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## American Comedy Film as Mass Communication: The Audience Experience

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AMERICAN COMEDY FILM AS MASS COMMUNICATION:  
THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

Amy Ealy, B.A.



An Abstract Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate  
School of Lindenwood University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Science in Mass Communication

1999

## ABSTRACT

Many American audiences have enjoyed comedy films throughout much of the twentieth century. In years past, some visited motion picture theaters on a weekly basis; today many audiences continue to enjoy comedy films. Given the numerous daily conversations that revolve around films, it seems that many viewers may learn about and remember the comedies they see. Besides the entertainment that comedy films provide, comedies may also teach audiences.

This culminating project is designed to discuss the communication of American comedy films with audiences. It will introduce various types of comedy and certain comedy actors. In addition, it will note literature used to research this project. After the review of sources, this project will discuss noteworthy American comedy films, including Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959).

The discussion will then analyze different ideas about possible meanings of these comedy films. Among other things, this project will discuss whether comedies, as Mary Douglas maintains, may support the status quo or may promote new ways of life (in Karnick and Jenins 270). By examining paradoxes that comedies may contain and vicarious experiences that they may

offer, this project hopes to explore some of the ways that comedy films may relate to viewers.

While films are interpreted in different ways, this project intends to offer a few of the many ways to look at them. Though comedies are often seen as mere entertainment, they may educate and influence viewers as well. More fully comprehending possible meanings of comedy can lead to a greater appreciation of comedy as well as a better understanding of the human condition. Thus, the study of comedy film messages seems worthwhile and interesting.

A Capstone Project Presented to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Lincolnton University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Science in Mass Communication



AMERICAN COMEDY FILM AS MASS COMMUNICATION:  
THE AUDIENCE EXPERIENCE

Amy Ealy, B.A.

A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Lindenwood University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Science in Mass Communication

1999

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Chapter I  
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

"A laugh is not to be sneezed at," declared comedy film director Ernst Lubitsch (in Crowe 29). It seems Lubitsch was right; perhaps comedy films, which have long been popular with audiences, should not be taken lightly. This project will discuss ideas about the mass communication of American comedy film, especially of some of those made from the 1930s through the 1950s. That is, it will examine different comedy films and establish some reasons why audiences may have enjoyed and continue to enjoy them. In addition, this project should result in a greater understanding of the meanings of American comedy films, particularly Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959).

Furthermore, this discussion intends to take a sociological approach by deciphering the messages sent by comedy films. The study of comedy films and any meanings that they may have for audiences is interesting and worthwhile for several reasons. As with other forms of communication like literature or theater, examining a film's subtexts can lead to a better understanding of the work itself. In addition, since a comedy film's

nuances and secondary meanings may offer enlightenment into the human condition, viewers may benefit by recognizing them. A film could suggest behaviors that may or may not be salutary to society; thus, it seems important to be an analytical audience member. Moreover, discerning what message, if any, a film might attempt to convey can help audience members become more cognizant viewers without taking away from a film's entertainment value. If nothing else, a general understanding of, for example, the historical events surrounding a comedy film or the paradoxes used to create comedy may make the film more humorous for audiences.

Likewise, this project will note some of the ways that audiences may relate to comedy motion pictures. For instance, audiences may vicariously experience the humorous antics of characters in comedy films, as anthropologist Mary Douglas believes (in Karnick and Jenkins 270). At the same time, though, comedy films may use characters' actions to encourage audiences to remain within the boundaries of society (270). Thus, comedy films may allow a chaotic catharsis while at the same time reinforce societal ideals; these and other ideas will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Throughout history, humorous stories have amused audiences. While these tales were indeed entertaining, each one carried a commanding message. Hundreds of



years ago, *commedia dell'arte* and Elizabethan comedy theater charmed audiences and may have revealed important facts about human life. For years, humans have communicated with similar humorous stories, both spoken and written, but in the last century, a new type of comical storytelling emerged in the United States of America: the comedy motion picture.

From the first black and white flicker on a movie screen in the early 1900s, comedy motion pictures have held American audiences' attention. Motion pictures seemed to enthrall audiences in a new, larger-than-life way. Different from spoken tales, books, and even theatrical performances, comedy films surround audiences and, for an hour or two, draw them into a world unlike their own. Comedy motion pictures of the twentieth century seem to entertain, enlighten, and educate audiences with comical stories.

According to Graeme Turner, storytelling is a vital component of the human experience and is "inseparable from and intrinsic to it" (67). Jerry Palmer notes that gags can be described as "micronarratives," or miniature stories (in Karnick and Jenkins 81-82). Thus, in addition to making audiences laugh, jokes in comedy films play the role of storyteller as well. Comedy films, then, may be similar to fables and myths in that they may educate as they entertain. With messages nestled amidst the entertainment, many audiences have enjoyed comedy films for decades.



Still, Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins note that comedy films often have a "low cultural status" (266); dramas are often seen as inherently, inexplicably better and more worthy of study than comedies. However, it seems to require as much skill to create comedy as to create drama. Many situations are inherently dramatic; it seems to take a unique skill to tweak a situation in such a way as to make it funny. In fact, according to Karnick and Jenkins, comedy is "a rich popular tradition consisting of a large number of films, some accomplished, some ordinary, but all defining the conventions and thematics of the genre" (266). Successful comedy films entertain audiences and may put them at ease; therefore, comedy films may be particularly effective at communicating with them. Thus, the communication of comedy films is the focus of this project.

### Types of Comedy

Before continuing this discussion of comedy film communication, it seems worthwhile to define comedy and its many forms. A comedy, according to Tim Dirks, is a "light-hearted drama" (n.pag.). Raymond Durgnat defines comedy as "drama with a kink" (20). A comedy film, then, is a motion picture that changes ordinary events in small or large ways to create circumstances that are

inherently bizarre or unreal and, therefore, humorous. Comedy films portray skewed, absurd, preposterous versions of life where nearly anything can and, usually, does happen. From zany musical numbers in Duck Soup (1933) to men dressed as women in Some Like It Hot (1959), comedies tend to use unexpected events to make audiences laugh.

In addition, comedy is a genre, or category, of film. Genres, writes Turner, use a variety of "narrative and representative conventions" to tell a story (49). These conventions may include methods of speech, types of costume, and the time period in which the film is set; audiences familiar with these conventions use them to more fully understand the film. Furthermore, the film genre is a literary term that specifies the organization of a film's plot and characters (Turner 37). Still, while comedy is a genre, all comedies are not the same. A Marx Brothers film will likely use different plot conventions and carry a different message than a comedy directed by Billy Wilder twenty years later. Thus, there are subgenres, or secondary categories, within the genre of comedy.

Dirks notes several subgenres of comedy, including slapstick, deadpan, verbal comedy, screwball comedies, dark comedy, and parody. Slapstick comedy, popularized by Laurel and Hardy, uses physical comedy to make viewers laugh. Another type of comedy is deadpan, according to Dirks, which was perhaps perfected by

Buster Keaton; Keaton made audiences laugh in part by showing no facial reaction to his comical surroundings. In addition, verbal comedy, like that of W.C. Fields and the Marx Brothers, uses innuendoes, double entendres, puns, and snappy dialogue to make audiences laugh (n.pag.). Furthermore, screwball comedies like It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and I Was A Male War Bride (1949) follow the humorous conflicts of a couple. Perhaps the most negative or sarcastic type of comedy is dark comedy, which focuses on gloomier subjects that would not be addressed in traditional, more light-hearted types of comedy. Finally, parodies or spoofs are comedies that mock more serious works (Dirks n.pag.).

From slapstick to deadpan to parody, there are many types of comedies, each with potentially different messages to communicate and different methods of communication. While the following films will be analyzed in greater detail in future chapters, a brief mention of their general classifications seems worthwhile. Though some scenes use slapstick comedy, verbal comedy, and deadpan, Duck Soup (1933) may also be considered to be a spoof. It Happened One Night (1934) and Bringing Up Baby (1938) are screwball comedies, though, as will be discussed later on, they are different in many ways. Some Like It Hot (1959), while it also uses verbal comedy and deadpan at times, may be considered a parody (Dick 87). Brief summaries and more



detailed analyses of these films will appear in later chapters.

In addition to entertaining audiences, comedy films seem to communicate with viewers. Whether they have a far-reaching effect on American morals or merely reflect societal happenings, audiences may become involved in the entertainment and receive a message. Humorous tales reveal actualities about human life that audiences may not have realized before. The next section will offer a brief overview of ideas about the audience experience with comedy film.

#### Audiences' Connections with Film

Viewing comedy films is certainly a popular American pastime; witness the sold-out films even in America's large, new multiplex theaters. In the early days of film, many Americans visited movie theaters on a weekly basis (Turner 95). While other forms of communication may compete for viewers' time today, many Americans still enjoy going to the movies. Whether they choose to watch American comedy films for fun or to avoid the tedium of everyday life, audiences seem to play an active role in films and learn from them as well.

Some maintain that audience members watch films simply for entertainment. According to Olga J. Martin,

"Every member of the family, from grandpa and grandma down to the kindergarten tot, goes to the movies for the sheer fun he gets out of it" (52). Indeed, many enjoy the experience of going to the theater, buying popcorn, and settling into a comfortable seat. However, there may be other reasons why audiences flock to movie houses. Films, including comedies, may indeed be entertaining, but others argue that they give audiences a reprieve from everyday life.

People may view motion pictures to step into another world. Pauline Kael writes that viewers "go to the movies for the various ways they express the experiences of our lives, and as a means of avoiding and postponing the pressures we feel" (25). This chance to avoid reality is another noteworthy part of the appeal of motion pictures. In addition, Martin notes Theodore Reh, M.D., of the Bureau d'Hygiene of Geneva, Switzerland, who believes in the "social-hygenic effect" of motion pictures (52). Reh's studies have shown that film "is one of the readiest and best methods of transporting a...jaded man or woman...into an atmosphere of self-forgetfulness" (in Martin 52).

Likewise, J.P. Mayer suggests that humans see motion pictures to avoid the apathy and repetitiveness of their everyday lives (17). Since comedy films intend to make audiences laugh, viewers may find them especially appealing. If, as some believe, Americans watch films to forget their troubles, they might find it

more pleasant to watch and participate in a funny film than a dramatic, potentially sad motion picture.

To experience motion pictures, audiences often play active roles in comedy films. Though the experience of viewing a film may appear passive, audience members play active roles in comedies by experiencing the emotions of characters on the screen. By cringing when David, played by Cary Grant, sees his dinosaur skeleton crash to the ground in Bringing Up Baby (1934) or laughing when Pinky, played by Harpo Marx, plunges his feet into a vendor's container of lemonade in Duck Soup (1933), audience members seem to play active roles in comedy films.

As active participants in the communication of film, audiences tend not to passively accept what they see on film (Jarvie 85-86). I.C. Jarvie notes that many filmgoers are "down-to-earth and skeptical" of the films they see (86). In fact, according to Turner, audiences must determine the meanings of films for themselves (49). Thus, in order to more fully understand and appreciate a comedy film, it is important to have a general knowledge of comedy films and what they may suggest.

In addition to the active roles audiences may play with comedy films, motion pictures are a decidedly important part of American life. Leo C. Rosten notes that the film industry has been called "the fifth estate," after the first four: the common people,



nobility, clergy, and printed press. In addition, he notes the "immense and pervasive" influence of film (355). "Indirect lighting, modern furniture...those landmarks of man's ascent from barbarism, owe much to the silver screen," Rosten writes (361). Beyond these perhaps more insignificant things that films may affect, Mayer declares that films "exert the most powerful influence in our lives" (17). While one might argue that family, church, and television may influence viewers more than film does, comedy films seem to clearly communicate with and affect audiences. To be a more discerning filmgoer, one should be aware of how comedies communicate, the messages they may send, and the actions they may evoke.

Comedy films communicate various messages to audiences in numerous ways. Fundamentally, films may attempt to explain parts of life to viewers (Turner 68). Some note that comedy can be moral because it portrays human frailties, cruel because it shows others' faults, or tolerant because it brings laughter instead of indignation (Durgnat 27). In addition, comedy may support the status quo or promote new and better behaviors (Mast The Comic Mind 20). Nonetheless, future chapters will discuss more specific ideas about messages that may be communicated through comedy motion pictures, especially those of some noteworthy comedy films.



## Conclusion

Excellent, timeless comedies have an adept ability to educate viewers. According to Barry Norman, such films have "hit upon a universal and eternal truth and held it up to the light for all to recognise and examine" (57). Amidst the jokes and pratfalls, comedy films may teach audiences about life in ways both big and small. Such films, writes Norman, "have the power to enchant and entertain one generation after another" (57). In addition, these films may seem to encourage certain behaviors, including neighborliness and skepticism. Through the years, many audience members have enjoyed comedies and, as will be discussed, may have learned from them as well.

By breaking the tedium of everyday life with humorous incongruities, comedy films can communicate with American audiences on different levels. It is important to understand deeper meanings of comedy films because, like literature and theater, comedies may subtly communicate profound messages and advocate certain behaviors. Understanding and analyzing these meanings can enrich the comedy film experience and give insight into the human condition. The next two chapters will review sources that provided information beneficial to this study. The final two chapters will discuss results and conclusions of this study, respectively. By focusing on comedy films Duck Soup (1933), It Happened

One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959), this project is intended to provide a better understanding of ideas about the audience experience with American comedy films.

Most studies should begin with the most complex information. One cannot run before learning to walk, as the saying goes. Consequently, it is best to understand some of the ways that comedy films communicate with, relate to, and affect audiences and many different aspects of information. Some offer information about comedy film plots or individual comedians. Other studies focus more specifically on comedy film as a genre, and a new genre filled with parodies. These details are useful in laying the foundation for the results and conclusions that will be discussed further in succeeding chapters. What follows, then, is a review of sources used to create a better understanding of the communication of American comedy film.

### Film Categorization

Works that classify, summarize, and analyze films are useful in this discussion because they supply ideas

## Chapter II

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

Most studies should not begin with the most complex information. One cannot run before learning to walk, as the saying goes. Consequently, this quest to understand some of the ways that comedy films communicate with, relate to, and affect audiences uses many different sources of information. Some offer information about comedy film plots or individual comedians. Other sources focus more specifically on comedy film as a communicator and a mass medium filled with paradoxes. These details are useful in laying the foundation for the results and conclusions that will be discussed further in succeeding chapters. What follows, then, is a review of sources used to create a better understanding of the communication of American comedy film.

Film Categorization

Works that classify, summarize, and analyze films are useful in this discussion because they supply ideas

about the popularity and meanings of comedy films. Learning which comedy films critics consider to be excellent helps determine which comedy films may communicate effectively with audiences. Still, there are many ways to classify films. Some writers select monumental films from different time periods and attempt to outline their plots. Others create lists of the "greatest" films. While such lists are often subjective, works that classify and summarize films offer new insight into audience members' reactions to comedy films. These reactions help determine how comedy films communicate with audiences. For this discussion, then, works that summarize and analyze various comedy films prove to be quite beneficial.

For example, Leonard J. Leff summarizes and analyzes films in Film Plots (1983). Leff declares that film may be "the most elusive" of all narrative media (vii). Different than a book, films do not allow viewers to "reread" a chapter; in a theater, where films show twenty-four frames each second, viewers do not have the ability to back up if they miss a line of dialogue (vii). Clearly, literature and film communicate in different ways; films offer audiences auditory and environmental experiences that books do not. Understanding these differences will help clarify the meanings of comedy film later on.

Adam Garbicz and Jacek Klinowski cover notable films from 1913 to 1949 in the book Cinema, the Magic



Vehicle: A Guide to Its Achievement (1975). Among other films, the authors review Frank Capra's film It Happened One Night (1934), the winner of five Academy Awards in 1934; Garbicz and Klinowski call the film "one of the best comedies made in the United States" in part because it is "sophisticated" and "sympathetic" (225). This book offers interesting perspectives about comedy films that may have effectively communicated with audiences.

Other sources show that viewers do remember specific details about the films that they see. In The 247 Best Movie Scenes in Film History (1992), Sanford Levine notes specific motion picture scenes, including the famous "mirror scene" from Duck Soup (1933) (121). Variety Comedy Films (1992), edited by Julian Brown, contains synopses and reviews of over 300 English-language comedy films; the book points out many famous scenes from noteworthy comedies. Since viewers seem to remember the scenes and jokes from comedy films they see, they may receive additional messages from them as well.

Barry Norman compiled a selection of what he dubbed "the 100 best films of the century" in the aptly-named book, The 100 Best Films of the Century (1993) (xi). Norman notes that he found it difficult to narrow his list down to 100; in fact, he writes that if he were to make the list ten years later, it would be different (64). "Like everything else," Norman writes, "the cinema has its vintage and its nonvintage years but

there is a constant flow...of potential classics" (64). Included in his list of the 100 best films of the 1900s are several comedies. He considers Bringing Up Baby (1938), Duck Soup (1933), Some Like It Hot (1959), and It Happened One Night (1934), among others, to be among the best films of the century (ix-x). By noting the films on these lists, one can gauge the "staying power" of comedy films. Comedy films that were popular in the 1930s may or may not be humorous today; if they are on these lists, though, they may be considered classic films that are able to communicate effectively with audiences today.

In 1998, the American Film Institute released its list of the 100 best American films. Comedies, while often overlooked by critics, were represented, although in relatively small numbers. The comedies Some Like It Hot (1959), Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), and Bringing Up Baby (1938) appeared on the list (Newsweek 17-19); this suggests that some comedies are viewed as excellent films. This list, too, may show which comedy films have remained funny over the years. Understanding which films amused audiences past and present may establish which films may have the most impact upon audiences and may be, therefore, especially worthy of study in future chapters.

Such selections of films are rather subjective; a list of "best films" will include some films that others dislike and will exclude some films that others prefer.

Still, these lists show which films have had and may continue to have an excellent rapport with audiences. In fact, after reviewing these sources, it seems that Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959) are four comedies worth focusing on in later chapters. In order to more fully understand the communications of comedy films, though, it is beneficial to study sources that refer to the ways that films, including comedies, relate to audiences. These sources will be discussed in the next section.

#### Ways Comedy Films May Relate To Viewers

In Some Like It Hot (1959), a forlorn Sugar Kane, played by Marilyn Monroe, asks why she always gets "the fuzzy end of the lollipop." By questioning the bad things in her life, Sugar seems to immediately and effectively relate to the film's audiences. After all, most people have probably wondered the same thing at one time or another. Films in general and comedy films in particular relate to audiences in many ways. The sources that will be discussed in this section note the ways that films, including comedies, relate to audiences.

In Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life (1995), a collection of essays, editors Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz note that film is distinctly different from



theater and literature (10). When this theory is applied to comedy film communication, it appears that comedy film, too, is unique from comedy theater or humorous literature; the environment, conventions, and languages are usually quite different. Thus, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, comedy films have a distinct relationship with American audiences. The essays included in Charney and Schwartz's book intend to encourage readers to regard film as "a common denominator bridging the nineteenth, twentieth, and (potentially) twenty-first centuries" (10-11). Because film does link historical periods, it seems worthwhile to understand the relationships between audiences and comedy films.

J.P. Mayer's Sociology of Film (1946) also notes inherent differences between film and theater that clarify the unique ways that comedy films relate to audiences. During his discussion of Elizabethan theater and today's film, for example, Mayer notes that while theater and film have many similarities (like the use of similar characters or basic plots), motion picture theaters are available nearly everywhere, while people of Elizabethan England had to travel to the few theaters that existed (45). Clearly, today's films have a far-reaching influence that Elizabethan theater lacked. Because of these different methods of communication, comedy films may have unique meanings for audiences.

I.C. Jarvie discusses the relationships of motion

pictures to audiences in the book Movies and Society (1970). Jarvie profiles film audiences, noting that audiences are unstructured groups that play active, rather than passive, roles in motion pictures (89 and 85, respectively). In addition, audiences may experience a sort of catharsis during films (124). Jarvie also notes that films are inherently incapable of accurately portraying reality, in part because films contain a beginning, middle, and end, while reality does not (127). This idea that films cannot mirror reality for audiences will be important during the later discussion of comedy films' paradoxes. Because audiences' roles are specific and sometimes misunderstood by others, Jarvie's descriptions of film audiences can be applied to this discussion of comedy film as well; understanding the nature of film audiences may help determine how comedy films relate to them.

Gerald Mast's The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies (1973) also discusses some of the ways that comedies relate to audiences. Comedies, according to Mast, tend to have two main messages. First, a comedy film may support cultural principles by insisting that a character obey the mores of society. On the other hand, a comedy film may suggest that a character's unconventional actions and beliefs are better than those of society (The Comic Mind 20). These theories may explain some of the messages comedy films may send to audiences and will be applied to several notable comedy

films in the last chapters of this project.

In the American Film Institute-affiliated book Film: The Democratic Art (1976), author Garth Jowett notes that during World War II, motion pictures were vitally important to audiences. In addition, films "were an important social influence" for concerned Americans looking for information about the world (301). Films like, presumably, the screwball comedy I Was A Male War Bride (1949) may have especially appealed to these audiences if they were looking to motion pictures for information. Learning about audiences' reactions to films of the 1940s may help explain those audiences' experiences with other comedy films as well.

In America in the Dark: Hollywood and the Gift of Unreality (1977), author David Thomson discusses, among other things, audiences' roles with films. He notes differences between film audiences and theater audiences, from the way viewers sit to the messages they may receive (97). Clearly, this information is beneficial to this project; to make conclusions about comedy film's communication with audiences, one should understand the uniqueness of film audiences.

Film as Social Practice (1993), by Graeme Turner, discusses many different ways that film and society may be connected. Turner explains that an interpretation of the "cultural signs and meanings" of film cannot be definite or complete (179). It seems as though it is difficult to objectively study film. "We can never



understand the whole cultural system and still be contained within it," he writes. "We can never step outside it and still understand its workings" (179). Thus, a study of comedy film may be affected by personal experiences and the very society one lives in. Consequently, as this discussion progresses, one should remember that the conclusions in it, though researched and supported, are subjective, nonetheless.

In I Lost it at the Movies (1954), Pauline Kael discusses, among other things, audiences' relationships with films. She disagrees with a motion picture being called "cinema." "Movies are going to pieces; they're disintegrating, and the something called cinema is not movies raised to an art but rather movies diminished," Kael writes (22). She does not want films to be appreciated only by critics (23). Her idea that films are to be enjoyed, not overanalyzed, is worth remembering as well. Hopefully, this project will discuss the value and possible meanings of comedy films without disregarding the joy they may bring to audiences.

### Ways Comedy Films May Affect Audiences

It Happened One Night (1934) was popular with audiences in 1934, but many undershirt makers were not impressed. In one scene, Peter Warne, played by Clark

Gable, removes his shirt, revealing a bare chest and causing undershirt sales to plummet. As Garbicz and Klinowski write, "Thus is the power of the movies!" (225-226). Clearly, comedy films may affect audiences in many ways. This section will discuss pertinent sources that note the effect of comedy films upon audiences' habits and beliefs; since a purpose of this discussion is to investigate how comedy films affect audiences, these sources are very beneficial. Before one can explore the ways that comedies of the 1930s through 1950s have affected audiences, though, one should study the first comedy motion pictures: silent comedy shorts.

In The Silent Clowns (1974), Walter Kerr discusses early silent comedy films. Kerr notes that some motion picture viewers did not enjoy the advent of sound films. Kerr writes that audiences realized that the experience of viewing silent comedy films "was unique" (9). Subsequent chapters will not concentrate on silent films, as the purpose of this project is to discover the ways that comedy films of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s may relate to audiences. However, later comedies grew out of silent comedy, so silent comedy is clearly worth mentioning.

Classical Hollywood Comedy (1995), a compilation of essays edited by Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, discusses different aspects of classic comedy films. One especially noteworthy idea is Karnick and

Jenkins' assertion that comedies may contain "a search for a universal humanity" (265). Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959) may communicate well with audiences in part because they may show a quest for the common good.

Another collection of essays is Movie Comedy (1977), a publication connected with the National Society of Film Critics and edited by Stuart Byron and Elisabeth Weis. The book discusses the comic film techniques of "spoofing" and "social satire" and focuses on specific comedy films like Bringing Up Baby (1938) and Some Like It Hot (1959) (viii-ix). Additional information about these two books that further shows their relevance to this discussion will be discussed in the following chapter, which is a specific review of literature.

Noted film critic Leonard Maltin comments on comedy films in the book The Great Movie Comedians (1978). In it, he profiles some of those he considers to be the best actors in comedy films. First, though, he notes that comedians have "a rare and precious gift" in the ability to cause audiences to laugh (vii). Maltin's writing, including his idea about the rarity and value of talented comedians offers insight about how comedic actors may relate to and, consequently, affect audiences.

In The Crazy Mirror: Hollywood Comedy and the



American Image (1970), author Raymond Durnat notes that comedies contain "little looping-the-loops of surprise" and "convulsions of incongruous surprise" that communicate effectively with audiences, in part, by grabbing their attention (20). However, comedies still address issues that, if handled in a different way, could make audiences cry as easily as laugh (26). Thus, though comedies tend to be light-hearted, they can affect audiences as profoundly as dramas can.

Screwball: Hollywood's Madcap Romantic Comedies (1989) by Ed Sikov also provides information that clarifies the relationship of these comedies to audiences. The ideas of screwball pain, cash, and deceit work together to create films that, according to Molly Haskell, "can sustain the most paradoxical analyses without ever ceasing to be great fun" (Sikov 13). This mention of comedic paradoxes is noteworthy as well; later chapters will discuss the catharsis that comedy films provide for viewers. Many audiences delight in these funny incongruities and receive messages at the same time. Sikov's book offers more proof of motion picture audiences' connection to comedy films.

Olga J. Martin's Hollywood's Movie Commandments (1937) discusses many things, including the actions that certain organizations have taken to avoid films that they felt could be detrimental to society. In addition to mentioning the "moral crusade" of 1934, which



encouraged "clean movies," (61), Martin's book includes "The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930," which sought to provide "correct entertainment" (Martin 271). Clearly, outside factors have influenced film; still, many agree that motion pictures have offered and continue to offer audiences a way to avoid the drudgery of everyday life. Just as the historical events occurring when a film is made can alter a comedy film's content, these agencies may be influential as well. Thus, to more fully understand the ways that comedy film may affect audiences, one should understand the ways that motion pictures themselves may have been influenced. Internet and magazine articles were helpful

In A Generation of Motion Pictures (1978), author William H. Short notes the power of film, including comedy film. Early on, Short states that experts have proven that, with the possible exception of home life, film is "the greatest existing force in the molding and influencing of thought and public opinion" (10). In addition, he devotes a portion of the book to the Hays administration, an organization designed to, among other things, "establish and maintain the highest possible moral and artistic standards of motion picture production" (332). While it is not the focus of this discussion, a general understanding of such organizations may clarify the various messages that comedy films may have sent and continue to send to audiences. offer useful information about the different

In Hollywood: The Movie Colony The Movie Makers (1970), Leo C. Rosten discusses various ways that film has affected American audiences. He notes the many changes in society since films became popular in America. For example, Rosten notes that the film industry reinforces already-held beliefs through the "overpowering repetitiveness" of films (360). Comedy films may use this repetitiveness to influence ideas, or, as future chapters will show, use new ideas to affect audiences. This source helps clarify the ways that audiences and comedy motion pictures may be connected.

Various Internet and magazine articles were helpful in this study as well. Tim Dirks' Internet article Comedy Films (1996) offers a useful discussion of the major forms of comedy films, including slapstick, screwball, and parody (n.pag.). Realizing that there are different types of comedy films suggests that they may communicate different things. In addition, in an article for Newsweek magazine in 1998, filmmaker Cameron Crowe writes about comedies that "leave 'em laughing" (23). In the article, Crowe notes the merit of the "small, quiet moments of comedy" (23-24). This source offers proof that comedy films are valuable, too. Within these great comedy films, though, exist exceptional comedic actors and directors who also give comedy films meaning; numerous books that comment on their films offer useful information about the different

roles that comedy films may take.

### Filmmakers' Communication With Audiences

In addition to the information already mentioned, numerous works about individual comic actors and directors offer information useful in this study. Certainly, a discussion of comedy film would not be complete without references to the industry's influential comedians; comedic actors and directors are connected to comedy films' communications. The works in this section are noteworthy because they offer interesting commentaries about comedic filmmakers. Learning about comedic actors and directors makes it easier to decipher the meanings of their comedy films. Without this information, any discussion of the communications of comedy film would be incomplete. From early comic genius Buster Keaton to comic director Howard Hawks, many sources discuss comedy filmmakers.

Films directed by Billy Wilder have often been well-received by audiences; thus, two books about Wilder's career offer opportunities to learn more about the ways that films he directed may relate to audiences. Bernard F. Dick's Billy Wilder (1996) discusses the films of the director, including the comedy film, Some Like It Hot (1959). Specifically, Dick's idea that Some Like It Hot (1959) contains "a sense of humanity and an



attitude of compassion" may help explain the film's appeal and meaning (87). Realizing that this film may be empathetic suggests that it may have a compassionate meaning for audiences. In addition, the book, The Film Career of Billy Wilder (1977), by Steve Seidman, includes, for example, the idea that Wilder's films portray society in either "closed" or "accessible" ways (27). Understanding whether a film has an open or closed theme also suggests ideas about that film's meaning. While many works concentrate on Wilder's work, others have focused on the work of Hawks, who directed many screwball comedies.

Donald C. Willis' book The Films of Howard Hawks (1975) discusses many of Hawks' films, but it is Hawks' comedy films that are of interest in this discussion. In the book, Willis notes Bringing Up Baby (1938), which he calls a "great" film (8). In addition, rather than being about "the lure of irresponsibility," for example, Willis suggests that Bringing up Baby (1938) is "just about Katharine Hepburn, Cary Grant, and some other memorable screwballs" (3). Other sources suggest that the film has a deeper meaning, though.

Comedies tend to use paradoxes or incongruities to make audiences laugh. In Howard Hawks, Storyteller (1982), author Mast discusses the value of Hawks' films. He notes that "Hawks fills his films with perceptive cultural paradoxes" (Howard Hawks, Storyteller 365). These paradoxes, perhaps including a wealthy heiress



casually handling a pet leopard in Bringing Up Baby (1938), make audiences laugh and may, as will be discussed, teach them something as well. In an article for Movie Reader magazine in 1972, V.F. Perkins comments on Hawks' work and declares that "Hawks' achievement is to create a world in which the abnormal is the norm and where, in consequence, the rational seems outrageous" (Howard Hawks, Storyteller 57). Audiences seem to enjoy comedy films' worlds full of incongruities.

In Visions of Yesterday (1973), author Jeffrey Richards devotes sections of the book to the comedy films of Frank Capra and Leo McCarey. Both men directed films that Richards classifies as "populist" in nature (254). Capra directed It Happened One Night (1934); McCarey directed Duck Soup (1933). Both films seem to use comedy to make statements about populism, or the search for "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". Capra, for example "enshrines the ideals of populism in its heyday," while "McCarey represents populism in its decline" (254-255). In addition to the numerous books written about specific directors of comedy films, many have written books about comedic actors, from the silent comedian Keaton to later star Lucille Ball.

My Wonderful World of Slapstick (1960) is Keaton's own account (with writer Charles Samuels) of his career. For example, Keaton explains how, when audiences laughed when he did not react happily to his surroundings, he developed his trademark "deadpan" style of comedy (13).

This book is useful in this discussion because it provides the personal, first-hand stories of one of the silent screen's biggest stars. Keaton's book helps explain what audiences find funny; this information can be applied to the study of comedy films in subsequent chapters. Keaton, however, is not the only early comedy star who has been featured in film literature.

Wes D. Gehring discusses Chaplin's appeal in Charlie Chaplin's World of Comedy (1980). He begins by analyzing the role of Chaplin's "tramp" character in American humor, noting that nearly all of Chaplin's comedy uses "incongruity" (39). These inconsistencies or paradoxes, like the idea of Chaplin's tramp becoming a gold miner in The Gold Rush (1925), appear in many comedy films; unusual events often make audiences laugh. Also, Gehring hopes that his work will help comedy films to be considered equal with "'more serious' arts" (50). As will be discussed in subsequent chapters, audiences learn from and enjoy comedy films and their incongruities.

While there are hundreds of comedic actors who could be mentioned in this discussion, as will be discussed in the next chapter, many consider Chaplin and Keaton to be clowns, while W.C. Fields is seen as a comedian. In The Art of W.C. Fields (1967), William K. Everson discusses Fields, who he calls "the funniest natural comedian of them all" (232). Throughout the book, Everson discusses Fields' motion pictures and what

he believes made them excellent comedy pieces. Ronald J. Fields discusses his paternal grandfather in the book W.C. Fields: A Life on Film (1984). The author completed the book "not only to discuss the facts of Fields' films...but also to help you understand the man and his art" (8). Understanding Fields' comedy may make it easier to understand other comedy films and, in turn, their effects upon audiences. While Fields may be known for his distinctive face and snappy dialogue, comedian Lucille Ball's red hair and hilarious facial expressions may be her trademarks.

Ball is perhaps best-known for her long-running role as Lucy Ricardo on the CBS television comedy I Love Lucy (1951-1957). However, Ball was also an accomplished radio and screen comedian. In her autobiography, Love, Lucy (1996), Ball (with Betty Hannah Hoffman) discusses her work in the comedy films The Fuller Brush Girl (1950) and The Long, Long Trailer (1954), among others. Her book details some of the struggles she faced trying to make audiences laugh. Thus, Ball's descriptions of her comedy offer ideas about the making of comedy and, consequently, the meanings of comedy that will be explored in future chapters. Ball is yet another one of the many comedians whose influence upon American comedy film and, in turn, American audiences has been recorded in books and articles.

general review of literature, the following chapter will focus on two works that proved to be



## Conclusion

Countless books have been written about film study; many of them offer insightful information about comedy film's communication with audiences. Whether in the form of a comedian's own account of creating comedy or critics' ideas about the roles audiences play in the comedy film experience, this chapter discussed many useful resources. Indeed, the works mentioned in this chapter offer remarkable contributions to this discussion, which is designed to unearth the meanings comedy films may have for audiences.

The following chapters will discuss ideas about the ways comedy films, especially those of the 1930s through the 1950s, communicate with audiences. In many ways, comedy films act as a catharsis for viewers. Comedy films also allow viewers to vicariously experience silly, incongruous events. In addition, comedy films may use subtle or obvious methods to influence audiences' beliefs and behaviors. This project will also discuss notable comedy films and what meanings they have offered audiences past and present. As a whole, this project intends to discover and define the audience experience with comedy films. While this chapter contains a general review of literature, the following chapter will focus on two works that proved to be



especially influential in this discussion of the mass communication of American comedy film.

Numerous books, essays, and articles have been written about the study of film. Many works contain information that is either helpful or useful in this discussion of American comedy film as mass communication. Among these are numerous sources that offer pertinent, applicable information about different aspects of comedy film and the relationship of comedy film to American society. Two books in particular contain noteworthy ideas about what mass audiences laugh, why they laugh, and what mass audiences may receive from comedy films. This chapter will discuss these two sources in greater detail.

Classical Hollywood Comedy, edited by Kristine Henningsen Karnick and Henry Jenkins, and Movie Comedy, edited by Stuart Byron and Elizabeth Weis, are two works that contributed greatly to this composition. Both books discuss, among other subjects, ideas about some of the theories of comedy used in film and the communication of such films. This chapter will discuss these two books and some of the noteworthy details they contain. In addition to the ones mentioned in the previous chapter, these two books proved to be

## Chapter III

## SELECTIVE REVIEW AND EVALUATION OF RESEARCH

Introduction

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influential in this discussion of audiences' experiences with comedy film.

### Discussion of Classical Hollywood Comedy

Classical Hollywood Comedy, edited by Karnick and Jenkins, contains a variety of interesting essays on various aspects of comedy film. The book contains information on comedy theory; it discusses, for example, different methods that performers and directors use to evoke laughter from audiences. It also discusses the communications of comedy films, including the relationship between comedy motion pictures and society. While there may be no clear rules on what is funny or what significance comedy films may have, the book seeks to explain and analyze the comic techniques and messages of many American comedy films. In addition to expressing ideas about various aspects of comedy theory, it also discusses messages and communications of comedy film, offering in-depth discussions of some of the roles that comedy film plays in American life.

Comedy films have been, and continue to be, popular with American audiences. From early silent comedy shorts to today's feature length parodies and romantic comedies, comedy films are many viewers' motion pictures of choice. Furthermore, some maintain

that comedy films may be "completely intertwined with a broad range of social, economic and cultural practices" (267). If these motion pictures do relate well to viewers, then comedy films should be recognized as an influential part of life, rather than merely an entertaining distraction. Still, many different comedy theories and principles attempt to explain the way successful comedies work.

In its earliest stages, silent American comedy films consisted primarily of sight gags, according to Karnick and Jenkins. These gags, which can be as simple as slipping on a banana peel or much, much more complex "are at once elements of visual spectacle and rudimentary narratives" (65). This style of comedy, called the "cinema of attractions," uses fragmented scenes to make audiences laugh (64). As gags grew in popularity, they expanded from an actor's momentary glance at the camera, for example, to what Kevin Sweeney calls "triparte disruptive gags" (in Karnick and Jenkins 81).

These types of jokes contain three parts, according to Sweeney. They begin with the actor showing a rule of human behavior. In the next scene, circumstances stretch the rule. In the final scene or the punch line of the gag, the rule "is exploded with comic results" (in Karnick and Jenkins 81). This comedic theory is apparent in everyday life; many jokes consist of three sections, each becoming progressively



more amusing until the punch line, which goes beyond the rules set up earlier in the joke.

While these kinds of jokes have appeared in many films, notable examples appear in Duck Soup (1933) and Some Like It Hot (1959) as well. In Duck Soup (1933), Chicolini, played by Chico Marx, and Pinky, played by Harpo Marx, enter a room and hear what sounds like a telephone ringing. Pinky goes to a desk in the room and picks up two telephones, one at a time; the ringing continues. Then he picks up both telephones at the same time, holding one to each ear. Finally, he reveals the source of the noise; he pulls a buzzing alarm clock from his pocket.

Another three-part joke appears in Some Like It Hot (1959), when musicians Joe, played by Tony Curtis, and Jerry, played by Jack Lemmon, attempt to join a band that, unbeknownst to them, is for women only. They hear the requirements for band members; they say that they could pass for being under 25 and could bleach their hair blonde. When they hear that they must be women, Jerry says, "We could--." Joe interrupts with, "No we couldn't." These perspectives on the comedy theory of gags lend insight into the world of comedy, comedians, and clowns.

In one of their essays included in the book, Karnick and Jenkins note the differences in comedy theory used by comedians and clowns, two major types of comic actors. Clowns can be defined as characters who

resist prevailing social norms to create comedy; comedians, on the other hand, may be described as characters who advocate acquiescence to societal behaviors (156). The comedy of clowns like the Marx Brothers in Duck Soup (1933), for example, lies in the calamities that occur as a result of the actors' attempts to avoid their restrictions. On the other hand, comedians like, presumably, Cary Grant in Bringing Up Baby (1938), create comedy from the problems that they cause while trying to fit into society. Clowns have trouble trying to escape society, while comedians cause trouble trying to be a part of it (156). While differences between comedians and clowns are noteworthy, there are other differences between comic actors as well.

Karnick and Jenkins also note that female comedians use different comic techniques than male comedians tend to. Comedians like Mae West, Charlotte Greenwood, Carmen Miranda, and Lucille Ball use some of the same methods of comic performance as their male counterparts; still, they incorporate their own unique mannerisms as well. Female comedians tend to use comedy that often scorns "the traditional construction of femininity" (159). That is, female comedians may amuse audiences by acting in ways that are contrary to traditional ideas about women. These comedians, according to Karnick and Jenkins, often play roles that mock ideals about beauty and domestic or passive

behavior (159). For example, witness Greenwood literally kicking up her heels in the musical comedy Springtime in the Rockies (1942) or Ball falling into a mud puddle in The Long, Long Trailer (1954). Audiences may have found it funny when Ellie, played by Claudette Colbert, dunks doughnuts and, later, reclines on a roadside railing in It Happened One Night (1934), in part, because one might not expect a demure heiress to do such things. Thus, women may use methods of comedy that are unique, often in screwball comedies.

Screwball comedies, according to Karnick, are funny because they contain a paradox. Though actions in the film may seem inconsistent with everyday life, audiences familiar with the "highly structured and formulaic narrative" of such films tend to expect these differences (80). That is, the humor in romantic comedy films arises from the irreconcilable differences between many opposed events. The next chapters will discuss comedy paradoxes or incongruities and their meanings in more detail. Karnick also writes that most films rely on audiences to follow the normal, on-screen circumstances that occur within an established environment; comedy films, though, create a temporary pause in that normalcy (80). Thus, romantic comedy films do not create humor from an on-going string of pratfalls. "Rather," according to Karnick, "the incongruous nature of humor arises from unexpected shifts away from narrative logic and continuity" (80).



Still, one might wonder how audiences who know they are watching a comedy film could be surprised by the events in the film.

After all, if a viewer has seen comedy films before, he or she may realize that comedies will deviate from the normal circumstances on the screen. Still, according to Karnick, while a viewer may try to guess how a comic scene will end, he or she will usually not be able to do so. Karnick writes that in order to be successful, comedy may depend upon viewers' inaccurate predictions of jokes (80). As audiences attempt to predict the outcomes of jokes, comedy films allow viewers to enjoy a change of pace.

Comedy motion pictures bring the world to its most base, write Karnick and Jenkins. At this lowly level, comedy is able to go beyond "petty concerns of the moment" into a place "where the sacred and the profane merge" (265). That is, Bringing Up Baby (1938) and Some Like It Hot (1959) can show then-racy scenes of men dressed in women's clothing in part because they are comedies. Within this mixture of characters, settings, and jokes, researchers have sought to find the deeper meanings and communications of comedy film (265). During this search, many have discussed comic text, or the things that certain audiences find funny, as well as comic interpretation, or the reasons why audiences find those things humorous (281).

Anthropologist Mary Douglas notes a paradox within



the study of comedy (in Karnick and Jenkins 270). Douglas mentions that audiences may experience two conflicting reactions to comedy. First, audiences may find comedy to be a refreshing absolution from societal constraints; comedy may be a type of "transgressive pleasure" (in Karnick and Jenkins 270). At the same time, though, comedy may solidify the rules of society by poking fun at those who do not wish to conform. Thus, audiences may laugh at comedy films that use anarchy-based humor just as they may enjoy films that encourage societal obedience (in Karnick and Jenkins 270). These findings about humans and comedy film will be applied to noteworthy comedy films and discussed in greater detail in the next two chapters.

This collection of essays provides interesting information as it discusses aspects of American comedy theory and the messages of comedy film. Many topics addressed in the book clarify the relationship between comedy film and society, as well as what comedy films may communicate to audiences. Furthermore, the writings suggest interpretations of the meanings of certain American comedy films. This book, as well as the one that will be discussed in the following section, contributed vital research to the study of American comedy film and its communication with audiences.

## Discussion of Movie Comedy

The information about comedy films in Movie Comedy, edited by Byron and Weis, serves several purposes. The essays in the book, which were written by members of the National Society of Film Critics offer details about, among other topics, comedy film theory. In addition, the book discusses film communication and what makes certain comedians and comedy films humorous. At one point, for example, the book quotes Tennessee Williams, who declared, "If they laugh, it's a comedy" (in Byron and Weis v). Still, the book does offer more specific ideas about the making of comedy. Byron and Weis' book contains many commanding and compelling topics; some of the information that proved to be influential in this discussion of the mass communication of comedy film in America will be discussed in this section.

While this collection of essays includes information about international comedy motion pictures, the portion of the book dedicated to the study of American comedy films offers interesting information beneficial to this study. In different essays, the book discusses American silent comedy films, comedy motion pictures of the 1930s, and later comedies as well. In many cases, the authors use the study of an individual film, comedian, or filmmaker to portray various ideas about American comedy film. One essay,

for instance, uses comic actors W.C. Fields and Charlie Chaplin as examples of comedians and clowns.

"Fields vs. Chaplin," an essay in the book by noted film critic Roger Ebert, discusses differences between comedians and clowns. An essay in Classical Hollywood Comedy that was noted in the previous section of this chapter mentions these distinctions as well, suggesting that the differences between clowns and comedians are important to the study of the communication of comedy film. In Movie Comedy, Ebert refers to some of the comedy techniques that Fields and Chaplin used. While both comic actors were successful in making audiences laugh, their styles of comedy are quite different. Consequently, Chaplin and Fields use various aspects of comedy theory to make audiences laugh. Most actors in comedy films play the parts of comedians, according to Ebert. However, a few actors, including Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Jerry Lewis, act as clowns. Clowns and comedians use different comedic techniques, different props, and different comic theory to make audiences laugh (53).

The comedian and the clown in comedy films use different principles of comedic theory, according to Ebert. He notes, "Comedians use fantasy to make the real world seem funny." Clowns, however, "use reality to make our fantasies seem ridiculous" (53). These differences in comic theory are evident in the works of Fields and Chaplin. While Fields' cynical, pessimistic



films may "destroy our faith in the real world," the characters that Chaplin played in his films were ones who supported the established principles of society (53-54). According to Ebert, Chaplin's clown was a naive idealist, whereas Fields' comedian was a skeptic (54). These differences in comedic style show two aspects of comedy theory; audiences may laugh at mean-spirited humor or kind, clownish antics. These ideas about different comic techniques will be especially useful in the discussion of Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night, (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959) in subsequent chapters.

In his essay in Byron and Weis' book, author Richard Schickel comments on the comedy of the Marx Brothers. The Marx Brothers often created comedy by wreaking havoc upon their surroundings and insulting or baffling the people they encountered. Their comedy began, according to Schickel, with the conflict between the Marx Brothers and their environment (47). In Duck Soup (1933), for example, the Marx Brothers' antics begin with their relationship to Freedonia, the kingdom that Rufus T. Firefly, played by Groucho Marx, is the ruler of; in A Night at the Opera (1935), the comedy begins when the Marx Brothers interact with the locations of the opera and, later, a ship. After the setting is established in a Marx Brothers film, the actors immediately begin to destroy it. "Theirs was the maniac humor of nihilism," writes Schickel (47).

Many audiences are entertained by the Marx Brothers' comedy of destruction, and, as later chapters will discuss, are enlightened as well. Still, three considerably different styles of comedy exist within their films (48).

With Groucho, Harpo, and Chico (Schickel does not mention brothers Zeppo or Gummo in this discussion.), the Marx Brothers use three distinct styles of comedy. Harpo, according to Schickel, "was the last of the great pantomimists." Groucho, on the other hand, was "among the first of the fast-talking masters of insult." Finally, Chico "was a dialect comedian" (48). While the Marx Brothers were using three distinct parts of comedy theory to make audiences laugh other kinds of comedy films were being made in Hollywood. While comedies like the Marx Brothers' were very popular in the 1930s, other comedies considered to be more sophisticated in nature were also created.

In the article, "High Comedy in the Thirties," author Bernard Drew discusses comedy principles used in American comedy films in the 1930s. Depression-era comedies were so popular at the time because they showed the lives of the rich; at a time when so many Americans were poor, the rich lives shown on theater screens seemed different and funny to audiences. Comedies of that time period tended to deal with the lives of America's more prosperous citizens, in part because many comedies made in the 1930s and early 1940s

were variations of stage comedies, which "were frankly artificial comedies of manners -- and who else had manners but the rich?" (55).

Director Ernst Lubitsch's comedies about high society provide noteworthy examples of comedy theory and comedic messages. Lubitsch, who directed comedies including Ninotchka (1939) and The Shop Around the Corner (1940), has been called "the Continental sophisticate" (in Byron and Weis 72). During his career, Lubitsch created "a cycle of films full of witty images and deft camera comments on the manners and morals of the well-bred" (in Byron and Weis 70). Lubitsch's work has stood the test of time, in part, because of his "refreshing cynicism" that balances "sadness and gaiety" (in Byron and Weis 70-71). In the 1930s, when so many Americans were suffering through the Great Depression, motion picture audiences seemed to enjoy watching comedies with wealthy main characters. Lubitsch, who realized this, is quoted as saying, "The American public -- with the mind of a twelve-year-old child, you know -- it must have life as it ain't" (in Byron and Weis 70).

Many audiences may have been especially entertained by the wealthy main characters such films contained. In addition, Depression-era audiences may have accepted the crazy antics of characters in Bringing Up Baby (1938) or It Happened One Night (1934) because those films, and others like them, contained



wealthy main characters. "The rich could do anything," Drew writes. Audiences were, by and large, so poor that they had no idea how America's wealthy really behaved (56).

Film audiences of the 1930s affected the comic techniques that filmmakers incorporated into their work. For example, since audiences would accept such behavior, female leads in comedies of the 1930s "were always dizzy, madcap, charming, and irresponsible" (Drew in Byron and Weis 56). In addition, as the 1930s progressed, the Great Depression caused audiences to appreciate wilder and crazier films (56). This seems apparent with It Happened One Night (1934) and Bringing Up Baby (1938), which were released four years apart. As will be discussed in the following chapters, It Happened One Night (1934) and Bringing Up Baby (1938) are both considered screwball comedies, though the latter seems to be the more fast-paced and zany of the two. Until America's involvement in World War II, when audiences grew more affluent and found the rich less funny, filmmakers refined the comic technique of using zany rich people to make audiences laugh. These comedy plot devices, including the techniques of using characters who repeatedly find themselves in unusual circumstances or who begin to regress, are other conventions of comedy that directors use to communicate with audiences.

In Richard Corliss' essay for Byron and Weis'

book, he discusses Some Like It Hot (1959) and its comedy. The film does contain characters who repeatedly find themselves in unusual circumstances, but Some Like It Hot (1959) has a notably different tone than the screwball comedies Bringing Up Baby (1938) and It Happened One Night (1934). Some Like It Hot (1959), notes Corliss, uses film styles of two different eras in American film history. With its "frenetic pace and strategically placed chases," the film is like "movies"; on the other hand, the characters played by Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon epitomize the "early-talkie actor" (81). These two styles combine to create a remarkable comedy that may make audiences think as well as laugh.

Byron and Weis' compilation of essays contains information on a wide variety of topics which have much to add to the study of American comedy film as mass communication. The essays contained in the book discuss different parts of comedy theory, from the ideas of actors as clowns and comedians to why audiences of the 1930s may have preferred comedies about high society. In addition, the book offers ideas about the meanings of comedy film in American society. This book, coupled with the other work mentioned in the chapter, as well as the numerous books and articles cited in the previous chapter, all contribute to a greater understanding of the roles of comedy film in American society.



### Conclusion

In these two books, the editors have compiled a vast amount of information about comedy films. The essays in the book span a wide variety of topics including comedy film theory, the communication of comedy film, and the relationship of comedy film with American society. While there are many, many different books, articles, and other sources of information that discuss comedy films, these books proved to be interesting and insightful. Information in these two books crystallizes ideas about how comedy is made and what comedy films may suggest to audiences, both blatantly and subtly.

The mass medium of comedy film is certainly an interesting and influential part of American life. But while audiences are entertained, they receive messages from film as well. According to Douglas, for example, comedy films may allow audiences to vicariously experience freedom from societal constraints; on the other hand, comedy may also solidify audiences' resolve to remain within the boundaries of society (in Karnick and Jenkins 270). Still, there are many other messages that comedy motion pictures may communicate. Comedy films may simply give audiences a reprieve from everyday life or may slowly change their deeply held



beliefs.

The next chapters will discuss ideas about the audience experience with comedy film. American comedy film has communicated and continues to communicate with audiences; audiences may laugh at film incongruities, vicariously experience events, and receive a message. To be informed, cognizant viewers, audience members should be aware of the ideas set forth in comedy films. In addition, understanding the full meanings of a film can increase viewers' enjoyment of it; by actively interpreting a film's subtext, viewers may find it funnier. The next chapters will attempt to examine possible meanings of some excellent American comedies, including Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959).

## Chapter IV

## RESULTS

Introduction

"Darkness descends, the screen is lit, the film rolls and a world opens up," writes I.C. Jarvie (131). Comedy films can offer audiences a new land full of characters and situations to laugh at and learn from. This chapter intends to discuss the results of this study of audiences experiences with comedy film. That is, this chapter will seek to develop ideas about comedy films and their relationships to American audiences. Many American comedy films from the 1930s through the 1950s have related well to audiences. In particular, Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959) seem to communicate effectively. These influential films are a valuable part of American history. Consequently, their communications with audience members should be examined.

Audiences have an interesting, intricate connection with comedy films. Viewers do not merely watch films and immediately forget them. Rather, audiences may play active roles in films, learning and remembering what they see. If, as Jarvie writes, viewers tend to be "down-to-earth and skeptical" of films, then they may analyze comedies as well (85-86). In addition, comedies

allow audiences to experience a catharsis, or release of tension. Furthermore, by vicariously experiencing the paradoxical events on the screen, audiences enjoy "becoming" part of the film (Karnick and Jenkins 270). Still, as audiences laugh at films, comedies may encourage them to follow society's rules or may offer new, unconventional actions (Mast The Comic Mind 20). The comedy films that will be the focus of this discussion seem to relate to audiences especially effectively.

Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959) are four excellent American comedies; each film is unique and may be considered representative of some American comedy films made between 1930 and 1960. Duck Soup (1933), directed by Leo McCarey, is one of the Marx Brothers' zany spoofs. In addition to being a road picture, It Happened One Night (1934), directed by Frank Capra, is a screwball comedy. While different than It Happened One Night (1934) in some ways, Bringing Up Baby (1938), directed by Howard Hawks, is also a screwball comedy. Finally, Some Like It Hot (1959), directed by Billy Wilder, is a comedy that parodies more serious works and uses talented actors and a snappy script to captivate viewers. Before the paradoxes and catharses of these films can be discussed, though, an understanding of the plots of these motion pictures would be beneficial.



Duck Soup (1933) takes place in Freedonia, a fictional country similar to America. Wealthy Mrs. Teasdale, played by Margaret Dumont, offers millions of dollars to the Freedonian government on the condition that Rufus T. Firefly, played by Groucho Marx, will lead the country. Firefly, of course, makes an capricious, unconventional leader. He deals with Sylvania spies Chicolini and Pinky, played by Chico and Harpo Marx, respectively, and finally ends up at war with Sylvania, in part because he had already paid a month's rent on the battleground. This film contains the famous "mirror scene" as well as a battle scene where soldiers wearing uniforms that appear to be from many different American wars. The film ends with Rufus, Chicolini, Pinky, and Bob Roland, played by Zeppo Marx, throwing fruit at Mrs. Teasdale as she sings, presumably, the Freedonian national anthem.

It Happened One Night (1934), which won Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Actor, and Best Actress, has been described as "an unpretentious, unusually leisurely screwball comedy," (Sikov 86-87). The plot surrounds Ellie Andrews, played by Claudette Colbert, who runs away from her wealthy father after he forbids her from marrying. She boards a bus where she meets journalist Peter Warne, played by Clark Gable. After Ellie loses her suitcase full of money, the two have different adventures from hitchhiking to sharing a room divided by a blanket

called "the walls of Jericho". In the end, Ellie and her father reconcile their differences, and Ellie and Peter marry.

Bringing Up Baby (1938) follows the fast-paced adventures of kooky heiress Susan Vance, played by Katharine Hepburn, and straight-laced paleontologist David Huxley, played by Cary Grant. Susan promises to help David get the money he needs for research if he will help her bring Baby, a pet leopard, to her house in Connecticut. The snappy dialogue and breakneck pace of the film continue as the two chase Baby around and try to find David's valued dinosaur bone after George, the dog, buries it. Barry Norman writes that Bringing Up Baby "creates a world of its own, one just recognisable to those of us who live in the other world but far more enchanting and carefree than ours" (96). The film ends as Susan and David embrace while sitting on a scaffolding over David's prized dinosaur skeleton, which Susan shattered.

Some Like It Hot (1959), set in 1929, follows the adventures of saxophone-playing Joe, played by Tony Curtis, and bass-playing Jerry, played by Jack Lemmon. After the two down-on-their-luck musicians witness a shooting in Chicago, they dress as women and join an all-female band headed to sunny Florida to escape. As they, dressed as women, board the bus out of town, Joe says, "We're the new girls." Jerry adds, in a lower voice, "Brand new." While in the band as "Josephine"

and "Daphne," Joe and Jerry meet Sugar Kane, a forlorn ukelele-player, played by Marilyn Monroe. Though both men fall for Sugar, Joe wins her affections in the end, in part by pretending to be a millionaire, complete with sailing outfit and Cary Grantesque accent. Meanwhile, dressed as "Daphne," Jerry debates marrying millionaire Osgood Fielding, played by Joe E. Brown. After a final chase scene, Joe, Jerry, and Sugar end up in Osgood's boat. Osgood gets the last word in the film; when Jerry finally removes his wig and tells Osgood he's a man, Osgood declares, "Nobody's perfect." Norman calls the film an "ingenious blend of slapstick and sophistication" (233). In addition, Bernard F. Dick calls the film a masterpiece, in part because "it has the classic comic plot of disguise, deception, and intrigue" as well as a feeling of kindness and consideration (87).

These films are excellent comedies that have demonstrated their power to connect and communicate with audiences. Such perpetually great films are, according to Norman, "the ones that qualify not just as hits of the moment, but as classics, for they have the additional attribute of timelessness" (57). They have remained funny for decades after they were initially released. Audiences may enjoy the films' paradoxes, while realizing that the films are too zany to be real. In addition, audiences can vicariously experience the events in the films. The next section will elaborate on



the roles that paradoxes may play in comedies.

### Incongruities and Unreality

Though comedies may not completely mirror reality, audiences and comedies connect, in part because of the incongruities used to create comedy. According to Graeme Turner, films compose a version of reality using the components of film as a method of mass communication (131). Thus, while comedy films may contain bits of reality, they tend not to accurately replicate it. Films communicate with audiences and may change their ideas about everything from clothing styles to societal norms. For audiences to learn, though, comedy films must entertain. An unfunny, unsuccessful comedy will not communicate effectively with viewers. As Gerald Mast writes, "only by being successfully funny can a comic work capture human experience" (The Comic Mind 27). To be successful, many comedies use incongruities or paradoxes, which, in this case, may be defined as unexpected, unusual plot twists. Before one can understand the meanings of comedy films, one should examine some of the paradoxes that they contain.

Some comedy films may use exaggeration, detachment, or feelings of superiority, but one common characteristic of comedy is paradox (Durgnat 20-22). Comedies use paradoxes to make audiences laugh; but even

these work within limits (23). If a paradox in a comedy is too mellow, audiences will find it weak or boring. On the other hand, films that use jokes that are too shocking may bother audiences and turn the comedy into drama (24). Thus, comedies must strike a balance between absurdity and reality to communicate well with audiences.

In addition to its anti-war comments, which will be discussed later on, Duck Soup (1933) is a silly, paradoxical romp through Freedonia. The very idea of Groucho Marx, as Rufus T. Firefly, running a country is funny; Henry Jenkins and Kristine Brunovska Karnick note that comedy often uses "extreme mismatches between performers and roles" (151). The scenes with Chicolini and Pinky selling peanuts and switching hats are hilarious examples of excellently choreographed comedy as well. Perhaps most notable, though, is the "mirror scene." After shattering the mirror in Rufus' room, Pinky, dressed as Rufus, must act as Rufus' reflection, imitating his every move.

Another example of an unexpected joke in the film occurs when Pinky grabs a newly-delivered telegram. He looks at it for a moment, appears angry, and then crumples the paper. One might assume that his actions mean that the telegram contains bad news. Not so in this film. Since Pinky does not speak, Chicolini explains Pinky's reaction: "He gets mad because he can't read." The jokes in the film seem to go on and on, just

as those in other Marx Brothers' films seem to.

Marx Brothers' comedies tend to use chaos to create comedy; A Night at the Opera (1935) is another noteworthy example of a film using unexpected surprises to appeal to audiences. Most interesting may be the famed stateroom scene. In it, Otis P. Driftwood, played by Grouch Marx, has a tiny room aboard a ship that becomes crowded as everyone from cleaning ladies to manicurists stops by for one reason or another; when the door finally opens, passengers, ship employees, and pieces of equipment fall out. Another of the nearly endless incongruities in the film is the enormous meal that Tomasso and Fiorello, played by Harpo and Chico Marx respectively, receive on the steamship. This film, too, makes audiences laugh by offering the unusual, the strange, and the silly.

It Happened One Night (1934), though, is quite different in tone than Duck Soup (1933) or A Night at the Opera (1935). It Happened One Night (1934) is a romantic comedy, and a road picture at that. It does not have the same war scenes, cramped stateroom scenes, or funny mirror scenes. While the film seems much more realistic than Duck Soup (1933), it still contains paradoxes that make it a compelling comedy. From walking through the rain after a bridge is washed out to eating raw carrots and sleeping in haystacks, audiences may have enjoyed the unexpected events that Peter and Ellie encounter on their journey. In addition, the very



idea of a woman giving up her inheritance, especially during a time when so many Americans were experiencing the Great Depression, may be difficult to believe and, therefore, funny.

Bringing Up Baby (1938) is full of paradoxes as well. From a leopard named "Baby" to David wearing a frilly woman's robe, paradoxes pepper the film. The first words that Susan speaks on-screen, for example, are, "You shouldn't do that, you know." Much of the film seems to echo that statement; perhaps Susan shouldn't take David's car, shouldn't break the dinosaur skeleton, and so on. In addition, fairly early on in the film, David says, "I don't want any woman interfering with my affairs." Only moments later, Susan telephones him, asking for help with the leopard.

To better understand the paradoxes of Bringing Up Baby (1938), I Was a Male War Bride (1949), another screwball comedy that Hawks and Grant worked on together, is also worth examining. Even the title of the film uses contradictory words. The motion picture, which was filmed in Germany and England, was based on a true story (Willis 16-17). It follows the troubles of French army officer Henri Rochard, played by Cary Grant, before and after he marries American WAC officer Lt. Catherine Gates, played by Ann Sheridan. While provisions for transporting foreign spouses of American military personnel to America exist, spouses of American military personnel tend to be female. Consequently,

Henri has trouble making the journey from Europe to America. Henri's problems continue throughout the film. While riding in a motorcycle sidecar, he crashes into a haystack; later, he sleeps in a bathtub. Eventually, he dresses as a woman, complete with horsehair wig, to board the ship to America.

I Was a Male War Bride (1949) is, according to Ed Sikov, "in many ways the most brutal" of Hawks' comedy films (195). In it, as in Bringing Up Baby (1938), the male lead character, played by Cary Grant in both films, spends much of the film losing his "professional 'pride' and 'dignity'" (Byron and Weis 42). While it is full of unexpected surprises, the one predictable part of the film is that each scene will make Henri "look silly" (Willis 18). Still, it was the third highest-grossing film in 1949 (Sikov 195). In fact, Donald C. Willis declares that "it's pretty nearly a great comedy" (17). The incongruities in this film, combined with Grant's excellent performance, make it funny in some of the same ways that Bringing Up Baby (1938) is.

Some Like It Hot (1959) also uses unexpected events to make audiences laugh throughout the film. One of the first incongruities appears in the first few minutes of the film. A hearse leads a high-speed chase through the streets of Chicago, resulting in gunfire. The coffin in the hearse is riddled with bullets and begins to leak...liquor. The hearse is really a rum-running car on its way to a speakeasy. Thus, the paradoxes of the

film commence. In addition, Mast notes that when dressed as a man, Jerry seems like Joe's acquiescent sidekick; on the other hand, when he dresses as "Daphne," he acts like an assertive woman, who, for example, tries to lead when dancing with Osgood (The Comic Mind 276). Thus, whether dressed as Jerry or as "Daphne," Jerry acts the opposite of a stereotype and is "too passive as male, too aggressive as female" (276). Humorous incongruities surround Joe's disguises as well; he acts as a woman and, later, a millionaire, when he is really a poor saxophone player. Audiences may find these incongruities funny, too.

The film also uses the film's time period, 1929, and witty word plays to create humor. For example, Joe tells Jerry, "Suppose the stock market crashes." Later, after Jerry suggests that they dress as women to join the band, Joe says, of Jerry, "He's got an empty stomach, and it's gone to his head." The unexpected jokes and events that fill this film finally end it as well. In the last scene, as was mentioned earlier, an unfazed Osgood learns that "Daphne" is really Joe. He doesn't even do a double take; he just merely comments that, "Nobody's perfect." Under normal circumstances, one would think that Osgood would be shocked and appalled to learn that his fiance was really a man. Not so in this film. The ending is so funny because Osgood merely takes Jerry's news in stride leaving Jerry bewildered; it is another example of the unexpected



twists in this comedy film.

In addition to making audiences laugh, the hilarious paradoxes in these films may effectively communicate with audiences as well. According to Mast, the purpose of comedy, with its many incongruities, is twofold. First, comedic ironies about life show that people are mere mortals. Also, comedy may remind audience members to be nicer to one another (The Comic Mind 324). Comedy films may not define life for audiences, but they can offer "an easy, unconscious, and involving way of constructing" the world (Turner 68). In addition to enlightening and entertaining audiences with paradoxes, comedy films allow audiences to learn about life by vicariously experiencing on-screen events and avoiding everyday tedium.

#### Catharsis and Vicarious Experiences

Audiences seem to especially enjoy comedy "when it makes [them] participate to the point of hysteria," according to Raymond Durnat (22). That is, many viewers appreciate the roles they play in comedy films; films offer viewers "an intense vicarious involvement" (Turner 110). In addition, these comedies may provide a catharsis for audiences as well. The idea of catharsis comes from the Greek word "katharsis," meaning "purification." As audiences laugh at comedy films,

they experience a release of tension. So, comedies may communicate with audiences by offering new experiences and alleviating stress. These films are excellent examples of comedies that allow audiences to expel anxiety and try new things, albeit indirectly.

Duck Soup (1933) seems to allow a variety of vicarious experiences and catharses. For the film's original Depression-era audiences, Duck Soup (1933) may have been particularly appealing. They may have enjoyed watching the carefree, rebellious characters have fun, something that poverty-stricken viewers in the early 1930s may have found difficult to do. For audiences today, the film's intermittent musical numbers and snappy wisecracks draw audiences into the action; however, audiences do realize that the film is not real, so they can simply enjoy the comical events in it. For example, audiences can laugh at the battle scene without being pelted with fruit, as Mrs. Teasdale is when she begins to sing. Audiences can pretend to take part in the film's zany war scenes, for example, without really experiencing a battle.

It Happened One Night (1934) may have allowed audiences of 1934 to vicariously experience events as well. When the film was released, many Americans were suffering through the Great Depression. The film may have allowed them to escape into a different world and enjoy Ellie's wealth as well as Ellie and Peter's comical road trip. In addition, it may have been

comforting to view Ellie's difficulties in the "real world;" even though she was from a wealthy family, she had problems, too. Furthermore, audiences may have viewed the lavish almost-wedding scene at the end of the film with "a mixture of contempt and awe" (Sikov 90). Audiences of the time could vicariously enjoy Ellie's wealth while noting at the same time that wealth alone did not make her truly happy.

While it did not share the immediate box office success of It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938) is still considered by many to be "the ultimate screwball comedy" (Sikov 100). Among other things, the film allows audiences to indirectly experience Susan's wealth and spontaneity. Audiences can enjoy her behavior; in real life, though, the character might be frustrating to deal with. In addition, audiences may experience a catharsis at the same time David seems to. In the beginning of the film, David is a serious scientist, not even sure how to enjoy a game of golf. At the end, when Susan sends his life's work, a dinosaur skeleton, crashing to the ground, he does not seem inordinately upset. He has learned to relax during the course of the film, just as viewers who play an active part in the film may relax.

Some Like It Hot (1959) seems to offer vicarious experiences and catharsis in several ways as well. First, audiences can step into 1929; when the film was made in 1959, audiences could "go back in time" thirty



years. In addition, audiences may enjoy the excitement of Joe and Jerry's life on the lam without truly experiencing the worries that they face. Furthermore, the part of the film set in Florida seems like a vacation. The band members seem to have such fun that viewers may enjoy pretending to be a part of it. The film seems to allow a catharsis as well. As tensions build during the chase scenes in the film, viewers may feel nervous for the characters; still, things end happily (for everyone but Jerry), allowing viewers to heave a sigh of relief.

Comedy films can offer different things to audiences, including a catharsis, or release of tension. The catharses of comedy films may be less extreme than the more wrenching experiences offered by dramatic works; however, comedy film audiences may still feel better and notice a release of tension upon leaving the theater. In addition, the vicarious experiences offered in films may help viewers relate to each other. Films may reveal new ways to look at life and may, therefore, have a notable socializing effect on viewers (Jarvie 104). Thus, comedies may allow audiences to experience events vicariously and alleviate stress. While there are many, many excellent comedy films, these may be considered particularly effective at offering a catharsis to audiences.

## Conclusion

There are many excellent American comedy films, including Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959). Among other things, these films seem to use paradoxes and incongruities to entertain and enlighten audiences. While comedies can take many different forms, from zany spoofs to kind-hearted parodies, they still allow audiences to take part in the events on the screen. Audiences may enjoy these silly antics without actually experiencing them, which can prove to be a relaxing, cathartic experience. Still, these films may communicate about other issues as well. In addition to offering audiences a catharsis, comedy films may influence audiences in other ways; they may support the status quo or advocate a new way of doing things. The final chapter will conclude with discussions of possible meanings of these comedy films and some of the behaviors, both old and new, that they may encourage.

## CHAPTER V

## CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

From the troubles that Rufus T. Firefly, played by Groucho Marx, has with the motorcycle sidecar in Duck Soup (1933) to "Daphne", played by Jack Lemmon, tripping on the train steps in Some Like It Hot (1959), comedy films have sought to make viewers laugh. But comedy films may be more than a mere diversion for the masses. As audiences laugh, they can learn. Comedies may be more capable than other types of film at conveying messages to audiences; by putting viewers in good moods, comedy films can facilitate effective communication. As viewers enjoy the events on the screen, they may receive a message that can help them see life in a new way. Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959) communicate with audiences in many ways. As the previous chapter noted, they may provide audiences with a catharsis and allow them to vicariously experience different events.

In addition to entertaining audiences, comedies may enlighten them about a variety of topics, including populism, greed, and kindness. This chapter will explore some of the different meanings these four comedy films seem to have for audiences. Among other things,



the films may persuade audiences to follow society's rules. Conversely, they may suggest new and different ways of life. Comedy films seem to be more than just an enjoyable diversion for audiences. These motion pictures used comedy to communicate with audiences when they were first released; even years later, film audiences may still learn from and enjoy them.

### Meanings of Comedy Films

According to Jeffrey Richards, the kingdom of Freedonia in Duck Soup (1933) represents "a fantasy version of America" (255). The crazy antics of the Marx Brothers work well in such a film. While it is funny to watch the conflicts between the Marx Brothers and more realistic settings like those in A Night at the Opera (1935), Duck Soup (1933) is comical, in part, because of its unreal, silly setting. Audiences may be more likely to accept and enjoy silly, far-fetched antics in a fictional land than in a real one. Still, though Freedonia does not exist, the film seems to have very real meanings.

McCarey's films, including Duck Soup (1933), often portray populism in its decline, according to Richards; though these populist ideals may be difficult to recognize scattered amongst the Marx Brothers' jokes and pratfalls, they do exist (255). The film uses the

battle scene at the end of the film to comment on "the folly of war, diplomacy, dictatorship and the moneyed interest" (256). In that scene, for example, wealthy Mrs. Teasdale, played by Margaret Dumont, seems to remain loyal to Freedonia and to Rufus, even though she knows that the ridiculous war was partially caused by a spat between the two countries' leaders. When the characters throw fruit at Mrs. Teasdale, they seem to thumb their noses at the wealth and patriotism she represents. In addition, Gerald Mast maintains that the parody reduces "the solemn events of American history to total nonsense" (The Comic Mind 285). Duck Soup (1933), then, may be viewed as an excellent comedy and an anti-war film.

Though it, too, deals with populism, It Happened One Night (1934) contains a different meaning, in part because it advocates a more optimistic populism (Byron and Weis 42). Director Frank Capra said that he puts his beliefs into his films (Richards 234). "People are basically good or can be made good," Capra declared (234). Thus, It Happened One Night (1934) seems to carry Capra's message; in the end, Ellie and Peter, played by Clark Gable, seem like good-hearted people. In addition, Ellie's father, Alexander, played by Walter Connolly, who at first seemed rather corrupted by his wealth, becomes more good-hearted by the end of the film, too. In addition, though, Sikov notes that the film is also about money (87).

It Happened One Night (1934), which focuses on a rich heiress who rejects the wealth she was born into, only to keep the money in the end, uses a simultaneous craving for and aversion to money as a major plot device, according to Sikov; he writes that this "split sensation" about money is commonly found in screwball comedies (90). In fact, by showing Ellie's unhappiness with her wealthy father and her happiness with Peter, the film may portray, according to Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, "work and the work ethic as preferable to a class-based system of inherited wealth, power and status" (277). Audiences today may find the film funny, but for audiences of the 1930s, it probably had a markedly different meaning. During the Great Depression, when many Americans were poor, "Americans demanded entertainment that would help them affirm their own beliefs, ideals, and mission," writes Mast (The Comic Mind 259). Thus, the film may have supported many Americans' feeling that working hard was better than inheriting money.

Furthermore, the film seems to comment on greed, generosity, and kindness as well. Money is portrayed as a barrier to human warmth; the fight between Ellie and her father, for example, is related to money (Mast The Comic Mind 260). In addition, when Ellie gives Peter's last dollars to a poor woman and child riding on the bus with them, the film seems to encourage generosity. Though the lack of money creates some problems for Peter



and Ellie, the film ends well for them; plus, they helped the woman and child along the way. In addition, Mast notes that "cynicism and sarcasm" keep characters apart. Ellie, the heiress, and Peter, the sardonic journalist, cannot connect until they escape the wealth and negativity in their lives (Mast The Comic Mind 260). While Ellie does not say that she will give up her money, she does leave her extravagant wedding for an inexpensive cabin with Peter at the end of the film. This seems to show that they will be happy with the simpler things in life. Depression-era audiences may have found it comforting to see that generosity and kindness, not greed and negativity, were rewarded in the film.

Still, It Happened One Night (1934) may have other meanings as well. According to Tina Olsin Lent, clashes between "intellect and emotion, reason and feeling" and "work and fun" exist in the film as well (in Karnick and Jenkins 324). An example of the conflict between work and fun appears early in the film; the audience is first introduced to Peter as he, drunkenly, argues with his boss. In addition, the first time the audience sees Ellie, she must decide between following reason and keeping her father's money or following her feelings and diving off the boat to gain her independence. In It Happened One Night (1934), the conflicts resolve themselves happily; Ellie and Peter end up together and with the money, suggesting that happy endings are

possible, even in unstable times like the Great Depression. After all, Capra himself declared, "Happy endings -- life is full of them" (Richards 234).

Mast writes that Capra's films, like It Happened One Night (1934), reflect American audiences' own values and principles (The Comic Mind 259). This film seems to uphold the idea that good-hearted people can overcome bad times. According to Mast, Capra was "the supreme master of the comedy of sentiment, moralizing, and idealization" (259); his films may have lifted the audiences' spirits by using comedy to send a positive message to audiences of 1934. While audiences today may not find the film funny in exactly the same ways that audiences of the 1930s did, the film may still encourage viewers today to be kind to others.

With its breakneck pace, Bringing Up Baby (1938), while also a screwball comedy, does not seem to have exactly the same message as It Happened One Night (1934). Donald C. Willis notes that Bringing Up Baby (1938) is "not about the tragedy of humiliation...or the filthiness of the rich;" rather, he writes that the film is "about nothing at all" (3). However, most films, especially ones that have been regarded so highly over the years, seem to have some meaning for audiences. Mast notes that director Howard Hawks did not allow his comedies to "sentimentalize or moralize" (The Comic Mind 250). While Bringing Up Baby (1938) does not seem to carry the same optimistically populist message of It

Happened One Night (1938) it still may speak to audiences and encourage certain behaviors or beliefs.

Some feel that the film advocates relaxation, though in a film with such a frenzied pace, it may be difficult to see that idea at first. Lent writes that the film shows the value of recreation (in Karnick and Jenkins 322). With her unconventional actions, Susan, played by Katharine Hepburn, epitomizes vitality and spontaneity, while David, played by Cary Grant, is serious and hopelessly devoted to his work; by the end of the film, David agrees to see things Susan's way (322). The film may encourage audiences to enjoy life and to take work less seriously. Still, the film itself progresses at such a fast pace that it sometimes seems chaotic as well as funny.

On the other hand, some feel that the film has a more gloomy message. Karnick writes that the last scene of the film, when Susan destroys David's prized dinosaur skeleton, suggests that David will have to spend a lot of time fixing the damage Susan has done, perhaps to his life as well as his work (132). Ed Sikov maintains that the last scene, like others in the film, shows the "implicit skepticism and frantic despair" of screwball comedies (107). The film does seem frantic at times, but it also seems plausible that, as Mast writes, the characters' liveliness stems from being "exuberantly alive" (Howard Hawks, Storyteller 160). Furthermore, the film seems to commemorate human endurance (Perkins



58).

Some Like It Hot (1959) is a film that, according to William S. Pechter, exudes "hard cynicism on the surface, soft sentimentality underneath" (in Byron and Weis 64). Though it parodies crime films of the 1930s, the film, directed by Billy Wilder, seems to have heart. Bernard F. Dick, for example, notes the film's "lovable" characters (91). While in the band, Joe, played by Tony Curtis, and Jerry, played by Jack Lemmon, experience "being" women, which may make them more considerate to women in the future. In addition, Richard Corliss notes that by meeting Sugar, played by Marilyn Monroe, whose life "has been pocked with fast-talking heels like himself," Joe learns to be more thoughtful (in Byron and Weis 82); at the end of the film he seems to genuinely try to dissuade Sugar's affections to keep her from being hurt. The characters in this film and, perhaps, the audience members may have learned to be kinder to each other. Mast writes that comedy "does warn us not to take our assumptions so seriously that we misjudge or mistreat those who appear different" (The Comic Mind 324).

In addition, the film may suggest that wealth is not all it is cracked up to be. For example, Sugar heads to Florida with the band, intending to meet a millionaire. Instead, she meets Joe, pretending to be a millionaire. When she finally discovers that Joe is just another saxophone player, though, she does not seem

to mind at all. Only when her focus shifts away from money does she seem truly happy. On the other hand, things turn out poorly for "Daphne" who does meet an actual millionaire, Osgood, played by Joe E. Brown, who has been married "seven or eight times". Thus, the film hints that Sugar and Joe will be happy together, though neither is rich, and Jerry would be better off without wealthy Osgood. Perhaps audiences should learn that wealth does not automatically bring happiness.

These films seem to have interesting, important meanings for audiences. For example, It Happened One Night (1934) seems to declare that happiness is more important than wealth; in light of the Great Depression, audiences of 1934 may have found this message especially meaningful. Any anti-war sentiments in Duck Soup (1933) may be as applicable today as in the 1930s, as battles continue to rage all over the world. Understanding the meanings of these films may help viewers better understand themselves and the beliefs they hold. The next section will discuss ways that these films may have influenced and continue to influence audience members.

### Comedy Films and Behavior

In addition to the different meanings and messages of these comedy films, they may suggest that audiences behave in certain ways as well. Anthropologist Mary

Douglas notes that comedy may be "an exhilarating release from social control" (in Karnick and Jenkins 270). Mast notes that comedies may portray a character's unconventional behavior as "superior to society's norms" (The Comic Mind 20). On the other hand, comedy films may also secure societal values by poking fun at nonconformist characters (Douglas in Karnick and Jenkins 270). Some of these four films seem to encourage rule-following while others appear to advocate more individualistic behavior.

"Comedy is truly the foe of progress and the social order," writes Mast (The Comic Mind 322). With its spoofs of musical numbers, snappy wisecracks, and funny, well-choreographed scenes, Duck Soup (1933) does seem to go against social order. Much of the film revolves around characters' preposterous behavior. As Pinky, played by Harpo Marx, uses scissors to cut other characters' clothing to pieces, he embodies Mast's notion that comedy often involves destruction (The Comic Mind 320). Clipping clothing may symbolize a disregard for social norms; this may not necessarily encourage audiences to defy authority, but it may suggest that they question some of the beliefs that they have taken for granted.

Jenkins and Karnick note that many comedies, including Duck Soup (1933), focus on more than merely "biological pleasures and social disruption" (275). As the film shows characters making jokes and seeming to



cause trouble, it also portrays "an expressive individualism" that demands "personal freedom and self-expression" (275). Thus, Duck Soup (1933) may advocate originality. In addition, Jenkins and Karnick write that some comedies may encourage "a resistance or contesting of dominate social categories" (Jenkins and Karnick 156). Countless scenes in the film seem to support this idea, including the situations Pinky and Chicolini, played by Chico Marx, encounter as street vendors and Rufus' entrance into Mrs. Teasdale's garden party. Thus, Duck Soup (1933) may suggest that uniqueness is, if not better, at least funnier than strict conformity.

It Happened One Night (1934), on the other hand, may encourage audiences to enjoy the simple things in life. The film seems to extol the value of the working class rather than of material wealth. When Peter instructs Ellie in the fine arts of doughnut-dunking and piggyback-riding, for example, the film shows the worth of the simple things. For audiences in 1934, the film may have suggested that audiences fit into and value the working class and not be discouraged by the Great Depression. For audiences today, the film may still suggest being content with what one already has. The scenes in It Happened One Night (1934) may also act, according to Mast, as "valuable sociological documents in the history of the American cinema, reflecting an era's idealized view of itself" (The Comic Mind 259).

Still, even if the film painted such a picture of life, it may have helped unify the country during a difficult time.

In addition, comedy films, including It Happened One Night (1934), may encourage "social integration and affiliation" (Karnick and Jenkins 156). For example, the scenes on the bus that show passengers singing together seem to reveal the bond that they have and that, at first, wealthy Ellie does not share. At one point, Peter tells Ellie, "The only way you get anything is to buy it, isn't it? You're in a jam and all you can think of is your money. It never fails, does it? Ever hear of the word humility?" In addition, though he says that he only wants to write a story about her, Peter goes to great lengths to help Ellie and does not ask for the \$10,000 reward Ellie's father offered. This may emphasize the value of kindness to others rather than greed. For audiences struggling through the Great Depression, this film may have encouraged them to stick together. By understanding how Depression-era Americans were portrayed in this film, today's audiences may better understand the film and what makes it funny.

Some maintain that screwball comedies like It Happened One Night (1934) may disguise a "depression-bred alienation, felt by a depression generation that felt cheated of its birthright" (Karnick and Jenkins 275). If audiences did feel alienated, the films may have worked to bring them together; It Happened One

Night (1934) and Bringing Up Baby (1938) both end happily. Though the two are quite different, Capra, who directed It Happened One Night (1934), and Hawks, who directed Bringing Up Baby (1938), both "deliver their critiques with a remarkable absence of negativism or cynicism" (Byron and Weis 42). Despite the many troubles that characters may encounter during the films, they seem to end up better off. This may have encouraged Depression-era audiences not to give up. Audiences today can be influenced in similar ways. In addition, the films seem to support devotion to the work ethic while still showing the importance of fun and leisure (Karnick and Jenkins 277).

Bringing Up Baby (1938) may encourage people to act both conventionally and unconventionally. Susan acts unconventionally and, though her actions put her in some unexpected circumstances, the film ends happily for her. On the other hand, David's conventional actions also cause problems for him, though they end (relatively) happily. Perhaps the film suggests that audience members should find a balance between Susan's offbeat behavior and David's straight-laced actions in their own lives.

To a certain degree, Bringing Up Baby (1938) seems rather existential in some ways. The dinosaur skeleton that David spent years assembling is destroyed in a matter of seconds. Thus, the film may suggest that he, and, in turn, viewers, should appreciate the moment. In



addition, it seems as though during the course of the film, David learns that there is more to life than work; thus he may not be too upset about the loss of the skeleton, since he now has a friend in Susan. In the end, the film shows "the evolution and expression of the calcified character's energy, vitality, and spontaneity" (Mast Howard Hawks, Storyteller 160). Bringing Up Baby (1938) may advocate "human wholeness" and "spiritual vitality" (160); Bringing Up Baby (1938) seems to encourage audiences to enjoy life as well.

Some Like It Hot (1959) may attempt to convince people to be nicer to each other. The problems in the film all begin with a shooting, an extreme example of "man's inhumanity to man"; Joe and Jerry would not be on the lam if they had not witnessed the crime. Sugar would not be smuggling liquor in a flask if people had been kinder to her. In the end, when Joe and Sugar are nice to and honest with each other, things end happily. On the other hand, Jerry, who attempted to marry Osgood under false pretenses, is stunned when Osgood declares that he does not care that Jerry is a man. Thus, the film may encourage kindness and honesty. The film lets audiences vicariously experience adventures, but it may also assure them that empathy and truthfulness are valuable, honorable traits. While perhaps more ironic on the surface than It Happened One Night (1934), Some Like It Hot (1959) seems to also encourage audiences to be kind.

These four noteworthy comedies seem to encourage audiences to behave in different ways. While the films do not seem to aggressively insist that viewers take specific actions, they do seem to support different behaviors, including kindness and generosity. Realizing that comedy films may have deeper meanings helps reveal the effects of these films upon audiences past and present. In addition, by recognizing principles found in such films, viewers can evaluate the messages comedies send and decide whether or not they agree with them. By actively analyzing comedic messages, audience members may become more insightful, analytical viewers and wiser, more thoughtful members of society.

### Conclusion

Long after the ticket stubs have been thrown away and the buttery popcorn smell has faded, an audience member may recall a scene from a comedy film and smile. Whether a viewer remembers Pinky and Rufus mirroring each other's movements in Duck Soup (1933), Ellie and Peter backlit in the hazy, hay-filled moonlight of It Happened One Night (1934), Susan climbing up the ladder towards the dinosaur skeleton in Bringing Up Baby (1938), or the train berth full of female musicians and "Daphne" in Some Like It Hot (1959), audience members may remember scenes from comedy motion pictures for

years. In addition to being entertaining, these films may have other meanings as well; they may, among other things, encourage kindness or advocate originality. Hopefully, this project has helped explain what some of these meanings may be.

From the 1930s through the 1950s, films including Duck Soup (1933), It Happened One Night (1934), Bringing Up Baby (1938), and Some Like It Hot (1959) seemed to hold different meanings for audiences and elicit various responses from them. Comedies, whether populist or anti-war, may have encouraged audiences to support the status quo or reevaluate the way society functioned. While these meanings may not apply as directly to viewers today as they did to the films' original audiences, the films still seem to be funny, thought-provoking, and enlightening motion pictures.

Comedy films invite viewers into a new world, where the norm is not normal. In this world, audiences may laugh at paradoxical events, pretend to be a part of them, and receive any messages a film may send. Amidst the jokes and pratfalls, comedy films may have important meanings for audiences. Whether the films suggest that audiences adhere to existing roles in society or encourage them to look at life in new ways, comedy films can potentially leave a lasting impact upon viewers. Years later, a joke from a comedy film may pop into a viewer's mind; thus, it seems worthwhile to understand any subtexts in the film.



These chapters were intended to offer new ways to look at the comedy films that can be applied to other comedies, both past and present. Clearly, it is interesting to examine the ways that comedy films may affect audiences. Interpreting the meanings and intentions of comedy films can lead to a better understanding of the human condition. In addition, this awareness facilitates being an analytical audience member. As with any form of communication, to be a more intelligent, thinking human being, one should understand as much as about it as possible. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz write that film "must be reunderstood as a vital component of a broader culture of modern life" involving, among other things, social and cultural changes (10). The same seems true of comedy films. Audiences can learn as they laugh.

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