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Laughing at the Movies: Comedy in Film History

People love to laugh, and they especially love to laugh at the movies. Comedies have been a staple of the movie house since the beginning of the silent film era. In fact, when asked to name an important silent film actor, most people can only name comedians, with Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd at the top of anyone’s list CITATION.

Critics and scholars typically divide movie comedies into a number of categories, including comedy of manners, slapstick, screwball and romantic comedy. Historically, the type of comedy that is popular in a particular era has varied, depending on changing social and economic conditions CITATION. In this research paper, I explain some of the more common types of comedy, with examples of each. In addition, I attempt to describe the social and economic conditions contributing to the popularity of each type of comedy

Comedy of Manners

All through history, audiences have loved stories that satirize the affectations of a social class. Shakespeare excelled at this type of comedy, as we can see in *Much Ado About Nothing*. The main ingredient of a comedy of manners is usually a scandal, such as a love affair that some of the characters think is inappropriate. As Fitzwilliam-Browne has observed, in this type of story the plot is driven by an interloper with a higher or lower social standing than the other characters CITATION. The contrast between what the two groups consider acceptable behavior is a constant source of humor.

Slapstick Comedy

Comedy involving exaggerated violence and nonsensical behavior is often called slapstick. The term “slapstick” derives from a noisemaker consisting of two sticks fastened together in a way that allowed them to slap together loudly. Actors dating as far back as the Italian Renaissance used such a device to simulate the sound of two actors slapping each other, to great comic effect. Early filmmakers quickly realized that this very physical style of comedy was perfectly suited to the world of movies. In particular, the extreme gestures and facial expressions required to express emotion in silent films lent itself easily to slapstick.

Romantic Comedy

As the name implies, a romantic comedy centers around a love affair. In a typical romantic comedy, the protagonists meet in some unusual, often awkward situation. At first, they may be wary of each other, or actually dislike each other. Eventually they become fond of each other, but then separate because of an argument or other impediment to love. Ultimately they reunite for the obligatory happy ending. Typically, external circumstances (for example, an extreme coincidence, or the interference of friends) cause the protagonists to declare their love for each other unexpectedly.