Bringing Up Baby (1938)

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Screwball and the Con of Modern Culture

Context

Howard Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) explores the trials and tribulations of a shy, bumbling paleontologist (Cary Grant) detoured from the altar by a forward, zany young socialite (Katharine Hepburn) and her pet leopard. The scientist is gradually drawn to ditch his dull intended for the ravishing heiress in a romp of hectic misadventure.

Bringing Up Baby's madcap plot—a complex series of misunderstandings, antics, pratfalls, and disasters—rapid timing, lavish settings, and sentimental appeal render it a central representative of the screwball comedy genre. The film not only offers spirited romance and quirky humor, but explores wider economic, social, and sexual anxieties at once endemic to modern Western culture and specific to the screwball period.

Screwball and Its Era

The height of the screwball comedy genre lasted roughly from 1934, with Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night*, to 1941, with Preston Sturges's *Sullivan's Travels*. Screwball may have proved too lighthearted and hard-edged for World War II and postwar audiences. It waned as studios began to concentrate on homey, sentimentalist productions aimed at family viewing.

With its chatty, slapstick story lines, lush architectures and landscapes, and fashionable, leisured characters, screwball provided Depression-era American audiences comic relief and escapist pleasure. The speculation-based economy that had led to the nation's economic collapse had destabilized long-held American faith in hard work, thrift, and responsibility as the sources of wealth and cultural power. The once agrarian, then industrial nation increasingly now traded in

intangibles. Meanwhile, women's rights were on the rise, along with the divorce rate (May 2). Traditional employments, knowledge, and mores were subject to reexamination.

With changing lifestyles arose anxiety over work, gender, and the family. Screwball characters, unlike their primarily working-class contemporary audiences, are generally unencumbered by such pressures and, as such, free to examine a range of choices in their full complexity. As one critic describes it, screwball "is both a satire of actual social solidity and an indication of possible social fluidity" (Bourget 55). Those more subject to constraint could investigate different, perhaps more desirable—richer, freer, "exotic," more "erotic" (Shumway 389)—manners of living by proxy in the dark of the movie theater, see troubling issues ostensibly resolved in happy endings, and return to the daylight world refreshed.

Screwball broke ground with the advent of synchronized sound, exploiting the new "talkie" form with a vengeance. Films of the genre stage language with a speed, subtlety, and intensity previously reserved for theater, further emphasized through close-ups, reaction shots, and intercutting. The fast-talking trickster figures central to the genre deliver witty dialogue at breakneck pace, achieving discursive feats that intertitled silents did not permit. Screwball comedy represents, in a sense, "the underside of, and compensation for, the action drama" (Haskell 137), and its characters' strengths lie, accordingly, far less in action, kindness, humility, or moral rectitude than in sophistication, articulateness, and finesse.

The male screwball lead is typically an antihero: immoral, amoral, or weak. If ignoble, he appears admirable because handsome and winning. He is generally nonphysical or even quite effete, as compared to "strong, silent" men of deeds. The female lead, reflecting early feminist trends, tends to be headstrong, self-directed, and accomplished while still charming, vulnerable, and appealing. Both, unlike traditional heroes and heroines, are able to laugh at life and themselves. Little is to be taken overearnestly or overseriously. Moral character, as conventionally conceived, holds little weight in the genre. The dependable, law-abiding authority figure, societal pillar, or "straight man" appears a buffoon in this context.

In Hawks's films, particularly, as Michael Wood has observed, elements such as desirability or style create their own kind of ethic. That which is beautiful or successful is presented, in some sense, as morally right, while that which is dull or fails is presented as, in some sense, wrong. The term for the genre—a categorization assigned only retrospectively by critics—is drawn from baseball, denoting an erratic pitch. In screwball, aberrant, even illegal or deviant behavior reigns, as opposed to "playing it straight." Indeed, in a context such as the Depression, in which economics and self-interest appear to trump more traditional human values, dullness and failure have no earthly compensation, while beauty and success are well rewarded. The screwball universe may thus be taken as wistful modern fantasy—or as ironic social commentary.

Background, Making, and Reception

The script of *Bringing Up Baby* was drawn from a *Collier's* magazine story of the same title by the writer Hagar Wilde. It was adapted by Wilde and screenwriter Dudley Nichols, with the gag writer Robert McGowan later adding material. The original story involves a couple in pursuit of an escaped panther. They are engaged, and the situation threatens to divide them. In subsequent script versions, the hero becomes a scientist engaged to someone else, and more—and more elaborate—comic scenarios and characters are added. The fun of the collaboration—and, perhaps of Wilde's and Nichols's affair during it—is evident in notes in script drafts. One note, for instance, regarding a lapse in continuity, reads: "The off-stage noise you hear is two authors being slightly sick because they don't know what Susan and David have been doing until sunset" (qtd. in Mast 5).

When a suitably trained panther could not be located for filming, the animal in question was changed to a leopard (played by Nissa; cast as George, the dog, was *The Awful Truth*'s Asta). Katharine Hepburn was cast as the female lead from the beginning. Cary Grant was chosen over the studio's suggestions: Leslie Howard, Ray Milland, and Fredric March. Gerald Mast surmises that the choice was inspired by Grant's noted comic work in Leo McCarey's *The Awful Truth* (1937) then in production (Mast 7). The director and writers envisioned the film as heavy with vaudevillian shtick. An early draft, for instance, has the lovers start a pie fight. Though the film is wordy, with dialogue echoing already evident visual cues, the initial versions were more so, and included lengthy love dialogues. Hawks shot but then

discarded much of this footage as excess, relying on the actors' chemistry and charisma to carry the message. Dialogue and physical business were often improvised, with Hawks's encouragement, on the set.

Gerald Mast describes the tone of the film thus:

> [The] breathlessly rapid chatter not only gives the film's dialogue a spontaneous energy; it also converts articulate patterns into the pure physicality of sound, a kind of verbal music. . . . *Bringing Up Baby* has no musical score whatever. . . . Its music is the breathless chatter of human speech. . . . Uniquely Hawksian about the film is its physicality, whether the physicality of sound and gesture or the building of scenes around concrete props and objects, easily overlooked but as important as the dialogue. . . . For Hawks, this contact with concrete objects anchors a wildly improbable farcical tale in the solid stuff of physical reality. . . . Hawks' shooting style works similarly. [Many shots] are extraordinary in their complicated choreography of movement, space, and time. . . . A single shot tells a complete little story. (9–11)

Hawks, in interviews, was notoriously reticent to discuss his directorial choices, but seems to have worked primarily, as he claimed, on instinct. The film was extensively edited, more for length than for the Production Code censors, who seem to have overlooked the numerous bawdy references and puns in the dialogue as subtle enough to place the onus of dirty-mindedness on viewers.

The film ran far over schedule and budget, but, according to Mast, RKO retained faith in its stars, as well as its director. Grant, whose career as passive male lover—called by Pauline Kael "the most publicly seduced male the world has known" (qtd. in Harvey 298)—had begun with his youthful turn opposite Mae West in *She Done Him Wrong* (1933). He would move after *Bringing Up Baby* to darker, more aggressive roles: the suave, shifty editor in Hawks's *His Girl Friday* (1940), the society rake in George Cukor's *The Philadelphia Story* (1940), the moody, caddish pilot in Hawks's *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939). Hepburn, "whose problem had been that audiences perceived her as cold, lofty, and contemptuous" (Mast 15), tempered the typical Hawks "tough woman" character with absurdist, often slapstick humor, and would draw acclaim from this point forward for patrician, peppery, but finally tender roles, for

instance with James Stewart and Grant, again, as a high-strung debutante in *The Philadelphia Story*, or as a career woman with real-life partner Spencer Tracy in George Stevens's *Woman of the Year* (1942) and Cukor's *Adam's Rib* (1949). Both Grant and Hepburn "emerged" after the film as "more valuable commodities" (Mast 15–16) than they had been. Hawks, who had begun his career with silent films, would continue to direct masterful films across all genres—screwball, *noir*, Westerns, musicals, even science fiction and a biblical epic—in Jacques Rivette's words, "fusing [comedy and drama] so that each, rather than damaging the other, seems to underscore their reciprocal relation: the one sharpens the other" (70). However, Hawks would fail to garner a single Oscar nomination for this, or his other finest and most famous films: *Scarface* (1932), *His Girl Friday* (1940), *To Have and Have Not* (1944), *The Big Sleep* (1946), and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953). Suffering less from critical "vituperation" than "silence" (McBride 5), Hawks would remain "the least known and least appreciated giant in the American cinema" (Sarris 35).

Upon its release, *Bringing Up Baby* showed poorly at the box office and in the critical eye. As one reviewer typically decried:

> To the Music Hall yesterday came a farce which you can barely hear above the precisely enunciated patter of Miss Katharine Hepburn and the ominous tread of deliberative gags. . . . After the first five minutes . . . we were content to play the game called "the cliché expert goes to the movies" and we are not at all proud to report that we scored 100 percent against . . . Howard Hawks, who . . . produced the quiz. Of course, if you've never been to the movies, *Bringing Up Baby* will all be new to you—a zany-ridden product of the goofy farce school. But who hasn't been to the movies? (Nugent 265)

Hawks himself, in retrospect, found one "fault" with the film from which he "learned an awful lot. . . . There were no normal people in it. Everyone you met was a screwball. Since that time I have learned my lesson and I don't intend ever again to make everyone crazy. . . . As it is they were all way off center" (qtd. in Henderson 311). The film would, however, be recouped by later generations of critics, as well as filmmakers, who would view Hawks as an important *auteur* and discover in his work deeper meanings and stylistic motifs. Philosopher

Stanley Cavell, for instance, reads *Bringing Up Baby* as illustrative of the thought of Shakespeare, Kant, and Emerson (*Pursuits* 111–32). Meanwhile, directorial homages have appeared in Peter Bogdanovich's *What's Up, Doc?* (1972), with Barbra Streisand as a Brooklyn Jewish incarnation of the resolutely Connecticut Anglo-Saxon Hepburn figure, as well as in Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* (1986); James Foley's *Who's That Girl?* (1987), a Madonna vehicle; and Catherine Corsini's *The New Eve* (1999). *Bringing Up Baby* is a now well-canonized revival film, frequently shown and taught as an exemplar of the genre.

Analysis

The film opens with establishing shots of a large, solid brick edifice resembling the New York Museum of Natural History. Inside Brontosaurus Hall, filled with fossils and artifacts, paleontologist David Huxley perches high atop a scaffold, assembling a dinosaur skeleton. Swathed in a cumbersome lab coat, in the pose of Rodin's sculpture *The Thinker*, he ponders: his great life project is nearly complete, but something doesn't fit. With a colleague and his assistant, Miss Alice Swallow, he awaits the delivery of a final piece from an expedition.

David is set to wed Alice the next day. His fiancée—cheerful but prim in a male-tailored suit and slicked-down coif—reveals herself as alarmingly unromantic:

> ALICE: As soon as we're married, we're coming directly back here and you're going on with your work.
> DAVID: Oh, Alice, gee whiz. . . .
> ALICE: Now, once and for all, David, nothing must interfere with your work.
> DAVID: Oh. . . .
> ALICE: Our marriage must entail no domestic entanglements of any kind. . . .
> DAVID: You mean, you mean . . .
> ALICE: I mean, of any kind, David.
> DAVID: Oh, well, Alice, I was sort of hoping . . . well, you mean, you mean children and all that sort of thing . . .
> ALICE: Exactly. (*David mutters to himself.*) This . . . (*making a long, sweeping gesture* . . .) . . . will be our child.

> DAVID: Huh? (*He looks . . . at the brontosaurus. . . .*)
> ALICE: Yes, David, I see our marriage purely as a dedication to your work. . . .
> DAVID: Well, gee whiz, Alice, everybody has to have a honeymoon. And . . . and . . .
> ALICE: But we haven't time. (Mast 37–38)

Alice reminds him that he has a golf date with the representative of a wealthy patroness who may, if he plays his cards right, fund a big museum grant. She reminds him, prudently, to let the representative win. David has literally climbed the ladder to hard-earned career achievement and is poised to join his fate to a conscientious partner. David's life, following an ancient pattern like that of the skeleton, is falling into place. Yet, equally, David's life plan is precarious, prime for collapse, and as yet incomplete.

Enter Susan Vance, a rakishly elegant, wild-haired fellow golfer. Susan, with a masterful swing, hijacks David's ball, and then David himself, as well as his car, which she takes for her own, like his ball, and smashes. David's effort to recoup his meeting, in a restaurant, is similarly foiled when Susan causes him to slip, ripping his jacket and sparking a trail of mishaps through which they each lose large parts of their outfits. Susan exhibits blithe disregard for the conventional values embodied by Alice: honest labor, obsequiousness, stoicism, self-surveillance. Susan commits grand extravagances, not only wrecks cars but steals them, evades summonses, and—beyond all—harbors a wild animal in genteel Connecticut. Property, law, and common sense are thrown to the wind in her ruthless pursuit of pleasure—and of David. David's attempts at the dignity and seriousness that his profession and Alice require are consistently destroyed in Susan's maelstrom of frivolity and misadventure. His career, it appears, will be ruined. This seeming roadblock turns out to be a long, wacky shortcut to success. The man he is meeting turns out to be Susan's doting friend, the potential donor her aunt, and the money hers, essentially. Rules—David, along with the audience, is shown—are meant to be broken. The proof of this lies in Susan's success, and in her glamour and attractiveness while achieving it.

Like the dinosaur Alice denotes as their future child, David's marriage to Alice is doomed to end in extinction. By contrast, Susan, with

her libertine ways and leopard pet—the sexualized half of the typical "Hollywood female opposition" (R. Wood 64)—seems a willing, even animalistic partner, and a more fertile mate. Robin Wood links an "explicit comparison of women to cats," from *Bringing Up Baby* to horror film, melodrama, and psychological thriller (62), to the suggestion of a seductive, dangerous, dark quality of the feminine, a vital factor Alice lacks. David, as the film is generally interpreted, is as dead as a brontosaurus carcass when he meets the correct woman for him, who leads him to a full life and fruition. David's journey from overcerebral repression to sexual and spiritual fulfillment tends to be the central focus of most readings. Stanley Cavell even ties a Kantian notion of immorality to the self-exile from community of those, like David, who retreat from coupledom, and Kantian good to a return to community via the marriage relationship (*Pursuits* 79). However, subtler—and often near-obscene—verbal and visual clues suggest deeper issues. At the heart of Hawks's comedy lies a vision if not, as in one critic's words, "bitterly tragic" (Prague 21), then, at least dark and complex.

Gender Questions

Early in the film, foreign-accented psychiatrist Dr. Lehman (Fritz Feld) cautions Susan against believing in stereotypes of insanity, while blinking, rolling his eyes, and exhibiting a tic. It is Lehman, authority of the normative and member of the aberrant, who first assumes that David and Susan are a couple, at once officiating the union and positioning it in his mad realm. Lehman, in a lampoon of Freudian therapy, translates David's initial resistance to Susan as the "conflict" that stems from the "love impulse" and David's encounters with Susan, who follows him, as evincing his "fixation" on her. Susan seizes on Lehman's words as a justification to pursue David, yet this functionalist explication is distinctly antiromantic. David's urges, applicable to any more or less appropriate object, may have less to do with Susan as an individual than with her as one of many possible answers to his need.

David is easy prey for smart, strong women: the smarter the better. He is transported from Alice's to Susan's jurisdiction with none but the faintest quibble. Neither Alice, charged to keep him, nor Susan, primed to steal him, pay regard to his wishes, which both ignore as irrelevant and/or suppress as insurrectionary. While Susan engages in strenuous antics to prevent his return to Alice, these appear less aimed at winning him over than at incurring delay, in an amorous habeas corpus. As with an imperiled woman ingenue, possession of David appears to fall to whichever rival exerts greater might to claim him. When he professes a preference for one woman over the other, it is done so perfunctorily, and markedly late in the story. As one critic notes:

> Norman Mailer in 1960 described the male movie star ideal as the sort who "could fight well, kill well (if always with honor), love well and love many, be cool, be daring, be dashing, be wild, be wily, be resourceful, be a brave gun." It's a nearly inarguable list in its way . . . but not much of it fits Grant. . . . One of the oddest and most interesting things about Grant is how he manages at once to be a paradigm of masculinity and yet at the same time to elude and even to defy most of the categories of the masculine romance. (Harvey 301)

Susan, meanwhile, is an unusually assertive, predatory figure, stalking David with obsessive desire—as well as with the entitlement, loneliness, and/or frantic ennui of the overleisured. Cavell compares Susan and David, respectively, to the heroines of Old Comedy and the heroes of New Comedy. In the first of these classical-period genres, a clever, bold heroine overcomes obstacles preventing her union with her beloved; in the second, a would-be couple, thwarted by a parental figure, is saved by the machinations of the male. Cavell describes *Bringing Up Baby* as a blend of the two: a "comedy of equality" (*Pursuits* 122). The film, however, more than redressing gender imbalances, wholly inverts them. Susan appears thoroughly dominant, ordering the undressed David while she showers to "be patient" until "I'm finished." Speaking to others, she refers to David as "Mr. Bone," as if that aspect of him were sufficient.

References abound to David's problematic "bone." The one he needs, shipped to him, goes missing, while the one in his possession malfunctions despite unorthodox attempts:

> DAVID (*shaking his head*): Alice, I think this one must belong in the tail.
> ALICE: Nonsense. You tried it in the tail yesterday and it didn't fit. (Mast 34)

The rear, as entity, position, or predicament, makes another appearance at the restaurant when Susan rips the tail of his jacket. David, stepping on her skirt, tears that. To cover her behind, he claps his hat over it, then backs her up against a pillar. David presses his pelvis to her backside and they move together, as one, to the exit. Susan has graphic and unusual proclivities as well. Jailed and approximating the pose of a stoolie, she threatens to "unbutton my puss and shoot the works!" In jail, she also promotes David as "a lady-killer" and "a wolf," attributing to him hidden savage, perhaps misogynist, and feral qualities. Where Alice proffers a fossil as a child, Susan lures David in with a leopard named Baby, on top of a babied dog called George. David even becomes a dog, crawling around in the garden. Susan, David, and what they will produce together belong to the outlaw and wild-animal realms.

On this verge of his wedding night, David has had relations neither with his fiancée nor with Susan, nor, perhaps, with any woman previously. His only other encounter with a young woman, a hatcheck girl, begins with his uncertainty over services, and ends with them bumping heads. David seems oblivious to her, while she eyes him, bemused, with unreturned desire. Soon after, David holds a purse, appearing as a cross-dresser. A deliveryman, looking David up and down in an ogling manner, congratulates him for a statement repudiating women. A nude hostage when Susan steals his clothing, David dons Susan's negligee, telling her aunt he "just went gay all of a sudden." David's hesitance, and choice of Susan over other women, may well be explained in this manner. The prudish Alice will not satisfy him. Susan appears able, but the nature of what he wants and what she offers him remain unclear.

Mores and Modernity

In the golf scene, Susan employs a Groucho Marx–like series of linguistic interruptions, substitutions, free associations, elisions, and absurd logics to detain the reluctant David:

> SUSAN: You shouldn't do that, you know....Talk while someone's shooting.
> DAVID: But that was my ball.
> SUSAN (*overlapping*): Well, anyway, I forgive you . . . because I got a good shot.

> DAVID: What kind of ball are you playing?
> SUSAN: PGA. . . .
> DAVID: Well, I'm playing a Crowflight.
> SUSAN: Uh huh, I like a PGA better. . . .
> DAVID: No, I'm just trying to prove to you that you're playing my ball. You see, a PGA has two black dots and a Crowflight has a circle. . . .
> SUSAN: I'm not suspicious about things like that. . . . Stop talking for a moment, will you please? . . . (*Susan putts the ball.*)
> DAVID: There, you see? It's a circle.
> SUSAN: Well, now, of course it is. Do you think it would roll if it was square?
> DAVID: No, I have reference to a mark on a ball.
> SUSAN: (*Laughs.*) I know. I was only being silly. . . .
> DAVID: You . . . (*holding the ball*) . . . you don't mind if I take this with me?
> SUSAN: No, not at all. Tell the caddy master to put it in my bag when you're finished. (Mast 41–44)

Susan is a type of "con" figure, a civil criminal who operates less through force than through the powers of representation. The con, lacking adequate material or physical means, compensates via performance-based forms of illusion, above all through the use of clever language. Language may be thought of as a kind of con itself, mimicking, manipulating, and distorting perception of the object world for which it purportedly stands. The poor, disenfranchised "immigrant" characters played by the Marx Brothers in their films, for example, ascend to wealth, social status, and political power through no other tool but clever language (Cavell, "Everything" 95–103). Just as conversation, in screwball, takes much of the place of action, it also tends to stand in for sexual interaction. The physically weaker Susan, unable to hold David literally in place, captivates him through ingenious language play.

Each assertion Susan makes is only loosely tied to the last, and insistently veers off the straightforward line of David's argument. The multidirectional nature and very speed of Susan's talk render the trail of her logic untraceable, untrappable, and, finally, irrefutable. In an even more complex tactic, she momentarily reverts to David's objective

plane, admitting that her deception of him has been conscious. However, she then closes their conversation with a return to her initial stance. With no witness to adjudicate—even, later, when others are present, they will be confused and/or charmed into Susan's position—David is forced to concede the role of adjudicator of truth to Susan and, thus, essentially, to live according to her altered truth. As with David's ball, Susan kidnaps reality and reworks it as she wishes.

Truth, in the screwball, is a shifting, slippery concept. This may have seemed true as well in screwball-era American society, with the increasing role of the speculative economy, a force based less in material holdings than in futures, rumors, and appearances. Class mobility and the media, including film, may have provoked similar cultural anxieties. Modern power, it may have appeared, resided in whomever most persuasively, authoritatively, or powerfully claimed it (I discuss this more extensively elsewhere; see "Dangerous Talk"). Like the compelling outlaw of *noir* crime drama, the screwball con is presented as a magical, romantic figure superior to the dross and stress of everyday living. The con, drawing only on inner resources of daring and wit, makes something out of nothing, gains without paying—and gets away with it.

The name of Susan's leopard springs from the odd fact that it responds only to a vaudevillian tune:

> *I can't give you anything but love, Baby*
> *That's the only thing I've plenty of, Baby*
> *Dream a while, scheme a while*
> *We're sure to find*
> *Happiness, and I guess*
> *All those things you've always pined for*
> *Gee, I'd like to see you looking swell, Baby*
> *Diamond bracelets Woolworth doesn't sell, Baby*
> *Till that lucky day*
> *You know darned well, Baby*
> *I can't give you anything but love.* (Qtd. in Mast 164–66)

The centrality of this plot point, and its frequent repetition, thrusts the song lyrics into awkward emphasis. Passion may be one precondition for love, but the institution of marriage—which the song may well eschew along with the diamond bond—is expected to provide anything and everything else in addition. While marriage has religious and romantic signification, its sociological uses are thought to lie largely in socioeconomics. Marriage supports economic and social production, bolstering the workforce, as well as heterosexually reproducing it. In intoning the lyric—Susan leads, with David gradually chiming in—the couple pledge, in a sense, to uphold the song's dictates: to live for, and on, love. They will flaunt their hedonism, glee, and freedom, in a joke on tradition.

David's manhood, Susan's womanhood, David's sexual preference, and their humanity at large are all at issue. As their influence spreads—even stuffy Aunt Elizabeth, strolling, suddenly runs for pure joy—anarchy, barely contained by romantic convention, threatens widespread lawlessness, deviance, and disorder as a form of happy social contagion. Like their adopted wild animal progeny, their union, while exotic and appealing, may not only fail to contribute to but actually endanger the stability of civilized convention.

The song lyrics, taken literally, celebrate devotion despite poverty. David, however, appears comfortably off, and Susan, well connected and wealthy, can give David more than love, indeed. At the film's end, Susan destroys the dinosaur. However, David need not work at all once he marries the heiress, who will, in any case, due to her family's connections and funding, essentially be his employer. David's new life with Susan is figured as one of pure unfettered spirit and freewheeling fun without consequences. However, this love story obscures its own material basis. In a perhaps slightly sour modern twist on pious romantic cliché, the rich con of a lover happens to win, while Alice, who works for a living and worries for David's career, is disregarded. David has sold himself to the highest bidder, and sold diligent, faithful, well-meaning, if less attractive, Alice out as well.

Leaving David, Alice—in one final animal metaphor—pronounces him "a butterfly": pretty, flighty, distinctly unmasculine, and effete, useless to any solid, productive project, and perhaps homosexual, as suggested by one common association. David—once naive and noble-minded, attaining happiness and success through the "back" way, neither developing character, nor contributing to the community, nor paying the price expected—has become a con himself: a thoroughly modern hero.

Close Reading

The final scene is oddly somber. David—freed of Alice and, ostensibly, Susan—has returned to his work, when Susan enters. The lighting is bright, undifferentiated, and the black-and-white contrast crisp. Susan wears a black dress and black-dotted veil, looking far more like a widow than a lover. The dinosaur's rib cage creates a spiky prison-bar effect; David, back atop the ladder, glares down at Susan like a chased animal. Susan has come to bring David the bone he has been missing: completing his search for manhood, perhaps. He accepts it, though without excitement, and rejects her, coldly demanding she leave it on a table and go away.

She climbs, unsteadily swaying, to meet him. He says that he is afraid of her. She implies that his fear must be a sign of love and offers him a million dollars of her own inheritance. He begins to warm to her, as they rock on the scaffolding in tandem:

> SUSAN: Did you really have a good time?
> DAVID: Yes, I did.
> SUSAN: Oh, that's . . . but that's wonderful. Do you realize what that means? It means you must like me a little bit.
> DAVID: Oh, Susan, it's more than that.
> SUSAN: Is it?
> DAVID: Yes. I love you, I think. . . .
> SUSAN: That's wonderful, because I love you too. (Mast 203)

Susan slips from the platform and, in grappling back up, causes the brontosaurus to collapse. David is shocked and disconsolate. The couple sits marooned above the wreckage together.

> SUSAN: David, can you ever forgive me?
> DAVID: I . . . I . . . I . . .
> SUSAN: You can? And you still love me?
> DAVID: Susan, that . . . that . . . that . . .
> SUSAN: You do! Oh, David.
> DAVID: Oh, dear. Oh my. Hmm.

"I Can't Give You Anything But Love," in "a bouncy orchestral version" (qtd. in Mast 206), comes up, as the couple embraces: The End.

The standard reading of the scene positions the destruction of the dinosaur as a metaphor not just for the end of David's fossilized bachelorhood, but for the end of his former life and entrance into a new, sexually vibrant, productive order. One critic further situates the collapse as effecting a complicity with the viewer who, laughing at social disorder, becomes an agent of it (Grant 127).

However, it appears less here that anarchy triumphs than that social norms are reinforced, in this case uncomfortably for both of the characters. The scenario is grim. David remains hostile until the final moments. When his love declarations come, they are cursory. Susan essentially purchases him, and nervously continues to pursue him and to ventriloquize his answers even after he acquiesces, with seemingly justifiable anxiety that she has not fully won him, or that she will lose him again. They have fun, but their partnership is less than mutual and runs on denial, irresponsibility, and money.

Conclusion

Bringing Up Baby is related by Stanley Cavell in *Pursuits of Happiness* to what he classes as Shakespeare's "comedies of remarriage." In these, Cavell argues, an audience is led to understand marriage through a separated couple's reacquaintance with it. Although they have just met, Cavell explains, David and Susan's previous alienation is so extreme, and their recognition of each other so intense, as to constitute reunion.

As David Shumway notes, however, countering Cavell, "[Screwball comedies] do just the opposite [of enlightening us about marriage]: they mystify marriage by portraying it as the goal—but not the end—of romance" (381). The film emphasizes attraction, danger, and fun over the more quotidian civic and reproductive values adherent to marriage as institution. Further, what qualities the pair detect in each other remains in question. *Bringing Up Baby* might stand, rather, as a comedy of queer marriage—if not homosexual, then queering marriage: estranging it from clichéd unseeing to highlight what might be peculiar in marriage, or in certain arrangements of it, as a project.

The standard reading of *Bringing Up Baby* has it that Susan will inspire David to grow to become his best self, and vice versa. However, David's faint acquiescence to Susan's ardor appears less than wholehearted or convinced. And Susan's lead might just as well release

David to recede further into confusion and impassivity, with her lonely again, at the top. The marriage plot, Shakespearean or otherwise—D. A. Miller cites Jane Austen—may appear to "end well" while remaining inconclusive and unsettling. Alternatively, a noncomedic reading might situate *Bringing Up Baby* as a noirish drama of induction by one con of another, or a cynical "education" tale after the mode of Balzac: a handsome young man, well intentioned but naive and lacking distinct character, discovers romantic, economic, and class shortcuts and succeeds in what turns out to be a similarly ignoble society.

Bringing Up Baby—like *His Girl Friday*, Hawks's next comedy, and his dark dramas such as *To Have and Have Not* and *The Big Sleep*—appears to be formulaic entertainment but ultimately proves troubling below the surface. It is in this complexity, as well as its fine comic sense, that *Bringing Up Baby* deserves the now-common claims to its artistry. It is a critical text for intensive study, both in the context of the period and that of today.

Credits

United States, 1938, RKO

Director and Producer: Howard Hawks
Associate Producer: Cliff Reid
Screenplay: Hagar Wilde (story), Dudley Nichols and Hagar Wilde
Cinematography: Russell Metty
Music: Dorothy Fields, Jimmy McHugh, and Roy Webb
Art Direction: Van Nest Polglase and Perry Ferguson
Costume Design: Howard Greer
Special Effects: Vernon L. Walker

CAST:

Susan Vance	Katharine Hepburn
David Huxley	Cary Grant
Major Applegate	Charles Ruggles
Slocum	Walter Catlett
Gogarty	Barry Fitzgerald
Aunt Elizabeth	May Robson
Dr. Lehman	Fritz Feld
Mrs. Gogarty	Leona Roberts
Mr. Peabody	George Irving
Mrs. Lehman	Tala Birell
Alice Swallow	Virginia Walker
Elmer	John Kelly
George, the dog	Asta
Baby, the leopard	Nissa

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