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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Comedy and Desire in *It Happened One Night*

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RESUMEN

En 1934, con su país todavía sobrecogido por los efectos de la Gran Depresión, Frank Capra estrena en Hollywood *It Happened One Night*, una comedia romántica y revolucionaria que cambiaría el modo de abordar la risa y el sexo en el cine durante las siguientes décadas, inaugurando el género conocido como screwball comedy, y ganando por el camino 5 premios Óscar.

El sentido profundo de la comedia, proveniente de ancestrales rituales dionisiacos, posee en su esencia un espíritu liberador en el que muchos artistas durante siglos han hallado un terreno seguro desde el que hablar de temas socialmente *tabús*.

It Happened One Night narra una sencilla historia de amor, en sí misma nada original: la que surge entre Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) y Peter Warne (Clarke Gable), dos personajes socialmente opuestos. La novedad de esta película se sitúa en la forma en la que se enfrenta a la estricta censura de la época. Capra utiliza la comedia para contar la evolución sexual y romántica de los personajes. Esto se puede ver en la comicidad de “los muros de Jericó”, por ejemplo, una inteligente metáfora que simboliza todo lo que separa a Ellie y Peter; o en la pelea falsa que los atrae todavía más; o en la canción en el autobús, espontánea y reconciliadora, exaltando la unión, la vida y el amor. A través de la risa provocada por sus sugerencias, metáforas y sobreentendidos, *It Happened One Night* consigue traspasar todas las barreras y mostrarnos la atracción y el deseo de sus protagonistas con toda la fuerza, imaginación y sofisticación del género.

ABSTRACT

In 1934, with his country still recovering from the impact of the Big Depression, Frank Capra releases in Hollywood *It Happened One Night*, a romantic comedy that would change the way laughter and sex are addressed in the cinema for the following decades, inaugurating the genre popularly known as screwball comedy, and winning 5 Oscars along the way.

The deepest meaning of comedy, one that comes from ancestral Dionysian rituals, poses in its essence a liberating spirit in which many artists have found a safe ground to display issues socially regarded as taboo.

It Happened One Night tells a simple love story not very original on itself: the relationship between Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) and Peter Warne (Clarke Gable), two characters from very different social backgrounds. The novelty of this movie lies in the way it faces the strict censorship of the time. Capra uses comedy to display the sexual and romantic evolution of the characters. This can be seen, for example, in the comedy of the walls of Jericho, a cunning metaphor that comes to represent everything that separates Ellie and Peter; or in the fake quarrel that brings them closer together; or in the song the passengers in the bus break into, one that highlights union, life and love. Through laughter, provoked by the film's suggestiveness, metaphors and on-the-nose allusions, *It Happened One Night* succeeds in breaking barriers and in opening the audience to the protagonists' mutual attraction and desire without sacrificing the strength, imagination and sophistication of the genre.

INTRODUCTION

Laughter has always been revolutionary. In the novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) the monk Jorge of Burgos describes laughter as a devilish wind that “shakes the body, distorts the features of the men, [and] makes man similar to the monkey” (Eco, 79). According to the novel, the liberating power of comedy posed a threat to faith in the Middle Ages and thus, to the social and religious stability that prevailed in society. Six hundred years later, comedy has no longer an evil or diabolic nature, but it is still an unsettling force that often defies the discourses of power. The history of cinema, the quintessential art of the 20th century, bears witness to the continuing centrality of the genre in helping spectators understand our place in the world, whether in psychological, social, sexual or political terms.

Frank Capra, one of the most representative directors of the period that is usually described as Classical Hollywood Cinema, found in the revolutionary universe of comedy and laughter a chance to create another radical and ground-breaking moment: *It Happened One Night* (1934), a movie that changed the meaning of comedy in cinema for the following decades. Jorge believes that laughter defies faith, and Capra uses comedy in his movie to challenge a harsh and strict censorship, an instrument that also shields and protects the dominant morality.

Comedy in screwball movies tells what cannot be said. In this case, it tells us the growing emotional and sexual relationship of two characters that go from rivals to affectionate lovers in the eternal battle of love. *It Happened One Night* set the example for the cycle of screwball comedies that flourished between the mid-1930s and the Second World War, and used comedy to tell one of the most memorable and outstanding love stories ever.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the liberating role of comedy in Capra's pioneering movie – *It Happened One Night* – as an escape valve that serves to display Peter's and Ellie's evolving erotic and sexual desire throughout the movie. In order to do so, I will start discussing the history and the meaning of comedy, and how comedy and sexuality became a successful pair in the screwball genre. Then, I will continue with the formal and thematic analysis of three different scenes fundamental in Ellie's and Peter's sentimental journey, and lastly, I will provide a brief conclusion.

COMEDY: FROM DIONYSUS TO SCREWBALL

In our culture, the term “comedy” is widely used in everyday speech; it has become an ordinary and mundane word that seems to have acquired a simple and trivial meaning. However, the connotations of comedy are wide and complex. Throughout history, many different critics and philosophers have attempted to furnish it with an accurate definition. Nonetheless, if there is something in which almost all critics agree is that comedy, as we understand it today, should make people laugh. Across the centuries, laughter has been interpreted in many different ways. It has been understood as an act of cowardice, of superiority, as a sin, as the result of excitement or as the product of defamiliarization. It has also been regarded as a “means of averting antisocial conflict and as an extra-linguistic bark signalling the limits of understanding” (Stott, 121).

In Ancient Greece, people laughed to scorn at someone else’s misfortune, abnormality or ugliness. They laughed to express disdain and to defile the other. In the Galenic tradition, it was believed that laughter stemmed from an imbalance of the four humours that shaped human personality; they thought that what provoked laughter was often ridiculous or excessive. Cicero emphasized that “the things most easily ridiculed are those which call neither for strong disgust nor deepest sympathy” (in Leggat, 7). In the Renaissance period, laughter became more complex. It was described as a sense of ‘sudden glory’ by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who defended the idea that laughter arises when someone sees from a triumphantly secure position how others stumble and fall. Three hundred years later this theory was rephrased by Anthony M. Ludovici adopting a Darwinian form. He developed the idea that humans, just like any other animal, need to show their fangs when feeling threatened. Thus, laughter is understood as an act of self-defence, as a way to cope and ease the painful sense of inferiority or danger at

someone else's threat of superiority. Laughter therefore, was seen as "a tactic for survival, a mark of 'superior adaptation' among gregarious animals" (Sypher, 25). Sigmund Freud elaborated on Hobbes' theory and described laughter as revealing a "pleasurable sense of superiority" (Freud, 168). According to Freud, someone laughs at us in order to bring us down to their level and to prevent us from exerting any possible claim of dignity and authority over them. Laughter arises in people because, in comparison with us, another person is making "a great expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones". In sum, laughter arises as a sense of superiority in relation to the other (Freud, 168). This explains why, by making oneself clumsy or stupid, it is easy to produce a comic effect and make others laugh. If another person's mental expenditure is greater, or his physical one lesser, however, then it is not laughter that it will produce, but admiration or astonishment. One of the methods of the comic is, thus, is to "degrade the dignity of the individual by directing attention to the frailties which they share with all humanity, but in particular, the dependence of their mental functions and bodily needs." (Freud, 170). Some years later, Susanna Langer asserted that everybody laughs simply for joy and for pleasure; "people usually laugh without finding a person or a situation funny, but for the joy of it" (77).

Whatever the origin or meaning of laughter is, many critics and philosophers agree that laughter is the source of the comic and the ultimate purpose of comedy. Susanne Langer describes laughter in a comedy as "a culmination of feeling – as the crest of a wave of felt vitality" (76). Laughter, therefore, arises when the suspense is broken and energies released. For Langer, laughter is the brilliance of drama, "a sudden heightening of the vital rhythm" (79), and it is precisely this "vital or comic rhythm" that she believes to be the core of comedy: "Comedy arises naturally wherever people are gathered together to celebrate life, in spring festivals, triumphs, birthdays or weddings. It is an image of

human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprises of unplanned coincidence (Langer, 8).” Comedy celebrates life and humans’ capacity to endure. It does not matter how many obstacles or misunderstandings people might face along the way; they always manage to pull themselves together and keep going. The joy that people get from the experience of the comic is that joy that “comes from the realization that despite all our individual defeats, life does nonetheless continue on its merry way” (Corrigan, 8).

The celebratory and festive nature of comedy is already hinted at the origin of the word. It is generally agreed that the word ‘comedy’ has its roots in the Greek peninsula, its etymology deriving from the amalgamation of the Greek words ‘kômos’ or ‘kômai’ (praise) and ‘oda (song). Comedy has been regarded as a product of the rural environment and it has long been associated to seasonal agrarian fertility rites, perpetual rebirth and eternal life. At some point in history it became related to the God Dionysus, God of the fertility of nature, well-known for its devotional use of wine and his orgiastic rites in which women withdrew into the wild to make contact with nature. It seems to be rather clear that Dionysus’ attributes, traits and the nature of his worship have significantly influenced some of the most important principles of comedy such as those of travesty, festivity o relative sexual freedom (Stott, 4). Because of its Dionysian associations and festive structure, comedy has been provided with “a fictional arena in which taboos may be openly discussed without fear of social contamination” (Stott, 59). Comedy is a secure place for desire and erotic arousal within the context of laughter.

At the same time, laughter and comedy can only be explained within their social context: “to understand laughter in comedies we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all we must determine its function which is a social one” (Bergson, 330). Aristotle already noted that human beings are the only creatures who feel compelled to laugh: “no animal but man ever laughs”. Bergson went

further to assert that “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human” (Bergson, 334). Nobody laughs at landscapes, animals, or lifeless objects, and if someone does, it is only because of some resemblance to humans. Freud also described the comic as “an unintended discovery derived from human social relations” (Freud, 167). Certainly, comedy is a social activity; it is always conceived with a specific kind of people in mind, and it is “everywhere produced from the matter of dominant cultural assumption and commonplaces” (Stott, 7). Thus, the question of how or why things are funny to certain people is similarly determined by culture.

Romantic comedy is a particular manifestation of comedy, but one that goes back to the genre’s origins in Dionysian rites. Being a type of comedy, spectators expect to laugh, but they also expect to come across themes such as “the nature of love, courtship rituals, transformations, renewal, and the relationship between individuals and society” (Glitre, 18). Many critics situate the emergence of this particular genre around the sixteenth century, when love, which had been strictly an extra-marital affair in a society in which marriages were prearranged, becomes the principal reason for marriage. According to Deleyto, “at that moment, love and marriage are fused together in a single narrative, a modern concept of society based on the nuclear family is inaugurated and romantic comedy is born” (168). Some critics like Barber and Northrop Frye have traced the origins of romantic comedy to Shakespearean comedy, in which they see a circular journey “from the character’s society to the countryside or foreign city and back to society” (Deleyto, 31). During this journey, characters learn something about themselves that they did not previously know through comic incidents such as disguise, masquerade or mistaken identities. It is the finding of this new self and identity that gives them enough courage and strength to return to society and take up their rightful social positions. Northrop Frye saw in Shakespearean comedy “a spirit of regeneration in sympathy with

the natural rhythm of the seasons” (Stott, 28) and he identified it with Greek New Comedy, as opposed to Old Comedy. Both, being forms of romantic comedy, deal with a young man that falls in love with a young woman, and focus on the different individual and social obstacles that the couple have to overcome in order to be together. However, whereas Old Comedy focuses on the “blocking characters” and on the separateness of the lovers, New Comedy focuses on the process of reconciliation (Deleyto, 19)

From 1934 to 1941 the Shakespearean structure of comedy: man and woman meet, match, marry and mate, surfaced again in Hollywood cinema in a new comic genre known as screwball comedy (Cavell). These films focus on the eccentric behaviour of the hero and the heroine who, in a variant of the eternal battle of the sexes, “move from antagonism to compromise” (Glitre, 19). The antagonistic nature of the couple, and screwball’s characteristic stress on physical humour, have been generally agreed to arise from the suppression of explicit sexuality under the harsh and strict censorship that controlled 30’s Hollywood cinema (Sikov, 1989). Andrew Sarris describes screwball comedies as “sex comedies without the sex” (in Greene, 21); he holds the idea that “screwball comedy is characterized by a sense of frustration” that appeared when the sex was removed from sex comedies by the PCA (Production Code Administration). This frustration was made evident in the way screwballs use “slapstick and violence to represent courtship and marriage” (Greene, 56).

In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, the direct representation of the sexual act was out of question on the Elizabethan stage and cleverly replaced by “verbal sparring” (Deleyto, 2011). According to Greenblatt, Shakespeare was a master transforming erotic heat into the “witty, erotically charged sparring that is at the heart of the lovers’ experience” (89). Therefore, he was mainly concerned with generating plots full of obstacles and occasions for “friction between the main couple” (Greenblatt, 90).

Some centuries later, the harsh restrictions of the Production Code on sexuality also made verbal battling and slapstick violence the main escape of sexual tension. The thornier the relationship, and the more obstacles on the lovers' way, the better (Sikov). As has been previously mentioned, from 1934 onwards, many directors and screenwriters found in comedy: in physical cartwheels, and slapstick, a safe place to discuss sex evading censorship, and in laughter, a way to release all the characters' frustrated passions.

IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT: A JOURNEY OF DESIRE.

In spite of its short life (it lasted for no more than a decade), screwball comedy has left a mark on our memories “far greater than could have been expected from [its] impact at the time” (Sikov, 10). It has been one of the most popular and beloved genres, and it produced some of the most extraordinary movies in the history of Hollywood Cinema, including *The Awful Truth* (1937), *Bringing Up Baby* (1938), *His Girl Friday* (1940) or *The Lady Eve* (1941). *It Happened One Night* (1934), which inaugurated the genre together with *Twentieth Century* (1934), was shot in 1933, in the midst of the Big Depression. This was a time when people, in Claudette Colbert’s words, “needed a dream of splendour and glamour” (Life Achievement Award, 1982), and this is what Frank Capra gave them with this film. Even though during the filming it was believed that the movie was going to be a failure, it became a surprising box office hit. Something about the film spoke to the people of the time and, later in 1935, *It Happened One Night* became the first of the three films in history to win all the five top Academy Awards, later followed by *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* (1975) and *the Silence of the Lambs* (1991). The story follows the simple and traditional plot of romantic comedies: *It Happened One Night* is the story of a man and a woman from completely different backgrounds that undertake an emotional – as well as physical – journey from being antagonistic in the battle of the sexes to becoming a happily married couple. Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) – a spoiled, strong-headed, runaway heiress – and Peter Warne (Clark Gable) – a charming and snarky working-class journalist – are thrust together by unforeseen circumstances and forced to work together. As they overcome the many obstacles that they find on their way, they fall in love. However, the plot is of little importance, since the main focus is on the eccentric, whimsical behaviour of the characters. Fast speed, witty dialogues and a cunning and comic way to evade the harsh and strict censorship that controlled thirties’ movies are

what made *It Happened One Night* a brilliant screwball comedy that paved the way for every other screwball that would follow.

It Happened One Night provided one of the most noteworthy and commented on episodes within screwball cinema; the hitchhiking scene. This spectacular scene has often been discussed because it displays one of the most recurrent and popular screwball topics: the power of female sexuality and the comic debasement of masculine confidence and charm. For my analysis, however, I have chosen not to include it. Despite the importance of gender roles and expectations in screwball comedies, my focus here will be, rather, on the comic spirit of screwballs and how the genre deploys it to deal with erotic tension and sexuality. In order to develop this topic, I will centre my attention on three different scenes that are very close together in the narrative of the movie, but that are crucial to understand the role of comedy in Peter and Ellie's growing emotional and sexual relationship. First, I will analyse the scene in which all the passengers of the New York bus start to sing "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze" as fundamental in the creation of the "comic rhythm" which, as we have seen, is according to Langer, a central characteristic of comedies, and that awakens Ellie's and Peter's willingness to acknowledge their sexual desire for each other. Even though following the narrative order of the movie this is the last scene that I am going to analyse, I will start from this purely "comic" and harmonic moment and then go back to the two previous scenes to study how it has been achieved. The first of these will be an equally famous scene, the walls of Jericho, which revolves around a cunning comic prop that works as a metaphor for Ellie's and Peter's antagonism but that, at the same time, fosters the erotic tension between them. Lastly, I will focus on the scene in which Ellie and Peter play out a comical charade to deceive Mr. Andrews' detectives (Joseph Crehan and Frank Holliday) as a turning point in the battle of sexes, and therefore, in Ellie and Peter's emotional relationship; by releasing some of their

frustrated erotic passions through a quarrel and having some fun, Ellie and Peter are able to laugh together and leave their rivalry behind.

The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze

The bus in which Peter Warne and Ellie Andrews travel to New York offers a micro-panoramic view of society in the thirties, a society very much debilitated by the Big Depression: a woman starves until fainting, someone steals Ellie's luggage and many passengers travel to New York looking for new opportunities. Only poor people who could not afford a train ticket travelled in bus, and it is hard to imagine Ellie, a spoiled and sheltered lady, riding on a bus; "we're wasting our time, can you imagine Ellie Andrews riding on a bus?", asks one of Mr' Andrews detectives while looking for Ellie at the bus station. Used to having her way in everything, Ellie makes a helpless traveller: she has to fight for a seat, she misses one bus and all her belongings are either stolen or lost. However, she meets Peter Warne, her saviour in many occasions, and they start a sentimental and personal journey together. Like in many Shakespearean comedies, Ellie and Peter undertake a circular journey away from society that allows them to grow as individuals and as a romantic couple and then, to return to society "having become wiser from their experience outside society" (Deleyto, 30). After overcoming two of the main obstacles that they find on their way to New York – sharing a room together and adopting different identities to fool Mr Andrews' detectives –, Ellie and Peter resume their journey towards the big city. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a band in the back of the bus starts to play "The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze", a very well-known and popular song among 1930s audiences (Kendall, 46). Different passengers stand up to sing different lines and everybody joins in to perform the chorus. All of a sudden, this traditional song abolishes all passengers' adversities and all the different economic and

social barriers that may have divided them, and turns everyone “into members of a giant ‘economy class’ community” (Kendall, 46). Ellie, now more experienced and mature, is no longer a hopeless or a misplaced traveller, but part of that small community within the bus. A long shot from the front of the bus frames all the amused and entertained passengers turned on their seats and focused on the song; for three minutes, social class and money are meaningless, music is all that matters. There is an explosion of joy and vitality, enhanced by the bouncing of the moving bus, and this scene comes to represent “the pure sense of life” that Langer describes as “the underlying feeling of comedy” (Langer, 68) (fig. 1).



Figure 1: Explosion of joy and vitality

Everything comes to a halt; the characters put aside their problems, their differences, and “an image of human vitality holding its own in the world amid the surprise of unplanned coincidences” (Langer, 70) is created. Throughout the scene, several medium close-ups of Ellie and Peter, together with bright front lighting, reveal the strong and emotional bonding that they are developing; gazes full of honest complicity and frank smiles run

between the two. The song uplifts everybody to the same level and, for a moment, it erases the heavy economic and social barrier that divides Ellie and Peter. This is further enhanced by the softening of their significant size difference (something with which Capra plays a lot throughout the movie) through medium shots from Ellie's seat side: since Ellie is closer to the camera, Peter does not look bigger or taller than her (fig. 2).



Figure 2: The exchange of looks and smiles between Ellie and Peter

Focalizing the singers and musicians from Peter and Ellie's perspective turns the audience into passengers on the bus as well, enjoying and even participating in the song. Freud claimed how important it was for comedy audiences to be also in a "cheerful mood in which one is 'inclined to laugh'" (Freud, 172) and, in this particular scene, sharing this moment of exhilaration with the audience is crucial for us to empathise with the couple's love and affinity (fig. 3).



Figure 3: Enjoying the show

Since this is a purely “comic moment”, comedy’s traditional associations with Boccaccio’s erotic liberation afford Ellie and Peter “a franker confrontation with their sexuality than society had previously allowed them” (Deleyto, 34). For the first time, all barriers have come down and Peter and Ellie’s sparkling eyes suggest that they are willing to consciously acknowledge their growing sexual desire. Comedy grew out of carnival, and “originally carnival was dedicated to the continuity of life” (Lehmann, 101) and to regeneration. The lovers, Ellie and Peter, reassure us that life is going to continue even though difficulties are going to arise: “the course of true love never runs smooth” (Lehmann, 101).

Even though this scene does not contribute to the development of the plot, it is crucial to understand the evolution of the two main characters’ feelings. It offers a moment of relief in the midst of problems and of the growing sexual tension that has been raising in the two previous scenes. In spite of the many obstacles Ellie and Peter have already had to face in their first part of the journey, life continues and this constitutes the “comic rhyme” Langer describes. Comedy focuses on the lovers’ togetherness that, in this scene, is further enhanced by a cheerful traditional song. Nevertheless, within the

structure of the genre, it is not possible to reach the lovers' complicity and a "happy ending" without a previous opposition between the characters and the appearance of some barriers that they will need to tear down.

The walls of Jericho

Sexual desire lies at the very heart of every romantic comedy. However, in 1934 a strict and harsh censorship put out of question any direct reference to sex or sexuality. Thus, in many romantic comedies sex becomes metaphorized, a process whereby filmmakers found clever ways of implying it without actually explicitly referring to it. Frank Capra set the example comically creating the "walls of Jericho" – a blanket hanging between two individual beds – that allows a married woman and a single man to sleep together in the same room: as Ellie remarks, "that, I suppose, makes everything quite all right" referring to the blanket but hinting at the censorship. Whereas the dividing blanket acts as a physical barrier that signifies all the different issues that separate the two main characters – social class, wealth, marital status, and gender conventions –, it also intensifies the sexual desire between them. Paradoxically, the blanket in the middle of the room prevented this scene from being censored while, at the same time, contributing to the creation of a deeper and richer sexual tone. As Cavell puts it, the thing that was to "make everything all right" by "veiling something from sight turns out to inspire as significant an erotic reaction as the unveiled event would have done" (155). The barrier works as censorship usually does: it hides the literal view of what is happening at the other side of the room and in doing so, it activates the characters' imagination thinking about what is going on in the dark.

When Ellie and Peter have to spend their first night together at the cabin since they have no money, they are still "outright antagonists in the battle of the sexes that was

to become standard for the romantic comedy film” (Mizejewski, 52). Sharing a room with Peter is the last thing in Ellie’s mind when they reach the cabin. It is her first time alone with a man and her vulnerability is visually underlined by a lateral medium shot that reveals their different sizes – Ellie looks even smaller in Peter’s big coat – and by Ellie’s stillness next to the door, ready to run away, while Peter moves happily all around the room (fig. 4).



Figure 4: Ellie ready to run away

The snarky journalist is the only one having fun and he feels free to tease Ellie because, as he says, he is only interested in her as an interesting “headline”. Still smiling and with exaggerated and theatrical gestures, Peter gives a comic speech on the walls of Jericho that now divide the room. However, instead of soothing Ellie’s anger, the shot-reverse-shot sequence makes clear that its effect is one of growing discomfort on her. She becomes even more annoyed and irritated when Peter, in another comic routine, starts to undress: “Perhaps you’re interested in how a man undresses” (fig. 5).



Figure 5: Peter's defiant striptease

By teasing Ellie, Peter is anticipating what will happen if she ignores the wall and remains on his side of the room. As Mizejewski puts it, “Peter’s monologue makes the game funny, but the flip side is the danger of sexual power relations – the male power of rape and Ellie’s vulnerability” (56). Just when Peter is about to unbuckle his belt, Ellie runs behind the safety of the walls of Jericho. Shot-reverse-shots show what happens on both sides of the room: on the left, a relaxed and comfortable Peter, smoking a cigarette, gets ready for bed. Not obtaining any kind of word from the other side, and probably sensing Ellie’s frustration, he assures her in a mocking tone: “The walls of Jericho will protect you from the big bad wolf”, quoting, and then singing, Disney’s famous theme song from “The Three Little Pigs”. The sudden appearance of this cartoon’s song in a highly sexual scenario does not only act as a highly funny and comic moment for 1934 audiences (Disney’s song had been released the previous year), but it also brings about a turning point in Ellie’s behaviour. On the right side of the room, something has awakened within Ellie. She is no longer annoyed or vulnerable; she bashfully bites her lips, her fingers, and dares to talk for the first time in three minutes. Mizejewski suggests that “humour grows more aggressive” throughout the scene; first the building of the wall of Jericho that places

Ellie on Peter's side of the room, then the disrobing, and then Peter in his bed singing the well-known Disney song that suggests the flimsiness of the "wall" between them (57). Finally, Ellie's sexual desire has arisen. This is further enhanced by a drastic change in lighting; only the moonlight illuminates now the room, revealing Ellie's silhouette as she changes into Peter's pyjamas. The rain outside is no longer oppressive, but a romantic element that contributes to the creation of a highly sensual and erotic atmosphere, together with the backlighting that casts different shadows on Ellie and Peter's faces. Several shot-reverse-shots enhance their proximity, and a close-up on the blanket from Peter's perspective reveals his sexual frustration; "I wish you'd take those things off the walls of Jericho", he says no longer in a mocking tone, as Ellie hangs her lingerie on the blanket. The imagination of what is happening on the other side of the blanket has also awakened Peter's sexual desire.

The silence makes the sexual tension palpable, and the blanket barrier positions the audiences as voyeurs. Unlike in many contemporary romantic movies, the night time chat between these two main characters takes place through a blanket that separates them, a scenario that is not only erotic but also highly comic. The final shot is a long shot that frames the whole room and reinforces "the *mise-en-scène* of desire"; a room split by a blanket barrier, one bed on each side, and two windows from which moonlight is cast on each character (Mizejewski, 60). Agreeing with Cavell, Leonard Leff also points out that "the blanket wall provokes and generates sexiness instead of repressing it" (in Mizejewski, 47). The famous framing of Ellie and Peter in the flimsily divided bedroom conveys desire and the promise of sex precisely because it shows the barrier, not the consummation (fig. 6).



Figure 6: The mise-en-scène of desire

The “wall”, therefore, becomes a significant prop throughout the film; it is only at the very end, when a close-up of the blanket on the floor reveals that the walls of Jericho have finally tumbled, implying the consummation between Ellie and Peter, that the complete meaning of the metaphor is realized.

The “Great Deceive”

The next morning, Ellie and Peter have to overcome their second greatest obstacle: deceiving Mr. Andrews’ detectives. Whereas sexual desire is only implied and hidden behind the walls of Jericho during the night, the next morning it is made “physical” when Peter and Ellie are forced to work together. Freud saw in comedy “a release, a free discharge of impulses we daily have to repress” (170). The comic masquerade of this scene works as a moment of sexual release for Ellie and Peter. As has been previously mentioned, sex was a topic that could not be discussed in thirties’ cinema and sometimes, according to Sikov, “it was sublimated into the furore of one-on-one combat, in which the double standard itself was overturned in noisy contest of verbal assault and insult battery (12).” This comes from a long tradition; in Elizabethan theatre, Shakespeare was

a master in creating “comic plots that could appropriate and profit from the special beauty of sexual arousal” (Deleyto, 34). Comic dialogues became a theatrical substitute for sex and “dallying with words became the principal Shakespearean representation of erotic heat” (Greenblatt, 90). According to Greenblatt, sex was transformed into the witty, “erotically charged sparring that is the heart of the lover’s experiences” (89). This traditional link between fighting and sex was used in many screwball comedies to avoid censorship and to deal with the characters’ frustrated passions.

In *It Happened One Night* this link is made clear when Ellie and Peter, trying to get rid of Mr. Andrew’s detectives, suddenly start to quarrel and to scream at each other pretending to be a thirties stereotypical working-class couple. Being able to adopt another persona, forget about their class differences, and bicker at each other, makes them, for the first time, enjoy this instance of intimacy. In contrast with the walls of Jericho that had divided them the previous night, the performance of domesticity for the detectives now enhances their proximity, framing them together on one side of the room, and separating them from the detectives (fig. 7).



Figure 7: Ellie and Peter play a charade together to fool the detectives

There is no longer an economic and social barrier between them: Ellie becomes a plumber's daughter with a high-pitched southern accent and Peter a jealous and abusive husband that is way too protective of his wife. He does not hesitate to aggressively push away the detective when he approaches Ellie, and to raise his hand when Ellie starts bawling. Ray Carney also associates the loud and hostile quarrel of this charade with the issue of intimacy, suggesting that an argument is "a close second to making love for the depth of involvement and emotional self-exposure it demands" (in Mizejewski, 36). Furthermore, this is enhanced by the topic of the quarrel itself: sex and gender expectations. Ellie is not allowed to "butt in" when "her husband" is arguing with other men, and Peter accuses her of letting "a big Swede" hit on her. Since they are now a working-class couple, drunkenness, jealousy and sexuality are no longer taboo issues but hot topics that foster screaming arguments. Mizejewski claims that the class drama is "also a sexual and material one in that the domain of plumbers is the lower body, culturally coded as the sphere of pleasure, looseness, and transgression" (36). This is further enhanced by Peter rearranging Ellie's look and clothes: seconds before the detectives enter the cabin, he hurriedly tousles her hair, unbuttons her shirt and pushes her thighs apart, forcing her to sit with her legs open, something that a lady like Ellie herself would never do (fig. 8).



Figure 8: Sharing a moment of intimacy

Their posture during the charade is also significant: while Ellie remains sitting down trying to hide behind Peter, he stands up enhancing his power and his authority over her. The comedy and the irony of this scene is further enhanced when, after all the bowling and shouting, the owner of the motel remarks in an accusative tone to the detectives: “I told you they were a perfectly married couple.”

The moment of intimacy that Ellie and Peter share in the cabin is not only created by the fake quarrelling and the charade itself, but also by the fun that they both have together. Cavell remarks the importance of play for these two characters: “the pleasure of their own company in the development of their relationship in this film” (159). As soon as she wakes up in the morning, there is a significant change of humour within Ellie; she is no longer defensive or vulnerable like last night, but happy and chatty: “What makes you so disgustingly cheerful this morning?”, asks Peter surprised. Ellie has a boring and dull life: she complains about always being told “what to do and how to do it and when and with whom”, and now she has a chance to escape this life – even if it is only for three days – and live without “nurses, governesses, chaperones or bodyguards” controlling her. In the charade, Peter gives her the chance to become the plumber’s daughter she had

wished to be in the previous scene: “I’d change places with a plumber’s daughter any day”. Unlike last night’s comic routines (the striptease, the monologue on the walls of Jericho) in which only Peter had participated, both of them work together in “the game” of deceiving the detectives. It is now that Ellie and Peter burst into laughter together for the very first time. As soon as the detectives leave the cabin, Peter crosses the wall of Jericho again to kneel before Ellie and button up her shirt in a very intimate gesture that enhances the sparks of attraction in their shiny eyes (Cavell, 1981). This is further enhanced by a medium close-up that highlights Peter and Ellie’s splendid smile (fig. 9). The shared fun of the charade has made them forget about the wall between them and thus, about all their differences.



Figure 9: Ellie and Peter laughing together

Ruiz also discusses the importance of play, which is linked with spontaneity, improvisation and role-playing, for Screwball couples; “Screwball improvisation and play involves a resurgence of childlike vitality through the properties of fun and laughter (155)”. Adopting and playing with different identities allow Ellie and Peter to grow together. They have a chance to leave behind their personal differences and to act together

and “share the joke” (Ruiz, 165). Being able to have fun together and release their sexual frustration in a fake quarrel allow the couple to leave behind all their rivalry and disputes. After having overcome these two main obstacles, Peter and Ellie are ready to resume their journey and, having become wiser and more experience in the country, they are also ready to let themselves acknowledge their feelings for each other.

CONCLUSION

It is no coincidence that screwball comedy – a genre characterized by the creation of strong sexual desire between the lovers – emerged at a time when a strict and harsh censorship banned any kind of sexual act or reference on screen. At a time of Depression and poverty people needed joy. They needed to believe in love stories with happy endings that gave them the hope and the promise of a brighter future full of opportunities, and this is what screwball comedies gave them. Screwballs were born out of censorship; their brilliance and their eternal footprint on cinema lie in the way they faced the Production Code. In reevaluating the ways in which essential sexual desire and sexuality could be displayed onscreen without directly attacking censorship, directors found in comedy a safe and open ground to portray these forbidden and taboo subjects. Highly charged sexual scenes were only made possible in screwballs using comedy – slapstick violence, masquerades, and verbal banter – to downplay and mask the strong erotic tension underneath. This mechanism, however, was not new. Three centuries earlier, in Elizabethan theatre, Shakespeare was also an expert in creating highly comic plots and characters in his comedies to escape his own time restrictions (Greenblatt). Censorship, in both cases, seems to have had the contrary effect to that at first intended.

This is best explained and reflected in *It Happened One Night*'s famous wall. The blanket is a physical representation of the censorship that does not let Peter and Ellie sleep together in the same room one next to another, but it is also a prop that enhances the sexual tension between them. When Ellie crosses the barrier-censorship to “throw herself” in Peter's arms on the last night, he sends her back to her side of the room. Because she is still a married woman, they still cannot be intimate, and therefore, the barrier must remain active between them. The delay of sex accentuates the audience's expectations and the characters' sexiness. Once Ellie has her previous marriage annulled

and has married Peter, they can finally consummate their relationship and the censorship literally drops on the last shot of the movie (symbolized with a close up of the blanket falling down). Nobody sees what happens after, but everybody knows that this is when sex finally happens. Thus, sexual desire becomes a fundamental comic and fun game for the screwball couple that brings about a clear evolution of their relationship; from the initial dislike and antagonism (Peter and Ellie's first night at the motel), to the overcoming of every obstacle on their way (Peter and Ellie's working together to deceive Mr. Andrews detectives) to the final celebration of the couple's love and union (the signing of a popular song by the whole bus).

The three sequences that I have analysed from *It Happened One Night* are three highly comic scenes that sum up and anticipate the main love plot (conflict, complicity and union) of not only this movie, but, with variations, of every other romantic comedy that would follow. Contrary to Jorge of Burgos, William of Baskerville in *the Name of the Rose* believes in the instructive value of comedy and how "through witty riddles and unexpected metaphors, it tells us things differently from the way they are" (Eco, 276). Comedy in these three scenes is crucial to understand the evolution of Peter and Ellie's growing sexual desire and relationship: from the playful and childlike verbal banter of the first night to the aggressive and violent masquerade close to love making the following morning, and to the singing of "the Daring Young man on the Flying Trapeze" on a night bus that celebrates their love, their union and their mutual acceptance as equals and as potential lovers. *It Happened One Night* is the story of a journey; not only the physical one that Peter and Ellie undertake together, but also the internal one that made Capra's pioneering movie sublime and eternal.

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