

Grégoire HALBOUT

Hollywood Screwball Comedy 1934-1945. Sex, Love and Democratic Ideals,
Bloomsbury, 2022

Table of Contents

Foreword

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Being happy

Line of descent: from remarriage comedy to screwball film

Deploying a new approach to an indeterminate and unstable genre

A social and political reading of a typically American genre

Part One – The screwball expression: a genre shows its credentials

Preamble: the fertility of Hollywood comedy in the 1930s

Chapter One: Proof of identity

The origins of the genre

1934, a pivotal year

The “Americanization” of fictional sources

A matter of language

The etymology and the improbable “trajectory” of the term screwball

Genre signaling in film discourse and movie reviews

Chapter Two: Protagonists: the artisans of screwball comedy

The directors at the helm

The reign of the jack of all trades

The director and the “screwballization” of scripts

The actors, stars of the genre

American actors for American stories

The stars, genre reference points

Screwball timbres and tones

The importance of the background: recurring secondary characters

Chapter Three: Narrative tropes and genre categories

Preliminary decryption

Narrative structures: “New Love”, “Old Love” and fornication forestalled

Plot types, a descriptive catalogue
A first attempt at a delineation of narrative tropes
Conditions precedent: zeroing in on the couple
The masquerade and the faces of conflict
The ordeal of alterity
Crises of identity
“Cocktails” and genre mixing
The impact of current events
Tones and subjects: a repetitive and polymorphic genre
A generation fades away
Shifting centers of interest and changing expectations

Part Two – Screwball discourse: interdiction and indirection

Chapter One: A socio-economic context conducive to censorship

Hollywood and the consequences of the 1929 financial crisis
New audiences, new censors
Popular art and popular culture: the ideological straightjacket
Men of circumstance take control
The censors' mission and their ideological apparatus
An improbable coincidence

Chapter Two: Expressions: Screwball comedy and the forms of censorship

The objective signs
A lengthy, comprehensive and conflictual approval process
The imprint of censorship on the Hollywood work process
Forms of regulation: rhetoric and frames of reference
Phraseology of the PCA
How the Hays Office intervened
Efforts towards an evolving methodology and judicial policy
What analytical tools for which interpretation?
The “Charter”, jurisprudence and the reinforcement of prohibitions

Chapter Three: Content: Ideological scrubbing

Creation under supervision: a system of prohibitions
Purified language to fit the needs of Hollywood's social project
Forbidden images: bodies and behavior
The Code, protecting institutions from the screwball menace

Echo and mirror: the press's final seal of approval

Chapter Four: Indirect discourse: The invention of the screwball style

Procedural Delinquency

The boomerang effect: censorship becomes fodder for comedy

The screenplay for *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife*, a model of narrative expurgation and lexical attrition

The rule-breakers' arsenal: words and images

Wordplay: the ruses and pleasures of screwball language

Gags and the advent of disorder

The symbolic function of objects

From one image to another: the metaphorization of forbidden gestures

An unexpected mirror: the amplifying effect of marketing

"Screwball Comedy, Sex Comedies"

Part Three – The screwball celebration and the democratic discussion

Chapter One: The screwball New Deal and the society of mutual consent

The discourse on marriage in 1930s America

A consumer society in a civilization of leisure

America's marriage debate

"Advice" comes to the rescue of marriage

Questioning marriage

The failure of authority figures

Screwball outlaws and their special arrangements

The revolution of modern marriage

Chapter Two: The tension of the screwball celebration; preserving the democratic space

The persistence of the established order

Paternal consent and the wife's return to domesticity

The missions of the screwball couple

Negotiation between private and public space

Escape from society

Invasion and living together

Conclusion

The romantic relationship, a reinterpretation of the democratic bond

Appendices
Filmography
Bibliography
Index