Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*: a Playful Review of the Rhetoric of Comedy

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"This witty journey film from Paramount Studios skillfully mixes every conceivable cinematic genre type and tone of film possible – tragic melodrama, farce, prison film, serious drama, social documentary, slapstick, romance, comedy, action, and even musical, in about a dozen sequences."
(Review by Tim Dirks, at: http://www.filmsite.org/sull.html)

Overview

Sullivan's Travels (Preston Sturges, 1941) is known for its engaging in, for its subject matter, the state of the entertainment business. But the film is not Sturges' first attempt as such. Before this, he had spent much effort trying to realize *Song of Joy*, a script about a satire of Hollywood that he conceived in around 1935 and submitted to Paramount's Zanuck, with no success in the end.[1] It seems the idea of a film on filmmaking itself had always been on Sturges' mind. Moreover, *Sullivan's* was "Sturges' first script written from first to last in full knowledge that he would direct it."[2] In a sense, the film in various ways bears Sturges' long-awaited full authorial signature. By the time he commenced with the scripting process for *Sullivan's* in February 1941, he probably had also managed to win substantially stronger faith among his investors: in that same month, *The Lady Eve*, which he directed but did not script, was released, with commercial and critical success. With *Sullivan*, Sturges was unusually speedy in getting ready the script for shooting. He finished scripting in May. It took him only a total of about six months from the first concept of the film to its final completion of post-production, which was the normal amount of time he spent to just polish the scripts for the first three films he got involved.[3]

Writing more than forty years after the film released, Brian Henderson contends that *Sullivan's Travels* "holds a special place among Sturges' turning points because of the work methods that produced it and the new kinds of comic structure, and humor, that it introduced." To him, *Sullivan's* is also "the first Sturges script not based upon an earlier script, but conceived and written from first to last in the period immediately prior to its filming" – a method of composition that Sturges continued to adopt in the films following *Sullivan's*.[4] In Stanley Cavell's language, *Sullivan's* departed from a principal Hollywood genre between 1934 and 1949, "the comedy of remarriage," of

[1] Brian Henderson, introduction to "Sullivan's Travels," in Preston Sturges, *Five Screenplays* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985), pp. 511-3.
[2] Ibid., p. 516.
[3] Brian Henderson, "Sturges at Work," in *Film Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 2 (winter), 1985-6, p. 21
[4] Sturges left Paramount in December 1943. By then he had already written and directed eight films. See Henderson (1985-6), pp. 19 & 21.

which *The Lady Eve* is a key example.[5] This paves the way for my attempt to examine *Sullivan's* as a unique instance of comedy in his time.

My essay picks up the idea of *Sullivan's Travels* occupying a special position in Sturges' corpus as well as in the US film history, but with rationality different from Cavell and Henderson's. My initial interest for writing about the film was incited by its equivocal, at times contradicting, intentions blended into a single text. The film makes an argument about the necessity of comedy in society in a tongue-in-cheek manner, within the generic framework of comedy. Added to this, the film calls my attention to its ultimate celebration of comedy in the final scene, also as a final seal of irony for such fact.

This essay has two interconnected objectives. My first objective is to describe a fundamentally unsettling quality I find in *Sullivan's Travels*, seeking to make sense of the film as an eclectic text of comedy, combining traces of different species within the genre, from slapstick, screwball, romantic comedy, satire to high comedy. The film is not only a turning point in Sturges' career, but also a rare instance embodying the effort of someone working within the confines of institutional norms to seek for unconventional moves to attempt reflexive statements on the status quo of genre and industry. My second objective is to dialog with Bazin and Truffaut's evaluative position on the film's achievement and failure, grounded in certain assumptions for desirable cinema. I read their account as a moral argument for cinema's obligation in upholding a political agenda in its dialog with culture. Implicit in their "moral picture" of cinema is the core objective to change society, which is also central to the long tradition of critical theory in Europe. Instead of defending *Sullivan's* for or against their appraisal, I propose a different evaluative stance that is more grounded in the context of the US studio system. I argue that more attention should be put on the film's performative power instead of the likely concrete change it could have instilled in the mind and behavior of the audience. After all, even the most "political" cinema in Europe remains inadequate in provoking changes, as many critics have pointed out regarding the limits of representation: concrete changes in society cannot be the isolated or privileged project of cinema. Rather than following Bazin's critique of mainstream cinema's necessary compliance with a "middle world" ideology, as in the case of *Sullivan's*, which ultimately closes off the film's progressive potentials, I re-opened the case with a focus on the rhetorical aspect of the film, to look at how it works on the micro-levels of viewers' trained, conditioned reception to play with their expectation. The "in-between-ness" of the film is therefore, to me, not compromise, but a shrewd, critical response to engage with set norms playfully.

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[5] Stanley Cavell, "Introduction: words for a conversation," in *Pursuits of Happiness* (Harvard Film Studies, New York, 1981), pp. 1, 45-70.

Immature Narrative, or Alien Structure?

As the token of Sturges' new phase in his film career, *Sullivan's* contains, nonetheless, the best of what he has achieved and what remains the feature of the signature style of his later works -- deliberately crafted concision and precision. Henderson highlights the brilliant dialogues, break-neck pace, and vivid characters that were the result of tireless revision at every stage of production.[6] Highly economical, effective exposition in the opening scene or sequence is another marking feature. Premises are established efficiently right away, and immediately explode into action within the same scene. In *Sullivan's Travels*, the set-up for the journey is taken care of basically in one to two scenes within the first sequence: "when the fast talk between Sullivan and the producers is over, he is already on his way."[7] One finds a similar treatment in *Palm Beach Story*, often dubbed the female version of *Sullivan's*,[8] both featuring its protagonist as a journeying adventurer.

Sullivan's has eleven sequences, unusually high for a Sturges script when compared with his earlier works. Organized as a journey film, an episodic narrative flow takes the place of the normative three-act structure. Each episode enjoys an obvious degree of autonomy -- in the sense that the narrative styles, types of story, problems to resolve, and performance methods all vary from episode to episode. (A more detailed discussion will follow in the next section on eclectic comic styles.) The film can also be compared to the omnibus film in contemporary cinema: each component has its own spatial-temporal logic, independent of other units and yet together they form a whole. The sequential order of the episodes does not really facilitate a strict causal logic, but instead enhances focus within individual episodes, each being a tale with its own gags and movement of ideas. The sense of a whole is achieved – or, the parts cohered – through repetition in the method of closure of each unit.

Another extended feature of the film's episodic structure is its highly constructional quality resulting from the fast meandering course of events. The abrupt twists and turns not only mark the inter-episodic transitions, but also occur within an episode. The sudden arrival of an unexpected ending is typical in this film. Whatever tension accumulates towards the end of each episode will relax altogether with the arrival of another timely rescue of Sullivan by his own luck or by his team (the studio employees, or "the eight stooges"). The underlying notion of adventure has implicitly justified the film's chain-narrative characteristic, juggling with crises and the works of "miracles," or last-minute rescues. The latter, in particular, is a

[6] Henderson (1985-6), p. 19.
[7] Ibid., pp. 23-4.
[8] In *Palm Beach Story*, the female protagonist Gerry also sets out on a journey, meets a variety of strange characters, and has a number of diverse adventures.

common feature of slapstick comedy, by which the generation of laughter closely parallels the viewers' physical process of eye-witnessing the on-going danger, thus their intensifying worries, and the throw-in of a "just-in-time" (or "almost-too-late"?) lift from danger. The final closure in *Sullivan's* is particularly illustrative of all the above features. In a way, this short scene is almost like an afterthought. Right after his "miraculous" release from prison, Sullivan declares the ultimate lesson of his adventure -- that is, laughter is the best cure for the ordinary person's miseries. But his release sweeps in like a quick wind, catching the viewer unprepared, and speeds off before there is any time for one to sort out how it happens. In principle, the film could have had just any number of scenes (adventures) until any time its maker wants to call upon the prison scene to bring out the lesson of laughter, to then rush in the final scene for a quick closure.

From a standard narrative practice's point of view, the film may be a little off-beat, lacking in narrative cohesion, or failing to achieve tight dramatic integration, when compared to other films before or after *Sullivan's*. Henderson, for example, calls the film a "transitional work" that reveals "tensions and difficulties" – "its episodic, and to some degree unconnected, narrative form and its treatment of some of its characters indicate the transitional nature of the film." Comparing *Sullivan's* with Sturges' earlier works, Henderson finds a "falling off in dramatic-narrative cohesion, in character differentiation, perhaps even in dialogue." Nonetheless, he recognizes the film's innovative potentials, that it contains "the portals to a new kind of comedy – to structures and effects that could not have been achieved within Sturges' older, *classical* forms."[9] From hindsight in my view, Sturges' works after *Sullivan's* show little that can be considered breakthrough or genre innovation beyond. *Palm Beach Story*, for example, despite its appearance of a journey film like *Sullivan's*, loses the flexibility of the latter's chain structure of travel adventures. Though keeping a touch of charming luck and fakeness in the felicitous resolution of events seen in *Sullivan's* – for the miraculous ending in both is too good to be true – *Palm Beach* is a much more tamed narrative with a clear sense of integration between scenes expected in standard practice. *Palm Beach*'s narrative falls back onto a safe, goal-oriented narrative, with a clear direction in its flow of events -- that is, to facilitate the reunion of the separate couple (the protagonists), and to fulfill the need for sexual companions for the couple in the supporting role -- rounding up in proper narrative closure.

It is not all that clear to me why Henderson only manages to recognize the unsettling qualities in *Sullivan* as marks of a difficult, struggling transition despite his recognition of the film's ability to renew "one's sense of film's narrative power and its

[9] Henderson 1985-6, p. 23.

capacity for a virtually unlimited variety of scenes and moods."[10] There could be the question of an implicit US standard at work to measure up Sturges' achievement. (This should be another essay.) Two elements in Sturges' background, however, interest me: first, his early and forming years and education in continental Europe, and his trained craftsmanship in theatre and dramatic writing.[11] It would not be reasonable to simply think of *Sullivan's Travel* as a sudden loss of coherence, especially when the film had been a long awaited project, the first one in which he would be director as well as script-writer, and with a subject matter that had been on his mind all the time. One other worthwhile project would be to trace the possible impact of continental European drama on Sturges' notion of narrative and script construction. In the context of my analysis, I find it illumining to bring in Truffaut and Bazin's reading of *Sullivan's Travel*. I suggest that it is more than sheer coincidence that it takes European critics such as the two to appreciate the deliberate deviant features in this particular work by Sturges, which they honor as a solemn critique of comedy. I shall bring in Truffaut and Bazin in a later section of this essay when I discuss what counts as "political-ness" in US cinema.

An Eclectic Text of Comedies

As suggested in the "overview" section, the need to sort out the strands of various comic norms and features combined in *Sullivan* is crucial to the two objectives in this essay: for understanding the degree to which Sturges reflects upon the genre by mocking and appropriating its features, and for evaluating the film's critical potential as the performative practice of rhetorics. A basic account of the features of the conventions of the comedy in US cinema should be in place and negotiated.

In his attempt to map the lineage of the many comic styles, Cavell applies the term "the genre of remarriage comedy" to those works he finds to be "inheritors of the preoccupations and discoveries of Shakespearean romantic comedy" -- works which he also finds evolving from the "great comedies of the Hollywood silent era."[12] For contrast, Cavell also juxtaposes comedies which highlight the young couple's effort to overcome obstacles to their love with works of the Marx brothers, W.C. Fields and so on. The former he calls "the romantic comedy of manners," and the latter "comedy of clowns."[13] *Sullivan's* protagonist is not designed to be clownish like Chaplin, the Marx brothers, or Keaton; and the romantic relation is at most an undercurrent or a

[10] Ibid., p. 21.
[11] According to François Truffaut, Sturges spent most of his childhood in Paris, then in Switzerland, before taking up his studies at Janson-de-Sailly, and did not return to the United States until the early 1930s when he first established his reputation as a theatre playwright. He joined Hollywood as a script-writer to begin, and became a director in the early 1940s. See Truffaut's introduction in Andre Bazin, *The Cinema of Cruelty: from Bunuel to Hitchcock* (Seaver Books, New York, 1982), p. xiv.
[12] Cavell, pp. 1, 2.
[13] Ibid., p. 2.

playful sideline. The film simply resists any easy naming. It seems the physical quality in its scene construction and narrative style begs for more discrimination.

Everson has taken greater length to account for more physical comedies. Farce, sight-gags, slapstick, and screwball comedy, in his survey, are close relatives.[14] The different articulations of the comic in each member of the genre form a trajectory that ranges from pure visible pleasure resulting from unusual bodily configuration of the characters to the implicit representation of the irony of human nature via dialogs and causal chains of events. Whereas sight-gags and slapstick emphasize the visible and the physical, screwball overlaps with the two with an additional blend of sophisticated comedies of manners and satire (from the 19th century), highlighting the manner of speech and the value functions of language.

More specifically, Everson calls his readers' attention to the screwball comedy's ultimate qualification in its battle-of-the-sexes element. It is not difficult at all to see the modified battle-between-the-sexes element in *Sullivan's* to qualify the film for screwball comedy. Part of the battle is between protagonist Sullivan and his to-be-divorced "wife" who is a heavily talked about absence in the entire course of the film. The changing relation between Sullivan and the Girl is a playful display of the gender-based tug-of-war, forming the manifest battle. The "literal and physical battle of the sexes" in *Sullivan's* may not be an exact copy as such, but the intense intimacy between the married Sullivan and his single female companion on his journeys has been suggestive of the on-going disputes we do not get to see between Sullivan and his about-to-divorce wife. Everson has cited many typical details found in screwball comedies which *Sullivan's* also shares.[15] The film is full of "disguise and masquerade": "rich posing as poor, poor as rich, as the opposite sex, adults as children" and so on. Everson observes that Screwball protagonists are usually divorced, therefore lack of innocence and coupled with frustration that leads to physical or mental mauling. What we see in the film is the Sullivan who is almost the mockery-opposite of such an image: he is excessively hopeful, compassionate, and almost invincible in will and physique.

There is yet one last defining feature of the screwball comedy in Everson's analysis: the unique quality of not taking itself seriously as a film. Everson argued that screwball comedies are political in its rhetoric and formal features, but without a political content. If lampoon of social, political corruption were to be presented with "humor and staccato wisecracking dialog," they should be used as a weapon and not as an end in itself. My reading of this last line is that humor and wisecracking dialogs function at the level of performance: what matters is the very act of

[14] William K. Everson, 1994: "A Definition and a Survey," in *Hollywood Bedlam: Classical Screwball Comedies* (New York: Citadel Press, 1994), pp. 12-3.
[15] Ibid., p. 19.

provocation via language and the emotive impact experienced in the process of viewing, whereas the referential value is secondary. One may say that manner and theatricality are more important than serious engagement with a problem. "Meaningful" social comments intended immediately disqualify a film's screwball comedy status.[16]

Everson's separation of political content from rhetorical form is useful for my assessment of the populist overtone in *Sullivan's* in the second half of this paper. The de-emphasis of serious social critique can be a productive proposition to open up questions on the status quo *Sullivan's* as an instance of comic intervention. In this context, it would be useful to go back to the 1920s, a time in which Everson detected different traces of "rebellion," also a moment in the history of US mainstream cinema in which comedy embodied the strongest transgressive tendencies. Everson cites romance comedies that "promised a revolt against conformity," with "a lot of surrealism and insanity…in the sight-gag comedies." Insanity in screwball comedies, for example, was more than pure entertainment in this period: "insanity [was] for punctuation rather than as a driving force." In addition, the use of sound and dialogues (instead of pure inter-titles) allows more room for subtitle manipulation for subversive expressions.[17] The affinity between film comedy and subversive tendencies continued on through the Depression in the 1920s and into the 1930s when the Production Code gradually came into effect. "The Depression spawned a specific style of screwball comedy," often about rich people and the problems that money brings, Everson writes, "which contended that in hard times it was perfectly acceptable to be dishonest and unethical as long as one remained technically legal."[18] "The backgrounds of society elegance became a kind of gymnasium for physical comedy and comic punishment." In the 1930s, after the Production Code was in place, screwball comedies, if not itself the vehicle against the Code, nonetheless stand out in ridiculing "the dull, lifeless respectability that the Code insisted on for family viewing." During the World War II, when warfare, international relations, home security and related high-level social economic issues dominated public discourses, film comedy gave its voice to poke "lunatic fun at such domestic home-front problems as shortages in hotel accommodations and travel… difficulties." Even back in the early 1940s, orthodox slapstick or trick comedies already "reflected a new, if occasionally labored, craziness," to which Everson cites Sturges as the key example accompanied by the team of Michael Fessier and Ernest Pagano whose works marked the mid 1940s. By then, "Hollywood had begun an aggressive attempt to create *deliberate* screwball comedy, to exploit traditions that had originally risen so

[16] Ibid., p. 13.
[17] Ibid., p. 21.
[18] Ibid., p. 22.

spontaneously, and to justify their zaniness by welding them to newly fashionable and pseudo-Freudian dream imagery."[19]

Everson demands that no full analysis of comedy is possible without reading the manipulation (subtraction and modification) of dramatic elements against the "morals, mores, speech patterns, racial attitudes, and so forth" of the period in which the films in question were produced.[20] While suspecting any claims for a reflectionist model to explain the relation between a film and its social cultural context, I affirm the value of Everson's discussion as one that seeks for that relation beyond signification and representation. What Everson really begs for is the rigor to go beyond auteur factors to look at how public opinion, mass psychology, existential crisis and other forms of ideational and emotive factors often get translated into concrete business decisions, corporate strategies and economic formulas – and in the context of the film business, how such kind of consideration result in concrete product design and the modification of existing species. Within this set game, a critic or historian also wants to look at how individual employees – filmmakers and other members of the creative personnel – maneuver their way through or negotiate with constraints to strive for innovations.

Along the above lines of thoughts, one way to make sense of the playful assemblage of incommensurable styles (as in *Sullivan's*) is to look at it as a subversive tactic against Hollywood's self-censorship Production Code which growingly steered the direction of filmmaking towards "stifling respectability" since the end of 1933.[21] In Everson's view, US cinema after 1933 was full of examples demonstrating attempts to find new ways to keep alive the free display of irreverence, vigor, and vulgar humor rampant in pre-Code cinema without explicitly breaking the Code. Lubitsch, for example, preserves the anti-conformity elements via the manipulation of plot points, which Everson describes as "sly and sophisticated compromises."[22] In a nutshell, in Everson's account, the screwball comedy was charged with the political mission to counteract the Production Code's insistence on "stifling respectability" in films since the end of 1933. Contrary to what it seems, then, comedy is suggested to have been the most serious genre in Hollywood – in the sense that "it reflected, through the comic mode, the deepest moral and social beliefs of American life," according to Bazin.[23]

Confrontational Performance in *Sullivan's*: Attraction or Integration?

Everson and Bazin's conclusions provide me with the ground to go beyond *Sullivan's* generic components of the comedy to sort out the intricate ways formal and

[19] Ibid., p. 24.
[20] Ibid., p. 17.
[21] Ibid., p. 15.
[22] Ibid., pp. 15-6.
[23] Bazin, p. 35.

generic expressions were prescribed by social cultural factors outside and within the circle of filmmaking. I suggest that there is the need to further focus on the rhetorical aspect of the film's form. In my analysis, *Sullivan* not only stems from the seed of rebellion against conformity. Beyond story content, subject matter and attitude, the film's hilarious chain of events and mockery are performative components that remind us of the playful space of early cinema (up till around 1905-6), fluid and relaxing in morality, its energy flowing from a method better described as presentation (direct address) than representation. These features of "direct attack" on the audience's senses, to which Tom Gunning ascribes the term Cinema of Attraction, can be loosely felt in the series of slapstick performances in *Sullivan's*, especially in a few of the early scenes.

According to Tom Gunning, who adapted the term from Eisenstein and Leger, an attraction aggressively subjects the spectator to sensual or psychological impact via exhibitionist confrontation rather than diegetic absorption.[24] Indeed, the actions presented in *Sullivan*'s early scenes are freed from the obligation to convey story points for narrative comprehension, and therefore stand independently as performances for their own physical interest, without having to be understood in relation to what comes before and after. The most prominent of these sequences, the one with the "boy whippet-tank commander" driving a car ruthlessly, is a sheer pleasurable display of an obsession with violent and aggressive sensation. In Henderson's words, the boy is the "infernal child of the day's technology" and therefore "a monster."[25] Adopting the typical chase sequence in early cinema, the scene draws the viewer to itself for a potential fascination with visual experience relying on the pleasure of looking. In the Miz Zeffie sequence which comes right after the car chase, Sullivan ends up doing yard work for a country widow and her sister. The sequence playfully incorporates a typical Meliès trick when the portrait of the dead husband on the wall makes funny faces upon his wife's flirt with Sullivan. The trick is an autonomous "attraction" delivering pleasure without subjecting it to the service of plot. The entire sequence shows no burden to build any connection to the rest of the film. "Cartoon effects" and other exaggerations create "a greater distance from its characters and plot." All the characters that Sullivan and Gerry meet along the way of their journeys are "living cartoons": the comic characterization is only at the edges of the journeys. By contrast, in *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (1944), the cartoon stylization reaches to the heart of the film – within the main characters themselves.[26]

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[24] Tom Gunning, "the Cinema of Attractions: Early Films, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in Thomas Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (BFI, London, 1990), pp. 56-62.
[25] Henderson (1985-6), p. 22.
[26] Ibid., pp. 22, 25.

Another element that culminates in the "attraction" quality of *Sullivan's* is a film style that deliberately omits psychological details but instead adheres to the surface traits of the main characters and events. Both Sullivan (in *Sullivan's Travels*) and Gerry (in *Palm Beach Story*) are rendered externally, which makes the two characters the object of observation for their appearance and physical features. Even the romance aspect is treated in a way that highlights the game quality so that it needs not be taken for relationship motivated by the psychological interiors of the characters, which is the core element of human drama. "Romance," if any in the film, is an "externalized, even cartooned version."[27] In a glance, the confession, or articulation of the moral of his adventures, no matter how "artificial" (my wording) or "light" (Bazin's wording) it may look, completes the film's narrative as a typical initiation story, by which a relatively young protagonist goes through a series of unusual experiences beyond his routine, which often result in immense psychological shocks and discovery, and finally leads fundamental change in his attitude of life. *Sullivan* arguably imitates the formula of the initiation story, carrying a lot of the typical features, except that there is a deliberate effort to stay away from any depth of psychological/emotional impact via a narrative grammar that isolates surfaces for emphasis.

In citing the Cinema of Attraction, I am invoking the connotation for subversive tendencies often ascribed to it in the context of revisionist film historiography. In the case of *Sullivan's*, my allusion to early cinema follows two aspects. The first concerns an inscribed viewer's position that encourages active, self-conscious viewing, as opposed to the passive viewer waiting to be absorbed into the diegesis for the entire duration of the film in the case of the cinema of narrative integration, a mode more or less standardized since the mid 1910s. The second concerns a kind of assumed playfulness, manifested in eclectic ways, especially through inter-media dialogs, the free combination of elements from existing leisure and artistic forms such as vaudeville curiosities, landscape photography, magic performance, painting and theatrical drama.

As the early sequences flow into more adventurous journeys, there is a clearer mix of attraction and narrative integration, which moves the film towards regular story representation. In a scene when Sullivan takes the Girl (no name is ever given to this main supporting character) back to his mansion, characters falling one after another into the swimming pool is no longer a pure performance – for that sequence of action is carefully inserted into the end of a much longer sequence of drama portraying the tension/attraction between Sullivan and the Girl. The fall is therefore intended to mark off the scene as a note of comic relaxation, or typical slapstick

[27] Ibid., p. 23.

punctuation. In the latter half of the film, moments of "attraction" and stand-lone slapstick punctuation marks diminish. Instead, we see comic effects tempered into integrated humor, and irony naturalized into the dramatic body. Slapstick passages, while growingly alternate as autonomous passages with the verbal passages, are also "inserted for overtly rhythmic considerations."[28] In sum, the episodic flow in *Sullivan* unfolds a continuum of changing narrative modes, from the overtly "attraction" style of early cinema's to slapstick, highlighting comic moments for their dramatic functions in the overall story, to integrated melodramatic moments, cut off with a "moral of the story" revelation often found in tales and fables.

Reflexive Qualities for Deconstruction

The reflexive qualities of *Sullivan's* can be discussed in three areas: excessive miracles, juxtaposition of different comedic styles, and the eclectic combination of genres – all of which weaved into the film's episodic chain mode which provides the skeleton that holds together the series of adventures.

Bazin tends to see the excessive miracles in the film as satire. To him, the eleven impossible situations in *Sullivan's Travel* may appear to be naïve, too much of idealized fantasy and wishful thinking, to the degree that it is too good to be true, and yet its approach is to inject "supersaturated solution" to the point of absurdity.[29] He sees, in the blatant "fakeness" of *Sullivan*'s miraculous endings and general course of events, social satire via formal deconstruction. "With Sturges, the humor of the American comedy became irony," and "if he made use of old themes it was by forcing them to reveal themselves and thereby to be destroyed," says Bazin about *Palm Beach Story*, which in my view also applies to *Sullivan's*.[30] To Truffaut, Sturges is comparable to Frank Capra in his interest to revive American comedy, and yet more sophisticated: "he shared Capra's social sense, but not his optimism or his idealism… In seeing a film like *Sullivan's Travels* again, we realize Sturges' importance and the originality of a style which dared to mingle comedy with cruelty."[31]

Both Bazin and Truffaut highlight the "intellectual" quality of Sturges' mix of laughter and cruelty, which makes what they call "satire." And they express doubt for whether such an intellectual attempt is recognizable among the American audience: for what make up the satire they see are "extremely slight" subject matters and apparently "pure pretexts for gags and predicaments." Without elaborate plot design like Capra's, these materials perhaps look too close to what an average American viewer of comedy would see as pure entertainment. Bazin presses for his evaluation, "Preston Sturges is unquestionably the only director who knew how to carry on the

[28] Ibid., p. 22.
[29] Bazin, pp. 35-6.
[30] Ibid., pp. 35-6.
[31] Truffaut, in Bazin, p. xiv.

genre by in essence reviving it" by "basing his humor and the comic principle of his gags on the sociological displacement of the classical comedy."[32]

As for *Sullivan's* self-reference as a product of the Hollywood studio system and as a member of the genre of comedy, Tom Dirks summarizes most succinctly:

> "Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels* satirizes Hollywood pretension and excesses with his particular brand of sophisticated verbal wit and dialogue, satire and fast-paced slapstick.
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> "This witty journey film from Paramount Studios skillfully mixes every conceivable cinematic genre type and tone of film possible – tragic melodrama, farce, prison film, serious drama, social documentary, slapstick, romance, comedy, action, and even musical, in about a dozen sequences."[33]

In Bazin's language of genre mutation, the narrative starts out "as an American comedy and continues in a realist vein on the same subject"; which then evolves into "a kind of self-destruction of the genre with which it appears to be connected." He does not see the above as the mockery of the generic norms of the comedy, but the core of the film's political valance. In his view, "Sturges makes their absurdity explode retroactively," and that if the norms are justified in the end, "it is only after admitting their untruth and because this untruth is in the end a lesser evil."[34]

My invocation of early cinema earlier on argues that what has been perceived as a quest for a new comic style by Henderson, or what Bazin and Truffaut have honored as "social satire," a solemn critique of comedy by revealing its own artificiality, acquires its power not on the meaning level, but on the performative level as a gesture and a game. This is done via a playful attempt to display the changing language of comedy via a collage of recognizable comic styles. The trajectory I have delineated speaks of a visual historiographic project that joyfully surveys the many invented modes of comic articulation, from physical to verbal comedy to serious satire, from nonverbal slapstick techniques to screwball-style verbal humor. In addition, the historical trajectory in *Sullivan* is not confined to the modes of comedy, but to other genres. For as viewers move into the later scenes -- such as Sullivan's assumed death (disappearance), his life in prison, conversation with other convicts, and the church scene which displays a lyrical melancholy via the sounds of blues and spirituals -- we see a succession of shuttles back and forth between making a plot point, moving the story forward and sheer display of performance. The game or play element is manifested in the film's unstable mode of narrative – somewhat like a guessing game, or a hide-and-seek. As an entertained viewer, I feel Sturges leading my way, constantly asking, "Are you ready? What's going to happen next? How

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[32] Bazin, pp. 34-5.
[33] Tim Dirks, at: http://www.filmsite.org/sull.html; read on February 13, 2005.
[34] Bazin, p. 37.

am I going to do the next scene? It's time we shed some tears. Let's take a jolly good break here…" and so on. The deliberate "instability" of the narrative method invokes and upholds a present continuous tense of (spectators') viewing as well as (the filmmaker's) story-telling. Be it the road (adventure) movie sequences, (murder) mysteries, dark moments of a lost hero, moving moments of the suffering finding comforts, or the spiritual enlightening of an "intellectual," the ethos and pathos of every single sequence are bracketed in a narrative vehicle that calls attention to its own functioning. The reflexive quality I have discussed here is, therefore, not exactly the same as typical Modernist reflexivity, which highlights the subjectivity of the author, the material and apparatus that make up the work, and a distantiation effect that keeps the viewers at a critical distance. In *Sullivan's*, the reflexive method amounts to playfulness: while alerting viewers to issues of human existence, suffering and absurdity of life, it calls attention to the fact of story-telling as a convention and a game-like activity, rule-based and therefore revisable. It also retrieve a kind of "active" viewer that has been lost since the transition of early cinema to the cinema of narrative integration.

The practice of cinema under the studio system in the US had always been ruled by clean-cut differentiation of genre products, standardized industrial requirements, and thus clarity of form and style. In such a context, consciously rendered hybridity, as in the case of *Sullivan's*, may be far more than sole parody. The many aspects of similarities I have drawn between early cinema and *Sullivan's* point to the latter's power of actively drawing its viewers to the very acts of construction and style composition. In the end, the film plays within the rule of comedy: its political energy lies in its playfulness and the very course of delivery, not in overthrowing a genre, nor in provoking actual change in the real world out there.

It is not difficult to understand why Truffaut and Bazin look at the same set of features of the film and conclude with a note of high appraisal. The base of their evaluative stance is the diagonal opposite of Hollywood cinema's: it assumes that purity of genre is not a merit for cinema, whereas complexity, equivocality, internal dialogs of conventions, and dialectics of formal components seem to be the mark of strong cinema. In today's vocabulary, Truffaut's appreciation of the mix of laughter and cruelty, and Bazin's compliments on Sturges' calling attention to the practice of comedy itself in *Sullivan's* are methods of deconstruction. In negotiating with Truffaut and Bazin's views, I have chosen to re-situate Sturges' practice in *Sullivan's* within the "game" of Hollywood cinema: it is self-conscious "appropriation," and not purely creative innovation for the genre. Along the same line of thought, I see Bazin's ultimate regret for *Sullivan's* derive only out of his own assumption of strong cinema, which I have sought to revise. To Bazin, what I have called the gradual

move into narrative integration is also compromise, and how Sturges destroys the satire he has achieved:

> "Sturges did not dare – or was not able – to play out the game that he had begun and that he owed us. The tragic interlude does not…contain sufficient violence and authenticity. Several commercial conventions still slid in and they contradict the nature of the scenario itself. Since Hollywood was to be contrasted with reality, the script should not have contained anything from Hollywood. The tragedy should have dialectically abolished the comedy and reality should have overwhelmed the film. Only then would the final return to Hollywood have had the ironic character it needed and which would have made the viewer questions Sullivan's final wisdom."[35]

The question is: does Sturges want Sullivan to be questioned? In my thesis of playfulness, Sullivan is an active agent of a narrative game that calls our attention to the artificiality of fictionalization. The question is, ultimately, what amounts to political cinema within the measure of a specific culture. My defense for *Sullivan's* is that within the paradigm of the Hollywood studio system and the reception mode and standards it had promoted, the film has shrewdly stretched to reach many limits. Of course, in the light of the basic agenda of critical theories, neither Bazin's call for critical awareness nor Sturges' call for playful participation qualifies – for neither of them amounts to concrete changes in society, at least not with pure intellectual activity.

Postscript

Writing this paper has been a great pain for me, but also a process of re-discovering. The reason why it has taken all these years to finish is partly personal and circumstantial, and partly a process of struggling to come to terms with the critical positions I have acquired during my days at NYU. "Born into" the early and mid-1990s into the field of Cinema Studies, I found myself in a theoretical terrain that was highly suspicious of the single power of the individual text and textual analysis in general. I have readily taken this position in the positive direction: it is part of the discourse of the return of the importance of historiography; it is also, in relation to revisionist film history, about opening up the field to allow the pursuit of cultural studies to come in to enrich historiography. However, my focus on historiography in my Ph.D. thesis, which I completed last year, time and again put me back to the question of what to do with the single film text, the basic "documents" for the writing of cinema history. Is there really no room to talk about an individual film? How should we cleanse ourselves of the contextual and philosophical burden of Structuralism to reclaim approaches that differ from textual analysis? Along this

[35]Ibid..

line of thought, I realize I also need to find new ways to make sense of authorial intent, an even older "evil." In this essay, I have responded both questions. Authorial intent is transformed into the maker's attempt to preserve and inscribe his/her own voice in face of the many industrial constraints and marketing considerations. In this way, a film is not so much taken as a text that exemplifies, or is thickly linked to, the broader cultural fabric at large, which is the case in the structuralist paradigm. Rather, I take a film as an instance of a speech act, as an utterance of an attitude pertaining to subjectivities, an act that hides and reveals the very constraints and provisions of a moment of articulations. This is what a performative approach is ultimately about: the concern lies not in the play, reclamation, subversion or substitution of meanings, but the very act, and the continuous act, in engaging in these activities.

I am extremely conscious of the fact that I have written this paper like a total alien. Even though I had sat in almost all of the late Prof. Everson's classes during my four years at NYU, I felt, even up to now, an extreme unease about my lack of not knowing the history of US cinema well enough to make a case of films in the pre-war era since the 1920s. My initial intuition as an alien had propelled me to situate my analysis within the broader frame of populism. I have consulted Michael Kazin's *The Populist Persuasion: an American History*, for example, and have summarized big chunks of his analysis to form a proper framework of the history of the populist rhetoric in representational practices.[36] Kazin claims, "From the birth of the United States to the present day, images of conflict between the powerful and the powerless have run through our civic life, filling it with discord and meaning."[37] In Kazin's view, images such as "God-fearing nuclear family," "middle-class taxpayers," "working man dressed in overalls," under the oppression of "industrialist [with] diamond stickpin gleaming from his silk tie," "federal bureaucrat," "fat cats," "Big Men" and so on have made up the vocabulary of populism. He also provides me with a convenient profile:

> "Whether orated, written, drawn, broadcast, or televised, this language is used by those who claim to speak for the vast majority of Americans who work hard and love their country. That is the most basic and telling definition of populism: a language whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded narrowly by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter."[38]

Based on the above, I have attempted to come up with a portrayal of the protagonist

[36] See Michael Kazin, 1995: *The Populist Persuasion: an American History* (Basic Books, New York).
[37] Ibid., p. 1.
[38] Ibid..

Sullivan as a populist speaker. Sullivan (as well as the Preston Sturges behind *Sullivan's Travels*), seems to be an equivocal representation (as well as spokesperson) of a populist sentiment: the powerful are those who have access to and control over the institutional resources of creative representation and the distribution channels for mass entertainment. This line of thinking is eye-opening for me as it leads me to delve deeper into the more socially-engaged aspect of creative practices. However, right before this final version, I decided to drop such pursuit as it too much subjugates and subsume the film to a broader practice, an assumption I find highly problematic. Part-and-whole cross-readings in discursive practices have their limits. To uphold my commitment to seek for new models to re-situate the use and function of individual film text in critical practices, I have confined myself to working on the taxonomy of the material construct of the work – to look at it as a node with many possible directions of connectivity, and not to turn it into the sole agent of an arguable project on the grand scale.

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