

AFTER ALL THE FUN WE'VE HAD?

AN INTRODUCTION TO SCREWBALL COMEDIES

CUFA FILM CLUB WEEK 4

THE STORY OF A LOST GENRE

There are many genres associated with old Hollywood: the musical, film noir, the screwball comedy. With its conventions of enemies to lovers romance, witty dialogue, and chaotic stories, the screwball comedy is also known as the "the sex comedy without sex," responding to the rise in the restrictive Hayes Code.

The genre emerged in the 1930s during the Great Depression in the USA. Faced with mounting unemployment and economic insecurity audiences turned to screwball comedies to provide levity in their lives. That many screwball comedies centre on the dysfunctional lives of the upper classes added to the escapist, but also satirical, elements of the genre.

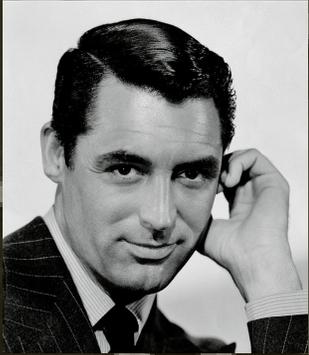
Even though the genre virtually disappeared by the 1950s, screwball comedies have had an undeniable impact on film history. They defined the careers of actors like Carole Lombard and Cary Grant, influenced filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino, and, most importantly, brought and continue to bring laughter, comfort, and joy to audiences everywhere.

Learn more about the screwball comedy here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4DCSC_saBjw&t=4s

NOW ON TO THE FEATURED MOVIES!



STARS OF THE SCREWBALL WORLD



CARY GRANT

Real name Archibald Leach, Cary Grant had a decades-long career that was established in the screwball genre. Grant had a talent for playing the beleaguered, overwhelmed "normal person" dragged into the chaos around him, as seen in *Bringing Up Baby* or *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

KATHERINE HEPBURN

Although initially known for dramas like *Little Women* and *Christopher Strong*, Hepburn demonstrated her incredible comedic talent in movies like *The Philadelphia Story* and *Bringing Up Baby*. Defiant, blunt, and witty, Hepburn brought her unique personality to every character she played.



CAROLE LOMBARD

Beginning in silent films, Lombard shot to fame following her performance in *Twentieth Century*. At once glamorous and hilarious, Lombard is often titled the Queen of Screwball Comedy, some of her best work including *My Man Godfrey* and *To Be or Not to Be*. This legendary career was cut tragically short when Lombard died in a plane crash in 1942.

WILLIAM POWELL

Best known as the lead in the detective movie *The Thin Man* and its many sequels, Powell also had a strong career in screwball comedies. His most famous film, *My Man Godfrey*, touches heavily upon the concerns of the Great Depression, and features Powell alongside Carole Lombard.



NOW ON TO THE FEATURED MOVIES!



BRINGING UP BABY



Year Released: 1938

Directed by: Howard Hawks

Country of Origin: USA

Available on: BBC IPlayer

Running Time: 102 min

CW:

Thanks to a madcap series of events, palaeontologist David Huxley winds up tagging along with the ditzy and chaotic Susan Vance as she takes care of her new pet leopard, the titular Baby.

Described by critic Sheila O'Malley as the "feral stepchild" of the screwball genre, *Bringing Up Baby* is a constantly escalating comedy of errors. Initially a box-office flop, the film soon rebounded, regarded as a comedy classic and featuring Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn in some of their greatest and most memorable performances. But for all its zaniness, *Bringing Up Baby* is a film bursting with heart, a charming tale of friendship, romance, and adventure.

IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT



Year Released: 1934

Directed by: Frank Capra

Country of Origin: USA

Available on: Amazon (Rental £2.49)

Running Time: 105 min

CW:

A socialite running away from her controlling family and a recently-fired reporter looking for his next big story are inadvertently stuck together when they miss their bus. What follows is a journey from begrudging travel partners to lovers, filled with all the ups and downs of romance.

Considered the first screwball comedy, *It Happened One Night* is yet another classic from Frank Capra, released "during the last hurrah of the so-called pre-Code era." Artful innuendo and flirty scenes therefore abound, but the most memorable scene is, ironically, the one that relies mostly on imagination and implication. At almost eighty years old, the film remains a joyous watch.

HIS GIRL FRIDAY

A black and white photograph of Walter Burns and Hildy Johnson from the movie His Girl Friday. Walter Burns is on the left, wearing a suit and tie, looking towards Hildy Johnson. Hildy Johnson is on the right, wearing a patterned hat and a dark dress, looking towards Walter Burns. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting.

Year Released: 1940

Directed by: Howard Hawks

Country of Origin: USA

Available on: Prime Video

Running Time: 92 min

CW:

His Girl Friday is a fast-talking comedy about editor Walter Burns and journalist Hildy Johnson, a recently divorced couple. When Hildy announces her remarriage, Walter decides to do anything to keep it from happening.

Adapted from the stage play *The Front Page*, *His Girl Friday* is comedy, crime caper, and romance all in one. The film is also known for its fast paced dialogue, moving at an incredible 240 words per minute. Indeed, director Howard Hawks' goal was to film the fastest dialogue on record. Yet another win from Hawkes, like *Bringing Up Baby* and *The Philadelphia Story* the movie remains a classic today.

MORE STUFF!

OTHER FILMS TO CHECK OUT:

My Man Godfrey (USA, 1936)

Ninotchka (USA, 1939)

The Philadelphia Story (USA, 1940)

To Be or Not to Be (USA, 1942)

The Lady Eve (USA, 1941)

Arsenic and Old Lace (USA, 1944)

OTHER ARTICLES TO READ:

Bringing Up Baby: Bones, Balls, and Butterflies:

<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/7454-bringing-up-baby-bones-balls-and-butterflies>

It Happened One Night: All Aboard!

<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3369-it-happened-one-night-all-aboard>

'His Girl Friday' and How They Created the World's Greatest Fast-Talking Rom-Com:

<https://filmschoolrejects.com/his-girl-friday/>

Flirting with screwball:

<https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/bfi-news/flirting-screwball>