

## Addicted to Fun: Courtship, Play and Romance in the Screwball Comedy

Manuela Ruiz Pardos  
Universidad de Zaragoza  
manoliru@posta.unizar.es

### ABSTRACT

During the 1930s and early 1940s Hollywood produced a cycle of many romantic comedies -including titles like *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Awful Truth* (1938), *Holiday* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and others- which have been grouped under the label of screwball comedy. In these narratives a new rhetoric largely based on concepts such as fun, eccentricity, adventure and partnership was articulated on the screen so as to visualize emerging patterns of coupledness and ultimately to define contemporary romantic and marriage ideals. In this paper I intend to explore the meanings of play and the pursuit of fun within the romantic ethos endorsed by screwball comedies as well as the centrality of these notions within the narrative structure of these texts in the light of the contemporary discourses on coupledness and the prevailing courting rituals which, by the 1930s and 1940s, were significantly grounded in the cultivation of leisure and the search for enjoyment as the main avenues towards romantic fulfilment.

From the slapstick productions of the silent era to the new romances of the present decade, play -basically shaped as eccentric behaviour and/or liberating release of physical and even sexual energy- has remained a central narrative element in the tradition of film comedy and, more specifically, of Hollywood romantic comedy. Devoid of its most obvious clownish side and invested with a new romantic significance, play was first integrated within the well-known comic motif of the battle of the sexes in the zany comedies so characteristic of the thirties and early forties, the so-called screwball cycle. Under the label of screwball

can be included such popular films as *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *The Awful Truth* (1938), *Midnight* (1938), *Holiday* (1938), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), *The Lady Eve* (1941) or *Ball of Fire* (1942), narratives in which a new rhetoric largely based on concepts such as fun, eccentricity, adventure and partnership was displayed on the screen to visualize emerging patterns of coupledness and ultimately to define contemporary romantic and marriage ideals. The value of play is such in these films that playfulness is defined not only as a necessary underlying principle of gender relations but even as a key ruling force shaping all human experience. In Babington and Evans' words (1989: 24), 'the best 30s comedies... insist on life as a fully shared playful experiment rather than a hierarchically and role-divided enactment of established attitudes'. In this paper I intend to explore the meanings of play and the pursuit of fun within the romantic ethos endorsed by screwball comedy as well as the centrality of these notions within the narrative structure of these texts in the light of the contemporary discourses on coupledness and the prevailing courting rituals which, by the 1930s and 1940s, were significantly grounded in the cultivation of leisure and the search for enjoyment as the main avenues towards romantic fulfilment.

In the Victorian period, courting practises, other than formal encounters under parental or adult vigilance, were normally restricted, as Steven Seidman (1991: 46) has argued, to personal full-disclosure, usually through intensely spiritual letters, 'requiring each individual to reveal all relevant details about oneself' since 'true love' for the Victorians, in Seidman's words (1991: 46), 'must not be based upon romantic feelings, with the inevitable idealization and transitory desires, but on a thorough knowledge of each other's inner nature'. However, from the 1920s onwards Victorian conventions affecting courting habits and romantic attachments started to be replaced by new rituals of courtship free of adult supervision and not so exclusively centred on searching for spiritual affinity or on gaining family approval. Such emerging patterns of courtship were inextricably linked with the appearance of a new series of spaces suitable for romantic encounters that opened up a wider range of opportunities for intimacy between lovers. As Elizabeth H. Pleck describes it (1993: 1972), 'instead of the sex-segregated, family based entertainments of the past, young women and men attended dance halls, amusement parks and movie theatres', activities that provided numerous chances for flirtation 'away from the watchful eyes of parents and neighbors'. Entertainment and intimacy, thus, went hand in hand in those days, especially for young couples who could find ideal moments for romance in cinemas, cafés or dance parties far from the family home. Fun and romance, therefore, began to be closely related as a result of new tendencies in social habits.

This growing interest in having fun as an essential way of relating to other people and especially to the opposite sex can be said to have its roots in the codes of behaviour prevailing in the 1920s among young people. As Tina Lent has remarked (1995: 322) a key concern of the youth culture of the 1920s was 'its pursuit of fun through activities like dating, dancing, sports and other forms of mass entertainment'. Since public amusements had already gained wide social acceptance by the 1930s and since the working conditions inherent to the corporate system and the receding economic activity of Depression years

involved longer periods of free time to spend, it became a widespread habit to look for personal gratification in leisure activities ranging from playing golf or bridge to sunbathing, going to the movies or gambling. With the proliferation of amusements US American men and women were drawn increasingly to urban night life, especially as part of the new rituals of courtship which typically involved going to public places of entertainment such as theatres, dancing halls or cabarets.

In keeping with this widespread 'fun morality', being a romantic couple was identified in screwball comedy with being able to have fun together. In *The Awful Truth*, Lucy Warriner (Irene Dunne) makes the point very clear when she explains that she was really happy with Jerry because they had 'some grand laughs' together. Since enjoyment, fun, excitement and also play and adventure were essential components of the ethos of romance in the US American mind of the 30s and 40s, screwball comedies made extensive use of these elements both as starting points and as developing strategies of the romantic plots. In these films, romance very often springs out of the clash between a powerful urge to have fun (usually coded in terms of a need for personal freedom and liberation) and the burden of enduring a conventional boring routine, often associated with parental authority. For instance, in *Holiday*, the central tensions established between the prescriptions of the old generation and the priorities of the young lovers are essentially dramatized through moments of playful, dynamic activity and eccentric behaviour, as when Johnny (Cary Grant), either by himself or together with Linda, performs various skilful pratfalls and cartwheels, which show the couple's challenging attitude to social conventions as well as their physical and, metaphorically, their romantic compatibility. Childhood activities and games, like the display of the puppet show, the song the 'Club' heartily sing and the continuous jokes Linda (Katharine Hepburn), Ned, Johnny and the Potters make at their playroom meeting represent not only a sign of the screwball emphasis on the value of play as an occasion for romance but also a challenge to the value system embodied by Mr. Seton, Julia and their friends. As Northrop Frye has argued (1990: 169), it is within the generic boundaries of comedy that the movement 'from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom' can be most effectively dramatised. This equation of romantic love with rebellious adventure, liberation, enjoyment and fun acquires in *Holiday* a relevance that turns the story of Johnny and Linda into a kind of romantic 'manifesto' of the time, quite similar to that signed by the two lovers in one of the original posters advertising the film, in which they claimed that 'in the course of modern events, it sometimes becomes necessary for two people to tell the world go jump in a lake' and declared themselves 'free and independent to find happiness in our own way, regardless of the raised eyebrows of the stuffed shirt brigade'. In *It Happened One Night* or *Artists and Models Abroad* a similar disregard for social convention paired with a desire to enjoy life is also expressed by Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) and Patricia Harper (Joan Bennett) respectively, a desire they are soon able to fulfil in the company of their future partners. In these three comedies just mentioned, the contemporary prescription of cultivating playfulness as the basis for

personal and romantic fulfilment is expanded to the idea of enjoying an extended, rewarding vacation, thus taking the current leisure cult to an even further extreme.

By releasing their urge to play and have fun, screwball lovers do not only articulate the tension between youth and old age - a convention as old as New Comedy - but also provide a fashionable background for the unfolding of their romantic experience. Romance emerges in these comedies as a playful negotiation, often approaching the status of warfare, in which desire and defeat, togetherness and separation, postponement and fulfilment are the ultimate rules. The future partners are established as a couple only after they have shared some experiences and have built a common ground, which they mostly do through experiment and play. According to Lent (1995: 325), contemporary sources claimed that 'love required a male/female friendship based on fun' and that 'play melded the complementary aspects of their natures into a harmonious whole', ideas which, no doubt, are behind the screwball images of romance. The romantic couple, therefore, is defined in these comedies as a team ready to face the 'playful experiment' of life together with unrestrained enthusiasm, even if a bit reluctantly at first. As Stanley Cavell has argued (1981: 88), what really matters in these films is not the kind of things that the romantic pair does together but 'the fact that they do whatever it is together', whether it is travelling around the country (*It Happened One Night*), looking for a lost bone (*Bringing Up Baby*), taking care of a homeless baby (*Bachelor Mother*) or working on American slang (*Ball of Fire*). For the romantic couple, these shared experiences represent training ground in which they playfully 'rehearse' how to live together and learn to reconcile their ideological, character and class differences. In Molly Haskell's terms (1987: 131), 'the games they play are an attempt to discover truth while taking the time to adjust to, or establish, a new balance, a bond of spiritual affinity that redeems the former, less important, discrepancies'.

In order to establish this 'new balance' the recurrent comic device of impersonation emerges as central in these narratives. It is by stepping out of the boundaries of their own identities that the future lovers come to realise that they are really made for each other. Only after one or both of them have overcome, though only temporarily, the constraints of convention, class and sometimes even of gender that have always surrounded them is their commitment considered genuine and satisfying, and it is precisely through role-play that they mostly achieve liberation from these constraints. As Lent (1995: 323) has pointed out, 'by playing fictional characters, the screwball characters freed themselves of their original personalities, expectations and value system. Experimenting with other identities allow them to grow together'. In *It Happened One Night* Peter and Ellie eventually overcome their personal and class prejudices against each other while pretending to be a working-class married couple and living for a while as such. Travelling as Mr. and Mrs. Warne they both learn significant things about each other and prove their complementariness. After living on a small budget with Ellie, Peter (Clark Gable) realizes that she is a resourceful woman capable of much more than spending her father's money, while Ellie comes to appreciate Peter's puritanical work ethic. Similarly, Eve (Claudette Colbert) and Tibor (Don Ameche) reconcile their ideological differences in *Midnight* playing the roles of husband and wife. Although their antagonism is bluntly emphasized throughout their performance as Baron

and Baroness Czerny, their attraction and mutual affection is also depicted as an essential part of it. As the narrative progresses, the bond that initially links them through impersonation stops being fictional to become truly real. Through the device of role-play the members of the romantic couple are presented as equals who can work out the terms of their relationship without being affected by class tension or economic motivations. As Haskell (1987: 131) explains, in many of these 30s and early 40s comedies 'a deception is practised in order that the hero and the heroine may meet on an equal footing, a concealment of money, or profession or a disability that would place one or the other at a disadvantage', a deception usually effected through the use of false identities.

The contemporary definition of romance as an occasion for the couple to play together and have fun, just like two children would do, was reinforced in screwball comedies through allusions to fairy stories -to Snow White in *Ball of Fire* (1941), to Cinderella in *Midnight* or to Red Riding Hood in *Easy Living* (1937). What better frame can be imagined for this 'playful love' than those worlds of fantasy discovered in childhood? It is true that in some comedies no such references appear; however, the connection between love, play, fantasy and childhood is never out of sight. Susan throwing stones at Mr. Peabody's window and David chasing Susan's dog on all fours in *Bringing Up Baby*, Linda and Johnny playing with various toys in the playroom of the Seton mansion in *Holiday*, Mary and Johnny having fun inside the sophisticated bathroom of the Hotel Louis in *Easy Living* clearly account for the importance attached to childish fun as a sign of romantic compatibility. As Cavell (1981: 60) has put it, romance in these comedies allows the principal pair to express and fulfil their 'wish to make room for playfulness within the gravity of adulthood'.

This celebration of play, leisure and fun as essential ingredients of Western romantic ideals has also been recuperated by recent postclassical comedy, together with a self-conscious resort to fantasy, as one more strategy to erase any potential conflicts or nervousness surrounding gender relations and to restore faith in romantic love and commitment. The so-called *new romances*, the cycle of romantic comedies of the late 1980s and 1990s which Steve Neale (1992: 295) has defined as up-dated versions of 'old-fashioned' romance, very often feature some kind of playful activity, such as pretending to be a happily married couple in front of relatives, neighbours and the whole community as Bronte and Georges do in *Green Card* (1990) and Davis and Gwen in *Housesitter* (1992) or shared entertainment, mainly watching opera and old movies, as it is the case in *Moonstruck* (1987), *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *Pretty Woman* (1990), as significant steps towards the achievement of a genuine bond between the leading couple. In these narratives, and in some others such as *Sabrina* (1995) or *French Kiss* (1995), the members of the couple are gradually attracted to each other and eventually united just as one of them teaches the other how to enjoy the bright side of life, thus getting a momentary release from the responsibilities of adult life and a fresh start for a promising relationship. Although in Neale's view (1992: 292), this connection between moments of play and occasional eccentricity can be said to pervade romantic comedy as a whole, and not just the screwball

films, I would argue that nowhere else as in the cycle of zany comedies under discussion has the notion of play occupied a more central position within the romantic plot.

Fun became not only a key sign of romantic fulfilment but also an essential signifier of sexual friction between the screwball couples. Both on the screen and in real life, having fun came to be regarded in the late 1920s and the 1930s as a socially accepted outlet for physical and sensual pleasures—particularly within the sphere of courtship—, pleasures which had strictly been kept under control in the Victorian era out of fear of social disorder. Indulgence in sensual drives of any kind, especially in those of an erotic or sexual nature, was considered very dangerous for the individual and also for society as a whole. Instead, continence, austerity and restraint in every sense were recommended to both men and women because, as Seidman has put it (1991: 27), it was a basic Victorian assumption that ‘controlled by sensual urges, the individual loses self-control and social purpose’, which ‘inevitably leads to self-destruction, social chaos and decline’. This code of behaviour gradually changed as more and more emphasis was placed on personal gratification, mostly through consumption; a process of social transformation that Elaine May describes in the following terms (1983: 94),

as the nation’s concern for production began to shift toward a preoccupation with consumption, there was a parallel trend away from work toward leisure, away from sacrifice toward satisfaction, and a corresponding decline of sexual repression in favour of physical gratification.

This new emphasis on ‘leisure’, ‘satisfaction’ and ‘physical gratification’ quickly made its way into the images of romance and courtship produced by Hollywood, though it had to be kept within the established boundaries of official censorship. When it came to the visualization of the erotic component of romance, the playful, relentless action characteristic of the screwball cycle paired with witty, sparkling dialogues became a most convenient signifier of sexual tension from the late 1930s onwards since, by that time, the prescriptions on the representation of sex dictated by the Hays Office were very much in force within Hollywood industry. It did not matter whether the couple was married or not: the act and the fact of sex were thoroughly removed from the screen in the mid-thirties, which marked a turning point in the development of Hollywood romantic comedy. In Andrew Sarris’s terms (1978: 13), ‘the nice naughtiness that characterized such early thirties comedies as *Laughter and Trouble in Paradise* and *The Guardsman* and *Reunion in Vienna* and *Design for Living*’ was supplanted ‘by the subterfuges of screwballism’, which include slapstick situations, verbal fight, play and even pratfalls and cartwheels that allow the couple to liberate sexual energy without transgressing the norms of the Production Code. Curiously enough, at a time when social experts, including psychologists, educators, physicians and social scientists, were promoting the ‘sexualization of marriage’ and a more eroticized view of romance, conjugal experience and romantic entanglements could not have looked more chaste than they do in screwball comedies. In my view, these images of innocent *naïveté* regarding sex were further enhanced not only by a self-conscious displacement of explicitly erotic attitudes onto all kinds of games and playful, sportive

activities but also by the sexually 'innocuous' style of some of the most outstanding actors and actresses starring in these films. The childish aura surrounding Gary Cooper and Cary Grant, the screwball gentleman *par excellence*, at this stage of his career -in such later comedies as *Indiscreet* (1958) or *That Touch of Mink* (1962) and others, his image would no longer be that of an infantile romantic hero but one of mischievous seducer-, the virginal and androgynous quality projected by Katharine Hepburn, the discreetly provocative femininity embodied by Irene Dunne and the professional, but never sexual, aggressiveness displayed by Rosalind Russell were, no doubt, perfectly in consonance with the overall tone of narratives that had to comply with the requirements of Hollywood censors.

To conclude, intensely publicised and endorsed by the contemporary discourses on gender relations and courting practices which praised it as an open path towards happiness and romantic satisfaction, the notion of play came to be regarded in the thirties as fundamental to Hollywood representations of romance and coupledness, except for those of melodrama. Defined as an unmistakable marker of romantic and sexual compatibility as well as a key narrative force carrying with it the liberating potential characteristic of comedy, the experience of playing together and having fun together emerged as the powerful underlying energy of a self-contradictory but profoundly appealing genre, the sex comedy without sex, the screwball comedy, in which lovers hit and mock each other, chase each other, play at being married and do everything together but make love. Drawing on the new liberal definitions of romance and marriage as an enjoyable, exciting adventure, the screwball cycle provided US American men and women with images of the romantic model that 'experts', magazines, popular fiction and marriage manuals were advocating in the post-depression years, the ideal which had its origins in the years of affluence, feverish consumerism and new female freedoms prior to the 1929 Crack: the *companionate ideal*, which was said to be essentially based on the notions of a lively partnership and a gratifying complementarity between the couple. Films like *Bringing Up Baby*, *Midnight*, *Easy Living*, *It Happened One Night*, *My Favorite Wife*, *The Philadelphia Story*, *Bachelor Mother*, *Ball of Fire*, *The Awful Truth*, *Artists and Models* and *Holiday* managed to articulate in their romance and remarriage stories not only the current dominant ideas about the relations between the sexes but also the dreams of relief and the most optimistic hopes US Americans had in those decades following the Depression: recovering a long lost comfortable lifestyle and fulfilling the expectations of pleasure, fun and excitement with which they had increasingly surrounded the sphere of private life. Courtship and romance, these mad-cap comedies of the thirties and early forties seemed to be saying, had become for the first time just a funny game men and women should be willing to play, one in which the only rule you had to follow was to enjoy being a player.

### Works Cited

Babington, Bruce and Peter Evans (1989): *Affairs to Remember: The Hollywood Comedy of the Sexes*. Manchester and New York: Manchester U.P.

- Cavell, Stanley (1981): *Pursuits of Happiness the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge: Harvard U.P.
- Frye, Northrop (1990): *Anatomy of Criticism*. London: Penguin Books.
- Haskell, Molly (1987): *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lent, Tina (1995): "Commitment and Reaffirmation in Hollywood Romantic Comedy". *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. Eds. Kristine Karnick and Henry Jenkins. New York and London: Routledge, 314-331.
- May, Elaine (1983): *Great Expectations: Marriage and Divorce in Post-Victorian America*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pleck, Elizabeth. "Family History Section."
- Sarris, Andrew (1978): "The Sex Comedy Without Sex". *American Film*, March: 8-15.
- Seidman, Steven (1991): *Romantic Longings: Love in America, 1830-1980*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Wexman, Virginia (1993): *Creating the Couple: Love, Marriage and Hollywood Performance*. Princeton and Chichester: Princeton U.P.