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Why are Comedy Films so Critically Underrated?

Michael Arell

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WHY ARE COMEDY FILMS SO CRITICALLY UNDERRATED?

by

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of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Bachelor of Music in Education)

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Abstract

This study explores the lack of critical and scholarly attention given to the film genre of comedy. Included as part of the study are both existing and original theories of the elements of film comedy. An extensive look into the development of film comedy traces the role of comedy in a socio-cultural and historical manner and identifies the major comic themes and conventions that continue to influence film comedy. Ten comedy film case studies are then presented, analyzing the recurring themes and conventions in practice and extracting the existing critical language used in the analysis of comedy film. The final chapter of the study brings together the recurring themes of comedy as they exist in the film medium and identifies several distinct principles and conventions of comedy that make it unique and that lead to explanations of why critics and scholars have difficulty approaching the genre of comedy. The study concludes with the presentation of practical solutions to the established, inadequate state of comedy film criticism.
Dedication

To the memory of those who made us laugh: the motley mountebanks, the clowns, the buffoons, in all times and in all nations, whose efforts have lightened our burden a little, this thesis is affectionately dedicated

-Adapted from Preston Sturges’ dedication to *Sullivan’s Travels*
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I. INTRODUCTION

“Amid all the lofty discussions of epic cinema and its status as art, one- and two-reel comedies poured out of the film companies, attracting little or no critical notice beyond the laughter of the common filmgoer” (Sklar 61).

Forward

Why are comedy films so critically underrated? How can one of the inaugural genres of film that brings so much pleasure to audiences be so overlooked by scholars? Is comedy as a whole held with disregard, or is it just certain types of comedies or certain comic personalities or situations that are? These are just some of the questions that I hope to answer in my study.

Very little scholarly consensus has been reached in regards to comedy:

[film scholar Brian] Henderson cites the absence of a master theory of comedy as blocking other understandings of the genre: It is a scandal of culture that there has never been a widely accepted theory of comedy to organize the general sense of the subject and to orient particular studies within it. Since Aristotle’s Poetics, there has been a theory of tragedy, more or less the same one…. Lacking such a founding text and oddly unable to form a later tradition, theorists of comedy have operated in a vacuum, each writer setting out boldly to do the whole job (Karnick and Jenkins 70).

Until a common critical language evolves to analyze comedies, critics and scholars will continue to approach comedy film rather haphazardly. Yet despite the absence of a disciplinary map that includes all types of comedy, one can easily categorize comedies into subgenres based on shared traits. While discovering recurrent threads shared by all subgenres of comedy (as I will explore in Chapter IV) will help clarify the field, trying to create an all-encompassing definition of comedy to include all, as Aristotle does for Tragedy, would remain nearly impossible:
Comedy is notoriously resistant to theorization. There is, after all, something inescapably comic and self-defeating about the scholar, oblivious to comedy’s charms, searching out its origins or trying to account for its effects. In Cicero’s *De Oratore*, one of the interlocutors in the discussion of the comic notes that everyone “who tried to teach anything like a theory or art of this matter proved themselves so conspicuously silly that their very silliness is the only laughable thing about them” (Leggatt 3).

As I have learned through my work on this study, to even attempt a “serious” study of comedy seems counterintuitive. Not only do most institutions even largely ignore comic subjects themselves, but also these institutions ignore any academic studies of comedy. I agree with literary critic Johan Verberckmoes, who feels that “Laughter and humour no longer need to be legitimized as proper subjects for historical research...They are interdisciplinary topics par excellence and invite thorough reflection on the working methods of historians of all kinds” (1). In this study, I have acknowledged the interplay of the history of comedy and audience expectations with the critical evaluation of comedy as an art.

Much of the meaning behind this project concerns me personally. I began making my own films—particularly comedies—at the age of seven, and I have always questioned why film comedy rarely seems to be recognized as possessing aesthetic value. My experience with the creation of comedy is significant in the scope of this study, since many who have written about film comedy before me have never attempted to create comedy of their own. Philosopher and (at times) comic writer Umberto Eco describes the major scholars who have attempted to study comedy:

Not one of those who have written on the Comic could be called a Comic writer. Among them we do not find, for instance, either Aristophanes or Lucian, or Molière or Rabelais—not even Groucho Marx. On the other hand, we come across the following… as serious a thinker as Aristotle, who introduces the Comic precisely as a final explication of the Tragic…. a fussy, moralizing, austere philosopher such as Kant… another philosopher who was just as austere, boring,
and not at all inclined to joke, such as Hegel… a romantic, morbid, whining—although reasonably desperate—poet such as Baudelaire… a somewhat gloomy and existentially anguished thinker such as Kierkegaard… a few psychologists with little sense of humor, as, for instance the German Lipps… of all the contemporary French philosophers, not the amiable conversationalist Alain, but the metaphysician Bergson and the sociologist Lalo… and… the father of neurosis, Sigmund Freud, who revealed the tragic aspects and the death wish lying at the bottom of our unconscious (“Pirandello Ridens” 164-5).

Personally, I feel that comedy is a more approachable topic when the writer has knowledge of what the making of a comedy entails.

The Current State of Film Comedy Research

Many before me have written about the history of film comedy, the significant comic minds of the Twentieth Century, and how the films are a reaction to the times:

Overemphasis on evaluation can lead to a reductive historical approach which simply assumes a linear progress from the ‘bad’ films to the ‘good’ films, without striving to understand the historical context or conventions in which those unfamiliar or unappealing films were produced (Riblet 170).

The significance of the historical and cultural contexts in which films exist cannot be overstated. The effect of historical events and changes in the culture are important to the comedies that appear at specific times, and sometimes the films themselves may influence the culture (as the reader will see in Chapter III). The resulting socio-historical compendium of comedy films results in ebbs and flows of many successful comedies of one style, featuring one performer or one filmmaker, contrasting with periods of few notable comedy productions. Some academics catalogue the various comic styles, defining them as “comedian comedies”, “slapstick”, or “Screwball”, among others. Although a few scholars have tried to discover what makes a comedy funny or to compare or contrast comedies to non-comic genres, to the best of my knowledge, no
scholar has ever tried to determine why critics do not give comedies the recognition that I argue they deserve:

Is film comedy a genre? If we are tempted to argue that it is, what are its distinctive features? There are no elements of setting or iconography that distinguish comedy as a genre. There is no plot structure that encompasses all comedies. Nor is there shared subject matter…. What pattern of narrative development can we point to that could encompass films as diverse as The Awful Truth, Dr. Strangelove, Tampopo, Monty Python’s Meaning of Life, and Modern Times? (Karnick and Jenkins 69).

Perhaps films classified as comedies are so diverse that one cannot create criteria by which to judge a quality comedy. I acknowledge that non-comic genres may have distinct subgenres as well, but few academics attempt to create master definitions of non-comic genres as they do comic films. Consider that a Western picture and a Science Fiction picture may both fall under the genre of Action, yet a scholar will not try to define them as following the same conventions as she would attempt to define Bringing Up Baby (Hawks 1938) and Doctor Strangelove (Kubrick 1964) as doing just that. As the reader will see in Chapters II and III, the range of comedy, as with non-comic subjects, is as diverse as the people that enjoy the form.

Viewing comedy as a social activity is much more a component than with other genres, “Laughter is always taken to be a communication” (Karnick and Jenkins 268). For example, with a gathering of friends, it would be commonplace to watch a Pink Panther or a Marx Brothers picture. This situation could possibly be due to the fact that a comedy (which can be quite episodic) can withstand an interruption such as a conversation during a viewing, which could be disruptive to the viewing of a non-comic film. It would be rare for friends to gather as a social activity and then view a tragedy like Love Story (Arthur Hiller 1970) or Romeo and Juliet (Franco Zeffirelli 1968),
although I do not wish to negate the ability for people to bond through watching a tragedy. It seems to be true for an audience in contemporary times that comedy is enjoyable when shared, while tragedy is preferred as a personal experience, “Our laughter is always the laughter of a group” (Bergson 64). The idea of comedy as a communal experience helps explain what makes comedy unique.

The story of the development of film comedy is a story of evolution. While the things that make audiences cry—death, heartbreak, separation, et cetera—are rather universal and unchanging, what makes one laugh is forever in flux due to cultural and historical audience preferences, as I noted above:

In film, the designation ‘comedy’ provides the spectator and/or the creator of a text with little more that is concrete about the text than that it is funny, thus returning us to one of the initial questions posed in this section: What can be said to unify the diverse group of films commonly regarded as comedies? (Karnick and Jenkins 72).

What audiences might have considered funny one hundred years ago may not receive the same reaction from an audience today. Even different contemporary cultures will disagree whether something is funny or not. This nature of comedy does not mean that common elements among comedy throughout history do not exist, quite the contrary in fact, but it does bring the reader’s attention to how popular and critical views of comedy can change drastically over time—an idea that I shall expand upon in Chapter II. With so many contrasting statements on the nature and conventions of comedy available from well-known scholars, it is necessary for me to present the definition of comedy that I shall be using in order for this study to be successful, which I shall present after I describe the parameters of my study.
Parameters of the Study

One of the major limits of my study and one of the most difficult decisions I had to make is that the study will only include post-sound era comedies. One distinguishing difference in the analyses of sound film versus silent film is how many critics approach silent comedy as the study of a comic performer, while sound comedy becomes the study of the director (Karnick and Jenkins 6). This difference in the critical focus, which I shall examine further in Chapters II and III, is noticeable in the analyses of many sound films—especially those pictures for which the performers were not the director’s first choice, indicating that the role was not written with a particular comic performer in mind. As the reader will learn, this performer/director debate does not apply to the auteur comedians like Chaplin and Allen, who assume multiple responsibilities in the creation of a film—performing and directing included. Before the sound picture, critics held film comedies in high regard, “It was the comics… that appealed to the discriminating as well as to the mass audience” (Dickinson 32). Keep in mind, as well, that many of the early filmmakers like Georges Méliès and the Lumière brothers made shorts that were entirely based on gags, as I shall address in Chapter II. Unlike films from the post-sound era, the silent comedies seem to resonate much better in the Twenty First Century than the silent tragedies—mostly due to the fact that the exaggerated actions of the silent film performers seem ridiculous to today’s audiences, which helps the silent comedies to remain funny, but only hurts the silent tragedies. Both comedies and tragedies had to experience changing conventions, but it seems to the modern viewer that the silent conventions of comedy are still more relatable than the silent conventions of tragedy.
The addition of sound to the motion picture medium, forced the comedians to change from a physical to a verbal style of comedy, “Of the popular genres that had formed into recognizable patterns during the 1920s, silent comedy was affected most radically by the introduction of sound” (Wexman 108). Of course, focusing on sound films forces me to exclude the contributions of many great comic performers and directors, for “The careers of Mack Sennett, Harold Lloyd, Harry Langdon, and Buster Keaton all declined rapidly with the coming of sound” (Cook 263). However, as we will see, sound opened opportunities for the mostly verbal comedy of Groucho Marx and the Screwball Comedies. Therefore, when I mention silent comedies in this thesis, it will be in the context of its influence on later comedies, and not as case studies in themselves.

Although film historian David A. Cook argues that “purely visual comedy was necessarily destroyed by sound, except insofar as it found a new home in the animated sound cartoon” (264), I have decided to exclude animated comedies. In the world of film criticism, animation occupies a genre of its own, with the intricacies of its unique conventions requiring a study of their own. Also, many studios create animated pictures in order to appeal to an audience of mostly children, which causes scholars to consider animated pictures separately in many film studies.

Another reason to exclude silent comedies in this study hinges on how some of the earliest examples of silent comedy have not aged well, “This style of physical comedy often seems too sadistic, unsubtle and narratively unmotivated to be genuinely funny to modern audiences” (Riblet 173). The technology of sound forced the performances of comedy to adapt, “sound technology mingled with cultural changes to shape a new, highly verbal comedy style” (Sklar 186). As I shall address in Chapter III
in the case study of Chaplin, the silent comedies had universal appeal. The addition of sound to comedy forced the comedy to be more localized. Even in translation, the subtleties of verbal comedies like the Screwball Comedies are lost on audiences of another language. This difference between silent and sound comedies drove the necessary adaptations in comic performances between the silent and sound film eras. Not only do the performances of film comedy change over time, but also the foci and methods of film criticism. The reader must remember this detail when critical judgments of a particular film seem to change depending on when the reviewer made the assessment, as the reader will find in Chapter III.

In addition to limiting the scope of my study to post-sound films, I will also limit myself on the other end of the timeline and only cover films released up through 1980. In their book, *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, film scholar Frank Krutnik states “There have been few prominent film comedians over the last 20 years” (Krutnik 22), citing that television comedians had overtaken the prominence of those in film. The influence of the limited runtimes of television programs and the necessary adjustment in comic timing to suit a television format is so great on the comedies of these decades, that it would be difficult to compare them to earlier comedies in a study of this size. By the late 1970s, television comedy had outgrown the bounds of television, so much so that a lot of the inspiration for film comedies in the 1980s and 1990s come from the writers and performers of sketch television series such as “Saturday Night Live” (Chevy Chase, John Belushi, Bill Murray, Dan Akroyd, Eddie Murphy, Mike Myers, et al) and “Second City Television” (Eugene Levy, Andrea Martin, John Candy, Martin Short, Rick Moranis, et al):
Comedy became a part of the new blockbuster phenomenon with the unexpected box-office triumph of a spoof on college fraternity life, *National Lampoon’s Animal House* (1978), directed by John Landis. Much of its success was credited to the manic performance style of John Belushi, a comic actor making his film debut after gaining wide popularity on the youth-oriented late-night television program “Saturday Night Live”. A showcase for young comic performers, the same series also propelled Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd… and later Eddie Murphy into film careers (Sklar 435).

Filmmakers and comic performers that came from the companies of “Saturday Night Live” and “Second City Television” assume that the audience is already familiar with the comedians and with their performances. Therefore, a comedy of this subgenre would receive a better reaction from an audience with prior knowledge of the characters, situations, and forms of the subgenre than from an audience that views it as a standalone piece. The style of many post 1980 comedies in this vein are so tied to the abrupt, vignetted style of sketch comedy television series that it is this particular style that defines these films, rather than their inherited influences from earlier comedy films. In summation, the case studies that I shall include in this study will be those film comedies that have been released from approximately the year 1930 to the year 1980.

As a second parameter, I shall only include English language films in my study, for “comedy… does not export as well, since national tastes in humor differ and language subtleties are lost in translation” (Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn 34). Tragedy is arguably more universal, while comedy is localized, “The comic… seems bound to its time, society, and cultural anthropology. We understand the drama of the protagonist of *Rashomon*, but we don’t understand when and why the Japanese laugh” (Eco “The Comic and the Rule” 269). Specific non-English speaking cultural references or subtleties are typically lost on English-speaking audiences, making English-cultural analyses of foreign language comedies difficult. As I mentioned above with the limits of translation of
English-cultural comedies to other languages, translations lose the specific capabilities of each language for nuance. One only has to consider how many foreign dramas simply become comedies to American audiences because of poor dubbing! For example, the original *Godzilla* (*Gojira*, Ishirō Honda 1954) was received as a well-made and highly regarded film in its native Japan, however when reedited and redubbed by an American studio that included the American actor Raymond Burr in order to make it a more relatable picture for American audiences, it turned into a ridiculous farce.

Third, although many great explorations into the realm of comedy have developed around the sequences of shorts, I have chosen to only include feature length comedies in my study for a couple reasons. The majority of shorts are comedies, with few critically-recognized dramatic counterparts with which to compare them. Likewise, most films that critics and institutions review are feature length. Many film reviewers, societies, and award ceremonies will not even consider films shorter than a certain running time. For example, The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) has determined that a film shorter than a 40 minute running time cannot qualify for an Academy Award. Exclusions such as this further underscore the lack of critical attention afforded comedy, a genre within which many of the earliest entries exist in the form of shorts. It would be quite difficult for a critic, under the assumption that an essential element of film is a continuous dramatic narrative, to approach a comedy that is made of series of vignettes. Even within a short subject, the simple narrative may contain dozens of gags, which at first impression do not seem to relate to the narrative. With my decision to exclude short subject films, I must exclude my beloved Three Stooges as well as much of the work of
Laurel and Hardy. However, as with many topics covered in this study, the contributions to film comedy from each one of these comedy teams merit a study of their own.

Finally, comedy can exist in all forms of situations, as its multiple subgenres confirms. In order for a film to qualify for my study, it must be primarily a comedy. This point may be the most delicate of all the criteria for this study, for a romance with an undertone of comedy would not qualify, whereas a comedy that includes a romance would, to name one example. Much of my decision in this category will be based upon the opinions of those scholars and critics that have studied comedy before me. With this parameter particularly, my definition of comedy that follows becomes quite critical. For example, while Ninotchka (Ernst Lubitsch 1939) and Adam’s Rib (George Cukor 1949) contain a lot of humor, most critics and film societies are more likely to classify them as romances rather than comedies. Likewise, some of the funniest pictures like Singin’ In The Rain (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly 1952), The Muppet Movie (James Frawley 1979), and Victor Victoria (Blake Edwards 1982), do not qualify because they are musical comedies—a genre that I shall explain in more detail in Chapter III. If a notable film comedy does not appear in this study and if it fits within the first three parameters, it is most likely excluded from this study because it fails to fit within this final parameter. Keeping these four preceding parameters in mind, I shall now present the definition of comedy that I shall follow in the course of this study.

A Definition of Comedy

I must begin this section by reiterating that there is no universal, unified definition of comedy, “we have no completely unexceptionable theory of laughter, and this fact is
very generally accepted” (Olson 7). While dozens of scholars have attempted to craft definitions of comedy since the earliest days of Greek comedy, it is difficult to even gauge what the components of a successful comedy are, “we do not all, as readers, laugh at the same things or even twice at the same place” (Charney 186). Defining comedy as an overall idea remains elusive if people will disagree whether a specific film is a comedy or not, as literary critic Elder Olson explains:

How can we have a single definition of things which are heterogeneous? If definition is the statement of something, how can one definition state the natures of things which are different in nature?... It would not be possible to find any but a vague formula to fit The Birds of Aristophanes, Tristram Shandy, A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Pride and Prejudice (Olson 4-26).

Olson goes on to argue that, “the comic plot need not consist wholly of comic incidents; it is comic if the overall action is comic” (Olson 61). However, film scholar Kristine Karnick demonstrates how this may be problematic, “classifying films as comedies because they contain jokes, comic moments and humorous situations is problematic, because obvious non-comedies contain a great many such situations” (126). They argue that “the goal of comedy [is] to provoke audience laughter” (269). Olson concurs by saying that “it is better to be funny than logical if you are a comedian” (80). From that explanation, philosopher Henri Bergson attempts to classify laughter and its causes:

What does laughter mean? What is the basal element in the laughable? What common ground can we find between the grimace of a merry-andrew, a play upon words, an equivocal situation in a burlesque and a scene of high comedy?... The greatest of thinkers, from Aristotle downwards, have tackled this little problem (61).

Bergson identifies five comic qualities: absentminded characters, the external focus of comedy, absurdity, exaggeration, and surprise (77-86).
His findings have inspired me to go further and to define what I call the Four Principles of Comic Effect. Together, these Principles do not form a universal definition of comedy, rather they reveal the themes and conventions that make comedy what it is—which is perhaps the closest one can get to a functional definition of comedy. I shall expand upon each of these Principles in the case studies and cite specific examples.

First, is The Principle of Comic Timing. This Principle includes the elements of surprise, discovery, revelation, and anticlimax—shown so well through the medium of film with which a filmmaker can disclose or withhold information through shot choice—an element of filmmaking that I shall discuss in later sections. Expectations and assumptions of the audience—either previously held or encouraged by the filmmaker’s use of patterns—fuels the Comic Timing, “Humor depends on unpredictability, which often takes the form of incongruity.... Successful humor involves our expectations being thwarted” (Karnick 128-9. Olson adds that:

people laugh hardest when they suddenly are struck with a sense of the absurd, and hence those who know how to tell a joke know they must mislead their listeners; no one is pleased by the joke the end of which he anticipates or knows” (47-51).

Here is where comedy and horror films diverge. Both rely on the unexpected, but comedy uses an aspect of surprise for its comedic absurdity, while horror uses it as suspense. The surprise of comedy occurs when the comic performer goes against the viewer’s conception of what is socially permissible. However, for the suspense of horror to work, the viewer must anticipate that something horrific will happen—the unexpected occurs because the viewer does not know when the horrific thing will happen. Some may argue that the surprise of horror results in a more predictable outcome of fright or shock, while the surprise of comedy may lead to many things such as absurdity, unpredictability,
chaos, a pause, or even a shift in the narrative. One may see a great example of the element of surprise as a narrative shift in comedy in the “and now for something completely different” style of the Monty Python pictures.

Following expectations, points of coincidence fall under Comic Timing. At its greatest extent, this Principle can totally catch the viewer off guard with a total reversal or opposition of what the viewer expects. Through this Principle, the comedy may go against socio-cultural expectations, entering the domain of taboo.

The second Principle of Comic Effect is The Principle of Comic Logic. Comedy uses the logic of the absurd (177), “For the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness” (62). Olson says that, “Comedy is the imitation of a worthless action, complete and of a certain magnitude, in language with pleasing accessories differing from part to part, enacted, not narrated, effecting a *katastasis* of concern through the absurd (Olson 47). He goes on to say, “we can render it more comic as we increase the degree of absurdity or make more and more of the grounds for seriousness absurd” (Olson 109). Under this Principle fall the comic methods of exaggeration, excess, caricature, imitation, and mockery. Exaggeration follows as a product of the logic of the absurd by functioning in a way that makes sense within the frame of the comedy, but seems ridiculous outside the comedy:

The fragmentary lives we live are an existential comedy, like the intense schizoid lives of Dostoevsky’s characters…. In his notebooks Kafka explained that he wanted to exaggerate situations until everything becomes clear. Dostoevsky has this sort of comic clarity (Sypher 196-198).

Following these methods are the complementary methods of repetition, recurrence, and intensification. As I shall demonstrate using the case studies, recurring events and
repetitive actions and motifs result in a compounding of the actions or motifs, intensifying with each repetition.

The third Principle of Comic Effect is The Principle of Comic Experience. Comedy brings attention to the external, physical, and literal, “[a]ny incident is comic that calls our attention to the physical in a person” (93). As part of the physical side of comedy, we find that pratfalls and the like are involuntary (66). Film scholars Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins describe this aspect of comedy as, “Comedy pulls everything down to its most basic level, and as such it transcends petty concerns of the moment and enters a space where the sacred and the profane merge” (265). This essential reduction inherent in comedy makes comedy the most direct way of addressing a subject, without masking it or coding it with the social constraints necessary in non-comic presentations. Sypher concludes this point by saying that, “Comedy teaches us to look at life exactly as it is, undulled by scientific theories” (ix). Under this Principle, we have the comic trait of impersonation and disguise—most commonly seen by the cross-dressing gags that I shall explore in a couple case studies, particularly Bringing Up Baby and Some Like It Hot.

The last Principle of Comic Effect is The Principle of Comic Sense, which describes the lack of awareness featured by so many comic characters. Comedy often comes as a result of absent-minded characters, for “Absentmindedness, indeed, is not perhaps the actual fountain-head of the comic, but surely it is contiguous to a certain stream of facts and fancies which flows straight from the fountain-head” (Bergson 68). From Cervante’s Don Quixote to Peter Seller’s Inspector Clouseau, a character that is unaware of his own flaws makes us laugh, for “he cannot be comical unless there be some aspect of his person of which he is unaware, one side of his nature which he
overlooks; on that account alone does he make us laugh” (Bergson 155). Physically enacted, this absentmindedness leads to clumsiness. As for a comic character’s traits, her precipitance, or penchant for jumping into situations without any forethought of consequences comes from this Principle—best shown by Katharine Hepburn’s character of Susan Vance in *Bringing Up Baby*. In terms of interaction among characters, comic sense leads to the possibility of misunderstanding, confusion, and deception—again seen in *Bringing Up Baby*, as well as in *The Ladykilers*.

Following the Four Principles of Comic Effect, I shall now present the first four themes that I have identified as commonalities across all the comedy films present in this study. I shall introduce further themes throughout the case studies and explain them in detail in Chapter IV. First, I find that comedy goes against the conventions of filmmaking. 1) Comedy can break the Fourth Wall:

No performer in a film can ever really function as an enunciator—but the comedian is allowed, at specific and regulated moments, to masquerade as enunciator… through looks to the camera… or by direct address (Krutnik 24).

In comedy, the narrative is no longer the be all and end all, as gags often exist outside of the narrative. 2) A film comedy does not require closure—the resolution necessary for a fulfilling dramatic narrative. The comic heroine or that comic heroine’s situation may appear at the end of the film exactly as it had appeared at the beginning—with no apparent transformation within the heroine or with her situation. 3) In comedy, when one actor can play several roles, it not only works, it shows true comic merit. Often, the comedienne takes precedence over any character she may be portraying. As I stated above, in addition to these broken film conventions, comedy is the only genre of film that comfortably, and frequently, addresses social taboo.
The second common theme among comedies is that comedy is a struggle between limiters and disruptions; it is a balance of “forces that disrupt and forces that contain” (Crafton 116). In comedy, gags may upset the narrative structure with no undue consequences. It is up to the filmmaker to craft a narrative that makes it possible for other narrative events to keep the gags in check. Typically, every comedy has at least one comic character and one serious character, or ‘straight-man’, in order for the comedy to work. As part of this balance, we often see comic characters that are ‘The Other’, one who does not fit into the preexisting social mold. This is frequently true in the films of Chaplin as well as the anarchic comedies. Philosopher Umberto Eco writes about the particular way in which comedy pushes the limits put in place by society, individuals, or the specific narrative of a film, “Humor does not pretend… to lead us beyond our own limits. It gives us the feeling, or better, the picture of the structure of our own limits. It is never off limits, it undermines limits from inside” (“Frames of Comic ‘freedom’” 8). As Eco describes it, the viewer gains a better understanding of what is acceptable by the comic character going against the limits of acceptability.

The third common theme is that comedy is an essential part of humanity, marking us as distinctly human. Comedy gives us the opportunity to deal with life honestly, because with comedy we are forced to laugh at ourselves, no matter how uncomfortable. It causes us to drop our guard in order to deal with truths that might otherwise be painful, “the comic spirit keeps us pure in mind by requiring that we regard ourselves skeptically” (Sypher 253). Comedy forces us, as viewers, to acknowledge the flaws that we all have:

At its most triumphant moments, comic art frees us from peril without destroying our ideals and without mustering the heavy artillery of the puritan. Comedy can be a means of mastering our disillusions when we are caught in a dishonest or stupid society. After we recognize the misdoings, the blunders, we can liberate
ourselves by a confident, wise laughter that brings catharsis of our discontent. We see the flaws in things, but we do not always need to concede the victory, even if we live in a human world. If we can laugh wisely enough at ourselves and others, the sense of guilt, dismay, anxiety, or fear can be lifted. Unflinching and undaunted we see where we are. This strengthens us as well as society (Sypher 245).

Further, comedy emulates life or as Bergson puts it, “The comic oscillates between life and art” (74). The nature of comedy allows us, as individuals, to lower our defenses and to address issues openly and honestly. In this sense, comedy is necessary for a fulfilling life. I would even argue that life is the great comedy—if we allow it to be that by acknowledging and expressing our genuine selves, flaws included.

Finally, and closest to a definition of comedy as it applies to this study, a film comedy contains three essential cinematic elements specific to the medium’s capacity. First, a film comedy must contain at least one visual gag—consider Chaplin’s walk or Cary Grant in a woman’s robe in *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks 1938). Second, a film comedy must contain auditory humor—think either of the classic banter of the Screwball comedies or how we hear horses neigh every time Frau Blucher’s name is spoken in *Young Frankenstein* (Mel Brooks 1974). Third, a film comedy must contain at least one comic situation, whether it is the mistaken identity of The Tramp in *City Lights* (Chaplin 1933) or the pursuit of the leopard in *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks 1938). The film medium can present these three types of comedy splendidly, as the filmmaker has the ability to manipulate the camera distance, the sound, the rate at which shots succeed each other, and more.

It is because of this final, three-part definition that I have excluded many films from this study that some critics and scholars may still consider comedies. For example, *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols 1967) certainly involves a comic situation, but not visual or
auditory humor. Likewise, *The Sting* (George Roy Hill 1974) contains a comic situation and many comic lines, but no visual gags. I admit that some may argue that they both contain such gags; but in any case, such gags that may exist are not a major focus of the respective films, as they would be in the films in this study that I consider to be comedies. If a film that the reader expects to find in this study is not present, it is most likely because it either 1) does not fit within the established parameters of the study or 2) it does not fit within the definition of film comedy that I shall be using for this study.

**The Underrepresentation of Comedy**

Before I pursue explanations for why critics and scholars underrate comedy, I will first support my argument that they do indeed ignore most comedy. When the first film comedy premiered (discussed in more detail in Chapter II), “it was the Cinematograph rather than the film which received praise” (Gunning “Crazy Machines” 88). Thus began a bias against comedy that continues through this day:

Like literary criticism, film criticism has gravitated toward genres more aligned with tragedy than comedy…. Film critics on the left have been wary of granting comedy a critical edge. The lessons about comedy… seem to have remained unlearned or at least inadequately studied. The consequences for film criticism of this lack of critical attention to comedy have been complex and, I believe, unfortunate (Rowe 43).

I do not want the reader to misinterpret the above statement as claiming “critics and scholars determine comedy to be bad”; however, by ignoring its significance, they seem to argue that it is not good enough to have aesthetic value. To demonstrate to the reader how comedy is left out in much of the literature of film criticism, I have compiled data from a variety of film associations and media publications.
In 1998, to mark the 100th anniversary of the invention of the motion picture, the American Film Institute decided to create a list, ranking the 100 greatest films of the first 100 years of filmmaking. They clearly touched on a popular idea, for many other institutions and publications followed suit. In the list of the 100 greatest films of all time, AFI only includes ten comedies: Some Like It Hot (#14, Billy Wilder 1959), Dr. Strangelove (26, Stanley Kubrick 1964), Annie Hall (31, Woody Allen 1977), It Happened One Night (35, Frank Capra 1934), Tootsie (62, Sydney Pollack 1982), The Gold Rush (74, Charlie Chaplin 1925), City Lights (76, Charlie Chaplin 1931), Modern Times (81, Charlie Chaplin 1936), Duck Soup (85, Leo McCarey 1933), and Bringing Up Baby (97, Howard Hawks 1938). To clarify, The American Film Institute has determined that of the 100 greatest films ever made, only 10% are comedies. Notice also that three of the ten films are works of Chaplin.

In 2008, AFI decided to update their original list to 13% comedies, including The General (#18, Buster Keaton 1926), The Philadelphia Story (44, George Cukor 1940), and A Night At The Opera (85, Sam Wood 1935). Some Like It Hot (now #22), Dr. Strangelove (39), Annie Hall (35), It Happened One Night (46), Tootsie (69), The Gold Rush (58), City Lights (11), Modern Times (78), Duck Soup (60), and Bringing Up Baby (88) return to the list, though in a different order than in the previous list. Once again, the reader may notice that Chaplin still has the most entries.

On American Movie Classic’s Filmsite, editor-in-chief Tim Dirks compiled a list of the 100 greatest films that appear on many such lists. He elected to include 13 comedies: Annie Hall, Bringing Up Baby, City Lights, Dr. Strangelove, Duck Soup, The General, The Gold Rush, His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks 1940), It Happened One
Night, The Lady Eve (Preston Sturges 1941), Modern Times, A Night At The Opera, and Some Like It Hot. Apparently, he was feeling more generous towards comedy when compared to other critics. Critics at Yahoo.com include 11 comedy films in their list of the “100 Movies To See Before You Die”: Annie Hall, Blazing Saddles (Mel Brooks 1974), Bringing Up Baby, Dr. Strangelove, Duck Soup, Groundhog Day (Harold Ramis 1993), It Happened One Night, M*A*S*H (Robert Altman 1970), Monty Python and the Holy Grail (Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones 1975), National Lampoon’s Animal House (John Landis 1978), and Some Like It Hot.

When Time Magazine set about to declare the “All-Time 100 Movies” in 2005, critics Richard Corliss and Richard Schickel decided to include only 6 comedies: The Awful Truth (Leo McCarey 1937), City Lights, Dr. Strangelove, His Girl Friday, It’s A Gift (Norman Z. McLeod 1938), and Kind Hearts and Coronets (Robert Hamer 1949). According to these two critics, of all the greatest films, only six of them are comedies. Only 5% of Total Film Magazine’s “Greatest 100 Movies of All Time” list from 2010, are comedies: Annie Hall, Dr. Strangelove, His Girl Friday, The Philadelphia Story, and Some Like It Hot. The lowest blow to film comedy came from The British Film Institute, which did not include a single comedy in its Top 10 Films list in 2002.

I would like the reader to consider how many of the comedies cited above are silent. Critics seem more favorable towards the silent comedies, yet another reason why I have decided to exclude silent comedies in this study, except for their role in the origins of later film comedies. I surmise that the physical humor of these silent comedies survives cultural changes better than verbal humor could.
If we were to create an aggregate from the percentages of comic films represented in these lists, we would find that the general consensus among the critical community is that only about 8% of the most significant films are comedies. Also, consider that from the above examples, the same handful of films appears on multiple lists—indicating the small canon of currently recognized comedies. These facts suggest the clear state of the current critical and scholarly view of film comedy.

To describe this phenomenon of critics ignoring comedy in terms of British film, scholar Marcia Landy explains:

Though this genre is a staple of British cinema, and though production of comedy films continued unabated from the 1930s through the 1950s, there are few studies devoted solely to the subject aside from certain studies of British comedy stars, the influence of the music hall on the cinema, and studies of the Ealing films. The low esteem in which British cinema has been held, the predilection for the realist aesthetic as opposed to the cinema of genres, and the priority given to films and filmmakers that have received international acclaim have been in part responsible for this situation. Neglect may also be due to the tendency in general to accord attention to individual texts rather than to genre analysis, a situation which is gradually changing (Landy 329).

The lack of study of comedy indicates that many academics feel that it is not worthy of study, not that there is a lack of comedy films to analyze. As we proceed through this study, it will become quite clear that a lack of a clear critical language specifically crafted for the analysis of comedy is one of the leading causes for critics to overlook comedies: they simply do not know how to write about it. I hope that through this brief explication of the underrepresentation of comedy within critical circles, the reader can now see the background from which I begin my study. Yes, many critics and scholars overlook comedy. Now, it is my goal to determine why.
Methods of the study

In Chapter II, I shall begin by tracing the origins of film comedy. It will not be
the history of the development of comedy, rather, a thematic exploration into the major
influences on film comedy that will best open up discussion of the too modest critical
language in regard to comedy. Starting from the Classical Greek and Roman comedies, I
will work through the comedies of Shakespeare, the comic operas of Mozart and Rossini,
and the Vaudeville routines of the Twentieth Century, to name a few. Once I get to the
era of the motion picture, I shall describe the different subgenres of comedy—a device
for categorizing and differentiating comedies that I have found to be quite useful in this
study. As I point out the inspirations for film comedy, I shall determine which historical
comedies were well regarded by critics at the time and by contemporary critics, and
which were (and possibly still are) overlooked. For some reason, one medium of comedy
might receive a lot of critical acclaim, while another medium is totally ignored, a
dichotomy that perplexes me. One related situation that scholars have an equally hard
time addressing is when a dramatic actor like Humphrey Bogart appears in a comedy like
*We’re No Angels* (Michael Curtiz 1955), or when a comedian like Woody Allen decides
to make a dramatic picture like *Interiors* (1978). Why would the rules of academia
consider one to be ‘uneducated’ if he or she is unfamiliar with Shakespeare’s *The Taming
of the Shrew* or Mozart’s *The Marriage of Figaro*, when it would seem to be perfectly
acceptable for an ‘educated’ person to be unfamiliar with Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931) or
Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1959)? One possible hypothesis for this discrepancy is that
after a century or more has passed, later generations of critics, influenced by their own
time and cultural trends, rediscover comedies that were at first disliked by critics or had
been forgotten over time. As the reader will learn in later sections, this rediscovery has happened with many comedies—Mozart’s operas for example. At this point in time, different trends in criticism throughout the last century are evident, but a century or more would have to pass after a comedy picture’s release until we may determine if critical views of a film have changed in the long-term.

In Chapter III, I will present in depth case studies of particular comedies that have received critical acclaim. The case studies will contextualize the films, detailing the people involved, the overarching themes, and the influence that each film has. The ten films that I have chosen are each distinctive examples of comic styles, comic performers, and how critical reactions to comedy change over time—each film seems to hold a unique reason for its critical and popular appeal. For the final case study, I will present the pictures that are generally regarded by critics and audiences as the worst film comedies. As with the previous nine case studies, I will detail the people involved, the overarching themes, and the circumstances surrounding the pictures. As part of the final case study, I will form connections among the scorned comedies, conclude why critics and viewers find these films to be so poor, and analyze how they affect our perception of film comedy as a whole. Out of the critical and scholarly writing available for each film, I shall extract the prevalent terms used by reviewers and academics and work towards assembling them into a critical language useful for the study of film comedy—a critical language that I argue is currently underdeveloped, if it exists at all.

In Chapter IV, I will present the conventions and common threads of comedy that have developed through the centuries, demonstrate how they are common to all film comedies, regardless of subgenre, and explain how each convention can act as an
obstacle to people that wish to analyze comedy. For my conclusion, I will present my answer to the question of why film comedy is so underrated, and then present my proposals for creating a dynamic and clear critical language with which to analyze film comedy, for creating a relative canon of films for the study of comedy, and for critics to stop comparing comic films to non-comic films. As I noted above, one may remark that a serious study of comedy seems to be an oxymoron, but through comprehensive research and logical argument, I hope to honor comedy as an important aspect of the human experience that deserves much more praise and critical recognition than it currently receives.
II. THE ORIGINS OF FILM COMEDY

“Comedy, we have to admit, was never one of the most honored of the Muses” (Meredith 5)

Although film remains, arguably, the youngest art form, the origins of film comedy began with the birth of humankind. Comedy appeared the first time someone tripped over a log, the first time one person performed an impression of another, or the first time someone did something foolish and looked around to make sure that no one had seen it.

Just as comedy has always existed, so too have comic characters—the clowns of society, “The comic hero’s indigenous versatility has enabled him, from the beginning, to tailor his coat to the times” (Torrance 275). Some scholars argue that many comic characters come from the archetypes found in ancient myth, first described by Psychologist Carl Jung:

Screen comedians, like their trickster predecessors in folklore, are often defined through their pursuit of pleasure… This pleasure-driven mentality pits them against… representatives of the social order, who work to contain and constrain their impulsiveness. In Marx Brothers comedies, the brothers’ spontaneity is continually contrasted with Margaret Dumont’s formal and serious attitude and appearance” (Karnick and Jenkins 76).

Freud had explained how comedy is an alternative to repression of thoughts and actions that are taboo. Instead of holding back, comedy rewards an outward display of forbidden subjects through the safe expression of laughter. Karnick and Jenkins go on to note that “the various tramps, con-men and ‘wanderers’ who have dominated the comedian comedy tradition” (77) represent the trickster archetype of one who goes against the rules of society. The authors conclude by saying that:

the trickster story is a highly episodic form that uses recurrent plot situations and the protagonist’s personality to link together an otherwise unrelated string of
incidents…. Although Trickster stories often constitute a cycle built around a recurrent figure… the events of one story may have limited impact on subsequent narratives (77).

Chaplin’s character of the Little Tramp is an excellent example of a trickster, and how he goes from one situation to another:

the Chaplins are the legitimate and indispensible heroes of our time. But the comic hero, however contemporary his impact, has a lineage extending back to an earlier day than Aristotle’s, when civilization and its coercive demands were less securely entrenched. Greek comedy apparently grew out of primitive rituals celebrating rebirth and fertility; and the hero of Aristophanic Old Comedy, however low a character in the eyes of later moralists and philosophers, normally transcended all obstacles in his path and came out king of the mountain (Torrance 10).

I shall analyze Chaplin’s Little Tramp in particular in Chapter III. The comic character as an outsider—one that exists within society, but is not necessarily a part of it, is a common theme that recurs throughout the different eras of comedy, “The fact that we normally do not link the words ‘comic’ and ‘heroic’ tells us something important about our accustomed perception of comedy” (Torrance 1). Perhaps the human tendency to seek heroes and role models is what draws people to many non-comic presentations. Throughout history the same comic characters, as well as similar situations and themes recur in notable comedies and across art forms—as some of the common threads that I have already mentioned that appear to be constant across many subgenres of comedy.

Film reviewers and scholars form opinions about what makes a good film and what does not—often on the basis of critics and scholars of the past who have researched other forms of comedy. As I guide the reader through the various eras of comic presentation and comic theory, it will become apparent that critical views of particular comic works change over time, from favorable to unfavorable and vice versa. The section headings that I have chosen are a general way of demarcating different eras and distinct forms. For
some sections, terms within the heading may pertain to different cultures or different artistic media in different ways, which the subheadings should clarify.

**Classical Comedy**

*(Greece: 600–250 BC; Rome: 250 BC ~100 AD)*

The first records of comedy and theories of comedy come from about 2,500 years ago, “The early history of Grecian Comedy is enveloped in still more obscurity than that of Grecian Tragedy.... The first shape... under which Comedy presents itself, is that of a ludicrous, licentious, and satirical song” (Buckham 70). From the earliest examples of comic plays, one can see the foundations for contemporary film comedy:

Comedy, we have to admit, was never one of the most honored of the Muses. She was in her origin, short of slaughter, the loudest expression of the little civilization of men. The light of Athena over the head of Achilles illuminates the birth of Greek tragedy. But comedy rolled in shouting under the divine protection of the Son of the Wine-jar, as Dionysus is made to proclaim himself by Aristophanes (Meredith 5).

Since its birth, comedy has been the enjoyable, yet less praised sibling of Tragedy. One important thing to understand about the first comedies is that they began as private exhibitions for the wealthy, much like Classical music of the Eighteenth Century. Only later did playwrights present comedies for the public, supported by public admissions (Buckham 138), a change that critically marks a shift in favor of comedy, recontextualized for the masses. We will see this difference once again when we examine film comedy specifically, for some films seem to appeal only to critics while some capture audiences and disappoint critics.
Certainly, presentations of comedy occurred across the world before the first records in ancient Greece, but unfortunately, it is impossible to analyze directly the ancient comedies that have continued through oral tradition:

In forming a judgment of the ancient Comedy, we must, in the first place, dismiss from our thoughts all considerations of that which among the Moderns, and, indeed, among the later Greeks themselves, bears the same name.... We must also take care not to look upon the Old Comedy as the rude beginning of the more cultivated species of later times, to which mistaken notion many have been led by the unbridled freedom of that Old Comedy; on the contrary, this is the genuine poetic species, and the newer Comedy... is a mere descent to prose and reality.... The Old Comedy may be most rightly conceived, as forming the thorough antithesis to Tragedy. This was perhaps the meaning of that assertion of Socrates, mentioned by Plato at the end of his Symposium (Buckham 344).

Traditionally, we separate the styles of Classical comedy into Old Comedy, Middle Comedy, and New Comedy.

**Old Comedy**

During this period, intellectuals began to write about comedy, “Comedy began with the particular—that is, with invective addressed to individuals—and worked its way toward universals, as Aristotle tells us” (Olson 85). Already, different styles of comic characters appear. One is the clumsy buffoon that does not fit within the society—a pariah. It is important to realize, however, that in Ancient Greece, it would have been more respectable to exist in society as someone to be mocked than to face exile from the society. Another is the more refined character that relies on verbal rather than physical comedy:

In the oldest comedy there was a struggle, or agon, with the Impostor (or alazon) who looked with defiling eye upon the sacred rites that must not be seen. The alazon was put to flight after a contest with either the young king or with a character known as the eiron, the “ironical man” (Sypher 228).
The reader may note that the comic character did not exist for its own purpose, but rather as an obstacle to test the hero—an almost proto-taboo figure. In addition to these two distinct comic types, we also find the first examples of the “straight-man”:

This ancient struggle was still being waged in Aristotle’s *Ethics* in the contrast between the boaster (*alazon*) and the self-depreciator (*eiron*); and midway between these two characters is the ‘straightforward’ man who neither exaggerates nor understates (Sypher 228).

Just like the *alazon* exists for the purpose of challenging the *eiron*, the straightman serves to contrast with the comic characters so that the audience may have a point of reference by which to judge how funny the comic characters are. In the films of the Marx Brothers, we see Groucho as the *alazon* who comments on nearly every other character and every situation, we have Harpo as the *eiron* whose antics make him seem almost subhuman, and we have Margaret Dumont (and sometimes Zeppo) as the straightman, or straightwoman, as the case may be. Note, however, that Groucho may switch roles and sometimes play the straightman to Harpo and Chico.

Structurally, Old Comedy was a “rich blend of satire and fantasy, physical farce and subtle word play” (Ousby). These qualities return in the anarchic comedies of not only the Marx Brothers, but those of W.C. Fields, *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick 1964), and *M*A*S*H* (Robert Altman 1970). Like these anarchic films, Old Comedy, “exercised the most unbounded liberty in satirizing the public faults and private failings of contemporary citizens. No rank, age, profession, or authority could shelter the object of Comic abuse or ridicule” (Buckham 85). Writers of Old Comedy had the freedom to make fun of anything and everything.
Aristophanes (ca. 446-386 BC) was the most prolific comic writer from this time period, “The Birds... has been acclaimed as Aristophane’s masterpiece” (Torrance 52).

However, his works did not find universal acceptance:

So unique is the Attic Old Comedy of Aristophanes that it has always posed a conundrum for posterity. Its riotous license, ranging from excremental buffoonery to ethereal lyric, failed in fact to survive Aristophane’s own lifetime (Torrance 37).

His social criticism of Greek society actually caused him trouble, “Having found himself in hot water for open assaults on the social order in his scandalous first plays...

Aristophanes now presents his spectators with a bizarre comic hero molded in their own image” (Torrance 50). In much the same way, Warner Brothers ended the Marx Brothers contract after Duck Soup (Leo McCarey 1933) mocked government, the wealthy, war, and everything in between.

Scholars praise Aristophanes for the sentimental qualities of his comedies that he is able to elicit, much in the same way that they praise Chaplin, “comic pathos, comic suffering; Aristophanes is a great master of it” (Olson 75). Both artists show that touching moments need not be removed from comedy.

Aristophanes was one of the first playwrights to explore the potential of parody. Parody finds a source of comedy in mocking an original serious idea, instead of creating an original idea:

Think of Homer’s “rosy-fingered Dawn”; now think of “red-handed Dawn” or “carrot-fingered Dawn”. The curious things about metaphor is that the mind, once it has grasped the likeness of part to part, tends temporarily at least to identify whole with whole; “rosy-fingered” makes Dawn a maiden, “carrot-fingered” a serving wench (Olson 71).

Aristophanes assumes his audience has prior knowledge of the original work that he parodies. In the later section about film in the age of television, I expand upon the idea of
parody looking to various films of the 1960s and 1970s, especially many of the works of Blake Edwards, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen, as examples. Several notable film comedies that exemplify the satirical themes of Old Comedy are *The Great Dictator* (Chaplin 1940), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), and the more recent *Wag the Dog* (Barry Levinson 1997) and *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (Grant Heslov 2009).

**Middle Comedy**

After Aristophanes, Greek Comedy entered its second stage, now known as Middle Comedy, “Whatever Middle Comedy may be (scholars disagree), burlesque of heroes and divinities dilutes the comic brew” (Ousby). No major comic works of this period that will later influence film comedy vary from the conventions previously established in Old Comedy. However, during this time period, philosophers began to theorize about comedy and to create philosophies of comedy, “The Aristotelian view of comedy, as the examples of Ben Jonson and Molière suggest, may have influenced the practice as well as the theory of later times” (Torrance 5). By far the leading philosopher of this time period when it comes to many things, Aristotle never actually created a theory of comedy as he did for tragedy.

One of the most important treatises on comedy, now known as the “*Tractatus Coislinianus*” after the Parisian codex from which Cramer first brought it to light in 1839” is actually an “anonymous document [that] has been variously hailed as the key to Aristotle’s views on comedy and denounced as a sorry Byzantine fabrication” (Janko 1). Philosopher Umberto Eco speculates that Aristotle may have written an original manuscript on the topic of comedy, “By a fluke of history, that part of the *Poetics* which
deals with the Comic was lost. Was this a mere accident? At any rate, let me present my own ‘humorous’ hypothesis: as a thinker, Aristotle was lucid enough to decide to lose a text in which he had not succeeded in being as lucid as he usually was” (“Pirandello Riendens” 164-5). Regardless of who wrote the original treatise, historian Richard Janko believes that it is “considerably closer to Aristotle than is usually thought” (1) and it gives the modern critic an accurate idea of the theory of comedy as it stood in the Middle Comedy period. The author of this *Tractatus Coislinianus* made conclusions that still affect the reasoning of scholars and critics today, as I have found in the reasoning of academics such as Dr. Kristine Karnick, Virginia Wright Wexman, Dr. Jack C. Ellis, Dr. Wylie Sypher, George Meredith, Henri Bergson, and many more included in this study.

**New Comedy**

The New Comedy works present us with something drastically different from the Old and Middle Comedy, “The new Comedy, in a certain point of view, may indeed be described as the Old Comedy tamed down” (Buckham 367). While plays harkening back to the style of Old Comedy still existed, just as films in that style still exist, New Comedy presented a formula that clearly demarcated it from the qualities of the other styles of comedy:

New Comedy depicted ordinary citizens beset by ordinary problems; the playwright’s concern was with the individual. The plot of New Comedy was often structured on the most durable formula of all drama: young lovers separated by an obstacle are united at the grand finale. New Comedy thrived on asides, eavesdropping, quid pro quo and mistaken identity, and it evolved such comic types as the old grouch, the pedant, the braggart soldier - often the obstacle in the path of the young lovers (Ousby).
It is important for the reader to realize that this style of New Comedy did not end with Ancient Greece. Many scholars would argue that New Comedy never really died. It certainly can be found in many of the comedies of Shakespeare, the operas of Mozart, the films of Lubitsch and Cukor, and in the Screwball Comedies of the 1930s and 1940s.

Litterateurs credit Menander (ca. 341-290 BC), the most prolific comedy writer of Greek New Comedy, with giving women a higher place in comedy:

Menander wrote a comedy called Misogynes, said to have been the most celebrated of his works…. We are unable to say whether the wife was a good voice of her sex; or how far Menander in this instance raised the idea of woman from the mire it was plunged into... Menander idealized them, without purposely elevating (Meredith 24).

The role of women in comedy is an interesting topic, which will reappear multiple times throughout this study. Throughout history, especially in the works of Shakespeare and Jane Austen, as well as in the Screwball Comedies, we find comedies in which a female character is no longer the object of comedy, but rather the instigator of comedy. The role of a female protagonist as a controller of the comedy is another theme that recurs across eras and subgenres of comedy. The fact that comedy allows for strong female characters also reminds us that comedy allows for what may be seditious topics at the time, such as women holding positions of authority in the Ancient World.

Menander’s works not only provided the world with prime examples of comedy, but they also predicate on the idea of comedy itself. When considering the impact of Menander’s Misanthrope, novelist George Meredith says:

As with the singing of the skylark out of sight, you must love the bird to be attentive to the song, so in this highest flight of the comic Muse, you must love pure comedy warmly to understand the Misanthrope; you must be receptive of the idea of comedy. And to love comedy you must know the real world, and know men and women well enough not to expect too much of them, though you may still hope for good (24).
Comedy only truly works when the audience expects to encounter a comedy (See Chapter 3.7). However, a joke can only work if the punch line is unexpected. As Menander’s *Misanthrope* teaches us, and so many film comedies echo, one must understand the conventions of comedy in order to appreciate comedy fully.

**Roman Comedy**

As professor Alexander Leggatt states, “Romans laughed at a rich variety of comic entertainments” (18). Much of the great comic writing of this era comes from Plautus (ca. 254-184) and Terence (ca. 195-159 BC), who both “created a rich treasury of dramatic character and situation, as well as a dense, flexible, and expressive set of codes and conventions” (18). Plautus was the first great Roman comedian:

Of all the Greek and Roman playwrights, Titus Maccius Plautus is the least admired and the most imitated. ‘Serious’ scholars find him insignificant, while serious writers find him indispensible.... [writing] nearly twice as many comedies as Aristophanes, more than three times as many as Terence.... Plautus was the most successful comic poet in the ancient world. We know of no setback in his artistic career comparable to Aristophanes’ frustrations with the *Clouds*, or to Terence’s inability to hold his audiences.... Plautus was the first known professional playwright... Plautus depended upon the theater for his livelihood.... It was primarily his economic motives, which put Plautus into disrepute with the ‘classicists’ (Segal 1).

The key to understanding the negative attitude towards Plautus has to do with the fact that he wrote many of his plays for the purpose of receiving income, instead of for strictly artistic reasons. The commercial appeal/aesthetic appeal debate is as old as art criticism itself and is most definitely still a factor for films. Plautus was extremely popular with audiences of the time, while his plays were part of the curriculum in many European schools throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance (Richmond).
Menander was a great influence on the plots and style of Plautus (Brown), whose plays dealt with plots and themes such as “family life” (Segal 22), “a young man... turning to his clever slave for salvation” (Segal 15), and “mistakes of identity, resolved through recognition” (Miola 19). Literary scholar Robert M. Torrance states that, “Plautus normally operates within the convenient New Comic fiction that everything will somehow work out for the best” (64). Plautus’ plays often dealt with situations in which servants are smarter than their masters as in Miles Gloriosus (Segal 100), as Mozart later explores in his comic operas, especially The Marriage of Figaro. The family life in Plautus’ works often involved characters like “the henpecking wife and cringing husband” (Segal 23), characters that we see frequently in comedy film—consider W.C. Fields’ It’s A Gift (Norman Z. McLeod 1934). Another thing that Plautus explored in his plays that has remained in comedy film is social criticism, “In sum, the very foundation of Roman morality is attacked in word and deed on the Plautine stage” (Segal 31). Time and again we see comedy as a way to safely criticize one’s own society.

Succeeding Plautus, Terence (Anglicized from Terentius) was highly influenced by the Greek comedies and became one of the most prolific Roman writers of comedy, “Of the six comedies of Terence, four are derived from Menander; two, the Hecyra and the Phormio, from Apollodorus” (Meredith 25). One can see that ancient critics recognized the merits of comedy. Of the two Roman playwrights profiled here, Terence is closest in style to Menander, “Julius Caesar hailed him ‘O fifty percent of Menander!’” (Segal 92). Throughout the different eras, we see how multiple styles of comedy enrich one another in any given era. For example, one could never confuse the comic style of Groucho Marx with that of Cary Grant, “Though the differences between them are far
less radical, Terence was long held up as a model of decorum against the purported crudities of Plautus, much as Menander was contrasted with Aristophanes” (Torrance 62-3). Regardless of which writer one may favor personally, scholars concede that both men created a style that succeeded and went on to influence later styles and eventually film comedies. The different comic approaches used by Plautus and Terence, helped to lay the foundations of the different subgenres of film comedy that exist today.

Many scholars credit the writers of New Comedy in creating the conventions of romantic comedies, or what became the Screwball Comedies in the mid-1930s:

The farcical and satiric elements were replaced in Middle and New Comedy by moralizing and character-study; and the plots, it has often been said, owed much to Euripides…. Comedy had changed into the comedy of manners (Olson 76).

Even in Ancient Rome, the comedy of manners became something distinctly different from the physical comedy, now known as slapstick. The zany situations and fast-paced banter define the former style, just as the pratfalls characterize the latter. While the contrast between these comic styles becomes even more apparent with the films of the early sound era, it began in ancient times.

In every art form, one finds that innovation occurs in two ways: an artist choosing to expand upon the foundations set down by another, or an artist reacting against the foundations set down by another, instead deciding to travel in a new direction. In this way, Classical comedy has influenced the comedies of every subsequent era, whether writers wished to follow in the Classical model or wished to avoid it, “Where has one heard a tale like that before? Separated families, adopted foundlings, love forbidden, resolution brought about through a recognition by tokens—the New Comedy, of course” (Olson 108). Meredith designates comedies influenced by Classical comedy as “literary
comedies... comedies of classic inspiration, drawn chiefly from Menander and the Greek New Comedy through Terence; or else comedies of the poet’s personal conception, that have had no model in life, and are humorous exaggerations, happy or otherwise” (10-11). As I stated in Chapter I, comedy draws from real life—one reason why the same or similar gag can elicit laughter for a millennium. Gags seen in nearly every case study in this thesis have their roots in earlier eras.

**Medieval Comedy**

*(Europe: 500~1400 AD)*

Although popular accounts of the general mood of Europe in the Middle Ages is rather morose, focused on plagues, wars, and poverty, comedy had a vital place in those societies, “humour and laughter have come to be accepted as essential qualities of medieval life and mentality” (Verberckmoes 8). Some historians have even gone so far as describing it as “a joyful era” (8). Out of this era, we not only find a great number of comedies, but a great variety of comedy as well, displaying “a spectrum of techniques from slapstick to puns, from topical satire to tropical fantasy” (Ousby). The comedies of this time appear in the vernacular, contrasting with “serious” writing in Latin. Of course, this trait affected how widespread a comedy’s influence may be as only one who can understand the language may appreciate the comedy without the aid of a translation—physical comedy excluded, of course. The early Medieval definition of comedy was actually quite free and many works could qualify as a comedy as long as it included “a happy ending; thus Dante called his great epic a comedy” (Ousby). Often this idea has been confused with the Classical definitions of comedy, which were actually much more
detailed and explicit in what qualified as comedy. This Medieval definition is possibly one of the reasons why today there is so much debate over what qualities make something a comedy. It is important to remember that only the wealthiest in the Middle Ages had the luxury of even knowing about Classical Comedy through reading it. The majority of the population was illiterate and therefore we see examples of characters like “devils and vice figures” that “were simultaneously funny and evil, implicitly contradicting an Aristotle they did not know—for the medieval mind the comic was painfully ugly” (Ousby). As I said above, the wealthy, educated members of the societies would have access to the Classical comedy of Menander, Plautus, Terence and others, but the majority of society would not have had this experience. Without knowing the existing conventions of written comedy, crafters of comedy in the Middle Ages had to determine their own ideas of what made a comedy, with the aid of their experience of comedies that would have been handed down orally across cultures.

Medieval carnivals became the showcase for comic performers, “The carnivalesque style and spirit engendered a laughter that represented joyful and triumphant hilarity. It possessed a positive, regenerative power” (Karnick and Jenkins 271). For a brief time, commoners and royalty alike could escape the reality of the world around them by means of comedy:

This tension between comedy as a source of social transgression and comedy as a source of cultural cohesion or social control runs through discussions of carnivalesque. Russian scholar and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the carnivalesque as a core concept in his rich and provocative reading of the comic works of Rabelais. His book is, first and foremost, a historical description of popular humor and folk culture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Bakhtin describes the medieval cultural consciousness, arguing that in early modern Europe serious and comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally ‘official’. A wide range of humorous forms coexisted in one culture of folk carnival humor. Bakhtin identified three distinct forms of this folk
culture: ritual spectacle, such as carnival pageants and comic shows of the marketplace; comic verbal compositions and oral and written parodies; and various genres of billingsgate, curses, oaths and marketplace speech. These forms of folk humor reflected a single humorous aspect of the world. Carnival festivities and comic spectacles, and the rituals connected with them, played a central role in the lives of medieval men and women. In Carnival, there was no distinction between actors and spectators (Karnick and Jenkins 271).

This sense of Carnival returns in later comedies, including the works of Shakespeare, Mozart, and of course, Monty Python. As the reader already saw from Chapter I, comedy is a group activity, and we can clearly see its roots in the Medieval Carnival. However, in this same atmosphere of the Carnival, one can see a reinforcement of the notion of comedy as being a lesser art. For indeed, comedy in the Middle Ages came from the lowly Court Jester, not the royalty, “As a professional entertainer.... The jester’s role was that of clown or court fool, who kept the king and his courtiers amused with his antics” (McConnell). Once again, we find the comic hero coming from a low social order, as he will continue to do throughout Shakespeare, Mozart, Chaplin, and more. Note how the comic hero in any era is quite different from the contemporary tragedies and their heroic figures.

Many examples of Medieval comedy demonstrate an appreciation of crude humor, “During the Middle Ages people seem to have laughed at the grotesque as when… Dante’s gargoyle-like demons caper through the lower circles of Hell making obscene noises” (Sypher 202). It does not need to be argued that crude humor still exists today, regardless of how low it resides on the comic spectrum, “since Bakhtin, late medieval humour in the form of ‘grotesque realism’ has been recognized as having been specific enough to define a whole period” (Verberckmoes 7). Crude humor was a large part of the early Greek comedies as well, continuing in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*,
considered not only one of the greatest vernacular Italian works but one of the greatest works in any language. Consider that writing in the vernacular gave Dante (ca. 1265-1321 AD) the opportunity to experiment with crude humor, as crude humor would not have been as acceptable in a work written in the “high” language of Latin. Scholars praise Dante not only for his comedy but for the depth of his allegorical and theological sense as well. This endurance marks the power of comedy, even when it is seemingly at its most profane. Dante’s comedy works as a foil to his serious nature of his journey through Hell.

As a Twentieth Century analogy to Dante’s exploration of the profane, consider the reaction to nudity in motion pictures throughout the Twentieth Century. Nudity was understood as an artistic exploration in pre-Code American motion pictures that mostly appeared in art museums and the like. However, once the Hays Code was established and films were intended for mass audience appeal, people then understood nudity as pornographic. Later in the century, we see the same discrepancy based on the context in which the nudity is framed when nudity in a 1960s art house picture would be “tasteful” while nudity in a mainstream picture would be “exploitation”. As it has been in the debate of aestheticism of the human body versus pornography for centuries, the actual subject of nudity did not change; the societal reaction to that subject did, based on the contextual framing. In much the same way, a comic work like Dante’s can have the reputation of being licentious in one era while in another era it can have the reputation of being one of the greatest works of Western literature—depending on how one wishes to interpret the nature of his comedy. Consider how Thomas Bowdler’s censored version of Shakespeare’s works presented a much different meaning to early Nineteenth Century
readers than Shakespeare’s actual texts (Leithart). In the centuries since Dante, many artists like Jonathan Swift, Mozart, and Mel Brooks have followed his example and explored crude humor.

Out of this canon of Medieval comedy, we find the origins of farce, “A type of broad comedy in which extreme crisis for the characters is amusing for the audience” (Ousby), but since the Middle Ages it has been “neglected or scorned in criticism” (Brown). When a film attempts to enter the realm of farce, it encounters a type of comedy that has existed for hundreds of years, but one that has never really been critically well recognized.

The next significant comic writer after Dante has to be Italian writer Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375). Boccaccio studied Dante extensively and was influenced by his *Divine Comedy*, “For some time he held a chair founded to expound the works of Dante, and produced a commentary on the *Divina Commedia*” (Rockwood), but Boccaccio often seems to use humor much more explicitly than his predecessor. Boccaccio’s most significant contribution to the genre of comedy is his *Decameron*, a “14th-century literary masterpiece…. Boccaccio’s collection of 100 stories” (Jones). The frame narrative occurs across ten days, and each day’s stories feature a different style of humor (Boccaccio i-iii). The *Decameron* became popular as soon as Boccaccio wrote it:

*The Decameron* was an immediate success with the merchant and entrepreneurial classes that figure so largely its novelle.... Although the early Florentine humanists were not prepared to recognize a collection of tales in Italian prose as a serious work of literature [Dante excluded, of course]… the *Decameron* quickly reached an international audience.... *The Decameron* is the first landmark text of modern times to exert a truly European influence.... The instant and enduring popularity of the *Decameron* is due to the energy and versatility of its style and the originality of its form... Boccaccio sometimes imitates and sometimes parodies the full range of medieval genres (Wallace 2).
The fact that the *Decameron* appeared in translations across Europe meant that it could reach a wide audience and have great influence on writers from many different cultural backgrounds. Although there are litterateurs that question the originality of the stories that Boccaccio includes in his work, “Many of the tales were already old at this time” (Crofton), it is because of Boccaccio that the stories reached writers from other countries, and certainly his “prose influenced many Renaissance writers, and his tales themselves have been borrowed for centuries” (“Decameron”). Even filmmakers have followed Boccaccio’s example of using comedy as a tool for teaching moral lessons:

Boccaccio is much ruder than Chaucer, who was influenced by him. Or, to put it more accurately, he’s more explicit, more comprehensive…. The moral is that people can be happy, prosperous and creative even in the worst of times: nothing quenches the life force (Jones).

Even more than Dante, Boccaccio demonstrates how crude humor can sometimes be the most effective means of delivering social criticism.

Many Medieval scholars argue that no writer was more influenced by Boccaccio than William Chaucer (1343-1400):

the most significant witness to the *Decameron*’s influence in England is Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*. Six of Chaucer’s two dozen stories find parallels in the *Decameron*…. Chaucer, whose knowledge of Italian was extraordinarily good, owes more to Boccaccio than to any other writer in any language (Wallace 111).

But just like any great craftsman, Chaucer learned from the style of Boccaccio to create a work distinctly his own. Chaucer continues with Boccaccio’s ability to teach through comedy. Even though “The predominant tone is of detached humorous satire” (Ousby), British literature scholars Steven Serafin and Valerie Grosvenor argue, “The serious vein in Chaucer’s work deserves to be recognized—the grimly humorous anecdote about greed and death by the Pardoner” (1). Through humor, Chaucer leaves his readers with a
memorable experience, but one that will cause them to reflect on their own moral dilemmas.

From the Sixteenth Century theatre of Italy came the stylized *Commedia dell’Arte*, or “Art Comedy” (Grout 79), of zany situations and physical stunts. It is curious that something with the word “Art” in its title so closely resembles the slapstick film comedies, which are not held in so high a regard:

This show-stopping character of gags in longer works has long been recognized in the theatrical forms that films drew on. *Commedia dell’Arte lazzi* (which provided schemata for many gags which survive into film comedy) were devised precisely as autonomous routines, which could be inserted willy-nilly into almost any comic plot, at the whim of the company manager or even an individual performer. Plot development would be shunted aside momentarily, while the *lazzi* action took over the main track. Like early film gags, *lazzi* had their own development, but it was self-enclosed one which contributed little or nothing to the unfolding plot action. Like modern comic routines, they are ‘bits,’ self-contained fragments. Considered as a structure of explosive interruption, the early gag film shows its relation to the cinema of attractions, a display of an action whose temporal development is prompt, rather than setting up an extensive working out of plot and characterization. The pleasure gags gave audiences may relate more closely to the spectators amazed by the operation of Lumiere’s new invention than to a contemporary audience laughing over a Neil Simon comedy (Gunning 97).

The *Commedia dell’arte* method of incorporating numerous gags and stock characters influenced many artists, including Shakespeare and Mozart (Headington 78). In addition to the comic routines and stock characters, *Commedia dell’arte* also exemplified physical comedy (Grout 248). So out of this one style of Italian comedy comes the seed for not only the anarchic slapstick comedies of the 1930s, but the stock characters of the Screwball Comedies as well. Already we see how critical the balance of narrative and gags, which I shall discuss further in Chapters III and IV, is to the genre of comedy.
The Renaissance

(Europe: 1400-1600 AD)

The Renaissance period presented a renewed appreciation for art and creativity and scholars still revere many of the comedies written during this period:

Renaissance laughter was complex…. When Machiavelli laughs he almost sneers… We can fancy that his Prince would laugh somewhat like a Borgia…. [with] the strained, joyless grimace of Thomas Hobbes, who explained laughter as a sense of ‘sudden glory’ arising from our feeling of superiority whenever we see ourselves triumphantly secure while others stumble (Sypher 202-203).

Many writers of this time acknowledged the profound potential of comedy, understanding that a genre that prides itself in avoiding seriousness could still make serious statements about life, society, culture, and humanity, just as earlier writers had discovered and contemporary writers still explore. However, despite the growing inspiration of artists during the Renaissance, comedy still remained a lesser form of expression in the eyes of critics, “Despite such gifted practitioners of comedy as Shakespeare, Molière, Lope De Vega and Jonson, critics and even practitioners tended to view comedy as a genre inferior to tragedy” (Ousby). In the same vein as the Italian Commedia dell’Arte, that continued into the Renaissance, was the Comedy of Humours of Renaissance England:

popularized by the enormous success of Jonson’s Every Man in His Humour (1598) in its performance by the Lord Chamberlain’s Men. Jonson peopled his play with characters, each of whom was dominated by a single attitude or ‘humour’. It was a comic technique familiar from Aristophanes…. Almost all contemporary and subsequent writers of comedy have been in various degrees reliant on the comic potential of ‘humours’ (Brown).

It is due to the influence of Commedia dell’Arte and the Comedy of Humours that we see stock characters in many comedy films. For example, the character of the wealthy woman (usually an older relative of the protagonist) appears in Twentieth Century
(Howard Hawks 1934), *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey 1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (Hawks 1938), and *His Girl Friday* (Hawks 1940), just to name a few. The narratives are not the same, simply the replicated character.

The foremost comic theorist of the Renaissance was Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), who some scholars consider “[t]he most brilliant and most important leader of German humanism” (Sauer). Erasmus wrote along the lines of art for art’s sake. He felt that one should appreciate comedy as something that has value in itself, not for what comedy can teach or to what it can lead. He also used humor in his critical writings, “The works of Erasmus... have so greatly enriched the literature of the world.... in the witty language of the Jester.... Erasmus was above all things a critic.... Erasmus was the most facetious man, and the greatest critic of his age” (Erasmus v-xv).

Erasmus’ best-known work that discusses comedy is his *In Praise of Folly*:

Wives are always allowed their humor, yet is only in exchange for titillation and pleasure, which indeed are but other names for Folly.... in the most luxurious entertainments it is Folly must give the sauce and relish to the daintiest cates and delicacies; so that if there be not one of the guests naturally fool enough to be played upon by the rest, they must procure some comical buffoon, that by his jokes, and flouts, and blunders, shall make the whole company split themselves with laughing (74).

In the writings of Erasmus, we find support for the argument that critics and scholars should judge comedy works for what they are, not how well they can approximate another genre, an argument that I shall return to in Chapter IV.

The greatest comic writer of the Renaissance, and perhaps the most celebrated playwright of all time, William Shakespeare (1564-1616), was as much a master of comedy as he was a master of tragedies, romances, and histories, “Shakespeare’s plays... are saturated with the golden light of comedy—the comedy that is redemptive as tragedy
cannot be” (Sypher 253). He crafted comic situations and characterizations that are still relevant in today’s comedy, “Supporting actors such as Edward Everett Horton or Franklin Pangborn, played roles within romantic comedies which parallel the traditional function of the comic servant in Shakespearean New Comedy” (Karnick and Jenkins 165). Shakespeare understood comedy, “We can assume, then, that Shakespeare thought long and hard about the nature of comedy” (Maslen 34), and no two of his comic plays are exactly alike:

> It is no easy task to summarize Shakespeare’s achievement in the field of comedy. This is partly because of the range and abundance of his work, extending as it does from *The Comedy of Errors* to *The Tempest*, including within these limits some three dozen plays (Parrott 402-403). 

Shakespeare demonstrates what I argue in Chapter I, that true comedy includes a visual aspect, an auditory aspect, and comic situations, “Shakespearean comedy finds expression in action, speech, and character” (Parrott 402-403). Because Shakespeare’s contributions to film comedy are so extensive, I have broken my analysis of his influence into several sections.

As we are able to see in his plays, Shakespeare inherited his treatment of comedy and his methods for crafting it from many older comic sources. We know that the works of Menander, Plautus, and Terence were part of the curriculum in most European schools at the time. From this fact, and from the similarity of some of his comedy to that of the Classics, we can surmise that Shakespeare would have encountered the comic works of Classical and Medieval comedians during his schooling. He used all of this acquired knowledge of past comedies in order to synthesize his own, “His comedy of incredible *imbroglio* belongs to the literary section. One may conceive that there was a natural resemblance between him and Menander” (12). Shakespeare had the ability to take both
paths of artistic innovation—he followed the styles of earlier writers and created scenarios uniquely his own, “From the eristic imitation of *The Comedy of Errors* to the eclectic recension of The Tempest, Shakespeare relies on New Comedy throughout his career” (Miola 17). A lot of literary scholars conclude that the Medieval Carnival played an important part in the shaping of Shakespeare’s approach to comedy:

the case emerges that the themes of Shakespeare’s comedies may be said to derive not from the mysteries or the moralities or the interludes, but from a fourth dramatic tradition of folk ritual. [Shakespeare scholar] C.L. Barber sees the roots of Shakespearean comedy in the community observance of those feast-days and holidays that formed periodic alternatives to, and inversions of, the pattern of everyday medieval and Elizabethan life (Charney 156).

However, one cannot discuss Shakespeare without mentioning his exquisite originality, “Out of his Renaissance-Roman and Renaissance-romance materials, Shakespeare wrought a form of comedy unmistakably his own” (Charney 3). As I mentioned in the section about Classical Comedy, the works of Plautus and Terence were taught in Renaissance schools, plausibly linking Shakespeare’s comedies as a continuation of the Classical New Comedy:

Not Jonson or Molière but Shakespeare is the legitimate heir to Attic New Comedy; his romantic festivities are far closer to Menander than their classical satires. In *The Comedy of Errors*, one of his earliest plays, Shakespeare adapted a Plautine farce, the *Menaechmi*, in such a way as to amplify the mysteries of divine providence (Torrance 111).

But Shakespeare’s New Comedy is what one could call “a romanticized version of New Comedic eros” (Miola 71), the “Characters and gags from Roman comedy exist in a new space, one Shakespeare creates by transforming convention and setting” (Miola 23). On the topic of the Shakespeare’s first comedy, *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare scholar Maurice Charney says that it “holds a place unique in the Shakespearean canon because it shows at once the most direct derivation from Roman comedy and, at the same time, an
awareness of contemporary audience and occasion” (Charney 17). Once Shakespeare had established himself as a writer, the inspiration for later comedies like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is unclear, “There is no single source for the *Dream*, no play, poem, or novel that gives singly or in combination all the elements of its plot” (Parrott 126), indicating to me that Shakespeare relied less on actual Classical conventions and more on his own creative adaption of these precedents. Just as earlier writers used comedy to teach lessons, Shakespeare presented examples of etiquette through his comedies, “the *Shrew* presents itself as a kind of comic schoolroom” (Maslen 56). Shakespeare used comedy to instruct because it is a form that could have been understood by the wealthy Globe patrons in the balconies as well as by the ‘Groundlings’. Here we are reminded, as we will continue to be throughout this study, that comedy has the power to address all social classes.

Unlike, the comic characters of Ancient Greece, Shakespeare’s comic characters exist for a purpose beyond comic relief, “they are not the tricksters—Shakespeare’s orientation is aristocratic and his plotters are dukes and princes and witty heroines” (Charney 10). Most often, his comic characters are deep and fully formed:

Shakespeare is a well-spring of characters which are saturated with the comic spirit; with more of what we will call blood-life than is to be found anywhere out of Shakespeare; and they are of this world, but they are of the world enlarged to our embrace by imagination, and by great poetic imagination. They are… creatures of the woods and wilds, not in walled towns, not grouped and toned to pursue a comic exhibition of the narrower world of society (Meredith 11).

As genuine, convincing, and believable comic characters, they live on in dozens of like types and in the comic situations of film:

the clue to the comic quality of Shakespeare: his comic agents, if they are ridiculous, are only very slightly so… and are viewed with affection; they make
mistakes which are perfectly excusable because they are perfectly natural, indeed practically unavoidable (Olson 91).

Through the convincing realism of his comic characters, we once again see that comedy stays close to reality. Unlike the ironic characters seen in some forms of comedy, Shakespeare’s comic protagonists are often willing to admit their flaws, “Falstaff is impervious to mockery because he laughs unrestrainedly at himself” (Torrance 124).

There is a sense of self-discovery in his character studies, “Shakespeare’s protagonists do not know what they want” (Charney 5-6). Maybe this humanness is why Shakespeare’s comic characters, just like George Webber of *10* (Blake Edwards 1979) or Felix and Oscar of *The Odd Couple* (Gene Saks 1968), are so appealing to audiences—they are not all “put together” and they do not know in what direction they are headed. Unlike the heroes of non-comic works, that often seem to have a clear purpose and clear objectives, the comic hero is much like the typical viewer that focuses more on the present and life’s little mishaps than on his or her “destiny”.

Shakespeare scholar Robert W. Maslen describes Shakespeare’s comedies as “comedy of love and death” (155). While this simplification may be an overgeneralization, they are the most common themes that Shakespeare addresses in his comedy, “*As You Like It* depicts love and war simultaneously as natural and cultural” (Holland 86). Literary scholar Maurice Charney channels St. Paul when he states “Classical, festive, and romantic elements help make up Shakespeare’s comedies—these three, but the greatest of these is romantic” (119). By “romantic”, Charney is not describing the presence of warm, bubbly feelings throughout, simply “[t]he pairing off of the lovers, at least the main characters, provides a festive conclusion to the play” (Miola 58) and “[t]he essential presupposition of final harmony through the restorative power of
love defines these comedies as ‘romantic’” (Torrance 113). From Shakespeare onward, romance and comedy becomes a successful pair in film and other media, from City Lights (Charlie Chaplin 1931), to the Screwball Comedies, to Annie Hall (Woody Allen 1977), to later examples like When Harry Met Sally (Rob Reiner 1989), and The Proposal (Anne Fletcher 2009), and dozens more notable examples of the subgenre.

As I stated in Chapter I, comedy is the only genre that can comfortably and successfully deal with subjects that are taboo. One of these subjects, of course, is death:

In a fixed reality, death is the unavoidable end of each human course. Romantic comedy thus has a special need to get around death somehow: by ignoring it completely or, more interestingly, by presenting it as nonfinal, illusory; indeed, Shakespeare preserves all his romantic comedy characters intact, no matter how minor (Charney 30).

Death is present in so many narratives of Shakespeare, but in his comedies, death does not have the final say:

It may seem perverse to argue that Shakespearean comedy is really about death and dying, but that is nonetheless what I should like to propose. More precisely, Shakespearean comedy is about the initial avoidance or displacement of the idea of death (Charney 121).

For example, consider Claudio’s ruminations on death in Measure for Measure or how The Comedy of Errors begins with a death sentence for Aegeon. Following Shakespeare’s influence, numerous film comedies deal with death—consider Arsenic and Old Lace (Frank Capra 1944), Kind Hearts and Coronets (Robert Hamer 1949), or M*A*S*H (Robert Altman 1970)—but often, as in Shakespeare, as an afterthought.

With Shakespeare, we first see the term Comedy of Manners as applied to New Comedy social situations:

A form in which laughter is provoked by exaggerations of fashionable behaviour, absurdities in fashion itself, or departures from what is considered to be civilized normality of behaviour. Thus a comedy of manners can only arise in a highly
developed society, in which there is a leisured class, which not only has standards of politeness and good sense in human relationships, but tends to give such standards first importance in social life (Wynne-Davies).

These comedies, however, are far from superficial, as “Shakespeare engages some larger issues” such as “identity, jealousy, love, and family relationships” (Miola 37). Many critics will describe film comedies such as the works of Lubitsch, Cukor, and (in some ways) Capra, as Comedies of Manners. One great example is Preston Sturges’ *The Lady Eve* (1941), in which we see Shakespeare’s often-used device of eavesdropping (Maslen 160-161).

Several scholars credit Shakespeare with creating strong female characters. Literary critic Northrop Frye explains, “What usually happens is that a young man wants a young woman’, the woman can only be ‘bride to be redeemed’” (172). However, film scholar Kathleen Rowe argues, “While this may be so in the Greek and Roman New Comedies, it is not true of Shakespearean comedy” (49). Shakespeare’s female protagonists have the ability to speak for themselves:

The most extraordinary of Shakespeare’s early exposures of these conventions is... *The Taming of the Shrew*... that anatomizes the Elizabethan views on comedy and on women that shape the main body of the play (Maslen 51).

Consider how Katherina’s behaviors that do not match the mandated behaviors of a woman in that society become a stumbling block to her suitor. As in the works of Plautus and Erasmus, Katherina controls the comedy. This manner of female character does not exist in film comedy until the Screwball Comedies of the 1930s and 40s in which actresses like Claudette Colbert, Irene Dunne, Myrna Loy, and Katharine Hepburn portray strong female characters that are in control of the comedy and are not simply the object of comedy.
Just as Shakespeare can discuss death through comedy, he is also able to discuss law, class differences, and government through the same lens, “One of the theories of metaphor is that its roots are found in taboo. What cannot be faced directly is approached obliquely” (Charney 81). Shakespeare “arrays the politics of race, class and gender around this distinction between what is natural and absolute, and what is imposed by human preconceptions” (Holland 87). Comedies are able to discuss class conflict without belittling the poor, “For Elizabethans the history of comedy in the theatre was inseparable from that of class conflict” (Maslen 5). The films of Chaplin, Sturges, and the Marx Brothers all exploit the nature of encounters between people of different classes.

Shakespeare often used foreign settings in order to criticize his own government without becoming too overt, “Four plays – The Comedy of Errors, The Merchant of Venice, Measure for Measure, and The Tempest – turn dramatically on legal or political questions” (Leggatt 198). In much the same way, Duck Soup (Leo McCarey 1933) mocks governments and war without directly mentioning any real countries by creating the fictional countries of Freedonia and Sylvania. Shakespeare’s The Tempest, his last play and one of his most acclaimed, is laced with social critique:

*The Tempest* has exerted a consistently strong influence on readers and audiences.... *The Tempest’s* high status within the corpus has never seriously been questioned, and this prominence is reflected in the large body of creative works—novels, poems, plays and films—where its influence is strongly felt.... [with] issues of race, sexuality and gender (Holland 146).

Shakespeare is free to discuss social issues in *The Tempest*, because of its setting on an unknown island.
The presence of animals in Screwball comedies like *The Thin Man* (W.S. Van Dyke 1934), *The Awful Truth* (1937), and *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) comes by way of Shakespeare’s influence. For Shakespeare, animals symbolized:

a way of thinking about the true nature of man. We may trace in these comedies sequences of man-animal associations that begin as spectacles enhancing comic vision and lead to revelations that, in bringing men ever closer to animals, work to dismantle the traditional hierarchy and put an end to laughter. In each case the animals are both objects of attention and agents of revelation (Charney 81).

Perhaps the purpose of the leopard, Baby, and dog, George, in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), or the dog, Asta, in *The Thin Man* (1934) and *The Awful Truth* (1937) is not for the viewer to notice how the animal behaves, but how the human protagonists behave with the animals. Philosopher Umberto Eco states that the act of revealing the animal tendencies of human beings is unique to comedy “the animalization of the comic hero is so important. The tragic hero cannot be an animal” (“The Frames of Comic ‘Freedom’” 2). Arguably, tragic heroes in films like those in *The Wolf Man* (George Waggner 1941) or *The Fly* (Kurt Neumann 1958), can become animals, but only in the realm of Science Fiction. Just as comedy encourages the viewer to laugh at herself and her own faults, comedy forces the viewer to acknowledge how people can still behave primitively. As we see in the Screwball scenarios that deal with animals, human beings’ natural tendency to think of the superior status of the human race is made to look silly and totally inaccurate when an animal outwits the protagonist. Often, the animal may appear as an allegorical extension of the protagonist as the terrier Asta is to Nick in *After The Thin Man* (W.S. Van Dyke 1936).

Impersonation in film comedy has had a lasting impression over the years, whether it is Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis disguised as women in *Some Like It Hot*
(Billy Wilder 1959), Chico and Harpo Marx both dressed as Groucho in *Duck Soup* (1933), or Jack Lemmon seemingly taking on the traditional roles of a woman in *The Odd Couple* (1968). Shakespeare’s comedies include many instances of deception and imitation, “Falstaff is a multi-impersonator, and in this he draws upon a source of pleasure, not exclusively and disjunctively the property of comedy, but anterior to all other comic pleasure: the art of mimicry” (Charney 13), including gender-bending forays into the “[s]exual disguise and the theatre of gender” (Leggatt 179). Often important plot points revolve around a character that is disguised for a particular reason, which Mozart later expands upon in his *Cosi Fan Tutte* and *Marriage of Figaro*. Recognize though, that the place of cross-dressing as a part of performance in Shakespeare’s day was much different from that of Mozart’s day and later eras. Male actors filled both male and female roles in a Shakespeare play during his lifetime, making a cross-dressed man not an unexpected joke, but something taken for granted as commonplace.

One convention that Shakespeare used, the “the play-within-a-play” (Holland 55), returns in several Screwball films like *Twentieth Century* (1934) and in *Sullivan’s Travels* (Preston Sturges 1942) as a film-within-a-film. Often the subject or situations of the play-within-a-play function as a metaphor for the overall play.

Shakespeare’s comedies have retained their status among critics and scholars, but the popularity of specific plays may rise and fall in cycles over time. In much the same way, we find films that are praised by critics and yet fail at the box office, only for audiences to rediscover it years later. For example, Shakespeare’s “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has never enjoyed great success upon the stage, but it is one of the most delightful of Shakespeare’s plays” (Parrott 131). Here we see a prime example of the
divergence from what appeals to the scholars to what appeals to the masses. Regardless, of their popularity at any given time, the conventions that Shakespeare both adopted and synthesized continue to influence new comedies.

A contemporary of Shakespeare, Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) is one of the most praised Spanish writers of all time (Oliphant vii), especially for his creation of Don Quixote, one of the world’s favorite characters of any genre, “No character in the literature of the world was ever more comically heroic than the ingenious hidalgo Don Quixote” (Torrance 144). Don Quixote does what the greatest social critics do by breaking many social taboos (Torrance 162). Much of the humor of the character comes from that which he imagines, “the polarization between dream and fact central to Cervantes and his age is transcended” (Torrance 154), just like when the character of Richard Sherman in *The Seven Year Itch* (Billy Wilder 1955) thinks of the women in his life, or George Webber in *10* (1979), as his fantasy eventually becomes a reality.

In his writing, Cervantes presents a comic character that is genuine about everything he does, “Don Quixote’s mad devotion to truth becomes heroic in proportion to his growing consciousness of the obstacles in its path” (Torrance 167). Literary historian Margaret Oliphant argues that for Cervantes:

> His ridicule is perfectly genuine, not put on; no mask for sentiment... but as real and natural as his laughter, yet never unkind. His true fun and hearty mirth, and that delightful sense of the ludicrous, which is the foe of all false sentiment, are almost too honest to attain always to the height of that more delicate faculty which we call humour (91).

This quality of authenticity both of the comic characters’ demeanors and of their actions is an essential attribute of many comic characters. The comic heroine does not see herself or her own actions as funny. She behaves in a way that is logical to her—
following the Principle of Comic Logic first mentioned in Chapter I. A great film example of this is the character of Inspector Clouseau in Blake Edwards’ *Pink Panther* series. Throughout his antics, Clouseau views himself as a gifted investigator, clever sleuth, and shameless womanizer—not the bumbling idiot that the viewer and most of the other characters see.

*Don Quixote* was (and still is) successful critically and popularly, “from the king to the peasant everybody had read it. A universal laugh had rung through Spain, and indeed over the Continent” (Oliphant 160). No proper study of comedy is complete without it.

**The Baroque Period**

*(Europe: 1600–1750 AD)*

One of the major showcases for comedy in the last few centuries has been in the form of musical presentations. The musical form that we now know as Opera began as a reaction against the musical style of the late Renaissance period. Unlike the musical works performed in the courts of monarchs and wealthy families, Opera was a public presentation made of content that reflected the tastes of the expanding audiences. The early *Opera Seria*, or “Serious Opera”, told stories of deities, demigods, and epic heroes. These *Opera Seria* included three Acts and a prescribed number of arias per singer. At first, the *Opera Seria* had no comic counterpart. But after some time, audiences became bored with the strict structure of the *Opera Seria* and the esoteric nature of the characters and narratives within them. As a response to this dissatisfaction, composers began to write short comic *intermezzi* to present in between the acts of the *Opera Seria*. Unlike the *Opera Seria*, the comic *intermezzi* featured characters to whom the common people
could relate. Once again, as with Terence, we see one of the major aspects in the
development of film comedy: the influence that audience taste exerts on what comic
writers create. The plot of the early _intermezzi_ usually came in a two-act structure (one
act between each act of the _Opera Seria_) and often involved humorous, realistic
situations, such as an older man trying frantically to woo a younger woman:

> Just as every age has its own kind of opera, so every age has its own humbler
counterparts of the form, designed to appeal to persons of less wealth or less
cultivation. These stepchildren of opera have been known by many different
names: _opera buffa, opéra comique_, ballad opera, ‘intermezzo’, comic opera,
vaudeville, operetta, musical comedy, and so on. Whatever the name, all have
certain common features: they are less expensive than the opera, their social
standing is lower, their tone is more familiar, and many of them caricature or
parody the serious opera. They are the poor man’s opera... So far as artistic merit
goes they may be equal or even superior to the more pretentious form (Grout 5-6).

The unexpected happened when these comic _intermezzi_ became more popular than the
_Opera Seria_ for which the composers had created them to accompany. These comic
_intermezzi_ evolved into the standalone _Opera Buffa_, or “comic opera”. One notable early
example of this form of opera, Giovanni Pergolesi’s _La Serva Padrona_, “has deservedly
maintained its popularity to our own time” (Grout 248). The _Opera Buffa_ form became
highly popular, “Between 1749 and 1761 Venice saw nearly seventy new comic operas,
and during the century nearly 2,000 such works were presented in Italy” (Headington 78).
One could argue that the leading expression of comedy at this time, and the one that
reached the widest audience was in the form of _Opera Buffa_.

Opéra Comique

(France: 1680~1800 AD)

In the same era, the French musical scene explored forms of parody and we find the first use of the term vaudeville:

They used for the most part little popular tunes to which the authors adapted new words—a process known technically as ‘parody’.... For a long time they continued giving popular comedies in which the vaudevilles were the principal source of music and burlesque of the serious opera a frequent device (Grout 255).

These forms of light entertainment soon developed into comic operas, known in France as the Opéra Comique:

The term opéra comique occurs first in 1715... Spoken dialogue was always a feature, just as it is in modern musical comedy. Voltaire praised [the composers for]... ‘first making a decent and ingenious amusement out of a form which, before you, did not concern polite society. Thanks to you, it has become the delight of all decent folk’ (Headington 51).

As one can see through Voltaire’s praise, the Opéra Comique appealed to audiences of a higher class when compared to the lower class patrons of earlier vaudevilles, much as the American vaudeville attracted mostly low-income patrons. Consider that the visual character, as well as the fast pacing and episodic form, of both the early French and later American Vaudeville could appeal to likely illiterate French lower class audiences and the barely English-literate immigrant American audiences. The performances could be entertaining without a need to understand the subtleties of the language.
**British Restoration**

*(England: 1660~1710 AD)*

The British Restoration emphasized a return to Classical style in both theatre and literature. “In the comedy of the English Restoration, witty talk among the superfluous leisure classes largely usurps the place of action, and sexual love overrides all lesser concerns” (Torrance 179). Restoration Comedy has been described by literary scholars as “witty, often bawdy and focused on sexual intrigue in fashionable society” (Arnold-Baker). One important aspect of the development of Restoration Comedy is that it came as a result of audiences wishing to focus on “the new sensations of the stage, actresses” (Brown). Once again, as in Elizabethan comedies, writers could present strong female characters that were the controllers of comic situations—but unlike in Shakespeare’s theatre, female performers could now fill the female roles.

**The Age of Enlightenment**

*(Europe: 1700~1800 AD)*

In the realm of literature, few writers, save for Machiavelli, can claim to have as much possession of dark irony and biting satire than Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), “Such is the enduring power of Swift’s satire that ‘Swiftian’ has entered the English language to distinguish a vein of savage, uncompromising, and powerful moral satire” (Serafin and Grosvenor). The comic subgenre of satire was forever changed when “he published the world-famous satire *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726)”, soon followed by “his ironical *A Modest Proposal*” (Rockwood). Swift demonstrated how far straight-faced satire could really
go, and multiple comedy films follow in his footsteps, most notably *Duck Soup* (1933) and *Dr. Strangelove* (1964).

In the world of music, “child prodigy”, “musical genius”, and “one of the world’s greatest composers”, are just a few of the dozens of adjectives one could use to describe Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). I would like to add to this list that he is also one of the world’s greatest craftsmen of comedy. Comic Opera reached its pinnacle with Mozart, “whose own *Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* show the new Italian *opera buffa* in its perfection” (Grout 226). His trio of operas with librettos by Lorenzo Da Ponte, *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Cosi Fan Tutte*, and his German *singspiele*, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (with libretto by Christoph Friedrich Bretzner) and *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*, with libretto by Emmanuel Schikaneder) remain both popular today and praised by scholars as prominent works. The recurring theme of disguises and role-playing within comedy appears in both *Cosi Fan Tutte* (when the protagonists masquerade as Albanians) and in *The Marriage of Figaro* (when the Countess and Susanna trade places). Like the comedies of Shakespeare, Mozart shows a “passion for carnival” (Solomon 356) as well as influences from “stock characters [that] populate the Da Ponte operas and *Die Zauberflöte*” (Solomon 511). The “*Buffo* style attracted Mozart because it dealt with real people” (Headington 103), unlike the *Opéra Seria* style that dealt with stories from mythology.

Mozart’s first major comic opera is the *singspiel, Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. The German word *singspiel* describes the musical form that is essentially a mix of spoken dialogue and sung arias, “The idea of *Singspiel* was that the story should be told in spiels [dialogues] and the singers should sing the songs about the situation in which the spiel
had put them” (Solomon 287). Mozart drew from “elements of Italian serious and comic opera and of French Opéra Comique, as well as the warmth and earnestness of German song. Moreover he created a work which, whatever its stylistic inconsistencies, is fresh and youthful in inspiration, filled with vitality and beauty which have not faded to this day” (Grout 292). On a purely comic level, Entführung is fast paced, has a simple plot, is full of jokes, and contains many stereotypical Turkish characters (Forman 671-672), all of which could easily sound like a description of an anarchic Three Stooges, Abbott and Costello, or Laurel and Hardy comedy. Entführung soon “became an international success” (Solomon 287) and it is still performed regularly today (Forman 670).

Mozart’s The Marriage of Figaro “was his most ambitious opera buffa until then” (Solomon 302-303). Today, critics praise it not only as a first class example of the Opera Buffa style, but also for the way it remains unique within the style:

For some people Figaro is just the best…. we can see some of the reasons why it is such a triumph. First, its brevity. The units are on average shorter than in any other Mozart opera—indeed nearly all operas…. The effect is to whizz the viewer/listener along at a terrific speed on a switchback journey that delivers him already dizzy with pleasure into the finales… Mozart’s Figaro, as well as being the great fixer, is a more complex character than Rossini’s Figaro, the ingenious factotum. He is jealous, insolent, hates his master and beats him at his own game. Not a standard buffa character at all (Forman 439-441).

Indeed Mozart liked Opera Buffa because he could use characters that represented the common people, “No characters in any opera give more the impression of being real persons than do Figaro and Susanna, the Count and the Countess, Cherubino, and even the lesser figures of this score” (Grout 285). In this way, Mozart contrasted with his Italian contemporaries:

Whereas the Italian composers as a rule were concerned only with suggesting bustle and activity and exploiting in every way the often crude farcical elements of the finale, Mozart never loses sight of the individuality of his persons; humor
than that of the Italians, a humor of character more than of situations, with that intermingling of seriousness which is the mark of all great comedy (Grout 286).

Mozart presents the audience with a comedy that contains a sentimentality that Chaplin would later replicate, “As so often happens with Mozart, the joke turns serious: we witness a display of authentic emotion” (Robinson 44). In a matter of seconds, Mozart can move the audience from laughter to tears, all without the audience ever feeling cheated out of a good comedy. Early accounts of the initial success of *Figaro* are varied, from “a great success” (Grout 284) to “a flop” (Forman 438-9). We do know that later performances in Prague met with a better reception than the earlier ones in Vienna (Headington 105):

To judge from the applause, calls for encores, and contemporary reviews, there were already numerous indications of its sweeping future popularity. Unfortunately, along with the bravos there was some hissing from the balconies, and opinion remained divided. ‘The public... did not really know on the first day where it stood,’ declared the reviewer in the Realzeitung. The end result was that the opera was both a triumph and a disappointment (Solomon 303-304).

Some music historians claim that while *Figaro* was “enthusiastically greeted by” opera scholars, it was “insufficiently favored by the majority of operagoers, who preferred the more traditional and less demanding products of the Italian composers” (Solomon 425). Despite initial success in Prague, *Figaro* did not become the international phenomenon that it is today until the Twentieth Century, “Outside of Germany it was not widely performed in Mozart’s lifetime. In the Nineteenth Century it had limited circulation but not until the 1930s did the Mozart revival lift *Figaro* into the top ten” (Forman 439).

Since the motion picture has only been around for a little more than a century, we are not yet able to see complete evidence of any long-term change in the critical or commercial appraisal of a particular comedy at a centurial level, as we find for these much earlier
works. However, some of the case studies in Chapter III will help to demonstrate changes in criticism that can occur over several decades. Beginning with the renewed interest in the films of Buster Keaton in the 1970s, we may be in an era of rediscovering the merits of earlier film comedies, but only time will tell.

Today, “Many people claim Don Giovanni is Mozart’s best opera, even the best opera of all time” (Forman 168), however this was not the case during Mozart’s lifetime. Its premiere in Prague was considered a success, including a “glowing review of the premiere at the Ständetheater.... Connoisseurs and musicians say that Prague had never yet heard the like... The unusually large attendance testifies to a unanimous approbation” (Solomon 421). However, once the opera moved to Vienna, it was seen as a relative failure:

later notices indicate the gist of contemporary Don Giovanni reception. “Is such magnificent, majestic and powerful song really stuff for ordinary opera-lovers, who only bring their ears to the Singspiel and leave their hearts at home?” asked one critic, adding, “The beauty, greatness and nobility of the music for Don Juan will never appeal anywhere to more than a handful of the elect. It is not music to everyone´s taste, merely tickling the ear and letting the heart starve” (Solomon 425).

As was the case with Figaro, contemporary critics felt that the opera appealed only to a select few and not the general public:

it was a flop and after a dutiful number of performances in its first run, it was never again played in Vienna in Mozart’s lifetime.... During the nineteenth century it lay pretty low until the 1880s when at last the world began to realize that it was something pretty good. Today everybody knows it as a masterpiece and it stands high amongst Mozart’s top four (the other three being Figaro, Così and the Flute) (Forman 166).

The reader will see a film equivalent of this type of response with Preston Sturges’ Sullivan’s Travels (1942), which was not initially praised by many critics. Film historians and audiences did not realize that it was actually quite a good film until decades later.
Mozart’s final collaboration with Lorenzo Da Ponte resulted in *Cosi Fan Tutte*, “with two pairs of lovers, a plot centering about mistaken identities, and a general air of lighthearted confusion and much ado about nothing, with a satisfactorily happy ending” (Grout 289-290). It is unclear if the story of *Cosi* is truly an original idea of Da Ponte’s or if it is a story he found somewhere. It does, however, show the influence of Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Cervantes in its narrative structure (Forman 131). One may recognize the motives of a wager over a woman’s fidelity and an act of disguise present in the comedies of these three writers as well as in *Cosi Fan Tutte*. Although the premiere received a “favorable reception” (Solomon 464):

Soon after the first performance of *Cosi fan tutte* the Emperor Joseph II died, and all theatres were closed. Consequently, the opera had little chance to claim an immediate place in the repertory, and it is really only in the twentieth century that it has joined the other Da Ponte operas in the Mozart canon (Headington 107).

As I stated above, many of the comedies profiled in this chapter are only praised as they should be after a couple centuries pass. Music scholar Denis Forman describes *Cosi Fan Tutte*’s revival:

During the whole of the nineteenth century it was played very little. Then in the 1900s Richard Strauss ‘discovered’ *Così*, recognized it as a masterpiece and became its propagandist.... *Così* is now, of course, in the repertory of all self-respecting opera houses (Forman 131).

*Così* is an excellent example of a comedy that takes on a new meaning depending on its audience. Its first audiences found it to be immoral, “For over a hundred years this ‘shocking and licentious work’ pretty well disappeared from view. The twentieth century was not so much shocked as condescending” (Forman 131). Forman goes on to say that if *Così* puzzles modern audiences it is because:

you can’t explain the plot of *Così* in terms of twentieth-century psychology. We have read Freud…. Mozart, by being born a bit earlier, escaped this experience.
To the eighteenth-century man the plot of Così would seem to be neat, funny and true, quite in keeping with the current male view that women’s proclivity to sleep around was widespread and reprehensible, whereas it was both natural and socially OK for men to sleep around whenever they felt inclined (Forman 132).

As a film comparison, the gay reference in Bringing Up Baby (1938) takes on a much different meaning for today’s viewers than it would have for its first viewers when it premiered.

Mozart’s last comic opera, The Magic Flute, “that sphinx among operas” (Grout 292), was his opera that critics and audiences alike found mesmerizing, “The Magic Flute was received with great enthusiasm by audiences” (Headington 109). Mozart biographer Maynard Solomon states “it was immediately evident that Mozart and Schikaneder had achieved a great success, the opera drawing immense crowds and reaching hundreds of performances during the 1790s” (487). Mozart’s contemporary and fellow composer “Salieri would be unstinting in his praise for Die Zauberflöte.... Haydn expressed his indignation that so great an artist was ‘not yet engaged by some imperial or royal court’” (Solomon 314):

the Flute was the biggest success of Mozart’s life.... the fame of the Flute soon spread all over Europe. But the language barrier kept it to German-speaking houses until the end of the century, when it was translated into French and Italian and suffered the usual mutilation in the process.... But in the nineteenth century the Flute cast its magic far and wide until today it ranks amongst Mozart’s top four (Forman 412-3).

Mozart adapted the conventions of existing comedies to suit his comic operas, which in turn went on to influence future comedians, including filmmakers. Consider the subject of mistaken identity, as seen in Duck Soup (1933) when Chico and Harpo impersonate Groucho. The same subject appeared earlier in Così Fan Tutte, when Guglielmo and Ferrando disguise themselves as Albanians, and in The Marriage of Figaro, in which the
Count believes he is flirting with Susanna but it is actually the Countess. The comedy in Mozart’s operas continues to impact the comic writing of others and the scholarly writing about comedy.

The 19th Century

(Europe and the United States)

Many would find it odd to see Jane Austen (1775-1817) listed amongst the great creators of comedy, but here I present her as not only the first notable female writer of comedy, but also as someone who today scholars still discuss as one of the most frank and observant social critics:

In her own quiet way Jane Austen devastates our compromises and complacencies—especially male complacency. Miss Austen placidly undermines the bastions of middle-class propriety. Her irreverence is calm, but she knows… that one must not compromise one’s honesty (Sypher 247).

One would not seem to read Austen’s Pride and Prejudice or Sense and Sensibility in order to enjoy an elaborate farce, but by looking to the Medieval definition of comedy that describes comedy as a story with a happy ending, as in Dante, one can see that Austen’s novels end with the joyful union of lovers. Austen has the keen ability of capturing the humorous side of characters, as one would encounter it in everyday life, “Her writing is noted for its wit, realism, shrewd sympathy, and brilliant prose style. Through her treatment of ordinary people in everyday life, she was the first to give the novel its distinctly modern character” (Feldman 4). Feminist scholars describe how Austen used comedy as a tool to speak out against social inequalities:

By adopting a comic frame of mind early in life... Austen paved the way for... mature social criticism. Worldplay, jokes, and riddles taught... an essential subversive strategy—to carnivalize language... Austen wielded the power of jokes and laughter as a means of self-assertion... the confidence... gained by
joking... enabled [Austen] to apply critical humor to [her] situation ... in a sexist society and thereby challenge the necessity of women’s subordinate status. [Austen] used comedy as an outlet for aggression and as a means of social criticism (Bilger 61-62).

Austen acknowledged the necessity of comedy for a person’s feeling of well-being. She saw “comedy not only as an entertainment, but also as a strategy for coping with life’s difficulties” (Bilger 33). The social convention that Austen probably criticized the most would have to be the “marriage market. As women’s only path to social advancement... skewed in men’s favor. To men belonged all power of choice; to women at most the negative power of refusal” (Bilger 120). I do not have to emphasize how this quality carries into film comedy. Marriage is fundamental to the narrative of films such as Dinner At Eight (George Cukor 1933), It’s A Gift (Norman Z. McLeod 1934), The Thin Man (W.S. Van Dyke 1934), and many, many more.

One of Austen’s greatest accomplishments in the realm of comedy is “the creation of female ‘trickster’ characters” (Bilger 89). One example of this character in Austen would be Lydia Bennet, of Pride and Prejudice, whose “transgressions take her almost beyond redemption, yet she remains unashamed from start to finish” (Bilger 107). The female trickster certainly exists in film, most notably as Katharine Hepburn portrays her in Bringing Up Baby (1938), and to a lesser extent, as Myrna Loy does in the Thin Man series.

Austen explored parodies in her later novels, most notably in Northanger Abbey, which “satirizes literary fashion, mocking not only novels but other profitable publications ‘with which the press now groans’” (Brownstein 227), “particularly the work of Ann Radcliffe” (Brown). Literary critic William Deresiewicz makes a convincing argument about Austen’s parody when he states:
Northanger Abbey was a satire of the gothic fiction so popular in Austen’s day—the exact same stuff she had taken off so raucously in her juvenile sketches. The name was a parody of high-flown titles like The Mysteries of Udolpho or The Castle of Otranto. (Northanger would have been the equivalent of something like New Jersey.) Austen herself must have loved those books, in a perverse, guilty-pleasure sort of way. She could never have lampooned them as brilliantly as she did if she hadn’t been reading them by the bucketful—and you don’t keep reading what you simply despise (86).

Like the reader, the author has to appreciate whatever is being parodied in order to truly appreciate the humor. The respect and affection that the creator of parody must have for the original source of the parody will be seen in Chapter III with Mel Brooks and Young Frankenstein.

In the time since Mozart, composers such as Gioachino Rossini (1792-1868; The Barber of Seville) and Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848; Don Pasquale) succeeded him in the crafting of comic gems. Rossini’s first well-known comic opera, L’Italiana in Algeri, includes a “fantastic plot, lunatic finale... and [its] farcical Pappatacian order is an hilarious romp, but a romp held together by considerable dramatic discipline and theatrical nous” (Forman 341-2). Rossini’s best-known opera, The Barber of Seville, faced difficulties at the beginning. An older opera setting of the same story already existed, so when Rossini tried to present his “Barber in 1816 he had great difficulty in overcoming the public prejudice in favor of Paisiello’s version” (Headington 97). In addition to this, the opening night was a disaster, “Everything went wrong: the Count’s guitar in the serenade was tuned to a different pitch to the orchestra’s: whistles and catcalling: the evening never recovered” (Forman 52). Fortunately, the opera’s reputation could only get better from there, with opera scholar Donald Grout calling it “The high point of Italian comic opera” (337). Like Mozart’s Figaro before, “Both are social comedies, in which we laugh at absurd conventions about class, sex, power, and
property” (Robinson 8). One of Rossini’s most brilliant innovations was “a single comic device: in all of them, Rossini achieves his desired effect by means of ironic imitation and repetition. One character’s statement is transformed into another’s question, and vice versa” (Robinson 45), a device that is replicated in the banter of many film comedies, like the overlapping dialogue in the final minutes of His Girl Friday (Howard Hawks 1940).

Barber was not only popular with audiences, but also with scholars, for “In 1898, Verdi wrote: ‘... Il barbiere di Siviglia, with its comic verve and its truthful declamation, is the most beautiful opera buffa in existence’” (Headington 163). Forman describes the longevity of Rossini’s Barber as:

_The Barber_ took a little time to establish itself as probably the most popular and most performed piece in the whole operatic repertory... _The Barber_ has frequently been written up as the greatest of all comic operas.... there are loads of quotes from nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics hyping it up as ‘Rossini’s masterpiece’, ‘the model comic opera’ (53).

Today, audiences everywhere are familiar with the music of Rossini, though they may not know it, for Bugs Bunny and the Looney Tunes appropriated much of it. As one can see through the Looney Tunes’ use of his music, Rossini’s operas present such a complete view of comedy. Not only are the libretti and situations humorous, the very quality of the music, with its twists and surprises, is comical.

The prolific Gaetano Donizetti succeeded Rossini in the genre of _Opera Buffa_, crafting several successful examples of the form:

The last echoes of the _opera buffa_ are heard in Donizetti.... His best comic operas were _L’elisir d’amore_ (‘The Elixir of Love,’ 1832), _Don Pasquale_ (Paris, 1843) and the French _opéra comique_ _La Fille du régiment_ (“The Daughter of the Regiment,” Paris, 1840). Of these, _Don Pasquale_ is fully in the _buffo_ tradition, a worthy companion to Rossini’s _Barbiere_ (Grout 340).
Music scholars now speak most highly of *Don Pasquale*, “the last true opera buffa to remain in the repertory, as well as the best Italian comic opera between Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and Verdi’s *Falstaff*” (Headington 170-1). Forman explains that “Don Pasquale was an immediate success and has held its position as one of the top of the pops in the Italian repertory ever since. Don Pasquale is apt to be hailed as Donizetti’s comic masterpiece” (173). One can see many of the gags known to slapstick films and the situations of the Screwball Comedies as being mainstays of Rossini and Donizetti’s operas.

**The Victorian Era**

(British Empire: 1840~1900 AD)

Few time periods in the history of the Western World have seemed to follow so many implied social rules than the Victorian Era. It was precisely for this reason that the Victorian Era needed comedy—something that can exist outside of social boundaries:

To express in reputable language some disreputable idea, to take some scandalous situation, some low-class calling or disgraceful behavior, and describe them in terms of the utmost ‘respectability,’ is generally comic. The English word is here purposely employed, as the practice itself is characteristically English. Many instances of it may be found in Dickens and Thackeray, and in English literature generally” (Bergson 142).

While one would seem off base labeling *Great Expectations, A Tale of Two Cities*, and *A Christmas Carol* as comedies, one needs to note how Charles Dickens (1812-1870) does craft many rich comic characters and situations. Numerous critics and scholars praise Dickens for his humor. Dickens scholar Hesketh Pearson states, “Serious though Dickens was... he could not help clowning when the humour took him.... the preponderating virtue in Dickens’ work is the predominant virtue in Dickens: his
inexhaustible comedy and vivacity” (177-307). English scholar Bernard Nicholas Schilling describes Dickens’ style as having “a sympathetic attitude toward the ludicrous” (13). Literature scholar Malcolm Andrews adds:

‘The qualities for which everybody reads and admires him are his humour and wit’ wrote one reviewer of Dickens’ work at the start of his career, in 1837. After Dickens’ death in 1870, [biographer] John Forster’s verdict on the writings was simple: ‘His leading quality was Humour’....Who would have thought Dickens, more than any other Victorian novelist, was famous for making people laugh, loud and long? (185-186).

Early filmmakers, including D.W. Griffith and Sergei Eisenstein, who also theorized about effective filmmaking, often cited Dickens as a source of inspiration for the multifaceted structuring of narrative. Dickens demonstrated how the reader could experience concurrent action in a novel, a structure also possible in film, unlike live theatre. Comic filmmakers soon adopted the narrative techniques of Dickens as Griffith and Eisenstein had utilized them. Andrews credits Dickens’ comic abilities to “The shock of incongruity” that “has long been invoked as one of the prime triggers of laughter” (187) and goes on to say that his “comic techniques... are... pretty traditional, but they are worked with an extra gusto and extra finesse by Dickens, and with his distinctive comic timing: that is the difference” (Andrews 192). Note that Andrews here describes Dickens’ use of the Principle of Comic Timing. In Dickens, we see comedy as a relief from the pains of life. Like Chaplin, Dickens grew up in poverty and felt a connection to the common people, pursuing comedy as a relief in the Medieval comedy, which also appears in Sullivan’s Travels (1942). Chaplin, Dickens, and (to a point) Sturges, were all populists who could approach social injustices through the lens of comedy.
Like Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Mozart before him, Dickens created many rich comic characters:

by far the most remarkable feature of *Barnaby* is the character of Simon Tappertit... Tappertit is a comic apotheosis of the ‘little man’ a century before he came into his own.... We who have lived to see the ‘little man’ personified by... Charlie Chaplin... can now recognize in the queer antics of Simon Tappertit the prototype of what has amused us (Pearson 95).

As for character relationships, “Dickens abounds in women who are the curse of their husband’s lives” (Schilling 120), as we see in W.C. Field’s *It’s A Gift* (1934). Another notable Dickens character is Wilkins Micawber of *David Copperfield*:

Comic treatment of failure that is hard to distinguish from wickedness raises the question of how Dickens manages to leave us with affection for someone whose surface behavior is intolerable. Micawber may be, as [novelist] J.B. Priestley says, the greatest comic creation in English except Falstaff (Schilling 98).

If laughter truly is a group activity, perhaps laughter allows the reader to affirm the comic character. From a later Dickens work, *Our Mutual Friend*, he presents us with “Simon Wegg... a masterpiece in the old style, done with all the old power; but the book is packed full of genius and contains his best social satire” (Pearson 298).

In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Dickens presents the reader with the perfect blend of comedy and pathos for which Chaplin is often praised, “Throughout, comic events are interspersed with Dickens’s moving indictment of society’s ill treatment of children and the cruelty of the educational system” (“Nicholas Nickleby”). But even in the most despicable of situations, Dickens is able to find a glimmer of hope, “Nicholas Nickleby is nevertheless informed by the joyful energy that typifies Dickens’ early work” (Ousby). Few authors would shape the philosophy of depression era filmmakers such as Chaplin and Sturges—working with urban settings—more so than Charles Dickens.
Romantic Period

(Europe and the United States: 1815-1910)

When we move into the Romantic period of art, literature, theatre, and music, we find that, “Romantic dramatists preferred tragedy to comedy” (Ousby), which makes sense in an era of industrial change, war, social upheaval, scientific and medical discoveries, and changing national identities. If the reader considers that one of the elements of Romanticism, personal feelings and individuality, it is not surprising that comedy—which is an expressive form that is meant to be shared—should not catch the attention of Romantic critics.

From the mid to late Nineteenth Century into the early Twentieth century, several composers created notable comic operas. Bedrich Smetana’s (1824-1884) most popular opera, The Bartered Bride, was also his first successful one (Grout 480). However, it “did not immediately gain an enthusiastic reception. The gathering clouds of war may have contributed to its failure” (Headington 248). Also, it was: misunderstood by many critics; in fact he was bitterly upset when his opera was likened to the operettas of Offenbach, then all the rage in Prague: ‘Did none of those gentlemen realise that my model was Mozart’s comic opera?’ Smetana much admired The Marriage of Figaro, and thought it ‘an unsurpassable example of the most delightful moods and the most lively comic action without ever ceasing to be beautiful or descending into triviality…. It is The Bartered Bride’s liveliness that has brought its international success…. Smetana’s later operas have a more complex and serious approach, and none has matched the popularity of The Bartered Bride (Headington 249).

It is interesting that of all of Smetana’s opera works, it is the comedy for which he is remembered best. Comedy makes people feel good, and one can always remember the feeling that a comedy inspired.
French composer Jacques Offenbach (1819-1880) held the world stage with a variety of comic operas, “works he termed either opéras bouffes, opéras comiques, or operettes. All have spoken dialogue and are witty, brilliant satires on classical subjects....

A satirical bite in Offenbach gave his works a dimension that had once belonged to vaudeville and opéra comique” (Headington 128). Offenbach was able to take the satire of Swift and mold it into a musical form.

It is ironic that Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901), who began his career with a comedy—Un giorno di regno—that was a critical and commercial failure (Headington 210), decided to end his career with a comedy as well. With Falstaff, “Verdi did more than justice to Shakespeare and surpassed even the finest of his earlier operas” (Headington 209). Opera historian Christopher Headington adds, “if there was a better way to end a career than with Othello, it was with Falstaff” (210). The public and critical reaction to Falstaff is somewhat mixed, “Probably more people pretend to like Falstaff (and don’t) than any other opera” (Forman 216). Forman goes on to say that Falstaff’s success might have followed with the composer’s reputation and not with the opera itself, “By the time of the first night of Falstaff, Verdi was held in such veneration that if he had set to music the register of Paris cab drivers it would have had a great reception” (214). Despite its flaws, “the opera has also earned the admiration of many composers, including the young Richard Strauss... Strauss had no love of Italian opera, but all his life he made an exception for Falstaff” (Headington 211). It is still performed today to enormous popularity.
Transitional Years

(Europe and United States: 1880-1930)

Much like the case with Verdi, Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) is known for his tragic operas. However, his *Gianni Schicchi*, based on a character from Dante, is a highly praised comic opera:

*Gianni Schicchi* is a little miracle. It must be placed alongside Boheme and Tosca as one of Puccini’s top three.... we have in Schicchi pure farce set with gusto, zest and an expert sense of timing, a feeling for the comic phrase, for the repetitive joke, for the cod sentimental piece, and above all the breakneck speed of events, which is the essence of farce.... all in all *Schicchi* is just brilliant (Forman 287-289).

Like Puccini’s skill in comedy as well as tragedy, some of the most notable comic filmmakers like Billy Wilder, W.S. Van Dyke, and George Cukor, could also succeed in non-comic genres. One only has to think of *Double Indemnity* (Wilder 1944), *Tarzan the Ape Man* (Van Dyke 1932), and *Gaslight* (Cukor 1944), to see this versatility in action.

The comic opera tradition continued with the works of three separate composers. In Vienna, Johann Strauss (1825-1899), “the Waltz King”, composed *Die Fledermaus*, with annual New Years performances still selling out fifteen years in advance, “In *Die Fledermaus* Strauss produced what is perhaps the central work of the operetta repertory” (Headington 279). Forman adds, “*Fledermaus*, was a hit from the word go....From its first night *Fledermaus* has never looked back.... What happens if you put together a top-class French farce with the composer of the very best Viennese dance music? The answer is *Fledermaus*, a terrific popular success” (Forman 252). As we shall see with several film comedies like Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931) or Wilder’s *Some Like It Hot* (1959), a comedy may be successful commercially and critically at its release and
continue to be so. Often, as with Verdi’s *Falstaff* or Strauss’ *Fledermaus*, the appeal is partly due to the comic creators and performers’ existing reputations. In the United Kingdom, librettist William Gilbert (1836-1911) and composer Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) collaborated on several comic operettas including *The Pirates of Penzance*, *H.M.S. Pinafore*, and *The Mikado*, “remarkable for their fertile melodious invention, bounding humour and keen sense of timing. Although their first collaboration, *Thespis* (London, 1871), was a failure” (Headington 289). In a similar way, American composer Victor Herbert created such comic operettas as *Eileen*, *Naughty Marietta*, and *The Red Mill*.

In the realm of literature, Mark Twain (born Samuel Clemens; 1835-1910) was not only an “exceptionally popular author during his lifetime” (Foner and Garraty), but also, he still “ranks among the most esteemed and influential authors the U.S. has produced and is widely regarded as our premier literary humorist” (Serafin and Bendixen).

Scholars credit his success to “his humorous manner, which some people found crude and irreverent, and on his appealing personality” (Foner and Garraty):

His adaptable talents enabled him to master a wide range of literary forms, including sketches, essays, short stories, travel narratives, and novels.... *The Innocents Abroad* (1869) scoffs impudently at tourist sights in Europe and the Holy Land.... *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court* (1889) retains its satiric force... [his works] have earned him the admiration of writers and readers of the modern era.... In the interim, he exploited his recent European travels for another anecdotal mixture of factual matter and comedy, *A Tramp Abroad* (1880) (Serafin and Bendixen).

Twain’s comic style relates to the social critique of Dickens and Chaplin, as well as to the satire of Swift. In a later work, *The Mysterious Stranger: A Romance*, Twain proclaimed the power of comedy, as scholar Ryan Simmons describes:

More than shame, however, laughter represents a potential source of agency in Satan’s view. Explaining that humans ‘have a mongrel perception of humor, nothing more,’ Satan goes on to discourse at length about this unfortunately
unexploited capacity: ‘Will a day come when the race will detect the funniness of these juveniles and laugh at them—and by laughing at them destroy them? For your race, in its poverty, has unquestionably one really effective weapon—laughter’....He genuinely seems aggrieved that people are not better than they are, that they fail to pick up the unemployed “weapon” of laughter (135).

It is a terribly important fact for American film comedy that one of America’s greatest writers specialized in comedy, particularly the ability to observe the people and situations of everyday life.

Part of the next generation after Mark Twain, composer/conductor John Philip Sousa (1854-1932) became quite a prolific writer of comic operettas, though today, the general public and most music historians remember Sousa as the “March King”. Sousa’s dream, in fact, had always been to be a musical theater composer, not a band conductor, and it was his wish “to create a truly American opera” (Tommasini) that motivated him. Despite this, many music reference texts do not even mention Sousa’s operettas in his biographies.

He first gained experience with operettas by orchestrating various Gilbert and Sullivan operettas (Sadie 67). According to musicologist Stanley Sadie, “Sousa’s style of operetta can be traced to that of Gilbert and Sullivan, and to a lesser extent Offenbach” (68). He also wrote:

“all the solos, duets, trios, choruses, etc” sung in [the] three-act traveling farce comedy, *Our Flirtations*. It was most unusual for such a show to have a complete score of new music, but the trade press was not impressed with this originality, remarking “the music with the exception of two numbers is not likely to become popular,” qualifying “not because it is not good, but because it is too good” (Ganzl 1912).

Despite the critics, Sousa’s work on *Our Flirtations* and other arrangements made him well known in the music world.
Sousa wrote nine comic operettas “that reached production and many more left unfinished” (Tommasini). Sousa even “wrote four operas to his own libretti: The Smugglers (1879), Desiree (1884), The Queen of Hearts (1886), and El Capitan (1895)” (Butterworth 425). His operettas written at the end of the 1890s were his most popular:

In its day, ‘El Capitan,’ which opened in 1896, was more popular in the United States, ran longer and drew larger crowds than ‘H.M.S. Pinafore’… on Jan. 1, 1900, the night “Chris and the Wonderful Lamp,” Sousa’s American retelling of the Aladdin fantasy, opened in New York, two other Sousa shows, ‘El Capitan’ and ‘The Charlatan,’ were also playing there… That’s three shows running simultaneously on what was then Broadway (Tommasini).

Music historian Kurt Ganzl calls El Capitan Sousa’s “one genuine musical-theatre hit” (1912). Sadie adds that “El Capitan… played for four years in America and six months in England and turned out to be the most important 19th-century operetta by an American composer” (68). Sadie claims that at this point, “Sousa had reached his peak as an operetta composer” (67). However, Sousa’s most successful operetta up to that point would also be his last great success in the field:

in spite of El Capitan’s success, Sousa’s career as a composer of comic opera did not flourish in the 20th century. Several of his pieces remained unproduced, and on another occasion he priced himself out of a job…. The handful of Sousa scores which did make it to the stage in later days did so for very short and unprofitable seasons and El Capitan and, to a lesser extent, The Charlatan remained Sousa’s sole musical-theatre references (Ganzl 1912).

Sousa’s last completed comic operetta, The American Maid, only had 16 performances on Broadway before it closed (Tommasini). Sousa’s operettas fell out of favor with audiences and critics just as silent film comedy was reaching the forefront of American popular entertainment and art. Many historians attribute the failure of his final show to the fact that it was the product of an era that had already passed in America, “by the time we get to ‘The Glass Blowers,’ musical theater had moved on…. Sousa’s work must have
seemed old-fashioned” (Tommasini). Sadie adds “by this time public interest in this form of musical theatre had waned” (68). Not only had the style of musicals changed, but the primary source of popular entertainment had shifted from the theatre to the motion picture.

Musical theater scholar Tracey Chessum argues that his operettas receive little notice today because they “are so tied to a specific historical moment that they become impossible to revive without considerable adaptation”. A further explanation for their lack of critical attention that Chessum offers is the fact that Sousa’s operettas were mostly touring shows, which means that regional directors added or removed musical numbers and dialogue, making it nearly impossible to find “any definitive form” of the works—similar to the situation of many early silent pictures.

Sousa’s operettas represent a short-lived yet extremely popular form of comedy. Once again, we see how some comedies seem to lose their mass appeal over time. Sadie describes Sousa’s operettas as having:

an unmistakable aura of optimism perfect for the time… The operettas reflect Sousa’s strong sense of propriety with no risqué wording or suggestive action. Their librettos… are deliberately nonsensical make-believe…. Sousa’s operettas remain period pieces, and except for El Capitan have had little success when revived (68).

Sousa’s operettas and those like them still exerted an influence on the later anarchic sound comedies of W.C. Fields, Laurel and Hardy, The Marx Brothers, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, and Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis—especially in the musical interludes of the latter three comedy teams. One should note how easily aspects of comic musical theater were absorbed into the comedy of the sound film.
The Twentieth Century

(Europe and United States)

Although author Thomas Mann (1875-1955) used a lot of humor in his works, he presented a dark humor and his narratives often resulted in tragedy, “Buddenbrooks will begin amid the ease and gayety of success... Mann leads us gradually toward failure and decline, the defeat of all attempts at improvement” (Schilling 194). Schilling credits Mann with making a “conventional distinction between humor and irony: humor shows a less intellectual and objective laughter than irony” (Schilling 194). Mann operates in the same realm of irony as Macchiavelli, Swift, and Mark Twain, demonstrating how the style of satire and irony was still a major factor of humor in the Twentieth Century.

One of the strongest influences on the film comedies of the first two decades of the sound film came from the contemporary theatre, “The cinema turned to the theater for material, and audiences were treated to the comedies of Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde, and George Bernard Shaw” (Landy 333). Many successful comedies of the day, especially the Screwball Comedies are adapted from contemporary plays:

At the turn of the 20th century comedy gained stature largely through Bernard Shaw, with his comedy of ideas. Although stage humour abounds in many times and places, the 20th century commercial stage has been particularly hospitable to frivolous entertainment that goes by the name of comedy (Ousby).

As literary scholar Ian Ousby’s statement alludes to, early film comedy not only drew inspiration from quality comedies, but from comparatively poor comedies as well. As novelist George Meredith explains:

These bad traditions of comedy affect us, not only on the stage, but in our literature, and may be tracked into our social life. They are the ground of the heavy moralizings by which we are outworned, about life as a comedy, and comedy as a jade, when popular writers, conscious of fatigue in creativeness,
desire to be cogent in a modish cynicism; perversions of the idea of life, and of the proper esteem for the society we have wrested from brutishness, and would carry higher (16).

But what audiences accept as humor means that it is hard to escape from the “bad traditions”, since it would mean having to alter audiences’ expectations:

how difficult it is for writers to disentangle themselves from bad traditions is noticeable when we find Goldsmith, who had grave command of the comic in narrative, producing an elegant farce for a comedy; and Fielding, who was a master of the comic both in narrative and in dialogue, not even approaching to the presentable in farce (Meredith 16).

This phenomenon was not confined only to the early Twentieth Century. Today, motion picture studios produce low quality comedy series with little to no aesthetic value, often featuring comedians with little to no talent. One such performer that I can think of is Adam Sandler, who seems to portray the same developmentally-delayed character in all of his solo ventures, like Billy Madison (Tamra Davis 1995), Happy Gilmore (Dennis Dugan 1996), The Waterboy (Frank Coraci 1998), and most recently Jack and Jill (Dugan 2011). As long as a picture is profitable, the studio will continue to make sequels regardless of any lack of recognizable artistic merit or creativity.

**Vaudeville**

*(United States: 1880~1930; British Music Hall: 1850~1960)*

The style of performance known as Vaudeville began to appear just a few years before the invention of the motion picture:

if...the classical norms (rooted in theatrical realism) were primarily interested in narrative causality and character motivation, the aesthetics of vaudeville played particular emphasis upon performance virtuosity and audience response. Performers, who held sole responsibility for the selection, rehearsal and presentation of the comic material, built the act to foreground their own
performance skills.... Characters played a limited role, often reduced to familiar stereotypes. Sometimes, vaudevillians invited audience awareness of the gap between their own personalities and the stock characters they assumed, layering identities to showcase their performance skills.... Vaudevillians directly addressed their audiences, sometimes pulling them directly into the act, often adjusting both the performance’s style and content to spectator response. The vaudeville manager made detailed records of the spectator reactions to various acts, measuring the performer’s merits according to the ability to provoke outward displays of emotion. The act was, as a consequence, built to intensify affective experience and heighten awareness of the performer’s skills and expertise; the simple plot became a ‘string’ upon which loosely associated bits of comic and musical material might be attached. Most acts built towards a ‘wow climax’, closing upon a spectacular moment to maximize the audience’s final response (Karnick and Jenkins 154).

As I stated above, the term “vaudeville” comes from the song parodies of Eighteenth Century France. Vaudeville focused not on a narrative or order of events, but rather on the performer herself. There was no director of the performances, aside from the owner of the venue that would choose the order of acts and determine which performer received the best audience response. This absence of a director left the performer as the controller of timing, audience rapport, and content. Later in the Twentieth Century, the Vaudeville tradition continued in the form of stand-up comedy.

Vaudeville, and the British equivalent of the Music Hall, had more influence on the style of comedy film than on any other genre, “The comedian-centered comedy has been most influenced by… one or several of the variety contexts provided by vaudeville, burlesque, British music hall, the theatrical revue, cabaret, radio, and television” (Krutnik 23). The episodic style of Vaudeville introduced a performance rhythm that became expected in film comedy and ultimately led to television variety shows:

The fragmentation and intensity of vaudeville shocked many middle class critics and reformers, who preferred the emotional restraint and realism associated with theatrical farce or ‘true comedy’…. If comedian comedy, as [film scholar Steve] Seidman suggests, drew heavily upon the vaudeville tradition, the roots of romantic comedy can be found in ‘true comedy’ (Karnick and Jenkins 154).
With its widespread influence, the style of Vaudeville and Music Hall affected many later filmmakers and theorists, including the great Russian filmmaker, Sergei Eisenstein, who wrote more about the art of montage than any other filmmaker or film scholar. He credits the inspiration of creating meaning through the juxtaposition of separate elements to Vaudeville and the Music Hall, “I think that first and foremost we must give the credit to the basic principles of the circus and the music-hall—for which I had had a passionate love since childhood. Under the influence of… Chaplin… this early love thrived” (12).

The rapid-fire delivery of antecedent-consequence, set up-punch line style of comedy that audiences come to expect with film comedy has its roots in Vaudeville.

Another innovation that came from within the context of Vaudeville is the duality of the comedienne as a character and the comedienne as herself:

Stylization… was a conventional aspect of many generic traditions, particularly those which ‘descend from episodic and composite forms in the American popular theater (e.g. vaudeville, melodrama). These genres allowed for a constant play between storytelling and showmanship, characterization and performance (Karnick and Jenkins 152).

By the 1930s, it was not uncommon to find examples of comedians, like the Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields, or (for that matter) Cary Grant, who appeared in films impersonating themselves instead of a fictional character:

Hollywood comedian comedy differed from mainstream fiction films in one important respect: comedian-centered films were not organized simply in accordance with the narrative-based aesthetic of classical cinema. They exhibit, instead, a combination of fiction-making and performative entertainment spectacle. In these films, aspects of the classical representational paradigm coexist with a presentational mode of attraction that has its roots in such variety forms as vaudeville and burlesque (Krutnik 17).

Of course, studios at the time could not help but encourage this trend. If a comedienne, or more importantly, if her style, were popular with audiences, succeeding pictures
featuring this comedienne were more likely to be successful, as audiences members knew what to expect from the comedienne’s performance. Vaudeville also presented the mindset that a successful comic performance should be judged not on the creativity of the performer or the variety of his or her performances, but on the number of laughs that the performer elicits.

**The Motion Picture**

*(Europe and United States: Beginning ~1895 AD)*

Since the birth of the motion picture in the late 1800s, film comedy not only developed due to the influence of other art forms, but also within the film medium as the techniques and styles of filmmaking became conventions of expression. Film scholar Tom Gunning denotes Lumiere’s *L’Arroseur arrosé (The Sprayer Sprayed, 1895)* as not only “the first film comedy”, but also “one of the first projected films” and “the first fictional narrative film” (Gunning “Crazy Machines” 87-88). Gunning goes on to argue:

this early genre of short gag films plays a key role in shaping the tradition of silent film comedy, it also has its own identity which differs in some respects from what has been described as classical narrative film, the model that Hollywood films, from about the beginning of the twenties until at least the sixties, seemed to follow. I would also maintain that this early film genre helped shape the later genre of film comedy, which frequently seems to teeter in precarious position within the classical model. The rather deviant relation that film comedy sometimes displays to the classical norms of narrative structure and character development derives from an alternative model that begins to form in this early period—the gag (89).

From this first film presentation, one can see the conflicting relationship between the narrative structure and the gag.

It is important here to note that the film genres that we know today did not appear fully formed, but rather developed gradually over a period of a couple decades, “[film
scholars] David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson see the classical Hollywood cinema as a mode of film practice which survived almost unchanged from 1917 to 1960” (Karnick and Jenkins 9). The major genres of the infant years of film were melodrama, comedy, and historical epic. Comedy was successful critically, as well as financially, “it is abundantly clear that the American silent film comedy was flourishing in the mid-twenties, rivaling drama as the dominant form of cinematic expression” (Crafton 106). In the 1920s, film reviewers and audiences saw the comic Chaplin (see Chapter 3.1) as at an equal level as that of the dashing Fairbanks, “Silent films gave an international impetus to farce, through the brilliance of Buster Keaton, Laurel and Hardy, Harold Lloyd, and especially Charlie Chaplin” (Brown). There was no difference between the comic performer and the dramatic performer. This trait of the silent era is another reason why I have chosen to exclude the particular comedy films of this era from my study of film comedy.

Some of the most influential comic characters and situations that are familiar today come from the silent film comedies, “If we include the work of Jerry Lewis, Woody Allen, and Mel Brooks within that tradition [of silent comedy], and maybe of Bill Murray and Jim Carrey as well, the influence of the comedies of the 1920s has extended to the present” (Wexman 73). As I stated in Chapter I, silent film comedy had true universal appeal, as knowledge of the language was unnecessary:

McCaffrey… argues that what separates the great silent classics from less satisfying comedies is the fact that the [silent comedians] were ‘concerned, first of all, with the comedy character and the development of a well-motivated dramatic story that sprang from the roots of the leading comic character (Karnick and Jenkins 3).
As was the case with Vaudeville, the character and her routine of gags is more important to the silent film comedy than the narrative. However, film comedy would not remain the prominent genre that it had been in the 1920s:

as feature-film narratives became the industry norm, however, comic films tended to lag behind dramatic films, retaining aspects of the earlier ‘cinema of attractions’ even as the classical Hollywood norms came to dominate film production (Karnick and Jenkins 157).

While audiences seem to be forgiving of dramatic films that reuse plot elements and character identities from film to film, audiences immediately notice when the same gag or comic situation is reused:

Unlike ‘mainstream’ dramatic cinema, which progressed rapidly through styles, techniques and stories, nothing was discarded in slapstick. Camera tricks perfected by Méliès and Zecca are still in evidence a quarter-century later; music hall turns that were hoary when Chaplin, Linder, and Keaton introduced them to cinema in the teens were still eliciting laughs by those clowns and others at the end of the silent period. We are forced to ask, if gags were so scorned, then why did the gag film linger on for so long, an important mode of cinematic discourse for at least forty years? And is there not something perverse about arguing that what is ‘wrong’ with a film form is that which defines it to begin with? (Crafton 107).

As I stated before, similar gags not only kept their impact over a period of a couple decades, but rather for centuries. Consider the influence of Vaudeville’s episodic structure on film comedy, and how the medium of film allowed for the filmmaker to insert gags at any moment of the film. A gag recycled from earlier films may even recur in the same film, if the context allows.

As I mentioned in Chapter I, film comedy changed style more drastically than any other genre out of necessity, “The transition to sound led Hollywood to a new reconciliation with the vaudeville aesthetic” (Karnick and Jenkins 158), meaning that verbal comedy became the main form of comic expression. Comic style also became
more diverse as the homogenous style of slapstick comedy branched out into “comedian comedies” and Screwball comedies, “Perhaps the most vital of silent genres, slapstick comedy, with its fundamental visual component, was replaced in the thirties by the anarchic dialogue comedies of the Marx Brothers (see Chapter 3.2) and W.C. Fields and the ‘screwball’ comedies of such directors as Frank Capra (see Chapter 3.3) and Howard Hawks (chapter 3.4)” (Cook 262). But verbal comedy did not eliminate all forms of physical comedy, as some of the most successful comedians developed trademarks with their physical mannerisms:

    The Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields, Will Rogers, Bob Hope, Jimmy Durante, and Marie Dressler—each had some special quality of voice and personality that found an immediate response in audiences around the world. Their humor was verbal, but it also had a strong visual quality (Knight 143).

Indeed, physical comic styles did not die completely in favor of purely verbal comedy. Rather, they remained ever present, synthesizing a greater comic impact than verbal comedy could alone.

    In the 1930s, comedy did not simply coexist with drama, it complemented it, “The vitality of these comic performers can be accounted for by the greater closeness of their comedy to everyday and commonplace experience than that achieved by melodrama (Landy 332). Of British films in the 1930’s and 1940’s, philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin states “all high and serious genres… were drenched in conventionality, hypocrisy, and falsification, laughter alone remained uninfected” (Landy 332). Sometimes only comedy is daring enough to show society as it really is.

    The next major technical innovation after the sound film was television, which became the primary showcase for comedy in the 1950s. As a result of this transition,
among other causes, few notable film comedies came from American studios in the 1950s when compared to other decades:

Symptomatically, comedy was in particularly short supply during the fifties, especially the topical comedy that ridicules or satirizes the world around us—the kind of comedy epitomized by the Marx Brothers on the one hand and by Preston Sturges [See Chapter 3.5] on the other… during the McCarthy years, nobody felt like laughing (Knight 254).

In Chapter III, I shall go into detail about the comedy films of this era. However, for now I will argue that the most successful American comic director of the 1950s would have to be Billy Wilder (see Chapter 3.7). His definitive comedies *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) and *Some Like It Hot* (1959), described by some film scholars as “sex comedies”, form practically a subgenre of their own. Also, I would argue that none other than Marilyn Monroe was the most successful American comic film performer of the 1950s. Nearly every comedy film in which she starred was a commercial and critical success, in part because she worked with some of the most critically acclaimed directors of the time. Keep in mind that, although she has now been dead for fifty years, she remains one of the most popular cultural icons. Licensing fees for the use of her likeness alone “reportedly nets the Monroe estate about $2 million a year” (IMDb). Her legacy is indisputable as is her influence on American popular culture and on comedy.

While the American film industry suffered during the Red Scare of the 1950s, British film comedy (see Chapter 3.6) found a sort of renaissance, a situation that I will describe in more detail in chapter III. Ironically, the successful British comedies of the mid Twentieth Century had their roots in documentary—a genre that relies on a strict narrative structure, unlike comedy:

Michael Balcon, head of Ealing Studios, had always been a friend of the documentary movement and favored fiction films that were distinctively British
rather than imitatively American. When documentarians began to cross over into feature film making it was to Ealing they came…. These British comedies turn documentary seriousness on its ear (Wexman 138-139).

It seems as if the filmmakers of the United Kingdom had to wait for the output of American comedies to stall in order for international audiences to appreciate their distinguishing brand of comedy.

The two most influential British comic performers of the mid Century were Alec Guinness, who was equally as comfortable in the historical epics of David Lean as he was playing multiple roles in Ealing Comedies, and Peter Sellers, who was one of the “‘Goons’, a zany comedy troupe whose off-the-wall humor inspired the later Monty Python television shows and films” (Dixon and Foster 267). These two performers introduced the world of comedy to the unprecedented feat of one actor portraying multiple roles within one film—and sometimes within one scene, as Guinness does in *Kind Hearts and Coronets* (1949), “The protean quality of Guinness and Sellers, their ability to impersonate a large number of different roles within one film and from film to film, distinguishes their work from that of most of their predecessors” (Landy 333).

Although I admit that many so-called “character actors” populate dramas, if one performer were to play multiple roles in a single dramatic film, it would give the impression of a low budget production that could not hire enough talent. But in the realm of film comedy, the ability of one actor to portray multiple convincing characters in a single film is a demonstration of that performer’s prowess. Note how this quality of performance unique to comedy in the field of motion pictures comes from the theatre, in which a one-performer show—whether comic or dramatic—seems to denote an accomplished performer.
By the early 1960s, British and American filmmakers seemed to return to a uniform style of comedy. For 1960s and 1970s comedy, parody was the order of the day. In the United States, Mel Brooks (see Chapter 3.8) imitated classic Westerns in *Blazing Saddles* (1974) and classic Horror with *Young Frankenstein* (1974). Woody Allen used an actual Japanese film that he redubbed in order to lampoon poorly dubbed foreign films in *What’s Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966) and he parodied documentaries with *Take The Money and Run* (1969) and *Zelig* (1983). The team of David Zucker, Jim Abrahams, and Jerry Zucker satirized the disaster movies that had become popular in the 1970s, including notable entries like *Airport* (George Seaton 1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame 1972), *Earthquake* (Mark Robson 1974), and *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin and Irwin Allen 1974), with their critically acclaimed *Airplane!* (1980).

Although some scholars may argue that Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) parodies Sidney Lumet’s *Fail-Safe* (1964), I disagree with this assessment. Kubrick released *Dr. Strangelove* in January 1964, while Lumet released his film in October 1964—nearly a year later (IMDb). It is quite possible that Kubrick had read the novel *Fail-Safe* (published 1962) and was aware that a film version of the novel was in the works (IMDb). However, if Kubrick had wanted his film to function as a parody of *Fail-Safe*, he would have waited for Lumet to release the aforementioned film. In addition, the credits of *Dr. Strangelove* clearly attribute the story to Peter George’s novel *Red Alert* (published 1958). For these reasons, I believe that *Dr. Strangelove* is not part of the parody tradition. Instead, it most closely follows the methods of the Anarchic Comedies.

Concurrently, versatile filmmaker Blake Edwards (see Chapter 3.9) parodied the James Bond franchise with a series of films beginning with *The Pink Panther* (1963). The
success of this series owes much to the performances of Peter Sellers and to the music of Henry Mancini. In the 1970s, the Monty Python comedy troupe lampooned historical epics in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975) and *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979).

One curious point that I wish to make about parody, and upon which I shall elaborate in Chapter III, is that so often the resulting parody is of a higher caliber of technique and aesthetics than the original film that it parodies. Filmmakers begin work on a parody with the assumption that the viewer will be familiar with the original source, but a well-made parody can succeed on its own without requiring the viewer to have any existing knowledge of the source. Most viewers will arrive at a parody knowing the rules for the particular genre or genres that the comedy film parodies, “comic effect is achieved if the rule is not cited but assumed as implicit…. To enjoy the violation, the rule of the genre must be presupposed, and considered inviolable” (Eco “The Comic and the Rule” 273-5). As the reader will learn in Chapter III, the most successful parodies work because they purposefully go against the rules of the parodied genre.

The 1970s ended with a return to romantic comedy as the primary subgenre of comedy with films such as Allen’s *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979) and Edwards’ *10* (1979) finding popular and critical success. Arguably, this trend continues into later comedies, like *Moonstruck* (Norman Jewison 1987), *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (Mike Newell 1994), *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (Sharon Maguire 2001) and more recently, *The Artist* (Michel Hazanavicius 2011).

Film comedy has in no way developed within its own bubble. As we venture forth into specific film case studies, the reader must continually question the influences of
particular forms of comedy to consider why a film may be scorned when the source of its inspiration is highly praised.
III. COMEDY FILM CASE STUDIES

Case Study #1: City Lights (Charlie Chaplin 1931)

“A Comedy Romance in Pantomime” (The film’s subtitle)

Context

As I stated in Chapter II, during the silent era, Comedy was one of, if not the, most popular and critically acclaimed film genres, “Some of the most distinctive American films of the 1930s, as they had been for twenty years, were comedies” (Mast “‘Short History” 288). Criticism of silent comedy remained consistent into the post-sound era, reaching its best clarity in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “Perhaps more words have been spent trying to analyze and interpret the performances of Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton and their contemporaries than have been devoted to any other aspect of screen performance” (Karnick and Jenkins 150). The art of pantomime—the communication of thoughts and emotions solely through the use of gestures and facial expressions—and the art of film were intertwined at this part of the century.

Although the Stock Market crash occurred in 1929, the economic situation continued to decline into 1931, the year of City Lights’ release, “when the situation of the outsider in America had become totally untenable” (Ingrao 22). The character of the Tramp became even more relevant as so many of the film-going public could relate to someone down on his luck.

Although the first feature length, full-sound film was The Jazz Singer (Alan Crosland 1927), throughout 1928 when Chaplin began production on City Lights, the majority of films were still silent. By 1931 however, when Chaplin released City Lights,
sound films had become dominant. As a silent character, the Little Tramp was the most well-known motion picture character in the world, “Chaplin was certain Charlie, the little tramp, was a man of mime, a character who could not survive in a world of words” (Mast “Short History” 288) due to the fact that “Everyone, across the world, had formed his or her own fantasy of the Tramp’s voice. How could he now impose a single, monolingual voice?” (Robinson). Chaplin himself later recounted his feelings at the time, “A good silent picture had universal appeal both to the intellectual and the rank and file…. Now it was all to be lost” (Passafiume). Here we see what I first discussed in Chapters I and II: the difference between the universal silent humor and the localized verbal humor. If City Lights were to fail commercially and critically, it would mean a sudden fall from the top for Chaplin, “as though the rug he had labored so long to weave was suddenly yanked out from under him” (Kamin 124). Chaplin finally compromised by using synchronous music and sound effects, but still removing any need for dialogue, “Chaplin survived the transition by making no transition at all” (Mast “Short History” 288). Although other films at the time used the same method of music and sound effects (288), Chaplin’s film remains the best example of the technique.

Charlie Chaplin

One cannot find a text that discusses film comedy that does not mention Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977), “Of the many illustrious alumni of the Sennett school, Charlie Chaplin still shines above all the rest…. Few men have ever succeeded in becoming a legend in their own lifetime” (Knight 31-33). It is important for the reader to understand that scholars write of Chaplin as an artist, not as a comedian:
Apart from the great merit which the discriminating found in the work of Chaplin and his contemporaries in American comedy… there was also their originality. These films were almost exclusively conceived in terms of cinema, not derived from works of literature and drama, the source of the bulk of film entertainment (Dickinson 33).

Many film historians write about Chaplin as one of the great creative minds, “like Charles Dickens and D.W. Griffith, both of whom he greatly resembles, Chaplin’s vision of the world was colored by a youth of economic deprivation, and he felt deeply sympathetic toward the underprivileged all of his life” (Cook 198-199). Sergei Eisenstein, the Russian director who was a contemporary of Chaplin, called him “a master” and said that when it comes to juxtaposing comedy and pathos, Chaplin’s fusion of these opposing elements… is unsurpassed” (27). This view of Chaplin’s artistic merit, beyond that of an entertainer, helped shape his recognition as quite possibly the first auteur in the film world, “[Sennett’s] transcendentally brilliant protégé was, of course, Charles Chaplin, whom George Bernard Shaw called the only genius at work in motion pictures” (Wexman 31). Chaplin handled many of the filmmaking tasks of writing, directing, acting, editing, and composing and had a “control over his films [that] would become unique within the art industry” (Wexman 32). Chaplin was an auteur before the impact of the French New Wave of the 1960s popularized the use of the term in film scholarship, “The contemporary film director, then, has emerged as the most important creative force in the making of a film….Only Chaplin and Welles foresaw this trend, and indeed they functioned much in this manner” (Bobker 160). Through his filmmaking methods, Chaplin set the standard by which scholars judge later auteurs.

Chaplin came from a family of music hall performers (Maland 23), where he developed the physicality of his performances, his “consummate skill, and his comic
mishaps… choreographed as carefully as any ballet” (Kamin 74). Chaplin described the rhythm of his physical pantomime as a dance, and few performers have demonstrated such subtle control over their bodies. Film scholar Lee R. Bobker claims “some of the best examples of the use of movement are the films of Charlie Chaplin” (197). As the reader will discover shortly, Chaplin understood that the internal motion within a static shot was as significant to the medium of film as was the external motion of the camera in capturing a dynamic shot.

Some film historians have criticized Chaplin for what seems to be his lack of knowledge of film conventions. Filmmaker Stanley Kubrick, when comparing Sergei Eisenstein to Chaplin, said “Eisenstein is all form and no content, whereas Chaplin is content and no form” (Ciment). I disagree with these scholars’ assessments of Chaplin’s filmmaking knowledge. Chaplin went against the established conventions of film presentation not because he did not understand the conventions, but because he had already mastered them and could create his own conventions. For example, instead of following the tradition of the wide shot to establish a scene and the closeup to reveal details, Chaplin preferred wide shots for his comic sequences, while he would only use closeups in order to capture the expression on his performers’ faces in moments of sentiment. Other scholars criticize Chaplin for what they see as a lack of editing. However, many critics feel that his lack of cuts is a strength, not a weakness, and I agree:

the scenes remain hypnotic regardless of their length….Cutting can, however, become intrusive and destroy the magic….we must believe absolutely in his body’s ability to perform the feats it does. Part of the magic of the Chaplin world is that it uses no cinematic tricks: it is physical perfection without trick. Editing instantly produces the suspicion of trickery. Chaplin’s refusal to edit very long scenes is a sign of both his artistic intuition and his assurance (Mast “Comic Mind” 66).
Other filmmakers do not hold shots as long, simply because they cannot. Chaplin alone has the ability as performer and filmmaker to hold the viewer’s attention without having to divert it through a change of angle. The cuts—when he does use them—are a textbook model of invisible editing. To sum up Chaplin’s filmmaking prowess, I believe that film historian Gerald Mast puts it best, “There has never been a better film technician than Chaplin because Chaplin’s technique was perfectly suited to communicate what he wanted. And that is as good as technique can ever be” (“Comic Mind” 67). Later Mast adds, “Chaplin’s contribution to the cinema has much more to do with what he does on film than with what he does with film” (113). Chaplin’s ability as a supreme artist rests partly on the fact that he understood not only exactly what to show the viewer, but also how to show it to the viewer in a way that made the technique unobtrusive.

Of all the comic filmmakers and performers, no artist has ever been better at juxtaposing comedy and tragedy without detracting from either, “Chaplin’s entire career can be seen as his search for that balance: his first tentative addition of melodramatic elements to his comedy, his growing achievement… and its culmination in *City Lights*” (Woal 3). At the end of *City Lights*, we have experienced an incredible emotional and aesthetic experience, but we do not feel cheated out of a good laugh.

**Production**

The mood of *City Lights* was highly influenced by the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald that dealt with themes of longing for romance and stability under the pall of class conflicts, especially seen in *The Great Gatsby* (Maland 56). One can also see the influence of Dickens as well as writer Elizabeth Gaskell on Chaplin’s themes
As I stated above, Chaplin was the biggest movie star in the world as he began work on *City Lights*, “he had established through his comic films of the previous fifteen years a kind of ‘aesthetic contract’ with his enthusiastic audience” (Maland 17). With this succession of films, his audience had high expectations for Chaplin’s next work, and he was not one to disappoint. Several personal events influenced *City Lights*; Chaplin’s second wife, Lita Grey, divorced him, in a settlement that cost him millions (19), Chaplin owed millions in back taxes (20), Chaplin’s mother passed away in 1928 (26), and on a professional level, Chaplin was involved in a personal struggle against the talkies (27-30). As for the preproduction stage of *City Lights*, the writing process was rather brief, with the major themes already chosen, and the story developing as shooting approached. While the narrative of *City Lights* was an original idea of Chaplin, many of the gags came from earlier sources, including Chaplin shorts. The greatest of artists, Chaplin included, always have the risk of duplicating previous work:

> When Charlie and the millionaire drunkenly cause chaos in a nightclub, Chaplin repeats the situation, indeed many of the gags, from such films as *The Rounders* and *A Night Out*, both of which contain café sequences. But in the feature film, the gags are modified by the specific circumstances that have brought Charlie and his companion together (Mast “Comic Mind” 85).

As I noted in Chapter II, the same gag can successfully return again and again as long as it is still able to elicit laughter.

Once production began, most of the filming took place on a several acre set at Chaplin’s private studios (Maland 15). *City Lights* was Chaplin’s longest production, taking nearly three years to complete, and “made with a degree of creative control unusual in Hollywood, before or since” (Maland 13). Influencing later filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock and David Lean, Chaplin had a hand in virtually every aspect of
production. Chaplin was a perfectionist (Maland 18), “However severe Chaplin was with others, he was always even harder on himself” (Robinson). He even took care to see that the set decoration enhanced the personality of each character within the setting (Maland 80-83), going beyond capturing each character through just the actor’s performance. Everything that Chaplin did involved thorough preparation and practice. His ease of motion and “comic antics could look wonderfully spontaneous, but they were always the product of days and weeks of meticulous rehearsals” (Bedell 4). The boxing scene alone involved “30 days of rehearsal to create the choreography—and money—hiring 100 extras for the audience—to create this gem of comic pantomime” (Bedell 4). Chaplin often directed through a process of role-playing, “Robert Parrish, who played the peasucker newsboy in City Lights, described it well: He said [Chaplin] found it best to show people rather than tell them” (Kamin 97). Some actors however did not respond well to Chaplin’s style of direction:

The early scene in City Lights (1931) in which the blind Flower Girl offers Charlie a flower haunted Chaplin for months, occasioning hundreds of retakes. His anxiety focused on this scene for several reasons… but since he was especially dissatisfied with the way Virginia Cherrill handled the flowers, the fact that the scene so directly recalled his own flower selling after his father’s death can hardly be ignored. Cherrill had the impression that Chaplin was the blind Flower Girl when he acted out the scene for her, and, in a way which she could not possibly have imagined, so he was (Kuryama 33).

The scene mentioned above is now “listed in the Guinness Book of World Records for having ‘The Most Retakes of One Scene’. According to Guinness, it took a total of 342 takes to get the scene the way that Chaplin wanted it” (Passafiume). At one point, Chaplin was so displeased with Virginia Cherrill that he fired her and attempted to replace her, only to rehire her after about a week (Maland 49-51). Needless to say, Cherrill did not think too highly of him after that incident, “More than 50 years later,
Miss Cherrill declared: ‘Charlie never liked me and I never liked Charlie’” (Robinson).
Unlike so many of the other leading ladies with whom Chaplin worked, Cherrill only appeared in one of his films.

One advantage of *City Lights* being a silent film is that Chaplin was able to have musicians on the set in order to set the proper mood for each scene (Kamin 103). When it came to scoring the film, Chaplin had to rely on the assistance and experience of orchestrator Arthur Johnson, “Since he lacked the technical knowledge to write out the music himself, Chaplin recalled that “I la-laed [the tunes] and [arranger] Arthur Johnson wrote it down, and ... he did a very good job. It is all simple music ... in keeping with my character” (Bedell 5). In addition to original melodies, Chaplin bought the rights to a Spanish melody, “La Violetera” written by Jose Padilla, to act as the theme for the Flower Girl (Bedell 5). While Chaplin may have lacked the knowledge to notate music, he certainly understood how it should function within the film medium:

With his instinctive dramatic and musical sensibility, Chaplin knew exactly what sort of music *City Lights* needed. “I tried to compose elegant and romantic music to frame my comedies in contrast to the tramp character, for elegant music gave my comedies an emotional dimension. Musical arrangers rarely understood this. They wanted the music to be funny. But I would explain that I wanted no competition, I wanted the music to be a counterpoint of grace and charm, to express sentiment, without which, as Hazlitt says, a work of art is incomplete.” (Bedell 5).

To complete the soundtrack, Chaplin added several key sound effects—including the sounds of speech for the opening scene, which were actually made by Chaplin himself, marking “the first time that his voice was heard on film” (IMDB). Harpo Marx later used the quasi-speech effect with his horns, as did the makers of the animated Charlie Brown series of the 1960s and 1970s.
Though Chaplin was intensely focused during production, he took the time to visit with Winston Churchill, who “visited the set” (Passafiume) while Chaplin was still filming. Despite the long production, and conflicts like those with Cherrill, “the finished film betrays nothing of this effort and anxiety. As the critic Alistair Cooke wrote, the film, despite all the struggles, ‘flows as easily as water over pebbles’” (Robinson). As the reader will learn shortly, all of Chaplin’s time and hard work certainly paid off.

**The Film**

Showmanship is at its pinnacle when the speakers in the opening scene pull back the cloth covering the statue of Peace and Prosperity and reveal the Tramp sleeping on the statue, it “opens with the curtain rising on Charlie himself,” (Stewart 305). As Gerald Mast explains, “A piece of comic business at the beginning of a film can color our responses for the next two hours—or until the film informs us to alter them” (“Comic Mind” 11), and *City Lights*’ opening does exactly. From the start, the viewer can see the genuineness of every single action and motion of the Tramp. Once the speakers begin to scold him for sleeping on the statue (3 minutes in), he attempts four times to climb down from the statue. The first attempt leads to a sword going through his pants, the second leaves him sitting on the statue’s nose, the third causes him to thumb his nose to the crowd while attempting to tie his shoe, and the fourth attempt is finally successful. Another example of the character’s genuineness appears later, at the restaurant (23), he mistakes a streamer for spaghetti, but even so, he tries his best to finish it.

Chaplin goes against the cinematic convention of the establishing shot followed by a closeup when he introduces the Flower Girl (6). He begins with a closeup of her...
face and then cuts to a long shot to reveal that she is selling flowers. In this way, Chaplin alters the established visual syntax to define her as a young woman who sells flowers instead of the much more objective alternative of a flower seller who happens to be a woman. Chaplin uses closeups sparingly, as when the Tramp realizes that the Millionaire is attempting to drown himself (11). In the first meeting of the Tramp and the Flower Girl, the girl acts as the straightwoman. She keeps the same look of longing on her face, even when she dumps a bucket of water on the Tramp (9). Along the lines of Dickens, the fact that the Flower Girl is blind makes this touching figure that much more pitiable, “depictions of disabled women in films... emphasize the characters’ complete passivity and their childlike innocence” (Pramaggiore 351). For the plot of City Lights to work, for the deception to occur, the girl has to be blind, “Blind, the young woman in City Lights is immune to disillusionment, oblivious to the social [anathema] that Charlie’s performance otherwise reveals” (Calhoon 391), making her “a screen onto which is projected the pretense of invisibility” (393). It is even more jarring for the viewer and the Tramp once she has regained her sight, and the Tramp’s identity is disclosed.

The entire sequence from the arrival at the Millionaire’s house (15) through the night at the restaurant (25) introduces gags of a lower class character trying to cope with an upper class setting, a theme that Dickens explored before Chaplin, and one that became common fare for later audiences through various Marx Brothers films and Three Stooges shorts. These antics include slipping on the dance floor (20), squirting people with seltzer water (22), misinterpreting and interfering with a dance performance (24), and stealing someone else’s dance partner (25). A lot of the gags in these scenes follow the Principle of Comic Sense as The Tramp honestly does not understand the social cues.
The qualities of the upper class are seen as excess and leisure, often employing the Principle of Comic Logic. When intoxicated, the Millionaire shows no restraint: he refers to the Tramp as “my friend” (13) and “my guest” (17) without even knowing his name, he seems to throw parties for little reasons, and he travels to Europe without any stated purpose (41). Chaplin often represents the actions of the upper class through fast, disorganized music. The Millionaire’s friendship causes the Tramp to feel as if he has unlimited wealth as well, as he demonstrates when he buys all of the Flower Girl’s stock for the day and then orders the butler to take them inside (29). The presence of fresh fruit for the taking at the Millionaire’s house offers a tempting allurement for the Tramp (42).

Psychologist Donald Goodwin states that “Charlie Chaplin may have been the first person to discover state-dependent learning” (317), alluding to the fact that the Millionaire can only remember the Tramp when drunk.

*City Lights* is not merely an encounter between members of the upper class and lower class; rather, it is a collision. A recurring motive for wealth is the automobile. The Flower Girl assumes that the Tramp is rich when she believes that he arrives and departs in a car (8). Later, the Tramp takes the Flower Girl for a ride in “his car” and her grandmother assumes that “He must be wealthy” (31). Another motive of wealth is cigars. It is clear at the restaurant that the Tramp is unfamiliar with cigars when the waitress has to light it for him (20). Later, he mixes these two motives when the Tramp uses the Millionaire’s car to follow a man with a cigar so he can shove another tramp out of the way when that tramp finds the cigar on the sidewalk (34).

Many critics speak of how the narrative of *City Lights* involves two different stories, that of the Millionaire and that of the Flower Girl. But as film scholars Linda and
Michael Woal describe, both stories are deeply interwoven:

In the end, both stories, like City Lights itself, play with desire. In one, the promise of friendship and wealth, alternately held out and withdrawn according to the millionaire’s waxing and waning sobriety, is bitterly ironic. In the other, the promise of love, held out and then threatened by the state of the girl’s eyesight, is achingly sentimental. Charlie’s promise of wealth and friendship is abruptly withdrawn. City Lights ends on the question of whether the same will be true for his promise of romance (14).

Chaplin scholar Dan Kamin goes on to mention “The millionaire’s metaphorical blindness” (127). By juxtaposing the two stories, Chaplin creates an end result that has a greater impact than either story could have provided alone.

City Lights is an enigma, for one cannot truly call it a silent film. As critic Calhoon explains, Chaplin “used sound largely to ridicule sound” (381). There is an absence of dialogue, yes, but sound effects appear throughout. The earliest sounds that the viewer finds are the mumbling of the speeches in the opening scene (1). Essentially, these first sounds that we hear are pitch without diction—one-half of the two components of speech. Other notable sound effects include the sound of a piano when both the Tramp and the Millionaire bang their foreheads on the keyboard (18), the ascending slide whistle when the Tramp slurps up his spaghetti (22), the whirling sound of the swerving car (25), the bell during the boxing scene (1:01), and the gunshots (18 and 1:06). One of the most significant sound effects in the film, that of the swallowed whistle at the party (37), supports not only a visual gag, but an auditory gag as well. These sound effects would have been quite a compelling gag at the time when sound technology was new and sometimes of poor quality and audiences were getting talkative.

I feel that the absence of dialogue draws more attention to the power of Chaplin’s music. Some is diegetic, as in the playing of the National Anthem (3), while some is
nondiegetic, as in Chaplin’s use of the Wagnerian style of leitmotivs to associate themes with different characters. The most overt use of the leitmotif effect is the accompanying “La Violetera” to nearly every scene with the Flower Girl, however Chaplin uses the same method to score scenes with the Millionaire. Every time the Tramp prevents the Millionaire from committing suicide, the same hopeful theme plays, when the Millionaire decides to spend a night on the town, the music becomes fast and rollicking, and once the Tramp and the Millionaire return from the restaurant, the score quotes “How Dry I Am”. By associating recurring musical themes with each character, Chaplin establishes a sense of consistency in their behaviors and personalities.

Although we know that the Little Tramp is heterosexual, not only because of his affection for the Flower Girl, but due to his admiration of a nude female statue (Kamin 71), there are many instances of male to male affection in the film, all played for comic effect. Several times, the Millionaire (of course, only when drunk) and the Tramp embrace (22, 28, 1:07) and even kiss (36, 1:07, 1:09). After a rowdy party at night, the scene dissolves to reveal that the Tramp and the Millionaire are sharing a bed (40). During the boxing scene, Chaplin imagines that one of his attendants is the Flower Girl and ends up kissing his hand (1:03), “City Lights contains more homosexual joking than any other Chaplin film, yet we never for one moment think that Charlie is gay” (Kamin 71). The gags are effective, because the viewer is never left with the opportunity to seriously question Chaplin’s sexuality. Chaplin never uses homosexual gags as an attack on homosexuality, but he does follow the established film conventions of implying that male characters that are not afraid to express same-sex affection are weak and effeminate—a trend seen in motion pictures throughout the century and frequently
analyzed by film scholars. Consider that the Tramp often resorts to showing affection to other males when he feels inferior or insecure, as he does with his boxing opponent (56). Note how Chaplin shows the assumptions and reactions of the other characters to the Tramp’s “flirtations” as unreasonable, as when the boxing opponent decides to change his clothes behind a curtain—assuming that Chaplin must be homosexual. It is important for the reader to know that homosexuality was more accepted by the heterosexual majority in the 1920s and 1930s than it was during the following decades (Fleeson), and therefore Chaplin’s audience would have been familiar with this type of humor.

Many of Chaplin’s visual gags work through the Principle of Comic Logic. Each subsequent occurrence of a gag causes more humor, because the viewer naturally assumes that someone could not fall for the same trick twice, and yet it happens again. Every time what was originally unexpected repeats, the surprises compound. For example, the Millionaire attempts to drown himself (10), the Tramp ends up in the water, the Millionaire tries to help the Tramp out of the water, only to be pulled in with him (a gag that has appeared in many comedies before and since), and the same exact sequence happens again, nearly motion for motion less than a minute later (13). Another great example is when the Millionaire ends up dumping champagne down the Tramp’s pants not once, but three times (16, 17, 18). The result of this repetition is that the Tramp then dumps his own Champagne into his jacket (18). Also consider the repetition during the boxing match, as the Tramp, referee, and opponent perform the same dance-like evasions multiple times (1:03). At times, the opponent and referee get so use to the motions that they go after each other while the Tramp performs the role of the referee—resorting to the Principle of Comic Experience. Once the bell gets caught around the Tramp’s neck
(1:04), the same pattern of the Tramp falling down and returning to his corner happens several times until the referee catches on.

From the opening titles, the characters in *City Lights* do not have names. Rather, they have generic descriptions “A Blind Girl, An Eccentric Millionaire, A Tramp”, allowing them to take on the universal characters that they represent, as in an ancient myth or fable. As far as comic heroes go, few can claim to be as virtuous as the Tramp. He not only does what is right by helping the Flower Girl, he truly performs an altruistic act by giving her all the money and never expecting a reward, as he never expects to encounter her again (1:13).

The Little Tramp conveys so many of his motivations and the qualities of his character through his subtle actions. His distinct walk appears throughout, most notably at 14 and 44 minutes in, when seen from behind. In a similar way, we realize that the Flower Girl holds importance to the Tramp, when he has to go back down to the bench to retrieve the flower after he rescues the Millionaire from the water (14). We see his aversion to hard work when he pushes a cart to pick up horse droppings and turns away from a street down which an elephant has just traveled (44). A physical object adds to our visual assessment of his character as he always carries a cane and even uses it to ring the doorbell (32).

As a performer known for his exaggerated motions and overt visual gags (that Principle of Comic Logic), much of the character development in *City Lights* happens through nuanced means. We (and the Tramp) first learn that the Flower Girl is blind when she feels for the flower that the Tramp has dropped (7), shortly thereafter, we (and again the Tramp) understand that the Flower Girl assumes the Tramp is a rich man when
she hears what she believes is his car pull away (8). Fueled by the Principle of Comic Timing, this device of shared discovery between the viewer and the protagonist works so well in the film medium, as the filmmaker has the power to visually reveal details to the viewer as the protagonist sees them. Chaplin reveals the inner motivations of his other characters through delicate means as well. When the Flower Girl returns home and greets a pair of lovers that she passes, the following long closeup of her face in the window indicates her longing for romance (10). Likewise, at the end of the film, the viewer learns that the Flower Girl has the ability to see when she looks at herself in the mirror (1:17). In an equally subtle way, we learn that the Millionaire wishes to kill himself because his wife has left him with one simple line from his butler, “your wife sent for her baggage” (15). To respond to those reviewers who describe all silent film performance as exaggerated gestures and expressions, I can think of few films that contain so many subtle actions as those in City Lights. One excellent example is when the Blind Girl knows that her grandmother has received some bad news simply by feeling her tears—an action that many viewers would miss if not watching for it (45).

The final line of the film also carries some of the most meaning out of any line in the film (1:21). The Flower Girl recognizes her benefactor and says “I can see now”, meaning not only literally that her sight is restored, but that she now understands who her benefactor and love interest was all along. The result is ambiguity, the likes of which is rare in mainstream American motion pictures. Film endings that were not perfectly happy were quite uncommon in American film before the 1960s (Mast “Short History” 342). With her realization, “He at last appears to her what he has always been to us, a lovable silent clown. And she, as we do, laughs” (Stewart 307). English scholar
Constance Kuryama states that:

City Lights is Chaplin’s most subtle and comprehensive essay in impure comedy, his only film in which pleasure and pain are so constantly and inseparably mingled that neither Charlie nor the viewer is ever free of at least subliminal discomfort…. Instead he hangs mysteriously suspended in a black, noncommittal void, a classic Chaplin-esque counterpart to Dali’s Christ of St. John of the Cross. (36-37).

Few filmmakers have been as praised by critics over the years for their perfection as Chaplin has. However perfect the film is, there are still several noticeable discontinuities:

Yet even the famous final scene in City Lights contains a significant discontinuity…. he bites his forefinger in his close-ups. In the shots of her, taken from over his shoulder, his hand is held lower. His hand position changes in each shot of the sequence, and it’s easy to see why—if he’d held his finger in his mouth for the reverse shots of her, the rose would have blocked her face and ruined the perfect composition. So Chaplin allowed the discontinuity to stand (Kamin 36).

Beyond the continuity error noted above and other continuity errors, the character of the Tramp’s makeup is often clearly apparent. In some shots even, the viewer can see Chaplin’s real eyebrows beneath his makeup ones (37). Kamin notes that this is intentional on Chaplin’s part, “The contrast in tones is reflected in the changes in Chaplin’s facial makeup” (127). The Tramp’s facial features are exaggerated with the Millionaire and subdued with the Flower Girl. Chaplin was willing to break with the established film convention of continuity in order to show something in a way that he decided it should be shown. Just like with Chaplin’s unobtrusive cuts, audiences and film reviewers are willing to accept the broken continuity because the discontinuity works to express what Chaplin wants in the way that he wants to express it.

Maland summarizes City Lights by stating that, “the film is Chaplin’s farewell to the 1920s….Chaplin leaves viewers poised between the two central images in the film -
the flower and the coin—and invites us to choose between them” (103). Leaving us with an ambiguity rarely found in other pictures, an ambiguity served so well by comedy and how it needs no resolution and Chaplin’s ability to combine laughter and pathos.

**Reception**

Always the master showman, “Chaplin spent $60,000 of his own money to publicize the premiere of *City Lights* in New York. $30,000 went to newspaper ads, and the other $30,000 went to renting an electric sign for the front of the theater” (Passafiume). Chaplin was very nervous about the premiere, “wondering if audiences would care at all to see his ‘old-fashioned’ silent film. The answer came quickly: the streets around the theater were jammed with people for many blocks” (Bedell 5-6).

Robinson adds:

> The premieres were among the most brilliant the cinema had ever seen. In Los Angeles, Chaplin’s guest was Albert Einstein; while in London Bernard Shaw sat beside him. *City Lights* was a critical triumph. All Chaplin’s struggles and anxieties, it seemed, were compensated by the film which still appears as the zenith of his achievement and reputation (Robinson).

Film Scholar Maland describes the outcome of *City Light’s* premiere as “His special niche as pantomimic genius firmly carved out, his new film a hit with the press and the public, Chaplin had hit the bull’s-eye. As he began to tour the world, he was on top of it” (110). As the dust settled, *City Lights* was a great commercial hit, it “earned Chaplin’s studio twice what it cost him to make. From that standpoint, Chaplin’s decision to resist the talkies was a resounding success” (Maland 109). It was clear that only Chaplin could have made a silent film during the sound era:

> “Nobody in the world but Charlie Chaplin could have done it,” a reviewer for the Los Angeles newspaper *The Record* wrote following the first press screening of
Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1931). “He is the only person that has that peculiar something called ‘audience appeal’ in sufficient quantity to defy the popular penchant for pictures that talk” (Passafiume).

Without Chaplin’s skill and reputation, a silent film during the sound era would not have succeeded.

The critics of nearly every major publication in the United States agreed that *City Lights* was a triumph. Mordaunt Hall of the New York Times said that “It is a film worked out with admirable artistry, and while Chaplin stoops to conquer, as he has invariably done, he achieves success”. *Box Office Magazine* called it Chaplin’s “finest comedy” and praised its story as well as the performances of its cast. Sid Silverman of *Variety* felt that it was a good film but “not Chaplin’s best picture, because the comedian has sacrificed speed to pathos” and had some doubts as to its “holdover power”, wondering if its initial success was “novelty money”. In 1931, The National Board of Review named it one of the Top Ten Films of the year, adding that it is “a challenge to the talkies, a crucial event in cinema history” but “not Chaplin’s best but far ahead of any other funny man’s best”. *Time Magazine* predicted “he, whose posterior would probably be recognized by more people throughout the world than would recognize any other man’s face, will be doing business after talkies have been traded in for television”.

Notice how each one of these critics speak of the film in terms of Chaplin, and do not address the themes that he explores. They describe the “novelty” of the film and its silent qualities of gesture and expression. The reviewers that criticize it, do so because of the relationship of comedy and pathos within the film.

As for the international critical reaction, Siegfried Kracauer of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* said that “In it Chaplin demonstrates again his mastery of the language of
gesture, a mastery that reduces the spoken word to shame”, however he added “It’s not difficult to find weaknesses in the film” referring to a plot that he felt was not as strong as earlier Chaplin pictures. Note how he echoes the above reviewers’ praises of the silent performance techniques of gesture. Also, consider how Kracauer criticizes what he claims is a lack of plot—showing that Kracauer does not completely understand comedy’s necessary balance of narrative and gag. E.A. Corbett of the _Edmonton Journal_ concluded that “no one else in the world can take the same outline and make it compete successfully with the talkies, because no one else can so fully occupy that delicious, illogical, unreal world which Chaplin’s genius has created for himself alone,” approaching the film in terms of Chaplin. Suprisingly, _City Lights_ did not receive any Academy Award nomination, which seems inconceivable considering its reputation today. Tim Dirks, of the American Movie Classics Filmsite attributed the lack of nominations, “to the pro-talking film Academy members, it must have appeared to be reversing the trend toward talkies and advanced sound films”, which would make sense. The contemporary film industry leaders’ advocacy for the “progress” of sound in 1931, has a parallel with today’s film industry leaders, who seem to favor many pictures because of the perceived revolutionary visual effects that they contain.

One of the most notable critiques of the film comes from James Agee’s 1949 article, “Comedy’s Golden Era”, written for _Life Magazine_. In it he praises the ending of the film, saying:

She recognizes who he must be by his shy, confident, shining joy as he comes silently toward her. And he recognizes himself, for the first time, through the terrible changes in her face. The camera just exchanges a few quiet close-ups of the emotions which shift and intensify in each face. It is enough to shrivel the heart to see, and it is the greatest piece of acting and the highest moments in movies (77).
Agee not only focuses on the balance of comedy and pathos, but the qualities of the performance inherent in its silent medium. Chaplin rereleased the film in 1950, sparking another slew of analyses. Once again, *Time Magazine* praised the film:

> Re-issued after 19 more years of talking pictures, *City Lights* is more impressive than ever. It is immensely funny, at times touching, and its storytelling is so eloquently visual that it makes most sound movies seem like the stunted products of a half-forgotten art…. Every inch a classic, *City Lights* should endure as long as anything on film.

I have been unable to find any explanation for why Chaplin chose to rerelease the film. I speculate that perhaps newly-formed television networks had begun to program some of Chaplin’s shorts, and this could have brought an audience demand for Chaplin features. Also, his most recent release, *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947), did not fare well with audiences and reviewers (TCM), perhaps prompting Chaplin to rerelease an earlier, more successful work in order to regain his reputation.

In addition to film scholars and critics, many filmmakers have cited *City Lights* as an inspiration. Both Stanley Kubrick (in 1963, *Cinema Magazine*) and Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky (in 1972, *Life Magazine*) have called it one of their favorite pictures. *Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert has reviewed the film twice; reviewing it for a second time 35 years after the first review. In 1972, he said, “Chaplin’s films age so well, I think, because his situations grow out of basic human hungers such as lust, greed, avarice”. In 1997, he added:

> If only one of Charles Chaplin’s films could be preserved, *City Lights* (1931) would come the closest to representing all the different notes of his genius. It contains the slapstick, the pathos, the pantomime, the effortless physical coordination, the melodrama, the bawdiness, the grace, and, of course, the Little Tramp—the character said, at one time, to be the most famous image on earth.
In a more somber tone, he relates:

There was a time when Chaplin was hailed as the greatest popular artist of the 20th century, and his films were known to everyone. Today, how many people watch them? Are they shown in schools? I think not. On TV? Not very often. Silent film, the medium that gave Chaplin his canvas, has now robbed him of his mass audience. His films will live forever, but only for those who seek them out.

The reader will learn that this is true of many such film classics. Ebert appears to be the first reviewer who talks about the deeper themes beneath the surface of *City Lights*—perhaps themes reviewers forty years earlier did not want to acknowledge.

Of the seventeen reviews written in the Twenty First century that I have compiled, only one critic, Alan Vanneman of the *Bright Lights Film Journal* gave it a less than favorable review, citing the “remarkably unfunny beginning”, the “numerous detours” in the plot, and how “Chaplin leaves entirely unresolved how Cherrill will treat the Tramp now that she knows who he is”. Looking at Vanneman’s review, we can infer that his expectations for a comedy were misaligned. The “numerous detours” (gags) and the lack of resolution at the end of the narrative are perfectly acceptable for comedy—in fact, sometimes a lack of resolution is an even more fitting ending for a comedy than the typical *deus ex machina* found in so many dramas.

The remaining sixteen critics praised the film, as dozens of critics had done when it premiered. Four of the reviewers, Collin Souter of *eFilmcritic.com*, Jules Dassin of *The Telegraph*, Wes D. Gehring of *USA Today*, and John Nesbit of *Old School Reviews* particularly praised the final scene—a scene of pathos and not humor. Several reviewers focused on the historical importance that it is one of the last silent films, and on Chaplin as an artist. Dan Mancini of *DVD Verdict* called it “Chaplin at his best…. his last—and arguably finest—silent feature”. Filmmaker Peter Bogdanovich explained, “Below the
surface of *City Lights*, there is an ache of nostalgia for the lost Eden of the silents that is still palpable today”. James Berardinelli of *Reelviews* called it “the quintessential silent film”, adding that “sound would have ruined it”. Jay Antani of *CinemaWriter.com* added, “*City Lights* is a great gift to all of us by a filmmaker at a latter-day peak of his genius. To see anything by Chaplin is to nourish the soul. Chaplin is good for the world”. Other critics attempt to analyze the deeper meanings behind the narrative and gags of the film. Following Ebert’s example, Dan Jardine of *Cinemania* noted its “universal themes, such as the intoxicating blindness of love and the rejuvenating power of selflessness”, speaking of the themes that contemporary reviewers did not address.

Many scholars have provided varying analyses of the film over the years. Charles Silver of the Museum of Modern Art calls it “Chaplin’s most perfectly accomplished and balanced work”, focusing on the combination of comedy and drama in one film. Chaplin scholar Dan Kamin, on the other hand does criticize it on a structural level, “*City Lights* may have the best plot, and it certainly packs the biggest emotional wallop, but its comic routines are inconsistent in quality” (Kamin 109). The foci of both scholars show opposite ends of the same critical difficulty in approaching comedy. Silver seems to appreciate it for its moments of sentiment, while Kamin seems to grade the value of a comedy by how funny he finds the gags. They insist on comparing a comedy film to something that is not—for Silver, a non-comic film and for Kamin, a comic Vaudeville routine.

**Legacy**

Even Chaplin, his own most severe critic, felt that he had accomplished something with his film, saying, “It’s one of the purest inserts—I call them inserts, close-
ups—that I’ve ever done” (Passafiume), describing the final scene, “By the end of his career, Chaplin prized City Lights. In 1973, Peter Bogdanovich asked Chaplin, ‘Which film of yours is your favorite? Can I ask you that? Or do you have no favorites?’ Chaplin’s reply: ‘Oh yes I have. I like City Lights’” (Maland 11). As film scholar Andrea Passafiume’s quote reveals, Chaplin was especially proud of his ability to combine comedy and pathos. In addition to Chaplin’s satisfaction, Orson Welles, who some authorities claim to be the greatest filmmaker of all time, called City Lights “one of his favorite movies” (Passafiume). Chaplin had created something that became a landmark film both commercially and critically, “And, today, some eighty years after silent films faded into obscurity, he is still adored as perhaps the finest and most universal of all comedians” (Bedell 1)—owing to his universal language of gesture. Arguably, City Lights was Chaplin’s greatest success, “Never again would he bask in undiluted critical acclaim” (Kamin 35). Historian Janet Bedell describes City Lights’ success as:

City Lights went on to tremendous runs throughout the world — and revivals for decades afterwards. It has become a beloved classic, proving that a genius like Charlie Chaplin could make his own rules and succeed handsomely, without paying attention to the fashions of the day (Bedell 5-6).

Film historian Roy Huss credits Chaplin for inspiring the “theater of the absurd” (131). City Lights has also inspired gags in many subsequent films:

Many of Chaplin’s visual gags in City Lights have been repurposed by other filmmakers in such films as The Producers (1968) - champagne is poured into a violin player’s pants - and Ken Russell’s The Boyfriend (1971) - a Charlie Chaplin lookalike appears with a pooper scooper. The score from City Lights has also been used in other films such as All Night Long (1981) and Scent of a Woman (1992) (Passafiume).

In 1952, critics at the British Film Institute voted it the second greatest film of all time, behind De Sica’s Bicycle Thieves (BFI)—juxtaposing it with one of the quintessential
film tragedies (especially during the European recovery from World War II when the BFI vote occurred). In 2002, critics at the British Film Institute voted it one of the greatest films of all time (BFI). In 2008, The American Film Institute declared it the greatest romantic comedy of all time (AFI).

In the 1970s, critics began to rethink their opinions on Chaplin, especially since more attention turned to Buster Keaton. Gerald Mast explains the situation as:

out of circulation for so long perhaps took some of the wonder out of the critics’ memories of Chaplin films. A whole generation of critics had never seen much Chaplin. The status of film criticism in the 1970s is simply different from what it was in the previous 50 years. Film devotees once had to grind their axes in support of the artistic and intellectual equality of the motion picture. Chaplin was the most suitable material for axe-grinding because his films were obviously as complex and intelligent as other “great art” (“Comic Mind” 64).

Fortunately, the availability of many silent comedy classics since the advent of home video equipment has allowed most critics to realize that Chaplin truly was a genius. I believe that Chaplin scholar Charles Maland’s closing argument from his study of City Lights says it best:

In the longer lens of film history City Lights must be considered one of the culminating masterpieces of silent film comedy, the film genre from the silent era that has probably survived most successfully into our new millennium…. It’s a crowning achievement, and it still breaks our hearts (116).

The reader needs to consider how the critics and scholars discuss the film. They focus on it as a silent film and comment on Chaplin’s use of “gesture” and “expression”.

Likewise, they consider the film in terms of Chaplin’s ability to combine comedy and pathos. To describe Chaplin and his skill, the reviewers use terms like “artistry”, “finest”, “genius”, and “grace”. The criticisms of the film stem from the reviewers’ lack of understanding of the necessary balance of narrative and gag in comedy. Several write about the narrative/gag contrast with terms like “speed”, “plot”, “delicious”, “illogical”,...
“unreal”, “slapstick”, “pantomime”, and “detours”. Also, remember that of all the represented reviewers, only Roger Ebert and Dan Jardine note the deeper, “universal” themes that Chaplin explores in the film. These terms and foci of the critics presented will serve in beginning to craft the critical language of comedy film criticism.
Case Study #2: *Duck Soup* (Leo McCarey 1933)

“You’re a brave man. Go and break through the lines. And remember, while you’re out there risking your life and limb through shot and shell, we’ll be in here thinking what a sucker you are” (Groucho Marx, as Rufus T. Firefly).

**Context**

The first successful comedies of the sound era were the dialogue-driven situational comedies of Ernst Lubitsch and George Cukor, most notably *Trouble In Paradise* (Lubitsch 1932), *Design For Living* (Lubitsch 1933), and *Dinner At Eight* (Cukor 1933). The films depicted taboo social situations and most always featured wealthy protagonists of the upper class. While the films were popular at the time and are still critically recognized, the films have become quite dated and seem dull when compared to the later Screwball comedies, which drew their foundations from the situations and banter of these films. In a sense, these almost purely verbal pre-Screwball Comedies were eclipsed by the Screwball comedies not much later in the decade.

At the same time, other comic performers were developing a completely different style of comedy from Lubitsch and Cukor. The Marx Brothers—one of the most influential comedy teams of all time—practically defined the subgenre known today as Anarchic Comedy:

The Marx Brothers represented a shift away from the genteel slapstick mode dominant in the feature comedies. Where the films of Chaplin… seek to integrate comic performance and narrative, the anarchistic films present a ‘highly fragmented and disruptive style of comedy’ (Frank Krutnik 20).

The major idea behind all Anarchic comedies is the struggle “between eccentricity and conformity” (Krutnik 24), as one can see in W.C. Fields’ film, *It’s A Gift* (Norman Z. McLeod 1934).
The Marx Brothers

Starting as performers on Vaudeville stages and on Broadway, the Marx Brothers (active as a group, 1912-1949) recognized quickly how film would broaden their audience. In fact, they would often try out their material in front of a live audience before shooting began (Library of Congress), this preview giving them live feedback. Unlike Chaplin before them, the Marx Brothers were solely performers, not filmmakers, “Lacking complete control over their material (and, later in their careers, not even interested in such control), the Marx Brothers were dependent on their writers” (Mast “Comic Mind” 281). Many film historians credit the Marx Brothers for being the first comic performers to realize that true sound comedy was a hybrid between verbal banter and physical gags:

The great silent comedies have no funnier sequences than many of those in the Marx films….The Marx Brothers films revealed the key elements of American sound comedy—comic physical types, suited to their comic personalities, suited to the physical-comic situations, suited to the verbal wit. Comic talkies had to move as well as talk (Mast “Comic Mind” 294).

Whereas, Harpo’s comic manner could have worked quite well in silent comedy, Groucho’s comic manner could not have existed in motion pictures until the advent of sound technology. The Marx Brothers were the first film comedians to realize the synergistic possibilities of combining the physical and visual humor previously mastered by the silent film stars with the new verbal possibilities of the sound film. Groucho’s verbal style acts as a foil to Harpo’s physical style and vice versa. One could call Harpo’s persona the successor to Chaplin’s Little Tramp.

Like Chaplin, the Marx Brothers spent weeks rehearsing gags to get them just right, resulting in “comedies of conception and construction, brilliantly executed by the
zany threesome or foursome” (Mast “Comic Mind” 200). Philosopher Jorn K. Bramann claims that “Their films contain many features in a popular form which later became fashionable among intellectuals in connection with the Theatre of the Absurd” (Bramann). Indeed playwright Eugène Ionesco admitted that the “three greatest influences on his work were Groucho, Chico, and Harpo Marx” (Huss 131). In order to get the most complete picture of the Marx Brothers’ genius, one needs to consider the contrast between their earlier Paramount films, which ended with *Duck Soup*, and their later MGM films. The MGM films were their greatest successes commercially, but not necessarily critically:

> In the Marx Brothers’ MGM films, the move towards ‘formalization’ resulted in a more emphatic ordering of their ‘disruptive’ comic performance in relation to a clearly defined narrative process. Groucho, Chico, and Harpo Marx operate as figures who are peripheral to the narrative—they are not protagonists (Krutnik 20-21).

Although some critics will argue for both, “Many fans think *Duck Soup* is the Marxes’ best film, and I agree, but *A Night at the Opera*, their most popular, contains four of the funniest sequences in movie history” (Barra). Personally, I find *A Night At The Opera* (Sam Wood 1935) equally as good, but due to space constraints, I have elected to focus on *Duck Soup* in this study.

Today, the Brothers’ gags are just as effective as they were when their films premiered, “Almost nothing has been lost from them” (Rowland 264). They continue to entertain audiences and engage film reviewers, “No other comedies so reward repeated viewings…. The Marx Brothers have never gone out of fashion and never will” (Barra). So much of the Marx Brothers antics follow the Id drives theorized by Freud—the same drives that society dictates are to be restrained by the individual. The Brothers’ total
disregard of social constraints makes them so appealing, because each one of us has, at one point or another, wished for the courage to break outside social boundaries.

*Leo McCarey*

Director Leo McCarey (1898-1969) specialized in comedy (Mast “Short History” 287). He began his career working on shorts with silent comedians, including Harry Langdon and Laurel and Hardy (TCM). Groucho Marx claimed that McCarey was the “only first-class director” (TCM) with whom they worked. Many of the physical gags in the film came from the mind of McCarey, “McCarey seems more comfortable with physical business than with words” (Mast “Comic Mind” 278). In addition to gags, the political sentiment of the film was a result of McCarey as well:

Groucho Marx attributes the film’s strong satire on war to director Leo McCarey. And with the rise of fascism in Europe, the release of *Duck Soup* did seem well-timed, given that Hitler had just come to power about two months before the film’s general release (TCM).

Despite the critical praise, McCarey never felt that *Duck Soup* was a good film:

I don’t like (*Duck Soup*) so much...I never chose to shoot this film. The Marx Brothers absolutely wanted me to direct them in a film. I refused. Then they got angry with the studio, broke their contract and left. Believing myself secure, I accepted the renewal of my own contract with the studio. Soon, the Marx Brothers were reconciled with (Paramount)...and I found myself in the process of directing the Marx Brothers. The most surprising thing about this film was that I succeeded in not going crazy, for I really did not want to work with them: they were completely mad (TCM).

I should think that the Marx Brothers would have taken McCarey’s last line as quite a compliment. After *Duck Soup*, McCarey went on to direct primarily romantic comedies, including *The Awful Truth* (1937), one of the best of the Screwball Comedies.
**Production**

Film Scholar Gerald Mast describes the making of *Duck Soup* as “striking in the thoroughness of its conception… written by Kalmar and Ruby, produced by Mankiewiez, and directed by Leo McCarey” (“Comic Mind” 284). Although he was the silent Marx, “By the time *Duck Soup* was in production, Harpo Marx was the critical darling of the intellectual community…. [that] considered Harpo to be the greatest pantomime since Charles Chaplin” (TCM), proving that the art of silent pantomime was not dead. Harpo’s popularity and critical praise demonstrates the influence of the silent film comedies in that non-verbal comedy persisted among the verbal banter.

Of all the gags in *Duck Soup*, the mirror scene seems to have the most widespread origins. Mast credits it to a Max Linder film, *Seven Years Bad Luck* (1921), which in turn borrows many of its gags from Chaplin’s *A Night Out* (1915) (“Comic Mind” 38). Wes Gehring of *USA Today*, however, credits it to “a 1926 Charley Chase short, *Mum’s the Word*, which involved a character interacting with a shadow”. From wherever the inspiration for the gag came, the Marx Brothers certainly performed it flawlessly and made it their own. In contrast to the meticulous work required for some parts of the film, other parts were improvised during filming, “According to The Marx Brothers biographer Joe Adamson, the elaborate ‘All God’s Chillun Got Guns’ musical number was mostly improvised on the set, as there is no reference to it in the… script” (IMDb), proving the Marx Brothers had the talent to not only painstakingly prepare gags, but to go with the flow when the inspiration was there.
The Film

*Duck Soup* combines excellent examples of both visual and verbal comedy. In every moment with Groucho, he presents verbal banter so quickly that often the other characters have no idea when he has insulted them (35)—they demonstrate the Principle of Comic Sense, as they are totally unaware of the consequences of his plans. In the opening gala, he literally controls the scene while the crowd around him can only remain still and quiet (9). On the other end of the comic spectrum, we have Harpo and Chico, who perform several mostly silent visual gags. After noting the contrasting comic methods of Groucho and Chico and Harpo, it is doubly effective that Groucho is involved in the totally silent mirror scene (46). The viewer sees it from Groucho’s perspective to suggest that any trick that he tries will work just as he believes it to be so. Without the power that his verbal wit gives him, Groucho cannot control the comedy in this scene, he is as susceptible to being outwitted as the viewer is. The gag obviously took hours of rehearsal to perfect, but with their skill, the performers make it appear spontaneous. With this gag, they utilize the Principle of Comic Timing, surprising the viewer along with Groucho when Harpo is able to anticipate every move.

The humor of the film shows excellent implementation of all Four Principles of Comic Effect. As is the case with *City Lights*, so many of the gags depend on the Principle of Comic Logic, specifically repetition. Groucho falls for the same motorcycle trick three times (12, 29, and 31), and never once appears to suspect it. One silent example of this Principle is the hat gag (22) that involves Chico, Harpo, and the lemonade salesman (Edgar Kennedy), in which repetition leads to frustration. We see the same compounding through repetition that we see in *City Lights*—the gag gets funnier
the longer that Chico and Harpo keep it going—particularly as it returns in other scenes (22 and 32). A repetitive verbal gag is the singing of the Freedonian national anthem at the most inappropriate times. Along with the Principle of Comic Logic goes the Principle of Comic Timing, lulling the viewer into a pattern (as in the mirror gag), shown splendidly when a slow pan of the foot of a woman’s bed slowly reveals her shoes, Harpo’s shoes, and finally the horses shoes, followed by a shot of the three of them sharing a bed. The same pattern of expected action works across several scenes, as when Harpo goes to rally the townspeople, he decides to visit a woman (59)—and at this point, the viewer cannot be surprised when it is the wife of the street vendor, who has already clashed with Harpo several times.

An additional use of Comic Timing in *Duck Soup* is in the form of anticlimax, as when the public waits for Firefly to arrive and he does not (5) and Comic Logic through imitation, as when Groucho raises his cigar to match the soldiers presenting their arms (6). A lot of the verbal jokes function on the Principle of Comic Sense, especially Groucho and Chico’s use of homonyms or words with multiple meanings. Almost all of Chico’s humor works on this last principle, best seen when he explains to the Sylvanian ambassador about his experience spying on Firefly (16) and with Chico’s entire trial (49-52).

Contrasting with the Marx Brothers’ gags is the stoic presence of Margaret Dumont, who many critics argue was practically one of the Brothers. She is the classic straight character, making the Brothers’ antics stand out even more. She is so proper, looking into the distance when she proclaims her lines. She simply gives Groucho a disapproving look when he insults her:
As far as Groucho Marx was concerned, Margaret Dumont, playing the matronly Mrs. Teasdale, was practically the fifth Marx Brother. She always played her scenes with Groucho and the boys in *Duck Soup* and their other pictures as if they were the most serious and dignified scenes ever put to film. Her ramrod straight and sincere acting make the picture’s madcap humor and satire that much more effective.... Apparently, Dumont truly did not get most of the Marx Brothers’ brand of humor. (TCM).

Dumont also represents the token wealthy widow, found in so many comedies, with more than one man pursuing her, or I should say, her money.

In terms of the portrayal of ethnicity, the film implies that anyone with an accent should not be trusted, which was very fitting for the general sentiment in the then Isolationist United States. As a first example in the picture, the Hispanic dancer introduced at the gala (3) is revealed to be a spy. Chico as well is seen as a spy in the first scene in which he appears (12). As the narrative progresses, we learn that he is not only a spy for Sylvania, but a double agent, serving either side as it suits him. In a way, we can consider that Harpo’s lack of speech makes him as much of an outsider as those characters with accents. Much like the approximated speech at the opening of *City Lights*, Harpo speaks through horns that utilize pitch without diction (25). Not only does Harpo not speak, we learn through Harpo’s encounters with texts that he is illiterate (14). Harpo also seems to be socially illiterate. He disregards personal space, he rests his leg on other people (especially other men, going back to the tradition of homosexual gags), he cannot seem to keep his hands to himself, and if he gets hold of a pair of scissors, nothing is safe, especially people’s clothing. Harpo is so like a child that while sneaking into Mrs. Teasdale’s home, he cannot help but make noise, whether it is the piano, music box, alarm clock, or safe/ radio (41-45). Like Chaplin’s Tramp, Harpo’s performance is a combination of gesture and facial expressions:
Lacan notices, in “the face of Harpo Marx,” which smiles as it destroys, cries when it is forced to hear others speak, and ‘Gookies’ [as Lacan describes the facial expression] when it reads. This face is nothing more than a mask, but a mask that, unlike other comic masks, is a kind of metasemblance, one that is all mask with no presumed person beneath it, only the sheer force of the signifier as empty semblance (Flaig 106).

Since Harpo seems to act on instinct and desire, it would seem that his facial expressions convey solely emotion without thought, making him difficult for anyone but a psychoanalyst like Lacan, recognizing the conventions for non-comic heroes, to analyze and to appreciate. It seems that scholars that study the human psyche are more able to recognize comedies merits than those scholars that study film alone.

*Duck Soup* is a political satire, but instead of targeting one regime, it generalizes with fictional countries to make fun of bureaucratic government and war on an ideological level, “But *Duck Soup* is subversive not only with respect to particular attitudes and values, but ultimately with respect to everything…. the worldview which emerges through the shenanigans of the Marx Brothers is essentially no different from that of T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*” (Bramann). In the opening gala (10), Groucho explains all his plans for the future of the country in song, but not with the specifics of Hynkel’s speeches in Chaplin’s *The Great Dictator* (1940). Years later, this revelation of plans took on more ironic meaning, as it paralleled the situations of many Totalitarian leaders, most clearly with the German people learning of Hitler’s plans from *Mein Kampf* and still supporting him. As a mockery of this situation, the people of Freedonia learn Firefly’s plans but still embrace his ideas and cheer him on. Later, we witness parliament in session (18), and all the politicians watch Firefly play jacks—he fools around as we imagine scandalous politicians must do.

A further criticism of government deals with class, for the only people we see in
the government, at the gala (11), and at Mrs. Teasdale’s invitation-only tea party (29), are all wealthy members of the upper class. The only lower class people we see are the street vendor and the soldiers at the end. The people who keep the economy going and defend the country are not the ones that rule the country, “Here, narrative sense and comic nonsense are so tightly interwoven that it becomes impossible to separate one from the other, which is partially why the film is such a devastatingly wacky portrait of politics and war” ( Flaig 114). Many scholars contend that the narrative/gag struggle inherent in comedy conveys the flaws of politics and class better than a non-comic presentation could. Gag and narrative merge in Duck Soup, because the whole country and resulting war are practically gags in themselves.

McCarey uses many classic Hollywood filmmaking devices to establish plot like displaying a flag before showing a country (1) and introducing Firefly’s presidency with a newspaper story (2). With the “Help is on the way!” sequence (1:05), the filmmakers poke fun at low budget productions’ liberal use of stock footage. The images begin with subjects that make sense and progressively grow more ridiculous. As the troops march to the front lines, the Brothers play their helmets like a xylophone (55). Years later, the Monty Python troupe used the same gag in the Camelot song in Monty Python and the Holy Grail (Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones 1975). Blake Edwards used the safe/radio gag in his Return of the Pink Panther (1975).

Reception

Unlike later comedies (including several case studies included here, see Chapter 3.3 particularly), Duck Soup did not have any difficulties with the Production Code. The
Production Code had existed since 1930, but it was not strictly enforced until 1934 (Jackson). *The Turner Classic Movies Database* describes the reception of *Duck Soup* as “a critical and commercial failure”. The film’s commercial failure makes sense when considering the time in which it was released:

According to Andrew Bergman, after a “year of Roosevelt’s energy and activism, government, no matter what else it might be, was no absurdity… If Bergman is right, in 1934, people were still enamored with Roosevelt’s “Happy Days are Here Again,” and weren’t in the mood to have all their conventions destroyed (TCM).

Not only was it released in the midst of the Great Depression, but also audiences still remembered World War I while the threat of a Second World War was on the horizon.

The critics’ reactions were not much better than the public’s:

Overall, *Duck Soup* received a critical drubbing upon its… release… *Motion Picture Herald* took a chance when it praised *Duck Soup*, calling it “another truckload of hilarious nonsense from the irrepressible comedy four,”…. *Time Magazine* said it was no different from their other films, while *The Nation* informed the reader, “Pretty near everyone seems to have agreed that in *Duck Soup* the Four Marx Brothers are not quite so amusing.” *The Nation* elaborated by saying that Harpo comes off as “tiresome,” Groucho is “badly provided for,” and Chico and Zeppo have “less excuse than usual for their existence.” Ouch. *The New Republic* and *The New Statesman*, intellectual publications that supposedly embraced the Marx Brothers’ anarchic brand of comic mayhem, were painfully silent about *Duck Soup*. Meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* declared “the same tricks can’t be worked over and over again. The comedy quartet has a rather set routine.” And as the *New York Sun* bluntly put it, the Marxes had taken “something of a nose dive” with *Duck Soup* (TCM).

As a political satire, the political leanings of the publications that review it can partly explain the starkly contrasted views of the film and some reviewers chose not to address the political humor at all. Most critics at the time considered it a fair to poor effort, but many reviewers also indicate that they would not expect much better from the Marx Brothers—although it is unclear if the critics’ low expectations were for the Marx Brothers specifically or for film comedy as a whole, since we have already stated that
film critics have difficulty approaching comedy. Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times*
described it as “extremely noisy without being nearly as mirthful as their other films”.
Joe Bigelow of *Variety* gave the film a rather positive review, praising the way that the
Brothers were able to combine physical and verbal gags, “Radio has killed all the good
gags”. He adds that “Practically everybody wants a good laugh right now and *Duck Soup*
should make practically everybody laugh”. Harold W. Cohen of the *Pittsburgh Post-
Gazette* also presented a favorable review, saying “It’s good to see the madcap Marxes
back”. Some might argue that *Duck Soup*’s message was a success internationally, since
Mussolini saw it as a threat, “It may be apocryphal, but legend persists that Benito
Mussolini banned the Marx Brothers’ 1933 antiwar film *Duck Soup* from being shown in
Italy” (Barra). Tim Dirks of *The American Movie Classics Filmsite* adds that it was
“devoid of any Academy Award nominations”, which is not a surprise considering the
relatively poor reviews that it received. Mussolini seems to be the only one who
addressed the politics of the film, for the remaining reviews all address the comic
structure of the film, using terms like “noisy”, “not mirthful”, and “laugh”. Just as the
reviewers of *City Lights* approached it as part of a larger Chaplin canon, these reviewers
approach *Duck Soup* in the context of all the Marx Brothers pictures. Also, in the same
way critics praised *City Light*’s balance of comedy and pathos, these critics praise the
film’s balance of physical and verbal humor.

In a few years, *Duck Soup* became virtually forgotten, and the Marx Brothers’
career declined in the 1940s. As William Ewald described it, they “simply seemed to run
out of juice after a while”. Renewed interest came to *Duck Soup* and the Marx Brothers
beginning in the 1950s, mostly due to their presence on television, with further reviews
appearing over the years. In these later reviews, many critics addressed the political humor of the film, not only aided by the perspective of a different political landscape, but also influenced by later anti-war sentiments, particularly during the Vietnam era. In 1976, Roger Rosenblatt of the *The New Republic* praised the film and the Smithsonian Institution for presenting it once again. In 1978, John J. Puccio of *Movie Metropolis* also praised the film, “It’s all quite zany and delightful, a mixture of clever wit, low humor, and outright anarchy” regretting that “the world appears to have outgrown [it] or maybe just lost sight of somewhere along the road to high-tech sophistication”—echoing the contemporary reviewers’ praise of the mixture of many different types of comedy, and describing the genre of Anarchic Comedy. He uses the terms “zany”, “delightful”, “clever”, “wit”, “low humor”, and “anarchy” to describe the comedy of the film. Notice how close these terms are to the ones used by reviewers in 1933.

Just like with *City Lights*, *Duck Soup*’s reputation has only grown and it is now more accessible than ever in the Twenty First Century because of home video technology. Many critics focus on the film’s longevity and continued relevancy, especially in its exploration of politics and war. In 2000, Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* commented on the innovative nature of its comedy, “Dated as *Duck Soup* inevitably is in some respects, it has moments that seem startlingly modern…. The Brothers broke the classical structure of movie comedy and glued it back again haphazardly, and nothing was ever the same”. Jeffrey M. Anderson of *Combustible Celluloid*, echoed Ebert’s sentiments, “The ridiculous reasons for going to war and the awkward, hysterical war itself are especially relevant today”, as does M.P. Bartley of *eFilmCritic.com*, “*Duck Soup* still has an edge today, because it’s the best film to remind
us just how dangerous the Marx Brothers were”. Like earlier critics, many critics still speak of the film within the context of the Marx Brothers’ overall style. Michael Koller of Senses of Cinema called Duck Soup, “indisputably the Marx Brothers’ greatest film…. their most creative and anarchic”. John Sinnott of DVD Talk called it “Not only… the best Marx Brothers film, but… also one of the best comedies ever made”. In 2005, Dennis Schwartz of Ozus’ World Movie Reviews gave the film an A+, dubbing it “The Marx Brothers high water mark in film; their one true claim to a masterpiece”. Ian Nathan of Empire magazine called it, “The Marx brothers on top form”. These reviewers focus on the innovative combination of visual and auditory comedy in the film as well.

In 2004, Jamie Russell of the BBC praised it for its “delirious verbal banter… and a total lack of respect for the rules”—two recurring devices inherent to comedy, as I noted in Chapter I. Most Twenty First Century critics that review the film inevitably compare it to the later MGM pictures, and prefer Duck Soup because it does not include musical interludes or a romantic subplot.

As for its detractors, Christopher Null of Filmcritic.com, complained that the plot was too simple, “Take the comedy, leave the story”. Total Film Magazine echoed this when it said, “the plot is just a flimsy backdrop” and that the “political nose-thumbing now seems a little dated”. Obviously, both reviewers do not know how to approach the narrative/gag balance of comedy. David Nusair of Reelfilm provided one of the harshest criticisms in 2006, when he said:

the majority of this just isn’t funny (something that’s particularly true of an excruciatingly prolonged sequence involving Harpo and Chico’s harassment of a blustering street vendor). The conclusion, which is action-packed and mind-numbing, does the movie absolutely no favors, and it’s extraordinarily difficult to understand why this is generally regarded as some kind of a comedy classic.
In Nusairs’ review, we can see that he does not know how to approach the Principle of Comic Logic nor the way in which the film borrows conventions from the war subgenre. The fact that more reviews have been written about *Duck Soup* in the past ten years than in its first ten years of existence is a testament to the power of the film and to its longevity.

**Legacy**

*Duck Soup* was the “last film to feature all four brothers” (Library of Congress), in part because its public reception had led Paramount to end the Marx Brothers’ contract:

when their satire of war and politics in *Duck Soup* (1933) left audiences cold, Paramount let the zany team go. They found a new home at MGM, where producer Irving Thalberg suggested that they counterbalance their patented brand of insanity by adding a love interest to their comedies (Dixon and Foster 133).

Critics at *Turner Classic Movies* call *Duck Soup*, the Brothers’:

last opportunity… to be at their most outrageous. But more than them running amok in front of the camera (and they had plenty of experience being let loose in front of an audience in vaudeville and Broadway), the Marx Brothers made a comedy that was cinematic…. The *Duck Soup* plot was absurd, but it was not so ridiculous that you didn’t care what was going to happen to the characters. This was one aspect of that Irving Thalberg did not abandon when he produced their next picture, *A Night at the Opera* (1935), at MGM.

The Brothers’ films at MGM became their most commercially successful. Thalberg had determined that the reason why the Brothers’ earlier films had not fared well commercially was because there were never any characters to which the viewer could relate. The Brothers themselves were too wacky to be relatable and Margaret Dumont was almost too proper, so Thalberg incorporated romantic leads and more mainstream narratives into the Brother’s MGM films. Even so, Zeppo, who sometimes played a
romantic foil to the other three Brothers in their earlier pictures, decided after *Duck Soup* to move on to a career on the business side of the motion picture industry. Perhaps Thalberg had thought that the addition of romance to the Marx Brothers pictures would have made them more approachable to audiences that were now accustomed to Screwball comedies (see Chapter 3.3). Most film historians today agree, however, that the romantic stories often detracted from the overall pictures, considering them to be inferior to *Duck Soup*, the poster child of the Anarchic Comedy, that “features no sappy romantic interludes that you would want to fast forward through, something that mars the MGM pictures” (TCM). Later examples of this subgenre, including *Dr. Strangelove* (Stanley Kubrick 1964) and *M*A*S*H* (Robert Altman 1970), were greatly influenced by it, sharing many of the same themes, devices, and character types.

In the decades since the Brothers’ last film, most critics and scholars acknowledge that *Duck Soup* was in many ways superior to the later MGM pictures. It is, “one of the watershed films of American cinema. No less a comedy artist than Woody Allen calls it ‘probably the best talking comedy ever made,’ and uses an extended clip from it to anchor one of his own later classics—*Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986)” (Gehring). Allen states “If you were asked to name the best comedies ever made, and you named *The Gold Rush* (1925) and *The General* (1927) and a half dozen others, *Duck Soup* is the only one that doesn’t have a dull spot.” (TCM)—drawing attention to how a comedy handles narrative structure. In 1990, the National Registry of Historic Films decided to preserve the film (TCM). In 2006, *Premiere Magazine* named *Duck Soup* one of The 50 Greatest Comedies of All Time (TCM) and in 2007, “The movie’s line ‘You know, you haven’t stopped talking since I came here? You must have been vaccinated with a phonograph
needle.’ was voted as the #43 of ‘The 100 Greatest Movie Lines’ by *Premiere*” (IMDb). Despite the fact that many political scientists consider *Duck Soup* one of the greatest political satires of all time, “The Marx Brothers denied [perhaps for the sake of irony] that there is a single social intention in any of their films...” (Mast “Comic Mind” 341). Perhaps, they wanted viewers to simply enjoy the film (political satire or not), exactly as viewers continue to do.

Regarding the themes that reviewers address in their analyses of *Duck Soup*, the most prevalent comments deal with the film’s innovation in the way that it combines a variety of comic styles: “physical”, “verbal”, “anarchic”, “wit”, and “low humor”. As with the reviews of *City Lights* (1931), critics cannot seem to disassociate this particular film from the rest of the Marx Brothers’ pictures. Also, as was the case for *City Lights* (1931), most of the negative criticisms focus on the narrative structure—not considering the unique narrative/gag balance of comedy. For both films, no review seemed to address the deeper themes of politics and war until forty years after the film’s release—perhaps indicating a trend in comedy film criticism: critics did not look into the deeper themes within comedy films until the 1970s.
Case Study #3: *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra 1934)

“Excuse me lady, but that upon which you sit is mine”
(Clark Gable, as Peter Warne)

*Context*

The mid-1930s was the age of the Screwball Comedy, when “the term ‘screwball’ itself became codified” (Karnick 125). This subgenre places its characters in bizarre situations that compound as the film progresses, typically in a romance-driven narrative. While some credit Howard Hawk’s *Twentieth Century* (1934) as the first Screwball comedy, I feel that the style of *Twentieth Century* is much closer to the Lubitsch/ Cukor comedies of the early years of the decade, and not the later Screwballs, “Screwball comedy redefined film comedy in the 1930s…. Not only, was there an equal teaming of a male and female star in screwball comedy, but for the first time the romantic leads were also the comic leads” (Lent 327). Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* provided not just the basis for every subsequent Screwball comedy, but for romantic comedy in general, “The bantering dialogue and rapid delivery which characterizes screwball comedy, for example, has been linked to the film’s overall conception of male-female relationships” (Karnick and Jenkins 164). The film’s comedy is forever linked to its unforgettable romance, as nearly every romantic comedy since reminds us.

*Frank Capra*

At the time, Columbia was not a major film studio. In fact, most people working in the film industry referred to it as a Poverty Row operation. However, “Columbia had a
major asset in Capra” (Landazuri), who delighted in stories of the average person, “the little guy”:

The rise of the comedy of Capra coincided with the decline of the comedy of Lubitsch…. The Capra comedies are among the most valuable sociological documents in the history of the American cinema, reflecting an era’s idealized view of itself…. But 1933… was the year of Capra’s first great personal success—Lady for a Day. And for the next eight years the Capra comedies (with scripts by Robert Riskin) were the most energetic and stylish expressions of the American audience’s hopes, beliefs, and ideals (Mast “Comic Mind” 259).

Capra (1897-1991) had a knack for creating believable, memorable characters, “Because Capra people live in his films with complete sincerity and seriousness, his film world seems saturated with human and comic (if not moral) truth” (Mast “Comic Mind” 265).

It Happened One Night is not only one of Capra’s funniest and most enjoyable films, but also one of his greatest commercial and critical successes.

Clark Gable

Today, we remember Clark Gable (1901-1960) as the iconic, suave, rebel Rhett Butler in Gone With The Wind (Victor Fleming 1939), but before making It Happened One Night, Gable was not the megastar that we think of today. Capra had originally wanted Robert Montgomery to star in his picture, but Montgomery turned him down (Weems), “saying the script was the worst thing he had ever read” (IMDb) and that there were already “too many bus pictures” (Landazuri). Getting Gable was actually a stroke of luck for Capra:

MGM studio boss Louis B. Mayer made Cohn an offer he couldn’t refuse. “I got an actor here who’s being a bad boy,” Mayer reportedly told Cohn. “I’d like to spank him.” The bad boy was Clark Gable, who was becoming an important star, and flexing his muscles. He told Mayer he wouldn’t play any more gigolo roles, and he wanted a raise. Mayer would punish him by exiling him to Siberia on Poverty Row (Landazuri).
Capra’s relationship with Gable started off rough. When Gable arrived on the set for the first day of shooting he said, “Let’s get this over with” (TCM). Little did he know that the film would shoot him to superstardom. Film scholar Linda Mizejewski claims that “Depression-era culture was ready for a high-profile masculine ideal” (99) and Gable gave audiences just that:

Because *It Happened One Night* was far more popular than any of his previous films, Gable’s ranking at the box office went from number 7 to number 2 by the end of 1934 (just behind Shirley Temple, illustrating the appeal of family-friendly stars at this time). For the first time, Gable was the object of female fan hysteria. When MGM sent him on tour to promote his next film in 1934, he was mobbed by 2,500 women at a train station in Kansas City. Women wept and handed him articles of their clothing during his appearances in Baltimore, San Francisco, and New York. Police motorcades escorted him to his film openings, and when he won the Academy Award for his role as Peter Warne, his salary at MGM doubled…. By the end of the decade, he was dubbed “The King,” Hollywood’s top romantic lead, a fitting nod to his first important victory in movies (110).

In hindsight, Capra’s second choice for the character of Peter Warne turned out to be the best. As I shall mention with several of the case studies, many of the performers in sound comedies were not the first choice. This fact supports the argument presented in Chapter I: sound comedies are the work of the comic filmmaker and not a comic performer for whom a role was created.

*Claudette Colbert*

Unlike Gable, Claudette Colbert (1903-1996) was already a big box office draw going into *It Happened One Night*. She began her career in theater, and her verbal delivery allowed her to transition well into sound films (Pace). Her stature was made quite clear by her salary that was “five times that of Gable’s” (Mizejewski 110). However, like Gable, she was not Capra’s first choice for the role of Ellie Andrews for, he attempted to entice “Miriam Hopkins, Constance Bennett, Margaret Sullavan, Carole
Lombard… Bette Davis…. Loretta Young” (Landazuri), and “Myrna Loy” (Pace) to accept the part before settling for Colbert, at the behest of the studio.

Colbert turned out to be quite selective when it came to what she would and would not do in her performance. Many of the classic moments of the film, came as a result of Colbert refusing to do what was in the screenplay, “For one intimate scene, he said: ‘Claudette refused to even partially undress before the camera. She wanted to feature her acting, not her sex appeal!’” (Pace). Her reservations inspired Capra to create the whole Walls of Jericho concept (IMDb):

By the same token, she refused at first to raise her skirt for the subsequently famous hitchhiking scene, in which the script called for her to demonstrate that a display of leg could stop a motorist…. And so, Mr. Capra recalled: “We waited until the casting director sent us a chorus girl with shapely underpinnings to ‘double’ for Colbert’s. When she saw the double’s leg, she said: ‘Get her out of here. I’ll do it. That’s not my leg!’” (Pace).

Both gags are now a couple of the most memorable parts of the picture.

Once the production had reached an end, Colbert reportedly claimed that she had “just finished the worst picture in the world” (Pace). She felt so poorly about the picture and about her performance that she did not even bother to go to the Academy Awards ceremony, “when she won for Best Actress, she was found about to leave on a trip and was rushed to the ceremony, where she made her acceptance speech in a traveling suit” (IMDb). This little picture had surprised not only the critics, but also the people involved in its production. Colbert’s volatility gives an indication that even people involved in comedy had a difficult time assessing it.
Production

The comic and narrative style of It Happened One Night has its origins in Shakespeare, Shaw, and Wilde (Mizejewski 18-40). The original idea came from a short story called “Night Bus” and apparently, “No one in his crew at Columbia had much faith that the story would make a very good film, and Capra had to convince everyone, including Columbia chief Harry Cohn, to let him do the film” (Weems). Production went very quickly and smoothly:

Director Frank Capra often said that the making of It Happened One Night would have made a pretty good screwball comedy in itself. Consider the elements: two irascible studio bosses, an impossibly fast schedule, a couple of spoiled stars who didn’t want to make the picture and are hostile to the harried director—yet somehow they manage to produce an enduring classic (Landazuri). From the start, the filmmakers had anticipated difficulty with the Production Code due to the innuendo and implied sexuality in the film. Film content standards were under heated debate at the time. In 1933, when the National Legion of Decency began, the Hays Office became the Production Code Administration, headed by Joseph Breen. Capra’s film not only had to pass inspection from these organizations, but from the internal studio censors as well. The federal government at the time had even considered taking charge of censoring films (Mizejewski 46). Much to Capra’s relief, the film managed to squeeze by the censors. It was:

made exactly at the moment when social pressures were mounting toward stricter film censorship in the early 1930s…. it was released in January 1934, four months before more rigorous Code enforcements were implemented… the handling of sexual innuendo and desire in It Happened One Night became a template for ways in which sex could be handled during the Code era, which stretched over the next several decades (Mizejewski 42).
Though many see the Production Code as a hindrance, it forced Capra and his contemporaries to become more innovative and resourceful in their telling of a narrative.

The Film

Class is very much the sometimes-disguised subject of *It Happened One Night*. The first shot (1) opens on a yacht, shifting inside it to a rich young woman who refuses to eat, even when millions suffering through the Depression struggle to afford food. As we see in the comedies of Shakespeare, the woman rebels against the wishes of her father. The entire narrative involves running away—but not from any real danger, simply because of a disagreement with her father. Her father goes to extremes to find her, including air reconnaissance, offering a reward, and retrieving her with an entire entourage of police even though he and the viewer are fairly certain that she would return on her own in a few weeks anyway. Feminist Scholar Maria DiBattista explains that, traditionally, the woman’s power lies in choice of marriage (20), and that “This power may be wielded in sheer fun and high spirits, as in the madcap heiress comedies like *It Happened One Night*” (23). Throughout the trials that Ellie endures, there is always a feeling of lightness to her dilemmas.

Ellie’s upbringing is clear when she does not understand the etiquette of riding on a bus, staying in a hotel, or hitchhiking. She has difficulty surviving on a budget or even eating food that is not specially prepared for her. She feels that her money could get her anywhere, and is quite confident—that is until her suitcase is stolen (10). While Ellie may have the best of intentions, she does not understand the concept of limited funds. She gives a boy on the bus all of Peter’s money, not considering the consequences that it
means for them (46). Opposite to Chaplin’s Tramp as an outsider, Ellie is the wealthy outsider in a low to middle class world.

On the other end of the class spectrum is Peter Warne, who prides himself on his world experience—from knowing the best way to dunk donuts (36) to knowing the right way to hitchhike (59)—no matter what, he has enough knowledge of the subject to write a book, or so he claims. Warne tries to appear apathetic to everyone else around him by openly insulting his boss, by trying to act tough in front of his peers, and by pretending not to care if Ellie appreciates what he does for her or not. It is not through his words, but through his actions that his true, caring nature appears. The contrasting qualities of Ellie and Peter’s personalities—her near-helplessness and his stubbornness—make the romance work. She cannot get to New York without his help, and his determination makes it so that they will get to New York no matter what. Warne needs a story, and she will be his story as long as he can keep her around.

Capra utilizes one of the oldest theater devices when, bathed in moonlight, Colbert and Gable are at their most vulnerable and most romantic (56 and 1:13):

The filmic apotheosis of moonlight occurs in It Happened One Night when Peter Warne (Clark Gable) provokes Ellie Andrews’ (Claudette Colbert) declaration of love by describing an island paradise where “you and the moon and the water all become one.” In this film, the moon is an obstacle to concealment, and so its glow must be occluded, its light banished (DiBattista 292).

As with nearly every Capra picture, “the pure, innocent allegory…. dances charmingly along the fence between lark and allegory” (Morrow). The film also includes the tempting insinuation that crime can be fun and exciting, when Peter tries to convince fellow bus passenger Shapeley that he is part of a kidnapping ring. DiBattista claims that comedies “impersonate gangster culture when they can’t round up actual gangsters” (52).
Crime is a theme in many later comedy films, including Capra’s own *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1944), *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks 1938), *His Girl Friday* (Hawks 1940), *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges 1941), *Sullivan’s Travels* (Sturges 1942), *The Thin Man* series, the Ealing comedies, *Some Like It Hot* (Wilder 1959), and *The Pink Panther* series of Blake Edwards. The crime subgenre is one of the many subgenres of non-comic films from which comedy borrows, or rather mocks, conventions—consider the gangster references in these comedies as foils to the dramatic pictures *Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman 1931), *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy 1931), and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks 1932), to name a few.

**Reception**

*It Happened One Night* has been described as “a sleeper hit” (Mizejewski 1).

Commercially, it had a rather soft opening, but gained publicity as more and more people saw it and spread the word (Landazuri). Eventually, it “broke the house records at Radio City Music Hall in February, 1934. Overall, the film brought in over $1 million [$17 million today] in rental fees for Columbia in its initial release. The total production cost on the film was $325,000 [$6 million today]” (Weems). No one—not even Capra—could have predicted this success.

The reviews were overwhelmingly positive. With these reviews, we begin to see the development of the critical language used to analyze romantic comedies. Mordaunt Hall of the *New York Times* called it a “merry romance” and praised the performances of Colbert and Gable, as well as the fast pace of the writing. *Boxoffice Magazine* called it “hilarious”, praising Gable’s performance and noting the “Capra technique”, that is, his ability to get at the basic human nature inherent in every situation. *The New Republic*
said, “Considering its subject, it is better than it has any right to be - better acted, better directed, better written…. The cast was particularly sound from top to bottom”. Variety said that it “proves two things. A clean story can be funnier than a dirty one and the best way to do a bus story is to make them get out and walk”. William Troy of The Nation stated, “Among the more gratifying phenomena of the current season has been the growing recognition of It Happened One Night… as one of the few potential classics of the recent cinema”. From these reviews we see distinct foci: the romance, the performers, the director, and the writing—indicating how the Screwball comedies became more of a collaborative effort than earlier comedies.

By the time awards season came around, the film was nominated for five Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Writing (Adaptation), Best Actor, and Best Actress—winning all five (Pace). It “stunned everyone when it won them all…. a feat that would not be repeated for another 40 years, until One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest (1975)” (Landazuri). It Happened One Night was “The first Academy Award Best Picture nominee to win both Best Actor and Best Actress” (IMDb), as well as “the first film to win both the Academy Award and National Board of Review Award for the Best Picture” (IMDb). It is credited with “virtually single-handedly [lifting] Columbia out of the ranks of poverty row” (IMDb), making it a valid studio in the eyes of industry executives.

Over 75 years later, the reviews are still mostly positive. Interestingly, most reviewers still focus on the same aspects of the film as the contemporary reviewers, while some approach the film in the context of an early Capra success. Martha P. Nochimson of Senses of Cinema called it “Capra’s best film”. Bret McCabe of the Baltimore City
*Paper* praised the performances, saying it “catches icons Gable and Colbert early enough in their careers where they let themselves be silly”. Still more reviewers praise the writing. Sukhdev Sandhu of *The Telegraph* stated, “it’s still witty and sophisticated today”. David Jenkins of *TimeOut London Magazine* said, “Every line of dialogue is calculated bliss”. Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* described it as “buoyant and elegant as bubbles in a glass of champagne”. A couple reviewers addressed the social taboo that the film violated at the time. Dennis Schwartz of *Ozus’ World Movie Reviews* admitted that “In many ways it’s dated, but the comedy still works even if it’s probably not as madcap humorous as when it was first released” and Neil Smith of *Total Film Magazine* agreed “Tame by today’s standards,” but adding, “it’s worth remembering just how shocking a glimpse of Colbert’s car-halting stocking would have been in Depression-era America”. Tim Dirks of *American Movie Classics Filmsite* seems to be the only one to explore the deeper meaning in the film, “The escapist theme of the film, appropriate during the Depression Era”. He also describes it as “a reversal of the Cinderella story”.

Derek M. Germano of the *Cinema Laser* summarized the film’s critical success:

*It Happened One Night* took home the awards that really matter. In my opinion, *It Happened One Night* is one of the most significant Academy Award winning films because it is a comedy. In later years, the Academy came to look upon comedies with distain, which is completely unfair since making people laugh is a genuine art form. After all, *dying is easy... comedy is hard*....

He reminds the reader of the critical bias against comedy.

**Legacy**

Capra made *It Happened One Night*, but *It Happened One Night* made Capra the standout director that we remember today. He went on to make many successful films,
comedies and dramas alike. Outside of the motion picture industry, the film inspired many cultural trends as well. In the hotel scene when Gable undresses, he found it too difficult to remove an undershirt while delivering all his snappy lines. His solution was to therefore not wear an undershirt. Consequently, undershirt sales in the United States dropped considerably (snopes.com). The importance of the bus trip in the film sparked “interest in bus travel nationwide” (Greyhound). Fritz Freleng, creator of many of the Looney Tunes characters, credits *It Happened One Night* with inspiring several well-known cartoon characters:

it contains at least three things upon which the character “Bugs Bunny” was based: - The character Oscar Shapely’s (Roscoe Karns) personality - The manner in which Peter Warne (Clark Gable) was eating carrots and talking quickly at the same time - An imaginary character mentioned once to frighten Oscar Shapely named “Bugs Dooley.” Other mentions of “Looney Tunes” characters from the film include Alexander Andrews (Walter Connolly) and King Westley (Jameson Thomas) being the inspirations for Yosemite Sam and Pepé LePew, respectively (IMDb).

Two musical versions of the film appeared, “*Eve Knew Her Apples* (1945) starring Ann Miller, and *You Can’t Run Away From It* (1956) with Jack Lemmon and June Allyson” (Dirks). The Screwball Comedy style of the film went on to inspire such comic gems as Howard Hawk’s *His Girl Friday* (1940), Preston Sturges’ *The Lady Eve* (1941), *The Thin Man* series, and George Cukor’s *The Philadelphia Story* (1940). *It Happened One Night* is significant in my study of film comedy not only as a film that has been recognized as one of the greatest screen comedies for nearly 80 years, but also as the only comedy film to win the top five Academy Awards as well as the National Board of Review award for Best Picture—awards for which most comedies were not even nominated.

With *It Happened One Night*, we see the first case of romantic comedy criticism. The reviewers focus on the craft of the film, praising the director, performers, writing,
and the romance. They describe the romance using the terms “sophisticated”, “buoyant”, and “elegant”, while at the same moment, they describe the comedy as “hilarious”, “silly”, and “witty”. It is not until the Twenty First Century and almost 70 years since the film’s release that reviewers begin to address the taboo elements of the film that would have been quite risqué at the time of its release. As we have already seen with the previous two films, few reviewers address the deeper themes of the film, and it is not until decades later—when Tim Dirks in the 2010s describes its escapist elements.
Case Study #4: *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks 1938)

“Now it isn’t that I don’t like you, Susan, because, after all, in moments of quiet, I’m strangely drawn toward you, but - well, there haven’t been any quiet moments”  
(Cary Grant, as David Huxley)

**Context**

Film scholars Maria DiBattista explains how so many of the Screwball Comedies end in marriage, as if it were a requirement of the subgenre, “Many of the most enchanting comedies of the thirties—*My Man Godfrey, Bringing Up Baby, The Awful Truth*—would have been stillborn ventures or would have ended miserably had the desirable men in those films not yielded to female sexual pursuit” (331). When modern critics and scholars analyze *Bringing Up Baby*, it is impossible for them to consider it outside of its relation to other Hepburn-Grant films. Since the film, Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant went on to make the successful comedies *Holiday* (George Cukor 1938) and *The Philadelphia Story* (Cukor 1940) together. Separately, both actors went on to many successful roles in comedies as well as in other genres, and are now remembered as being two of the greatest motion picture performers of the Twentieth Century.

**Howard Hawks**

Howard Hawks (1896-1977) was one of the most successful filmmakers of the 1930s. Some film scholars have dubbed him an *auteur*, as film theorist Peter Wollen explains:

The test case for the *auteur* theory is provided by the work of Howard Hawks.... Firstly, Hawks is a director who has worked for years within the Hollywood system.... Secondly, Hawks has worked in almost every genre.... Hawks achieved
this by reducing the genres to two basic types: the adventure drama and the crazy comedy (“Comic Mind” 271).

Hawks cited Chaplin as a source of inspiration when it came to his comedies (Mast “Bringing Up Baby” 258). He was also quick to share his own experiences with comedy:

> It’s much easier to get a comedy if you don’t start out trying to be funny. That’s a particular theory of mine, that if people start a picture and they have a funny main title, a lot of funny things, it’s as much as to say, “We expect you to laugh.” I think that’s committing suicide. They’re going to go against it. So I start out and try to get their attention with a good dramatic sequence and then find a place to start getting some laughs (Mast “Bringing Up Baby” 259).

Film scholar Rob Nixon lists many traits of Hawks’ style, including “the aggressive female who destroys a man’s composure, fast-paced action and dialogue and the sparse use of close-ups” and a preference “to shoot his romantic leads in two-shots that emphasized a sense of partnership”. Mast comments on Hawks’:

> world of men…. Hawks reserves his women for comedies, but even the delightfully wacky Bringing Up Baby (1938) has a tough, antisentimental core. Hawks runs Katharine Hepburn through swamps, mud, and thickets in a romantic chase after her man that has more to do with a tame leopard and a lost dinosaur bone than with love (“Bringing Up Baby” 304).

As masculine as Hawks’ worldview may be, he is certainly not afraid to make a film in which the lead is a strong female character.

**Katharine Hepburn**

At the time of Bringing Up Baby’s development, Katharine Hepburn (1907-2003) had gained some notice in dramatic pictures, but RKO wanted her to branch out into comedy (Miller). When the film failed financially, the studio blamed her:

> The studio suits knew Hepburn had a considerable personal fortune and no tolerance for people who undermined her position so they offered her an ultimatum once Bringing Up Baby began to go over budget. She had the option to
take a part in an undesirable film—*Mother Carey’s Chickens* (1938) or buy out her contract. To no one’s surprise, she chose the latter (Nixon).

Hepburn was quite athletic, and Hawks’ film allowed her “to show her gift for physical comedy by juggling olives, playing ‘squat tag,’ marching to her own offbeat drummer on the side of a hill, losing her footing on a ridge and her balance crossing a ‘shallow’ stream, swinging on a jailhouse door, even wrestling with a leopard” (DiBattista 211). Her physicality set her apart from the other female leads of the time, who could impress only on a verbal level, to which she could add a physical level.

*Cary Grant*

Like Clark Gable at the time of making *It Happened One Night*, Cary Grant (1904-1986) was not yet the megastar that he would become later in his career. He had already appeared in the successful *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey 1937) with Irene Dunne, but after *Bringing Up Baby* he appeared in a string of successful comedies, to only later branch out into other genres in the 1950s and 60s. Eventually, he became the ideal American man, as DiBattista describes, “the most hypercivilized male in classic American film comedy. If any man ever sported the manners of perfect freedom, it is the debonair Grant” (219). However, Grant was not Hawks’ first choice for the role of David Huxley:

The male lead was turned down by Leslie Howard, Fredric March, Robert Montgomery, Ronald Colman and Ray Milland before Hawks turned to Cary Grant, who had previously worked with Hepburn in *Sylvia Scarlett* (1935). Grant didn’t want to do the film either, claiming that he didn’t understand the character. Hawks said, “You’ve seen Harold Lloyd, haven’t you?” and counseled the actor to play the role in the manner of the noted silent screen clown as a total innocent caught up in insane events. He even had Grant wear horn-rimmed glasses like Lloyd’s (Miller).
For Grant, glasses indicate intelligence and scholarship, but he is at his most romantic when the glasses come off. The fact that Gable and Colbert in the case of *It Happened One Night* and Grant in the case of this film were not the first choices for their respective roles reinforces the argument presented in Chapter I: many early sound comedies were primarily the comedies of filmmakers and not of comic performers. While a silent film comedy could be built around a specific comic performer, the early Screwball directors would usually create the story and the characters and then find performers to fill the roles as the director envisioned them.

*Production*

The original story of the film came from a short story of the same name written by Hagar Wilde (Miller), who later collaborated on the screenplay with Dudley Nichols. Hawks described the casting as “Katie Hepburn and Cary were a great combination. It’s pretty hard to think of anybody but Cary Grant in that type of stuff. He was so far the best that there isn’t anybody to be compared to him…. He and Hepburn were just great together” (Mast “Bringing Up Baby” 260). As this was her first real comedy, Hepburn had a hard time getting the comic timing down at first. As a remedy, Hawks hired well-known stage and film comic Walter Catlett, to coach Hepburn in the ways of comedy, “And from that time on, she knew how to play comedy better, which is just to read lines” (Mast “Bringing Up Baby” 261):

After a bad start, Hawks grew to respect Hepburn tremendously for her comic timing, ad-libbing skills and physical control. He would tell the press, “She has an amazing body—like a boxer. It’s hard for her to make a wrong turn. She’s always in perfect balance. She has that beautiful coordination that allows you to stop and make a turn and never fall off balance. This gives her an amazing sense of timing. I’ve never seen a girl that had that odd rhythm and control” (Miller).
The reader may recognize Walter Catlett’s name, since he plays Slocum, the constable in the film.

All of the people involved in the production described it as a joyful experience, “On some days, Hawks cancelled shooting and took the cast to the races. When he was particularly pleased with one scene, he brought the cast two cases of champagne…. Hepburn and Grant frequently socialized off the set” (Miller). Besides the stellar human cast, the film also included two animal performers. The same terrier, Skippy, who performed as Asta in *The Thin Man* series and as Mr. Smith in *The Awful Truth*, was featured in *Bringing Up Baby* as George, who seems to control much of the action at parts of the narrative (Miller). A trained leopard named Nissa appeared as both Baby and the circus leopard. Hepburn reportedly worked very well with the leopard (Miller). Even so, the production crew did not want to take any chances with a potentially dangerous animal. As a result, the film contains quite a lot of optical effects (Miller):

Most of the split screens had a lot of movement in them, which meant the dividing line had to be moved around as well. Even the scenes of Susan dragging the mean Leopard on a leash are split screened. You can see that the rope does not line up. A puppet Leopard was also used in some shots. It’s most clearly seen in the shot after Susan gets the Leopard dragged into the jail. The reaction shot immediately afterwards, shows David and Mrs. Random with “Baby” the Leopard on the table. The Leopard is a puppet (IMDb).

At some points during the picture, the animal performers steal the show from the human ones.

Hawks “encouraged Grant and Hepburn to pop in whatever wisecracks that might fit” (Mast “Bringing Up Baby” 9) and several of the more memorable gags are improvisations or come from the performers’ own inspiration. The bit when Grant accidently rips off the back of Hepburn’s dress and then tries to cover it up came from a
similar real life experience of Grant’s (Miller). The final stunt with the collapsing Brontosaurus skeleton worked because of “Grant’s circus background…. He drilled [Hepburn] on exactly when to let go of the ladder and how to grab his wrist to make sure neither would be hurt” (Miller). Hepburn improvised the line “I was born on the side of a hill,” when the heel of her shoe actually broke (Miller). When Hepburn refers to Grant as “Jerry the Nipper”, it is homage to The Awful Truth in which Irene Dunne refers to Grant with the same nickname (Miller). One of the most historically significant improvisations came from Grant, when in the woman’s bathrobe he proclaims that he just turned “gay all of a sudden”. This line was the first time the word “gay” had been used in mainstream media to refer to homosexuality and not happiness (Sinfield 110). It was also the only time “during the reign of the Code” (Russo 47) that the word appeared in this context, mostly because it was not in the original screenplay.

During postproduction, “Hawks frequently patched shots together that did not quite match or whose dialogue did not connect. Overlapping dialogue, from both on- and off-frame, eased the connection and erased any sense of discontinuity in either the film’s action or editing” (Miller). One cannot imagine the film without these qualities now; it is interesting that this was originally done to cover up what Hawks saw as flaws. Outside of the opening titles, “There is no musical score for the film” (IMDb). This lack of nondiegetic music makes it that much more significant when Grant and Hepburn sing “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love, Baby” to calm Baby.
The Film

Of all the Screwball Comedies, Bringing Up Baby has to be the screwiest. The greatest appeal of Bringing Up Baby is the performances of Grant and Hepburn. We first meet David Huxley involved in what is the center of his life—his profession. Hawks uses the classic film trick of a closeup of the sign to show that it is a museum (1). In the first scene, we also meet David’s dull, unemotional fiancée, Miss Swallow (3), her dryness signaling that she is not the right woman for David.

Susan Vance is introduced to both David and the viewer not a moment too soon (4). She is the exact opposite of Miss Swallow—Susan is the epitome of the female trickster of Shakespeare and Austen. As a comic figure, Susan has no regard for social faux pas, perhaps because she is already of the upper class, and therefore does not need to impress anyone in order to gain wealth or reputation. Susan has neither an apparent occupation nor obligations. She says and does what comes to her mind without considering the consequences and she is a source of disruption in David’s life.

Nearly every character in the film is upper class. Susan’s aunt is the stereotypical wealthy widow, who even has a financial advisor to help make decisions about her money—and more than one man wants her money. The lower class characters all fill stereotypes. The Irish groundskeeper (55) is always intoxicated—to the point that he claims that everyone tells him to stop drinking, and he is not surprised when he thinks he is imagining the leopard. The Sheriff is a typical, ignorant, bumpkin stereotype. He gets confused and deceived quite easily (1:22).

So much of the comic situations follow the Principle of Comic Timing and depend on coincidence. Of course Susan and David keep running into each other—the
viewer would not expect it any other way. The narrative brings David and Susan together through coincidences that work so perfectly that the viewer can only see it as fate. Of course David’s golf ball rolls to her area of the course, of course she gets in his car mistakenly (7), of course he slips on her olive (10), and of course the museum’s wealthiest potential donor is Susan’s Aunt (18). The viewer not only expects them to meet, but also looks forward to it.

The Principles of Comic Experience and Comic Sense work together to bring us the classic comic elements of deception and impersonation that are rampant in the film. The deception goes to such extremes that not even David and Susan can keep up with it. David does not even realize that his fictitious aliases are Mr. Bone (51) and Jerry The Nipper (1:23), a lack of understanding that leads to some amusing confusion.

The film not only focuses on the romantic relationship between Susan and David, but their relationships with the animals in their lives. From the start, Susan treats Baby like a pet, and she treats David in much the same way (25): “Man is woman’s ‘prey’.... there is a clear identification between women and the animal world, most explicit in Bringing Up Baby” (Mast “Comic Mind” 274). Eventually, David behaves like a pet—he imitates George as he digs in the garden (46). As the animals meet and warm up to each other, so too do our protagonists (1:07):

Against all the teachings of our science, we are entertained with the wondrous possibility that a leopard might find much to like—besides his supper—in a dog. The sight of Baby and George interrupts David and Susan’s wild chase like a divine vision of a paradise momentarily regained, in which, if the lion would lie down with lamb, so the leopard with the terrier (DiBattista 197).

In the end, we learn that the animals are smarter than the people. Susan and David think themselves clever for deceiving everyone—except for when two leopards are present and
confuse everyone (1:36). DiBattista describes *Bringing Up Baby* as a Darwinian comedy, meaning that it ultimately goes down to sexual selection and mating rituals, and she offers a valid point when she says:

No one to my knowledge has openly wondered why David, who has no profession in Hagar Wilde’s story on which the film is based, should be given the character (such as Hollywood understands it to be) of a paleontologist. Nor has much thought been given to how the entire menagerie of human and animal types presented in the film relates to that monitory skeleton of the brontosaurus who visually dominates the film’s beginning and its end (176).

Concurrently, the neck of the Brontosaurus skeleton and its missing bone serve both as phallic symbols and a reminder of an animal that failed to attain Darwin’s survival of the fittest. Regarding Susan, DiBattista explains:

We thus cannot fully appreciate, much less endorse, Susan Vance’s license as a fast-talking dame who says and acts on any zany idea that pops into her head (many of them of questionable legality) unless we understand her comic and social role as a Mendelian renegade. Her surname immediately alerts us to her vanguard status, encouraging us to regard her not as a prime specimen of her class but as a singular human type. Indeed, as played by Katharine Hepburn, Susan Vance is a particularly fine (and refined) if madcap incarnation of the “Hawksian woman.” The Hawksian woman was a female type first identified by Naomi Wise. As Wise described and commended her, the Hawksian woman was a radical screen presence who existed apart or beyond the more stolid conventions of movie womanhood (180).

Just like in *It Happened One Night*, moonlight reveals a moment of truth (1:09). As David and Susan get emotionally closer, their physical proximity seems to get closer as well (1:16).

**Reception**

By the time of its release, the film had gone well over budget, something that the studio executives at RKO had been warning Hawks about all along (Mast “Bringing Up Baby” 14), and upon its release, the film was a commercial failure, “because it went over
budget [$1,200,000] and grossed only $715,000 in the U.S. and another $394,000 in the rapidly declining overseas market” (Miller). Beyond the approaching war, Sherrod explains the reason for the poor reception, “Despite a delightfully absurd plot, the characters in *Bringing Up Baby* were intellectuals and the dialogue was considered too fanciful for mainstream audiences at the time” (Sherrod), most of which would have been working class looking to comedy as a form of escapism. The film eventually did make a small profit, but not enough to satisfy the studio.

While the reviews were mixed, the critical reaction was not as negative as many scholars would lead one to believe. Norbert Lusk of the *Los Angeles Times* hated the film, stating that it was the wrong type of film for Hepburn and that:

Dissatisfaction and displeasure are voiced by patrons, many of whom are susceptible only to entertainment and are without critical bias. The consensus of audience opinion is that the picture is too outrageous a parody on good taste and common sense. It may clean up in neighborhood houses.

*Film Weekly* found the film to be passable, but criticized it, “The opening is a little off-key and several comic sequences have only the elementary appeal of slapstick”. Those were the only negative contemporary reviews that I was able to find. Note how both use comic terms, particularly “outrageous”, “slapstick”, and “parody”. Also notice how the reviewer for film weekly finds physical comedy, “slapstick” in particular, to be only “elementary”. Unlike these two reviewers, reviewers from four major publications gave the film positive reviews. Another reviewer for *The Los Angeles Times* incorrectly predicted, “in the end *Bringing Up Baby* will probably be a decisive hit”. Mae Tinee of the *Chicago Daily Tribune* said, “It’s been a long time since we’ve had a real feature length slapstick comedy. As a quite amusing specimen of this class, I welcome *Bringing Up Baby*”. *Variety* praised the performances of Hepburn and Grant and called it “definite
box office”. We see critics praising the inclusion of slapstick as they did with *Duck Soup* (1933), and the performers as they did with *It Happened One Night* (1934).

After the success of later Hepburn-Grant projects like *Holiday* (1938) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *Bringing Up Baby* found a renewed interest among film reviewers and audiences. In the 1980s, philosopher Stanley Cavell brought new scholarly attention to the film, “*Bringing Up Baby* straddles originality and formula as blithely, cheerfully, and rewardingly as any Hollywood studio film ever did. It is truly extraordinary” (Mast “Bringing Up Baby” 3), describing the decision that every artist makes to follow formula or to depart from it that I have already mentioned. Most recent reviews praise the rapid pace of the film. In 1997, Jeffrey M. Anderson of *Combustible Celluloid* said, “It’s a brilliant movie, and one of the greatest and most intense ever made”—using the term “intense” to describe the film’s use of the Principle of Comic Logic. Diane Wild of *DVD Verdict* described the Screwball Comedy’s collaborative nature, calling it “Magic…a sublime convergence of greatness”. Jon Danzinger of *Digitally Obsessed* added, “It really is one of the all-time great screen comedies, and in almost seventy years it’s lost none of its fun, charm, wit or spirit”, speaking of its longevity. Joshua Rothkopf of *Timeout New York Magazine* agreed with Danzinger, saying, “A comedy that never should have worked is now all but immortal”.

**Legacy**

The low profits from the film resulted in RKO ‘punishing’ both Hawks and Hepburn, “This movie did so badly at the box office that Howard Hawks was fired from his next production at RKO and Katharine Hepburn was forced to buy out her contract”
Hawks himself remarked that, “I think the picture had a great fault and I learned an awful lot from it. There were no normal people in it. Everyone you met was a screwball” (Henderson 12-13), supporting the statement in Chapter I that every comedy needs a straightman—a foil for the comic characters. Because of this film and other failures from around the same era, Hepburn became known as “box-office poison” (Miller), a title that she would not lose until later success with *Holiday* (1938) and *The Philadelphia Story* (1940).

In subsequent decades, *Bringing Up Baby* inspired dozens of television series and motion pictures, most notably Peter Bogdanovich’s *What’s Up, Doc?* (1972). Bogdanovich had several interviews with Hawks before and after making his film, and credited *Bringing Up Baby* for giving him the idea for *What’s Up, Doc?*. Hawks himself called his own *Man’s Favorite Sport* (1964) a remake of *Bringing Up Baby* (Miller):

> Like *Casablanca* (1942), *Bringing Up Baby* is a film that became a classic thanks to television airings starting in the ‘50s and revival screenings during the height of repertory cinema in the ‘60s. It is now regarded as one of the greatest comedies of Hollywood’s golden age and has influenced the work of such contemporary directors as Peter Bogdanovich, Jonathan Demme and the Coen Brothers (Nixon). The rapid, zany style of *Bringing Up Baby* influenced later Screwball comedies, including *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Frank Capra 1944) and *The Odd Couple* (Gene Saks 1968). In 2006, *Premiere Magazine* named it one of The 50 Greatest Comedies of All Time and *Entertainment Weekly* named it the 24th Greatest Film Of All Time (IMDb).

The genre of comedy and the subgenre of the Screwball Comedy would not be the same without *Bringing Up Baby*. Like *It Happened One Night*, it is a treat to witness two of the last century’s most acclaimed performers lose all inhibition and act goofy. Notice, from *It Happened One Night* to this film, how reviewers look for chemistry between the
romantic leads—revealing a critical convention in the analyses of romantic comedies that first appears in the critical language of the mid-1930s. The critics describe the Screwball comedy of the film as “outrageous”, “parody”, “slapstick”, “brilliant”, “intense”, “fun”, “charm”, “wit”, “spirit”, and “magic”. They also praise the way it combines the verbal banter with slapstick, much as they did for *Duck Soup*. It is with this comic synergy and carefree spirit of its characters that the film succeeds.
Case Study #5 *Sullivan’s Travels* (Preston Sturges 1942)

“I want this picture to be a commentary on modern conditions. Stark realism. The problems that confront the average man…. With a little sex in it”

( Joel McCrea, as John L. Sullivan)

**Context**

At the time of *Sullivan’s Travels*, many filmmakers had dabbled in making socially conscious films. Known collectively as The Popular Front, most of these filmmakers focused on the serious nature of social issues. Two notable examples of Popular Front works are James Agee and Walker Evan’s book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Jean Renoir’s film, *Rules of the Game* (1939) (Moran 107). The author’s name seen on the airplane in the final scene, “Sinclair Beckstein” is “an amalgamation of the names of authors Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, and John Steinbeck” (TCM), three contemporary Popular Front authors.

*Sullivan’s Travels* is ironic. In it, Sturges criticizes the methods and motivations of the Popular Front, yet at the same time, he somehow seems to make a social critique in the style of the Popular Front, “Self-reflexive from beginning to end, *Sullivan’s Travels* is a film about the effort of a director of escapist comedies to make a Popular Front film” (Moran 106). At the time of its release at the end of the Great Depression and the start of World War II, the film was almost dated:

By the time *Sullivan’s Travels* was released in January 1942, the Depression was over, the United States was at war, and the 1930s had come to an end. The hobo jungle and prison farm that take over Sturges’ movie marks it as the last 1930s social protest film. But *Sullivan’s Travels* is more usually understood as the last successful screwball comedy, an affirmation of 1930s Hollywood’s most distinctive genre (Moran 111).

Unlike many social protest films, Sturges did not need to exaggerate the current situation:
The word hobo is of obscure origin. It is first sighted around 1890, when it meant an out-of-work man on the move in search of any sort of odd job. The first wave of hoboes appeared after the Civil War, when jobless veterans were dumped on a country and an economy at whose center was the railroad. The second wave was after World War I, again mostly veterans, faced with depression and Dust Bowl (Carnes 217).

Again remember how easily the genre of comedy can approach sensitive social issues, poverty and homelessness included.

Another of Sturges’ significant statements in the film involves race, as the only real sympathetic characters are members of the all Black congregation: The Negro spiritual was the one safe form in 1930s film in which black Americans could be depicted in a noncomic, nondenigrading mode. Sturges goes much further... the film allows the black preacher to condescend to whites by labeling prisoners who have fallen off the social ladder as “equal in the sight of God”... No wonder the NAACP praised the films (Moran 124).

The inclusion of these sympathetic Black characters marked one of the few and earliest occasions that Black characters existed in a comedy film for a purpose other than being the butt of a joke.

Preston Sturges

Like Chaplin before him, scholars have called Sturges (1898-1959) an auteur (Moran 114). He began his film career as a writer, later transitioning to the role of director. Because of his screenwriting background, his films contain a great deal of “verbal wit”, which he combines “with great visual slapstick and... a sharp sense of editing and narrative construction” (Steffen). One of the director’s trademarks is that his films frequently feature “moneyless heroines” (DiBattista 126), as exemplified by Veronica Lake’s character in Sullivan’s Travels. Within recent years, more critical
attention has returned to Sturges’ works, which had been mostly overlooked for decades.

For *Sullivan’s Travels*:

Sturges is aided greatly by the work of cinematographer John Seitz, one of Hollywood’s finest cameramen of the day…. remembered for films with noirish elements such as Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)….he displays his talent for shooting both types of films, as suggested by the contrast between the bright world of Hollywood and the low-key, chiaroscuro lighting of the chain gang sequences (Steffen).

This film features some of the best cinematography of the Screwball Comedy subgenre.

**Production**

Sturges was first inspired to write the story for *Sullivan’s Travels* after reading the stories of actor John Garfield who shared his experiences “living the life of a hobo, riding freight trains and hitchhiking his way cross-country for a short period in the 1930s” (IMDb). From the start, Sturges wanted Joel McCrea to star in his film, but as was the case with the other two Screwballs of the 1930s that I have already profiled in this study, Veronica Lake was not Sturges’ first choice for the female lead. He had originally wanted Barbara Stanwyck with whom he had worked on *The Lady Eve* the previous year (Steffen). He chose Lake when he discovered her in another film:

Sturges wanted Lake for the part of the waiflike actress after seeing her in Paramount’s *I Wanted Wings* (1941), about three air force recruits. What Lake didn’t tell Sturges at first was that she would be six months pregnant when shooting began. Lake’s condition forced Sturges to rewrite some scenes, and he ordered costume designer Edith Head to create for Lake gowns and a floppy hobo costume that wouldn’t show her condition (Carnes 217).

Many critics now feel that Lake’s performance in *Sullivan’s Travels* is her “best performance and one of the few instances where she was able to overcome the burden of her glamorous image” (Steffen). Notice that Sturges chose to hire an actress that was not
recognized by audiences as a comic performer—adding to the ambiguity that audiences felt when the film premiered and they could not understand if it was a comedy or a tragedy.

Before its release, the threat of censorship appeared, not because of innuendo as in most other pictures, but because “the US Office of Censorship [was] concerned that the film might be used as propaganda by the enemy during World War II” (Steffen). The Office “asked Paramount to cut some of the harsher scenes; the studio refused, and as a result the film was not allowed to be exported during the war” (Steffen). This decision, of course, eliminated any international audience that the film might have gained, but it is difficult to say how well such a distinctly American film could have done in the international market.

**The Film**

With its title’s reference to Jonathan Swift’s famous satire, *Sullivan’s Travels* is very much Sullivan’s film, as it presents exactly what the character sets out to discover. It presents a blend of comedy, pathos, and inspiration that together reinforce and paradoxically undermine the filmmaker’s argument. The film contains several exquisite visual gags, such as the chase scene with the trailer following Sullivan over fields and dirt roads (13), the changing expressions of the portrait in the widow’s house (21), and several characters falling into the pool (36)—a gag which channels the drowning gag in *City Lights* (1931). The verbal humor appears in most of the encounters with Sullivan’s associates (12) and with the Girl’s dry, sarcastic comments.

Much of the film focuses on Sullivan and the Girl’s development as a couple. The opening title features a picture of them together (0) and the stars’ names together.
Sullivan even explains her presence to the police, “There’s always a girl in the picture” (31). Their relationship begins with the Girl in the dominant position, as she pays for his food (25), though he begins by deceiving her. Once again, the strong female character is in control of the situation in a comedy. The two share a common motif in that no matter how Sullivan tries to get away he “always ends up back in Hollywood” (32) and she always ends up “back where [she] started” (34). The Girl not only provides support for Sullivan on his expedition, but also acts as a counterbalance when he becomes too profound (50). We gradually see them get closer both literally and emotionally until it culminates in a shot of the Girl and Sullivan walking along the lake while holding hands (56).

Film scholar Gerald Mast credits the opening scene with setting the mood for the entire picture, “The comic dialogue of this opening scene is essential to the effect of the rest of the film, which gets precariously close to the edge of bathos in its later sequences” (“Comic Mind” 10). Much like the opening to City Lights (1931), the viewer understands it as a comedy from the start. Scholars Kathleen Moran and Michael Rogin claim that Sullivan’s Travels “Parodies the road movie like It Happened One Night” (118), but unlike the earlier film, Sullivan cannot seem to ever go anywhere but back to Hollywood.

The film is not afraid to acknowledge the Great Depression. From Sullivan’s first discussion with the studio heads through the rest of the film, we see a real conflict between his wish to bring attention to the suffering around him and their wish to distract audiences by making escapist pictures (2-7). Only in the end does Sullivan realize that perhaps the studio heads may have the right idea (1:29).
Like *City Lights* (1931) before it, *Sullivan’s Travels* juxtaposes lower and upper class characters and conventions so well. In a film so centered on class difference, it is clear from the start (6) that Sullivan really has no clue about poverty, to the point that his butler makes a great statement: the definition of poverty comes from people who are not poor (9). Sullivan’s naivety is apparent when he can barely jump onto the train (39) and later when he tries to have an intellectual discussion with a couple of tramps aboard the train (40). A critique of the justice system argues that there is a bias against poor defendants (1:12). Consider how the Mister at the labor camp and the court Bailiff show a clear negative attitude toward the underprivileged, as they treat each other civilly yet treat Sullivan poorly. When we enter the world of the upper class, the Girl’s (and the viewer’s) introduction to Sullivan’s mansion is a wide shot that contrasts the small human figures with the large structure (32). The setting is important for characterization, as the Girl defines wealth and status by whether or not one has a pool (33). One of the most remarkable transitions in the film that juxtaposes rich and poor so articulately occurs when the “land yacht” dissolves to a hobo camp (51), moving from one extreme to another. The labor camp shows us a direct contrast of leisure and labor when the prisoners dig ditches as the Mister lounges in a boat (1:14).

While the comedy in the film is very fast and very verbal, the pathos comes from sequences with little to no dialogue. For Sullivan’s third attempt to experience poverty, an entire seven-minute sequence (51-57) of him and the Girl going to the Salvation Army (as indicated by the band), showering, eating, listening to a revival, and sleeping, happens only to music. Most of the sequence is told through long shots and dollies of the crowds of tramps and closeups on the Girl and Sullivan. Likewise, when the Girl learns that
Sullivan is still alive (1:26), most of the ensuing action is delivered through the changing tempos and styles of music.

Unlike many comedies, *Sullivan’s Travels* is a story of change. He begins by impersonating a hobo, but eventually becomes trapped in the lower class world that he was trying to discover, “Sullivan has finally become what he was pretending to be” (Moran 121). One interesting quality of the film is the presence of Sullivan’s two butlers. Though not quite upper class themselves, they certainly do not understand how the lower classes function, as is evident by their phone calls to the train depot (37). Historian Mark C. Carnes describes the prison camp, “When the plot requires that Sullivan end up in a southern chain gang, he knows what Hell is like” (216). Unlike the ancient heroes in the Greek and Roman epics who nobly travel to the underworld and back, as a comic hero, Sullivan does so unwillingly—as a victim.

The film also presents interesting points about race. For the upper class, the Black chef is obviously there to cater to the needs of the White studio workers and then acts as the object of comedy when he gets tossed around in the chase scene (15). However, in several scenes, we see poor Blacks and poor Whites eating, sleeping, washing, and attending revival meetings together, and the Black prisoners at the labor camp work with the White prisoners. These scenes argue that disempowerment is more a matter of class than of race. As I stated above, the most overt statement about race in the film is the fact that it is the all-Black church that invites the prisoners to their “picture show” (1:18). The ensuing cartoon results in everyone present, Black and White, rich and poor, laughing together (1:23)—a sequence arguing that social class is the only real separator among people, and that comedy can overcome even that. Sturge’s film shows
clear social consciousness, and his socially unacceptable arguments succeed because of comedy’s unique ability to explore taboo.

Probably the largest theme of Sullivan’s Travels, and one of reasons why it makes such a worthwhile addition to this study, is its exploration of the amount of humor found in everyday life, and of film’s ability to educate. The film opens with a dedication to the people who make us laugh (1). Sullivan argues that film is a “sociological and artistic medium” (4) and “the greatest educational medium the world has ever known” (29). Sullivan’s trip to the cinema with his first employer juxtaposes tragedy with comedy (19). Clearly, the highlight of the prisoners’ lives at the labor camp is a trip to the “picture show” (1:15). Sturges shows the magic of cinema as the parishioners rise to dim the lights and wind up the projector, and the organ begins to play (1:21). Sullivan truly understands comedy when he laughs (1:23) and realizes what he states at the end of the film, “there’s a lot to be said for making people laugh… did you know that’s all some people have? It isn’t much… but it’s better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan” (1:29). Sullivan goes from producer to consumer:

Sully was an involuntary audience member in his earlier genre travels, watching with the widow a movie we do not see…. now he is happy to be part of it. In this one painful moment, Sullivan’s Travels finds the Archimedian point it has been structured to deny. Sturges has closed the gap between film and the world by invoking our need, as mass audience (Moran 125-6).

The film ends with a fitting montage tribute to laughter.

**Reception**

Film reviewers all over the United States praised Sturges and his film. Many reviewers compared his style to many filmmakers from Capra to Welles (Moran 127-8). However,
the film did not do as well commercially as the studio had hoped, “Due to confusion over the varying, inconsistent moods within the film, the marketing campaign decided to focus on Veronica Lake’s peekaboo hairdo instead, with the tagline: “VERONICA LAKE’s ON THE TAKE” (Dirks). Here we see how the manner in which comedy borrows the conventions of other genres is not only confusing to reviewers, but to the studio producing the comedy film as well. Variety liked the film, stating, “Sullivan’s Travels is one of the screen’s more ‘significant’ films. It is the best social comment made upon Hollywood since A Star Is Born. And that, we quietly suspect, is exactly what Mr. Sturges meant it to be”. About Sturges, Bosley Crowther of the New York Times, said “Preston Sturges need make no excuses for the dominance of comedy on the screen, since he has done more than any one over the last two years to give brightness and bounce and authority to this general type of fare”. Notice how these critics address its explorations of the nature of Hollywood and of comedy, yet ignore his explorations of class struggle.

The National Board of Review named it one of the Top Ten Films of 1942. However, it was not nominated for any Academy Awards (Dirks). I cannot find any explanation for why the Academy did not recognize the picture, but perhaps its left-leaning themes and criticism of America were too controversial for a nation at war.

Today, many film historians consider the film Sturges’ greatest achievement. Although it is a comedy, many say that it is one of the most accurate depictions of the plight of the homeless during the Great Depression—a fact that contemporary critics avoided mentioning. Once again, a Screwball Comedy represents a collaborative effort and the reviewers acknowledge that. As director and writer, Sturges’ talents receive the most praise. In 2001, Glenn Erickson of DVD Savant said “Preston Sturges at his best is
nothing short of amazing”, noting its great dialogue as well as Sturges great direction. Jeff Ulmer of *Digitally Obsessed* echoed Erickson, when he called Sturges “a genius both as a director and as a writer”. Todd McCarthy of *Criterion* remarked on Sturges’ ability to combine comedy and tragedy, calling the film “both terribly funny and deeply moving”—a statement reminiscent of reviews of *City Lights* (1931). Derek M. Germano of *The Cinema Laser* compared Sturges to the title character when he said, “Sturges achieves the goal that he sets up for his fictional director in the film”. Terry Coll of *DVD Verdict* added “you can’t dislike Sullivan because he’s so well intentioned, if a little naïve. He truly wants to make his work meaningful”, much as we can infer Sturges had wanted. Peter Bradshaw of *The Guardian* added that the film succeeds as “a distillation of pure happiness”. Like the contemporary reviewers, John J. Puccio of *Movie Metropolis* dubbed it “the finest film about filmmaking ever made,” commenting on its accurate depiction of the Hollywood mindset. Speaking to its longevity and to its exploration of the value and purpose of comedy, Angie Errigo of *Empire Magazine* said, “Sullivan’s Travels is still as brilliant and funny today as it was back in the early ‘40s,” adding “Few comedies are as smart as this. Anyone with a taste for laughter, even those with the lowest of brows, should forever find the consolation, vindication and affirmation of comedy’s merit”. In 2009, Ed Howard of *Seul Le Cinema* added that the film is “an ode to comedy, a love letter to Charlie Chaplin and all the other great comic performers who have graced the screen”. Jeffrey M. Anderson of *Combustible Celluloid* wrote about the film’s history, “Forgotten for years along with its maker, writer/director Preston Sturges, *Sullivan’s Travels* has only recently enjoyed a comeback and induction into classic status”, adding “It actually describes the same conundrum that’s still going on in real life;
that comedy doesn’t get the same respect drama does”. No doubt the attentive reader has encountered this argument before.

I was unable to find any reviews that are wholly negative. The less than favorable reviews are few and far between, mostly reaching a consensus that the film has a high quality of presentation, but is not a comedy filled with laugh out loud moments. In 2001, Tim Purtell of *Time Magazine* said that it does not “match the sleek perfection of his *Lady Eve*”. Dan Harper of *Senses of Cinema* called the moral lesson of the film “somewhat transparent” today, although it was not so to a contemporary audience. Sam Adams of the *Philadelphia City Paper* called it “a rather forced (and, you can’t help but feel, self-serving) defense of comedy over drama, often seems too broad to support such a nuanced conclusion”. Matthew Kennedy of the *Bright Lights Film Journal* stated that the film is “not Sturges’ best movie. It lacks the commanding high spirits of *The Lady Eve* and *The Palm Beach Story*”. Chris Barsanti of *Filmcritic.com* echoed the opinions of many of the film’s detractors when he stated:

Would it be fair to say that, when all is said and done, Preston Sturges’ *Sullivan’s Travels* is just not as funny as its choir of supporters have made it out to be? It’s not dour by any stretch of the imagination, but it’s hardly laugh-filled enough to merit inclusion at #39 on the AFI’s list of 100 Funniest American Films.

He concludes by saying that it is “somewhat of a mystery as to why it has been so enshrined in the public memory” but then adds, “At the same time, to ask that a filmmaker like Sturges hit every note perfectly each time out of the gate is asking a bit much”. Notice how the unfavorable reviews judge the quality of the comedy on the basis of how many laughs it elicited, in the same way that venue managers would judge quality Vaudeville acts.
Legacy

In historian Mark C. Carnes’ book, *Past Imperfect*, writer Gore Vidal describes his first experience with *Sullivan’s Travels*:

The Japanese have already attacked Pearl Harbor. I know that by the time I am seventeen I shall be in the army. Meanwhile, I sit in the cold gymnasium and watch *Sullivan’s Travels*. I don’t much like it. The director/writer, Preston Sturges, keeps sliding from farce into grim realism—well, stern pathos—and I am having a hard time keeping up with him (216).

From Vidal’s account, it sounds as though the difficulties of World War II faced by audiences at the time of the film’s release overshadowed the domestic problems that Sturges’ film highlights. Vidal describes his experience seeing hoards of homeless in his life and how well Sturges captured them “For more than half a century their images keep coming back to me—and always, curiously enough, in black and white—even those scenes recalled from life” (219). Universal rereleased *Sullivan’s Travels* in 1983 (Mirisch 364), most likely due to the popularity of reviving classic films at that time. In 2000, Joel and Ethan Coen released a film titled *O Brother, Where Art Thou*, an homage to the title of the film that Sullivan had wished to make.

Of the three major themes that Sturges addresses in *Sullivan’s Travels*, the critics speak about his exploration of the Hollywood system and of comedy much more so than his exploration of class. As we see in the critical trend established in the previous case studies, the reviewers do not acknowledge the social message of the film until decades later. Reinforcing the sense of the sound film as the medium of comic director and not comic performer, the critics focus on Sturges and his talents in their reviews and praise his writing, direction, and the “authority” with which he handles them. As with Chaplin, they compliment his ability to juxtapose comedy and tragedy—which appears to be
something that reviewers really appreciate with comedy films. As for describing the
comedy in *Sullivan's Travels*, reviewers use the terms “brightness”, “bounce”,
“happiness”, “funny”, “moving”, “brilliant”, “smart”, “spirit”, and “laughter” when
describing it. The terms that they use with negative connotations include “low brow” and
“forced”. As with the other case studies, the narrative/gag balance causes a lot of
difficulty for reviewers. The same critics that complained about a perceived lack of
narrative in *City Lights* (1931) and *Duck Soup* (1933), complained that there were not
enough gags in *Sullivan’s Travels*—sometimes the balance tips the other way.
Case Study #6: *The Ladykillers* (Alexander Mackendrick 1955)

“No really good plan involves Mrs. Wilberforce”
(Alec Guinness, as Professor Marcus)

*Context*

The first five films profiled in this study are all American productions, not because of any bias against non-American productions, but rather because American pictures dominated the motion picture market of the English-speaking world for most of the Twentieth Century. In order to fully understand the ability of British comedies to succeed globally in the 1950s, one must first understand the situation in the United States at the time.

Film historian Robert Sklar states that American film comedy of the 1950s, in particular, “has been generally neglected in critical writing” (328-329). There are four somewhat interrelated reasons for this situation. First, with the American film industry during much of the 1950s living in fear of the Communism investigations by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee, comedy, as the most subversive of all film genres and the most critical of the status quo, stood the most to lose. Second, when television became extremely popular in the 1950s, it welcomed tamer comedians such as Lucille Ball, Jackie Gleason, Red Skelton, Jack Benny, and Sid Caesar. Third, as a reaction to the popularity of television, film studios attempted to win back audiences with big-budget, widescreen epics, featuring grand, dramatic subjects. Of course, most comedy was not well suited to this sort of exhibition. Film historian David Cook states:
The big-budget widescreen comedy was represented by films like *How to Marry a Millionaire* (Jean Negulesco 1953), *The Long Long Trailer* (Vincente Minnelli 1954),…. and *A Hole in the Head* (Frank Capra 1959). The strong point of film comedies like these was less verbal or visual wit than excellent production values (430).

Comedies like these did not do very well with the critics, most likely because critics tried to compare them to big-budget widescreen dramas. The fourth reason that we do not see much pure comedy film in the 1950s is because so much of the comedy of the time appeared in the form of musical comedy. Unlike comedies with musical interludes, like many of the Marx Brothers’ pictures, the musical numbers in a musical comedy are part of the action—in fact, they drive the narrative. While the Marx Brothers could perform a song as a mere aside, the characters in a musical share their thoughts, feelings, motivations, plans, and reveal plot points through song within the scope of the narrative. Comic stars such as Gene Kelly, Danny Kaye, Bob Hope, and Bing Crosby featured most of their work in the form of musicals. Even most of the films of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis are arguably musical comedies. In the late 1950s, Jerry Lewis began a solo career and appeared in many non-musical comedies, however, as Cook writes, “Today he is regarded by the French as a major auteur, but his idiotic comic persona has not found much favor with American critics” (430). Lewis’ status with English language critics could be a symptom of the same bias that film reviewers and scholars seem to have against comedy film in general, but because I have not been able to find a critical consensus on Lewis, I have decided not to include a case study of one of his films. In his exploration of 1950s American film comedy, Cook goes on to mark the comedies of Judy Holliday “*Born Yesterday* [George Cukor 1950]; *The Marrying Kind* [George Cukor 1952]; *The Solid Gold Cadillac* [Richard Quine 1956]” (430) and the late 1950s pictures
with Rock Hudson and Doris Day, most notably “Pillow Talk (Michael Gordon 1958)” (431) as significant. These pictures however share more with the genre of romance than they do with true comedy. As I stated in Chapter II, the greatest American director of pure comedy film in the 1950s is Billy Wilder, whom I shall profile in the next case study. With American film focused elsewhere, other English language comedies could arise.

England’s Ealing Studios, under the direction of Michael Balcon, first excelled in the field of documentaries before Balcon realized that British comedies could carve their own niche in the international film market, when he:

assembled a skilled comedy team and began making films that reflected the changing attitudes of a war-weary public. The combined talents of screenwriters William Rose, T.E.B. Clarke and John Dighton along with skilled direction of Robert Hamer, Alexander Mackendrick and Charles Crichton resulted in an explosion of irreverent black comedies and social satires that would be celebrated for years to come with worldwide success (Vossler).

The most significant performer at Ealing studios was Alec Guinness (profiled later in this section), who starred in what are today considered Ealing’s greatest comedies, Kind Hearts and Coronets (Robert Hamer 1949), The Lavender Hill Mob (Charles Crichton 1951), The Man in the White Suit (Alexander Mackendrick 1951), and The Ladykillers (Mackendrick 1955). Although comedy was only “one-fifth of the studio’s product during this period” (Johns), the comedies were “by far the most successful in the 1950s” (Landy 10). In her book British Genres, film scholar Marcia Landy adds “comedy was the only British genre that did consistently well at the box-office” (329). Cook calls the Ealing comedies “Among the most important British films of the post-war era” (488). Landy credits the distinct style of British humor to:
contradictions in the culture…. The pleasure of comedy is thus related to the subversion of the mechanisms of repression…. The Ealing comedies… at their best, are carnivalesque. They focus on dominant social institutions—the public school, the world of commerce and industry, political parties—and turn them on their head…. The existence of rigid and hierarchical social forms lends itself to a carnival atmosphere, for there would be no need to turn the world upside down if it were not so insistently ordered and controlled (333-334).

Today, when film historians write about British film comedies of the 1950s, most likely they are speaking of the Ealing comedies, which set the tone for later British comedies.

**Alec Guinness**

Sir Alec Guinness (1914-2000) was one of the Twentieth Century’s most versatile actors. He began his career on stage and appeared in dozens of plays throughout England, transitioning to mainstream film in the 1940s, although he never left the theatre. In 1946, Guinness first worked with director David Lean on *Great Expectations*, resulting in a nearly 40 year collaboration with director Lean in such notable films as *Oliver Twist* (1948), *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), and *A Passage To India* (1984). Later in his career, his portrayal of Jedi Master Obi Wan Kenobi in George Lucas’ *Star Wars* saga brought him millions of more fans from younger generations. Guinness brought experience to the cast of *Star Wars* as the most respected actor involved in the production at the time. Even with his success in other genres, Guinness first became “an international star” (Cook 488) because of the Ealing comedies. Guinness soon became known as a virtual chameleon after “His tour-de-force performance as all eight members of an aristocratic family in *Kind Hearts and Coronets*” (Ansen). *Time Magazine* described him as “the man of a thousand faces” and it was his versatility that Guinness himself most enjoyed about acting, saying “One
hates… to let oneself get into a rut” (Ansen). Throughout his career, Guinness demonstrated that an actor did not need to specialize in comedy or drama in order to achieve success—indeed, his comic knack for timing complemented his dramatic sense of character study.

**The Production**

Director Alexander Mackendrick (1912-1993) was an unlikely master of British comedy, as he was American-born (Johns). When writing about Mackendrick, filmmaker Martin Scorsese says, “he did some of the best work in the middle of what is now remembered as the Golden Age of British film comedy” (Mackendrick). He came to *The Ladykillers* after directing an earlier Ealing comedy *The Man in the White Suit* (1951). According to Michael Balcon, the original idea for *The Ladykillers* came to screenwriter William Rose in a dream (Stafford). Like director Mackendrick, Rose—who captured British humor and sensibilities so eloquently—was an American (Stafford).

The filmmakers assembled a fine cast. From the start, Mackendrick wanted Katie Johnson for the role of Mrs. Wilberforce, but the studio initially rejected her because they felt she was too old for the rigors of production. Ironically, Johnson received the role when the younger actress they had hired passed away before filming began (IMDb). This film was Johnson’s biggest hit, as well as her penultimate performance (IMDb), for she passed away a couple years later.

Although critics and scholars today consider the performance of Professor Marcus as one of his best, Guinness originally felt that Alastair Sim should have received the part (IMDb). Guinness later admitted that he based his performance on “theatre critic Kenneth Tynan” (IMDb). Michael Balcon once said that Guinness’ costar, Peter Sellers
“was much the same… and it is interesting that they greatly admired one another”. Both men were insecure about their performances, yet they inspired each other (Stafford). Sellers would later go on to display the same caliber of versatility that Guinness possessed, although he said “Not that I could hope to be as good as Guinness”. Both Sellers and costar Herbert Lom are best remembered today for their roles in the hugely successful Pink Panther series. Because of the popularity of the aforementioned series, modern audiences find it strange to see Sellers with shifty eyes, a Cockney (instead of French) accent, and no mustache, and to see Lom attempting to kill someone other than Sellers. In addition to playing Harry, Sellers also supplied the voices of the parrots (IMDb). Jeff Stafford of Turner Classic Movies says, “Other cast members who would go on to greater fame and fortune after The Ladykillers were Kenneth Connor and Frankie Howard, who appeared in several popular Carry On comedies”.

The Film

The first character that the filmmakers introduce to us is Mrs. Wilberforce, simply referring to her in the opening titles as “The Old Lady” (1). The first sequence of her traveling to the police station reveals so much of her character. The viewer’s first sight of her is in an extremely wide aerial shot, as a tiny figure emerging from a house that seems to be so out of place surrounded by train tracks. We can tell that her visit to the police station is a common occurrence, as they humor her (3). At the same time, we learn of her sense of duty, which becomes so important later in the film, as she felt it was necessary to explain that her friend’s report of a flying saucer was simply a
misunderstanding. At the end of the sequence, we first see the gag of her always leaving her umbrella (4)—a running gag that demonstrates the Principle of Comic Logic.

Our first glimpse of Professor Marcus is a shadow that appears over Mrs. Wilberforce in the shop window (4), through her window (5), and finally at her front door (6), when Guinness slowly removes his hat to reveal his almost unrecognizable face. With disheveled hair, chronic dark circles, lipstick, and false teeth, Professor Marcus is at once charming and creepy, yet there is never a doubt that he truly is the “Master Brain” (17) of the operation. He shows his craftiness when he tries to manipulate the other four men in order to get them to betray each other (1:13) and right before Louie’s demise (1:25). His lunacy appears at this point, and he realizes that that “No really good plan involves Mrs. Wilberforce” (1:23).

Following the Principle of Comic Logic, the filmmakers include clever uses of music and sound effects—and also the same leitmotif musical formula utilized by Chaplin in *City Lights* (1931). Mrs. Wilberforce is always accompanied by some light, Classical melody that is reminiscent of a music box. The gang, on the other hand, is accompanied by sinister music that seems to creep in any time they speak of the robbery and when Professor Marcus scouts the train station (18). The music gets very intense anytime that the gang fears that Mrs. Wilberforce has discovered the robbery, only to be relieved when she has not (18). The same discovery motif plays when the gang returns to the house to discover that the trunk has arrived (40) and when Mrs. Wilberforce figures out the robbery (48) and confirms it through an eye match shot with Professor Marcus. The music is ironic when Professor Marcus knocks Louie off the scaffolding (1:26) as it is victorious—totally unassuming, just like Professor Marcus and the viewer—for no one
knows that he is about to meet his own demise. In other scenes, the diegetic music creates the humor, as when one of the parrots dances to the string quintet music (25) and when the gang joins the group of elderly women in singing some old standards (52). The following mock funeral procession (1:14) is both beautiful and satirical. The final confrontation between Louie and Professor Marcus is intriguing because the smoke screen and sound work to confuse the viewer as much as Louie is confused (1:25)—utilizing the Principle of Comic Timing.

Like the music, many of the sound effects follow the Principle of Comic Logic and work as comic motifs throughout the film. The sounds of trains constantly remind the viewer of the house’s proximity to the station—these sounds take on a greater meaning as the film proceeds, when the trains become the best way of disposing of bodies. The same cartoon-sounding drum effect is heard each time one of the deceased gang members is dropped onto a train (1:16, 1:18, 1:21, 1:23, 1:26), demonstrating a nostalgic Vaudeville style sound effect. In a similar way, the clunking sound of Mrs. Wilberforce’s hammer violently hitting the water pipe contrasts comically with her petite frame and delicate nature.

Most of the verbal gags work due to the Principle of Comic Sense, primarily as an act of misunderstanding. Usually a character misunderstands Mrs. Wilberforce—as when Professor Marcus believes that she has just told him that she has had four husbands, when she is really talking about parrots (8) or when Louie believes that she means Harry is on top of the cabinet, when it is really the parrot (20). One of the most amusing misunderstandings occurs when Mrs. Wilberforce tells the men that she “knows the truth” about them (15). They of course panic, but are relieved when she means that she
believes they are professional, not amateur, musicians (15). Still in the vein of Comic Sense, other verbal gags are a result of Mrs. Wilberforce being so oblivious and understated about everything, like when she tells them that last time the parrot got away the police and fire brigade took care of it (23) or when she tells Professor Marcus that the cab driver would not take her money because “he said he was going into some other business” (41)—the understated brand of humor is distinctly British. Mrs. Wilberforce is at the same time funny and almost pitifully British when she believes everything that the criminals tell her and then repeats their directions word for word to the police sergeant and tells him to “please BUZZ OFF!” (59). Some of the funniest lines of the film are said regarding Mrs. Wilberforce. For example, the exasperated street vendor complains to the police “You know her and you let her wander around loose?!” (39).

The film also contains many visual gags. Many of them serve to convey the characters. All of the pictures, and indeed, the entire house are crooked (7)—much like the activities that occur inside the house. Mrs. Wilberforce has perfect timing and places the kettle under the water tap just as it starts to pour (13)—indicating her familiarity with the house. Some of the best visual moments occur when she attempts to bring the men tea and they scramble to look as if they had been playing their instruments (14). The pursuit of Major Gordon is one of the best sequences, including One Round breaking the chair (22) and Major Courtenay ripping off the gutter (24). The gang’s first attempt to leave the house contains visual gag after visual gag. Mrs. Wilberforce keeps stepping on Professor Marcus’ scarf, but of course she is totally unaware of it (42), One Round’s cello case gets stuck in the door (43), the money spills everywhere (44), all five men try to get into the car at the same time (44), and the car repeatedly stops and goes as the men
inside debate (45)—all of the compounding visual gags in this sequence work due to the Principle of Comic Logic.

Several of the gags work as a synthesis between the visual and audio elements. We see this during the robbery when four criminals try to squeeze into one phone booth and all talk at once (34). A similar gag occurs when more and more old ladies keep arriving at Mrs. Wilberforce’s house (47). Both gags work along the same lines as the scene from the Marx Brothers’ *A Night At The Opera* (Sam Wood 1935), when more and more people keep showing up to Groucho’s cabin on the ship and attempt to fit inside.

Like so many comic heroes, Mrs. Wilberforce is unfailingly honest. When she suspects that the street vendor is being cruel to the horse (36), she charges in to remedy the situation. She is determined to do the right thing, even if that means having to “sew mailbags” (1:00) in prison. Of course, she still feels bad for the poor men when they tell her all their concocted sad stories (54). Mrs. Wilberforce is a pitiable figure as well as a comic figure, because although she makes us laugh, we cannot help but feel sorry for her. Visually, we see that she is lonely when the house is seen at night, with only one light on (10). Verbally, she brings up her solitude quite often, “I would just like to say how very happy I am that you are all here” (12) and she cannot help but interrupt them to wait on them (19). We learn that her husband has been gone for 29 years (1:20) and her only companions are the parrots. Demonstrating comedy’s frequent lack of resolution or transformation, the film ends exactly as it begins, with the police humoring Mrs. Wilberforce, and the viewer cheers for her when the sergeant suggests, “Why don’t you just keep the money?” At the end of the scene, she breaks the recurring umbrella gag—the same one that caused a panic during the robbery (34)—when she decides that she can
buy a dozen new umbrellas now. The final shot of the film—an extremely wide aerial shot of her house—is the same as the beginning, giving the viewer a sense that everything is once again as it should be, or as English poet Robert Browning once wrote, “All’s right with the world”.

**Reception**

As I stated above, *The Ladykillers* was a commercial hit across the world. Most critics’ reviews at the time were favorable, though many agree that the film has several flaws, of which the reader will soon learn. *Variety* liked the picture, especially the cast, “Cecil Parker strikes just the right note as a conman posing as an army officer. Herbert Lom broods gloomily as the most ruthless of the plotters, with Peter Sellers contrasting well…. Danny Green completes the quintet”, although the reviewer felt that “Guinness tends to overact the sinister leader”, apparently unaware of the Principle of Comic Logic, particularly the quality of exaggeration. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* called the film a success, also praising the cast, especially Johnson, “a performer who does one of the nicest bits of character acting you could ask for at any time”. He adds however that he felt it was “slightly labored. Perhaps it does have the air of an initially brilliant inspiration that has not worked out as easily as it seemed it should” and that “Michael Balcon’s production in color gives the whole thing a slightly garish look that is not wholly consistent with the humor”—once again supporting the argument that the praised technology of the time, particularly full-color presentations, did not always serve comedy film well. Andrew C. Mayer of *The Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television*, an American trade publication, was more critical of the film than his contemporaries, stating it “takes itself a little too seriously…. The film is therefore necessarily miscast because it
is badly conceived; but it does have its humorous moments”. He was especially critical of Guinness, “in his new role he is far less attractive; in all his previous performances he was, basically, a sympathetic character who occasionally got away with murder, or some lesser offense…. The lighthearted quality of Guinness’ early pictures is gone”, overlooking Guinness’ preference for playing a broad array of characters in his career. I believe that Mayer misses the distinctly British qualities of its humor—the understated manner and utterly serious delivery.

Recent reviews have been more favorable than the contemporary reviews. In 2002, Peter Bradshaw of The Guardian (London) called it “Subversive, hilarious and more English than Elgar, though written by the American expatriate William Rose, this is one of director Alexander Mackendrick’s masterpieces and a major jewel in the Ealing Studios canon”. Adrian Hennigan of the BBC described it as a “wonderfully macabre black comedy that really does improve with age”. Hennigan praised the cast saying, “Guinness delivers a typically mesmerising performance…. While Guinness’ teeth could have won a best supporting actor award in their own right, every performance shines through in smog-filled London”. It is important to note that these two domestic reviewers give the film more praise than the following American reviewers, who come from a different cultural background and experience of comedy. While James Kendrick of QNetwork called it “very much a stagy production”, he adds, “it is still one of the funniest and most wicked British comedies ever made”. As with any film, there are of course reviewers that find it flawed. Many such critics note how Mrs. Wilberforce seems almost too oblivious throughout the picture—not acknowledging how she follows the absentminded quality of the Principle of Comic Sense. Although he liked the film, Clark
Douglas of *DVD Verdict* did say, “The film’s premise is honestly a little bit thin”. Dennis Schwartz of *Ozus’ World Movie Reviews* agreed, adding that the film is “Always witty but never fully believable (it takes a lot of crafty writing and smart acting to make the flawed plot line so workable)”. The worst review comes from Christopher Null of *Filmcritic.com*, who gave it 3 out of 5 stars in a 2004 review. In the review, he said, “As black comedies go, *The Ladykillers* is neither terribly black nor terribly comedic”. It is important to note that, unlike many other British comedies, reviewers from both the United Kingdom and the United States seemed to agree on many aspects of the film.

**Legacy**

*The Ladykillers* was the last Ealing comedy (Mackendrick x), for in the following year, Ealing Studios was sold to the BBC and became the production house for many television series (Vossler). In 2004, Joel and Ethan Coen remade the picture to fit an American setting, but apparently, the inherently English qualities of the original situations and characters did not translate well into Americanized ones, for by the time of the remake’s premiere, so many film reviewers and scholars had written about how it was far inferior to the original that it failed at the box office (*Boxoffice Mojo*). In 2006, *Premiere Magazine* named *The Ladykillers* one of the 50 Greatest Comedies of All Time (IMDb). Around the time of Ealing Studios’ 100th Anniversary in 2002, James Christopher of *The London Times* called it “THE finest Ealing comedy…. The humour is so dark, steely, and polished that it slides through the drama like a knife”. Jeff Stafford of *Turner Classic Movies* stated that the film is:

> a delightful black comedy that has aged much better than some of the other Ealing entertainments from the same period. For one thing, the clever script by William
Rose (it was nominated for an Oscar) is so impeccably British, conjuring up a portrait of postwar London that is both idealized and satiric.

In the liner notes to the 2002 DVD of the film, filmmaker Rand Vossler describes the appeal of the comedy, “Mackendrick deftly handles Rose’s masterful script that derives most of its humor by contrasting the callousness of the thugs with the polite Victorian sensibilities of their landlady and her circle of friends”. The addition of The Ladykillers to the canon of British motion pictures added not only to the prestige of British comedy worldwide, but of British film in general.

Of all the terms that critics use in their analyses of The Ladykillers, the most prevalent are “English” and “British”—indicating that the Ealing comedies are a subgenre of its own with a distinct set of conventions. The reviewers describe this comic style as “brilliant”, “humorous”, “lighthearted”, “subversive”, “hilarious”, “black comedy”, “mesmerizing”, “funny”, “wicked”, and “witty”. As for the criticisms of this understated presentation of humor, reviewers use the terms “labored” and “too seriously”. Perhaps a quality of the criticism of this subgenre is the fact that the critics seem to praise the talents of the cast much more than the talents of the filmmakers. It seems as if the reviewers are more able to find merit in a comic performance rather than in the craft of creating a comedy as a whole.
Case Study #7: Some Like It Hot (Billy Wilder 1959)

“I tell you, it’s a whole different sex!” (Jack Lemmon, as Jerry)

Billy Wilder

When considering the comedy films of the 1950s United States, no filmmaker comes close to Billy Wilder (1906-2002) in the sense of the quantity and the quality of films:

The best postwar comedies of manners were Billy Wilder’s, who, with his coauthor, I.A.L. Diamond, preserved the tradition of comic collaboration between director and scenarist. Wilder’s comedy juxtaposed verbal wit with a sinister, morally disturbing environment: comedy and the corruption of post-war Berlin (A Foreign Affair, 1948), comedy and a psychotic has-been of the silent screen (Sunset Boulevard, 1950); and a concentration camp (Stalag 17, 1953); and the gangster underworld (Some Like It Hot, 1959); and the corruption of Madison Avenue (The Apartment, 1960). The films vary in their balance of comedy and moral seriousness (Mast “Comic Mind” 334).

As Wilder’s stature in the industry grew, he had the ability to attract some of the biggest stars of the time to perform in his pictures, most notably Marilyn Monroe, who worked with Wilder on this film as well as on The Seven Year Itch (1955). Film scholar Gerald Mast places Wilder in a long line of comedy masters, “Although Billy Wilder reached the peak of his comic career more than a decade after Lubitsch, Hawks, and Sturges, he was a product of the same tradition and represented the last of that line” (Mast “Comic Mind” 272). Indeed, if Wilder had made The Seven Year Itch and Some Like It Hot twenty years earlier, they would have fit quite well into the Screwball Comedy subgenre.

Wilder often explored many of the same themes in the majority of his films, particularly impersonation, “it is only in disguise that characters discover suppressed aspects of themselves or perceive their society from a point of view denied to someone
who always looks at it through the same, similarly attired eyes” (Cardullo 201) and “sensitive sexual issues” (Phillips 268), both certainly showcased best in *Some Like It Hot*. Mast concludes his statement on Wilder’s comedy with:

Wilder’s best film, certainly his funniest and probably his most effectively subtle at examining social and human values, is *Some Like It Hot*. The film is a rich, multilayered confection of parodies and ironies. It is a parody of gangster films... and it is a parody of sexual love and romance.... Beneath all the wonderful fun, *Some Like It Hot* implies that stereotypes hurt and kill.... Like Miss Monroe’s whole performance, the song [“Through With Love”] slices through the film’s wonderful silliness with its own kind of unspoken, unmistakable appeal. That slicing—as well as the clever and complex silliness—is the very best of Billy Wilder (“Comic Mind” 275-8).

One of Wilder’s greatest moments of praise came in 1995 when “the Library of Congress claimed the films of this native Austrian as part of the American film heritage” (Phillips 343). Today, Wilder is remembered as one of the greatest film directors of any genre.

*Jack Lemmon*

Once again, we see an example of a sound comedy being the medium of filmmaker and not comic performer, as Jack Lemmon (1925-2001) was not yet the popular and critically acclaimed actor that we think of today. Wilder discovered him through his Best Supporting Actor Academy Award win in 1956, for *Mister Roberts* (John Ford 1955), a comedy (Phillips 213). Since Wilder was able to cast, “Curtis and Monroe, UA no longer had an objection to his hiring Lemmon” (Phillips 214). Lemmon was delighted with the screenplay when he first received it, “[Wilder] ended up saying, ‘Which means you’re going to play 85 percent of it in drag. You want to do it?’ I said yes” (as quoted in *Time Magazine*). He believed that the reason the film succeeded was due to the writing of Wilder and Diamond, “I have to tell you in all candor, and not
because I was in it, I think it’s one of the best comedies I’ve ever seen” (Time). As the reader will see in a later section, Lemmon’s performance in this film is considered one of his greatest.

**Tony Curtis**

From its inception, Wilder wanted Curtis (1925-2010) to star in his film, “Today, critics and audiences alike remember Curtis primarily for his role in this film” (Los Angeles Times). His imitation of Cary Grant came as a result of working with Grant on “Operation Petticoat, in which he played a submarine officer serving under a captain played by Cary Grant” (Kehr). In the 1990s, *Some Like It Hot* was adapted into a stage musical and Curtis appeared in it as Osgood Fielding (Newsweek).

**Marilyn Monroe**

Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) was indisputably one of the biggest stars of the Twentieth Century. More than 50 years after her death, she is still a major cultural icon, “People are still intrigued by her” says Curtis” (Time). However, many film scholars and critics seem to overlook her great talent. Lemmon once said that she was “tremendously important” (Time) to the success of the picture. Curtis adds that during production:

> She was very distracted….Wilder just had her keep doing scenes over until she finally let everything go and it was perfect…. [She was] late for work, didn’t know her dialogue. She was giving everybody problems. They put a lot of pressure on her, and she just couldn’t handle it (Time).

When the actors and crew of *Some Like It Hot* would complain about Monroe’s tardiness, Wilder would say “My aunt in Tuscaloosa can be on time, but who the hell’s going to pay to see my aunt in Tuscaloosa?” (Time). The addition of Monroe to the cast made Some
Like It Hot the classic that it is today. Without her, the picture was simply an amusing story about two men disguised as women—her screen presence was the icing on the cake that made it something magical.

**Production**

The original idea of two male musicians joining an all girl band came from an earlier German film *Fanfarender Liebe* or *Fanfares of Love* (Phillips 357), but according to producer Walter Mirisch, “Billy used little material from the original film, except the idea of two men who disguise themselves as women so they can get jobs in an all-girl band. Nearly everything else was original” (Mirisch 100). Film scholar Bert Cardullo describes the writing, “the real triumph of the writing is that even when we do not laugh, the dialogue is funny” (194), bringing attention to the way in which a great comic writer can control the comic structure outside of individual verbal gags. Screenwriter I.A.L. Diamond and Wilder began writing the screenplay in 1958 (Phillips 215):

Wilder said that his relationship with Diamond was “like a marriage; We fought all the time”…When it passed, they would go back to work…. The last third of the script “is never finally formulated when we begin shooting,” Wilder noted. The point is, “If you give the bosses the final third in advance, they can fire you at any time” (Phillips 216).

At first, Wilder did not like the final line that Diamond wrote for Osgood, “Nobody’s perfect”, but fortunately they agreed to keep it in and it is now one of the most memorable closing lines in film history (Phillips 229).

While still working on the screenplay, Wilder began to think of the actors that he wished to appear in the film. Most of the actors that he cast as the gangsters were already well known as having appeared as gangsters in many other pictures (Mirisch 101). From
the beginning, Wilder wanted Tony Curtis to star in his film, but Monroe and Lemmon were not the people he envisioned in the particular roles. According to Curtis:

Wilder told me he wanted to get Frank Sinatra, and Mitzi Gaynor for the girl. Then about a week later Billy told me he wasn’t going to use Frank. He said Frank would only be trouble. And he said he wanted to get Marilyn instead of Mitzi, even though everybody was warning Billy that Marilyn was going to be a lot of trouble too. He didn’t care. He wanted Marilyn (Svetkey).

Monroe actually approached Wilder for the role, but was at first disgusted when she read the screenplay:

Monroe was sick to death of playing dim-witted blondes in pictures. After attending acting classes at the Actors Studio in New York in the fall of 1955, she was eager to play serious roles. She had already played a seedy saloon thrush in Bus Stop (1956) and proved that she could act. Hence she angrily threw the synopsis of Some Like It Hot on the floor, declaring that “she had played dumb characters before, but never this dumb! Monroe vehemently objected to playing a showgirl so stupid that she can’t tell that the two women she is becoming friends with are men in drag.” But, as Sarah Churchwell writes, “Marilyn’s character is not the only one in the film who falls for the comically bad disguise; according to the conventions of farce, all the characters are fooled by it.” Playwright Arthur Miller, whom Monroe had married in June 1956, encouraged her to accept the part. The scenario, he perceptively pointed out, was well structured and had the makings of a solid screenplay. Wilder was delighted (Phillips 213).

To understand how the studio and filmmakers valued Monroe, it is important for the reader to know that Monroe’s salary was three times that of Curtis’ or Lemmon’s and her contract entitled her to ten percent of the film’s profits” (Phillips 214). Some Like It Hot marked the beginning of the tragic final Chapter of Monroe’s life. While her antics during the production sound like the product of a selfish and careless person, they were the result of someone who was overwhelmed and struggling with addiction. Screenplay editor Alison Castle described the situation as:

her anxiety level only increased her dependency on barbiturates, which she was taking in alarming amounts… The following night Monroe “swallowed an overdose of sleeping pills, not for the first time, she attempted suicide”…. As
shooting wore on, Monroe’s takes were more and more “stretching into double digits,” and the patience of her costars was wearing thin (Phillips 221).

According to producer Mirisch, the production had to extend an additional eighteen days because of Monroe’s behavior and it caused the film’s budget to increase to $2.8 million, “which at the time was a very high price tag for a comedy” (Phillips 222). At one point during the production, Monroe suffered a miscarriage. One can assume it was due to her drug and alcohol abuse, but husband Arthur Miller would forever blame Wilder.

Wilder’s decision to shoot the film in black and white had two reasons behind it. First, he felt that it would be more fitting for the 1920s time period of the picture. Second, he felt that Curtis and Lemmon’s makeup would have appeared far too ridiculous in color. The only problem with this decision arose when Monroe’s contract “stipulated that all of her films were to be shot in full color” (Phillips 217). However, once Monroe saw the color tests with Curtis and Lemmon in drag, she agreed with Wilder that black and white would be more suitable. According to Curtis, “Wilder brought a female impersonator to the set to help us learn how to hold our arms so you can’t see the muscles” (Svetkey). Regarding their outfits, Lemmon explained:

The dress wasn’t difficult. What was difficult was the shoes. Tony and I were both getting shin splints. The minute Billy would say cut, we’d run and flop down, and the prop men would come running up with big bowls of ice and Sea Breeze, a soothing astringent. We’d just stick our feet in them (Time).

Curtis added, “We had to wear some tight underwear, so there wouldn’t be any unnecessary bulges….We had these pieces of equipment built in that brought us down to practically nothing” (Newsweek). In his book, Some Like It Wilder, Wilder biographer Gene D. Phillips describes the definitive test of Curtis and Lemmon’s female impersonations, “Lemmon, dragging a bewildered and somewhat shy Curtis behind him,
went traipsing to the ladies’ room in the studio lobby. They sat in front of the mirror in the lounge adjoining the women’s restroom” (216-217). Not a single woman noticed that they were actually men, which Wilder considered to be a sign that they had succeeded in their impersonations.

Wilder possessed a great knowledge of comedy, not only of the visual aspects of comedy like Joe and Jerry’s appearance, but of comic timing as well. In the original screenplay, for the scene after Joe’s night on the yacht and Jerry’s night on the dance floor, Jerry was not playing the maracas:

The gimmick with the maracas “allowed time to pass for the audience to laugh,” said Lemmon, and not lose the next straight line from Joe…. When Lemmon finally saw the movie with an audience, he realized that “the manner in which Wilder had paced the scene was brilliant.” Wilder had “sculpted and edited” the scene to make room for laughs (Phillips 228).

Wilder’s insight went beyond comic timing to an ability to predict audience reactions. Originally, Wilder wanted to title the film “Not Tonight, Josephine”. The title “Some Like It Hot” actually first belonged to a Bob Hope movie from 1939. When Wilder insisted that it would be the title of his film, the studio managed to buy the rights to the title (Mirisch 103).

Once filming was complete, two problems arose. First, The Legion of Decency objected to the film’s portrayal of cross-dressing as a legitimate lifestyle choice—that recurring trend of the Production Code and Legion of Decency wishing to censor the social transgressions inherent in comedy, as they did with *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), and *Sullivan’s Travels* (1942) decades earlier. However, “Shurlock [the representative from the studio] responded to [The Legion], defending his decision in favor of the movie by pointing out that men masquerading as women had
been a perennial source of humor throughout theater and film history” (Phillips 222).

The second problem was a failed preview. United Artists made the poor decision to screen the film at a local theater after a showing of *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (Richard Brooks 1958), a drama:

> The audience did not laugh because they apparently thought *Some Like It Hot* was a serious melodrama too. Jack Lemmon remembered that people were leaving in droves…. Wilder was devastated. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, an old friend of Wilder’s, attended the preview. He put “a consoling arm around Wilder’s shoulder” and murmured, “It’s alright, Billy; it happens to all of us.” (Phillips 224).

Mirisch figured that the running time was too long, and ordered Wilder to shorten the film by 10 minutes. However, Wilder decided to show the film in an unaltered version to another test audience, “This audience laughed uproariously—not because Wilder had made one small, token cut but because the audience had been alerted that the film was a comedy” (Phillips 224), which supports my argument from Chapter I that comedy works best when the viewer expects to encounter a comedy. Also, it demonstrates how the conventions of other genres influence critics’ and audiences’ perceptions of comedy. *Some Like It Hot* borrows the conventions of the crime and romance subgenres of drama, but only to a point—the dramatic conventions serve to drive the narrative, yet that is where their influence ends and the pure, gag-driven comedy takes over. When released, the film opened slowly, but through word-of-mouth it soon became a hit (Mirisch 103).

**The Film**

One of the reasons that *Some Like It Hot* works is the fact that it is set 30 years before it was made, which allows the conventions of the film to not appear dated to Twenty First Century audiences, as it already gave the appearance of being dated at its
release. The average viewer today is more likely to notice the cultural qualities of the 1920s rather than the late 1950s filmmaking conventions.

It is not mere coincidence that the narrative is set in the 1920s. Beyond the parallel atmospheres between both post-war decades of the 1920s and 1950s, the film is set when the women’s liberation movement really took off. In the 1920s, recently gaining the right to vote, women became more independent and self-expressive in terms of fashion, social interaction, and business dealings. In the decade of the 1950s out of which this film emerges, women achieved an entirely new level of autonomy. Women that began to hold jobs during World War II, realized that they had a potential outside of the home. Joe and Jerry’s experience of life as women symbolizes the women who began to adopt societal functions that traditionally belonged to men. Jerry realizes that marrying Osgood is his way out of poverty, whether Osgood is a man or not. Wilder explained the situation as “But even when he forgot himself, he was not consciously toying with the notion of engaging in a homosexual relationship. It was just the idea of being engaged to a millionaire that was very appealing” (Phillips 229). While Joe and Sugar share some time on the yacht, we see Jerry become more and more comfortable with the prospect of marrying someone wealthy—albeit a man (1:30). With Sugar, we see a woman who is content with the status quo of marrying up and of the traditional nurturing qualities that society expects from a woman. She does not try to seduce Joe on the yacht; in her mind, she is trying to help him (1:25). Audiences of both the 1920s and the 1950s, turned from anxieties surrounding war and finances to anxieties surrounding gender roles, making 1929 a socially-relatable setting for 1959 audiences.
As a necessary foil to the comedy of the picture, the Mobster sequences keep interrupting the comic-romantic mood that develops in Florida—or, quite possibly, the humor interrupts the narrative set down by the borrowed gangster conventions. Just as the gangsters interrupt Joe and Jerry’s lives, so too do they interrupt the viewer, even though the frame narrative is how Joe and Jerry are fleeing from the Mob—not Joe and Jerry’s romantic encounters in Florida. The gangster inserts appear as a struggle to return the narrative to a dramatic, and non-comic structure and although the gangster motifs seem to be just a plot device to move the story along, they are in fact what make the comic moments so successful. As a director that excelled in multiple genres, Wilder understood how comedy’s power is at its best when the narrative disassociates from the gags for a moment, and can include moments of sentimentality. When Sugar sings “Through With Love” (1:55), it is truly heart wrenching and causes the viewer to be completely off guard when “Josephine” kisses Sugar on stage (1:57).

With only one racial stereotype in the film, the Italian-American Mobsters, many class stereotypes dominate—all borrowed from 1930s gangster pictures. As two musicians, Jerry and Joe are poor and get work wherever they can. In a similar situation, the only way someone like Sugar can live happily is to marry a wealthy man—even one much older than she. Returning to the recurring theme of borrowed dramatic conventions, Wilder catches the viewer off guard by opening the film with an action sequence (2-8): the “Valentine’s Day Massacre” (19), which is quite violent for a comedy. The comedy does not really begin until we meet Joe and Jerry (7)—showing the traditional comic contrast between the straight characters and the comic heroes.
Monroe’s exquisite talent shows in her ability to genuinely portray Sugar, who claims to be ignorant (45). Ironically, after the three main characters go through the experience of a lifetime, Joe and Jerry living as women and Sugar finding (who she thinks is) the man of her dreams, they remain completely unchanged, sticking to the conventions of comedy. Joe and Jerry are still running form the Mob and Sugar has once again fallen for a saxophone player. All three main characters also have men after them: Jerry has Osgood, Joe has the lascivious bellhop, and Sugar has Joe (in disguise of course). This lack of character transformation—consider the same lack of closure in *City Lights* (1931) or *The Ladykillers* (1955)—is relatively unheard of in drama, in which the protagonist follows the heroic journey cycle and returns from the quest as a changed person.

Wilder makes excellent use of visual and verbal motifs. “Spats” is not only the character’s name, but also his most identifiable trait—demonstrating as Chaplin does in *City Lights* (1931), how the filmmaker can reveal the shot of his Spats to the viewer, just as Joe and Jerry see them—forming a parallel discovery through the Principle of Comic Timing. The verbal motifs often serve as gags, like the recurring reference to type-O blood—following the Principle of Comic Logic.

The most memorable running gag of this film, of course, is the female impersonation, but what many reviewers fail to recognize is Joe’s second layer of impersonation. As an excellent example of the Principle of Comic Experience, he not only is a man who impersonates a woman, but a man who impersonates a woman, who later disguises himself (?) as a rich man. One of the most classic of visual gags comes from Joe, as the rich bachelor, when he trips Sugar on the beach (59) in order to get her
attention—she literally falls for him. The same gag happens in many Screwball comedies, but with the gender roles reversed. In *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), David slips on Susan’s olive, while in *The Lady Eve* (1941), Charles trips over Jean’s foot.

**Reception**

Producer Walter Mirisch described *Some Like It Hot* as a “smash hit” (154). It was one of the highest grossing films of 1959 (Phillips 224, *BoxOffice Mojo*). Phillips claims that “At the time of its release, the very popularity…. was reason enough for some critics to write it off as a mere crowd pleaser. But over the years the movie has gained stature, and it is now considered one of Wilder’s major achievements” (229). According to critic Barry Norman, Monroe’s performance “made her tiresome and troublesome behavior during production seem ‘worth it’” (229). Wilder later said, “Many actresses were more reliable, but no one was as convincing or had better technique” (229). Monroe won a Golden Globe award for her performance (229). One criticism of the film was due to Lemmon’s performance because he “seemed to be enjoying his role too much. It was virtually the only female impersonation sustained throughout an entire film since the teens” (Russo 7). According to Tim Dirks of *American Movie Classics Filmsite*, *Some Like It Hot* “was the all-time highest-grossing comedy up to its time, one of the most successful films of 1959, and Wilder’s funniest comedy in his career”. *Variety* praised the film, saying “*Some Like It Hot*, directed in masterly style by Billy Wilder, is probably the funniest picture of recent memory. It’s a whacky, clever, farcical comedy that starts off like a firecracker and keeps on throwing off lively sparks till the very end”. Both reviews particularly praise the comedy. The National Board of Review declared it
one of the Top Ten Films of 1959. The film was nominated for six Academy Awards, Best Directing, Best Writing (Adaption), Best Actor (Lemmon), Best Art Direction (Black and White), Best Cinematography (Black and White), and Best Costume Design (Black and White). Orry-Kelly won for costume design (oscars.org). The reader should remember that the 32nd Academy Awards was when William Wyler’s *Ben-Hur* (1959) won a record eleven Academy Awards, including Best Directing and Best Actor. As for the remaining three nominations for *Some Like It Hot*, Art Direction (Black and White) and Cinematography (Black and White) went to *The Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stevens 1959), while Writing (Adaption) went to *Room At The Top* (Jack Clayton 1959), a drama-romance (oscars.org).

Over the past decade, encouraged by several home video releases, more critics have reviewed the picture than ever before. Many reviewers praise the film for its overall product, “one of those rare movies where all the elements gel all the time”, as Michael Thomson of the BBC described it. In 2006, Ty Burr of *Time Magazine* said “Nobody’s perfect, but Billy Wilder’s transvestite farce comes awfully close”. Clark Douglas of *DVD Verdict* said that the film is “only regarded as a comedic masterpiece because… every … element is handled with such professionalism and wit”. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* called it “one of the enduring treasures of the movies, a film of inspiration and meticulous craft”, and that the “screenplay by Wilder and I.A.L. Diamond is Shakespearean in the way it cuts between high and low comedy, between the heroes and the clowns”. Dennis Schwartz of *Ozus’ World Movie Reviews* said “The broad slapstick juxtaposed against the hard-hitting gangland scenes, worked amazingly well even if some scenes seemed forced”—using “forced” as a term to describe comedy that
does not seem to register. Schwartz brings attention to the way in which this film, like so many other film comedies borrows the conventions of a non-comic genre.

Many reviewers praise Monroe’s performance. Jeffrey M. Anderson of Combustible Celluloid called it “Monroe’s greatest film”. Ed Howard of Seul Le Cinema commented on the necessity of Monroe in the film when he said “Of course, the transformation of Curtis and Lemmon into a pair of very unlikely-looking women, funny as it is, wouldn’t be nearly as brilliant without a true avatar of femininity to contrast against them”. Chris Cabin of Slant Magazine described the suspension of disbelief necessary of the viewer when he remarked, “Of course, Joe and Jerry are the only men who seem interested in actually courting Sugar Kane”. Regarding Monroe, Tomas Alfredson of The Telegraph said, “she is acting stupid of course—which takes a lot of intelligence. She must have been a very intelligent woman—you can see that masterfully in this film”.

Regarding its longevity and continued relevancy, Brad Laidman of FilmThreat, said it is “as funny today as it was when it was first released”. James Kendrick of QNetwork stated “In the annals of film comedy, there are a select few films that truly stand out as having withstood the test of time—that are just as funny now, if not funnier, than they were when first released—and Billy Wilder’s Some Like It Hot is right at the top”. Angie Errigo of Empire Magazine called it “A joyful classic which delivers on comedic value no matter how many times you’ve seen it”. Joshua Rothkopf of Time Out New York Magazine called it “the Great American Comedy (if you discount the Marx Brothers)”.
Of the couple less than favorable reviews that I was able to find, the main criticism is that the entire film centers around a “one-joke premise”, as Jeremy Heilman of MovieMartyr.com described it. David Nusair of Reel Film added, “The American Film Institute recently declared Some Like It Hot to be the funniest movie ever made. And while that may have been true upon its release (which was some odd 40 years ago), it’s certainly not true now. It’s a different kind of funny - based mostly upon double entendres and dry one-liners—more likely to elicit smiles and chuckles rather than full-fledged belly laughs”. Clearly, both reviewers have difficulty judging the success of a comedy besides relying on quantifying it according to how many jokes it contains or how many times it elicits laughter, once again returning to the mindset of Vaudeville managers.

Legacy

Following the success of the film, Wilder commented, “Producer David Selznick told me mixing gangsters and comedy wouldn’t work. In fact, it did” (Phillips 211), describing how comedy must borrow the conventions of non-comic genres in order to be successful. Producer Walter Mirisch added, “If one wanted to make Some Like It Hot today, I don’t think it could be done any better. Neither the style, nor the casting, nor the writing or direction could be improved upon” (102). In the 1960s, Mirisch presented a pilot for a proposed television show based on Some Like It Hot, but the project never happened (103). In 2006, Premiere Magazine named Some Like It Hot as one of the 50 Greatest Comedies of All Time, one of the 25 Greatest Screenplays of All Time, and Lemmon’s performance as one of the 100 Greatest Performances of All Time (Phillips 230). Wilder and Diamond went on to cowrite many more successful features, several of
them starring Jack Lemmon (230). Film scholar Bert Cardullo claims that *Some Like It Hot* is still a significant film for four reasons:

It is the best film by the last European director to flourish in this country.... It is the best film of the last great sex star created by Hollywood. It is the last of the carefree American comedies that sprang up when sound came in, bloomed through the thirties, and had a revival after World War II. And it is the last really good film farce produced in the United States to date” (192).

Although the reviewers praise the filmmakers’ “inspiration”, “meticulous craft”, and “professionalism”, the presence of a skilled comic performer like Monroe returns the critical focus from the comic filmmaker, as it had been for so many sound films, to the comic performer. When they analyze the comedy of *Some Like It Hot*, the critics use the terms “funny”, “whacky”, “clever”, “farcical”, “firecracker”, “Shakespearean”, “high”, “low”, “heroes”, “clowns”, “wit”, and “slapstick”. *Some Like It Hot* is a prime example of how comedy films borrow the conventions of non-comic genres, gangster pictures in this case, and of how a comic film needs no resolution—the protagonists end in the same situations in which they began.
Case Study #8: Young Frankenstein (Mel Brooks 1974)

“it’s pronounced ‘Fronkensteen’” (Gene Wilder, as Frederick Frankenstein)

Mel Brooks

By the time he made Young Frankenstein, Mel Brooks (1926-) was already one of the leading creators of parody in the world:

In his two best comedies, before this, The Producers and Blazing Saddles, Brooks revealed a rare comic anarchy. His movies weren’t just funny, they were aggressive and subversive, making us laugh even when we really should have been offended. (Explaining this process, Brooks once loftily declared, “My movies rise below vulgarity.”) (Ebert).

Brooks understood how audiences came to parodies with numerous expectations, which some of his most successful gags would purposely go against to achieve their success:

their stunning violations of a familiar formula…. Musical numbers in the Mel Brooks films consistently produce the most delightful anomalies—just as they did in the Marx Brothers parodies….when Young Frankenstein reaches its musical numbers it takes a leap into wild illogic that justifies and excuses the more predictable moments of the parody (Mast “Comic Mind” 311).

Mel Brooks is perhaps the most prolific filmmaker-parodist of the Twentieth Century, exploring various subjects like the Old West (Blazing Saddles, 1974), silent film (Silent Movie, 1976), Alfred Hitchcock thrillers (High Anxiety, 1977), world history (History of the World: Part I, 1981), science fiction (Spaceballs, 1987), the Middle Ages (Robin Hood: Men in Tights, 1993), and vampires (Dracula: Dead and Loving It, 1995). Brooks was at his peak in 1974, releasing two of the most popular and critically acclaimed parodies, Blazing Saddles and Young Frankenstein. Brooks feels that Young Frankenstein is his best film, but he gives all the credit to the power of Mary Shelley’s novel:
I wrote *The Producers*, and the bones of *The Producers* are very good, but I don’t know how enduring *The Producers* is and I know how enduring Mary Shelley’s characters are…. The other shoe that we drop in *Young Frankieinstein* is emotion, great emotion. You can call it father and son, the creator and his creation, that’s the real love story that Mary Shelley devised (Lacher).

With *Young Frankieinstein*, Brooks achieved a new level of sophistication for parody.

Few films are as fine a parody as this one. It lampoons the conventions of previous, dramatic film adaptations of Shelley’s novel—and yet at the same time, it approaches her novel in a reverent way. His film reveals the necessity of the borrowing of the conventions of tragedy in order for comedy to succeed. Many scholars argue, and through my research I concur with their statement, that Brook’s comedy is far closer to the spirit and themes of Shelley’s original work than the earlier, “serious” pictures. In an unintentionally backwards way, I viewed this film years before James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), which resulted in me feeling horribly underwhelmed when I finally saw the latter film. I can say in all honesty that *Young Frankieinstein* is truly a superior film, for it simply has a tighter narrative, more carefully crafted tension and release, and is a more genuine portrayal of Shelley’s characters, particularly The Creature. The plot points and character motivations of *Young Frankieinstein* are clear and succinct, no matter how absurd they may be. On the contrary, *Frankenstein* (1931), just ends with Henry Frankenstein’s father celebrating with young women after the monster is apparently gone forever. It presents the denouement necessary to a non-comic film, yet it feels tacked on—almost an attempt to distract the viewer from the real tragedy of The Creature. Though not necessary to a comedy, *Young Frankieinstein* does present a resolution for *The Creature*, as he becomes the intellectual of Shelley’s novel—however, the primal instincts that *The Creature* had displayed now seem to have been brought out in Victor—
perhaps arguing that those instincts were always within him, but repressed.

   I find the creation scene of Young Frankenstein as much of an aesthetic experience as when Sir Laurence Olivier recites a Shakespearean soliloquy. It is here in the film that the line between the conventions of comedy and the borrowed ones of drama blurs the most. The platform slowly raises as Frederick’s enormous shadow covers the wall (44).

   As I stated above, Young Frankenstein comes closest to the intellectual Creature of Shelley that reads frequently and is quite eloquent. Brooks presents a bourgeois Creature that reads the Wall Street Journal (1:44), while Karloff’s portrayal presents a stiff-limbed mute who merely stumbles around:

   Nothing about the creature she presents to us is more poignant than his longing to be loved. In Young Frankenstein, Elizabeth gratifies this desire. Acting out-campily, to be sure—the creature’s deepest fantasy, she plays a loving Beauty to his Beast. Wacky as it is, the monster’s marriage to Elizabeth in Young Frankenstein also points directly to the sexual energies that Mary Shelley’s Victor so perversely thwarts in himself and the monster alike (Heffernan 152).

   Brooks’ film is as much another, equally valid, interpretation of Shelley’s novel, as it is a parody of past interpretations. It not only explores the themes of Shelley, but the role of comedy as a direct foil to drama. Comedy reveals the painful truth of The Creature’s longings beneath the surface of his actions more readily than tragedy can. Young Frankenstein works exactly because it gives us better access to Shelley—a direct approach that only the genre of comedy allows.

   The Cast

   Of all the films in which Gene Wilder appeared, Young Frankenstein is his personal favorite (IMDb). Critics recognize the role of Frederick Frankenstein as one of Wilder’s greatest performances. In 2006, Premiere Magazine named it 9th on its list of
the 100 Greatest Performances of All Time (IMDb). Note the term “Greatest Performances” is not limited to “Greatest Comic Performances”. Both Cloris Leachman and Peter Boyle began their comedy careers with this film. Leachman later went on to star in the “Mary Tyler Moore Show”. Television executive Mark Legan commented, “Her performance… in… Young Frankenstein was one of the funniest, out-there comedic performances I have ever seen” (Time). Peter Boyle went on to star in the sitcom “Everybody Loves Raymond”, but he still considered the role of the monster in this film as “the highlight of [his] career” (Time). In 1975, Golden Globe nominations went to Cloris Leachman (Best Lead Actress in a Comedy/Musical) and Madeline Kahn (Best Supporting Actress in a Comedy/Musical) for their performances in Young Frankenstein.

Production

The seminal idea for Young Frankenstein came from the mind of Gene Wilder while he was working with Brooks on Blazing Saddles (1974). Brooks recalls, “His idea was very simple: What if the grandson of Dr. Frankenstein wanted nothing to do with the family whatsoever. He was ashamed of those wackos. I said, “That’s funny”” (Lacher). The screenplay contained many references to actual scientists and historical figures including Erasmus Darwin and Hans Delbruck (IMDb), appealing to the well-informed audience members. Many scholars fail to recognize that a “crude” humor is capable of this intellectual appeal. Much of the techniques used in the making of this film actually came from the Universal horror series that it parodies, including the use of green makeup for the creature, and the original sets and laboratory equipment:

When Mel Brooks was preparing Young Frankenstein, he found that Ken Strickfaden, who had made the elaborate electrical machinery for the lab
sequences in the Universal Frankenstein films, was still alive in the Los Angeles area. He visited Strickfaden and found that Strickfaden had saved all the equipment and had it stored in his garage. Brooks made a deal to rent the equipment for his film and gave Strickfaden the screen credit he’d deserved, but hadn’t gotten, for the original films (IMDb).

Brooks took care to remain true to the original films, making his parody work so much better by copying the original conventions so precisely—causing the viewer to realize how one takes the conventions for granted in the original source.

When writing the screenplay, Brooks initially objected to Wilder’s ideas for two of the film’s most memorable gags, the “walk this way” bit (IMDb) and the entire music hall sequence (Lacher). A couple of the film’s gags were improvised on the set. Igor’s hump that keeps moving from side to side was an idea of Marty Feldman (IMDb) and Gene Hackman’s line “I was gonna make espresso” was completely ad-libbed during filming (Fristoe).

Once the filmmakers previewed the first cut of the film for test audiences, it was “twice as long as the final cut” (IMDb). The preview audiences hated it, and it appeared to Brooks and company that it was a failure. Wilder and Brooks got together and cut the film down considerably. Brooks said:

I didn’t want it to be longer than 90 minutes....Your energy is used a lot more when you’re watching a comedy; more of you is given to the film. You can’t sit through a comedy for more than 90 minutes; it puts you in a very high metabolic state. You can’t be that high for that long. If you’re in that state for more than 90 minutes, you’ll crash. And it can’t all be big laughs—you have to give the audience a chance to catch its breath and gear up for the next assault (Fine).

For the final cut, the two men had eliminated “all the jokes that didn’t work” (IMDb).

Both felt that the final cut was far superior to the original cut. The experience of the test audience reminds the reader of the communal nature of comedy. The live feedback of the test audience is the same phenomenon of spectator participation in the Medieval Carnival
the audience reactions to live Vaudeville acts, and the Marx Brothers’ road shows.

Brooks’ discussion of the running time of the picture alludes to the episodic nature of comedy—shown so well through Vaudeville. The shorter (than drama) runtime of a feature comedy seems to be an audience expectation, related to the aforementioned audience feedback.

**The Film**

To me, *Young Frankenstein* is an excellent example of masterful filmmaking that is severely overlooked simply because it is a comedy. The film opens with the tragic theme music and one seamlessly edited sequence (0-6). Indeed, like several shots of Welles’ *Citizen Kane* (1941), the shot goes from a slow dolly towards a distant castle, through to a shot of the courtyard, through the window to the room, with a shocking finish at the opening coffin. The first visual gag occurs nearly 4 minutes into the film, when the skeleton will not let go of the will. In this sequence, we witness the expansiveness of parody—Brooks does not have to parody specifically one subject, but can mock the conventions of all drama. Much as in the opening of *Some Like It Hot*, the sense of drama instantly shatters to reveal comedy as soon as just one dramatic convention breaks.

Beyond the characters that come from Shelley’s novel, Brooks’ presents his own original characters so well. Frederick Frankenstein’s personality is established through his interactions with others. We see his lecture students first (6) and then we first see him as he corrects a student on the pronunciation of his name. His eccentricity becomes apparent when he argues with a student and consequently stabs himself in the leg (11). Through Inga and Elizabeth, we see two female stereotypes. Inga is the naïve assistant
who relies on men for her worldview and seems to be willing to copulate with little
couragement needed. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is the high-maintenance girlfriend
who controls the men around her—indeed, Frederick is not sure whether to adore her or
to fear her. However, we see that no matter how prim and proper she seems to be, the
Monster still brings out the same latent, primal feelings within her.

With the oft-quoted “walk this way” gag (17), the film demonstrates the innate
humor in misinterpreting the meaning of a phrase, following the Principle of Comic
Sense. In much the same way, Frederick, Igor, and Inga channel Chico Marx with the
“werewolf” routine (18) and later the “knockers” misunderstanding (19). Brooks
expertly handles the power of the Principle of Comic Logic, especially repetition, with
the whinnying horses every time a character speaks Frau Blücher’s name. Many of the
gags work with one of two extremes of the Principle of Comic Timing—anticlimax and
surprise. The tension holds as Frederick reaches for the door handle and instantly fizzles
out as the handle breaks (28). Shortly thereafter, the viewer jumps when a succession of
skulls in a shelf reveals Igor (29). Some gags function at a level of pure irony and
absurdity. Frederick’s grandfather leaves the book *How I Did It* (32), Igor visits the
Brain Depository (40), and Inga warns Frederick, “you’ll kill him” as he chokes the dead
corpse (48).

Brooks understands that the viewers of his film have preconceived notions of
what should happen in his film based on what they experienced with the Universal horror
pictures. Often the funniest moments in *Young Frankenstein* are a result of Brooks
purposefully thwarting those very expectations. This occurs most notably when the
creature plays by the well with the little girl (1:06), an almost shot for shot replica of the
scene in *Frankenstein* (1931). Boyle’s look to the camera when the girl asks, “what
should we throw in now?” confirms that the viewer expects the creature to throw her in,
as occurred in the original film. The following shot of them on the seesaw is so effective
because it is so unexpected. The only real aside from the *Frankenstein* (1931) narrative
is the music hall scene (1:17), which is more reminiscent of *King Kong* (Merian C.
Cooper 1933), yet still in the classic horror vein.

Any humor at the expense of one’s cultural background in *Young Frankenstein*
comes as an exaggeration of the characters portrayed in the original Universal horror
pictures. Brooks does not mock people from Eastern Europe; rather, he mocks the
stereotypes of these people as they are portrayed in the Universal horror films. One of
the recurring gags is that the locals cannot understand their shared accent. We witness
Frau Blücher struggle with Frankenstein’s name (22) and none of the townspeople can
understand the inspector (50)—what I take to be a mocking of the feeling native English
speakers get when they encounter a person with a foreign accent—they assume that
someone with an accent cannot even understand himself. A running gag such as this
combines the Principle of Comic Logic (the recurrence) and the Principle of Comic Sense
(the misunderstanding).

Brooks is perhaps one of the greatest presenters of purely visual gags since
Chaplin—whether it is darts covering the police car as it pulls away (1:01) or when a
member of the town posse walks directly into a tree (1:32). As I mentioned above,
throughout his career, Brooks was known for crude humor. The lack of profanity
throughout the film makes the inspector’s curse, as his wooden arm rips off, so effective
(1:41). While there are very few elements of slapstick in the film, the few that do exist—
Frederick getting squished by the bookcase (26) and Frederick playing charades while the creature chokes him (55)—work splendidly.

Reception

*Young Frankenstein* was highly profitable. With a budget of $2.8 million (about $13 million today), it ended up grossing $86 million (nearly $400 million today) (*BoxOffice Mojo*). It reassured the public and film executives of Brooks’ box office appeal that he had established with *The Producers* (1968) and *Blazing Saddles* (1974). The film was nominated for two Academy Awards, Best Sound and Best Writing (Adaption), but did not win either. Tim Dirks of *American Movie Classics Filmsite* remarks that it was odd that Madeline Kahn and Gene Wilder were not nominated for their performances and that Gerald Hirschfield was not nominated for his cinematography. If we consider the cinematography of the opening sequence, for example, we see that it serves as a running visual gag that continually mocks the cinematic conventions of dramatic presentation. It is for this reason, I surmise, that no reviewers thought to recognize Hirschfield’s contribution, as critics only saw his work as a parody of cinematographer Gregg Toland’s style.

At the time of its release, the reviews were overwhelmingly favorable. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* said that “it works on a couple of levels: first as comedy, and then as a weirdly touching story in its own right”, alluding to its unique interpretation of Shelley’s work. *Box Office Magazine* gave the film a positive review and noted that Brooks “takes on horror movies, a field that has sometimes been funny when the films were done too seriously”, raising the point of how daring Brooks had to be in order to
parody a series of pictures that elicit laughter in their own right. Both reviewers talk about the necessity of an original, non-comic source for parody to work. Jay Cocks of *Time Magazine* liked the film, especially the dance hall sequence, which he called “some sort of deranged high point in contemporary film comedy”. The sequence curiously stands out because of its furthest departure from the novel. The one negative review that I found comes from Stanley Kauffman of *The New Republic*. In it, he mostly complained about the running time, which he thought was too long, “Brooks is a funny joke-and-gag man, but not 104- minutes funny”. Vincent Canby of the *New York Times*, focused on the gags as well, “Mel Brooks’s funniest, most cohesive comedy to date…. Some of the gags don’t work, but fewer than in any previous Brooks film that I’ve seen, and when the jokes are meant to be bad, they are riotously poor. What more can one ask of Mel Brooks?” Notice how Canby addresses the narrative structure through the term “cohesive” and describes the gags as “riotous” and also implies that one should not expect more from a comic filmmaker than a few funny gags. I find it interesting that only two of these five reviewers acknowledge the necessity of the conventions of the established *Frankenstein* lore for the parody to succeed.

Unlike most of the other comedies profiled in the other case studies, quite a few of the more recent reviews of the film have been negative, much more so than when it premiered. I attribute this partly to the fact that so many later comedies, like *The Naked Gun* series, *The Scary Movie* series, and even some television comedies, have copied Brook’s manner of parody so closely, that the humor of *Young Frankenstein* does not seem to be as fresh and original as it genuinely is. As for the less than favorable reviews, in 1999, Donald Liebenson of the *Chicago Tribune* said, “Viewed from a Marxist (as in
Brothers) perspective, *Young Frankenstein* is Brooks’ *Night at the Opera*. It is not his purest, funniest film, but it is his most sustained, satisfying, and accessible”. His terms “pure” and “funny” describe the gags, while “sustained”, “satisfying”, and “accessible” describe the narrative—ignoring the necessary balance between them. In 2007, Dennis Schwartz of *Ozus’ World Movie Reviews* complained that “Most of the gags were juvenile and bombed”, adding that “The best parody of *Frankenstein* is Whale’s own followup of *The Bride of Frankenstein*”, echoing early statements of the source series’ (unintended) laughable quality.

The majority of reviews are still positive. Unlike the earlier reviewers, almost every Twenty First Century reviewer focuses on the necessity of Shelley’s novel and Whale’s interpretation to the success of Brook’s comedy. In 2006, Ryan Keefer of *DVD Verdict* said, “If James Whale’s films are the gold standard, then Brooks’ interpretation of the Mary Shelley characters is a more unspoken, yet outstanding sequel to the original”. In 2009, independent critic Cole Smithey, stated that “Mel Brooks caught comic lightning in a bottle” and added that it contains “an atmosphere of reverent delight beneath its bawdy puns and outrageous physical humor”. Bill Gibron of *Filmcritic.com*, loved the film stating, “No one could have expected the abject brilliance that was his take on the terror genre” adding that there is “something so satisfying about this movie, so likeable and loving that it’s hard to look at the rest of Brooks’s canon in a similar light”. Adam Smith of *Empire Magazine* called it “a marvelously crafted, beautifully shot comedic homage to James Whale’s 1931 classic”, adding that it is “a perfect example of early Brooks firing on all comic cylinders, and what it demonstrates is that for spoof to work, the spoofers must have deep affection for the material” that they parody. The
statements of these reviewers reinforce my argument that *Young Frankenstein* is one of the finest examples of parody, for they not only acknowledge his faithfulness to Shelley’s novel, but his superior filmmaking sense over that of Whale. Parody’s closeness to its source allows reviewers to clearly evaluate it against the source material. With these few reviews, we see a faint comic blip on the radar of film criticism, in that these critics directly praise a comic filmmaker as having created a work more significant than that of a “serious” filmmaker. Supporting their arguments, look at the terms these reviewers use, “gold”, “outstanding”, “lightning”, “brilliance”, “marvelous”, and “beautiful”—I argue that these are similar to terms that literary critics would use to describe Shelley’s novel, once again indicating the film’s closeness to its inspiration.

**Legacy**

The film was an undisputable triumph for Brooks. He took great pride in his work on *Young Frankenstein*:

> It’s the best thing I ever directed; the direction was superb. And I don’t mind being immodest. But I wasn’t nominated for it. They didn’t nominate directors for comedy in those days. Woody Allen broke through on that score with *Annie Hall*. He gave comedy a respectable name. I didn’t. I was too vulgar. (Fine)

Although Brooks’ statement reinforces the argument that most comedy films are denied critical recognition, his remark about Woody Allen does not take past comedies like *It Happened One Night* and *Some Like It Hot* into account. I shall go into more detail about Woody Allen later in this chapter.

Since its release, *Young Frankenstein* has never really fallen out of the public eye. In 2006, *Premiere Magazine* voted it one of the 50 Greatest Comedies of All Time (IMDb). In 2008, Brooks premiered “Young Frankenstein: The Musical” (Lacher) on
Broadway, bringing his story to even more audiences, so that the work’s influence could now extend into media beyond film. Brooks shares his philosophy of comedy when he comments that the film “was meant to be seen in theaters. ‘We’re losing communal laughter and joy,’ he says. ‘One fat bald guy in a summer undershirt drinking a Michelob Light in front of a TV is not what this was designed for’ (Fine). Once again, we see an argument for comedy as a group experience—an experience that the development of the home video forever changed. The private nature of home video opens up a new experience of isolation and alienation from others—a theme that comedy explores in a unique way, and a thread that I shall address in Chapter IV. *Young Frankenstein* will always remain a shining example of how far parody can go—yet how seriously it can treat its subject. As a comic hero, we may laugh at Victor Frankenstein’s antics, but we never lose respect for his genuine belief that he can do the impossible.

With the reviews included in this case study, we find two clear foci of critics: the way in which Brooks uses the original sources and the nature of the film’s gags. To speak of the film’s relation to the novel and earlier pictures, reviewers use terms like “touching”, “satisfying”, “sustained”, “accessible”—I might add, words that could be used to describe narrative construction. As for the comic moments, reviewers use the terms, “aggressive”, “subversive”, “deranged”, “funny”, “joke”, “gag”, “riotous”, “pure”, “parody”, “bawdy”, and “puns”. I would like to point out that many of these terms could work in writing about the works of Aristophanes, Dante, and Boccaccio, among others.
Case Study #9: 10 (Blake Edwards 1979)

“On a scale from 1 to 10, she’s an 11!” (Dudley Moore, as George Webber)

Blake Edwards

Though never universally recognized for his skill, the work of Blake Edwards (1922-2010) has drawn new attention from critics in the past couple of decades. In a career spanning nearly 50 years, he experimented in practically every genre of film, making notable contributions to romance (*Breakfast At Tiffany’s* [1961], *The Tamarind Seed* [1974]), drama (*The Days of Wine and Roses* [1962]), thriller (*Experiment in Terror* [1962]), war (*Operation Petticoat* [1959], *What Did You Do In The War, Daddy?* [1966], although it is debatable whether these pictures fit better into the war subgenre or the comedy genre), crime (*Gunn* [1967]), musical (*Darling Lili* [1969], *Victor/Victoria* [1982]), Western (*Wild Rovers* [1971]), and of course, comedy (*The Great Race* [1965], *The Party* [1968], and *The Pink Panther* series). *Cinema Journal* describes him as:

quite a controversial director. To the industry, Blake Edwards is known for the success of the *Pink Panther* films and “10.” To film fans, he’s the husband of Julie Andrews. To film scholars, he’s a second-rate director with a small cult reputation…. his background in television and radio (22).

Film scholar Gregg Rickman praises his “complex departures from many norms and conventions of both classical and contemporary film practices” (33-34) and adds “Someone someday will have to analyze Edwards’s use of space more extensively…. His inventive use of framing and screen space, including off-screen space, deserves a chapter of its own, for even the worst of Edwards’s films contain hilarious sight gags made so by his formal flair” (34). Film scholar Bill Desowitz says that “every Edwards film
alternates between comedy and suspense” (50) and describes his style as “anarchic and eclectic” (51). Desowitz’s statement demonstrates how Edwards truly understands not only how comedy needs to borrow the conventions of drama in order to succeed, but also that a comic picture can in fact take these dramatic conventions and present them in a superior way than drama alone could. By contrasting the comedy with the pathos in his films, as Chaplin, Sturges, Wilder, and others had done, Edwards shows how the comic elements make the tragic ones that much more moving and, likewise, how the tragic elements make the comic ones that much funnier.

One of the interesting aspects of Blake Edwards’ career is his professional relationship with his wife, Julie Andrews. It is partly because of Edwards, that Andrews was able to branch out into roles that she never would have been offered by most studios, which usually considered her only to be suitable for children’s pictures and musicals. In the films of Edwards, Andrews had the opportunity to play complex, mature characters without losing her public, family-friendly appeal. In my opinion, Edwards is one of the most under-recognized filmmakers of the past century, and I hope that someday this status will reverse.

_Dudley Moore_

Today, in all honesty, viewers may remember Bo Derek—who portrays a character whose physical attractiveness is supposed be her defining attribute—more so than any other performer in 10, but Dudley Moore (1935-2002) is the clear star of the picture. Moore began his career in comedy with his longtime stage partner Peter Cook. Together, they created a popular television series called “Beyond the Fringe”, which inspired later sketch comedy series and troupes, including Monty Python. Moore
transitioned to Hollywood in the late 1970s, “his Hollywood breakthrough as a hapless swinger in *Foul Play* (1978)” (*Time*). When Blake Edwards hired him for the role of George, “He was still virtually unknown in this country” (*Time*). Moore’s greatest success came two years later with *Arthur* (Steve Gordon 1981), which “made him a household name” (Burr). Unfortunately, his two most successful films caused him to be typecast for subsequent roles and he never got to experiment with the versatility that he had expressed before entering the motion picture industry.

**Production**

Edwards actually first wrote the screenplay for *10* in the early 1970s but for whatever reason, did not attempt to produce the film until years later. He “was inspired to write this script when he caught a brief glimpse of a woman on the way to her wedding” (IMDb), an event replicated by George in the film. Edwards’ first choice for the role of George was actually Peter Sellers, with whom Edwards had worked on the *Pink Panther* films as well as on *The Party* (1968), but Sellers “just didn’t feel [he] was right for the part” (TCM), and so he turned it down. Actor George Segal was all set to play the role on the first day of filming, but “walked off the set” once production began (TCM), leaving the role to Moore. It was never entirely clear why Segal left, but in several subsequent interviews, he has alluded that he was afraid to have been overshadowed by Bo Derek (Crawley). Edwards considered many actresses for the role of Jenny, including “Melanie Griffith who turned it down. Kay Lenz was offered the role of Jenny but turned the role down. Kim Basinger and Christie Brinkley were both
considered” (IMDb). Julie Andrews was Edwards’ one and only choice for the role of Sam.

**The Film**

Few films establish their premise and characters as quickly as *10*. The simple titles appear on black with a simple piano theme (establishing pianist George before the viewer ever meets him), which dissolves to reveal a dark house (1). The viewer is equally as surprised by the party as is George (2). Within minutes, George reveals his songwriting background, his resistance to accept the fact that he is aging, and the supportive presence of Sam in his life. More so than in most of Edward’s other comedies including *The Pink Panther series* and *The Party* (1968), *10*’s characters can get preachy from time to time, most noticeably so when George and Sam have a lengthy discussion about the terms “sexually-emancipated women” versus “broads” (20-25). The discussion does not really present the viewer with any visual gags nor carry the narrative, leaving me to believe that Edwards must have been making a statement with this discussion.

As for the gags in *10*, Edwards perfectly blends visual (George’s bee sting, 15), auditory (George’s antihistamine/birth control comment, 16), and situational (George’s trip to the dentist and its aftermath, 41-48). At a time when dialogue-driven romantic comedies returned as the major subgenre of comedy—*10* uses many visual gags that have since become classics, including George spying on the neighbors (and consequently rolling down the hill as the phone rings, 37), the old housekeeper at the church (33), the hot sand in Mexico (1:13), and George under the effects of Novocain dribbling coffee all over himself (42).
By utilizing the type of gags that reference an earlier era’s approach to comedy, as Wilder experimented with in *Some Like It Hot*, Edwards intentionally resists the current trend in audience’s expectations for comedy. The “outdated” style of these gags supports Edwards’ major theme in *10*—that of aging and the feeling of being a product of a bygone era. Much of George’s sentiments go beyond feeling old, instead more significantly, feeling no longer part of modern times, suggesting an autobiographical feeling by Edwards. Like Chaplin, Edwards was able to be a revolutionary artist while making films in a rather classic style. Instead of joining his contemporaries by filling his soundtrack with the newest disco hits, he instead uses the timeless orchestral jazz music of Henry Mancini—who is today remembered as one of the most prolific and successful composers in any genre.

The music alone is enough to set apart Edwards’ style, but he uses it to contrast the pathos and comedy in his picture, a trait of Edwards that I mentioned earlier. As I stated above, Edwards clearly understood the successful comedy’s necessity of borrowing conventions from dramatic subgenres. As George fantasizes about he and Jenny running towards each other in slow motion on the beach (a parody of the romance genre), the music creates a level of euphoria, and all at once the result is something both hilarious and deeply beautiful (1:21). Like Chaplin, Edwards has the ability to consciously allow the dramatic conventions to overtake the comic ones—if only for a moment. Like the final scene of *City Lights* (1931), Edwards’ moments of pathos never let the viewer feel deceived—as if the film that they had perceived to be a comedy had suddenly turned dramatic—because he never lets the viewer forget how comedy always intertwines the dramatic and comic conventions.
Just as Katharine Hepburn’s character of Susan Vance in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) appears in repeatedly unexpected moments, George controls a series of apparent coincidences through the Principle of Comic Timing—of course his dentist is Jenny’s father (40), of course he vacations at the same hotel as she (54), and of course the man he rescues is her husband (1:23). On the literal sense, George is caught between two women—his faithful girlfriend that is his contemporary and the young blonde that is his obsession—but he is symbolically caught between being old and living in the past and longing to be young and to live a fantasy. He ends up being associated with the old men standing in the surf (1:16) and with “elevator music” (1:32), but he wishes to rent a surfboard like a young man (1:20) and take risks and live vicariously through Jenny (1:30). George’s fantasy and resultant disappointment reveals an important truth about the balance of fantasy and reality within comedy. While drama can present us a fantasy world in which the viewer could actually imagine existing, comedy shatters the fantasy by forcing us to face reality—a reality that drama dares not address. As with the greatest comic heroes, George is so genuine; he so desperately wishes to please Sam as well as feel young by being with Jenny. No matter how much he may want Jenny’s husband out of the picture, he does the right thing by rescuing him—an action that ironically brings him to Jenny’s attention (1:30).

Despite the fact that over a third of the narrative takes place in Mexico, Edwards does not really engage ethnic stereotypes. Any moment that seems to portray a stereotype can be justified when seen under careful examination. The hotel employees on the beach seem desperate to please the hotel guests, to the point that they are willing to carry patrons to the water (1:18). The attitude of the hotel employees is not mocking
Mexicans, but the nature of anyone working in the field of hospitality anywhere in the world. Likewise, when the hotel desk clerk believes that incommunicado is a place and not a state of being, the misunderstanding is not meant to function as a joke about gender or ethnicity—it is to show how humorous situations can occur when one takes vocabulary for granted (1:24). One interesting situation on the topic of ethnicity is the fact that George warms up to the American-born bartender, and none of the Mexican employees (1:00). This relationship may appear to be a stereotype that an English-speaking patron could only relate to an English-speaking bartender, but I argue that in fact, that the filmmakers cast an American actor, not because of prejudice on their part, but because they felt that an English-speaking viewer could relate to an English-speaking character better.

Robert Webber’s portrayal of Hugh is one of the most sensitive portrayals of a homosexual character in comedy. Hugh is neither flamboyant nor eccentric, he does not cross-dress, nor does he speak with an effeminate voice. In fact, the viewer would not know he were homosexual without his direct reference to it (8). On the other hand, George’s derogatory slurs directed at Hugh that emphasize gay stereotypes all prove to be inaccurate in Hugh’s case (28)—allowing Edward’s to make a statement before it was really socially acceptable to do so, as misconceptions about homosexuals were still strong for at least another decade, and still exist today.

One of the highest moments in the film occurs when Edwards takes advantage of comedy’s ability to support asides, even musical ones, as perfectly acceptable and even necessary. Near the end of the film, George abruptly halts the narrative and all the gags to play a nearly five minute piano piece (1:25-1:30). In a demonstration of how well
comedy allows for such an aside, the moment harkens back to the episodic format of
Vaudeville and The Marx Brothers’ pictures, reinforcing the theme of aging and longing
for an earlier time with earlier tastes. However, this musical interlude carries a greater
narrative meaning than those of the Marx Brothers: the recurring melody functions in
almost the same way as Chaplin’s leitmotivs in City Lights (1931). The musical theme
first appears after George sees Jenny for the first time (27) and develops throughout the
film. It is not until the end (1:52) that George and the viewer realize that he was really
writing the piece for Sam (revealed to be the right woman for him) and not Jenny (the
wrong woman for him). For the scene of George’s final revelation, Edwards seems to
share the knowledge of the great silent comedians, i.e., once again, supporting his theme of
wanting to exist in an earlier era. Without any dialogue, George and Sam share their
feelings and reconcile through music and action. George does not seem surprised that
Sam has returned and the viewer knows that it will work out between them when Sam
once again joins George at the piano bench and they end the song gazing at each other.
Unlike Chaplin’s leitmotivs, this song is positioned ambiguously, as it sometimes
functions diegetically as George plays it while other times it functions non-diegetically
and accompanies the narrative. The film closes with Dudley Moore and Julie Andrews
(note, not as their characters) performing the piece together while the credits scroll. One
realizes that Henry Mancini and Blake Edwards have created a song that not only
reinforces the theme of longing for older styles, but also, in working both diegetically and
non-diegetically, allows them to take one step closer to blurring the line between art and
life.
Reception

10 became one of the top grossing films of the year, grossing $75 million (about $237 million in 2012 dollars). It was also Edwards’ highest grossing film in theaters, and did very well in the newly developing home video market, marking the first case study in which the picture was available for private viewing within a year of its release.

It is important for the reader to remember that by the time he had made 10, Edwards already had a thirty year history of past films—some critically successful and some not so successful. As we see in the case of other filmmakers with many successful films, it was impossible for reviewers to approach the film without comparing it to every previous Edwards picture. The majority of reviews at the time of its release were very positive, with several reviewers addressing Edwards’ retrospective comic style. Richard Schickel of Time Magazine called it “an almost perfect example of the kind of purely visual humor of which Blake Edwards is a modern master”. Roger Ebert of the Chicago Sun-Times remarked “What we’re struck with, in 10, is the uncanny way its humor gets laughs by touching on emotions and yearnings that are very real for us. We identify with the characters in this movie: Their predicaments are funny, yes—but then ours would be, too, if they weren’t our own”, alluding to the Chaplinesque way in which Edwards is able to bring dramatic emotion into a comedy setting. For its detractors, John Simon of The National Review admitted that it was “The most popular film currently on our screens” but called it “A self-indulgent film… that sacrifices comedic structure to cheap laughs and easy pathos”, although in a negative manner, Simon does echo Ebert’s allusion to Edwards’ similarity to Chaplin’s blending of comedy and pathos. The ‘self-indulgence’, as Simon describes it, is the autobiographical element of the picture that I mentioned
earlier. Jay Scott of the *Globe and Mail* absolutely hated it, titling his review “Blake Edwards’ *10* rates about a zero”, in which he criticizes the performances of nearly every cast member, especially those of Moore and Andrews. I can only infer that Scott’s review reads like it came from someone who had already decided that he was going to hate the picture before even going to see it. For a critic that claimed the picture had no merit, he manages to describe it in great detail—as if he had viewed the film looking for specific points to discount.

Recent reviews of the film are still majority positive. Most reviewers focus on the picture’s longevity and continued relevancy, also noting its impact on American culture. In 2010, Michael O’Rourke of the *San Antonio Express-News* stated “All these years later, I still consider *10* a 10…. *10* is still funny. *10* is still sexy”, note how the terms “funny” and “sexy” are also used to describe *Some Like It Hot*. In 2011, Todd Gilchrist of *Cinematical* praised the character of Hugh saying, “the film offers one of the most complex and complimentary portrayals of a homosexual character in a mainstream Hollywood movie, not just for that era but really for any era”. As I said above, the character of Hugh demonstrates how well comedy is able to present The Other—and present him as a protagonist. Gilchrist also adds that the film “holds up in an important way that the filmmaker may or may not have intended: namely, to provide a mirror for [today’s] baby boomers who are eager to participate in youth culture but cannot fully embrace or accept that culture’s values”, referring to the theme that I have been stressing throughout this case study. Gilchrist argues that this theme is still relevant to modern audiences. While Lou Carlozo of the *Chicago Tribune* liked the film, he admitted that “It lacks the spunk of Edwards’ *Pink Panther* films”, but he contends that it was a culturally
influential film. John J. Puccio of *Movie Metropolis* found the film passable, but said that he had a hard time sympathizing with George, whom he found to be inherently selfish. Puccio does not consider that, as a comic hero, George’s flaw of selfishness brings the viewers’ attention to the potential of that flaw as universal. The only completely negative recent review that I found comes from Christopher Null of *Filmcritic.com*, who dubbed it “An absurd and hopelessly dated bit of slapstick…. Blake Edwards made worse films than this, but his comic timing is all wrong, exiled to long bouts of non-sequitur gags”.

Out of this short statement, we can extract a lot of information. Notice how he focuses on the retrospective style of Edwards’ humor, but does not acknowledge that it is purposefully dated. Assuming that Null uses the term “non-sequitur” to refer to the fact that the gags do not go with the narrative, it is clear that he does not understand that gags are historically separate from the narrative. The gags in this film in particular reveal George’s character so well that they serve a clear purpose of their own without needing to help the narrative. Also, in the world of film comedy, his use of the term “absurd” may be a compliment. Nearly every reviewer seems to focus on one of two things, Edwards’ particular quality of gags or how he crafts a narrative that incorporates non-comic conventions. When writing about Edwards and the narrative that he crafts, reviewers use terms like “perfect”, “master”, “structure”, “pathos”, “sexy”, “complex”, “complimentary”, and “non-sequitur”. The manner in which the reviewers describe the comic moments range from the vague “humor”, “laughs”, and “funny” to the more specific “purely visual”, “spunk”, “absurd”, “slapstick”, “gags”, and “comic timing”.
Legacy

10 made Dudley Moore and Bo Derek stars and proved that Edwards was still a strong contender in the film industry as he entered the fourth decade of his career. The film was very culturally influential as well. It not only influenced future comedies, but aspects of culture distantly related to comedy—if at all. For example, Bo Derek’s cornrows hairstyle became popular among young women, the idea of rating members of the opposite sex on a scale of 1 to 10 also became (and remains) quite common, and Ravel’s *Bolero* became popular, even among non-classical music fans:

Entirely thanks to this movie, Ravel’s “Bolero” is, to this day, one of the most expensive songs for which to obtain usage rights for film and TV (in excess of $25,000) and, according to SACEM (the French equivalent of ASCAP), Ravel’s estate earns more royalties than any other French composer (IMDb).

In 1984, Derek appeared in the film *Bolero* (John Derek), its title homage to the piece in *10* (TCM). It seems that *10* resonates most strongly with the people who saw it when it was first released. Unfortunately, most members of my generation have never discovered *10*, and therefore are blindly unaware that when Pamela Anderson ran along the beach in “Baywatch”, she was doing nothing more than copying Bo Derek. Beyond what I have already mentioned, I feel that *10* is still a significant picture because it proves that comedy can have deep moral lessons—those of aging, nostalgia and fidelity—and that gags can serve to demonstrate the personality of a character.

Recall how for several of our earlier case studies, the critics did not seem to acknowledge the deeper themes of the films until we got to reviews published beginning in the 1970s. Without going into detail, an interest in film studies and film criticism became quite popular in the 1960s and 1970s, allowing for an atmosphere of theorization.
from many different approaches. The result was that earlier films as well as contemporary ones were reexamined and reevaluated. As 10 premiered during this expansion of film criticism, the reviewers had already become used to searching for the deeper issues and themes within a film. From this background, we see that the reviewers at the time of 10’s release discuss Edwards’ theme of aging and nostalgia. Of the ten film case studies profiled in this study, 10 was released closest to my cut off date of 1980. From 1931’s City Lights to 1979’s 10, we see a general change in the focus of critics: later critics are more willing to focus on the deeper themes within a film.
Case Study #10: Santa Claus Conquers The Martians (Nicholas Webster 1964)

“And Mrs. Claus has positively identified the kidnappers as Martians” (Don Blair, as TV Announcer)

Context

To heighten how film comedies succeed, I shall identify the three major causes for a comedy film to fail critically, and sometimes commercially as well. Explaining how poor comedies impact the critical and popular view of film comedy and why it is so important that critics and scholars understand these causes will help us to develop a well-informed, relative canon of quality comedy films. Please note that these three causes are not exclusive; it is quite possible that a particular poor comedy may fall under more than one cause.

The first major cause of an unsuccessful comedy is a preposterous scenario. If the premise of the film is too far removed from reality, the viewer cannot relate to it well enough in order to find it amusing. I would like to present the reader with several examples of comedies with preposterous scenarios: in Jean Yarbrough’s Hillbillys in a Haunted House (1967), a group of country singers decide to spend the night in what appears to be a vacant mansion. Of course, the mansion is not really vacant and the haunted house is actually a front for an evil organization of spies. In Milton Moses Ginsberg’s The Werewolf of Washington (1973), one of the top aides to the President of the United States travels abroad and a werewolf bites him. As expected, the moon becomes full and he turns into a werewolf at the most inopportune times—like during an international peace summit. In Bert I. Gordon’s Village of the Giants (1965), a group of teenagers discover a magic growth potion. Once several of the teenagers become giants,
they decide to spend excruciating long periods of time dancing to beach party music. I cannot say much about John De Bello’s *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* (1978) that the title does not describe already. The reader should note that *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians* fits under this first cause of unsuccessful comedy as well.

The second cause of an unsuccessful comedy is an attempt to nearly imitate the styles of successful comedies or of successful comic performers, which can only result in just a poor copy. Instead of finding their own original style, these performers can do nothing but disappoint us and make us want to see the actual performer that they imitate even more. In William Beaudine’s *Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla* (1952), the two lead performers Duke Mitchell and Sammy Petrillo try to imitate Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis (discussed in more detail later). Duke Mitchell does not sing as well as Dean Martin and Sammy Petrillo is not as funny as Jerry Lewis, but somehow the filmmakers thought they could lull audiences into believing that they were watching Martin and Lewis. It did not work. Allan Dwan’s *The Gorilla* (1939) features the three Ritz Brothers, who imitate The Three Stooges. Literally every gag in the picture is a recycled Three Stooges gag. The result of the imitations in both pictures is that the viewer feels cheated. One will also note that both these films could also fit in the first category of preposterous scenarios. *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* also features a poor imitation, as the reader will shortly see, reminding the reader that a poor comedy can follow more than one cause of unsuccessful comedy.

As may be the case for many dramatic films failing, the third cause of an unsuccessful film comedy is the spawning of too many sequels. Often a comedy series finds a formula that works quite well, and for more than one picture. But at some point,
the formula simply becomes old and tired; few filmmakers at this point seem to recognize when it is time to throw in the towel. In 1949, The Marx Brothers starred in *Love Happy* (David Miller), their last and worst-reviewed film. It was their thirteenth feature film (IMDb). Before he brought the world *Hillbillies in a Haunted House* (1967), Jean Yarbrough worked with Abbott and Costello on *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1952), their twenty-ninth feature film (IMDb), that is considered by most film reviewers to be their worst. But apparently some people never learn, as the duo went on to make seven more feature films together. Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were one of the most popular comedy teams of the 1950s and influenced other comedians, as mentioned above. The duo starred in sixteen feature films together (IMDb). Their penultimate attempt, *Pardners* (Norman Taurog 1956), a Western spoof, is considered by most critics to be their worst. They made one more picture together before attempting various solo ventures. Two other big names in the entertainment business, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby starred in a series of comedies from the early 1940s through the early 1950s, now know as the *Road* series because each title began with “Road to…” Their last picture *Road To Hong Kong* (Norman Panama 1962) came ten years after the previous installment in the series (IMDb). Most critics agree that the series should have ended with the previous film in 1952. The reader may have noticed that several of the comedy teams listed under this third cause of unsuccessful comedy specialized in musical comedies, however, I feel that the particular sequels that I have cited above fall into the category of comedy films with musical interludes and fit within the parameters of my study. In England, a series of comedies, known as the *Carry On* series because of its similar title scheme to the *Road* series, were highly popular for quite a few years. The
series consisted of thirty-one pictures released from 1958-1978, with one additional picture appearing in 1992. Film reviewers contend that *Carry On England* (Gerald Thomas 1976), the twenty-eighth installment in the series is the worst. The only way I can describe the picture is that it feels like the writers simply ran out of ideas. The whole thing feels worn out and all the gags fail—they are just not funny. As I said above, each one of these series began as a great idea, but once studios recognize it as a successful formula, they wish to capitalize on the financial prospects alone, ultimately ringing the series dry.

**Production**

Producer Paul L. Jacobson came from a television background. Most notably, he worked on the popular “Howdy Doody” television show (Miller). *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians* “was a first-and-only picture by a would-be producer trying to break in to the potentially lucrative market of children’s films” (Miller). Apparently, the idea for the narrative was an original inspiration of Jacobson. Director Nicholas Webster had little experience directing. As critic Samantha Miller describes it:

As an all-ages film, *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians* faces a basic problem: the combined experience of the producer (working on his first and only film), the director (who had previously only filmed a stage play), and the actors (most of whom had primarily stage experience) could not serve up a suitably compelling cinematic experience, and even a matinee audience of kids deserves to see something cinematic rather than stiff and stagey, particularly when the genre is science fiction and fantasy (Miller).

As Miller noted above, most of the performers came from various stage productions in the New York City area. John Call who plays Santa Claus had a small part in the musical *Oliver!*, while Bill McCutcheon, who plays Dropo, had some experience in children’s television (Miller). The performer that most people talk about today is Pia Zadora
(Girmar, the little Martian girl), who went on to appear in many more B-movies and became somewhat of a cult icon and sex symbol. According to the Internet Movie Database, “Most of the film was shot in an abandoned aircraft hangar on Long Island, New York”. The Martian ray guns that look like hair dryers were apparently “painted Whammo Air Blasters” (Miller). Eventually, Embassy Pictures agreed to distribute the film (Miller). Besides these effects of its limited budget, the telltale sign of an inexperienced or perhaps oblivious filmmaker is the fact that actors mess up their lines and acknowledge it in their faces—something that would clearly indicate an additional take is needed, yet a filmmaker like Webster still found the performance passable and thereby made it so that the finished product could be nothing more than merely passable. The reader also should consider how the producer, director, and performers’ lack of experience with the medium of film highlights not only how different stage or (the then-young medium of) television presentation differs from film, but also how one must present the comedy differently as well.

**The Film**

Just from the opening title, the viewer approaches *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians* expecting to laugh—but a laugh at the expense of everything that the filmmakers did not expect to elicit laughter. The filmmakers clearly target their young viewers by not only having the theme song “Hooray For Santy Claus” (0-2) performed solely by children, but also by introducing us to our protagonist through the aid of KIDTV (2). The first verbal gags in the movie are nothing but pathetic as Andy Henderson, reporter for KIDTV, delivers a slew of cold jokes in reference to the North
Pole. At 4 minutes in, the viewer is introduced to Mrs. Claus, who fills the stereotype of nagging wife (see Chapter II). She is so annoying to Santa (and to the viewer) that when she gets stunned by the Martians, Santa remarks “I can’t recall a time when you were so silent for so long” (39), a remark that Groucho Marx, who would have been quite familiar to the filmmakers due to his television work, might have made had he and Margaret Dumont played Santa and Mrs. Claus.

Once the narrative shifts to Mars, the quality seems to go even further downhill. The names of the Martian family, Kimar, Momar, Bomar, and Girmar almost seem as if the filmmakers took the words ‘king’, ‘mom’, ‘boy’, and ‘girl’ and simply put a ‘-mar’ on the end to create exotic names. Another equally uncreative name is for a Martian month, Septober (12), which sounds quite similar to what would occur if one combined the words September and October! The character Dropo’s name (6), sounds like a clown’s name—or perhaps the name of a long-lost Marx Brother. Perhaps, using a clown name was the filmmakers’ way of indicating that the viewer should find Dropo funny, the type of gimmick that Howard Hawks warned against in comedy filmmaking (see Chapter 3.4) However, Dropo is not funny; he is annoying. His verbal gags do not even make sense, “I’ve been having trouble sleeping. I forgot how. So I was just practicing!” (7). Santa, on the other hand, is a true comic hero, exemplifying the quality of absentmindedness straight from the Principle of Comic Sense, as he only realizes the true nature of his predicament once he has arrived on Mars and the Martians explain that he will never return to Earth (57), to which he exclaims “Ho! Ho! Ho!”, as if to say “is that so?”.

I feel that one of worst flaws of this picture is that the performers try so hard—far too hard. Kimar (Leonard Hicks), the Martian leader is so serious (except for two brief
moments: when he smiles [1:00] and when he laughs [1:17]) and seems to be chronically miffed. The character Chochum (Carl Don, 12), the ancient seer, is so outrageously frail that the scene becomes a farce, when the filmmakers did not intend it to be. Donna Conforti’s performance as Betty may be one of the worst in film history. Judging by her age, I would assume that she was unable to read her lines, but she recites every line at such an unnatural pace that it seems like she is reading each one. On top of that, most of what Betty says is a complaint and a major understatement. For example, she states, “I’m cold” (32) as she wanders around the North Pole in a skirt. *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians* follows the old B-Movie trick of liberal use of stock footage, a practice I noted in my analysis of *Duck Soup*. The footage shows the military pursuing the Martians at four separate cutaways (18, 22, 25, 41), sometimes even repeating the same footage!

As all comedy borrows the conventions of other genres, the best of low-budget Science Fiction appears in the sequence at the North Pole when the Martians arrive to capture Santa (30-40). I find it absolutely hilarious, but I have never been able to tell if the filmmakers had intended it to be so. The biggest issue that I have with this sequence is that the Martians are too serious about capturing Santa (30). They want to be sure that the operation is covert and efficient. But unlike the serious nature of Buster Keaton, for example, who used his straight face for comic effect, it is never clear if the performers are acting in the same manner, or if they truly believe that the idea of kidnapping Santa is a somber situation. Beyond the performances are still more borrowed conventions from Science Fiction. For example, a picture of this caliber could not show the North Pole without including at least one polar bear (33). However, this polar bear is obviously a performer crawling on all fours, with a white shag rug draped over him, and with a
disproportionately large head. Unfortunately, Billy and Betty’s troubles are not over once they escape from the polar bear, because they run into the Martian’s robot, Torg (35). Torg is quite possibly the finest amalgamation of cardboard boxes, PVC piping, and Duct Tape ever assembled. The fact that the Martians have to repeatedly yell every voice command for Torg makes the situation that much more entertaining. The most ridiculous part of the entire picture is when the Martians storm Santa’s workshop and tell him to “come along quietly” (39), as if they expected anything else from him. Displaying the Principle of Comic Sense, Santa appears quite naïve and seems to welcome the Martians’ invitation to travel to Mars. Once Santa is captured, the NASA consultant that appears on the television fills every stereotype of the Wernher von Braun-type German émigré scientist of the space age.

Two scenes in this picture are in the style of popular television comedy of the time. First, when Kimar and the evil Voldar (Vincent Beck) fight (49), it is so similar in style to the campy “Batman” television series from later that decade, that very much followed the style of the comic books and pop art of the period. However it is important to note that the basic idea of camp—a specific quality of humor that I do not have the space to describe in detail—is that it is made to appear sloppy. With this picture however, I do not believe this result is intentional. In a similar scene, when Santa and the children arrive on the control deck (55), the gentle, music box sounding music is very reminiscent to that of the “Shari Lewis Show”, which premiered in 1960, and that of “Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood”, which would premiere later in the decade.

As I stated above, the true low-quality of the filmmaking appears in the failed verbal interactions between characters. Some of the greatest of these verbal interactions
occur between the Earth children and the Martian parents—especially when the children clearly mess up lines and the adult actors struggle to continue with their own lines (1:01). When Voldar and his two ignorant henchmen break into Santa’s workshop on Mars (1:04), it is an imitation of the Three Stooges—an imitation that is characteristic of poor comedies, as I stated above. The ending is quite fulfilling, as Voldar ends up crying when the children outwit him (1:16). In a circular fashion, the picture ends with Santa and the children returning to Earth, and the viewer hears the joyous strains of “Hooray For Santy Claus” once more (1:18).

Reception

The filmmakers and distributors attempted to market the film specifically to children, but even with that the film failed at the box office (Miller). Despite its notorious reputation, not all the reviews of Santa Claus Conquers the Martians were poor. It is important to realize, however, that these positive reviews illuminate a common assumption among critics—that a poor comedy picture is acceptable as long as the intended audience is children, an opinion which I personally cannot understand. Howard Thompson of the New York Times found the film to be “aimed straight at the very small fry, who probably will eat it up”, and considered it to be passable for a children’s movie, but he adds:

Mr. Jacobson’s economical production and Nicholas Webster’s direction, not to mention the very broad acting, make the picture seem like a children’s television show enlarged on movie house screens.”All this trouble for a fat man in a red suit,” growls one Martian, and a couple more lines like this might have wrecked the picture.
Boxoffice Magazine echoed Thompson and said that “The small town and neighborhood exhibitors’ cry that few pictures are being made for youthful audiences is answered by” Santa Claus Conquers The Martians. The reviewer adds “the picture will have strong appeal to the tots and the younger teenagers although a lobby sign with ‘No One Admitted OVER 16 Years of Age” might be appropriate, for most adult patrons are likely to find it overly saccharine and nonsensical”. Notice how apologetic both reviews are for the picture, especially noticeable when Thompson uses the sensitive term “economical” instead of a more overt term like “cheap” or “low-budget”. What bothers me the most about these critics’ assumptions is that they clearly feel that children are too ignorant to know when something is not deserving of their attention. To refute their claim, I would like to present the fact that some of the most successful “children’s” pictures are the animated Disney features and the live-action Muppet pictures, which adults are still able to revisit and appreciate decades after they first saw them as a child—and perhaps sometimes appreciate them more. It may be that the critics’ shortcomings in their ability to approach comedy are related to their inability to gauge what makes a quality picture for children.

What is most interesting is that recent reviews do not focus on it as a children’s picture, but as the cult classic that it has become. The most positive review from recent years that I could find, written by Jeffrey M. Anderson of Combustible Celluloid, gave the picture 3 out of 4 stars, mostly for its nostalgia value:

What holiday would be complete without it? This bad sci-fi classic—complete with little Pia Zadora as Girmar the Martian and a cheesy holiday song (“Hooray for Santy Claus!”)—is currently available (appropriately) on several budget DVDs.
His statement brings attention to the impact of the affordable home video on these low-quality comedies for which one would not want to spend much. In 2000, Nick Cramp of the BBC said, “Some films are merely bad. Others are enjoyably bad. Some films are so bad that watching them is physically painful. Santa Claus Conquers the Martians is one such special case”. He elaborates on this statement, “The plot, such as it is, proves it is possible to insult the intelligence of a three-year-old…. Scripting, acting, production values, and plot are universally risible”, supporting the argument about children’s pictures that I made above. Py Thomas of eFilmCritic.Com commented “I guess it seemed like a good idea at the time” but adds that the picture “is a fruitcake of a stinker”. Notice the particular vocabulary that he uses, “fruitcake” and “stinker”, and how it becomes part of a specific critical language for the criticism of poor comedy. Jake Euker of Filmcritic.com said “The fact is that Santa Claus Conquers the Martians is just too stupid—not stupid in the Ed Wood way, but exasperatingly, tediously stupid—to view in a single sitting”. He sums up the critical consensus quite well:

The plot is deadly, but it’s the filmmaking that really eviscerates Santa Claus Conquers the Martians. It’s shot in that hopeless, bad filmmaking style in which nothing flows naturally or at any time feels organic or unplanned. In Santa Claus Conquers the Martians, characters walk into scenes and stand, deliver their lines, wait, and then exit or maybe give another line. While not speaking they stand stock still or woodenly ‘interact,’ and conversations are punctuated by little pauses between speech that give the action the delayed, artificial rhythm of a trans-Atlantic phone call.

In 2011, Anthony De Valle of the Las Vegas Review-Journal mentioned a local stage adaption of the picture and stated “The 1964 Grade Z movie… is ripe for parody, in an Ed Wood sort of way”, alluding to the same situation that Mel Brook’s faced with Young Frankenstein (1974) when he parodied the original Universal series that was humorous in its own right.
Legacy

As I mentioned above, producer Jacobson (fortunately) never again tried his hand at a motion picture. Director Webster however went on to direct several more science fiction pictures throughout the next decade (Miller). Earlier that year, Stanley Kubrick used some of the same stock footage for the opening titles of Dr. Strangelove (IMDb), which is most likely a coincidence from using the same stock footage library. A recent poll on ticket site Fandango.com revealed that its customers consider Santa Claus Conquers The Martians to be the worst Christmas movie of all time (Chicago Tribune). The film has the dubious honor (?) of appearing not only in Harry Medved and Randy Dreyfuss’ The 50 Worst Films of All Time, but also in “Golden Raspberry Award founder John Wilson’s book THE OFFICIAL RAZZIE® MOVIE GUIDE” (IMDb). The picture went from a box office bomb to B-movie classic due to several reasons, all closely related to the developing popularity of camp humor in the late 1960s that I addressed above. Although a cousin of parody—the comic style of camp is comparable—camp does not require an original source to mock nor rely on the viewer’s knowledge of that which is mocked.

The first reason for Santa Claus Conquers The Martians’ rise to popular and critical attention is that cinema owners began to show it on an annual basis during the holiday season. Second, television stations began showing it regularly. Third, and perhaps most significantly, the popular television program “Mystery Science Theater 3000” featured it in an episode and brought attention to the film into the mainstream media. Many other cult television shows followed suit. Recently, the picture “fell into the Public Domain” (Miller), making it affordable for television stations and cinemas to
present it, for DVD manufacturers to distribute it, and for fans to share it online. In 2011, USA Today columnist Susan Wloszcyna wrote about the many bad portrayals of Santa Claus in motion pictures and considered this particular one to be the worst, “movies have few compelling portraits in red felt. The big guy even suffers the indignity of being upstaged by a young Pia Zadora in that nutty slice of outer-space fruitcake”, note that she uses the same “fruitcake” term that Py Thomas of eFilmCritic.com used above. Recently, Entertainment Weekly called it “The best bad movie Ed Wood never directed, this antidote to all those Xmas classics clogging up the schedule is as stinky as they say, down to and including the insane theme song”. No matter how low-caliber this picture may be, no one can argue that it is not highly entertaining from beginning to end.

To examine the reviewers’ foci and how they describe their foci, we find two themes—completely based on when the reviews were written. The earliest reviews simply find it forgivable because it had been marketed for children (“very small fry” and “tots”), describing it in apologetic terms like “economical” and “broad acting”. The reviews from more recent years all focus on the film as a cult classic that is enjoyable simply because it is so bad. Out of these recent reviews, we see the clear emergence of the vocabulary used by reviewers, both professional and amateur, that have become part of the trend of reviewing poor films, a trend that has spread rapidly since the accessibility of the internet made it possible for worldwide communities of these reviewers to form. Among these terms are “bad sci-fi classic”, “cheesy”, “physically painful”, “risible”, “fruitcake”, “stinker”, “stupid”, “deadly” “ripe for parody”, “exasperating”, “hopeless”, “tedious”, “woodenly”, and “bad”. We see the terms in these reviews could apply to bad
dramas as well as to bad comedies, not really giving us any specific insight into the quality of the comedy.

Poor comedies, like *Santa Claus Conquers the Martians*, and the others profiled in this section have a greater impact on the esteem of film comedy in general than one would think. As I said in the section about sequels, filmmakers and distributors will keep producing comedies of little aesthetic value, as long as the products turn out to be profitable. The result is of course, that for every one excellent example of film comedy, we may find nine poor examples. Of course, every genre from Western to Science Fiction has its high points and low points, but bad comedies seem to remain in the viewer’s mind much longer than a bad drama, because of the effects of the memorable flaws of preposterous scenarios, imitations of A-list comedians or comic styles, and too many sequels. Consider how these three flaws almost go against the Principles of Comic Effect and the common conventions that we have found throughout many film comedies. A preposterous scenario never demonstrates the narrative/gag balance necessary in a quality comedy because the entire narrative seems to be a gag. The imitation of familiar comic performers leaves no room for the Principle of Comic Timing, because there is no element of the surprise—nothing that the comic performers do is unexpected—in fact, it is all quite predictable. The same is true for the existence of too many sequels; the Comic Timing is lost because the viewer can predict everything that can unfold within the tired formula.

A fourth and final reason why bad comedies seem to have much more of a cultural and critical impact than a bad drama is the fact that a lack of pathos in a tragedy can be forgivable, while a lack of comic moments in a comedy cannot be so. Often in a
tragedy, the flow of the narrative is the primary element, and beyond that, many scholars still debate what Aristotle considered to be necessary pathos when he stated that a tragedy required pathos (Rees 2). Because of these facts, I argue that one would not detest a tragedy that does not make one cry as much as one would detest a comedy that does not make one laugh. Consider that a viewer may be willing to sit through a poor drama, assuming that there must be something that she or he simply does not comprehend, or perhaps the drama may have an interesting narrative without causing a release of emotions. Laughter, on the other hand, is a natural instinct, and does not need a narrative to prepare it. One immediately feels the emotional disappointment of going to a comedy as soon as she or he does not laugh, and no one wants to experience this disappointment. It is the wish to avoid this uncomfortable emotional disappointment that contributes to viewers and critics’ wishes to avoid comedy. The emotional impact of suffering through a poorly constructed comedy is so memorable that many critics and viewers have an inherent aversion to comedy of any caliber of which they are not even aware.
Why Is There No Woody Allen Case Study?

At some point during the course of this thesis, the reader might have wondered why I have not chosen a Woody Allen comedy as a case study. I admit that many film historians declare him to be one of the greatest comic filmmakers of the late Twentieth Century. I acknowledge that he has had several critical and commercial successes in the field of comedy. However, I also argue that the statements that some scholars make about his work are not entirely accurate. In my research, I have encountered the same argument from several scholars, which is that Allen validated film comedy when he won the Best Directing and Best Picture Academy Awards for *Annie Hall* (1977). While, as I have shown in this study, it is quite rare for a comedy to win an Academy Award, to describe it as a singular achievement for film comedy ignores so many of the comic filmmakers that preceded him and influenced him.

Consider the two films that film historians contend are his most significant, *Annie Hall* (1977), followed by *Manhattan* (1979), “Allen’s most commercially and critically acclaimed film” (Dixon and Foster 360). Film scholar Virginia Wexman describes *Annie Hall* (1977) as containing “a highly personal brand of humor” (339), which characterizes how I approach it as well. Personally, I see *Manhattan* (1979) as *Annie Hall: Part II*. Diane Keaton seems to play more or less the same quirky, risk-taking character and in both films, Woody Allen plays Woody Allen: an odd-looking, neurotic, middle-aged, fatalistic, depressed, Jewish man living in New York City. Besides the obvious color to black and white cinematography difference, I cannot see any evidence of artistic growth or experimentation between these two films that one would expect to see from someone who is so praised by scholars.
As for *Annie Hall* (1977), I can appreciate the quality of the sharp (albeit morbid) writing, that the role of Annie Hall is the definitive role of Keaton’s career, and Allen’s distinctive worldview. Still, I cannot understand how the film was awarded Best Picture and Best Directing. Granted, the 50th Academy Awards were held twelve years before I was born, but from my perspective nearly 35 years after, I cannot see how Allen’s picture received Best Picture, when *Star Wars* (George Lucas) did not. Personal tastes aside, *Star Wars* literally made the Science Fiction subgenre a legitimate, A-list attraction that now had the potential to earn critical recognition, and it helped to define the Blockbuster as we know it today (whether a good or bad phenomenon, it is culturally significant). What confuses me further is how Allen received Best Directing not only over George Lucas, but also over Steven Spielberg (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*—one of his top five most critically acclaimed films [*Rottentomatoes.com*])—who is perhaps the most critically acclaimed director of the past four decades.

I think the biggest issue that I have with both *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan* is the fact that Allen’s characters do not fit the role of comic heroes very well. The great comic heroes, many of which I profile in this study, are genuine, relatable, and fill the viewer with hope—as they have clear flaws, yet they continue to exist with a sense of joy despite their shortcomings. Alvy Singer or Isaac Davis, as the case may be, is a complainer. As I stated above, he is so specific to Woody Allen that it is very difficult for most viewers to relate to him. Instead of celebrating his flaws, as the true comic hero does, he portrays a sense of fatalistic, learned helplessness and complains about everything. By the time Annie Hall leaves him, it is difficult for the viewer to empathize with him—on the contrary, we wish that we could leave him too.
The final point that I would like to make concerning Woody Allen is the phenomenon of his generation-specific audience. He became popular with my parents’ generation, the Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) in the early 1970s. However, his attempt to channel Bergman and his bizarre personal life caused his audience to drop off considerably in the 1980s. Today, it is impossible for Baby Boomers to think of Woody Allen without considering his personal life. *Manhattan* (1979), in which forty-something Isaac Davis dates an eighteen-year old girl, is as much a terrifying foreshadowing of Allen’s future, as it is a comedy. With his popularity fading in the 1980s and with the audience made of Baby Boomers turning away from him, my generation (born mid 1980s to late 1990s) never encountered Woody Allen’s pictures. The result of this situation in the critical world is that the vast majority of scholars who highly praise Woody Allen today are Baby Boomers who saw his 1970s films when they first premiered, and as scholars, are more equipped to look beyond the stigma of his personal life. This lack of longevity in the critical and commercial impact of Allen’s films is in contrast to the other films that I have included as case studies. It is for the combination of all the reasons stated above that I have refrained from including any Woody Allen picture as a case study.
IV. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

“One excellent test of the civilization of a country... I take to be the flourishing of the comic idea and comedy” (Meredith 47)

Before I present my conclusion, I wish to address the major points of film comedy that scholars discuss, adding to this list of commonalities that I originally presented in Chapter I: comedy goes against established film conventions, comedy is a struggle between limiters and disruptions, comedy is a necessary part of humanity, and that a true film comedy contains visual and auditory gags, as well as comic situations. After I have identified the additional recurring threads, I shall address two arguments that I have encountered from scholars as to why they believe film comedy is critically underappreciated. Each thread presents a reason why critics and scholars have such a difficult time approaching comedy. The reader should also remember what I stated in the last case study, that poor examples of film comedy help to make all film comedy appear unappealing to film reviewers and audiences. Through following the Four Principles of Comic Effect, first defined in Chapter I and acknowledging the common threads that recur across comedies, one can begin to construct a critical sense of and a critical language for the use of discussing film comedy.

Gags vs. Narrative

One common discussion across a lot of research into comedy is the relationship between the narrative and the gag, “Most work on gags... suggests a fundamental tension within most comic texts between our interest in narrative and our interest in gags and humor” (Karnick and Jenkins 79). When analyzing comedy, film scholar Don Crafton
sees gags as things that “disrupt an original stasis while the narrative seeks to contain and limit the disruption in order to regain the original equilibrium” (82), while film scholar Tom Gunning disagrees, arguing that gags are “what set the narrative into motion and what delay its potential resolution” (Karnick and Jenkins 82). Note that film scholars Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins use the term “potential resolution” (italics mine), indicating as I have said in Chapter III, that a comic narrative does not require a resolution as a dramatic one would. The comic filmmaker may choose to emphasize gags over the narrative, as film scholar Henry Jenkins explains, “Gags, unlike other narrative details, are never invisible, never function quietly, but always demand our attention, even at the expense of other aspects of narrative comprehension” (85) and it is this overt presentation of gags that makes a film a comedy, for as I have said before, a comic film requires visual and verbal gags.

The simplified manner of classification, to approach narrative as plot and gag as interruption, ignores the intricacies of both. Just as the working definition of comedy follows the Principles of Comic Effect, and not an overall scheme or structure, “There can be no concrete definition of a gag because it is marked by affective response, not set forms or clear logic…. The gag may also contain its own microscopic narrative system that may be irrelevant to the larger narrative, may mirror it, or may even work against it as parody” (Crafton 109). I agree with the view of many scholars that the gag/narrative relationship is a symbiotic one. The narrative serves to present the gags, just as the gags serve to convey the comic heroes, “gags become absorbed into the narrative economy of most films, marking perhaps an excess, but an excess that is necessary to the film’s process of containment” (Gunning “Pie and Chase” 121). Earlier in his discussion film
comedy, Gunning describes a gag as “an elementary building block of narrative, one which could be expanded, and therefore a direct ancestor of later classical narrative film” (“Crazy Machines” 95) that may be “intricately worked into comic personas (as in films of Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd and later Jerry Lewis)” (97). Just looking at two of the preceding case studies, *City Lights* (1931) and *10* (1979), we see that the gags serve to establish the personality and motivations of the comic heroes, The Little Tramp and George Webber.

Many film scholars have written about comedy as a delicate balance between the urge to break out of the narrative and the forces that seek to limit and to contain the gags within the narrative:

One way to look at narrative is to see it as a system for providing the spectator with sufficient knowledge to make casual links between represented events. According to this view, the gag’s status as an irreconcilable difference becomes clear. Rather than providing knowledge, slapstick misdirects the viewer’s attention, and obfuscates the linearity of cause-effect relations. Gags provide the opposite of epistememological comprehension by the spectator. They are atemporal bursts of violence and/or hedonism that are as ephemeral and as gratifying as the sight of someone’s pie-smitten face (Crafton 119).

No medium works so well to demonstrate the contrast between gag and narrative than film. No other art form has the ability to capture an aside to the extent that film does, for only with film, can the audience’s orientation to the subject literally change. Through the use of camera angle changes, cut-ins, and cut-aways, a filmmaker can bring the viewer to a totally unrelated shot.

Many such scholars believe that this conflict between gag and narrative is one of the leading causes for critics’ difficulty in approaching comedy, “It may be that the tendency to suppress the antinarrative elements of film history results from a hasty overclassicism of actual Hollywood output” (Crafton 119). CraftonF adds that when film
comedy became codified in the form of silent comedy, “spectacle ‘attraction’ was the primary characteristic; narrative was greatly diminished, if present at all” (119). A film reviewer that looks for a tight narrative, free of excess, as a sign of a quality film, will not be able to find that a comedy film follows that expectation. Likewise, closure at the end of the narrative or a clear change in the protagonists or in their situation is possible, yet not necessary in a comedy as it is in a non-comic narrative. *City Lights* (1931) ends in ambiguity, *The Ladykillers* (1955) ends as it begins, and the protagonists of *Some Like It Hot* (1959) remain unchanged. In order to properly analyze a comedy, one must not focus on either the narrative or the gags, but rather how the relationship between them functions in the film.

**Comedy and Taboo**

Film comedy’s ability to challenge established conventions of filmmaking parallels its principle to go against the conventions of proper society and social interaction, “comedy’s antiauthoritarianism… breaks taboos and expresses those impulses which are always outside social norms” (Rowe 43). This exploration into taboo subjects sometimes comes in expressions of The Seven Deadly Sins, not to promote them, but to acknowledge that every person is equally vulnerable to these forbidden desires. Comedy not only addresses these certain socio-cultural taboo, it embraces them. Freud argued that comedy is so appealing for this reason:

comedy is a process of safeguarding pleasure against the denials of reason, which is wary of pleasure. Man cannot live by reason alone or forever under the rod of moral obligation…. From its earliest days comedy is an essential pleasure mechanism valuable to the spectator and the society in which he lives. Comedy is a momentary and publicly useful resistance to authority and an escape from its pressures (Sypher 241-242).
Freud also suggested “a person telling a joke which takes as its butt an individual or human type is expressing aggression towards that individual or group in a socially acceptable form” (Curry 228). Comedy allows the performer to express what the viewer may personally feel, but dare not say out loud. A critic particularly faces difficulty when trying to determine if a comedy film is socially and culturally significant when the comedy not only purposefully goes against the conventions of filmmaking but also the conventions of society. Also, if the critic fails to recognize the semiological codes, or symbols, with which the comedy expresses taboo, she will not be able to properly analyze their import to the nature of the film and to the film’s cultural and historical significance.

**Women, Minorities, and Identity**

By opening up taboo, comedy has the ability to liberate. For the first half of the Twentieth Century, issues of identity—gender roles, ethnicity, and sexuality—appeared openly in the genre of comedy. Only by the 1960s, did these topics appear in non-comic pictures, but the comic sense of shock and voyeurism was never lost.

Out of every film genre, women performers and characters found their greatest prominence in the realm of comedy, but not until the sound film. While scholars often call the silent features of Mary Pickford comedies, they take more from the subgenre of melodrama, with comic elements added. Unlike silent male comedians like Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon, no comedienettes seem to stand out in the pre-1930Ms primarily as a comedienne. If an actress was well known, it was for other reasons beyond her comic talents, “Humanist cultural criticism has neglected gender almost altogether in its studies of comedy” (Rowe 41). Before the
athleticism of Katharine Hepburn and the distinct physical mannerisms of Marilyn Monroe, the world of physical comedy was male-dominated. It was the advent of sound film—when film could exhibit the power of words as much as it could pratfalls—that women truly blossomed in comedy. The first superstar film comedienne would have to be Mae West, who was as well known for her overt sexuality as for her comic delivery.

Novelist George Meredith states:

comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it, on the side of sound sense. The higher the comedy, the more prominent the part they enjoy in it…. The heroines of comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted; they seem so to the sentimentally reared, only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot. Comedy is an exhibition of their battle with men, and that of men with them; and as the two, however divergent, both look on one object, namely, life, the gradual similarity of their impressions must bring them to some resemblance (14-15).

The complexities of male-female relationships reached its peak in the Screwball Comedies, in which the female protagonists were equal to, if not superior comic figures to their male counterparts, “there never will be civilization where comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality of the sexes” (Meredith 32). I truly believe that it is no accident that some of the Twentieth Century’s biggest stars were actresses that found great success in comedies. Consider the place of Katharine Hepburn, Audrey Hepburn, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, Barbara Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert, Ginger Rogers, Shirley Temple, Rita Hayworth, Lauren Bacall, Sophia Loren, Jean Harlow, and Carole Lombard in film scholarship as well as in the annals of pop culture, and remember that each one of these women had at least one major foray into the genre of film comedy (American Film Institute).
Some of the major explorations of the role of ethnicity in modern American society also have occurred in film comedy. Unfortunately, Black characters in comedy (at least until the 1970s with the success of Richard Pryor and later Eddie Murphy) played minor roles, often as the object for comedy instead of the instigator of comedy, “In keeping with racial stereotypes in other 1930s Hollywood films… lines in the banter … take the African-American characters as the butt of the joke, implying that they are lazy, ignorant or untrustworthy” (Curry 224). However, it is important to note that the role of Black characters in drama was no better. Although, the first publicly recognized achievement in film for an African American was Hattie McDaniel’s Best Supporting Actress Academy Award win for Gone with the Wind (1939), no Black performer held a lead role in a mainstream motion picture until Sammy Davis Jr. in the 1950s—of course the reader need recognize that Davis often played a comic lead in his films. In my research, the only positive portrayal of African Americans in roles that are superior to that of the roles of the White performers is the scene of the all-Black congregation in Sullivan’s Travels, of course, a comedy.

Although addressed by film scholars more than any ethnicity, the role of Black performers and characters in comedy are not the only minority performers that found prominence in the genre of comedy. Many of the major comic performers and filmmakers of the Twentieth Century are of Jewish heritage, including The Marx Brothers, Danny Kaye, Gene Wilder, Jerry Lewis, The Three Stooges, Mel Brooks, and Woody Allen. Of these Jewish comic filmmakers and performers, and more not included here, many used their ethnic identity as an inspiration for humor, most notably Mel Brooks and Woody Allen. Others, especially the Three Stooges and the Marx Brothers,
utilized Jewish humor but as part of a larger catalogue of gags, not as a focal point for the humor. One should note that the contrast between the two approaches is as much for historical reasons as it is for personal taste, as the former comedians worked in the second half of the Twentieth Century, whereas the latter comedians worked in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Often Jewish performers in the earlier decades of the century would deflect attention away from their own ethnicity by impersonating the stereotypes of other ethnicities. This trait can be seen most notably in the performance of Al Jolson in blackface for *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland 1927), and most pertinently for this study in the way that Chico Marx exemplifies the stereotypes of an Italian immigrant.

With the appearance of various ethnicities and their stereotypes in film comedy, the sound of speech from different backgrounds is also exploited in comedy. Consider for example that characters with accents are untrustworthy in *Duck Soup* (1933) and *Young Frankenstein* (1974, mocking the style of early horror). Note how later in the century, accents were not so much presented as threatening in comedy, but they were a source of humor—a case in point is Peter Sellers’ Inspector Clouseau, whose accent is so bizarre that even fellow Francophones cannot understand him. In a similar manner, the many accents represented in *Dr. Strangelove* (Kubrick 1964)—from Strangelove’s German to Ambassador Sadesky’s Russian—work as a verbal gag in their hindrance of communication and of understanding by way of the Principle of Comic Sense.

Perhaps more unique to comedy than either the roles of women or of ethnicity, would be the demonstration of sexuality beyond mainstream heterosexuality. For a good part of the century, the Production Code (earlier the Hays Code) and the Legion of Decency expressly forbid any serious film study of homosexuality or transgender, “Nor
was any hint of homosexuality (referred to in the Production Code as ‘sexual perversion’) to be allowed” (Curry 217). The only socially acceptable way to address these issues was in the least socially acceptable genre of film—comedy. Although many argue that the examples of homosexuality and transgender in comedy are offensive and only presented for laughs, one cannot deny that comedy filmmakers acknowledged that homosexual and transgender people not only existed, but also hinted that perhaps homosexuals and transgender people enjoyed living in the way that they did. Film comedy, as we have seen in comedies for millennia, has the power to challenge the common stereotypes of the time.

*The Other*

Sometimes going along with the above category, comic figures represent an outsider, one who looks in on the society but can never truly be a part of it, “The clown constitutes a liminal figure, existing on the edges of civilization and contesting its dictates; the clown resists the civilizing process, celebrating social transgression, fluid identity and bodily pleasure” (Karnick and Jenkins 156). Consider Chaplin’s Little Tramp who watches The Flower Girl through the window of her shop in the end of *City Lights* (1931). Harpo Marx seems to treat the world and other people as his playground. Ellie Andrews in *It Happened One Night* (1934) can never really feel comfortable in a lower class world. Sullivan will always be the wealthy observer who becomes trapped within a world of hoboes and convicts, while Joe and Jerry will never truly be women in an all-girl band. In *Young Frankenstein* (1974), the Creature’s greatest longing is to belong; George Webber in *10* (1979) yearns to be one of the young people, but his own personal tastes will always prevent that:
One of the strongest impulses comedy can discharge from the depths of the social self is our hatred of the ‘alien,’ especially when the stranger who is ‘different’ stirs any unconscious doubt about our own beliefs. Then the comedian unerringly finds his audience, the solid majority, itself a silent prey to unrecognized fears…. Wherever comedy serves as a public defense mechanism, it makes all of us hypocrites: we try to laugh our doubts out of existence (Sypher 242).

The comic figure takes individuality to the extreme, and fulfills the viewer’s wish to have the strength to resist social etiquette.

With individuality, another topic explored through comic characters is alienation. The exploration of loneliness and alienation in various art forms has existed for centuries, but many scholars describe the distinctive ways in which alienation appeared in art of the Twentieth Century. As I stated in Chapter II, artists have a choice whether to follow the pattern of an existing style or to go against the existing style. Several scholars will argue that this consciousness drives how many artists in the Twentieth Century approach the idea of alienation and individuality:

what makes the modern period unprecedented is the fact that this time, in nearly every category, the old reality has not been replaced by something equally substantial, accessible, and satisfying. It has been replaced by a question in many instances, and by a negation in others…. There is nothing in cultural history comparable to the scale and speed of the 20th-century withdrawal from familiar certainties (McMullen 15).

Scholar Roy McMullen describes the Twentieth Century artist’s tendency “Not so much to use history as to escape from it” (19). He adds, “It is not uncommon for people to feel obscurely that the various strands in the 20th-century cultural pattern, the various arts included, go better with each other than each does with its own previous history” (14).

When speaking about the relation of art to alienation in the Twentieth Century, many philosophers, like Herbert Marcuse, speak of “art as alienation” (Reitz 22), while at other
times it may be seen as “a major political, economic, and philosophical weapon against alienation” (Reitz 67). McMullen argues that:

1900 is a convenient, round date, useful for dramatizing the important fact that we are now living in a new cultural period, one that is as distinct and all-embracing as the Gothic and Renaissance periods that preceded it in the West—although much more complex and geographically extensive (14).

I believe that it is no coincidence that a different view of isolation and alienation formed during the first century of the motion picture. The archival nature of film—the fact that one can experience a motion picture alone and in private encourages alienation from others. McMullen describes this phenomenon as:

the ‘privatization’ of art…. The drama and ballet are flourishing in their public forms, but both are now frequently viewed by a television audience of millions, in domestic privacy….Many people now prefer, even if they are reluctant to say so, the radio and records to public concerts and live opera. Symphonies are listened to as if they were privately preformed string quartets. The microphone has transformed the old music-hall song into an intimate ballad, for you alone (25).

The technology of the Twentieth Century allowed one to have an aesthetic experience without any interaction with another human being. As we have seen through the first decade of the Twenty First Century, a viewer can now access films alone on a computer, without any human contact needed to receive a film, just by clicking a link.

Dramatic films such as Bicycle Thieves (Vittorio De Sica 1948), On the Waterfront (Elia Kazan 1954), The 400 Blows (Francois Truffaut 1959), Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (Karel Reisz 1960), and The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner (Tony Richardson 1962) show alienation as the result of some form of inequality—whether social, economic, gender-related, age-related, or another form of it. In these pictures, the alienated protagonist is the victim of a social problem. In a contrasting way, comedy films show alienation as a source of power for the alienated
person—for the comic heroine, alienation is a choice. The separation from other people, and perhaps from society as a whole, is liberating for the comic character and is part of what makes the situation of The Other such a unique quality of film comedy and such a stumbling block for critics that try to approach comedy without understanding this quality.

Comedy and Tragedy

Throughout this study, I have elucidated the reasons why film comedy is unique, but what about its relationship to tragedy, the dramatic form with which it has been contrasted since the earliest Greek plays? In the Twentieth Century, many scholars have begun to examine the two forms not as contrary, but as complimentary, as film scholar Kathleen Rowe explains, “every comedy contains a potential tragedy. But every tragedy can also be seen as an incomplete comedy” (48). Litterateur Wylie Sypher declares:

Perhaps the most important discovery in modern criticism is the perception that comedy and tragedy are somehow akin, or that comedy can tell us many things about our situation even tragedy cannot. At the heart of the nineteenth century Dostoevsky discovered this, and Soren Kierkegaard spoke as a modern man when he wrote that the comic and tragic touch one another at the absolute point of infinity—at the extremes of human experience, that is (193-194). The existence of tragedy necessitates the existence of comedy and vice versa.

Philosopher Henri Bergson adds:

a comedy is far more like real life than a drama is. The more sublime the drama, the more profound the analysis to which the poet has had to subject the raw materials of daily life in order to obtain the tragic element in its unadulterated form. On the contrary, it is only in its lower aspects, in light comedy and farce, that comedy is in striking contrast to reality: the higher it rises, the more it approximates to life; in fact, there are scenes in real life so closely bordering on high-class comedy that the stage might adopt them without changing a single word (148-149).
Sypher adds, “the comic action touches experience at more points than tragic action” (206). The greatest contrast appears in the elicited audience reaction. Comedy expects one to laugh, while tragedy expects one to cry:

When we say, thus, that tragedy imitates a serious action, we mean that it imitates an action which it makes serious; and comparably, comedy imitates an action which it makes a matter for levity…. Comedy… removes concern by showing that it was absurd to think that there was ground for it. Tragedy endows with worth; comedy takes the worth away. Tragedy exhibits life as directed to important ends; comedy as either not directed to such ends, or unlikely to achieve them (Olson 35).

Literary critic Elder Olson goes on to argue that unlike tragedy, comedy needs the element of surprise (47)—once again reminding the reader of the Principle of Comic Timing.

Many scholars have studied the subtleties of the tragic hero against the comic hero, and I take from their research, and my own, one major point in regard to this contrast: the tragic heroine’s flaws are her undoing, while the comic hero celebrates his flaws, “the tragic poet is so careful to avoid anything calculated to attract attention to the material side of his heroes” (Bergson 94). Film scholar Frank Krutnik argues that the tragic hero has set the standard by which comic heroes must be judged, “The comedian figure deforms familiar conventions of film heroism, unified identity, and mature sexuality” (29). Here we find one of the fundamental errors of the existing criticism of film comedy: Just as one cannot judge an apple by how well it approximates an orange, one cannot judge a comic heroine by how well she follows the conventions of a tragic heroine. If a critic compares the opposing conventions of comedy and tragedy in order to determine which results in a superior product, one genre will have to lose out, and history has shown us that usually the losing genre is comedy. For example, it would sound
foolish to argue “Katharine Hepburn’s performance as Susan Vance in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) was a failure because it did not make me cry as much as Vivien Leigh’s performance as Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone With The Wind* (1939) did”, but this is exactly what film reviewers do in calling for sensibility and emotional depth in a performance regardless of whether the character or subject is comic or non-comic. I cannot understand the flawed logic of these critics and scholars when they fail to appreciate a comic hero because he does not “improve” as a human being, as one expects a dramatic hero to do. Recall how in the end of *Some Like It Hot*, our three main characters remain unchanged, and this lack of transformation is a completely acceptable way to end a comedy.

Shakespeare stated that the world is a stage. I go beyond that to state that life is a comedy:

> art can never have a greater value than life, for it is ultimately measured by the values of life. The values, then, are prior; and anyone who laughs, anyone who is moved in any way by the comic, proclaims them… so long as comedy and the comic are possible, so long will life and its values have meaning (Olson 128).

As Sullivan states at the end of his journey, “There’s a lot to be said for making people laugh. Did you know that that’s all some people have? It isn’t much, but it’s better than nothing in this cockeyed caravan”. Comedy is an expression of joy, a joy that makes life worth living.

**Contrasting Subgenres**

As I said in Chapter I, one of the greatest difficulties that anyone who wishes to approach comedy will face is how comedy film encompasses so many, sometimes contrasting subgenres. In the ten case studies alone, the reader experienced romantic
comedy, slapstick comedy, anarchic comedy, Screwball comedy, British comedy, sex comedy, and parody. What succeeds in one subgenre could fail in another. An Anarchic Comedy, like *Duck Soup* (1933), or a parody, like *Young Frankenstein* (1974), could not work with the particular conventions of the Romantic Comedy subgenre. As I said in Chapter I, non-comic pictures fall into many distinct subgenres as well, but scholars and critics do not seem to expect one dramatic subgenre to follow the conventions of another, as they seem to expect when analyzing comedy. The comedy film as a concept is abstract. One cannot possibly consider all variables involved in film comedy at any one time. To complicate the matter further, comic subgenres are unruly; they are not self-contained units in themselves, but rather are flexible and influence each other and cross genres.

By focusing on the comic character, one is able to find two traits that are common among all film comedy. First, as film scholars Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins argue throughout their book *Classical Hollywood Comedy*, all comic heroes deal with issues of identity. For some, like Sullivan, it is a conscious exploration of self, while for others, like George Webber, a discovery of identity happens by accident. Second, someone is always in control of the comedy. This control may be part of the film as we see with Groucho Marx or Chaplin, or it may be clear that an outside force—the filmmaker—controls the comedy at all times, as we see with the comedies of Wilder or Capra. Although these two traits will be expressed in a different way depending on the film, they exist in some form or another in every example of film comedy.

The first six sections in this chapter represent the existing scholarship that I have accepted and my own personal insights. The following two points are those proposed by
scholars as possible reasons for critics overlooking comedy that through my research and discoveries, I have found reasons to refute.

**Debated Argument #1: Low and High Comedy**

Since the first comedies, scholars have attempted to define low comedy and high comedy and the contrasts between them. The most basic definition of low comedy that I could find comes from Wylie Sypher, “At the bottom of the comic scale—where the human becomes nearly indistinguishable from the animal and where the vibration of laughter is longest and loudest—is the ‘dirty’ joke or the ‘dirty’ gesture” (208-209). Sypher also presents an adequate definition of high comedy, “characters realized in depth stand at the threshold of ‘high’ comedy, which is really a transformation of comedy of manners. Whenever a society becomes self-conscious about its opinions, codes, or etiquette, comedy of manners may serve as a sort of philosophic engine called ‘comedy of ideas’” (211-212). Many writers on comedy consider comedy of manners and high comedy to be synonymous.

Several scholars will use the plays of Shakespeare as examples of low or high comedy, but it is also within these plays that we see that there is no clear line separating the two. In *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, Henri Bergson claims that something becomes high comedy the more true to life it becomes. However, Sypher cites the character of Falstaff to disagree with Bergson’s statement:

> at the basest level of his ‘low’ comedy, Falstaff ventures to address himself directly to us, making us doubt Bergson’s opinion that only ‘high’ comedy is close to life. Indeed, Falstaff shows how narrow the margin sometimes is between high and low comedy, for he was doubtless born a comic machine of a very low order—the *miles gloriosus*—yet as if by a leap he traverses the whole
Some scholars will argue against two separate forms of comedy having any difference at all, “Ordinarily we refer to ‘high’ and ‘low’ comedy; but we cannot speak of ‘low’ tragedy. All tragedy ought to be ‘high’…. as tragedy falls away from its ‘high’ plane it tends to become something else than tragedy” (Sypher 206-207), instead becoming melodrama.

Some scholars will argue that film reviewers only recognize high comedy while they scorn low comedy. This argument, however, is simply not true if one thinks of high and low comedy as it exists in the medium of film. High comedy exists at an intellectual level of social assessment and interpersonal exchanges (dialogue driven for sound films, but present in the silent films as gestures and expressions), existing in the realm of ideas. Low comedy is almost always physical or speaks of physical things, acts, and behaviors. Low comedy plays with patterns and repetition, existing in the physical world. While the high comedy versus low comedy debate may have been legitimate in the early decades of film, once the Screwball Comedies appeared, any contrast between high comedy and low comedy was lost. For example, Bringing Up Baby (1938) presents the verbal banter of Susan and David, as an assessment of the role of couples in society, while they roll down hills and chase after George the terrier—high and low comedy occur simultaneously.

The argument that critics praise only high comedy in film becomes totally inaccurate when we consider that Charlie Chaplin, who is perhaps the most praised comic filmmaker, frequently exemplified low comedy as he presented his body as an object as malleable as a puppet, typically to convey his ideas.
Debated Argument #2: The Auteur Theory of Comedy

In earlier chapters, I discussed the *auteur* theory of filmmaking that a lot of scholars cite when assessing films of any genre. The French word for author credits the director as the author of his film, but not always in the literal sense of the screenwriter. At its most basic, the meaning behind *auteur* is that the filmmaker retains absolute control over the filmmaking process. In the realm of comedy, the *auteur* theory functions in a different sense than simply noting the director’s methods. Often when the comic performer and director are one in the same, as is the case of Woody Allen or Charlie Chaplin, critics will treat the comedy as the product of an *auteur*:

Even within the account of a career of a recognized ‘comic mind’ like Buster Keaton, the focus is on those films over which Keaton is presumed to have creative control, while others… are read as marginal and uninteresting because they are ‘someone else’s film’ (Karnick and Jenkins 5).

Scholars that support this theory argue that only the comedies of these *auteur* filmmakers are the ones that critics will praise. While this argument holds true for Chaplin, and arguably for Hawks and Sturges, many other comic filmmakers and performers including The Marx Brothers, Capra, Mackendrick, Wilder, Brooks, and Edwards have all made comedies that are highly praised by critics. By the late 1970s, the definition of *auteur* becomes unclear as it applies to film comedy, because so many comic performers at this time came from a background of standup comedy. As a standup comedian, like Woody Allen, one has total control in every aspect of the timing, variety, and type of comedy—one could argue the standup comic has the control of an *auteur* in that situation. However, once the same comedian transitions to comedy film, under the direction of another, he loses the connotations of *auteur*. Consider also how French critics and
audiences find Jerry Lewis to be an *auteur*, but nearly all his films have received a poor critical reception in the English-speaking world. These facts can only lead me to conclude that the *auteur* argument does not adequately explain why the majority of critics overlook film comedy in general.

**Conclusion**

Why are comedy films so critically underrated? With no single answer, we need to consider all the recurring threads that I have addressed above, as well as the reasons that I had already stated in previous chapters. 1) Many reviewers lack the knowledge of what makes something a comedy, knowledge I have attempted to simplify with *The Four Principles of Comic Effect*. 2) Comedy film goes against the established conventions of filmmaking, rather it transgresses these conventions. 3) The negative experience from viewing poorly constructed comedies makes many reviewers reluctant to consider any comedy film as valid for study. 4) A critic looking for consistency and continuity throughout the narrative could not find this in most film comedy. 5) By praising the taboo focus of a film, one would have to go against what society determines to be an acceptable attitude, behavior, or lifestyle. 6) Comedy is so close to life, that one cannot fully accept a comedy without accepting all of one’s own personal flaws and the flaws of one’s society. 7) Comedy purposefully contrasts with tragedy, and if a reviewer sees tragedy as the ideal form of expression, the comedy will go against what that reviewer considers to be of a high caliber of art. 8) Without an understanding of the conventions of comedy, and with so many contrasting subgenres, a critic cannot hope to fully appreciate a comedy film if she cannot even begin to understand what makes it a comedy.
All of these above reasons point to the fact that there is no standard curriculum for the study of film comedy and no common critical language for the discussion of film comedy. Each critic and each scholar must therefore decide on their own what makes a quality comedy and judge others against this very personal definition, using terms perhaps only significant to that particular reviewer.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, critics overlook comedy because comedy is in fact a hybrid of genres. Pure humor on its own is the gag, but the narrative of a comedy film comes as a result of the comedy borrowing the narrative style, the qualities of, and the conventions from another genre of film or from multiple genres. In a sense, comedy alone cannot exist as a feature film. In order to clarify this statement, I would like the reader to refer to the case studies presented in Chapter III. *City Lights, It Happened One Night, Bringing Up Baby, Sullivan’s Travels, Some Like It Hot, and 10* are incomplete without the use of the conventions of romance. *The Ladykillers* and *Some Like It Hot* would not have narratives without the use of the conventions of crime. *Duck Soup* utilizes the conventions of war and drama. *Sullivan’s Travels* takes much of its narrative from melodrama. *Young Frankenstein* uses the horror conventions. Even *Santa Claus Conquers The Martians* makes use of science fiction conventions. Critics face great difficulty when attempting to critique a film comedy, because a film comedy will always follow the conventions of more than one genre. Often, the nature of comedy dictates that a comic film will purposely undermine the non-comic conventions that it utilizes—those conventions that do not follow the Four Principles of Comic Effect. The fallacy in the current trend in film research and scholarship is the fact that reviewers insist on evaluating comedies by how well they approximate another genre of film. One
cannot compare the romance of *Some Like It Hot* to that of *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz 1942), but critics, academics, publications, and film societies *do* try to compare them in that respect every time that they judge a comedy against a non-comic film. One cannot properly appraise a comedy film against the merits of a non-comic film, but should instead judge it against fellow comedies, or judge its success as a foil to tragedy. In order for comedy film to receive the recognition that it deserves, three things must occur: 1) developing a clearer critical language for the discussion of film comedy, 2) developing a clear methodology and canon, and 3) separating the comic film from the non-comic film.

**Towards The Development of A Clearer Critical Language for the Discussion of Film Comedy**

In order for there to be an ongoing, shared discussion of film comedy, the film critics and scholars of the world must agree to adopt a clearer critical language for use in the analyses and critiques of film comedy. As with the difficulty in determining a definition of comedy—the difficulty of making something approaching universal out of elements that are quite disparate—so too is it difficult to agree upon a critical language when one critic alone may not be able to write about two different comedies in the same manner.

A critical language is made of two components: what the reviewers focus on and what terms they use to examine this focus. As the reader will recall, for each case study, I extracted the foci and terms of the represented reviewers. Across the ten case studies, I have found the most common foci and the most common descriptive terms.
The most prevalent focus of critics is the craft of filmmaking, including the filmmakers, the writing, and the direction. They use terms like “meticulous craft”, “professionalism”, and “authority” to describe a particular director’s touch. As for the comic writing, the reviewers speak of it as “clever”, “witty”, “brilliant”, and “smart”, calling attention to the specific comic skill and knowledge that a comic writer must possess. Second to the filmmaking process, the reviewers focus on the performers—who they are and the quality of their performances. They use terms like “mesmerizing” and “moving” to describe performances. Note that neither term indicates an association to humor, but rather a performance skill beyond that of comic timing and delivery. When reviewers do not like a performance, they describe it using the terms “labored”, “too seriously”, “forced”, or “too outrageous”, often revealing their own lack of understanding the nature of parody.

Few critics address the overall structure of the films. If they feel that it succeeds, they mostly write about its balance—whether that balance is between comedy and pathos or between visual and verbal gags. When reviewers feel that the overall structure fails, they either describe the film as having too many gags and not enough plot, or having a good narrative and too few gags—ignoring completely the balance of narrative and gag that is essential to comedy. Even fewer critics choose to focus on comedy’s nature to explore that which is outside of what is socially acceptable, using the terms “taboo” and “subversive”, when they do address it.

The biggest obstacle in the critical writing becomes apparent when critics attempt to analyze the comedy of each film. Through my study, I have found two approaches that critics take when discussing the comic moments. The first approach uses mostly
ambiguous adjectives like “funny”, “humorous”, “hilarious”, and “silly”. These terms really do not tell us much about the film, besides confirming the fact that it is a comedy. Slightly clearer than those terms, are ones that describe what the comedy causes for the viewer, “laughter”, “happiness”, and “inspiration”. Very few critics come close to writing about the film in terms of the Principles of Comic Effect. For example, terms like “whacky”, “intense”, and “zany”, describe comedy that is a result of the Principle of Comic Logic—more clear descriptions of the comedy than the ambiguous terms above.

The second approach to discussing the comic moments within a film, and an approach that I would like to see become part of a new, clearer critical language for comedy analysis, is to write about the comedy in terms of the subgenres and of the origins of film comedy. The terms used in this approach are specific, like “farcical”, “Shakespearean”, “high”, “low”, “slapstick”, “English/British”, “black comedy”, “parody”, “romantic comedy”, “anarchic”, and “silent comedy”. With these terms, we also see ones particular to a subgenre. For example, “delightful”, “elegant”, “buoyant”, “sophisticated”, “brightness”, “spirit”, “charm”, and “magic” all work well as signifiers within the realm of the language of romantic comedy criticism. Once one has an understanding of the Principles of Comic Effect, the common themes across film comedies, the origins of film comedy, and the particular conventions of each comic subgenre by way of the relative canon of film comedy that I shall propose in the next section, one could write reviews of comedy films and understand the reviews of others that use specific, referential terms, as above.
Towards Forming A Relative Canon For The Study of Film Comedy

Just as there is no all-encompassing definition of comedy, there is no universally recognized canon of quality comedy films. Informed by the Four Principles of Comic Effect, and acknowledging the common threads that I have identified above, film scholars across the world need to connect and to discuss a relative canon for the study of comedy. In this way, future studies of film comedy would be well informed by historical examples and methods with which to judge quality film comedy.

In order to properly analyze and to discuss comedy film in a reasoned way, the academics of the world must develop clearer methodologies for the analysis of film comedy. The construction of an historical overview is no easy task, as scholar Will Straw argues, noting the “absence of a methodological and theoretical foundation for the writing of film history” (237). Different authors organize film history in different ways depending on who is reviewing the history:

The practical impossibility of exhaustivity and the regretted necessity in recent historiographical writing of limited objectives are both meaningful only against the larger project of a history of the cinema. What is disputed is the extent to which this inevitable process of exclusion can serve to justify a retreat into subjective whim. In neither case is the possibility of a complete cinema history considered in anything beyond what might be called logistic terms (Straw 242). The reader should not interpret this statement as an argument for the futility of trying to construct an overall history of film comedy, rather the necessity of alternative ways of categorizing films based on clear methods. One way to catalogue film comedy follows the philosophy of Gerald Mast, who “proposes a number of total histories—‘a history of cinema styles,’ ‘a history of cinema contributors’, ‘a history of camera technology,’ of which a total cinema history would be ‘the aggregate collection’” (Straw 243). In order
for a film historiography to make sense and to show connections among works, the
author must approach it beyond a chronology. One way to follow Mast’s philosophy is to
group films based on filmmakers and subgenres, as I have done in this study. In this way,
the student of film comedy may discover the themes and methods explored by different
works of one filmmaker and the recurring motives and styles within a subgenre, as well
as the social and economic history of the era in which the film premiered. I cannot argue
that the history of film comedy that I present through this study is exhaustive nor
definitive, but I can say that it is quite functional.

As with any genre of film, or with the selected works of any filmmaker, there will
always be outliers that cannot fit the mold of the majority. This necessary exclusion is a
condition in quite possibly every academic field. However, as I have demonstrated, by
grouping the major entries of a subgenre into one succinct subject, one can approach the
films of that subgenre in a similar way. From that point, one may compare and contrast
the shared qualities of the films in that subgenre to those of another subgenre. This form
of analysis is what I have performed in this study and have presented the results of which
earlier in this chapter—the discovery of common threads among films across all
subgenres of comedy. Like my efforts to categorize comedy films historically,
generically, and by filmmaker, the common elements across comedy subgenres that I
have presented in this study are in no way the only themes that one may discover in a
study of film comedy. However, I find these threads to be compelling and clearly
demonstrated in multiple films across the various subgenres of comedy. Hopefully, I
have presented my findings in a way that will be accessible to anyone who wishes to
study film comedy further.
Towards Separating Comic from Non-Comic Films

From 1939 to 1966, separate Academy Award categories existed for black and white and for color films. For example, Doctor Zhivago (David Lean 1965) in color, and Darling (John Schlesinger 1965) in black and white, were both able to win Academy Awards for Best Costume Design. Likewise, depending on what films are nominated, the Academy may break the Best Original Score category into Musical Picture and non-Musical Picture. This split allowed Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (George Roy Hill 1969) and Hello, Dolly! (Gene Kelly 1969) both to win Best Musical Score. Since 1943, there has been a separate category for Best Documentary. In a similar way, the Best Animated Feature Film category has existed since 2001 (oscars.org). The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences elects to create separate categories because its members realize that there is a fundamental difference between the films that they compare. There is a fundamental difference between comic and non-comic films—as clear as the difference between black and white and color presentations—but there are no separate Academy Award categories for comedy film. The Academy Awards is simply the best-known example of film recognition, but the same is true for most critics, scholars, publications, and film societies throughout the Western World.

Once the scholars and the critics of the world have considered a relative canon for the study of film comedy and a clearer critical language for the discussion of film comedy, a modification in the field of film criticism must take place in order for comedy film to receive the critical and scholarly recognition that it deserves. This modification may seem to be common sense, but even so, it is not widely practiced. My proposed
modification is that critics and film societies must critique comedy as comedy and not try to judge it against non-comic genres, but rather appreciate how it transgresses the conventions of non-comic genres. Organizations that recognize achievements in the art of film need to make separate categories for comedy.

If the respected authorities can develop a relative canon of film comedy, based on clear methodologies and a clear critical language for the study of comedy, and if adjudicating bodies may appraise comedy films without comparing them to the films of other genres, then the great film comedies may take their rightful place among the greatest films of all time. I look forward to the day when one does not have to choose between *Ben-Hur* (William Wyler 1959) and *Some Like It Hot* (Billy Wilder 1959) as the superior film, but can acknowledge that the world is a better place because both can exist concurrently.

I would like to conclude by saying that, personally, this study has left me with a positive outlook. I am no longer ashamed that most of my pictures are comedies. With the development of an understanding and of a critical language for comedy, the embarrassment I feel in presenting comic films to viewers (that may find comic pictures as belonging to an aesthetically insignificant genre) will some day prove to be unfounded, or in comic terms, absurd. The comic hero teaches us the courage to follow our genuine nature without fear of disapproval. I hope that the reader will be able to learn something from this study and maybe even one day decide to perform their own study of film comedy. If this study has not inspired you to do nothing more than to laugh, then my thesis has taken the first step to becoming a successful comedy. Comedy eliminates our all too frequent negativity, it turns our limitations into a joke, and it allows for the
impossible. Through the comic, it is possible for us to realize our potential, to self-actualize; for only through genuine laughter can we lower our defenses and achieve understanding and illumination. After all, as John L. Sullivan learned, laughter is not much, but it may be the best natural resource that human beings possess.
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**Author’s Biography**

Michael Arell (1989-) was born and raised in Bangor, Maine and graduated from Bangor High School in 2008. He has had a lifelong love of filmmaking and started his own film production company, Sleepy Dog Films, in 1996. While at the University of Maine, Arell was a Music Education Major with a Film and Video Minor. He is a member of Alpha Lambda Delta (National Honor Society) and recipient of that Society’s Senior Book Award. He is also a member of Phi Beta Kappa (National Honor Society), Pi Kappa Lambda (National Music Honor Society), The National Society of Collegiate Scholars, and The Golden Key International Honour Society. He received the University of Maine’s Presidential Achievement Award in 2009 and was declared a Presidential Scholar in both 2011 and 2012, and made the Dean’s List every semester. Arell graduated *summa cum laude* from the University of Maine in May 2012, receiving Highest Honors. He plans to further his studies in graduate school and pursue a career in the field of arts education. His future plans also include completing his current film project, which is (of course) a comedy.