“Screwball”: A Genre for the People

Representing Social Classes in Depression Screwball Comedy (1934-1938)

Virginie Pronovost

Department of Media Studies
Master Thesis 15 ECTS credits
Cinema Studies
Master's Programme in Cinema Studies (60 ECTS credits)
Spring term 2020
Supervisor: Bo Florin

Stockholms universitet

“Screwball”: A Genre for the People

Representing Social Classes in Depression Screwball Comedy (1934-1938)

Virginie Pronovost

Abstract

History welcomed the screwball comedy genre in 1934, a time where cinema was in urgent need of providing escapism to audiences victim of the Great Depression. Screwball films, therefore, chose to underline the distinction between social classes and to emphasise on the imperfections of the upper class. The following thesis aims to determine how Depression screwballs (screwball comedies released from 1934 to 1938) used their narrative power to establish this distinction between opposed social classes and how this reflects the undeniable importance of an overlooked genre. It is with a socio-historical approach, personal analyses and observations, that the following research has been conducted. In conclusion, it has been recognised that the genre drew its importance, not only in the way it represents social classes but also how it depicts their mutual interactions, therefore forming a significant whole.

Keywords

Screwball comedy, Depression screwball, social classes, Great Depression, cross-class relationships, escapism, 1930s American Cinema

Acknowledgements

It is with my deepest gratitude that I wish to thank the following people who made the writing of this thesis possible:

My supervisor Bo Florin for his guidance and feedback during the various steps of the thesis development

My grandparents whose immense generosity allowed me to pursue university studies

My parents, sister, family and friends who have always been encouraging and supportive regarding my interest in classic films

My teachers at Stockholm University who often encouraged me to think outside of the box

Contents

Introduction

When banker Edward Seton Sr. (Henry Kolker) organises a high-class party to announce the engagements of his daughter Julia (Doris Nolan) in *Holiday* (George Cukor, 1938), his son, Ned (Lew Ayres), describes the event as a "first-class funeral".[1] Although Ned, like the rest of his family, comes from a wealthy background, the words he chooses to qualify this social gathering are a direct reflection of what classic screwball comedies aimed to express and denounce regarding the on-screen depiction of social classes.

William K. Everson in *Hollywood Bedlam: Classic Screwball Comedies* explains that the genre, which entered cinema History in the early 1930s and continued through the end of the Second World War, was a subgenre of romantic comedy mixing farce, slapstick, comedy of manners and satire.[2] The chosen name, *screwball*, comes from baseball vocabulary describing and "unpredictable pitch by a baseball pitcher" as explained by Christopher McKittrick in his detailed description of the genre.[3] The action in screwball films is indeed spontaneous and dynamic like the trajectory of a ball in a baseball game and chaotic like a team's victory. Films from the genre used chaos and dynamism to illustrate several social questions and problems, the main ones being marriage and divorce, social classes, and genders depiction. In connection to these themes, the screwball comedy received different names over the years such as *the sex comedy without sex*, *the comedy of remarriage* or *the Depression comedy*. It is the last designation that will take its importance in the following research. After all, screwball comedy, a genre that was mostly all-American, saw the day during the Great Depression.

Consequently, it was the answer to the distinction between those who had been affected by the crisis and high society people who had the privilege to continue living a comfortable and prolific life. Filmmakers made screwball comedy films for the little people. They were a critic and satire of the unreachable upper class. Author Stephen Sharot, in *Wealth and/or Love: Class and Gender in the Cross-class Romance Films of the Great Depression,* supports this contextualisation by describing screwball comedy as a mixture between social and cultural changes and the "permutation of class and gender", which resulted into "cross-class

[1] 00:44:25
[2] William K. Everson, *Hollywood Bedlam: Classic Screwball Comedies* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publ., 1994), 13.
[3] Christopher McKittrick, "What Is a Screwball Comedy?" LiveAbout, accessed May 22, 2020, https://www.liveabout.com/screwball-comedy-definition-4157505.

romance films".[4] The 1930s was a decade of significant changes for the American population, not long after the end of the First World War and at the dawn of the second. Screwball comedies helped ordinary people to struggle during these difficult times, and filmmakers made the best use of the 7th art to illustrate social problems and social distinctions. The genre followed the pre-code era of the late 20s-early 30s, gangster films and Busby Berkeley musicals and began to lose its impact at the break of the war.[5]

Films like *Platinum Blonde* (Frank Capra, 1931), one of the many collaborations between Frank Capra and screenwriter Robert Riskin, or *Bombshell* (Victor Fleming, 1933) are considered pre-screwball comedies. However, many agree to label Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) as being the first screwball comedy. It truly set the tone of the genre. It is the story of the almost impossible cross-class encounter between a spoiled heiress, Ellen "Ellie" Andrews (Claudette Colbert), and newspaper reporter without a job, Peter Warne (Clark Gable). It is a film where high society is taken out of its comfort zone and has to rely upon an inferior one to survive. On its release, the film was a box-office success and did well at the Oscars.[6] It appealed to the audience with characters reflecting their reality: men losing their jobs and women going to work.[7] Was the success of the film due to its realism, the presence of superstar Clark Gable, *the King of Hollywood*, or its cinematographic quality? It was most likely a mixture of all that. One thing is sure, a generation of movie directors then used the film medium to express and illustrate social classes in a way that resonated with the audience. Watching those films became the perfect way for those hit by the economic crisis to escape from their worries and become conscious of rich people's problems.

Frank Capra was one of the essential figures of screwball comedy, but one can also list Howard Hawks, Mitchell Leisen, George Cukor, Preston Sturges and more. Although *It Happened One Night*'s success proved that this type of films worked, not all screwball comedies were financial successes. *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), released at a time where Katharine Hepburn was labelled *box-office poison*, was a commercial flop. However, cinephiles today consider it a classic and one of the best depictions of the screwball

[4] Stephen Sharot, "Wealth and/or Love: Class and Gender in the Cross-class Romance Films of the Great Depression," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 89, accessed May 23, 2020, doi: 10.2307/23352508.
[5] Joy Gould Boyum, "Columbia's Screwball Comedies: Wine, Women, and Wisecracks", in *Columbia Pictures: Portrait of a Studio*, ed. Bernard F. Dick (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 89, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130hrz7.8.
[6] Ed Sikov, *Screwball: Hollywood's Madcap Romantic Comedies* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1989), 89.
[7] Elizabeth Kendall, *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), 60, accessed May 22, 2020, https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Elizabeth_Kendall_The_Runaway_Bride?id=E5mPoIBAXKEC.

genre. By considering its 1938 release, audiences were perhaps more preoccupied with the imminent arrival of the war and possibly did not need this form of escapism anymore.

The idea with the following thesis is to focus more particularly on the Depression-era screwball comedy and study the depiction of social classes in films made between 1934 and 1938. I have been fascinated by this comedic genre for a few years now, and I am still disappointed at the idea that this is not a subject that is often approached in academic contexts.

As screwball comedies aimed to have a positive impact on their audiences during the difficult years of the Depression, my interest in this research relies mainly on the narrative parts of these films and the overall historical context of the screwball comedy. It is one thing to understand why these films were made. However, it is another to dig deeper into them and analyse their structure, precisely determining what the methods of film directors and screenwriters to reach that objective were. The overall idea is to answer the following research question: *How did screwball comedies represent different social classes and the interactions between social classes within the idea of providing comfort and escapism to their audiences and make fun of the upper class?* This thesis is not a reception study since this would consist of a different type of research. It will try to understand the origin of this impact and focus on the films and the genre itself. This research is important because it will make one understand another way cinema worked to influence people's life. I believe using a sub-genre of the comedy can have an even bigger impact since it is more often a genre that is associated with entertainment and not necessarily taken seriously. There are various layers to explore. Although the context of this subject is the 1930s, this pattern could repeat itself depending on how we decide to use the power of films. Hopefully, this thesis will open a new door to the importance of an overlooked genre.

To answer the research question, I am particularly interested in taking a more socio-historical approach to the subject as well as an analytical one in regards to the various screwball films made between 1934 and 1938. Although the use of analytical texts and studies of the genre will support the argumentation, it will be essential to use ideas that do not contradict each other too much. Since this thesis bases its various arguments on historical facts and the socio-economic situation of the 1930s, it is essential to use observations that are in concordance with these. That is why the socio-historical context will be particularly important to take into consideration. Among the academics, historians and theoreticians that will serve as a pillar to this thesis, one can list William K. Everson, Ed Sikov, Stephen Sharot, Maria DiBattista, among others. These are people that approached the screwball comedy

genre. Their writings on the subject provide interesting observations regarding its narrative structure and its tone as well as arguments that reflect how the genre depicts social classes. On another side, people like Giuliana Muscio, Gwendolyn Audrey Foster or Lewis A. Erenberg offer good sources for the 1930s and Depression context. It is important to point out that the desire to write about the screwball genre more or less began in the mid-70s and continues to flourish today. Therefore, one must understand that the following thesis and the perspective around the historical and social context in which screwball comedies were made and appreciated rely upon an external point of view and not one that is contemporary to the genre. Yes, exploring different subjects connected to screwball and different analysis will help to answer the research question. However, it will also be pertinent to give personal reflections and focus on details that might have been overlooked.

The following text consists of four chapters. The first chapter will give a more detailed contextualisation exploring the arrival of screwball comedies in a Depression context as well as why they were made. The second chapter will explore the various types of characters represented in screwball comedies, which will help in making the distinction between social classes. Four types of characters will be analysed, more precisely: the madcap/spoiled screwball heiress, the screwball working man, the screwball working girl, and the screwball businessman. The third chapter will analyse the different settings in order to understand how the different social classes evolve into these and how these settings contribute to ridicule the high society. Finally, the fourth chapter will take a closer look at three screwball comedies, three case studies: *It Happened One Night*, *Easy Living* (Mitchell Leisen, 1937) and *Merrily We Live* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1938). It will approach these with the concepts of *adaptation* and *moving places*, which will be pertinent and in direct connection with the previous discussions. These are three films released during three different years and which contain noteworthy and varied examples of social classes depiction. While *It Happened One Night* is one of the best-known screwballs, it would also be exciting and rewarding to take a look at lesser-known screwballs hence the choices of *Easy Living* and *Merrily We Live*.

Hopefully, this research will consist into a complete and pertinent one that will allow the reader to understand better the way screwball comedies developed their representation of social classes and how this is a genre that is as significant as another.

Chapter 1: Screwball Comedy in the Years of the Depression

To understand better why screwball comedy was introduced to American cinema in the 1930s, it is necessary to put this one in its historical context, a politic and economic one. That will be the role of this chapter. This section will also make brief parallels with the musical and gangster films of the early 30s as well as introducing the narrative structure used by screwball films in order to become something that strongly connected with their contemporary audiences.

The screwball comedy genre got developed at a time where there was an urgent need for laughs and escapism in the United States. Even in the Depression years preceding the first projections of screwball comedies in movie theatres, so roughly between 1929 and 1934, there was a desire to create comfort films to help the population cope with those difficult times. The films in question were not necessarily all comedies, but films that gave off a sense of hope and that allowed a place to reflection. William K. Everson explains that the first social films made at the beginning of the crisis were either a direct depiction of the situation or used a poetic approach, philosophical idea and suggestions that love, not money, was the key to survive. When the Depression eventually lasted longer than expected, screwball comedies finally entered the game because, at this point, laughing at the situation seemed like the best solution.[8] It most probably was.

The Hollywood pre-code era that preceded the imposition of the Production Code by Will H. Hays and the arrival of screwball comedies was a time in American Cinema History where filmmakers approached the Depression in various ways. However, it seems that hope always triumphed in the end. Giuliana Muscio supports the idea that Hollywood happy endings were a way to reassure the viewers.[9] She more explicitly explains how those films were structured:

> Even in the most problematic situations, this guaranteed happy ending arrived, but only after having run every route, every curve, and every conflict of the plot. If, on one hand, the predictability of the happy ending reassured viewers in advance, the unravelling of the plot

[8] Everson, 22.
[9] Giuliana Muscio, *Hollywood's New Deal* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 73, accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs9f9.7.

> kept their attention alive to the obstacles that had to be overcome and guaranteed the constant affirmation of individual activity and responsibility.[10]

Harry Beaumont used this structure in the drama *Faithless* (Harry Beaumont, 1932), a film in which Tallulah Bankhead plays a spoiled socialite whom the Depression eventually hits hard and makes her lose her fortune. Even if the situation seems to get worst each day for her and her love interest played by Robert Montgomery, the conclusion is a happy one and love triumphs over money.

On the comedic side, Busby Berkeley musicals such as *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933) or *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933) deal with precarious situations where putting on a Broadway show is risky. Companies cancel shows due to unpaid bills, a director becomes morbidly obsessed with the success of his musical, and so on. However, in the end, after many efforts, the shows open, and the public witnesses beautifully staged musical numbers that smell of richness and sophistication. Furthermore, the shows are, obviously, successes. Although these musicals use comedy, the constant quest for fortune and the idea that *money* rhymes with *triumph* (the musical number "We're In the Money" from *Gold Diggers on 1933* is a good example), somehow goes against the will of screwball comedy.

One could designate some pre-code gangster films as making an exception to the rule concerning the happy endings. Films like *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931) or *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931) present gloomy endings, but those generally concern the fatal downhill of the said gangster, the *bad guy*. Therefore, it must have been a type of character that resonated less with audiences. The fatality of the main character, which is led by his criminal activities, probably served more as a lesson than anything, a way to warn audiences not to take the same path even in the most desperate situations.

Concerning the screwball comedy genre, which followed the pre-code era, what differs mainly with that development to the happy ending is generally the tone. It would indeed be less surprising for a sub-genre of comedy to end happily. Although the characters encounter obstacles, the used tone is comic instead of desperate. However, not all screwball comedies necessarily end on a perfect note. One could take the example of *Nothing Sacred* (William A. Wellman, 1937). It is one that deals less with the Depression context, but it would still be pertinent to point out the ambiguous ending where the faith of Hazel Flagg (Carole Lombard) and Wally Cook (Fredric March) remains uncertain as they have to run away from their troubles.

---

[10] Ibid.

Everson reveals the initial objective of the screwball comedy genre, which was to make fun of the wealthy population and portrait their problems in a humoristic way.[11] However, as Wes D. Gehring points out in *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*, this does not mean that there was not a fascination for the upper world anymore.[12] While it was to laugh at it, the best examples of screwball comedies involve class crossovers and, thus, creating an opposition to the fact that inequalities between classes are not adjustable.[13] How many times have we seen poor on-screen characters eventually succeed in the end, or situations that are advantageous to both classes?

My Man Godfrey (Gregory La Cava, 1936) effectively depicts the mixture between a wealthy triumph and a win-win situation for opposed classes. Godfrey (William Powell) is a tramp that becomes the new butler of the wealthy Bullocks after sisters Irene (Carole Lombard) and Cornelia (Gail Patrick) Bullock *find him* at the city dump during a scavenger hunt. After the hunt's participants ridicule Godfrey by asking him indiscreet questions, Irene feels sorry for him and hires him as the new family butler and makes him his *protégé*. The truth about Godfrey's past is eventually revealed: he is a graduate from Harvard who chose to live as a tramp after a failed love affair. For the Bullocks, finances are not going so well either, and Mr Bullock (Eugene Pallette) eventually has to announce that they are broke. Fortunately, Godfrey, who is, after all, an educated man, has taken the responsibility to sell a pearl necklace that Cornelia put in his room to accuse him of stealing and used the money to buy stock sold by Mr Bullock. It is a *forgotten man* that saves the family.[14] Godfrey uses the rest of his profits to open a nightclub, The Dump. The employees at Godfrey's new club are tramps like he used to be, and he, therefore, gives them a second chance thanks to his initiative. The Bullocks do not lose their fortune, and a more reassuring environment now surrounds those who had lost it. Moreover, in the very last scene, Irene and Godfrey get married, which proves that money is not necessarily a priority for Irene (she becomes obsessed with Godfrey long before he opens his restaurant). However, one would not deny the fact that this wedding is a symbolic union between classes. It is an open ending and, with

---

[11] Everson, 22.

[12] Wes D. Gehring, *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.), 5, accessed May 22, 2020, https://books.google.fr/books?id=sbeuw3PNv6AC&lpg=PP2&dq=screwball%20comedy&lr&hl=fr&pg=PA2#v=onepage&q=screwball%20comedy&f=false.

[13] Orrin Konheim, "Q: How does 'Ball of Fire' reveal the class messages of the classic screwball comedy?" The Take/ScreenPrism, accessed May 22, 2020, http://screenprism.com/insights/article/how-does-ball-of-fire-reveal-the-themes-of-the-classic-screwball-comedy.

[14] According to the definition of Ryan Errington, *forgotten men* were "men who were unemployed and had no financial stability during the Great Depression". (Ryan Errington, "Representations of the Rich in Screwball Comedy," The Artifice, accessed May 22, 2020, https://the-artifice.com/representations-rich-screwball-comedy.)

Godfrey's successful nightclub, one assumes that he would not have to rely on the Bullocks' money to survive. The end of the story does not say it explicitly.

Similar situations occur at the end of *It Happened One Night*, and *She Couldn't Take It* (Tay Garnett, 1935). Andrew Bergman, who explains that screwball comedies aimed to reconcile the different social classes, supports the idea of poor and rich characters co-habiting together. Playing the comic card in screwball films was a way to unify the classes and prove that these could work together and get merged into one single class. Bergman also makes the distinction between the "exploding" films of the early 30s and the "implosive" ones from the screwball era. To reunite classes instead of making a separation between them worked best.[15]

Everson raises another pertinent point explaining the benefits of making comedies during the Depression. It was not only a moral advantage but also an economical one. Since strict budgets did not allow affording to pay rights to adapt plays or novels, comedies became a financially advantageous way to make films. Moreover, the author supports his argument by specifying that, since those stories took place in contemporary settings, same sets could be reused for different films and modified for the necessity of what a film crew was going to do with them.[16] Characters do often seem to find themselves in similar types of houses, so, it should not come as a surprise that a set might have been used more than once. In other words, producers understood that there was no need to make big-budget films *à la DeMille* to entertain people. The ideas conveyed by screwball comedies were probably more important than their aestheticism.

In *Preston Sturges and the Screwball Comedy*, Leger Grindon informs the reader that releasing screwball comedies was also a way for cinema to co-habit with the New Deal plans established by Franklyn D. Roosevelt to re-shape the economy of his country. If people behind the New Deal worked to make the economic situation better, screwball comedies were in charge of giving hope and possible access to success to those who had been affected by the Depression.[17] Cinema and politics united forces for triumph and optimism to win over failure and pessimism. Depression-era screwball comedies showed that it was not wrong to illustrate poverty because, at this point, many people were on the same boat. Charles Maland, in *Frank Capra at Columbia: Necessity and Invention*, uses the example of the little boy (George

[15] Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 133. **Cited in** Terry Donovan Smith, "Mixing It Up in the Depression: A (Not-So) Hidden Representation of Class Struggle," *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 24, no. 3 (Fall/1996): para. 5, accessed May 23, 2020, doi: 10.1080/01956051.1996.9943722. EBSCOHost.
[16] Everson, 46-47.
[17] Leger Grindon, "Preston Sturges and the Screwball Comedy", in *ReFocus: The Films of Preston Sturges*, ed. Jeff Jaeckle and Sarah Kozloff (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 26, accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzcm1.

Breakston) whom Ellie and Peter meet on the bus in *It Happened One Night*.[18] The poor soul is travelling with his sick mother (Claire McDowell). They are on their way to the city with hopes of finding employment for her.

In *My Man Godfrey*, the scenes showing the tramps at the city dump are other good examples. On another side, a film like *Holiday* presents the clash between the rich and the poor people differently. Their attitude toward each other varies. Johnny Case (Cary Grant) got engaged to Julia Seton during a holiday at Lake Placid. When the time comes to meet the family, he discovers the fortune in which the Setons live as he sets foot in their enormous mansion. Johnny compares it to the Grand Central Station. Although Julia did not judge necessary to mention it, which initially makes the spectator assume that it is a marriage of love, as the story evolves, it becomes more evident that she wishes Johnny to make serious money. On his side, Mr Seton is clear on that point, at it is Johnny's disinterest in economics that makes him hesitate to give his benediction for the wedding. As for her, Julia's sister, Linda (Katharine Hepburn), she has views that are similar to Johnny's. She has a free spirit like him, and money does not come first even if this is what raised her. When Johnny's friends, Nick and Susan Potter (Edward Everett Horton and Jean Dixon) attend the party organized by the Setons to announce the engagements, they are seemingly the only middle-class people to attend, and their discomfort towards the wealthy guests shows easily. It is Susan that invites them to the welcoming playroom and makes them feel at home. She is interested in people from the outside world.

In his book *Screwball: Hollywood's Madcap Romantic Comedy*, Ed Sikov's answer to the reason-to-be of screwball comedies and their objectives to create a form of escapism goes against the popularity around them in the 30s. Although he supports the fact that people went to see those films to escape from their sad realities, he also claims that there is no proof that screwball comedies were necessarily more popular among audiences than other genres. The author uses the example of screwballs and musicals (which were the escapism genres by excellence) vs horror films, melodramas or historical dramas that he claims did not necessarily attract fewer audiences.[19] Sikov has a point, but there is a distinction to make between releasing a screwball film and its eventual popularity. The argumentation various writers give about the subjects leans more directly toward the way screwball comedy approached its different themes intending to comfort to the spectators. If people decided to see

[18] Charles Maland, "Frank Capra at Columbia: Necessity and Invention", in *Columbia Pictures: Portrait of a Studio*, ed. Bernard F. Dick (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 78, accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130hrz7.
[19] Sikov, 16.

those films or not was a matter of personal choices and personal finances. Wheeler Winston Dixon, in *Black and White Cinema: A Short History*, writes that the film industry was, however, a sector that survived relatively well during the Depression and going to the movies was affordable. Moreover, with the proof that going to the movies was beneficial for mental health, people were ready to pay a dime for a seat.[20] The danger that the cinema industry could collapse was not necessarily absent, but it is because people continued to go to the movies that it survived and some of the major studios could afford to produce around 50 films/year.[21] One also has to understand that screwball comedy is a genre that is particularly limited in time. It was popular in the 1930s, and cinephiles continue to appreciate it nowadays, but the original release of screwball comedies is more or less limited to a decade.[22] Screwball comedies were here as a mean of moral support and, even if they were not necessarily all financial successes, they continued to be made after the end of the Depression, hence why the genre lasted a decade rather than half a decade.

One of the main aspects that helped people to connect with those films was that they could identify with the characters.[23] That, in my opinion, probably did not only concern the working and middle classes. The upper class, although screwball films made fun of it, could learn lessons by watching screwballs. There are numerous examples where a wealthy character is encouraged to become a better person by co-habiting with characters that did not have as much luck as them. Irene Bullock and Mrs Kilbourne (Billie Burke) in *My Man Godfrey* and *Merrily We Live,* two very similar films, are both people that, because of their charitable heart, hire tramps as domestics. Those do not have a good reputation among the Kilbournes as Ambrose, a tramp Mrs Kilbourne had hired as a chauffeur, ran away with kitchen dishes and the silverware. That is the film's introduction. When the wealthy lady hires Wade Rawlins (Brian Aherne), a writer in rags, to be the new chauffeur, he manages to give a better reputation to tramps. Another good example would be what Susan Vance (Katharine Hepburn), the female lead character in *Bringing Up Baby*, decides to do with the 1M$ given to her by her rich aunt, Elizabeth Carlton Random (May Robson). Instead of keeping it for herself, she decides to donate it to the natural history museum where her love interest, Dr David Huxley (Cary Grant) works as a palaeontologist. One thing is certain, screwball

[20] Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Black and White Cinema: A Short History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 51, accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c84fch.
[21] Mark Glancy, "The 'Awful Truth' about Cary Grant", in *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, ed. Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 142, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g050p5.
[22] Dennis Hickey et. al., *America in the Thirties* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 198, accessed May 22, 2020, doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1j1nvgk.
[23] Sharot, 105.

comedies were the result of something else, the Depression, and this is how those characters became particularly relevant.

Burton Peretti in *The Leading Man: Hollywood and the Presidential Image* states that film historians have explained that the chain reaction that took the prolific United States into a black hole of poverty drove people to rely on movies to get emotionally released.[24] Not only the Great Depression but also the war that followed increased the desire for escapism through film viewing. It, moreover, led the population to look for idealized traits, film characters personalities in the leaders of their nation.[25] As Roosevelt was elected for four mandates, making him the president of the United States for more than ten years, people might have seen these qualities in him. Peretti more directly explains that he "paid increased attention to the content of motion pictures, and to the style and substance of the performances given by their leading players".[26] By doing so, he learned lessons from those characters and used them to maintain his political image.[27]

Moreover, by presenting the New Deal programs, the former president made it clear that he wanted to work for the *people*. Yes, the objective was always a capitalist one, but the idea behind those programs was to help the economy rerun and, therefore, help the American people to rise again. Giuliana Muscio supports this connection between Roosevelt's ideals and what attracted people to screwball comedies. She writes that "[l]ike Franklin Roosevelt, the movies aimed at a large public, identified as 'people' rather than 'masses'. And, like Roosevelt, the movies in the 1930s enjoyed their greatest popularity with the less well-to-do classes".[28] In simpler words, Roosevelt and the screwball films were popular among individuals from lower classes because they were the ones that needed them the most. Muscio also adds the interesting fact that, like screwball comedies, Roosevelt always closed his speeches with an optimistic note.[29] However, in regards to *people*, one must emphasise on the fact that screwball comedies mainly addressed their messages to the white American. The position of black characters, for example, is never challenged in those films and their roles taken for granted. Black actors and actresses in those years usually played parts of servants, maids, porters, and their status remains the same from the beginning until the end of the film. If a screwball comedy includes an immigrant character as part of the upper class, it is more

[24] Burton Peretti, *The Leading Man: Hollywood and the Presidential Image* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 67, accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjdtx.
[25] Ibid., 68.
[26] Ibid., 51.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Muscio, 66.
[29] Ibid., 73.

often a white European character. Carlo (Mischa Auer) in *My Man Godfrey* or Mike Rossini (Leo Carrillo) in *If You Could Only Cook* (William A. Seiter, 1935) are examples among others. This problem did not concern only screwball comedies and was present in the American film industry in general.

Frank Capra films were perhaps the best examples of social problem screwballs reflecting the political environment of the United States in the middle of the 1930s. *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (Frank Capra, 1936) presents a situation where the hero, Deeds (Gary Cooper), supports the less fortunate and has to defy those working the capitalist system. Charles Maland directly supports the idea that the conflict between the hero and the villain was a metaphor of the opposition between the New Deal and what Roosevelt called the "economic royalist" in his 1936's re-election campaign.[30]

Although screwball comedies made their way through the 40s with films that still dealt with social classes' issues and representation such as *The Devil and Miss Jones* (Sam Wood, 1941) or *Ball of Fire* (Howard Hawks, 1941), the situation became more complex. On one side there were those escapism films; the remaining screwballs or MGM's musicals such as *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) or *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, 1944). On another side, the decade also saw the birth of what would later be called *films noirs* by Franco-Italian critic Nino Frank. Those were a completely different answer to the American situation. Ed Sikov argues that, if people tried to escape misery during the Depression years, the war incited them to take refuge in this misery.[31] The cinematic approach to social problems thus became a different one, a much more pessimistic one.

[30] Maland, 84.
[31] Sikov, 71.

Chapter 2: Screwball Characters

It was necessary to establish the screwball comedy's context, not only to justify the birth of this genre but also to determine why and how directors and screenwriters chose to approach it a certain way. The previous chapter has already made parallels between how the screwball comedy genre could reflect itself in real life and how it could influence its contemporary spectators. The objective of this new chapter is to look closer at a first on-screen theme that will help the reader understand the portrayal of different social classes in screwball comedies. The discussion to follow will also study how those opposed classes co-habited together in screwballs for the final product to be something that appealed to the Depression audiences. It is a way to support the initial claim that screwball comedies reassured the working or middle-class spectators by making fun of the upper class. Many different types of screwball characters could be listed. However, this chapter will linger on the most obvious and relevant ones: the madcap or spoiled heiress, the working man (and the tramp who is often a working man who has lost his job), the working girl[32] and, finally, the rich businessman. To make distinctions between those characters will not only serve as a way to understand the opposition between the different classes but also the oppositions within classes. For example, the working girl and the working man are far from being portrayed the same way and, despite being both high society characters, the businessman father and the madcap heiress's personalities are complete opposites.

1. Screwball Heiress

The young madcap, spoiled heiress is, without a doubt, the character who is more often associated with screwball comedy and its way of making fun of the upper class. Actresses like Carole Lombard, Katharine Hepburn, Claudette Colbert or sisters Constance and Joan Bennett are examples of those who have portrayed such characters. The heiress depicted by the screwball films is one that does not have to worry about money and its value. If one uses the

[32] The term *working girl* could cause a problem, as it is also an old-fashioned British expression to designate a prostitute. However, in this case, the term is used to describe a young unmarried woman who works for a living, regardless of her profession. It is also a way to make a distinction with the married working woman that I am also briefly discussing later in this chapter.

example of *Bringing Up Baby*, there is a scene toward the beginning of the film that illustrates perfectly this lack of conscience for money value. David Huxley meets Susan Vance on a golf field as one of his golf balls rolls to the section where she is playing. Later, a guy who is accompanying David on his golf day makes him notice that Susan is about to leave with his car. The woman is in the parking lot, sitting in David's car and trying to start it. Alerted, David goes to her and tries to make her understand that she is in *his* car. The lady does not understand and is still determined to leave the parking lot. She asks David to move the car next to her (it is, in fact, her car) to give her space to drive away. He, careful and patient, sits behind the wheel of Susan's car to move it. As they both try a manoeuvre to give space to Susan, this one un-carefully bumps into the car, her car, therefore living damages on David's car. When he makes her notice what she has done with a ton of despair, she nonchalantly replies "Oh, that's alright, I'm insured"[33], which upsets David even more. David belongs to the middle class, not the working class. He is a palaeontologist who seems to have a good and rewarding profession, but he does not have Susan's money either. He does not live in the same luxury as her either and, as he earns his money, he probably worries more about it than Susan for whom a scratch on a car is a minor concern.

Taking money for granted leads the screwball heiresses to live a life that Maria DiBattista, in her book *Fast-Talking Dames*, describes as "easy living". It implies that their luxurious and leisurely life allows them to do unproductive activities such as chasing a leopard in Connecticut (Susan Vance in *Bringing Up Baby*) or participating in scavenger hunts (Irene and Cornelia Bullock in *My Man Godfrey*).[34] If the screwball heiress has to worry about something, it is often about her attraction or relationship to a man from a class lower than hers.

Ed Sikov raises a relevant point about the presence of heiresses on screen. He writes that a film with an heiress character is not necessarily a screwball comedy. That depends entirely on her characteristics, and when the film was made.[35] It seems obvious, but it was important to mention it to avoid any confusion.

The madcap heiress often finds herself in running away position or a situation that takes her outside of her comfort zone. She either steps out of its borders, as it is the case for Ellie Andrews in *It Happened One Night,* or brings someone from a lower class inside her world as it is the case for Irene Bullock in *My Man Godfrey*. Maria DiBattista explains the

[33] 00:07:58
[34] Maria DiBattista, *Fast-Talking Dames* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 244, accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npn5p.
[35] Sikov, 47.

reason for the relevance of a runaway heiress. She writes that this is a way to show the heiress's desire to leave the upper class in which she was born and raised.[36] The heiress often presents herself as a *madcap* or *spoiled* one. That was a way to place her on a thin line, a line between what society expected of her and how the Depression public eventually perceived her. As DiBattista more precisely advances, this was a manner for the spectator to "feel [...] her proximity to danger, the irrecoverable loss of dignity, loss of status and [...] loss of herself".[37] That is one of the ways to put the screwball heiress in ridicule and vulnerable position.

When listing a few madcap heiress examples, film historians or simple cinephiles will more often refer themselves to the names of Susan Vance, Ellie Andrews or Irene Bullock. A lesser-known but still relevant case is the one of Carol Van Dyke (Joan Bennett) in *She Couldn't Take It.* Her situation is not entirely one of a runaway heiress, but she is dragged into that spiral against her will and has a taste of what *real life* is. She might not be the most madcap of the madcap heiresses, but she is immensely spoiled, that goes without saying. *She Couldn't Take It* begins when Mr Van Dyke (Walter Connolly) goes to prison for tax invasion. There, he befriends another tax invader, Joseph Ricardi (George Raft). One day, as the two men are socialising in their cell, Mr Van Dyke shares his worries about his spoiled and extravagant family. He wants it to live more modestly and judges that they would be able to live on 100$/month. Because he knows Ricardi is about to be freed from prison, he asks him to be responsible for his financial interests and help him keep his family away from extravagances. Ricardi hesitates to accept such a responsibility. The conversation ends as Mr Van Dyke suffers from a heart attack and finds himself in the prison's clinic. The doctors cannot save him and, before passing away, he, once again, begs Ricardi to become the *trustee of his estate.* This one finally accepts. Mr Van Dyke's last words are "Sucker!"[38], which reflect the fact that he is passing his problems to Ricardi.

The Van Dykes are eventually made aware of their newly imposed restrictions and that a stranger is now in charge of their money. They are far from pleased by the idea, especially the daughter, Carol. However, this one, although she does not want to have anything to do financially with Ricardi, is still curious to meet him. She goes to his apartment dressed like a working girl (with glasses and sober clothes) and introduces herself as "Polly

[36] DiBattista, 52.
[37] Ibid.
[38] 00:21:41

Pride, the graphic".[39] The two of them become more than colleagues and eventually spend time together. Carol accidentally reveals her true identity by referring to a song that her father used to sing. At this precise moment, she and Ricardi are rowing on Central Park Lake, and the ex-con decides to teach the spoiled heiress a lesson by pushing her overboard. That is the first of a series of incidents during which Carol drags and exposes herself to the "loss of dignity [and] loss of status" the words used by DiBattista to describe the screwball heiress's situation.[40]

On his side, William K. Everson describes Carol's journey as a "taming-of-the-shrew-path". According to him, this is the usual path taken by heiresses in screwball comedies.[41] Later, Carol finds herself running on a muddy countryside road wearing high heels and a long fancy dress, losing her dignity by having hiccups and making business with gangsters. There is a scene in the countryside part that leads the spectator to believe that Carol has learnt to adapt herself to the rustic life. She decides to take a nap in a wooden cart parked inside a barn. That is not the usual four-poster bed she is used to, but her peaceful facial expression reveals her comfort in this newly improvised bed. However, in the next shot, she is seen combing and fixing her hair, making her someone who still cares about her comfort and social appearance.

There is a precision to make when discussing the connection between male and female characters in screwball comedies, especially when it comes to approaching the subject of the heiress who meets the working-class man. If the screwball heroine coming from a wealthy background is one that often looks for freedom and independence, this is something she can allow herself precisely because she is rich.[42] However, as soon as she steps into the other world and commits herself to a man, she faces the same responsibilities that were expected from working and middle-class women in those years as Olympia Kiriakou reveals it in her article *Carole Lombard as a Transcendental Comic.*[43] Therefore, the price of freedom and independence does not come without its share of responsibilities and consequences.

Often, screwball comedies depict situations where the madcap heiress shows love interest for a man coming from a lower class. The examples are various: Irene Bullock's interest for Godfrey in *My Man Godfrey*, Jerry Kilbourne's (Constance Bennett) interest for Wade Rawlins in *Merrily We Live,* or Ellie Andrews's interest for Peter Warne in *It*

[39] 00:28:27
[40] DiBattista, 52.
[41] Everson, 70.
[42] Veronica Pravadelli, *Classic Hollywood: Lifestyles and Film Styles of American Cinema, 1930-1960*, trans. Michael Theodore Meadows (Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 24, accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt6wr582.
[43] Olympia Kiriakou, "Carole Lombard as a Transcendental Comic," *Film Matters* 3, no. 4 (Winter/February 2012): 24, accessed May 23, 2020, doi: 10.1386/fm.3.4.23_1.

Happened One Night. Kiriakou writes that if those appreciations eventually lead to a wedding, this obliges the heiress to take the domestic position that was the one imposed to regular women from the middle or working class. She, in other words, eventually loses her short-lived independence at the expense of her future husband.[44] There is, however, no real revelation on how the spoiled heiress will eventually live her modest life. The previous chapter discussed this point: films ending depicting a union between a high-class dame and a lower class man are often opened, and never really show the result of this wedding or the wedding itself. On the opposite, the working girl often sees herself being taken out of her ordinary world and brought to the wealthy one, and it is the same story for male characters like Wade Rawlins or Godfrey. These stories are precisely about how someone from a less fortunate class will learn to get adapted to the upper class.

There is an illustration of the spoiled heiress living a more quiet life in *It Happened One Night*. Although Ellie's journey with Peter Warne teaches her to live with the strict minimum and about life lessons and important values, the question of a potential marital union to the reporter gets implied only towards the end of the film. There is, however, an indication that, without her money, Ellie struggles to be entirely independent since she needs to rely on Peter to survive during her journey between Florida and New York. This one, although he is a stranger Ellie met on the bus by coincidence, does not only decide to continue the journey with her but also to control her expenses because he does not want to see her spend the four dollars she has left on unessential goods. Is he already playing the role of the controlling husband? Despite the pessimistic tone of this question, this situation teaches Ellie how to spend money more responsibly. Thus, it possibly became a way for Depression spectators to eventually identify with her as she faces problems and restrictions similar to theirs.

Joy Gould Boyum, in *Columbia's Screwball Comedies: Wine, Women and Wisecracks*, writes that the screwball heiress (or, occasionally, the screwball heir) is, sometimes, promised to someone from his/her class, someone with the same wealth and glamour than he/she has. However, this remained a manner to prove to the Depression audiences that money can buy a lot of material goods, but it does not buy happiness.[45] Some examples present situations inspiring financial security and comfort: Ellie's engagement to aviator King Westley (Jameson Thomas)*;* Lucy Warriner's (Irene Dunne) engagement to oilman Dan Leeson (Ralph Bellamy) in *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey 1937) and Jim

[44] Ibid.
[45] Boyum, 90.

Buchanan (Herbert Marshall)'s engagement to Evelyn Fletcher (Frieda Inescort) in *If You Could Only Cook*. However, these planned liaisons seem rather monotonous. Most of the time, the rich protagonist chooses someone else and, more often, someone from a lower class.

If the screwball heiress protagonist is a young woman coming from a rich family, Ed Sikov, however, makes a noteworthy distinction between the different generations represented in screwball comedies and their relation to money. On one side, the oldest generation overvalues its importance while, on the other side, members from the youngest generation learn to reject it.[46] Those rich on-screen women from the oldest generation, mostly the young heiresses' mothers, were portrayed by character actresses like Mary Nash, Alice Brady or Billie Burke. Those are often even crazier than their daughters, and it seems that it will never change. If one takes the example of Billie Burke as she appears in *Merrily We Live* or *She Couldn't Take It,* a first observation to make are the ridiculous-looking clothes that make her look like a wrapped present. Despite her craziness, the young heiress smells of glamour and elegance in her Adrian-designed gowns. The screwball mother, however, always seems to exaggerate the extravagances by wearing too elaborated clothes for simple activities (such as having breakfast or gardening as it is the case for Mrs Kilbourne in *Merrily We Live*). Yes, Mrs Kilbourne is someone who warmly welcomes tramps to her house just the way Irene Bullock does it, but there is not any moment in the story stipulating that she would be ready to leave her comfortable life.

Another pertinent screwball mother example would be Mrs Ball (Mary Nash) in *Easy Living*. The story begins when her husband, J.B. Ball (Edward Arnold), Wall Street's third-richest banker, discovers that she has spent $58 000 (more than one million today) on a sable coat. Infuriated by his wife's extravagances, especially after discovering that she already owns several similar fur coats, he throws it from the rooftop after chasing her in their Park Avenue penthouse. Of course, Mr Ball does not get his money back by committing this spontaneous gesture, but it does remain a symbolic way for him to turn his back to the extravagances of his social class. Concerning Mrs Bullock (Alice Brady), Irene and Cornelia's mother in *My Man Godfrey*, Everson says of her that she is the "symbol of all that was wrong with the thoughtless rich". He adds that she is "stupid, tactless [and] abrasive".[47] Her idiotic laughter when her *protégé* Carlo imitates a monkey, or her hallucinations after drinking alcohol supports well Everson's claim.

[46] Sikov, 84.
[47] Everson, 90.

2. Screwball Working Man/Screwball Tramp

The screwball working man or the screwball tramp is one whose role, as previously observed, is to take the spoiled heiress out of her comfort zone and teach her more about the real world and, consequently, about herself. Behind this idea, there was another way for Depression audiences to be satisfied with the destiny of the spoiled heiress brought to their level. Kelli Marshall, in '*Something's Gotta Give' and the Classical Screwball Comedy,* writes that, in the end, "it is not the working-class character who leaves his or her profession but the upper-class lover who leaves his or her wealthy life-style to make the union work".[48] The reason behind that was to display the importance of the American work ethic to the audiences in opposition to leisure life.[49] It was, in other words, a way for the working-class to feel more confident about themselves.

The cross-class stories, as it is pointed out by Elizabeth Kendall in *The Runaway Bride*, could already be observed in pre-screwball films such as *Platinum Blonde* in which a rich heiress (Jean Harlow) marries a reporter (Robert Williams).[50] However, the characteristics of this union, and the way it evolves, are far different from the way Screwball era films developed cross-class romances. Kendall uses the example of *It Happened One Night*, the first-said screwball comedy, to highlight the fact that power is distributed equally between Peter Warne (the working man) and Ellie Andrews (the heiress).[51] On the opposite, Ann Schuyler (Jean Harlow), remains an heiress with a spoiled attitude and does not learn life-lessons the same way Ellie Andrews does, despite marrying reporter Stew Smith (Robert Williams). In the end, Smith plans to divorce his rich wife to marry his colleague, Gallagher (Loretta Young), whom he realises is the woman he truly loves. Thus, the union between opposed classes is not concluding or does not seem possible. That is a tactful way to announce the message screwball comedies will set by showing audiences that rich people are only worthy of themselves if they learn to change and be less self-centred. Since Harlow's character hardly evolves, it was probably difficult for Depression audiences to feel any sympathy for her.

Ed Sikov qualifies these cross-class romance screwball stories between an heiress and a reporter as the "great cultural powerhouse of the thirties". This powerhouse results in a

[48] Kelli Marshall, "'Something's Gotta Give' and the Classical Screwball Comedy." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 37, no. 1 (Spring/2009): 11, accessed May 23, 2020, doi: 10.3200/JPFT.37.1.9-15.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Kendall, 60.
[51] Ibid.

"struggle for love and authority".[52] Those stories indeed often start in an ambiguous way letting the spectator believe that such a zany union will never work. There is an authority report between Ellie and Peter in *It Happened One Night* that their social status initially establish even before they cross each other's paths. Ellie is the first one to make her entrance in the story. She is having an argument with her father (Walter Connolly) who opposes himself to her wedding to aviator King Westley whom, according to him, is just a gold-digger. They are travelling by yacht in Florida, and Ellie seems surrounded with comfort (she is a spoiled heiress after all). However, since she cannot stand obeying her father, she runs away by jumping overboard and swimming to the shore. Not long after, Peter Warne gets introduced in a far different atmosphere. He is at a bus terminal with a group of friends. He is drunk; the place is loud, dusty, and he manages to lose his jobs after a phone conversation with his boss. So, at this point, the story involves a runaway heiress and a workless man. By coincidence, both of them happen to be travelling on the same Greyhound bus. Ellie wishes to join Westley in New York.

If Peter eventually recognises Ellie Andrews-the-Socialite and, initially, seems only interested in the juicy story her escape could bring to the newspaper, his real motivations to stay with her are, at first, not completely honest. He becomes the power authority, as, in this world, it is people like him who dominate. Ellie, because she is not used to modest life, is more vulnerable. It is hard to say if he *controls* Ellie or if he takes care of her. On her side, the heiress has to bow to someone else's authority without protesting probably for the first time in her life because if she jumps off the bus, she will find herself back to the starting point. As the story evolves, their mutual appreciation becomes more evident, although they never really want to admit it. Ellie promised herself to King Westley, and Peter is a cynical man who is not interested in the upper class except for writing stories about hem.

Interestingly, the working man or the forgotten man who encounters the heiress is not necessarily less glamorous than she is. Furthermore, he is not someone who does not know how to behave in society. As the authors observe in *America in the Thirties*, the screwball hero is one that is chic, sophisticated and cynical. He, therefore, does not need to make much effort to adapt himself to a refined life.[53] Actors such as Cary Grant, William Powell, Brian Aherne and Clark Gable are some that adapted themselves perfecting to the classy working man or the classy tramp. The example of William Powell as Godfrey in *My Man Godfrey* is a

[52] Sikov, 93.
[53] Hickey et. al., 199.

significant one as it helps to understand the distinction between how people from his class perceive him and how people from the high society do. When he first meets the Bullocks, he presents himself under the traits of a tramp, wearing rags and a three-day beard. The following day, after Irene hired him to become their new butler, he goes to their place, and the Bullocks do not immediately recognise him with his clean face and clean butler uniform. Despite living in a dump, Godfrey knows how to behave in society, like a real gentleman, something he will not take long to prove to the Bullocks (who are the ones who probably need lessons in good manners). A similar situation happens to Brian Aherne as Wade Rawlins in *Merrily We Live*. After he gets appropriately dressed to become the new Kilbournes' chauffeur, they also do not recognise him.

Godfrey and Wade Rawlins are two educated men (Godfrey is a graduate from Harvard, and Rawlins is a writer), so this certainly plays in their favour as of how to be presentable. However, this does not mean that they lose their original values and become like those they serve. On the contrary, if the spoiled heiress finds herself on the other side of the track, she has to learn about this different way of life from the beginning. Although he is not a female character or a spoiled heiress, Jim Buchanan, the rich male protagonist of *If You Could Only Coo*k, decides to take a vacation from his well-paid job. While he is sitting on a park bench, he meets Joan Hawthorne (Jean Arthur) who believes he is one of those many people desperately seeking employment as she is. She suggests that they pretend to be husband and wife to find combined jobs as a cook and a butler. Despite the strangeness of the offer (and the fact that Buchanan is wealthy enough), he accepts the proposition, and the rich Michael Rossini hires them not long after. During their first night there (they have their own room in Rossini's mansion), Jim elopes at night to go back to his place for his butler (Romaine Callender) to give him lessons. Buchanan is used to being served but, at this moment, he shows his vulnerability by trying to learn from a servant. This idea of trying to adapt oneself to domestic chores also happens when Wade surprises Jerry Kilbourne trying to cook. It seems she wants to prove something but, having been served all her life as well, her cooking skills are far from admirable. The young woman pretends to be preparing fudge. She has added pickles to her unsavoury mixture.

Maria DiBattista describes the privileged status of the screwball heiress as one that inspires pity. She is, in a way, trapped by her money and lacks the essential un-material richness that gives life its value.[54] The working male protagonist, as mentioned before, has for

[54] DiBattista, 90.

the role to precisely teach these values to the heiress to complete her life learning. That was essential to explain how screwball comedies were received as it allowed the Depression audiences to realise that those who had not been affected by the crisis could learn from them and, therefore, become more aware individuals, aware of their luck. Someone like Ellie Andrews learns about the "value of money, humility and loyalty" as William K. Everson lists it.[55]

In connection to that, one might wonder if characters from lower classes can learn from characters from the upper class. The answer is yes. However, as one will observe by watching various screwball films, these lessons rarely concern something that has to do with wealth and class status. One of the best examples is the lessons that Godfrey learns from the Bullocks after spending time serving them. After saving them from bankruptcy, Cornelia, who has, so far, always been cruel and snobbish towards him, apologies for her disdainful behaviour and the fact that she had underestimated him. She has learned her lesson. Godfrey is grateful for what the Bullocks have taught him and for the chance they gave him. He learned patience from Mr Bullock and the falsy of false pride from Cornelia.

Eventually, the union between the heiress and the working man is one that is advantageous for both of them as they undeniably learn from each other. Although screwball comedies imply that money is not the top priority for the lower class man, there is, however, no evidence that this one rejects it completely.[56] That could have been a clue that, by adopting the proper attitude, those who were struggling due to the economic crisis, could have miraculously find themselves into some coincidental luck. However, films are not reality, and the power they have has its limits.

3. Screwball Working Girl

The case of the working girl in screwball comedies is not entirely comparable to the one of the working man. Indeed, the purpose of including such characters was one that resonated with audiences in a much different way. Moreover, the screwball working girl's journey is one that does not start and does not end at the same points than the one of the screwball working man. Although actresses like Claudette Colbert and Irene Dunne have portrayed this

[55] Everson, 70.
[56] Sikov, 92.

type of character, it is more often Jean Arthur who embodied the role perfectly. She played such roles in *If You Could Only Cook*, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, *Easy Living*, *You Can't Take It With You* (Frank Capra, 1938) and *The Devil and Miss Jones*.

The working girl is not a regular girl-next-door without a story. If her life lacks pep, it usually does not last long. For understanding the role of the working girl in screwball comedies, it is essential to make the distinction between how she is affected by the Depression vs how the working man is. There is, in fact, an inversion of the conventional roles (at least, those that were the norm in the first half of the 20th century) when approaching the subject of male vs female characters in screwball comedies. In the foreword to Ed Sikov's book, Molly Haskell writes that this comic genre tended to put men and women on the same pedestal. Most of the time, this equalisation was the result of class and money. The screwball heiress reaches the liberty ensured by her proximity to money with ease, meaning that she is free of domestic chores, at least, while being single.[57] The screwball working girl, on her side, gains that sense of freedom and equality precisely with her access to work that frees her from the traditional woman-at-home status.

However, the status of the working woman, being married or not, was not necessarily an optimistic one during the Depression. So, it is necessary to contextualise the subject. In the problematic decade that followed the 1929 crash, women had easier access to work. Three main reasons can be listed: the lower wages, working in service occupations (a professional field that was less affected by the Depression than manufacturing for example) and being willing to take bottom jobs in opposition to working men.[58] *America in the Thirties* also adds the fact that they more often worked in light industries rather than heavy industries, and those had a better facility to recover from the Depression's consequences. Consequently, women had a better facility to return to work if they had jobs in light industries or if they could find work in service industries, which were not appealing to men.[59]

America in the Thirties gives many details on the woman condition in the 30s. If at the beginning of the century, working women were more often young, poor, unmarried, women coming from immigrant backgrounds, the situation changed in the 30s when middle-class American and married women joined the working forces and represented one-third of the working women.[60] However, this does not mean that women were not affected by the Depression even though they may have had easier access to work. Their working positions

[57] Molly Haskell, "Foreword" **in** Ed Sikov, 12.
[58] Sharot, 95.
[59] Hickey et. al., 170.
[60] Ibid., 169.

were always more or less unstable. Moreover, the wage for women was lower in comparison to men's, which discouraged their participation in the workforce. Besides, men had the top priority over skilled jobs, and women saw themselves occupying stereotyped professions such as nursing or school teaching.[61]

The reason why the number of working married women increased during the Depression was due to their felt responsibility to save their families from the situation and prevent them from being completely buried by poverty and hunger.[62] However, the place of the women at work was not necessarily seen positively by the patriarchal society. Although around half of the working women were the only bread-winners of their family, those often received accusations of abandoning their families, their traditional womanhood responsibilities and disturbing the traditional family roles.[63] The problem of unemployment was, in fact, more present for married women precisely because the patriarchal society firmly believed that their place was at home.

Interestingly, there is a comparison to make between these previous historical facts and Heather Gilmour's discussion on the position of men and women within families in the Depression years. The author mentions the study of sociologists Robert and Helen Lynd stipulating that the Depression had less impact on family women than on family men. If a woman stayed at home to play the expected role of the housewife, her family status was not affected by the situation. However, if she decided to seek employment, she would see her family status rising. For the family man, on the contrary, his position could only go down, particularly with the loss of employment.[64]

Hickey, Olszwoka, Sheridan and Sullivan advances that the situation for the single working girl (the one that screwball comedies more often represent) was different but not necessarily more positive or easier. One of the main obstacles that presented itself to the single working girl was the lack of visibility that surrounded her. The Depression population focused on the poor *forgotten man* or on the working married woman whose controversial role attracted attention. The single working girl, as for her, remained in her corner, and the population did not care much whether or not she was able to keep her job. She, in no way, drew attention, sympathy or support.[65] Her background was also different. She could come

[61] Ibid., 170.
[62] Ibid., 171.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Heather Gilmour, "Different, Except in a Different Way: Marriage, Divorce, and Gender in the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage," *Journal of Film and Video* 50, no. 2 (Summer/1998): 31, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/20688177.
[65] Hickey et. al., 171.

from working or middle-class families that could not support her, be a woman abandoned by her husband, someone who postponed her marriage due to economic the situation or someone who chose voluntarily to remain single.[66]

If one looks closely at the way screwball comedies represent these women, it is, first of all, primordial to emphasise on the fact that the message of the 30s films was that "even if a woman is successful in her profession or in business, she will only be happy and find meaning in her life if she gives up working for love, marriage, or her husband's esteem" as Stephen Sharot explains it.[67] That, regardless of the fact that 30s American films included a significant amount of female worker characters in their narrative lines.[68] This situation applies itself well to the case of Mary Smith (Jean Arthur) in *Easy Living*. Earlier was mentioned the scene during which Mr Ball throws his wife's sable from the roof. The next shot shows Mary receiving the coat on her head as she is sitting in the exterior part of a double-decker bus. If she wants to return the coat, Ball insists that she must keep it and even wants to buy her a fancy hat. It leads Mr Van Buren (Franklin Pangborn), the hat shop proprietor, to believe that Mary is the banker's mistress. Later at work, Mary's boss fires her since he believes that she will ruin the reputation of the magazine she works for by owning such an extravagant piece of clothing. Mary is now the poor and vulnerable woman whose piggy banks has not much to offer and who can not pay her rent on time. At home, she receives a call from Louis Louis (Luis Alberni), the owner of the Hotel Louis, who happens to know Mr Van Buren. Mr Louis invites Mary to stay at his hotel because he believes that she has access to Ball's fortune and could help him to give a good reputation to his hotel to avoid Mr Ball to foreclose it.

After visiting her new suite at the hotel, Mary goes to an automat in the hope of grabbing a bite with the few coins she has left. There, she meets J.B. Ball's son, John "Johnny" Ball Jr. (Ray Milland) who works there anonymously as he wishes to gain his financial independence. Johnny sympathises with Mary and then, gets fired for giving her free food. Since he has no place to go (he is too proud to go back to his chic family home on Park Avenue), Mary invites him to share her enormous suite. Unsurprisingly, the rest of the story develops a feeling of mutual love and appreciation between them. Moreover, Mary receives more gifts and products from people who believe she can help their business by being in such a privileged position. So, the young lady rapidly moves from being the poor working girl to the one that becomes rich without making any effort. All this is due to a coincidence

[66] Ibid., 172.
[67] Sharot, 96.
[68] Ibid.

(receiving the coat on her head) and to a considerable misunderstanding. After disastrous consequences on the stock market that are luckily solved, Ball offers a job to his son and Mary agrees to marry Johnny. So, the man and the woman are, once again, placed in the cases organised by the society.

Although Johnny does not truly need a job with his wealthy background, there is, on no occasion, a clue of Mary trying to find a job or thinking of going back on the job market. She is going to marry Johnny, and the end of the film lets the viewer believe that this the only thing that matters to her and that it will make her happy.

Ed Sikov compares a story like that to a "modern-Cinderella" tale. The author gives the example of *Easy Living* but also of *Midnight* (Mitchell Leisen, 1939) in which a wealthy John Barrymore turns a penniless Claudette Colbert into a fake baroness.[69] As Sharot writes, just like the working man who encounters the madcap heiress, the working girl who encounters the wealthy man is also brought into a cross-class romance. Her facility to step over the fence separating the different classes indicates that evolution is not impossible.[70]

This chapter previously established that the screwball working man had for objective to prove audiences that nothing was entirely lost, and the madcap heiress was proof that high society could learn from the working class. Considering that, what was the role of the working girl in connection to the comfort she could bring to audiences? This text has already explained that screwball comedies were not necessarily encouraging the woman-at-work status, especially with those ending showing the working girl becoming the traditional wife. However, there is a comparison to make between what she and the working man (or the forgotten man) embody. Spectators could certainly see those fairytale-like stories as another way to tell the working girl that her financial situation was not desperate or, at least, provide her comfort and escapism by offering her this fantasy world. As the introduction explained it, the man who had lost his job could identify himself to the screwball male character and the woman who had a job could identify herself to the screwball working girl.[71] Screwball comedies do not necessarily embellish the working girl's situation and, even though they do not encourage such a status, they provide an indirect comprehension of what she could have been living during those difficult years. They gave her more visibility than it was the case in real life.

[69] Sikov, 110.
[70] Sharot, 105.
[71] Kendall, 60.

It is important to precise that the screwball working girl is not necessarily one working as a nurse or a schoolteacher as the society often expected it in the 1930s. Just like the working man, she often has what Famita El-Tayeb qualifies of "cool jobs". That is a way to fit the refinement of the screwball world, which could either be portrayed by rich characters living in a fancy world or by those "cool jobs".[72] The overdominant "cool" screwball comedy jobs are undeniably those of the writing world. Jean Arthur and Claudette Colbert play reporters in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and in *It's a Wonderful World* (W.S. Van Dyke, 1939), Irene Dunne embodies a writer in *Theodora Goes Wild* (Richard Boleslawski, 1936). However, in many of these cases, the working girl finds herself handicapped by her job. Babe Bennett's (Jean Arthur) journalist job forces her to betray Longfellow Deeds (Gary Cooper). Theodora Lynn (Irene Dunne) has to hide her true author identity, to name a few examples.

The working girl that perhaps satisfied the criticising society the best would be Jean Arthur in *If You Could Only Cook*. Yes, Joan Hawthorne is married (or, at least, she pretends to be) but she has no children, she and her "husband" reside at their workplace and, therefore, she does not owe anything to anybody except to her employer. When Rossini and his right-hand man, Flash (Lionel Stander), discover that she is not a real cook, Rossini does not care because she cooks well. It is also probably because a woman handling a kitchen is less surprising than a woman writing salacious stories, as it is the case for Theodora Lynn. Therefore, as long as the working woman did not disturb society's peace, she was accepted as she was.

One last point to observe by watching screwball films is how the development of the story often leads the working girl to worry less about money and worry more about love. A character from the upper class often provokes this change of thoughts. While the role of the working man is to lead the madcap heiress on the right path, the working girl is someone who often seeks fortune, as she believes it buys dreams and stops misery. A relevant example to illustrate that is the relation between manicurist Regi Allen (Carole Lombard) and rich-man Allen Macklyn (Ralph Bellamy) in *Hands Across the Table* (Mitchell Leisen, 1935). Allen becomes Regi's regular client, a friend and a confidant. As they are having tea on Allen's balcony, Regi praises the importance of money while Allen talks about its unimportance and the importance of love. Regi, however, gives a logical explanation by telling her friend that poverty destroyed her family. However, the rest of the film gives reason to Bellamy's

[72] Barbara Kosta and Fatima El-Tayeb, "Everything Will Be Fine: An Interview with Fatima El-Tayeb," *Women in German Yearbook* 18 (2002): 38, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/20688940.

character. Regi meets Theodore Drew III (Fred MacMurray), a man who has lost his fortune during the Crash, and both are determined to marry for money (so, not to marry each other). However, in the end, now able to admit their mutual love, they marry each other instead of Drew marrying the rich Vivian Snowden (Astrid Allwyn) and Regi marrying Allen. Once again, love triumphs over money and the two of them are seemingly much happier that way.

4. Screwball Businessman

If the madcap heiress is usually not one that could give such lessons, screwball comedies often represent the rich family man as a voice of wisdom depending on his life experience. Most of the time, this paternal figure, is the sanest and most ordinary member of the wealthy screwball family. Middle-age character actors such as Eugene Pallette, Walter Connolly, or Edward Arnold often portrayed the rich businessman fathers. Grey-haired and fat man embodying the physical stereotypes of the businessman, this character is on that is often seen as an intruder among his family. His down-to-earth attitude towards life and the way he perceives his madcap family often put him in a strange position where he continually seems to ask himself "what am I doing here?". In opposition to the working man who eventually marries the heiress, there is no real progression shown for the businessman, and the viewer is not told much about his background and how he came to obtain such a privileged position.

However, this is not so important concerning what he could teach to audiences. As Maria DiBattista explains, screwball comedies represent the fortunate patriarch as "a hardworking but emotionally harassed father".[73] He is in constant opposition with his family, often having to deal with their nonsense. Most of the time, he is the one who wishes to take the right path, and he wants what is best for his family depending on their mutual interests or his interests. Yes, he is a man driven by power and money but, in opposition to the madcap heiress, he seems more aware of its value and does not wish to gamble with it. To support this claim, one can think of Mr Seton's opposition to Johnny and Julia's wedding in *Holiday,* because the young man does not seem interested in taking an office job. There is also Mr Kilbourne's (Clarence Kolb) opposition to Wade Rawlins working in his house, which is provoked by his prejudices against tramps. In the end, however, he evolves and,

[73] DiBattista, 91.

although he still does not understand his daughter's interest in Rawlins, he decides to accept it.

The businessman, even if lower classes characters can see him as their enemy, beneficiates from his wisdom after all. In opposition to Mr Seton and Mr Kilbourne, there are those moneyed paternal figures that learn to sympathise with members from a lower class without completely saving them from their situation. Those are Mr Van Dyke in *She Couldn't Take It* or Mr Bullock in *My Man Godfrey*. Those are men that are driven crazy by their family and whose contact with the outside world, being with Godfrey the tramp or Ricardi the convict, incite them to re-think about their situation and how they can improve it. For example, at the end of *My Man Godfrey*, Mr Bullock finds the courage to send the annoying Carlo away.

A working-class figure often saves the life of the businessman when financial problems disturb it. Earlier was mentioned the example of Godfrey saving Mr Bullock from a financial crisis or the example of Ricardi who becomes in charge of Mr Van Dyke's fortune and manages to put his family on the right track. A less obvious example would be the fact that, at the end of *Holiday,* Johnny decides not to marry Julia, which is probably a relief for her father who might instead see his daughter marry someone financially worthy. That is also why the rich father opposes himself to his daughter marrying gold-diggers, hence the reason why Mr Andrews (Walter Connolly) does not agree with his daughter's marriage to King Westley and trusts Peter Warne much more. This one is not obsessed with money, especially when he asks Mr Andrews the modest sum of $39, 60 (covering what he spent on Ellie during the trip) instead of the $10 000 Mr Andrews is offering as a reward to the one who would find his daughter. By making the working man the hero of the situation, this could have been a strategy for Depression audiences to find comfort in those films and feel less worthless about whom they represented in opposition to what the upper class represented. Moreover, despite his desire to remain dignified, this does not mean that the course of the story will not eventually ridicule the rich father as well, and this, once again, provided comic relief to Depression audiences. However, some of the ways used to ridicule him will be explained and developed in the next chapter.

Maria DiBattista makes a pertinent observation about the physical aspect of rich fatherly characters. She argues that if these are, most of the time, little round men, this shape reflects their financial path but does not make them refine aristocrats either. She gives the example of J.B. Ball in *Easy Living* whom, when he goes to the hat store with Mary Smith,

does not hesitate to express his prejudiced views against *haute-couture*.[74] The banker indeed compares a hat to a salt-shaker. Another example could be the fact that Mr Seton does not approve of his son, Ned, to pursue a musical career.

By portraying the various screwball characters this way, the cinema industry of the 1930s was playing a safe card by using the power of films as a way to reassure people instead of increasing their fears caused by the Depression and, therefore, to prevent them from committing wrong. Sam B. Girgus, in *1938 Movies and Whistling in the Dark*, explains that to comically portray wealthy characters was a way for the working class not to rebel against the upper class.[75] Furthermore, if I may add, this was done by giving importance to the working-class protagonist and making him the real hero of the situation. That does not mean that Depression screwballs did not recognise the extent of the economic crisis, but they were not blaming the upper class either.[76] Moreover, Biran Kellow, in his book on the Bennett family, *The Bennetts: An Acting Family,* adds that, by developing fortunate characters this way, screwball comedy films found a way to humanise them.[77] Their lack of refinery is in opposition to the educated lower classes men portrayed by William Powell, Cary Grant or Brian Aherne.

[74] Ibid.
[75] Sam B. Girgus, "1938: Movies and Whistling in the Dark", in *American Cinema of the 1930s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Ina Rae Hark (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 214, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj0s2.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Brian Kellow, *The Bennetts: An Acting Family* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 109, accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jcr1k.

Chapter 3: Screwball Settings

The previous chapter has established with details the different characteristics that not only create oppositions between the social classes but also help to understand them as they are and how they work together. That is, naturally, always done in a screwball comedy context and as a way to develop on the pertinence of representing different social classes on-screen. The following chapter will linger more particularly on the various environments and settings screwball comedies used, and how those contributed to give power to the lower classes and gently make fun of the upper class. Interestingly, some elements that associate themselves to the subject of place and setting, that writers have not necessarily discussed in details in various writings on screwball comedy. Therefore, it will be rewarding to discover them and try to understand how they contributed to the messages conveyed by the main comic genre of the 1930s.

1. New York City in Screwball Comedies

Regardless of any screwball character's economic background and status, if one would choose one (or two) words to describe the environment in which they develop most of their journeys, it would be *New York*. Yes, New York, the city of many creative and economic possibilities, a place that frequently over-dominates the screwball world. Films of the genre that take place in this American metropolis or in which, at least, a part does (as it is the case for *Bringing Up Baby*) assuredly own the majority. Even if the spectator is initially not a hundred per cent sure if New York is the represented city, most of the time, the estimations are valid, and the plot eventually reveals that this or that film does not make an exception to the rule.

The question now is: why choosing New York as the *capital of screwball comedy*? The hypotheses can be numerous but, one thing is sure, New York was, and still is, a city that offers many different opportunities as of whom we wish to develop, where and how. It is not only a city where the various social classes co-habit together but also a place where moving from one social world to another with ease is seen as credible. Another explanation concerns the logic of setting those films in the city where the American economy started crashing in 1929. That was probably not a coincidence either. Setting stories in *Depression Land* also,

more than likely contributed to the feeling of proximity audiences were seeking. Curiously, while the Depression brutally hit the city, it seems that films of the screwball genre more often associate the place to a sense of optimism rather than one of pessimism. The different social classes, especially the working class and the lower class, manage to evolve in screwball films positively. That even happened before the arrival of screwballs. As the first chapter established it, Busby Berkeley's musicals, although they take place during the worst years of the Depression and show various characters struggling with their new reality, usually offer a positive message. On the opposite, if one looks at the *film noir* era that began during the first years of the war and ended at the end of the 1950s, films from this movement were, more often, set in West Coast cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco. They were criticising the USA's economic problems, post-war struggles, the place of men in society, etc. Wherever more positive or more negative stories took place, screwball comedies used New York at its full potential and gave it a positive image but not an entirely realistic one either. In other words, it remained a way to show the many possibilities the city had to offer and a manner to accentuate the hopes and dreams of Depression audiences.

Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, in *New York Class-Passing Onscreen in the 1930s,* underlines the importance of New York City in Depression-era films by describing it as an extra character to the stories.[78] That is indeed what it is, not only a place but also a character whose influence on the course of the story and the characters' journey has a significant impact. Moreover, Foster emphasises on the fact that New York offers many possibilities of class-passing stories as it was previously briefly noted in this chapter. She more precisely writes:

> New York City, by virtue of its anonymity, architecture, size, societal infrastructure, and mythic embrace of the American Dream [...] allows [...] a liminal space where the possibility for class mobility seems endless. Films of the 1930s, in particular, with their embrace of change, consumption, modernity, and individualism, offer zones where anything can happen in terms of class.[79]

The notions of the *American Dream* and *class mobility* that Foster uses in her writing are good ones regarding screwball comedies' sense of optimism. There is, however, confusion as of how social classes evolves in such a complex environment.[80] Nevertheless, one must not

[78] Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, "New York Class-Passing Onscreen in the 1930s", in *City that Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination*, ed. Murray Pomerance (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 165, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjb0f.
[79] Ibid., 151.
[80] Ibid., 165.

forget that the feeling of escapism was probably more important than realism for 1930s Depression spectators.

My Man Godfrey is, without a doubt, a film that efficiently supports the notion of class mobility Foster discusses in her text. Immediately from the beginning of the story, two people from the upper class, in this case, sisters Cornelia and Irene Bullock, find themselves in a lower-class environment, more precisely the city dump next to the East River, to pick a forgotten man for their scavenger hunt. Put another way, to use a poor unfortunate soul for their sole entertainment. That is where and how the two sisters meet Godfrey. Visibly, even if they dare to disturb the peace of those living in the dump, they hardly fit in such an environment, especially Cornelia who cares only for her economic status and, more precisely, only for herself (which easily explains her lack of empathy). For her, finding a forgotten man is a game and not a way to take him under her wing. Once the forgotten man is found and shown to the other players, she will more than likely send him back to the dump. So, when Godfrey pushes her in a pile of dust, it is not something she was expecting, and it brutally hurts her ego. On her side, Irene behaves more nicely so, although the fancy gown she wears and the stupid questions she asks Godfrey reveal her economic status, she is more at ease in this new environment than it is the case for her sister. Godfrey and Irene's encounter also offers the possibility for the development of a future relationship between people from opposite backgrounds.

The previous chapter has elaborated on how Godfrey does not have so much difficulty to adapt himself to the upper world. That would not only be explained by his past as a Harvard and high society man but also because it is usually more positive to climb up on the social ladder than it is of going down. After all, why Cornelia, who lives in luxury and comfort, would want to abandon what she has to live in the most modest parts of New York City? That depends on the characters' motivations and their life priorities. Although screwball films wanted to offer audiences a message that money was not the only world's priority, they did not either imply that economic success was wrong and that one had to accept his or her tragic faith caused by the Depression. Godfrey, who invests his new money in a nightclub, The Dump, and gives jobs to the other tramps, is a significant example of that. It is mostly a question of how a character decides to exploit his/her financial situations, in hopes that it is positively. It goes in the same way that the New Deal meant to help people affected by the Crash but also aimed to make the overall economy roll again. It is not with the $5 he gets from the wealthy scavenger hunter that a tramp will see his life changed.

The very beginning of *My Man Godfrey* might showcase one of the most significant contrasts between wealth and poverty. It starts with the opening credits, which are designed as neon lights and inspire the extravagance and success of the upper class as well as the world of nightclubs, Broadway, and New York's trendy nightlife in general. The visual power of these opening titles as well as the orchestral music, inspire a prosperous way of life. However, the spectator is soon brought back to the brutal reality of the economic crisis when the opening titles sequence finishes on an ensemble shot of the city dump with a dark-looking Brooklyn bridge in the background. The music also becomes sad and gloomy. If 1930s films had only tempted to comfort audiences by showing the reality of the riches and their problems, without acknowledging the one of those living under more difficult or disastrous situations, they doubtlessly would not have been able to deliver their message the same way. On the one hand, audiences needed the comic relief provided by making fun of the wealthy population. On the other hand, they also had to identify with something or someone to project themselves in this reality.

Foster acknowledges this contrast between comedy and the difficult reality of the Depression. It was not uncommon to see breadlines in New York City (with people from all economic backgrounds), unemployed people living in Central Park or Hoovervilles (shanty towns named after President Herbert Hoover). The author explains that those Hoovervilles were a reflection of the blame put on President Hoover for the Depression and the fact that his government took time to react to the problem, therefore making Roosevelt, who was then a governor, to be the first politician to seek a solution to this major crisis. She also writes that the main challenge was, not only to boost the economy again but also to encourage the wealthy population to participate in the effort. Consequently, films like *My Man Godfrey* were encouraging social and economic changes.[81] Irene Bullock is one of those representations of the wealthy population trying to help the less fortunate and being encouraged not to close eyes on what was going on outside their Park Avenue apartments.

If Godfrey eventually manages to work his way up and open his new fancy nightclub, such a place remains a symbol of wealth associated with the fortunate ones. Indeed, even if he reboots the city dump, turns it into a club and gives jobs to the tramps, those remain at the service of the high society by holding doors for its members and serving them drinks.[82] Hopefully, with luck and willingness, some of them will move from being servants to starting their enterprise the same way as Godfrey. The film, thus, closes on an optimistic note. There

[81] Ibid., 153.
[82] Bergman, 140. **Cited in** Smith, para. 7.

is, after all, a significant gap between begging in the streets and working for a fancy nightclub.

Although there is a debate of it being a screwball comedy or not, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* is another case that uses New York at its full potential. The way it introduces the city to the story fits well with the idea of class-passing brought by Foster. Here, New York is the ultimate synonym of *wealth* and *success* as this is the city where attorney John Cedar (Douglass Drumille) and newspaperman Cornelius Cobb (Lionel Stander) bring Longfellow Deeds after this one inherits a fortune of $20 million. He quits his hometown, Mandrake Falls, Vermont accompanied by the two men to start a new life in the Big Apple. Used to simplicity and a life basically without problems, Deeds now has to face a world where everything is bigger and faster. His modest mentality and the fact that his new fortune is not something that makes him happier both play in his favour and is an obstacle at the same time. Deeds does not have the capitalist mentality of Wall Street businessmen but, instead, decides to use his fortune to help the less fortunate, for which Cedar takes him to court for "insanity". Interestingly, if one compares Godfrey to Deeds, yes, both characters make a step in the wealthy world but, at the opposite of Godfrey, who once was a member of the high society before becoming a tramp, Deeds has always been a middle-class man. That could explain why he has more difficulties to cope with his new way of life in New York City. However, it is his middle-class background that leads him to use his money has a way to help those affected by the Depression instead of using it to become even richer, at the great despair of his new high society acquaintances.

2. Nightclubs in Screwball Comedies

The nightclubs previously mentioned would be a pertinent element to discuss, as they are often associated with the upper class's extravagances and recklessness. It is the kind of place one would not only associate to an elite but also entertainment because that is a luxury rich people could afford and had time for instead of occupying their evenings looking for a job or something to eat. Historically, nightclubs first appeared in New York and Chicago in the 1910s and became particularly popular in the 1920s. However, it is New York's clubs that became more often associated with the entertainment the city had to offer in opposition to Chicago's as Lewis A. Erenberg discusses in the article *From New York to Middletown:*

Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression.[83] With the beginning of the Depression at the end of the 20s, nightclubs were not immune, and their success became in great danger, especially in 1932, which is often considered the worst year of the Depression.[84] Plus, the criminalisation brought by the prohibition did not help either. Luckily, the second half of the 1930s was more beneficial to nightclubs, especially for the interest people had in the entertainment industry and the culture the city had to offer.[85] Besides, luxurious hotels became part of the game, and the 1930s marked their entrance in the world of nightclubs and cabarets.[86] Those began to offer a myriad of entertainments for the high society and middle-class business people with ballrooms, orchestras, and dancers.[87]

Various screwball films use nightclubs as a background on how rich and poor characters interact together but also as a way to show the ease in which middle-class or working-class characters manage to enter these places. For example, in *Hands Across the Table*, Regi Allen and Theodore Drew are refused entry to a nightclub for not wearing the appropriate clothes (the ones they are wearing are probably not fancy enough). So, being more cunning than the doorman could have thought, they begin removing them. They, therefore, alert the man who instantly forgets about the fashion rule and lets them enter.

Another example occurs in *The Awful Truth* when Lucy Warriner and Jerry Warriner (Cary Grant), who are going through a divorce process, meet in a nightclub. Lucy's future *fiancé*, Dan Leeson, accompanies her, and Jerry is here with his frequentation of the moment, Dixie Belle Lee (Joyce Compton). Although the narrative lines do not say it explicitly, the viewer concludes that the young lady comes from a class that is inferior to the one of the Warriners and Leeson's, being by the way she talks for example. She enters the high society game by performing a song with dance moves that embarrass Jerry and the others. One could interpret this scene as a way to show that Dixie does not quite know how to properly behave in the upper world or, on the contrary, the discomfort of the upper class is, perhaps, used as another comic element and form of ridicule.

Nothing Sacred also presents this idea of including a middle-class or working-class character in such an environment when reporter Wallace Cook makes Hazel Flagg, an ordinary girl from a little town, the star of New York. One could also think of *Easy Living* when Mr Louis takes Mary Smith to his chic hotel and reporter Bill Chandler (William

[83] Lewis A. Erenberg, "From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression," *America Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (Winter/1986): 762, accessed May 23, 2020, doi: 10.2307/2712822.
[84] Ibid., 763.
[85] Ibid., 764.
[86] Ibid., 767-768.
[87] Ibid., 767.

Powell) who finds himself on a luxurious cruise ship with socialite Connie Allenbury (Myrna Loy) in *Libeled Lady* (Jack Conway, 1936). Even if all those places are not nightclubs per se, they reflect that desire fashionable places had to be more inclusive. That was precisely driven by the Depression which circumstances led the nightclubs' organisations to make their places as reputable as possible (particularly by distancing themselves from the criminality often associated with nightclubs during the prohibition years) and welcoming for the "moderate spender".[88]

Even more fascinating, the architectural style of the nightclubs also changed to make those a better reflection of people's variety. Erenberg explains the process architects used for this new architectural revolution among nightclubs:

> Designers stripped away the excess, luxury and class distinctions that many thought had produced the crisis that left those theaters dark. They thus abandoned both the eclecticism of theatrical architecture, modeled after European castles, and the decorative motifs of art deco. Instead, they turned to streamlined art moderne, a style that sought to balance the emphasis on luxurious consumption with attention to values of production. Long horizontal axes rather than the vertical ones of the theaters now dominated, and as a result sight lines were laid out so that everyone had an unobstructed view. Parabolic rooms, [...], made this possible. [...] To increase intimacy within the crowd, separate staircases were replaced by long, curving ones. Art moderne architecture, [...], provided a style appropriate to the amusements of the modern world.[89]

The popularity of nightclubs eventually led fancier places, such as ballrooms, to adapt themselves to nightclub's qualities and make them more appealing and accessible to younger, middle class and, to a certain extend, working-class people.[90] Nightclubs were no longer associated with criminal money and not only to those who had the luxury to frequent these places. It is, first and foremost, important to understand that the objective was not to reflect New York's economy, but its glamour and the richness of its culture.

The Art Deco architecture Erenberg mentions is a pertinent one as it is an architectural style that has been approached on a few occasions when discussing the visual settings of screwball comedies. As Erengerg implies it, the style was more often associated with wealth and luxury.[91] On his side, Ed Sikov supports this idea by adding that Art Deco "could be used in a more or less straightforward fashion as an expression of wealth and chic".[92] He develops on the fact that the style reflected the elegant life-style that people with money could afford.[93] Interestingly, the access to this luxurious life seems more pertinent for the working or middle-

[88] Ibid., 770.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid., 772.
[91] Ibid., 770.
[92] Sikov, 26.
[93] Ibid., 27.

class character than it is for the upper-class character who was already born in this environment and, therefore, does not need to expect more in terms of comfort and material possessions.

3. Screwball Interiors

It is curious how accessing these deluxe places becomes a way to provoke the luck of the working-class characters and lead them towards a more comfortable way of life. These locations are often seen as a reflection of unnecessary extravagances by the working-class characters and do not necessarily rhyme with a desirable place to live. They often reflect, not only the material wealth of the upper class but also the many visual exaggerations that could be associated with it. For example, in *Easy Living*, there is an enormous bath with the shape of a shell in the bathroom of Mary Smith's new suite at Hotel Louis. The only use Mary makes of this bath is when she and Johnny try to turn out the tap, driven by curiosity. They only end up getting all wet. Both are in the enormous shell, fully dressed, and looking ridiculously small in comparison to it. Useless bibelots and an out-of-tune grand piano pack the place as well, but, ironically, there is no food in the fridge, a clue that wealthy people do not automatically think of the essential. After all, they can always go out to the hotel bar or some fancy restaurant.

Cukor's *Holiday* also uses the contrast between wealth and modesty at its best. Not only does Johnny compares the Setons' place to Grand Central Station, but his friends, the Potters, compare it to Caligula's palace. Yes, Johnny, the Potters or any middle-class person that enters such an enormous mansion are impressed by its grandeur, but *impressed* does not mean *envious*. The Potters do not feel at the right place and would prefer to go back to their quiet home. So, when Linda invites them to the playroom, they change their minds about leaving the party. The playroom creates a significant contrast with the rest of the house. There are books, toys, tapestry, a small fireplace, and a warm and welcoming ambience emanates from it. Showing this type of characters in opposed types of environments must have been a way to prove Depression audiences that human warmth was a better path to happiness than living in a cold and enormous palace.

That, however, does not mean that the wealthy characters themselves cannot be clumsy in their daily environment. Because they are too used to it, it plays tricks on them and

becomes an obstacle. Once again, it was a way to show audiences that wealthy possessions bring their share of troubles.

An architectural element one has to discuss (as of how high society people ridicule themselves in their environment) are the *staircases*, often grand and majestic staircases. If one thinks of the way it physically contributes to the means used to make the public laugh, those are often too big, too high, too prestigious and too polished, even for those who use them every day. Screwball comedies use narrative humour at its full potential. However, the visual humour used in silent-era comedies, such as Buster Keaton or Charlie Chaplin films, is not abandoned, and some screwball comedies such as *Bringing Up Baby* are also very visual. So, to use settings as a way to contribute to the clumsiness of the upper class was nothing but a noticeable logical suite within the overall comedy genre.

The first example one could think of occurs at the beginning of *Easy Living* when J.B. Ball greets his domestics in the morning before seeing a black cat. He makes them notice how it represents bad luck and, the instant after, he tumbles down the stairs supposed to lead him to the dining room for breakfast. While he is tumbling down, one of the maids tries not to laugh and, when he lands at the bottom of these dangerous steps, his butler notices, "I see you're down early for breakfast his morning sir".[94] That is an excellent example of laughing at someone else's misfortune, and the way it happens allows the viewer to do so without seeming mean. It would be inappropriate for someone to laugh at the misery of someone who has lost his job and money but here, one can see that J. B. Ball seems fine and it is his ego that is mostly hurt. Life goes on as usual afterwards. Placing a business person in such a ridiculous situation remains a way to show people that, although he is powerful, he is not invincible either. Someone could also interpret that as a symbolic manner of representing the stock market going down, but then, it probably sounds twisted.

Screwball comedy also uses staircases as a physical obstacle for the upper class in *Merrily We Live*. Mr Kilbourne, who is a serious businessman, comes back from home drunk after an evening with business friends. Wade Rawlins is here, waiting for him to make sure he gets home safe and sound, although Mr Kilbourne had made it clear that he does not appreciate the fact that a tramp works in his house. When they both get inside, the businessman is obstinate to go up the stairs leading to his bedroom alone and that he does not need Rawlins's help. This one, however, stays behind making sure that Mr Kilbourne does not trip and falls. It is a twin staircase that leads to the bedrooms. The drunken businessman

[94] 00:02:07

manages with difficulty to climb up the right staircase and, as he arrives upstairs, his drunken walk leads him to the left staircase. He uncarefully goes down, therefore getting back to the starting point. That remains another way to show how extravagant architecture designs are not always advantageous. It is also a way to reassure people that members of the upper class need members from lower classes. In this case, to make sure a man does not dangerously fall off a luxurious staircase. Wade Rawlins, the helping man in this situation, is a character who knows plenty about patience and respect considering the way Mr Kilbourne treats him.

Lastly, there is a scene in *Bringing Up Baby*, perhaps one of the most famous, in which a staircase is not the sole contributor to the ridicule of high society but is a tool nevertheless. Susan Vance and David Huxley meet by coincidence and, once again, Susan manages to get on David's nerves. So, this one decides to leave, followed by Susan trying to understand what she has done wrong. As he is going down the stairs in the nightclub where they are, she tries to pull him back. By doing so, she tears his tuxedo (he already destroyed his high hat a few minutes before by falling on the floor). David, irritated, un-politely sends Susan away and, as she goes up the stairs, insulted, he accidentally tears the back of her dress having his foot on it. He eventually manages to make her notice what happened, and the two of them leave the place, making a spectacle of themselves. Here, fancy clothes are disadvantageous and being destroyed makes them look like clowns (particularly David), but since the incident occurs in a staircase, one can say it contributed to it. If David had gone in a straight line, as Susan was pulling him back, instead of turning with the stairs, his coat probably would not have been torn and same if the bottom Susan's dress was not at David's foot level as she was going up the stairs. Of course, the staircase this scene uses is much more modest than the ones in the previous examples. Nevertheless, it remains a pertinent example to understand the different ways they impact the ridicule of fancy people.

Another notable architectural element present in many upper-class mansions or fancy nightclubs in various screwballs is the significant presence of glass windows and mirrors. Besides, one would also notice the presence of immaculate tones in the houses, being the furniture or the curtains. Of course, as most of these films were shot in black and white, it is difficult to determine the exact colours of the surroundings. However, one can observe how the Bullocks' bedrooms, for example, are much more immaculate in comparison to Godfrey's bedroom where the furniture is of darker tones. Yes, on the one hand, the use of white tones in luxurious habitations reflects a sense of purity, design, good taste and cleanness. On the other hand, white is a cold tone, so those apartments, hotel suites or mansions lack the warmth of

smaller places such as the playroom in *Holiday* or Regi's apartment in *Hands Across the Table*.

The presence of mirror and glass windows could be a clue of how the upper class likes to expose itself, and how it likes the outside world to observe it. Just like the grand staircases, it also becomes a way to put the dignified members of the upper class into vulnerable positions. They let the world admire them, but they also expose themselves to this world and its judgment. Furthermore, the mirrors symbolically reflect that: members of the high society are not perfect, and they must preserve their image. Furthermore, by looking at the external world from these windows, they might realise that they are not invincible, and the economic crisis could hit them unsuspectedly. Of course, this remains an interpretation and, in most cases, upper-classes houses and apartments are isolated from the working-class neighbourhoods. However, a cage of glass somehow traps the prolific people.

One would not contest that, most of the time, it is easier for a character from the lower classes to adapt himself or herself to the upper-class environment than the opposite. Even the upper-class characters seem trapped in their own milieu. Therefore, it accentuates the worries as of how a wealthy character that marries a middle-class or working-class character will adapt himself/herself to his/her new life. Since Carol Van Dyke can sleep in a country cart and Ellie Andrews manages to sleep in a modest wood cabin, the conclusion is that it might not take them long to understand that it is possible to live well with the minimum. People of more modest backgrounds have all the reasons to be happy or happier. The Depression audiences could, therefore, become conscious of what they truly needed.

Chapter 4: Adaptation and Moving Places in *It Happened One Night*, *Easy Living* and *Merrily We Live*

The previous chapters exploring the different sub-topics of the social classes representation in Depression screwballs used examples from various films to support the arguments and development. It was a primordial step to apply the notions into concrete situations to enforce their credibility and make them more comprehensible for those who might not have been familiar with this genre and its importance. This fourth and last chapter will focus more closely on three screwball comedies: *It Happened One Night*, *Easy Living* and *Merrily We Live*. These are three cases from three different years, released at the beginning of the Depression screwball era, the middle and at its end. The objective is not to repeat the same ideas previously discussed but to dig deeper into them and develop new ones while understanding how these three particular films idealistically reflect the concepts conveyed by the screwball genre. Thus, two ideas that join the previous ones will be more precisely discussed: the concept of *adaptation* and the one of *moving places.*

Despite being released on three different years, these films make no exception to the rule by adopting the key-concept of cross-class relationship that, as the thesis previously developed, is one of screwball comedy's narrative priorities. Characters, dialogues, and settings illustrate that in various ways. Moreover, this is in direct connection with the first concept I wish to discuss in this chapter, the one of adaptation or, more precisely, the importance of adapting oneself to a strange or unfamiliar environment. In these cases, the idea of adaptation applies itself to the following characters: Ellie Andrews who must adapt herself to a more modest life during her road-trip with Peter Warne; Mary Smith who must adapt herself to her new wealthy life after Mr Louis welcomes her to his hotel; Johnny Ball who tries as much as possible to adapt himself to the working world and, finally, Wade Rawlins who has to adapt himself to a new type of work and the Kilbournes' wealth.

1. Adaptation

If one first takes the case of Ellie Andrews, what leads her on this road trip and to commit the class-passing actions is a desire for independence and liberty, which she invokes by jumping off the family yacht. Therefore, she radically turns off her back to her comfortable life. According to Mr Andrews, this is not the first time his daughter runs away, explaining why he is not scared for her. However, the viewer later discovers how Ellie will have to rely on someone else to manage travelling from Miami to New York under conditions that are not familiar to her. As she steps in the bus, Ellie manages to go unnoticed. The spoiled heiress wears ordinary every-day clothes, which makes her look like someone from the working class or middle class at best. She knows that wearing the fancy gown she had on when she jumped off the boat will only attract attention and raise suspicions. Her disguise works well as Peter Warne does not immediately notice her. It is mainly her voice and her manners that betray her.

In Heidi Wilkins's book *Talkies, Road Movies and Chick Flicks: Gender, Genre and Film Sound in American Cinema*, there is a pertinent chapter on how screwball comedies use voices and voice tones and how those can be associated with a social class. The author uses *It Happened One Night* and Ellie Andrews as examples and, more precisely, discusses Ellie's ability to modify her voice according to the situation and objective. Wilkins makes a distinction between Peter and Ellie's voices, which evoke their social and economic backgrounds. That is not only done with the used tones but also with the chosen vocabulary.[95] One can indeed notice the more rustic tone of Peter's voice and his use of familiar words such as "scram", "screwy" or "nuts". He does not take the time to speak correctly to Ellie, showing his non-pity towards her, and the fact that working-class people are not necessarily at the mercy of the upper class. Then, it is not only the ad in the newspaper that reveals Ellie's identity but also her snobbish and long tone voice as well. Her attitude of superiority initially leads her to ignore Peter, who wishes to converse. She eventually talks to him when he tries to catch a man that ran away with her suitcase. Ellie initially addresses Peter as "young man"[96], showcasing her feeling of superiority towards a class where she does not belong. Moreover,

[95] Heidi Wilkins, *Talkies, Road Movies and Chick Flicks: Gender, Genre and Film Sound in American Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 17, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzcj0.
[96] 00:10:32

when Peter wants to help her find the suitcase, she tells him "I want to be left alone"[97], making her sound like Greta Garbo in *Grand Hotel* (Edmund Goulding, 1932).

Despite Peter frequently guiding her and teaching her how to live in the real world and spent her money intelligently, Ellie knows how to play the game and mould herself into a new personality if necessary. The best example, which Wilkins discusses, occurs when Ellie and Peter manage to escape from the detectives looking for the heiress by passing for a working-class couple. About this scene, Wilkins writes:

> The sequence provides key evidence of the fast-talking dames' ability to abruptly switch roles and also demonstrates Ellie's awareness of the differences in social classes. [...] When the detectives enter the cabin, Peter and Ellie quickly assume to roles of a lower-class couple, primarily by changing their voices. Peter's becomes low, aggressive and excessively loud, whereas Ellie's becomes high-pitched and she assumes a country accent complete with southern drawl.[98]

Ironically, despite Ellie's facility to switch roles, when Peter sees her back in her high society environment, surrounded by gentlemen, a cocktail in her hand, and wearing a beautiful gown, he tells her, "Perfect. Now you look natural"[99], which makes one wonder if she is doomed to be associated with her birth class despite her desire to distance herself from it.

In *Easy Living*, Mary Smith and Johnny Ball Jr. precisely meet thanks to their class-passing actions, Mary being passed for the mistress of a prolific banker and Johnny by having a job at the automat. Mary's class-passing is done involuntary and is the result of a misunderstanding, while Johnny's is done voluntary according to his desire of not economically relying on his father anymore. The previous chapter explained how it often seems easier for working-class or middle-class characters to adapt themselves to the upper class, while the opposite situation usually involves more concessions. *Easy Living* illustrates these various ways of adaptation in efficient manners. First of all, it suffices for Mary to accompany J.B. Ball to a hat store for someone to automatically believe that they are lovers and that she is, therefore, used to live the fancy life. The viewers are aware of Mary's feeling of awkwardness as they see the situation from an external point of view. They are more often *alone* with her and know better than the other character that she has to figure out how to live her new life. Secondly, high society is a world full of blind people as they only see Mary for whom they think she is, a tool to become rich, and they focus only on that version of her and this rumour about her being Ball's mistress. Contrary to the spectator, they do not see the real Mary Smith and are unaware of her veritable background.

---

[97] 00:11:17
[98] Wilkins, 19.
[99] 01:38:50

As for Johnny, one can see his will but difficulty to adapt himself to the working world along with a strong desire to help its people. The scene in which he works at the automat briefly demonstrates that. Because he is not able to keep his easy job more than one day, one guesses that he must not be suited to work for a living and, because he gives free food to Mary, this shows his desire to help and his generosity. However, Johnny eventually gets back to a more prolific way-of-life when he accepts a business job from his father. So, once again, one wonders if the wealthy character will ever be truly willing to live under a modest salary.

One last point to make about the question of adaptation in *Easy Living* relies upon the fact that one of the most materialist possessions someone could have, a $58 000 sabre coat, is what allows Mary to move incognito from one class to another. Rashna Wadia Richards in *Show-Stoppers: 1937 and the Chance Encounter with Chiffons* explains how, during Hollywood classic films era, it was common to associate high fashion with a way of being financially successful.[100] She, moreover, quotes Sarah Berry who claims that "fashion was a medium of new beginnings".[101] That is what happens to Mary Smith. Suffice for her to put a fur coat on her shoulder, and she can fool anyone she wishes, although it is done mostly involuntary.

The question of class adaptation in *Merrily We Live* applies itself mostly to Wade Rawlins, the poor author tramp-like who finds himself working as the Kilbournes' chauffeur. Rawlins, similar to Godfrey, manages to adapt himself because of his gentleman-like behaviour and polite manners. Ironically, according to Jerry Kilbourne, he does not have good enough manners as he forgets to open the car door for her. She believes he should possess a book on é*tiquette*, on good manners. It reflects her habit of being served by others rather than Wade not being courteous enough. One witnesses his immense patience towards the Kilbournes as they are people who could have scared more than one domestic. After all, the madcap screwball families are living in their small world, unaware of how to fit in more restricted conventions.

In comparison to Mary Smith, Wade Rawlins is also the victim of a misidentification, which his ability to behave in society and his sharp clothes seem to provoke. The Kilbourne are having a party receiving Senator Willie Harlan (Paul Everton) and other notorious guests.

---

[100] Rashna Wadia Richards, "Show-Stoppers: 1937 And The Chance Encounter With Chiffons," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 48, no. 2 (Fall/2007): 95, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/41552492.

[101] Sarah Berry, *Fashion and Feminity in 1930s Hollywood* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), xviii **Cited in** Richards, 95.

Wade has been freed from his chauffeur job and is instead in charge of serving drinks and supper. However, when he meets the senator's daughter, Minerva (Ann Dvorak), she believes he is another fancy guess like her, and she chooses to spend the evening with him, without giving him the chance to reveal his true identity. Rawlins is, therefore, trapped in his new role and, because the Kilbournes do not want to tarnish their reputation, they pretend he is another guest. That gives him the occasion to speak to the senator as an equal. Then, in the morning, it is reported to the family that someone is occupying the blue room whom, at the surprise of all, is Rawlins. That is the result of his new connection with the senator and the interest his daughter has for Wade (which makes Jerry jealous). Wade later plays golf with Minerva, another wealthy people activity.

In opposition to Mary Smith, Wade Rawlins is in better control of his new reality, but one feels he sees it more as a game than as an eventual way of life. One notes how he also manages to easily take control of one situation and adapt himself to a reality he is involuntary dragged in. While Ellie Andrews manages to pass for a working-class woman only by changing her voice, Wade Rawlins does not have to make much effort either for other people to accept him in their social circle. If Mrs Kilbourne (and the spectator for that matter) believes Rawlins is a poor tramp because of the way he is dressed instead of a writer, he still accepts the job she generously offers him.

One might wonder what his place as a writer in the whole story is. William K. Everson compares Wade Rawlins to John L. Sullivan, the movie director played by Joel McCrea in *Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1941).[102] He disguises himself as a tramp to study their world with the perspective of making a film about it. However, in Wade Rawlins's case, his intentions are not clearly established, and one guesses his torn clothes and the state of his car might reflect his current economic situation. Why does he accept the chauffeur's job? Does he need it? A newspaper reveals his true identity only towards the end of the film. One could advance the hypothesis that it is his background as an author that allows him to adapt himself to different classes, as he might have studied and written about different social realities, therefore becoming a book character himself. However, in opposition to Sullivan, his perspective and intentions are not explicitly revealed. The question now is, will Wade apply his experience with the Kilbournes to his writing profession and a perhaps future novel?

[102] Everson, 109.

2. Moving Places

The three chosen films adopt the idea of moving places. That relates to the previous discussion on adaptation as it implies both physical spaces and the characters' place in society. That also makes echo to the previous chapters. Therefore, it results into a pertinent element of discussion within the perspective of how screwball comedies organise themselves to deliver their message and add credibility around what they represent and the impact they tried to have on their viewers on their original release. The three case studies present a link between physical places and a character's economic situation. Although they illustrate it in three distinct ways, these are equally efficient as of how the characters evolve in different socio-economic backgrounds. In the end, the intentions remain seemingly the same. Although the previous chapter widely discussed New York City as an essential background to screwball comedy films, it is false to think that it was the only physical place in which the different screwball characters evolve and that makes echo to the economic Depression. The films chosen for this discussion prove it quite drastically.

First of all, *It Happened One Night* is not only a screwball comedy; it is also a road movie. Yes, the characters' objective is to reach New York, and this is the case for many of the other bus passengers. For Ellie Andrews, it is to join King Westley, but for many others, New York is a synonym of *proliferation* and a place where they hope to find employment in those miserable times. However, in this case, it is not the final destination that counts but the characters' physical journey and the psychological transformation that allows them to see the world from another perspective. For Ellie Andrews, it is indeed to *see the world*. By watching a character like her getting impacted by her physical and somehow mental journey, the spectator becomes conscious of the possibilities offered for someone to change for the best. Yes, in Ellie's case, it is done quite radically. Moreover, will it make her completely change who she is? No, there are no signs that she gives up everything after her trip between Miami and New York. However, she becomes a more aware person, probably more conscious of the privilege and the luck she has of coming from an economically comfortable family. She also learns that wealth is something very material and does not make her invincible either. That was probably another way to satisfy the Depression spectator as of how the wealthy screwball character might become someone with whom they could eventually identify or, at least, that they could understand better. Of course, Ellie Andrews chooses herself to get on that Greyhound bus to reach her independence. Nevertheless, the reality of a world she is barely

conscious of brutally becomes part of her life. It differs from Sullivan who enters this world voluntarily.

That plays for the best in Ellie's case, not only because she learns her lessons on the value of money, empathy and other similar things, but also because she learns about the simplicity of life that her economic background does not necessarily provide. As a result, it gives more value to the modest life of people from the working class or middle class. For example, as she is having breakfast with Peter, she declares: "I'd change places with a plumber's daughter any day".[103] The viewer does not know yet if Ellie is talking through her hat, but the more the story evolves, the more one feels she gets closer to Peter and goes away from King Westley, which gives an implicit clue of her transformation. In *Hollywood 1938: Motion Pictures' Greatest Year*, Catherine Jurca directly supports this previous idea:

> Such characters and comedies in the 1930s have been called 'egalitarian' and 'democratic', as the upper classes-Ellie Andrews (Colbert) in *It Happened One Night*, for example-learns to appreciate other values and ways of living in the process of becoming less spoiled, more regular.[104]

Yes, there is a possible consensus to make as of how a narrative line transforms a character and makes him or her more self-conscious of the environment in which he/she evolves, in this case, the one of the Great Depression. It would be pertinent to mention that *It Happened One Night* is not the only screwball comedy depicted as a road movie or something similar. *Twentieth Century* (Howard Hawks, 1934), which mostly takes place on a train journey, is another example. However, this one is less directly about how social classes impact each other.

Easy Living does take place in the heart of New York City, and the spectators are aware of it since the film brings them to all types of environments showing the city on different angles. That is in opposition with *My Man Godfrey*, for example, where, aside from the Waldorf-Ritz Hotel and the city dump, most of the story takes place inside the Bullocks' house. The concept of moving places goes in the sense of how Mary Smith and Johnny Ball try to adapt themselves to a reality that is at the complete opposite of the one they are used to. It also relies on the precariousness of belonging to a social class and how this can drastically change as Christopher Beach explains in *"These Are Troublous Times": Social Class in the*

---

[103] 00:38:50

[104] Catherine Jurca, *Hollywood 1938: Motion Pictures' Greatest Year* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2012), 119-120, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp0ps.1.

Comedy of Preston Sturges.[105] The author more exactly discusses the narrative style of Preston Sturges (who wrote *Easy Living*'s screenplay) and how he transposed his personal socio-economical background to his films. Beach writes:

> Yet while Solomon's marriage to Mary conferred on the young Preston an identity as a member of the solid upper-middle class, it also brought with it an awareness that Preston's class status was based on a fortunate turn of events, that vicissitudes of good and bad fortune were arbitrary, and that changes in social and economic position could occur at any time. This idea would inform the situation of many of his characters, as when Mary Smith is elevated to the upper class through the accidental fall of a fur coat onto her head [...].[106]

Here, *Solomon* refers to Solomon Sturges, the man who raised Preston Sturges and *Mary* is Mary Dempsey, Preston Sturges's mother.[107] The transposition of this reality is clear in the case of *Easy Living*'s characters, particularly for Mary Smith and the way she moves places with considerable rapidity and facility. Mary goes from being a middle-class girl to losing her jog, to live in a luxury hotel and to, eventually, marry the son of a banker. On his side, Johnny goes from living in a Park Avenue penthouse with his family, to seeking his independence by finding work in an automat, to losing his job after a day and joining Mary in her adventure. As the film closes, this might go on forever if one considers Sturges's desire to show that someone's economic position changes continuously. In the spirit that screwball films aimed to comfort Depression audiences, the main lesson one has to learn from Sturges's narratives it that no one is under the protection of unexpected changes and these can happen for the better of for the worst. That also goes in the sense that, during the Depression years, anybody could see his or her economy falling.

Finally, *Merrily We Live* belongs to that group of screwball comedies that put the New-Yorkian background aside and choose a quieter one that seems to be closer to the countryside. That is also the case for *Bringing Up Baby*, which was released the same year. This case illustrates the concept of moving places by bringing the narrative lines to a newer environment. This transposition is an evolution as of how the screwball social classes co-habit together. These can be transposed in various backgrounds and step out of the heart of the economic crisis. One can observe that some of the late screwball comedies that followed the Depression Era, those made in the early 40s, follow a pattern of radically moving places, as it was the case in *It Happened One Night*. The 40s Sturges's screwballs, *The Lady Eve* (Preston Sturges, 1941) and *The Palm Beach Story* (Preston Sturges, 1942) are good examples. In the

---

[105] Christopher Beach, "'These Are Troublous Times': Social Class in the Comedies of Preston Sturges", in *ReFocus: The Films of Preston Sturges*, ed. Jeff Jaeckle and Sarah Kozloff (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 135, accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzcm1.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.

case of *Merrily We Live*, what is particularly noteworthy is how the story introduces Wade Rawlins. Nobody knows where he comes from and, before he goes to the Kilbournes to use their phone, nobody knows either where he had the intention of going. The course of the story never reveals it. That creates an opposition with *It Happened One Night*, in which the characters evolve through a journey between two cities. In Wade's case, it is his final destination that matters and that has the best impact on him.

Although she becomes a less condescending person, Jerry Kilbourne is not necessarily the screwball heiress who undergoes the most radical transformation. That might be because she never really confronts the external world. The principal connection she has with it is through the tramps that worked for her family before and through Wade Rawlins. This one eventually moulds himself perfectly in the high society with his intelligence, culture, politeness and sharpness. Characters like Ellie Andrews or Irene Bullock change because they are eventually forced to face a reality that is different from theirs. However, Jerry Kilbourne more or less, only hears about it through the grapevines. Brian Kellow argues that Wade's role is to teach Jerry about the meaning of love.[108] So, this could be something to take into consideration as of how the young heiress gets transformed. The value of money might not be a question directly approached in this case, but Wade Rawlins influences Jerry to become a more agreeable heiress. He shows her the important sides of life the same way various screwball comedies showed it to Depression audiences.

[108] Kellow, 211.

Conclusion

With the previous detailed discussion that formed the body of this text, the objective was to look at Depression screwball comedies under a socio-historical and analytical perspective in order to establish how those films represent social classes and how they make them interact together. That was a way to observe how the genre provided comfort and escapism to their audiences during the Great Depression. The conclusion is that screwball comedy is a complex genre with the way they represent social classes. Yes, the text focused on precise narrative elements, the main ones being the characters and their environments but, regardless of the eventually discussed sub-subjects, preparing this thesis opened many opportunities for further developments about topics related directly or indirectly to screwball comedy. This thesis also hoped to underline the too-often neglected importance of screwball, and how it was a significant genre, although it is not always seen that way at first glance.

The development of this thesis does not only allow the reader to determine how screwball comedies represent different social classes but also to understand the significance of their mutual interactions. Moral of the story: a screwball comedy is not one if it only approaches distinct social classes separately and never make them interact with each other. Moreover, these interactions must be meaningful and provoke reflection on how the genre represents social classes and how they complete each other. The reason these interactions between social classes are essential is that it allows the different characters to learn from each other and evolve, hopefully, for the best. Moreover, as the second chapter advanced, screwball comedies do no only involve clashes between social classes but within social classes as well. For example, one can think of the difference between the portrayal of the working man and the working girl or the significant contrast between the madcap heiress and the more down-to-earth businessman, generally a paternal figure.

Analysing the different types of characters in different environments allowed to establish how a context they are not familiar with could impact them, and how they could learn and change by making this step into a new world. That also permitted to establish whether or not a character might fit with his/her social class. However, the overall conclusion is that, even if the wealthy character goes back to the upper class, it is generally with a new gaze upon life. By presenting the narrative variety of screwball comedies, this encouraged the Depression spectator to be willing to understand a social class he or she did not belong to

rather than judge it. Furthermore, although the objective of the different Depression screwballs was seemingly the same, the various ways in which they meant to reach it is particularly noteworthy, hence why it was essential to emphasise on more than one case to point out the global significance of the genre.

Even though screwballs made fun of the wealthy population, that was generally not done in a mean way, and it instead followed the pattern of *laughing with you* instead of *laughing at you*. Although the lower classes could have learned about the unimportance of being rich by watching screwballs, it is false to think that these were made only for those who had been affected by the economic crisis. No, this is a genre that could have resonated with all sphere of society, the upper class included. Overall, it is primordial to comprehend that, by watching these films, an individual could learn about himself/herself and his/her place in society, but that he/she could also learn from the other classes and apply this new knowledge to a better way of life. After all, the second chapter gave the example of how Godfrey learns as much as Cornelia Bullock precisely by making the step between the poverty world and the wealthy world.

As stated earlier, the writing of this thesis opened doors to more possibilities and more researches. Indeed, on various occasions, the text made links with subjects external to cinema such as architecture, politics and History. Being personally fascinated by general History and not only film history, researches on the subject and its context have also been more than fruitful and fascinating. One could decide to eventually focus more in detail on the development of nightclubs during the 20th century and how films illustrate it. As for myself, the perhaps most intriguing information my research revealed is the fact that 30s films influenced Franklyn D. Roosevelt on how to maintain his political image.[109] An eventual detailed study of how President Roosevelt applied what he learned from films to his politics and discourses could be another rewarding research to think of eventually.

Hopefully, although screwball comedies aimed to have an impact on their contemporary audiences, people today should continue to value them and understand how much they can learn from them. Films can teach anyone as an individual, to be a better person and to see the world more positively. With that perspective, cinema becomes something of undeniable importance, not only for film students or cinephiles, but for everybody, hence why each of us should show interest and curiosity for the Seventh art. In this particular case, a curiosity for screwball comedy and the power of laughter. After all, John L. Sullivan says it

[109] Peretti, 51.

himself at the end of *Sullivan's Travel* when he decides to make a comedy instead of a drama: "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".[110] Yes, although this is a film from the early 40s, so post-Depression, nothing could be truer, more universal and more timeless than these words.

[110] 01:29:31

Filmography

Awful Truth, *The* (Leo McCarey, 1937)
Ball of Fire (Howard Hawks, 1941)
Bombshell (Victor Fleming, 1933)
Bringing Up Baby (Howard Hawks, 1938)
Devil and Miss Jones, *The* (Sam Wood, 1941)
Easy Living (Mitchell Leisen, 1937)
Faithless (Harry Beaumont, 1932)
42nd Street (Lloyd Bacon, 1933)
Gold Diggers of 1933 (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933)
Grand Hotel (Edmund Goulding, 1932)
Hands Across the Table (Mitchell Leisen, 1935)
Holiday (George Cukor, 1938)
If You Could Only Cook (William A. Seiter, 1935)
It Happened One Night (Frank Capra, 1934)
It's a Wonderful World (W. S. Van Dyke, 1939)
Lady Eve, *The* (Preston Sturges, 1941)
Libeled Lady (Jack Conway, 1936)
Little Caesar (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931)
Meet Me In St. Louis (Vincente Minnelli, 1944)
Merrily We Live (Norman Z. McLeod, 1938)
Midnight (Mitchell Leisen, 1939)
Mr. Deeds Goes to Town (Frank Capra, 1936)
My Man Godfrey (Gregory La Cava, 1936)
Nothing Sacred (William A. Wellman, 1937)
Palm Beach Story, *The* (Preston Sturges, 1942)
Platinum Blonde (Frank Capra, 1931)
Public Enemy, *The* (William A. Wellman, 1931)
She Couldn't Take It (Tay Garnett, 1935)
Sullivan's Travels (Preston Sturges, 1941)
Theodora Goes Wild (Richard Boleslawski, 1936)

Twentieth Century (Howard Hawks, 1934)

Wizard of Oz, *The* (Victor Fleming, 1939)

You Can't Take It With You (Frank Capra, 1938)

Bibliography

Work Cited

Beach, Christopher. "'These Are Troublous Times': Social Class in the Comedies of Preston Sturges". In *ReFocus: The Films of Preston Sturges*, edited by Jeff Jaeckle and Sarah Kozloff. Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2015, 133-154. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzcm1.

Bergman, Andrew. *We're in the Money: Depression America and Its Films*. New York: New York University Press, 1971.

Berry, Sarah. *Fashion and Feminity in 1930s Hollywood*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

Boyum, Joy Gould. "Columbia's Screwball Comedies: Wine, Women, and Wisecracks". In *Columbia Pictures: Portrait of a Studio,* edited by Bernard F. Dick. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1992, 89-105. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130hrz7.8.

DiBattista, Maria. *Fast-Talking Dames*. New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001. Accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npn5p.

Dixon, Wheeler Winston. *Black and White Cinema: A Short History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015. Accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c84fch.

El-Tayeb Fatima and Barbara Kosta. "Everything Will Be Fine: An Interview with Fatima El-Tayeb." *Women in German Yearbook* 18 (2002): 31-44. Accessed May 23, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20688940.

Erenberg, Lewis A. "From New York to Middletown: Repeal and the Legitimization of Nightlife in the Great Depression." *American Quarterly* 38, no. 5 (Winter/1986): 761-778. Accessed May 23, 2020. doi: 10.2307/2712822.

Errington, Ryan. "Representations of the Rich in Screwball Comedy." The Artifice. Accessed May 22, 2020. https://the-artifice.com/representations-rich-screwball-comedy.

Everson, William. *Hollywood Bedlam: Classic Screwball Comedies*. Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publ., 1994.

Foster, Gwendolyn Audrey. “New York Class-Passing Onscreen in the 1930s”. In *City that Never Sleeps: New York and the Filmic Imagination*, edited by Murray Pomerance. New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007, 151-165. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjb0f.

Gehring, Wes D. *Romantic vs. Screwball Comedy: Charting the Difference*. Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Accessed May 22, 2020, https://books.google.fr/books?id=sbeuw3PNv6AC&lpg=PP2&dq=screwball%20comedy&lr&hl=fr&pg=PA2#v=onepage&q=screwball%20comedy&f=false.

Gilmour, Heather. “Different, Except in a Different Way: Marriage, Divorce, and Gender in the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage.” *Journal of Film and Video* 50, no. 2 (Summer/1998): 26-39. Accessed May 23, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20688177.

Girgus, Sam B. “1938: Movies and Whistling in the Dark”. In *American Cinema of the 1930s: Themes and Variations*, edited by Ina Rae Hark. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007, 206-226. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj0s2.

Glancy, Mark. “The ‘Awful Truth’ about Cary Grant”. In *Hollywood and the Great Depression: American Film, Politics and Society in the 1930s*, edited by Iwan Morgan and Philip John Davies. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016, 139-158. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g050p5.

Grindon, Leger. “Preston Sturges and the Screwball Comedy”. In *ReFocus: The Films of Preston Sturges*, edited by Jeff Jaeckle and Sarah Kozloff. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015, 25-45. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzcm1.

Hickey, Dennis, John Olszowska, Brian R. Sheridan, and Marnie M. Sullivan. *America in the Thirties*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014. Accessed May 22, 2020. doi: 10.2307/j.ctt1j1nvgk.

Jurca Catherine. *Hollywood 1938: Motion Picture’s Greatest Year*. Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press 2012. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp0ps.1.

Kendall, Elizabeth. *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s*. New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002. Accessed May 22, 2020, https://play.google.com/store/books/details/Elizabeth_Kendall_The_Runaway_Bride?id=E5mPoIBAXKEC.

Kellow, Brian. *The Bennetts: An Acting Family*. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2004. Accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jcr1k.

Kiriakou, Olympia. "Carole Lombard as a Transcendental Comic." *Film Matters* 3, no. 4 (Winter/February 2012): 23-27. Accessed May 23, 2020. doi: 10.1386/fm.3.4.23_1.

Konheim, Orrin. "Q: How does 'Ball of Fire' reveal the class messages of the classic screwball comedy?" The Take/ScreenPrism. Accessed May 22, 2020. http://screenprism.com/insights/article/how-does-ball-of-fire-reveal-the-themes-of-the-classic-screwball-comedy.

Maland, Charles. "Frank Capra at Columbia: Necessity and Inventions". In *Columbia Pictures: Portrait of a Studio*, edited by Bernard F. Dick. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1992, 70-88. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130hrz7.

Marshall, Kelli. "'Something's Gotta Give' and the Classical Screwball Comedy." *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 37, no.1 (Spring/2009): 9-15. Accessed May 23, 2020. doi: 10.3200/JPFT.37.1.9-15.

McKittrick, Christopher. "What Is a Screwball Comedy?" LiveAbout. Accessed May 22, 2020. https://www.liveabout.com/screwball-comedy-definition-4157505.

Muscio, Giuliana. *Hollywood's New Deal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997. Accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bs9f9.7.

Peretti, Burton. *The Leading Man: Hollywood and the Presidential Image*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014. Accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hjdtx.

Pravadelli, Veronica. *Classic Hollywood: Lifestyles and Film Styles of American Cinema, 1930-1960*. Translated by Michael Theodore Meadows. Urbana; Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2015. Accessed May 22, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt6wr582.

Richards, Rashna Wadia. "Show-Stoppers:1937 And The Chance Encounter With Chiffons." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 48, no. 2 (Fall/2007): 84-110. Accessed May 23, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/41552492.

Sharot, Stephen. "Wealth and/or Love: Class and Gender in the Cross-class Romance Films of the Great Depression." *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 89-108. Accessed May 23, 2020. doi: 10.2307/23352508.

Sikov, Ed. *Screwball: Hollywood's Madcap Romantic Comedies*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1989.

Smith, Terry Donovan. “Mixing It Up in the Depression: A (Not-So) Hidden Representation of Class Struggle.” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 24, no. 3 (Fall/1996): 124-133. Accessed May 23, 2020. doi: 10.1080/01956051.1996.9943722. EBSCOHost.

Wilkins, Heidi. *Talkies, Road Movies and Chick Flicks: Gender, Genre and Film Sound in American Cinema*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016. Accessed May 23, 2020, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1bgzcj0.

Stockholms universitet/Stockholm University
SE-106 91 Stockholm
Telefon/Phone: 08 – 16 20 00
www.su.se

Stockholms universitet