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Crooked, but Never Common: The Films of Preston Sturges, by Stuart Klawans. Columbia UP, 2023, 366 pp.

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Has there ever been a director who burned brighter, and for a shorter period, than Preston Sturges? The first to utilise, and subsequently capitalise on, the "written and directed by" credit, Sturges was a wunderkind filmmaker—acidic in both his portrayal of politics and romance over the course of eight masterpieces in as many years. That his filmography actually consists of twelve features over fifteen years (not counting the twenty or so screenplays he had a hand in writing) is a central tension in Stuart Klawans's deft and dutiful examination *Crooked, but Never Common: The Films of Preston Sturges*. Here, the long-time *Nation* critic unpacks Sturges's filmography with an eye towards "the trains of thought, ambiguities, and semicovert artistic impulses that emerge in his films on a second viewing, or a fifth" (5).

Using Stanley Cavell's *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* as an entry point into the fissures between Sturges' "[c]ynicism about social and political arrangements" and the "frantic pace" at which he conveys these stories, Klawans argues that "Sturges's movies like many other films produced in the studio era can be understood to unfold like reasoned arguments about subjects of real concern" (3). He does so by deploying various rhetorical devices including "parody, doubletalk, double entendre, personification, metaphor, metonymy, parallel construction, self-contradiction, sudden candor, dialect, diatribe, cant, argot, and enough elegant variation to fill a thesaurus" (6). And just as a Sturges film features no shortage of madcap energy, Klawans book almost threatens to burst at the binding with reasoned and impassioned rhetorical analyses of the films, biographical details, and historical context.

Taking its title from a line spoken by Colonel Harrington to Barbara Stanwyck's Jean Harrington in Sturges' 1941 comedy *The Lady Eve*, Klawans moves rapidly through Sturges' filmography, with a chapter dedicated to each of his Paramount films—from *The Great McGinty* (1940) to *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944)—in addition to his Howard Hughes collaboration *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* (1947) and the David O. Selznick-produced one-off *Unfaithfully Yours* (1948). Through the chapters, Klawans provides readings of Sturges' films that, while not necessarily cohering into a thematic through-line outside of his contempt for "political and commercial sham, his mockery of romantic sappiness, and the simpleminded conventions of popular narrative" (8), nevertheless add up to a complete picture of a filmmaker whose preoccupations with narrative structure allowed him to bend and twist the form of a studio comedy to political and social ends.

Further, while films such as *The Lady Eve, Sullivan's Travels* (1941), and *The Palm Beach Story* (1942) are well trodden, Klawans still finds new interpretative avenues, beginning in the first chapter. There, Klawans underlines the "mathematical rigor" of *The Great McGinty* (17). By juxtaposing the "back-and-forth bounces of dialogue, the rise and fall of the action, the parallel movements of the camera" against the "amorphous" characterisation of McGinty, he notes the recursive structure of Sturges' screenplay (13, 16). While McGinty threatens to break free of the rigid political machinations of the Boss (Akim Tamiroff) late in the film, after having modified himself to fit whatever role the Boss needed him for (voter, fixer, chief of staff, and, eventually, mayor and governor), he is ultimately unable to enact change, ending up almost exactly where he began the film, as a poor man cheating his way to every dollar. Klawans reads McGinty's flirtation with political reform before a regression to work-for-hire as a metaphor for Sturges, who believed the "purpose of attaining writer-director status was to enable self-expression" but nevertheless found himself locked into fights with Paramount throughout the duration of his contract (27).

The marriage of high and low—artistry and commercialism—comes to a head in his third chapter on *The Lady Eve*. Here, Klawans openly wonders "why Sturges pressed a biblical text into the foreground of [the film] and then made its meaning obscure" (66). If the parallels between Genesis and *Eve* are, at best, cursory, Klawans suggests the film is more interested in narratives outside the Bible, particularly the myth of Lilith, Adam's supposed first wife before Eve. Klawans reads Stanwyck's Jean as Lilith to Hopsie's (Henry Fonda) Adam in this slightly askew retelling, noting Lilith "was said to be proud of her hair (which flowed loosely over her shoulders like Jean's, rather than being put up like Eve's) and enjoyed looking into mirrors (as Jean does, too)" (80). But Sturges isn't one to play up the comparison too much, instead letting "contradictions and continuities build up around Jean" but not enough to draw "attention to the contrast" (84). Instead, *The Lady Eve* stands out from Sturges's other work precisely because it pushes back against the algebraic structure of most of his scripts, which "make it seem as if everything has already been decided in them" (70). For Klawans, *The Lady Eve* is a narrative of perpetual motion, throwing overboard biblical references, character doubles, and filmmaking illusions at a manic pace.

In subsequent chapters, this push-pull between geometric screenwriting and freewheeling direction is laid bare. In some cases, including *The Palm Beach Story*, it's possible to thread the needle between narrative order and character-driven chaos. In others, particularly *Triumph Over Pain*, his screenplay of René Fülöp-Miller's book of the same name, the weight of "the too-muchness of its rhetoric" threatens to collapse the work (168). Klawans compares the finished film, *The Great Moment* (1944), with Sturges' original screenplay *Triumph Over Pain*. The only historical film that Sturges made, his biopic of W.T.G Morton, the Boston dentist who first showed the possibilities of ether as an anaesthetic, was a troubled production that portended the types of studio fights he'd have for the rest of his career. Taken out of his hands by Paramount, the feature was re-edited to streamline its complex flashback heavy structure, with the studio diluting Sturges' intended conflict between "good people and their institutions" (184). Yet Klawans complicates what, at first, reads as an almost routine tension between filmmaker and studio. As he makes clear, many of the edits that Paramount made dulled the political impact of the film, but they also removed the "retrospective and funerary mood" that Sturges' script was foregrounding (176).

Taken together, these chapters add up to a coherent "rhetoric" of Preston Sturges, albeit one that juxtaposes the writer and director credits against each other, suggesting sometimes that

Sturges' best work created a harmony between mathematical structure and controlled mayhem. His most prescient critiques were ones that ably moved between genres, never allowing the audience to become complacent in their expectations. With that mischievous approach, Sturges resembled another contemporary writer and director, Orson Welles. While Klawans goes to great lengths to distance Sturges from Welles, his spectre nevertheless haunts the book, in more ways than one. Not only do Sturges and Welles fall along parallel career tracks, they also mirror each other in temperament. While Sturges was fighting Paramount over edits to *The Great Moment*, "RKO cut *The Magnificent Ambersons* into something the executives thought was suitable" (171). After a string of aborted projects, and the tepid critical and commercial reaction to the release of his *Macbeth* (1948), Welles "busied himself with film, stage, and television work in Europe," only for Sturges to follow. That Welles would prove to be the more resilient filmmaker, with the release of *Touch of Evil* (1958), *The Trial* (1962), *Chimes at Midnight* (1966), and *F For Fake* (1973), with Sturges only releasing a handful of forgotten features speaks to their critical reputation, and the purpose behind Klawans's project.

When accounting for "a genealogy of Preston Sturges" in his conclusion, Klawans dismisses those lesser—that is to say, weirder—late-period films (317). Those wishing for extended readings of *The Beautiful Blonde from Bashful Bend* (1949) or *The French They Are a Funny Race* (1955) may be disappointed by their cameo appearances. The same goes for Sturges' California Pictures period, itself a subject of endless biographical fascination. Instead, his Harold Lloyd-starring quasi-*Freshman* sequel *The Sin of Harold Diddlebock* is given the shortest chapter and a reading of Sturges' professional and personal troubles, grafting Diddlebock's liberated clerk onto a "biographical-psychological interpretation" of Sturges own emancipation from Paramount (268). That Diddlebock ends up with an influx of cash, in addition to an entire zoo following him around reads as an apt metaphor for Sturges' time working with Hughes, a partnership that he believed would liberate him, but only led to more unrealised projects.

When we finally arrive at an actual lineage, Klawans is quick to dismiss the easy answers. The Coen Brothers "lack a carnivalesque spirit" (327), while Armando Iannucci "differs from Sturges in not caring *why* his characters have reasons "(328). Instead, Klawans sees Sturges in Alexander Payne's *Election* (19990, Chris Rock's *Top Five* (2014), and, importantly, Charlie Kaufman, who shares a thematic fear of "being enclosed in situations of endless, dreadful repetition, from which the only escape is death" (334). Perhaps the closest corollary that Klawans arrives at is David O. Russell, another filmmaker whose temperament got in the way of his artistry, going on an incredible run of films for a period, before falling into an extended rut for both personal and professional reasons. Yet, while Sturges's ability to marry screwball comedy with social and political commentary might have been short lived, he nevertheless left a lasting impact on film culture. Like a Sturges comedy, the too-muchness of material sometimes threatens to overwhelm Klawans wonderful interpretations, but, in its own madcap energy, he's created a fitting tribute to the writer and director.

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