

**LOVE TRIUMPHS: THE PRODUCTION CODE, SEX, AND THE SCREWBALL COMEDY**

by

Zoë S. Sherman

B.A., Portland State University, 2017

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(Film Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August 2019

© Zoë S. Sherman, 2019

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

Love Triumphs: The Production Code, Sex, and the Screwball Comedy

---

submitted by Zoë S. Sherman in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

in Film Studies

---

**Examining Committee:**

Lisa Coulthard, Theatre and Film

Supervisor

Brian McIlroy, Theatre and Film

Supervisory Committee Member

## Abstract

“The love impulse in man,” reports a psychiatrist in *Bringing Up Baby*, “frequently reveals itself in terms of conflict.” This statement perfectly embodies not only the situation of the central couple in the film, but also the circumstances surrounding the creation of the screwball comedy, a genre representative of 1930s Hollywood.

In June 1934, Hollywood implemented a new system of internal regulation which radically altered the cinematic landscape and its representation of sexuality for the next three decades. The Motion Picture Production Code required films to pass rigorous processing by the Production Code Administration and its newly appointed leader Joseph Breen. The Production Code enforced strict regulations for film content, promoting socially conservative views and banning material which could challenge the institution of marriage. This involved themes of sexuality, forbidding any depiction of explicit or suggested nudity, sex, or illicit behaviour.

The screwball comedy became a predominant genre in Code-era Hollywood, in spite of its seduction-driven narratives. However, the screwball did not represent sex or any implication of it onscreen. Often, the principle couple of the screwball comedy did not so much as kiss by the film’s end. So how did the screwball comedy represent love and sex? In what ways were these themes coded in order to evade interference from the Production Code Administration? How was romantic union represented as triumphant when so many barriers were put in place to prohibit the depiction of sexuality onscreen?

This thesis discusses such questions via case studies of Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934) and Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). By employing historical research and visual formal analysis, this thesis examines the genre’s codification of sexuality and lust,

positing the archetypal screwball heroine as a critical figure for breaking down narrative and symbolic barriers. In transgressing the narrative barriers of these films, the “screwy” female also subverts conservative values promoted by the Production Code in the 1930s. By reading the genre alongside its historical context, this thesis considers the screwball heroine as an important cultural critique for the era’s expectations of gender and discourse of women’s sexuality.

## Lay Summary

How did Hollywood create films about seduction at a time when onscreen sexuality—whether explicit or implied—was strictly prohibited? This project interrogates the ways sexuality and sexual desire were codified throughout the screwball comedies of the 1930s. Emerging the same year that the Production Code placed ironclad prohibitions on depictions of nudity, sex, or illicit behaviour onscreen, the screwball recounted stories of unmarried men and women and their eventual sexual and romantic union. In case studies of *It Happened One Night* (1934) and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), this thesis examines the archetypal screwball heroine as a crucial figure for breaking down narrative and symbolic barriers. Successful love, and its implied sexual union, is coded throughout the screwball comedy as a transgression of such barriers. By placing the “screwy” female at the centre of this transgression, this thesis examines the genre’s subversion of conservative values promoted by the Production Code.

## **Preface**

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Zoë S. Sherman. A preliminary draft of Chapter 3 was presented at the Film Studies Association of Canada's annual conference in June, 2019.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Lay Summary</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Acronyms</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>Dedication</b> .....	<b>xi</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Sex, Cinema, and Society</b> .....	<b>9</b>
1.1 Women and Sexuality in the Early 20th Century .....	12
1.2 The National Board of Film Censorship and Initial Attempts at Censorship .....	15
1.3 The Roaring Twenties, Will H. Hays, and the Origins of the MPPC .....	19
1.4 Catholic Intervention and The Breen Era .....	25
1.5 Concluding Remarks: Towards the Screwball Comedy .....	30
<b>Chapter 2: It Happened One Night and the Birth of a New Genre</b> .....	<b>33</b>
2.1 On Genre - The Who, What, Where, and Why.....	34
2.2 An Unexpected Success.....	37
2.3 A Rocky Start.....	39
2.4 American Optimism as Romantic Signifier.....	42
2.5 A Shared Fantasy .....	44

2.6 A Moonlit Night.....	48
2.7 A Lesson in Hitchhiking.....	50
2.8 A Runaway Bride.....	52
2.9 Conclusion: The Walls Topple.....	57
<b>Chapter 3: The Love Impulse: Sexual Desire and the Screwball Heroine .....</b>	<b>60</b>
3.1 Creating a New Woman.....	62
3.2 The Wrong Partner.....	65
3.3 The Anticipatory Embrace.....	70
3.4 Democratic Framing, Deleted Scenes, and Slapstick Comedy .....	73
3.5 Conclusion: The Dinosaur Falls .....	79
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>Works Cited .....</b>	<b>90</b>



## **List of Acronyms**

<b>MPAA</b>	Motion Picture Association of America, Inc.
<b>MPPC</b>	Motion Picture Production Code
<b>MPPDA</b>	Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America
<b>NBC</b>	National Board of Film Censorship of Motion Pictures
<b>PCA</b>	Production Code Administration
<b>SRC</b>	Studio Relations Committee

## Acknowledgements

I am so grateful for the inimitable support I have received throughout the past two years, without which the completion of this thesis would not have been possible. First and foremost, I'd like to thank my supervisor, Dr. Lisa Coulthard, who guided me through this sometimes frustrating process and instilled in me a strong work ethic and enthusiasm for rigorous academic work. Thank you for advising me through the difficulties of research, and compassionately listening during the challenges that arose for me personally and academically throughout this year. Your kindness, intelligence, and encouragement have been instrumental to my thesis. A thousand times thank you!

I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Brian McIlroy. Thank you for your careful reading, insightful comments, and kind words. I am grateful to have been able to engage with you in a challenging and informative discussion about my ideas. Thank you, too, to Dr. Christine Evans, for being such a positive figure and guide throughout my time at UBC. Working with you in a variety of settings has been a wonderful opportunity, and your work as a scholar and educator continues to inspire me.

I was fortunate enough to execute a portion of my research for this project at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles back in April. I gratefully acknowledge the funding I received from UBC's Faculty of Arts which allowed me to carry out this trip, and the support I received from Dr. Coulthard in pursuing this opportunity. Additional thanks is owed to the librarians and staff at the Herrick Library for their assistance and indispensable knowledge.

During my time at UBC, I was lucky to have shared seminar rooms and offices with a myriad of brilliant colleagues. Thank you to Jemma Dash, Ellie Berry, Jared Aronoff, Morgan Harper, and Zoë Laks, for enriching my academic experience and always providing useful and interesting perspectives and ideas. For Ellie, with whom I shared deadlines and a defense date, I'd like to express additional gratitude for the opportunity to work with you and to support each other as collaborators and friends. For the wonderful friends who have checked in, motivated me, and kept me joyful during this writing process, thank you. I have been fortunate enough to meet so many intelligent, encouraging, and inspiring individuals while living in Vancouver, all of whom have continued to shape my outlook on life and love. My great appreciation goes out to my friend Vanessa Putnam, for her unconditional love and friendship.

To my siblings, Ariel and Micah, thank you for being two very different but equally impactful role models throughout my life and for your interest in my work. To Ariel, Jesse, and Avi, thank you for always welcoming me into your home, where many drafts of these chapters were written. I am so grateful for you!

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Theresa Stein and Robert Sherman, for their unwavering love and support. Words fail me when I think about everything I am indebted to you for. All I can say is thank you, and I love you.

For Mom, Dad, and Leo.

## Introduction

A man stands outside his home, which happens to be a New York City dump at the East River. The atmosphere is intensely dreary. He wears a tattered trench coat, his face scruffy and unkempt. He stands among the ash piles, dark and gloomy, bleakly accented by nearby campfires. Several men in the same position wander around the junkyard, aimlessly. Out of the smog appears a chauffeured car, sleek and polished, a stark contrast to its dingy surroundings. A group of glamorous people emerge, among them, a beautiful and lively blonde. She is dressed in a glittering evening dress and gloves, her hair fashioned stylishly. She is upbeat and enthusiastic, he is solemn and stoic. They learn each other's names—he is Godfrey, and she is Irene Bullock, heiress to a family fortune. There is no doubt of their financial disparity, and their attitudes reflect and emphasize this difference. Twisting the knife, Irene has a strange request: she'd like to offer Godfrey money to attend a party she is a guest at. She is participating in a scavenger hunt, in search of a "forgotten man."

So begins Gregory LaCava's 1936 screwball comedy *My Man Godfrey*. Produced just two years after *It Happened One Night*, the film that would introduce and popularize the genre, *Godfrey* exemplifies the iconography and conventions that mark the screwball as such—the depression-era landscape, the ditsy socialite, and an unlikely couple. Indeed: outside the context of a screwball comedy, where would it be possible for Godfrey (William Powell) and Irene (Carole Lombard) to fall in love? This becomes the cornerstone of the film; in search of her forgotten man, Irene Bullock finds the man of her dreams. Over the remaining ninety minutes of the film, Irene does whatever she can to keep Godfrey by her side. She hires him as a family butler, becomes engaged in an attempt to make him jealous, feigns ill, and by the film's end,

bulldozes him into an impromptu elopement. The film's final sequence attests to the drastic lengths Irene is willing to go in her passionate pursuit of Godfrey. Returning to the East River dump after he has quit his butler position, Irene realizes that Godfrey, thanks to some financial success, has built a new nightclub on the property, called "The Dump." She fervently enters Godfrey's office and informs him that she is there to marry him. Bringing with her an ordained official and a witness, she holds Godfrey closely, telling him "Stand still Godfrey, it'll all be over in a minute." The film ends and their marriage begins. This sequence hones in on what the film has already established: the screwball female, in her unapologetic pursuit of passion, is at the helm of the romantic and sexual narrative.

Witnessing Lombard's performance is akin to watching a tornado destroy everything in its path. The behaviour of Irene Bullock is as perplexing as it is compelling, her mannerisms verging on insanity. She moves and speaks erratically, giggles relentlessly, and fakes dizzy spells, her idiosyncrasies resembling those of a child rather than a member of the New York social elite. Perhaps the most memorable moment from *My Man Godfrey* occurs as Godfrey, in response to one of her faked dizzy spells, places Irene in a cold shower; as soon as the water hits her, Irene springs from the shower, drenched and elated, screaming and bounding up and down. "Godfrey loves me!" She cries out. "Godfrey loves me he put me in the shower!" She continues chanting this as she springs around the room, overjoyed at her logic that Godfrey's seeming attentiveness indicates his reciprocated feelings for her. This volatile, uninhibited, and yet somehow charming comportment identifies Irene as a true screwball dame. The term "screwball," in fact, is credited as first being applied to Lombard for her work in *Godfrey*.<sup>1</sup> This review was the first to associate

---

<sup>1</sup> A review of the film in *Variety* read: "Lombard has played screwball dames before, but none so screwy as this one" (1935).

such characters with the name of the baseball pitch—one which is thrown fast and with a twist, in order to confuse the batter. Inimitably analogous to this, the screwball heroine acts irrationally and unpredictably, leaving her male counterpart reeling.

In this thesis, I interrogate the nature of the screwball heroine and her “screwiness.” In doing so, I call into question the manner in which these romance narratives dominated at a time when Hollywood was prohibited from representing sex, sexuality, or sexual desire of any kind, explicitly or implicated. As the genre emerged the same year the Production Code Administration was formulated, these films underwent regulatory scrutiny unprecedented in the history of Hollywood’s film industry. The Administration, spearheaded by Catholic pundit Joseph Breen, sought to ensure all productions were in accordance with the Motion Picture Production Code, a set of regulations and restrictions which dictated that in the movies, “The guilty are punished, the virtuous are rewarded, the authority of church and state is legitimate, and the bonds of matrimony are sacred”.<sup>2</sup> Along these lines, insinuation of sexual flirtation between unmarried couples was plainly restricted. Yet within the same decade, the popularity and critical acclaim of the screwball comedy propelled romantic narratives of unwed men and women into theatres. In deciphering how the genre was able to do this, my project aims to identify how sexual themes were coded within the screwball comedy, utilizing Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (1934) and Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) as primary examples. Throughout this thesis, I highlight thematic and visual manners of codification which, for the screwball comedy, indicate sexual desire, romantic union, and the possibility of circumventing restrictions of the Motion

---

<sup>2</sup> See: Doherty 2006.

Picture Production Code. Specifically, I offer the screwball heroine as a subversive character whose turbulent behaviour stands in for lust and sexual drive.

It would be unfeasible to conduct a study of the screwball comedy without referencing Stanley Cavell's seminal work on the genre. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* remains one of the most influential books on the screwball and is employed by this thesis. Cavell's philosophical reading of the genre posits two important conventions which are fundamental to the arguments of this thesis. The first is that of a "shared fantasy" between the couple, which is discussed further in my second chapter. Overcoming obstacles is an important motif of the screwball comedy, and this "shared fantasy" indicates a mutual understanding between the couple about what those obstacles are; that is, what is keeping them from being together? Cavell identifies this shared fantasy—the recognition of a barrier—as a requirement for its transgression and for the eventual union of the couple. Drawing from Cavell's argument, this shared fantasy insists that viewers too must "care about the rigors" of symbolic barriers which separate the couple from uniting until the end of the film (81). As the symbolic barrier, and its symbolic overturn, are crucial narrative elements of both *It Happened One Night* and *Bringing Up Baby*, I argue that this shared fantasy also applies to the regulations and limitations maintained by the Production Code. Thus, I suggest that the "shared fantasy" does not only apply to the couple and their narrative barrier, but also to the film viewer and their understanding of the barriers imparted on the genre by internal regulation. Secondly, I draw on Cavell's historical reading and recognition of the female character's importance to the genre. Cavell proposed that the screwball narratively revolves around the "creation of a new woman" (16), necessarily relating to the time period's challenges within gender dynamics. I expand on this in the third

chapter, which centers around the screwball heroine and her unapologetic pursuit of sexual desire.

The first chapter of this thesis, “Sex, Cinema, and Society,” reviews historical studies of film censorship, the development of social discourse surrounding sex, and societal shifts in the United States in the early 20th century. In compiling a timeline, I examine significant cultural events and trends occurring while new methods of censorship and regulation were being developed within the film industry. In this chapter, I do not seek to solely recount the previous work of film and cultural historians; rather, I propose that these events in the years leading up to Breen’s takeover set up the precise milieu within which the screwball comedy and its heroine would thrive. In doing so, this timeline focuses on events concerning gender relations, marital developments, feminist progress, and financial matters. The screwball comedy would eventually assume these societal shifts as repeated generic tropes, and centralize them as important factors in the development of the film’s romance. I begin this timeline by discussing the concern with onscreen depictions of sexuality and desire, evinced as early as 1896. This persisted as a predominant concern for social conservatives and film censors until the decline of the Production Code in the 1960s. Further, I contend that much of this concern appears to have been directed towards female sexuality in particular. Overall, it is my goal in the chapter to survey the social construction of sexuality and female sexuality throughout the early 20th century and how this correlated to the formulation of various censorial and regulatory boards within the film industry. The direction of this groundwork leads to 1934, the year Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* was released and the final version of the Motion Picture Production Code was instituted. The timeline I establish in this chapter serves to argue that rather than hindering the genre, the Code



and the specific cultural and historical space it occupied allowed the screwball comedy to develop. Because of this, romantic narratives of the 1930s specifically coded sexuality in a manner reflective of and reactive to the surrounding discourse on sexuality and gender relations.

In Chapter Two, “*It Happened One Night* and the Birth of a New Genre,” I utilize Frank Capra’s 1934 hit to identify how specific tropes of the screwball relate to the time period and cultural context of 1934. Invoking the work of genre theorists such as Rick Altman, Barry Keith Grant, and Andrew Tudor, I discuss the iconography, conventions, and syntax of the screwball, particularly as they relate to representing sexual desire and romance without breaking Production Code regulation. In this section, I discuss initial loathing as a standard convention of the screwball romance. The historical condition of the Great Depression and resulting tensions between social class and gender dynamics are represented in the film and genre through this initial feud. This tension relates to another major screwball trope which I present in this chapter, that of the *barrier*, that thing which operates as what Cavell identifies as the shared fantasy. The well-known “Walls of Jericho” occupy this function in *It Happened One Night*, as a literal divide between the protagonists as they spend the night together as an unmarried couple. This analysis argues that in the screwball comedy, the barrier functions both literally within the narrative and outside of the film’s world, in response to Production Code regulation. The successful union of the couple depends on both the literal and symbolic dismantling of such a barrier. Throughout the development of the genre, it becomes increasingly common for this dismantling to be led by the female protagonist. From here, I transition into a discussion of Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), paying special attention to the representation of female desire and its resistance to Production Code stipulations.

Chapter Three, “The Love Impulse: Desire and the Screwball Heroine,” focuses on Katharine Hepburn’s portrayal of Susan Vance in *Bringing Up Baby*. I argue that through her overt demonstration of sexual desire, the character subverts societal expectations of women and the reflection of this in Production Code regulation. This chapter centres around the *aggressive* screwball female as a predominant vehicle through which the screwball comedy represents sexuality. Like Irene Bullock, the character of Susan Vance’s behaviour verges on insanity, going to extreme lengths under the pretense of keeping her male subject of desire by her side. This character became a trope in the screwball’s later years, developing from and exaggerating the strong will and tenacity of *It Happened One Night*’s Ellen Andrews. By codifying sexual desire through this unrelenting female force, the genre both corroborates Code regulations by never admitting sexual desire explicitly and destabilizes traditional gender expectations by placing the woman in control of the romance. The central argument of this thesis hinges on this revelation—the screwball female represents an anarchic force required in dismantling both symbolic and literal barriers fundamental to the screwball comedy. This dismantling functions as a codified depiction of sexual union which would be restricted from explicit representation under the constraints of the Motion Picture Production Code.

As this thesis seeks to keep its analyses historically rooted, both chapters two and three utilize Production Code Administration files as primary resources in analyzing *It Happened One Night* and *Bringing Up Baby*.<sup>3</sup> These files provide invaluable information about each of these films and demonstrate how the Production Code Administration and Studio Relations Committee conducted business. Throughout these chapters, I reference correspondence written during the

---

<sup>3</sup> All Production Code Administration records, which include correspondence and details between the Breen office and film producers, are courtesy of the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles.

writing, production, and post-production stages of the films, specifically citing moments in which matters of sex or sexuality would have potentially raised red flags. In employing these documents, I construct an argument surrounding the regulation and censorship of these films utilizing empirical evidence in support of my theoretical reading and visual analysis. These documents and letters point to specific points of contention or controversy for the Administration, providing evidence that the Breen office often overlooked or did not recognize the screwball female's exhibition of sexual desire, and therefore did not consider her a threat to traditional values. As these chapters highlight, the Administration's seeming ignorance of the heroine's demonstration of sexual desire supports my proposal that this character's irrational behaviour was utilized as an effective tool in coding and disguising sexuality.

Considering the historical period from which the screwball comedy emerged is not an unfamiliar approach in reading the genre. However, my work here seeks to fill a gap in the research concerning the historical context of the Great Depression, its relationship to gender dynamics, and the resulting regulation of women's sexuality onscreen as required by the Production Code Administration. In attending to this gap, my study asks how sexuality, and female sexuality in particular, became codified and disguised throughout Code-era Hollywood. Considering the screwball female as a fundamental channel through which this sexuality was represented, this thesis aims to discover how the screwball genre and its heroine work to dismantle barriers in the promotion of a narrative romantic triumph. Like Irene, bursting through Godfrey's office doors to declare their impending marriage, the screwball female is wild, off-kilter, and furiously unabashed in her pursuit of love and marriage. She does not simply break down barriers; she barges through them.

## Chapter 1: Sex, Cinema, and Society

In identifying how the screwball comedy emerged from its precise historical context, and out of the specific regulations imposed on Hollywood in the 1930s, this project requires a thorough understanding of the cultural trends, historical events, and social attitudes leading up to the fateful year of 1934. This year represents both the moment adherence to the Motion Picture Production Code (MPPC)<sup>4</sup> would become a strict requirement for every Hollywood production, as well as the year the screwball genre would become one of the most successful formulas that would come out of Hollywood's Golden Era. Despite 1934 being the year that the MPPC became an uncompromisable demand for the success of a motion picture, the history leading up to this date demonstrates that this version of the Code was the solution to over twenty years of inconsistent attempts at internally regulating cinematic productions. In addition to amendments within the film industry itself, innumerable cultural factors altered the social landscape of the United States in the years leading up to 1934. The first half of the 20th century in the United States ushered in a first wave of feminism, prompting regulated birth control and the enactment of the 19th Amendment. It introduced the Ford Model T, Trojan condoms,<sup>5</sup> and bathtub gin. A new era of liberalism, sexual freedom, and autonomy for women was established in the US, and with it, accompanying conservative anxieties and reactions. Such anxieties were, in turn, applied to the ways films were regulated. This regulation would seek to control new, modern attitudes onscreen, and is unmistakably related to social changes in the US.

---

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this chapter, the MPPC will be referenced by its acronym, "the Production Code" or, simply, "the Code."

<sup>5</sup> The brand places its first magazine advertisement in 1927 (See Newman).

There are several well-researched publications that tackle the MPPC's arduous backstory, such as Matthew Bernstein's volume *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, Thomas Doherty's *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen & the Production Code Administration*, Aubrey Malone's *Censoring Hollywood: Sex and Violence in Film and on the Cutting Room Floor*, and Tom Pollard's *Sex and Violence: The Hollywood Censorship Wars*. Each of these titles include thorough accounts of the evolution of censorship and regulation in the film industry, beginning from the mid-1890s (Bernstein, Doherty, etc.) and expanding until modern times (Malone). While some volumes focus almost exclusively on events and figures within the film industry itself (Pollard), others encompass important events in the United States in general, such as the Great Depression and suffragette movements (Malone). It is fairly evident that such events occurring in the wider cultural landscape would have an effect on the inner-workings of Hollywood, and would not be overlooked by scholars investigating the history of censorship and regulation. Of course, cinema employs a unique function for the public, with its capacity to reach wider and more diverse audiences than other forms of popular (printed) media. In this chapter, I wish to expand on this existing literature by looking outside cinematic historical research and towards the work of cultural historians such as Carolyn J. Dean, Angus McLaren, and Sharon R. Ullman. These scholars examine numerous factors which impacted the social construction of sexuality in the early 20th century, including changes in marriage and divorce rates (Ullman), medical research related to marital sexuality, and the impacts of war on expectations of gender roles (McLaren). Collating the work of both film and cultural historians and relating how such factors influenced the increasingly rigorous regulation of sexuality onscreen, this chapter will provide a comprehensive timeline leading up to the strict

implementation of the MPPC in 1934. I do not, however, intend to simply recount events and circumstances which have already been well documented. Rather, the arguments drawn from the timeline will assert that these historical factors created the precise political and cultural milieu in which the screwball genre and its iconic heroine would thrive.

The Code was preoccupied with representations of sex and sexuality on screen. Comparing sex and violence, Tom Pollard specifies that “the code censored [violence] far less stringently than...sex” (55).<sup>6</sup> Because of this, it is particularly useful to understand how cultural events related to sexual liberation, gender relations, and the social and sexual autonomy of women participated in Hollywood’s concern with sexual subject matters. Matters of gender equality in the United States have had a long and, unfortunately, incomplete history.<sup>7</sup> While early suffragette action in the US dates back to the 1840s,<sup>8</sup> American women did not receive full voting rights until 1920,<sup>9</sup> just fourteen years prior to the year the Code would become ironclad. Clearly, by this time women still held a fragile and submissive position in the US. Bearing this in mind, we may interpret the Code’s concern with sexuality as an attempt to reinforce socially

---

<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that this trend has persisted throughout time—the US’s current rating system (known as the Motion Picture Association of America film rating system) still rates sexually suggestive content as more threatening to younger audiences than depictions of violence. According to the MPAA’s “Classification and Rating Rules” handbook, for example, representations of violence are permitted at every rating level (stipulations are included regarding the “intensity” of such violence, but little is specified), while anything other than “brief nudity” will grant a film a PG-13 rating (7-8).

<sup>7</sup> I find it important to acknowledge here that this struggle persists in recent history in many capacities, but have been especially reiterated with recent abortion bans in the US. By June 2019, nine states had banned abortions at any stage of pregnancy (See: Gordon and Hurt).

<sup>8</sup> The first Women’s Rights Convention took place at Seneca Falls, NY in 1848.

<sup>9</sup> The 19th Amendment, however, still failed to grant full voting rights to women of color. Brent Staples recounts that “black women in the former Confederacy were being defrauded by voting registrars or were driven away from registration offices under threat of violence” (Staples).

prescribed gender roles; for example, the authoritative man, providing for his family, and his docile, unassertive wife.

Matthew Bernstein's historical overview of Hollywood censorship argues that "Genres... provide the most revealing link between films and society" (3). Thus, cultural conditions create generic trends. In this tradition, I find it useful here to examine the cultural conditions leading up to the 1934 version of the Production Code which was in place as the screwball comedy developed. Specifically, I am interested in how the screwball heroine manifested at a time in which Hollywood attempted to promote traditional roles for men and women through the Code. In breaking down this timeline leading up to the Code's implementation, I offer a reading of how the screwball comedy's makeup derives from an extensively cyclical history of women's suffrage, liberation, backlash, retreat—and back again.

### **Women and Sexuality in the Early 20th Century**

Thomas Edison's *The Kiss* (1896) is an obligatory starting point for any discussion of onscreen displays of affection. In the film, actors May Irwin and John Rice engage in an eighteen second-long embrace and seemingly harmless peck on the mouth. It soon became one of the most popular Vitascope offerings in the United States, demonstrating the power of utilizing human sexuality as an effective audience lure. Tom Pollard notes in his overview of Hollywood censorship that *The Kiss* is one of the earliest examples of the cinema raising the attention "of social conservatives aghast at public displays of attention," (13) and this trend would continue throughout the first decades of film's public exhibition.

Evidenced by 1890 and 1900 censuses which reflect significant increases in the number of unmarried women, conservative backlash regarding onscreen sexuality likely stemmed from

fears surrounding female sexuality and autonomy. In *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America*, Sharon R. Ullman explores the changes in social construction of sexuality during the 20th century, citing these censuses and also noting that a striking amount of these unmarried women were white, college-educated women (22), a particularly striking demographic that the period's social norms would be expected to be married. These statistics absolutely reflect a change in the role of gender dynamics, specifically regarding the independence of women at the time. This independence would prove threatening to social conservatives and religious groups and continue to emerge and decrease throughout the rest of the century. Fears surrounding female sexuality, particularly outside of marriage, would remain a primary concern for film censors and their supporters.

*The Kiss* was not a one-off portrayal of sexuality and public displays of affection in the early days of moving pictures. Ullman notes that other early Edison and Biograph films both “reflected and provided models for a world of sexually engaged men *and* women” (23), and did not shy away from portraying women as active agents of desire. These short films, made between roughly 1898 and 1901, clearly reflect an often disregarded period of history regarding potential advancements in sexual autonomy and power for women. Ullman suggests that these films “lent early witness to the public dialogue on sexuality,” and represent “an important shift in cultural imagination,” shining light on a historical period in which cultural values questioned sexual morals and conventions of “male lust and female purity” (23-24). Those gendered virtues, while often associated with the late 19th and early 20th century, were actually called into question in this short period of time. Continuous shifts in beliefs of what women should or should not do became a rich area of exploration for the moving pictures as well.



Many cultural phenomena generated discourse over sexual possibilities for women at the time, and these cultural trends were often used as narrative content for filmmakers, such as G.W. Bitzer. Around 1905, Bitzer produced a number of films preoccupied with the intersection of exercise and sex, such as *Physical Culture Lesson* and *The Athletic Girl and the Burglar*. The timing of these productions coincided with the rising cultural trend of “physical culture” in the United States, the first time women were encouraged to exercise after doctors shattered the Victorian idea that physical activity was harmful to the ‘fairer sex.’<sup>10</sup> According to Ullman, physical culture pushed women to “see their bodies as a natural part of themselves instead of as an “animal” side to be shunned” (25). It is important to note that although certain social conditions played some part in empowering, or at least introducing, the autonomy of women, they were still denied politically. At this point, women would still not gain the right to vote in the US for over ten more years. Men were still very much in control, especially in regards to sexuality. Because trends such as “physical culture” in the US insinuated that women could be in control of their physical, athletic bodies, it would then be implied that they may be in control of their sexual and reproductive bodies as well. This thought, all too pertinent to today’s social sphere, was enough for conservatives to believe they should step in and stop such ideas to permeate the silver screen.

Those early shorts seemed to prove threatening because they represented not just female sexuality, but what Ullman notes as “*aggressive female sexuality*” (19, italics mine). It is useful

---

<sup>10</sup> In addition to Ullman’s accounts of the 1900s trend, the movement can be traced back to the publication of *Physical Culture Magazine*, which was an American magazine on bodybuilding, health, and fitness. It was founded and edited, for the most part, by Bernarr Macfadden, who is credited with bringing the physical fitness craze to the US (See: Norman). The magazine was in print until 1948 (See Ockerbloom for an archive of the publication).

to understand that such action was specifically sanctioned against once the Production Code would become enforced some thirty years later. This characterizes the Code as a system of regulation that did not occur overnight, just as sexual women were not just characters that emerged out of the Roaring Twenties and the Jazz Age; both existed long before that. In the following thirty years, it is interesting that despite the implementation of the Code, the screwball female's sexual desire is exactly that: aggressive. These early shorts, then, may provide an early model for these types of characters. As discussed in Chapter Three, the assertive screwball female may be considered somewhat of a caricature of these early versions of the aggressively sexual heroine.

### **The National Board of Film Censorship and Initial Attempts at Censorship**

Assertive female sexuality was a particular focus of the first attempts at film censorship in the United States. Although censors were also concerned with issues such as violence and foul language, Tom Pollard remarks that sex and sexual suggestiveness remained the principal worry for those in charge (55). In the US, censorial undertakings began occurring at a state-by-state level. These early attempts were simply efforts to stop the screening of movies in general. One of the earliest examples of this, according to most scholars, occurred in Chicago in 1907, a mere nine years after *The Kiss* scandalized the screen. In response to resistance against sex and violence onscreen, The Chicago Arts Council voted to allow the chief of police to censor penny arcades and nickelodeons. To understand the importance of these locations for the American public, Pollard notes that by 1910, 26 million people were attending nickelodeon theatres per week, marking the moving pictures as the first truly mass-entertainment medium (15). As so many people were watching these films, it is understandable why social conservatives were

worried about the effect certain themes would have on the public. New York City followed Chicago's actions in 1908, with the city council voting to close all arcades and nickelodeons. After court hearings, however, theatre owners won court injunctions against these closures, under the stipulation made by the New York City mayor that would ban all film screenings on Sundays (16). Such city-by-city attempts at regulating film screenings led to the establishment of the National Board of Film Censorship of Motion Pictures (NBC), the first regulated organization in charge of monitoring film content. It is the NBC from which all future iterations of regulatory boards and codes arose from, including the 1934 Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America's MPPC, the only one that would, eventually, actually stick.

Created by producer Charles Sprague in 1909, The NBC served to forestall or prevent efforts to establish government-sanctioned censorship, a concern proven to be legitimate once states would begin to create their own censorship boards a couple of years later. Producers and others in the film industry wanted to avoid this in order to maintain overall coherence in their films, worried that outside censorship would threaten this. The NBC's approach was to review all films created and determine whether or not they were acceptable by the standards of parents and teachers to show to children. Charging a small fee per foot of film reviewed, their basic criteria for deeming a film acceptable or unacceptable was that, simply, "All obscene subjects are strictly taboo."<sup>11</sup> Following such basic guidelines, the eventual concerns of future Production Codes do seem to maintain the same, albeit less general, regulations. The real case for film censorship became especially obvious at this point in history, as schools and libraries also began banning certain controversial novels at this time. Pollard does note, however, that such bans often incited

---

<sup>11</sup> Tom Pollard cites an NBC board member as having been responsible for saying this (17).

intrigue for these books, which were widely available due to their having already been published. Films, on the other hand, requiring a theatrical release in order to be seen, were deeply indebted to the censors and at their mercy in whether or not they would even be consumable goods (18). Despite the potential power it wielded, the NBC decidedly lacked any true authority, serving basically as a weak shield in that attempt to stop real, government-sanctioned censorship. Because of the NBC's inability to fine filmmakers for not adhering to code standards, it proved practically ineffective.

This authorial lack came to a head in the 1910s, which introduced the exact thing the NBC had been established to prevent. In 1911, Pennsylvania began regulating movies independently, followed by Ohio and Kansas creating their own censorship boards in 1913. By the 1920s, five states were censoring films autonomously. This type of censorship caused many films to be cut differently state-to-state, so that a screening of one film in Kansas could look completely different than the same one in Massachusetts, for example (Longworth). Of course, this threatened both the narrative and artistic integrity of the films, the exact result the NBC was created to forestall. So, Hollywood once again asserted the importance of self-regulation for the industry, believing that if film content had to be controlled, internal regulation would be a lesser of two evils. As Gerald Gardner suggests, "Self-regulated movie censorship was the worst form of control except all the rest" (xvii). Political censorship came to its climax in 1915, with the Supreme Court case known as *Mutual Film Corporation versus the Industrial Commission of Ohio*. This case, winning 9-0, ruled that free speech as outlined in the First Amendment did not extend to motion pictures. This ruling, while giving censors legal and political justification for their work, did not give exact guidelines for material defined by Justice Joseph McKenna as

“things which should not have pictorial representation in public places and to all audiences.”<sup>12</sup>

Although the ruling did not really have any teeth because of its lack of guidelines, it is an interesting moment in the history of American film censorship, as it demonstrates the real sense of threat that surrounded film content and its potential effects on audience members. Considering other areas of American society revolving around sexuality at the time, it is possible to understand why conservatives could have found sexuality represented onscreen especially potentially dangerous.

Emerging cultural and scientific discourse in the early 20th century shines additional light on possibilities for why sexuality was a particularly threatening topic for social and religious conservatives at this point in history. Angus McLaren’s *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History* takes a look at new marriage “manuals” which surfaced at this time, and the resulting importance allocated to sex in society and within the domestic sphere. McLaren’s chapter on the “Eroticization of marriage” discusses W.F. Robie, an American physician who, in 1916, published *Rational Sex Ethics*. This account of early 20th century marital sexuality held the belief that if sex were investigated scientifically, “evils” such as “sterility, low fertility, divorce, venereal disease,” etc. could be avoided. Robie “believed that a good sex life was necessary for one’s general well-being,”<sup>13</sup> emphasizing new and increasingly liberal views of sexuality. Notably, these notions separated sex from being necessarily related to reproduction. Ullman notes the emergence of family planning as a result of 19th century industrialization, and its connection with scientific literature which “forced the issue of personal desire and sexual need

---

<sup>12</sup> Cited in Pollard (19).

<sup>13</sup> These selections from *Rational Sex Ethics* are reprinted in McLaren’s chapter.

into the marital equation” (73). McLaren argues that an important aspect of this literature is how it “produced a sexual script tailored to strengthen existing family relationships” (46). Such dialogues shifted former, religious views of marriage (with the objective of producing children) to the relatively modern idea that pleasure and passion could be a marital goal or motivator. “The development of a personally satisfying sex life contained within marriage,” notes Ullman, persisted as an important area for discovery in professional psychology as well, especially after the First World War (another factor in shifting gender relations during this period). The makeup of marriage around this time shifted away from a couple’s societal obligation to reproduce, and moved towards the couple’s obligation to one another and their satisfaction as a couple. Surely, this also increased the value of a woman as an equal part of the relationship, her role no longer merely to bear children. It was increasingly acceptable for women to have sex in pursuit of their own desire and marital satisfaction, and not under the moral imperative of reproducing. Shifting gender relations and increased autonomy for women were palpable during this brief period. However, as the pattern would continue, sexually independent women would continue to threaten the patriarchy, and soon more conservative values would have to be further reinforced.

### **The Roaring Twenties, Will H. Hays, and the Origins of the MPPC**

The next major move for film regulation would not occur until 1922, and the years leading up to this continued to fluctuate between advancements and regressions for attitudes surrounding the progress of female sexuality. The First World War drove women both into factories for work and away from their husbands fighting in the war, leading to an obligatory increase in their independence. Both Ullman and McLaren assert how the war interrogated traditional gender roles, noting that Victorian values were “in tatters. Public imagery of women

no longer conveyed purity and chastity” (Ullman 42). This threat to Victorian assumptions about gender and sexuality “necessarily led to a reappraisal of traditional views” (McLaren 10), as evidenced by the peak of the suffragette movement, which directly intersected the war years. Aubrey Malone marks 1917 as a key year for the movement, with forty women being arrested for picketing outside the White House by November of that year (11). These efforts were not made completely in vain, as 1919 introduced the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, finally giving (white) women the right to vote. The first birth control clinic opened in the US in 1916, and by 1921 the US saw its first birth control conference, both organized by Margaret Sanger.<sup>14</sup> The Model T Ford had been introduced to the public in 1913, allowing women the power of mobility, especially important during those years their husbands were overseas.<sup>15</sup> Independence and autonomy were increasingly feasible for both married and unmarried women, and continued efforts in this direction continued throughout the early 1920s.

Outraged with this “new woman” who was thriving onscreen as well as in society, religious leaders became increasingly concerned with the representation of such freedom for women in film. Certain Christian ministers were scandalized and raged against film sex, threatening federal regulation and leading the NBC to expand.<sup>16</sup> Despite this, Pollard notes, the NBC remained ineffectual in terms of its censorial authority because of its before-mentioned incapacity to fine those who disregarded the code (19). This authorial lack is obvious when considering many of the films produced in the early 1920s relied heavily on sex and violence in

---

<sup>14</sup> Jean H. Baker’s book *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*, recounts these and other milestones for women’s rights accomplished by Sanger in the early 20th century.

<sup>15</sup> These events are discussed in Malone’s volume.

<sup>16</sup> See Pollard (19) for more details about these figures.

order to attract audiences.<sup>17</sup> Thanks in part to the ineffectiveness of the NBC, sex used as audience enticement remains a fairly defining feature of pre-Code Hollywood cinema during this time. And it worked—the 1920s witnessed an increase of audience attendance to 50 million people per week.<sup>18</sup> The Roaring Twenties not only carried with it an increase of movie-goers, but a proliferation of reckless behaviour outside the theatre. The Volstead Act, while established to prohibit the sale and consumption of liquor, unexpectedly popularized bootleg alcohol and speakeasies. Such unanticipated results of the prohibition increased the general mood of lawlessness often associated with this era. In *I Love You, But...* Cherry Potter notes the opening of speakeasies as a contributing factor to the fall of social barriers in the 1920s, allowing people from all social classes to intermingle for entertainment (1).<sup>19</sup> As Lawrence Kardish observes in *Reel Plastic Magic*, “Millions of people, despite Prohibition, pursued a fast and reckless life. Drugs were a national concern. Drinks were consumed in a thousand illegal speakeasies. Skirt hems went up, and for many a Puritan mentality went out the window.”<sup>20</sup>

This “fast and reckless life” was threatened in 1921 with what would become perhaps one of the first “Me Too”s in the history of Hollywood. Silent film star Fatty Arbuckle became a headline in one of the industry’s first publicized scandals, as actress Virginia Rappe mysteriously died after attending one of the actor’s infamously rowdy parties. This became a defining moment

---

<sup>17</sup> This tradition remains, but can be traced back to the filmographies of Griffith, Keaton, Chaplin, DeMille, and Lubitsch, to name a few.

<sup>18</sup> By the 1930s, this number would rise to 80 million attendees per week, making up approximately 65% of the US population (Pautz). Compare this to a recent survey of American audiences, which found that in early 2019, a mere 13% of Americans attended the movies each month (statista.com).

<sup>19</sup> It is worth noting here that class relations, and the intermingling of social classes became a key trope for the screwball comedy in the following decade.

<sup>20</sup> Qtd. in Malone 22.



in Hollywood's reputation as a licentious and potentially dangerous industry, leading to increased concern for what would be allowed onscreen, in the attempt to "clean up" what was being done off screen. Following the scandal, many studio contracts issued new "morals clauses" for actors, allowing studios the right to cancel an actor's contract should they partake in any activity which would lead them to "forfeit the respect of the public" (Longworth). Should the clause be breached, performers were threatened with "outright backlisting from any other studio as well" (Malone 16). In 1922, stricter self-regulation would persist as a preventative measure in response to backlash against the industry with the formation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA). A revival of the NBC, the MPPDA introduced the new MPPC and its public face, the notorious Will H. Hays who would later become the namesake for the production code.<sup>21</sup> With the same goal as the NBC in striving to ward off federal censorship, the MPPDA and MPPC instituted pre-production scrutiny. This new approach would require films to be regulated throughout the writing and filming processes, whereas the NBC's tactic merely required a film to be screened and picked apart after the production stages. This new system of step-by-step regulation is arguably largely responsible for the eventual efficacy of the Code, and a missing link in the regulatory strategy of the NBC.

The first issue of the MPPC from 1922 was released by Will Hays,<sup>22</sup> with a list of ten situations to avoid—most of these, as it were, being material which had for a long time proven to

---

<sup>21</sup> Pollard outlines Hays as a man who "possessed a sober reputation for moral and religious conservatism," hired by the MPPDA to "present a suitable public face" (29).

<sup>22</sup> The Code is also popularly referenced as "the Hays Code" for this reason.

rush audiences into the cinema.<sup>23</sup> This version of the MPPC, however, proved ultimately ineffective and doomed to the same fate as the NBC, brushed aside or simply ignored. Like the NBC, the 1922 version of the MPPC relied on a “gentleman’s agreement,” meaning that it was voluntary and therefore could just as easily become broken (Pollard 30). A new iteration of the Code was released in 1927, in response to complaints from social conservatives concerning this permissiveness. This was notoriously referred to as the list of “Don’ts and Be Carefuls.” The list contained eleven themes and situations to be explicitly avoided in film, as well as twenty-five items to be handled with special care (50). Many of these topics concerned sexual situations, including “man and woman in bed together,” “first-night scenes,” and “excessive or lustful kissing” (51). Control of sexuality on film at this stage can be implied to apply especially to the control of women’s sexuality, as so many of the other listed regulations controlled other aspects of female autonomy. However, this list remained ineffective due to the lack of any rigorous enforcement, leading it to the same fate as the NBC and the 1922 version. The Code’s authorial deficiency would become especially exhausted in the following years, as American tragedy would threaten the prosperity of Hollywood.

The stock market crash on October 29, 1929 and the resulting Great Depression greatly affected the movie industry in both its financial success and content. As movie attendance plummeted significantly following the crash, filmmakers would have to pull out all the stops to regain audience numbers matching those from the beginning of the decade. Gardner explains that “artists and fast-buck experts who comprise the filmmaking community have always known that the right button to push to bring out the multitudes was marked “Sex”, and so, as the economy

---

<sup>23</sup> Half of these rules concerned depictions of various sexual situations, including “sexuality and vulgarity” and “sexual perversions” (see Pollard 30 for the full list).

sank...into depression, the movies rode a rising tide of sex and sensation” (Gardner xvi). As exemplified by a 1933 *Variety* article which stated, “The Code isn’t even a joke anymore; it’s just a memory”<sup>24</sup>, attempts at censorship up to this point had not been respected, and were even completely disregarded. This disregard was especially exhausted during the first years of the Depression, aiming to increase audience intrigue. Increasingly edgy material infiltrated the screen and pushed cinematic boundaries. Gangster films reached peak popularity.<sup>25</sup> Stories of infidelity, crime, and lecherous behaviour pervaded the theatre. Sex sirens dominated the screen. Scandal after scandal filled the pages of magazines. After synchronized sound was introduced in 1927, the dirty words of perverse men and passionate women overwhelmed the speakers of the silver screen. Sin was not just a sight for sore eyes—it could be heard, too.<sup>26</sup> Film titles such as *Madame Satan*,<sup>27</sup> *Red-Headed Woman*,<sup>28</sup> *The Godless Girl*,<sup>29</sup> and *The Divorcee*<sup>30</sup> exemplify the type of story that was heavily pushed during this period. These titles also refer, more or less, to a

---

<sup>24</sup> Qtd. in Malone 38.

<sup>25</sup> William A. Wellman’s *The Public Enemy* (1931) and Howard Hawks’ *Scarface* (1932) were among the highest grossing films between 1930-1939 (IMDb).

<sup>26</sup> Mae West, one of the era’s leading sex symbols, was considered especially threatening due to the suggestive nature of her comedy, but also because of her vocal quality. According to Malone, West “was seen as Public Enemy Number One” in the eyes of the censors (46), and her voice was likened to “a vibrating bed” (Kobal, qtd. in Malone 48).

<sup>27</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, 1930.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Conway, 1932.

<sup>29</sup> Cecil B. DeMille, 1929.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Z. Leonard, 1930.

supposedly sexually deviant woman.<sup>31</sup> Onscreen, it appeared as though women's liberation was imminent.

Despite the filmic representation of sexually autonomous heroines, the reality for many women at this time did not correspond with what was going on in the movies. Outside of Hollywood, people were suffering. The Depression pushed the flourishing organized feminism from the last two decades into retreat. The "big domestic issue of the thirties," Potter writes, was that of male unemployment. These unemployment rates truly threatened any attempts to preserve traditional gender roles at the time, as "Men's primary role as breadwinner was at stake and by extension his very claim to manhood as provider and protector" (3). Thus, women's rights and equality were issues demoted in importance for most of society. Many screwball themes would, eventually, reference and perhaps critique the shifting state of gender relations brought on by this period of economic struggle.

### **Catholic Intervention and The Breen Era**

Conservatives in favor of film censorship, however, disregarded the reality for women and men at a time where domestic tradition was valued. The controversial movie heroines were enough to infuriate many religious constituents. By 1934, a massive boycott was threatened against all films if studio heads did not agree to implement legitimate, strict, and enforced censorship.<sup>32</sup> The Catholic Legion of Decency was formed amidst this threat. Editor of the *Motion Picture Herald* and Catholic layman Martin Quigley and a priest, Father Daniel Lord,

---

<sup>31</sup> The content of these films, correspondingly, tell the stories of scandalous female behaviour. Malone recounts the heroine of Jack Conway's *Red-Headed Woman* as "a gold-digging secretary... who corrals her (married) boss on her uncompromising way to the top" (25).

<sup>32</sup> See: Malone 37. Here, Malone also cites a boycott that actually happened in Philadelphia that year, which reportedly caused a forty percent decrease in box office receipts.

proposed another iteration of the Code, known as the Lord Code. The Lord Code prohibited the glorification of gangsters, prostitutes and adulterers, demanded films present governmental and religious institutes favorably, and mandated conservative “family values” in movies. According to Malone, the Lord Code was based on the Ten Commandments of the Bible (15), and under threat of boycott, the MPPDA adopted it. Once again, this version of the Code became weak and easy to circumvent, and merely stalled stricter federal censorship (Pollard 31). Immorality in cinema continued to sneak past censors, and this is exactly why Giovanni Cicognani, an apostolic delegate to the American Catholic Church, called for a boycott. Over 8 million Catholics at this point took a pledge against “watching impurity onscreen” as it was “deemed a mortal sin, with eternal damnation the likely punishment” (Malone 37). Cardinal Mundelein, who was one of the most influential clerical figures in the US at the time, is noted as having said “An admission to an indecent movie is an admission ticket to hell” (37).<sup>33</sup> The zealotry surrounding these boycotts finally led the Giannini brothers, who were the heads of the Bank of America, to threaten to cut off funding for Hollywood productions should they continue to forestall strict Code enforcement. Malone points out the very clear distinction between the two sides of the censorship wars at this time: “on one side the moguls who feared losing their shirts and on the other a fiery self-righteous group of Catholics who understood neither art nor fun” (41). Hollywood knew that once financial funding was cut off, there would be no future for the movies. The seemingly laissez-faire regulation throughout the pre-Code period was forced to come to an end.

---

<sup>33</sup> Catholics were not the only religious group against movies. Jewish and Protestant organizations also took part in this wide-spread threat of mass boycott (Malone 37).

In 1934 the MPPC was effectively put into practice. Despite several attempts at self-regulation throughout the past two decades, Hollywood had failed to find a system that would guarantee a lack of potentially offensive material. A new enforcement arm of the MPPDA was created, known as the Production Code Administration (PCA). Hays appointed Joseph Breen, an important figure in the Catholic community, to run the PCA and to work as head of the Studio Relations Committee (SRC). Malone cites that “Breen had more mental toughness than Hays. He felt Hays was too lightweight, that Hollywood didn’t take him seriously enough. In time Breen would come to be known as ‘the Hitler of Hollywood’” (36). This period of time would become known as the Breen Era. Facing threat of financial breach from the banks, studio heads agreed to the implementation of this new regulatory system, which would charge a \$25,000 fine for failure to adhere to the Code. This type of financial threat seems to have been the missing piece of the puzzle in all of the past versions of the Code that did not stick. The new Code created what Pollard describes as a social portrait of “stable, docile, law-abiding, monogamous citizens...” (55), prescribing (and adhering to) strict limitations on acceptable subject matter. The Hays Code, outlined by Pollard, utilized three overarching principals which “express[ed] the essence of Hays morality:” (54)

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law—divine, natural, or human—shall not be ridiculed nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

The Code retained its power thanks in part to an extensive process of regulation and monitoring throughout all stages of production. The PCA, overseen by Breen, would track scripts from their

conception to completion. The process was exhaustive. Correspondence between the Breen office and the film's producer would be kept throughout the writing process, with the Breen office suggesting cuts and edits to make so that the dialogue and action did not oppose the three overarching principles.<sup>34</sup> A stage of negotiation would then take place between the Breen office and filmmakers, which Lea Jacobs states as "most evident at two levels: in the treatment of dialogue and the construction of blatantly offensive scenes or sequences" (95). The regulatory board not only controlled what could or could not be said on film, but also general situations, and often, entire concepts for films.<sup>35</sup> This back and forth would continue until the screenplay was considered acceptable. Throughout the filming and editing process, similar suggestions for cuts or changes may be made as well. A thorough adherence to these instructions would lead to the film receiving the Motion Picture Association of America "Seal of Approval," a new designation required for any film to be released. If, at any point throughout this process, a producer or filmmaker failed to comply with directions from the PCA, and a film was released without a seal, the studio would face expulsion from the MPPDA, the \$25,000 fine, and the potential loss of financial backing from banks. The rigidity of this system, combined with the threat of financial trouble, was enough to ensure that this Code would remain effective.

---

<sup>34</sup> An investigation of the Production Code files at the Margaret Herrick Library points to many of these letters actually being written by Breen himself, indicating his dedication to ensuring films produced would not offend the public.

<sup>35</sup> In *Censorship Papers*, an insightful collection of notes from the Breen office, Gardner discusses Breen's 1938 rejection of the film *The Letter* starring Bette Davis, stating that the overall theme of the film (involving adultery and murder) was unacceptable in general. The last bit of the letter reads: "Because of all this, we could not...approve a motion picture based upon this story" (79).

In discussions of the Breen Era, there is a general understanding of the films from this period as chaste, innocent, and fanciful.<sup>36</sup> In cutting out the brutal or offensive, the Code effectively cut away the most realistic aspects of life. This effect, most literature on censorship seems to argue, harbors greatly negative ramifications. Kardish profiles the Code-era as one in which “good was equated with conformity and/or sweetness, suicide was never contemplated, drugs simply did not exist, sex was never mentioned, marriages were mostly happy, children called their father “Sir”, babies were never naked, no one ever went to the toilet, the pains of childbirth were never witnessed, married people never kissed passionately, and when they were married were consigned to separate beds” (qtd. in Malone 37). Sex and sexuality were primary concerns for the censors, logical when considering the Code’s Catholic upbringing. Scenes of lust, adultery, illicit sex, and seduction were to be avoided “unless they were absolutely essential to the plot and condemned by the film’s end” (DiBattista 10). Excessive, lustful kissing<sup>37</sup> was also not allowed to be shown onscreen. Maria’s DiBattista’s study of the *Fast-Talking Dames* of this era also mentions that “One of the commandments of the Code inculcated respect for the sanctity of marriage” (10). General flirtatious behaviour, especially among unmarried people, was disapproved of: “Sexuality between characters courting but not yet married, or between those who were no longer married, was forbidden” (Pollard 55). The institution of marriage was no laughing matter, although as fate would have it, the screwball comedy would become the antithesis to this stipulation of the Code.

---

<sup>36</sup> Malone argues that the establishment of the Code “also stimulated newer, more conservative genres” (53).

<sup>37</sup> This usually involved open-mouth kissing or kissing lasting over 30 seconds (Pollard 54).



## **Concluding Remarks: Towards the Screwball Comedy**

Annette Kuhn's *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality*, while focused on British censorship, offers a particularly nuanced reading of censorship which connects profoundly with this period of internal regulation in Hollywood. "Cinema..." suggests Kuhn, "was not so much subjected to, as created through, regulation" (10). Kuhn makes an argument somewhat countering typical writing about censorship, suggesting a consideration of this era's implementation of stricter censorship as possibly productive and constructive, rather than merely restrictive or even harmful. This interpretation of film regulation is especially useful to my reading of the screwball comedy in the 1930s. While the Code denied a substantial amount of material to Hollywood filmmakers, these barriers required the construction of new and inventive ways to tell stories. Despite sexuality being a scorned subject in the eyes of the Breen office, narratives revolving around courtship prevailed. The following chapter will examine how such barriers created an opportunity for a new romantic genre to develop. The screwball was formed by the Code, created in a pressure cooker of censorial policing and requiring special care when it came to how its central characters would eventually—inevitably—fall in love. "Screwball comedies relied on the forbidden," writes Pollard (56), this statement not only applying to the narrative content of the films, but also to the conditions under which they were produced. Potter also notes that the romantic comedy in general "involve[s] a tenacious struggle against adversity" (xiii). The screwball genre arose out of such adversity, just as its central couple would be destined to be together despite all odds. As the rest of this project will discuss, such destiny was often under the command of the female protagonist. This is significant, as the findings of this chapter indicate

that many factors leading to the Code's implementation had stemmed from conservative values surrounding women and their sexuality.

As an overview of the research surrounding the twenty years leading up to the formation of the Code indicates, issues of censorship and regulation went through many stages during the nascent years of motion pictures. Evidently, much of the backlash that occurred in the early 1900s was brought about by religious and social conservatives preoccupied with the preservation of traditional, Victorian values. Their vexation, because of this, often revolved around the behaviour of women, particularly in relation to their sexual conduct. A sexually aggressive female denoted potentially threatening behaviour in their domestic life, risking their conventional role as homemaker and caretaker. Early onscreen depictions of such behaviour distressed conservatives who led the first attempts at censoring potentially dangerous material.<sup>38</sup> The state-to-state censoring of films before 1910 proved damaging to the artistic integrity of the material, leading film producers to begin the process of creating a system of internal regulation for moving pictures. While the NBC and its successors proved fairly ineffective, they laid the groundwork for the MPPC which would finally rely on financial punishment in penalizing offensive films. It is significant to consider that each iteration of the Code was particularly concerned with depictions of sex. Tracing this trend back to the early 1900s, it is clear that the unease about sexuality stemmed from an unease about sexual *women*. As cultural studies of this period report, concern over this behaviour on film tended to coincide with moments in history in which women's rights were of central social concern.

---

<sup>38</sup> See Pollard 52, Malone 36-37, for examples. Thomas Doherty's *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen & the Production Code Administration* also gives a thorough account of Breen's own relationship to the Catholic church.

Despite the Code's attempt to squelch onscreen sexuality, stories of unmarried men and women came to the forefront in 1930s Hollywood. What's more, the pursuit of passion in these peculiar couplings was generally led by women. The screwball female held the reins of these relationships, recalling the *aggressive* sexual heroine of the early 1900s. Potter's labeling of the screwball as an "anarchic farce" (5) can accidentally be read, in a slight visual slip, as "anarchic force." The female anarchic force serves as a cornerstone for the arguments made in these following chapters. Despite the conservative environment from which it evolved, the screwball comedy may be interpreted as an antithesis to the rigidity and conventionality of the Breen Era of Hollywood. The screwball heroine, then, becomes the vehicle for that antithetical quality of the genre.

## Chapter 2: *It Happened One Night* and the Birth of a New Genre

Towards the end of *It Happened One Night*, scorned newspaperman Peter Warne exclaims “I want to see what love looks like when it’s triumphant—I haven’t had a good laugh in a week!” He has fallen in love with Ellie Andrews, a wealthy heiress whom he has spent the past two nights traveling and quarreling with as she has attempted to escape the commands of her father. The question Peter asks here is pertinent to the central questions of this project—what *does* love look like when it triumphs? What preconditions have to be established for love to succeed? How is successful love identified in the screwball comedy? What socio-historical conditions have to be in place to compel the creation of a brand new genre?

In 1934, Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* introduced to the world what would be henceforth known as the screwball comedy. Cited as the originator of the genre,<sup>39</sup> the film is an ideal text to study the birth and development of a new genre—specifically, a new genre about seduction without sex. In the process of this study, I identify and engage with the characteristics of the screwball genre, analyze how they originated in *It Happened One Night*, and trace them back to the social and historical conditions of 1934 which influenced these themes and tropes. Through its iconography, conventions, and syntax, the screwball comedy codifies sexuality in a manner passable by the MPPC—but how? Because genre theory asserts that genres originate, develop, and modify because of social factors,<sup>40</sup> it is clear that 1934 was a crucial year for the screwball, as it points to the interrelationship between the development of the genre and the formation of the PCA and MPPC. Seeing that this genre about sex appeared the same year the

---

<sup>39</sup> See: Glitre 23, Grindon 31, and Harvey 107, among others.

<sup>40</sup> Rick Altman, Barry Keith Grant, and Andrew Tudor all allude to this point in their work on genre. Their work will be discussed in more detail in the following section of this chapter.

PCA would start going after sexuality in an increasingly aggressive manner, this chapter is particularly concerned with how exactly the genre codified sexuality—through its iconography and conventions, and their relationship with events occurring throughout the US in the 1930s.

### **On Genre - The Who, What, Where, and Why**

‘Genre’ occupies a crowded area in film studies, where several scholars have ventured to define and deduce the term to its most simplified meaning. The term is not exclusive to the cinema, its literary history long preceding the birth of the moving picture. Its extended lineage, Andrew Tudor argues, is a factor in the term’s disparate definitions, the difficulty in pinning down a precise definition.<sup>41</sup> In *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman assigns the term four separate meanings: *blueprint*, *structure*, *label*, and *contract* (14), each of these imbuing the term with varying significance. These “fourfold assumptions” (17) of genre contend that 1) a genre is created from a previously determined formula (blueprint), 2) a genre is the “formal framework” on which a genre is founded (structure), 3) that a genre indicates the name of a category under which a film is arranged (label), and 4) a genre is an understanding between the film and the audience (14). Meaning, a film will be recognized as a genre film because of specific characteristics, and these characteristics will be recognized as the genre’s previously established blueprint and structure. By this explanation of genre, it is understood that a film is created with a specific generic category in mind, and that by process of collection, recollection, and recognition, an audience will be able to identify the category under which the film fits. Altman argues that “Genres are defined by the film industry and recognized by the mass audience” (15), suggesting one consistent rule in defining genre: identifying a genre takes the effort of both the

---

<sup>41</sup> See: Tudor 3.

film industry/filmmaker *and* of the film viewer. It is generally believed, then, that a genre signifies a category in which a film fits into, more or less. Typically, it is also immediately recognizable by an audience.

But here is a dilemma posed by this conjecture: how does a genre originate when it is not part of literary or established tradition, when its category has not yet been created? It is akin to asking “what came first, the chicken or the egg?” The recognition of a genre, by both the industry and the audience, has to start from somewhere. Here, it is useful to refer to Barry Keith Grant’s work on genre, which recognizes the emergence of some genres as a result of specific social and historical conditions, values, and collective identities. Grant understands ‘genre’ as a sort of cultural myth, arguing that specific genres “embody and express a society’s rituals, institutions and values” (29). His work posits that new genres may be introduced as a result of new ideology becoming engrained in societies, working to “address and sometimes seemingly resolve our problems and dilemmas” (29). Therefore, it is necessary to ask: what were the problems and dilemmas of 1930s Hollywood, and the US more broadly? How did the screwball comedy specifically address and possibly try to rectify these issues?

Grant explains that a genre’s “mythic capacity” allows film to engage with society in a meaningful way by addressing relevant cultural concerns: “genre films provide a means for cultural dialogue, engaging their audiences in a shared discourse that reaffirms, challenges and tests cultural values and identity” (30). In the screwball comedy specifically, these cultural concerns are twofold: first, the genre addresses a conflict or “battle” of the sexes, and second, it recognizes the tension of class differences and social status.<sup>42</sup> These two areas of cultural

---

<sup>42</sup> See Belton, who similarly argues that Hollywood comedy, since its inception, has been used as an attempt to reconcile cultural taboos such as ethnic, racial, economic, and gender differences (164).

concern are ineluctably related: a genre which challenges gender dynamics emerged from the context of the Great Depression, an event which prompted significant angst concerning male unemployment rates, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Another condition of concern to the screwball comedy was the increasingly strict regulation of film imposed by the MPPC. Introduced to Hollywood in the same year, the screwball was naturally shaped by the new rules of the PCA. “Entertainment inevitably contains, reflects and promulgates ideology” (32), posits Grant, and so, the screwball comedy contains, reflects, and promulgates the ideology perpetuated by the Production Code. Altman’s study points to the screwball genre specifically, identifying it as a “volcanic eruption of mythic magma, brought to the surface by...censorship” (20), insisting that the genre’s ideological messages were formed by the Code. The question becomes, then: what values do screwball comedies promote? Although scholars have argued and re-argued that the genre’s ideology is used to uphold the institution of heterosexual, sexually monogamous marriage,<sup>43</sup> I believe the answer is more nuanced. The influx of films in the 1930s, which involved unmarried people behaving outrageously and flirting freely, does not reflect an intention of promoting *normalcy*. In support of this, I will analyze the conventions and syntax of the screwball, as established by *It Happened One Night*. These components initiated a generic tradition for identifying what love and sexuality look like in the screwball comedy. In asking what these elements tell us about the screwball’s interrelation with 1930s America, the genre may be connected to wider cultural beliefs surrounding courtship, sex, and love.

---

<sup>43</sup> See: Glitre, McDonald, among others.

## **An Unexpected Success**

*It Happened One Night* was based on a short story called “The Night Bus,” written by Samuel Hopkins Adams. The first mention of the title changing to *It Happened One Night* from *The Night Bus* in the film’s Production Code files occurs on February 8, 1934, just weeks before the film’s release on February 22. Daniel M. Kimmel’s historical overview of the film’s production explains that *It Happened One Night* was not expected to become a hit. Its success merely “happened by accident. It wasn’t supposed to make history, but it did” (25). The film was produced by Columbia Pictures, a minor studio, and was assigned to director Frank Capra as “make-work” (25) in between larger and more important pictures. Clark Gable, who was under contract with MGM, was apparently loaned out to Columbia for the picture as “punishment” (29) for his big ego and demands for higher pay (30). In a letter to producer Harry Cohn, Louis B. Mayor wrote “I got an actor here who’s been a bad boy. Wants more money. And I’d like to spank him. You can have Clark Gable” (30). Gable, unhappy about the situation, apparently arrived at the first day of shooting completely belligerent.<sup>44</sup> Claudette Colbert was cast opposite Gable. Colbert disliked Capra, and was overworked after releasing thirteen films between 1931 and 1933. She was on loan from Paramount, after several actresses turned down the role. The role of Ellie was purportedly unfavorable as the part was not particularly glamorous.<sup>45</sup> And so, Colbert reluctantly joined Capra and Gable, none of whom expected such high praise for their work on the film or for the picture in general. The film was released with respectable but not

---

<sup>44</sup> See: Kimmel 30.

<sup>45</sup> Most accounts of actresses who turned down the role (including Myrna Loy, Miriam Hopkins, and Constance Bennett) believe that this rejection had much to do with the character’s lack of costume changes. “In fact, other than a man’s bathrobe and a wedding gown, she wears only one outfit for most of the entire film” (Kimmel 31).



astonishing critical reviews,<sup>46</sup> so what came next was a pleasant surprise. It became not only the first genre film of its kind, but also the first film to ever win all five major categories at the 7th Academy Awards.<sup>47</sup> Such success was so unexpected, that two of the winners (Colbert and writer Robert Riskin) did not attend the award ceremony. Colbert, who was boarding a train at the time the Academy would announce her win, was quickly rushed over to the ceremony, and accepted her award in her travel attire.<sup>48</sup>

The circumstances of this film's unanticipated success asserts a significant amount about the nature of the screwball/romantic comedy genre and its cultural impact. The enormous industrial triumph that surrounded *It Happened One Night* validated the importance of this type of film to the time it was made, and canonized the film as a milestone in film history. The screwball genre resonated with its audiences and critics, propelling it to become a mainstay of 1930s Hollywood. Its conventions gave insight into cultural conditions and values of the era, particularly when it came to the merging of differences, as represented by the romantic union of the couple. Furthermore, as discussed later, the film's working around Production Code restrictions also gives insight into societal values; as the romantic union of the couple would trump Code regulation, it is possible to read these films as calling for acknowledgment of social discord, whether related to gender or class differences and resulting tensions.

---

<sup>46</sup> See: Glitre 22, Kimmel 37.

<sup>47</sup> These categories are Best Picture, Best Director (Capra), Best Actor (Gable), Best Actress (Colbert), and Best Writing (Robert Riskin)

<sup>48</sup> See: Kimmel 38-39.

## A Rocky Start

The film begins with an heiress on a yacht—this is important, as she will spend the rest of the film ‘slumming it’ with an out of work newspaperman, staying in roadside motels, and wearing the same clothes day after day. Ellen “Ellie” Andrews (Colbert) has recently married King Westley, although their union has yet to be consummated.<sup>49</sup> Ellie’s father, however, knows that King’s motivation for the marriage is the Andrews fortune. Mr. Andrews will do whatever it takes to keep their nuptials from becoming fully realized. Ellie refuses to eat—her hunger strike theorized as an “angry, intimate refusal of love” (Cavell 91), which will come full circle as her experience on the road unravels. This refusal is also significant within the film’s historical context of the Great Depression, and her eventual acceptance of food would be part of what Stanley Cavell writes about as her “acceptance of humanity [and] equality” (93) allowing this spoiled heiress to experience what a majority of Americans were experiencing at the time.<sup>50</sup> The film established the variance of social class as an important convention of the screwball comedy. Often, these films involve a couple from opposite social groups; one from high society and another from the working-class (or lower).<sup>51</sup> The disparity in the couple’s social status was another factor in that conflict; it will be Ellie’s eventual denial of her wealth and acceptance of the ‘fun’ of belonging to the working-class that will indicate union, and love, between the pair.

---

<sup>49</sup> This point is insinuated by her father’s line: “But you’re never going to live under the same roof with him, now I’ll see to that.”

<sup>50</sup> In *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell discusses *It Happened One Night* in his chapter “Knowledge as Transgression.”

<sup>51</sup> Examples include *My Man Godfrey* (1936), a love story between a rich socialite and a homeless man-turned-butler, George Cukor’s *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), which involves a flirtation between another upper-class socialite (Katharine Hepburn) and a working-class tabloid journalist (James Stewart), and Preston Sturges’ *The Lady Eve* (1941) which is about a con artist (Barbara Stanwyck) and the wealthy heir to a family fortune (Henry Fonda).

Operating under the theoretical framework of Barry Keith Grant, the screwball's theme of affluence or lack thereof reflected the state of the US in 1934. Why place a love story at the centre of this narrative? And why imbue this courtship with comedy? Why tell stories about courtship and sex at a time where these topics were to be avoided under the ruling of the Production Code? These are the key questions in understanding how the screwball genre worked in addressing and attempting to resolve the cultural dilemmas of 1930s Hollywood. Closing the first sequence of *It Happened One Night*, Ellie jumps from her father's yacht and swims to shore, rejecting the opulence of his fortune, and begins to learn about those on the other side of wealth.

Soon after her escape, Ellie meets Peter Warne (Gable), a newspaper reporter who has just lost his job. They are both passengers on a night bus to New York, and show immediate disdain for one another. Their "meet cute" is not so cute.<sup>52</sup> Peter can tell that Ellie is out of her element. She is entitled and conceited, obviously used to getting what she wants, and that rubs Peter the wrong way. It is clear to him that Ellie is somewhere she doesn't belong, as she is immediately identifiable as someone who was raised outside of the world of unemployment, night buses, and taking "no" for an answer. Ellie is not so keen on Peter's attitude either. His dry humor comes off as abrasive and arrogant. He is blunt, and not intimidated by their vast difference in social status. He calls her a brat (his pet name for her throughout the film). He answers to nobody and is highly independent. By the time the two fall in love, these traits eventually become those that they recognize as most lovable. The two first meet while the bus is loading, and Ellie unknowingly takes Peter's seat. After he points out that the seat accommodates

---

<sup>52</sup> The etymological origin of the term "meet cute" is difficult to pin down, but an early example of its usage is Billy Wilder's 1996 interview with *The Paris Review*. He references Ernst Lubitsch's *Blue Beard's Eighth Wife* (1938), citing the main characters' first encounter as a "meet-cute...a staple of romantic comedies back then" (See: Linville).

two people, she reluctantly makes room for Peter to sit next to her. He soon realizes her true identity and makes her a deal: she lets him cover her story as an exclusive, or he will turn her into her father. She chooses the former, and their journey—and quarreling—commences.

In the screwball comedy, the first meeting of the couple often presents an initial conflict. This is a convention established by *It Happened One Night*, and a significant one in relation to 1934 America. Peter and Ellie originated the screwball couple's preliminary aversion to one another, the bickering, the absolute distaste for the very thing that other person stands for. Eventually, after some grand revelation, this couple would admit their love for each other and unite despite their differences. This trope propels both the romance and the comedy forward. In *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, Tamar Jeffers McDonald states that the screwball comedy uses "the energy of the couple's friction and mutual frustration to drive the narrative forward...in the screwball [their] affection is expressed through aggression" (20). Animosity between the characters may be read as a codified identifier of sexual attraction—a corporeal force, like actual annoyance, but without the threat of being eliminated by censorship or regulation boards. As the genre progressed, this aggression transformed into actual pratfalls and sometimes comedic violence between the couple.<sup>53</sup> Quick-witted banter and hurling (or subtly tossing) insults became the oral iteration of similar conflict. As Pauline Kael wrote of the screwball, "trading wisecracks was its courtship rite."<sup>54</sup> Thus, conflict and combat (whether verbal or physical) substituted overt sexual desire. In *It Happened One Night*, the (sexual) tension and conflict stems from Peter Warne's realization that he has met his match; Ellen

---

<sup>53</sup> This point will be elaborated on in the following chapter, as there is little, if any, slapstick comedy in *It Happened One Night*.

<sup>54</sup> See: *5001 Nights at the Movies*.

Andrews is just as clever as he is. His jokes and quips are met with sharp replies and subtle digs, proving that Ellie can dish it out as easily as he can. In inverting gendered expectation of the demanding man and subservient woman, antagonism arises. In the historical context of the Great Depression, where male unemployment rates were a national epidemic, it is unsurprising that an assertive female character would provoke conflict. Add to that the fact that Peter has recently lost his job, and Ellie is a wealthy heiress, the couple's fiscal disparity increases the grounds for hostility between the couple.

### **American Optimism as Romantic Signifier**

In the screwball genre, matters of money are an important theme. Many screwball comedies, like *It Happened One Night*, were both produced and set during the Great Depression, and often did not hide the unfortunate circumstances many Americans were faced with at the time.<sup>55</sup> Despite its dreary setting, however, the screwball remained optimistic in its tone and message. In *It Happened One Night*, high-class Ellie joins the underdogs; the unemployed, the working-class, and even the homeless become inspirations for the spoiled heiress to find her humanity and open herself to new experiences. Often, the film's jokes centre around Ellie's aloofness, her sense of detachment from the "real world" that has been a byproduct of her privileged upbringing. It is characteristic of the screwball to make fun of the wealthy, deriding their opulence and guiding viewers' sympathy towards the lower or working-class characters. In a sense, this demonstrates the screwball's seeming ideological siding with the majority of Americans in the 1930s. However, the romantic narrative reshaped this ideology to not necessarily side with the poor and deride the rich, but rather offer resolve between social conflict,

---

<sup>55</sup> *My Man Godfrey* is another notable example of this.

by “engineer[ing] the reconciliation of class tension through the romance” (Grindon 32).

Offering the romantic union of a rich partner with one from the working-class as an opportunity for the former to learn to become more “down to earth,” the romantic union of the class-crossing couple insists that screwball ideology offers happiness as achievable through the reconciliation of tensions posed by societal tragedy. In *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, Dana Polan argues that the screwball emerges in part from a spirit of American transcendentalism, and promulgates the idea that “One has to be low enough to see what is really and truly high” (136). In order to experience the joys of life, one has to know what it means to be truly joyless; the screwball, and its jovial celebration of love, would lack poignancy outside of the context of the Depression. This notion similarly reflects the nature of screwball courtship—should the couple not initially demonstrate dislike for one another (the “low”), their eventual romance will not strike as so euphoric (the “high”).

The paradox of having to reach a low to experience a high is masterfully reflected by Capra in a later bus scene. Poverty-stricken, the bus is occupied by commuters most likely looking to find work in a bigger city. Musicians on the bus are playing a lackluster and downtempo tune. In an instant, however, the entire environment changes. A singer begins a verse of “The Man of the Flying Trapeze,” and soon the rest of the bus passengers erupt into song, singing, clapping, and cheering. Everybody joins in, even the bus driver. The scene instantly transforms from dreary and dismal to an outburst of community and optimism. It is a moment of the film brimming with joy, demonstrating that a bus full of strangers, many faced with the upmost misfortune, can join together in happiness. Ellie and Peter join in too, laughing and singing along with the rest of the crowd—in a microcosmic iteration of the bus occupants, the

pairing represents the pleasure achievable in joining together. This scene's optimism reflects the hopeful attitude struck by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, which followed his inauguration the year before *It Happened One Night*'s release. Ending a twelve-year-long republican presidency, FDR introduced a number of new policies, legislation, and programs designed to improve the country's financial crisis. These policies and programs "argued for...an extension of federal policy into areas long considered private domains, such as the economic welfare of the unemployed, the aged, and the disabled" (Siomopoulos 1). Martin Rubin's article "Movies and the New Deal in Entertainment" characterizes the New Deal as resulting in a "boost of public morale" and "renewed optimism" (94). Anna Siomopoulos argues that at the time "Hollywood films gave complex public expression to many of the fears and fantasies about the New Deal" (3).<sup>56</sup> The screwball expressed the latter, mirroring the hopefulness associated with the new presidency. Rubin divides 1930s film into two parts: early 1930s "turbulence" and mid-1930s "order," the "order" signifying the "upswing in morale inspired by the FDR administration" (95). The screwball comedy fits within that second category; it promoted "order" through the reconciliation of class differences. Further, by representing class difference through the central couple, the screwball comedy uses the settlement of financial disparity as a coded metaphor for romantic union.

### **A Shared Fantasy**

This codification of romantic union is reshaped as a codifying of sexual union in one of the following scenes. Somewhere between Miami and New York, Ellie and Peter's bus stops for

---

<sup>56</sup> While Siomopoulos' book, *Hollywood Melodrama and the New Deal: Public Daydreams*, focuses on the New Deal's relationship with melodrama films of the period, many of her introduction's arguments are easily applicable to other genres from this time.

the night. As they do not have enough money for separate rooms at an auto camp, Peter registers them as husband and wife to avoid raising suspicion. The Code had strict regulations surrounding what unmarried men and women could or could not do onscreen, and overnight scenes such as the one set up here would be strongly discouraged. However, as the film's production occurred before the PCA would be formally established,<sup>57</sup> *It Happened One Night* had more immunity under the prior, less stringent version of the Code. Even so, the film becomes self-referential at this point, aware of its possible points of contention with the increasingly strict regulation. Peter sets up a clothesline in between the room's two beds, hanging a sheet between them. Ellie responds to the set-up: "That, I suppose, makes everything..." she dismissively raises a hand, "...quite alright." This line is two-fold; it can be read both as Ellie speaking to Peter about their spending the night together as an unmarried couple (actually, they aren't even a couple at all), but also as a message regarding the Code, acknowledging its aversion to overnight scenes. As the scene is vital to the narrative, there has to be a way around regulatory suggestions. Supporting this notion, Peter declares: "Behold the Walls of Jericho," invoking the Biblical incident. He admits that while the "walls" aren't as thick as the ones Joshua blew down with his trumpet, but just as effective. "You see," he says, "I have no trumpet." In this line, Peter signals that he does not have any intention to cross the barrier he has created. His objective is strictly practical and nonthreatening to the institution of marriage. By admitting that he lacks the desire to break Code regulations, Peter pleads to not only Ellie but to the censors—there isn't anything to worry about here. No illicit sex, no desire for it, no suggestion of it, even. The Walls of Jericho may be fabricated of mere fabric, but their symbolism is rock solid. For Ellie, and for the Code,

---

<sup>57</sup> The PCA was officially installed in June 1934, whereas *It Happened One Night* was released four months prior.



these Walls are presumed to be enough to keep the overnight sequence acceptable. Until the couple unites (and we know they will), the blanket will remain upright. Cavell, speaking to the film's classical "Hollywood symbolism," insists that "we could already predict that the action of the film will close with the walls tumbling down" (81). Cavell reads the blanket as symbolic of Ellie's virginity, or perhaps her resistance to sex (81-82)—she does admit, after all, that this is the first time she's been alone with a man. But I find that this symbolism spreads outside the film's diegesis, into the studio system by which it was produced. The blanket can be read as Hollywood's regulation at the time; although implemented in earnest, there were still ways around it. Statutes of the Code stood in the way of unmarried couples uniting onscreen, but the formation of the screwball comedy allowed these tales of courtship to remain in the mainstream. The screwball's various narrative and visual tropes work around the Production Code, fulfilling the prophecy of the Walls tumbling down.

Despite the Walls and their denial/restriction of sex, the scene becomes instantly seductive. As Ellie makes her way to her side of the blanket ("Do you mind joining the Israelites?" Peter asks her), Capra's camera generates and highlights the tension between the two characters, on opposite sides of the room, separated by this barricade. This tension, at first antagonistic in the context of the crowded bus, has become distinctly sexual under the guise of marital cohabitation. This sexuality seeps through the picture, seemingly declining the protective shield provided by the blanket and the Production Code. Despite attempts to prevent it, eroticism emanates from the film's *mise-en-scène*. As Peter puts out the light, the persistent rainstorm outside becomes greatly pronounced. In spite of the Code's insistence that nothing should happen between such a couple, Capra's filming insists that what is natural must transpire—the rain

outside illustrates the natural, lustful affect that inevitably occurs between two attractive people. Their figures are low-lit, almost in silhouette, their outlines defined by the storm-streaked light outside the windows. The rain seems to sparkle, imbuing the room with a magical quality. Ellie changes into a pair of (Peter's) pajamas. And while neither the audience nor Peter can see her undressing, we can sense it. The camera, placed on Peter's side of the blanket, shows her movements against the sheet. Peter strains to look away.

It is mild, but the tension already noted in the room and between the couple codes the moment as highly erotic—but not to the point of offending censors. She throws her slip over the blanket, Peter notices: “You should take those things off the Walls of Jericho,” he says. She does. They converse as Peter tells her his name and she responds, saying that she doesn't like it. He replies: “Don't let it bother you. You're giving it back to me in the morning.” Their banter, even in this dimly-lit, erotically-charged scene, does not cease. Their make-believe marriage, and their shared fun in playing pretend, is a crucial precursor for their eventual falling in love. Because the audience can predict that the film will end with the Walls of Jericho toppling, it is required “that the pair come to share a fantasy of what is holding them up” (81), as Cavell puts it. If there is a shared reason for them to be held up, there will be a shared reason for them to come down. Narratively, the characters' knowledge of their dissimilarities—and the fact that Ellie is already, technically, married—is shared fantasy enough. Outside the narrative, stipulations of the Production Code is another ‘fantasy’ keeping them apart. The change from them “playing house” to becoming man and wife marks the fantasy becoming reality, and this allows for their union (for both between Ellie and Peter, and for the Production Code). Masquerade, make-believe, and fantasy become an important codification of intimacy within the screwball comedy. Marital

union—whether legally defined or merely a charade—ultimately allows the Walls, and the Code, to topple.

### **A Moonlit Night**

Ellie and Peter spend the following night in a forest, sleeping on bales of hay. Ellie has been recognized by a fellow bus passenger, and the two make a run for it to avoid getting caught. Nature here, unlike in the preceding night, is not confined to the windowpanes; now, the couple becomes a part of nature, immersed in it entirely.<sup>58</sup> The setting has a mythical quality—one has to wonder just where in between Miami and New York it is possible to stumble upon an excess of hay in the middle of the woods. Odd indeed, but equally beautiful; the hay glimmers under moonlight, providing the same glittering effect provided by the previous evening’s rainstorm. Peter quickly gets to work, fashioning makeshift beds out of the hay. He separates their beds on opposite sides of the frame, but tonight there is no blanket separating them. Here occurs a crucial instance of the film, the moment where all of the couple’s shared experiences converge. It is an admittance of desire, a critical event for the genre in defining that these people now feel the same way about uniting as the audience has from the start of the film. The moment, however, is silent; it occurs not with words but images. The initial avowal of love in *It Happened One Night* is entirely visual.

Ellie settles into her haystack and Peter uses his overcoat as a blanket to tuck her in. This kind gesture, surprising as moments before the two were bickering in their familiar way, leads to a pivotal series of cuts. They are first framed in a long shot, which cuts to a medium shot. Here, the camera privileges the moonlit face of Ellie, who gazes up at Peter in a fixed and steady

---

<sup>58</sup> Cavell’s concept of the “Green world” (49) can be appropriately applied here; the term will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

manner. The camera cuts again: this time to a closeup. The camera shifts slightly from its last position, allowing the two figures to now take up equal space onscreen. The camera cuts even closer. Their profiles fill the screen, the shallow focus of the camera dismissing any other element of the setting. Their eyes lock, and Ellie's lips part slightly. Peter glances down at her mouth and back up to her eye line.<sup>59</sup> The entire sequence lasts about ten seconds in total, and will be the closest Ellie and Peter come to kissing throughout the rest of the film. Despite its brevity, the significance of this moment cannot be missed. It is minute but highly potent. This visual declaration of love confirms the screwball trope: the union of the couple will surpass all barriers.

The tension created in this instance is interrupted, their attempt at fulfilling desire is denied. That moment—the almost-kiss that occurs is a threat to the Code, an almost-transgression of the barriers represented by the Walls of Jericho. Peter stands up and walks off and lights a cigarette, he says that he was “just wondering what makes dames like you so dizzy” after Ellie asks what he has been thinking about. This customary snide remark, recalling their forgoing antagonism, does not halt the romantic declaration, as the next shots—closeups of Ellie, pensive and amorous (such closeup will be emulated in a later scene)—indicate that the moment was not merely fleeting. It does, however, signal that it is not yet time for the Walls to topple; there are still regulations in place that cannot be breached. The couple must complete their education, as Cavell might contend, before this can happen: “In the genre...the man's lecturing indicates that an essential goal of the narrative is the education of the woman” (84). Although this definition of education is clearly gendered in Cavell's chapter, it soon becomes apparent that the lessons to be learned are not merely passed along from the man to the woman.

---

<sup>59</sup> The term I offer for this cinematic moment, “the anticipatory embrace,” is examined and analyzed in the following chapter.

## **A Lesson in Hitchhiking**

The next morning, Peter contemplates the intricacies of hitchhiking as the pair attempt to catch a ride. He demonstrates three techniques—to no avail. He tries again, several cars pass by without so much as slowing down. He thumbs his nose at the next car.<sup>60</sup> Ellie, who has been perched nearby, decides to give it a try. She contends, “I’ll stop a car, and I won’t use my thumb.” The following sequence is canonical in cinematic history: a car approaches as she walks to the side of the road. The camera cuts to frame her high-heeled foot, followed by the long line of her leg, exposed as she has reached down to lift up her skirt. The car comes to a screeching halt. Cut to Ellie and Peter in the back of the car, Ellie seeming rather gratified, Peter chagrined. And while there is no real lesson that Ellie is giving to Peter here (imagine if he had utilized her technique), the scene is momentous in its indication that each partner has an equal stake in the relationship.

The mutuality of learning is of paramount importance to the screwball genre. In the context of the Depression and its straining effect on gender relations, reciprocal education points to a desire to resolve such tensions, deemed possible by the humbling quality of love. In an earlier scene, over breakfast, Peter disrupts Ellie, apparently appalled by her donut dunking technique. “Where’d you learn to dunk, finishing school?”; he advises that her method will leave the donut soggy. “A dip and—sock!—in your mouth” he instructs. She responds: “Thanks, professor,” acknowledging Peter’s current position as teacher and she as student. Cavell beautifully notes that in the screwball comedy, learning from each other represents an

---

<sup>60</sup> This instance was a surprising point of contention between the filmmakers and the PCA, the action noted several times in their letters back and forth—it is mentioned throughout the film’s PCA file, in notes from 1934, dated February 8, March 1, March 5, March 28, and April 4.

overarching goal of the couple—that of “learning to speak the same language” (88). It is an intimate exchange, giving and receiving these lessons, a private activity reserved only for the couple. It is also important that this teaching/learning is mutual. Each character learns just as much from the other, breaking down the social barriers of both class and gender, and equalizing the working and upper class, as well as men and women.

This is an essential element of the genre—the screwball female takes on comparable responsibility for the relationship, driving the narrative and the romance forward by openly demonstrating her desire. In later screwball comedies, this convention is exaggerated as the central female character demonstrates her desire to an inflated degree, and taking control of the relationship completely.<sup>61</sup> As the first of these screwy women, Colbert’s Ellie Andrews remains fairly tame compared to later iterations of this character trope. Even so, Ellie demonstrates a strong will and unapologetic approach to achieving her goal, qualities which become emphasized in the later screwball dames. Ellie’s ability to keep up with Peter and his lessons indicates her willingness to change, her inclination to revise her old life. As explained by Cherry Potter, she “doesn’t want to be the person she was at the beginning of the film” (15), the spoiled heiress to a family fortune. Peter’s acceptance of change occurs more subtly, in his acceptance of Ellie and the qualities he had once disdained in her. In the screwball comedy, the desire for change is an enduring topic. This is why the education of both the man and woman from one another is part of the falling-in-love process of these films. Potter argues that “change is, in essence, what most of

---

<sup>61</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of this occurs in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), which will be discussed in the following chapter.

us seek in love-relationships—we want change, and love changes us” (xx). It is a presumptuous statement, but the trope is certainly unwavering throughout the rest of the genre’s cycle.<sup>62</sup>

### **A Runaway Bride**

As previously mentioned, *It Happened One Night* occupies a tricky moment in the development of the Production Code and its enforcement. Although the film was produced before the PCA was implemented, a PCA file for the film still exists, and its being processed by the PCA is perhaps part of its lasting success and impact, especially after the Code became further enforced. The first version of the script was submitted to the PCA on October 31, 1933, with *The Night Bus* still as its title. Upon first review of the script, MPPDA director James Wingate responded relatively favorably, stating “While a few of the situations will need careful handling, we feel sure that under Mr. Capra’s direction, they will be treated in such a way...as to be not only satisfactory under the Code, but free from danger of censorship.” Many of the situations requiring “careful handling,” evidently, concern the sex element of the film. Two primary examples include the first overnight scene, particularly with Ellie undressing and placing her undergarments over the blanket, and Ellie’s lifting her skirt in the hitchhiking scene. These scenes were not requested by the PCA to be deleted fully. Rather, Wingate would write statements such as “We recommend care with this action” or “We recommend modifying this scene.” The ambiguity reflected in this document points to the way the PCA functioned in studio-era Hollywood. The regulatory board did not have the power of a state censor, who would be in a position to prevent exhibition or remove specific scenes from the film’s final cut. Their authority

---

<sup>62</sup> In *My Man Godfrey*, Irene Bullock is humbled by her love for her butler. In *Bringing Up Baby*, scientist David Huxley is taught to think outside the box. The heroines of *The Philadelphia Story* and Howard Hawks’ *His Girl Friday* (1940) both learn that they still love their ex-husbands.

extended to so much as suggestions, particularly in the film's pre-production phase. There is evidence of this in the case of *It Happened One Night*, as both the undressing and hitchhiking scenes remain in the final film. It is impossible to say whether these scenes would have varied much had the producers not received this advice from the PCA, however, it is possible that scenes such as that of Ellie undressing could have contained more shots from her side of the curtain. PCA regulation, in this case, allowed for the particular type of eroticism which emerged through suggestion and symbolism.

The film's final sequences function to solve narrative issues which allow the couple to unite while still upholding standards of the Code. In other words, these last scenes narratively support the symbolic toppling of the Walls. Peter and Ellie stop one last night at a motel. Cavell notes the familiarity of their behaviour at this point, the ease with which the pair proceed through their nighttime routine.<sup>63</sup> Their marital charade now occupies a domain of reality. Ellie is no longer nervous to be alone with a man; Peter prepares the "Walls of Jericho" without the former decorum. They converse, both responding with a curt, unenthusiastic "yeah" as the other reminds them what they will be getting in the morning (for her, her husband, for him, his story). At this point, it is clear that whatever they had wanted at the beginning of their journey is no longer relevant. They have both gathered lessons from each other throughout their time together. Love has bestowed in them an openness for change, and the humility required for such openness. The only thing that matters at this point is the fulfillment of their desire—their desire for each other, for a mutual agreement forceful enough to knock down the Walls of Jericho. On their respective

---

<sup>63</sup> "The night of the second auto camp...the pair achieves something like marital familiarity as they prepare for bed...They are living under the same roof" (Cavell 85-86).



sides of the blanket, Ellie asks Peter if he's ever been in love. He responds with a lengthy monologue describing his dream girl and the life they'd live together:

“...she'd have to be the sort of girl that'd jump in the surf with me and love it as much as I did. You know, those nights when you and the moon and the water all become one and you feel that you're a part of something big and marvelous...Boy, if I could ever find a girl who's hungry for those things”

This fantasy brings to mind the previous evening they had spent together, with the moonlight reflecting off the setting and complementing the lovers' faces and they draw nearer, all becoming one. Ellie is hungry for those things. She appears in a medium shot, crossing the barrier between them. The shot cuts to a closeup on her face, similar to the frame following their almost-kiss the night before.

The closeup, in the screwball comedy, is rare.<sup>64</sup> While *It Happened One Night* contains more of them than most, as the genre progressed, it increasingly used the closeup shot only very selectively. More than a mere star vehicle, the screwball closeup is an important indicator that something is shifting emotionally within the story. The importance of the cinematic closeup has been accounted for since the earliest days of film theory, and such discussion is pertinent in understanding the significance this shot scale holds for the screwball comedy. In “The Face of Man,” formalist Béla Balász discusses the emotional impact of the closeup and in its visual representation of human subjectivity. He writes that the tightly framed face in modern cinema has fully replaced the necessity for monologue, deeming the shot scale a “silent soliloquy.” This scene in particular certainly recalls the silent cinema of less than a decade earlier, Colbert's face

---

<sup>64</sup> Discussed in more detail in the following chapter, this point is supported by many screwball films: such closeups occur in both *My Man Godfrey* and *Bringing Up Baby*, for instance, as the heroine first realizes that she is infatuated with the leading man. In *The Philadelphia Story*, closeups occur rarely and similarly highlight the heroine's loving glance. In *His Girl Friday*, there is no such closeup to speak of.

arguably offering more emotional impact than would be possible from a spoken delivery. As Balász notes, “the film has brought us the silent soliloquy, in which a face can speak with the subtlest shades of meaning without appearing unnatural and arousing the distaste of spectators” (277). The closeup speaks to the audience in a manner by which words cannot, the shot of Ellie’s face here predicting her declaration of love. She glances past the blanket-barrier, her tear-filled eyes directed at Peter. Her head tilts slightly and her lips part as though she were about to speak (she doesn’t). Her eyebrows raise—just slightly. It is a look of longing and desire, a sacrifice of the life she thought she wanted. This moment encompasses her humility and acceptance of Peter and possible repercussions of their union. It is at once hopeful and heartbreaking. It is a “mute dialogue,” as Balász would contend, all occurring within a mere five seconds. In later screwball comedies, closeups are used in a similar capacity, however much more infrequently. Such shots occur strategically, often as a visual signifier for the audience that love, indeed, is imminent.

Here, Ellie has offered the first attempt at bringing down the Walls of Jericho. Peter unromantically tells her to go back to bed. He cannot accept her declaration either narratively, as she is still married, or under regulation of the Code. The “walls” are still held up by rather strong forces. Later, however, he asks over the blanket: “Hey, Brat—did you really mean all that?” He too hopes to dismantle that barrier. As Cavell asserts, “a legitimate marriage requires that the pair is free to marry, that there is no impediment between them; but this freedom is announced in these film comedies in the concept of divorce” (103). While, yes, Ellie is still married to King and will require an annulment, Cavell’s point seems to also argue that it will be required of the pair to divorce *metaphorically* from their old lives, their previous ways of being, and in order to

do so they will need to fully accept each other's lessons, in dunking, hitchhiking, life, and love. The acceptance of one another and of their unusual affection is necessary for the allegorical tumbling of the Walls. But what is required for their literal, physical demolition?

After he realizes that Ellie has fallen asleep, Peter leaves the motel to find enough money to take her away and live life on the same side of the barrier. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding arises as Ellie wakes up to an empty motel room, believing that Peter has abandoned her. Reluctantly, she contacts her father who has agreed (also reluctantly) to throw her and King a proper wedding. Peter sees Ellie wedged between her father and fiancé en route to his return to her, and a separation occurs between the pair. It is conventional for the genre to include a temporary breakup, usually after a misunderstanding has occurred and the central couple confronts a seemingly irreparable problem.<sup>65</sup> They have both been “convinced the relationship is at an insurmountable impasse” (Schreiber 8), and the Walls of Jericho still stand erect. Later, Ellie prepares for her (re)marriage to King, and breaks down over her love for Peter as her father realized something is wrong. She believes that it is his former annoyances with her that has held the barrier between them, that his disdain for her privilege that has kept them apart. Ellie's father tells Ellie that Peter has just admitted his love for her to him (“But don't hold it against me, I'm a little screwy myself!”), and gives Ellie his paternal blessing to forget the wedding and leave to be with Peter. As she approaches the altar, she hesitates. She glances at King, a stand-in for her old life; to choose this fate would bring her back to the beginning of the film, obstinate and half-starved. Instead, she runs—towards Peter and towards the acceptance of her change. Their

---

<sup>65</sup> Later screwballs perpetuate this convention: in *My Man Godfrey*, Irene becomes engaged to another man as she falsely learns that Godfrey has a wife and children. In *The Lady Eve*, Charles leaves Jean/Eve twice after learning about her past. Leo McCarey's *The Awful Truth* (1937), *The Philadelphia Story*, and *His Girl Friday* all tell the stories of a separated couple coming back together.

reunion is unseen, but it recaptures the intimacy of their first nights together. The owners of another motel discuss a recently arrived newlywed couple—they've seen the marriage certificate and everything—and ponder their request for a toy trumpet. Right before this, a telegram arrives for Mr. Andrews, demanding a quicker turnaround on Ellie's annulment: "The Walls of Jericho are toppling," it reads. Andrews shrugs: "Let 'em topple!" The trumpet blasts, the blanket falls to the floor. The film ends. As the Production Code would have it, there is no climactic scene showing the reunion or consummation of Ellie and Peter's relationship. We understand their desire for one another, and now the barriers preventing their union have been overcome. The regulations and restriction imposed by the PCA have been overcome narratively by the legal marriage of the couple, as have the emotional obstacles, by the lovers' acceptance of change.

### **Conclusion: The Walls Topple**

*It Happened One Night* established a series of icons and conventions that would remain fundamental for a genre that persisted throughout the 1930s and early 1940s. While the central narrative of the film circulates around the union of a couple, that union was unable to be made explicit within the context of the Production Code which was becoming more strictly enforced the same year as the film's release. This chapter has analyzed the icons and conventions that became codified symbols for love and sexuality in the screwball comedy, many of which carried on throughout the genre's development. *It Happened One Night* and the screwball function as ideal examples of a genre that reflects the socio-historical conditions under which it was produced. In examining the ways in which the film codes its representation of romantic union and sexuality, I have considered how successful love looks in the screwball comedy.

The screwball romance is coded as an initial conflict. Although there may be sparks between the couple, their social disparities mark them as different from one another, usually to a point seemingly too severe for reparation. In *It Happened One Night*, and many future screwballs, these disparities are particularly found in their monetary status. The wealthy woman and working-class man further reinforce social concerns of the 1930s, as the Great Depression created significant anxiety about male unemployment. The couple's financial imbalance creates a point of tension upon their first meeting, but historically, the genre's creation during the era of FDR's New Deal eventually transform their conflict into optimism. As demonstrated in the "Man on the Flying Trapeze" sequence, the screwball reflects a boost in public morale which encompassed the US's new presidency. Further, the scene insists that a reconciliation of differences is possible in the face of adversity. I have also discussed the mutuality of teaching and learning as a major convention of the genre. This action, wherein each partner takes on the role of both teacher and student, becomes an indicator of closeness. Instead of embracing passionately, they exchange lessons. While not specifically sexual, this action is still decidedly intimate. Learning from one another becomes a private ritual for the screwball couple, another convention through which the genre avoids condemnation from the censors. Finally, the screwball comedy codifies sex through the couple's "shared fantasy." Utilizing Cavell's term, this fantasy is representative of whatever it is that denies intimacy between the couple. Narratively, the "Walls of Jericho" in *It Happened One Night* represent this obstacle, while contextually, the Walls stand in for the rigidity of the Code. It is this shared fantasy that keeps the Walls in place and allows the unmarried couple to spend time together, push the story forward,

and eventually fall in love. An issue, conflict, or barrier, and its eventual demolition is a major identifier of desire being fulfilled in the screwball comedy.

When Peter Warne states that he wants "to see what love looks like when it's triumphant," he is referring to a newspaper headline: "LOVE TRIUMPHS AGAIN!" it declares. By coding love as initial conflict, representing financial disparity and gendered tensions, and stressing the importance of sharing lessons, *It Happened One Night* perpetuates an optimistic ideology resonant with political attempts to restore faith in the American people during the ongoing Depression. Despite the stricter regulation imposed on studio productions in 1934, *It Happened One Night* and the new genre introduced its own system of conventions which codified sexuality in a manner passable by the PCA. Regardless of the conservative climate it was born into, the screwball comedy insists that love is triumphant when expectations are broken and barriers are overcome.

### Chapter 3: The Love Impulse: Sexual Desire and the Screwball Heroine

In the years between 1934 and 1938, the screwball comedy and its associated conventions and tropes turned from fantasy to full-on farce. The fairytale-like world of *It Happened One Night* evolved into something quirkier, embracing the “screwy” aspects of falling in love and interpreting them diegetically into a world of pratfalls, verbal quips, and extraordinary women. These extraordinary women proved to be true screwball of these comedies. Two years after Carole Lombard’s performance in *My Man Godfrey*, a screwball dame to end all screwball dames graced the silver screen as the character Susan Vance in Howard Hawks’ *Bringing Up Baby* (1938). Hawks’ film intensified and invigorated the screwball comedy, exaggerating the groundwork and conventions laid out *It Happened One Night* four years prior. This chapter will examine *Bringing Up Baby*’s hyperbolic iteration of the screwball romance, by focusing on the desire of its leading lady. In doing so, I consider the screwball female as a vehicle for the codification of sexuality throughout the Breen Era, with *Bringing Up Baby*’s heroine as the quintessential case study.

The film tells the story of a wild goose chase—or rather, wild leopard chase—which unwittingly brings a peculiar couple together. *Bringing Up Baby* follows the eccentric socialite Susan Vance (Hepburn) and the conservative paleontologist Dr. David Huxley (Cary Grant) on a series of misadventures from New York to the countryside of Connecticut, in pursuit of Baby the leopard, a bone, and a dog named George. Susan cons David into remaining by her side in this escapade until the two eventually end up in jail. Despite all common sense, and every standard previously set by David and his established world, Susan pulls him in like a force of nature, a tornado, a wild animal, driven by her unrelenting desire. How can this type of desirous woman

be interpreted during a period of Hollywood which was strictly controlled by traditional expectations of gender and sexuality? Here, I examine the central themes of love and lust in *Bringing Up Baby*, paying particular attention to the female protagonist's exhibition of wanting; through this analysis of feminine desire, I argue that Susan Vance subverts standards and depictions of the female lover established by the Production Code, providing an unexpected, sexually autonomous heroine. By further interrogating the role of women in the screwball comedy, this chapter will continue to excavate the codification of a romantic and sexual narrative in Code-era Hollywood.

*Bringing Up Baby* was based on a short story of the same name. "Bringing Up Baby" was written by Hagar Wilde and published in *Collier's* magazine in 1937. With only minor details that vary, the differences between the original story and the film adaptation give significant insight into the screwball genre's interpretation of love and the romantic couple. The screenplay version of the story was created by Wilde herself in collaboration with scriptwriter Dudley Nichols, and became a "literal labor of love" as the two eventually began a romantic affair—a detail which becomes especially endearing when perusing the notes included on different versions of the script "that indicate they are having a terrific time" (Mast 5). As Gerald Mast outlines, the basic premise of the film remains the same as the short story—a couple searches for an escaped pet leopard (a panther in the original story) throughout Connecticut. Many of the film's screwiest moments—the commotion with the brontosaurus, the series of misadventures on the road, the jail scene—only exist in the film version of *Baby*. Perhaps the most notable difference, and the one most interesting to this project, is that in Wilde's story, Susan and David are already a couple engaged to be married. There is no Miss Swallow, no love-related



complications. This variation in the two versions of the story produces fertile ground for inquiry—what makes a story of courtship more interesting as a movie? Why add a third character and an engagement to be broken? What does Miss Swallow add to the story and to the film’s themes of pursuit, sexual desire, and love? Moreover, what does Miss Swallow say about Susan’s character and female desire in the screwball comedy?

### **Creating a New Woman**

Stanley Cavell marks the genre as being concerned with the “creation of a new woman.” This “new woman” is the screwball female. Cavell’s recognition of her as a new type of woman undeniably ties the genre with progress and/or regressions in women’s autonomy in the late 1930s, identifying “this phase of the history of cinema [as] bound up with a phase in the history of the consciousness of woman” (16). Considering the implications of unemployment rates for men during the ongoing Depression, and the influx of women in the workforce during the impending Second World War, Cavell suggests the inextricable link between the screwball dame and her place in history. Certainly, this historical period delineates a moment of in-betweenness for gender expectations; this tension is emphasized in the screwball’s depiction of male/female relationships. By recognizing that “these phases of these histories are part of the creation of one another” (16), Cavell asserts the importance of the genre’s codified depiction of sexual desire during one of Hollywood’s most conservative times. As I argue, *Bringing Up Baby* provides a key example of one of the period’s most disruptive female characters, specifically in her overt demonstration of sexual desire. This is specifically pronounced in the visual depiction of the protagonists together onscreen. Through Hawks’ cinematic style and Hepburn’s performance, it becomes evident that the screwball female runs the romance. Whereas Cavell proposes that the

nature of this film “poses a structure in which we are permanently in doubt who the hero is... whether it is the male or the female, who is the active partner, which of them is in quest, who is following whom” (122), I argue that it is the heroine who actively takes on the role of pursuer in the screwball comedy. By means of visual pointedness, this cycle of films presents a woman taking responsibility for disrupting the regulations of the Production Code.

Desire—and specifically female desire—is unmistakably lacking from the established world of David Huxley. *Bringing Up Baby* opens on the eve of his wedding to his assistant, Alice Swallow (Virginia Walker). She is prim and serious, a steady and reliable figure in David’s life and career. Her top priority is his four-year-long project, assembling the skeleton of a brontosaurus; the only piece missing is the (quite precariously named) intercostal clavicle. Miss Swallow is distinctly unromantic, reminding David that she views their impending marriage “purely as a dedication to [his] work” and that their “marriage must entail no domestic entanglements of any kind.” Their wedding will not be followed by a honeymoon. As David inquires about the possibility of having children (and, it is implied, consummating the marriage), Miss Swallow responds, while gesturing to the nearly completed brontosaurus, “this will be our child.” Sexual denial is made even more explicit in the film’s repeated double entendres. Even Cavell admits a reluctance in pointing these out, apprehensive of “seeming too perverse or too obvious” (117). The innuendos in the film do indeed seem rather obvious, to the point that it is fairly astounding that the PCA did not intervene. In this opening sequence, David ponders the placement of a bone he holds in his hand: “Alice, I think this one must belong in the tail,” he

states, and her response, “you tried it in the tail yesterday and it didn’t fit,” connotes a fairly evident sexual allusion.<sup>66</sup>

Surprisingly, none of Breen’s correspondence mentions any of these double entendres which most scholars have been apt to pick up on. As Gerald Mast offers in his essay on the making of *Baby*, “Either members of the PCA did not hear or did not understand these suggestions” (13). The PCA, it seems, was more concerned with visual suggestions of sexuality. In a letter dated January 24, 1938 (after shooting was completed), the PCA mentions a moment in which Katharine Hepburn’s undergarments are briefly shown after her skirt rips up the back. They remark that this sequence is “border-line business and may be deleted by a number of the political censor boards.” The scene, however, remains in the film’s final cut, and is perhaps one of the most amusing moments of the film. It is entirely possible that the manner in which Hawks shot the scene posit it as more comedic than sexual, allowing it to slide past regulation. Other than these notes, there was little interference from the Breen office. In Breen’s earliest letter to RKO producer Samuel J. Briskin about *Baby*, dated September 20, 1937, he writes “We...are happy to report that it seems to meet the basic requirements of the Production Code.” The letter includes suggestions for nine sequences, only two of which regard sexuality.<sup>67</sup> The first asks that shots of David and Susan in the shower should include no indecent exposure, and the second seeks a modification of a line that would imply premarital cohabitation (a subject shunned by the PCA). The PCA’s seeming ignorance of the dialogue’s rather evident sexual intimations and

---

<sup>66</sup> See Mast, who also discusses the film’s multiple innuendos. In a less modest attitude than Cavell, Mast writes about the implications of adding one letter in particular to the word “bone” in this film’s context and the word’s “fairly familiar sexual slang” (298).

<sup>67</sup> These letters all come from the film’s PCA file.

phallic double-meanings<sup>68</sup> support the reading of David's relationship with Miss Swallow as the wrong one; this opening conversation about the placement of a "bone," and the denial of that bone, give an undisguised suggestion that desire is denied within this initial partnering.

### **The Wrong Partner**

The Breen office's passivity of these double-entendres work in favor of the film's set up of David's two prospective partners. Such dialogue clues the viewer into understanding Miss Swallow's positioning in the film as a recognizable character to the genre. She stands in as a significant trope of the screwball comedy: that of the "wrong partner." This canonical character is often used as a plot point which assists the protagonist in determining what he or she truly wants—in a partner and in life. At first glance, the wrong partner displays whatever seems "ideal" and exemplifies the optimal standards laid out by authorities. It soon becomes apparent, however, that these ideals are illusionary. In actuality, these features are merely conveniences disguised. The protagonist initially sees the Wrong Partner as the ideal one because of the convenience she poses for him. This may be manifested by her physical proximity, established integration into the protagonist's existing world, or generally simple disposition and behaviour. The Right Partner, by contrast, displays the opposite. She may live miles away, not fit in with or be rejected by the protagonist's inner circle, or demonstrate overall erratic and complicated behaviour. The Right Partner will never be the easiest option, but the rules of the genre insist that the protagonist chooses challenge over convenience.

---

<sup>68</sup> Cavell also notes that the "characters are themselves wholly unconscious of the doubleness in their meaning" (118), unlike those of Shakespearian comedy, whose characters' recognition of their inappropriateness creates a different type of comedic effect. Perhaps it is the characters' ignorance of their double-meanings that shield the dialogue from being deemed dirty by the PCA.

Cavell remarks that the protagonists' choice of the crazy or difficult is reflexive of the genre's recognition that the society they find themselves in is crazy in and of itself. As proven by *Bringing Up Baby*, the "Hawksian comedy, through its characters' struggles for consciousness, remembers that a society is crazy which cedes it, that the open pursuit of happiness is a standing test, or threat, to every social order" (129).<sup>69</sup> The choosing and pursuing of happiness is the choice of difficulty or challenge, showing that the protagonist's decision to pick the right partner for him or herself is an active choice against the markers of what "makes sense" to a society, through the markers which have been set up authoritatively. The lover in the screwball comedy acts decidedly against the acceptable standards of society, the standards of normality, in order to fulfill his or her romantic desire; in turning away from the expected, the lover experiences the unanticipated satisfaction of fantasy realized. Despite their similarities and the ease with which Miss Swallow fits into David's life, that element of challenge or desire is clearly missing for the couple. Cue Susan Vance.

Cavell marks the central couple of *Bringing Up Baby* epitomizes what Cavell would identify as the "purest form" of the genre's rule that for the screwball couple, "what they do together is less important than the fact that they do whatever it is together." This kind of "directedness without direction" (113) emphasizes the importance of *play* for the screwball lovers. This is settled upon at their first meeting, as Susan remarks to David that "it's only a game anyway," in response to his becoming unnerved after she hijacks his golf ball. As David is just beginning his round of golf, Susan mentions she is on the last hole—evidently, she is always a step ahead in their game. Susan's prowess in her game with David undeniably lies in her

---

<sup>69</sup> Cavell's book title *Pursuits of Happiness* references the union—or rather, reunion—of two individuals who are inevitably destined to be together.

romantic and sexual desire for him, which for David comes off as abrasive and annoying. As their relationship develops, however, David's attitude toward Susan will begin to shift. He will begin to actively participate in the game, rather than view himself as being disrupted by it. His acceptance of Susan's game, by the end of the film, will connote his love for her.

Susan and David's first scene together immediately contrasts the previous opening scene with Miss Swallow, not only in the conversation between the two couples, but also in how the scene looks. David's meeting with Susan takes place outdoors, candidly opposing the stuffy indoor setting of David's first interaction with Miss Swallow in the film. Hawks' camera moves freely throughout the scene, accompanying the movements of Susan and visually reflecting her demeanor. As Gerald Mast points out, this moving camera is a "typical Hawks method of conveying human spirit, power, and vitality" (299). Although this is Susan's introduction in the film, and her "screwiness" has not yet reached its peak, her movements here, and those mimicked by the camera, foreshadow the erratic behaviour to come. With more dynamic cinematography, this scene works at variance with the previous, which is shot with a mostly-steady camera. The preceding scene, set in the natural history museum and David and Miss Swallow's place of work, copies the dynamic of that liaison. It is quite sterile, organized, and constrained. It reflects the initial couple's professional field—that of the sciences, free from any iota of emotionality or feeling. Not to mention the most obvious visual element of the scene—the dinosaur skeleton, which is not the only ossified object in the room. David and Miss Swallow are literally surrounded by *dead things*—clearly, this is not an environment in which love will survive. Placing Susan in an open-air environment, surrounded by trees and grass and living things, denotes the opposite.

*Bringing Up Baby* emphasizes the polarity between these two women through its mise-en-scene. The settings each woman occupies, as discussed above, clearly indicate the overall atmosphere and tone of each relationship; one is stifled and monotonous, the other fruitful and uninhibited. To amplify these denominations, the film's costuming gives obvious evidence of the women's disparities. In the opening scene, Miss Swallow is shown in a binding black ensemble. Her outfit is restrictive and traditional, complete with a high collared neckline and a meticulously styled coiffure. There is no movement or freedom in her clothing; it is unyielding and highly controlled. In Susan's introductory scene, by contrast, Hepburn is dressed in a loose-fitting, free-flowing white dress. Her hair, in Hepburn's signature style, is blown out, curly, unpinned. Their outdoor environment increases the liberated impression of Susan's ensemble as the light outdoor breeze gently blows through her clothes, emphasizing the lightness of the fabric. In the manner of another classical Hollywood genre—the western—*Bringing Up Baby*'s costuming indicates to the audience in a very transparent way that one partner is good and one is not. One cowboy wears the black hat, the other bears it in white; there is no doubt visually about who will be the hero of the town, the victor of the shoot-out.

These initial scenes work in establishing “the clash between the scientific order of Dr. David Huxley and the vital disorder of Susan Vance” (297). Where the space which Miss Swallow occupies is rigid and cold, the space in which David meets Susan is fertile, sentient. This, in addition to the camera's imitation of Susan's lively behaviour, indicates the less restrained milieu in which her and David's relationship will progress. Immediately set up in these first two scenes, Susan and her desire represent for David a direct opposition to his established

world. His life of order, of reason, of Miss Swallow and that old brontosaurus skeleton is about to become obliterated in the crossfire of Susan's passion.

During the couple's second interaction in the film, Susan's desire is visually emphasized and her parallel to a wild animal begins before the titular "Baby" is even introduced. This occurs after David trips over an olive Susan has dropped while learning a party trick—again, Susan has intervened with David's established direction. After he gets up and leaves, Susan's eyes lock in on him. She is framed in a long shot, moving slowly towards him without his knowledge, her eyes fixed upon him, unblinking. Her mannerisms here are inarguably identical to that of a jungle cat stalking her prey, and this parallel becomes even more literal throughout the narrative. The camera, panning to follow her, moves invisibly alongside her, as fixed and concentrated as she is. This image of Susan staring David down is the first indicator of her extreme desire, her resemblance to a jungle cat accentuating sexual lust as the lynchpin of this desire. After asking a psychiatrist about David's initial aversion to her, she is told that "the love impulse in man very frequently reveals itself in terms of conflict." Susan's rapture escalates. From here on, female desire drives the film's narrative, and the pursuit of satisfying that desire will cause a complete upheaval of David's life. From this moment on, Susan moves, speaks, and acts like a natural disaster, a wild animal—erratic, unpredictable, wily—all under the pretense of remaining by David's side. In support of this argument, I consider the formal properties of the couple's courtship, paying special attention to the visual markers of feminine desire as represented by the film's framing of the couple. Specifically, the onscreen composition of the two couples (David/Miss Swallow and Susan/David) gives explicit insight into how the film 'frames' each woman as the wrong or right partner. The film's undeniable comparison of the screwball heroine with a



jungle cat symbolizes the importance of sexual hunger in the screwball comedy, demonstrating how the genre subverts classical representations of romantic love and expected regulations of sexuality in film during Production Code-Era Hollywood.

### **The Anticipatory Embrace**

Up until this point, I have discussed the 'sex' in *Bringing Up Baby* as sex disguised—as innuendo, as suggestion, as metaphor. Intimations of sex in the film have been offered through metaphor, and deflected as a result of this symbolic ambiguity. The couple, however, still end up getting together by the end of the film. Their union is no longer imagined or abstract. But the Production Code remains in place, and so the dilemma remains: what does it look like when the couple unites? How does the screwball comedy move from sex as metaphor to sex onscreen? The cinematic moment leading to a couple's first physical union has been analyzed in scholarship before, yet not given a precise lexical marker. For the sake of this thesis, I will be utilizing the term "anticipatory embrace" in describing the moment directly leading up to the cinematic kiss. The anticipatory embrace displays clear tension between the two bodies on screen—their movement and facial expression make the couple seem as though there are magnets between them, drawing them closer and closer together until that pinnacle moment in which their lips (finally) meet. It is an image that is well known in the cinema, perhaps even more romantic and exciting than the kiss itself. This instance seems to visually place the couple in extended and suspended time, which seems to slow down as the impending embrace seems inevitable. The anticipatory embrace offers erotic tension resulting from the promise of union—often a union which has been highly anticipated by the audience. This moment delights spectators because of the satisfaction occurring from the fulfillment of our own desires for the on-screen couple. As we

spend the duration of a film watching the tension between the couple grow, the anticipatory embrace offers up the last few moments before our desires, and those of the couple, are fulfilled. Just as Virginia Wright Wexman argues that “the movie kiss represents a privileged moment of romantic bonding” for the couple (Wexman 60), I offer that the anticipatory embrace exists as a privileged moment of romantic bonding for the audience. It is this moment that allows the audience to insert themselves into the couple’s relationship, satisfied in awaiting their anticipated union. In past and contemporaneous non-screwball romances, the use of extreme close-up is traditionally used in capturing this moment before romantic fulfillment. Kathrina Glitre notes that this part of a film is “Customarily...designed to highlight the expression of romantic fulfillment on the face of the woman” (Glitre 60), filling the screen with the face of the female lover until she is enveloped by her romantic counterpart. Often, the anticipatory embrace at the peak of the romantic union is often shown visually as a series of shot-reverse-shots, heightening the tension between the couple until they unite in a kiss. However, the screwball comedy undermines the expectation posed by the anticipatory embrace.

In *Bringing Up Baby*, the couple’s partnership does not culminate in a sweeping and dramatic moment of union. Even after his declaration of love, David and Susan do not share a grand and revelatory kiss. Despite this, the anticipatory embrace is not missing from their development as a couple, and is actually a significant moment recurring throughout their romp around Connecticut. This is reflective in David’s saying to Susan that “it isn't that I don't like you, Susan, because, after all, in moments of quiet, I'm strangely drawn toward you...” These “moments of quiet” in which David is drawn by Susan are emulated formally, emphasizing the tension between the two figures, resembling the anticipatory embrace. These moments, however,

do not occur out of extremely romantic moments or instances of high sexual tension. Rather, the anticipatory embrace of *Bringing Up Baby* occurs in between moments of play, those instances where David is swept into Susan's game or storm. The first significant example of this happens after the olive incident. While following David outside later in the scene, she grabs him by the tail of his jacket, which promptly rips up the back. David, understandably, becomes aggravated as Susan backs away whilst defending herself. As the two discuss what has just happened, and David expresses his desire for her to "go away," the characters and the camera linger. Although they are arguing in this moment, their steady eye contact and body language, drawn into one another, create a sense of closeness between the couple, nearly resembling the moment before a kiss.

A similar instance occurs in the latter half of the film, described by Mast as an "almost kiss" (Mast 308). Susan and David search for Baby and George in a dense forest, the sequence involving the pair performing a series of pratfalls which ends in David's glasses falling off and shattering. After expressing, once again, his desire for Susan to "go home," she reluctantly and tearfully agrees and begins to leave the scene. This leads to another comedic stunt which ends with Susan tumbling over a low-hanging tree branch and falling onto the ground. Obviously concerned, David quickly goes after Susan and attempts to comfort her. As she cries "you don't like me," David consoles her by denying the accusation and blotting her tears with a handkerchief. She appeals to him, "Oh David, please let me come with you," and for a brief moment, their eyes lock in on one another. David's head tilts to one side as Susan's eye-line moves to his mouth. A kiss, at this point, appears to be inevitable. Mast proffers this moment as the couple's "ultimate emotional union" (308).

It is within the screwball tendency that this instance of emotional union occurs in what Cavell identifies as the “green world.” Referring to Northrop Frye, Cavell interprets the “green world” as a “place in which perspective and renewal are achieved” (49).<sup>70</sup> This place is rooted in the institution of literary romance, recalling Shakespearean tradition.<sup>71</sup> Recurrent in screwball protocol, the “green world” signifies the place where the relationship will be transformed. Recalling the hay bale scene in *It Happened One Night*, this moment between Susan and David functions as a significant instance of change for their relationship, as Mast suggests that they “will not separate emotionally again” (Mast 308). Also with the screwball tendency, however, the couple subverts the expectations implemented by the anticipatory embrace. They do not kiss. David, however, invites Susan to remain with him, and the scene ends in a two-shot, which is the most often used shot scale within the film.

### **Democratic Framing, Deleted Scenes, and Slapstick Comedy**

The two-shot is an important formal element of *Bringing Up Baby*, and of the screwball comedy more generally, as the nature of the shot reflects the couple’s relation to one another. The couple is framed counter to what traditional gender roles would assume. The two-shot emphasizes the equality of the couple, offering the two figures at an equal distance from the lens, neither one dominating the other or dominating the screen. Glitre notes the two-shot as “democratic,” allowing the couple to be seen fully and dividing the frame space equally (61). This two-shot in the screwball comedy de-emphasizes the female’s romantic fulfillment as most important; instead, both characters are visually privileged, allowing the male and female lover to

---

<sup>70</sup> Cavell cites Frye’s “The Argument of Comedy” (1948), which discusses the differentiation between Old and New Comedy.

<sup>71</sup> The “green world” of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is most analogous to that of *Bringing Up Baby*, “a forest...explicitly a place of dreams and magic” (Cavell 49).

participate in this romantic moment equally. The anticipatory embrace, when shown in a two-shot, allows the audience to understand the value of this union for both the man and woman. In *Bringing Up Baby*, the film's form encourages us to understand the effect that Susan has on David. Invoking André Bazin, Mast considers the importance of shared screen space in his analysis of the film.<sup>72</sup> He remarks that "Shared cinema space in narrative cinema can be used to imply shared emotional space, a spiritual conversation between the beings enclosed by that framed boundary, a sharing which transmits itself not by explicit words but by the evocations of physical proximity" (Mast 304). The subtextual implications of such framing allow for intimacy between the couple, even when their tête-à-tête implies the opposite. The framing of these moments visually contradicts David's verbal frustration with Susan; the two-shot translates his "Go aways" into "Stay heres."

This becomes even more obvious if we consider how David's interactions with Miss Swallow are filmed. In the first scene, as they discuss their upcoming wedding, Miss Swallow is visually de-emphasized by the film's form. Their dialogue is shown mostly in shot-reverse shots, never allowing the couple to be framed from the same angle. The shot-reverse-shot accentuates the couple's separateness, each cut of the film allowing for more physical and temporal space between the pair. Most shots of the pair together, with the exception of their break-up scene, include additional persons in the frame. Even more explicitly, Miss Swallow is rarely seen from the front in the scene, mostly framed with her back turned toward the camera. The visual contrast between how Miss Swallow and Susan are shot explicitly encourages viewers to believe that

---

<sup>72</sup> Here, Mast is referring to Bazin's "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage" in *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1 (1967), which discusses the "belief in authenticity of shared cinema space as opposed to...suspicion of trickery with montage" (Mast 304).

Susan is the right partner for David, their equality visually emphasized, and Susan's desire prominent in those "moments of quiet" during their repeated anticipatory embraces. Although these moments are never fulfilled by the traditional kiss, as would be the case in a non-screwball romance, the audience understands that the couple is drawing into one another. Although David remains resistant to Susan's affection until the end of the film, these anticipatory embraces frame the couple with a fixated, steady camera, reflecting the way that Susan continually pulls David into her vortex of desire; despite his best effort to escape, he is compelled to stay. Eventually, he will allow himself to be swept away by Susan's desire for him.

The visual codification of Susan as the 'right' partner and Miss Swallow as the emotionally and physically distant woman, is also found in deleted scenes and shots from the film. These deleted shots, which are usefully documented in Mast's volume, give further insight into the prioritization of Susan over Miss Swallow. The first cut of the film, which was sent to the PCA in January 1938, ran at 10,150 feet. By February 18, the film was cut to its final 9,204 feet.<sup>73</sup> As Mast argues, eliminated footage included "peripheral scenes for the character players," "lesser comic scenes," and "reaction shots" (13). Among those reaction shots were those of Miss Swallow on her second phone call with David in the film, a conversation obnoxiously impeded by Susan. As well as simply decreasing the film's runtime, these deletions quite literally eliminate any significance from the character of Miss Swallow.

Amongst the remaining 946 feet of film that was deleted from the final cut were three conversations of particular interest to this chapter. In these scenes, Susan verbally declares her

---

<sup>73</sup> See Mast 13 for more of these details.

desire and affection for David. In one early scene, Susan tells her maid (a character that does not appear at any point in the final film) that she is in love:

Susan: Oh, Carrie, I'm in love and he's the most wonderful...

Maid (*off*): I think you're crazy!

Susan: So does he—(*Sits up*)—but it doesn't matter...

Later, David and Susan are searching for the intercostal clavicle, which has been stolen by George the dog. In this sequence, set at a “romantic spot beside a stream” (212), Susan once again brings up the topic of love. David ignores her:

Susan: You know, I always say that people in the city don't have time to fall in love. Now what could be nicer than just spending months and months getting acquainted—with somebody you like—and maybe could fall in love with.

David (*hopelessly*): It's just possible—

Susan (*a ray of hope*): What's possible?

David: it's just possible that he didn't bring [the bone] out of the house at all.

The last of these deleted scenes occurred after the “almost kiss” in the forest. In the sequence, Susan and David discuss what has just transpired:

Susan: You know, David, I've been trying to figure out why you didn't kiss me back there. You almost did.

David: We won't discuss that, Susan.

Susan: Well, there nothing really wrong with kissing a girl [...] I mean, you could even do it accidentally, couldn't you?

David: Susan, I couldn't kiss you accidentally. If I were to kiss you, it would be quite deliberate. You see?<sup>74</sup>

As these scenes are not mentioned in the film's PCA files, and therefore did not contain material of any concern to the board, it could be argued that the rationale for this deletion was more practical than political. Most likely, these conversations were considered inessential to the story. Because there were so many visual indicators of Susan's fervor for David, and of the couple's

---

<sup>74</sup> These script variations are documented in Mast pages 208, 212-213, and 223-224.

connection with one another, straightforward dialogue and verbal declarations of love were not necessary. In addition to the substantial use of two-shots, as well as visually privileging Susan over Miss Swallow in the film, Hawks utilizes close-up shots to “imply intimate revelations” (12). These close-ups are used exceedingly sparingly, no more than three times throughout the film, during crucial emotional moments. Importantly, the film’s first close-up occurs after Susan learns that David is engaged to be married. The shot, lasting less than three seconds, shows Susan’s shocked reaction, which quickly transforms into a fit of tittering laughter. It becomes obvious that Susan’s desire for David exceeds her concern for anything else. Indeed, Mast suggests it is Hawks’ “cinema style” which deemed the before-mentioned sequences unneeded (13). The film’s framing does the talking, as “A close-up is confession enough” (12), allowing for the deletion of verbalized admissions of love.

Along with such framing, the physical actions of the characters within the frame powerfully evoke the emotional sentiments of the characters. The many pratfalls—the tumbles, the stunts, the topplings-over—which are signature markers of screwball desire, are an equally significant element of the love language of the film. In a 1938 article titled “Anything but Love, Baby,”<sup>75</sup> Ezra Goodman writes that “Black eyes replace purple passion in present-day movies.” Observing the screwball-trend of slapstick humor and violence between onscreen couples, Goodman relates that these actions have replaced more traditional markers of love and affection: “No longer does the tender passion find expression in soulful glances, whispered vows or burning clinches. instead, the hero and heroine trade volleys of uppercuts as tokens of their mutual affection...” Goodman’s article traces the trend of physical conflict in these films,

---

<sup>75</sup> Published in World Film News magazine, 1938.



demonstrating that movie viewers and critics of the time understood the implications of these actions as replacing romantic conventions. There is, however, no mention of the recent changes within film regulation in such articles. Many contemporary scholars have theorized on the significance of these actions for this particular genre, taking the mere observation of this trend as noted by Goodman's article a step further. While pratfalls augment the overall comedic tone of the film, their meaning becomes critical when considered in the context of the Code Era and its attempted erasure of onscreen sexuality. As the Code forced open sexuality underground, these stories of (screwy) seduction remained in the mainstream, and physical humor is a primary vehicle through which sexuality was still able to drive these narratives. Because the consummation of romance could never take place onscreen, John Belton offers that "lovers remained in an uncomfortable limbo, which best translated itself into a kind of tension or conflict" (181). In addition to the antagonistic dialogue typical of the screwball comedy, these characters' conflict often resulted in slapstick humor and physical fighting. Some screwball comedies of the era did have instances of actual interpersonal violence, such as *Twentieth Century* (1934), *His Girl Friday* (1940) and *The Lady Eve* (1941). This was less the case in *Bringing Up Baby*, which relies more on pratfalls and accidental nosedives, but the codified meaning of these stunts carry the same weight as these other films' purposeful punches and kicks. In *Baby*, characters trip over olives, trip and roll down grassy hills, plunge accidentally into rivers, and fall from towering scaffolding. Hepburn is even subjected to becoming what Belton refers to as "the butt of anal humor" (179), as David repeatedly slaps his hat against Susan's backside to hide her undergarments. These pratfalls and corporeal gags manifested what the Production Code strived to conceal; demonstrated sexual desire would become disguised

through other corporeal action. In the screwball comedy, such gags became a visual metaphor for intimacy which could not be shown overtly or implicitly onscreen.

### **Conclusion: The Dinosaur Falls**

In *Bringing Up Baby*'s final sequence, David finds himself back at the museum, contemplating the fate of his incomplete brontosaurus and the end of his engagement to Miss Swallow. One last time, Susan brazenly infiltrates David's space, bringing with her the intercostal clavicle of the skeleton which had been stolen by her dog George. There is an obvious sexual allusion brought upon by Susan's presentation of the intercostal clavicle to David, the only bone missing from his skeleton, and therefore from his partnership with Miss Swallow. Susan barges into the museum: "David I've got it!", explicitly offering up her sexual desire in one last attempt to win the affection of her beloved. In response, David runs up a ladder in order to escape her. Uninhibited as ever, Susan follows him up the ladder, the only thing now between them the incomplete brontosaurus. It is clear that the skeleton represents David's previously established world of order and the lack of acted upon sexual desire which Susan brings. Finally, David gives into her, accepting and submitting to her desire. He concedes, admitting that he is scared of her, and that he thinks he might love her. Within the screwball genre, these two sentiments—fear and love—work perfectly in tandem. David's initial aversion to Susan makes sense within this genre's world. For the screwball lover, "Go away" means "I love you," as the genre insists that "seeming hatred is a mark of desire" (Horton 137). This recalls an earlier moment of the film, as Susan and David find themselves isolated in a forest while searching for Baby the leopard and George the dog. They stumble upon the two animals, wrestling playfully with one another. The unexpected pairing of the two animals—the dog and the leopard, one

domesticated, one wild—certainly reflects Susan and David themselves. As they observe the animals fighting, Susan exclaims “Oh look, David, they like each other!” The fact that Susan reads the animals’ aggression as affection evokes that theory that “the love impulse in man frequently reveals itself in terms of conflict.” It is when David accepts this that his previously secured world becomes irrelevant.

After his admission of love, Susan becomes so overjoyed that she inadvertently becomes unbalanced on her ladder, grasping at the dinosaur skeleton for stability. She climbs onto the brontosaurus which begins to collapse under her, but before falling to the ground David rescues her, pulling her up onto the scaffolding next to him. The dinosaur falls—and with it, David’s previous life of order. As David accepts Susan’s desire, he is accepting the pleasure of the unexpected by turning away from the familiar, the orderly, and the established. Female desire in *Bringing Up Baby* challenges the expectations of womanhood in conventional narratives, subverting traditional gender roles and depictions of romance in the 1930s. The screwball female and her assertive incorporation into the life of the male offers a new type of romantic cinematic narrative, coming out of a period in Hollywood where sexuality was heavily coded by internal regulation and censorship. The Code-era of Hollywood may be read in parallel to the character of David Huxley—rigid and traditional, stagnant in accepted and established conventions. And like the Walls of Jericho in *It Happened One Night*, the skeleton falling to the ground points to the ways in which the screwball comedy—and its leading woman—challenged the regulations of the PCA. The screwball female challenged these conventions just as Susan challenges David; by accepting feminine desire, classical Hollywood accepts a female-driven romance, turning established expectations on their head, just as David’s acceptance of Susan’s desire brings his

world to a screeching halt. As the couple embraces at the film's end, David welcomes the confrontation of convention brought on by Susan and her relentless pursuit of passion.

Despite the PCA's attempt to stifle explicit representations of sex, sexuality, and their implication, characters such as Susan Vance prevailed throughout the screwball genre.

Throughout this film, and in many screwball comedies of the era, sexual desire is demonstrated and sought after by the female character<sup>76</sup>. Considering societal expectations of acceptable relations between men and women in the 1930s, it is entirely possible that the vitality and determination of her pursuit could have been a point of contention for the Breen office.

Surprisingly, an investigation of the film's PCA files reveals that censors showed minimal concern for such ostentatious displays of desire from a female character.

*Bringing up Baby* illustrates how sexual matters passed PCA adjudication by visually codifying longing and lust through framing, staging and performance. These components of cinematography and mise-en-scene allow visual cues to identify sexual desire in the place of verbal proclamation. Specifically, I proffer the screwball heroine as the central vehicle for coded sexuality in Code-era Hollywood. *Bringing up Baby*'s Susan Vance is an exemplary screwball female, unbarred by narrative inhibitions or barriers set up extra-textually through internal regulation. By codifying desire as something comical, 1930s Hollywood perpetuates stories of seduction despite restrictions. In this way, the sexually aggressive and "screwy" female became an acceptable means of codifying stories of seduction on the silver screen. In the face of strict regulation apropos sex and sexuality, movies about desire and lust endured, thanks to characters like Susan Vance and other screwball heroines.

---

<sup>76</sup> Additional examples include *My Man Godfrey*, *The Philadelphia Story*, and *The Lady Eve*, among others.

## Conclusion

This thesis considers how romance, flirtation, and sexual desire were depicted in the screwball comedies of the 1930s. Throughout this study, I have compiled the tropes and conventions of the genre, and placed them within the wider context of the historical events, societal changes, and cultural trends of the early 20th century. In so doing, I argue that the screwball and its positioning within this history offers a codified representation of sexuality. Specifically, visual tropes such as framing techniques, character staging, and other elements of mise-en-scene are discussed as notable methods of indicating sexual desire in a non-explicit manner. The introduction of the screwball genre intersected a critical moment in the history of censorship as *It Happened One Night* was released the same year as the PCA's institution. By codifying sex, the screwball avoided raising suspicions of the PCA or disobeying stipulations implemented by the newly enforced MPPC. In the preceding chapters, I have identified how these codified tropes fit within the socio-historical context of 1930s America, and represent love and sex as capable of breaking cultural conventions while remaining unthreatening to a board of censors.

In the first chapter, a narrative timeline reviewed both cultural and film-specific events occurring within the first part of the 20th century which led to the formation of the PCA and introduction of the screwball comedy in 1934. I have considered the metamorphosis of Hollywood's censorship system between 1907 and 1934 in tandem with simultaneous cultural movements and events. Throughout this process, it became clear that several early attempts at film censorship and regulation transpired concurrently with shifts in women's liberation movements. Events relating specifically to women's sexual liberation seem to have, in part,

prompted many changes within film censorship, both in and outside of the studio system. While iterations of censorship and regulation remained fairly ineffective until 1934, the appointment of Joseph Breen as head of the Studio Relations Committee would be the most impactful internal regulation system in the history of Hollywood. The timeline offered in this chapter delineated the Breen Era's preoccupation with representations of onscreen sexuality to rising social anxieties surrounding female sexual progression offscreen. In subsequent chapters, my study correlates established screwball conventions to the events outlined in this opening chapter, demonstrating the genre's representation of love and sex as inextricably tied to the cultural and historical factors occurring at the same time as the genre's emergence.

In the second chapter, I discussed Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, the film which canonically marks the initiation of the screwball comedy in 1934. This chapter presented a case study of the film, identifying important indications of the "falling in love moment" and instances of sexual desire, and elucidating how these moments were codified in a manner that would pass the requirements of the Code. Although the film was released before Breen's appointment and the official installment of the PCA, a PCA file for this film still exists, and provided useful insight for this chapter into how the film was reviewed by the censors. Many of the tropes which designate sexual desire were established in *It Happened One Night*, and are repeated throughout future screwball comedies. This chapter examined how these tropes corresponded to the film's contemporaneous historical events, and argued that the codifications of love and sex in the screwball work to break down barriers which were enforced in 1930s America.

These ideas were expanded in the third chapter through an analysis of Howard Hawks' *Bringing Up Baby*. In examining this film as a hyperbolic version of the screwball, my attention

turned specifically to the female character as an anarchic force of the genre, the character responsible for propelling the narrative and the romance forward. As the screwball female evolved over the four years in between *It Happened One Night* and *Bringing Up Baby*, she became the primary vehicle of desire for the genre, openly displaying her longing and lust for her male counterpart. However, in order for this behaviour to be acceptable to the PCA, sexual desire had to be disguised. By representing the sexually active female as vaguely insane, her actions seem to adhere to Code regulations. In codifying the heroine's sexual desire as lunacy and farce, the screwball female is capable of subverting gendered expectations in 1930s America while simultaneously adhering to the conservative policies of the Breen office.

Bearing in mind the arguments I've made about these two films, it is worth reiterating that both *It Happened One Night* and *Bringing Up Baby* feature literal and symbolic "barriers" which are narratively and figuratively broken down by the film's end. The "Walls of Jericho" and Dr. Huxley's brontosaurus skeleton work twofold throughout the film and in the wider context of the Hollywood studio system. Narratively, the collapse of these barriers indicate an acceptance of love and desire, consequentially denouncing a previously established way of being. Outside of the film's world, this may be read in tandem with the genre's subversion of the PCA's stipulations regarding filmic representations of sex and sexuality. An interconnection between this thematic "barrier breaking" and the cultural climate of 1930s America may be inferred. The prevailing years of the genre coincided with multiple societal challenges in the US. Most notably, the Great Depression and its resulting decline in male employment rates presented an alarming crisis for gender relations in addition to its obvious financial catastrophe. These issues are openly represented throughout the screwball genre, presenting social class and gender differences as

seemingly insurmountable differences between the central couple. Despite their dissimilarities, the generic prerequisite for the eventual union of the couple symbolically represents a solution to the problems posed by those differences as well. In addition to this, the genre's place within the history of the PCA presents a new reading of the romantic union in these films as a sort of solution to, or a disbanding of obstacles. In that sense, despite its positioning within a constrictive and conservative period of time in the US and within Hollywood, I offer an interpretation of the screwball comedy as a genre that both corroborated and challenged and its surrounding dominant ideology. The screwball comedy thus proposes that triumphant success, represented in the genre as romantic union, occurs when barriers are overcome.

Although the breadth of my study does not extend beyond 1938, these ideas promulgate throughout the remainder of the screwball cycle and into later iterations of the romantic comedy. While many scholars such as Tamar Jeffers McDonald, Kathrina Glitre, and Leger Grindon have written on the various cycles of the romantic comedy, it is worth considering how these different cycles either challenge or reassert dominant ideology through their representations of sexual desire, and more specifically how their female protagonist demonstrates her own desire. The screwball cycle is believed to have ended around 1942 (Grindon 31), a year after the US entered the Second World War. Following this, the genre continuously developed, elaborated, and reshaped itself in reaction or in synch with its socio-historical surroundings.

Following World War Two, the 1950s encountered a rise of romantic comedies for which sex became a central focus. Identified by scholars as the "Comedies of Seduction" (Grindon) or simply "the sex comedy" (McDonald, Glitre), these films approached sex more directly than the



screwball.<sup>77</sup> The sex comedy straddled a moment in history where men returned from war, prompting gender dynamics to settle back to more traditional views. The (sexual) differences between men and women were highlighted in the comedy of this cycle of films, and the loosening grip of the PCA allowed sexuality to become more pronounced than in the screwball.<sup>78</sup> Although sex was still not permitted to be shown onscreen, lustful kissing became common in the films of this time.<sup>79</sup> Succeeding the sex comedy, the next cycle of romantic comedy coincided with counter culture movements of the 1960s and 70s. The Production Code was also abandoned by 1966 (Malone 138), and with its cessation came a series of romantic comedies which discarded many older tropes and permitted a more open ending in terms of romantic union (McDonald 72). These films are known as the “nervous romance” (Grindon 54) and “radical romantic comedies” (McDonald 59), and their challenging of conventions quite clearly corresponds to the political atmosphere of these decades, with the second wave of feminism, as well as new movements for black and gay rights (60).<sup>80</sup> In seeming reaction to both the radical romantic comedy, and radical new social movements in the US, the 1980s and 90s experienced another cycle of the genre, best described by Grindon as the “reaffirmation of romance cycle” (58). Now fully disintegrated, the Production Code was no longer a concern for

---

<sup>77</sup> Popular sex comedies include Howard Hawks’ *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), Billy Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *The Apartment* (1960), and Michael Gordon’s *Pillow Talk* (1959).

<sup>78</sup> See: Grindon 46, who also discusses Otto Preminger’s *The Moon is Blue* (1953), an early example of a director challenging the Code by releasing the film without a Seal of Approval.

<sup>79</sup> Marilyn Monroe and Tony Curtis’ maritime embrace in *Some Like It Hot* is an excellent example of this.

<sup>80</sup> Examples of the radical romantic comedy include Mike Nichols’ *The Graduate* (1967), Hal Ashby’s *Harold and Maude* (1971), and Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977).

filmmakers, allowing any amount of sexuality to be represented onscreen.<sup>81</sup> Despite this, the reaffirmation romances reflect the time period's emerging conservatism. McDonald describes these films as reacting to social trends and challenges "including the full emergence of the AIDS crisis, the reassertion of 'family values', the rise of the religious right and a corresponding emphasis on sexual caution, monogamy and abstinence" (88). The reaffirmation romances arguably return to many conventions endorsed by the traditionalism of the Production Code, despite it being a Code of the past. Most notably, these films reassert traditional values by rejecting the ambivalent endings of the nervous romances, once again heralding the romantic union of a couple as the ultimate solution to life's problems.<sup>82</sup> Since this cycle, the romantic comedy has withstood the test of time, reshaping itself within various societal changes and attitudes toward romance.

It is, of course, not uncommon for studies of the genre to connect a film's representation of romance with the historical context. Recalling the work of Barry Keith Grant, genres "embody and express a society's rituals, institutions and values," attempting to "address and sometimes seemingly resolve our problems and dilemmas" (29). In this vein, associating a film's themes or underlying message with the era in which it was produced is not a particularly novel undertaking. This work has been done. However, the romantic comedies following the screwball still present a fertile area for research. Throughout the years, these films have retained something in common: that somewhat "screwy" female protagonist. Whether the gold digger or virgin of the 1950s, the

---

<sup>81</sup> By this point, the current Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) film rating system was put in place. Contemporary audiences are familiar with the classification system of modern film ratings, such as "G," "PG 13," and "R."

<sup>82</sup> Prominent films of the "reaffirmation" cycle include Nora Ephron's *You've Got Mail* (1998), Rob Reiner's *When Harry Met Sally...* (1989), and Garry Marshall's *Pretty Woman* (1990).

neurotic or unconventional heroine of the 1970s, or the headstrong working woman of the 1980s and 90s, the women of the romantic comedy have remained a force for the genre. Despite the transformations of the genre over time, its principle female characters have retained much in common with the 1930s' Irene Bullock, Ellen Andrews, and Susan Vance. Scholars have already been discussing these new romantic heroines,<sup>83</sup> but these characters' demonstration of sexual desire is a particular area requiring more research. Although the representation of sex onscreen has not been restricted by regulatory boards since the Breen Era, it is worth noting the discrepancy in these films' ratings.<sup>84</sup> While certain contemporary romantic comedies have been granted an "R" rating, others have remained at a "PG" rating or lower.<sup>85</sup> Keeping this in mind, further studies on the genre may find interest in how these films depict sexual attraction and desire, particularly in regards to the female character, while remaining under current film rating guidelines.

Back in the 1930s, the screwball comedy posed a variety of challenges. Most notably, the genre asked how to make a film about sex at a time where its representation onscreen was strictly prohibited. Andrew Sarris' proposed the solution to such a dilemma in his oft-cited essay, "The Sex Comedy Without Sex," writing "Here we have all these beautiful people with nothing to do. Let us invent some substitutes for sex. The wisecracks multiply beyond measure, and when the audiences tire of verbal sublimation, the performers do cartwheels and pratfalls and make funny

---

<sup>83</sup> Michele Schreiber's *American Postfeminist Cinema: Women, Romance and Contemporary Culture* is one apt example of this kind of research; her book examines contemporary heroines in post-1980s romantic comedies.

<sup>84</sup> MPAA ratings require that even a PG-13-rated picture may contain "More than brief nudity...but such nudity in a PG-13 rated motion picture generally will not be sexually oriented" ("Classification and Rating Rules" 7).

<sup>85</sup> For example, both *When Harry Met Sally...* and *Pretty Woman* are rated "R," while *You've Got Mail* is rated PG.

expressions” (13). While pratfalls and verbal humor certainly do account for a large amount of the genre’s codification of sex, this thesis investigates further means by which sexual desire was represented in these films throughout the Breen era. Specifically, I have identified visual conventions repeated throughout the genre which may replace explicit demonstration or declaration of desire. In both *It Happened One Night* and *Bringing Up Baby*, the employment of a narrative “barrier” is also an important signifier of challenges being overcome. Both of these—the blanket and the brontosaurus, respectively—are real, physical obstacles, and only upon their visually explicit and grandiose collapse do they leave the romantic union of the couple unambiguous. By placing the screwball female at the center of the transgression of these barriers, the genre subverts conservative values promoted by the Production Code in the 1930s. Invoking the newspaper headline read by Peter in *It Happened One Night*, the screwball’s literal and symbolic toppling of these objects proclaims to the audience: “Love Triumphs Again!”

## Works Cited

- Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. British Film Institute, 1999.
- “American Comedy.” *American Cinema/American Culture*, by John Belton, 4th ed., McGraw-Hill, 2013, pp. 163–194.
- Annie Hall*. Dir. Woody Allen. United Artists, 1977.
- The Apartment*. Dir. Billy Wilder. United Artists, 1960.
- The Awful Truth*. Dir. Leo McCarey. Columbia, 1937.
- Baker, Jean H. *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*. Reprint ed., Hill and Wang, 2012.
- Balász, Béla. “The Face of Man.” *Film Theory & Criticism*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Oxford University Press, 2009, pp. 275–281.
- Bazin, André. *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 1, University of California Press, 1967.
- Bernstein, Matthew. *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*. Rutgers University Press, 1999.
- Bitzer, G.W. *The Athletic Girl and the Burglar*. American Mutoscope and Biograph Co, 1905.
- . *Physical Culture Lesson*. American Mutoscope and Biograph Co, 1906.
- Blue Beard's Eighth Wife*. Dir. Ernst Lubitsch. Paramount, 1938.
- Bringing Up Baby*. Dir. Howard Hawks. RKO, 1938.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Harvard University Press, 1981.
- Dean, Carolyn J. *Sexuality and Modern Western Culture*. Twayne Publishers, 1996.
- Deleyto, Celestino. *The Secret Life of Romantic Comedy*. Manchester University Press, 2009.
- DiBattista, Maria. *Fast-Talking Dames*. Yale University Press, 2001.
- The Divorcee*. Dir. Robert Z. Leonard. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1930.

- Doherty, Thomas. "The Code Before 'Da Vinci'." *Wall Street Journal*, 20 May 2006, [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/19/AR2006051901530.html?noredirect=on](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/19/AR2006051901530.html?noredirect=on).
- Doherty, Thomas. *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and The Production Code Administration*. Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Gardner, Gerald. *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters From the Hays Office, 1934-1968*. Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1987.
- Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Dir. Howard Hawks. 20th Century Fox, 1953.
- Glitre, Kathrina. *Hollywood Romantic Comedy: States of the Union 1934-65*. Manchester University Press, 2006.
- The Godless Girl*. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Pathé, 1929.
- Goodman, Ezra. "Anything But Love, Baby." *World Film News*, 1938. Lantern.
- Gordon, Mara, and Alyson Hurt. "Early Abortion Bans: Which States Have Passed Them?" *NPR*, 5 June 2019, [www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/06/05/729753903/early-abortion-bans-which-states-have-passed-them](http://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/06/05/729753903/early-abortion-bans-which-states-have-passed-them).
- The Graduate*. Dir. Mike Nichols. United Artists, 1967.
- Grant, Barry Keith. *Genre and Society*. Wallflower Press, 2007.
- Grindon, Leger. *The Hollywood Romantic Comedy: Conventions, History, Controversies*. Blackwell Publishing, 2011.
- Harold and Maude*. Dir. Hal Ashby. Paramount, 1971.
- Harvey, James. *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood from Lubitsch to Sturges*. Da Capo Press, 1998.
- His Girl Friday*. Dir. Howard Hawks. Columbia, 1940.
- Horton, Andrew, editor. *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*. University of California Press, 1991.
- IMDb. "Yearly Top 10 Grossing Films 1930-1939." IMDb.com, 29 Apr. 2014, [www.imdb.com/list/ls058253921/](http://www.imdb.com/list/ls058253921/).
- It Happened One Night*. Dir. Frank Capra. Columbia, 1934.

- Jacobs, Lea. "Industry Self-Regulation and the Problem of Textual Determination." *Controlling Hollywood: Censorship and Regulation in the Studio Era*, edited by Matthew Bernstein, Rutgers University Press, 1999, pp. 87–101.
- Kael, Pauline. *5001 Nights at the Movies*. Henry Holt and Company, 1991.
- Kardish, Laurence. *Reel Plastic Magic: A History of Films and Filmmaking in America*. Little, Brown, 1972.
- Kendall, Elizabeth. *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s*. Cooper Square Press, 1990.
- Kimmel, Daniel M. *I'll Have What She's Having: Behind the Scenes of the Great Romantic Comedies*. Ivan R Dee, Inc, 2008.
- The Kiss*. Dir. Thomas Edison. Thomas A. Edison, Inc., 1896.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality, 1909-1925*. Routledge, 1988.
- The Lady Eve*. Dir. Preston Sturges. Paramount, 1941.
- Linville, James. "Billy Wilder, The Art of Screenwriting No. 1." *The Paris Review*, issue 138, 1996.
- Longworth, Karina. "Will Hays and 'Pre-Code' Hollywood." *You Must Remember This*, 13 August 2018, <http://www.youmustrememberthispodcast.com/episodes/2018/7/30/will-hays-and-pre-code-hollywood-fake-news-fact-checking-hollywood-babylon-episode-7?rq=will%20hays>.
- Madame Satan*. Dir. Cecil B. DeMille. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1929.
- Malone, Aubrey. *Censoring Hollywood: Sex and Violence in Film and on the Cutting Room Floor*. McFarland, 2011.
- Mast, Gerald, editor. *Bringing Up Baby*. Rutgers University Press. 1988.
- McDonald, Tamar Jeffers. *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*. Wallflower Press, 2007.
- McLaren, Angus. *Twentieth-Century Sexuality: A History*. Blackwell, 1999.
- The Moon is Blue*. Dir. Otto Preminger. United Artists, 1953.

Motion Picture Association of America. *Classification and Rating Rules*. Effective as revised January 1, 2010.

Motion Picture Association of America. *Production Code Administration Records*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

*My Man Godfrey*. Dir. Gregory La Cava. Universal, 1936.

“My Man Godfrey.” Review of *My Man Godfrey*, directed by Gregory La Cava. *Variety*, 31 Dec. 1935.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. *God, Justice, Love, Beauty: Four Little Dialogues*. Fordham University Press, 2011.

Newman, Andrew Adam. “Pigs With Cellphones, but No Condoms.” *New York Times*, 18 June 2007. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/18/business/media/18adcol.html>.

Norman, Geoffrey. “Strong Circulation.” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 Mar. 2009, [www.wsj.com/articles/SB123750174381989343](http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123750174381989343).

Ockerbloom, John Mark. “Physical Culture Archives.” *The Online Books Page*, Serials Archive, 10 May 2019, [onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=physicalculture](http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=physicalculture).

Pautz, Michelle. “The Decline in Average Weekly Cinema Attendance: 1930 -2000.” *Issues in Political Economy*, Vol. 11, 2002.

*The Philadelphia Story*. Dir. George Cukor. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1940.

*Pillow Talk*. Dir. Michael Gordon. Universal, 1959.

Polan, Dana. “The Light Side of Genius: Hitchcock's Mr. and Mrs. Smith in the Screwball Tradition.” *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, edited by Andrew Horton, University of California Press, 1991, pp. 131–152.

Pollard, Tom. *Sex and Violence: The Hollywood Censorship Wars*. Paradigm Publishers, 2009.

Potter, Cherry. *I Love You But... Romance, Comedy and the Movies*. Methuen, 2002.

*Pretty Woman*. Dir. Garry Marshall. Buena Vista Pictures, 1990.

*The Public Enemy*. Dir. William A. Wellman. Warner Bros. 1931.

*Red-Headed Woman*. Dir. Jack Conway. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1932.



- Robie, W.F. *Rational Sex Ethics: A Physiological and Psychological Study of the Sex Lives of Normal Men and Women, With Suggestions for a Rational Sex Hygiene With Reference to Actual Case Histories*. 1916.
- Rubin, Martin. "1933 Movies and the New Deal in Entertainment." *American Cinema of the 1930s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Ina Rae Hark, Rutgers University Press, 2007, pp. 92–116.
- Rybin, Steven. *Gestures of Love: Romancing Performance in Classical Hollywood Cinema*. State University of New York Press, 2017.
- Sarris, Andrew. "The Sex Comedy Without Sex." *American Film*. vol. III, no. 5, 1978.
- Scarface*. Dir. Howard Hawks. The Caddo Company, 1932.
- Schreiber, Michele. *American Postfeminist Cinema: Women, Romance and Contemporary Culture*. Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1595/96.
- Sikov, Ed. *Screwball: Hollywood's Madcap Romantic Comedies*. Crown Publishers, 1989.
- Siomopoulos, Anna. *Hollywood melodrama and the New Deal: Public Daydreams*. Routledge, 2012.
- Some Like it Hot*. Dir. Billy Wilder. United Artists, 1959.
- Staples, Brent. "When The Suffrage Movement Sold out to White Supremacy." *The New York Times*, 2 Feb 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/02/opinion/sunday/women-voting-19th-amendment-white-supremacy.html?auth=login-email&login=email>.
- Tudor, Andrew. *Genre*. University of Texas Press, 1986.
- Twentieth Century*. Dir. Howard Hawks. Columbia, 1934.
- Ullman, Sharon R. *Sex Seen: The Emergence of Modern Sexuality in America*. University of California Press, 1997.
- Wartenberg, Thomas E. *Unlikely Couples : Movie Romance as Social Criticism*. Westview Press, 1999.
- Wexman, Virginia Wright. *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage, and Hollywood Performance*. Princeton University Press, 1993.

*When Harry Met Sally...* Dir. Rob Reiner. Columbia, 1989.

Wolf, Susan R., and Christopher Grau. *Understanding Love: Philosophy, Film, and Fiction*.  
Oxford University Press, 2014.

*You've Got Mail*. Dir. Nora Ephron. Warner Bros., 1998.