Preston Sturges and The End of Laughter

Alenka Zupančič

Abstract: Preston Sturges embodies, in his own person, the break between the so-called "old" and "new" Hollywood, the decline of the latter's "golden age", which roughly coincides with the decline of the studio system. The paper analyses this break and the wider social circumstances related to it through discussion of two of Sturges' films. *Sullivan's Travels* carries the date 1941 and certainly represents one of the peaks of the old Hollywood, whereas *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948) already belongs to a different era. Both films are comedies, yet they are profoundly different in form as well as in spirit. The paper focuses particularly on how Sturges' cinematic genius responds to the question which has been in the air at that time, and which also seems to be very relevant today: should artists engage with the pressing issues of their time, and how?

Keywords: Comedy, laughter, social relations, collective, ideology

There seems to be a unanimous agreement that Preston Sturges embodies the very point when something irreversible happens to the classical Hollywood (and particularly to comedy[1]); something that irreversibly changes the direction and even the "nature" of Hollywood, ending the so-called golden age of Hollywood (on the systemic level this is of course related to the beginning of the decline of the studio system). Sturges embodies this shift in the most literal sense: his opus is quite literally split in two. On the one hand we have the extraordinary and absolutely deserved success that accompanies his early movies, made within the framework of the classical studio system;[2] on the other hand there is the period when (led by the desire of a greater artistic freedom) he left the studio system, to which he had subsequently returned with *Unfaithfully Yours*. Even though this is also the period of some of Sturges' great artistic achievements, it is generally seen as the period of his "decline". I propose to take a closer look at two films by Preston Sturges, which are paradigmatic of this shift, *Sullivan's Travels* (1941) and *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948).

1 See Harvey 1998. *I will be referring a lot to this excellent book.*

2 *The Great McGinty, Christmas in July, The Lady Eve, Sullivan's Travels, The Palm Beach Story, The Miracle of Morgan's Creek, Hail the Conquering Hero* – a series of extraordinary achievements all of which were made between the years 1939 – 1943. 50 years later the American film institute will put no less than 4 of these movies (*The Lady Eve, Sullivan's Travels, The Palm Beach Story, The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*) on the list of the 100 funniest American movies.

Sullivan's Travels

What happens with Hollywood (and particulars with comedy) in the late 40s and early 50s is usually described in these terms: comedy loses its innocence and turns black, or vanishes altogether. In this it shares the destiny of genre films in general; but let's focus on comedy for now. We can attempt to put this shift in a slightly broader perspective by way of reminding ourselves of a few facts. Screwball comedy, which is a unique and extremely interesting variety of comedy, became popular during the Great Depression, originating in the early 30s and thriving until the early 40s—another proof that hard times and comedy usually go together. Times were hard also in terms of the artistic freedom, as censorship got harsher by the increasingly enforced Hays Code. But Freud was right: obstacles and censorship can increase the ingenuity of humor, and outsmarting the prohibitions is in itself an important source of pleasure in comedy. The Hays Code was particularly harsh on sexual matters, and screwball comedies ended up finding such ingenious ways of circumventing it that film critic Andrew Sarris even defined screwball comedy as "a sex comedy without sex". And as it turned out, this was a great recipe for inventing, exploring, and keeping alive what Alain Badiou has named *la scène du deux*, the scene of the two. That is to say, a love relation that is neither a fusion of the two into one, nor an anatomy of the impossible love, but a scene on which the "two" is kept alive through the very difficulties, oddities, and non-obviousness of the relationship.[3] Crucial for this kind of ongoing dance, this *pas-de-deux*, was the invention and presence of the "screwball ladies". These were not simply strong, independent women, they were also active generators of comedy and of the comic spirit of love.

So, times were hard, but screwball comedy was not the only kind of comedy around. Another Hollywood giant, Frank Capra, while inaugurating the screwball comedy cycle with *It Happened One Night* (1934), had turned away from it and towards a very different kind of comedy: less crazy or immediately funny and more moderate, sentimental, even moralizing. Capra's comedies always have a message and profess a direct engagement with the most pressing "issues" of the time (poverty, deprivation). There is no doubt that Capra was a cinematographic giant (and Master), but it is far from sure whether this kind of direct engagement makes him politically more radical than other authors of comedy. He did convince Graham Green who, in a 1936 review of *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*[4], wrote: "Capra has what Lubitsch, the witty playboy, has not: a sense of responsibility."

3 Alluding to Lacan's famous dictum we can perhaps best define relationships in screwball comedies as "non-relationships that work".

4 *Mr. Dees* is a comedy about a rich man who, at the end, gives his money away to the people who need it.

This is an interesting question, and of some actuality today, since times are not so very different. Should artists engage with the pressing issues of their time, and how? As far as comedy goes, and leaving Lubitsch out, we could say that there is the Capra way, and then there is the Sturges way—and the comparison is indeed quite instructive. The Capra way echoes in a lot of what we hear today in terms of "responsibility" in dealing with the contemporary issues of (increasing) poverty, social differences, and deprivation, even in otherwise rich parts of the world. What brought this about, we hear, is (moral) *corruption*. Corruption is the source of all evils, and it comes with wealth and power, which is why poverty is on the side of moral good. Although it makes people rough on the surface, once you scratch the surface and get to know these people, they are all really nice and good. The flipside of this is, of course, that poor people are good only so far as they stay poor, that is to say so far as we are in the position to help them. To quote from James Harvey:

"The 'sense of responsibility' that drives Capra to rise these issues doesn't prevent him from betraying them on screen – from falsifying and condescending to the poor people he shows us and from sentimentalizing the impulse to help them. ... There is always a lot of talk in Capra's films about dignity of people like this farmer [the maddened out-of-wok farmer from *Mr. Deeds*], but what we get when we see them is wheedling and ingratiation and emotional blackmail. The poor man who comes on with a gun [and threatens to kill Deeds] finally says 'Excuse me' for pointing it and ends up just the way these movies like their poor people: weak and lovable and grateful. ... Capra seems nearly unable to imagine a poor person who isn't genteel, once you get to know him. Getting to know him is always the main problem – as it is with your neighbor, too. John Doe [another famous Capra's hero] sees 'the answer'—'the only thing capable of saving this cockeyed world' in people's finally learning that the guy next door isn't a bad egg.' But what if you learn that he *is*—even worse than you imagined, or at least more troublesome? Then what?—forget him?"[5]

In respect to the social issues taken up by Capra, his main message is thus that poor is good, and that one should love the poor for the richness of their heart, and for their moral standards. Diagnosis of corruption as constituting the main problem wipes out all consideration of social antagonisms and of their systemic causes; it sends out the message that these antagonisms can be overcome by a kind of sentimental reconciliation between the poor and the rich.

It is in relation to this that we can measure the subversive edge of Sturges' position, whose answer to the question of the "pressing issues of the time" was considerably different. In one of the highest points of his first, screwball period, *Sullivan's Travels* (1941)—a movie directly dealing

5 Harvey 1998, p.141.

with the question of if, and how, should a rich film director engage with "the pressing issues of the time"—he engages in quite open polemics with Capra. He frontally dismantles the axiom "poor is good", as well as the condescending posture relating to it. And, philosophically most interestingly, he proposes a kind of *ontology of poverty*. I am referring to the deservingly famous exchange between Sullivan (a very rich and successful movie director) and his valet; the dialogue revolves around Sullivan's decision that he would stop making genre movies which only entertain people, and take up a serious and pressing issue of poverty and misery in which more and more people find themselves. In order to carry out this project, he has to—this is his conviction at least—begin by learning first-hand about poverty and deprivation, so that he can make a realistic move about it. He thus decides to go out in the real word and take a closer look at it. Here're some bits of the dialogue:

> **Sullivan:** I'm going out on the road to find out what it's like to be poor and needy and then I'm going to make a picture about it.
> **Burrows:** If you'll permit me to say so, sir, the subject is not an interesting one. The poor know all about poverty and only the morbid rich would find the topic glamorous.
> **Sullivan:** But I'm doing it for the poor. Don't you understand?
> (...)
> **Burrows:** You see, sir, rich people and theorists—who are usually rich people—think of poverty in the negative, as the lack of riches—as disease might be called the lack of health. But it isn't, sir. Poverty is not the lack of anything, but a positive plague, virulent in itself, contagious as cholera, with filth, criminality, vice and despair as only a few of its symptoms. It is to be stayed away from, even for purposes of study.

This is certainly not the way in which any of Capra's heroes would speak about poverty. Burrows' thoughts are undoubtedly intriguing, and we should repeat and recite them today with rigor, in the face of the (almost exclusively) humanitarian approach to poverty, and of its sentimentalization.[6] There is absolutely nothing glamorous or "nice" about poverty, and we should not think of it simply in negative terms: it is an ontological entity of its own standing, and produces certain kind of behavior. It needs to be eradicated, and not understood. To say that poverty is not a lack of something is of course not the same as to say that the poor lack nothing—the deprivation is very real. Yet the point is that this deprivation can precisely not be understood *solely* as deprivation (minus), but as something that has its "positive" ontological foundation

6 As well as its glamorization. –The fashion industry is turning big money out of the business of glamorization of poverty: just think, for example, of all the torn, ragged jeans sold over past decades, often for higher prices than impeccable jeans....

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in the systemic reproduction of social relations. Or, put more simply: if we want to abolish the minus, it is not enough to "fill it up", for the minus will not disappear, but rather become a filled-up, "full minus"; in order to really change anything, the structural place of the minus (deprivation) itself would have to disappear, for this place is in itself a positive entity, perpetuated by the existing social relations, regardless of the changing fluctuations of richness. The question, for example, is not simply why so many people are poor and dying of hunger, if we know that there is enough food and money in the world for this not to have to happen. The right question is slightly different: Why is it that, in spite of this, so many people *have to* live in poverty?

To return to the movie: Sullivan doesn't listen to his valet, and goes on with his plan. After several comical and unsuccessful attempts to get out in the real world, attempts at the end of which he always ends up in Hollywood again, he finally succeeds to "infiltrate" himself among the poor and live with them for a while.[7] Sullivan is touched and affected by the misery he sees, and he decides to directly distribute part of his money among the poor; which he does, enjoying the surprised and grateful looks of the lucky receivers.

Now comes the crucial turning point of the movie, in which Sullivan unexpectedly gets to experience in full what it means to belong to the bottom of society. What happens is this: one of the poor and needy—who, however, does not correspond the cliché of the inner goodness of a poor man's heart—steels his shoes in which Sullivan has hidden documents testifying to his real identity. A bit later (when he sees Sullivan handing out big amounts of money) this same tramp robs him and almost kills him; while escaping from the scene, however, the perpetrator is run over by a train. Disfigured beyond recognition he is identified by "his" (that is Sullivan's) shoes, so Sullivan is proclaimed dead. The real Sullivan remains without identity, and when he wakes up from his unconscious state after the fight, he also suffers from short-term memory loss. When he then responds to a railway guard (who treats him as brutally as he treats other tramps hiding in trains) by punching him, Sullivan is sentenced and sent to six years in a hard labor colony. This part of the movie is particularly interesting, and for many reasons.

First for how it extends the comedy over its own edge: the real—not only of poverty, but also of social injustice—surprises us in what is a direct extension of comedy (and not in the form of dropping the comedy, and turning to serious business). Sturges uses the classical comic technique of the surplus-realization (of what Sullivan planned and wished for): Sullivan gets to realize his original plan (to experience how the poor and needy really live) fully, and with a surplus. He is officially dead, nobody is looking for him, and in the prisoner's colony where he now finds

7 Connected to this is a love story with an unemployed actress played by Veronica Lake: they "join" the poor together.

himself they look upon his claims that he is really a famous movie director as simple craziness. He is submitted to brutal violence, even torture—all of which is considered perfectly normal here, considering the *class* of people sent to these colonies. A classical comic technique of surplus realization is thus used in a way that (gradually) kills the laughter off. There seem to be absolutely no way out.

Then, in a rather sublime twist, which actually constitutes the peak of the movie, the laughter moves from the audience (we have stopped laughing a while ago) and emerges on the side of the "poor and needy", and of the prisoners. The prisoners join a congregation of black people in a church where they are allowed to watch a movie; a slapstick cartoon. We first see a long line of worn-out prisoners marching toward the church in chains, against the background of gospel music. They sit down on the benches and the black priest greets them as equals (with the rest of congregation). The projection of the slapstick cartoon that follows is filmed as a series of cuts, jumping back and forth between the action on the screen and the faces of the spectators (the blacks and the prisoners). The rhythm is accelerating as the salves of laughter also intensify, and the camera takes time for a series of close-ups of the crowd and of the faces of the prisoners (each face being a story of its own), laughing more and more uncontrollably, hysterically. Upon seeing the shots of the prisoners, with their faces deformed with irresistible laughter, we cannot but agree with the labeling of Sturges as "American Breugel"... The laughter is hysterical and contagious, which is not unimportant, and the whole sequence is long, meaningful. The prisoners laugh from their hearts, as we say, but at the same time there is something sinister (menacing, ominous) in this laughter and in the way it is filmed: something excessive, something disturbing the homely comfort of the (supposedly natural) social differences that frame the film at the level of its narrative. We get something like a time outside of time, a hint at the emergence of masses as collective subject, or at least at the possibility of such an emergence. The poor and underprivileged are certainly not shot here "as we like to see our poor": as weak, grateful, and lovable; no, they are presented as a subjects emerging out of, and with this excessive laughter...

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Sullivan eventually finds a way out of prison. He finds a newspaper reporting about his mysterious death, and thus, learning what happened, he turns this into an opportunity. He claims to be the one who has killed the famous director (himself), for which he gets a lot of attention and publicity—which is how his friends and co-workers find out that he is in fact still alive. In the end, he gets to marry the girl he loves, and decides against making a realistic movie about the suffering of the "common people", although the studio bosses now fervently want him to do it, because of the huge publicity that his adventure got.[8] He decides to make a comedy instead, for this is what he has learned: the best he can do is to create something that will give the masses of the poor an opportunity to laugh.

This ending and its message may seem rather meek, even trivial, but are they really? I would point out two important things that one shouldn't fail to notice. The first concerns the question of how this ending affects the storyline that leads to it, and particularly what it brings out in relation to its final part (Sullivan's time in the prisoner's colony). Sullivan abandons the project of the realistic film about the poor, claiming that he hasn't suffered enough to make it. What exactly does this mean, this idea that he hasn't suffered enough? Here's what I think this means, or suggests: as much as a good-hearted rich man may want to think that underneath all his wealth, he is just the same kind of human being as the poor are, *he is wrong*. Once we have our social (class) positions, there is no zero-level of humanity at which we would all be the same. He is not one of them, they are not in the same boat, and it would be extremely

8 The film was supposed to be called "O Brother, Where Art Thou?". As it is well known, the Coen brothers made a movie bearing this title in 2000—a direct reference to Sturges and, in many aspects, a homage to him.

presumptuous to think so. This is precisely the lesson Sullivan learns in the prisoner colony, and especially *by getting out of it*. For the following is quite amazing, if you stop to think about it: Sullivan wasn't sent to the prison colony on false charges, he *did* hit the guard, and for this he got exactly the sentence that low class people usually got for this kind of offence. There was no individual injustice or misunderstanding at the origin of his imprisonment. The injustice is *systemic*, and this becomes obvious when, upon succeeding to make his (also class) *identity* known, he is immediately set free, while the rest of his co-prisoners stay in prison—although we may reasonably suspect that at least some of them committed no bigger offenses than he did. What comes out here is the real, and the irreducible, of the class difference. This is marked clearly enough (although in a playful way) in a brief dialogue between Sullivan and an old man whom he befriends in prison.

> **Sullivan**: I don't have time to spend... six years...
> **Old man**: But you were sentenced.
> **Sullivan**: I know that, but I still haven't the time.
> **Old man**: Then you'll have to find the time.
> **Sullivan**: Look, they don't sentence picture directors to a place like this for a little disagreement with the railway guard.
> **Old man**: Don't they?
> **Sullivan**: No.
> **Old man**: Then maybe you aren't a picture director. Maybe this idea just came to you when you were hit on the head. Maybe. We used to have a fellow here who thought he was Lindbergh. He used to fly away every night. But he was always back in the morning.

This last line is a very nice formulation of the class difference: whatever this guy thought or did, he always ended up back in prison. On the other hand we have Sullivan who, whatever he tires and does to get away from Hollywood, always ends up back in Hollywood (this is precisely the joke, the running gag, of the first part of the movie: the comedy of his unsuccessful attempts at getting "out in the real word").

We are not claiming that the film calls for Communist revolution, but it certainly doesn't embellish the misery of the poor or romanticize it: it doesn't reduce the poor to the stereotype of "inner wealth" and goodness, but leaves here a space for the subject. It does not picture class division as an epiphenomenon under the surface of which we are all the same (just human beings), nor does it imagine that class division could disappear if the rich experienced and appreciated what it feels like to be poor. This is decidedly not a matter of feeling (which is why comedy is perhaps the best genre to approach it). Despite the happy ending, the end of the movie is certainly not an image of general social harmony (or at least of its approaching)—but this does not exclude the laughter.

The other important point related to the film's ending concerns the question of laughter as such, and of its place in the movie.

Laughter is not only or simply an expression of individual relief and pleasure, it is decidedly a *collective*-forming affect, more so perhaps than any other. At the same time the collective setting enhances the powers and effects of comedy (the two feed and increase each other in a kind of dialectical spiral). And let us not forget that movies of that time were unavoidably intended for a *collective public* experience (and their directors were very much aware of this). We also know that to see a good comedy home alone, or even with a few friends or family, is never the same experience as to see it in a public place, together with all kinds of different people we don't know. "Seeing a smart comedy with a smart, responsive audience—where everybody's perception seems to sharpen and heighten everybody else's, where intelligence as well as the hysteria becomes infectious—is an experience like nothing else."[9]

This is a very simple and a very far-reaching observation. It holds particularly true for comedy (and much less for melodramas, thrillers, or other kind of movies). And it is safe to say that whereas the rise of TV (and the huge decline in movies attendance)[10] did not destroy the movie industry, it destroyed (or deeply affected) movies as collective experience; and this has a lot to do with the end of the golden age of film comedy.[11]

So the final argument of "Sullivan's Travels" about the importance of making people laugh is not simply an argument about the comforting pleasure of laughter; it rather points to laughter (and comedy) *outside of their service to anything* (outside of their being good for this or for that purpose). If laughter can function as a potential place of the emerging of a subject (and of a collective subject), it is precisely so far as it serves no immediate purpose. The ending of the movie clearly suggests that.

Sullivan is out of prison, very happy, and decides to do a comedy, while the rest of the poor prisoners remain where they are. Except that they get the last laugh. The last lines of the movie are followed by a shot

9 Harvey 1998, p. 672.

10 The average weekly attendance, which had been around 90 million in the mid- to late-forties, dropped to almost half that by 1953, and has been declining more or less steadily ever since.

11 We often hear today that movies and TV shows, including comedies, are so stupid and simplistic because "this kind of thing is what people want". But there is no "people" here, no collective, just a sum of individuals in no danger to be infected by an intelligence other than their own. Which may explain the increasing stupidity of these films and shows. Freud has already written on how jokes do not really exist before they are told and laughed at (by others). Joke is by definition ontologically incomplete, and it needs an audience to come into being. By responding to a joke we don't respond to a full-blown entity, we are involved in its ontological constitution. And it is this shared involvement that transforms a mass of individual into a (temporary) collective. And the possibility that a joke falls flat is as important as its success, and is actually part of it. To be sure, there are lots of reactionary jokes and reactionary collectives, and stupidity can be as contagious as intelligence, but this in itself is no argument for dismissing the capacities of the collective. Collective is more than just a mass of people (and we also know how the post-war America was scared of anything collective, directly identifying it with "totalitarianism").

in which we see again the prisoners joined in a collective laughter. This could be understood of course simply as an illustration of Sullivan's last words (that a good comedy or laughter, is the most he can give to the people). But this final shot has a non-negligible self-standing, independent power of suggestion:; it is a dream-like, phantom-like shot, in which the "poor and needy" are united in hysterical collective laughter; inserted among them, in an amorous cloud, is the love-couple (Sullivan and the actress), who laugh together with the prisoners.

This last image is extremely interesting. It is a paradigmatic image of the screwball comedy's invention of the relation between love and comedy, sanctified by collective laughter. But it also invites some further speculations. For example, in screwball times, people were looking at amorous couples on screen, laughing at their adventures, dialogues, jokes. This last ephemeral shot of *Sullivan's Travels* looks like the laughing collective itself moved from the audience to the screen, on the side of the amorous couple, almost as if all of them were now waving goodbye to us, the "real" audience, which will remain there merely as an assembly of individuals condemned each to him or herself. This assembly will have, from now on, only irony in its disposal—irony, rather than comedy. As Harvey formulates this brilliantly (linking it to the "death of laughter"):

"Where a successful joke connects you to an audience, an irony may do just the opposite. Mostly, an audience 'gets' a joke or else it falls flat, as we say. But an irony ... may only confirm itself, may begin to seem richer than it did even at first, if half the audience misses it."[12]

So in the final, phantom-like scene of *Sullivan's Travels*—a film which is otherwise the paradigmatic representative of the golden age of Hollywood and of comedy—we can already see a kind of premonition of the future history of Hollywood: the comic love and collective experience are leaving the scene, which will soon be occupied by other, newer, and more mature trends and approaches, at pace with social changes and new circumstances.

Before we thus jump from 1941, when he made *Sullivan's Travels*, to Sturges' second period, when he made *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948), we can briefly and roughly resume these circumstances as follows:

There was the war and the end of the war; men returned home and women who were encouraged to work during the war and take an active part in the war economy and public life were now encouraged (in different ways, including cinema) to stay at home and serve as perfect housewives. In the movies this marks, among other things, the end of the (screwball) comedy, and the comedy that remains gets increasingly sentimental (just think, for example, of Capra's paradigmatic *It's a Wonderful Life,* made in 1946), or it slowly turns black (Chaplin made *Monsiuer Verdoux* in 1947). Mainstream Hollywood moves from genre movies to more "mature",

12 Harvey 1998, p. 672.

problem films, often about personal problems and controversial topics (postwar traumas, adolescent's problems, racism...), whereas on its more imaginative or bizarre ("creative") side, screwball comedy is replaced by film noir and its typical black irony.[13]

The genre film started to feel outdated after the war, it started to be considered as a mode of "escapism", and (screwball) comedies as utterly childish and unrealistic. The set-bound films were replaced by films shot more realistically, on real locations. But, as Harvey again remarks most perceptively, this passage from the (alleged) war time "escapism" to post-war "maturity" was itself highly ambiguous.

"The movies took on such topics as psychoanalysis, juvenile delinquency, postwar readjustment and Cold War jitters, even racism. But the odd thing was that however 'explosive' the subject, it always took place in these films against a backdrop of social harmony. America was pictured as a place where the political problems had been solved. All we had to do now was solve the 'personal' ones, as it seemed. ... And yet, paradoxically, it was the old-fashioned genre films (...)—rather than the 'mature' and 'controversial' ones, the so called new Hollywood'—that turned out to be most daring. Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), for example, and Ford's *The Searchers* (1956), and Hawks's *Rio Bravo* (1959). (...) They revealed things in their 'genres' that no one had ever suspected before. And more."[14]

Let's stop first at the first part of these extremely lucid observations, which hold astonishingly true not only for today's Hollywood as well, but also for politics (and its media support): controversial, "radical" themes (inciting the passion of the spectators and dividing in fervent debates, "pros" and "cons") are very welcome, so far as they are situated against the background of social harmony (as

13 In spite of its popularity, screwball was never mainstream Hollywood; and film noir developed out of B production movies. When we think today of the Hollywood stars of the 30s, of the best that that period produced, we think of course of Barbaro Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert, Carol Lombard, Katharine Hepburn and many others). Yet the top box office star at that time was the (child star) Shirley Temple (she starred in *Heidi*, for example). Between ages 7–10 she was at the top of box office for four consecutive years, ahead of stars like Clark Gable and Jean Harlow. We have a similar situation with film noir and thrillers that count today as absolute classics; while some of the greatest masterpieces were made (including most of Hitchcock's films), the most famous star was from a quite different orbit: Bing Crosby. As Harvey poignantly describes him:
"By the time he had become a major star, his main characteristic was a kind of relaxing blandness, omitting all trace of the exciting young singer he had once been .... He became instead the most affectlessly genial of stars... In his musical numbers he had perfected the ability to make any song he sang—whatever its tempo, mood, or style—sound exactly like the last song he's sung. .... And everywhere he was recognized as distinctively American type... he was a suburban type: at home in the outdoors, but generally on some kind of lawn – with golf clubs and Hawaiian shirt. Anyway, he was inescapable, and his prominence banalized our lives in the same comforting way that advertising did: suggesting that there was very little at stake in them—beyond a choice of lawns. It's no wonder then that the apocalyptic tone of film noir – a movie genre even less generally popular than screwball comedy was—found appreciative and receptive audiences, and to some of them even seemed oddly cheering." Harvey 1995, p. 665-6

14 Harvey 1998, p. 679.

already achieved). The existing socio-economic system is ideal, what still remains to be solved are individual (or cultural, identity) problems—and of course we have to fight the corruption, replacing it with personal "responsibility"...

This allows us to conclude that the narrative that framed the mentioned shifts in the post-war society and film production in terms of the passage from (innocent, and necessarily childish) "escapism" to "maturity", was itself a highly ideological narrative; moreover, this was the very narrative that paved the way for a genuinely modern form of escapism: the escape to "maturity". Or, perhaps more precisely, *the escape to reality*. Realism became the big thing. Of course there exist different sorts of realism, some of them most-interesting. But it is nevertheless important to see how "realism" has become a kind of general ideological trademark of our times, on all kids of different levels. It is therefore no coincidence that reality shows function as the prominent form of escapism (as entertainment): there seems to be nothing as comforting and reassuring as this showing off of realism, watching "real" people on "real" locations doing whatever they do in "real" life. Is there any better proof and illustration of Lacan's thesis that "reality is always and necessarily fantasmatical", than the popularity and mesmerism of reality shows? Reality is fantasmatic, and if we want to get to some real—we need recourse to some artifice.

This brings us to the second part of Harvey's observations. We can add that the above-mentioned daring directors (Hitchcock, Ford, Hawks) didn't act as if nothing happened to affect and change the genres they were working with; they didn't act as if they could simply go on making the genre films in the same way as they were done in the old days. On the contrary, they were highly sensible to this change; they were all aware that their genres lost their innocence, but they were satisfied with pursuing the genre after it lost its innocence. This is precisely what was formally most-interesting and led to some of the most outstanding formal inventions (as well as experiments in "breaking the rules": Hitchcock's killing the leading star only 20 minutes into the film is one of the more notorious ones).

Unfaithfully Yours

We can also include in this company Sturges himself, and particularly his late comedies. For example *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948), which is particularly interesting because it is also a quite direct reflection (at the formal-cinematographic level) of the changes that we are talking about. We are still dealing with comedy, yet a comedy that differs considerably, both in texture and in form, from Sturges' early successes.

To begin with, the collective background of Sturges' early movies all but disappears. Like any other movie, the film introduces many different characters, but the amazing thing is that in all the action and interaction,

the main character (Sir Alfred, a famous conductor) has no real interlocutors, he seems to be strangely alone, wrapped in and obsessed by himself. His remarkable eloquence in dialogue sounds more like a well-rehearsed monologue. His wife Daphne, the lady of the film, is not the classical screwball lady, but is reduced to a surface so unproblematic and blank (and beautiful) that it becomes enigmatic and fascinating because of its blankness (So it is no coincidence that she functions as the screen on which Sir Alfred projects his fantasies...).

This is the basic outline of the story: Sir Alfred is talented and successful composer, married to a beautiful and much younger woman (of the domestic type—she has no life of her own) who adores him, and they are shown as a happiest couple. Then his brother-in-law manages to plant a seed of jealousy in Sir Alfred. He suggests that his beautiful younger wife is cheating on him with Tony (Sir Alfred's young secretary), and what follows is a perfect and most-literal illustration of what Slavoj Žižek has called "the plague of fantasies". There is this seed of doubt, and it spreads like a plague and affects the whole of Sir Alfred's being. Although he does his best to rationally resist it, it wins, torments him, and produces the three fantasy scenarios, or "prospects", as Sturges called them, that constitute the central part of the movie. All three are played out (for us) while Sir Alfred conducts three different pieces of music: they seem to further inspire his conducting performance and make it an outstanding success. Each time we move into Sir Arthur's head by means of a close-up of the pupil of his eye and see the "movie" that takes place in his head, against the background of the music he is conducting.

The first fantasy/prospect (played out against the music of Rossini's overture to *Semiramide*) is that of *revenge*, filmed in a film noir style. In this fantasy scenario, Sir Alfred commits a perfect murder: he kills his wife and frames Tony for it, following which Tony is sentenced to death by execution. In spite of its comic framework, the episode is quite macabre, and it was experienced even moreso that way by the audiences of the time. Sir Alfred is shown as clearly *enjoying* killing his wife (slashing her throat), and there are other details (like the close-up of her hand trembling and then relaxing as she dies) that kill the laughter off.[15] And then laughter returns from an unexpected side, in the form of Sir Arthur's own diabolical laughter when he sends the innocent Tony to death.

The second fantasy (played out against the background of Wagner's overture to *Tannhäuser*) is that *of noble forgiveness*. As with the first *noir* fantasy, Sturges goes all the way (and further) this time with the melodramatic genre. Not only does Sir Arthur forgive his wife, he (who is older and thus "should have been the wiser") describes himself

15 So much so that after the test screening they even thought of advertising the movie as thriller, rather than comedy: the unexpectedness of seeing this kind of shot in comedy was too much; it was too black.

as "the one to blame, entirely and alone". He goes on and on like this, reproducing all sorts of clichés of dignity, indulging rather shamelessly in this grandiose image of himself and his eloquent nobility.[16] He writes his unfaithful wife a check for 100.000 dollars, so as for her to never be in the position to worry about unromantic things like money.... And then he lets her join her lover ("Youth to youth, beauty to beauty."). Again, he gloats in what he does and says, enjoying every moment of "seeing" himself in this scene...

The third fantasy (on the music of Tchaikovsky's *Francesca da Rimini*) is that of *humiliating the guilty couple*, and especially Tony. Sir Arthur confronts the young couple, and it is interesting that the first two fantasy-scenarios are referred to within this one. He tells his wife that he first wanted to cut her throat, then to forgive her and even give her an enormous check, but then decided to do neither. "No, you should have no money, and fate will decide which man you'll have and how much of a man he is." And he challenges Tony to a duel—a game of Russian roulette—in the presence of his wife. Tony stars to sweat, visibly nervous and afraid, panicking in face of the possibility that he will die. Sir Arthur thus succeeds to humiliate him in front of his wife, revealing him as a coward, unable to put up a fight for her, while he, Sir Arthur, bravely takes the gun (without his hands shaking, as he doesn't forget to point out)—and shoots himself. The wife, realizing just how brave and honorable her husband has been (as opposed to her lover), embraces him, crying. Although in this fantasy he dies, he still enjoys every moment of it.

It is most interesting that even Sir Arthur's fantasies are not about what his wife did with Tony (as in the classical "plague of fantasies"), but about what *he* did to them. It's again all about him; his reaction and his enjoyment. The only thing that resists the isolating and all-encompassing dominance of his subjectivity in the movie are inanimate objects. There is a very peculiar scene that literally sticks out of the movie; that is out of its smooth and eloquent elegance (which is mostly Sir Arthur's eloquent elegance). Once the three fantasies (and the concert he conducted) are over, Sir Arthur runs home with the intention to make the necessary preparations for carrying out, this time for real, his first scenario. The preparations involve a recording machine (which he needs in order to frame Tony for the murder). What follows is an extremely long scene (by all standards: it goes on for a full 14 minutes) of continuous mishaps during which he manages to completely wreck the apartment (every object he takes in his hands breaks, or falls, and he with it), constituting a sort of "*slow motion slapstick*". Objects resist him, he acts with embarrassing clumsiness. ... And this drags on and on. The scene doesn't really make us laugh, and I don't think it was intended to, although it looks like a classical slapstick comedy scene. The scene is literally "off":

16 He even throws in a kind of self-satisfied self-reflection concerning his artistic work: "I couldn't understand music the way I do if I didn't understand the human heart".

in terms of rhythm, timing, length, but above all by being put in this kind of (rather sophisticated) film at all. It looks as if it is coming from a very different movie. All this makes it almost painful to watch. I would suggest that the scene in question actually *stages* the death of laughter—of precisely the kind of hilarious laughter that this kind of scenes could still produce, say, in the times of *Sullivan's Travels* (at least supposedly, like the prisoners laughing to the slapstick cartoon—and the scene with Sir Alfred is constructed in exactly the same way, even with sound effects that come directly from cartoons). But instead of making us laugh, it is rather painful to watch.

The only funny part of the scene is its very last bit, when Sir Arthur tries to follow the instructions of the recording machine, and then manages to produce and record a strange, low, animal roar, upon which his wife and Tony enter the apartment; as if at this point Sturges slowly and almost imperceptibly reintroduced the comedy, so as to connect this scene with the remaining of the film.

In what follows Sir Arthur acts his suspicions out, for the first time, in a real confrontation with his wife. The suspicions finally turn out to be completely unjustified, caused by a pure and unfortunate misunderstanding.

This last part of the film is, indeed, a masterpiece of comedy, provided that we stayed with the joke so far. For the whole movie could be seen as a complex and extremely rich staging of one fundamental *joke* that comes at the end. In its structure this joke corresponds incredibly well to the following one:

A man comes home in the evening, quite drunk. He lives alone on the fourth floor of an apartment building, and as he tries to put his key into the keyhole he gets an irresistible urge to have a potato soup. He has no potatoes at home, and so he concludes: "I will go down to the concierges' apartment and say to her: 'Excuse me madam, could you please lend me a few potatoes, I will return them tomorrow'." And down he goes. As he arrives to the third floor, he thinks, "But why should I call her madam, she is only a concierge. I will say to her: 'Excuse me, could you please lend me a few potatoes, I will return them tomorrow.'" Arriving to the second floor, he thinks some more: "'But after all, why should I use polite formulas like 'excuse me' and 'please', she is only a concierge. I will simply say: 'Could you lend me a few potatoes, I will return them tomorrow'". When on the first floor, he thinks again: "But, after all, why should I return the potatoes, she is only a concierge, I will just say to her: 'Give me a few potatoes!" Finally arriving to the ground floor where the concierge lives, he rings her bell. When she opens the door, smiling politely, he snaps at her: "You know what, you can take those potatoes and stick them up your ass!"

This is precisely how sir Arthur's thinking and acting are structured. After some real grounds of suspicion appear, the whole drama of his wife's infidelity and of his reaction to it is played out in his head

exclusively, following the three fantasy scenarios, and she has no clue about his suspicions. And when he finally tries to confront her with his suspicions and his knowledge about her betrayal, he behaves exactly like the man in this joke: acting and talking as if she knew all that went on (only) in his head so far; that is, as if she were there for the whole path of his suspicions, fantasies, and conclusions. The scene is a real comic delight, built from little details and the discrepancies between the knowledge of the two protagonists, and she is more and more at loss as to what is going on while he keeps hinting at his fantasy scenarios. Until he finally spells it out directly: he knows that she had betrayed him with Tony. From there on everything is cleared up very quickly, the misunderstanding explained, and the couple is happily reunited.

Unfaithfully Yours is, among other things, a good example of comedy that persists after and beyond the genre "lost its innocence". It follows the general trend of shifting towards "seriousness", psychological complexity, introspection, disturbing events (hence the *noir* side and the black humor of the film)—yet it renders this as a new version of comedy and of comedic heroes, and not as an antipode to comedy. There exists in fact an interesting continuity—in some respects at least—that leads, for example, from the character of Sir Alfred to the characters often portrayed by Woody Allen...

Earlier on, I evoked Lacan's thesis that reality is always fantasmatic, and that if we want to get to the real, we need recourse to some artifice. The usage of different genres (fantasy scenarios) inside comedy is certainly an example of such an artifice. Similar claims could be made for black humor. How does black humor work? It works by introducing a crack into the most genuinely felt, serious sentiment; yet is not the same as cynicism. It is above all something the disturbs the monolithic structure of reality (as felt and experienced), injects it with some dialectics, gives rise to thought, as well as to pleasure more awarding than the kind of preemptive gratification that mostly dominates today.

Some consider black humor as a more realistic form of humor—but wouldn't it be more precise to say that it is actually an answer to realism; an artifice that cracks it open? Preston Sturges knew something about black humor. When his career went downhill, he started writing his autobiography, and he died before he finished it. It was later published under the title *Preston Sturges by Preston Sturges*.[17] Unsurprisingly, his own idea for the title was much less "mature". He wanted his autobiography to be called –: *The Events Leading up to My Death*.

17 Edited by his last wife, Sandy Sturges.

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