**COMEDY FILMS**

**Comedy Films**are "make 'em laugh" films designed to elicit laughter from the audience. Comedies are light-hearted dramas, crafted to amuse, entertain, and provoke enjoyment. The comedy genre humorously exaggerates the situation, the language, action, and characters. Comedies observe the deficiencies, foibles, and frustrations of life, providing merriment and a momentary escape from day-to-day life. They usually have happy endings, although the humor may have a serious or pessimistic side.

**Types of Comedies:**

Comedies usually come in two general formats: comedian-led (with well-timed gags, jokes, or sketches) and situation-comedies that are told within a narrative. Both comedy elements may appear together and/or overlap. Comedy hybrids commonly exist with other major genres, such as musical-comedy, horror-comedy, and comedy-thriller. Comedies have also been classified in various [*subgenres*](http://www.filmsite.org/subgenres.html), such as romantic comedy, crime/caper comedy, sports comedy, teen or coming-of-age comedy, social-class comedy, military comedy, fish-out-of-water comedy, and gross-out comedy. There are also many different kinds, types, or forms of comedy, including:

* **Slapstick**

Slapstick was predominant in the earliest silent films, since they didn't need sound to be effective, and they were popular with non-English speaking audiences in metropolitan areas. The term *slapstick* was taken from the wooden sticks that clowns slapped together to promote audience applause.

This is primitive and universal comedy with broad, aggressive, physical, and *visual* action, including harmless or painless cruelty and violence, horseplay, and often vulgar sight gags (e.g., a custard pie in the face, collapsing houses, a fall in the ocean, a loss of trousers or skirts, runaway crashing cars, people chases, etc). Slapstick often required exquisite timing and well-honed performance skills. It was typical of the films of Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, W. C. Fields, The Three Stooges, the stunts of Harold Lloyd in [**Safety Last (1923)**](http://www.filmsite.org/safe.html), and Mack Sennett's silent era shorts (for example, the Keystone Kops). Slapstick evolved and was reborn in the screwball comedies of the 1930s and 1940s (see further below).   
  
More recent feature film examples include the comedic mad chase for treasure film by many top comedy stars in Stanley Kramer's **It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World (1963)**, and French actor/director Jacques Tati's mostly dialogue-free **Mr. Hulot's Holiday (1953, Fr.)**, and Jim Carrey in **Ace Ventura, Pet Detective (1993)** and **The Mask (1994)**.

The Blake Edwards series of *Pink Panther* films with Peter Sellers as bumbling Inspector Clouseau (especially in the second film of the series, **A Shot in the Dark (1964)** with Herbert Lom as Clouseau's slow-burning boss and Burt Kwouk as his valet and martial arts judo-specialist) are also great examples. Cartoons are the quintessential form of slapstick, i.e., the Roadrunner and Wile E. Coyote, and others.

* **Deadpan**

This form of comedy was best exemplified by the expression-less face of stoic comic hero Buster Keaton.

* **Verbal comedy**

This was classically typified by the cruel verbal wit of W. C. Fields, the sexual innuendo of Mae West, or the verbal absurdity of dialogues in the Marx Brothers films, or later by the self-effacing, thoughtful humor of Woody Allen's literate comedies.

* **Screwball**

Screwball comedies, a sub-genre of romantic comedy films, was predominant from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s. The word 'screwball' denotes lunacy, craziness, eccentricity, ridiculousness, and erratic behavior.

These films combine farce, slapstick, and the witty dialogue of more sophisticated films. In general, they are light-hearted, frothy, often sophisticated, romantic stories, commonly focusing on a battle of the sexes in which both co-protagonists try to outwit or outmaneuver each other. They usually include visual gags (with some slapstick), wacky characters, identity reversals (or cross-dressing), a fast-paced improbable plot, and rapid-fire, wise-cracking dialogue and one-liners reflecting sexual tensions and conflicts in the blossoming of a relationship (or the patching up of a marriage) for an attractive couple with on-going, antagonistic differences (such as in [**The Awful Truth (1937)**](http://www.filmsite.org/awfu.html)). Some of the stars often present in screwball comedies included Katharine Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Claudette Colbert, Jean Arthur, Irene Dunne, Myrna Loy, Ginger Rogers, Cary Grant, William Powell, and Carole Lombard.

The couple is often a fairly eccentric, but well-to-do female interested in romance and a generally passive, emasculated, or weak male who resists romance, such as in [http://www.filmsite.org/redstar.gif](http://www.filmsite.org/brin.html) [**Bringing Up Baby (1938)**](http://www.filmsite.org/brin.html), or a sexually-frustrated, humiliated male who is thwarted in romance, as in Howard Hawks' farce **I Was a Male War Bride (1949)**. The zany but glamorous characters often have contradictory desires for individual identity *and* for union in a romance under the most unorthodox, insane or implausible circumstances (such as in Preston Sturges' classic screwball comedy and battle of the sexes [http://www.filmsite.org/redstar.gif](http://www.filmsite.org/ladye.html) [**The Lady Eve (1941)**](http://www.filmsite.org/ladye.html)). However, after a twisting and turning plot, romantic love usually triumphs in the end. (See more discussion later in this section.)

* **Black or Dark Comedy**

These are dark, sarcastic, humorous, or sardonic stories that help us examine otherwise ignored darker serious, pessimistic subjects such as war, death, or illness. Two of the greatest black comedies ever made include the following: Stanley Kubrick's Cold War classic satire from a script by co-writer Terry Southern,[[http://www.filmsite.org/redstar.gif](http://www.filmsite.org/drst.html) **Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)**](http://www.filmsite.org/drst.html) that spoofed the insanity of political and military institutions with Peter Sellers in a triple role (as a Nazi scientist, a British major, and the US President), and Robert Altman's **M\*A\*S\*H (1970)**, an irreverent, anti-war black comedy set during the Korean War. Another more recent classic black comedy was the Coen Brothers' violent and quirky story [**Fargo (1996)**](http://www.filmsite.org/fargo.html) about a pregnant Midwestern police chief (Oscar-winning Frances McDormand) who solves a 'perfect crime' that went seriously wrong.

Hal Ashby's eccentric cult film **Harold and Maude (1972)** was an oddball love story and dark comedy about a suicidal 19 year-old (Bud Cort) and a quirky, widowed octogenarian (Ruth Gordon), with a great soundtrack score populated with songs by Cat Stevens. (See examples of other feature films below for more.) John Huston's satirical black comedy **Prizzi's Honor (1985)** starred Jack Nicholson as dimwitted Mafia hit man Charley Partanna for the East Coast Prizzi family, who fell in love with West Coaster Irene Walker (Kathleen Turner) - another mob's hitwoman. The film included an Oscar-winning performance from Anjelica Huston as the vengeful granddaughter of Nicholson's Don. Tim Burton's dark and imaginative haunted house comedy **Beetlejuice (1988)** featured Michael Keaton as the title character in a dream house occupied by newlywed spirits Geena Davis and Alec Baldwin. The shocking but watchable first film of Peter Berg, **Very Bad Things (1998)** told the dark and humorous story of a 'bachelor' weekend in Las Vegas gone bad for five guys when their hired stripper/prostitute was accidentally killed.

* **Parody** or **Spoof -**also **Satire, Lampoon** and **Farce**

These specific types of comedy (also called put-ons, send-ups, charades, lampoons, take-offs, jests, mockumentaries, etc.) are usually a humorous or anarchic take-off that ridicules, impersonates, punctures, scoffs at, and/or imitates (mimics) the style, conventions, formulas, characters (by caricature), or motifs of a serious work, film, performer, or genre, including:

* the Marx Brothers' satiric anti-war masterpiece [[http://www.filmsite.org/redstar.gif](http://www.filmsite.org/duck.html) **Duck Soup (1933)**](http://www.filmsite.org/duck.html) with anarchic humor
* the western spoof **Cat Ballou (1965)**
* Woody Allen's Japanese monster film parody **What's Up, Tiger Lily? (1966)**
* the 'genre' films of Mel Brooks (the quasi-western [**Blazing Saddles (1974)**](http://www.filmsite.org/blaz.html), the quasi-horror film [**Young Frankenstein (1974)**](http://www.filmsite.org/youn.html), the inventive Hitchcock spoof/rip-off **High Anxiety (1977)**, the [**Star Wars (1977)**](http://www.filmsite.org/starw.html) spoof**Spaceballs (1987)**, and his swashbuckler send-up **Robin Hood: Men in Tights (1993)**)
* Jim Abrahams' and the Zuckers' revolutionary comedy **Airplane! (1980)** - a sophomoric parody of the earlier disaster series of **Airport (1970)** films and the original **Zero Hour (1957)**; their **The Naked Gun (1988)** series parodied TV cop shows, and **Top Secret! (1984)** ridiculed Cold War agents and espionage spy films (and Elvis Presley films); Abrahams' military comedy **Hot Shots! (1991)** was a genre parody/spoof of **Top Gun (1986),**while **Hot Shots! Part Deux (1993)**parodied **Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985)**
* Christopher Guest's **Waiting for Guffman (1996)** - an intelligent satirical parody (and mockumentary) about small-town 'drama queen' hopefuls

In many comedies, there is much overlap with the category of **'farce'**, since the term has now been broadened and extended (from the early part of the 20th century) beyond its origins and roots in silent film (and early talkies) comedy (W.C. Fields, Charlie Chaplin, The Marx Brothers, and Buster Keaton to name a few), and the works of The Three Stooges. Now, farces - and farcical elements in films, may include fairly outrageous plots, unlikely and absurd circumstances, frantic-paced action, mistaken identities, a major transgression or hidden secret (i.e., often an extra-marital infidelity) sometimes based upon a misunderstanding, and lots of verbal humor, absurdities and physical slapstick, often with a concluding chase scene of some kind. Recently, farces have widened their scope by deliberately and satirically mocking established genres and standard filmic conventions themselves:

* Classic screwball comedies and other classic comedies: such as [**Trouble in Paradise (1932)**](http://www.filmsite.org/trou.html)**, Twentieth Century (1934),**[**My Man Godfrey (1936)**](http://www.filmsite.org/myman.html)**,**[**His Girl Friday (1940)**](http://www.filmsite.org/hisg.html)**, To Be or Not to Be (1942),**[**The More the Merrier (1943)**](http://www.filmsite.org/more.html)**,**[**Arsenic and Old Lace (1944)**](http://www.filmsite.org/arse.html)**, Born Yesterday (1950)**, [**The Seven Year Itch (1955)**](http://www.filmsite.org/seve.html)**,**[**Some Like It Hot (1959)**](http://www.filmsite.org/some.html)**,**etc.
* UK comedies: the British Ealing Studios comedies (**The Lavender Hill Mob (1951)**), the grotesque commentaries found in the **Monty Python** films, **Tom Jones (1963)**
* Kubrick's classic, black comedy: [**Dr. Strangelove: Or... (1964)**](http://www.filmsite.org/drst.html)
* Other comedies in series: the Hope/Crosby 'Road' movies, the Peter Sellers/Inspector Clouseau Pink Panther films, the Mel Brooks comedies (beginning with **The Producers (1968)** and including such films as **Spaceballs (1987), Robin Hood: Men in Tights (1993)**, and **Dracula: Dead and Loving It (1995)**), the Abrahams/Zucker/Zucker films such as **Airplane! (1980)** and **Hot Shots! (1991)**, some Woody Allen films (i.e., **Love and Death (1975)**), Carl Reiner/Steve Martin films: (i.e., **The Jerk (1979), The Man with Two Brains (1983)**, and **All of Me (1984)**), the Mr. Bean movies (i.e., **Bean (1997)**)
* Other recent examples: **What's New, Pussycat (1965), A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum (1966), Murder by Death (1976), Tootsie (1982), Planes, Trains and Automobiles (1987),** Peter Bogdanovich's **Noises Off... (1992)**, **There's Something About Mary (1998), Waking Ned (1998), South Park: Bigger Longer & Uncut (1999), Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy (2004), The 40 Year Old Virgin (2005)**, **The Simpsons Movie (2007)**, etc.