

Grégoire Halbout, *La Comédie Screwball hollywoodienne, 1934-1945, Sexe, amour et idéaux démocratiques*, Artois Presses Université, 2013, 424 pages.*

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Serious studies can also be entertaining, particularly when they deal with Hollywood comedies, and Grégoire Halbout's impressive book on the screwball output is both invigorating and illuminating. Starting with definitions of screwball comedy, Halbout offers precise and stimulating analysis of the *word* screwball itself through its etymology and history, showing how the word was carefully repeated in films and in the paratext of critics in the press (90). Etymology thus suggests allusions to various games and sports: snooker – “a stroke in which the ball recoils and moves backward after striking the cue ball below its centre” – or cricket and base ball, implying a devious and astute move from the player. The word points to the character's cunning and eccentricity, before taking on the meaning of typical zany behavior (54).

La Comédie Screwball hollywoodienne proposes “a coherent discourse about the American couple at a specific moment” in the country's history, while revealing this “free expression” for the “charming illusion” it is. As Halbout writes: “The point is not to evaluate the efficiency of such propaganda, but rather to understand why their filmic formulas were so successful among audiences”. Inherent to the genre is “the idea that the world can be improved by films” (12).¹

The introduction puts forward Halbout's three-point methodology: a) the description of recurrent phenomena such as censorship, the debate about marriage as an institution in the years 1910-40, etc., b) structural analysis of themes, plots, codes and narrative stereotypes, c) the study of the social function of film as cultural mediation. The impressive corpus of the book consists of an extensive group of 130 films, with a focus on 40 more basic titles.

Chapter two offers the expected panorama of directors and actors who made screwball comedies. For the sake of demonstration (e.g. the real independence of filmmakers within the Hollywood system) some pages tend to present a mere list of people and films, but these can be read rapidly - and returned to when the reader is looking for instructive data. On the other hand, detailed analyses of sequences illustrate the way directors such as Michael Leisen built their narratives on the spot and displayed actual creative freedom (87).

Halbout provides a clear typology of male and female types and characters, from Fred McMurray as the all American athletic boy-next-door, to Gary Cooper and James Stewart as Jeffersonian idealists, or from Melvyn Douglas' easy man of the world to Cary Grant's childish fight against objects and everyday life. He insists on the fact that actors

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¹ As the book has not yet been translated into English, all quotations are translated by the author of the review.

tended to wear the same clothes in the films as the ones they wore in their “everyday” lives: typically, Cary Grant’s film *persona* was meant to coincide with his “real life” person (98).

The second part of the book (171-291) gives an in-depth description of the relationship between the Hays Administration and Hollywood. The general point of view follows the line adopted by French scholars such as Jean Loup Bourget and Francis Bordat: the double paradox of the “land of freedom” enforcing a drastic form of self-censorship and the surprisingly creative film production it “favored”. However, having consulted the Hays Office archives in the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles, Halbout is able to provide a new detailed picture of the meticulous relationship between Hollywood and the Censors, including tone, words, pictures, attitudes and even objects. For example, a close analysis of *Bluebeard’s Eighth Wife* illustrates the way directors mocked their censors. As Halbout puts it

The paradox of internal Hollywood censorship was to induce the opposite of the expected result and generate stories and situations that were considerably more suggestive (271).

The whole study of *censorship* (more than a hundred pages) is both precise and entertaining and, more generally, illustrates the many paradoxes of any artistic creation.

The third part of *La Comédie Screwball hollywoodienne* deals with the meaning of screwball comedies within the American democratic system in the wake of the Wall Street Crash and during the New Deal period. Halbout offers a cultural history of the country according to three sources: novels, “advice books” and films, all addressing the institution of marriage in order to define and improve it. Screwball comedies question authority (“cops, ill-conceived rules, fathers, aristocrats... and all forms of “conservatism”). And they do it seriously:

While at first glance one may imagine screwball comedies to be based on sweet, sentimental romances, they actually put forward uncompromising social and political discourses, establishing the weakening of the father figure as a criterion for identifying the genre and its ideological posture (317).

Naturally, a new conception of marriage emerges from the repeated crisis and recovery of the screwball couple:

...[marriage] is an informal contract to which both members of the couple adhere, reposing on a declaration of love and recognizing the reciprocal rights of the sexes, while offering a large diversity of roles to each member (325).

The last chapters provide a detailed study of the relationship between the individual contract of marriage and its social equivalents within American democracy:

Screwball comedy daringly offers a re-reading of the social contract by fictionalizing intimate relationships, thus allowing a private pact to take precedence over an institution, and for couples to free themselves from the influence of society’s rules (380).

Finally, this important book is also an excellent occasion to discover – or rediscover – a body of films that are now more readily available.