“SOMETHING MECHANICAL ENCRUSTED ON THE LIVING”: MODERNITY, EMBODIMENT, AND EMPATHY IN AMERICAN SLAPSTICK FILM, 1895–1929.

by

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Introduction

Slapstick Film's Contexts

Slapstick, that most disrespectful of film genres, doesn't get much respect of its own. Certainly critics praise its master craftspeople, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton foremost among them. In this dissertation, however, I explore those elements of the genre that have received little analytical attention and less theoretical scrutiny. Slapstick presents humor on a physical level, with conventions that make it recognizable across media: it requires violent and exaggerated action with insignificant physical consequences. This description would be difficult to argue with, but it only takes us a short distance toward revealing slapstick's value for film studies. Considering Linda William's sense of low genres that elicit spontaneous spectator response, slapstick is a body genre as well in that it aims to generate a bodily reaction in its viewers. Slapstick's audience compulsively laughs at it, but we also squirm a little uncomfortably, and more than likely recognize—with some trepidation—the pleasurable sadism of our own (and others') responses to it. I argue that the body-objects in slapstick and the bodies of slapstick viewers are locations for slapstick's effects. The body in slapstick is the site for slapstick conventions' efforts: it is the primary object in gags and comic business, and it is the victim of violence. I address not only this locus but also the body of the viewer. Slapstick draws laughter from the viewing body, which generates a viewing position for the collective audience. Laughter operates as a link between viewers so that individual viewers become part of a unified audience for the duration of the film.

My goal is to fill in the gaps in history left in the literature on slapstick by focusing on less recognized films than the "masterpieces" that too often stand in for the whole genre. Within this pool of slapstick's entries, I will first focus on specific generic conventions. For my purposes, such slapstick elements as the gag, comic business, and violence will be counted as conventions alongside "body genre" conventions as slapstick uniquely shapes them, such as viewer empathy and even the specific type of attention these films demand of us and that we learn to expect. I argue that by attending to slapstick as a genre, we can elucidate its machinations more clearly. Doing so helps us figure out how this historically significant group of films operates in detail by not simplifying their features through thinking of slapstick as a synonym for "physical comedy." Without a doubt (and as this dissertation argues), slapstick is based on physical comedy, but it is also complexly capable of manipulating its viewers through a variety of strategies. Many slapstick films were constructed in a fairly arbitrary way: without "script girls" or continuity scripts, for example, many multi-shot films lacked stylistic and diegetic flow. Yet, these films—most of them conceived and filmed quickly, on a weekly basis in the case of Keystone Film Company—were able to evoke laughter, a feat that is not so easy. Comedians, working from a scenario, improvised using various sources such as vaudeville and itinerate shows for inspiration, with a close eye to what they thought viewers would find funny. This material may seem like mere imitation of what had worked before—and it quite frequently was imitation—but it was also creative and inventive. Considering slapstick as a genre allows me to explicate the fashion in which these films function as machines for influencing viewers' attention (including

the way in which they attended to the world outside of the exhibition space) and eliciting empathy.

How slapstick manages attention is a second element that I intend to address. Through screen figures, slapstick stages the dangers of mismanaging and misallocating attention. The screen figures within these films allot their attention in contextually inappropriate ways. They pay too little or too much attention; they aim their attention in the wrong way or at the wrong thing; or they offer the wrong kind of attention to the situation at hand. Attention is an associated part of what cognitive scientists call perceptual learning, the ability to improve performance of perceptual tasks through repetition. Attention and perception are closely linked, to the extent that without attention, the brain will not process some percepts.

Empathy is attention directed at another subject, or in the case of film, screen figures. I will explore a kind of empathy that can be considered perverse in that it requires that viewers both to empathize with the dupe and to enjoy both the pain of the screen figure and the empathy with it. After the initial sensation of slapstick comedy, viewers must both recognize the pain of the dupe and disregard in part fellow feeling for its pain, for it is ultimately an object among other objects on the screen. In slapstick, empathy becomes shared among the audience in addition to being conveyed by conventional narrative's focus on the relationship between the viewer and the screen.

FILM'S RELATIONSHIP TO VAUDEVILLE

Vaudeville played an important role in the exhibition of films and the development of nickelodeons. It was a popular entertainment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The etymology of the word is murky. Some trace it back to the mid-eighteenth century and claim it is derived from the French *vau de ville*, or "voice of the city," named for urban folksongs. Others suggest that the origin is from *vau de vire*, named for the pastoral ballads of France's Vire Valley (Snyder 12). By the mid-eighteenth century, the word came to mean a variety show featuring songs and comedy entertainment. Vaudeville's predecessor was the concert saloon, which offered variety shows and alcohol for a largely male audience. Concert saloons and vaudeville theaters had an identical structure: a number of performances presented serially as a complete program of entertainment. But vaudeville theaters differed in one respect. They aimed to show variety entertainment "made tasteful for middle-class women and men and their families by removing the smoky, boozy, licentious male atmosphere" (Snyder 12).

According to Robert M. Snyder, vaudeville theaters began showing films in 1901 in response to a strike by members of the White Rats organization, which operated in part as a trade union. Films were less expensive than live vaudeville acts and more reliable than vaudeville performers. Charles Musser, however, notes that the exhibition of films didn't begin with the strike. In August 1895, Woodville Latham and his sons exhibited the Eidoloscope motion picture system at Chicago's Olympic Theater (99). Arthur Frank Wertheim refers to an exhibition of the Eidoloscope at Keith's Bijou in December 1895 (88). He also records the first major

commercial presentation of the Vitascope projector, at John Koster and Adam Bial's New Music Hall on April 23, 1896 (89). The program showed six shorts, including *Rough Sea at Dover* (Birt Acres, 1895). He notes that the premier was such a success that in May, 1896, the Keith Circuit (the largest, most reputable vaudeville circuit, founded by Benjamin Franklin Keith) showed the same shorts at its Boston theater and three months later in Philadelphia.

Keith switched to the Lumières' Cinématographe after hearing that it was a higher-quality machine. According to Werthheim, Edward Franklin Albee, Keith's business partner, echoed the myth of viewers panicking at the sight of the train approaching at the first screening of *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Lumiére, 1896). Albee claimed that the audience rose from their seats in readiness to flee upon seeing a cavalry charge by French soldiers in the film *Charge of the Seventh French Cuirassiers* (Lumiére, 1896) (89). That viewers had such intense reactions to film is far overstated. These accounts are wildly overblown, perhaps encouraged by the desire to tout the power of the new inventions, but there is no doubt that viewer response is embodied in a very real way.

After the Lumières stopped distributing the Cinématographe out of fear of an Edison lawsuit, Keith and Albee switched to the Biograph, produced by the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company. Wertheimer notes, "By May 1898, Biograph films had played seventy-two weeks at the Union Square, sixty-seven weeks at Keith's Boston, and fifty-eight weeks in Philadelphia" (90). They became an important part of the playbill for the Keith Circuit theaters. Keith and Albee, however, were not the only entrepreneurs to take advantage of the new technology.

According to Musser, Tony Pastor's Theater in New York City first exhibited the Vitagraph on June 19, 1899, and Pastor later decided to keep it on the bill indefinitely (274). This was representative of film's permanent status on the playbill of many vaudeville operators who were independent of the Keith-Albee Company. F. F. Proctor, having missed the opportunity to show films of Admiral Dewey's homecoming celebration and the America's Cup yacht races in September 1899, decided in October of the same year to establish a business relationship with William Paley (Musser 275). "His Kalatechnoscope opened on 9 October at Proctor's Twenty-third Street Theater and two weeks later at the Pleasure Palace . . ." (275). By August 1900, Paley had a Kalatechnoscope in five of Proctor's vaudeville theaters (276). Proctor's theaters, Keith's venues, and the Orpheum theaters played a significant role in acquainting American audiences with film.

Vaudeville's other notable influence on film was its contribution to the content of films and, in particular, its contribution to slapstick. Not only did vaudeville supply many slapstick actors (e.g., Keaton, Ben Turpin, Chester Konklin, Mack Sennett—who was an actor before he was a director and producer—and later, the Three Stooges and the Marx Brothers, among many others), it offered a stage for the development of slapstick routines. The gags performed on the vaudeville stage (e.g., the pie in the face, the pratfall) translated well to film. Performers also had the opportunity to hone comic business. Buster Keaton, for example, learned how to maintain his "stony" face during performances of "The Three Keatons," his family's vaudeville act. Chaplin made his start in England's version of the vaudeville theater,

the music hall, where he developed his take on the Tramp figure, which many American slapstick performers emulated (Billy West being the most famous).

COMEDY

In Chapter 3, I outline a history of laughter theories as they relate to the function of slapstick and the social role of laughter. This distinction is important because it points to a difference betweeen mode and result. Comedy provides an opportunity for aesthetic enjoyment of a particular kind, whereas laughter is a product of some kinds of comedy. (Genteel comedies aim to draw a smile rather than a laugh, for example.) (See Chapter 1.)

Comedy is an ancient mode. Aristotle remarked on comedy only briefly in *Poetics*, but his work on drama can be used to contrast his thoughts about comedy. He argues that drama portrays people as better than they are, whereas comedy portrays them as worse than they are. He notes that the Megarians of Sicily lay claim to the beginning of comedy because Epicharmus, a Megarian poet, preceded Chionides and Magnes, two Athenian authors of comic poetry. According to Aristotle, comedy consists of "an imitation of inferior people," characters who are morally inferior (1449a32f). Comedic characters behave badly, even if they are of high social rank. This is in contrast to tragedy, which portrays virtuous traits in its characters. In tragedy, the appearance of the less virtuous would be limited to the periphery. Tragedy endeavors to evoke fear and pity and involves harm, "an action that involves destruction or pain" (1452a32f). Comedy, on the other hand, rejects suffering and involves "an error or disgrace that does not involve pain or

destruction" (1449a34f). Aristotle points to the comic mask, which is ugly and distorted but not out of pain. In addition, distorted language, wordplay, can be considered comic. Deviations from the norm, whether social or moral, are also a mark of the comic. He uses the example of the story of Orestes. If it were made into a comedy, he writes, Orestes would have reconciled with Aegistus. Instead of avenging his father, he would have become friends with his enemy.

Several comedic plots that are characteristic of slapstick can be deliniated. One kind, the comedy of happy endings, is associated with Greek New Comedy, which focuses on romantic and domestic issues rather than the social and political satires of Old Comedy. A familiar formulation for this kind of plot is boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl. Northrop Frye refers to this formulation in his third essay in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. He asserts, "The movement of comedy is usually the movement from one kind of society to another" (163). At the beginning of the work, those blocking the romance are associated with the work's construction of society as it stands. The resolution of the work aligns a new society with the hero, and it is through this realignment that the hero is able to attain his desire. The complication is resolved through the couple's recognition of their love for each other, and the narrative often ends in a wedding or other celebration. In slapstick, proposals and weddings initiate the action in many slapstick films, including *A Muddy Romance* (1913), *Ask Father* (1919), *Haunted Spooks* (1920), and *Be My Wife* (1921), among many others. In some cases, this offers a variation of the romance formulation, in which boy gets girl, boy loses girl, and boy gets girl again. *Moonshine* (Comique Film Corporation, 1918) subverts this comic plot by having the girl fall in

love with the main character, Fatty, but when she declares her love for him, he turns her down, saying that he already has a wife.

Many of Chaplin's films present another comedic plot, the picaresque. In films such as *The Rounders* (1914) and *A Dog's Life* (1918), Chaplin's characters find themselves in various situations within the same film. The success of the picaresque film relies on the individual gags constructed on the basis of those situations and the character's reactions to them. Some of Keaton's two-reelers also follow this structure (e.g., *The Balloonatic* [1923]). However, as Gerald Mast notes, few of their better-known contemporaries appeared in picaresques: Harold Lloyd, for example, always appeared in films with a clearly constructed, straightforward plot (7).

One variety of comedy plot that is significant to slapstick is the parody or burlesque. In the nineteenth century, *burlesque* meant "stripping conventions of their believability" (Gunning, "Take This Book" 7). Nothing was too high or too low to escape slapstick's inversions, from drama (e.g., *The Three Ages* [1923], a burlesque of *Intolerance* [1916]; *Bromo and Juliet* [1926]) to melodrama (e.g., *Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life* [1913]). Their structure and themes appear within some slapstick films (e.g., the race to the rescue, love lost).

Melodrama was a particularly good target for slapstick's burlesque. Ben Singer notes that it too has nonclassical narrative mechanics:

> Melodrama has a far greater tolerance, or indeed a preference, for outrageous coincidence, implausibility, convoluted plotting, deus ex machina resolutions, and episodic strings of action that stuff too many events together

> to be able to be kept in line by a cause-and-effect chain of narrative progression. (46)

He lists several conventions of melodrama, some of which slapstick shares—such as the representation of exaggerated characters, actions, and gestures and the tendency to cram as many actions into as short a time as possible—but some of which it inverts, including pathos, overwrought emotion, and, particularly, moral polarization. Eileen Bowser writes,

> [After 1912], all the things that the moral melodrama was meant to suppress appeared again in slapstick comedy: anarchy, amorality, eroticism, vulgarity, fantasy, cruelty, the total disrespect for the forces of organized society. ("Subverting" 14)

As Tom Gunning describes, "Melodrama takes seriously signs of virtue and vice. Comedy unmasks them, recombines them and creates a new zone of stylistic freedom, fashioning carnival out of ritual" ("Take This Book" 8). Slapstick takes the Manichean logic of moral evaluation and dismantles it, presenting instead an equivocal view of morality. It enters the Bakhtinian realm of play with authority and customs. The main screen figure in slapstick film can produce violence against another screen figure or be on the receiving end. It simply doesn't matter.

Mast identifies a comedic plot that appears in many slapstick comedies: a loose plot that "riffs" on a situation by collecting miscellaneous gags around it. He suggests that such a plot type could also be called "goofing" or "improvised and anomalous gaggery" (7). This kind of plot, he argues, is one of two that appear in Keystone films, the other being burlesque. Sennett would give his actors a situation,

and they would improvise gags. Examples include the Hal Roach Studios production *Oranges and Lemons* (1923), Keaton's *The Garage* (1920) and *The Boat* (1921), and Chaplin's *The Cure* (1917).

Michael North points out that during cinema's nascent period, the majority of films were comic (41). According to Bowser, the most popular and widely produced fiction genre in the first twelve years of the cinema was slapstick , comprising 70% of films (and more) prior to 1908. In *The Transformation of Cinema,* she notes that from 1907 to 1908 the number of comedies dropped precipitously and continued to drop even further until 1911. Then the numbers began to rise. As I noted above, vaudeville was a significant fount for slapstick film, and to that category, Bowser adds French and Italian slapstick comedies. The "cheerfully amoral traditions" of the first decade of American cinema were resurrected in post-1911 slapstick film as well.

In 1912, Sennett recieved funding to establish an independent production company, Keystone. Bowser writes that burlesque was the most common form of slapstick that Keystone produced, using that form to address "everything from melodrama, uplift, progressivism, patriotism, and mother love of the Ford car" (181). Of course, Keystone wasn't the only producer of slapstick: also adding to the reinvigoration of slapstick were the comedy divisions of Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, Nestor Motion Picture Company, Lubin Manufacturing Company, Kalem Company, and, later, Hal Roach Studios.

The Lumières' *L' Arroseur arrosé* (1895) carries great weight as one of the first films presented to an audience and as a model for future slapstick films. The audience came to see the new Cinematographe in action, and *L' Arroseur arrosé* presents an example of what people presumably wanted to see: the action of the water and the excitement of watching a boy play a trick on a gardener. A boy creeps up behind a gardener watering bushes. The boy steps on the hose, causing the water to stop flowing. The gardener, unaware of the boy, looks into the nozzle. It's unclear why he does so: He must use hoses daily and has knowledge about why hoses sometimes don't work, whether from a kink in the hose or low water pressure. The boy steps off the hose, and water gushes into the man's face. Laughing, the boy runs out of the frame, but the gardener catches him, bringing him to the fore of the frame. The gardener beats the boy and sprays water at him as the boy runs away, ending the film. All of this is staged in a single shot with an immobile camera.

This film is an especially apt initial example for my study because it illustrates most of the central points I make in the following chapters: viewers see several of the generic conventions in slapstick, like the gag and violence; they share a sadistic empathy; and they see the inattention of the gardener as he ignores the boy in favor of his work. Although this film is cited as the first slapstick films (and, indeed, referred to as the first fiction film), these issues have not been fully explored in prior scholarship, and the following chapters will delve into them. I need to rehearse that literature because I must demonstrate that my intervention furthers the field of contemporary slapstick scholarship.

One major question that some slapstick criticism tries to answer is about the films' generic qualities, a question that I attend to in Chapter 1. At stake in attempting to codify genre is the ability to discuss it as a whole. By defining slapstick as a genre, critics invest the genre with certain characteristics. The critics I draw from include Jay Leyda, Bowser, and Alan Dale. Another set of the questions that slapstick criticism asks is about the role of the comedian. Much silent slapstick scholarship focuses on individual comedians, most notably Chaplin and Keaton and their work in the 1910s and 1920s. How should criticism about slapstick be organized (e.g., by certain "masterpieces," by comedian)? To what extent do the actor's persona as established through fan magazines and his or her established comedic style influence the construction of character? In what ways can actors be differentiated by comedic style? These questions shape one large aspect of slapstick criticism, and Walter Kerr, Steve Seidman, Musser, Gunning, and Justus Neiland attempts to address them. It is crucial to note that criticism about comedians and their roles and criticism about the machinery of slapstick assume that it has definable generic conventions. Otherwise, the objects of its focus would be difficult to maintain. Significant is their agreement about what slapstick is.

I also wish to pay attention to two less global areas of slapstick criticism: the role of machinery in slapstick and Keystone's establishment and career. Regarding slapstick machinery, Bowser, Rob King, and Gunning argue that it plays a central role in slapstick and represents a mixture of trepidation and fascination for moderns. I take their arguments as a jumping-off point for my assertions about the role of the automobile in slapstick's exploration of attention. The material about

Keystone is significant because Keystone was the studio that helped revive slapstick after a lull between 1908 and 1911. Simon Louvish and King attend to Keystone closely, and among the questions they attempt to answer is to what extent was Keystone implicated in the emergence of mass culture.

As I assert throughout this dissertation, slapstick does not abide by many of the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema. In "California Slapstick: A Definition," Leyda suggests that rather than discussing slapstick as the product of Hollywood, people should use "California" as a modifier instead of "Hollywood" because the meaning of the latter word has become diffuse. California slapstick, in his view, is most closely tied to Sennett's brand of comedy. It developed in 1912 when Sennett moved actors and crew to Edendale, California, after splitting with the Biograph Company. Leyda lists the component parts of this kind of slapstick: "violence, acrobatics, embarrassment, irrationality" (2). While this provides a good starting point, I amend it by including other constitutive elements.

Bowser also addresses slapstick as a genre. In "Subverting the Conventions: Slapstick as Genre," she asserts that several slapstick inversions of classical Hollywood cinema exist: burlesque of moral melodrama, direct address to the camera, long-shot camera distance, and shot length. The camera presents a full view of the screen figure's body, and a gag takes place during one shot, until the gag is resolved. She also identifies the use of split screen and "the destruction of space." This latter phenomenon occurs when a shot seems to show a given situation, but when the camera pulls back, that situation is revealed to be false. Although I have not found widespread use of split screen or the destruction of space, Bowser's

insights about camera distance, shot length, and direct address to the camera influence my discussion of slapstick genre conventions in Chapter 1.

In *Comedy is a Man in Trouble* (2000), Dale argues that slapstick "occurs anytime things go wrong physically for the hero in such a way that we know the movie-makers are inviting us to laugh" (10). He further refines this definition by writing that two chief moods in slapstick are bewilderment and exasperation, which are caused by obdurate objects. "In response, the hero's determination propels him through the story, by the end of which he often enough triumphs by means of the very objects and forces that bewildered and exasperated him at the outset" (10). This definition clearly and easily applies to Keaton's films, but it is less obvious in films without the elaboration of extended plots that don't involve a well-developed "hero." It is also less applicable to a great many other films in which the gag is less impersonal, when it is effected by another screen figure (e.g., *Mr. Flip* [Essanay, 1909], *Haunted Spooks* [Hal Roach Studios, 1920], *Wandering Willies* [Mack Sennett Productions, 1926], among many others). Dale also addresses another strand of slapstick, in which we laugh at someone's loss of dignity. This kind of laughter is in keeping with Hobbes's superiority theory of laughter (see Chapter 3), and I argue, is one of the chief qualities of slapstick.

Rather than arguing for a definition of genre, as the previous selection of scholars do, Kerr assumes it by approaching slapstick through the use of certain "masterpieces" as symbols of how it is constituted. In *The Silent Clowns* (1975), Kerr argues that underlying silent film comedy is the "fantasy of fact" (26). Silence subtracts from the verisimilitude that the camera offers, resulting in a contradiction

that allows for the film comedians' anarchic inventions. The book is driven primarily by synopses of films. He looks at the work of a variety of 1920s comedians, including Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon, and provides a view of lesser film figures, such as Lloyd Hamilton, Larry Semon, and Lupino Lane. His nostalgic analysis focuses on masterpieces of each comedian and his skills in acting and filmmaking. Kerr attends mainly to the behavior of comedians as characters in these masterworks, rather than the strengths of individual comedians per se.

Seidman implicitly criticizes Kerr's use of these works, which subjugates comedians' presentation to the demands of character construction. In *Comedian Comedy: A Tradition in Hollywood Film* (1981), Seidman identifies what he calls "comedian comedy," collecting the work of comedians from the 1910s to the 1970s to highlight these performers as comic specialists. He focuses on the dialectic between the comedian as a recognizable performer and as a character in a fictional film. Musser, Gunning, and Neiland follow in Seidman's footsteps in looking at comedians' performance of characters.

Musser (in the paper "Chaplin's Tramp and Ideological Appropriation") attends to Chaplin through the lens of the tramp figure as ideological. He claims that Chaplin incorporates "the gentleman" and "the tramp" figures, creating an unstable amalgam that collapses under pressure. The tramp exists outside of society—relying on soup kitchens to eat, finding places outside to sleep, and avoiding work—whereas the gentleman operates according to norms of his class. When put to the test, Chaplin's characters revert to their tramp characteristics. Musser accounts for

those films in which Chaplin plays the "idle rich" (e.g., *The Idle Class*) by noting that the keyword is "idle." He argues that Chaplin's films create a "metafilm" in which his characters cycle from tramp to employee to tramp.

Whereas Musser treats Chaplin as the sole subject of his essay, Gunning's 1995 appraisal of Keaton contrasts him with Chaplin ("Buster Keaton"). He argues that Keaton's works portray characters that must overcome modernity's technical complexities, whereas Chaplin's work shows a more romantic, character-based approach that questions social norms. Gunning writes that Keaton's films point to the mechanical qualities of the modern world, "an alien and alienating system in which only lightning reactions and an identification with the mechanical might aid the all too vulnerable human body." Keaton must navigate systems by making his body into a point within the grid of the mechanized world. Gunning remarks that Keaton's physical relationship with his surroundings is ambivalent. On the one hand, his characters can appear to be victimized by inanimate objects and machines; on the other hand, he can seem to master them.

Nieland (2006) takes a different view of Chaplin from Gunnings'. Where Gunning sees Chaplin's characters as mostly romantic (and his films more thematically than structurally modern), Nieland sees ambivalence in them: "Chaplin's persona is at once radically common and a figure of inassimilable difference. And this impossible tension fuels the construction of . . . modernism's most liberatory affects" (189). This position is similar in nature to Musser's. Nieland's assessment is not in direct opposition to Gunning's, however, in that he sees Chaplin's characters as existing outside of "instrumental reason" (190). This is

an evaluation that Gunning would not disagree with, I suspect. If Keaton and Chaplin can be contrasted in this way, they would seem to be opposites, one managing machines (however successfully) and one refusing to become a machine. This assessment of Chaplin is in direct opposition to Walter Benjamin's sense of him as operating as a machine: "Whether it is in his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat—always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions" (qtd in North 3).

Kerr's and Seidman's are two major texts on slapstick, but they succeed only in part because they fixate on individual comedians. However, Kerr's and Seidman's books provide insights into the performance of slapstick. In my work, I acknowledge comedians' mastery, particularly in the case of their bodily skills (see Chapter 1), but I believe that slapstick contains more complexity than can be summed up by investigating only the comedians' work within the films. A key aspect that these texts are missing is the effects of slapstick films on the viewer. I intend to address this missing aspect. Another slant that these texts take is to focus on comedians performing during the "hey day" of slapstick, the teens and twenties. They assume generic conventions in order to focus on individual comedians.

The articles I draw inspiration from for my discussion of automobiles in Chapter 2 likewise take slapstick's construction as a genre for granted: "Mack Sennett vs. Harry Ford" by Bowser, "'Uproarious Inventions: The Keystone Film Company, Modernity, and the Art of the Motor" by King, and "Mechanisms of Laughter: The Devices of Slapstick" by Gunning. Each argues that machines play a

central role in slapstick and represent a mixture of trepidation and fascination for moderns. I take their arguments as a jumping-off point for my assertions about the role of the automobile in slapstick's exploration of attention.

Bowser argues that in the 1910s and 1920s, the proliferation of the cheap Ford Model-Ts led to a boom in slapstick films that showed cars being manipulated, disassembled, or destroyed. She sketches a loose (and equivocal) metaphor between Ford's Taylorist system for producing cars and Sennett's chief control of Keystone's regular production. For her, Ford and Sennett represent a tension between economy and mass-production. She suggests that, considering the car comedies of the first decade of the production of inexpensive cars, it can be conjectured that moderns felt "apprehension, pride, and considerable ingenuity, tempered by resignation" (111).

King investigates Keystone's use of mechanical tricks and stunts. He argues that moderns felt a deep ambivalence toward new technologies and that slapstick comedies exhibiting play with mechanization helped them cope with those experiences. Keystone's operational aesthetic—Neil Harris's term for viewers' pleasure in both being taken in by what seems to be a magical performance and wondering how it was achieved—focused on moderns' wish to grasp "technical processes when technological advancement far outstripped the average individual's understanding or control" (121).

Gunning also addresses the ways in which machines, and in particular, cars operate as "crazy machines," machines that foil human goals by exploding or falling apart (138). Unlike Bowser, he argues that in the 1920s, the car was a prized possession, rather than a common one. The car's function in narratives of

domesticity and romantic love denotes its importance to middle-class families who aim to use it as a vehicle for goal-directed behavior and social status. Machines in slapstick frustrate this purpose, inverting an instrumental logic of machines as a means to an end and instead offering humor in the face of modern misgivings about technology.

These articles provide a background for my discussion of the thematic use of cars in provoking the audience's anticipation of the gag. Car comedies operate in slapstick films by helping moderns work through their anxieties about the operation and function of the car. By representing cars that self-destruct and motor out of control, these car comedies produce a vision of the ambivalence surrounding this relatively new technology. Thematically, they address the intrusion of the car in everyday life, in both urban and rural settings.

These sources reference Keystone's role as central to a discussion of machines and slapstick. Keystone's operation also functioned as a measure of the emergence of mass culture. Louvish's book, titled *Keystone*, is largely descriptive, but implicit in it is the argument that Keystone's films reflected the continued development of modernity in the early twentieth century. He also suggests that Sennett was the "apex" in the Triangle Company, which was formed in partnership with Thomas Ince and D. W. Griffith. This nostalgic text is representative of a number of other works, such as Kalton C. Lahue and Terry Brewer's *Kops and Custards: The Legend of Keystone Films.*

In a more critical approach to Keystone, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* by King scrutinizes the intersection

between Keystone and the continuing development of mass aesthetic desires. He begins by asserting that all comedy relies on social changes and that laughter involves "the experience of social inversion" (2). Keystone used social inversion of Victorian class and aesthetic norms. It participated in "a major reorientation in the meaning and function of culture in turn-of-the-century America" (8). He addresses such issues as class, ethnicity, and the way in which women were made into spectacles in Keystone's "bathing beauty" films. He also does a close reading of *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914), Keystone's only feature-length film, and attends to the pressures associated with including knockabout gags in the context of an extended narrative.

MODERNITY AS THE CONTEXT FOR SLAPSTICK

Slapstick cinema was especially suited to addressing the newly complicated ways of urban life. Modernity created paradoxes in the lives of moderns, in which technologies restricted their behavior in some ways, as on city streets or on a factory floor, and opened up new behaviors and new freedoms in others, by putting people behind the wheels of automobiles or setting them loose to mingle on the midway of an amusement park. Modern technologies placed workers at the behest of the clock and the machine, but they also gave rise to media and other technologies that offered workers distraction and amusement after hours of anesthetizing jobs. Urbanization uprooted individuals from their communities but also gave them new roles as consumers of goods. Modernity provided them the ability to improve their station, even if only through the purchase of a single theater ticket. Women flooded

into the workplace and made money that they could spend independently. New sensory demands were paired with altered and expanded sensorial opportunities, such as the entertainments of the fairway. Cinematic screen practices came to a head as thousands of people gained access to film via itinerant exhibitors and urban theaters, and they became viewers of slapstick—once constrained to vaudeville theaters and circus acts—well before classical Hollywood cinema was developed.

As Gunning suggests, the issue of the cinema's birthing by modernity is "not only [one of] equivalences and interpretations but [of] actual intersections among the diverse manifestations of modernity" ("Whole Town's Gawking" 196). Hansen contends, "The cinema was not just one among a number of perceptual technologies" such as the telephone and the phonograph, but preeminent among them ("America" 365). Beyond all other perceptual technologies, it was "the single most expansive discursive horizon in which the effects of modernity were reflected, rejected or denied, transmuted, or negotiated" (365). Among participants in the wide array of modern amusements, cinema viewers could witness the effects of their cultural and industrial life context, steered in a wide range of ways, from a safe distance. Cinema, particularly slapstick cinema, allowed viewers to observe themselves within modernity. Slapstick viewers saw modernity reflected in, changed by, and overcome by the mirror of cinema.

Cinema created a mode of expression that offered modern viewers ways to cope with its demands: by transforming modern experience into an amusement, but more to the point, by replicating a certain perceptual difficulty that quotidian life in

the city posed to its denizens. The modern sensorium resembled modern technologies. Susan McCabe describes this sensorium as follows:

> Modern consciousness . . . approximates the fragmenting shutter mechanism in film, and attention is held at the expense of contiguity. Visceral shock jolts the body into grasping an experience and simultaneously threatens to blot its memory. (432)

In the relatively slow and predictable pace of life (even in cities) before the steam engine and the telegraph, sensation and cognition seemed to take place more or less simultaneously. Modern experience segmented the moment of sensation and the moment of cognition. The first moment becomes evacuated because the body cannot in the same instant both sense and think about a sensation—such as a car you didn't see or hear before it suddenly honks its horn a few feet behind you—at the same time. One cannot *be* a body (through sensation) and *have* a body (through cognition) at the same time. Sensation transforms one into a body–object, whereas cognition returns one to subjecthood.

Slapstick replicates, and indeed confronts, the articulation between shock and the cognitive moment afterward. This junction overwrites the moment of shock, a mechanism that protects against the shocks themselves. Cinema developed a method of representation that allowed viewers a way to cope with modernity's demands through a sensory experience. That segmentation of the moment of sensation and the moment of cognition caused a rift between sensation and experience. As Leo Charney observes, one of modernity's chief traits is the emptying out of the now, the shock of sensation. The first moment—the now—becomes

evacuated because the body cannot in the same instant both sense and think about the sense at the same time. The result was a modern sensorium that resembled modern technologies in that it could utter that which was otherwise unspeakable.

American slapstick responded directly to modernity, not by ignoring modernity's commands or by trying to recuperate them through an appeal to pathos, but by mimicking its breakneck speed and mechanized landscape. Modernity's forces fostered vernacularly modernist works and these same forces gave birth to slapstick cinema, a genre distinguished formally by self-reflexivity, suspicion of the ideal of the centered subject, and an inquiry into the uncertainties of the world. Slapstick and many other forms of modernism are playfully experimental. Slapstick is self-reflexive in that its iterations of pies and bricks in the face return the film back to itself, making it seem self-conscious. In early mischief films like *L'arroseur arrosé*, the bad child looks into the camera and laughs, making the film seem aware of itself in its ability to recognize the camera as an object-subject. Slapstick is reflexive in that comic business is demonstrative of itself, as individual twitches and gestures are repeated for the viewer among shots. Films repeat successful gags; and some films were made again and again, with each iteration recalling the others.

Direct address to the camera—especially in the films in the late 1910s and 1920s after the practice had become submerged in classical Hollywood cinema—demonstrated reflexivity. Another quality of modernism, suspicion of the ideal of the centered subject, is a theme throughout slapstick, such as Keaton becoming a subject-turned-object when he turns himself into a pendulum in *Our Hospitality*

(Joseph M. Schenk Productions, 1923). Such skepticism resonates strongly with Henri Bergson's 1909 assertion that, in the comic, the mechanical is "encrusted" on the living. Viewership of slapstick, however ambivalent, also calls into question the unified subject as the object of the laughter becomes the viewer him- or herself. As a subject, the spectator has a body, but through laughter, the subject is returned to the body *qua* object and becomes the object that he or she *is*, rather than one that he or she *has*. By rendering subject–object relations unstable on the screen and in the exhibition space, slapstick reveals a fundamental concern regarding contemporary social, cultural, philosophical, and bodily uncertainties about how the individual might establish a stable relationship with the world as modernity had recast it.

An inquiry into the uncertainties of the world operates in the "truncated syllogism" of the gag, in which causality explodes, when the apparently small-stakes beginning of a gag unfolds into a conclusion of outrageous proportions (Crafton 356). The staged, reflexive unreality of slapstick film questions the reality of causality in the world outside the exhibition space, as viewers leave their seats to reenter a modern world that resembles such films in its speed, in its rapid mutual exchange of one object for another, and in the preparation for the unexpected that it demands of everyone, from the factory worker dwarfed by monumental machinery to the urban pedestrian who hopes simply to cross a busy street.

I contend that we must understand early slapstick not as a prelude to a more sophisticated era but as a phenomenon in itself that set many indelible standards for the genre: gags, comic business, humiliation and violence, antisocial tendencies,

direct address to the camera, play with bodies and objects, and speed. With this act of historical recalibration as my starting point, I approach the slapstick genre as a constellation of specific textual and spectatorial conventions, with examples of slapstick films folded into a discussion of such effects of slapstick as empathy, reflexive play with the notion of "staged" attention (a recurrent slapstick theme to which I'll return), and a didacticism that hinges on both how and to what viewers ought to pay attention outside of the exhibition space as well as when they're enjoying raucous physical comedy on the screen.

In this dissertation, I provide a structure for understanding the genre, its relation to a curious role of empathy, and its part in the modern viewer's development through perceptual learning. Doing so creates a vocabulary and context for understanding the first thirty-five years of slapstick. Chapter 1 addresses genre and slapstick conventions in particular. Chapter 2 confronts perception and attention and its staged misdirection. Chapter 3 explores slapstick's call to a peculiar kind of empathy, one that spreads to the film and over the audience, rather than focusing solely on screen figures.

Chapter I

Conceptualizing Slapstick as a Genre

The genre of slapstick was ideal content for early film because audiences already knew what to expect from it. *L'Arroseur arrosé* became a comic template of sorts, and it inspired more than ten reiterations between 1895 and 1900 (Gaines 213). When viewers saw the gardener, the boy, and the water hose in the single-shot film, their expectations stemmed from a collective cultural knowledge of slapstick, gained from music halls, vaudeville, traveling shows, burlesque shows, and comic strips. The film's duplicates attest to the gag's popularity, and its multiplicity of copies helped build slapstick film's generic qualities. This chapter investigates genre formation more generally and slapstick's generic conventions more specifically. It also differentiates slapstick from competing forms of comedy in order to delimit it. Finally, this chapter addresses the system of slapstick and embodiment to show the complexity of slapstick's unique approach to subjectivity. I argue that, within the mode of comedy, slapstick as a genre contains definable conventions, that its construction clearly contrasts with other kinds of contemporaneous comedy, and that its approach to embodiment is different from other kinds of cinematic embodiment.

GENRE FORMATION IN CINEMA

Genre as a category of film deserves some inquiry because the question of how genre is constructed has still not been addressed to the extent that slapstick requires. This section summarizes important definitions and sets up the distinction between my sense of genre and those of the critics I address here. I emphasize genre creation here in order to make visible my stake in setting out an aggregation of qualities that slapstick operates within. My approach to genre is akin to the model that Michael Sinding identifies as a "structural and mimetic model" which focuses on the "similarity of the work to genre members" with the work in question representing a vision of the world (379). I use genre as a deductive category, penetrable by other genres and situated within historical development. Determining the genre characteristics of slapstick pushes into the forefront the usefulness of genre formation study, both thematically and stylistically.

Some critics, such as Bordwell, Staiger, Carroll, and Keil, who describe the classicality of Hollywood cinema, argue that genres simply create their own idiolects within classical Hollywood norms. Bordwell, for example, insists that generic motivation is a subcategory of intertextual motivation, in which genre is a subformation. He further maintains,

> On the whole, generic motivation cooperates with causal, or compositional, unity. Genres are in one respect certain kinds of stories, endowed with their own particular logic that *does not contest* psychological causality or goal-orientation. (*The Classical Hollywood Cinema* 20; italics mine)

In other words, classical Hollywood narrative subsumes all genres under the capacious category of classical narrative—narrative motivated by clear cause and

effect and character-driven goals. His argument is not that genre conventions are restrictive but that the classical Hollywood narrative system absorbs all genres. Bordwell wishes to normalize genres by suggesting that "multiple motivation—causal logic reinforced by generic convention—is again normal operating procedure" (20). Slapstick's generic qualities do not conform as easily to Bordwell's sense of genre as a kind of acting out within institutionalized narrative conventions. Yet his argument furthers the discussion of genre in that it suggests a baseline for distinguishing slapstick from classical Hollywood narrative.

In contention with Bordwell, Gunning suggests a system of genre that relies on historical and stylistic grouping in his essay "Noncontinuity, Continuity, Discontinuity: A Theory of Genres in Early Film." He argues that four historical periods make up early film, with similarities in editing joining the periods. His first genre of early film includes single-shot films made from 1895 until 1903, such as early gag films and actuality films.[1] The second genre, non-continuity, consists of films in which "the move from one shot to another, rather than being minimized through the rules of continuity editing, is actually emphasized (and explained) by a discontinuity or disruption on the level of story" (90). This genre lasted roughly until 1904, overlapping with the third genre, the continuity genre. The chase film represents the third genre, in which the movement of the figures in any single shot signals a cut to the next shot. Gunning writes that although prototypes of this genre occur as early as Georges Méliès's *A Trip the Moon* (1902), this genre becomes important in 1904 and appears frequently until 1907 (92). His final early cinema genre is "the narrative of discontinuity," which "refers to the reintroduction of the

cut into situations similar to the chase films" and finds as its apogee the parallel cutting associated with D.W. Griffith and those after him (92). In Gunning's view, this period began as early as 1907 and became dominant by 1909. He concedes that "there may be room for the consideration of genres based on other aspects of filmic discourse" but that thinking about genre as connected with editing offers a new field of investigation into early cinema (93).

In contrast with Gunning's systemization of genre, Steven Neale argues altogether against using genre as a classification system in discourse surrounding film. He asserts that genre studies allow critics a way of "avoiding detailed studies of anything other than selective samples of 'Hollywood's art'" while insisting on "the importance of genre as a means of conceptualizing the links between Hollywood's films and U. S. society" (124). According to him, what is troubling is the nature in which critics use genre studies to create an exclusive list of films that they then use to construct a tenuous connection between Hollywood film and American society that is not apparent without such an exclusive list.

In an effort to clear the way for a new understanding of genre, Rick Altman criticizes the semantic approach to genre in which "an unwieldy list of texts corresponds to a simple, tautological definition of the genre" (216). Altman writes,

> Tautological semantic definitions, with their goal of broad applicability, outline a large genre of semantically similar texts, while syntactic definitions, intent as they are on explaining the genre, stress a narrow range of texts that privilege specific syntactic relationships. (221)

The semantic approach favors a more inclusive list but gives up explanatory power for something more descriptive than analytical. Its definitional categorization is redundant in that it assumes what the genre is and then fills in the large number of

films that define the genre. In Altman's account of the semantic approach, genre becomes something more like a checklist or encyclopedic category rather than a meaningful discursive tool. Altman also discusses the syntactic strategy, which helps critics choose from a narrower list in order to discuss and explain genre by selecting films that are well known, that are well made, and that "more fully and faithfully represent the genre than other more tangential films" (216). He ultimately argues for a combination of semantic and syntactic approaches, leading to what he calls a pragmatic approach in which the critic combines the two different tactics in order to gain both illustrative and explanatory powers. Although I recognize Altman's criticism of the semantic approach, I argue that without outlining semantic qualities first, no foothold can be gained from which to then take a more syntactic approach. Furthermore, another problem with the syntactic approach is that it relies on already established generic definitions gained from a semantic approach. I intend to give a semantic record of slapstick's qualities and analyze them, moving then to a more syntactic approach later in this chapter and in the next two chapters.

Bordwell's conception of genre does not fit for slapstick cinema, in that it offers little voice for the genre's particular characteristics (and its disruption of conventional narrative). Neale's rejection of genre as a discursive tool leads to a lack of vocabulary with which to describe films with common features, a refusal that demands the impossible. Films are produced to belong to particular genres, and at the very least, ignoring that production strategy leads to folly. Gunning's construction of genre as an historical set of editing conventions may be useful for the earliest films but loses its explanatory power for later films. In the following

section, I establish my view of genre formation by elaborating on the features of the slapstick genre itself.

SLAPSTICK GENRE CONVENTIONS

I wish to emphasize genre as a descriptive, critic-originated cluster of qualities that are retroactively applied from observations of films. In the following subsections, I describe several conventions of slapstick, and subsequent chapters will put these conventions in context, tracing a strand of history that includes classical narrative as a secondary element. Common, as well as critical, parlance about slapstick is rather vague, and by describing these conventions, I intend to clarify the common terms, as well as those terms that are uncommon in definitions of slapstick as a genre. I propose that slapstick acts through

1. Gags
2. Comic Business
3. Humiliation and Violence
4. Antisocial Tendencies
5. Direct Address to the Camera
6. Play with Bodies and Objects
7. Speed

Gags, comic business, and humiliation and violence constitute necessary elements of slapstick. Antisocial tendencies, direct address to the camera, play with bodies and objects, and speed in the *mise-en-scène* and in editing all appear in slapstick films to various degrees and in combinations related to their tasks in the construction of

individual films. The purpose of explicating these conventions is to clarify their distinctions and to lay out a sense of the dynamic in slapstick.

Gags

All sorts of films can contain gags, but it is the primacy of the gag in slapstick that determines whether a film is part of the genre. The gag's prevalence in a film cues the viewer to understand the film as slapstick. Slapstick signals itself by having a gag appear early in the film and by giving priority to gags. So what constitutes a gag? In "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle, and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy," Donald Crafton answers Bordwell's question in *Narration in the Fiction Film*: "Is there anything in narrative film that is not narrational?" with a firm yes: the gag is nonnarrative. He addresses the relationship between gags and the frame narrative using an example from *His Wooden Wedding* (Hal Roach Studios, 1925) but seems ambivalent about the nature of the gag as its own narrative. Gags and attractions seem to be synonyms for him at some points in the essay. He also suggests that the gag may have "fuzzy" logic and that it "may also contain its own microscopic narrative system that may be irrelevant to the larger narrative, may mirror it, or may even work against it as parody" (109). The questions that this brings to the fore are whether gags must be antinarrative and whether one can draw a distinction between the gag and the spectacle. I argue that we can. Gags must be narrative, and comic business, a key element of slapstick that I address in the next section, as an attraction, is nonnarrative.

In its earliest cinematic form, slapstick takes the gag as its only content, whereas, in later slapstick films (following Gunning's first genre category), it uses gags as a concatenation or as a series leading up to what James Agee refers to as a "boffo" laugh, one in which the viewer laughs painfully. This succession of laughter is almost narrative in nature, if we use André Gaudreault's formulation of narrative.

Gaudreault quotes Claude Brémond's definition of the basic principles of narration: "The message should place a subject . . . at time *t*, then at time *t + n*, and what becomes of the subject the moment *t + n* should follow from the predicates characterizing it at the moment *t*" (68). In other words, during an interval, the subject should undergo a change based on the initial situation. Gaudreault describes *L'Arrivée d'un train* à *La Ciotat* as a narrative in which the development is that "travelers become new arrivals and passersby become travelers," a simple kind of narrative without direct causality (70). This stripped-down account of filmic narrative conflates fabula (the story) with syuzhet (the plot). As explicated by Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp, the fabula consists of a causal account as might be presented in real time, the raw narrative material within the film and imagined by the viewer. The syuzhet is a transformation worked upon the fabula, presented through a manipulation of time.

Other scholars have a more exacting definition of narrative, such as Bordwell, who provides a formal definition of narrative in cinema: "In the fiction film, narration is *the process whereby the film's syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channeling the spectator's construction of the fabula*" (*Narration* 53). The logic of the gag is consistent with this fabula–syuzhet format. However, Bordwell's

definition relies on a classical sense of what a story is: an imagined, canonical fabula format that consists of "introduction of setting and characters—explanation of a state of affairs—complicating action—ensuing events—outcome—ending" (*Narration* 35). As I argue, this fabula format is not always applicable to slapstick, and thus a different set of fabula expectations must be constructed.

The unconventional narrative of the gag is the backbone of slapstick. Gags operate within the bounds of cause and effect, although the effect is often a surprise or is out of proportion with the cause. Slapstick films can have a conventional frame narrative, but gags specialize in disrupting them. They throw into disarray conventional narrative as classically defined by delaying the next step of the cause–effect chain, by stopping the film's forward momentum so that gags' narrative achieves dominance for the time they command, or by damaging the frame narrative entirely. They can change the tenor of the film or parody the main course of action. They can interfere with causal unity or even fracture causal dominance altogether by introducing nonsense into the film.

Gags frequently strip down the fabula to a barer structure than Bordwell constructs. Crafton notes that gags may offer "a truncated syllogism. The joke is set up as a set of logical relations, but the expected conclusion does not follow" (115). An example of an early gag film is *A New Waiter Opening a Fizz* (American Mutoscope Company, 1897), a single-shot tableau in which the joke rests on a waiter's opening a bottle of champagne for a dining couple. The cork pops, the champagne jets out of the bottle, and the foam covers the waiter, the diners, and the table. The film establishes an initial setting, presents a single event, and an ending.

But the gag lacks any real characterization: the characters are defined only by their roles and combined desire for the champagne bottle to be opened. The viewer doesn't know the relationship of the two diners or any other defining characteristics. He or she can only guess that the waiter hasn't had much experience with opening a bottle of champagne. Likewise, the little narrative lacks complicating action. This simplified version of narration operates as a distinct unit, and the viewer desires an outcome that does not satisfy any suspense that the gag might create but instead produces laughter.

Gags rely on causality but without most of the other trappings of what Bordwell calls canonical narrative, and they survive even when taken out of context of a feature-length film. Gunning argues that "in their contact with narrative, gags do not . . . lose their independence, but precisely subvert the narrative itself" ("Response" 121). Consider a gag from Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr* (Buster Keaton Productions, 1924). Two suitors compete for the attention of a woman. One suitor offers the other suitor a banana as a consolation prize for not getting the woman's attentions. The second suitor eats the banana and places the peel strategically behind the other man. When the first suitor leaves the room, he doesn't fall for the trick, stepping unwittingly over the peel, which introduces a delay in the gag, When the second suitor tries to approach the woman, he steps on the peel himself. Although the gag seems to be recuperable within the overarching narrative, it fails to advance the plot of the film as a whole. It instead presents a parody of the main action, in which the suitors attempt to show the woman their appeal.

Noël Carroll offers a taxonomy of slapstick gags in "Notes on the Sight Gag." All of the sorts of gags he identifies are based on the premise of the incongruous. (See Chapter 3 for an overview of incongruity theory.) The first sight gag is that which results from "the mutual interference or interpenetration of two (or more) series of events (or scenarios)." The screen figure has one perspective on the situation and the viewer, able to observe what the screen figure cannot, takes another. The result of the screen figure's misapprehension of the event is misfortune. *Out Bound* (Cameo Comedies, 1924) includes an extended gag sequence that begins when a man is sleeping in his bedroom with one of the windows open. A truck backs up next to the house, and two long wooden poles jut into the window and slide under the bed. As the truck pulls away, the bed is carried through the window and down the street, with the man continuing to sleep. It is only until the truck is backed up to the edge of a cliff that the man wakes up and sees his danger. After a series of rescue-attempt gags, the man falls out of the bed and to the bottom of the cliff.

The second sight gag is that of mimed metaphor, in which a character's pantomime relationship with an object draws a metaphor between that object and another, imagined object. Carroll notes that mimed metaphor is different from the gag of interfering scenarios because "the alternative points of view need not be relativized to any characters, they need not result in mishaps, and they are directed more at objects than at events" (33). This kind of gag occurs in *Fluttering Hearts* (Hal Roach Studios, 1927) when a young man is revealed as a con in a nightclub. The

other patrons throw objects at him while he is on stage, which the musicians have fled from. He uses a banjo as in improvised tennis racket to fend these objects off.

The object analog gag is virtually indistinguishable from the mimed metaphor. This category encompasses gags in which objects are repurposed on the basis of their appearance. For example, a tuba in *The Pawnshop* (Mutual Film Company, 1916) is used as an umbrella stand. A telephone receiver is used as a cup for drinking liquor in *Live Wires and Love Sparks* (L-KO Kompany, 1916). Carroll differentiates between the mimed metaphor gag and the object analog gag by arguing that the object analog does not require as much pantomime as the mimed metaphor to draw the similarities of the objects to the surface. The issue that he glosses over is that in order for the object analog gag to occur, a screen figure must be the agent of the action producing the analogy.

The switch image gag concerns an image given to the audience that invites one interpretation, only to be contradicted by the next image. This is similar to Bowser's generic category of the destruction of space. The comedy *Wild and Woolly* (Douglas Fairbanks Pictures, 1917) contains a switch image gag in which the main character (Douglas Fairbanks) is shown sitting in front of a tent, heating a kettle over a small fire. In the next shot, the camera has pulled back, and it is revealed that the character is in a well-appointed room. The switch image gag is sequential in nature, and the connection between the two images is not causal. The switch motion gag occurs when one motion is turned into another. Carroll uses several examples from *The Pawnshop*, including a scenario in which the pawnshop assistant (Chaplin) aims to punch a co-worker, but when the boss walks in, he follows the trajectory of

his fist to the floor and pretends to scrub it. Carroll likens switch images to verbal puns in that the movement that follows the first motion requires that the first motion be reinterpreted.

Carroll's final gag type, the solution gag, is rare and perhaps doesn't belong in any category of the sight gag. It occurs when a screen figure devises an unexpected solution to a problem—and here he refers to a specific gag in Keaton's *The General* (Buster Keaton Productions, 1926). Among the differences between the mutual interference gag and the solution gag is that in the mutual interference gag, the viewer has more awareness of the situation, whereas with the solution gag, it is the character that has more insight. It may not belong among these types because, as he puts it, the gag is based more on physics than on incongruity.

The reason why I've gone into so much depth into Carroll's taxonomy is that it illuminates the structure of the gag's visual signification. His categories are intriguing, and they suggest a way to describe not only the visual puns (which do not require narrative and are not, in my view, truly gags) but also those movements and shot constructions that constitute the gag. By creating this typology, he constructs a new, if not precise, approach to understanding gags. His work contributes to my understanding of the gag as a piece of incongruity that results in laughter.

In *The Logic of the Absurd,* Jerry Palmer argues for a semiotic approach to the construction of the gag in which its logic requires socially constructed givens. His approach is useful for my purposes because it suggests one way of looking at the

incongruity of some (but not all) gags. It's also useful as a way to explore how many gags revolve around the gag's victim both being a subject that has a body and being an object. These two contradictory conditions fuel a copious number of gags, as myriad gags treat bodies as objects.

Palmer describes two moments of the gag: the instant of surprise, or the peripeteia, and the unconscious instant in which the viewer has two simultaneous, contradictory responses, which can be analytically elaborated as two syllogisms. For Palmer, surprise must be part of the gag's narrative structure.[2] The second moment of the gag, after the surprise, involves the viewer's unconscious, spontaneous reaction. This produces two syllogisms in which two premises are laid out: the acceptable logic and the nonsensical logic. The one syllogism leads to a "plausible" conclusion and the other leads to an "implausible" one. Because the gag is both plausible and implausible, the contradiction creates the absurd.

Palmer uses *Liberty* (Hal Roach Studios, 1929) as an example. Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy play escaped convicts. The characters find themselves on the exposed girders of an uncompleted skyscraper, and after some gags revolving around heights and obstacles (e.g., bags of cement, beams), the two eventually end up in the elevator they took to get to the top level of the skyscraper in the first place. Meanwhile, a police officer has taken shelter from falling objects in the elevator landing. Laurel and Hardy's characters descend to the landing using the elevator, with the police officer underneath in the elevator shaft. When the elevator goes up again, the police officer has survived but has been shrunk to a smaller version of himself. His emergence is assigned to the peripeteia.

The first syllogism can be described in this way: the major premise is that the viewer knows that the result of the police officer getting squashed should be fatal. The second, minor premise is that he survives. The conclusion of the first syllogism is that the event is implausible. The second syllogism's major premise is that the typical result of squashing a soft object is a reduction in the object's size. The minor premise is that the police officer comes out of the elevator shaft smaller. Therefore, the event has a measure of plausibility. Key to the relationship between these two syllogisms is the way in which the first takes the man as a subject and the second takes him as an object. Embodiment in this case becomes disputable, and the problem creates an absurdity in which the police officer is a body and an object at the same time.

Using Palmer's insight as a tool, one can ascribe absurd logic to almost any gag. *Moonshine* (Comique Film Corporation, 1918) contains a series of examples. Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle and Buster Keaton play revenue agents seeking a distillery in the hills of Virginia.[3] After they both fall from a peak, Fatty finds his lieutenant buried in the dirt, with just his waggling feet and hands jutting from the ground. Fatty takes a pickaxe and starts digging for him. The peripeteia occurs at the moment the pickaxe buries itself into the ground. The viewer knows roughly how tall the lieutenant is, and considering the length of the space between the hands and the feet, he or she expects him to be buried rather shallowly in the ground. However, the pickaxe goes into the earth deeper than expected. Thus the peripeteia is sprung at the exact moment of the pick entering the earth, and this moment unleashes the process of reaction analyzed as the two syllogisms. The implausible syllogism can be

constructed thus, with several premises: the lieutenant can be buried only so deeply and the depth at which the pickaxe buries itself exceeds the depth at which the lieutenant's body presumably is. The result of being cut by a pickaxe is death. The lieutenant survives. The conclusion is that the situation is implausible. The balancing, plausible syllogism can be constructed in this way: the result of using a pickaxe is that a solid object is dug out of the earth. Fatty digs his lieutenant out of the earth. Therefore, the situation of the gag is plausible. Again, embodiment becomes moot, as the first syllogism takes the screen figure to be a body and second syllogism assumes the body to be an obdurate object.

Inherent in Palmer's logic is a construction of narrative that is both interior to the gag and abstracted from it. The preparatory shots set up an initial situation for the narrative. The peripeteia announces a second point or turn in the narrative, and the unconscious attempt to explain the cause–effect relationship through syllogisms occupies a third brief span of time. One can also see Palmer's logic as a narrative of mental and embodied cause–effect connections. His construction of the operation of gags describes a cognitive cause (e.g., astonishment in the case of this gag) and a physical effect—laughter, which is the result of a momentary internal, though unconscious, production of two competing syllogisms. This combination of unconscious and embodied activities on the part of the viewer creates logic consistent with that of most gags.

Palmer uses the word "absurd" to refer to the clash between the plausible and implausible syllogisms. But what about gags that are absurd narratives but do not invite the formation of a balancing plausible syllogism? Crafton notes that gags

may offer a single truncated syllogism. (115). He uses *His Wooden Wedding* (Hal Roach Productions, 1925) as an example. In the film, Charlie Chase's character throws his hat over a ship's rail three times, and it returns each time. When he throws the boat captain's hat over the rail, it sails away. "These subversions of logic undermine the viewer's ability to match effects with causes" (115). The truncated syllogism in Crafton's view is singular and partial. Each time Chase's character throws his own hat overboard, it sails back to him. These events lack a plausible syllogism. The fourth time that the character throws a hat overboard, it sails away. The gag lies in the accumulation of occurrences in which the thrown hat returns to Chase three times. This sets up an assumption that the captain's hat will return as well. The fact that the captain's hat glides away isn't in keeping with the first three incidents, and its logical outcome determines the gag.

Examples of this kind of absurd gag occur in *Moonshine* as well. Fatty and the lieutenant exit a car. Fatty calls for more revenue agents to search a mountainside for a secret moonshine operation. Forty-five men (an absurd number) climb out of the car. (Arbuckle's editing of this gag is flawless.) The narrative is simple: one man exits the car and then another one. The result of the gag is that all forty-five men are on the scene, but the viewer cannot construct a tenable syllogism. It's simply implausible. The same narrative occurring within the viewer happens, but the peripeteia is dependent on the measure the viewer allows for the number of people possible in the car. When does the turn happen? After six people exit the car? After seven? The stream of men coming out of the car pauses after four men, which would suggest to the viewer that six men (including Fatty and his lieutenant) were in the

car to begin with. This pause indicates a structure in which the viewer is meant to be surprised at the seventh man exiting the car. The pause sets up the surprise of the following men. At the emergence of each additional man, the surprise continues, not as a single moment, but as a series of moments. Each man provokes another surprise.

The moment following the last surprise contains no balance of syllogisms. The implausible syllogism could be constructed as such: Cars can contain a finite set number of passengers, a number based on the size of the car. However, this car contains more than that number; therefore, the gag doesn't make sense. In fact, it relies on nonsense to be a gag. This absurdity comes not from a clash of syllogisms, as Palmer might suggest, but from the lack of a balancing, plausible syllogism. Because it is the first gag of the film, it signals to the viewer that its context is a slapstick film.

Sigmund Freud deconstructs this kind of absurd joke in *The Joke and the Unconscious* (1905). It takes nonsense and fails to reveal a sensible resolution, as would happen in other kinds of jokes. The absurd joke, according to Freud, demands a child-like sense of play, afforded to the person who is predisposed to laughter by already being in a jolly mood, such as in "a toxically altered state of mind" (120). He compares the play of children to those who are intoxicated and so thus enjoy absurdity and nonsense without intellectual repression.

Another example of absurdity occurs in *One Too Many* (Vim Comedy Film Company, 1916). Although by 1916 editing practices had been established to create a sense of a diegetic world that is continuous and can be inferred, *One Too Many*

rejects customary editing practices.[4] This rejection leads to a confusion of shots of spaces within the film, adding to the absurdity within the film. How the rooms connect with each other is at times unclear and each flight of stairs looks identical to the others, creating viewer perplexity using the mise-en-scène.

In the film, Plump's uncle sends a message that he's coming to visit Plump (Oliver Hardy) that afternoon. Plump has lead his uncle to believe that he has a wife and child, so Plump pays Runt (Billy Ruge) to find a surrogate wife and child. Plump steals a baby from another room and puts it in his room. On a floor of the building, an unnamed man (who doesn't reappear in the film and whose relationship to the baby is unknown) hears the child crying and returns the child to its mother, who is in yet another room. With the child gone, Plump instructs Runt to "get a flock of babies." It's unclear why Plump gives this instruction because he needs just one baby to satisfy his uncle's expectation. Runt rents babies from three mothers with the ostensible purpose of bringing them to Plump, but when Runt appears again, he's carrying only a basinet. Where are the babies? Meanwhile, another man kidnaps the first baby and hides in a closet. The closet could open onto any of the rooms seen thus far in the film.

Plump instructs Runt: "You must be the baby!" Runt climbs into the bassinet and Plump dresses him up. Plump hears the first baby crying and says to his newly arrived uncle, "I was afraid to tell you it was twins." While the baby-juggling goes on, it's unclear how Plump was going to find a wife. An intertitle says, "The wives commence to report." There's a confusion of women entering Plump's room, and two of them fight in a bathroom. Then, an intertitle reports, "The husbands come

after the wives." Everyone jumps around in Plump's room, as multiple men enter and push the women out. Another man chases the uncle out of the room and fires a pistol at him. The final shot reveals Plump's room, where Runt is still in the bassinet. Runt cries, and Plump shows him more money.

The series of shots of rooms don't indicate what rooms are on the same floor. There are matches on action that indicate the space between a room and a stairwell, but these matches are not enough to give a sense of the space of the building. At times the film shows a closet or bathroom that isn't "placed" logically within the building. The shots of Runt renting babies on the street and in a park don't necessarily need to be connected, but the inside shots multiply the nonsense that individual gags create. Although the film's gags have a cause–effect relationship, the overall narrative space makes little sense. Gunning's idea about the gag subverting narrative is applicable here. Freud's conjecture about nonsense as an important joke technique suggests a connection in the film between nonsense and riotous behavior, a relationship between gags as subversion and what Freud refers to as the comic.

Moonshine contains a gag that is utterly absurd in that it has no plausible syllogism, constructed with the aid of an intertitle. Fatty is trapped in a cabin set with dynamite. A wick burns down toward the can of explosives, and bootleggers, who have tied Fatty up, run out of the building. An intertitle interrupts the narrative: "Fatty deserves great acclaim for the scene where the cabin explodes and automatically reassembles itself." Before the gag begins, the intertitle announces the result, leaving a turn in the narrative but without surprise. A long shot after the intertitle shows the cabin as a whole, so that the viewer can see it explode and

watch parts of it rain down. The intertitle causes an anomaly by introducing an extradiegetic element to the events. The first event is plausible in the context of the scene before it, but it also relates to the metarepresentational intertitle that introduces the action. The second event is impossible, but it is announced. The intertitle explicitly states that the cabin reassembles itself and that it does so automatically. Yet the intertitle suggests, in the context of previous intertitles, that Arbuckle as the filmmaker deserves credit for accomplishing the scene. If the intertitle is read as announcing the filmmaker's editing, the cabin's seeming return to a whole state is logical in the context of what filmmakers can do. If the intertitle is read as announcing the manipulation of the mise-en-scène, the reassembling of the cabin is illogical. The intertitle is a wink at the audience, drawing attention to the filmmaker's intervention in the film even while claiming that the cabin's reassembly is automatic. Its sly move is akin to a direct address to the camera, except in this case, it is verbal address to the audience, causing the audience to realize itself as part of the manner in which they and the film collaborate to make meaning.

Furthermore, the intertitle conflates Fatty the character on the screen, Arbuckle the filmmaker (as previous intertitles indicate), and Arbuckle the actor. In addition to the first two readings of the intertitle, the intertitle can be read as Fatty the actor deserving acclaim for his acting in the scene. After the cabin reassembles, without a cutaway, Fatty emerges from it with a shotgun in hand, looking around for the bootleggers, as the viewer would expect him to do after he is freed from the chair he had been tied to before the explosion. The conclusion is that not only has the cabin been exploded and reconstructed, Fatty's body has been as well. This

portrays a kind of embodiment in which Fatty's body is equivalent to the cabin as an object. The body becomes a fantastical object, even more so than the cabin. Its constituent parts ostensibly are reunited without the intervention of the intertitle, resulting in a body that is easily refabricated without the filmmaker's hand. *Moonshine's* fantastical body is further evidence of the film's play with bodies and objects.

Truncated gags began to appear in slapstick films in the late 1910s. Slapstick audiences by this point had a well-developed set of expectations regarding what a car gag, for example, will look like. In this kind of gag, the gag is frustrated. It doesn't come to fruition. Instead of coming to an explosive conclusion, the gag dissipates as the action continues. A viable question might be how one notices a truncated gag: it is one that presents a common, even conventional, easily recognizable gag cause but does not offer the expected, exaggerated ending.

Comic Business

Comic business, a colloquial term that I define here, is also a required convention of slapstick. It seems as though comic business is something recognizable that everyone knows when he or she sees it. Here I wish to define it clearly as non-narrative comedian- or trickster-centered gestures and other physical actions that don't rely on speech or intertitles. Comic business consists of a performer's actions that have the purpose of eliciting laughter: a routine, gimmick, or twitch that arrests narrative for the goal of producing laughter at the comedian's (or comedians') antics. It is a paralysis of narrative. Jonathan Auerbach notes how

comic business addresses "the body itself [as] an expressive medium" (2). The language of gesture is difficult to translate into description because of its essential reliance on the manipulation of bodies through gesture or facial expression. I have created the second generic category of comic business because although it frequently occurs within gags and some gags come about through such manipulation of the body, comic business also appears separately from gags. As a nonnarrative feature of slapstick, it deserves its own category.

Tillie's Punctured Romance (1914) has the typical characteristics of comic business in Keystone films. These bits of business accelerate the speed in the film but slow the narrative. Comic business—such as Tillie (Marie Dressler) using her hips and buttocks to hit objects and people, her repetition of sticking out her tongue, and her odd dance—is evident. In one scene, she's an example of a modern workingwoman, but her body does not fit into the work environment, as the other women almost mechanically serve other customers and do their associated duties. Tillie's body is uncontrolled, whereas the other women's bodies are disciplined by their work environment.

In many films, Chaplin's Tramp figure is recognizable through his outfit and duck walk, but his comic business changes on the basis of the situation at hand. In *The Rink* (Mutual Film, 1916), the Tramp arrives at a roller rink wearing a straw boater. He sits next to a girl on a bench and takes his hat off to her by leaning his head back against the wall, causing the hat to lift up as though it did so by itself. This bit relies on the setting, the costume, and the situation in which the two characters

find themselves. The bit doesn't rely on the Tramp's usual trappings because in addition to costume, his comic business adapts itself to the situation.

One of the challenges to contemporary film scholars is recognizing comic business when they see it because early slapstick at times draws on bodily practices that do not seem unconventional. For example, in *Body Shots*, Auerbach examines chase scenes like *How a French Nobleman Got a Wife Through the New York Herald's "Personal" Columns* (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1904) and sees the women in the film as a mass of femininity: "Just as the shots themselves are interchangeable . . . so too within each particular shot are the women themselves. . . .The chase records many bodies in motion, but as if they formed a kind of composite group" (99). They must each overcome some obstacle in each shot. Each shot, however, contains a different bit of comic business, through which one of the women can be distinguished from the others. The purpose of the concatenation of shots is not narrative development or continuity. The scenes are interchangeable because the chase film relies on duration, with narrative causality as a byproduct of the film, but the women are not interchangeable, because one in each shot is identifiable by her comic business in relationship to the landscape in the shot.

Humiliation and Violence

Humiliation and violence are the slap in slapstick that is the sign of the genre. They can occur either at the climax of an enchainment of events or as part of an ongoing progression of a comic business routine. In *An Interesting Story* (Williamson Films, 1904), the protagonist (a man characterized through his business suit and

avid reading) undergoes a number of mistakes, trips, and other mishaps, only to be run over by a steamroller, which flattens him. The resolution comes after this violent action, as a pair of cyclists reanimates the man by pumping him back up with bicycle pumps. The climax of the events—the man run over by a steamroller—offers a violent shock to the viewer. The action builds to such an almost deadly end to the man that the cyclists' intervention comes as a relief. The business with the cyclists is excessive of the main gag, offering the additional spectacle of the man being pumped up into life again. Embodiment in this film is questionable. As with the examples of Palmer's competing syllogisms, the syllogisms require the man to behave both as body and as object.

Later in the slapstick period, humiliation took on a bawdier form. Freud sets up a category of "tendentious" jokes, in which the listener may not react to the joke with the intended response. Bawdy jokes belong in this category. Present must be a teller and a listener, with an object of the joke being a third entity. Freud asserts that bawdy talk is directed at a third object by which the teller and the listener are sexually aroused. To laugh at a bawdy joke is to be "a viewer at an act of sexual aggression" (93). According to his discussion of bawdy jokes, both the teller, or the film, and the listener, or viewer, derive pleasure: "The first person's bawdy talk strips the woman naked before the third, who is now, as listener, bribed—by the effortless satisfaction of his own libido" (95). The bawdy joke helps both expend the energy that they have used to suppress hostile or socially dangerous unconscious thoughts:

> Internal resistance is overcome and inhibition lifted with the aid of a joke. This enables the intention to be satisfied, as it was in the case of an external

> obstacle, and suppression avoided, together with 'psychical damming-up' involved. (114)[5]

In the one who tells the joke and the one who receives it, the pleasure derived overcomes any social or aesthetic boundaries. Bawdy jokes, such as the gags present in *A Night in the Show* (Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, 1915) and *Mabel's Strange Predicament* (Keystone Film Company, 1914), provide pleasure in the form of sadistic laughter.

In *A Night in the Show*, the Pest, played by Chaplin, removes the feathers from the hat of an attractive woman sitting in front of him. It can be said that the removal of the feathers presents him an opportunity for a vision he would prefer—the removal of the woman's clothing. In this case, the Pest's declared purpose is to have a more visual connection with the figures on stage, but it is not permissible for the Pest to undress the woman in public or in the action on the screen. The action presents the Pest's latent desire to see the woman. The screen figure stands in for the viewer, which further displaces the desire to undress a woman in public.

Another example of a bawdy joke occurs in *Mabel's Strange Predicament*, which features Chaplin and Mabel Normand.[6] Alone, Mabel has rented a hotel room for the night. The drunken Tramp follows her into the hallway and leers at her. Mabel goes into her room and undresses for bed, but she returns the hall for a moment. She becomes locked out of her hotel room dressed only in her pajamas, and her state of undress is the key to her humiliation and the gags that ensue. The Tramp looks for her. She hides in the room of a married couple, under the bed, while the husband, who is alone in the room for the moment, does not notice. Mabel's humiliation increases when the wife, who is fully dressed in upper-class clothing,

returns to their room and finds her. Accusing her husband of infidelity, the woman yells at him while Mabel tries to cover her body with a blanket. A series of mishaps find her in the couple's hotel room, then her hotel room, and finally locked out of both rooms, in the hotel hallway. The combination of Mabel in her pajamas and her obvious embarrassment fuels the film. The gags are about Mabel's body, and the bawdy is present in her inability to hide. The film allows the viewer to laugh at the woman, who, in her state of undress, cannot escape the gaze of the viewer. Mabel is the object of the gag, the second part of Freud's triad needed for the bawdy joke.

After the revival of slapstick in the 1910s, the violence increased in frequency and intensity, and humiliation became more secondary. Sennett helped usher in a new regime of violence, which became a yardstick for other slapstick films. For example, in *A Muddy Romance* (Keystone Film Company, 1913), an ardent suitor tries to woe Mabel Normand's character through a window, while another suitor arrives in Mabel's house and gives Mabel a ring in view of the window. The two men argue through her window, and the unwanted suitor turns away to get a pie to throw into the second suitor's face. Of course, at this point, Mabel sticks her head out the window and gets the pie instead. She and her beau retaliate by hurling bricks at the other man, which don't seem to hurt him. It's only when he stubs his toe on one of the bricks that the viewer sees his grimace of pain. In this case, pain exhibits itself on a nonsensical level. Getting hit in the face by bricks and stubbing a toe should be in sharp contrast in terms of the pain expressed. Not reacting to the bricks in the first instance isn't especially funny. The second bodily experience of stubbing a toe and communicating pain would be an example of comic business.

However, the juxtaposition of reactions creates the gag: The lack of expression of pain in response to the bricks suggests a body that is durable, but the exaggerated response to stubbing a toe proposes an excessively fragile body. The impression of the insensate body sets up an expectation, and the gag comes about through the surprising display of sensitivity.

Sennett's Keystone Cops specialized in slapstick violence as part of the ongoing progression of spectacular events. For example, in *Barney Oldfield's Race for a Life* (Keystone Film Company, 1913), a villain (Ford Sterling) shoots at the hero (Mack Sennett) and shoots to death five Keystone Cops who are on their way to rescue Mabel.[7] The film ends with the villain trying to shoot himself in the head. When he discovers that he has no more bullets, he chokes himself instead. In this case, although the actions take place within the enframing narrative, the level of their violence is excessive of the narrative. Not only does the villain strangle himself, his grimaces and kicks emphasize the action that closes the film.

Antisocial Tendencies

Among slapstick's chief characteristics is its antisocial tendency. This is displayed in two ways: the way in which the diegetic world is constructed and the way in which screen figures behave. The first, an antisocial schema, is illustrated in films that aim to undercut societal norms by showing the prevailing schema to be flawed. Very many Keystone films do this by mocking policemen, marriage, and the middle class. More widespread (as it applies to Keystone films as well) is antisocial behavior. Films such as *Bromo and Juliet* (Hal Roach Studios, 1926), *Pie-Eyed* (Joe

Rock Company, 1925), and *Dry and Thirsty* (Gayety Comedies, 1921) all show characters that buck Prohibition. *The Mystery of the Leaping Fish* (Triangle Film Corporation, 1916) and *The Detectress* (Bulls Eye, 1919) both portray characters using drugs that were made illicit by the Harrison Narcotics Act of 1914. Scenes of distribution and consumption of illegal substances were rampant in slapstick.

Other films include behavior that is more generally prohibited. *Three of a Kind* (Joe Rock Company, 1926), for example, ridicules the patrons of a supper club for stepping away from social norms by responding violently when their classed aesthetic desires are unfulfilled. Three performers put on various acts, each of which is monstrative until the gags set up by the performative attractions intervene. The show is unsuccessful. The manager of the club distributes fruits and vegetables to the patrons so they can pelt the performers. The scene quickly devolves into a vegetal standoff in the supper club between well-dressed patrons and the performers. The upper crust is lowered to the standards of the performers through this battle, as each side uses a table as a shield from the attacks of the others. Through violence and humiliation, the social world of the supper club deteriorates. This spectacle contributes to a sense of unreality, as slapstick introduces the anarchic.

Another film, *Fluttering Hearts* (Hal Roach Studios, 1927) shows this tendency to a higher degree. The film begins with impropriety. An upper-class married man (William Burress) writes a compromising letter to a young actress. Her brother, Big Bill (Oliver Hardy), finds it and attempts to blackmail him with it. The married man hires another man, Charley (Charley Chase), a millionaire in disguise,

to retrieve the letter under the guise of meeting Big Bill at a nightclub to pay the price. The nightclub has a policy that a man can only enter with a woman, which suggests that the owners of the place aspire for it to be better than other, lower-class nightclubs. Charley buys a life-sized rubber woman, dressed appropriately, and pretends she is his date. To the nightclub patrons, the rubber woman appears to be a real woman because she is sufficiently life-like. Then, by standing behind the rubber woman with her veil pulled down over his head, he dances with Big Bill. Using the rubber woman's "hand," Charley rubs Big Bill's chest and in doing so, is able to steal the letter. Charley shoves the letter down the rubber woman's bodice. At least three social norms are violated here: cross-dressing, the prohibition of sexually charged affection between two men, and the prohibition against a man touching a woman's breasts in public. This is tempered by the fact that all of these transgressions occur through the object that is the rubber woman.

Big Bill discovers that he's been duped and that he no longer has the letter. He shoots at Charley and hits the rubber woman. At first the other patrons are horrified but then realize that the rubber woman is not a real woman. Charley's in the nightclub under false pretenses. They chase him around the nightclub, and soon Charley's on the stage with the musical instruments. When they begin to throw bottles and plates at him, he wards them off with first a bass drum (as though it were a shield), then a banjo (as though it were a tennis racket). He hits the things back to the other customers, and some of items hit them. In a few cases, individuals catch the items and throw them back at Charley. The scene deteriorates quickly into

chaos as middle-class characters are acting in the way that lower-class characters, as constructed by the film, are supposed to act.

The final scene that I'd like to attend to involves the daughter of the man who wrote the letter. She finds out that Big Bill is trying to blackmail her father, and she goes to the nightclub. While the patrons are busy trying to hit Charley with things, she finds the rubber woman and puts its dress and veil on. Now she has the letter. In a hurry to get out of the nightclub, Charley doesn't notice that the daughter is not the rubber woman. He grabs her around the waist and carries her out of the nightclub. He races to a taxicab and before he gets inside, he reaches into the bodice of what he thinks is the rubber woman to get the letter. The daughter slaps him. In this case, it is an actual breaking of prohibition, not a simulated one. For this, Charley gets punished, and the chaotic world of the film is set right. This is the final action of the film. The restoration of propriety must end the film.

The laughter that these films provoke is a laughter of relief, which idea is based on Freud's theory of jokes (see Chapter 3). The listener (in this case, the viewer) is able to laugh because the film has lifted the prohibition against what had previously been repressed. Because someone else has created the gags, the viewer is allowed to laugh with the same amount of energy that he or she used to suppress the antisocial tendency. This suggests that slapstick films contain within them an ability to relieve the viewer from what has been pressing against the surface all along. That these shorts preceded feature films indicates that the viewer is able to find deliverance from the uncomfortable state of repression before the feature film

reestablishes it, which offers pleasures that compensate for the reformation of the repressed antisocial drive.

Direct Address to the Camera

Although direct address to the camera is not an element peculiar to slapstick (consider, e.g., the famous shot in which a cowboy shoots directly at the camera with his handgun in *The Great Train Robbery* [Porter, 1903]), it takes on a different dimension in slapstick film. Direct address to the camera makes the viewer complicit in the chaos of slapstick. Gunning describes direct address in his essay "Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avant Garde." Direct address was a way of letting spectators look back into a camera that confronted them. Prior to 1906, Gunning argues, the cinema of attractions, which included direct address, was dominant in cinema. It may have gone "underground" in transitional and Hollywood films after that point, but slapstick continued to use direct address, an interruption of narrative for the express purpose of exhibition.

The direct address breaks the imagined fourth wall between the film and the viewer by disrupting an illusion that classical narrative struggles to establish. In Chaplin's *A Woman* (Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, 1915), the Tramp finds himself trapped in the house of his sweetheart, whose father is after him. In an attempt to escape, he dresses in the woman's clothes and shoves a pillow into the bust of the dress. A close-up then reveals Chaplin staring straight into the camera. The viewer sees the Tramp dressed up, complete with make-up and without his moustache. The direct address interrupts the narrative not simply to show how well

the Tramp could pass as a woman but also to enjoy his look of complicity with the viewer. It demonstrates the Tramp's charm, without participating in narrative causality.

In another Chaplin film, *The Pawnshop* (Mutual Film Company, 1916), the Tramp works as a pawnshop assistant. In one scene, a man comes in with his wife's wedding ring and a sob story about how he is down on his luck and must sell the ring. The assistant agrees to buy the ring for $5, a more than fair price, which he rings up on the cash register. He also gives the ring back to the man. The register has only a single $10 dollar bill, more than the $5 the shop owes the man. After the assistant explains the problem, the man brings out a bankroll in order to make change. The assistant, realizing he's been taken for a fool, looks directly into the camera and hits himself on the head with a hammer. The direct look in this instance allows Chaplin's character to share his error with the viewer, giving himself a knock on the head to acknowledge his own stupidity.

Play with Bodies and Objects

Slapstick's play with bodies and objects has a number of permutations: bodies substituted by objects, objects substituted by bodies, attraction and repulsion of bodies and objects, and transformation of bodies to objects and vice versa. They all share in an inquiry into the body as representative of a subject. Slapstick participates in the question of the status of the embodied subject, much as modern industrial practices did. An effect of Taylorism, mechanical repetition ruled in the lives of workers. With specialized tools used for the purpose of the same

mechanical movement, the Taylorist system reduced workers to pieces of a machine.

Sociologist Georg Simmel makes into metaphor the way in which modern life can be formally associated with human mechanics:

> The individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of purely objective life. (422)

Simmel identifies the formal disconnection between inner life and the external circumstance of the worker, in which the worker does not merely lose inner life but has it is ripped from him or her by the mechanics of his or her own work. This functionally changes the worker from a human being into a part of the massive modern machine, a part that is both interchangeable and easily replaced.

Sociologist Max Weber also used the cog as a metaphor for the formal relationship between worker and machine, in which the worker is a "specialist without spirit . . . a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route to mark" (I: 637). Weber's sense of the worker as part of the modern machine posits further diminution, in which the worker exists as a small part of a greater machine that needs only identical cogs, running within a simple course, to keep the behemoth moving. In the opposing direction, the machine needs the worker, however diminished, to continue to function. The mechanical repetition that Simmel and Weber discuss is thematized in slapstick.

Mechanical reproduction suggests that the body is an object. In *Tillie's Punctured Romance,* when Tillie shoots a gun inside a house during a party, guests

run backward and forward. Sennett uses the same shots of the running guests repeatedly to give a sense of the mechanical nature of their attempts to escape Tillie. This repetition enlivens Bergson's first contention about humor: that what is most laughable is humans behaving like machines. The guests run back and forth like panicked automatons, if there can be such things, and the only distinguishing characteristic of any of them is the comic business that each performs, again and again, in exactly the same way, four times.

In *Easy Street* (Charles Chaplin Studios, 1917), Chaplin plays a newly created policeman. He's charged with patrolling the rough streets of a neighborhood recently troubled by riots. The man who runs the street (Eric Campbell) leads the riots, and to establish peace, the policeman must subdue him. (Regular viewers of Chaplin's films would recognize Campbell as the heavy, distinguished by his massive size, his eyeliner, and his exaggerated eyebrows.) In one scene, with the villain close by his side, the policeman walks over to the police telephone, which is mounted on a lamppost, and opens the cabinet. When he makes a move toward the telephone, the villain jerks toward him. They repeat this cycle six times. The repetition appears machine-like and aims to stimulate laughter resulting from incongruity. The seventh and eighth times the cycle is repeated, the policeman manages to grab the telephone's receiver while the villain's head is turned. Each time, the villain catches him, and the policeman pretends to play the receiver like a horn, signaling an opportunity for laughing at the analogy between the fluted shape of the earpiece and the shape of an instrument. The ninth time in this cycle, he pretends to see something in it, as though looking into a vessel, and the villain snatches it away. Of

course, there is nothing to see inside the receiver, and the villain's action of duplicating the policeman's looking into it indicates that the repetition is reflexive.

While the villain is looking into the receiver, the policeman hits him on the head with his truncheon. The villain doesn't notice. He happens to turn around, and the policeman hits him on the head again. The villain turns his head to one side, and the policeman hits him on the head. The villain turns his head to the other side, and the policeman hits him again. The villain looks straight at him, and the policeman hits him with all his might. The villain turns to take off his coat, and the policeman hits him yet again. Each time the policeman hits the man, the man reacts hardly at all to the intended pain. Again, the repetition draws an analogy between policeman and machine, and the lack of response from the villain indicates that he is an unfeeling object. In this case, no screen figure in the scene rises to the level at which the viewer can project subjectivity.

In a period of economic panics and recessions, one worker could be replaced with another as simple pieces in a machine. Objects and bodies were in danger of becoming indistinguishable in terms of labor. Slapstick thematized this unsettling of bodies and objects. A famous example is the exchange of food for a leather shoe in *The Gold Rush* (Charles Chaplin Productions, 1925). Other moments illustrate this convention as well, as when Buster Keaton's character chalks the end of his violin bow as though it were a pool cue in *The Play House* (Joseph M. Schenck Productions, 1921). These are spectacles of a moment without implied narrative, such as Chaplin's character replacing food with cleaning supplies on a dish in *The Rink* and the assistant using a trombone for an umbrella stand in *The Pawnshop*.

Scenes of work become complicated by intervening situations. Consider the Keaton film *The Blacksmith* (Joseph M. Schenck Productions, 1922). During one scene, the blacksmith (Joe Roberts), his assistant (Keaton), and two other men are standing in the foundry doorway. Metallic objects seem to pull up out of the assistant's hands as if on purpose. They disappear out of the top of the frame until the camera pulls back, and the viewer realizes that the horseshoe above the foundry door is actually a magnet. (This is an example of Bowser's concept of the destruction of space.) The attraction that the metal objects have toward the magnet is in direct proportion to their ability to escape the grasp of those handling the objects. The screen figures act like the reverse polarity of the magnet, but they blame the blacksmith's apprentice until the circuit of magnetic attraction becomes clear. The agency among bodies and objects appears reversed.

Speed

Slapstick reflected modernity's matrix of uncontrolled, high-speed, super-stimulating forces and simulated it through a chaotic, breakneck style. High speed is apparent in most slapstick films in front of the camera, in the camera, and/or through editing. In the mise-en-scène, depicting speed was a matter of showing cars and other vehicles in high motion, a technique that Enda Duffy refers to as adrenaline-driven. He argues that speed on film creates an immediate "speed experience" (155). As an example of speed in the mise-en-scène, *Fatty and Mabel Adrift* (Keystone Film Company, 1916) provides an instance of speed producing adrenaline. In this short, Fatty (Arbuckle) and Mabel (Normand) marry and move

into a tranquil seaside cottage. A thwarted suitor (Al St. John) seeks revenge on the couple by pushing their house into the ocean while they sleep. After waking up to find their beds floating, they send their dog for help. The race to the rescue begins. The dog finds Mabel's parents, who jump on their tandem bicycle and rush to the shore. There they find the real estate agent who sold the couple the seaside property, and he calls the Keystone Cops. Using the agent's boat, the three characters motor quickly to the floating house. The Keystone Cops never reach the house at all because the speed at which they operate their motorboat causes several of the Cops to fall out. In this race to the rescue parody, people run, cycle, and motor fast. The film aims to produce a racing heart, heightened breathing, and tensed muscles, all while producing laughs. The combination of the physical features of the viewer's body leads to a breathless laughter.

Speed in the mise-en-scène was most often used with the technique of undercranking. The camera produced speeds beyond a normal human pace as technology controlled the screen figures in the film. Through undercranking of the camera, several short films of the first decade exhibit a rise in speed, which later films capitalized on. *Impossible Convicts* (1904) appears to be a single-shot film in which convicts and their captors not only move at breakneck speed, but they also move equally fast going forward and backward. Forty seconds into the film, the convicts seemingly fall up the stairs, feet first, quicker even than when they run up the stairs in their attempt to escape the jail. The figures appear to become objects that can be run up and down, across the frame, and beyond it.

Not only is speed seen before and within the camera through theme and technique, it works historically through the developments of editing. As films became longer, the speed of objects and bodies increased through editing, producing a wide variety of speeds within a single film. Crosscutting, which builds suspense in melodramas, westerns, and other genres with race-to-the-rescue sequences, increased the comic speed in slapstick films. It was also often combined with undercranking to produce an even greater sense of speed. For example, in *Teddy at the Throttle* (Keystone Film Company, 1917), a villain (Wallace Beery) chains the heroine (Gloria Swanson) to train tracks. She calls her dog for help, and it dashes through the countryside to her aid. When it arrives, she puts a note explaining her circumstances in its mouth, and it traces back its steps at in-camera–manipulated speed. It finds her sweetheart, who then catches the train barreling toward her. As the train rushes toward her, her sweetheart convinces the train operator to try to stop the machine. At the very last moment, the train stops, avoiding crushing the woman while simultaneously breaking her chains. In this case, it is the body of the dog that works at extreme speed, calling into question its "dogness."

Quick cutting among adjacent spaces to follow the escalated gag also lends perceived speed for the viewer. In *Roughest Africa* (Hal Roach Studios, 1923), Stan Laurel's character, Professor Stanislaus Laurello Bhanana Pheel (a play on Laurel's name plus a foreshadowing of a banana peel gag) goes on a journey through Africa —which, by the map shown, seems to consist of Southern California. He encounters a bear and an ostrich. Director Ralph Ceder uses undercranking to show Professor

Pheel and his photographer running away from the ostrich, encountering the bear, and running away from the bear toward the ostrich, which runs ahead of them. The scene moves swiftly from left to right, then cuts to show them running from right to left, as a 90° rotation of the typical chase scene, which tended to present action moving from the right side of a deeply framed corner of the shot toward the left front of the frame.

Douglas Riblet notes that the tempo of the Keystone Cops films escalated during a period of three years, from 1912 to 1915. The average shot length (ASL) in the last year of Mack Sennett's Biograph films is ten to twenty seconds long, but after Sennett's switch to the Keystone Film Company, the ASL decreased to between five and eight seconds due to the action-packed sequences toward the end of the films (179). In *Tillie's Punctured Romance,* the speed within the film is paced carefully. Almost all of the more narrative shots are between twenty and thirty seconds long, and the shots of dancing at the party for the rich are also relatively long. Shots of the knockabout violence are short: between four to seven seconds, unless they are lengthened by piling on of blows. By the climax of the film, shots last from one to two seconds, with undercranking used to increase the sense of speed. I calculated the ASL for *Tillie's Punctured Romance:* 7 seconds. This indicates the sheer number of 1-second shots at the climax. Speed in front of the camera, in the camera, and in editing, serves as reminders of the medium itself.

Slapstick's Dynamics

Each combination of genre characteristics creates a different dynamic within slapstick films. Adding direct address to the camera allows for comic business that might otherwise go unnoticed. Incorporating play with bodies and objects in conjunction with mechanical repetition creates a greater sense of objecthood for the screen figures, which permeates the film and gives the air of social commentary. In addition, speed lends an exaggerated tempo and rapidity to the individual film. Each of these qualities, in conjunction with gags, comic business, and violence, contribute to the dynamics of slapstick. They cue viewers to expect a kind of embodiment in which bodies vacillate between subjecthood and objecthood. Although I've elaborated each of these characteristics separately, it is in their combination that the quality of each slapstick film comes through.

COMPETING FORMS OF COMEDY AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO SLAPSTICK

In this section, I contrast contending forms of film comedy in order to show the paradigmatic differences between slapstick and these other genres of comedies. To show slapstick film as distinct from contemporaneous film comedies, this section covers three different kinds of comedy: race films, trick films, and genteel comedy films. Although these comedy film types are not the only competing forms of comedy, they serve as useful foils for slapstick. The work of presenting these generically different films helps slapstick become more striking in its dissimilarity.

One type of film comedy that held potential appeal for audiences of slapstick—but does not fit slapstick conventions—was the race film. Although it

shares with slapstick the drive for caricature, its focus on race is more pointed. For example, a number of films about Black people eating watermelons were produced between 1896 and 1900. Edison released two versions of *Watermelon Contest* in 1896. One film shows two men eating large slices of watermelon and another shows four. (Despite the title, the second film shows two of the men having a conversation while they eat, an unlikely contest strategy.) Siegmund Lubin made *New Watermelon Contest* in 1897, hoping to capitalize on the success of the films made by his former employer. In the same vein, American Mutoscope Company released *A Watermelon Feast* in 1897, the topic of which it described in its catalog as "a family reveling in a feast of the favorite food of their race." Edison released a 2-minute version of *Watermelon Contest* in 1900 that included additional material showing the men grabbing each other's watermelon slices and making each other laugh.

Each of these films shows Black people eating enthusiastically and without restraint. In the mise-en-scène, their bodies seem unregulated. It is exactly their seeming excess that makes them the object of a superior kind of laughter. These films fit into a social narrative of Black excess, and by constructing the scenario of these films, the producers display not only their contribution to that narrative but also their mastery of the people filmed. It is the combination of this mastery and the spectacle of excess that induced white racist audiences to laugh. The bodies of Black people in the watermelon films are doubly objectified, through their reduction from possible bodies to screen objects and through their position as objects of scrutiny and accompanying laughter. However much these films contribute to the contemporary viewer's discomfort, they were amusing to their intended audience

because of the opportunity they presented for the kind of superior laughter that Chapter 3 describes. They cue the viewer differently from slapstick in that they strive for the appearance of an actuality. Comic business appears, but without the unique narrative of the gag, these films do not signal that they are slapstick comedies.

Early trick films offered humorous pleasure of a different sort, an opportunity for delighted laughter produced by moments of surprise. Méliès' trick films have an affinity with slapstick films in that both play with bodies and objects, sliding from one category to the other. In *Les cartes vivantes* (Star Films, 1904), Méliès plays a magician working with cards and bodies. He appears on stage in a long shot. He first gestures with a baton to a bench, demonstrating that it is an ordinary bench with no magical properties. He props a human-sized sheet of card-stock paper on the bench. He then produces a playing card and presents it to the camera, but the card is illegible. With a few gestures, the card becomes bigger and bigger, until the magician throws it toward the paper, and it becomes illustrated on the paper. He takes another playing card out, tears it up, and throws it away. He gestures toward the paper, and the Queen of Hearts appears. Replacing the vessel with a short staircase, he gestures some more, and (with the trick of a dissolve), the line-drawn queen is turned into a real woman, who steps onto the stage. He helps her back up the stairs onto the bench, and with another dissolve, she turns back into the picture on the playing card. Using a similar set of gestures, he conjures up a King of Spades card. A man dressed as the King bursts through the paper with a flourish. By magic, the card behind him becomes whole again, and the magician looks

bemused. He touches the card to make sure it's a flat piece of paper. The magician leaves the stage, and the King laughs. Suddenly, the King disrobes. Beneath the costume is the magician himself. He jumps through the whole piece of paper, then emerges from behind it. He takes a bow and exits the stage.

This series of tricks uses a variety of dissolves, invisible cuts, and cross-fades. The magician transforms images on card-stock to bodies and back again. The film evokes delighted laughter through its use of astonishment. In this aspect, the trick film employs the "cinema of attractions" aspect of early films, just as slapstick does. It also plays with the cross of bodies and objects, an element of slapstick. The embodiment produced in these two types of films overlaps. The key difference is that Méliès's technogags aim to play with what editing and the camera can do, in a particularly self-referential way. Rather than embodiment per se, technology is the primary interest for Méliès's trick films.

One later competing type of film comedy was the genteel comedy. It set a precedent for television situational comedies, with the comedy based on initial given conditions, at least one complication, and a resolution. An early example is Sidney Drew's work. He criticized slapstick for its broad, knockabout technique of producing laughter. In a *Moving Picture World* interview in 1916, he delivered his rational for more genteel comedy, aimed at producing thoughtful laughter:

> True comedy . . . is human. It tells of the things that not only can happen, but probably have happened to you and me and all the rest. I aim at stories that find a responsive impulse in the breast of a majority of our clientele. (qtd. in Jenkins 55)

Genteel comedies relied strongly on a more classical cause–effect narrative. They have a fabula format that consists of "introduction of setting and characters—

explanation of a state of affairs—complicating action—ensuing events—outcome—ending" (Bordwell, *Narration* 35). Drew asserted,

> No matter how interesting a comedy incident may seem to be at the moment or in what proportions it is assembled, there MUST be plot in back of the incident if it is to have an excuse . . . . It is plot that gains and holds the interest of the viewer and this alone can do.

Drew advocated for comic situations that would arise from everyday occurrences. The realism that Drew preferred is present in *Fox Trot Finesse* (Vitagraph Company of America, 1915).

Sidney Drew and Lucille McVey star as a married couple. The film opens with a man, Ferdie, and his "Ma-in-law," Mrs. U. Newit (Ethel Lee), at the breakfast table. She's the embodiment of the overbearing mother-in-law–stereotype, further evidenced by the pun that is her name. The scene establishes the mother-in-law's distaste for Ferdie, and he seems to feel oppressed. Ferdie's expressions are understated but clearly visible because the shot-distance shows him from the waist up. This scene is made comic through its emphasis on the awkwardness and discomfort Ferdie feels around his mother-in-law, not through any overt comic business as would happen in a slapstick version of the film. In fact, the scene relies on the Drew's nuanced performance in order to communicate how strict the rules are that the mother-in-law enforces.

Then, an intertitle reads, "Ferdie's wife has foxtrotitis." The following shot shows the wife getting ready for her day while she dances around her dressing room. In the next shot, of Ferdie and the mother-in-law at the table, she dances into the frame and asks Ferdie to dance with her. They dance for two seconds, and then he leads her to her chair. The mother-in-law receives a telegram asking her to

return to her own home. It reveals that she's been visiting Ferdie and his wife for three months. The contents of the telegram motivate the next scene.

An intertitle reads, "The departure of Mumsey." The next shot reveals a happy Ferdie dancing around the parlor. When his mother-in-law appears, he tries to look sad when her face is turned toward him but smiles when she turns her face away. The smile is not a grin but simply an upward curl of his lips. When she approaches him for a goodbye kiss, he hides his face in his handkerchief both to mime sobbing about her departure and to avoid kissing her cheek. The handkerchief also hides what otherwise could be an exaggerated expression for effect.

Then, a second causal series begins. An intertitle reads, "After dinner, the trotting starts." The wife holds Ferdie and dances around, and he simply moves in the direction she pulls him, with his hands to his sides. She receives a telephone call from someone holding a foxtrot party, and she cajoles Ferdie into going. While they're at the party, Ferdie tries to hide in a corner behind a curtain so that he can smoke a cigarette. His plan fails: an elderly woman pulls him close, and he reluctantly dances with her. The humor is in his inaction and his expression, through which he clearly shows that he hates dancing. This establishes the motivation of the next plot point.

An intertitle reads, "Ferdie has been fox trotted nearly to death," and the following scene takes place in his office. He reads a newspaper article about a "toe dancer" having a foot injury, and the article notes that she cannot dance again for months. Ferdie telephones his wife and says, "I've busted the pectoral fin in my right ankle." He calls in his office staff and mimes an ankle injury. A staff member brings

him a crutch that is too short. The crutch allows Drew to perform some comic business, but the gag that a slapstick viewer would expect doesn't occur. Ferdie goes hobbling home. In the parlor, his wife fusses over his ankle. In parallel with his response to his mother-in-law leaving, he smiles whenever his wife turns her face away from him but pulls a serious face whenever she looks at him. He says, "My one and only regret is that I won't be able to dance again for years and years!"

The next day, Ferdie limps out of the house but straightens up and carries the crutch once he is on the sidewalk. Ferdie's wife catches a glimpse of him from a window. At the office, the guise falls, and he paces around while giving dictation. The wife, curious to see what has happened to her injured husband, peeks into the office and sees him. After work, he limps into the parlor but walks normally to his chair when she's not looking. He props the crutch against his chair and sits, knocking the crutch to the floor with his elbow. This looks quite natural, but the action's significance is revealed when the wife comes up behind Ferdie and drags the crutch away to hide it behind a curtain. She watches him again, this time from behind the curtain, while he walks around the parlor. When she comes into the room, she feigns boredom and seats herself at the parlor desk. She composes a letter: "Dear Mother, Ferdie has hurt his foot and I'm so unhappy. He cannot dance at all. You must come and stay with us until he is better." She shows the letter to Ferdie. He finds himself in a position in which he must decide which pain to choose: living with his mother-in-law again or dancing with his wife. Ferdie stands and says, "Aw, I was only joshing—I could just die fox trotting!" The couple dances around the parlor as Ferdie tears up the letter.

The plot can be summed up as follows: 1) Ferdie finds his mother-in-law distasteful and is happy when she leaves. With her leaving, this point seems to be resolved, but it's required for the understanding of the complication and resolution. 2) Ferdie dislikes dancing, but his wife browbeats him into doing it. This presents a second, unresolved problem. 3) He pretends to be injured to get out of dancing. This seems to be a solution to Ferdie's second problem. 4) His wife finds out and devises a plan to get him dancing again. She writes a letter that threatens to reestablish Ferdie's first problem. Thus, the film introduces the complication. 5) After she springs her trap, he then makes the decision to admit to his dishonesty. The situation is resolved. The plot structure is fairly standard. It consists of Ferdie's conflicting emotions and the resolution of that conflict. The cause–effect chain is carefully explicated, and the film's character development, standard in genteel comedy, makes it more clearly associated with classical Hollywood film than with slapstick. The effect of the short is a developed series of chuckles, an effect that Drew strove for, not out-loud laughter.

SLAPSTICK AND EMBODIMENT

Slapstick reveals the body as the surface on which slapstick is inscribed. Sometimes slapstick bodies fail and fall; sometimes they behave with grace and ease. They evoke two kinds of responses: desire to be a particular body as it is performed and the grasp of the limits of bodily control. At times, the evocation of these kinds of understanding occurs at once. The desires arise in response to gags and comic business, which operate as tools for comprehending embodiment in

slapstick. The slapstick body can be passive, active and incompetent, and/or active and volitional.

The passive body has events enacted upon it. It is a rigid body. For example, in *Ask Father* (Rolin Films, 1919), Harold Lloyd plays his "glasses character," a young man with a go-getter attitude. In this film, he uses his character to play the Boy, a young man in love with a woman whose father is "the busiest man in town." According to the first intertitle, "To see the boss you must send in your card and then wait two weeks." The Boy gets the woman's romantic attention by bringing her armloads of flowers and candy that he and two other men carry. When the Boy asks his sweetheart to marry him, she says, "Ask Father." The rest of the film involves the Boy trying to do just that. In one scene, after several attempts to get into the businessman's innermost office, he finally stands in front of the businessman's desk. The film cuts to a close-up of the businessman's hand as he pushes a button, and after a cut to a long shot, the floor opens up under the Boy. He plunges down the shaft until he reaches the first floor, where the building spits him out. His body is subjected to the machinery built into the building, a case in which the efficiency of the workplace requires no more than a button to get rid of an unwanted caller. The weight of the Boy's body makes him roll down the chute. This is a case of the body turning into a passive object, rather than an active body.

As another example, consider *Moonshine*. Fatty washes his lieutenant in the river to clean him and then hangs him up by his feet to dry. In this case, the lieutenant's body is as passive as it is possible to be: he is turned into a piece of laundry. These examples illustrate how the passive body fails to react to its

circumstances. It is not a body to be admired, and it suggests inflexibility more akin to an object than to a person.

The active, incompetent body is also common to slapstick. In *The Haunted House* (Joseph M. Schenck Productions, 1921), Keaton plays a bank clerk. Early in the film, he tries to cash a man's check, but while counting the money, he knocks over a glue pot. What follows is an extended series of gags in which a number of people get stuck to gluey dollar bills. At one point, the clerk puts his hands, which are still covered in glue, into his pockets while he tries to think of a solution to the situation. When he moves to take his hands out of his pockets, he finds himself glued into them. Two bank robbers come in to hold up the bank, and the clerk cannot put his hands up. He loses his balance while trying to hide and flops around on the floor. This performance is an example of an inept form of embodiment.

Copious references are made to drunkenness in slapstick film. In films such as *The Rounders* (Keystone Film Company, 1914) and *The Cure* (Mutual Film, 1917) (and in fact, many other Chaplin films), the main characters are drunk, and they stumble and move their bodies in exaggerated sways. The intoxicated body presents a target for superior laughter, and in some cases, the laughter of recognition. It represents another kind of body: the inebriate, which is uncoordinated and blundering. It is not exactly an inert, object-like body or an active but inept one; rather, it is a body that cannot be competent or skilled because it has been altered. The inebriate is also of interest because it illustrates attentional challenges built into impairment. These three kinds of bodies seem to make up much of what we think of when we think of slapstick: the debased body subject to its surroundings.

Less often, slapstick contains an active, volitional body that exhibits agility in response to a gag, as Chaplin does in *The Rink*. When Chaplin's character rolls onto the skating rink, he glides around it, looking to his audience for admiration. Moments later, he roller-skates into a large man, and they bump bellies. The man falls down, and Chaplin's character loses his balance. His upper body at a cant, he quickly runs forward on his skates, trying to stay upright. This seems like a prelude to an accident, but he manages to keep his feet under him. Although his successful ability to keep himself from falling isn't as graceful as his entrance, it does present a vision to be envied—a body that doesn't succumb to gravity.

In extended gags, the body's ability to adapt to its surroundings or condition can vacillate from passive to either kinds of active behavior. In a scene in *Ask Father*, the Boy is able to make his way through the outer offices of the businessman (and the men who safeguard them), and he tries to explain his love to the man. The businessman hits another button, and the part of the floor the Boy is standing on becomes a treadmill. The Boy doesn't notice at first. He stands on it, one hand over his heart and one arm cocked in the air as he attempts to express his great love for the man's daughter. The treadmill deposits him in the outer office, but he gets on again, walking fast to get back into the inner office. He succeeds, but the treadmill's speed increases. Then he stumbles as he jogs. As with Chaplin's character in *The Rink,* the Boy maintains his footing after a precarious moment. The treadmill's speed increases further, and he has to run to stay abreast with the businessman's desk. The treadmill gag starts out with the Boy as a static object, but he becomes an ungainly, active figure. Although he appears to be clumsy, his ability to stay on the

treadmill indicates the actor's great skill in stumbling as he runs but remaining upright. The camera is undercranked to give the effect of great speed, and the Boy rises to the task until the treadmill's speed is too fast and he falls. This gag is extended, and the level at which the Boy is able to perform fluctuates. At one moment, his body is incompetent, at another quite responsive. The character learns from his mistake, and his body adapts.

Another scene from *Ask Father* displays Lloyd's great control over his body. He climbs the side of the office building to return to the businessman's office. This brief scene foregrounds the difference between the awkward body of the character and Lloyd's skill as a performer. The overlapping embodiment of character and actor leads to a kind of ambivalence over whose body to take pleasure in. In the climbing scene, the slapstick body does more than the viewer's body can.

Muriel Andrin's article "Back to the 'Slap': Slapstick's Hyperbolic Gesture and the Rhetoric of Violence" provides some insight into the slapstick body. She argues that it is impervious to pain and deconstruction. The humor of slapstick relies on the slapstick body not registering pain. Furthermore, she contends, slapstick bodies are employed as the slap stick itself: "Much more than . . . objects, these dry, cold, yet elastic bodies are instrumentalized, used as props or tools to induce laughter through their exposure to and actual confrontation with cruelty and physical threat" (230). In the slapstick of the 1910s and 1920s, bodily integration is apparent, but pain is often visible. It is through this apparent and exaggerated pain that slapstick bodies elicit laughter in many cases (e.g., the stubbing of a toe on a brick in *A Muddy Romance* [1913], the loosened board gag in *Family Life* [1924]).

Take, for example, Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle's 1917 film *The Butcher Boy* (Comique Films). Arbuckle plays a store clerk, and Keaton plays a customer. Keaton's character enters the store to buy some molasses, carrying an empty pail. While the customer is distracted, the store clerk fills the pail with the molasses. The customer has failed to tell him that the money for the molasses is at the bottom of the pail. After telling the clerk about the money, the customer becomes distracted again and doesn't notice when the clerk pours some molasses in his hat for revenge. The customer puts his hat on, and it becomes stuck to his head. As he's trying to get the hat off, he throws the pail to the floor, and the molasses spreads. When the clerk tries to help him, the customer falls down and is glued to the floor. The clerk tries to help, and when his attempts at getting the customer's shoes loose fail, he employs a kettle of hot water. Keaton's character feels pain, as evidenced by his facial expression and gestures, and that bodily expression becomes the effect of a gag that occurs in the middle of a long sequence of gags surrounding the customer's bodily predicament.

The slapstick genre can be seen as a comic category separate from other competing kinds of comedies. It is characterized by gags, comic business, and violence and humiliation in particular, with a constellation of accompanying features. Slapstick film calls on chance and danger, and it questions subjectivity in its use of bodies and objects. The following chapter addresses the problem of attention in slapstick. Modernity required a shift in attentional demands. Slapstick both thematized these demands and offered viewers practice in attending to the

moving image. Slapstick draws viewers into itself through viewer anticipation and the desire to experience surprise on the perceptual level.

Attention is implicated in a number of generic slapstick features. It determines the success of many gags. It is necessary for noticing and enjoying comic business, and in some cases, recognizing the comic business common to a single actor's various characters across films. Speed commands attention both from characters and from the audience. In order to follow the intense speed of slapstick, viewers had to be conditioned to cope with these perceptual demands. Chapter 2 explores all of these generic aspects in terms of attention, a critical part of slapstick viewership. It also investigates the position of the viewer in relationship to the slapstick film. Viewers are distinct from spectators, and this distinction is crucial for understanding the ways in which these films elicit attention.

Chapter II

Vision and Attention in Slapstick Film

Modern subjects struggled to keep up with modernity's splintered visual demands. With the massive influx of people into urban centers, the intrusion of technology in daily life, and the address of the modern subject as consumer, subjects had to manage their attention to a greater number of details than ever before. Such material and cultural changes in the environment prompted perceptual learning, the development of an ability to perform new perceptual tasks. Coping with sensory pressures required physiological and cognitive work. Attention admits of a limitation of perceptual awareness, contingent on what seems most important to the subject at a given time. Slapstick films draw the viewer's attention by presenting an opportunity to practice noticing the role of contingency. Through the actions of screen figures, slapstick stages the danger of misallocating attention and reveals the importance of audience attention to the screen, even as the audience is addressed as a group of viewers. First, I turn to a discussion of perception and the body. Then, I address attention as figured in slapstick. Finally, I contrast the slapstick viewer with the spectator of classical narrative.

MODERN PRESSURES

Cinema's context was modernity, what Charles Baudelaire defined as "the transient, the fleeting, the contingent" (107). Modernity at the turn of the twentieth century was characterized by a number of extraordinary and complex changes. Among the changes I argue are relevant to this dissertation are 1) the industrialization of production, which turned scientific knowledge into new and ever-expanding technologies that transformed human work; 2) rapid urbanization, which brought masses from small communities into the teeming streets of cities and created newly mobile, heterogeneous populations; 3) the rise of mass communication, binding diverse populations into new groups of media consumers; and 4) new sensory demands in response to these modern forces.

The first of the main aspects that I wish to address is the manner in which work conditions changed as a result of standardized processes. In the 1910s, Frederick Winslow Taylor pioneered a method called "scientific management," in which measures were taken to identify inefficiency in workers' labor, to measure the wasted labor, and to optimize the production process for greatest productivity on the basis of those measurements. In *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), Taylor asserted, "In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first." His utopian vision was for employers *and* workers to gain maximum prosperity. Producing more goods in less time would result in more profitability for the employer, who can then in turn pay the worker more and still profit more than the competitor. From this, it follows that it is in the best interests of both management and workers for workers to be trained to produce the largest amount

of high-quality work in the shortest period of time with the least labor, working cooperatively with the machines specific to their industry. The process that led to the most efficiency was then standardized. However, the result of Taylorism, as it came to be called, was that as each worker was trained for a specific position (e.g., tightening bolts in an assembly line, like Chaplin's character in *Modern Times* [Charles Chaplin Productions, 1936]), work became more repetitive and led to the kind of inattention and dullness that Seigfried Kracauer refers to. Furthermore, as the system became more important than the worker, working conditions declined. As Taylorism spread, workers became beholden to the meter of the time clock, the cadence of the typewriter and the stock ticker, and the repeating thud of large machinery.

Outside of work, populations began to explode. Rapid urbanization choked the city streets as rural people and immigrants began pouring into cities. Major cities in the United States boomed. Between 1900 and 1920, Los Angeles went from the thirty-sixth largest city in the nation to the tenth, with a population growth of 474,194. In the same amount of time, the third largest American city, Philadelphia, grew from 1,293,697 to 1,823,779 people. Chicago, the second largest city, had a population of 1,698,575 in 1900 and by 1920 had reached a population of 2,701,706. Most impressively, New York City grew by 1,329,681 in the years between 1900 and 1910 and reached a total population of 5,620,048 by 1920. (All population figures were taken from U. S. Census Bureau Table H5-7.) By 1925, it reached more than 7,742,000 (Singer 60).

Immigration accounted for much of the burgeoning size of these cities. Los Angeles's nonnative population in 1910 made up 20.7% of the total population. Philadelphia's foreign-born population constituted 24.8%. Chicago's nonnative population percentage that year was 35.9%. In New York City, it was an unbelievable 40.8%. The records for the following decade don't show a decline in these percentages. (All percentages were taken from U. S. Census Bureau Table 22.)

Cars were a new danger to urban pedestrians, as well as a new opportunity for mobility, both physical and social. According to the National Automobile Chamber of Commerce's 1920 pamphlet, in New York in 1914, 168,223 cars were registered. By 1920, that number had grown to 566,511. In California in 1919, the ratio of cars to people was 6.07. In Los Angeles in particular, the ratio was 6.48. Even smaller cities, like Des Moines, Iowa, had a small ratio of cars to people. In 1908, the year that Ford's Model-T came onto the market, there was an increase in car registrations of 37% from the previous year, with a total of more than 190,000 cars registered. The number of car registrations jumped from 1908's number by 57% in 1909. Not only was the car a daily feature of the urban environment, as Singer shows, it was figured in newspapers and magazines as a leading cause of accidents, preceded only the trolley car. These and other developments combined to infiltrate daily life, each element transforming conventions and traditions to such an extent that lived experience seemed to demand new forms of representation and expression. They also required a new way of sensing.

PERCEPTION

Benjamin's argument in the Artwork essay indicates that he believed in a changing sensorium. Here I do not wish to simply use his work as a kind of proof of such a change but rather to show how a break in sensory modes was imagined in the early twentieth century. Taking a symptomatic view of some of the observations of perception in the early twentieth century, Benjamin addresses the articulation of sensation and cognition. He makes an unequivocal statement about perception: not only did cinema "correspond to profound changes in the apparatus of apperception"—the mental process through which both masses and individuals absorb the new into a body of ideas already possessed—"it did so on the scale of the individual crossing a busy urban street and also as the mass collective experience of struggle against modern social conditions" ("Work of Art," 148, fn 48).[8]

He suggests sociological and aesthetic elements involved in changes in the sensorium that reflect societal pressures. In the Artwork essay, he states,

> *Just as the entire mode of existence of human collectives changes over long historical periods, so too does their mode of perception.* The way in which human perception is organized—the medium in which it occurs—is conditioned not only by nature but by history." (104)

He equates the organization of perception with its medium and connects the change in the sensorium to the decay of the aura, that "strange tissue of time and space" in which the art object is distant, unique, and self-identical.[9]

According to him, film mirrors the jolts in consciousness that each subject encounters in the urban milieu. Jarring instants—unavailable to contemplation—continuously overwrite conscious perception. He likens these shocks to "the shock effect of film," which "induce[s] heightened attention" (132). Here, he connects the

changes in conscious perception to the need for allocating attention successfully in urban contexts.

Film was the foremost of media to reflect the profound changes, Benjamin suggests. The apparatus Benjamin focuses on is the mechanization of cognition itself, resting not only on the sensations of the moment—a physical state—but also on the moment afterwards, the point at which a cognitive impression occurs. This segmenting of sensation and thought led to a disjointed experience of the visual and emotional landscape. The apparatus of cinema interpenetrated reality to such an extent that these differences became separated and articulated, he argues.

According to Benjamin, what threatens human sensation is also that which the mirror of cinema—the principal technology of the senses—can recover. The most visual of technologies becomes the one that can repair vision as a vital sense. It does so by superimposing the senses of the actor onto film or "innervating" the actor, thereby conveying a modern sensorium through the apparatus, the articulating machine, of cinema. Benjamin borrows Freud's term "innervation," but uses it with a difference. Freud thought of innervation as a unidirectional transmission of the hysteric nerves' energy as a discharge to the organs, a dissemination from the psychic to the somatic. Benjamin's use of the term indicates a bidirectional process, "not only a conversion of mental, affective energy into somatic, motoric form, but also the possibility of reconverting, and recovering, split-off psychic energy through motoric stimulation" (Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema" 318). Benjamin imagines that outward emanations of the performer's nervous

system could translate themselves viscerally through the apparatus to an otherwise anaesthetized audience.

He insists that the screen actor's innervation through film production was reciprocated by film technology's ability to innervate spectators, to allow them to escape nerve-deadening daily events, produced by, for example, factory work, which required labor at the pace of machinery, and office work, punctuated and driven by synchronized clock time. Film opened up a field for play through which viewers could experience a kind of technology that "[offered] a second, though perhaps last chance for reversing sensory alienation, the numbing of the human sensorium in defense against shock and the concomitant splitting of experience" (Hansen, "Room-for-Play" 28). The formal relationship between the spectator and his or her alienation had as its intercessor the apparatus, which could help viewers cope with the shock of the now by supplying the moment afterward, the moment at which the body moves from sensation to an experience of representation.

Siegfried Kracauer describes a paradox similar to Benjamin's, in which technology that produces alienation likewise produces a way out of that alienation by working through it. He argues that cinema is a possible site of disruption in which the lack revealed by cinema "demands to be compensated, but this need can only be articulated in terms of the same surface sphere which imposed the lack in the first place" (*The Salaried Masses* 93). The tension that Kracauer identifies must be released with the screen, upon which the masses may look at their condition in order to change the formal absence of fulfillment. Kracauer and Benjamin both argue that, ideally, cinema should represent the social world, and they choose

slapstick as an exemplar of that ideal. According to Kracauer, "Such stories as [the slapstick film] advances have merely the function of interrelating somehow their gags or monad-like units of gags. What matters is that the units follow each other uninterruptedly, not that their succession implements a plot" (253). He further states that although they frequently develop within narrative frames, "the intrigue is never of so exacting a nature that its significance would encroach on that of the pieces composing it" (253). For Kracauer, the narrative frame fails to divert attention from the atomized gags and exists only as connective tissue. Benjamin's passionate appeal against the instrumentalization of human life can lead to laughter "over the abyss of horror" ("Letter" 17). Benjamin and Kracauer share a desire for a cinema that can express that which is otherwise unsayable. Through slapstick, they believed, shared laughter in the public sphere of an exhibition space could return to viewers their alienated sensoria by opening up a space of play within the management of attention.

I use Benjamin's and Kracauer's arguments here not as proof of the idea that perception changed—I have ample empirical evidence of its likely shift—but as suggestive of how perception was figured in early twentieth century thought. I argue that the penetration of the film apparatus into modern life brought with it the articulation of moments invisible to the naked eye. Spectators were newly able to see modernity in a way that was manageable through slapstick film. That Benjamin and Kracauer imagine these concrete changes to the sensorium is possibly symptomatic of the kinds of changes that, as I argue, did occur. A deeper inquiry into the possibility of the kind of sensory shift that Benjamin conceives of suggests that

he may not have been far off the mark. Key to understanding how this shift occurred is an understanding of a phenomenon called perceptual learning.

Neuroscientists Merav Ahissar and Shaul Hochstein define perceptual learning as "practice-induced improvement in the ability to perform specific perceptual tasks" (457). Gilles Pourtois and colleagues found that "successful acquisition of a perceptual skill can produce long-lasting changes for initial sensory inputs in the adult human visual system" (52). Vision can be manipulated experimentally, and the effects of such manipulation can be measured in milliseconds, days, and years. For example, Pourtois and colleagues tested participants by presenting a brief flash of an image of a field of straight vertical lines, with three lines turned at a forty-five degree angle. This image was flashed for sixteen milliseconds. Participants were asked to fixate their gaze on a small letter (an upper-case L or a T, randomly chosen for each image) centered at the bottom of the image. This image was followed by a blank interval, and then a mask (an image with exes at the same locations where the lines previously were) was flashed for a hundred milliseconds. The experimenters asked participants to focus on the letter and report the letter and the location of the three slanting lines. Twenty-four hours later, Pourtois and colleagues measured the participants' brain activity. They decreased the exposure to the image slowly so as to promote learning and discovered "durable changes [lasting more than twenty-four hours] at early stages [of exposure, less than eighty-five milliseconds] of the visual cortical response to trained stimuli" (61). The limited number of times the participants were exposed to the test image and the decreasing amount of time of exposure promoted perceptual

learning, which was observable through a brain scan. This showed not only that perceptual learning, a shift in the manner in which the subject can process a percept, occurred but also that it actually changed the way in which the brain operates. The myriad stimuli that presented themselves to modern subjects promoted perceptual learning, which in turn led directly to changes in the part of the brain that processes percepts: in essence, perception actually did change. And in a number of ways prompted by modernity's broad shifts.

One question that Singer asks is whether "the sensations and actions triggered by [the urban environment] are actually powerful and consistent enough" to generate something like perceptual learning. Modern life is full of stimulus presentations, including (but not limited to) the consumption of a variety of mass media, the industrialization of production, and rapid urbanization. The proliferation of mass media, such as advertisements, regional and local newspapers, and cinema led to bombardment of the consumer, whereas labor demanded a particular mode of attention and distraction that had to be learned on a perceptual level, lest disaster ensue through industrial accidents. The multiplication of stimuli on urban streets—shop windows, vehicles passing, crowds to negotiate—required another, new manner of viewing, a rapid increase of the eyes' activity and an increase in the activity of the brain's primary visual cortex.

Outside the theater, viewers continued to visualize their surroundings as continuous, contiguous, and noncontingent. David E. Irwin, James L. Zacks, and Joseph S. Brown ask, why do we see an integrated world? One answer is that we rely on object-relative relations, in which we see things in relationship to each other,

rather than as *mental representations* of the environment with objects in them. As a subject moves her eyes, her personal relationship to objects changes because the relationship of the objects to each other changes. If it is the case that visual perception relies on the ability of the visual system to establish the sense of a stable environment through objects' relationship to each other, modern subjects had to do much more work to fit together the surrounding environment. Life in the metropolis presented a greater number of objects to correlate in the subject–object field. This proliferation of objects in the urban environment further called into question the ability of moderns to imagine the repletion of their vision. The demands of the city presented a larger number of objects for modern subjects to cobble together, causing urban perception to be created from a vaster field of objects than rural life presented. Attention of the object-oriented subject became contingent on the number of objects he or she could either attend to or safely ignore as secondary features of the environment.

Vision and the Slapstick Film

In this section, I discuss how slapstick figures vision with an emphasis on the way in which each of my examples explores the relationship between attention and vision. *The Detectress* (Bulls Eye, 1919) contains scenes of detection, a special kind of attention. A man discovers a formula for "eyeglasses that will enable the eaters of chop suey to see what is in it." An Asian man, Jip Yu, steals it. As he's running away down an alley, he bumps into Lizzie, "an almost detectress" (Gale Henry), and puts

the formula in her pocket when she isn't looking. Most of the rest of the film is spent trying to find the formula.

Her sense of herself only extends to what she can easily see. She does not scan spaces; she moves her head to look at various things. Her bird-like movements draw attention to her act of looking. Without moving her head, she seems unable to view what is proximate to her, such as the formula protruding from her pocket. (Except for in a few shots—in which its absence appears to be a mistake—the viewer can observe the location of the formula in Lizzie's pocket both when her body is turned in that direction toward the camera and when she stands frontally to the camera.) The film emphasizes the dangers of only attending to that which is fully visible by deliberate and laser-like looking.

She herself is quite easily distinguished. She attempts to disguise herself by putting on a Chinese shirt over her dress, and she minces into the room where the men are in order to find the formula. The intertitle announces her failure to impersonate a Chinese woman: "Like an ostrich, Lizzie thought she was disguised." This intertitle iterates the visual information provided to the viewer. She fails to take fully into consideration the spectacle that she makes for the men in the room. She doesn't even take her hat off. In the next room, she declares, "I am a china doll," which is meant to bolster her attempt to hide her identity. However, it is immediately apparent to the men that she is the same woman. A man replies to her: "That's funny, I thought you was [*sic*] a Spanish chicken." As he responds to her, the men gather around her and maneuver her to the place in the floor where a trapdoor

is. Even having fallen through the trapdoor twice, Lizzie (of course) doesn't notice, and through the floor she goes, yet again.

Her second attempt to disguise herself is somewhat more effective. She and a policeman drape bearskin rugs over themselves in an effort to crawl through the room with the men in it and escape. At first, they are successful, provoking fear in the men. However, as they pass the men, the group sees Lizzie's foot sticking out from beneath the rug. She fails to attend to her own body's position in its relationship to the rug's edge. This lack of knowledge of her bodily position underscores the importance that Lizzie gives to her eyesight, which is compromised by her manner of looking without a wider gaze because she fails to consider how her body is visible as well.

The Mystery of the Leaping Fish (Triangle Film Corporation, 1916) also plays with vision and technology. Douglas Fairbanks stars as Coke Ennyday, "the world's greatest scientific detective." The chief of the Secret Service visits Ennyday to ask him to solve a case: a man at Short Beach has a lot of money but no visible means of support. In approaching Ennyday to put him into service, the chief first slides his card into a slot next to the door. Then, he waits. Ennyday's assistant gives the card to Ennyday, who examines it under a microscope. A close-up shows the card, which is at first out of focus. The name on the card comes into focus, through the detective's manipulation of the microscope. Establishing a theme, the film presents a world in which things must be viewed through technology that the detective can operate. The film carries this theme forward when his assistant folds out a cabinet with a screen from the wall. Ennyday looks at the screen, and a close-up reveals a moving image of

the chief standing outside in the hall. Although the film does not reveal a camera through which the chief can be recorded, the camera is implied through the production of the image. Anyone approaching Ennyday's apartment will be surveilled.

Furthermore, the image is of the chief from the waist up and against a black background, not of the chief and his surroundings in the hallway. The implied diegetic camera itself determines what must be attended to and what can be ignored. The detective then becomes the interpreter of that which has already been detected by the camera's "eye." The self-referential use of the camera anticipates what the audience will accomplish—solving the mystery—with the detective as the intermediary.

The next shot shows the cabinet in which the screen sits, the surrounding dials and buttons, and the back of Ennyday's head as he is looking at the screen. The chief seems to be looking in Ennyday's direction, that is, off to the side rather than straight into the camera. It is a scene of direct address but with a significant difference. Rather than looking directly into the implied diegetic camera (which would result in direct address to the camera filming the film), the chief anticipates Ennyday's point of view, collapsing the perceived distance between the image and Ennyday as the viewer. The implied diegetic camera seems to allow the transmission of point of view, creating a reciprocal relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

Super-Hooper-Dyne Lizzies (Mack Sennett Comedies, 1925) also contains a fantasy of visuality mediated by technology. An inventor designs a way to power

cars using radio waves. In the film, the radio also has the capacity to transmit images. As the inventor tinkers with his creation, one of the screens in a bank of panels lights up. The inventor and his assistant look at the screen. The film cuts to a close-up. In the image, a woman jumps up and down in her convertible car, waving her hands for help. The car and her entire body are in the frame. She directly addresses the implied diegetic camera, which also collapses the space between the film and the viewer. Then, the film cuts to a medium shot of the daughter. In this shot, she's looking to the right, which shows that the implied diegetic camera and the film's camera are positioned in different places. This precludes direct address to the camera in this shot and suggests that the long shot is unique to the radioscope. Key to this scene is the method that the characters employ when operating the radioscope. The machine detects a broadcast that the inventor refines by manipulating the machine's knobs. The daughter initiates the radioscope transmission, using equipment that must be portable. Using this televisual technology, the inventor and the daughter co-create the image. They both determine what is technologically visible. The inventor produces the image on his screen, and the daughter establishes the construction of the shot of herself and the car. The co-creation of the shot leads to a means of attending: the inventor's observation of the screen and the daughter's care in setting up a transmission that communicates all of the necessary details of her predicament.

In each of these examples of perception in slapstick film, vision and attention are combined for the purposes of conveying to the viewer a way of perceiving film. Lizzie's inability to perceive what is not immediately apparent to her intensely

directed attention illustrates the danger of too much attention at the expense of perception. Ennyday's and the inventor's machines, on the other hand, indicate the degree to which technologies can heighten the ability to perceive that which is otherwise unavailable to unmediated sight. The following section explores further how attention and perception work together within films.

ATTENTION

As a prelude to this discussion, I'd like to clarify some terms. "Attention" is derived from the Latin verb *attendere*, formed from *ad-* (toward) and *tendere* (to stretch), or "to stretch one's mind toward." It is the deliberate act of taking notice of someone or something. "Distraction," derived from the Latin verb *distrahere* (*dis-* [apart] plus *trahere* [to draw or drag]), should be differentiated from "inattention." While "distraction" and "inattention" are close synonyms—both meaning "lack of attention"—"distraction" describes something that is diffuse: a subject can be distracted in general, without a clear attentional direction. It is absentmindedness, the opposite of self-conscious perception. "Inattention" supposes a specific context for this absentmindedness, delimiting it. Whereas distraction can be a chronic state, inattention is situation-specific. By contrast, "misallocation of attention" suggests that attention is being paid but to an inappropriate subject, object, or task.

Crary quotes Charles Féré and Alfred Binet, whose description of attention closely matches my understanding of it:

> [A]ttention is a concentration of the whole mind on a single point, resulting in the intensification of the perception of this point and producing all around it *a zone of anesthesia*; attention increases the force of certain sensations while it weakens others." (*Suspensions* 39)

Perception is subject to one's focus of attention. Perception and attention are inextricably linked. Vision seems to take in the world as replete, but what is actually perceived is that which is most exigent. The idea of this kind of attention brings to the fore the push–pull of the necessities of attention and distraction. Distraction allows the subject to unfocus attention for the purposes of coping with the dangers of paying too much attention to a single element in the sensory field at the expense of distinguishing other percepts. Without attention, however, the ability to perceive at all is compromised. This idea is thematized throughout slapstick film.

Attention operates within slapstick film in three ways: attention successfully managed by screen figures, distraction, and the misallocation of attention. Attention appropriately managed leads to a screen figure perpetrating a gag successfully or detecting details of his or her surroundings. Misallocated attention causes a screen figure to become dupe or to fail to manage a situation (e.g., operating a car). Attention works in two ways on the part of the viewer: attention leading to the anticipation of a gag and inattention regarding the gag itself. Viewer attention leading to the anticipation of the gag results when the gag's punch-line is signaled or when a potential gag is avoided. Inattention to the context of the gag arises when the viewer does not suspect that a gag is being played. It's only the visual "punchline" that reveals the nature of the gag.

The following explications of films show the way in which problems of attention are rehearsed. In *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (Edison, 1902), a rube exhibits his naiveté about film by trying to interact with the images he sees on screen. He's unable to suppress his emotional responses because he sees screen

figures as subjects and diegetic images as concrete objects. The Edison Catalog describes the film:

> Here we present a side-splitter. Uncle Josh occupies a box at a vaudeville theater, and a moving picture show is going on. First there appears upon the screen a dancer. Uncle Josh jumps to the stage and endeavors to make love to her, but she flits away, and immediately there appears upon the screen the picture of an express train running at sixty miles an hour. Uncle Josh here becomes panic-stricken and fearing to be struck by the train, makes a dash for his box. He is no sooner seated than a country couple appears upon the screen at a well. Before they pump the pail full of water they indulge in a love-making scene. Uncle Josh evidently thinks he recognizes his own daughter, and jumping again upon the stage he removes his coat and prepares to chastise the lover, and grabbing the moving picture screen he hauls it down, and to his great surprise finds a Kinetoscope operator in the rear. The operator is made furious by Uncle Josh interrupting his show, and grappling with him, they roll over and over upon the stage in an exciting encounter. (Edison Catalog)

The three films within the film are Edison's *Parisian Dance* (1897), *The Black Diamond Express* (1896) and *The Country Couple* (presumably made for this film). *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* rehearses the myth of the unsophisticated viewer who believes his eyes too much, and it presents an opportunity for the viewer to feel superior to the rube.

Two of Edison's other "Uncle Josh" films modify how I read the first film. *Uncle Josh's Nightmare* (1900) and *Uncle Josh in a Spooky Hotel* (1900) contextualize Uncle Josh's behavior in *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*. *Uncle Josh's Nightmare* shows the rube going to bed for the night, and without a break in action (which would signify that he's asleep), a caped demon pulls his sheet off and they wrestle with it. Because there is no shot of him going back to bed and waking up, the film indicates no frame narrative. For the viewer, as for the rube figure, it is as if the interlude were no dream at all.[10]

In *Uncle Josh in a Spooky Hotel,* the rube and another man enter a room and sit in two adjacent chairs. They have a conversation, and then a ghost appears and slaps the rube while his head is turned. Thinking it was the other man, he pushes him out of his chair. While the other man looks toward the door, the ghost appears and slaps him, and he then pushes Uncle Josh out of his chair. Then the ghost taps the other man on the shoulder. When the man sees the ghost, he runs out of the room. The ghost sits down, and Uncle Josh finally sees it. He is frightened.

In each of the three films, Uncle Josh faces decisions about how to interact with presences the material existence of which he's unsure of. He makes errors of vision and immediacy, rather than errors of category. In other words, he can't trust his eyes. He doesn't know what kind of attention to pay, yet his surroundings require him to react quickly to what's happening, which he is not able to do without mishap.

Another category of film, the mischief film, features inattentional blindness, the phenomenon of not being able to see what is in plain sight because attention is directed elsewhere.[11] Many of these simple gags involve a bad boy and a dupe. Typically, the dupe is deeply involved in another activity and fails to register the set-up of the gag. Frequently in these early films, the dupe is involved in work. For example, *L' Arroseur arrosé* (1895) is a model for future mischief films. The gardener is completely unaware of the boy sneaking up behind him, an instance of inattention. In fact, in mischief films, the dupe of the gag is otherwise preoccupied or in fact seems completely unaware of what is happening behind, above, or around

him or her. It is as though the dupe cannot hear, just as the audience does not hear a sound track synchronized with the image track.

Work produced the conditions for inattention through the need for attention to the job at hand. Another example of the work-related mischief gag that involves inattentional blindness is staged in the private sphere. *A Wringing Good Joke* (Edison, 1899) shows a woman wringing out clothes using a wringer, also known as a mangle, in the left-hand side of the frame. In the right-hand side of the frame, a man leans back in his chair, reading a newspaper. She answers the door to a caller (with her back to the camera). While she engages with the caller, a boy sneaks in and ties one end of a string to a chair leg. He feeds the other end of the string into the washerwoman's mangle. When the woman resumes her chore, the string goes taut and pulls the chair out from the man, who falls on his rump. When the gag is sprung, the boy laughs at his handiwork. In this instance, the woman had to pay full attention to the mangle, lest she smash her hand.

Gunning makes the argument that mischief gags, although they don't appear in all early comedies, were prevalent in the first decade of film and that they also appear in later film as more elaborated gags. Linking the prankster and the dupe, Gunning asserts, is "an apparatus that makes the mischief gag work," and part of the fun was watching the device work ("Crazy" 90). He writes, "These devices are machines whose purpose is to stop things from working, or make them work in an explosive, counterproductive way" (98). The logic of the connective machine that supplies the impetus for the gag is evident in this short.

He also points out that in order for the mischief gag to work, the film must construct separate spaces for the action ("Crazy" 92). In this case, the woman occupies the space of the doorway, the man occupies the space around the table, and the boy is free to move from the space of the table to the mangler when the woman has moved away. Her action makes room for the boy. Each adult has his or her back turned to the boy's action, creating an area of inattention that the woman returns to.

The forces of modernity required viewers to approach new pressures using new strategies. For viewers watching Keaton's *The Electric House* (First National Pictures, 1922), the film was a wonder of modern technological abilities. Keaton's character Buster learns how to "electrify" a house by reading a book. What he comes up with is an array of modern attractions. The house becomes a fantasy of modernity, with automatic, electrical devices: stairs that work as an escalator, a library arm that can retrieve books from the shelf and present them to whomever sits in the reading chair, a pool that can be drained or filled by pulling on a lever, dining-room chairs that pull in and out from the table with the push of a button, and many others. These contraptions present an array of what electricity, a modern preoccupation, can do for a household. For several of Buster's demonstrations for the family who lives in the electrified house, the camera is undercranked so that the speed at which they run seems even more miraculous. The inventions themselves present a way for the audience to envision what the future may look like. They also reflect the ambivalence that modern subjects felt in response to new technologies. Furthermore, they echo the fascination that early viewers felt toward the new

technology of the cinema. The film capitalizes on their feelings of pleasure, desire, and discomfort associated with modernized life.

The pleasures of modernization can supply drawbacks. The first problem appears when Buster shows the father how the electrical stairs work with the turn of a dial. When Buster turns it a little, the stairs ascend rather slowly. However, having failed to pay much attention to the working of the dial, the father turns the dial obviously much further than Buster had, as a close-up of his hand on the dial shows. The small movement has big consequences. The stairs speed up to the extent that they send him and Buster through a second-story window. This is a clear case of inattention: had the man been paying enough attention to Buster's instruction instead of attending to the wonder of the technology itself, the accident would not have happened. In this gag, the simplest effect has disastrous consequences, dramatizing attentional requirements within the home. It also presents in a vivid way the dangers of technology's ability to capture attention.

Bowser notes that car comedies proliferated in the 1910s with the newly affordable Ford Model T. The theme of the automobile escaping human control continued in the 1920s. By the time of the production of *Super-Hooper-Dyne Lizzies*, this theme had become commonplace. The film plays with the convention of the out-of-control car by offering a view of the car as obstinate object. The crashes in this film happen slowly, a result of inattention and force rather than inattention and speed. After the inventor's car breaks down, his assistant decides to push the car to a gas station. He puts his shoulder to the rear of the car. He pushes it into the back of

another empty car, and without realizing his error, he pushes that car as well. As he goes, more and more cars pile into line in front of him. Soon, he's pushing seven cars in addition to the inventor's car. He pushes the cars up a hill and over a small cliff. As each car goes over the edge, the load gets lighter and the assistant pushes faster. Finally, when all of the cars in front of the inventor's car have gone over the cliff, the inventor's car's axle becomes stuck on the edge of the cliff. The man stops shoving at it and looks over the edge of the cliff. He jumps back from the edge after seeing so many cars piled up at the bottom. These cars are both manipulated and destroyed, also offering the pleasure of watching a symbol of modern technology that is easily moved but unsuccessfully controlled.

By the 1920s, viewers were primed for gags that they could forecast. To contrast viewer anticipation of gags with screen figure inattentional blindness, I provide here some examples of gags that viewers can predict will happen. These gags produce the viewers as lab rats for attentional experiments. For these gags, the element of surprise does not come into play. Instead, the viewer is asked to attend to the gag and his or her conception of what will happen.

For an example of a film that builds viewer anticipation, consider *Saturday Afternoon* (Mack Sennett Comedies, 1926). A man, Harry Higgins (Harry Langdon), gets into a fight. After being punched, he crawls away to hide between two cars that are parked close together. He sits on the running board of one car and puts his feet up on running board of the other. The cars' motorists drive away in tandem, with Harry still perched, unknowingly, on the cars' running boards. A shot of the road

shows pavement going by very fast, which emphasizes the speed of the cars. For the majority of the scene, the camera is situated between the cars and pointed downward so that Harry is fully within the frame and the road is visible as well.

Three times, his leg slips, and he almost falls off, movements that build viewer anticipation of a violent result. The film cuts to a long shot as the cars go through an intersection. When it looks like Harry's body will collide with a traffic officer, the man leaps up and over Harry's outstretched legs. Harry lays down on the running boards. The film cuts again to a long shot, with the cars in full frame. Harry's body is hidden between them. The cars hurtle toward a telephone pole, and although Harry doesn't notice the pole, the viewer does. The cars straddle the pole. Harry hits it, and his body wraps around it, which ends his ride. The film cuts to a medium shot of Harry. The pleasure of seeing the gag satisfied is supplemented by the pleasure of seeing Harry's body revealed as still wrapped around the pole after the cars have left the frame. Harry's body behaves like a soft, sticky object that adheres to the immobile pole. After a full second of his body remaining enfolded around the pole, the body-object slowly slips down the pole and out of the frame.

In the slapstick western *Alkali Ike's Auto* (Essanay Film Manufacturing Company, 1911), the urban technology of the car enters the country and competes with horses and a carriage for road domination. Two cowboys, Alkali Ike (Augustus Carney) and Mustang Pete (Harry Todd), vie for the attention of Betty Brown (Margaret Joslin). Alkali Ike brings a pair of horses to her house for the two of them to ride. Mustang Pete appears with a horse and carriage, and Betty agrees to go with him instead. Then, Alkali Ike spots a man with a car that has a "for sale or trade"

sign. He trades two horses and some money for the car. After the man shows him how it works, Alkali Ike drives the car up to the carriage and asks Betty to ride in the car with him. She agrees to do so, and the car containing the two of them exits the frame. In the next shot, which uses deep space composition, the car slowly goes down the road, entering from the upper right corner of the frame and exiting in the lower left corner, enframing that is reminiscent of the early chase films. This shot gives a sense of the normal pace of the car and establishes the direction of movement that the following shots will show as well. The next shot duplicates that movement, except that the car overheats and stalls in the middle of the road, in the center of the frame. Alkali Ike gets out of the car and uses the crank to hit the car. He climbs under the car and hits its back left tire. The car suddenly jerks into motion again and speeds out of the frame, with Betty in it. In the next shot, the road is at the same angle and depth within the frame, but this time, the out-of-control car moves quickly through the frame. The camera lingers, showing Alkali Ike running after the car. His human pace emphasizes how fast the out-of-control car is going. The following shot shows the car again accelerating through the frame in the same direction and angle as before. The next shot shows the same composition and movement.

What's peculiar about this shot is its length. Although it's undercranked, the shot lasts seven seconds. The car begins as a dot on the horizon and grows in size as it hurtles toward the camera; however, the distance between the car and the camera gives the initial impression that the car is moving slowly, seeming to build

momentum as it approaches the camera. The viewer is supposed to anticipate the speed of the car, which offers an additional pleasure.

Collectively, these shots indicate spatial consistency. The penultimate shot in this sequence breaks that pattern. It's also undercranked, creating the impression of the car's unchecked speed. The car enters the frame from the top, moves to the center of the shot, and out of the bottom of the frame. It shows the car going around in circles before shooting forward again. This shot highlights how out-of-control the car has become, and the distance of the shot allows the viewer to notice Betty's unbound hair, her disheveled clothing, and her broken parasol.

The film reprises the rube figure of early slapstick films. The viewer can anticipate the gag on the basis of the rube's inexperience with the car and his naïveté about the car's working parts. This film establishes the circumstances that lead to the gag early in the film, when Alkali Ike is buying the car. The man selling it has to tell Alkali Ike how to start it, setting up a foreknowledge of what is to come. It also offers the superior laughter of much slapstick, directed at both Alkali Ike and Betty. (See Chapter 3.) Attention is rewarded by the gag's explosive pay-off.

The Grocery Clerk (Vitagraph Company of America, 1920) likewise has a scene with an out-of-control car that provokes viewer anticipation. In the beginning of the film, the grocery clerk (Larry Semon) pays no attention to the road. He has his feet propped up on the steering wheel and reads the paper as the car races down the road. Because of the slapstick convention of the out-of-control car, the viewer expects to see a car accident. The film heightens the expectation when it cuts away to a group of women waving on the side of the road. However, when the clerk hears

them hailing him, he looks up from his paper and successfully stops the car. This is an example of a truncated gag.

The Grocery Clerk's main action continues: the women get in, and they make their way down the road without incident. After a short drive, the clerk picks up "the postmistress" (Lucille Carlisle) "who considers the clerk a bunch of first-class mail." As they ride, the clerk repeatedly looks away from the road and kisses her hand, but he still pays more attention to the road than at the beginning of the sequence. While his head is turned, the car runs into a ditch, which upsets the car and spills the people out. Because the beginning of the car sequence leads to no repercussions, the crash comes as a surprise. The audience's anticipation in response to the beginning of the truncated gag has by this point evanesced, and the delayed crash serves to wake it.

Sherlock Jr. plays with audience attentional abilities as well, but with a significant difference. In a film within the film, a gag is played on the viewer. Sherlock Jr. looks at himself in a full-length mirror, adjusting his clothing, then steps through it as a doorway. The gag is underscored when his assistant stands with one foot through the bottom of the mirror-doorway's frame. This is a case of inattention revealed to the viewer. At first viewing, the "mirror" appears to reflect the surroundings closest to it, but in retrospect, it becomes clear that what appeared to be mirrored isn't in the right order for reflection and that Sherlock Jr. himself wasn't reflected in the "mirror." His ability to pass through a doorway that doesn't seem like a doorway plays a trick with the viewer's inattention.

SPECTATORSHIP

Classical cinema reinforces the belief that vision is not related to the body and that it truthfully gives access to the environment. Apparatus theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz construct systems that argue for a transcendental relationship between the subject (as the locus of the eye) and the screen. Their theories address the solitary viewer within a darkened theater, an asocial relationship between the subject as constructed by the cinematic apparatus and the screen.

According to Baudry, the transcendental subject sees without the input of the rest of the body. In his account, the viewer feels elevated by or absorbed in the movement that he or she sees. If the transcendental subject, controlled through the eye, can assign him- or herself the movement on the screen, the world will seem constructed "not just for the eye but by it":

> Limited by the framing, lined up, put at the proper distance, the world offers up an object endowed with meaning, an intentional object, implied by and implying the action of the 'subject' which sights it. (292)[12]

Contrary to Baudry's conclusion of the spectator as a transcendental eye disconnected from the body, his idea of "seizing movement to become movement" suggests a connection between body and visuality, in which a sense of movement and trajectory brings the body into the spectating position. The false impression of transcendence—the spectator's sense of becoming a disembodied eye before the screen—is undermined by the body's relationship to its part, the eye.

Baudry argues that the illusion of the spectator as lined up with the camera, possessing its omniscience, must be maintained lest the spectator be returned to the object that he or she is, rather than the body that he or she has:

> We should remember, moreover, the disturbing effects which result during a projection from breakdowns in the recreation of movement, when the viewer is brought abruptly back to discontinuity—that is, to the body, to the technical apparatus which he had *forgotten.* (291)

The subject experiences the body as fragmentary, like the filmstrip, whereas vision allows the misapprehension of the psyche as whole and unified and the body as irrelevant. (Lacan's mirror stage theory connects this misrecognition with the development of the Ideal-I.) The association between the experiences of the body and the apparatus indicates that both remind the spectator that the sense of the transcendental eye is imagined. The return to that which has been forgotten is a return to the material aspects of experience.

Baudry's voyeur would be traumatized by the breakdown of the fourth wall. Direct address to the camera, a slapstick convention, undermines the illusion presented to the viewer. It draws back the veil to suggest a represented face-to-face confrontation. The absorption of the look of the viewer in the look of the camera is broken. The direct address fractures oculocentric subjectivity by making the viewer aware of his or her position in the darkened theater.

Jacque Lacan's theory generated Baudry's, yet his discussion of the object-gaze seems more suited to a discussion of the slapstick viewer. In his later theory of the object-gaze, one cone of vision emanates from a geometrical point to an object, bisected by the image, while a second cone reverses its orientation, in which a point of light projects a picture, intersected by a screen. The second radiation is Lacan's

object-gaze. Lacan's screen is not a cinematic screen. According to Hal Foster, the screen comprises the codes of visual culture. It mediates the object-gaze and arrests it. It protects the viewer from the object-gaze for it apprehends the object-gaze and "tames it in an image" (109). Without the screen, the viewer would be blinded by the object-gaze and would come into contact with the Real. In this schema, the image and the screen align so that the image is legible as having signifying properties. This gaze is not generated by the subject; rather, it describes the object looking upon the viewer.

The concept of the object-gaze is pivotal with regards to early cinema, in which the subject is split into primarily identifying with the camera (as a technological object that "sees") and secondarily with the screen figure peering out into the audience. Objects with agency seem also to look back upon the viewer, who must occupy a double position as subject and viewer. Lacan writes, "I am not simply that punctiform being located at the geometral point from which the perspective is grasped . . . . The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I, I am in the picture" (96).[13] The viewer is exposed to the gaze of the object, the object at the point of light, the subject at the point of that viewed. He observes, "I see only from one point but in my existence I am looked at from all sides" and then notes, "in the scopic field, the gaze is outside. I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture . . . . Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which . . . . I am photo-graphed" (76, 106). The concept of being an object that is both looked upon and looking is key to the composition of the viewer's body. Viewers become spectacles.

Take *The Boat* (1921) as an example of the frustration of secondary identification that leads to the unease that being looked at by an object creates. Keaton plays an amateur sailor. His boat sinks, and his family must use a bathtub as a lifeboat. After the tub the family is floating in sinks, they walk up a beach. The wife looks directly into the camera, and the intertitle that follows reads, "Where are we?" The next shot is of Keaton, also looking into the camera. He says, "Damned if I know." The couple seems to look into the space of the theater with bewilderment, and their exchange signals their discomfort, as though they are aware that they are being looked at. It produces discomfort for the viewer as well, as though he or she has been seen by the characters. Their direct address to the camera positions the viewer as the object of the gaze and undercuts the viewer's illusion of being a subject whose position is voyeuristic and invisible.

In terms of primary identification, apparatus theory would suggest that a return to the memory of the body—a return also to recognition of the filmic apparatus—would reveal the subject as fractured and would thus induce trauma. Yet, secondarily, slapstick viewers are often addressed by the gaze of the screen figure. The genre does not fully support a voyeuristic viewer position. Rather, the body of the viewer is not forgotten but positioned as explicitly participatory. This is especially true after the establishment of classical Hollywood cinema when spectator etiquette was codified. Slapstick's audience escapes the apparatus that constructs the spectator as solitary, silent, and isolated within the darkened theater. It also dodges any attempts to particularize it within a unified category.

The status of the viewer and the spectator provokes some scrutiny. I believe it is necessary to draw a distinction between the two viewing positions. The slapstick audience is a group of viewers who respond actively—and often loudly and in rough unison—to the film, whereas the classical spectator, as the apparatus theorists describe it, is visually sequestered and still. To further investigate this difference, I turn to additional theories of spectatorship that respond to apparatus theory. Judith Mayne points out that disentangling the concepts of subject, viewer, and spectator is both conceptually and historically difficult. She quotes Kaja Silverman, who writes, "The term 'subject' 'helps us to conceive of human reality as a construction, as the product of signifying activities which are both culturally specific and generally unconscious'" (32). This concept of the subject as inhabiting both a psychoanalytic category and a cultural one suggests ambiguity about its status: It is simultaneously turned inward toward the unconscious, and outward, as part of a socially and textually conscripted class. Mayne remarks that it has been long assumed in film studies that the subject cannot be equated with the real-world observer. The distinction cannot be so clearly made. As she notes, 1970s film theory wasn't concerned with the lives of "real individuals"; however, to make the distinction is to suggest that those viewers might somehow exist outside of discourse. Although the 1970s apparatus theorists and textual analysis theorists were uninterested in real people, their approaches cannot escape a conflation of the two categories of viewer and subject.

Mayne distinguishes between *viewers*, *subjects*, and *spectators*. The viewer is the real person, as imagined by the theorist and his or her culture. Regarding the

contrast among categories, she writes, "I am opposing . . . the cinematic *subject* and the film *viewer* so as better to situate the *spectator* as a viewer who is and is not the cinematic subject, and as a subject who is and is not a film viewer" (36). The category of *spectator* ambivalently delimits both viewer and subject *and* neither viewer nor subject. The spectator is a real person who may or may not be positioned ideologically as a subject by the filmic apparatus. The spectator is also not a real person who may or may not be so positioned. This construction allows Mayne to create a *spectator* category that remains complex and irreducible to a dichotomy of *viewer* and *subject.*

Spectator still carries with it an extra institutional significance. The viewer, as a category, is created by the slapstick film as a set of viewing practices separate from the spectatorial practices that classical Hollywood cinema induces. If the viewer is the "real person," that person is the one who laughs. I use the word "viewer" to indicate that the person who does the viewing is not hailed as a part of an apparatus.

Early films addressed audience members as viewers. In the transitional period, the collective viewing experience that early cinema generated diminished as the feature film became foremost on the screen. Dominantly narrative films that stylistically created a subject position gave rise to the institutionalized spectator. Historically, the viewer of early cinema was revised as the spectator, which shift began as early as 1908 and became nearly completely developed by 1917.

Hansen notes the importance of film style in creating the category of spectator: the centering of narrative within the film constructs the spectator as temporarily incorporeal. Important for Hansen are the consumer qualities

associated with the development of the classical film style. The spectator adopts a position in which he or she receives the film as a commodity. She argues that the concept of the spectator is constructed on the levels of film style, reception, and production strategies. Film style contributes to the illusion that the spectator has an authorial relationship to the film, through the use of the omniscient camera, which privileges spectator knowledge over character knowledge. The spectator's reception of the film relies on his or her desire to be engulfed in the narrative, for the moment abandoning quotidian woes and instead indulging in the fantasy of being "a fantasmatic, mobile, yet seemingly unified self" (*Babel* 84). Finally, the category of the spectator, propped up by film style and reception, enabled production companies to "precalculate" potential profits and "standardize" films for the consumption of otherwise heterogeneous audiences (84).

The existence of the viewer remained, however. The practice of showing slapstick shorts before a feature meant that the experience of the audience became fractured. They were first hailed as viewers: mobile, heterogeneous members of an audience held together by mutual laughter. The following feature film addressed them as spectators. The tension produced between the slapstick short and the feature suggests that the category of viewer, subject, and spectator cannot be easily disentangled, an observation that I'd like to point out differs slightly from Mayne's position. She suggests that the entanglement among viewer, subject, and spectator happens in response to the classical Hollywood film, a claim that I don't dispute. However, I do see a relationship among those categories as also operating sequentially within a single viewing experience. When slapstick viewers become

spectators in the theater, they must shift viewing registers and adapt themselves to the spectatorial position. This is not to say that slapstick does not locate the viewer as a kind of subject—it does—but the subject position that slapstick creates for viewers is one in which the viewer can enjoy the anarchy and overthrow of the dominant ideology that the subsequent conventional narrative film reinforces.

When the slapstick viewer experiences his or her fellow audience members as phenomenologically given, a particular set of film reception practices is enacted. Slapstick film still hailed the viewer as one of a mass. This address made to the audience as whole was complicated as filmmakers began releasing feature-length slapstick comedies in the late 1910s (e.g., *The Kid* [Charles Chaplin Productions, 1921], *Dr. Jack* [Hal Roach Studios, 1922]) that incorporated classical narrative techniques, such as more fully developed characters that evince agency within an overarching narrative. This created a peculiar kind of viewer, one who occupies two contradictory positions at once: that of the spectator created by the filmic apparatus and that of the viewer who is conscious of his or her location within the theater and of other viewers who are responding bodily in the same way as he or she is. The viewer/spectator is allowed to enjoy both the pleasures associated with being part of a crowd who laughs and the pleasures that accompany being drawn into the film. I have chosen to refer to these audience members as viewers because whatever pleasures they get from spectatorship are disrupted—at least for a time—by laughter, which distracts the viewer from the overarching narrative and emphasizes embodiment.

The other issue in slapstick viewership is the position of the audience as addressee. Because of the phenomenological interconnections among viewers, the audience has to be taken into consideration as a single mass viewer. I do not intend to elide the specific socioeconomic and raced identity of the individual, as taken up in Hansen's work; rather, I wish to address how the audience as a whole—a whole made possible through shared laughter—receives the film. Made up of multiple bodies, the body of the audience escapes any spectatorial position as described by apparatus theorists because it is impossible by definition to situate the mass audience as solitary and cloistered. The anarchy of the slapstick film provokes a bodily anarchy in the audience, as laughter overtakes an ocularcentric position. Because laughter is both communal and wave-like in response to slapstick films, it binds the viewers together into a collective viewing body that receives the film in concert.

In the nineteenth century, attention became a precarious concept, and cinema helped viewers negotiate that crisis. Cinematic slapstick in particular illuminates this unsettled condition by thematizing contextually important management and allocation of attention within films. Cinema has a discursive relationship with visuality. It allows the viewer to see what could not be seen with the unaided eye, and it gives the impression of a sense of repletion in the visual field. However, early cinema also put into conflict that sense of repletion through the multiplication of movements, people, and objects in the mise-en-scène and though editing practices. Slapstick emphasizes the contingent nature of perceptual

awareness in a characteristic way by playing with surprise and by provoking viewer anticipation. In the following chapter I focus on the relationship between empathy (a kind of attention) and slapstick viewers. It also addresses theories of laughter and how slapstick elicits laughter from the viewer. Slapstick continues to demand bodily responses from its audience. It insists on audience participation, and through that insistence, slapstick as a genre is created. If—as Vivian Sobchack suggests in *Carnal Thoughts*—the film and the viewer co-create a film's meaning, a constituent part of that meaning-making was laughter. This percept was not a distraction from the film, then, but an important part of it. The overarching narrative is interrupted, necessarily, by laughter. The body is directly enmeshed within the film itself. The role that the body plays is not limited to a changing sensorium and new attentional demands; it comes into consideration through empathy and laughter.

Chapter III

Empathy and Laughter in Slapstick

In *Family Life* (Educational Pictures, 1924), a man steps on the end of a loose board. The other end hits his face. In this gag, the screen figure clearly feels pain in reaction to the board hitting him. In order for the gag to be funny, the viewer must be able to know his pain. This requires empathy. Yet, the ideal viewer does not feel so much empathy that it keeps him or her from laughing. Furthermore, the viewer must feel empathy with his or her fellow audience members in order for laughter to be sustained. This tension produces perverse empathy, which is characteristic of slapstick. One key to understanding American slapstick film is a grasp on empathy as these films elicit it. In this chapter, I discuss slapstick film as a site for a construction of empathy that uses the entire body. I argue that slapstick films extract empathy from the individual viewer and that viewers within the exhibition space experience empathy among themselves, facilitated by shared laughter.

Empathy is the product of a process through which a subject feels as if he or she were emotionally joined with an other.[14] It means reaching out of his or her self to feel *into* an other. While empathy requires an intimate relationship with the other, sympathy occurs at a remove. Lauren Wispé calls this a difference between *sympathy as relating* versus *empathy as knowing*. Sympathy is a connection that involves a feeling toward a character as a social association, establishing an I–other relationship. In contrast, empathy necessitates a sense of the other *as though* that

other's internal beliefs, responses, and intentions were the subject's own, collapsing the I–other dichotomous relationship. It is bolstered by recognition of the self in the other. A separate term that arises is spectatorial identification. This term requires that there must be a spectator who feels that identification. As Miriam Bratu Hansen notes (and as Chapter 2 explores in more depth), the category of spectator supposes an individual viewer who sees a film in a solitary position. Spectatorial identification also refers to a one-to-one relationship between spectator and screen figure. Although spectators feel a sort of empathy toward a film, as this chapter outlines, their ability to feel empathy toward other spectators is limited because they are not hailed as an integral part of a mass audience, in contrast with slapstick viewers, who are.

AESTHETIC EMPATHY

The history of the word "empathy" offers insight into the relationship between a beholder and an art object. Critic Robert Vischer coined the term *Einfühlung* in his 1873 work *On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Arts*, and Theodor Lipps, in the essay "Empathy and Aesthetic Pleasure" (1906) modified it. Edward B. Titchener was the first English-speaking writer to translate that term into "empathy" in *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought Processes* (1909). Titchener writes, "Not only do I see gravity and modesty and pride and courtesy and stateliness [in an object], but I feel or act them in the mind's muscle. That is, I suppose, a simple case of empathy, if we may coin that term as a rendering of *Einfühlung*" (21). In this way, he builds on Lipps's discussion of the relationship

between beholder and art object.[15]

Vischer uses *Einfühlung* to describe a projection of the self into an art object. The body of the beholder, he writes, "unconsciously projects it own bodily form . . . into the form of the object. From this I derived the notion that I call *Einfühlung*" (92). He describes the effect of the art object:

> I project my own life into the lifeless form. . . . Only ostensibly do I keep my own identity although the object remains distinct. I seem merely to adapt and attach myself to it as one hand clasps another, and yet I am mysteriously transplanted and magically transformed into this Other. (104)

He changes places with the object, which becomes a subject that has power over him. He writes that only "ostensibly"—apparently, but not actually—does he remain distinct from the art object he beholds. He only *seems* to connect with it "as one hand clasps another." Yet the object he beholds is an object he becomes. The intimacy he feels with the object goes beyond a physical bond, and he metamorphoses "magically" into another kind of being, a being without life. This paradoxical stance puts him in a position in which he simultaneously feels-into and cannot, by virtue of *being* as an *object*, feel.

Vischer conceived of empathy as something experienced not simply through vision. "We can often observe in ourselves," he noted," the curious fact that a visual stimulus is experienced not so much with our eyes as with a different sense in another part of our body" (98). It is as though the eye grasps what the body can feel. This sensation happens on the surfaces of the body, Vischer argues, and accounts for the physical responses, like shivers, that occur in the presence of the sublime.

Vischer complicates his perspective:

> To trace the outline of a form is a self-movement, an act that is predominantly subjective: the form being no more than an arbitrary, willful, and unilateral means by which the body can enjoy itself. . . . Thus the whole person and all his vital feelings are lured into empathy. (107)

Here, tracing the profile of an art object involves a measure of subjectivity. He demotes the art object's form to a method of bodily enjoyment, the object in this case being a means through which to gain pleasure. Entering into the object is gratifying. Marking the form of an art object gives the body a sense of movement that is both volitional and transitory. The "self-motions" are proprioceptive processes that turn the entire subject into a body that has fellow-feeling with the object. Self-movement allows the body to become a self-enraptured, empathic being, trading empathy for pleasure and back again. This pleasure is what is gained by the absorption into the art object.

Vischer imagines the encountered art object as auratic, yet his idea of self-movement and its pull toward empathy can be applied to film. Being a viewer or a spectator of a film requires a yielding to the movement on the screen, screen movement as bodily pleasure. Film viewers do not abandon their bodies for the purpose of focusing on vision; they are bound up in the experience of the flesh. They respond bodily to narrative cues, as when a race-to-the-rescue scene occurs and, hearts pumping faster, they tense their muscles. The marriage of the visual and the haptic creates synesthesia, in which the stimulation of the eyes produces a sense impression in the rest of the body. Vischer's beholder gazes upon the art object for a voluntary time, during which he chooses to be as an object or—tracing the contours of the form—as a subject. The two states vacillate as the beholder experiences the art object and then traces its form and back again. The film viewer relinquishes

some measure of subjective power for the time that the film plays. In search of pleasure, she or he allows it to absorb her or him for a time determined by the length of the film.

Viewers trade subjectivity and objecthood reflexively, as suggested by Vischer's ideas. Empathy intervenes in the meaning of the art object and the viewer's ambivalent subjectivity, as his or her body is drawn into an exchange of the two kinds of embodiment, that of the subject and that of the object. Sobchack argues,

> These bodies [of cinesthetic subjects] . . . subvert their own fixity from within . . ., reversing the human and technological sensorium, so that meaning, and where it is made, does not have a discrete origin in either spectators' bodies or cinematic representation but emerges in their conjunction. (67)

Sobchack suggests that this merging of body and film creates meaning, not that meaning is made either by the spectator or by the film exclusively. There must be an exchange of sensation and representation. Also, the interaction between body and film unsettles the concept of meaning as consciously received. Film invites the viewer to feel empathy as she or he comes together with it to make meaning cooperatively. Empathy becomes a real feeling-into, as Vischer would have it. The bodies of slapstick viewers make meaning with the film by collaborating with it through a reflexive bodily response: laughter.

Secondarily, empathy for figures within the film operates differently. It comprises character empathy. Sobchack discusses her bodily reactions to *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993), in which an antagonist chops the fingers off of the main character's hand. She reveals that she could not watch the scene, throwing her hands over her eyes by impulse, rather than by conscious decision, because her bodily displeasure overwhelmed any conscious decision to watch. She addresses

spectatorial identification in the short section, a sentiment that builds on empathy as constructed for spectators. Although slapstick film does not evoke such an extreme reaction, it can sometimes make the viewer flinch, even while he or she laughs.

Vischer and Lipps had similar projects that suggest "feeling-into" is also feeling with the body. However, Lipps disagrees with Vischer about the position of the viewer in relationship to art objects: "I necessarily permeate [objects] with . . . striving, activity, and power. Grasped by reason, they bear within them, insofar as they are 'my' objects, this piece of myself" (qtd. in Koss 409). Both Vischer and Lipps describe a relationship between the viewer and the art object as that which requires absorption into the object viewed. But Lipps's position is that the relationship between the object and the ego is reciprocal only to the extent that the ego beholds and so owns the object. The art object as a thing carries only a piece of his subjectivity. It transports him: "In empathy, therefore, I am not the real I, but am inwardly liberated from the latter, i.e., I am liberated from everything I am apart from contemplation of the form. I am only this ideal, this contemplating I" (qtd. in Worringer 24). This contrasts with Vischer's depiction of his relationship with the art object as transforming him into it. Lipps explains his interrelation with the art object that remains separate from himself, although instrumental in his transcendental experience. He feels empathy as that which at once owns the art object and reifies him as a centered subject, an Enlightenment ideal, capable of that ownership.

In 1908, Wilhelm Worringer produced a critique of Lipps's argument in his monograph *Abstraction and Empathy*. He quotes Lipps's central argument: "Art enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment" (23). He sees a flaw in what he calls "positive empathy," or pleasurable empathy.[16] It doesn't account for the kind of psychic discomfort that Worringer characterizes as "the urge to abstraction." Instead of the comfortable "feeling into" that Vischer and Lipps describe, the beholder experiences a break between his enjoyment of the object and a distraction from his own body. Worringer also opposes the ideal of consciousness that Lipps argues for.

He attacks Lipps's position for not taking into account the discomfort associated with the junction between art object and viewer. Instead of positing that the self is again established with the connection with the art object, Worringer argues that the absorption Lipps describes has an urge to self-alienation as its foil:

> [Lipps's argument] implies that the process of empathy represents a self-affirmation, an affirmation of the general will to activity that is in us. . . . . In empathizing this will to activity into another object, however, we *are* in the other object. We are delivered from our individual being as long as we are absorbed into an external object, an external form, with our inner urge to experience. We feel, as it were, our individuality flow into fixed boundaries, in contrast to the boundless differentiation of the individual consciousness. In this self-objectivation lies a self-alienation. (24)

Worringer's argument is reminiscent of Vischer's in that both scholars contend that to empathize with an art object is to be bounded and transformed into that object. However, in contrast to Vischer's position, Worringer argues that being in that other object does not entail pleasure. In becoming the object, the beholder is estranged uncomfortably from himself. For Worringer, the object delimits the beholder, in contradistinction to Lipps's sense of the object as a tool for transcendence.

After Worringer's work, the ideal of empathy as he, Vischer, and Lipps respectively describe it began to wane. Juliet Koss notes, "The concept was soon recoded as passive, describing an uncreative process of identification to which weak-willed audiences easily and happily succumbed" (735). The reimagining of empathy is not without its merit, considering the way narrative cinema began to hail its spectators during the development of classical Hollywood cinema. This development led to the elaboration of the viewer as spectator, a phenomenon in which the narrative film steers the spectator to identify with characters by way of the omniscient camera. Hansen remarks,

> On the level of reception [the shift from a collective, plural notion of the film viewer to a singular, unified but potentially universal category] marks the dynamics by which cinematic pleasure and meaning increasingly came to depend upon the viewer's identification with the position of a textually constructed spectator, upon the viewer's desire to submerge for a spell the complexities and frustrations of everyday experience into the ordered perceptions of a fantasmatic, mobile, yet seemingly unified self. (84)

The proposal is that the viewer as spectator trades his or her own distinctive attributes, ideology, and racial, class, and gender positions for the ideological and demographically coded stance—that is, capitalist, white, middle class, and male—established by the classical Hollywood film (and its filmmakers and producers). Absorption into the classical Hollywood film produces a passive, voyeuristic perspective in which giving up volition in determining a unique point of view allows for pleasure. This pleasure derives from the illusion of the spectator as singular, whole, and without the fractures in subjectivity that Freud and Jacques Lacan, for example, expatiate on.

Kracauer describes the distraction that the total-artwork spectator in Weimar Germany felt: Visiting the new picture palaces diverted attention from the required emptiness of daily work by attending to the show and its call for intense absorption in the narratives he or she followed on stage and on screen. The spectator was no long able to hold the artwork in his or her hands but held it in the mind instead. It is in this kind of absorption that *Einfühlung* could establish its grasp on its audience. Kracauer remarks that the total artwork promotes

> the naïve affirmation of cultural values that have become unreal and . . . the careless misuse of concepts such as personality, inwardness, tragedy, and so on—terms that in themselves certainly refer to lofty foundations but that have lost much of their scope along with their supporting foundations, due to social changes. ("Cult" 326)

These social changes upend the conventional hierarchies that orthodox art depended on to suppress lower-class cultural forms, and they undermine traditional claims to truth and universality, as Hansen points out ("Decentric" 58). Not only are the concepts misused, they also are suspect even without being manipulated through the total artwork, having been circumscribed by traumatic social shifts. The total artwork advances an individual viewing experience through which the illusion of the personal social position is strengthened.

Kracauer contrasts the total artwork with the potentially emancipatory power of cinema as presented without the ostentation of the picture palace. He suggests that if picture palaces "rid their offerings of all trappings that deprive film of its rights and . . . aim radically toward a kind of distraction that exposes disintegration instead of masking it," they could address their audiences as a mass ("Cult" 328). This would accomplish two things with regards to empathy. First, it

would eliminate a layer of remove from film and allow the mass to see the social reality posed by the fractures film presents. It would allow for a closer encounter with film as a vision of social and material reality. Second, it would cause the mass to become aware of itself. This second potentiality is the point at which the individual, transcendental *Einfühlung* becomes a communal empathy of the audience. The I–object relationship of aesthetic empathy as posited by Vischer and Lipps then transforms into an I–object–audience relationship, with the screen figure as the object and the pivot.

Benjamin discusses an I–other relationship with an auratic art object in "Moscow Diary." For him, the very word *Einfühlung* is unpalatable. He recounts his experience of being in a museum and encountering an art object:

> As I was looking at an extraordinarily beautiful Cézanne, it suddenly occurred to me that it is even linguistically fallacious to speak of "empathy." It seemed to me that to the extent that one grasps a painting, one does not in any way enter its space; rather, this space thrusts itself forward . . . (42).

He rejects the notion that Vischer, Lipps, and Worringer put forth, that a subject can gain access to an art object by way of feeling as though inside it. Yet, his next remark uses language that suggests inhabitation: "It opens up to us in corners and angles in which we believe we can localize crucial experiences of the past; there is something inexplicably familiar about these spots." This is a version of empathy in which the beholder seems to penetrate the art object and discover past events as revealed within the art object. The "corners and angles" hold a possibility of remembrance of a place submerged in the painting itself. Benjamin relates his experience of the spaces of the art object as jutting out of the painting, but his further explication

reveals that this perspective is perhaps more difficult to maintain in the face of the aura.

In the second version of the Artwork essay, written seven years after "Moscow Diary," Benjamin reverses his stance on the relationship between beholder and auratic art object, suggesting by extension a volte-face of his thoughts about I–other empathy. He contrasts the contemplation of the auratic art object with the experience of the masses in response to the reproducible artwork:

> A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work . . . . By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. Their waves lap around it; they encompass it with their tide. (119)

The mass is engaged in the art object, but in a different way. Distracted, it is not engrossed by the object it confronts. Benjamin's mass audience is active; it envelops and consumes the art object. His metaphor suggests a solidity of the art object, which the mass flows around rather than being taken in by it. The mass is constituted as a collective that is not divisible and so cannot become absorbed into the art object, in contrast to the way the single individual may experience *Einfühlung*.

SECONDARY EMPATHY

Spectatorial identification works in conventional narrative in a simple way: it cues the spectator to stand in the shoes of the character and imagine how he or she feels.[17] In contrast, slapstick film positions viewers in a space peculiar to it: they must be able to feel-into the pain or embarrassment of the screen figure but ignore whatever consequences the pain might have. This process of alienation turns screen figures into objects that feel. These objects can have the illusion of subjectivity but are ultimately things that the spectator feels into. When sitting before a screen, viewers inhabit an equivocal space in which their relationship to screen figures remains unsettled. Instead of empathizing solely with screen figures, slapstick viewers also share empathy with the rest of the film's audience, who are ambiguous subjects in the exhibition space.

Conventional narrative evokes Immanuel Kant's concept of the unified subject. The subject is centered as a single psychic entity that is internally consistent and uniform, both unitary and made whole by virtue of universal principles. To sum up Kant, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer describe, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, "The Enlightenment [subject] behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them." (9). Conventional narrative cinema supports the Enlightenment ideal of the unified subject when characters behave as though they are in possession of stable traits. Slapstick film thematizes contingency's threat to subjectivity: the chance of outside events that require rapid adaptation jeopardizes a person's ability to construct a stable

subjectivity. Slapstick viewers' empathy is similarly contingent. It denies the Kantian illusion of the centered subject, an illusion that conventional narrative relies on.

Bordwell uses the Enlightenment ideal of the unified subject as a model for analyzing characters in the context of the classical narrative paradigm. He notes the importance of the action-oriented character with stable traits: "Character-centered—i.e., personal or psychological—causality is the armature of the classical story" (*Classical Hollywood Cinema* 13). Making the claim that character causality requires those characters to be consistent, he argues, "If the character must act as the prime causal agent"—which he contends he or she must in classical Hollywood cinema—"he or she must be defined as a bundle of qualities or traits" (13). Moreover, he maintains that these traits are set up by "occupation, age, gender, and ethnic identity . . . to which individualized traits are added" (14). "Most important," he writes,

> A character is made of a consistent bundle of a few salient traits, which usually depend upon the character's narrative function. It is the business of the film's exposition to acquaint us with these traits and to establish their consistency. (14)

For Bordwell, classical Hollywood cinema depends on a realist construction of characters, upon which rests the narrative causality so important in these films. Conventional narratives cue spectators to respond to films as though the screen figures were subjects.

Murray Smith proposes a tripartite structure of spectatorial identification. His description of the three levels of imaginative engagement with characters in conventional narrative films assumes that the viewer develops a theory of the screen figure's mind. His three stages—recognition, alignment, and moral

allegiance—demand that the spectator of classical Hollywood cinema project subjectivity onto characters. In the first stage, recognition, viewers' construction of characters "cohere[s] around the image of a body as an individuated and continuous human agent" (40). The body serves as a discrete locus for traits that the film establishes. Because the actor's body and the character's body are inextricably linked, the traits seem to adhere to the actor's body as represented. Although the character's body is the represented actor's body, they are not the same body. A clumsy body on film is evidence of the capable body of the actor. An illustration of this occurs in Chaplin's *The Rink* in which one scene portrays his character, the waiter, on roller skates. The waiter seems to lose his balance, and it is only through running in his skates that he's able to stay upright. He is graceless, but Chaplin's control of his own body allows him to present this graceless quality with the utmost bodily mastery.

Recognition requires that screen figures can be perceived as subjects. While recognizing that characters are only assemblages of traits presented by the film, spectators assume that these traits are analogous to those found in real-world subjects. This requires theory of mind. According to cognitive theorists, subjects develop a theory of the other's mind in order to explain the other's actions and interactions.[18] Using a theory of the other's mind, a subject speculates about the other's emotions, thoughts, and intensions. Cognitivists promoting simulational theory of mind propose that the subject employs analogy to determine the other's interior states.[19] In this view, the subject directly experiences his or her own mental states. He or she uses his or her own mind as a model for understanding the other's.

Simulational theory of mind permits the subject to understand that others may have their own beliefs, desires, and intentions different from one's own but also to attribute those beliefs, desires, and expectations as analogous to those of one's own experiences.

Smith's concept of recognition, then, relies on this process. Although slapstick film incorporates underdeveloped screen figures even in the 1920s (with a few significant exceptions, e.g., Chaplin's later films), it does offer types that suggest characters. For example, in *The Sea Squawk* (Mack Sennett Studios, 1925), the main character, a mild-mannered Scottish immigrant (Harry Langdon), is quickly sketched out in the early scenes. The first shot of him shows him sitting on the deck of the S. S. Cognac, dressed in a kilt, tweed vest and jacket, Glengarry bonnet, and ostentatious sporran. He stares at a woman longingly but doesn't approach her because he's too timid.

The second scene reinforces that trait by showing the immigrant in a cabin getting ready for bed. His cabin is also occupied by the villain (Christian J. Frank), who is cleaning his gun. The immigrant gives him an alarmed look and takes a much smaller gun out of his sporran, which is lying in his lap. The innuendo is that the immigrant's genitalia are smaller than the villain's, and the film suggests that he is less virile. It invites the viewer to construe the character as timorous and effeminate. It is not necessary for viewers to have those traits in order to recognize them in the characters. Rather, they imagine what it must be like to have those traits, as expressed in the film through facial expressions, gestures, and other

behaviors. Viewers base this imagining on the way in which the screen figure's body demonstrates itself.

Although viewers realize that screen figures are constructed for their viewing experience, and although they are not duped into believing that character subjectivity is "real," they suspend this knowledge for the purposes of enjoying a film. It is not a matter of misrecognizing the screen figure as a subject so much as it is a matter of acting cooperatively with the film to create the illusion of subjectivity in the screen figure. Imagining the screen figure's subjectivity allows the figure to be legible as a character. It is the foundation of viewer understanding of films. A necessary part of theory of mind—so important to the ability of the viewer to decipher characters—is empathy.

Shaun Gallagher states that theory of mind generally "assumes that one's understanding involves a retreat into a realm of . . . *simulacra*, into a set of internal mental operations that come to be expressed (externalized) in speech, gesture or interaction" (93). Viewers project subjectivity onto the screen figure, and they expect that it will display actions stemming from this pretend subjectivity. They imagine that the screen figure's subjectivity is similar to their own. This experience of screen figures allows viewers to produce a model of their own minds. Because theory of mind involves creating a simulacrum of the other and because screen figures are themselves simulacra, viewers essentially create a mirror of their own subjectivity in a recursive process that allows them to co-create meaning with the narrative film. They produce an aesthetic empathy in which they experience enjoyment of their own empathetic capacity.

Smith's second level of engagement is alignment, in which spectators "are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions and to what they know and feel" (41). Narrative film cues spectators to ally themselves with one or more sympathetic characters by "controlling the apportioning of knowledge among characters and the spectator; the systematic regulation of narrative knowledge results in a *structure of alignment*"(41). *The Sea Squawk* accomplishes this by affiliating the viewer with the immigrant spatiotemporally. With a few brief exceptions, after he is introduced in the film, he is in almost every ensuing shot. One notable exception is when he enters a cabin, closes the door, and reemerges dressed in a woman's dress and underclothes. (The viewer can see his underclothes when the hem of the exaggerated hoop-skirt lifts up several times in the film.) Although the film is ostensibly about a jewelry heist, the film shows little that is not directly related to the immigrant. The emphasis on his body's presence in these scenes—a body that is constantly expressing itself as timid and weak—produces the stage of alignment.

In slapstick film, an individual gag can turn the main character's distinctive features upside down, depending on the context of the gag. For example, despite the widespread belief—both popular and in several instances, critical—that Chaplin's Tramp seems to have a stable identity, the iconic character changes traits among films (e.g., Chaplin's portrayal of an upper-class inebriate in *The Cure* and in *One A.M.* [Mutual Film Corporation, 1916]). The only markers he seems to retain consistently are his moustache and his characteristic walk.

Consider *Easy Street.* Chaplin's character begins as the indigent Tramp, complete with moustache, ill-fitting suit, and derby. He sits against the wall of a mission, curled up around himself. He enters the building to get warm, and a woman lends him her hymnal. He holds it first one direction, then another, which indicates his illiteracy. He tries to steal the collection box, which suggests that he's penniless and dishonest. These traits are standard to the Tramp character.

Then he has a change of station. In the next scene, the Tramp walks by a police precinct and sees a "policeman wanted" sign. As a policeman guards the door, the Tramp paces the sidewalk, steps onto the stair leading into the doorway, and then paces again, tempted by the sign but reluctant. He finally gets his nerve up and enters the police station. He convinces the police chief that he's able-bodied (by fighting him), and the chief allows him to become an officer. In the next scene, the reformed Tramp appears in a policeman's uniform. In addition to his original costume, he wears a policeman's coat, which is several times too big for him. The scene requires him to use his newfound authority. A man on the sidewalk outside of the police station looks and laughs at the Tramp as the police officer, who has his hat on backwards. The new police officer hits the man over the head with his baton. The man's head shakes, and he falls directly backwards. While the Tramp was downtrodden and pitiable in the opening scene, now that he is a policeman he is authoritative and confident, a significant change in traits, motivated by dress.

In a later scene, a man kidnaps the mission worker and takes out a syringe filled with dope to drug her. When Chaplin's policeman bursts into the room, the kidnapper puts the syringe down on a chair in order to fight him. The policeman

evades the kidnapper's attempts to hit him. Then, he sits on the syringe. With sudden newfound strength, he beats up the kidnapper in a drug-induced delirium. Whereas previous scenes have established the policeman as rather cowardly (except in his encounter with the man who laughs at him), the drug makes him both courageous and capable. He's also able to take on a mob of ten men who want to fight him on the street. When he quells that small riot, he demonstrates his ability to occupy his position as police officer fully. All changes that Chaplin's character undergoes serve the purpose of motivating the plot, but unlike the "consistent bundle of . . . traits" of a character in classical Hollywood films, he is ever-shifting. He transforms from impoverished would-be thief to powerful, even heroic man of the law.

Cinema displaces the viewer of artworks (which, Benjamin reminds us, lost their aura with the onset of the capacity to reproduce works of art) in favor of the individual spectator. Not only does the spectator seem to experience an intersubjective relationship with the screen figure, he or she also experiences both a distraction from the body and an absorption into it, an art experience as Sobchack describes.

Empathy, as it relates to the experience of early cinema, including early slapstick, depends on the varying degrees of on-screen character development. Spectators of conventional narrative film project their empathy onto screen figures. This results in an affective state that remains between the screen and the spectator, with vision as the primary (although not the only) sense at work.

In contrast, slapstick viewers experience an ambivalent empathy toward screen figures, which seem to behave contingently on the unconventional narrative of the gag and the comic business they engage in. These viewers experience a different kind of embodiment, in which vision blends with the aural and haptic experience of being part of an audience laughing. Viewers find screen figures in some slapstick films that would seem to offer anchors for sympathy, but these figures ultimately become dupes, catalysts for laughter, rather than agents. For example, *The Thieving Hand* (Vitagraph Company of America, 1908) revolves around a prosthetic arm that plays gags on the screen figures around it. It is the star of the film, but only appears after the frame narrative is established. What set this film apart from other early gag films are not only the special effects but also the film's drive to thematize empathy. First, the film introduces screen figures that seem to have the agency of subjects. A one-armed beggar finds the wallet of a rich stranger and returns the wallet. In a display of gratitude, the stranger buys a prosthetic arm for the beggar at a pawnshop. The shopkeeper takes the life-like arm out of the window and winds it up. So far in the film, the screen figures appear to make agent-oriented decisions that confer on them the characteristics to which audiences direct empathy. The rich stranger shows compassion to the beggar, who in return thanks him for the gift. This is simply a delay in the film, setting up a frame narrative that will motivate the gags.

In a surrealist turn, the prosthesis slithers up the sleeve of the beggar. The prosthesis steals the stranger's wallet and handkerchief. Once the beggar is back on his corner, the arm steals the belongings of passers-by. Each time, the beggar

berates his arm, which has an agency out of the beggar's control. In another attempt to control the arm, the beggar sells it to another pawnbroker, who puts it in his store window. The prosthesis steals jewels and other expensive items from the window and returns to the beggar. The arm makes its way up the beggar's sleeve again. The pawnbroker alerts the police, thinking that the beggar is the thief. The policeman arrests the beggar and jails him. One of the prisoners in jail happens to be a one-armed thief, and when the beggar expresses that he doesn't want the arm anymore, it crawls out of his sleeve and into the sleeve of the convict.

In this film, the prosthesis is the agent, not the beggar, who only has things done to him. The initial narrative set-up of the film is misleading. The beggar becomes the dupe of the thing attached to him, almost as an object that carries the prosthesis around. Initially signaled to be the subject of the film, he becomes the object, turning the empathy that the spectator feels into a feeling-into the object. The animated arm and hand likewise share an ambiguous subject–object relationship. The trickster prosthesis provokes laughter from the audience, who share their laughter with each other.

Gags have an unconventional causality that does not depend on stable characters because the screen figures are objects that set gags into motion. Sometimes, mechanical objects sustain the gag rather than screen figures, as in *The Thieving Hand*. For another example, take D.W. Griffith's *Those Awful Hats* (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1909). The gag involves a huge mechanical object that intervenes in a disturbance in an audience. A man with a top hat (Mack

Sennett) and a woman with a large, flowery hat (Flora Finch) enter an exhibition space (denoted by a film inset into the frame), talking to each other. Other viewers begin to complain about their conversation in the aisle, and the man offers a seat to the woman. The man takes his hat off and sits down in another seat across the aisle. He argues with one woman in front of him who has a large hat on. Then, women with bigger hats, with more flowers and feathers, begin coming in and sitting near the film screen. A pincer-like part of large machinery comes down from the upper edge of the frame and takes the hat off of one of the women. Then, the pincer descends again and grabs an entire woman, lifting her completely out of the frame. The other viewers stand and look up. As a mass, the film depicts, they share laughter and applause at the sight of the hat being taken and the woman herself being lifted out of the theater.

The film sets up the slimmest of characterization for the screen figures. The women want to wear their outrageous hats, and other members of the audience want them to take off the hats. The characterization stops there, unless one wants to count the ominous quality of the piece of machinery that effects the gag. The mechanical device is suspended above the frame and suggests to the viewers that the mechanisms of the factory can intrude on the entertainment they seek. They have the agency of an audience to point and laugh, even though they are types. As with *The Thieving Hand,* the agent of the film is also made into an object susceptible to the machinery of another object, which itself gains agency.

In a way similar to the protagonist–antagonist relationship in more conventional narrative, slapstick proposes a doer–done-to relationship among

screen figures. The doer is the joker in the gag, whereas the done-to is the object of the gag. Slapstick's viewers contrast their subjectivity with this doer–done-to structure. This bolsters their sense of subjectivity through their interdependent relationship with other viewers, created by mutual laughter. Lack of spectatorial identification for the done-to, then, protects spectators from feeling like objects themselves, *despite feeling empathy for the done-to as well*. Viewers empathize with screen figures that lack sympathetic identification with each other within the films.

Maude's Naughty Little Brother (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1900) portrays a small boy who is both the doer and the done-to. A young woman, Maude, answers her door and invites a suitor in. They sit down at a small tea table and talk. Meanwhile, her younger brother sneaks in. He ties a rope to the man's coattail and creeps around him to get under the table. He ties the other end of the rope to the tablecloth. At no point do either the suitor or Maude notice the boy, who is the doer. Maude's father comes in and throws a large bag at the suitor, the done-to, who stands up quickly to avoid the bag. The table comes with him, completing the gag. The boy stands and laughs at his gag, but the father then beats him, turning the boy into the done-to. The rapid turn-about leads to more laughter as the screen figure shifts from being the agent of the gag to being the object of violence.

INTRA-AUDIENCE EMPATHY

Gallagher proposes a phenomenological position: that we understand each other as subjects directly through the process of communication, through gesture, tone of voice, and facial expression, for example. This concept of an embodied,

expansive interpretation of empathy eliminates the problem of the subject as an internally consistent, bounded self and instead suggests a more cooperative sense of empathy that is based in the body.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty writes about the direct experience of the other:

> The sense of the gestures is not given, but understood, that is, recaptured by an act on the spectator's part. The whole difficulty is to conceive this act clearly without confusing it with a cognitive operation. The communication or comprehension of gestures comes about through the reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people. It is *as if* the other person's intention inhabited my body and mine his. (185; italics mine)

In other words, the other's actions need not be thought about in order to be understood. They are perceptible to the self though contact with the other. For Merleau-Ponty, understanding the other is a reciprocal experience—the self perceives itself in the other and in doing so, feels that the other perceives itself in the self. The two are mutually constructed. His conception of empathy relies on first-person access (I) and third-person access (you). Of course, third-person access is unavailable in films. It is through the work of the two relationships that viewer empathy happens. Instead of empathizing unambiguously with screen figures, viewers build an empathic relationship with each other as the laughter spreads. Viewers shift part of their attention, and hence empathy, from characters on the screen in order to share it with each other in a raucous fashion.

The existence of mirror neurons confirms both what turn-of-the-twentieth-century empathy philosophers (Vischer, Lipps, and Worringer) write about the recognition of the self feeling into the other and what phenomenologists have theorized. Within the brain's structures lie bunches of neurons known as mirror

neurons. They fire under two conditions: when the subject performs an action and when the subject sees the same action performed by an other. These brain cells are activated even when the result of the action remains hidden, provided that the action is in the individual's repertoire. Marco Iacoboni posits an underlying significance between the mirror-neuron system and the limbic system, which is partially responsible for emotion and the remembered association with physical sensation. The limbic system is crucial both to emotion experienced as part of cognition and to the autonomic nervous system, which maintains the individual's most basic drives. Its proximity to mirror neurons indicates that imitation and empathy are securely linked. This accounts for the empathy that viewers feel as part of a mass audience and the empathetic experience of watching a slapstick film.

THEORIES OF LAUGHTER

Slapstick laughter is the glue for intra-audience empathy. It binds the audience's empathy with each other—with the screen figures as pivot—allowing a triangulated empathy between individual, screen figure, and audience. Although a few of the theorists mentioned here acknowledge nonhumorous laugher—laughter proceeding from tickling or provoked by mental illness, for example—several of them attempt to account for it in a singular theory (e.g., Hobbes, Bain, Freud). David Hector Monro, in *Argument of Laughter*, separates theories of humorous laughter into three categories: superior theory, incongruity theory, and relief theory. Monro's classification of theories of humor, however limited by its tripartite construction and the way in which it suggests competition among these theories, is a useful

rubric for thinking about theories up to the beginning of the 20th century. The specificity with which I intend to apply various elements of these classes to slapstick laughter will allow me to avoid some of the other theories' pitfalls. I argue that slapstick laughter results from feelings of superiority, from incongruous elements, and from recognition and analogy, each to varying degrees depending on the individual film. It is a relief from empathetic engagement with the screen figure, an object that the viewer associates him- or herself with.

One of the theories that would most seem to relate to slapstick is superiority theory, which posits that the laugher laughs in response to a person or thing over whom he feels in some way triumphant. It is most closely associated with Thomas Hobbes. In *Leviathan* (1651), he submits,

> *Sudden glory,* is the passion which maketh those *Grimaces* called Laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. (39)

Laughter in this case arises both from pleasure in the self's own deeds—an egocentric laughter—and from a sense of superiority in juxtaposition with the other. In both kinds of laughter, the self is self-satisfied. But it is this second source of pleasure that he focuses on in the comments that follow the initial description of laughter:

> And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. (39)

Laughter, in Hobbes's view, requires self-knowledge, and many who laugh signal a timidity or deficit of confidence regarding the self's qualities. It is meant to

compensate for failures of the self. It bolsters the attitude toward the self by comparison to another's flaws. This suggests that laughter in general supports the creation of self-respect in an otherwise self-critical subject.

Alexander Bain gives a similar account of laughter, granting that Hobbes gestures toward a correct, though partial, conjecture. He proposes a theory of derisive laughter but without the "pusillanimity" component. He announces, "The occasion of the ludicrous is the degradation of some person or interest possessing dignity, in circumstances that excite no other strong emotion" such as pity or disapprobation (315). Contra Hobbes, he asserts that the self need not have a conscious intimation of its own inferiority to compensate for with laughter. Furthermore, although derisive laughter can be aimed at a person, it can also be "excited against classes, parties, systems, options, institutions, and even inanimate things that by personification have contracted associations of dignity" (316). For Bain, the laugh need not be egocentric, as it can be enjoyed "sympathetically," which further distinguishes his theory from Hobbes's. And it is not necessarily egocentric. The laugher can laugh when the object of that laughter is generally perceived as dignified and is brought low.

In the monograph "Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic" (1906), Henri Bergson comments on Bain's position and that of other superiority theorists:

> It is doubtless the comic in parody that has suggested to some philosophers, and in particular to Alexander Bain, the idea of defining the comic, in general, as a species of DEGRADATION. They describe the laughable as causing something to appear mean that was formerly dignified. But if our analysis is correct, degradation is only one form of transposition, and transposition itself only one of the means of obtaining laughter. (124)

Bergson's theory incorporates superiority. He argues that the primary *goal* of laughter is the social correction of an other. However, he also suggests there must be something additional to *produce* laughter in the first place.

No doubt, much slapstick laughter comes about because the viewer feels superior to the screen figure. For example, in *Danger Ahead* (Weiss Brothers Art Class Pictures, 1926), one shot shows a villain sitting at the table with the heroine. A second shot shows what's under the table: a child and a dog. The next shot shows the villain stiffen. The following shot is again under the table and shows the child pouring water out of a glass onto the man's foot. When the man looks under the table, he sees the child and the dog. He looks stricken. The viewer has the opportunity to laugh at the man, who has a mistaken assumption about what has happened. If the dog urinated on the man, it would degrade him. However, this does not happen. Because the viewer has had a privileged view of the situation, he or she can judge the man to be obtuse. It is the man's belief that it was the dog that is meant to be funny, and the suggestion that it *might have been* the dog in another circumstance is also funny.

Another moment in which superior laughter is invited occurs in *Angora Love* (Hal Roach Studios, 1929). Stan and Ollie are walking quickly down a sidewalk to try to keep a goat from following them. They get to the corner, and Ollie steps in a puddle. Instead of just his foot getting wet, he falls in—the puddle is waist deep on Ollie. He can't get out. The viewer is invited to feel superior not simply because of what is essentially bad luck magnified but because Ollie's girth keeps him in the hole. I wish to modify the superiority theory by including what might be called a

laughter of cruelty. It results from watching someone brought low, but it also includes an additional component of sadism. It comes from the desire to see someone physically hurt. This laugh is perhaps foremost a response to slapstick.

Superiority theory explains much slapstick laughter, but it cannot stand alone as a complete theory. A viewer doesn't laugh at Chaplin's character when he disguises himself as a woman in *A Woman* (Essanay, 1915) because he or she feels superior to him. The close-up of Chaplin's face provokes laughter in part because the disguise is surprisingly good and because his direct address to the camera invites the viewer to feel like an accomplice. This is another kind of laughter, the laugh of recognition and analogy. This kind of laugh occurs when the film displays an image of a screen figure or object that resonates with the viewer's previous knowledge. For example, in *The Garage* (Comique Film Company, 1920), Keaton and Arbuckle star as mechanics. They use a carwash system to clean a customer's car. The system consists of a water hose, a large turntable set into the floor, and a fan. Arbuckle's character drives the car onto the turntable, sets it in motion, and hoses the car clean. Then he turns on the fan to dry it. In the following scene, a suitor (Harry McCoy) brings flowers to the garage owner's daughter (Molly Malone). He accidentally dips the flowers into a container of oil that is behind him. When he brings the flowers back around, he moves to smell them and gets the oil on his face and the front of his clothing. Keaton's and Arbuckle's characters make the matter worse when they try to brush off the oil with their oily hands. Then a solution occurs to them: clean the man with the carwash system. The man becomes clean, just as the car did. The film furnishes the understanding of how the car wash system operates in a previous

scene, so that in the following scene, when the man is attached to the turn-table and spun around, the viewer is able to make the connection between car and man. The man is turned into an object analogous with the car.

Often, as in the previous case, the slapstick analogy is between two incongruous things. In the 1776 essay "On Laugher and Ludicrous Composition," James Beattie argues that for laughter to occur, first there must be a comparison between or among objects, ideas, circumstances, and/or people. Second, the parts of the collection must be "unsuitable and heterogeneous" (320). Third, the parts of this collection must be formed into a whole or must be supposed to form into a whole. From this, he argues, it must follow that

> Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them. (320)

Furthermore, "the greater the number of incongruities that are blended in the same assemblage, the more ludicrous it will probably be" (322). In this essay, Beattie does not suggest that such an apprehension of incongruity be sudden. Rather, awareness of the incongruous can be come about through contemplation. This detail is essential to a theory of slapstick laughter, in which the incongruity may come at a surprise, and often does, but the laughter can also come as a response to the suspense that a film builds up. (See Chapter 2.) Sometimes a gag is funny precisely because the audience knows what's going to happen.

Kant proposed an incongruity theory of laughter in which "something absurd . . . must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty, convulsive laughter." He posits that a listener builds an expectation while hearing a joke, and the punchline reduces

that expectation to nothing. The tension of expectation, when released, brings about a "mental movement" and a corresponding and reciprocal movement of the body. He supposes that some movement in the body's organs is connected with cognition and that shifting thoughts from one perspective to another "may involve a corresponding and reciprocal straining and slackening of our intestines," which is relayed to the diaphragm. The diaphragm then causes the lungs to expel air "with rapidly succeeding interruptions." In this way, he describes laughter as a physical manifestation of a frustration of meaning. Laughter returns the body to balance, and it is that balance that is gratifying. His theory of laughter as the result of a return to equilibrium anticipates Herbert Spencer's relief theory (see below).

The otherwise grouchy Arthur Schopenhauer also gives an account of the incongruous provoking laugher in the essay "On the Theory of the Ludicrous" (1844):

> The origin of the ludicrous is always the paradoxical, and thus unexpected, subsumption of an object under a concept that is in all other respects heterogeneous to it. Accordingly, the phenomenon of laughter always signifies the sudden apprehension of an incongruity between such a concept and the real object thought through it, and hence between what is abstract and what is perceptive. (91).

The concept is the major premise, and the minor premise is the object under consideration through that concept. Schopenhauer insists that laugher is always provoked by the incongruous and that the incongruous always takes the laugher by surprise. (This is not to say, he notes, that the incongruous is always funny.) Palmer's theory of the absurd logic of the gag owes a debt to Schopenhauer's theory.

Bergson's claims about what makes people laugh are useful as a way to understand the kind of laughter slapstick provokes. He breaks down the comic's requirements into three stipulations: 1) it exists within "the pale of what is strictly *human*"; 2) it insists on empathetic distraction; and 3) it is social in that it demands a defined audience. He sums up these three conditions: "The comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions" (6). Slapstick film combines these conditions to incite laughter in spectators. In this case, "one of [the spectators'] number" includes screen figures who address the camera and who are presented as in the same discursive space as the audience.

Key to Bergson's first stipulation for laughter is the extent to which "something mechanical" is "encrusted on the living" (38). "The more exactly these two images, that of a person and that of a machine, fit into each other, the more striking is the comic effect" (31). In response to Bergson's argument, Simon Critchley notes that the humor of a certain stiffness or rigidity provokes an uncanniness in that "the human begins to blur with the machine, becoming an inhuman thing that stands over against the human being" (56). Humor involves not simply the mechanical encrusted on the living but also the living encrusted upon the mechanical, as the two interpenetrate. It comes out of that tension through laughing at the human that is machine-like, a laughter over the abyss, as Benjamin puts it.

In *Machine-Age Comedy,* North elaborates on Bergson's argument. He uses Freud's metaphor of an "inner mechanism" of the mind as a hydraulic system in which opening the tap of laughter releases the stress of a prohibited emotion by

lifting the prohibition, thus lowering the subject's overall psychic pressure and reducing stress in the system (14). He argues, "Bergson means that people laugh at automatism, but he also means to say that laughter itself is a kind of automatism elicited by the comic" (16). North, like Critchley, suggests,

> If a correctly humane point of view [laughter as a moral corrective] can arise from so automatic a reaction as laughter, then it seems that the living can sometimes be found encrusted, as it were, on the mechanical. It somehow becomes possible for automatism to yield the very spontaneity it seemed to cancel out. (16)

Instead of one pitted against the other for dominance, the human and the mechanical appear to have a recursive relationship. Vachel Lindsay insists, "It is a quality, not a defect, of all photoplays that human beings tend to become dolls and dolls and mechanisms tend to become human" (33–34). When examined in this light, Bergson's first claim—human beings are laughable insofar as they remind others of "*a mere machine*"—indicates that laughter itself is machine-like in its performance, an action without conscious thought or intention. Slapstick authorizes the mechanization of screen figures that both act as "*mere machines"* and allows the objects in the film to take on human qualities.

Modern Times (Charles Chaplin Productions, 1936) is a narrative of technologically induced psychosis. In the first act of the film, a factory worker tightens nuts on machine parts. He falls behind on the line and is drawn into the factory machine. It eats him. When the line is shut down and he emerges, he cannot stop making the same motions that his job requires. The process objectifies him, turning him into an object, a machine. Up until this scene, the film has focused on his bodily demands: he falls behind in his work to scratch an itch, for example. The

viewer has been invited to project subjectivity onto him. In this scene, however, when the factory line stops, the worker continues working like he himself is a machine. It is as though he has incorporated the machinery into his own system, translating the factory's mechanical production into bodily gesture.

He sees a woman walking by with buttons on the back of her skirt. He chases her out of the factory, staring at her rear and waggling his wrenches. The viewer is meant to enjoy the sexual innuendo: the buttons that are nuts that are body parts, the wrenches that are phalluses, the intent, purposeful focus at the place where those wrench-phalluses would do their work. The factory worker's desire is dual, and he becomes a desiring machine. It is the mechanical body that Bergson refers to, the body as that which both gives the impression of living and the impression of being an object. This suggests that at the heart of Bergson's argument is incongruity theory.

The incongruous certainly contributes to slapstick laughter. As Chapter 1 explores, the gag operates on the absurd logic of the contact between two mutually exclusive syllogisms. As you recall, in Palmer's view, the two concepts underlying each syllogism may be plausible separately, but it is the incongruity of the two when put together that leads to the success of the gag. Incongruity theory also operates in slapstick outside of gags as I've defined them. In a paean to the near-magical powers of technological reproduction, *Now You Tell One* (Bowers Comedy Corporation, 1926) presents a man (Charles R. Bowers) who has created a serum that allows him to graft anything onto any plant. He grafts together a tree and a pair of shoelaces and grows more shoelaces. Using the same plant, he makes a lemon grow out of a

pineapple. The effect is surprising and funny because shoelaces do not grow on plants (one incongruity) and lemons don't grow out of pineapples (another incongruity). And even if both those premises were true, the shoelaces, lemon, and pineapple would surely not be part of the same plant. As Beattie might elaborate, the viewer is invited to compare the shoelaces, lemon, and pineapple, which contrast sharply with each other, and are part of a whole, that is, the plant.

An opposite movement, from incongruity of premise to predictable outcome, also occurs in the film. After establishing that the inventor can graph anything onto a plant and after showing the incongruous results (which are meant to be funny in the first demonstration), the film then takes incongruity as its premise and a second kind of joke is created. A woman has a problem with mice overrunning her farm. The inventor, hoping to win her favor, offers to use his serum to help her. He creates a plant that will yield cats, but the experiment fails when the harvested cat has no tail. It's not a "complete" cat. He goes to a pond, cuts a cattail, and then grafts it onto the cat plant. Out grows a cat with a tail. Here, the premise is set up as incongruous: cats and plants don't go together. However, the film has already indicated that the inventor can create such a plant. That he uses a cattail is not entirely unsurprising—the viewer had not yet seen the pond. It is the punch line, the cat with a tail, that the viewer foresees. The film presents a visual and aural pun with the cattail, and the new cat completes that pun. It involves the pleasure of recognition of similarity.[20]

Among these theorists, some disagreement about the role of the body remains. Hobbes, Bain, Beattie, and (especially) Schopenhauer—who gives a description of a potential phenomenon in geometry as an example of something that

is risible—believe laughter to be intellectual. Kant, on the other hand, refers to laughter as an "animal" gratification in that it is a bodily pleasure. Bergson is less straightforward on the matter. He writes that incongruity theories that describe laughter as produced by an abstract relationship between ideas fail to explain laughter as a bodily phenomenon: "How, indeed, should it come about that this particular logical relation, as soon as it is perceived, contracts, expands and shakes our limbs, whilst all other relations leave the body unaffected?" (7). He decides, however, to avoid expanding on this point in favor of pointing to laughter in its "natural environment," the social sphere (7). To that end, he describes how inelasticity is "an activity with separatist tendencies" and places it in the category of a symptom or gesture against society (20). The response to that gesture, then, should be another gesture. Laughter is that "social gesture" that corrects such an eccentricity (20). He returns to the language of the body with that statement.

Spencer relies completely on the body to understand, or at least explain, laughter. He dismisses the idea that the risible itself can be explained in any way. In "On the Physiology of Laughter" (1860), he claims that laughter is a muscular motion that is a sign of the internal redirection of nervous tension produced through strong emotion. Nerves in a state of tension can accomplish three things. They transfer their energy to other nerves with no direct connection to the body; they produce visceral effects; or they activate motor nerves. He notes that these three routes are not exclusive—nervous energy can cause both muscle contractions and visceral effects, for example, or all three at once.

Laughter, he says, is not only produced by the ludicrous but through strong emotions and percepts of any sort. Its distinguishing feature is that—unlike clenching one's fists in anger as though in preparation for hitting someone—it has no object. An overflow of "nerve-force" without an object is released first through habitual routes: the movement of the mouth, face, and vocal cords and an increase in respiration. Should these muscle movements not suffice for the relief of nervous tension, a second order of muscles will be excited. The upper limbs are set in motion. When this further action fails to facilitate a relaxation of nervous tension, an even lesser-used group of muscles are activated: "the head is thrown back and the spine bent inwards." In this way, Spencer accounts for what he sees as three stages of laughter, which can be elaborated as the chuckle, the laugh, and the guffaw.

Freud builds on Spencer's tension–relief theory and adds the concept of the unconscious to complicate Spencer's simpler explanation. In *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), he suggests that laughter is a response to a build-up of psychical energy and that nervous energy is created through unconscious inhibition, suppression, or repression. Laughter is the pleasurable outlay of this energy. Freud uses an economic metaphor: the listener "purchases the pleasure of the joke with a very small expenditure of his own" (142). If the listener had to conceive of the joke, he or she would have had to overcome the unconscious barrier, costing an amount of psychical energy. Because the joke relieves the listener of having to overpower that which is prohibited, he or she saves that amount of energy, receiving the savings allowed through the joke as thought it were a "present" (142).

> Because the forbidden imagined idea has been produced by . . . perception, the charge of energy used for inhibition has suddenly become superfluous and so is ready to be released by laughter . . . . [The listener] is laughing with the amount of psychical energy that has become free through the lifting of the inhibitory energy-charge; he is laughing away this amount, as it were. (142)

The listener uses the same amount of energy that has been used to submerge the prohibited idea in the unconscious and is able to laugh at the joke. Laughter, then, allows for a release of tension and provides a return to equilibrium. Freud suggests that although incongruity theory does not account for laugher in full, incongruity has a place in subverting the inhibitions placed on unconscious ideas through absurd joke-work.

Slapstick laughter offers a relief, then, from the repressed. Benjamin, in his Artwork essay, borrows Freud's idea of laughter as therapeutic and adds the dimension of film and the mass audience: "American slapstick comedies . . . trigger a therapeutic release of unconscious energies" (118). Benjamin links modernity, film, and laughter through film's ability to dissipate a mass psychosis brought on by the crises of modernity:

> If one considers the dangerous tensions which technification and its consequences have engendered in the masses at large—tensions which at critical stages take on a psychotic character—one also has to recognize that this same technification has created the possibility of psychic immunization against such mass psychoses. It does so by means of certain films in which the forced articulation of sadistic fantasies or masochistic delusions can prevent their natural and dangerous maturation in the masses. Collective laughter is one such preemptive and therapeutic eruption of such mass psychoses . . . . (118)

The "development of sadistic fantasies" operates within cinema generally and within slapstick specifically. Here Benjamin confronts the psychological pathology that modernity brought with the catharsis of laughter. He proposes that a

deleterious psychosis could result from how modernity's effects on quotidian life split off individual experience from sensory perceptions. The realm of technology that could cause mass psychosis can also cure it by provoking a different kind of psychosis, the mass audience's laughter. This fosters a publicly shared perception, rather than the perception of an individual whose psychic states are confined to dreams and nightmares about modern technologies.

People and things crash in modern spectators' lives, but laughing at an exaggerated collision on screen alleviates a pathological anxiety surrounding life's actual contingencies. McCabe argues, "The modernist crisis of representation became . . . a crisis of embodiment; and experimental film made visible a body never visible before—one at once whole and in pieces" (430). What McCabe says is true for experimental film and for slapstick. Although films in other genres make characters recognizable as ostensible subjects, slapstick plays with the subject–object position. If it is true that slapstick viewers must recognize the face of pain in slapstick, they must have some sense of the film figure as a subject. However, in order to partially suspend empathy for the screen figure, they must at the same time understand the figure to be an object. Their experience outside the exhibition space causes them to wobble between subjecthood and objecthood inside the theater, as they see an object that they themselves at least in part identify with.

This phenomenon may have provoked Benjamin's statement that cinematic slapstick "is comic, but only in the sense that the laughter it provokes hovers over an abyss of horror" (Benjamin, "Letter" 17). One approach to disentangling Benjamin's paradox is through feminist critic Julia Kristeva's work on abjection, in which the

"phobic object" is "a metaphor that is the anaphora of nothing," that it is has "an *indexing* value pointing to something else, something unknowable" (204).[21] Kristeva's abject cannot be spoken, just as the moment of sensation cannot be spoken. Modernity's audiences confronted their own abjection in their fear of the unmediated forces around them: the speed of the urban street; the seemingly undifferentiated masses unconnected by family structures; fluctuating and unaestheticized somatic contact with the world; anesthetizing Taylorist labor. They felt it in their own bodies.

Critchley argues, "The body that is the object and subject of humour is an *abject* body—estranged, alien, weakening, failing" (50). To escape the abject, modern subjects emitted laughter at that object that is a slapstick screen figure. They could experience catharsis—a getting out of oneself—through laughter, a pleasure felt by viewers as they recognized the represented fates worst than their own on screen. Narrative closure is unnecessary for catharsis. It can be replaced by duration, for it is in slapstick's enduring filmic pain that audiences found relief.

The disorganized fear of the abject provokes a "horrified laughter" (204). It is an apocalyptic laughter, which lays "bare, anguished, and as fascinated [with the abject] as it is frightened" (205). Kristeva contrasts apocalyptic laughter with carnival laughter, which "transgresses [any moral position and] sets its repressed against it—the lower things, sexual matters, what is blasphemous and to which it holds while mocking the law" (205). Critchley points out that sometimes laughter is uncomfortable: "We often laugh because we are troubled by what we laugh at, because it sometimes frightens us" (56–57). The laughter that slapstick evokes falls

between two such kinds of laughter: a laughter that is horrified at the nondiscrete, inarticulate pressures of modernity as they operate in human lives but that also responds to modernity through an aim to misbehave. Through the representation of slapstick cinema, spectators avoid both apocalyptic laughter and carnival laughter and instead indulge in the ambivalent laughter of slapstick, which leaps the abyss and is free to play with carnival laughter without holding to the law it sends up. Slapstick laughter rides the median line between a laughter that is disturbed and sadistic and a laughter that is exuberant.

According to Bergson, laughter without a group is difficult to produce. Laughter within audiences is contingent on the laughter of the viewers as a whole group, not individually. He writes, "You would hardly appreciate a comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo" (5). The theater, for Bergson, becomes a kind of social echo chamber:

> Listen to it carefully: It is not an articulate, clear, well-defined sound; it is something which would fain be prolonged by reverberating from one to another, something beginning with a crash, to continue in successive rumblings, like thunder in a mountain. (6)

Bergson figures audience members' laughter as the thunder in a theater, not unlike the noise of applause. Bergson notes, "Still this reverberation cannot go on forever" (6). Repeated laughter relies on a concatenation of gags, either as simple one-gag films exhibited in a row or as in gags within the connecting narrative of a longer film.

On the one hand, slapstick viewers are drawn by their own laughter into identifying bodily with the audience members around them. On the other hand,

conventional narrative films cue the spectator—absorbed in the experience of viewing film, outside of the social experience of the theater—to identify with sympathetic characters. Slapstick comedy encourages indifference toward the screen figures, within an overtly social context. Its viewers are aware of themselves, their bodies, *and* the bodies around them.

EASY STREET

Chaplin had complete control over the production of *Easy Street* and determined the emotional cues so broadly drawn in the film. This film is a good example of a slapstick film that elicits sympathy, alignment, and empathy. It contains an identifiable, well-developed protagonist and a clear antagonist. The film opens with the Tramp sitting slumped in a corner between a building and its stairs. At this point, the film elicits a feeling *for* the poor man, not a feeling *with*. He hears singing from the building he's slumped against, and the camera cuts back and forth between a long view of the Tramp and a close-up of a woman singing (Edna Purviance). This demonstrates a connection between the Tramp and the woman he will pursue. It also signals the relationship of the main character and the object of his desire, initiating alignment with the Tramp.

In this film, the laughter produced includes the laugh of superiority, the laugh of incongruity, and the laugh of recognition and analogy. Two scenes in particular operate as examples of these three kinds of laughter. In one scene, the villain appears in the midst of the brawl in the street. He punches four people, and the rest scramble to escape. He patrols the street. When his back is turned toward one side

of the street, the people hiding on the other side emerge as a mass, each body leaning out in the same way. When he turns again, those people hide and the people on the other side of the street come out. The laughter elicited here is the laughter of incongruity. The people behave in unison, as though their bodies were mechanically reproduced.

A later scene provokes a laughter of incongruity, as in this case in which the actions of individual screen figures appear mechanic. When the policeman, played by Chaplin, walks onto the block, he sees the villain. The policeman walks up and down the street, and the villain follows him step for step. The mimicry that the villain performs signals empathy that the villain feels for the policeman. This embodied simulation stems from the villain's belief that following the policeman will intimidate him. The villain can stand in the shoes of the policeman and determine what will be most threatening. This mimicry also suggests that the two are interrelated as puppets might be. The action of one appears to be duplicated by the action of the other. The difference in the two men's build, combined with their mirrored actions, provokes a laughter of incongruity because the two are similar yet quite contrasting. The repetition of movement creates a plausible analogy (the two men are the same) and an implausible one (they are significantly different in size and appearance).

Empathy in slapstick plays a peculiar role. Slapstick requires an exceptional empathy toward the on-screen figures and also spreads that fellow-feeling around the audience. Vischer, Lipps, and Worringer argue for different kinds of empathy: a

"feeling-into" in the first, earlier type and in the later type, a sense of absorption in distraction. The subject–art object relationship generates aesthetic empathy. Film returns that empathy to the subject as its object in the theoretical viewing situation. Slapstick film complicates that empathy through adding the screen figure, which is an object onto which the viewer projects subjectivity. Slapstick empathy is perverse in that the viewer enjoys the humiliation and violence that the screen figure experiences, which is a sadistic perspective. Yet because of the empathy that viewers feel toward screen figures, the relationship is also masochistic. They, in part, feel the pain that the slapstick screen figure feels. Empathy is also exchanged in the theater from viewer to viewer, in simultaneous attention to the screen and attention to each other. Laughter makes people laugh, and slapstick was the premier catalyst for laughter in early cinema.

Conclusion

The Future of Slapstick Body-Objects

This dissertation argues that the development of slapstick film in the United States was instrumental in the way that early cinema responded to the shocks of urban modernity, which viewers experienced as mass audiences both inside and outside of the exhibition space. It also asserts that the body is a site for slapstick's effects. The body-object on the screen expresses the tensions of modern life, and gags, comic business, and violence center on it. The body of the viewer must also be taken into consideration: laughter brings the viewer's body to the fore as it binds the viewer to others in the audience.

Because slapstick represents embodiment in a contested way, it questions the body *qua* body. Bodies can operate as objects, rigid, failing things. They can also be active but inept. These two kinds of bodies—debased and subject to their surroundings—are what we associate with slapstick. Less often, slapstick represents the effective body. Laughing disdain for the passive body (e.g., the lieutenant's body in *Moonshine* in the gag in which he hangs from a branch as though he were a piece of wet laundry) in response to one film contrasts with an occasional desire to have the active, successful body (e.g., the Boy's body in *Safety Last!* [Hal Roach Studios, 1923]) in response to another film. That Lloyd used a double, Robert A. Gordon, in many of his films matters not at all to the viewer, who conflates the character's and the actor's bodies. Furthermore, the ability of the actor to appear

incompetent in his or her body requires control over his or her body. In extended gags or in gag sequences, the body can oscillate between one state and another.

This dissertation provides a contribution to the field in that it offers a vocabulary with which to write about slapstick. It also is suggestive of the ways in which later films can be explicated. Formative slapstick continued to be made in the works of Laurel and Hardy, the Three Stooges, and the Marx Brothers.

A second hey-day for slapstick was the 1950s and extended into the early 1960s. Feature-length films with Bud Abbott and Lou Costello and Dean Martin and Lewis were popular through the mid-1950s. Lewis, an iconic figure of slapstick, began performing as a young boy, but it was his pairing with Dean Martin that made him famous. The two first appeared in starring roles in *At War with the Army* (Paramount Pictures, 1950). By 1956, they split. Lewis went on to star in a number of films, many of which he directed and produced. In 1964, he starred in *The Disorderly Orderly* (Jerry Lewis Productions), directed by Frank Tashlin. *The Disorderly Orderly* follows Jerome Littlefield (Lewis), who works at a private hospital in Beverly Hills, California. He has failed out of medical school because he has "neurotic identification empathy," a condition in which he over-empathizes with the patients. He is unfit to administer to patients on two levels. He is too sensitive to patients' expressions of pain and physical illness. Paradoxically, he is also blind to silent suffering. If he doesn't hear it, he doesn't see it. The feature is a recycling of the first decades of slapstick film. It also represents an inquiry into empathy as figured within the film. Jerome's contact with other characters is mediated by language in a way that slapstick films made before the production of the

simultaneous sound track were not. His character is also more elaborated than screen figures of the previous "golden age" of slapstick. Yet, the generic qualities in the film remain the same.

In slapstick, the gag does the chief labor. A film signals that it is slapstick when the gag either makes up the narrative, as in very early films, or is given priority in an overarching narrative. Gags are unconventional narrative: They feature small causes that lead to disproportionately large effects. Even in films in which danger and its consequences are presented, gags cue the viewer to register that the effect is insignificant. The object of the gag is the slapstick body. *The Disorderly Orderly* constructs gags based on the failure of bodies, specifically Jerome's body. Lewis's comic business is the real star in the film. He twitches and grimaces his way through the film. *The Disorderly Orderly* manipulates embodiment as objecthood.

Lewis's films are products of mid-century pressures, many of which echo modernity's shocks and jolts. Television as a new medium further joined audiences, as commercials appealed most explicitly to the masses, binding them as consumers. The expanded middle-class could newly afford technologies that were being developed rapidly. Avant-garde artists and filmmakers continued to call into question the ideal of the unified, centered subject, to use self-referential techniques, and to inquire into the certainty of the world. In this sense, mid-century avant-garde art and filmmaking is a continuation of modernist practices. Of course, the context of these questions and techniques changed in a multiplicity of ways, which included

paranoia about the Cold War, the de-urbanization of cities with the emergence of suburbs in the 1950s, and the development of late capitalism.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, with the rush of people moving into cities and the encroachment of technology on daily life, modern people in urban areas had to perceive and attend to more details than ever before. This influx and repetition of percepts led to perceptual learning, the ability to learn how to cope with new percepts. Subjects believe in repletion in their visual field, an illusion of their perception as noncontingent, continuous, and contiguous. Yet, perceiving a stable environment relies on the ability of the sensorium to piece together disparate percepts. With the proliferation and speed of people and objects (e.g., automobiles, commodities on display), this required the modern sensorium to do much more physiological work. Perception and attention are reciprocal. Without attending to something, that thing cannot be perceived, and without perceiving something, that thing cannot be attended to. In that sense, attention *is* perception. It is contingent on the number of things that can be perceived at once, which is relatively small. That these pressures remain the same even after the Second World War is significant in that it suggests that although the context of modernization changed, the process did not.

The implications of this dissertation are many. With a framework for discussing slapstick as a genre, future scholarship can more complexly address it. Another significant contribution to the field that this dissertation offers is an

intervention into the arguments surrounding the modernity thesis, as Bordwell labels it. The proponents of the modernity thesis (including Gunning, Hansen, Charney, and Vanessa Schwartz) address cinema's resemblance to modernity, its context, and its cause (to use the tripartite explanatory structure that Singer elaborates). Opponents of the modernity thesis, such as Bordwell, Carroll, and Keil, argue against the position that modernity caused cinema's stylistic qualities, stating that it ignores those films that do not exhibit qualities ascribed to modernity. Gunning proposed a theory of a "cinema of attractions" twenty years ago, and this influential idea is among those categorized as part of modernity theory. The disputation between the modernity theorists and the classicists has continued to thrive.

As Singer argues, the modernity thesis may be broken down into three root suppositions. The first supposition is that "in certain salient respects cinema is *like* modernity" (102). The second supposition is that the modernity thesis argues for "cinema as a *part* of modernity, as a significant element of modernity in dynamic interaction with a range of adjacent, similar phenomena" (103). The new practices of modernity were part of cinema's circumstance, and slapstick displays their contiguity. For example, in *Sherlock Jr.,* the projectionist (Buster Keaton) finds a dollar in the detritus he is sweeping up in front of a theater. He leaves his post and walks over to a candy shop. In the window is a small box of candy for a dollar and a large box for four dollars. After walking inside, he tries to get the saleswoman to give him the large box for a dollar, but she refuses. This exchange is presented to the viewer through the front window of the shop. The proximity of the shop and the

theater suggests that not only are these two places adjacent to one another physically but adjacent in practice as well. The theater and the shop, as businesses, represent the capitalist context as the projectionist window-shops and interacts with the shop worker. The act of the projectionist's moving and viewing in both circumstances demonstrates that the two locations are neighboring sites of display.

Singer asserts that the third leg of the modernity thesis is the most difficult to argue: "cinema—either cinema in general or particular forms stressing overt stimulation, like the 'cinema of attractions' or sensational melodrama—was a *consequence* of modernity" (103). Gunning's essay "The Whole Town's Gawking: Early Cinema and the Visual Experience of Modernity" argues precisely this point. Gunning states, "The cinema of attractions developed out of a visual culture obsessed with creating and circulating a series of visual experiences to stimulate consumption" (193). He contends that, within the context of visual attractions, cinema developed as another attraction that solicited viewers' attention (193). He also asserts that attractions such as "world fairs, the department store (and its shop windows), the billboard, and the amusement park all exploited visual attractions, creating the context in which early cinema shaped itself" (194).

Charney makes the argument that cinema was created in the context of a uniquely modern experience of self-alienation. He locates at the crux of modernity the experience of bodily sensation and its disconnection from conscious knowledge, and he argues that cinema expresses this discontinuity in time. The modern subject faces "shocks, speed, and dislocation," which cinema demonstrates through editing (292). Furthermore, "the emerging form of cinema . . . allowed modernity's potential

drawbacks to become aesthetic advantages" (292). Charney and Schwartz also express that cinema was an outgrowth of modernity: "The culture of modernity rendered inevitable something like cinema, since cinema's characteristics evolved from the traits that defined modern life in general" (1–2). They further maintain, "Cinema forced . . . elements of modern life into active synthesis with each other; to put it another way, these elements created sufficient epistemological pressure to produce cinema" (10). These examples of the claim that Singer identifies are a few of many embedded—but typically not directly stated—in modernity theorists' works.

Singer asserts that within this claim lies the assumption that "the intensity of modern experience generated in individuals a psychological predisposition toward strong sensations, reflecting profound changes in the 'perceptual mode' prevailing in modern society" (103). These changes then shaped the creation of films, which communicated the "tempos and shocks of modern life" (103). Gunning's discussion of the desire for attractions does indeed seem to include a version of this argument when he suggests that attractions evoked visuality that was "less coherent or anchored" ("The Whole Town" 194). Hansen likewise points to cinema's response to "an ongoing crisis of vision and visibility" ("America" 363).

In response to the history-of-perception argument, Bordwell observes that many films of the period fail to exhibit a predilection toward the expression of modernity's tensions and disjunctions. He posits that because an artwork's stylistic features have no obvious connection to culture, modernity theorists had to invent a social history of vision in order to incorporate cinematic style into their scholarship. He refers to this as "the history-of-vision doctrine." He argues, "If vision has adapted

itself in a few decades to collective experience and the urban environment, we have a case of Lamarckian evolution" (*On the History* 142). In his view, proposing that culture helped define visuality draws on the discredited idea of circumstance affecting evolution.

Bordwell then asks a rhetorical question: "Should we not rather speak of changes in *habits and skills*, of cognitively monitored ways of noticing or contextualizing information available to new surroundings?" (142). Such a habits-and-skills stance takes the teeth out of the history-of-perception argument, for it suggests an ability to develop (or discard) a *method* of seeing, rather than a change in the sensorium. Habits and skills would be spread variably among individuals. They would be "intermittent, specialized, and transitory" (143). If the history-of-vision proponents concede that shifts in perception were more accurately attributed to a change of habits and skills, they must also abandon the claim that modernity as a period led to a particular shift in perception for the masses as such.

Carroll echoes Bordwell's resistance to the argument that advances the idea of modern adaptations in vision. He likewise calls into question the possibility of perceptual learning:

> But if [the faculty of perception did change], since we do not yet possess the requisite super-science of genetic engineering, it would have had to result from the normal processes of natural selection. . . . So on evolutionary grounds, we have substantial grounds, in principle, to be suspicious of the modernity thesis. (13)

However, no critic has suggested that modes of perception changed on a genetic

basis or through natural selection in so short a time. Rather, modernity theorists argue that perception as a mode changed. Urban subjects' experience of the world shifted with modernity's pressures, as I argue in Chapter 2. Slapstick reflected modernity's matrix of super-stimulating forces and simulated it through a chaotic, breakneck style. Keil suggests that modernity theorists cherry-pick films that illustrate the way in which the changes associated with modernity and fail to account for "average" films: "Although many films have the prized aspect of attractions . . . probably even more do not" (55). I argue that slapstick films—given their prevalence in early cinema and their popularity during the transitional era—constitute a significant percentage of films that do contain attractions, stylistic elements associated with the shocks of modernity (e.g., speed both in the mise en scène and later in editing practices as well), and topsy-turvy, anarchic content that mirrors the disjointed, perceptually disorganized experience of modernity.

My discussion of perception and attention not only serves to support the modernity thesis, it is also useful to understanding the ways in which attention is figured in other genres, such as horror and melodrama. Horror uses similar methods as slapstick, such as its attempt to flood the viewer's sensorium with violent attractions. How horror signifies inattention is comparable to slapstick as well. The difference is the affective goal of the two genres. Thinking about empathy in relationship to horror (a topic that Williams glances at in "Film Bodies") brings to light the manner in which the viewer is manipulated into sympathizing not only with the victim *but with the perpetrator as well*; more telling is how horror draws empathy from the viewer toward the film itself in the viewer's implicated

cooperation. This view of empathy has far-reaching implications. It requires a re-evaluation of the affective quality of even mainstream genres and a reconsideration of the spectator as entangled in the viewing situation.

This dissertation will be useful to scholars studying cartoons, television, and more recent slapstick films (e.g., *Shallow Hal* [2001], *Super Troopers* [2002], *Death at a Funeral* [2010]). The prevalence of direct address to the camera and violence in cartoons (e.g., those by Walt Disney, Max Fleischer, Tex Avery, Chuck Jones) suggests that their viewers are drawn into them as collaborators, interlocutors, and colluders, heightening the connection between character and viewer. Single-shot television comedy used laugh tracks to empathetically engage an audience watching in familial privacy, and since then, many comedies have been taped in front of a live audience. These uses of canned and live laughter to elicit laughter from the viewer calls to mind Bergson's requirement that laughter be social.

Television shows such as *America's Funniest Videos, Jackass,* and *Tosh.0* exhibit lived (and sometimes staged) experience on television. The main focus on *Tosh.0*, for example, is clips from YouTube entries. Empathy is split between Daniel Tosh, the host of the show—whose jokes and observations provide the framework within which to view the videos—and the video screen figure in unmediated pain. That it features actual people doing actual things is significant. One of the implications of my dissertation is that the body-object as documented provides a more intense springboard for empathy with the done-to. Scenes of traditional filmic slapstick provoke a slight wincing; Youtube videos of someone in pain can cause the viewer to recoil as he or she laughs. Knowing that the effects of violence and

humiliation are not simulated and yet are part of a television show filmed in front of a live audience (who also groans and laughs) calls to mind Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's reformulation of Paul Levenson's concept of remediation. This would be a fruitful direction for further study.

I hope that this study will help others theorize slapstick and comedy in more general. The goal of this study is to reinvigorate critical discourse about slapstick. Scholarship developed around the history of filmmaking must consider slapstick as a film genre born out of modernity. It is a low genre, to be sure. Early slapstick existed uneasily among high-genre films, but its shocks took on new power as it articulated not simply the split between sensation and cognition, but also its reflection of modernity more generally. Slapstick continues to be a vital genre. This dissertation's insights can contribute to future scholarship about television and film slapstick into the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Actuality films were nonfiction films created by positioning a stationary camera to record real events, places, and things, akin to later documentaries. The genre can also include travelogues, newsreels, reenactments and other short films depicting popular events.

2. He does acknowledge briefly that a previous gag or the set-up of a gag (e.g., an iris-in on a banana peel in a gag in *From Soup to Nuts* [Hal Roach Studios, 1928]) can telegraph the instant of peripety, but he doesn't elaborate on this point, at the risk of undermining his argument.

3. The name "Fatty" is deliberately used in a confusing manner in this film. For the purposes of discussion, I use the name "Fatty" to refer to the character and to the director where indicated by the intertitle that I elaborate next.

4. Singer notes that the film's disjunctions are a result of slapstick film units' lack of continuity editors, and he also cites the fact that the units were required to create two-reelers every week. Although this is true, it does not adequately explain the multiplication of wives, for example. The disjunctions were not simply a result of lack of continuity but also deliberate play with absurdity.

5. Freud borrows the phrase "psychical damming up" from Theodor Lipps. For more discussion of Lipps, see Chapter 2.

6. My use of "Mabel" and "Mabel Normand" are not interchangeable. In points of difference, I'm drawing a distinction between Mabel the character and Mabel Normand the actress.

7. Barney Oldfield was a celebrated racecar driver, and the title of the film announces his involvement, resulting in a marriage of real-life celebrity and Sennett's enormously popular shorts.

8. In this dissertation, I use the second version of Benjamin's famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility," from *Selected Works*, vol. 3, pp. 101–122. As Miriam Bratu Hansen notes in "Room-for-Play", Benjamin considered this 1936 version his "*Ur*-text" (4). The general editor of *Selected Writings* states that this version of the essay "represents the form in which Benjamin originally wished to see the work published" (122). Although Hannah Arendt's version of the essay is taken as canonical, I chose the second version for Benjamin's expansion on ideas. All works from *Selected Writings* were translated from the seminal publication of Benjamin's complete works in *Gesammelte Schriften*. Because I rely solely on *Selected Writings,* I will not include parallel citations of that work.

9. Miriam Bratu Hansen notes that Benjamin used the word "aura" to describe other objects besides works of art, including but not limited to everyday objects. See her "Benjamin's Aura." *Critical Inquiry* 34 (Winter, 2008): 336–85.

10. This film is resonant with the trick films of Méliès, who edited shots so that screen figures and other objects could appear and disappear from the frame in order to seem like magic. These trick films are an early example of the use of invisible cuts.

11. See Mack and Irvin for more information about the term "inattentional blindness."

12. Laura Mulvey, too, notes, "The camera becomes the mechanism for producing an illusion of Renaissance space, flowing movements compatible with the human eye, an ideology of representation that revolves round the perception of the subject . . . " Her intervention surrounds the woman as a fetish and an erotic image on the screen breaking down the distance between viewer and the film. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn, 1975): 6–18.

13. Foster notes that the Sheridan translation inexplicably renders this last sentence as "I am not in the picture."

14. See Daniel Barratt. "Tracing the Routes of Empathy: Association, Simulation, or Appraisal. *Film Studies 8*(Summer 2006): 39–52; Amy Coplan. "Catching Characters' Emotions: Emotional Contagion Responses to Narrative Film. *Film Studies 8*(Summer 2006): 26–28; Changming Duan and Clara E. Hill. "The Current State of Empathy Research." *Journal of Counseling Psychology 43.3*(1996): 261–274; Alvin I. Goldman, "Empathy, Mind, and Morals." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association 66*(Nov. 1992): 17–41; Lynne Layton. "Who's Responsible? Our Mutual Implication in Each Other's Suffering." *Psychoanalytic Dialogues 19*(Mar/April 2009): 105–120.

15. Both Lipps and Titchener eventually began to use the term as a psychological concept. I'm limiting my discussion here to Lipps's earlier work in which he attends to art objects rather than to interpersonal relationships.

16. Worringer is responding to Lipps's conception of positive empathy, which Lipps explicates in *The Aesthetic View and the Screen and Art* (1906): "Positive *Einfühlung* is the experience of . . . harmony, negative the experience of discord" (qtd in Jahoda 159). Lipps also described negative *Einfühlung* in relationship with an other:

> I see . . . a person looking, not proudly but arrogantly. I experience within myself the arrogance contained in that look. It is not just that I imagine this inner conduct or inner condition; it is not just that I know about it; rather it obtrudes, forces itself onto my experience. But within myself I work against it. My inner being objects; I feel in the arrogant look a life-denial or life-inhibition affecting me, a denial of my personality. Because of that, and only because of that, the arrogance can hurt me. My feeling of discomfort rests on that negative. (qtd in Jahoda 158)

For Lipps, a subject can have both positive and negative empathy in relationship to an other but in beholding an art object, the proper feeling is positive empathy.

17. See Amy Coplan. "Empathic Engagements with Narrative Fictions." *The Journal of Arts and Art Criticism 61*(Spring 2004): 141–152; Daniel Barratt. "Tracing the Routes of Empathy: Association, Simulation, or Appraisal." *Film Studies 8*(Summer 2006): 39–52; Murray Smith. "Altered States: Character and Emotional Response in the Cinema." *Cinema Journal 33*(Summer 1994): 34–56.

18. For examples of the vast literature on this topic, see Simon Baron-Cohen, "Precursors to a Theory of Mind: Understanding Attention in Others." In *Natural Theories of Mind: Evolution, Development, and Simulation of Everyday Mindreading.* Ed. Andrew Whiten. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991: 233–251; Susan C. Johnson, "Detecting Agents." *Philosophical Transactions: Biological Sciences 358.*1431 (March

2003) 549–559. Charles W. Morris, "The Mind in 'Process and Reality,'" *The Journal of Philosophy 28*.5 (February 1931): 113–127; Stuart Silvers, "Representational Capacity, Intentional Ascription, and the Slippery Slope." *Philosophy of Science 56*.3 (September 1989): 463–473.

19. A second conception of theory of mind competes with simulational theory in the current literature, what is known as theory theory of mind. Proponents of theory theory of mind argue that subjects take a detached theoretical stance, relying on a folk psychology that offers a commonsense explanation of the other's mental states. In this view, mental states are inferred because they are unobservable. Advocates of theory theory of mind posit that these states cannot be directly experienced. Theory theory of mind puts forward two contentions. First, the subject's belief about the other's mental states is deductive. Second, the subject must take a theoretical stance regarding his or her own mental states. According to Alan M. Leslie, "Because the mental states of others (and indeed of ourselves) are completely hidden from the senses, they can only ever be inferred" (qtd. in Gallagher and Zahavi 172). This can be elaborated in the following way: to understand why a person at a funeral is crying, I infer that because I know that people become sad when they lose someone emotionally close to them and that very sad people cry, the person is must be crying because he is very sad. Furthermore, I would make the same inference to explain my own crying in that situation. One of the problems with theory theory of mind, as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi note, is that children only develop theory of mind at around age 4. If theory of mind is required for the subject to experience thoughts and emotions, then small children, not having developed a theory of mind, would not experience any thoughts and emotions. This is clearly not the case.

20. See my discussion of Noël Carroll's essay "Notes on the Sight Gag" in Chapter 1.

21. Kristeva's argument is psychoanalytic. In short terms, she posits a category called the abject, which is the imagined desire of the object. As part of the symbolic order, it is the law of the father, the introjected law, the superego. The abject is that which is most abhorrent and least expressible. It rejects what cannot be fully ejected, and so it remains as a manner of ghost. It finds its expression in metaphor, which is a naming of something that covers over the abject, and in fact, Kristeva describes it using metaphor, as the abject cannot be directly spoken. She connects writing to metaphor, suggesting that the writer "is permanently confronted with such a language [of fear]. The writer is a phobic who succeeds in metaphorizing in order to keep from being frightened to death; instead he comes to life in signs" (38).

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