Film and Sexual Politics
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INTRODUCTION

KYLO-PATRICK R. HART

From the birth of cinema to the present, a wide range of social actors have been concerned about the various ways that sex, gender, and sexual orientation are represented in films of all kinds. Their concerns have stemmed largely from the concept of dystopian fears associated with cinematic reception—which typically regard film images as potentially evil forces capable of producing social chaos and a range of negative social effects—as well as from complex, related processes pertaining to cinematic spectatorship and identification in its various forms. While some individuals have historically regarded such phenomena as threatening and deleterious, others have viewed them as offering utopian potentialities in the ongoing cultural struggle to achieve equal acceptance, balanced power dynamics, and positive social constructions of individuals of all kinds, no matter what their specific sex, gender, and/or sexual orientation may be.

This collection features eighteen noteworthy critical essays—all addressing power, domination, and representation in their numerous forms—that explore the evolution and social construction of sex, gender, and sexual orientation in films from the early days of cinema to the early twenty-first century. Contrary to popular perceptions of films as relatively simplistic forms of “entertainment,” these essays demonstrate clearly how the act of producing meaning through the use of cinematic verbal and visual signs is far from a simple process, but rather one with substantial social, political, and cultural consequences for the lived realities of individuals of all backgrounds and lifestyles.

The essays in Part I explore the impact of restrictive Motion Picture Production Code regulations, enacted in the early 1930s, on the contents of Hollywood films. With regard to screwball comedies, Jane Greene demonstrates that there were two distinct phases of industry self-regulation during the decade of the 1930s that substantially affected the development and contents of films of this kind, including their representations of women in relation to men. Catherine Burke examines how the Production Code restrictions dramatically transformed the lovemaking scenes in the films of Warner Baxter, one of the most popular Hollywood actors during the early years of talking pictures, by restricting the range of sexual acts and actions that could be presented on the screen. David Lugowski reveals the range of “queerness,” prohibited from explicit depiction
by the Production Code, that demanded expression and is therefore readily identifiable in Orson Welles’ classic film Citizen Kane.

The essays in Part II investigate various forms of sexual politics evident in films of the postwar 1950s, the contents of which continued to be restricted by the regulations of the Motion Picture Production Code. In my own essay exploring From Here to Eternity, I demonstrate that, even though overtly homosexual characters and homosexual storylines were prohibited from appearing on screen, the film contains a substantial subtext that reveals itself to be a gay love story between Sergeant Milton Warden (played by Burt Lancaster) and Pvt. Robert E. Lee Prewitt (played by Montgomery Clift), its two attractive, masculine leading male characters. Nate Brennan offers an in-depth analysis of The Incredible Shrinking Man, focusing on its allegorical representations of male anxiety and restrictive gender-role constructions in the postwar era. Tamar Jeffers McDonald explores how the bodies of actresses in “virginity-dilemma films” visibly indicate their virginal or non-virginal status during an era in which mainstream society, as well as mainstream films, preferred not to reveal such information in plain language. Whitney Strub applies Janet Staiger’s concept of perverse spectators to Los Angeles law-enforcement officials in the 1950s and beyond, with regard to their official responses to gay-themed films and gay social spaces and the resulting obscenity prosecutions that served as repeated attacks on the formation of stable, secure gay communities.

The essays in Part III explore controversial cinematic representations from the early twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. Heather MacGibbon focuses on influential cinematic portrayals of abortion and the individuals who sought and performed them during the first half of the last century. Melissa Ooten investigates the phenomena of censorship and rejection of sex-hygiene films by members of Virginia’s movie-censorship board during the period from 1922 to 1965, as well as the messages they communicated about socially valued and devalued individuals based on race, class, gender, and other attributes. By focusing on Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film Porcile from the late 1960s, Mattias Frey investigates complex, controversial representations of bestiality, savagery, and cannibalism in an eye-opening example of how the country of Germany functioned historically in Italian postwar cinema as a site of national transference, with Germans frequently being represented as possessing and demonstrating “deviant” forms of sexuality and social behaviors. Analyzing Jackass the Movie, Mary Pagano reveals how, rather than offering a subversive representation of masculinity, the human jackasses in the film maintain mainstream media’s traditional boundary between acceptable homosocial bonding and threatening homosexual impulses at the start of the current millennium.
The essays in Part IV offer advanced investigations into cinematic strategies, cinematic identification, and cinematic spectatorship. Focusing on the U.S. film *Female Perversions* and the Dutch film *A Question of Silence*, Cynthia Lucia demonstrates how both of these works strive intentionally to fulfill the desires of feminist female spectators in traditionally patriarchal societies. Jaime Bihlmeyer analyzes *Elizabeth* in ways that expand upon existing poststructuralist approaches to exploring gender imaging in mainstream films. Jack Beckham utilizes an audio-visual approach to more adequately decode the complexities of *The Matrix*—in relation to themes of birth, reproduction, and gender construction—than traditional approaches focusing primarily on the cinematic image allow. Sarah Sinwell explores the phenomenon of cinematic identification in relation to the groundbreaking independent film *Being John Malkovich* and its challenging postmodern privileging of mobility, fluidity, and multiplicities of identity and identification.

The essays in Part V focus on noteworthy representations of gay men on film and video. Offering an in-depth analysis of *My Own Private Idaho*, Christine Pace demonstrates how that film efficiently projects a powerful political unconscious stemming from the paradoxical social construction of gay men in U.S. society. Alina Patriche demonstrates the historically important role that heritage films, such as *Maurice* and *Wilde*, have played in restoring representations of homosexuality to history as well as to mainstream visual culture. Hollis Griffin concludes this collection with his pioneering exploration into the forms and functions of bareback pornography, which has emerged as a contentious albeit increasingly popular subgenre in the field of gay adult film and video over the past decade.
Part I
Sexual Politics and the Motion Picture Production Code
Critics and historians have long recognized a unique relationship between industry self-regulation and screwball comedy. While all genres were affected by censorship in the 1930s, screwball comedy supposedly owes its existence to changes in regulatory policy. Andrew Sarris was the first critic to advance this argument in his 1978 essay “The Sex Comedy Without Sex,” in which he links screwball comedy’s characteristic verbal and physical battling to changes in censorship that made “the act and the fact of sex” forbidden after 1934. Channeling a Hollywood screenwriter from the 1930s, Sarris writes:

Here we have all these beautiful people with nothing to do. Let us invent some substitutes for sex. The wisecracks multiply beyond measure, and when the audiences tire of verbal sublimation, the performers do cartwheels and pratfalls and make funny expressions. (13)

Hence, 1934 is crucial in the history of the romantic comedy genre. First, it marks the formation of the Production Code Administration (PCA), headed by Joseph Breen. Created by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the Hollywood industry’s trade organization, in response to growing public protest over film content, the PCA reviewed scripts and films in light of the Motion Picture Production Code, a series of guidelines based upon the presumed response of external censorship groups. PCA censors worked with producers, suggesting changes and deletions to ensure that films would not encounter any difficulties with state and local censorship agencies. Second, according to traditional histories, 1934 also marks the debut of screwball comedy with the releases of Frank Capra’s It Happened One Night and Howard Hawks’ Twentieth Century.

Most studies of screwball humor and censorship focus on the slapstick-comedy characteristic of the genre: Carole Lombard sparring with Fredric March in Nothing Sacred (1937); Katherine Hepburn and Cary Grant tumbling
down hills in pursuit of a dog and dangling from a collapsing brontosaurus skeleton in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938); Henry Fonda tripping on Barbara Stanwyck’s outstretched leg and upsetting a multitude of waiters in *The Lady Eve* (1941). As Sarris’ remarks suggest, this eccentric behavior is often explained via a lay psychoanalytic reading: the sexual energy suppressed under the watchful eye of the PCA finds its expression in an acceptable physical and verbal loonyness. By this line of reasoning, the wisecracks, pratfalls, and funny expressions of screwball comedy are both a replacement for and symbolic of sexual desire, as when Sarris compares the “subterfuges of screwballism” to the dance duets of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, arguing that they “achieved much of their seductive charm through the need for a new symbolic language of motion and gesture to circumvent repression” (13). Similarly, Ed Sikov contends that screwball violence in particular was the inevitable result of repression:

Prevented by the Production Code from expressing human sexuality, screwball characters are in an unbearable emotional bind; if they were unable to express the rage they so abundantly feel, they’d go mad…. When we see and hear screwball characters berating, hitting, insulting, and denouncing one another,…we are witnessing personal liberation in its purest and most therapeutic form, the end of repression and the beginning of a healthy life. (217)

It is true that the producers of screwball comedies could not explicitly represent a couple’s sexual union or reunion and therefore found alternative ways to demonstrate the couple’s suitability and desire. For example, in the 1937 screwball version of *The Awful Truth*, the filmmakers substituted an escalating battle of social embarrassment for the comic seduction of the 1922 play (Greene 356). However, most censorship accounts remain limited in their portrayals of the self-regulatory process, the style of screwball humor, and the impact of the former on the latter.

First, they rest on the faulty assumption that industry self-regulation did not exist or was ineffective prior to 1934. Sikov, for example, contends that if the genre could be traced to one single event, it would be “the establishment in 1934 of the now infamous Production Code” (20). William K. Everson echoes this assertion, noting that “Hollywood’s self-censoring Production Code [was] imposed at the end of 1933” (15). However, the Production Code was first implemented in 1930 and was administered by the Studio Relations Committee (SRC), a forerunner to the PCA, until 1934. While the SRC was originally thought to be largely ineffectual, recent work on self-regulation has demonstrated that this was hardly the case. Under the SRC, industry censorship may not have been as rigorous or as systematic as under the PCA, but MPPDA members were still required to submit scripts and completed films for review,
and the agency did affect the form and content of films. Hence, to understand how changes in self-regulation influenced the development of screwball comedy, one must first establish how censorship functioned prior to 1934.

Second, many screwball comedies were problematic with industry censors and outside interest groups. The remarriage variations faced special problems with the Catholic Legion of Decency, the industry’s most vocal external pressure group, during the late 1930s and early 1940s. According to Frank Walsh, over half of the Legion’s B classifications (“morally objectionable in part”) in 1940 resulted from the light treatment of marriage or divorce (169), and between 1939 and 1941, the Legion gave a C rating (“immoral”) to four films, two of which were screwball remarriage comedies: *This Thing Called Love* (1940) and *Two-Faced Woman* (1941) (163). Walsh explains:

In an attempt to circumvent the Code, producers were using unusual marriage situations, such as a trial marriage or a husband or wife, long thought dead, who returns to find the spouse remarried, to introduce suggestive scenes and dialogue. They reasoned that such screenplays would enable them to get away with situations that would be rejected if the couple were unmarried. A string of such films were released between 1939 and 1941: *He Married His Wife*, *My Favorite Wife*, and *Too Many Husbands* all squeaked by with a B rating. (165)

This demonstrates that filmmakers were not simply replacing sex with cartwheels, at least by the latter half of the 1930s. If it were this simple, it seems unlikely that the films would have encountered any difficulty with the PCA, and they certainly would not have provoked the condemnation of the Legion.

Revisionist work on industry self-regulation also indicates that the relationship between the screwball genre and censorship is more complicated than previous studies have suggested. Lea Jacobs contends that screwball comedies were a source of frustration for censors “because they were so adept at exploiting the sorts of denial mechanisms typically favored by the Production Code Administration” (113). “Denial mechanism” is a term used by Jacobs to describe methods employed by filmmakers to create ambiguity around transgressive situations, setting up one interpretation of an event, say that a couple engaged in premarital sex, while simultaneously denying it. Jacobs describes a scene from the 1936 film *Camille*, in which the heroine and her lover, Armand, arrive at a cottage in the country. Armand carries Camille over the threshold, an action that suggests they will spend the night together. However, the following scene shows Camille waking up alone in her bedroom the next morning, and in a conversation with her maid, she reveals that Armand spent the evening at a nearby inn. As Jacobs points out, because the PCA pushed for greater ambiguity via the use of denial mechanisms, “in many cases
such as that of Camille, it is difficult for the spectator to pinpoint with certainty when or how the...sexual transgressions occur” (111-113).

The PCA’s methods worked well for dramas like Camille. But the gag structures, character behaviors, and comedic situations that characterize screwball comedy were, in fact, strategies developed by filmmakers to represent risqué situations in a Code-approved manner. The negotiations between producers and the PCA reveal that censors struggled to rein in writers and directors who had essentially discovered a loophole in the Code, developing a style of humor and gag structures that simultaneously satisfied the letter of the law but defied its spirit. Moreover, there are two distinct phases of censorship following the formation of the PCA, and the style of humor characteristic of later screwball comedies was simply not possible earlier in the decade. Films such as My Favorite Wife (1940), This Thing Called Love (1940), and Love Crazy (1941) are quite distinct from mid-1930s romantic comedies in their representation of sexual desire (particularly with a marriage) and in the way they use sexuality to create gags and humorous situations. Hence, the earlier films commonly thought of as screwball comedies are better characterized as sentimental comedies, a distinct cycle of romantic comedy.

**Sophisticated Comedy**

To understand the unique characteristics of screwball humor, especially as it functions to subvert the Code, it is useful to consider romantic comedy precedents. The dominant form of romantic comedy in the 1920s and early 1930s was sophisticated comedy, sometimes referred to as “comedy of manners” in trade and popular press reviews. Sophisticated comedies have upper-class settings and, in the remarriage variants, the cause of marital discord is typically infidelity. At the very least, one or both members of the main couple are seriously tempted by or attracted to someone other than their spouse. Many sophisticated comedies were adaptations of theatrical properties, and their humor is rather suggestive, based on the open representation of adultery or the expression of modern ideas about marriage, divorce, and infidelity.

An example from the 1931 film Private Lives illustrates the style of humor typical of sophisticated romantic comedies. The source material for the film was the Noel Coward play of the same name, which centers on a divorced couple, Amanda and Elyot, who have just remarried and are embarking on honeymoons with their new spouses Victor and Sybil. As luck would have it, the couples wind up in the same hotel, where Amanda and Elyot encounter each other on a terrace that adjoins the two suites. After some initial bickering, they begin reminiscing about their marriage and are soon professing their love for one another. Vowing never to argue again, they abandon their new spouses and run
away together. In the play, the next act opens in a flat in Paris. The stage
directions indicate that a few days have elapsed since Act One. It is about ten
o’clock in the evening, and Amanda and Elyot, wearing pajamas and a dressing
gown respectively, are enjoying coffee and liqueurs. The following exchange
indicates that they haven’t left the flat since arriving in Paris:

ELYOT: I’m glad we didn’t go out tonight.
AMANDA: Or last night.
ELYOT: Or the night before. (54)

When MGM submitted the play to the SRC for review, the censors were
particularly concerned with the representation of adultery suggested by this
scene. In his initial response to the script, censor Lamar Trotti noted:

The fact that Amanda and Elyot are married and that they run off together on the
first night of their honeymoon is, in my opinion, contrary to the Code provision
governing the institution of marriage, as well as the provision respecting
adultery, which is not only justified but made extremely attractive. Yes
extremely. (4 Feb. 1931)

After several months of negotiation, the censors and studio agreed that the
problematic material could be fixed by eliminating what they referred to as “the
time element.” As Trotti described it:

If it can be played so Amanda and Elliot [sic] run off together and have their
fight and are discovered before anything actually could have happened, the
implication is much less serious. (4 June 1931)

In response to this suggestion, the producers not only accounted for most of
Amanda and Elyot’s time together, but found in this requirement a method of
creating humor—that is, making a joke out of the couple’s inability to be alone
and re-consummate their love. Immediately after Victor and Sybil discover that
their new spouses have abandoned them, there is a fade, followed by an intertitle
that reads, “Came the dawn.” The next shot, a close-up, shows Elyot in profile,
sleeping. He wakes up and smiles. The camera then pans right, in the direction
he is looking, revealing Amanda facing him, still asleep. As Elyot tries to wake
her, she moves closer to him and the camera pans left and tracks back slightly,
leaving them in a two-shot. The initial framing of the shot and the behavior of
the couple encourage the viewer to surmise that they have re-consummated their
relationship. But after a few minutes of dialogue, the camera tilts up and tracks
back to a long shot, revealing that Amanda and Elyot are not alone. Rather, they
are sleeping in the middle of an enormous bed, sharing it with at least five other people.

In his essay “Notes on the Sight Gag,” Noël Carroll classifies this type of gag as the switch image. According to Carroll:

In these cases, the image is given to the audience under one interpretation, which is subverted with the addition of subsequent information. The initial image is subsequently shown to be radically undermined. At first, it seems to mean one thing unequivocally in terms of its visual information, but then it means something entirely, and unexpectedly, other. (151)

Carroll points to an example of a switch-image gag in the 1917 Charlie Chaplin comedy *The Immigrant*. The opening shot shows Chaplin from behind, leaning over the railing of a boat, moving in such a way as to suggest that he is seasick and vomiting. A few moments later, Chaplin turns around to reveal that he has actually been struggling to land a big fish.

As noted previously, the opening moments of the Alpine bed gag in *Private Lives* invite the audience to surmise that Amanda and Elyot have slept together. Yet SRC censors did not object because the track out to a longer shot reveals that this interpretation was incorrect. Responding to the gag at the script stage, Jason Joy, head of the SRC, even referred to it as a model for covering “the time element” throughout the film:

In the first appearance of the runaway couple, you have taken care of this situation by placing Amanda and Elyot in an Alpine bed with half a dozen other persons, and this encourages us to believe that you can find a way to cover this situation throughout. (27 Aug. 1931)

Yet, in order for the gag to work, the spectator has to make the risqué assumption invited by the beginning of the shot. As Carroll points out, “Once the initial image is subverted, part of our pleasure involves noting the way in which our first identification of the image was misguided” (152). In fact, this visual joke in *Private Lives* is a small-scale illustration of the way the SRC employed its compensating moral values policy. Just as the punishment or redemption of a character at the end of a film could compensate for his or her earlier transgressions, the suggestion that Amanda and Elyot have been unfaithful in the first moments of the gag is recuperated by the assurance, at the gag’s conclusion, that they have not transgressed.

An example from the 1934 sophisticated comedy *Easy to Love* illustrates how this gag structure could be extended across an entire sequence. The lead couple, John and Carol Townsend, have been married for twenty years and have a seventeen-year-old daughter, Janet. When Carol discovers that John has been
having an affair with her best friend, she asks for a divorce. Meanwhile, Janet grows increasingly frustrated with her parents’ behavior. She and her fiancé, Paul, announce that they no longer have faith in marriage so they have decided to forgo matrimony and simply live together. The two run off with Janet’s parents in pursuit. Carol and John follow the young couple to a hotel and, after summoning a justice of the peace, force their way into the room to find Paul and Janet lying under the covers of two twin beds. Carol and John soon realize how foolishly they have been acting and agree to reconcile. Janet then reveals that she and Paul were married earlier that day, unbeknownst to her parents and the audience.

Like the Alpine bed gag in *Private Lives*, the hotel room gag in *Easy to Love* is based in the incongruity between a risqué initial interpretation and a later, innocent truth. I call these “switch-assessment gags” to reflect the fact that the humor is not simply rooted in the visual elements of a shot or scene; dialogue, plot, and our knowledge of character psychology contribute to the incongruous sequential interpretations. Reviewing this scene in the script stage, the SRC did ask the studio to eliminate some dialogue and elements of mise-en-scene that would have made the suggestion that Janet and Paul are in bed together in the hotel room more explicit—for example, eliminating “the action of clothes being thrown on the sofa” and “shots of the underclothing scattered around the room,” as well as the line, “As soon as we can get some clothes on, Mother” (Wingate 4 Nov. 1933). The producers adopted some of these changes, but the finished film still clearly invites the risqué interpretation; John and Carol and the audience are meant to think that Janet and Paul have gone to the hotel to have premarital sex.

The script for *Easy to Love* was submitted to the SRC just a few months before Joseph Breen and the PCA censors took over the task of regulating film content. The change in personnel and policy after 1934 meant that the producers of screwball comedies did not have recourse to suggestive switch-image and switch-interpretation gags and instead relied on more indirect representations of intimacy.

**Screwball Comedy**

In 1934, self-regulation did become more restrictive and systematic. The PCA monitored films more closely than the SRC, elaborating on strategies that had been used earlier in the decade. For example, Jacobs demonstrates that post-PCA, filmmakers could no longer use an ellipsis to suggest an action that could not be explicitly represented. Instead, censors began considering how an ellipsis functioned within a scene to determine what it was meant to suggest (111). In other words, if a dissolve or fade clearly indicated that a couple had engaged in sex, it was not acceptable. The PCA wanted producers to create greater
ambiguity around taboo actions. As discussed earlier, they frequently advocated
the use of denial mechanisms, which involved setting up one interpretation of an
event while simultaneously denying it. This strategy worked fairly well in
dramas, but in the later 1930s, filmmakers began exploiting this technique to
make their comedies more suggestive.

It is important to make a distinction between switch-image and switch-
assessment gags and the type of denial mechanism one finds in a film like
Camille, since there are structural similarities. In the Alpine bed gag in Private
Lives and the hotel room gag in Easy to Love, there is little or no ambiguity
because the first stage of each gag purposely misleads the viewer into making a
risqué interpretation. In contrast, the shot of Armand carrying Camille into the
country house may be interpreted as an indication that they are spending the
night together, but there is nothing that directly confirms this interpretation.

Switch-image and switch-assessment gags depend on a complete lack (or
minimum) of ambiguity to be truly effective, since they are built on the
incongruity between earlier and later interpretations. And purposely misleading
the audience to believe that a character has committed a transgression would
have been quite difficult under the PCA, especially if this were done for
comedic effect. This is not to say that screwball comedies never employ switch-
image or switch-assessment gags but, given censorship restrictions, these are
typically not suggestive. The sexually oriented switch gags that do appear do not
mislead the audience as explicitly as those in sophisticated comedies and, I
would argue, are not as funny.

To illustrate this, consider the only switch interpretation gag in the 1937
screwball comedy The Awful Truth. Jerry Warriner, who is separated from his
wife Lucy, overhears her on the phone with her music teacher, Armand Lavalle.
Lucy confirms a meeting with Armand for the following afternoon but then tells
Jerry she was speaking with her masseuse. This lie and the mysterious nature of
Lucy’s appointment create doubt for both the spectator and Jerry, suggesting
that she is carrying on an affair. These suspicions prove unfounded in the
following scene, when Jerry goes to Armand’s apartment expecting to catch
Lucy and her voice teacher “in the clinch” and instead finds them in the middle
of a recital, surrounded by an admiring audience. The restricted narration in the
earlier scene creates some curiosity about Lucy’s appointment, but it does not
trick the audience into believing that she is having an affair, particularly since
the film never definitely establishes that she has been unfaithful. Thus, when
Jerry finds her engaged in an innocent activity, there is a moment of comic
surprise, but the degree of incongruity is not that great. In contrast, the Alpine
bed gag in Private Lives does trick the spectator into believing that Amanda and
Elyot have committed adultery by using close framing and character behavior;
in other words, the most logical interpretation of the beginning of the shot is that they have slept together, not that they are in a large bed with a group of people.

Most of the humor in the recital scene in *The Awful Truth* is the result of Jerry’s screwy or slapstick behavior, which might be understood as a supplement to the less incongruous switch-assessment gag. When Jerry arrives at the door of Armand’s apartment, a butler tries to prevent him from entering. Jerry forces his way in and the butler trips him, exclaiming, “Me ju jitsu!” Rising from the floor, Jerry pretends to shake hands with the butler only to flip him onto the floor, stating, “Me ju jitsu, too.” Jerry then bursts into the main room of the apartment to find Lucy and Armand in the middle of a song. Embarrassed, he takes off his hat and moves to a chair in the back of the room. After sitting properly for a moment, he leans back in the chair and then falls over, taking a small end table with him. Trying to recover his dignity and straighten out the situation proves impossible when his arm gets caught in the chair and his leg gets caught in the table. The filmmakers may have added this series of slapstick antics to build up the scene’s comedy, recognizing that the switch-assessment gag alone was not funny enough to sustain the scene. Much of the humor in the scene arises from the incongruity between Jerry’s ridiculous behavior and the quiet civility of the gathering he has interrupted, but this incongruity is quite different from the suggestive switch-assessment gags typical of sophisticated comedy.

Many screwball gags are best understood in comparison to another sight gag discussed by Noël Carroll: “the mutual interference or interpenetration of two (or more) series of events (or scenarios)” (148). In this type of gag, a scene is “staged in such a way that an event, under one description, can be seen as two or more distinct, and perhaps in some sense mutually exclusive, series of events that interpenetrate each other” (148). Carroll’s description of a scene from Alfred Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps* (1935) offers an effective example:

The character played by Robert Donat has been manacled to a woman who positively hates him. They come to an inn, where the landlady takes them to be intensely affectionate newlyweds. Their closeness is in fact mandated by the handcuffs, and when Donat pulls his prisoner toward him, this in order to get more control over her. The landlady misinterprets these gestures as further signs of the “lovers’” infatuation, although we hear them exchanging hostilities. The scene is shot and blocked in such a way that we not only know how things actually stand between the “lovers,” but also simultaneously see how someone in the landlady’s position could systematically misinterpret the situation. Our amusement is generated by the fact that the scene is staged to show not only what is actually going on but how that set of events could also visually support an alternative, and in this case, conflicting interpretation. (146-147)
The mutual-interference gag is, in its structure, a mechanism of denial. In fact, it goes even further than the denial mechanism in *Camille* because it ensures that the audience knows the innocent “truth.” For example, the 1939 screwball comedy *Bachelor Mother* is based on an extended mutual-interference gag: a shop girl named Polly finds a baby on a doorstep and, due to a series misunderstandings, is forced to keep the baby in order to keep her job. All of the characters in the film believe that the baby is Polly’s and, moreover, most of them believe that the child is illegitimate. In one scene, Polly takes the baby out for a walk in the park with David Merlin. David is the son of John “J. B.” Merlin, who owns the department store where Polly works. J. B. has come to believe that David is the father of the child. He follows his son to the park to confirm his suspicions and approaches the couple, who are unaware that he believes the baby is his grandchild. Wiping tears from his eyes, he proclaims, “I’d know that chin anywhere.” He then asks the baby’s name, and when Polly informs him that it is John, J. B. tells his son, “Well, thanks for that anyway.”

There are three distinct points of view in the *Bachelor Mother* scene: (1) J. B.’s, who believes the child is his grandson; (2) Polly and David’s, who are confused by the old man’s behavior; and (3) the truth, known only to the audience, which is that J. B. has been misinformed, and the child is not even Polly’s, let alone David’s. All of the events in the gag interpenetrate, or have overlapping elements that make each interpretation possible. As Carroll explains:

> The relevant conflict of interpretations emerges from the disjunction of the character’s point of view—which is a function of the situation being laid out in such a way that the spectator can see why the character fails to see it properly—and the way the situation is. (150)

With a switch-image gag, humor is created by the incongruity between the spectator’s initial interpretation and a later (more accurate) understanding of the event made possible by the revelation of additional information. In contrast, with mutual-interference gags, two (or more) interpretations are simultaneously available and the incongruity between the points of view creates humor.

Lea Jacobs points to *Bachelor Mother* as an example of the way screwball comedies employed mechanisms of denial “to introduce notions of sexual deviance which would otherwise have been taboo” (113). She explains:

> Many of the jokes are predicated upon the disparity between the heroine’s (and spectator’s) knowledge and that of the other characters.... The story thus develops “as if” the heroine had had an illegitimate baby, although the film assures us that she “really” did not. (113-114)
The very structure of the mutual-interference gag, with its complicated hierarchy of knowledge, allowed the filmmakers to deny Polly’s transgressions (the audience knows that she is not the child’s mother) while at the same time playing upon illegitimacy for comedic effect, as when Mr. Merlin insists the child has his chin or grudgingly thanks his son for naming the boy after him.

It is important to note that, in order to get the joke (or to even understand the film), the audience must understand that the characters believe Polly has had an illegitimate child. The PCA censors were not unaware of this, and they monitored dialogue, actions, and performance to ensure that the characters’ misinterpretations about the baby’s illegitimacy or paternity were not made too explicit. The ending of the film was particularly problematic in this regard. In the original script, David Merlin proposes to Polly, and she asks him if he still thinks she is the baby’s mother. When he says he does, she responds, “And have I got a surprise for you!” (Breen 3 Mar. 1939). The PCA objected to this line in several memos to the studio, and when it remained in the completed film, Joseph Breen wrote to producer J. R. McDonough:

I regret to be compelled to advise you that the “tag line” of the picture appears, in our judgment, to be unacceptable and, unless you delete this, it will be necessary for us to withhold approval of the film. (Breen 13 May 1939)

Ultimately, RKO replaced the line, and in the film as released, the closing exchange appears as follows:

DAVID: I’ve got a surprise for you. We’re going to be married tonight.
POLLY: And you still think I’m the mother of that baby?
DAVID: Of course.
POLLY: Ha, ha!

Polly’s original closing line (“And have I got a surprise for you!”) too explicitly acknowledged David’s belief that Polly has had sex, suggesting that he will be surprised to discover that she is a virgin. In the revised scene, Polly’s “Ha, ha!” could be taken as a reference to the more innocent but still incorrect assumption that she is the baby’s mother. The change does not completely rule out or deny the sexual interpretation but simply makes it more indirect. And significantly, the PCA censors left the structure of the mutual-interference gags intact, demonstrating that they functioned successfully as denial mechanisms.

Screwball behavior itself could function as a mechanism of denial when used in a double-meaning gag. Like mutual-interference gags, double-meaning gags make multiple interpretations simultaneously available to the viewer. However, they are not built upon the incongruity between the audience’s knowledge and the misinterpretations of characters. Rather, they are similar to a
double-entendre in that they offer two interpretations of characters’ actions, one innocent and one risqué. Hence, aside from just substituting for sex, screwball behavior could act as kind of camouflage; a scene could offer a sexually suggestive way to understand characters’ behavior while simultaneously providing a second, innocent interpretation—namely, the characters are behaving this way because they are screwy.

Take, for example, the double-meaning gag in the opening scene of the 1941 screwball comedy *Love Crazy*. Steve Ireland arrives home on the evening of his fourth anniversary, clearly happy and excited. In the back of the cab, he sings along to a new portable phonograph record he has purchased as a gift for his wife, Susan: “It’s delightful to be married. There’s nothing quite so jolly as a happy married life.” On the way up to his apartment, the elevator gets stuck and Steve tells the operator, “We can’t be stuck. I’ve got the most important date of the year tonight.” He then encourages the elevator: “Oh, come on elevator, nice old elevator. Get me upstairs and I’ll put you out to pasture in a beautiful green meadow.” Entering his apartment, Steve greets the maid, reminding her, “Tonight’s the night.” The maid informs him that Susan has been primping since breakfast. Steve sets up the phonograph and hides behind a curtain as Susan enters the room. She finds him and they dance into the bedroom so Susan can finish preparing for their evening together. Susan then tells Steve to ask their maid for her walking shoes and heavy gloves, noting that she will need them for the four-mile walk and the rowing. The ensuing exchange reveals their plans for the evening, as well as the fact that Steve has a different idea.

STEVE: Do you think we want to go through with all that rigmarole tonight?
SUSAN: Rigmarole?! … Oh darling, we swore that every year we’d do exactly what we did when we were married…. I love that walk to the justice of the peace.
STEVE: Four miles.
SUSAN: But he always gives us sherry when we get there.
STEVE: One finger.
SUSAN: Then I row you up the river.
STEVE: That takes an hour.
SUSAN: And you read our future in the stars. That’s the part I like best….
STEVE: Say, look, I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we do everything we did last year, and the year before, and the year before that, only, uh, in reverse.
SUSAN: In reverse? … But that would mean we would have to take our four-mile walk at midnight and backwards at that.
STEVE: Yes….
SUSAN: Oh yes…. Well, then I don’t see why we shouldn’t do just as you say.

Steve then instructs the maid to serve them dinner at the regular time, but backwards. He returns to the bedroom, yawning and noting that it is one
o’clock. “What was the first thing I did?” he muses, trying to recall the exact order of events on their wedding night. Just as Steve turns out the light, however, the doorbell rings. “Whoever it is,” he vows to Susan, “they shall not pass.” However, when he answers the door he finds his mother-in-law, who invites herself for dinner.

A viewer could find humor in this scene simply for its representation of a happily married, slightly eccentric couple about to celebrate their anniversary. There is also a comic incongruity between this apparently elegant couple on this supposedly romantic evening and Susan’s sudden request for walking shoes and heavy rowing gloves. Steve in particular is the source of much of the comedy: singing in the cab, pleading to the elevator, and hiding behind the curtain to surprise Susan. Moreover, his idea to perform the ritual backwards has an innocent explanation, indicated by his responses to Susan’s recitation of the ritual (“Four miles,” “One finger,” “That takes an hour”). It makes sense that, after four years, he would like to avoid the four-mile walk, long boat ride, and delayed supper.

On another level, the scene is about a husband rushing home and trying to get into bed with his wife as quickly as possible. This level of interpretation really comes into play after Steve suggests reversing the order of the evening, when Susan’s response (an emphasis and drawing out of the line, “Oh yes”) indicates that she understands Steve’s underlying motives. I would not deny that the risqué meaning is fairly obvious. Moreover, once a viewer takes that leap, Steve’s earlier actions (singing in the cab, pleading with the elevator) can be reinterpreted and enjoyed for a very different reason than may have initially been the case. However, if the viewer has no inkling of the risqué meaning, the scene still makes sense and is still funny.

This was crucial; the PCA did recognize the suggestiveness of the opening scene of *Love Crazy* and asked the filmmakers to eliminate or change details of performance and dialogue that encouraged a risqué interpretation. For example, censors pointed to dialogue that referred to the wedding night and Steve’s desire to perform “the marital act.” In some cases, they requested subtle changes, as when they asked producers to change Susan’s line, “We swore that every year we’d do exactly what we did on our wedding night” to “we’d do exactly what we did when we got married” (Breen 24 Jan. 1941). Censors also examined script directions, identifying problematic facial expressions described after Susan’s mother arrives: “The business of [Steve and Susan] exchanging a hopeless look is questionable as an indication of their desire to cohabit and, as such, must be omitted” (Breen 21 Jan. 1941).

The best evidence that both filmmakers and censors were aware of the way the double-meaning gag functioned can be found in Steve’s request to perform the ritual backwards. As discussed above, there is an innocent and not-so-
innocent interpretation of this suggestion, but originally the filmmakers attempted to slip a third, even more risqué meaning into the exchange. In the original script, Susan agrees to Steve’s request to perform the ritual backwards with the following line, “Well, then, I don’t see why we shouldn’t do everything backwards…just the way you say” (Breen 21 Jan. 1941). The PCA memo places emphasis on the word “everything” by underlining it, although it’s not clear if it was emphasized in the script. In this instance, censors did not object to the suggestion of sex, as they did with other dialogue in the scene, but to the “intimation of sex perversion” (Breen 21 Jan. 1941). Similarly, in a memo to Will Hays, president of the MPPDA, Breen noted that the original script for Love Crazy contained “offensive sex suggestiveness and perversion” (24 Jan. 1941). The phrase “sex perversion,” which is not used in reference to any other scenes in the film, suggests that censors interpreted Susan’s agreement to do “everything” backwards as a reference to coitus a tergo. While that interpretation could still be made with the reply in the finished film (“Well, then, I don’t see why we shouldn’t do just as you say”), the elimination of select words in Susan’s reply makes it a more difficult leap to make.

The fact that Susan and Steve are married is significant. The degree of sexual innuendo that remains in the film would not have been acceptable in a scene involving an unmarried couple, no matter how well disguised by screwball antics. Producers appear to have recognized the benefits of the remarriage plot, as the number of screwball comedies featuring a married, separated, or divorced couple rose significantly, from a few films per year between 1935 and 1937, to six films in 1938, to nine films in both 1940 and 1941. A shift in censorship policy also contributed to the rise of remarriage comedies and the PCA’s acceptance of the double-meaning gag as a mechanism of denial. An examination of the few remarriage comedies produced in the years immediately following the formation of the PCA indicates that producers did not have recourse to the same gag structures that characterize later screwball comedies and, for that reason, these films may be more effectively thought of as a distinct subgenre.

**Sentimental Comedies**

Only two remarriage comedies regularly appear on screwball filmographies prior to 1937: She Married Her Boss (1935) and The Bride Walks Out (1936). Yet these films, along with many other so-called screwball comedies released between 1934 and 1937, are actually better understood as sentimental comedies, a subgenre of romantic comedy distinct from screwball in its frequently dramatic and moralizing tone and indirect representation of sexuality.
I have borrowed the term “sentimental comedy” from theater, where it refers to a movement that began at the turn of the eighteenth century, a reaction against the lewd wit and amoral tone of such comedies of manners as William Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1674-1675) and William Congreve’s *The Way of the World* (1700). The comparison brings to light many salient features of mid-1930s romantic comedies, particularly with regard to changes in self-regulation. Just as theatrical sentimental comedies such as Colley Cibber’s *Love’s Last Shift* (1696) and William Whitehead’s *The School for Lovers* (1762) sprang in part from a desire to reform the stage, Hollywood sentimental comedies of the mid-1930s reflect an attempt to reform the movies, a rejection of the risqué humor and situations characteristic of pre-PCA sophisticated comedy. As Kenneth Muir notes in *The Comedy of Manners*, “The sentimentalists believed their plays would have a beneficial effect on the morals of audiences, who duly approved—even if they were not improved” (154). Similarly, Hollywood censors hoped, if not to improve the moral standards of spectators, at the very least to avoid corrupting impressionable viewers, as was made clear in the Production Code, which states, “No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it” (Maltby 53).

To that end, sentimental comedy characters are virtuous and moral, and although plots may deal with domestic tribulations, they typically avoid any real threat of adultery or demonstrate the sincere repentance of the guilty party. In fact, as James E. Cox notes in *The Rise of Sentimental Comedy*, a defining feature of the theatrical genre is its “zealous defense of marriage” (5-6). Cox also provides a succinct description of the sentimental approach to comedy in contrast to other forms, noting:

Sentimental comedy is that species of comedy in which man is made to act as the author thinks he should act, to the end that virtue may be commended; as opposed to the orthodox notion of comedy in which man acts foolishly, even viciously (as in real life) to the end that folly and vice may be discredited through ridicule. (2-3)

Hollywood sentimental comedies were produced throughout the 1930s and 1940s, but following the formation of the PCA, a large proportion of them focused on the tribulations of a newly married couple such that, by 1938, *Variety* identified *Thanks for the Memory* as “another in the newlywed cycle” (9 Nov. 1938). The review does not name other films in the cycle, but I would include *Maybe It’s Love* (1935), *The Moon’s Our Home* (1936), *Small Town Girl* (1936), *Three Married Men* (1936), *A Bride for Henry* (1937), *As Good as Married* (1937), *Live, Love and Learn* (1937), *Wife, Doctor and Nurse* (1937), *The First Hundred Years* (1938) and *Men Are Such Fools* (1938). This group of films actually represents a nascent attempt to circumvent the Code with recourse
to the remarriage plot, exploiting the couple’s marital status to present sexually suggestive material.

*The Bride Walks Out* (1936) illustrates the basic conventions of the sentimental comedy plot. Michael Martin, a struggling young engineer, wants to marry his girlfriend, Carolyn, a beautiful and somewhat spoiled model. Although she loves Michael, Carolyn resists his proposals, saying she does not want to get by on Michael’s $35 a week when her job as a model would contribute $50 a week to the household income. But Michael refuses to let his wife work. Eventually, Carolyn gives in and the couple is married in a rushed civil ceremony. During the first few months of marriage, Carolyn gives Michael the impression that she is handling the household finances, but their bills are actually past due because she cannot resist buying expensive clothes. Eventually, she returns to modeling and, when Michael finds out, he tries to leave her. But Carolyn beats him to the punch, storming out of their apartment with the words, “Goodbye Mr. Martin, and give my love to your budget!” After their separation, Carolyn begins dating a wealthy playboy, and Michael takes a dangerous but lucrative assignment in South America. When Carolyn finds out, she rushes to stop him. The two are reunited and the film ends with Carolyn promising to quit her job to manage the “home office.”

The defining characteristic of sentimental comedies that separates them from screwball comedies is the emphasis on serious, everyday concerns of married life and, arising from this, the dramatic tone of the breakup. Finances and careers are almost constantly referred to in *The Bride Walks Out*, even during the film’s comedic moments. The couple’s financial difficulties are not treated lightly during the breakup scene, when Carolyn rushes out of the apartment in tears. Sentimental comedies also present a conservative moral or lesson. The most radical notion in *The Bride Walks Out*—Carolyn’s insistence that women should be allowed to work outside the home—is ultimately discarded, as she simply renounces her ideals and resolves to be a traditional, supportive, stay-at-home wife. A similarly conservative agenda can be found in *She Married Her Boss* (1935). The heroine, Julia Barclay, is a respected, successful working woman who desires nothing more than to marry and have a family. Granted, she is in love with her boss, Richard, and wants to marry him in particular. However, Julia’s desire to be a traditional wife and mother is also marked as a rejection of the modern career woman’s lifestyle. This is most apparent when Julia’s female assistant reveals that she has been her “ideal,” noting, “There’s nothing in the world I’d rather be than someone like you. You see, my career means everything to me.” Julia asks if she has a boyfriend, and the assistant admits she does but hastens to add, “My career comes first and he understands that.” Carolyn then insists that the woman leave the office immediately, explaining: