Close stylistic analysis of a segment of *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938)

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Howard Hawks’s *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) is a true masterpiece of screwball comedy of all time, which brings the brilliance of Cary Grant’s and Katharine Hepburn’s acting through the absurd misadventures, funny situations and humorous misunderstandings. The illustration of the unusual relationship between two different social class characters, Susan, an upper-class female, and David, an upper-middle-class scientist, indicates game, confusion, sexual attraction and battle between people as well as female domination and male feminization. What is noteworthy above all about why this fast-paced film is the archetype of screwball comedy is the perfection of cinematic devices as the mise-en-scène, editing, cinematography and other.

The night-time wardrobe malfunction scene at the fashionable restaurant perfectly demonstrates these cinematic codes, which are used to create the right meaning of the sequence and understanding the opposite qualities of the characters as well as to make a proper impact of the whole segment on viewers.

This scene, being as a part of a huge sequence at the nightclub, follows another segment where the identities of two women purses are mistaken.

Beginning with an extremely long shot (1), the emphasis is on the background, which not only allows audience to understand that two characters leave the dinner hall, but also together with the music creates a special delight, festive and solemn atmosphere indicating a social class of the female character and influencing the viewers perception of this segment. The arch at the background and the decoration of the rails at the foreground communicating with this atmosphere and characters’ wardrobes (David’s white bow; Susan’s hair decoration looks like a bridal veil) remind audience a marriage process. At this moment Susan is running after David to explain him her mistake. Susan’s evening dress is very bright and brilliant; it attracts attention and characterizes her as an attractive, self-confident and impulsive person. David has the opposite characteristics as he is a conservative academic.

Then characters go down the stairs towards a camera while it gradually tilts down following Susan and David (2.2). When Susan stands on the upper steps for a while explaining him a situation with the mistaken identities of the purses she visually seems to have a higher position than David has (2.1); and, indeed, an idea about the female domination develops thorough the film as the heroine’s appearance, her confidence, personality and behavior, mise-en-scène’s details like Susan’s higher position in this segment, which are hardly to be noticed and, especially dialogues underlines this fact.
Susan tries to stop David by grabbing his tailcoat to explain that her mistake was not an intentional one and suddenly rips it (3)! Ripped clothing here is a symbol of broken relationships as to start new relationship with Susan David has to end up with the previous one with Alice. The love triangle occurs here.

Enraged David turns and goes up the stairs towards Susan (4.1), and when the medium shot is established and the camera crabs right following the characters, David is annoyed and wants her to go away (4.2). Now it is seen that their roles have been changed as now David follows Susan. At this moment characters are close enough and the medium shot hints very indirectly that there might appear a relationship in the future between them. Usually audience percept it unconsciously, but there are no doubts, that these characters will finally up a couple. The reason for that are the camera manipulations, which show us that these woman and man could be a couple! Camera moves with them and keeps them in a two-shot composition and they are not divided in the separate shots even to show that they are mad at each other while they are arguing.

Another theme of this moment is an emphasis on the confusion and battle between male and female. But here it is presented in a funny way through the man and woman game. David is angry and wants Susan to disappear as she brings him only troubles and disorders and in a very playful manner he asks her to go away. He covers his eyes with his hand (5), which in the recognition of non-verbal gestures and signals means that he tries to protect himself from being manipulated and influenced by Susan; it is obvious he feels that he is weaker than his opponent, the self-confident woman. As John Belton says (1974, p.11), “Hawks roots his films in physical action, shaping his plots around events rather than ideas, and building his characters around concrete gestures and mannerisms rather than abstract inner motivations. We know immediately through the expressiveness of the characters’ physical actions how they feel and what they are thinking. They do not need to explain themselves in words; a glance or a gesture communicates more to us than dialogue or an intrusive penetration into their thought processes ever could”  

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After Susan has been rejected, the medium long and extreme long shots are used to show how she is walking away back to the restaurant dinner hall rapidly (6),(7). Although a barrier between them has been established for a while as Susan feels hurt, they are still in a two-shot composition, which means they are still put on a screen as a couple. Audience understands what the direction Susan goes is; the long shot allows to see the background where the dinner hall is.

After the entire back piece of Susan’s evening dress has been ripped off, David is horrified at the situation and rushes towards her (7). As each of them is about to go away, there is a reason to keep Susan and David together in the same frame. And here is starting to appear another symbol regarding ripped clothing. Exactly the lower part of closing is ripped in both cases and it symbolizes the strong sexual attraction between David and Susan. Adrian Foo in one of his articles write: “...in Bringing Up Baby (1938) the male and female leads are able to form relationships that are more intimate and interactive than those with any other character. Thus, the ultimate requirement for a successful screwball comedy is that there be a strong sexual attraction between the male and female characters that is at least partly sublimated”\(^1\).

The next shot is closer than the previous one and it catches how David finishes running (8). Here is an example how the continuity principles of editing are used in Bringing Up Baby (1938).

Trying to protect Susan’s backside from being observed by the public, firstly, David moves Susan to a pillar (9.1), secondly, covers her backside by his silk hat (9.2) and, finally, stands behind her (9.3). Trying to shield Susan, David squats slightly and it underlines that this man is ready to be dominated by the woman; his personality is stuffy and bumbling. Adrian Danks, writing about Howard Hawks’s I Was a Male War Bride (1949), mentions: “In this respect I Was a Male Bride is closest to Bringing Up Baby in that it emphasises the command and prowess of its female characters, and focuses on the relentless humiliation of its 'marginalised' male 'protagonists' (one French, the other an emasculated paleontologist)”\(^2\).

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Then the medium shot is used when Susan notices the wardrobe malfunction (10.1). She is
the only in the shot for a while and the David’s back is seen, but just to let audience know that
she is emotionally aroused and to create the sympathy for her. The close-up shots are not used during this sequence at all as the story about the adventures of the new couple only sets and it is not necessary to make audience think about the feeling and emotions of these characters at this stage. David grabs her behind very close (10.2); the next long shot is set and the camera crabs left during the characters are moving fast, passing amused visitors, who stare at this couple, towards the camera to the left corner of a frame (10.3). Camera makes a quick medium two-shot edit to show these people as a couple again.

Then the medium long shot is set from the point of view of the characters to show that Mr. Peabody, who has just arrived, is following them (11.1); as well as to help audience feel the speed as they swiftly go to the restaurant exit, participation and sympathy for Susan and David.

As Susan and David approach the nightclub exit, David turns his head right to say Mr. Peabody that he would be (11.1) with him in a minute. And here is an example of a film mistake, which is almost invisible as it is very difficult to notice it: David had to turn his head left, not right, while Mr. Peabody had to be staying on their left, as it was in the previous shots. (11.2)
In conclusion, exactly the wardrobe malfunction scene was selected from the Howard Hawks’s screwball comedy *Bringing Up Baby (1938)* as it fully represents the main ideas and themes director wanted to send audience. Prediction of characters’ relationship, woman and man sexual attraction, female domination, feminization and humiliation of male, battle and game between sexes and other ideas, which audience understands because of the cinematic codes are used in the film. And how these cinematic devises are used to communicate, to reach the concrete impact and meaning can be investigated only through the close stylistic analysis.

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