

Film Genre (CAMF5005)

Any Old Irony: an analysis of British and American film and television comedy

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In *Bringing up Baby*, the 1938 screwball comedy directed by Howard Hawks, produced by RKO, and starring Cary Grant as David Huxley and Katherine Hepburn as Susan Vance, the palaeontologist Huxley says to the 'screwy' heroine Vance 'Our relationship has been a series of misadventures from beginning to end'.

This remark, besides being something of an understatement, also functions as a summary of the narrative conventions of the comedy genre as a whole. Huxley, who works at the Stuyvesant Museum of Natural History with his colleague and fiancée, the equally bookish and sober-sided Alice Swallow (Virginia Walker), is due to get married the day after the narrative begins. We first see him atop a scaffold next to the skeleton of a brontosaurus which he has been busy assembling, puzzling over where to place a dinosaur bone which he is holding in his hand. He muses 'I think this one belongs in the tail', whereupon Alice remarks 'Nonsense, you tried it in the tail yesterday and it didn't fit'. The puzzle of the missing dinosaur bone is an obvious metaphor for the fun that is absent from Huxley's life, an existential problem which Alice cannot help him address.

The museum is hopeful of a million dollar donation from a wealthy benefactor, Elizabeth Random (May Robson). In pursuance of this, Huxley goes to play golf with Mrs Random's lawyer Alexander Peabody (George Irving). Here he meets Susan, who is playing the ball which Huxley has hooked off the fairway, so badly, it transpires, that Susan has mistaken it for hers. The hooked golf shot thus marks the first of the 'series of misadventures' which see Huxley deviate further and further from the norms of his everyday existence whilst growing closer to Susan and further apart from Alice. These misadventures escalate, becoming more and more involved and potentially damaging to the reputation of the palaeontologist and his relationship with Alice. However, as Susan turns out to be Mrs Random's niece, and as she is, in any case, much more fun than the rather dour and conservative Alice, paradoxically, this does Huxley no harm at all. Huxley gets jilted by Alice, but ends up with everything he desires, either openly or secretly.

In the final scene, Susan tells him that her aunt is going ahead with the donation. She also returns the missing dinosaur bone, the intercostal clavicle which completes the brontosaurus skeleton, and which Susan's dog, George, had stolen during one of the misadventures. This prompts Huxley to declare his love for Susan, shortly before she brings the skeleton crashing to the ground, another obvious metaphor representing the way in which the stuffy academic has been brought back down to earth by the eccentric but physically active and fun-loving screwball heroine.

Bringing up Baby belongs to the screwball comedy sub-genre which flourished during the Depression era of the 1930s. The characterisation and misadventures of the narrative, which nonetheless lead to a happy ending, exemplify the principles of the sub-genre, as well as some of the key elements of the comedy genre as a whole. Taking the sub-genre first, this is defined by Richard Gollins:

The screwball comedies of the 1930s paired a conventionally repressed person with an unconventional opposite, apparently flea-brained but in fact instinctually shrewd, who altogether overturns various plans, and thereby makes possible a future together, laced with impulsive vitality, sportive fun¹

Huxley, a palaeontologist, is shown as stuffy, repressed, and preoccupied with the minutiae of life. This is demonstrated in the opening scene, where he is shown clutching a dinosaur bone, unable to solve the perplexing problem of the brontosaurus skeleton. There are, of course, more pressing problems in life. At the time the film was made, the American, and consequently the world, economy was experiencing an unprecedented crisis, a real-life fact which makes the scientist's dilemma all the more absurd. Huxley thus becomes a prime target for satire. Having no formal structure, satire is, rather, a mode which draws upon, scrutinises, and 'sends up' social issues and concerns, such as the seeming irrelevance of academic pursuits in the midst of mass poverty and unemployment. Parody, its close relative, operates in much the same way, but in relation to the arts rather than society.

In addition to this, as a 'conventionally repressed person', Huxley has other issues of which, at the start of the narrative, he is unaware, chief amongst these being his impending marriage to Alice. Although his conservative co-worker seems well-suited as a partner, she

¹ Gollins, R., *A Viewer's Guide to Film: Arts, Artifices, and Issues* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1992), p.127

cannot, as a repressed person herself, aid Huxley in his quest for self-realisation. As Tamar Jeffers McDonald observes of the Romantic Comedy genre, in which screwball takes part:

A Romantic Comedy is a film which has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion²

It should appear fairly obvious to the audience that Alice, with her conservative, sombre wardrobe, short dark hair, and clipped, precise diction, is, like David, overly serious, made all the more unforgivable due to her being a woman. She is similarly preoccupied with the insignificant details of academic life occurring within the sterile confines of the Stuyvesant Natural History Museum. She informs Huxley that after their wedding, instead of going on honeymoon, they will be returning to the Museum, the implicit joke being that their life together will be devoid of any pleasure, sexual or otherwise, and thus hardly the 'successful conclusion' of the 'quest for love' referred to by McDonald.

Regarding the broader topic of the representation of female characters in Hollywood, Alice is a administrator rather than a scientist in her own right, as demonstrated by her being unable to help her fiancé with the perplexing issue of where to place his rogue dinosaur bone, as well as her insistence that he adhere to his schedule and play golf with Peabody. Huxley is thus brow-beaten by the overbearing and serious-minded administrator, who is simultaneously an underling and a domineering shrew – an extraordinary feat made possible by the stereotypes and generic conventions of Hollywood cinema. As the final 'reveal' is to emphasise, only Susan will be able to help Huxley complete his 'puzzle'. As noted, this is due to her being fun-loving, sexy, and unconventional, that is, by being 'apparently flea-brained but in fact instinctually shrewd', which enables her to overturn Huxley's plans and to make possible a happy future for them both.

The 'bone' theme which runs throughout the film can be interpreted in a number of ways. As noted, it can be viewed in terms of Huxley's inability, hitherto, to piece together the missing parts of his existence, most importantly where the Romantic Comedy (or 'Rom Com') is concerned, to find a suitable partner. The remedy for all of Huxley's apparent ills, that is, a joyless relationship with a staid and repressed woman, and an unhealthy preoccupation with intellectual pursuits, is a future with Susan. The life of the mind, as

² McDonald, T.J., *Romantic Comedy: Boy Meets Girl Meets Genre*, (London Wallflower, 2007), p.9

represented by the Huxley-Alice relationship, is thereby shown to be boring and inconsequential when counterpointed with the excitement and anarchic fun Huxley experiences with Susan, a life of the body and soul, of surprise and excitement, in which the academic equates with the trivial.

The 'bone' also provides a prime example of the kind of innuendo which enabled Hollywood scriptwriters to circumvent the Production Code. Simply put, the bone is a veiled reference to Huxley's penis. Interpreted in this way, it is sex, as well as romance and adventure, which is missing from Huxley's life. It is interesting to reflect upon the way in which comedy is able to tackle sexual themes with relative impunity when compared with other genres. This is seen to be especially so when one realises that 'tail' is also a slang reference for 'backside' or 'rear', and that Alice's reference to the 'bone in the tail' can thus be interpreted as an extremely daring use of innuendo relating to anal sex.

It is interesting to note how the screwball heroine compares and contrasts with the 'femme fatale' of film noir. As noted, Susan throws Huxley's life into turmoil. She does this by being physically active, or 'sporty', and by embodying a certain spontaneity and *joie de vivre*, moreover, an independence of spirit, lacking in her love rival and binary opposite, Alice. She is thus somewhat akin to the 'femme fatale', in film noir, who also throws the male hero's life into disarray. There is a sense in which spontaneous, vital, eccentric and instinctually shrewd screwball characters such as Susan embody the female 'id', whereas repressed characters such as Huxley can be associated with the male 'ego'. This is also seen to be true of the 'femme fatale' and her hapless 'male victim'. For instance, one might interpret the relationship between Phyllis and Walter in *Double Indemnity* as a confrontation between id and ego, with Phyllis manipulating Walter by playing upon his primal urges and instinctive desires, thereby imbuing herself with phallic power. The essential difference between the two genres is, of course, that the screwball heroine brings love and self-fulfilment to the male hero, whilst the femme fatale destroys him.

Thus both genres rely upon stereotypical representations of male and female characters. Continuing the Freudian reading supplied by McDonald, the stereotypical female in film noir is associated with 'Thanatos', or the 'death drive', and the screwball heroine with 'Eros', or the tendency towards, sex, reproduction, and survival. In addition, the 'femme fatale'

stereotype tends to occur in a binary pairing with the staid and conservative 'girl next door'. This corresponds with the screwball heroine stereotype paired with a repressed woman incapable of enabling the male hero to become reunited with his instinctual desires, and to find love and fulfilment. Whereas the generic modalities differ, the underlying techniques of the Hollywood genre system do not.

There is a distinction between the 'comic' per se, as it exists within and without Hollywood, that is, to comic instances occurring in life, and those occurring in the arts. Neale and Krutnik define the difference between the comic instance, that is, an event or a remark which generates laughter and which exists independently of an aesthetic context, and comedy.³ Comedy, which may or may not involve the generation of laughter, presupposes an aesthetic context. There are many such contexts, with forms of comedy being wide and various, including plays, novels, animated films, 'stand-up' routines, and sketch shows, and spanning various media, including film, television, and online formats.

These structural forms can be divided into the two broad categories of narrative and non-narrative comedy. *Bringing up Baby* is an example of narrative comedy, whilst the BBC series *The Fast Show* (1994-2000) falls into the non-narrative, sketch show category. Whereas *Bringing up Baby* can be referred to as 'a comedy', that is, as a self-contained, standalone form of comedy, complete with plot and story, *The Fast Show* is simply 'comedy', reliant upon comic instances, such as gags, jokes, and comic characters, but devoid of an overarching narrative.

Comedy, whether narrative or non-narrative, can be seen to involve a deliberate inversion of both social and aesthetic norms. As Neale and Krutnik observe:

All instances of the comic involve a departure from the norm, whether the norm be one of action, appropriate behaviour, conventional dress, or stereotypical features.⁴

This is the case, both in *Bringing up Baby*, and the 1958 comedy *Some Like it Hot*, directed by Billy Wilder, produced by MGM, and starring Jack Lemmon (Jerry), Tony Curtis (Joe) and Sugar Kane (Marilyn Monroe). In the Wilder and Hawks comedies, the male leads, Cary

³ Neale S., and Krutnik, F., *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.16-17

⁴ Ibid., p.67

Grant, Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis, are all seen to behave and dress unconventionally. Grant appears in a negligee as well as a variety of other unbecoming costumes, such as his work apron, which highlight the feminisation of his character. This is carried to extremes in *Some Like it Hot*, where the two male leads are disguised as women for much of the film, with Curtis, a lowly saxophone player, also masquerading as Junior, a bogus millionaire playboy and heir to the Shell Oil fortune. However, Neale and Krutnik also note that there is requirement for instances of comic unconventionality, or abnormality, to be offset with the conventional, or normal:

The unlike must be tempered by the like ... There must in other words be a degree of normality in the abnormal, a degree of the appropriate in the inappropriate, a degree of the logical in the illogical ... Comedy that relies on the grotesque ... risks verging either on the monstrous ... or the silly⁵

It is perhaps for this reason – the need to prevent the subversive aspect of comedy from lapsing into the ‘monstrous’ or ‘silly’, that is, ‘something so ludicrous or ridiculous that it isn’t even funny’ – that in *Some Like it Hot* and *Bringing up Baby* a careful balance is maintained between the abnormal and the normal. For instance, the narrative and character arcs of both films involve feminised but nonetheless exceptionally handsome male actors, Grant and Curtis, in pursuit of equally attractive female leads, Hepburn and Monroe.

There is no mistaking either actor for anything other than a red-blooded, heterosexual male, despite the fact that both appear disguised as women, due to their physical stature, good looks, and the sexualised female who is the object of their conscious (in Huxley’s case, unconscious and repressed) desire. However, with regard to the ‘topsy-turvy’ world of Wilder’s comedy vis-à-vis gender roles, the same does not apply to the Jack Lemmon character, Jerry, who, disguised as Daphne, is wooed by Osgood Fielding III (Joe E. Brown), and who appears to succumb to the ‘real’ millionaire playboy’s charms.

The Junior-Sugar and Osgood-Daphne pairings provide an interesting counterpoint, by means of which the careful balance between normality and abnormality is maintained. The scenes involving Junior and Sugar may be a charade, but of the various parties involved, that is, the audience, Junior, and Sugar, only the latter is unaware of this. The comedy derives, in part, from the fact that the audience knows more than Sugar and is therefore ‘in on the

⁵ Ibid., p.67

joke'. Given that Sugar, a working class female and 'dumb blonde', is being outwitted and seduced by a 'street smart' working class white male, and that furthermore, both characters are played by physically attractive actors, this scene reinforces hegemonic values through the deployment of recognisable male and female stereotypes.

So much, then, for the 'normality' which pervades the text. However, this is effectively subverted by the Osgood-Daphne pairing. Despite the audience being 'in on the joke', that is, being aware that Daphne is in fact Jerry, with Osgood as the unwitting party, Jerry's immersion in his role as Daphne and his acceptance of Osgood's marriage proposal results in a confusion of gender roles on a more profound level than that otherwise entailed by two men masquerading as women. This confusion is heightened by the fact that Osgood is played by an older and physically diminutive comic actor, Joe E. Brown, whilst Jack Lemmon lacks Curtis's stature, good looks, and conventional masculinity.

Whereas the Junior-Sugar scenes tread fairly safe, hegemonic ground, those involving Osgood and Daphne provide an instance of the carnivalesque, whereby gender roles are confused and traditional masculine attributes are destabilised. There is, hence, an uneasy tension as well as a balance between normality and abnormality within the text. This is maintained until the final scene of the film when Daphne confesses to Osgood that s/he is in fact Jerry. *Some Like it Hot* therefore demonstrates that while comedy relies upon the inversion and transgression of social and aesthetic norms, it is not necessarily dependent upon the generation of laughter.

That is not to say that it isn't funny. True to the conventions of both Hollywood and the comedy genre, Osgood delivers a pithy last line, responding to Jerry's admission that he is a man by saying 'Well – nobody's perfect!' Thus Osgood, the oldest, shortest, admittedly richest, but nonetheless least good-looking male character gets the last laugh, thereby resolving the latent tension, but with Wilder managing one final destabilising attack upon traditional masculinity. *Some Like it Hot* is, therefore, exemplary of the way in which comedy relies upon the inversion of social norms.

Traditionally, comedy deals with the lives of the lower classes, that is to say, 'ordinary people', but in extra-ordinary and often thoroughly absurd situations. This is particularly true of postwar British film and television comedy from Ealing productions such as *The*

Lavender Hill Mob (Crichton, 1951) to the BBC series *Only Fools and Horses* (1981-2003). American film and television comedy, on the other hand, tends to involve middle class characters. There is therefore a difference between aesthetic vis-à-vis social norms as they occur in British and American film and television comedy. However, using *Bringing up Baby* as an example, although neither of the main characters is 'ordinary' in terms of their social class, the middle- and upper-middle class characters, Huxley and Susan, are seen going about their daily business, such as working in a museum or playing golf. This is equally true of the television sitcom *Friends* (1994-2004), which also involves a relationship between a palaeontologist, Ross Geller (David Schwimmer) and his 'screwy' but nonetheless 'instinctively shrewd' girlfriend, Rachel Green (Jennifer Aniston).

The word 'screwball', meaning eccentric or unconventional behaviour and deriving from a type of baseball pitch which veers in unexpected directions, is exemplary of the transgressive and subversive nature of comedy and the comic. As a slang term in everyday usage, it would be frowned upon by shrewish and 'stuck-up' characters such as Alice in *Bringing up Baby*, who censures her fiancé over the use of the vernacular when he predicts of his golf game with Peabody that he will 'knock him for a loop'. Susan belongs to a higher social class than either Huxley or Alice. However, in terms of aesthetic rather than social norms, given that her character functions so as to bring Huxley down to earth, and to inject a sense of fun into his rather sterile and sedentary existence, despite her eccentricity, she is shown to be more 'normal' than either Huxley or his fiancé, whom she usurps and displaces.

The fractious-but-fun relationship between Huxley and Vance is indicative of the work of Hawks as well as the genre system in which it flourished, comparable with that of Harry Morgan (Humphrey Bogart) and Marie Browning (Lauren Bacall) in the romance thriller and proto-noir *To Have and Have Not* (1944). Whether the genre is screwball or film noir, the male and female leads adopt adversarial roles in the initial stages of a romance before the inevitable consummation of their relationship. In addition, both Hawks films can be seen as career vehicles for the hugely successful pairings of Grant and Hepburn, and Bogart and Bacall, respectively.

Whether interpreted from the perspective of genre or auteur theory, or the Hollywood star and studio system, the male and female leads of *Bringing up Baby* and *To Have and Have*

Not are, or turn out to be, 'winners', by contrast with the 'losers' so denigrated by Hawks. They are all physically active, enterprising, and self-reliant characters worthy of success in their romantic as well as professional endeavours, where the lines between these two areas of human activity are made indistinct. There is a sense of camaraderie which makes certain Hawks films, including the noirish *The Big Sleep* as well as the comedies and action adventures, resemble 'buddy' movies as much as they do romances.

That the success of the male and masculinised female leads, in love as well as money, was the norm in Hollywood films made during a period when the capitalist system was beset by catastrophe, and where masculinity was in crisis, is indicative of the gulf between genre films and real life, that is, between social and aesthetic norms. Indeed, it is this very gulf which would afford cinema-goers a sense of escapism, an essential part of the pleasure derived from watching genre cinema. However, when discussing norms which are seen to be subverted by certain genres such as the screwball comedy and film noir, one might consider that the aesthetic status quo as it exists in the Hollywood genre film is far from 'normal' when compared, that is, to its social equivalent.

Another of the modes occurring in film comedy, besides instances of the comic such as gags and wisecracks, its narratives of misadventure, and its careful deployment of the 'unlike', is parody. *Some Like it Hot* provides an excellent example of comic parody. Besides his female disguise, as noted, Tony Curtis also appears as a playboy. However, Junior is no 'ordinary' playboy, so to speak, but a comic impersonation of none other than Cary Grant. This is supplemented by a comic prop, that is, the 'bottle-top' spectacles worn by Grant in *Bringing up Baby*. This intertextual reference, not merely to the Hollywood genre film but, more specifically, to the screwball comedy, indicates the self-reflexive nature of Hollywood film-making of the period. The same applies to the casting of George Raft in the role of mob boss Spats Colombo, bearing in mind Raft's association with the Gangster genre in films such as Hawks's *Scarface* (1931). *Bringing up Baby* also contains a moment of parody. When the male and female leads end up in jail, Susan adopts the persona of a gangster's 'moll', a masquerade which involves the trademark 'hard-boiled' mode of speech, with Susan referring to Huxley as 'Jerry the Nipper'. This was the nickname given to Jerry Warriner, the character played by Cary Grant in another screwball comedy, *The Awful Truth* (Leo McCarey, 1937), by his wife, Lucy (Irene Dunne).

Given that Leo McCarey received the Academy Award for Best Director in 1937, this intertextual reference imbues *Bringing up Baby* not merely with topicality and relevance, but also with accessibility, all of which enrich the sense of parody, and thus the audience's pleasure. This is an interesting point in respect of the audience response to comedy, as opposed to other genres, such as film noir. One of the effects of parody in the Hollywood comedy, as per the 'Jerry the Nipper' remark, is that it is inclusive, allowing the audience to share in the self-reflexivity of the moment. The requirement here is that the audience is 'in on the joke', a principle informing many latter-day comedies, such as *The Simpsons* and *Family Guy*. Compare this to a reference made by Fritz Lang in the American noir, *The Woman in the Window* (1944), to one of his own films, the Weimar crime thriller *M* (1931), when Professor Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) sees himself reflected in a shop window, thereby reproducing a shot from the earlier film involving the murderer, Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre). This intertextual reference is, by contrast, exclusive in nature. It would have been accessible only to the director himself and devotees of his work from the Weimar and Hollywood periods. Thus, the parodic element of Hollywood comedy is comparatively democratic, in keeping with generic practice as a whole.

The tradition of parody in Hollywood genre cinema dating back at least to the late-1930s not only persists, but rather has become a dominant feature during the postmodern period. This is exemplified by the 2008 comedy *Tropic Thunder*. Directed by Ben Stiller, *Tropic Thunder* features Stiller himself (Tugg Speedman), Robert Downey, Jr. (Kirk Lazarus) and Jack Black (Jeff Portnoy), in a film about the making of a Vietnam War film of the same name.

Speedman's career is in decline. Not only has he become type cast as an 'action hero' after his six appearances in the *Scorched* franchise, but he also made the rash career move of playing a character with learning disabilities in *Simple Jack*, described in a 'spoof' (parody) news story as 'one of the worst films of all time'. As a consequence of oversized egos and personality clashes, for instance between 'action hero' Speedman and academy-award winning actor Lazarus, and the inability of director Damien Cockburn (Steve Coogan) to control the cast, the situation on set soon descends into chaos. Cockburn and the author of the eponymously titled book upon which the film is based, John 'Four Leaf' Tayback (Nick Nolte), conspire to send the cast into the jungle setting without creature comforts such as mobile phones and TiVo, in order to discourage histrionics, inspire more committed

performances, and prevent the film for going even more over-budget, and thus further enraging fictional Hollywood producer Les Grossman (Tom Cruise).

Tropic Thunder is thus a film within a film, with Stiller and the screenwriters deploying a 'mise-en-abyme' device whereby the focus of the story becomes the actors themselves. Moreover, the comedy derives, in part, from the hopeless inadequacy of the actors' so-called 'life skills' in dealing with the tensions on set, leave alone in the jungle, where they are intercepted by the Flaming Dragon, a gang involved in the heroin trade, leading to Speedman's capture and imprisonment. Meanwhile, Speedman's agent, Rick 'Pecker' Peck (Matthew McConaghey) approaches producer Grossman to negotiate his client's release, whereupon Grossman suggests to Peck that they allow the Flaming Dragon to kill their hostage, then claim on his insurance and split the proceeds, tempting Peck with the offer a G4 executive jet and 'lots and lots of money'.

The film is both a comic parody and satire, given that it also draws upon 'real life' episodes, that is, the outrageous off-screen antics of 'bad boy' actors, including those of Downey, Jr. himself. As for the reference points for Les Grossman, these are exaggerated for comic effect, resulting in a caricature of a Hollywood producer. In the traditions of *Bringing up Baby* and *Some Like it Hot*, Cruise appears in heavy disguise as Grossman, complete with grotesquely enlarged prosthetic forearms, covered in thick hair, thereby accentuating the 'grossness' of his caricature. As Neale and Krutnik observe, comedy which deals in the grotesque must take care not to exceed the limits of taste, that is, to slip from the appropriate to the inappropriate and, or from the grotesque into the monstrous. *Tropic Thunder*, which also parodies 'gross out' comedy (another connotation of Grossman's name), takes a lot of risks in this respect, but manages to be funny rather than disgusting or offensive, due largely to the logic of the absurd, which 'insulates' it, thereby enabling it to avoid such pitfalls.

That is not to say that the film did not provoke controversy – it did. One of the 'serious' points made by *Tropic Thunder* is regarding the fact that genre films, such as the action movies made by Speedman and the comedies made by Cockburn, Grossman, and of course Stiller himself, are seldom honoured with an Academy Award, at least not in the main categories such as Best Picture, Director, and Actor. The main reason for the friction

between Speedman and Lazarus is the fact that the latter has won five academy awards for his appearance in serious dramas, such as *Satan's Alley*, which is featured in a 'spoof' trailer at the start of the film.⁶ The joke here is that nobody has ever won five Oscars, with Katherine Hepburn, who received four, heading the list. In one of the most memorable, funny, but nonetheless controversial scenes from the film, Lazarus advises Speedman that he will never win an Oscar for films such as *Simple Jack*, due to the fact that he overdid his performance and, in Lazarus's words, went 'full retard'.

Clearly, 'retard' is an offensive term, referring in a derogatory way to people with learning disabilities, prompting disability advocates in the States to boycott the film. However, it seems to be equally clear that the target of the satire is not disability, but the actors who take on roles involving a character with a disability in order to win awards, furthermore, the Academy for awarding them. Lazarus opines that Dustin Hoffman and Tom Hanks both received Best Actor Oscars for such roles in *Rainman* (Levinson, 1988) and *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994). One might take the opposing view, as held by disability advocates, that the use of the term 'retard' is unacceptable, irrespective of context. This indicates that the balance between the appropriate and inappropriate, although essential to comedy, is far from stable, given that these notions differ according to one's own cultural values.

In fact, the notion that film actors who play disabled people are guaranteed an Oscar was first aired in the BBC comedy series *Extras* (2005-2007). The series, written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, which chronicles the misadventures of the eponymous film and television extras, Andy Millman (Gervais) and Maggie Jacobs (Ashley Jensen), also features cameo roles from renowned Hollywood actors. In Episode Three, Series One, first broadcast in August 2005, Kate Winslet, playing a nun in a 'spoof' war film, ventures to Millman that 'You are guaranteed an Oscar if you play a mental'. As with *Tropic Thunder*, the use of the derogatory term 'mental' is highly contentious and potentially offensive, although, once again, the target of the satire is the alleged cynicism of actors taking on such roles, rather than disability. Whilst Winslet cites two British actors, John Mills and Daniel Day-Lewis, for their roles in British and Irish films *Ryan's Daughter* (Lean, 1970) and *My Left Foot* (Sheridan, 1989), she also mentions Hoffman in *Rainman*. Even the structure of the lines and the rhythm of Winslet's delivery – 'Daniel Day Lewis in *My Left Foot* – Oscar, Dustin

Hoffman in *Rainman* – Oscar’ – are echoed in the corresponding scene from *Tropic Thunder*. The intertextual connection is strengthened by the fact that Ben Stiller appeared in Episode One of the first series of *Extras*, suggesting that the controversial Lazarus speech is Stiller’s ‘hommage’ to the pioneering BBC show.

As mentioned, *Tropic Thunder* also engages in comic parody, as evidenced by the ‘spoof’ trailers for genre films and serious dramas at the start of the film, specifically the *Scorched* action franchise, serious drama *Satan’s Alley*, and *Fart 2* (clearly the sequel to *Fart*), Portnoy’s ‘gross out’ comedy franchise. Barry Keith Grant observes that ‘genre films provide a means of cultural dialogue, engaging their audience in shared discourse’.⁷ This is nowhere more apparent than in comic parody, which, as with these hilarious trailers, depends upon ‘shared discourse’ for its comedic effect. Besides reflecting social change, Hollywood comedy from *Bringing up Baby* to *Tropic Thunder* also reinforces traditional values regarding romantic love and gender roles, despite the capitalist system and masculinity being beset by uncertainty and crisis. It also holds up a mirror to something else – that is, itself. It is not unique in this respect, given that all types of Hollywood films reference habitually other films. However, by nature of its inherent subversiveness, comedy is an ideal vehicle for both parody and its close relative, satire.

In Comedy the ‘unlike’ must be tempered with the ‘like’, that is, the inappropriate with the appropriate, the illogical with the logical, and so on. This is so as to prevent certain features of humour, like the ridiculous and the ludicrous, from slipping into the monstrous or silly. Olsen has defined these two elements of humour, that is, the features which mark comic instances, as relating to the fault of the ‘agent’ in the case of the ridiculous, and the ‘ignorance of circumstances, or because of chance’ in the case of the ludicrous.⁸

Characters such as Basil Fawlty in *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979) and Inspector Clouseau in the *Pink Panther* series of films, when viewed from this perspective, are ridiculous in ‘appearance, speech, and action’.⁹ When Basil Fawlty hits out at his car with a tree branch, or when Sellers/Clouseau adopts his peculiar accent and refers to a bomb as a ‘böem’, they are ridiculous, in terms of action and speech, respectively. This is due to the humour which

⁷ Grant, B.K., *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* (London: Wallflower, 2007), p.29

⁸ Olsen, E., *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington: Indian UP, 1968), p.15; Neale and Krutnik, p.66

⁹ Neale S., and Krutnik, F., *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.67

marks the comic instances resulting from the actions and speech of the agents. When Del Boy falls over in a wine bar in *Only Fools and Horses* this is ludicrous, due to his 'ignorance of circumstance'. However, the fact that he is a working class man attempting to flirt with middle-class women in a wine bar (or the fact that he is there at all), along with his expensive-looking raincoat, worn to aid him in his social climbing, are all ridiculous. These class-related instances of the ridiculous are also satirical. Unlike the ludicrousness of the wine bar pratfall, they could be avoided – perhaps even should be, due to the satirical nature of the comedy, and the commentary on the British class system entailed.

Jerry Palmer refers to the 'comic insulation' which, according to the logic of the absurd, prevents such slippage from the funny into the monstrous or silly. In terms defined by Aristotle, absurd logic insulates 'error' and 'ugliness', ensuring that it remains 'painless'.¹⁰ In other words, instances of the ridiculous and ludicrous within comedy, a domain where absurd logic is seen to apply, due to 'comic insulation', are seen to be funny rather than cruel or silly – and eminently so. Del Boy's ludicrous pratfall in the wine bar and Basil Fawlty's ridiculous antics when he beats his Austin 1100 with a branch, are often cited as two of the funniest moments in British comedy history.

Moving towards a definition of comic instances marked by features of humour, these are seen to function according to the logic of the absurd, whereby a fine balance between the appropriate and the inappropriate is maintained, and where 'comic insulation' prevents actions and events from becoming silly or cruel. However, that which is deemed appropriate and inappropriate differs from society to society and from historical period to historical period. The success (or failure) of comedy is therefore dependent upon aesthetic and social standards which underpin its fundamental principles, and which vary significantly, not just from one era to the next, but within different societies at any given time. Thus, a situation comedy which appears funny in one social context, for instance, in Britain, may not be funny in another, for instance, America.

In fact, there are numerous British sitcoms which failed to make the transition to American television. Lea Donovan of the *New Statesman* observes in 'How not to adapt a British sitcom in America' (*NS*, 16 March 2015) 'For every successful remake of a classic British

¹⁰ Palmer, J., *The Logic of the Absurd* (London: BFI, 1987), p.21, in Neale and Krutnik, p.69

comedy, there is a handful of dreadful clangers that never make it beyond a pilot'. Donovan argues that this is largely due to a combination of 'commercial, narrative, cultural, or personality-related' issues. In terms of commercial reasons, 'Often contrary to British Broadcasting's business model, American TV is also beholden to advertisers.' The dependency on free-to-air television on advertisers, or sponsors, can have a 'knock-on effect on content'.

This was not always the case. During the 1970s, there were a number of successful American adaptations of British TV sitcoms, most notably those brokered by Beryl Vertue on behalf of clients Ray Galton and Alan Simpson, and Johnny Speight, the writers of *Steptoe and Son* (1962-1974) and *Till Death Us Do Part* (1965-1975), adapted as *Sanford and Son* (1972-1977) and *All in the Family* (1971-1979) in the US. Produced by Norman Lear, these shows 'took long, hard-disguised-as-soft looks at social issues such as racism, classism, and bigotry'. Donovan observes 'These adaptations are remembered for holding up mirrors to US society and challenging its social attitudes, as are their original versions in Britain', arguing that this was possible due to 'very few channel choices in both countries', and where 'perceptions could be materially altered' due to large audiences.

According to Donovan, the focus within British comedy upon issues of race and class, that is, a preoccupation with social realism which also marks British cinema, survived the transition to American TV during a different historical period, when large audiences enabled the material alteration of public perceptions. Hollywood cinema is also marked by resurgent liberalism during the 1970s, for instance, the revisionist tendency within the American New Wave, which also addressed issues of class, race, and gender in the neo-noir and revisionist western and gangster genres.

It is interesting, however, to note the view taken by Donovan that even these socially conscious adaptations on the 1970s were 'hard-disguised-as-soft looks at social issues', particularly in light of remarks made by the British comedian, Ricky Gervais, in a *Time* interview entitled 'The Difference Between British and American humour' (Gervais, Nov 9, 2011). Before devising *Extras*, Gervais and writing partner Stephen Merchant co-wrote and appeared in the hit British sitcom *The Office* (2001-2003). This made a successful transition to American TV, also as *The Office* (2005-2013), with Gervais and Merchant involved in the

rewrite. Gervais is, thus, ideally placed to observe the cultural differences between Britain and America, the social and aesthetic norms which underpin comic instances, and which determine whether or not these are viewed as funny within different social contexts. Regarding the 'redrawing' of the character of the office manager David Brent as Michael Scott (played by the Hollywood actor Steve Carell), Gervais observes that 'We had to make [him] a slightly nicer guy, a with a rosier outlook to life ... Network America has to give people a reason to like you not just a reason to watch you'. Indeed, the requirement for sympathetic characters is an integral part of Hollywood screenwriting, an aesthetic standard by which it also possible to mark deviations, such as the 'male victim' of film noir.

Returning to the *New Statesman* article, and in continuation of the argument regarding cultural differences, Donovan observes that:

Americans and American free-to-air networks also have different cultural attitudes toward, and accepted business practices about, the inclusion of profanity, sex, or violence on TV. Some offensive material that is broadcast in the UK in post-watershed timeslots still doesn't make it past the US's traditional networks censors at any time of day. More recently, British shows have been remade for American pay-premium subscription networks like HBO, which do not fall under the same rules of censorship as do the free-to-air networks ... This allows the likes of Armando Iannucci to replicate the satire, intrigue, and notoriously foul-mouthed political spin doctors in *The Thick of It* with *Veep*.

In summary of British vis-à-vis American comedy and the social and aesthetic norms pertaining to them, then, it seems that the former has a tendency towards social and political satire, the use of profanity, and references to sex and violence which are deemed inappropriate, both within certain sections of American society, and by American TV networks and censors. However, the success of shows such as HBO's *Veep* (2012-) demonstrates that American audiences, like their British counterparts, derive pleasure from biting social and political satire, bad language, and adult themes. It would be at best patronising, at worst, racist, and in either case ridiculous to suggest otherwise. Besides *Veep*, other shows such as the risqué comedy drama *Californication*, which ran for seven seasons on pay-premium channel Showtime between 2007 and 2014, underline this fact.

The objections of advertisers and the conservative ideology of sections of American society are not a defining factor in terms of content on pay-premium channels, where the viewer is aware of such 'subversive' content and willing to pay for it. It appears to be the case,

however that these commercial factors militate against these elements of comedy, whether British or American, within the free-to-air sector of American TV.

The study of film and television comedy exposes certain elements of the Hollywood genre system in a uniquely illuminating manner. The continuing popularity and commercial success of British situation comedy has made many such shows attractive to American networks. However, due to the cultural differences between the two societies, and the dependence of free-to-air American TV upon advertising, it is deemed to be necessary to rewrite these comedies in order that the content is appropriate, and therefore funny.

So much, then, for the export of British comedy to America, however, the same is not true of the import of American comedy into Britain. It was necessary for Ricky Gervais to make David Brent more likeable for American audiences, censors, and sponsors, and for premium networks like HBO to exist before Armando Iannucci could export his coruscating political satire. However, whilst there is deemed to be a need to remake, and effectively tone down British comedy – the swearing, the sex, the social commentary – for American audiences, the same does not apply to the transatlantic traffic heading in the opposite direction, where the main characters are already ‘aesthetically mainstreamed’ and likeable.

If anything, one might perceive there to be a need, as it were, to ‘tone up’ the content of comedy shows such as *Friends*, *Frasier* (1993-2004), and *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005), given that it is so relentlessly upbeat when compared with relatively sardonic British shows such as *Spaced* (1999-2001) written by Simon Pegg and Jessica Hynes, and *The IT Crowd* (2006-2013), written by Graham Linehan. Indeed, *Spaced* was the subject of controversy when the American network Fox commissioned a pilot but did not involve director Edgar Wright and writers Pegg and Hynes in the rewrite. Given that the original series was not merely sardonic but involved numerous references to drugs, alcohol, and the Nick Frost character Mike Watts’s obsession with firearms, the American remake had to be toned down significantly. This may have been a contributory factor to the failure of the project with *Spaced* joining *The Vicar of Dibley* (*The Minister of the Divine*) on the list of unsuccessful Fox remakes.

One might echo the sentiments of David Huxley in observing that the remaking of British comedy for American TV has been a series of misadventures. Indeed, this very topic has

itself formed the basis of a successful comedy show. In *Episodes* (2011-), British husband-and-wife comedy writers Beverly and Sean Lincoln (Tamsin Greig and Stephen Mangan) travel to America to participate in the remake of their successful sitcom, *Lyman's Boys*, featuring *Friends* star Matt LeBlanc as a fictionalised version of himself. A collaboration between British and American production companies Hat Trick Productions and Showtime, *Episodes* therefore capitalises upon the comic potential of that most ill-fated of undertakings, the 'airbrushing' of British comedy for American audiences, with a 'real life' sitcom superstar in the lead role.

It would therefore appear to be the case that American TV networks, mindful of censorship and advertising revenues, are responsible for the moderation of content which certain British and American audiences, irrespective of cultural differences, would find funny. The consequence of this is that the British public readily consumes American comedy which has been moderated for American censors and advertisers, and which therefore conforms to the dictates of a deeply conservative ideology. If it is seen to be the case that public perception was materially altered in America during the 1970s by socially conscious comedy originating in Britain, then it perhaps equally likely that the perception of the British public has been altered by the relatively toothless, conservative, and advertiser-friendly American comedy shows.

It would appear to follow that if Hollywood is obliged, due to censorship and the conservative values of certain sections of American society, to represent an 'aesthetically mainstreamed' version of America to Americans, then the same would apply to its representation of the UK and Ireland. Moving now to the 1949 Ealing comedy, *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, Michael Newton observes of the film's producer and production head at Ealing studios, Sir Michael Balcon 'He had endured enough of the Hollywood version of Britain; now he would make British films for British audiences'.¹¹ Balcon had made films for a subsidiary of MGM in London, including *Goodbye Mr Chips* (Sam Wood, 1939), after starting his career at the British studio Gainsborough Pictures, although Newton argues that 'he hated the experience'.¹² Perhaps due to his MGM experience, Balcon instituted 'something akin to a democracy' at Ealing, where 'the atmosphere was earnestly

¹¹ Newton, M., *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, (London: BFI, 2003), p.10

¹² Ibid., p.10

workmanlike', and where 'they would all sit at a round table, drinking tea and thrashing out stories'.¹³ It is out of this relatively democratic ethos at Ealing that *Kind Hearts* emerges, a darkly satirical film which owes its success to a working knowledge, and an insider's view, of the British class system.

The story of *Kind Hearts* involves the misadventures of the serial murderer Louis Mazzini (Dennis Price). Louis murders eight members of the D'Ascoyne family, all played by Sir Alec Guinness, in order to become the tenth Duke of Chalfont, after his mother, the daughter of the seventh Duke, has been disinherited following an affair with Louis' father, an Italian opera singer. Besides being quite openly satirical of the British class system, it also involves a more subtle parody of the arts. As Newton also observes 'The film appears to concern snobbery in class terms; it is just as much about snobbery in art. It looks down upon the entire world of 'second rate' artistic taste'.¹⁴ In the scene where Louis' mother dies, for instance, although the tone is ostensibly sombre, it is suffused with a sense of 'theatrical awkwardness'. As Newton rightly argues:

There is nothing particularly funny about any of it, and yet the off-key effect is undoubtedly comic ... The humour comes from the feeling that we are not seeing life, or even the representation of life, but rather the parody of that representation¹⁵

Kind Hearts, which is both a satire and a parody, is certainly suffused with a sense of the ironic and the absurd, both of which impart subtle comedy to the otherwise appalling events of the story. The logic of the absurd, as Jerry Palmer argues, provides 'comic insulation' and prevents the ridiculous and ludicrous from slipping into the silly or cruel. Newton's observations seem to echo those of Palmer when he argues that 'When film depicts violence so fancifully, as only a kind of art, then it is easy to ignore the fact that it is nonetheless violence'.¹⁶ The difference in this case is that the sense of absurdity is driven, at least in part, by parody, along with the absurd premise that a man would murder an entire family to inherit a dukedom. Besides the absurd, the comedy is also instigated by the central visual gag, that is, the eight parts played by Guinness. These elements are seen to account

¹³ Ibid., pp.10-11

¹⁴ Ibid., p.39

¹⁵ Ibid., p.39

¹⁶ Ibid., p.66

both for the black comedy not being too black, and for the subtlety of the humour, which smoulders away behind the drowning, bombings, and poisonings.

In terms of satire, *Kind Hearts* lambasts British cultural values in a suitably reserved, stylish and elegant manner. For instance, Mazzini's childhood sweetheart, Sibella (Joan Greenwood), mocks his offer of marriage at first, that is, whilst the disinherited hero is still a lowly draper, but warms to the idea once it emerges that he is a member of the D'Ascoyne family and heir apparent to the dukedom. Likewise, Louis' mother is disowned by the nobility after she elopes with the Italian opera singer, Mazzini (also played by Price), thereby paying dearly for absconding not merely with a commoner, but a foreigner to boot. These two instances highlight class snobbery and racial intolerance, not to mention the ruthlessness and cruelty of the British aristocracy.

The characters played by Guinness – a vicar, a general, an admiral, and several dukes – represent the respective state institutions of the church, military, and nobility. Besides the air of artifice and theatricality which pervades the film, emanating in part from its parody of the arts, it is also characterised by these painstakingly observed satirical vignettes. Whilst the state institutions concerned date back to feudal times, they were not often the target of satirical films, at least not during the late-1940s, a mere four years after the end of the Second World War, when British films such as *In Which We Serve* (Coward/Lean, 1942) had shown the British united in the effort to defeat Nazi Germany, irrespective of social class. This fact bears testimony to the democratic, earnestly workmanlike, yet still thoroughly British ethos of Ealing Studios. The film was made under Atlee's Labour government which oversaw the introduction of the Welfare State. This aspect of British life is itself hardly, if ever, seen in Hollywood versions of British society, which is more easily recognisable in terms of the state institutions which *Kind Hearts* satirises – quietly, determinedly, and comprehensively. The postwar Ealing Studios output can therefore be seen to pre-empt the social realism of British cinema in the 1950s and 60s.

It is also the forerunner of the final film under discussion, Armando Iannucci's *In the Loop* (2009). Based on the BBC television series *The Thick of It* (2005-2012), and starring Peter Capaldi as Malcolm Tucker, the British Prime Minister's Head of Communications, the film satirises the British and American governments and their joint involvement in a fictional Iraq

War. Fictional it may be, but the satire draws upon a series of military interventions by Western forces in Iraq, in particular the campaigns overseen by Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair in 1998 and 2003. However, the Prime Minister is never seen or heard, with both the film and TV series focusing upon cabinet ministers and their aides, relative underlings such as the Minister for International Development Simon Foster (Tom Hollander), his Director of Communications Judy Molloy (Gina McKee), and his aide Toby Wright (Chris Addison).

In keeping with generic practice, then, the narrative concerns itself with the everyday – although in this case far from mundane – business of running the country. Indeed, the everyday aspect of civil servants' lives is juxtaposed with state affairs when Toby is shown in a lift chatting with his girlfriend Suzy (Olivia Poulet) about the carcinogenic effects of cling film, whilst Malcolm is threatening a 'hack' journalist to prevent him from running a damaging story about Simon Foster.

The American contingent is represented in a similar way. Assistant Secretary of State for Diplomacy Karen Clarke (Mimi Kennedy) is seen working closely with her aide Liza Weld (Anna Chlumsky) and military advisor General George Miller (the late James Gandolfini). Whilst attempting to expose the secret war committee of Assistant Secretary of State for Policy Linton Barwick (George Rasche), Karen is experiencing dental pain and asks Liza to arrange a dentist's appointment, a menial task which the disgruntled aide resents having to undertake. However, the representation of the American team both corresponds and contrasts with that of its British counterpart. Much of the comedy is driven by the supreme ineptitude apparent in the misadventures of Simon Foster and Toby Wright, and the subsequent lambasting they receive from Malcolm Tucker, with Judy Molloy looking on disbelievingly and providing the film with the quiet voice of dismayed and affronted reason. The American contingent is, on the whole, relatively competent, and equally disbelieving of Simon and Toby's ridiculous antics.

The satirical edge where the representation of American politics is concerned derives from the aggressive militarism of Linton Barwick, with whom Karen Clarke and General Miller fight tooth and nail in order to prevent military intervention in Iraq. As with real life events, the decision whether or not to intervene rests upon the threat posed by Iraq to the national security of Western powers. The film supports the view that the evidence relating to the

Iraqi military capability, that is, the alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction, was tampered with in order to precipitate war with Iraq and to effect regime change and the removal of Saddam Hussein. In an even more telling juxtaposition of the public and the private, not to mention the tragic and the comic, Karen and George calculate potential American troop losses in Iraq using a toy computer whilst sat in a child's bedroom.

Given that *In the Loop* satirises international politics, suggesting a high-level conspiracy leading to a preventable war, it is therefore a black comedy much in the tradition of *Kind Hearts*. However, one might argue that the main target of the satire is neither politics nor the preventable war, but the way in which they were represented in the media. The undoubted star of the film and the TV series is the famously foul-mouthed 'spin doctor' Malcolm Tucker. It is he who 'doctors' the evidence relating to the military threat posed by Iraq and who bullies anyone who will let him from Whitehall to the United Nations Building in New York. Given that the various civil servants and Ministers, the fast-track graduates and classical-music loving public school boys, are dominated by a working class Glaswegian also provides a satire of the British class system, from the inside looking out.

The film also contains an element of parody, that is, the 'mockumentary' style, which as the name suggests, assimilates documentary film-making techniques into the fiction film, most notably, the use of hand-held cameras. This subjects the means of representing the news, as well as the news itself, to scrutiny. Like *Kind Hearts*, then, *In the Loop* is both a satire and a parody. Unlike *Kind Hearts*, however, the respective targets, namely, the British and American governments and their spin doctors on the one hand, and the news media on the other, are the subject of a sustained, brutal, and frontal assault.

As noted, *The Thick of It* and *In the Loop* led to the 'spin-off' series *Veep*, thereby confirming the popularity of political satire amongst American pay-premium viewers. The success of the 2013 Netflix series *House of Cards*, starring Kevin Spacey as the despicable Frank Underwood, suggests that a trend is developing, given that it, too, was based on a BBC series of the same name, first broadcast in 1990, and adapted by Andrew Davies from the Michael Dobbs novel. There appears to be a burgeoning American market for scathing political satire, representing the respective governments of Britain and America as

dangerously corrupt and warlike, and originating in British television, moreover, in BBC series such as *House of Cards* and *The Thick of It*.

In conclusion, it is perhaps worth considering that in the pay-premium era of American television, production companies and audiences alike seem to be debunking the myth of divisive cultural differences between Britain and America. The transatlantic cultural exchange discernible in television shows such as *Veep* and *Episodes* and films such as *Tropic Thunder*, as discussed, can be traced to BBC comedies such as *Extras* and *The Office*, and beyond that to *House of Cards*.

Returning to *Kind Hearts and Coronets*, the final scene of the US version of the film was 'doctored' to show the memoirs of Louis Mazzini, in which he details all the D'Ascoyne murders, being discovered by the prison authorities. This was in order to accommodate the Production Code Administration (PCA), whose guidelines stipulated that crime cannot be seen to pay. The UK version, on the other hand, had no such narrative closure, with British audiences being allowed to speculate upon Mazzini's fate, although this does not involve much speculation, given that he left his 'confession' in his cell following his eleventh-hour reprieve. However, this alteration was made to accommodate the PCA, rather than US audiences, and was a consequence of relatively stringent US censorship, and not necessarily of any cultural differences between British and American cinema-goers.

It is also acknowledged that Michael Balcon told Robert Hamer, the director of *Kind Hearts*, that he was trying to sell 'that most unsaleable of commodity' to the British public. The commodity to which he was referring was irony. One can only speculate upon the prevailing cultural values in 1940s Britain that led Balcon to this belief, given that these days the British tend to pride themselves on their ability to appreciate irony. It is a fact not lacking in irony itself, then, that in so doing the British tend to take the same view of the Americans with regard to their inability to understand irony as Balcon once took of them. Given that this state of affairs is both somewhat comic and entirely the fault of the British people concerned, then as well as being ironic, it also qualifies as ridiculous. Irony, a staple of British and American comedy from at least the screwball era onwards, rather than being unsaleable, is, in the twenty-first century, a highly marketable commodity.