fictional representations of society, they raise questions about traditional authority figures, the organization of the American socio-political system and freedom of expression.

A consultation of the Hollywood Production Code Administration's archives makes clear the financial, and therefore ideological stakes represented at this time by the cinema, which had become, since the end of the First World War, a mass medium. The conflicts that arose in 1930s America between conservatives and liberal reformers extended to the film industry. And even with cinematic expression strictly monitored, Hollywood and that vast swath of humanity known as the middle class were on the same wavelength when it came to the depiction of their aspirations in the realm of private life, beyond the wall erected by conservative elements. The conflict was between two opposing views of the role of elites and of cinema's cultural and social responsibilities: on one side, conservative ideological and religious currents, embodied by the Hays Office, on the other side, the studios and their artists, conscious of being charged with a social and political mission and a responsibility to deliver a message within the American democratic arena. It is therefore a priority of our study to observe how these opposing conceptions of the role of the elites applied in the case of Hollywood comedy, by examining the transgressive and innovative nature of what it had to say.

Accordingly, this book primarily focuses on a text-based study of the crafting of the messages—after observing the conditions of their development. It is structured around a tripartite reflection, organized according to the methodological axes previously discussed.

Part One establishes a blueprint for the screwball genre, identifying the assorted genre markers for this form of comedy. This recognition of the genre's domain and lineage derives from a study on the emergence of the generic label *screwball*, the presentation of narrative formulas and genre actors, as well as an exploration of the unique relationship between industrial organization and artistry within the Hollywood studios.

Having laid down the framework of the screwball universe, Part Two examines the conditions that made this representation possible: the institutional context in which these films were made and the influence of Hollywood's internal censorship on the development of the storylines and style. The studios, in pursuit of profitability, had to reconcile the irreconcilable: securing the censors' blessing and ensuring commercial success. An ideological clean-up job was mandated to limit screwball transgressions affecting language, the body, and sexuality, and to protect institutions. These constraints led to *sui generis* filmmaking procedures and the development of a new language of circumvention: innuendo, suggestiveness conveyed through acting and images, metaphors and ellipses … Censorship became an essential element shaping the genre and encouraging the evolution of a new type of comedy with a knack for the art of insubordination. The connections between the work, the institutional context, and the means of production account for the genre's aesthetic choices and contributes to the definition of screwball style.

Despite the deceptive trappings imposed upon it, screwball comedy created an open space for public discussion. The genre established a sense of complicity with the era in which it emerged and its cultural and societal environment. In an atmosphere of festive celebration, it convened couples, spaces, temporality, and the recognized value of money to animate the democratic arena. Part Three explores the genre's political and cultural

function. Stories and characters, swept up in the "screwball celebration," argued on behalf of American democratic ideals. These films spread the messages of political and economic upheaval. In dialogue with their audience, they expressed aspirations of individual and sexual freedom. By establishing the coupling of love and democracy, they endeavored to make a convincing case for the virtues of social cohesion in those tempestuous times.

She's making all this up out of old motion pictures she's seen.

BRINGING UP BABY (COVER IMAGE)

Part One

The Screwball Expression: A Genre Shows Its Credentials

The first step in the recognition of a genre is the identification of its most obvious features. This involves gathering examples, comparing them, and highlighting the most salient genre markers. The genre's "transparency," whether de facto or by design, calls for historical contextualization and stylistic analysis. Despite Stanley Cavell's assertion that a genre "emerges full-blown … so that … it has no history, only a birth and a logic,"[1] we cannot entirely neglect to establish its pedigree. It is both necessary and possible to trace its lineage, its influences, and the sources from which it borrowed, emerging just seven years after the end of the silent era. With this identity card in hand, we can cross the frontier of genre territory to engage with an extended corpus of films regarded as *screwball*.

The principal players—studios, directors, stars, and supporting actors—provide a second set of genre reference points. They were at once the purveyors and the products of the Hollywood system. Their names alone served as signs of recognition, guarantees of genre allegiance, as much for audiences of the 1930s as for film researchers. Mass commodities for a mass culture, these artists were converted by marketing campaigns into brand ambassadors. As such, these "trademarks" helped to define the category, contributing not only to the establishment of the genre, but also to its transmission.

Thirdly, we must consider the film industry's capacity to try out, approve, and then mass produce stories that appealed to audiences. These marriage-centered tales adhere to a limited set of narrative framings, focused squarely on the couple. Nonetheless, simply cataloging their characteristics does little to facilitate the classification process. At once a movie category and the expression of a specific "tone," screwball films constitute a recalcitrant genre. Hollywood in general, and comedy in particular, engaged in a practice of hybridization. All-embracing, the screwball narrative opened its arms to external influences, welcoming every style and every particularity, enlivening its repetitive plotlines with unexpected, even incongruous, tonal elements: cartoons, musical theater, film noir, supernatural fiction, melodrama, populist comedy,[2] and so on. At the same time, the historical context of the years from 1934 to 1941, marked by gradual recovery from the financial crisis and the arrival of the Second World War, exerted its own influence

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[1] Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness*, 27–8.

[2] The term "populist" refers here to social comedy.

on the stories that appeared onscreen. We are thus left grappling with a genre that was constantly evolving throughout its brief heyday.

Finally, and above all, screwball comedy is recognized for its style and its tone. These unique inflections show through in the presentation of each story, and in its telling. The effectiveness and charm of the genre's distinctive rhetorical style derive from its capacity to draw upon and reconfigure every form of comedic expression that preceded it, while maintaining the apparent innocence of a fairytale.

Preamble: The Fertility of Hollywood Comedy in the 1930s

With more than one hundred comedies produced over a ten-year period that display a screwball affiliation, this group of films has enough staying power to constitute a genre. As we will see, its distinctive style of dialogue was tried, tested, and easily identifiable, with established themes that audiences recognized and came to expect. The genre's success made it a source of aesthetic inspiration. In the 1930s, screwball expression insinuated its way into other forms of comedy, even as it drew from these forms to spice up its own storylines. It is one of the numerous offshoots of the classic romantic comedy,[3] whose family history we must now trace.

Romantic comedy—and its screwball iterations—didn't suddenly spring into existence with Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* in 1934. Over the course of thirty years, the silent era had already laid the foundation for the majority of cinematic genres. After a period of adjustment, the turmoil that irrupted with the arrival of sound enriched the Hollywood narrative, pairing spoken dialogue with silent film aesthetics. Slapstick[4] and "sophisticated" comedy paved the way for the various "formulas" of 1930s comedy. At the height of the silent era in America, slapstick dominated as a mode of cinematic expression. Cultivated, in particular, by the studios of Mack Sennett, the art of slapstick initially revolved around the two golden rules of the gag: loss of dignity and mistaken identity, with chases, pratfalls, and pie-throwing in the mix. Later, under the influence of Hal Roach, it underwent an evolution that anticipated the 1930s, with the emergence of character-driven comedy, oriented around individual heroes, or more accurately, antiheroes. The short films of Harold Lloyd, Charley Chase, or Laurel and Hardy steered American comedy to focus on identifiable individuals rather than the stylized "types" favored by Sennett. Furthermore, slapstick now featured storylines in which the gags built on one another in the service of a linear narrative, establishing the kind of pacing that would come to typify American comedy.

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[3] In introducing her work, Kathrina Glitre takes care to specify: "There is a need to distinguish the broad genre 'romantic comedy' from the historically specific forms of that genre produced by the studio system." Hollywood Romantic Comedy, 13.

[4] This often violent form of physical comedy owes its name to the *slapstick*, a device used by comedic actors, made of two wooden slats that slammed together to produce a disproportionately loud sound relative to the force of the blow. Petr Král, *Le Burlesque ou morale de la tarte à la crème* (Paris: Stock, 1984), 14. See also the work of Jim Leach, Andrew Sarris, and Wes Gehring.

At the same time, Hollywood was mining a different vein, with the urbane narratives that came to be known as "sophisticated comedies." Jean-Loup Bourget traces their origin to German director Ernst Lubitsch's arrival in Hollywood[5] and the five comedies in this register that he made for Warner, beginning with *The Marriage Circle* and *Three Women* in 1924. Nevertheless, Hollywood was not the only purveyor of sophisticated comedy in the silent era. It emerged simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, Mauritz Stiller**'s** *Erotikon* (1920) is recognized as a trailblazer in cinematic comedy, coming on the heels of Lubitsch's first comedies, notably his now-revered *Austernprinzessin* (*The Oyster Princess*, 1919), which featured among the forty films he made in Germany. Meanwhile, in California, Cecil B. DeMille was setting the standards for comedies of manners, with a series of worldly farces whose plots centered on married couples and—a sign of what was to come—on the theme of remarriage: *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919), *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920), *Forbidden Fruit* (1921). Other directors joined in this movement, from 1918 onward: William DeMille, Harry Beaumont (*The Gold Diggers*, 1923, and *Don't Doubt Your Husband*, 1924), James Cruze (*Crazy to Marry*, 1921, and *Is Matrimony a Failure?*, 1922) as well as Donald Crisp (*Less Than Kin*, 1918, *A Very Good Young Man* and *Love Insurance*, 1919). Finally, "while the genre of sophisticated comedy may not owe [him] everything,"[6] it was Charlie Chaplin who laid the blueprint for sophisticated style with *A Woman of Paris* (1923). The film set the standard with its expression of unspoken thoughts and implications by accentuating certain details, and its extensive use of visual shorthand, ellipses, metonymy, and allusion. Literally and figuratively, it established a common currency for the economy of American comedy. *A Woman of Paris* influenced an entire generation of directors, beginning with Frank Capra, George Cukor, and even Ernst Lubitsch himself, who made his own contributions to the rise of the sophisticated comedy in Hollywood, refining the style he had already honed during his time in Germany: *The Love Parade* (1929), *Monte Carlo* (1930), *The Smiling Lieutenant* (1931).

The arrival of sound upset the balance between comedic genres, prompting filmmakers to turn to Europe and the theater for inspiration. Words were given priority, and a flood of dialogue replaced intertitles. From 1930 to 1934, Hollywood drew from the sophisticated comedies in vogue on Broadway, trying its hand at "dialogue comedies." Persuaded by the 1931 box office performance of *Private Lives* (Sydney Franklin), adapted from Noel Coward's play, MGM pursued the same formula with *The Guardsman* (1931) based on a play by Ferenc Molnár (previously adapted for the screen in 1918 as *A Testör*),[7] *New Morals for Old* (1932), adapted from *After All* by John Van Druten, and *Reunion in Vienna* (1933), a film version of the eponymous play by Robert Sherwood. RKO also churned out drawing-room comedies like *Our Betters* (George Cukor, 1933), originally written for the theater by Somerset Maugham. Warner and Universal jumped on the bandwagon as well with, respectively, *Jewel Robbery* (1932), based on a play by Ladislas Fodor, and *By Candlelight* (1933), from a play by Karl Farkas and Siegfried Geyer.

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[5] Eithne Bourget and Jean-Loup Bourget, *Lubitsch ou la Satire romanesque* (Paris: Stock, 1987), 55–8.

[6] Ibid., 56.

[7] Hungarian theater of the 1920s–1930s was a major source of inspiration for Hollywood's sophisticated comedies: *The Good Fairy* (Wyler, 1935), adapted from Ferenc Molnár's *A jó tündér*, and several of Ernst Lubitsch's films (*Trouble in Paradise*, *Angel*, *The Shop Around the Corner*, *Heaven Can Wait* …). For more on this cross-pollination, see Katalin Pór, *De Budapest à Hollywood* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011).

The omnipresence of speech lured the cinema into recreating plays on film. But, as always, no matter what Hollywood put on offer, the public had the final say in its success. That public showed a decided preference for melodrama, gangster films, and "tough comedies" (*Tarnished Lady* by Cukor and *Dishonored* by Josef Von Sternberg in 1931). There was a widening gap between the American middle class and the movie studios, which, under the influence of new arrivals from Europe, were becoming havens of cosmopolitan, continental culture, tending to elide the distinction between culture and class. The studio heads were more focused on chasing prestige than appealing to the masses. Comedy plots unfolded in royal palaces or London drawing rooms. In depicting the pursuit of "the distinctions of rank and power and money,"[8] they reflected bourgeois dreams of liberty and emancipation that preoccupied a certain subset of the urban elite but carried little resonance for mainstream movie audiences. Scaling up from a theatergoing minority to the mass of moviegoers altered the financial stakes. Did these comedic stories cater to the "tastes" of the moment? If not, their language and tone would have to be recalibrated.

After trying out an assortment of offerings from 1930 to early 1934, the studios hit upon the necessary narrative and stylistic adjustments. At the risk of oversimplifying, comedies were reorganized into four subgenres: slapstick, sophisticated comedy, populist comedy, and madcap or "screwball" comedy. In the course of this reorganization, some forms settled down and grew more staid, while others let loose, absorbing elements of their predecessors. Slapstick turned over a new leaf, retreating from the violent anarchy that had endeared it to the surrealists. The evolution of the Marx Brothers in their mastery of verbal comedy provides a striking example. In 1933, discouraged by the failure of *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey), Paramount cut loose the foursome. They moved on to MGM with *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood, 1935), which shoehorned their anarchic brand of humor into the conventional structure of a musical comedy. This more formalized approach limited the disruptive function of gags, channeling them toward a clearly defined narrative purpose. With these modifications in place, the Marx Brothers remained active in "comedian comedy" and slapstick throughout the second half of the decade.[9] Meanwhile Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd faded from view, while Laurel and Hardy successfully crossed over into talkies and feature films. From 1935 to 1944, they appeared in nearly twenty-five movies, holding their own against the screwball juggernaut. Charlie Chaplin, whose comedy was less verbal, made only two films during this period—*Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator* (UA, 1936 and 1940)—while W. C. Fields rounded out his career starring in vehicles built around his persona.[10] The cinema of the 1930s thus stayed true to the slapstick legacy of the silent era, but moved away from sophisticated comedy once the first screwball films of 1934 confirmed their potential. Comedic depictions of affluent,

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[8] James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges* (New York: Alfred Knopf, [1987] 1998), 75.

[9] *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood), *A Day at the Races* (1937, MGM, Sam Wood), *Room Service* (1938, RKO, William Seiter), *At the Circus* (1939, MGM, Edward Buzzell), *Go West* (1940, MGM, Edward Buzzell), *The Big Store* (1941, MGM, Charles Reisner).

[10] Five films with Paramount in 1934: *Six of a Kind* (*Poker Party*), *You're Telling Me*, *The Old-Fashioned Way*, *Mrs. Wigg of the Cabbage Patch*, *It's a Gift*. He continued his collaboration with the studio (*Mississippi* and *The Man on the Flying Trapeze*, 1935; *Poppy*, 1936, and *The Big Broadcast of 1938*, 1938) before moving to Universal (*You Can't Cheat an Honest Man*, 1939; *My Little Chickadee* and *The Bank Dick*, 1940; *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break*, 1941). He also appeared in *David Copperfield* (1935) at MGM, under the direction of George Cukor.

urban, high society simply didn't have enough mass market appeal.[11] It was mainly in the comedies of Ernst Lubitsch that the sophisticated spirit of the silents and early talkies lived on (*Angel*, Paramount, 1937; *That Uncertain Feeling*, UA, 1941; *Heaven Can Wait*, Fox, 1943), even as Lubitsch made his own contributions to the screwball tone with *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (Paramount, 1938) and *Ninotchka* (MGM, 1939). Nonetheless, from 1933 onward, Hollywood comedy was dominated by the populist and screwball subgenres, which frequently overlapped and borrowed from one another, making classification sometimes uncertain, an inevitable hazard of trying to dissect genre categories.

Populist comedy, largely identified with the work of Frank Capra, also abandoned the drawing rooms and urbane storylines to join audiences in the street. Quantitatively, this formula was rather sparsely represented compared to screwball comedy. Yet, its vigorous, often melodramatic focus on middle-class characters helped to define the cinema of Hollywood's classic era as one of "identification and participation."[12] Indeed, it sought to engage in an emphatic and persuasive socio-political discourse. The comedies of Leo McCarey, Gregory La Cava, and Frank Capra, as well as films featuring the folksy figure of Will Rogers, explicitly referenced the financial crisis of the 1930s and proposed that individual initiative was the key to a comprehensive solution. The heroes are characterized by their political engagement. Taking up the mantle of Jeffersonian philosophy—the name of Jimmy Stewart's character in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is "Jefferson Smith"—they embody the American everyman, standing up for the nation's foundational values. They come from small towns where they live contentedly, far from the influence of the federal government. Unconvinced of the efficacity of the elites, populist comedy reminds us that social progress depends more on the action and engagement of the man in the street than it does on structural reforms (*The Talk of the Town*). Jefferson Smith puts an end to the Senate's corruption (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*); John Doe (Gary Cooper) prevents a fascist organization from seizing power (*Meet John Doe*, Warner, 1941). In keeping with the Jeffersonian tradition, the hero's rustic, provincial origins guarantee his sincerity and legitimacy. Indeed, he is constantly tempted to leave the city far behind and return to the purity of nature. Populist comedy inserted itself into the ideological debate, revisiting the centuries-old conflict between small-town Democratic America and the Republican industrialism that dominated the cities, held partly responsible for the economic crisis. The fable is meant to be didactic, illustrating the fundamental American belief that man is good and improvable. After the Second World War, Leo McCarey based two of his most successful films (*Going My Way*, Paramount, 1944) and *The Bells of St. Mary's* (RKO, 1945) on the premise that there is good in everyone, just waiting to be brought to the surface. In a fairytale context, the populist hero—whether portrayed by Will Rogers as a mature man of experience or embodied by Capra's fresh-faced heroes with the innocent glow of youth—represents triumph through change. The stories conclude with a celebration of American democracy; the hero brings everyone together, literally and figuratively, as shown in a final sequence of collective jubilation (*Lady for a Day*, *You Can't Take It With You*, Columbia, 1933 and 1936).

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[11] Cukor, in keeping with the times, gave a strong screwball inflection to his comedies: *Holiday* (RKO, 1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (MGM, 1940), *Two-faced Woman* (Loew's/MGM, 1941).

[12] Jean-Loup Bourget, *Le Cinéma américain. 1895–1980* (Paris: Stock, 1983), 225.