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INTRODUCTION

Of all the genres of Hollywood film that underwent the transition from silent to sound production in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it was the comedy, along with the musical, that most obviously benefited from the arrival of the "talkies." Screen comedies of the silent era – though they had included sophisticated social comedies by directors such as Cecil B. DeMille and Ernst Lubitsch – had been dominated by the physical, slapstick, or clown comedy popularized by such actors as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Harry Langdon. The sound era brought to the fore an essentially new genre of dialogue-based romantic comedy, a genre that foregrounded both the art of spoken language and the nuances of class-based relationships.

In silent comedy, class divisions tended to be depicted in terms of crude dichotomies. The characters created by comedians like Chaplin, Mack Sennett, Mabel Normand, and the Keystone Kops represented working-class types and situations that were immediately familiar to their audiences and that would allow the filmmakers to parody conventional middle-class standards of behavior. In Chaplin's films, for example, the tramp figure stands as a universally recognizable icon of lower-class status rather than as a fully delineated social individual. The tramp was already well established as a stock figure in American popular culture, from music hall and vaudeville to pulp literature, newspapers, comic strips, and nickelodeon pictures. Chaplin's tramp, as a particularized variant of the

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familiar character type, remains a constant throughout his films, prompting some critics to question the social relevance of the tramp figure or even its basis in real life. "The tramp character," as Theodore Huff remarks, "could be of any country and of any time."[1] Chaplin's tramp is, in fact, more an "eternal clown" than a well-defined individual operating within realistic social structures.

It was not until the early sound era, when the highly specific social codes involving speech were added to more general codes governing behavior and dress, that comedies moved beyond slapstick caricatures of middle-class and upper-class society and began to reflect more nuanced social distinctions. The advent of spoken language in film permitted a much more intimate relation between cinema and the specifics of social reality, including class. While a silent filmmaker like Chaplin could explore class relationships quite effectively through such elements as plot, setting, character, costume, and physical movement, sound films could use the additional dimension of speech to register more subtle differences in social class, ethnicity, and educational or geographical background. In addition to the use of gesture and physical appearance, filmmakers could now convey social distinctions through such linguistic signs as accent, diction, vocabulary, grammar, and verbal proficiency, as well as the sound of the voice itself (rough vs. smooth, raw vs. refined). In the work of early sound comedians such as the Marx Brothers, W. C. Fields, and Mae West, the new combination of spoken text and visual image became a coherent mode of semiosis. The movies could now unify speech and image in presenting more coherent and complex characterizations. Films like the Marx Brothers' *Animal Crackers,* Mae West's *She Done Him Wrong,* and Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* – all made within the first few years of sound cinema – were in large part the products of a new social semiosis made possible by the introduction of spoken language to the filmic medium.

In this book I am concerned with the representation of social class in American film comedy from the beginning of the sound era to the present. I use the analysis of a variety of comedies from different points in the development of Hollywood film and from different subgenres within the larger genre of film comedy to explore the representation of social class and social mobility. I argue that the issue of social class was crucially important to the development of sound comedy, and I propose two reasons for this importance. The first of these is the historical fact that the

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origins of sound film coincide almost exactly with the beginnings of the Great Depression. Given this historical coincidence, it is only logical that the formative early history of sound comedy would trace the social upheaval and increased class consciousness that characterized the 1930s. The second reason for the importance of class relations in Hollywood comedy has to do with the medium of sound film itself. As an intensely *verbal* genre, comedy was the form that best exploited the possibilities of spoken language, including the potential of spoken discourse to articulate differences based on class and on related social formations such as gender, race, ethnicity, educational background, and geographical origin. With the advent of sound in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the enlargement of the semiotic possibilities available to filmmakers had important narrative, aesthetic, and ideological consequences. The presence of spoken language in film made possible the representation of the many forms of symbolic power and linguistic capital with which speech is invested. My understanding of comedy as a genre deeply concerned with both class and speech is not new. Comedy has traditionally been a mode that uses language to examine and critique existing social structures, including those governing the construction of class. What this study does provide, however, is a closer analysis of the complex reconfiguration of social relationships within a wide range of Hollywood sound comedies, and of the different ways in which the verbal dimension of these films contributes to their representation of class issues.

Finally, the book makes a larger argument about the status of film comedy within American culture as a whole. As one of the most popular genres of American film production, and one of the most widely disseminated forms of cultural representation during the past seventy years, film comedy is an intriguing instance of a popular form that provides moments of genuine social critique while also fulfilling its primary function as a source of mass entertainment. As a genre, comedy examines and critiques social structures – including those of class – and at certain points in history it has served as an important facilitator or mediator of society's attempts at self-critique. Yet at the same time, as an important component of the culture industry, film comedy responds to the need for what Richard Dyer has described as a "utopian" form of entertainment, an escapist and often ideologically conservative response to the social conditions operative at different historical moments.

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Given these dual and often conflicting tendencies within American film comedy, the representation of class also possesses an important historical dimension. The diachronic study of American comedies undertaken in this book allows us to see how Hollywood has negotiated class relations in the genre of comedy and to ask how films of different eras have addressed issues of class and their relation to other kinds of social issues. In the films of the early 1930s like those of the Marx Brothers, we find a more overt representation of class antagonisms, as Hollywood cinema played out the tensions inherent in a period characterized by profound socioeconomic disruption. By the late 1930s – with the more restrictive post–Production Code limitations on social content – class tensions are largely displaced onto gender tensions. Although class antagonisms are still apparent, the dominant forms of romantic or "screwball" comedy are more concerned with the fantasy of a cross-class romance enacted by its male and female leads. In the postwar era, comedies become even less concerned with class relations per se, but they continue to examine questions of social status and the relations between forms of sociocultural distinction and forms of gender and sexual difference. Finally, within what I will designate as the "postmodern" era of American film comedy (the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s), the treatment of social class takes a wide variety of forms, from the critique of mainstream middle-class values in the work of Woody Allen or Albert Brooks to the parodic vision of certain class fragments in the work of filmmakers such as the Coen brothers, John Waters, and Whit Stillman.

Steven Ross's highly informative study *Working-Class Hollywood* has provided a comprehensive treatment of class issues as they pertain to films of the silent era.[2] My work on class in *sound* comedy should provide at least a partial complement to Ross's book, though my approach is in important ways different from his. Unlike Ross, I am not a film historian seeking to document the impact of changing class attitudes and class relations on American film, or to explain the impact of political radicalism and labor movements on film production. Instead, I am interested in analyzing through "close viewings" of a number of Hollywood films the representations of class relationships within the genre of American film comedy. Although I have tried to contextualize these representations within the broader history of class definitions and attitudes during the period in question, my interest is less thematic and sociohistorical than

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rhetorical and aesthetic. I ask: How does class function within the particular genre of comedy in a way that is both socially provocative and aesthetically challenging?

For the purposes of this study, I define class as the system by which social divisions are created, delineated, and maintained. In a culture where class boundaries and relationships are less historically determined and less rigidly imposed than in many other societies, the definition of class becomes a highly flexible rubric providing limitless possibilities for both narrative and comic treatment. In the United States, class is interwoven in a dense social fabric with such determining factors as gender, ethnicity, race, religion, education, and geography. As Amy Schrager Lang puts it, "class, race, and gender appear not as self-sufficient categories, much less independent ones, but as vocabularies from which the language of identity is drawn."[3] In the history of American film, therefore – as in the much longer history of American literature – the representation of class cannot be isolated from other kinds of representation. Instead, class must be evaluated in a dialogue with other factors that emerge in particular films: ethnicity in the case of the Marx Brothers or Woody Allen, gender and sexuality in the screwball comedy, or race in the films of Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy.

Chapter 1 of this book examines the beginning of the sound era, contrasting the sophisticated social comedy of Ernst Lubitsch with the first five films of the Marx Brothers and arguing for a reading of early sound comedy as a highly transgressive genre. I proceed in the second and third chapters to a discussion of the emergent screwball comedy of the middle and late 1930s. I focus Chapter 2 on the evolution of the screwball genre and its more typical manifestation in films like Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey* and Mitchell Leisen's *Easy Living;* Chapter 3 is a more sustained reading of the mid-1930s comedies of Frank Capra. In the fourth chapter, I look closely at representative films by two of the most important directors of classical Hollywood film comedy in the early 1940s – Preston Sturges and Howard Hawks – in order to examine the increasingly parodic (and even self-parodic) nature of the screwball format. The fifth chapter takes up the Hollywood comedies of the 1950s – in particular films by Vincente Minnelli, Frank Tashlin, and Jerry Lewis – focusing on their attempts to negotiate a postwar American obsession with social status. Chapter 6 looks at the mode of "postmodern" comedy as

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exemplified by the films of Woody Allen. In the final chapter I turn to contemporary social satire, focusing on both mainstream Hollywood comedies and films by independent filmmakers that offer strikingly different views of postmodern American social existence.

It has often been argued that the United States is a nation with no meaningful language of class. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge and analyze the ways in which the medium of film has not only reflected but also helped to shape Americans' ideas of class, class identity, class distinction, and class conflict. Steven Ross has usefully delineated the way the movies of the silent era "taught audiences, especially newly arrived immigrants, what it meant to dress, to think, and to act like a member of a particular class," presenting "competing visions of what the working class, middle class, and upper class looked like" at a time when traditional class identities were in flux (xiii). By the late 1920s and early 1930s, when the first of the sound films I examine in this book were being made, the social function of film had changed considerably, as had the social composition of its audience. The audience for these films was largely middle-class and educated, unlike the audiences Ross describes for the early silent era. The romantic comedies of the 1930s continue to deal with class issues, but they are concerned less often with presenting overt class conflicts between highly polarized groups (i.e., wage-earners and capitalists) than with exploring the possibilities of various kinds of interaction between members of different classes.

The subject of class was a particular preoccupation of filmmakers throughout the period between the world wars: Lary May identifies seventy-five films made during the 1920s with the explicit theme of "success up [the] class ladder," and many more of these films were made during the 1930s.[4] That social mobility was a focal point of interest during these years was hardly surprising, given both the personal trajectories of many who worked within the film industry and the institutional history of the cinema itself. Virtually all of the Hollywood "moguls" running the major film studios during this period were from ethnic (Jewish) backgrounds, either immigrants themselves or second-generation immigrants. Most of them grew up in working-class families – their fathers being tailors, cobblers, waiters, and shoe salesmen – and they embody in their own personal histories the kind of upwardly mobile trajectories plotted in many of the Hollywood productions for which they were responsible.

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In fact, the importance of class issues in the films of the period, and especially the theme of class ascension, can be related to the overall drive to gentrify the film industry and its products. Both executives like Adolph Zukor and directors like D. W. Griffith had sought to move Hollywood film up the social scale from the decidedly working-class nickelodeons of the early 1900s to a form more commensurate with the ideals of cultivated audiences.[5] As of 1908, the high point of the nickelodeon, the majority of the audience had been working-class; by the late 1910s and early 1920s, according to Lary May, "the core of the new audience was made of precisely those people who would have not appeared in the neighborhood of a nickelodeon" (164). The films made by Griffith and other directors were increasingly geared toward middle-class tastes, and they were shown not in the nickelodeons but in luxurious picture palaces and socially integrated movie theaters that were in safer neighborhoods and supplied more luxurious amenities. As Ross notes, "studio moguls realized they could make big money by turning moviegoing into a 'respectable' entertainment that catered to the rapidly expanding and amorphous ranks of the middle class" (9).

For immigrant and working-class audiences, the cinema became increasingly a means of assimilation into mainstream American life. At the same time, for middle-class spectators, the social stigma attached to the movies all but disappeared during the late 1910s and early 1920s. By the late 1920s, film had become completely respectable, and its audience largely bourgeois. In an effort to promote visions of class harmony that would cater to a middle-class audience, films of the 1920s shifted attention away from the problems of the workplace and toward the pleasures of the new consumer society. These films often depicted cross-class fantasies, stories of interactions and romantic involvements between an upper-class and either working-class or middle-class protagonist that conveyed an underlying ideology of class harmony and reconciliation. These cross-class films, as Ross argues, "shifted attention away from the deadening world of production and toward the pleasures of consumption," teaching their audiences that "participation in a modern consumer society made class differences irrelevant" (195).[6]

This role of film as a promoter of social harmony was not entirely new. As Miriam Hansen suggests, film was from an early point in its development marketed as a "democratic art," a form of popular culture

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that could "submerge all class distinctions in an ostensibly homogeneous culture of consumption" (65). By the 1930s, commentators were already well aware of the power of the movies as a socializing and homogenizing influence. As early as 1939, Margaret Thorp pointed to the role of Hollywood in "furnishing the nation with a common body of knowledge": "The movies span geographic frontiers; they give the old something to talk about with the young; they crumble the barriers between people of different educations and different economic backgrounds."[7] According to social historian Richard Pells, the movies fulfilled not simply a democratizing function, but a fundamentally conservative purpose of "educating people to the accepted fashions and norms of behavior"; Hollywood films inspired not simply community but "conformity."[8] This tension between the vision of American film as a democratic and socially unifying medium and that of Hollywood as a reactionary manifestation of the American culture industry is often played out in the films themselves. In the comedies of Capra, for example, it is through the treatment of class relations among the film's characters that more general sociocultural relations both within Hollywood and within American society as a whole can be viewed and (re)interpreted. As a highly flexible cultural medium (unlike the opera or Broadway theater, for example), film was uniquely positioned to negotiate such sociocultural issues. Film was a prerecorded mass medium that could be packaged and sold to very different class constituencies with no change in the fundamental product being offered. As Thorp points out, admission charges in the late 1930s ran "all the way from $2.20, and even more, for first showings in big urban theaters to 10 cents in the farm districts and the third- and fourth-run city houses," with an average price of 25 to 35 cents (10). Seen by every part of the socioeconomic spectrum, Hollywood films were among the cultural commodities that contributed to the breakdown of class barriers and to America's view of itself as a relatively classless society.

The expanding audience for film – the most widely disseminated form of mass culture after the First World War – was in part a result of the blurring of class boundaries in American society from the turn of the century into the 1920s. This is not to say that American film neglects or deemphasizes class issues, but that it presents them in a context which may not always accurately reflect social realities as they exist at a particular historical moment. Read as a subset of Hollywood films in general, Hollywood come-

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dies are not merely reflecting in some unmediated sense the class dynamics of the era in which they are made. Instead, they represent a reciprocal relationship between audiences and filmmakers, and an even more complex configuration of relationships between those who make films (writers, directors, producers), those who finance and distribute them (the studios and their parent corporations), those who control or censor them (the Hays Office), and those who watch them (an extremely diversified audience).

A better understanding of these relationships will help us to answer the question that this book begins to address: To what extent did sound comedy of the studio era function as social critique, and to what extent did it function – in the terms of Richard Dyer – as pure "entertainment," as an escapist fantasy or a utopian alternative to the everyday situation of Depression-era Americans? In his influential essay "Entertainment and Utopia," Dyer deals with the genre of musicals and not with nonmusical comedies. Nevertheless, it would seem that much of his definition of entertainment as a utopian form of escape or wish-fulfillment and a response to "specific inadequacies of society" would apply to comedy as well, particularly during a period like the 1930s:

> Entertainment offers the image of "something better" to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide. Alternatives, hopes, wishes – these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized.[9]

That Hollywood films fulfilled some form of utopian or escapist fantasy for moviegoers was the view of many commentators of the Depression era, who pointed among other factors to the tremendous popularity of Walt Disney's extravagant and nostalgic productions, to the lavish musicals of Busby Berkeley, and to the luxurious settings of Hollywood films which allowed women viewers in particular to escape from their hum-drum lives into utopian dreams of elegant cars, streamlined penthouses, and sable coats. It is overly reductive, however, to read film comedy as an essentially utopian genre. While many comedies do involve some form of wish-fulfillment or liberation from authority or oppression, there are numerous exceptions to these tendencies, as in the more satirical films of comedians like the Marx Brothers and W. C. Fields, and more recently in the films of

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Woody Allen, John Waters, and the Coen brothers, to take only a few examples.[10] I would argue that even within many comedies that appear to offer utopian solutions, there are elements that work against such simplified resolutions of social or ideological conflicts. Although comedies by definition involve some sort of "happy ending" for the central characters, it is important to remember that even though a film's resolution may represent a movement toward the society's dominant ideology, the nature and articulation of the dramatic conflicts within the film should not and indeed cannot be ignored. Perhaps more than utopia, what the most interesting comedies provide is a means of envisioning potentially liberating forms of transgression. The kinds of social transgression permitted within the films made by Hollywood in the 1930s – whether in gangster films or screwball comedies, two of the most popular genres of the decade – were, despite the efforts of the censors, the best release valve for Americans whose average lives were increasingly limited in both economic and sociocultural terms. Because of the nature of comedy as a genre that is perceived as "lighter" and thus as less threatening to society, the kinds of transgression permitted (often in the form of satire or parody rather than in the form of explicit statement) tend to be greater than in other genres. As Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik suggest, comedy is often allowed a considerable latitude, since "subversion" and "transgression" are to at least some degree "institutionalized generic requirements" of comedy.[11] We need only think of the fact that in 1940 and 1941, during one of the tensest periods of World War II, American comedies ridiculing Hitler and the Nazis were made by both Charlie Chaplin *(The Great Dictator)* and Ernst Lubitsch *(To Be Or Not To Be)*. What these comedies offered audiences was not a utopian vision of the world, but the opportunity to laugh at a very serious and very threatening issue.

Throughout the history of sound film, American comedies have enacted transgressions against a wide range of societal, institutional, and historical forces: against systems of law and order *(Trouble in Paradise, The Lady Eve, Take the Money and Run, Serial Mom);* against a rationalistic, bureaucratic, and repressive society *(Bringing Up Baby, Holiday, You Can't Take It with You, The Bellboy, Sleeper);* against prescribed forms of feminine behavior and sexual conduct *(She Done Him Wrong, I'm No Angel, Design for Living, Desperately Seeking Susan);* against excessive forms of consumerism and commodification *(Easy Living, The Long, Long Trailer,*

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