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**DAVID  
THORBURN:**

Welcome people. I'm glad to see you this afternoon. We finally make our transition to sound film. I hope that you endured the silent era with good spirits. I think you'll find, as the semester goes on, that even some of the silent films you found less compelling when you began will resonate for you and become more valuable. And my expectation is that some of you will decide, after the fact, that Keaton and Chaplain, and perhaps even for some of you Murnau, presented you with films that were at least as memorable as the most memorable sound films.

But we now move into a segment of the course in which every object has more than merely artifactual a art value, although the artifactual value of these remarkable films is very great. And as I indicated earlier in the semester, my hope is to toggle back and forth in some ways, in each of our conversations about these films on our syllabus. To toggle back and forth between what we might think of as an aesthetic perspective, talking about the qualities in these texts that make them artful, memorable, long lasting, worth something even beyond the eras in which they were created on the one side. And then on the other side, more an anthropological kind of perspective rather than an aesthetic one. What do these texts tell us about the culture from which they come? In what ways do the social, and moral, and political mythologies of the society find complex articulation in these texts? So those are the two sort of perspectives between which we oscillate.

We now turn to the kind of film that emerges after the advent of sound in 1927. And we can say that the period, roughly between 1927, 1928-- when the first sound films began to be made-- and the era into the 1950s, briefly after the advent of television, that era is often thought of as-- often called by some film historians the golden age of Hollywood. And it was in some respects, maybe in many respects, a golden age. It was certainly a golden age in terms of the size and loyalty of the audience for American movies. And I'll come back to that in a moment.

What happened of course in the sound era was that an industry emerged. A more neutral term for the golden age of Hollywood might just be the studio era. Because what happened in the

sound era was a fortification and extension of the system that had already emerged, and which we've discussed-- and which David Cook catalogs very fully in the required reading-- a fortification, an extension of the system that had emerged in the silent era. The mass production system that was already in place in the silent era was perfected and extended. The principle of the specialization of labor became even more complex and effectively deployed in the production of motion pictures.

And in this period, in the period between 1928 and 1930 for example, Hollywood spent what was then a tremendous amount of money-- \$500 million-- in gearing up for the transition to sound. It was almost as if silent films became obsolete almost instantly. Almost instantly. And the famous line from-- what's the title of the first sound film? *The Jazz Singer*. Who's the star? The theater singer Al Jolson, right. And there isn't very much dialogue in that film, although there are some 8 interpolated songs. There's very little synchronous dialogue, but there's a little. And one of the most famous lines-- maybe the most famous line in the film-- comes at a certain point where someone says "You ain't heard nothing yet", and the implication is you ain't seen nothing yet either.

And it is certainly the case that within three years there were no sound films really being made. As I've suggested earlier, a comic and still illuminating perspective on this process of Hollywood adjusting to the advent of the new technology of sound is dramatized for us in the wonderful musical we're going to see in a few weeks, *Singing In The Rain*.

So in this era then, after the advent of sound, the movies become America's dominant entertainment form. And in the period between 1930 and 1945, 7,500 films are made by the Hollywood production system, approximately-- almost exactly in fact-- 500 films a year. Think about the confidence that this production system needed to have in its capacity to get a return on the number of films that it turned out. And think about what it meant that the entire society was now geared toward this mass form of entertainment.

We can get some measure of the tremendous popularity of the movies, the centrality that the movies assumed by the end of the silent era and into the sound era, if we think of some numbers. In 1938, for example, what we might think of as the central, the height, the apex of the studio system, of the sound era, there were a total of 80 million admissions per week in the American movies. That comes to something like 67% of the population. Now I'm sure some people were going to the movies more than once a week, so it isn't literally as if 70% of the population was attending the movies every week, but it's something close to that. Far more

than half the population had an intimate, weekly, habitual relationship to the movies.

And the form that the Hollywood system took on was surely, in part, a reflection of this increasingly intimate and knowledgeable connection between a mass audience and the kinds of movies, the kinds of stories that Hollywood was pumping out. Can you think, for example, why the broad attributes of the system that I've already described, can you think about why those broad attributes would encourage the development of what we would call a system based on stars, in which, movie stars, the names of particular actresses and actresses become so well known that their names carry the film. And people go to the movies to see Gable, or Colbert, or whatever famous performer, famous actor. And there were dozens of such films, in a tiering system in which there were great stars at the top, B level stars below them, C level actors and actresses below them.

And the border between those were somewhat permeable. And an extraordinary number of people in the society were familiar not only with these stars and the particular films they had made, and would follow them from film to film, but were all so familiar with what was a partly mythological and fictional story about their private lives that the Hollywood publicity system kept pumping out about the stars and performers. And what was essentially created was a kind of mythological system in which the stars were literally-- for the audience-- characters or creatures who are literally larger than life.

And something, some vestigial form of that star system still survives today in the great celebrity stars, rock stars, and some of the great movie stars of today, but it's on very different scale. And the number of such recognizable figures is much smaller today than it was in the heyday of the Hollywood era, when there were dozens and dozens of actors and actresses whose entire careers were known intimately by the audience and whose work from film to film was something that particular members of the audience would follow religiously, would follow as if they were members of a kind of fan club.

And then the second aspect of the star system was-- coupled to it and linked to it-- was what we might call a genre system. What's a genre? A category or a kind of story. So the elegy is a poetic genre, and the western is a narrative genre. And as soon as we mention western, or elegy, or situation comedy-- to talk about a dominant television genre-- as soon as we say that, a set of expectations immediately enters our mind, right? We know that there are certain features that westerns have. We immediately know when we hear the word western what historical era the story is set in. We know what the costumes will be like. We can predict what

kinds of animals we're likely to see in the film. We can even, if we know the western genre well, we could even predict pretty accurately what kind of story we're likely to be told, and what the rhythms or trajectory of that story might be. Not because we know the particular western, but because we know the category. And every western that calls itself a western is in some sense in conversation with every previous western.

What we're talking about here, in part, is a new form of literacy. Or at least not exactly a new form, but a central form of literacy. A form of literacy that emerges in popular art when a mass audience becomes more and more knowledgeable about the conventions, and operations, and formulas on which the system depends. By the middle of the 1930s, virtually the whole history of the silent era and all the new genres that were elaborated and fulfilling themselves in the sound era, were now intimately known by segments, if not the entire American audience.

So to come back to my question, why would a system that emphasized the repetition of stars and the repetition of genres across experiences be a particularly appropriate or useful one for the kind of system I've described? What's the answer? If it's a mass production system. The alternative would be, to clarify my question, why would we not have a system in which every movie was a unique experience? Did not make gestures toward a whole class of other stories to which it belongs in, which it wants the audience to compare it. Or that a series of stars would emerge, so that every time you see a Clark Gable movie, or a Claudette Colbert movie, or a Barbara Stanwyck movie, you associate those performances in those films with all the earlier performances in which you've seen-- why does that system work? What's the answer?

All right. That's right. Because it's familiar, you know what to expect. It's a branding. And in fact, if you think about it, if you want people to shell out money every single week, you can understand why the notion that they should be getting something familiar might work, might be important. It's possible that you could get people to spend all of a significant amount of money, or at least a small amount of money-- in the early days admissions we're not that expensive-- for one experience, but if you expect them to do it week after week after week, it's natural that you would expect that the system that would develop would offer the audience certain familiar landmarks.

In other words, the answer-- and I think it's a very good answer-- the answer is that a mass production system lends itself to principles of repetition and economies of scale. What's an obvious thing, if you're a studio and you make a lot of Westerns, how can you save money? Do you have to hire the horses every time? Maybe you have your own stable. Not only that,

maybe if you have a scene of a stampede, you could use it in more than one movie, you don't have to film it again. And in fact, a lot of early Westerns have stock footage that were put in. They would film a tremendously exciting cattle stampede and they would use it in four or five different movies that needed stampedes. The same with the sets. They don't have to tear down the Western town and rebuild it for every movie.

So in other words, one could say that there are economic incentives that encourage this system. But this is another example of that magnificent paradox that I spoke to you about earlier in the term, the paradox that the crassest of alliances between commerce and technology should be the enabling conditions of a narrative art. Why? Because even though the origins of these strategies may very well have been totally commercial, as they begin to elaborate themselves, they inevitably become more complex. The audiences begin to generate expectations. The people who are repeating themselves begin to repeat themselves with variation. Even if they never intended to get better, they would get better. And of course some of them are excellent professionals and they do want to do a better and better job.

So what happens is the system begins to refine itself, even if it begins in the crassest of intentions. Figure out a way to save money and make as much money as we can, by giving the audience the same thing again and again. If the audience would buy the same story over and over again, no doubt Hollywood would give it to them. But of course, they have to introduce variations just to make a living. Just to make people come back. And then as these variations begin to elaborate themselves, something complex and rich begins to emerge. And this knowledge that the audience has becomes what we might call a form of literacy, a form of popular literacy.

So there's much more one could say about this, and I'm being very abrupt and overly brief about the way this system elaborated. Suffice it to say that there emerged in this era a series of recognizable separate categories of movie making. Westerns, gangster films, various forms of comedy, various forms of social realism, certain forms of historical spectacle. And other smaller genres like the newspaper picture, which is a kind of smaller sub genre. We're going to see one example of that tonight.

And so that what I'm trying to do over the next couple of weeks, and especially in this week, is trying to demonstrate these principles in small, by talking today especially about certain aspects of screwball comedy. And by placing that particular central Hollywood genre in the larger context of this manufacturing system, this mythological system that we've been

describing.

One way of explaining what I'm trying to get out when I talk about these stars and genres, and the purely commercial origins of what becomes a rich set of narrative expectations, is to say that what I'm really implicitly dealing with is a problem. It will seem less of a problem to your generation than it did to generations earlier. But it took a long time before the American Society began to recognize that the movies were a signature art form of American society, and that if American society was going to be remembered for its artistic achievements in the 20th century, the movies were going to be one of the prime instances of its artistic identity as a society.

It took a long time for Americans to recognize this. In fact, the Europeans recognized it before the Americans did. And one of the fundamental reasons for that is that our ideas about what art is were inherited notions that came essentially from the traditions of romanticism and modernism, which lead tremendous emphasis on pure originality. On the idea that the work of art has to be *sui generis*, unique to itself. That it has to grow out only of the individual genius of the artist.

Well, this notion of art is actually a very time-bound one. It's not really a universal notion of art at all. The notion of art that I want to suggest to you was a more populist one. It goes back to Homer and to the various forms of Epic Performance, and this notion of artisan work-- a communal one, in which the artist is a singer or a speaker to the main parts of the community, to the whole of the community, or to a large part of the community. And in order to do that kind of singing, to do that kind of address, the singer, the poet, the storyteller needs to use the categories and the story forms, and the language that is known by the majority of the community.

The aesthetic for this kind of art is an aesthetic of familiarity, in which meaning and significance is generated not by a shock of total recognition of everything in the text being new or innovative, but by something else. By the fact that certain very familiar strategies are suddenly very, very slightly. And it's the slight variation from the familiar that generates the significance. And I'm going to try to demonstrate these principles. In fact, all of the clips and films that you're going to see over the next few weeks-- and especially in today's viewing and lectures-- are embodiments or instances of this principle, as I hope you will see.

What we're talking about here, to borrow a phrase from the film scholar Leo Brody, whose

essay *An Aesthetics of Connection* is required reading in the course, we might say that what we're trying to identify here is an aesthetics of connection, in which the links and connections amongst different texts or amongst different performances, are emphasized. In which the familiar is a central element in artistic experience. Most people love to recognize the familiar. It is not the case that art always must continually surprise you. In fact, art that is constantly surprising, that makes no assumptions that you can share, or that allude to or refer to earlier forms of the experience, probably such a text doesn't even exist. Even if the allusion or reference to ancestors is one of antagonism in which the text is saying look how different I am from my ancestors, it still needs its ancestors in some way.

So the notion that a text can be entirely creatively original is itself a kind of modernist and romantic fallacy. In any case, the artistic principles on which the Hollywood film is based are artistic principles we could identify as populist or democratic. Democratist. And they're based on the idea that the familiar and the every day can be transmuted into something more complex by good performances, by good writing, by the creation of a compelling story. And that meaning is created not by a single unique creative act, but essentially by a conversation on communal process, in which a particular perception or sense of the world is juxtaposed against older instances of the same thing. And by comparison, one learns something about where one is in the particular new text. *An Aesthetic of Connection*.

It's one measure of the complexity and social centrality of the movies in the 1930s, '40s, and early '50s, that we can find in the system three separate kinds of comedy. It's a measure of its maturity, by not just one but three fairly robust separate strains of comedy. And this even excludes musical comedy, the musical film, which could be said to be even yet a fourth strain. Not just one form then, but three. And the form of comedy we're focusing on today is screwball comedy, but I want to say a word about the other two strains to give you at least some sense of where we're coming from.

The first significant strain that I would like to mention to you is what I call anarchic comedy. It mobilizes something that's elemental. An elemental impulse in many comedies and maybe in the comic impulse itself at some very deep level, which is an impulse toward anarchic destruction. There's always, hidden in comedy, at least a kind of skepticism or suspicion or hostility toward the established and the respectable. And one form that that can take in comedies is a kind of systematic anarchy, in which the large respected structures of a culture are systematically-- or sometimes unsystematically-- disabled or dismembered. And over and

over again, in the comedies of the Marx brothers, something like this happens.

I won't mention titles, but there are a number of titles-- I think I mentioned one of them last week or the week before-- *A Night at the Opera*, which concludes with the entire set of the opera falling apart, breaking down. And that kind of destructive-- there's another film that the Marx brothers made in which they are on a football team, and we see one of the things that Groucho does in that film is he gets the ball and he runs the wrong way. And he scores a touchdown for the other team, but then he keeps running, and he starts running out of the stadium. It was a sense that, the rules of this games are silly, let's ignore them. And so this sense of the dissolution of boundaries and the anarchic chaos that follows from the breaking down of established categories and edifices is part of the pleasure of these Marx brothers' comedy.

And it even extends, in some way, to a kind of deconstructive attitude toward language itself. And many times the dialogue in a Marx brothers film will go nowhere, it will be able end up making no sense. So even language itself is reduced to a kind of anarchic nonsense at times, in the Marx brothers films. An even cruder version of this would be in *The Three Stooges*. *The Three Stooges* are a version of this kind of anarchic comedy. And there's a final version I should mention, a rather distinguished one in it's own way, films that are associated with the actor W.C. Fields, a gravelly voiced comedian who often portrayed people who were half drunk and were very hostile toward children, very anti-sentimental. He would kick children, or spit at them, act as if children were smelly, annoying things who should get out of his way so we could keep drinking his scotch, that sort of thing. So there was both an anarchic and a kind of subversive element to this kind of comedy.

A second strain of comedy, even more powerful and artistically more valuable. A very, very interesting one, which continues to be influential. Films from this tradition have been remade recently in American cinema. And this is the strain of comedy we would call worldly, that other scholars have called, it's not my label. And one thing that the label intends to acknowledge is that many of these directors in this tradition were Europeans. And they brought a European attitude, especially toward sexuality. They were much more amused than shocked by sexual shenanigans.

So one measure of worldly comedy was it had a more generous and a less puritanical attitude toward infidelity, toward the body itself, toward sexual allusion, and sexual by-play. They still were not explicit by today's standards. You didn't see nudity in these films. But they were more



open about the fact that men and women actually engage in that behavior, and even sometimes take pleasure in it. An acknowledgment that was more difficult for non-worldly films to make.

And the central director of this tradition, although there were others, was Ernst Lubitsch. I put his name up on the board there. His dates are 1892 to 1947, and he made a series of films, especially in the '30s through the early '40s, that are still regarded as classics of this kind of worldly comedy. *Trouble In Paradise*, *Design For Living*, a film called *Ninotchka* in 1939. A film called *To Be or Not To Be* in 1942, an immensely bold film in which Jack Benny the comedian plays an actor who impersonates Hitler. The film is set in Berlin, and he actually plays as a double of Hitler. A very bold film, on a par-- and intellectually, I think, and artistically an even more powerful film than Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, although it shares the same ambition.

And these worldly comedies often told infidelity stories, or stories, as I've suggested, that took a much more benign and amused attitude toward our sexual crimes and misdemeanors. Both these strains of comedy are robust and deeply popular in the era. But the form of comedy that I want us to focus on, that we're centering on in this week, is the most important of all of these strains of comedy, it's what has come to be called screwball comedy.

And let me say a few things about screwball comedy as a category, describe it a little bit, and then I want to show you two clips that are intended to illustrate many of the principles I'm trying to articulate here. And we'll come back to this idea of star and genre in these clips as well because those elements are also at issue or embedded in what I want you to look at.

Maybe I should've mentioned, if you were curious about the later incarnations of worldly comedy, I meant to mention that for example in 1998, Nora Ephron made a film called *You've Got Mail*. How many of you have seen it? At least a couple. That's a remake of one of Lubitsch's films. And in fact, the Lubitsch film, *A Shop Around The Corner*, is a much more wonderful film. And it's a measure, I think, in part of the power and authority of Lubitsch's imagination and the elegance of his comedies that they continue to inspire imitation in that way.

What screwball comedy is, in some ways, a distinctive, a signature form of American movies. It's a unique equation of Hollywood in the depression years. It's derived in part from Broadway farces of the 1920's, and also from the slap stick physical comedy of the silent era. It's a kind of marriage or hybrid. And remember-- we've already said this but let me remind you-- one

measure of a mature medium or of a medium that's coming into maturity-- an expressive medium, a communications medium-- one measure of its maturity or of its emerging maturity is that forms that used to be thought to be separate, marry. Become hybridized. One of the things I was suggesting about Chaplin's work is it suggests a new maturity in the film, in the cinema as an institution because it's marrying comedy and melodrama, because Chaplin brings seriousness into comedy. He slows it down, it's not merely just slapstick anymore, it's also psychologically resonant. Not only can it make you laugh, it can move you.

That marriage or hybridization of two essentially separate forms-- melodrama, comedy-- makes for a richer film. I'm saying the same kind of thing about this particular form of comedy, this merging of ancestor forms, of the slapstick comedy of the silent era-- and of course the slapstick comedy of the silent era has its ancestors in stage slapstick-- and fast dialogue and witty repartee that was especially characteristic of a series of Broadway farces, made in 19-teens and the 1920's.

But the particular historical moment in which this form emerges is also a shaping factor in the kind of comedy and the subject matter of these comedies. The key qualities of screwball comedy were a kind of irreverent humor, something of the anarchic subversive skepticism that's characteristic of many comic perspectives, coupled with very fast paced vernacular dialogue. One way to think about screwball comedy is to say it's one of the first forms, along with singing movies, movies that have singing in-- I don't want to call the musicals yet because sometimes they weren't fully musicals, although musicals do emerge at a very early time-- but any movie that had singing in it, like some westerns. Early westerns had singing in it. Why? Because sound had just come in, it was a novelty. The screwball comedy is one of the forms that exploits sound in a really expressive and powerful way, compelling way, because it's full of dialogue. It's full of witty, rapid dialogue, most often arguments or conflicts or quarrels between men and women, dramatizing certain kinds of conflicts of gender in the course of the film.

So, key qualities. Irreverent humor, a kind of vernacular fast-paced dialogue, a fast physical pace as well, full of slapstick. So a physical quick pace and a verbal quick pace that are often in competition with each other to see which can be more irreverent and quick and fast and abrupt. Eccentric, often high born characters, who are made fun of and mocked. A lot of the screwball comedy deals with the upper social orders, but they're seen as clownish or foolish in some way. And in many screwball comedies, the wealthy characters need to be rescued by their servants. It's a very modest form of class warfare, in which-- again, remember it's the

American capitalist system that's making these stories, so we're not going to have a Marxist comedy that says that the government should be overthrown by violence-- but the comedy is constrained in certain ways, what the story's able to say, what the films are able to say. This is a matter to which I'll return tonight and talk a little bit more fully about the ideological and political limits that are imposed on the Hollywood system because it has to appeal to everyone. I think what I have to say will clarify these questions in ways that you'll find very helpful.

But for now, let's stick with screwball comedy itself. These high born characters then, they're criticized and seen as clownish, but they're never seen as morally evil in the way that a Marxist or a social historian might regard them. The stories are often very deeply improbable ones that are set among the irresponsible wealthy, the irresponsibly wealthy people. Often the aristocrats are very spoiled and hard drinking. In one of the most famous of these, a film made in 1937 titled *My Man Godfrey*, directed by Gregory La Cava, Carole Lombard and William Powell, two of the central to screwball comedy performers, are the stars. And there is a scene in a shantytown by the river, in which the poor are located. And the film seems to make some sort of an acknowledgement of the fact that the poor are here. It's acknowledging the horrors of the Depression. But it solves the horrors of the Depression in the end by having the wealthy people build a nightclub on the river banks to create employment for all the unemployed. And it's a very imposed-- and rather foolish in some sense-- happy ending.

So that film acknowledges more fully than some screwball comedies the actual existence of shanty towns and places where homeless people, or people who have to live under canvas live. Many screwball comedies didn't even go that far, but it solves the social problem in a characteristically mythological and magical, socially incredible way.

Another aspect of these films is that they foregrounded women, and this is a very important aspect of it. This is partly a function of the fact that in the 1920s, the era of the flappers, a new kind of sexually liberated woman begins to appear. Some of that is an outgrowth of the fact that, during the First World War when so many American men were in uniform, women got new jobs and were able to work, enter the workforce for the first time. And that created moments of freedom for women that had never existed in American society before. And some of that is reflected in screwball comedy, and in other films as well, but especially in the screwball comedies of the era. So it foregrounds women. And it shows women who often have a great deal more energy and freedom than the females in other films of the era.

Very often in these films, marriage is seen for the first time as a partnership of equals. And as

you'll see in *It Happened One Night*, that's the ideal of marriage that's dramatized in that film, one of the two screwball comedies we'll be looking at this evening. So these films also reflected the social disorientation of the '30s, the uncertain values that were represented during the Depression. The fear, in some sense, that the culture was breaking down or that the fabric of society was tearing in some ways. And so these films were ironically simultaneously escapist, because they were screwball comedies and they did zany things, and they often had ridiculous or improbable plots and improbable characters, and yet at the same time the anxiety that they also dramatize, the anxiety of things falling apart, of the center not holding, of a kind danger to the established structures and belief systems of the society, underlay even the most apparently escapist of these films.

So there's a subtext of strong women, of quarreling and manipulative men. And especially, of course, one of the things this dramatized for us were intelligent and witty women, like Katharine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby*, or Claudette Colbert in the film you're going to see tonight, *It Happened One Night*, or Rosalind Russell, in the second screwball comedy you're going to see tonight, *His Girl Friday*. And then finally, implicit in what I've been saying is that there are implicit in these stories, sometimes rising to the surface, sometimes just beneath the surface, but there are as a kind of hint or anxiety, are what we might call first some form of class conflict. Some sense that the class structure of the United States is a problem, that the Depression is causing difficulties. And second, a form of sexual warfare, in which the inequality between men and women, and the unequal relations that men and women have in the society are put in question, are quarreled with. In some sense, even mocked. And in many of these films, the actress is the dominant figure and the male character is the secondary figure. And even in some of the films where the male characters are even more powerful, the best one can say is that they're equals. And that in itself, regardless of what the plot does, was in some sense, not exactly revolutionary, but transformative. Potentially transformative.

Well, what I want to do with the time I have left is show you two clips, and they're intended to dramatize many of the principles I've been talking about. So let me rehearse them very quickly to you. I'm going to show you two clips from two separate screwball comedies. One, directed by Preston Sturges in 1941, called *The Lady Eve*. A second, directed by Howard Hawks, the director of the second film we're going to see tonight, *Ball of Fire*. Hawks is probably, of all the directors, the one most identified with screwball comedy, although as you'll see tonight when I talk a bit more about him, he was a master of other genres as well.

But the reason I want you look at these two clips is-- I have multiple reasons. It's the multiplicity principle in criticism. What I want you to recognize as you're looking at this, is first the power of the star system. Because here's Barbara Stanwyck. At this point in her career, she's one of the dominant female stars in the society, one of the biggest moneymakers in the society. And here we see her in two films that are in the same genre. Two different versions of screwball comedy. As you're watching, think about the way in which the persona that she established, the kind of character she stood for in film to film, is both stable but also changing. That is to say, the pleasure you take in watching the two different versions of Stanwyck is an embodiment of the principle I was talking about before, when I said that we need an aesthetic of connection.

We need to recognize that it's the familiar, rather than the completely strange and new, that can generate profound, complex sentence of artistic achievement. Because the Stanwyck we see in these two films is in many ways a radically different character, but we can also see certain continuities across her characters. And we can take pleasure both in what is the same about her, but even more we can take pleasure in the variations she's working on this persona.

So one of things that is embedded here is a notion of acting that emerges in the studio era that establishes American acting as something different from the classical British theory of what an actor is. The classical British theory of what an actor is is that the actor submerges herself in her role and becomes indistinguishable from the role. And that you shouldn't even be able to recognize the actor from role to role.

The American system that emerges from Hollywood and from movies is an opposite one, in which you are not only are you supposed to recognize the actor, you're supposed to take pleasure in the way the actor-- it's not really Barbara Stanwyck but the character that Stanwyck plays, the persona Stanwyck established is in film after film after film, how does that persona evolve? Change in nuances, when that persona is presented with different sets of questions, different sets of problems. And what you can feel-- and this isn't just true of the actresses of course, it's even truer for the male stars who had more freedom, there were more rules available to them. So people who are interested in Clark Gable or Humphrey Bogart could watch these actors across a range of films, each time not getting the same experience, but watching a variation on the persona that the actor was setting up.

So a new idea of acting, a different conception of what an actors job might be and of how the

audience might have a kind of literacy in performance that would enhance and complicate their sense of any individual performance, emerges in this era as well. And the Stanwyck clips demonstrate that.

The second thing I want you to see, again, same principle, having to do with screwball comedy itself. Here are two different screwball comedies, look at the differences in tone. They belong to the same genre, we can feel how much they belong to the same category, but also how much variation there is between them. So the point is, it isn't a simple form of repetition at all. It's a form of very complex elaboration and complication, in which the relation between one text in the category and another text is far more complex, artistically satisfying, and rich than we might imagine if we described this system in too abstract a way.

So here's the first scene from *The Lady Eve*. And let me set the scene. In this scene, Barbara Stanwyck plays a con lady. She's on a ship loaded with wealthy aristocrats, wealthy American businessmen, and she and her partner are trying to goal them out of money. And she's sitting at dinner trying to pick out a guy that is going to become her mark, played by the great American comic and serious actor Henry Fonda.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

**DAVID**  
**THORBURN:** He's very wealthy. Everybody knows he's very wealthy. He's the son of a beer magnate, an ale magnate. He's sitting down in the dining hall of this cruise ship. And all the fortune hunting women who are there wanting to marry rich men are staring at him.

-Not good enough.

-What did you say?

-I said they're not good enough for him. Every Jane is giving him the thermometer, and he feels they're just a waste of time. He's returning to his book, he's deeply immersed in it. He sees no one except-- watch his head turn when that kid goes by. Won't do you any good, dear. He's a bookworm, but swing them anyway. Oh, now how about this one? How would you like that hanging on your Christmas tree? Oh, you wouldn't? Well, what is your weakness brother?

**DAVID**  
**THORBURN:** So Stanwyck has become the narrator of this scene. But see what intelligence she shows, what knowledge.

-Look at that girl over to his left. Look over to your left, bookworm. There's a girl pining for you. A little further. Just a little further. There. Wasn't that worth looking for? See those nice store teeth, all beaming at you. Well, she recognises you. She up, she's down, she can't make up her mind. She's up again.

**DAVID**

I hope you see how brilliant this is because look in her hand here, we're looking at this through the mirror as she's narrating it to us.

**THORBURN:**

-Went to manual training school with in Louisville? Oh, you're not? Well, you certainly look exactly like him, it's certainly a remarkable resemblance. But if you're not going to ask me to sit down, I suppose you're not going to ask me to sit down. I'm very sorry, I certainly hope I haven't caused you any embarrassment, you so-and-so. I wonder if my tie's on straight. I certainly upset them, don't I? Now who else is after me. Ah, the lady champion wrestler. Wouldn't she make a houseful? Oh, you don't like her either? Well, what are going to do about it? Oh, you just can't stand it anymore. You're leaving, these women don't give you a moment's peace, do they? Well, go ahead. Go sulk in your cabin. Go soak your head and see if I care.

-Very sorry, sir.

-Why don't you look where you're going?

-Why don't I look?

-Look what you did to my shoe, you knocked the heel off.

-Oh, I did? Well, I'm certainly sorry.

-You did, and you can just take me right down to my cabin for another pair of slippers.

-Oh, well certainly. It's the least I can do. By the way, my name's Pike.

-Oh, everybody knows that. Nobody's talking about anything else. This is my father Colonel Harrington. My name is Gene, it's really Eugenia. Come on.

[END PLAYBACK]

**DAVID**

I hope you recognize the tremendous intelligence and wit that was embedded in that dialogue.

**THORBURN:**

That was a little too low. What is revealed about that character, dramatized about that

character, in that opening scene, tells us almost everything we need to know about her. Not everything, but almost everything. And you can feel the energy, the wit. And of course, who's in control of that scene? Not the man, but the woman.

Now let's look at another scene from Howard Hawks film, *Ball of Fire*. The basic situation is Gary Cooper, the man in the middle here, this fellow Gary Cooper is the head of a consortium of scholars who are compiling a dictionary of the English language, with special emphasis on colloquial or slang English. And earlier in the film, Gary Cooper went to a nightclub. And he saw the Barbara Stanwyck character, who is actually the mistress of a mob boss, do a song and dance number. He spoke to her, he interviewed her, and he became very excited by what she represented. By the linguistic resources, the verbal realities of the American language that he'd been oblivious to. And he wants her to contribute to his project.

She's not interested. When she shows up at the lair of the men of the scholars, when she invades the nest of scholars, she does it because-- although you don't know that from seeing this clip, but viewers of the film would know it-- because she's really on the run. She's afraid that her boyfriend, the mob boss, is going to bump her off. So she needs to hide out. And that's really why she's come here. All right. So here is this scene from *Ball of Fire*.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

-Have I missed anything?

-No, I was just about to explain. You see the word puss means face. As for instance, sour puss, pickle puss. Sugar puss implies a certain sweetness in her appearance.

-Never mind the etymology, was she--

-Was she blonde or brunette?

-Yes, which?

-That I don't know, I didn't notice. But her vocabulary, even an ordinary conversation--

-Oh, you spoke to her?

-Yes. In her dressing room--

-In her dressing room?



-Backstage?

-Yes. Unfortunately, she disclaimed any interest in our project, in words so bizarre they made my mouth water. Shove in your clutch, for instance.

-It's amazing.

-Potts, could you tell us, what was it like backstage?

-Very vivacious, I imagine.

-Perhaps ballerinas giggling up and down iron stair cases?

-Possibly wearing tights?

**DAVID**

I hope you're picking up the subtext that these old men are revealing.

**THORBURN:**

-It's getting a bit late gentlemen. Perhaps we had better get to bed.

-Someday I'll tell you my experiences with a young actress named Lillian Russel.

-Did you know her?

-I stood in the snow four hours to get--

-Is that our doorbell? But it's 12:25!

-Oh, must be the statistics on San Salvador saltpeter. I asked for it to be sent--

**DAVID**

Did anyone pick up on the joke there? Why is there a joke in reference to saltpeter? It's used

**THORBURN:**

in the army to keep men from getting too horny. It damps down your sexual energies, and he's writing an article about saltpeter.

-Hi-DE-ho! Don't tell me I'm too late for class.

-Oh my goodness gracious me.

-What is that?

**DAVID**

I don't know what scholar came up with this brilliant description, but there's a kind of

**THORBURN:** convention now among Capra's fans, and fans of this movie, to refer to this scene as the Snow White and Seven Dwarfs scene.

-Those are my colleagues.

-Oh!

-I must apologize for their lack of costume.

-Oh, that's all right professor.

-I haven't got my tie on.

-Oh, you know once I watched my big brother shave.

-Would you come in?

-Why not?

-Frankly, your coming here was the last thing I expected. Your no was so explicit.

-Well, I got thinking it over, and I said to myself, who am I to give science the brush?

-And I take it you've reconsidered?

-Yeah, that's the big idea.

-Oh dear, oh dear.

-Look out.

-That was Professor Oddly.

-Anymore of them around?

-I hope not.

-Hey, who decorated this place? The mug that shot Lincoln?

-This is our work room. The living quarters are upstairs.

-Whee, that's a lot of books. All of them different?

-I trust. May I have your coat?

-Yeah, thanks. Oh, Greek philosophy. I've got a set like this with a radio inside.

-Are you sure you don't want your coat?

-No, I'm fine. Except I've got a run in this stocking. Well how do we start, professor? You see, this is the first time anybody has moved in on my brain. Have you got some kind of a machine, an x-ray or a vacuum cleaner maybe that's out the words you want? What's your method, professor?

-Well, it's quite simple. If you'll be here tomorrow morning, not later than 9:30--

-Tomorrow morning?

-Well, yes. I've arranged a roundtable discussion with a few people of various backgrounds.

-You, you don't think we could begin the begin right now?

-Well, it's nearly one o'clock Miss--

-Oh, fool professor. Let's get ourselves a couple of drinks, light the fire maybe, and you can start working on me right way.

-I wouldn't think of imposing upon you at this hour.

-Listen, I figured I'm working all night.

-Any hasty, random discussion would be of no scientific value. You see, I have to have my notes thoroughly prepared for the seminar tomorrow.

-OK. Where do I sleep?

-I don't know, where do you live?

-Up on riverside, but I'm going to sleep here.

-Here? Oh, you don't understand Ms. O'Shea. We're all bachelors, with the exception of Professor Oddly who is a widower. Why, no woman ever-- even Ms Bragg, who takes care of our needs-- goes home every night at 7:30.

-If you want me tomorrow morning at 9:30--

-Oh, I do Ms. O'Shea. But even the most free-thinking people must respect the--

-All right. Feel that. Go on, feel that foot. OK, tootsie bell, what do you say?

-It's cold.

-It's cold and it's wet. Now, come here. Come here. Closer. Closer. Oh, come on, give. Hello kids. Look down my throat. Go on, look down. All right. [MUMBLING]

-I don't know what to look for.

-There is possibly a slight rosiness in the laryngeal region.

-Slight rosiness? It is as red as the Daily Worker and just as sore. Who are you?

**DAVID**

**THORBURN:**

The Daily Worker. Red as the Daily Worker. Did you get that? No? The Daily Worker is a communist newspaper, so when she says "it's as red as The Daily Worker, she's making a rather witty joke, especially for a gunman's maul.

-Oh.

-Professor Robinson, Law. Professor--

-Ah, ah, ah. Not so fast. Just let it creep up on me. I'll get to know them. Come here physiology, for all I know I've got a fever. Feel.

-It's possible.

-Certainly. And he wants to throw me out on my tin. There'll be no 9:30 for me if you make me go out in the rain now.

-Naturally not.

-With the streets cold, and the subway hot and full of germs?

-Oh. I'm a pushover for streptococcus. Can I have this now, kid?

-We'll call you a taxi, and furnish you with woolen socks and warm slippers.

-Really, I don't understand you Potts. Why take chance with valuable material?

-Think of your article, Potts.

-See. They get the point.

-If I might venture a suggestion, why couldn't the young lady sleep in my room?

-Professor Peagram!

-I can bunk in with Professor Robinson, I sometimes do when there's an electric storm.

-Yes, he's afraid of thunder.

-Well then, it's all settled. Well, I guess I'll turn in. Can I have my coat?

-Thank you. Hi-DE-ho, fella!

-I'll show you to my room.

-Yes, we all will.

-I know where my own room is, thank you, without any help from you.

-I'll find it, don't bother. Just rough out the directions.

-The top of the stairs, and the third door on the left.

-Gentlemen. Just a moment, please. Gentlemen, this is all highly irregular. What if this should come to the attention of the foundation? And what about Ms. Bragg tomorrow?

-What are you talking about? This is research, isn't it?

-Yes.

-Certainly. Who was that guy that learned so much from watching an apple drop?

-Isaac Newton, 1642 to 1727, the law of gravity.

Yeah, that's him. And I want you to look at me as another apple, Professor Potts. Just another apple.

[END PLAYBACK]

**DAVID**

**THORBURN:**

All right. So you can get an idea not only for how richly comic these films can be, but also how rich the subtext, the sexual subtext can become. Even though, of course, as you all should know if you've been reading Cook, there was a production code in force after 1934, and there were all kinds of very elaborate rules imposed on American movies. A form of self censorship because the movies feared censorship from the government, so they came up with their own system. And until sometime in the, I guess it was the 1960's, the code held and it had all kinds of ridiculous elements in it.

One of the primary ones that people always laugh about, rightly I think, is that if it showed a woman on a bed, at least one of her feet had to be on the floor. You couldn't show a woman lying with both feet on the bed, it was too suggestive. But you can see how clever filmmakers and powerful performers were able to make a mockery of those kinds of constraints, because subtle and complex and witty films are able to do many, many things that are in a suggestive way, that keep them from crossing the boundaries set up by the censors, but nonetheless have a powerful energy and sexuality. So the similarities between those two scenes, but also the differences between them, tell you something about the way in which the aesthetic of connection, this aesthetic of familiarity, this popular aesthetic operated in Hollywood movies.