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, 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), 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.

**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)). 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 Bringing Up Baby (1938), 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 The Lady Eve (1941)). However, after a twisting and turning plot, romantic love usually triumphs in the end.

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.

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 Duck Soup (1933) with anarchic humor
- the 'genre' films of Mel Brooks (the quasi-western Blazing Saddles (1974), the quasi-horror film Young Frankenstein (1974), the inventive Hitchcock spoof/rip-off High Anxiety (1977), the Star Wars (1977) spoof Spaceballs (1987), and his swashbuckler send-up Robin Hood: Men in Tights (1993))


This category may also include these widely diverse forms of *satire* - usually displayed as political or social commentary, for example:

- Billy Wilder's sex farce *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) - a parody of a conventional Hollywood romance
- Terry Gilliam's tasteless but hilarious Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life* (1983) and *The Life of Brian* (1979) - an irreverent parody of religious films

**Earliest Comedy:**

Cinematic comedy can be considered the oldest film genre (and one of the most prolific and popular). Comedy was ideal for the early silent films, as it was dependent on visual action and physical humor rather than sound. *Slapstick*, one of the earliest forms of comedy, poked fun at farcical situations of physical mishap and indignity, usually in pratfalls, practical jokes, accidents, acrobatic death-defying stunts, water soakings, or wild chase scenes with trains and cars. *Burlesque* is another form of early comedy, characterized by unrefined and broad humor, designed to produce ridicule. Pioneers in the early days of silent cinema and film-making, the Lumiere Brothers, included a short comedy film in their very first public screening in 1895 titled *Watering the Gardener* or "The Sprinkler Sprinkled" (*L'Arroseur Arrose*). Its predictable subject matter included a man with a garden watering hose who was tricked into being soaked by a prankster child.

**Buster Keaton**

One of the great silent clowns of the early comedic period was Buster Keaton, known for acrobatic visual gags, physical action, and for his deadpan, unsmiling, expression-less "stoneface." (His first name was a nickname given to him by Harry Houdini after he fell down some steps.) Keaton was first a vaudeville performer, performing and partnering quite often with former Keystone star and mentor Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. He entered the profession of film-making in 1917 at the age of twenty-one as a supporting player, in his film debut *The Butcher Boy* (1917). Then, he started his own production company and became an actor in his own production unit in many excellent short films (usually two-reelers) from 1920-1923, including *One Week* (1920), *Neighbors* (1920), *The High Sign* (1921), *The Boat* (1921), *The Haunted House* (1921), *The Playhouse* (1921), *The Paleface* (1921), *Hard Luck* (1921), and *The Frozen North* (1922), but none as a repeating character.

A few years later, he also starred in a number of feature-length silents, his first being *The Three Ages* (1923). Among his best features were *Our Hospitality* (1923), *The Navigator* (1924), *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), *Go West* (1925), *Seven Chances* (1925), and *Battling Butler* (1926). His most-acclaimed feature-length production was the fast-paced Civil War adventure tale of a railroad engine called *The General* (1927), which he soon followed with *College* (1927) and *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928). The latter film is known for one of the most suicidal stunts ever filmed - a falling wall with only a top-floor open window to save him from being flattened. One of his last film appearances was as one of the 'waxworks' friends who plays bridge with silent film star Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950).

**Laurel and Hardy**

One of the greatest and most-beloved of the comedy teams was the one of British-born Stan Laurel and the fat-faced Oliver Hardy, first purposely teamed together toward the close of the silent era by producer Hal Roach in
the slapstick film *Slipping Wives* (1926). They had first met, by accident, during the filming of *Lucky Dog* in 1917. Director Leo McCarey at Hal Roach Studios recognized their potential as a team and capitalized on their contrasting, disparate physical differences (Stan: the "thin" man and Oliver: the "fat" one - each with derby hats) and classic gestures (bewildered head-scratching, tie-twiddling, eye-blinking and baby-like weeping).

Although Laurel and Hardy worked together as a successful comedy team for 20 years (and were precursors of the 50s team Abbott and Costello), they were not equal partners - Stan considered himself the creative force and "brains" of the team. Their dozens of short films and twenty-seven feature-length films were produced over three decades (the 20s to the 40s), including such film classics as *Sons of the Desert* (1933) - arguably their best film, *Way Out West* (1937), *The Flying Deuces* (1939), and *A Chump At Oxford* (1940). One of their funniest bits involved getting a piano up a set of stairs in *The Music Box* (1932). Laurel and Hardy's last Hollywood film was *The Bullfighters* (1945), capping a teamed career of almost twenty years. They were among the few actors who successfully made the transition from silents to talkies.

Plots of their hilarious films used situational mishaps or incidents to trigger chaos and personal jeopardy, usually with the dignified, superior-acting, pompous Ollie trying to succeed and boast, only to be frustrated, exasperated and sabotaged by the simple-mindedness, childishness and brainlessness of Stan. Audiences were amused by their endearing qualities of naivete, clumsiness, innocence, and stupidity as they sunk deeper and deeper into trouble, chaos, and self-destruction.

**The Marx Brothers**

Once talkies emerged, the most famous and popular comedy team was the zany foursome of the Marx Brothers. They were the only real-life sibling comedy group in Hollywood history:

- the witty, wise-cracking, ad-libbing, absurdly-punning, caustic, fast-talking Groucho (famous for his crouched walk, mustache, cigar, round glasses and leering eyes)
- piano-playing, broken Italian-accented Chico, famous for distorted logic
- the mischievous mute-pantomimist/harpist Harpo (with an old taxi horn and numerous harp solos), known for chasing girls
- the straight-man Zeppo (who left the other brothers in 1933 after his performance in *Duck Soup* (1933), his fifth film)

Their comedy was a mixture of slapstick, sophisticated verbal comedy (often absurd and risque), zany anarchistic disrespect for the establishment, nonsensical action, and inspired buffoonery.

After almost two decades in vaudeville together, the brothers finally received widespread attention in their screen debut, *The Cocoanuts* (1929), filmed at Paramount's East Coast studios. Next were major box-office and critical successes - the film version of their Broadway play, *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Horse Feathers* (1932) and their last film for Paramount - the political, anti-war satire/spoof *Duck Soup* (1933).

The Marx Brothers further developed their unique brand of absurdist, hilarious, slapstick comedy with a change to MGM Studios in the mid-30s. MGM's productions of *A Night at the Opera* (1935) with its memorable scenes of the stateroom and a legal contract, and *A Day at the Races* (1937) were made at the height of their popularity. A frequent romantic foil for Groucho who appeared in a number of their films was Margaret Dumont, a memorable character actress. The film career of the Marx Brothers extended from 1929 to 1949. Marx Brothers Groucho, Chico and Harpo made their final film appearance as a team in *Love Happy* (1949), with a young 23 year-old Marilyn Monroe. Later on, Groucho became a star as an early TV game-show host.
Mae West

Another contemporary, wise-cracking, drawling performer was the bold, blowsy and flirtatious Mae West who enjoyed titillating and shocking audiences with double entendre dialogue, sexual innuendo and a desire for sex, especially before the advent of the Hays Production Code. [One of her typical lines was: "Listen, when women go wrong, men go right after them." ] Mae West starred in her own films, notably as a buxom burlesque queen and singer in an 1890s saloon in *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), and as a circus floozy in *I'm No Angel* (1933). She also appeared with Fields in their only film together: *My Little Chickadee* (1940).

Sophisticated Comedy:

Depression-Era social comedies and satires have been categorized as sophisticated comedies. This sub-form of the comedy genre generally finds humor in the lives and activities of the rich and urbane, and are marked by witty and sophisticated dialogue, centering on marital and romantic relationships. A recent example of sophisticated comedy is the off-beat, wistful love story of Manhattan party girl Holly Golightly (Audrey Hepburn) in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961).

50s Comedy:

There were 50s comedies as well - usually squeaky-clean, formulaic, courtship romantic comedies exemplified by the Rock Hudson/Doris Day films.

Sexual comedies were successively enhanced by the appearance of Marilyn Monroe at her prime in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955) as a Manhattan apartment dweller, and as the lead singer in an all-girls band in director/co-writer Billy Wilder's hilarious and subversive adult comedy *Some Like It Hot* (1959) - a ribald spoof of gangster films.

Other Comedies in the Late 50s and 60s:

The rise of television and its increasing popularity had a damaging effect on film comedy. Screen comedies declined in number and quality in the 1950s, contributing to the rise of TV situation comedies ('sitcoms') and variety shows, and stand-up comedy routines/sketches. There have been only a few comedy films since the 1950s with the innovative vigor and creativity of the classic era of film comedy.

The 70s:

In the 1970s and 80s, self-effacing, satirical humor, usually in a New York upper middle-class setting, was showcased in the films and acting of stand-up comic turned director Woody Allen, including his early film *Play It Again, Sam* (1972) and then in two of his most influential films: his classic, semi-autobiographical, bittersweet romantic comedy and Best Picture winner *Annie Hall* (1977) with Allen as a Jewish stand-up comedian and Oscar-winning Diane Keaton as his WASP girlfriend, and the black and white success of his ode to his hometown, *Manhattan* (1979).

The comic madness of Mel Brooks' films was evident in the cult farce classic *The Producers* (1968) with Zero Mostel and Gene Wilder as show producers and would-be con artists deliberately attempting to produce a bomb - *Springtime for Hitler*. It was Brooks' directorial debut film and one of his best, and the basis for one of Broadway's biggest hits. Later, he spoofed different types of genres in parodies: westerns in the anarchic *Blazing Saddles* (1974), horror films in *Young Frankenstein* (1974), and Hitchcock in *High Anxiety* (1977).
The Monty Python Films:

Monty Python's Flying Circus, the famed British comedy troupe (composed of Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Eric Idle, Terry Jones, and Michael Palin), a group similar to the Marx Brothers, starred in a series of BBC-TV comedy shows from 1969-1974 that pushed the comedy envelope. From there, they went on to star in four big-screen films beginning in the early 70s:

- And Now For Something Completely Different (1971)
- Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975)
- Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979)
- Monty Python's The Meaning of Life (1983)

Each member of the group would go on to star in his own film and television projects after the breakup of the group. They would often appear in films together as well, such as in Time Bandits (1981), Yellowbeard (1983), A Fish Called Wanda (1988), and Fierce Creatures (1997).

The 80s and 90s: Widely Divergent Comedies:

The writer/director team of David and Jerry Zucker and Jim Abrahams (known as ZAZ), first gaining notoriety with The Kentucky Fried Movie (1977), created Airplane! (1980) - a fast-paced lampooning of all the Airport-like disaster films of the 70s, with non-stop visual gags, pratfalls and parodies of common film clichés.

Director Ron Howard's romantic comedy fantasy Splash (1984) featured Daryl Hannah as a mermaid rescued by successful workaholic Tom Hanks (an unknown TV actor at the time) in a fairy tale brought to life. Hanks also starred in director Penny Marshall's Big (1988) as a 12 year old boy in the body of an adult, with additional insightful commentary on friendships, business, sex, and growing up.

Romantic Comedies in the 80s and Early 90s:

The romantic comedy was making a strong comeback in the late 80s and early 90s, with films like the following:

- director Rob Reiner's When Harry Met Sally... (1989) was about a long-term platonic friendship and relationship threatened by sex
- Garry Marshall's opposites-attract Cinderella story - the blockbuster Pretty Woman (1990), was about a prostitute named Vivian Ward (Julia Roberts) 'dating' a corporate businessman named Edward Lewis (Richard Gere) for a week in Beverly Hills

TV to Film Cross-Over Stars:

The counter-cultural, shocking-for-its-time TV show Saturday Night (introduced as "Live from New York, it's Saturday Night") first appeared in the mid-70s and featured some of the best, up-and-coming comics (Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, Bill Murray, Gilda Radner, Eddie Murphy and more) known as the Not Ready for PrimeTime Players, and hip guest hosts. [George Carlin was the first guest host of Saturday Night and the first musical guest was Janis Ian.] From television shows such as SNL, a new breed of talented comedians, all cross-over stars, emerged in the 80s and 90s. For example, Barry Levinson directed Good Morning, Vietnam (1987) with stand-up comedian Robin Williams as Adrian Cronauer, the manic, anti-authoritarian DJ voice of Armed Forces Radio in Vietnam.
The most popular *Saturday Night Live* film was the wildly popular *Wayne's World* (1992) with Mike Myers and Dana Carvey in spin-offs from their *Saturday Night Live* sketches as self-mocking Wayne and Garth, two stoned, high-school public access cable-TV show hosts. The sequel that was poorly received was *Wayne's World 2* (1993). Myers also starred in a series of James Bond spy-spoof films: *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997), *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999), and *Austin Powers in Goldmember* (2002).

**John Hughes - Teen Film Director of "Coming of Age" Films:**

There were also a number of comedic, "teen"-oriented *coming-of-age* or 'rites of passage' films directed toward a youth audience, frequently emphasizing the tensions of the adolescent and post-adolescent years, the problems of growing up, the high school years, aspects of peer pressure, teen parties, money, rebellion, friendship, romantic relationships among teens, and family strains. Rock 'n roll musical scores accompany many of them. *Sixteen Candles* (1984) told the tale of a sixteen year old girl suffering romantic angst. Teenpix film director/writer John Hughes' *The Breakfast Club* (1985) was about a group of high school students during a weekend detention and struggling with issues of conformity and parental values; Emilio Estevez was the jock, Ally Sheedy the weirdo, Judd Nelson the delinquent, and Molly Ringwald the socialite.

Hughes also scripted *Pretty in Pink* (1986) - a comedy/drama involving the angst romance of a poor, outcast girl (Molly Ringwald) falling for an elitist rich boy (Andrew McCarthy). In the following year, Hughes directed a reversed-role 'sequel' titled *Some Kind of Wonderful* (1987), about a teenaged boy's (Eric Stoltz) romantic attraction to teen queen co-star Lea Thompson while ignoring his faithful, long-suffering, tom-boy companion and true friend Mary Stuart Masterson. One of Hughes' best teenage comedy films was *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), the story of a malingering, high school risk-taking, spirited prankster and malingering Ferris (Matthew Broderick) taking another day off (from school and Principal Rooney) for misadventures in Chicago with his friend (Mia Sara); the film was filled with tips on how to fake a high fever, break into a computer system, and crash a parade.

**Low-Brow, Raunchy, Gross-Out Comedies at the Turn of the Century and into the 21st Century:**


Chris Kattan and Will Ferrel starred as two obnoxious lounge lizard brothers in *A Night at the Roxbury* (1998), and Rob Schneider starred in a number of Adam Sandler-produced films (via Happy Madison Productions) including *Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo* (1999), *The Hot Chick* (2002), and *Deuce Bigalow: European Gigolo* (2005).

Although PG and PG-13-rated films were generally proven to be the biggest moneymakers, the new 2000s decade was destined to show that semi-offensive R-rated comedies, including retooled romantic comedies and 'bromances' (guy-meets-guy romances) containing generous portions of profanity, sex and nudity, and debauchery, could also be popular - and appealing to male audiences. But sometimes success bred repetitiveness and exploitation. Although there were some bright spots, it was a decade of many prurient films...
with abundant and gratuitous T&A nudity, in-the-toilet gross-out humor and jokes about oral sex, farts and excrement, homosexuality, penis size, and incest - and more.

The R-rated Not Another Teen Movie (2001) was also released to serve as a tasteless parody of Hollywood teen (high school) flicks from the last few decades. It used cliched lines of dialogue and most of its unoriginal characters were stereotypical teen portrayals (for example, the Pretty Ugly Girl, the Popular Jock, the Bitchy Cheerleader, the Token Black Guy, the Dream Girl, the Naked Foreign Exchange Student).

Two strangely-popular mockumentary comedies were released by marquee comedian Sacha Baron Cohen: the satirical Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan (2006) - about a fictitious, anti-Semitic, sexist and racist Kazakhstani journalist who traveled through the US and interacted in unscripted situations. His follow-up film Bruno (2009) - was about a flamboyantly gay Austrian fashion journalist. The two films were among the most popular (and controversial) comedies of the decade.

Two other hit comedies in 2005 proved that pushing the boundaries of good taste were profitable:

- Judd Apatow's directorial debut breakthrough film The 40-Year-Old Virgin (2005), a hilarious sex comedy that signaled the return of raunchy R-rated fare, about a middle-aged male virgin (Steve Carell) seeking a sex partner and finding love with an appealing, intelligent newly-single mother (Catherine Keener)
- Wedding Crashers (2005) - surpassed There's Something About Mary (1998) as the top R-rated comedy in two decades (although it was soon surpassed by The Hangover (2009))
