Knockabout and Slapstick: Violence and Laughter in Nineteenth-Century Popular Theatre and Early Film

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies
University of Toronto

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2015

Abstract

This thesis examines laughter that attends violent physical comedy: the knockabout acts of the nineteenth-century variety theatres, and their putative descendants, the slapstick films of the early twentieth-century cinema. It attempts a comparative functional analysis of knockabout acts and their counterparts in slapstick film. In Chapter 1 of this thesis I outline the obstacles to this inquiry and the means I took to overcome them; in Chapter 2, I distinguish the periods when knockabout and slapstick each formed the dominant paradigm for physical comedy, and give an overview of the critical changes in the social context that separate them. In Chapter 3, I trace the gradual development of comedy films throughout the early cinema period, from the “comics” of 1900 to 1907, through the “rough house” films of the transitional era, to the emergence of the new genre in 1911-1914.
Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 present my comparative analyses of the workings of four representative “tropes,” ubiquitous in various forms of knockabout performance and in various representative slapstick films: i) The burlesque prize fight (in variety theatre, in the Ethiopian sketches of blackface minstrelsy and in Keystone’s “The Knockout”); ii) the Pete Jenkins act (in nineteenth-century circus) and the “Wild Ride” (a sub-subgenre of chase film); iii) the “One-Two-Three-Switch motif” in knockabout song and dance and in the slapstick pie fight; and iv) The “White Night” of the Ethiopian sketches and the “Inn Where No Man Rests” of early film.

Chapters 8 and 9 present my attempt to synthesize my findings and come to a conclusion by concretely theorizing what this comparison teaches us about knockabout and slapstick performance. Slapstick has a twofold nature: as a performance style, it is a quasi-verisimilar acting “anti-technique,” incorporating acrobatic elements. As a film genre, slapstick represents an intervention in the superfluous violence of everyday life: it functions to recuperate the spectator’s sense of his/her own potential freedom from complicity in social violence; and to make reconciliation with others possible. Nevertheless, the spectator may well reject these functions and use the slapstick film as a pleasurable outlet for his/her own sadistic energies.
Acknowledgments

This thesis could never have come to completion without the support of a uniquely constituted and remarkable committee. It relied from the outset on the unique accomplishments of my two co-supervisors, Stephen Johnson of the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, and Charlie Keil of the Cinema Studies Institute, in the University of Toronto; on Stephen’s thorough acquaintance with the scholarship on nineteenth-century popular theatre in general and on minstrelsy in particular; and on Charlie’s insights into early film. Rob King provided me with invaluable guidance and support in forming my initial reading list, in deepening my understanding of the field, and in developing my argument; and it was chiefly he whose feedback proved critical to the eventual development of my approach. Throughout a long and difficult process, and in spite of many disappointments these three scholars and teachers never wavered in their support; and words have no power to express my gratitude for their patience, which I must often have severely tested.

Among those whose generous feedback on my prospectus for this project heartened me for the task ahead were Professors Paula Sperdakos of the University of Toronto, Scarborough, and Martin Revermann of the U of T Classics department. For much kind advice and guidance with my research I am thankful to Marlis Schweitzer of York University, Nikki Cesare Schotzko of the Centre for Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies, U of T, David Klausner of the Centre for Medieval Studies, U of T, Professors Emeritus Cameron Tolton of the French Department and William Blissett of the Department of English, both of U of T, and David Mayer of the University of Manchester. Throughout the research process, I received invaluable support and encouragement from numerous friends and colleagues at the erstwhile Graduate Centre for Study of Drama in the University of Toronto: Jill Carter, Keren Zaiontz, Jamie Ashby, Leslie Barcza, Barry Freeman, Alexis Butler and Sam Stedman.

I was most fortunate to receive much gracious financial support through a succession of Ontario Graduate Scholarships, a SSHRC doctoral fellowship, and a research grant from the School of Graduate Studies that enabled me to visit archives and view films that must otherwise have remained inaccessible to me. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to a number of outstanding archivists, librarians and research assistants at the University of Toronto. Outstanding among them is Len Ferstman of the Innis College library, whose untiring helpfulness was chiefly responsible for getting the initial phase of my research off the ground.
This project could never have come close to achieving its aims, however, without the inexhaustible patience and invaluable expertise of the staff of the University of Toronto’s Media Commons working under Brock Silversides: Mike Hamilton, Guy Ziebert, Joan Links, Rachel Beattie, and the late Don Sklepovich. I should also like to offer particular thanks to the staff of the Inter-Library Loan department of the Robarts Library, and especially to Anne-Marie Crotty, who so cheerfully raided the libraries and archives of the world in attempting to comply with my many bizarre requests.

It is an honor for me to have become one of the large number of film scholars whose work has benefitted from the astonishing erudition of Steve Massa of the New York Public Library. For giving me access to a number of films which I might otherwise never have seen I am thankful to Steve, to Ben Model, and to Charles Silver of the Museum of Modern Art. I should also like to express my gratitude to Maryann Chach and Reagan Fletcher of the Shubert Archive for their kind assistance during my visit there, as well as to Samuel J. Perryman of the Library of Congress. I should also like to thank the many librarians in the U.K. who ransacked their local archives in search of helpful data in response to my call for information on knockabout performance in Great Britain: Bryony Dixon of the British Film Institute, Christian Algar and Adrian Schindler of the British Library, Anna Elson of the Museum of London, Bridget Howlett of the London Metropolitan Archives, Peter Lester of the Nottinghamshire Archives, Bridget Gillies of the University of East Anglia, Sally Harrower of the National Library of Scotland, David Weston of the University of Glasgow, Martin Humphries of the Cinema Museum, Rosie Hall of the Kirklees Archives, Sue Slide of the Nottingham Central library (for many very useful suggestions, including an extremely helpful reading list), Elizabeth Highfield of the Islington Local History Centre, Nathan Williams of the University of Reading, Angela Kale of the Scarborough Library and Information Centre, Louise-Ann Hand of the Local and Family History Library, Leeds, and Anna Fineman of the University of Bristol.

I gained numerous valuable insights that renewed my confidence in the value of this study through the performance-based research project, “Hallowe’en Vaudevilles” in which I participated in October 2009. I would like heartily to thank the excellent performers -- Nicole (Gypsy) Bischoff, Sasha Kovacs, Laura Hendrickson, Laura Lucci, Art Babayants, Julian Cervello, Rein Kartna, and Mike Reinhart – and our dedicated dramaturgical team -- Rachel Steinberg, Aynsley Moorhouse, and Colin Tierney – all of whom worked so hard to help me test the practical application of my ideas. I also owe a vast debt of gratitude to the professional
colleagues who have listened so patiently and commented with such incisive practical wisdom on the various iterations of my argument as it gradually emerged -- to Kristi Heath (Madame Buskerfly), Greg Tarlin, John McCorkle (Johnny Toronto) – and to my friends at Zero Gravity Circus: especially Eli Chernenky, Svava Stefanson, Angela Morra, Jen Georgeopolous, Britten Vincent, Ben Burland, Lindsay Stephens and Jeff Kearns.

Finally, let me pause to thank three faithful friends for their unremitting support through a long and often tortuous process: to Stacey Halloran, whose enthusiasm and acute attention so frequently emboldened me to develop what I might have dismissed as whimsies into clear and distinct ideas; to Fermen Andrew, whose admonition and encouragement to show “TOTAL DEDICATION” is not only taped to my fridge but inscribed by his example on my heart; and most of all to Julie McNeill, whose daily kindness, infinite patience, and unfailing wisdom alone could have brought me through – to all, as my words can only fail, my gratitude alone can express sufficient thanks.
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Introduction

In an obscure item in the pages of the New York Clipper for Aug. 20, 1864, the echoes of a special quality of laughter, long since lost, can dimly be heard to resound across the waste of years between now and then:

THE CIRCUS BOYS see a great deal of fun during a summer’s peregrination through the country towns. A laughable incident occurred at Oswego, N.Y., week before last, during the visit of Wheeler, Hatch and Hitchcock’s Circus to that town. Everybody that has ever been to a circus knows Charley Sherwood, and who that has seen Charley will ever forget his capital performance of Pete Jenkins? During the afternoon performance of the circus, August 5th, the ring master announced Mr. Sherwood in his metamorphose act. While the horse is waiting in the ring, Charley Sherwood, disguised as a drunken man, and with an innumerable number of clothes on, stumbles into the ring from the audience part of the house, falling over the banks, and requesting the master of the circle to let him ride (hic) that horse. With a laudable intent to preserve the peace, Officer McNamara, of Oswego, who happened to be present, immediately stepped into the ring and laid his hand on the inebriate’s shoulder, and requested him to “come along.” This the inebriate (Charley) refused to do, when a regular rough and tumble engagement took place. Officer McNamara tackled Charley and both went down together. The struggle for mastery then became very exciting. Sometimes one was on top, and sometimes the other. The sawdust flew in all directions, and the audience, thinking it all right, went into convulsions of laughter. At this juncture Officer Keenan stepped into the ring and, after a good deal of difficulty, got speech with McNamara, telling him to “hold on, it’s one of the actors,” whereupon Mac let go his hold and retired amid such roars of laughter as was (sic) never before
heard, even in a circus tent. The scene, taken as a whole, will long be remembered by those who were fortunate to behold it.¹

The superlatives that the anonymous columnist is employing here, are highly revealing—less, perhaps, as objective descriptions of the event, than for the characteristically nineteenth-century understanding of laughter they reflect. In the reportage of knockabout comedy performances in the concert saloons, music halls, opera houses and vaudeville theatres of the age, contemporary commentators repeatedly emphasize four characteristics of knockabout laughter. i) It is—or it is supposed to be—riotous “from beginning to end” (rather than building up incrementally).² ii) The audience’s laughter is typically compared to some sort of expression of extreme animal pain, by far the most often expressed in “roars of laughter,”³ but also in

² “For what is called “knockabout” business these gentlemen are unrivalled. From the beginning to the end of the sketch laughter and cheers alternatively prevailed . . .” (*The Era*, Aug. 26, 1877 “North Woolwich Gardens” p. 4); “Dermott and Doyle keep the audience in one continuous roar of laughter” (*Era*, Jan 13, 1883, p. 27); “… the whole farce goes like wildfire, and is a scream of laughter from beginning to end . . .” (*Era*, Aug. 16, 1884, p. 14 “Advertisements – The Forresters”); “The “business” of Ferguson and Mack alone, in their respective parts of Alderman M’Carthy and Senator Mulligan, is so full of downright drollery as to keep the audience in constant laughter . . .” (*Era*, Apr. 10, 1886, “Provincial Theatricals,” p. 16), etc.
³ “The Irish-American comedy McMarthy’s Mishaps (sic) . . . provokes roars of laughter from beginning to end.” (*Era* Aug. 14, 1886, p. 16); “… further practical joking in a comic boxing act, elicited roars of laughter from the audience” (*Era*, Nov. 20, 1886, p. 10); “The Bros. Lang, Knockabout Artistes, Evoke Roars Of Laughter . . .” (*Era*, Nov. 27, 1886, p. 17); “Ferguson and Mack, whose knockabout business is provocative of roars of laughter . . .” (*Era*, Dec. 25, 1886, p. 10); “Ray and Robins are great favourites, their clever knockabout business creating roars of laughter . . .” (*Era*, May 28, 1887, p. 19); “The Brothers Nixon cause roars of laughter in their knockabout business . . .” (*Era*, Sept. 10, 1887, p. 19); “(T)he Two M’Cormacks, knockabout comedians and dancers, keep the audience in roars of laughter.” (*Era*, Oct. 29, 1887, p. 16); The Brothers Muldoon, Irish, Dutch, and knockabout entertainers . . . for twenty minutes kept the audience in a roar of laughter. . .” (*Era*, June 9, 1888, p. 23); “(T)hose who enjoy the vagaries of knockabout comedians are well catered for by the Brothers Passmore, whose eccentric acting provoked roars of laughter . . .” (*Era*, Nov. 10, 1888, p. 27); “Ashley and Beach, knockabout comedians, cause roars of laughter with their boxing act. . .” (*Era*, Nov. 10, 1888, p. 22); “Elliott and Benson, the Yorkshire Tykes, cause roars of laughter by their clever knockabout business . . .” (*Era* June 22, 1889, p. 17); “An extra attraction is Rae and Weston, knockabout bicyclists, whose clever feats evoke roars of laughter.” (*Era*, Sat. Jan. 18, 1890, p. 19); “THE BROTHERS M’GRATH . . . are capital, and their knockabout bit being so evidently dangerous to their own lives and limbs that the house is kept in roars of laughter.—South Shields Gazette, Jan. 28th 1890 . . .” (*Era*, Feb. 8, 1890 p. 26); “By such simple expedients roars of hearty laughter are created . . .” (*Era*, Jan. 3, 1891, p. 16); “The Negro knockabout business of Messrs Lisburn and O’Marr causes roars of laughter. . .” (*Era* Jan. 25, 1890, p. 15); “The stars of the evening, Weber and Fields, introduced a number of new tricks in their poolroom act, and with their dialect contortions, interspersed with real knockabout work, kept the house in roars of laughter.” (*New York Clipper* Feb. 24, 1894, p. 818); “KENDALL IS THE STAR. His Presence on the Stage Is Accompanied by a Continual Roar of Laughter” (*The Saint Paul Globe*, May 26, 1902, p. 4); “Dr. Burdette’s climax and finish struck the crowd as quite the funniest part of his humorous talk. He was greeted with roars of laughter.” (“Burdette on Laughter,” *Los Angeles Herald* March 13, 1907, p. 5); “There is an element of pathos in the drama that is not overworked and the comedy is not of the “slap-stick” order, but is clean, refined, yet the situations never fail to bring roars of hearty laughter.” (*Omaha Daily Bee* April 19, 1908, Editorial Section, p. 6)
“shrieks,”⁴ “shouts,”⁵ “screams,”⁶ and “yells.”⁷ iii) Knackabout laughter is visceral – in the language employed by British reviewers, “heartly,”⁸ in the American argot of the period it is

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⁴ “In a wrestling match between a couple of wild Irishmen their antics are indescribably comical, and, like the rest present on the occasion of our visit, we don’t mind confessing that we fairly shrieked with laughter.” (The Era, August 8, 1880, p. 4); “Shrieks of laughter greet the Bros. Armstrong, Irish knockabout comedians . . .” (Era, Sept. 11, 1886, p. 18); “Comedy of the slapstick variety that is said to extract shrieks of laughter from an audience will be given by the Bowers, Walters and Crooker team . . .” (The Washington Times May, 14, 1908, p. 6); etc.

⁵ “(Petrie and Fish) also found their reward in repeated shouts of hilarity and in enthusiastic cheering. . . .” (Era, Sept. 29, 1878, p. 12); “(T)he knackabout doings of Messrs Mason and Collins have caused shouts of delight that must have been highly gratifying to those clever artists” (Era, Feb. 22, 1880, p. 10); “(T)he Two Armstrongs (George and Bernard) occupied a prominent place, and raised shouts of laughter by their marvelous knackabout fun . . .” (Era, Apr. 16, 1887, p. 16); “The knackabout business of Messrs Regan and Ryan has been received with shouts of laughter . . .” (Era, Jan. 13, 1894, p. 7); “(L)ast, but not least, Sipple and Dickens (whose novel Negro and knackabout business was received with shouts of laughter)” (Era Sun. Aug. 22, 1880, p. 7); “The eccentric knackabout entertainment of the Two Mikes was received with shouts of laughter . . .” (Era May 22, 1886 “Amusements in Canada,” p. 17); “(T)he Two Armstrongs (George and Bernard) occupied a prominent place, and raised shouts of laughter by their marvelous knackabout fun . . .” (Era, Apr. 16, 1887, p. 16), etc.

⁶ “The Brothers Clayton (knackabout artists) produce screams of laughter . . .” (Era, Jan. 15, 1881, p. 9); “Of the Claytons it is only necessary to remark that . . . the whole farce goes like wildfire, and is a scream of laughter from beginning to end . . .” (Era, Sat. Aug. 16, 1884, p. 14); “THE CANTERBURY . . . The First-Rate Bill Was Completed By Ferguson And Mack, Whose Knockabout Business And Burlesque Of The Acrobat’s Art Fairly Made The Audience Scream With Laughter, And Sent Everybody Away In The Merriest Of Of (Sic) Moods . . .” (Era, Oct. 11, 1884 p. 10); “Here there is a diversion by two young actors, Messrs Spry and Monti, who put an abundance of humour into step-dancing, knock about, and embellish a humorous ditty by much playful “gag,” causing screams of laughter. (Era, Jan. 9 1886, p. 22); “‘The Two Macs’ set the house screaming with laughter by their quaint wheezes, their very realistic knackabout business, and their burlesque acrobatic display.—the Referee, Feb. 28th, 1886” (Era, Mar. 6, 1886, p. 23); “‘After a pianoforte-banjo solo by Mr E.D. Ward the Two Macs appeared, and in their Hibernian knackabout grotesque eccentricities set their hearers screaming with merriment’” (Era, June 26, 1886, p. 16); “Mr J.M. Colvil’s . . . burlesque humour finds plenty of scope, and his knackabout business with Mr. Jake Eduard . . . causes screams of laughter” (Era, Jan. 7, 1888, p. 18); “I never saw this screeamingly funny “knackabout pair” (the Two Macs) . . . without rolling off my seat with unquenchable laughter. (Era, Feb. 11, 1888, p. 22); “(S)creams of laughter reward the knackabout antics of Shipley and Boston” (Era, Jan. 23, 1892, p. 18); “(P)leasant it was to hear their hearty laughter at the evolutions of the Coco troupe. These four clever performers do some screamingly funny business, when the cook and his spouse are sadly tormented by the tricks of the two mischievous and agile animals” (Era, Mar. 5, 1892, p. 30); “THE CALIFORNIAN GIRLS. The Greatest Eccentric Act ever seen . . . Fifteen Minutes’ Screams of Laughter.” (Era, Jan. 13, 1894, p. 24)

⁷ “THE THREE CARNOS... Still the rate of Paris with Our New White Act, roars, screams, yells, Performing at the Leading Hall of Paris, the ELDORADO . . .” (Era, May 14, 1887, p. 23); “The Merry Martells, the knackabout swells, With Dancing a treat, and voices like bells./At the STAR, SHEFFIELD, Nightly, are causing such yells . . .” (Era, June 25, 1887, p. 23); “ECLIPSE THREE, Greatest Knockabout Acrobatic Comedians, Vocalists, Dancers Extant. Roars, Screams, and Yells. Finish To-night Marine Palace, Margate . . .” “The yells of delight from the audience when the gentleman . . . comes a cropper on the stage, compel old staggers even, like myself, to laugh in chorus . . .” (Era, Feb. 8, 1890, p. 24); “Johnny Ray had nothing new to offer, being the same funny little Irishman as of yore, but every expression of the face or movement of the body was greeted with the most uproarious yells of laughter and approval.” (Evening Star (Washington, D.C.) Dec. 5, 1899, p. 12); etc.

⁸ “Messrs Maccabe and Macnally . . . sang, acted, and danced cleverly, but their banging, tumbling, and turning over elicited the most hearty expressions of surprise and delight from the spectators . . .” (Era, Sun. Apr. 20 1879, p. 4); “The Two Mikes, Irish comedians and “knackabout” artists, had an excellent reception, and caused hearty laughter . . .” (Era, Aug 2, 1884, p. 14); “These gentlemen (Messrs Rice, Melrose, and Lovell) met with the reward that their clever business deserved, laughter hearty and unchecked becoming general.” (Era, Nov. 13, 1886, p. 10); “Ferguson and Mack too, are tolerably familiar to us, but we could not refrain nor could the audience either, from giving way to hearty hilarity at their oddities . . .” (Era, Jan. 22, 1887, p. 10); Messrs Lisburn and O’Marr, Negro grotesque knackabout performers and dancers, win many a hearty laugh. . .” (Era May 7, 1887, p. 18); “The Two
known as the “guffaw”\(^9\) -- it proceeds from the body outwards, sometimes independently of the spectator’s will, disrupting their autonomy;\(^10\) so that consequently iv) knockabout laughter is often depicted as a quasi-ecstatic experience, sometimes analogous to an epileptic fit,\(^11\) like the “convulsions” into which the circus audience is sent by Officer McNamara’s intervention in Charley Sherwood’s act. But the effect is ultimately benign, analogous to that of an exorcism, and the only appropriate response is to be grateful. “Fun, Jan. 20\(^{th}\), 1886, states:-- I am personally indebted to the Two Macs in a portion of their ‘assault and battery’ act, for the heartiest, healthiest, and most soul-satisfying laugh I have enjoyed for years. Their knockabout business is both expert and funny, and their burlesque tumbling would make an anchorite roar and reduce a dyspeptic to helpless cries for mercy . . . “\(^{12}\)“For mine own part,” says another British reviewer, “I owe a great debt of gratitude to the Two Macs. They have provoked in me more hearty laughter than I have derived from any cause since Mr Nunquam bought his black-and-tan topcoat.”\(^{13}\)

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Mikes in their knockabout entertainment create hearty laughter . . .” (Era, May 23, 1891, p. 15); “The Oscars, knockabout Artistes, evoke hearty laughter . . .” (Era, Aug. 13, 1892, p. 15); etc.

9 “When I see one of these honest old gags, I know it’s the place to laugh, and I cut loose a guffaw that gives me an appetite and saves doctor bills.” (The Washington Herald, Oct. 9, 1907, p. 6); “Its humor is not of the sort that evokes the same sort of guffaw as when one comedian knocks another down with a stuffed club, or when an Irish woman sticks a wet mop in the rent collector’s face.” (The Washington Herald Nov. 6, 1910, Second Part, p.4); ““Har! Har! Har!” You laugh once more the cosmic laugh of a schoolboy. You lean back in your chair, throw back your head and howl. The tears run down your cheeks and your midriff aches with the violence of your merriment. All around you sounds the deep booming of a thousand whole-souled guffaws.” (The Washington Herald, Oct. 15, 1909, p. 6), etc.

10 E.g., “Never in all my experience of pantomimes have I seen any performance that so arbitrarily and irresistibly compelled my mirth as the performance of the Two Macs in this ‘Aladdin.’” (Era, April 10, 1889, p. 22)

11 “The audience goes into ecstacies of laughter at every rap. – Manchester Guardian, December 18\(^{th}\), 1883 . . . It is almost impossible to write about them without laughing. It is certainly impossible to see them without unrestrained merriment.” (Era, Dec. 22, 1883, p. 19); “The basis of (the Two Macs’) humour is serious drollery ; they knock one another down with face as grave as a judge, their business is neat, and their imitation in pure pantomime of the feats of an acrobatic troupe convulses the audience with laughter” (Era, Jan. 30 1886, p. 22); “Great Excitement. BELFAST convulsed with laughter and astonished at TURLE and VOLTO . . . the Wondrous Knockabout Masher Clowns, Grotesques, Gymnasts, &c. . . “ (Era, Mar. 13, 1886, p. 22); “The way they make people laugh is also beyond the powers of imagination of all who have not experienced the “fits” caused by witnessing the ridiculously comical performance of Messrs Ferguson and Mack.” (Era, Oct. 23, 1886, “Advertisements”, p. 5); “These old friends of the music hall public (The Two Macs) seem to be quite at home on the burlesque stage, and their knockabout business excites at the Gaiety, as elsewhere, uncontrollable fits of laughter” (Era, Dec, 31 1887, p. 11); “I never saw this screamingly funny “knockabout pair” (the Two Macs) . . . without rolling off my seat with unquenchable laughter” (Era, Feb. 4, 1888, p. 22);

12 Era, Jan. 30 1886, p. 22

13 Era, Apr. 20, 1889, p. 22
The dominance of knockabout as the paradigmatic form of physical low comedy reaches its zenith in the early 1890s; by the first decade of the twentieth century low comedy begins to take on a new form, emblematized in a new kind of symbol. The transition can be seen coming as early as 1899:

Speak well, if you will, of the terse epigram,
    The sparkling original jest;
The quip or the gag that would make a horse laugh—
    They’re not very much at their best.
The god that presides over laughter and mirth
    Has saved something else for the call--
Though epigram, jest, quip or gag may be nice,
    The slapstick goes better than all . . .

Let us worship and praise at the altar of art,
    Let us hail the superior wit;
Let us root for the highest ideals we can find,
    But don’t let that fool us a bit.
For your audience grave or your audience gay
    The subtlest of humor ignores,
Or smiles at true wit in a half-hearted way—
    But welcomes the slapstick with roars.14

Within this new laughter economy the guffaw receives maximum purchase as a kind of inverted “concrete absolute” of which the slapstick is the symbol:

Unless you have seen a true artist wield the slapstick you have never fathomed the ultimate depths of comedy. Going further, it may be said with assurance that you have never really laughed.

Behold the assistant comedian in the center of the stage, provoking

14 Record-union (Sacramento, Cal.) June 18, 1899, p. 7.
the willing snicker with his stale wheezes. Suddenly, from the third groove, the chief comedian emerges, sneaking softly and with slapstick in hand. Snorts of anticipation are shot through the snickers. The assistant comedian keeps on; the chief comedian sneaks closer. Then, while the whole house hold breath, the slapstick rises in the air and begins to describe its exquisite parabola. A half-second of dead silence and –bing! bang! bing!

“Har! Har! Har!” You laugh once more the cosmic laugh of a schoolboy. You lean back in your chair, throw back your head and howl. The tears run down your cheeks and your midriff aches with the violence of your merriment. All around you sounds the deep booming of a thousand whole-souled guffaws. The fat man across the aisle has fallen out of his seat . . . 15

But there is a pervasive irony about the employment of this symbol. The first two decades of the twentieth century see a re-evaluation of the place of laughter in popular culture which takes place at the intersection of a number of macro-cultural concerns. Pre-eminent among these is the question of the social “work” which is accomplished by laughter. This concern is connected with what I shall refer to presently as the “cultural hierarchy” and “universality” discourses in a contemporary observation on the American sense of humor by the British humorist Jerome K. Jerome (made in 1906):

There is a danger that the stage is coarsening humor. I went to one of the New York vaudeville theaters not long ago, and during the course of the performance an actor came on – doubtless a capable representative of his craft – who gave a very delicate recital, full of real humor and of witty points. This performer but mildly amused the audience; he was merely tolerated. Following on his heels came a company who proceeded to engage themselves simply in

‘knock-about business.’ One man sat down on a bandbox and wiped his face with a feather boa, or a hat, I forget which, and tipped up against a sideboard and brought down a lot of crockery, and so on.

This went on for about twenty minutes, and the whole of the audience was delighted. From all appearances they were intelligent, educated people. It was undoubtedly a first-class theater—if I may so assume from the fact that I was sitting in a dollar seat. The audience was composed of professional people—well-to-do tradesmen and business men. But they did not seem to enjoy the humor of the preceding actor, which was real humor. They preferred the ‘knock-about business.’ They roared over it. They doubled themselves up with laughter.

I think the American indulges too much in humor. He really absorbs too much humor. It is like a man who has come to drink champagne for every meal.16

During this period, the term “slapstick” is overwhelmingly used as a term of opprobrium: it stands for “low” cultural practices that require re-alignment within a newly emerging social framework. Numerous articles during the period, however, turn to practical authorities in order to rehabilitate slapstick laughter. “When I see one of these honest old gags,” writes an American commentator, “I know it’s the place to laugh, and I cut loose a guffaw that gives me an appetite and saves doctor bills.”17 A 1914 article in the Washington Times by Dr. Leonard Keene Hirshbert, A.B.M.A., M.D. (Johns Hopkins) proclaims “Why Laughter is a Tonic; How Smiles Bring Vigour:”

… Laughter is associated with growth and avoirdupois. It is synonymous with vitality, vigor, and strength. Each tiny snigger,

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titter, giggle, cackle, chuckle, smile, grin, chirp bark, exultation, and rollick has a health value.

Their physiological victories are no less renowned than roars, side-splitting guffaws, paeans of jubilation, and the wildest revels of slap-stick comedy. To tone up a few little muscles of the mouth and lips, to exercise the skill of the eyelids, eyebrows, cheeks and chin is as important as to move the stomach walls in waves …¹⁸

By 1947 the paradigm for laughter has markedly changed from the undifferentiated uproar that greeted Charley Sherwood’s Metamorphose Act. In his seminal elegy for the slapstick film, “Comedy’s Greatest Era,” James Agee speaks of slapstick laughter as a kind of modern industrial commodity, regulated and ordered into standardized grades like a set of shoe sizes:

In the language of screen comedians four of the main grades of laugh are the titter, the yowl, the belly laugh and the boffo. The titter is just a titter. The yowl is a runaway titter. Anyone who has ever had the pleasure knows all about a belly laugh. The boffo is the laugh that kills. An ideally good gag, perfectly constructed and played, would bring the victim up this ladder of laughs by cruelly controlled degrees to the top rung, and would then proceed to wobble, shake, wave and brandish the ladder until he groaned for mercy. Then, after the shortest possible time out for recuperation, he would feel the first wicked tickling of the comedian’s whip once more and start up a new ladder.¹⁹

In the succeeding paragraph, Agee goes on to suggest that the deterioration of screen comedy in the following decades can be quantified in terms of the numbers of each type of laugh that could be procured in a given film.

Agee’s description is organized around a perceptive analogy with a profound metaphor at its root. As the events of the film are to the silent physical comedian, so is the comedian to the spectator: the film operates through a structured metonymical system which bridges the boundary inserted between performer and spectator in the form of the screen while at the same time preserving the autonomy of each. Meanwhile, the function of the film is like that of the metamorphose act, only more so: the film itself is an act of violent transformation, of unrestrained chastisement; it doesn’t simply shake spectators up – it terrorizes them. But, as with knockabout, despite its surface horrors, the violence of the slapstick film is benevolently intended, uplifting and pleasurable in its effect – indeed, its fourfold degrees represent a kind of Jacob’s ladder of cacchinatorial exaltation.

In this thesis I shall attempt to understand the transition from the “knockabout laughter” of the nineteenth-century theatre to the “slapstick laughter” of the twentieth-century cinema and to suggest that it has a place within a wider “history of laughter” which is an important, though under-investigated, aspect of the cultural history of the West. My approach will be that of a particularly eclectic form of Performance Studies, drawing on the methods and insights of a variety of disciplines, and seeking to synthesize them within what I call a “histrionic” (or “actorly”) perspective. This is one which is ultimately concerned with the pragmatics of performance and reception: with the raw materials of performance, beginning with the performer’s instrument itself; with the conditions which govern what can be done with it – with what can or cannot be said and what can or cannot be shown at any particular historical juncture; and with the cultural function of performance itself. But in the present instance its major concern is with the relationship(s) in knockabout and slapstick between laughter and violence in their various forms.

Historians of religion such as Ingvild Gilhus20 point to a long development from the derisive and threatening, but also potently generative laughter of the Gods of the ancient Near East, through a low point during the classical and early Christian periods when the creative and

curative powers of laughter became demythologized, subjected to ideological restraints and forced into the service of various systems of thought and belief. For Gilhus, this low point was succeeded by an emancipation of laughter beginning during the medieval period followed by a gradual appreciation of its significance, leading to its remythologization and the rediscovery of its salvific properties in the modern era.²¹

This account is broadly consistent with what has been the seminal approach to body comedy in the field of literary theory since the 1970s. The “history of laughter” as Mikhail Bakhtin conceives it in Rabelais and his World consists of four main periods. First was the classical period, during which the “Hippocratic novel” describing the cynical laughter of Democritus, Aristotle’s remarks in the De Anima about laughter as a distinctively human capacity, and the works of Lucian, laid the foundations for a ”sleeper” view of the philosophical function of laughter which would not re-emerge and be coherently formulated until the Renaissance. Second was the medieval period, during which laughter was strenuously repudiated by the Catholic Church, but functioned unofficially as the “social consciousness of all the people.”²² Towards the end of the Middle Ages, laughter began to emerge from the obscurity of popular culture and to exercise an influence on high culture during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

The Renaissance conception of laughter can be roughly described as follows: Laughter has a deep philosophical meaning; it is one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man; it is a peculiar point of view relative to the world; the world is seen anew, no less (and perhaps more) profoundly than when seen from the serious standpoint. Therefore, laughter is just as admissible in great literature, posing universal problems, as seriousness. Certain essential aspects of the world are accessible only to laughter.²³

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²¹ Of course, the structure of this development is a familiar one: it’s the characteristic U-shaped structure of Biblical narrative as described by Northrop Frye in The Great Code: The Bible and Literature (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982). C.f. especially Chapter 7 (pp. 169 – 198).
This flowering, however, was all too brief—it lasted for only about 50 years in each of the European countries it visited. Its effects were transformational, most notably in France, where Rabelais was its prime exponent. All too quickly, however, a process of “degeneration” set in which resulted in a new attitude characteristic of the seventeenth century:

Laughter is not a universal, philosophical form. It can refer only to individual and individually typical phenomena of social life. That which is important and essential cannot be comical. Neither can history and persons representing it—kings, generals, heroes—be shown in a comic aspect. The sphere of the comic is narrow and specific (private and social vices); the essential truth about the world and about man cannot be told in the language of laughter. Therefore, the place of laughter in literature belongs only to the low genres, showing the life of private individuals and the inferior social levels. Laughter is a light amusement or a form of salutary social punishment of corrupt and low persons.  

The “degradation” of laughter continues through the Romantic and modern periods, culminating in later theories like Bergson’s “which bring out mostly its negative functions.”

Bakhtin’s essentially literary-critical approach in Rabelais carries with it a somewhat monolithic view of laughter that elides many crucial distinctions. The one I am principally concerned with here is the distinction between the laughter which greets verbal humor and that which greets physical comedy. This distinction is one which is critical to understanding the emergence of slapstick:

The writers have written good lines many times,
    They’ve done all they might to amuse;
We hear their repeated attempts to be bright,
    But seldom indeed we enthuse.
The brightest and best of the things ever writ,
    The marvels that humorists make,

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Are all very well in their way, but of course,  
The slapstick acquires the cake.\textsuperscript{26}

The rise of knockabout comedy and the eventual emergence of slapstick took place within a critical historical context: they were in large part in response to a widespread loss of faith in the power of words and the ideological structures that were imbricated in literacy. In the United States, this loss of faith in the word and a correspondingly increased emphasis on embodied meaning was dramatically expressed on the occasion of the “Sabine Controversy” – a polemic which broke out in 1871 in response to the decision of the Rev. W.T. Sabine of the Church of the Atonement on Madison Ave., to perform the funeral ceremony of George Holland, a well-known and popular actor who had died in poverty in New York City the previous December, on the grounds that the business of the theatre was inimical to that of the church. Of the many voices raised in defiance of Sabine the most influential was that of Mark Twain, in a column in the monthly magazine \textit{The Galaxy} entitled “The Indignity Put Upon the Remains of George Holland by the Rev. Mr. Sabine.”\textsuperscript{27} For Twain, first of all, popular culture functions not as a supplement to religious institutions in edifying the social life of the people; it does the vast bulk of the work:

The pulpit teaches assemblages of people twice a week – nearly two hours altogether – and does what it can in that time. The theatre teaches large audiences seven times a week – 28 or 30 hours altogether; and the novels and newspaper plead and argue, and illustrate, stir, move, thrill, thunder, urge, persuade and supplicate at the feet of millions and millions of people every single day, and all day long, and far into the night; and so these vast agencies till nine-tenths of the vineyard, and the pulpit the other tenth.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Record-union} (Sacramento, Cal.) June 18, 1899, p. 7.  
\textsuperscript{27} Twain’s whole article can be found online at \url{http://www.twainquotes.com/Galaxy/gindex.html}. It was reprinted in the \textit{Clipper} for Feb. 4, 1871, and it is from this reprinting that I have worked.
Conventional religious instruction is hampered in its fulfillment of its mission because it is boring; and it is boring because it deals pedantically in language – in terms and concepts:

I am aware that the pulpit does its excellent one tenth (and credits itself with it now and then, though most of the time a press of business causes it to forget it); I am aware that in its honest and well meaning way it bores the people with uninflammable truisms about doing good; bores them with correct compositions on charity; bores them, chloroforms them, stupefies them with argumentative mercy without a flaw in the grammar, or an emotion which the minister could put in the right place if he turned his back and took his finger off the manuscript. And in doing these things the pulpit is doing its duty, and let us believe that it is likewise doing its best, and doing it in the most harmless and respectable way.

Popular performances, on the other hand, are efficacious precisely because they are exciting, and they are exciting because they are embodied: because, performed in a spirit of goodwill, they inscribe that will on the nervous systems of their auditors:

… for fifty years it was George Holland’s business, on the stage, to make his audience go and do right, and be just, merciful, and charitable – because by his living, breathing, feeling pictures, he showed them what it was to do these things and how to do them, and how instant and ample was the reward!28

With the development of the twentieth-century audio-visual “text” and its thousandfold extension of the reach of embodied meaning, the cultural efficacy of physical comedy approaches its historical zenith: since the publication of Agee’s essay, critics and philosophers from Walter Kerr29 to Lisa Trahair30 have discovered in the work of the leading slapstick

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comedians social efficacy and philosophical meaning of a high degree of profundity. This zenith comes perhaps exactly at the nadir of the influence of the verbally comedic. To make this observation is to complexify the notion of a “history of laughter” in a critical respect. It behooves the student of laughter to inquire into the reciprocal relationship between the efficacy of the laughter which greets body-comedy and that which attends the comedy of the word, and to question whether they may not be proportionate in any complex way.

The second respect in which, for the purposes of the present discussion, Bakhtin’s notion of “carnival laughter” is of limited usefulness to the construction of a sufficiently nuanced “history of laughter” is with regard to the distinctive common object of knockabout and slapstick foolery – the problem of violence, which leads the discussion onto potentially polemical grounds. In accounting for the efficacy of the laughter attending body-comedy, much depends on our assumptions regarding whether the world is becoming a more or a less violent place; and this in turn depends on our assumptions as to what constitutes violence. The body of work that bears perhaps the greatest promise for the empirical study of relations between laughter and violence arises in the discipline of sociology. Quantitative research has demonstrated that the centuries that have transpired since the Middle Ages have brought with them a striking development whose implications for a history of laughter are far-reaching; and that is the history of violence – not merely in Western society, but in Western culture at large. Drawing on Ted Robert Gurr’s pioneering 1981 study of violence in England$^{31}$ and on subsequent validations of Gurr’s conclusions by specific empirical studies,$^{32}$ French historian Robert Muchembled$^{33}$ has


summarized this development as follows: the late Middle Ages demonstrated what for us today are appallingly high rates of civil violence, exemplified by statistics ranging from 6 to 150 murders annually per 100,000 people. But in the brief span of the years from 1600 to 1650 throughout Europe, this level of violence suddenly fell by half. Across the period from 1650 to 1960 the incidence of violence continued to pursue a steady decline until the statistics had come to represent one tenth of even this reduced figure. The years since 1960, however, have demonstrated a slight, but unmistakable, increase.

The explanation for the decline in violence over this period is to be found first of all in a general pacification of human relations resulting from increasingly stringent conscience-formation in men and women; and, more specifically, in a radical change in fundamental concepts of masculinity -- particularly in changes to masculine notions of honour accompanying a long evolution in the means by which the often explosive energies of young men have been contained and redirected into constructive pursuits. According to Muchembled, from the Middle Ages down to the present day, the statistics show that the perpetrators of violent crimes have been overwhelmingly young men of between eighteen-to-twenty and thirty years of age. A fundamental shift in the perception of youthful male violence began with radical changes in judicial practice throughout Western Europe during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. As the medieval system of plaintiff-versus-defendant was replaced by a system in which the state undertook all prosecutions, so also local judiciaries, which had formerly relied predominantly on fines in exercising their authority, came increasingly to rely on what Foucault would call the carceral system, and to avail themselves of the penal prerogatives of the crown. As absolutist monarchies like that of the Bourbons in France introduced increasingly repressive penal regimes, featuring the spectacular cautionary drama of grisly public executions, homicide and


35 For example, the execution of Damiens, so ironically eulogized in Peter Weiss’ Marat/Sade.
infanticide, offenses which had formerly been pardoned with great regularity, came to be regarded as inexpiable crimes. In a Europe ravaged by the effects of war, a settled phobic attitude to the sight of blood gave rise to a powerful taboo on its shedding. The year 1650 represents a turning point in the history of violence – the point at which Western cultural authorities began to make a universal respect for human life – rather than tribal codes of honour - the fundamental principle of civil conduct. At the same time, popular morality begins to construct the two genders in new and different ways. In this way the modern state acquired the power to condition the human subject by compelling men and women to internalize in the form of private conscience what had originated as state-enforced controls on the display of aggression in public. This cultural advance was further entrenched with the institutionalization during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of standing police and military forces.

Muchembled’s approach, of course, depends heavily on Norbert Elias’ theory of the Civilizing Process as a corelate of the progressive monopolization of the legitimate use of violence by governments since the Middle Ages – an account which in turn relies on the highly influential sociological theory of Max Weber. The theory of the Civilizing Process has itself been highly influential, and has been developed particularly by the school of sociology at the University of Leicester. According to the theory of the Leicester School, civil violence is of two major kinds, depending on the purposes for which acts of violence are performed: “instrumental” violence, in which acts of violence are directed at the production of real social change; and “expressive” violence, in which the same acts are directed towards the articulation of social concerns. The concept of expressive violence in turn has been the foundation of the Leicester School’s ground-breaking work on the development of modern sporting culture. It is no surprise, therefore to find that the theory of the Civilizing Process is premised on a radical decline in the incidence of material violence since the Middle Ages, and the sublimation of violent energies into popular culture.

A contrary view is provided, however, in the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu, which suggests that “symbolic” violence in Western society has increased in proportion as the incidence of material violence has declined; and for the same reasons. Bourdieu’s theory, which reaches its primary articulation in Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste, like Elias’, derives in principle from Weber’s theory of the governmental exercise of monopoly

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control over the means of violence, a principle which in its turn is related to the monopoly control of taxation. These twin capabilities are indeed the tools by means of which the governing power maintains external security, internal pacification, and economic growth. For Elias, the sign of a government’s effectiveness is the propagation of steadily lengthening “chains of interdependency” between the constitutive estates of society: the growth of divisions of labour, the increasing monetization of social relationships; the increasing pressure towards social responsibility on the part of the upper classes of society from those beneath them, called “functional democratization,” and, as the ultimate result of the latter, the eventual decrease in central control of the force and tax monopolies and their increasing accessibility to the public.

For Bourdieu, it is precisely in the exertion of pressure between social agents that “symbolic violence” consists; and it is in its symbolic form that violence, emblematized in the form of governmental coercion, is universally distributed. For Bourdieu, society consists in a social space throughout which individuals are distributed according to the sum total of their economic and cultural capital, as well as according to the proportions in which they are endowed with each kind of capital. The differing endowments of social subjects impose on them a “sense of one’s place” within the overall system, which is at the same time a sense of the place of all others. In the form of personal habitus, this sense inscribes itself in their behaviors, and determines their personal and group identities in terms of clusters of “properties.” It is through the distribution of these properties that the social world is organized into groups, divided by class, race, age group, gender, and so on, and defined by social distance. But the social order is objectively indeterminate. Consequently, the quest for personal and social identity – and autonomy -- inevitably locks both individuals and groups in “the symbolic struggle of all against all” for the right to determine that order and “to impose the legitimate vision of the world” on others. Thus, for Bourdieu, “(t)here are always, in any society, conflicts between symbolic powers that aim at imposing the vision of legitimate divisions, that is of constructing groups.”

The imposition of one vision on another is symbolic violence; every attempt to define one’s own place necessarily involves the allocation of a certain place to some other which must then become a subject of conflict. The capacity to perpetrate symbolic violence is symbolic power; the state, which also has a monopoly over legitimate symbolic violence (expressed through the prerogative of “official nomination,” i.e., the ability to confer social position) is the fountainhead

of symbolic power and the referee of the innumerable conflicts that arise ceaselessly between
individuals and groups in the effort to deconstruct and reconstruct the social world in order to
establish autonomous identities:

The social world may be uttered and constructed in different ways
according to different principles of vision and division – for
example, economic divisions and ethnic divisions … the potency
of economic and social differences is never so great that one
cannot organize agents on the basis of other principles of division
– ethnic, religious, or national ones, for instance … 38

For Bourdieu, “symbolic efficacy” rests on two conditions: the possession of symbolic
capital (i.e., the economic or cultural capital necessary to exert influence); and the degree to
which the vision in question is founded in an underlying (though invisible) reality. The ability to
impose a vision is the same thing as the ability to construct a (social) reality. “In this sense,
symbolic power is a power of consecration or revelation, the power to consecrate or to reveal
things that are already there.”39 The tool by means of which social power is exerted – and
consequently the preferred instrument of symbolic violence – is language. For Bourdieu,
ultimately, “Symbolic power is the power to make things with words.”40 This principle has a
corollary which is of the utmost moment for physical comedy: even artistic works of the highest
legitimacy – which also work at consecration and revelation – must work in the service of
symbolic power, and tacitly function as acts of symbolic violence.

The primary way in which words can function to this end is by constructing the
differences which distinguish things (especially social agents) from other things:

Social space … presents itself in the form of agents endowed with
different properties that are systematically linked among
themselves … These properties, when they are perceived by agents
endowed with the pertinent categories of perception … function, in
the very reality of social life, as signs: differences function as

distinctive signs and as signs of distinction, positive or negative

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But the agent endowed in the highest degree with the “pertinent categories of perception” to appreciate and mobilize the signifying function of social differences is, of course, the artist, and in particular the actor -- the raw material of whose work is precisely other people’s perceptions of difference (as the performer is able to evoke them). The actor, then, is the social agent most uniquely qualified to intervene in the exercise of symbolic violence – to serve, or to subvert it.

It’s relatively easy to see how complementary the notions of “chains of interdependence” and “symbolic violence” are. As the concatenation of interdependent functions within society becomes increasingly more complex, social relations must inevitably require ongoing readjustment – every readjustment requiring a renegotiation of the balance of power within each connection within a chain. Indeed, the “symbolic struggle of all against all” seems like the inevitable dark side of the Civilizing Process as it begins to operate on the mass scale of post-manorial society. Bourdieu’s notion of “symbolic violence” is an essential complement to the Leicester school’s ideas of “instrumental violence” and “expressive violence.” It will not surprise us, then, to learn that the changes in the laughter which greeted the fictive violence of knockabout and slapstick comedy, may have been correlates of changes in real violence of two kinds during the period from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries: i) a decrease in instrumental and/or expressive violence; and ii) a complementary (and perhaps even corresponding) increase in symbolic violence.

The theory of Distinction and the theory of the Civilizing Process, then, represent two indispensible, mutually complementary optics by means of which we may examine the way in which the violence of the real world and the laughter of violent play interact. This seems all the more likely in view of the fact that both sociological approaches to violence have strong affinities with performance studies, relying heavily on the complementary concepts of performance and embodiment which are central concerns of the present study.

The account furnished by the theory of the Civilizing Process supplies us with a particularly useful optic by means of which to interpret the radical transformation in festive

culture between the Middle Ages and the Victorian period which saw the emergence of knockabout comedy. Violence in the Middle Ages had been an integral and in no way proscribed part of daily life. On the contrary, it was a regular and expected feature both of courtship- and marriage-customs and of intergenerational relations. Young men were in regular conflict with their peers for access to the local pools of marriageable women and with their elders for positions of dignity and responsibility in society. The consequence was a regular pattern of increases in violent activity which was approximately counter-cyclical with the recurrent wars of the period: times of war (during which the ranks of aspiring young men were thinned out, and the competition for paternity and property was decreased) would be followed by periods of peace and strong population growth (during which the incidence of violent crime gradually increased until another war began). Muchembled supplies us with ample reason to conclude, therefore, that the “culture of violence” which characterized medieval festivity was not adventitious, but was an integral part of it, and one which informed festive play at all levels, from the games of parish ales to sacred ritual and to the civic cycles of morality- and miracle-plays.

Following folklorist Anthony Caputi, Andrew Davis has observed that this tradition of festive play is the source of the traditions of popular performance that ultimately re-emerged in the form of the knockabout comedy of the burlesque and vaudeville stages:

… low comedy, or what he calls “buffo,” evolved “from an extended background of European folklore.”

“Vulgar continuities leading from antiquity to the Renaissance, or more accurately, a series of emergences and re-emergences, births and rebirths, with the dramatic forms which crystallized in antiquity exerting now a major and now a minor influence.” This is closely tied to traditions of revelry and festival. These “revel backgrounds are crucial in explaining the frenzy, energy, violence, and ugliness of

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vulgar comedy,” Caputi asserts. Festival plays and entertainments exploit a principle of generating a high level of excitement. In such entertainments, “comic excitement is produced both by the use of the familiar formulas and by stimulating comic suspense repeatedly until excitement approaches frenzy,” he asserts.

This “culture of festive violence” is documented in numerous medieval play-texts: for example, in the tournament-structures of the *Castel of Perseveraunce* and the Digby *Mary Magdalene*. It is often striking how closely such records as remain seem to anticipate later forms: for example, in the Punch-and-Judy-esque interplay between Noah and his wife (who, tradition holds, was played by a man) in the Wakefield text of the play:

```plaintext
NOE. We! Hold thy tong, ram-skit, or I shall the[e] still. I'll silence you.
UXOR. By my thrift, if thou smite, I shal turne the[e] untill. on you
NOE. We shall assay as tyte. Have at the[e], Gill! make trial at once
Apon the bone shal it bite [Strikes her.]
UXOR. A, so! Mary, thou smitys ill!
         Bot I suppose
         I shal not in thy det
         Flit of this flett: Leave this place
         Take the[e] ther a langett thong
         To tie up thy hose! [Strikes him.]

NOE. A! wilt thou so? Mary, that is mine! [Strikes.] here’s my blow
UXOR. Thou shal thre for two, I swere by Godys pine! [Strikes.] suffering
NOE. An I shall qwite the[e] tho, in faith, or sine. [Strikes.] ere long
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UXOR. Out upon the[e], ho!  

NOE. Thou can both bite and whine  
   With a rerd!  
   For all if she strike, [To the audience.]  
   Yet fast will she skrike.  
   In faith, I hold none slike  
   In all medill-erd.  

This contrast-within-similarity is perhaps even more evident in the Three-Stooges-style buffoonery of New Gyse, Nowadays and Nought in the morality of Mankyn, which seems to prefigure the “break-neck song-and-dance” of American variety halls in the 1880s:

NEW GYSE: Ande now, mynstrellys, pley the comyn trace! popular dance  
   Ley on with thi ballys tyll hys bely breste! bales (whips)  

NOUGHT: I putt case I breke my neke: how then? Suppose; will break; what  

NEW GYSE: I gyff no force, by Sent Tanne! I care not; Saint Anne  

NOWADAYS: Leppe about lyvely! Thou art a wyght man. Leap; nimble  
   Lett us be mery wyll we be here! while  

NOUGHT: Shall I breke my neke to schew yow sporte?  

NOWADAYS: Therfor ever beware of thi reporte. In that case; talk  

NOUGHT: I beschrew ye all! Her ys a schrewde sorte. curse; rascally  
   Have theratt then with a mery chere!  

   Her thei daunce ...  

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47 Mankyn, ed. Kathleen M. Ashley and Gerard NeCastro, (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, Western Michigan University, 2010) p. 15. The editors gloss this passage as follows: “… New Guise, Nowadays, and Nought enter; the former two attempt to make Nought join in their foolhardy and very physical games and dances, but he will not. As the action resumes below, they are flogging Nought’s belly – perhaps tickling him – until it will “burst.” When they have exhausted Nought, they force Mercy into the ‘dance.’”
But in these medieval performances the scope of acceptable horseplay far exceeds that of the vaudeville stage: When the three vices attempt to seduce Mankind, he attacks their genitals with his shovel:

[Strikes them with his spade]

NEW GYSE: Alas, my jewellys! I shall be schent of my wyff! testicles; rejected by (of no use to)

NOWADAYS: Alass! And I am lyke never for to thryve, I have such a buffett. injury (from being hit)

If we compare these texts with representative counterparts in the physical comedy repertoire of the nineteenth century, we find (perhaps not entirely to our surprise) that between the Middle Ages and the Victorian period, an evolution has taken place in the contexts for physical comedy. In the play of Noah, violence can be broadly physical and yet at the same time express an explicit spiritual allegory (Noah’s wife is acting under the influence of Satan). The cross-dressed pugilism of the same play and the explicitly genital humour of Mankynd both reflect a different attitude to the relationship of violence and sex than underlies, for example, the use of wench parts in the sketches of Frank Dumont. There seems even to be a difference in the degree to which the performed violence approximates the doing of actual hurt. This is suggested by the example of the medieval somergame, which, according to Lawrence Clopper, was less an organized passion-play than an improvisatory game structured around a contest which “seems to center on the rewarding of the tormentors and demons with food and drink for being the best tormentors”:

One person was Christ, another Peter, another Andrew, some were the tormentors, and some the devils. Christ was stretched out, crucified, and beaten, mocked, and held a fool; he was hungry and thirsty and no one gave him anything but strokes and scorn. And whoever knew how to torment and scorn him best was reckoned to

play the best. When the game was over, all the players talked among themselves and considered playing again; and one of them said, “Who shall be Christ?” The others said, “He who was today, since he played well.” That one then said to them: “I was Christ and was crucified, beaten, mocked, held to be a fool; I was hungry and thirsty, and nobody gave me anything. I looked down below and saw tormentors and demons in great joy. For he who could make them drink and eat was well pleased. I looked to the right and saw Peter on the cross, and I looked to the left and saw Andrew on the cross, so that for me and my apostles everything was a pain, but for our tormentors and the demons everything was comfort. And therefore I tell you for sure that if I must play again, I do not want to be Christ nor an apostle but a tormentor or a demon.50

This text of the Somergame seems to suggest that, just like many medieval sporting pastimes involving the chasing of a ball that involved real physical violence involving personal injury and occasionally death,51 these theatrical pastimes also involved performers actually hurting each other in a spirit of fun.


51 C.f., for example, the Cornish “Hurling Match” described by Sir Richard Carew in 1602: “The ball in this play may be compared to an infernal spirit: for whosoever catcheth it, fareth straightways like a madde man, strugling (sic) and fighting with those that goe about to hold him . . . when the hurling is ended, you shall see them retyring home, as from a pitched battaile, with bloody pates, bones broken and out of joynt, and such bruses as serve to shorten their daies . . . “ qtd. in Eric Dunning, Sport Matters: Sociological Studies of Sport, Violence and Civilization (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 86. Denning reports how, throughout the Middle Ages, village games such as this were proscribed by royal decree due to the violence with which they disrupted the king’s peace.
It’s perhaps largely because of the compelling theoretical underpinning of the Civilizing Process that the school of sociology at the University of Leicester has been able to provide such a compelling account of the development of the modern sporting industry out of the folk games of the Middle Ages – one which seems equally promising for the historiography of other forms of leisure activity in Western popular culture such as theatre. In fact, seen in this light, the parallels between their twin developments are particularly striking for the purposes of the present discussion – most notably in view of the fact that most sports take their contemporary forms at the same time as the theatre (and later cinema) industries are establishing the foundations of their own modern forms.

In the theory of the Leicester school, as modern civility became ever more deeply entrenched through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the peoples of Europe were forced to adapt to the monopolization of the use of violence by their governing powers by using their games as outlets. The eventual dominance of one national form of sport over others argues that the social and political circumstances of nations are imbricated in the structures of their favorite games: of these, some have ultimately proved more efficacious than others in the context of modern industrial society. Elias supplies detailed examples for the cases of the elaborate rules governing English football and fox-hunting:

Increasing restraints upon the use of physical force and particularly upon killing, and, as an expression of these restraints, a displacement of the pleasure experienced in doing violence to the pleasure experienced in seeing violence done, can be observed as symptoms of a civilizing spurt in many other spheres of human activity … they are all connected with moves in the direction of a greater pacification of the country in connection with the growth, or growing effectiveness of, the monopolization of physical force by the representatives of a country’s central institutions. They are connected, furthermore, with one of the most crucial aspects of a country’s internal pacification and civilization – with the exclusion of the use of violence from the recurrent struggles for control of
these central institutions, and with the corresponding conscience formation.\textsuperscript{52}

The development of the concept of “fair play,” for example, was a requirement essential for the establishment of the rules of English football (one totally absent from medieval English versions of the game): it necessitated the equalization of the number of players on each side, the imposition of limitations on how long a particular side could hold possession of the ball, the offside rule, and so on. The idea of “fair play” in turn was a unique reflection of the political structure of English society at the time those rules were evolving:

In England, the relative weakness of King and court, or inversely the relative strengths of other social cadres, also played a part in the development of the earlier forms of pastimes into sports. The landowning classes – the gentry and the aristocracy – were the groups from which, during the eighteenth century, the transformation of English pastimes into sports received its main impulse …\textsuperscript{53}

Similarly, in the case of fox-hunting, the self-imposition of a variety of restraints on the hunter, which have among others the effect of substituting witnessing the kill for performing it, commemorates the establishment of a unique balance of power between the crown, the nobility and gentry and the Commons in the parliamentary democracy of eighteenth-century Britain. Though the “threshold of repugnance” has, in accordance with the civilizing process, continued to descend in the centuries since the establishment of the sport in its current form, so that many people today regard it as a barbaric atavism, fox-hunting is in effect a ritual celebration of a special moment in the establishment of civilized restraints. The dilemma which this suggests proposes a reason for the ongoing flexibility in the rules governing mimetic pursuits:


Sport is … one of the great social inventions which human beings have made without planning to make them. It offers people the liberating excitement of a struggle involving physical exertion and skill while, ideally at least, limiting to a minimum the chance that any will get seriously hurt in its course … One of the crucial problems confronting societies in the course of a civilizing process was – and remains – that of finding a new balance between pleasure and restraint. The progressive tightening of regulating controls over people’s behaviour and the corresponding conscience-formation, the internalization of rules that regulate more elaborately all spheres of life, secured for people in their relations with each other greater security and stability, but it also entailed a loss of the pleasurable satisfactions associated with simpler and more spontaneous forms of conduct. Sport was one of the solutions to this problem.\textsuperscript{54}

The performance of violent physical comedy seems to have followed a trajectory in several respects parallel to that of sports. Like the development of sport, it has been characterized by the incremental addition of restraints to the performance of “dramatic” events, especially the substitution of witnessing a deed for participating in it; it has introduced degrees of participation based on this primary division between “performers” and “spectators”; and it has involved the development of a new balance between pleasure and restraint. These developments are all comparatively recent: it’s apparently not until the mid-seventeenth century that any kind of distinction is consistently drawn between leisure activities consisting essentially in ‘athletics’ and those consisting mostly in ‘dramatics’: for medieval and renaissance pleasure-seekers they were all “sports.” It therefore makes sense to look at the development of modern dramatics under the optic of the idea of the civilizing process, and to see what light is shed on the development of many popular theatrical pastimes by vewing it by analogy with the development of sporting events – as processes by which the violence of the performative moment is

progressively mediated in various ways in proportion to the descent of the “threshold of repugnance.”

Mimesis and Catharsis. The sociologists of the Leicester School employ variations on two concepts which are traditionally central to performance studies, but inflect them somewhat differently. The first is “mimesis,” by which is meant not the representation of some third person or object to a spectator by a performer: it refers rather to the quality of the spectator’s engagement in the performance, and is broadly co-extensive with the innervation-theory of Freud which is employed so fruitfully of early film comedy by writers such as Jennifer Bean, Mary Anne Doane, and Lauren Rabinovitz. By “mimesis,” i.e., imaginatively placing him-/herself in the position of the player, the spectator manifests physically the characteristic balance of nervous tensions inscribed in the sporting event. These come to a formal conclusion in an experience of “catharsis,” which here differs radically from its usage in either traditional theatre aesthetics or Freudian psychoanalysis. It represents neither a purgation of a determinate affect nor the abreaction of a psychological conflict, but simply a more or less conscious and sensible discharge of pent-up energy.

The pertinency to the present inquiry of the theory of the civilizing process as applied to sports culture is the more evident in view of the fact that, until the mid-nineteenth century, “sporting” and “dramatic” pursuits typically both count within a unified range of leisure activities; it is only late in the period when knockabout and slapstick comedy emerge that the two forms of pursuit go their separate ways. The manner in which the theory of Distinction reflects concerns with performance and embodiment is profoundly suggestive of the reason for this diversion.

The theory of Distinction supplies us with a key criterion for appreciating the micro-historical importance of movement style as a barometer of cultural change. As Bourdieu observes, the “sense of one’s place” (which is at the same time a sense of the place of all others), the key indicator of one’s personal and social habitus, is reproduced in the movements of the body: “In effect, social distances are inscribed in bodies or, more precisely, into the relation to the body, to language, and to time …” Habitus is continually, unconsciously performed by all social agents at all times. It is on what we read in each other’s bodies that all of the relationships that define us are based:

(T)his sense of one’s place, and the affinities of habitus experienced as sympathy or antipathy, are at the basis of all forms of cooptation, friendships, love affairs, marriages, associations, and so on, thus of all the relationships that are lasting and sometimes sanctioned by law …

It is in fact by means of performance that we bestow stability on a fundamentally unstable social world by creating the security of groups: groups are not given in “social reality” – they have to be made, and they are made largely through the “theory effect” – the imposition of a vision of divisions. Otherwise, the world remains “objectively indeterminate” – and this objective indeterminacy is the source of symbolic struggle – which in itself is essentially performative:

This objective element of uncertainty . . . provides a basis for the plurality of visions of the world which is itself linked to the plurality of points of view. At the same time, it provides a base for symbolic struggles over the power to produce and to impose the legitimate vision of the world.

As a corollary of this, performance is at the same time the essential form of symbolic power:

(T)he power to preserve or to transform objective principles of union and separation, of marriage and divorce, of association and dissociation, which are at work in the social world; the power to conserve or to transform current classifications in matters of gender, nation, region, age, and social status, and this through the

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words used to designate or to describe individuals, groups, or institutions.58

It is, in effect, the power to change the world. The special ability of the actor to reproduce patterns of difference is a specially powerful form of cultural capital; it is an embodied competency which can enable the performer to intervene in the exercise of symbolic power (and thus in the perpetration of symbolic violence) by individuals, groups, and even the state.

If this violence is symbolic, however, it is by no means less real: the existence and continued ubiquity of domestic violence, violent labor unrest, ethnic and cultural clashes, and the mass brutality of war all testify to the potential for symbolic violence to erupt into material violence at any time. Symbolic power – and, by extension, the “real world” of common sense and the security of the social group which are constructed by means of it – are highly unstable, and may collapse into violence at any time. This effect, moreover, can all too easily be provoked through the mere performative power of language.

Seen in this light, the work of the physical comedian is uniquely situated to interfere with the forces of symbolic violence: possessed by virtue of a talent for exciting laughter with a unique form of cultural capital, the practitioner of body comedy eschews the hegemonic tool of language and instead employs the discourse of the body to engage in the articulation of difference at its primary level – the level of movement style. But it is perhaps less as a producer than as a deconstructor of meaning that the physical comedian works: instead of introducing a competing vision into the “symbolic struggle of all against all,” the comedian works to undo the effects of the symbolic depradations perpetrated by others.

The physical comedian, then, stands halfway between the literary artist working through language, and the athlete whose sphere of activity is exclusively physical. Small wonder that the prototypical signal of the body-comic’s effort is laughter: an ejaculatory expression which articulates nothing, and an active intervention with nothing beyond itself as goal. As a corollary, we may guess that significant changes in the means and ends of comedians in the creation of changing qualities of laughter must themselves be related to significant social change: change which must also be reflected in parallel ways in both verbal and sporting culture. In the

transition between the laughter of knockabout comedy and that which greeted the emergence of slapstick, we have a case in point.

It is by studying the “rules of the game,” or by what Elias and Dunning call “figurational analysis” that we can form an appropriately dynamic understanding of the ‘meaning’ of an athletic performance – its roots in the social and political life of its country of origin, as well as its ongoing efficacy in the international community. What figurational analysis involves, essentially, is simply a particular kind of formal analysis, in which a game is described in terms of its dynamics: the particular tension between opposition and cooperation which is manifested between the player(s) on either side, and the complex of ancillary tensions within it, or within which the rules of the game are situated. The game is regarded as a formal pattern which sustains a particular “tension-equilibrium” representing one working-out of the dynamics of the game as determined by its rules. As Eric Dunning puts it,

The tension-equilibrium is best conceptualized as a balance struck between the opposites in a whole complex of interdependent polarities, including:

1. The overall polarity between the two opposing teams;
2. The polarity between attack and defense;
3. The polarity between co-operation and tension between the two teams;
4. The polarity between co-operation and competition within each team;
5. The polarity between the external control of players on a variety of levels (for example by managers, captains, teammates, referees, linesmen, spectators) and the flexible control which the individual player exercises on himself or herself;
6. The polarity between affectionate identification with and hostile rivalry towards the opponents;
7. The polarity between the enjoyment of aggression by the individual players and the curb imposed upon such enjoyment by the game-pattern

8. The polarity between elasticity and fixity of rules

It is . . . the tension-balance between interdependent polarities such as these which determines the ‘tone’ of a game, that is whether it is experienced as exciting or dull, or whether it remains a ‘mock-fight’ or breaks out into fighting in earnest.⁵⁹

This taxonomy makes it clear that the knockabout comedy which was performed in Britain, France and the United States during the second half of the twentieth century had, in many respects, a much stronger affinity with the athletic event than with the drama of the legitimate stage. Very frequently it was structured around a serious contest of physical skill, such as the “rigged” boxing match, a challenge dance, or a clog- or jig-competition. Frequently too, it operated by complicating such contests through the introduction of a tension between the rules of the “real” contest and a second set of conventions governing the “theatrical” construction and management of the spectator’s sympathy. It very often turned on a polarity between affectionate identification and hostile rivalry between spectators and performers, and knockabout performances apparently often seemed, at least, to tread the line between mock- and genuine physical combat.

But the development of slapstick film seems to have introduced a new variety of factors into the mix. Following the introduction of the cinema and the development, by about 1914, of a uniquely cinematic outlet for physical comedy, the slapstick movie palpably begins to concentrate on a variety of concerns integral to the construction of “distinction:” on success and failure in achieving personal and/or social identity; on competition and cooperation between individuals for the achievement of social position and/or prosperity; and even a tacit concern with the stylistic construction of common sense itself -- with the “realistic” and the “hyperbolic”; with what we might call the “verisimilar” and the “histrionic”; with understatement and

exaggeration; and, in one of the most comprehensive oppositions of categories, between the Grotesque and the Eccentric physical styles.

The methodology of figurational analysis is calculated to expose the tensions within sporting performances that make them effective outlets for tensions relating to the real violence of society – the tensions which the game elicits within the player and the spectator are there in the first place because they are simulacra of the social tensions in which real historical violence is likewise manifested. It’s not just a question of the game as an ‘outlet’ for violent impulses produced elsewhere (e.g. in ‘real’ life): it’s a system for transforming violent energies into play-energies; one which has evolved as an indispensible adjunct of the civilizing process. The conclusion of the game has a ‘cathartic’ effect on the tension which the game has aroused; but it is a matter of indifference whether this consist in feelings of victory or defeat: either way, the energy is spent positively (rather than destructively), and the tension which has aroused it is brought to a formal resolution. In Chapter 8 we shall find that this “cathartic” account is compatible with the theory of physical comedy deriving from the notion of “innervations” as articulated by Freud in Chapter 7 of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*.

But offsetting the sporting analogy, in order to appreciate the ways in which physical performance engages with the violence of the world as it is reflected in language, it will be necessary to find a way of navigating the divide between the exclusively physical construction of meaning, and the association of movement with meanings which can be expressed verbally. For this reason, I have proposed, so far as possible, to reconstruct the production of laughter in knockabout and slapstick comedy by means of a modest theory of “tropes.”

**THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF TROPES**

To the present, most accounts of the origins of violent physical comedy have tended to emphasize an unbroken historical continuity between its various manifestations. For example, Andrew Davis’ highly useful study *Baggy Pants Comedy: Burlesque and the Oral Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) speculates of the genealogies of venerable elements of twentieth-century burlesque:

Some of the routines can be traced to European originals, where many of the same comedy bits circulated in English music halls
and seaside entertainments, in French clown entrées, and in Italian variety shows. Certain stock situations go back to the earliest forms of Greek theatre as well as in oral storytelling traditions. Most of the scenes that became standard in burlesque already circulated on a more or less casual basis in a variety of popular entertainments. Longer and more involved “body” scenes originated as afterpieces. A number of these afterpieces were published, primarily as blackface sketches. A few burlesque sketches can be directly traced to these published versions. In the early 1950s, comic Bob Ferguson and his wife Mary Murray were performing “Who Died First?” – a scene originally published in 1874 as a Negro sketch. “The Theatrical Agency” (Jess Mack Collection) appears to be a revised version of the popular nineteenth-century afterpiece “Razor Jim.” The courtroom sketch is said to have originated with a minstrel show afterpiece titled “Irish Justice.” The term “Irish Justice” is really a category, for, as Joe Laurie points out, “If the judge was played by an Irish comedian, it was called, ‘Irish Justice’; if a Dutch comedian played the lead, it was called, ‘Dutch Justice’; and if a blackface comedian played the judge, it was called, ‘Colored Justice.’

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60 One widespread scene is “Buzzing the Bee,” which Dario Fo describes in his book *The Tricks of the Trade*, 174-175. The same scene is included in Paul Harris, *The Pantomime Book*, 64-66. The scene was also used by medicine showmen in America and is performed in *Free Show Tonight*, a reenactment of a traditional medicine show by surviving members of the profession. It is also featured in two burlesque films – *Hollywood Burlesque* and *Strip Strip Hooray* (Davis’ note).
61 Allardyce Nicoll, *Masks, Mimes and Miracles*, p. 41 (Davis’ note).
64 Eddie Ware and Charley Crafts perform the routine with other cast members in the 1951 burlesque feature *Ding Don* (or *A Night at the Moulin Rouge*). As “Razor Jim,” the scene featured a razor-wielding black man who drives the auditioners from the theatrical manager’s office. Eddie Ware chases them out with a broom. Interestingly, the character of Edwin Booth persists in the twentieth-century version. For more material on “Razor Jim,” see Conner, *Steve Mills*, 118-119; Isman, *Weber and Fields*, 89; and Kahn, *The Merry Partners*, 120 (Davis’ note).
But it is only very rarely that we can establish a genealogy for an entire sketch or physical routine. Although we are able to argue for the historical continuity of cultures of laughter, we are not able to follow the patterns of disappearance and re-emergence of their concrete elements, or to distinguish in detail different periods and stylistic tendencies:

Although a number of sketches can be traced to published versions, this does not solve the origin of these scenes. Many of these scenes circulated in the oral tradition before being set down on paper. Some of these scenes derive from European originals. The scene published as *Black Justice*, which is supposed to take place in a “Kentucky Courtroom” shows evidence of being an English farce, as characters repeatedly address the Judge as “m’lord.” Joe Laurie’s version of “Irish Justice” contains a ruse that goes back to a medieval French farce, *Maitre Pierre Pathelin.*

Caputi’s hypothesis of a “revel tradition,” however, provides Davis with a theoretical bridge between 20th-century burlesque comedy and the Bakhtinian carnival grotesque:

This revel tradition connects the burlesque stage to the carnival world of the Middle Ages and to Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on the carnivalesque. In *Rabelais and his World*, Bakhtin showed how the medieval peasantry drew upon an established “culture of folk humor” to resist the church-dominated official order by creating a world outside of officialdom. During carnival time, the peasantry was able to experience, at least temporarily, a “utopian realm of community, freedom, equality and abundance.”

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distinct from official rituals, which were conducted with great seriousness and decorum. Carnival was, Bakhtin argued, “a second world, a second life outside officialdom,” which was “to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a ‘world inside out,’” during which “all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions” were suspended.  

68 Bakhtin’s ideas are not confined to the medieval carnival, but have meaning for a wide range of festive practices in many different cultures and historical periods...

Davis’ summary implies that American burlesque theatrical performance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constitutes a phase of what can be assumed to be an unbroken festive tradition extending back into the medieval period. But his evolutionary model seems to gloss over several crucial limitations in our knowledge about the development of modern forms of performance: i) the lacunae and other discontinuities in the historical records; ii) the incongruities and inconsistencies between the records which have come down to us of the characteristics of diverse national traditions; iii) the apparently uneven progress which the development of contemporary forms has displayed, suggesting a more complex dynamic than a steady and straightforward evolution; iv) the divergences between concrete actual performance practices within various traditions.

These limitations are as inescapable with regard to knockabout and slapstick as they are with regard to the common elements between them and the commedia dell’arte, the grand guignol, or any other earlier, unwritten tradition. Though isolated instances of isomorphisms over wide intervals (such, for example, as in the gag in Pierre Patelin) reassure us that the parallels must be there, there are few cases in which we are actually able to point to a succession of parallel instances of complete sketches, or acts, or even set pieces. What we find instead, particularly in the intersection between the subject matter of nineteenth-century knockabout acts and the early films leading up to the emergence of slapstick is the intensive repetition of


particular elements of these acts, as they are borrowed and repeated in different contexts. These I have found it convenient to treat as “tropes.”

The difficulty I face is in establishing criteria for testing the validity of a claim that there is a similarity between two performance events occurring in diverse contexts which justifies isolating them as tropes. Ultimately, in my opinion, that test cannot be merely linguistic, but has to be formal: in each case of a repetition, the onus is on me to show that there is a formal identity which may underlie two diverse performances. As a corollary of this, it becomes necessary to postulate various forms of relationship based on the putative cause of this underlying identity (assuming it has a cause and isn’t purely adventitious).

1. _Perseveration_. In some cases, the identity between two instances of a trope can be established on the basis of a historical continuity: a practice which was common in one period continues to be common into the next period. I call this form of relationship Perseveration. In the case of the present study, the burlesque prize fight which became popular during the nineteenth century and demonstrably continued through the early twentieth, furnishes a particularly good example.

2. _Revival_. In other cases, a performance practice or text falls out of currency, perhaps as a result of having lost its relevance due to changes in the social or cultural context; but then another change occurs and the practice or text is revived again (though its form may be somewhat altered in the process). We might, for example, want to cite the very striking set of similarities between the medieval French farce _Pierre Patelin_ and James Maffitt’s Ethiopian sketch, “The Mutton Trial” as an example, since they rely on the identical trope of making animal noises before a judge in order to get off a charge. But revivals and perseverations are difficult to distinguish: though we have no reason for thinking of the coincidence as explainable as a perseveration (we can’t point to a succession of productions of _Pierre Patelin_ from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries), we have to admit that we don’t know that it’s not one.

As an example of a body of practices which have undergone a revival, the best example is _commedia dell’arte_: a tradition of performance which was entirely lost until a generation of artist-scholars undertook to resuscitate it on the basis of the existing documents in the 1910s. However, in Chapter 5 I shall argue that during the 1920s, certain types of slapstick chase employ a figure which must in fact be viewed as a revival of one of the most popular features of nineteenth-century circus knockabout performance; one which, though it had flourished in mid-century, by World War I was all but forgotten.
3. Reinvention. It is axiomatic to the “histrionic” approach that physical performances may often represent spontaneous creative acts which draw intuitively on the resources of the body. A repetition which is neither the result of perseveration nor of intentional revival, therefore, may be a reinvention. There is no reason not to believe that reinventions occur all the time: the famous gag which I refer to as the “Composite Body” trope\(^{70}\) is spontaneously reinvented by children all the time. The fact that Charlie Chaplin did it in silent pictures, or that Johnny Wild did it before him on the minstrel stage does not qualify the spontaneity of each fresh invention in the slightest. What is operative about the successive performances of the gag is its reappearance in new contexts.

4. Repurposing. Context is continually shifting, continually unique. What is critical, therefore, in each of these three cases is the role of context, and the relationship between the performer and his/her context in which the performance of the gag transpires, and in which it has its meaning. The major factor that shifts in context will affect is the purpose of a particular performance. Consequently, wherever I am able to identify a case of either perseveration, revival, or re-invention, my first interest will be in whether it represents or doesn’t represent the repurposing of a trope.

In the examination of the tropes which produced the laughter of the knockabout stage and the slapstick screen, I will be using a combination of figurational with what might be called “tropical” analysis: to identify the insertion of bodily tensions within the discursive contexts characteristic of nineteenth-century theatrical knockabout and early twentieth-century slapstick to reconstruct the presence of the laughing spectator. We shall find those spectators reflected in the technique by which the comedians of the age endeavored to appeal both to their hearts and to their heads:

(H)orseplay is a process of creating laughter by the employment of mechanical or acrobatic work alone, with no aid from the intellect: whereas, the more legitimate style of comedy tricks must bring about the thing to be laughed at as a result of brain or wit or thought … Some one has said that the difference between high comedy and low comedy is that in the former the audience laughs

\(^{70}\) In which character B, standing behind character A, inserts his arms through the armpits of the latter, and performs all kinds of tricks which seem to compromise character A’s control over his own body.
with the comedian and in the latter they laugh at him. Of course, all comic opera fun comes under the head of low comedy; but I want to insist on my belief that if low comedy is to be deservedly classed as art the comedian must not only make his audiences laugh at him, but he must create the laughter in such a way that the audience will laugh with him, too. In other words, for an audience to respect a low comedian it is essential not only that he should appeal to the brains across the footlights, but that he should demonstrate that he has brains himself …  

Chapter 1
Towards a History of Laughter

Violent physical comedy is something of a paradox. It is always with us; and yet it is somehow always passé. The performance historian discovers to his surprise, that it always has been – it has always been something people had thought they’d outgrown. Every re-emergence is received at first as a reversion to a superseded form. When it’s written of, the writing generally discloses a sense of shame. If from time to time we indulge in the enjoyment of unabashed physical humor, it will only be to dismiss the lapse shortly afterwards, ill-concealing our embarrassment behind gestures of disavowal.

On the other hand, when we witness a virtuoso performance by a knockabout artist or acrobatic team, by a well-loved TV or Hollywood star, our exaltation knows no bounds. We emerge from our trance feeling somehow liberated, even purified; revitalized and naively grateful to the performer. Ironically, the greater our exaltation, the more ashamed we are likely to feel soon after; as though our purification had somehow stirred up the worst in us.

Like all sorts of humor, violent physical comedy seems to invoke the power of laughter to detach us from an all-too-intense engagement with the world and to renew our internal energies through the experience of pleasure. But there are two primary differences between verbal and physical comedy. First, while verbal humor foregrounds the play of concepts, physical comedy focuses on affects – it’s feelings and sensations that are in play. Secondly, what is remarkable about these feelings and actions is that they are violent – just the ones that ought to produce the opposite of pleasure. Though under normal circumstances, we instinctively labor to avoid these affects, in special, social, circumstances they can become instruments of relaxation, of recreation – and even somehow help to “educate” us. There’s an inference here that diverting destructive energies to the production of laughter is a quintessentially civil procedure; one which may be fundamental to what we mean by “civilization.”

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72 This is not to deny that physical comedy is intelligible; on the contrary, the scholarship, particularly Jerry Palmer’s invaluable *The Logic of the Absurd, On Film and Television Comedy* (London: BFI Publishing, 1987) demonstrates that physical gags are susceptible of a high degree of wit.

73 This is only the first of a series of striking homologies between the physical comedy of violence and the modern horror narrative: c.f. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
I. Laughter and the ‘Modernity Thesis’

But if so, the development of the “sense of humor” may be a complex historical problem, marked, like the Civilizing Process itself, by numerous conflicts, changes and even reversals of direction. It may be intimately related to the histories of taste and of ideas; it might exemplify the role performance plays in the development of civil societies. This would suggest that in each age, violent physical comedy has had various functions; perhaps different functions at different times, perhaps related in some more or less constant way to changing function(s) of verbal comedy. But this hypothesis has yet to be proven: indeed, it has yet to be seriously articulated.

The alternative view would be that laughter – and comedy, as our chief means of producing it – does not change, and therefore does not have a history. Its function, whether as a site for moral discourse or for social conflict, as a sort of “safety valve” for personal and social pressures, or simply for “just entertainment,” is the same in all places and at all times. It is universal, ahistorical, forever returning us, despite the pretensions of our civilized personae, to the eternal Square One within each of us. If laughter implies a narrative at all, it is a circular one which leads back where it began.

To decide between the two views ought to be simple – the historian can simply do some research and conclude. But to reckon so is to overlook the paradox of physical comedy – for in so many cases the documents are simply not there. If there is a “history of comedy,” there has apparently also been someone or something –perhaps to do with the sense of shame that declares all violent comedy passé – covering its tracks. If it should turn out to be the case that violent comedy has a necessary function, it is a major problem – a problem with which this thesis will be tacitly concerned throughout – that among all types of performance, violent physical comedy has for so long been not simply allowed, but made, in Peggy Phelan’s highly evocative phase, “to pass unmarked”; to slip into obscurity, leaving scarcely any trace.

With the invention of the cinema in 1893, however, the performance of violence for purpose of exciting laughter becomes “marked” for the first time in human history, and subject to enthusiastic re-production. The period from roughly 1860 to 1930 or so marks a major change of direction in the production and reception of comic performance – one which may be symptomatic of a change of function which marks a turning point in the history of laughter.

Assuming that physical comedy would be about what is left over when whatever can be spoken, has been.
During the twentieth century, several accounts have arisen which address the specificity of film comedy and particularly slapstick. For some writers, the slapstick comedies of the silent era are prime examples of the “Modernity Thesis,” which regards film as a uniquely modernist art form by virtue of its formal characteristics – editing, the juxtaposition of shots of various scale, and through rapidly and even violently mobile framings – which confront the spectator with a series of somatic “shocks,” working on the spectator’s nervous system in order to acclimatize it to the assaults of contemporary (urban) living. If the “Modernity Thesis” holds, then slapstick comedy, which presents “shock” in content as well as form, is a fortiori a special instance of modernist art. The argument is carried further, quite early in the century, by various members and affiliates of the Frankfurt school. Miriam Bratu Hansen eloquently summarizes their arguments her last book, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno.*

For Kracauer, slapstick evolves as the antidote to a sense of alienation peculiar to twentieth-century industrial society: slapstick forcefully dismantles the psychological structures which are the subjective counterparts of Fordist and Taylorist modes of production, and make human beings strangers to themselves and to each other. Much as, according to Bakhtin, the “carnival grotesque” proposes a community of ribaldry as a counter-utopia to the medieval church’s constraining vision of a morally pure kingdom of God on earth, so for Kracauer the cinema becomes “a blueprint for an alternative public sphere that can realize itself only through the destruction of the dominant, bourgeois public sphere” that has lost its contact with reality. For Walter Benjamin, the same notion could be carried much further: in the preliminary versions of “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” the effect of industrial organization has been the production of “mass psychoses” for which cinema – in the forms especially of Disney’s Mickey Mouse and American slapstick comedies – emerges as a specific therapy.

By articulating the repressed pathologies of technological modernity…the Disney films, like American slapstick comedies, could work to preemptively diffuse, through collective laughter, an otherwise destructive potential. In other words, by activating

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individually based mass-psychotic tendencies in the space of collective sensory experience, and, above all, in the mode of play, the cinema might prevent them from being acted out in reality, in the form of organized mob violence, genocidal persecution, or war.”

From the optimism of Kracauer and Benjamin, the voice of Theodor Adorno sharply dissents. For Adorno, the culture industry’s “medicinal bath of fun” not only fails to inspire a form of laughter able to bring about the politics of reconciliation necessary for the salvation of modern society, it actively encourages “Schadenfreude, a terrible laughter that ‘copes with fear by defecting to the forces that are to be feared.’” Slapstick is not part of the solution; it’s part of the problem. For Hansen, Adorno’s ambivalence about film stems from deep within his ethnic psyche in the ancient Jewish notion of the Bilderverbot, which complicates his view of filmic representation. As Hansen very aptly summarizes, “(t)he heart of the problem that Adorno confronts for a film aesthetics appears to be that the photographic basis of the moving image privileges the representational object over aesthetically autonomous procedures.” It is the dependency of film on industrial technology, as a means of mechanical reproduction and distribution which has prevented the autonomous development of the techniques which might make it a genuine art form. On the contrary, the “pictographic writing” of audio-visual image culture spells out “behavioral scripts” of social identity under the guise of slices of reality which, by producing “the illusion that they speak the viewer’s desire,” brainwash spectators into complicity with the dominant ideology. This view of audio-visual image culture informs Adorno’s objection to the play-theory invoked by Benjamin. As Hansen puts it:

Insofar as art qua play abdicates its responsibility to engage with an antagonistic, heteronomous reality, it merely sidesteps the crisis of semblance that “engulfs” all Western art. In rejecting semblance in the same breath as instrumental rationality, it either regresses into harmlessness (“fun”) or degenerates into sport.\(^\text{82}\)

There is a radical break between all these theories and traditional accounts of comedic performance which is evidently rooted in the problem of medium-specificity. Traditionally, (live) comic performance has always been thought of as analogous to medical treatment;\(^\text{83}\) but the technological basis of film makes it a special case, and the industrial conditions of modernity place it in a special context: Kracauer and Benjamin need to show whether the development of slapstick represents an unprecedented adaptation to unprecedented circumstances, and if not, why it was successful (to the extent that it was popular) where live performance failed (to the extent that it declined). But in the face of the damning evidence of the Holocaust and World War II, the “homeopathic” account of film comedy must brand it a conspicuous failure. It behooves the historian who is also a theorist to ask how comedy has always dealt with the problem of violence; whether it has always done so successfully; and what was particular about the case of silent slapstick.

If laughter has a purpose, then it must be a human purpose: the meaning of laughter, then, is a function of the meaning of life as it is actually lived by women and men. In this thesis, I will argue that laughter has a history; that in the period between roughly 1860 and 1930 it manifestly changes direction in pursuit of a goal which it ultimately fails to achieve, producing in the meanwhile a golden age of performance, and marking the inauguration of a new stage in the process of social evolution.

II. Knockabout and Slapstick – The Received Narrative

My working assumption is that slapstick comedy, and the tradition of theatrical knockabout performance with which it is conventionally associated, are specifically modernist


\(^{83}\) “A merry heart doeth good like medicine” (*Proverbs* 17:22).
forms. This assumption is contrary to everyday usage, which sanctions projecting these terms backward through history, effectively without limit. Everyday usage, however, is sanctioned by the received narrative, whose obscuring influence I need to clear away before I can correctly formulate my explicit research questions.

The received narrative begins with the *commedia dell’arte*: *commedia* performance was largely improvised, combining dancing, acrobatics and physical gags known as *lazzi* with verbal comedy in stories within the tradition established with Greek New Comedy: in the typical *commedia* scenario, the young *inamorato*, Lelio, wishes to marry the *inamorata*, Isabella, against the wishes of his father, Pantalone. With the aid of the tricky servant, Arlecchino, he eventually succeeds. For Northrop Frye, this scenario was the epitome of the Western comic tradition: it is the prime example of the “mythos of spring:”

>The hero’s society rebels against the society of the *senex* and triumphs, but the hero’s society is a Saturnalia, a reversal of social standards which recalls a golden age in the past before the main action of the play begins. Thus we have a stable and harmonious order disrupted by folly, obsession, forgetfulness, “pride and prejudice,” or events not understood by the characters themselves, and then restored…“

During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the *commedia* tradition gradually became obsolete, migrating in Britain into the *ballet-pantomime*, where the *commedia* scenarios were supplemented by folk and nursery tales such as the stories of Dick Whittington and the Babes in the Wood. After a first half in which the folk-tale plot was developed to a crisis, the characters would change into their *commedia* counterparts in a magical “transformation scene.” Gradually, the original *inamorati* were replaced by Harlequin himself and Columbine, while Harlequin’s place as the lead performer of physical comedy was taken by Clown, usually the

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84 Hence we read of “slapstick comedy” at the Lenaia in ancient Greece; in the *commedia dell’arte*; and in 17th-century French *Grand guignol*.

servant of Pantalone. The outstanding physical comedians in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century, Joseph Grimaldi and Tom Matthews, were naturally exponents of Clown.

The British pantomime tradition (so runs the received narrative) was exported to the United States, where it underwent several major modifications, its repertoire of dances, acrobatics and physical gags being repurposed as the content of acts in variety and vaudeville theatre. After 1893, these variety performances became the subject matter of the first films, gradually evolving throughout the 1900s and 1910s, by a process which has never been made the object of a detailed study, into silent-movie slapstick. The overall tendency of the narrative can be confirmed, however, by the reappearance of well-known lazzi as gags in silent comedy films, some striking visual parallelisms between slapstick stars and the commedia characters as depicted by Watteau and in the Recueil Fossard, and, especially, by the perseveration of Harlequin’s slap-stick itself across a three-hundred-year span as the principal prop and emblem of this particular comic form.

The task of filling in the large lacuna in the received account between the decline of the commedia dell’arte tradition and the commencement of the knockabout/slapstick period was not begun until the 1980s with Laurence Senelick’s book, The Age and Stage of George L. Fox (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1988) and his 1990 essay “Custard’s First Stand: Origins of American Slapstick Comedy.” Senelick’s essay, his contribution to Commedia dell’Arte and the Comic Spirit, “a monograph from the 1990 Classics in Context Festival,” outlines the three major links between the American tradition of physical comedy and that of European commedia – the pantomime tradition as practiced by its major Anglo-American exponents, the Ravel family, George L. Fox, and the Hanlon-Lees acrobats. The account is amplified by Senelick’s book on Fox, and by Mark Cosdon’s The Hanlon Brothers: From Daredevil Acrobatics to Spectacle Pantomime, which began as a dissertation project under

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86 The “lazzi of the glass of wine” in Buster Keaton’s College (1927), for example.
88 Of course, continental Harlequins did not call their implements “slapsticks”; but a tradition exists that a slapstick along the lines of that used in American variety theatres of the 1890s and 1900s was invented by David Garrick on March 21, 1765 as the counterpart to the batoccio of Arlecchino and Arlequin’s baton (c.f. The Washington Herald, 21 March, 1912, p. 6).
Senelick’s supervision. “During the 19th century,” Senelick proposes, “when an urban, proletarian culture was emerging in industrial societies, the traditional Commedia characters evolved into such new types as the clowns of Christmas pantomime and circus ring, the music-hall comedian and the vaudeville knockabout, and such new forms as French pantomimic ballet, Viennese magic play, and American acrobatic farce.” Though Senelick wisely deprecates the critical tendency to blur the distinctions between comic styles, he himself elides a major gap in arguing eloquently that the “magic of Ravelian fairy pantomime,” the “high-velocity chaos” of the Hanlons and the “wide spectrum of emotions” manifested by Fox’s “earthy American clown” provided the fresh inspiration which resulted in Georges Méliès’ fantastic voyages, Hollywood chases, and the personality cults of the major silent clowns respectively.

It was not until a generation had passed since the introduction of film before historians set about the task of retracing the steps by which the industry, now in its ascendancy, had first set out on its path. The first histories of the early period begin to appear in about 1910; in the pages of *Moving Picture World* by 1913 a sense of history begins to manifest itself in the notion of a gap between “the early days” and “the present”; and by 1916 serialized histories for general consumption are being syndicated in the daily papers by writers like Beatriz Michelina. They take up and elaborate on the ameliorist narrative established in the trade papers: in the early days, films were primitive and vulgar; but they have since improved. One of the most significant signs of this improvement is a purported general decline in the ubiquity of slapstick comedy – this decline is in turn a function of the film industry’s distancing itself from the excesses of the stage:

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93 Hopwood’s *Living Pictures* is the first to be mentioned in *Moving Picture World*, Vol. 7 (July-Dec.) 1910, p. 1280.


95 C.f., for example, Michelina’s “History of Motion Picture Industry,” which ran in papers like the *Ashland Tidings* from late 1916 through early 1917. Michelina had been a star Hollywood performer in 1913 and 1914.
When the pictures were new, all of the performers came from the regular stage. The comedian came with his slapstick and his bag of tricks. old as the hills. ¶ He found a new situation, however, and had to invent a new brand of fun making… The bewhiskered business of the tall comedian whacking the short comedian over the head with a club every time he told a joke while standing waist deep in the sad sea waves, was not only difficult, but it failed to get over. ¶ Rough-house comedy was born; the chase, knock down, drag out, throw ‘em in the river – anything to get a rise out of the audiences. ¶ This brand of fun making lasted a long time, too long a time, in fact. But while it was going on, a new form of fun making was being evolved, the real screen comedians were being made, until today there is a distinct kind of film comedy that is unlike anything the regular stage has ever offered us, and infinitely better…“96

Accounts of the development of American screen comedy during this period have two noticeable tendencies: first, they tend to erase American comedians’ debt to foreign, (i.e., French and British) sources; and secondly, where they decline to apologize for the “lowness” of violent film comedy, they tend to transvalue it, repositioning it as a positive, rather than a negative quality, and affirming it against outworn European models. The essay with which serious critical discussion of silent film comedy commences, James Agee’s “Comedy’s Greatest Era,” treats slapstick tropes as an indigenous American form. It’s only with Robert Payne’s identification of Chaplin’s tramp with a comic archetype extending through the ages “from mythical Pan to Harlequin and Grimaldi” in The Great Charlie (London: Pan Books, 1957) that the continuities between American and continental forms of physical comedy begin to be rediscovered.

In the meantime, the received narrative regarding the development of American screen comedy is fleshed out in the foundational works of Kalton C. Lahue. It is Lahue, writing in the 1960s and 1970s, who establishes the standard periodization of the silent film comedy era: after a phase of experimentation lasting approximately from 1910 to 1914 or 1915, a Golden Age of comedy shorts follows from 1915-1920 which is characterized by the contrast between two rival aesthetics—“Polite comedy,” produced predominantly by those studios who were licensees of the Motion Picture Patents Co., – and the wilder forms of “rough house” comedy, produced largely by the Independents. This age was succeeded in 1920-21 by a Silver Age which lasted until the introduction of sound, in which the narrative bifurcates: while the major comedians (Chaplin, Keaton, Arbuckle, Lloyd and Larry Semon) move into features, combining the “rough-house” with the “polite” style to produce the great slapstick classics, the minor comedians continue producing the inexpensive shorts which carry a minor, derivative form of slapstick practice forward well into the 1930s and 1940s. Lahue’s work re-emphasizes and re-entrenches the central legend of the received narrative regarding silent film comedy, one which is already in place in the newspaper discourse during the 1910s: the foundational role played by Mack Sennett, first at Keystone and later, following the debacle of Keystone-Triangle, at the Mack Sennett Studios.

The received narrative is one of a steady, unbroken, continuous evolution. It emphasizes a continuity, both of form and of function, in comic practice throughout history. The fact that the same gagspersevere from Renaissance Italy to twentieth-century America is weighty circumstantial evidence that the same things are funny in all places and at all times. The theory and criticism that have grown up on its basis are characterized by a heavy concentration on the universal appeal of a handful of star performers – Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, and Langdon, and increasingly of late years, Roscoe Arbuckle, Stan Laurel, Larry Semon, Lupino Lane and Lloyd Hamilton – and its aesthetics are readily observable in the canon of its classics, comprising mostly the features of the 1920s.

The received tradition has always tended to be auteurist. From its outset – that is, James Agee’s celebrated essay, “Comedy’s Greatest Era,” (1947) – slapstick criticism has treated the silent-movie comedian as the producer of a universally intelligible discourse:

When a silent comedian got hit on the head…he gave us a figure of speech, or rather of vision, for loss of consciousness. In other words he gave us a poem, a kind of poem, moreover, that everybody understands. The least he might do was to straighten up stiff as a plank and fall over backward with such skill that his whole length seemed to slap the floor at the same instant. Or he might make a cadenza of it – look vague, smile like an angel, roll up his eyes, lace his fingers, thrust his hands palms downward as far as they would go, hunch his shoulders, rise on tiptoe, prance ecstatically in narrowing circles until, with tallow knees, he sank down the vortex of his dizziness to the floor and there signified nirvana by kicking his heels twice, like a swimming frog.98

Agee’s approach has been repeated often in the literature on slapstick: for example, by Peter Krämer, in “‘Clean, Dependable Slapstick’: Comic Violence and the Emergence of Classical Hollywood Cinema,”99 in “Charlie Chaplin and the Annals of Anality,”100 by William Paul, and in Noël Carroll’s “Notes on the Sight Gag,”101 which constructs a taxonomy of visual motifs, while his Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humour, and Bodily Coping (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) analyzes Buster Keaton’s performance in The General as a discourse on work and problem-solving: Carroll even goes to the extent of attempting to provide a taxonomy of gags in Keaton’s work which might function as both a lexicon and a guide to syntax for the student wishing to submit Keaton’s performance to intensive linguistic analysis.

The *chef d’oeuvre* in the field of auteurist treatments of the work of the silent slapstick stars is indisputably Walter Kerr’s *The Silent Clowns*. Kerr had, amongst his numerous accomplishments, a prodigious sensitivity to the depth and complexity of the layers of meaning which may be evoked through performance; moreover, as a pre-eminent New York theatre critic, he was both trained in articulating this sensitivity and practiced in doing so on a daily basis. His study, though it concentrates on the Big Four (Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd and Langdon), extends from the work of Mack Sennett before them to that of Laurel and Hardy after their heyday, throwing light in the meantime on selected less well-appreciated luminaries such as Raymond Griffith, Larry Semon, and Lloyd Hamilton. From the work of each, Kerr extrapolates a distinctive aesthetics, personal philosophy and *Weltanschauung*, disclosing unexpected depths of thought and feeling articulated by these great star comedians in terms of action.

On the other hand, since the 1980s, a counterbalancing, genre-oriented tendency has emerged in cinema scholarship with Tom Gunning’s invocation of “the vaudeville aesthetic” in his pivotal essay “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, the Spectator and the Avant-Garde.” Gunning invokes the theatricality of vaudeville to distinguish an essentially theatrical “cinema of attractions,” based on unmediated sensational appeal, from a “cinema of narrative integration” in which the operative element is the progress of the story. Those accounts of silent film slapstick which develop Gunning’s distinction, such as Gunning’s own “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy” and Donald Crafton’s “Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy” treat the tension between the non-narrative visual appeal of the slapstick gag and the narrative appeal of the story within which it is set as a fundamental, and perhaps even defining, characteristic of slapstick film. But they typically omit to question the received narrative on the descent of slapstick film, and tend to gloss over the vexatious relations of theater and film in this period.

In spite of the considerable body of scholarship that has accumulated on its basis, the received narrative continues to be problematic. It elides numerous gaps and discontinuities in the historical record; it tends to suppress the role of conflict in the development of slapstick, and

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103 Though Kerr’s book is entitled *The Silent Clowns*, he concentrates on those who were best-known as slapstick comedians, giving short shrift to silent performers in the “polite” tradition like Max Linder, John Bunny and Sidney Drew.
to replace a pattern of waves of progress and regress with the narrative of a teleologically driven, linear progression towards ever greater, technology-based “realism.”

III. The Historical Context: A Closer Look

The nineteenth century was a period characterized by violent upheavals — technological, socio-political and ideological. It seems curious at such a time that the progress of a popular art that holds the mirror up to the violence of our natures, should not be caught up in them. I would argue that we are not equipped to reflect on any of these developments unless we see them in the context of the following major turning points:

i) The establishment of what Max Weber has called the modern “military-industrial complex” and the establishment of twentieth-century nation-states with effective monopoly of the legitimate use of violence and the authority to use it in support of their right of taxation;

ii) The creation of permanent professional standing armies and police forces;

iii) The entrenchment of democratic political institutions throughout Europe and North America, with the development of specific cultures in which the rights of the individual (including the right to perform acts of violence) are balanced in various proportions against the prerogatives of the government;

iv) A sharp statistical downturn in the incidence of civil violence, following a steady decline since the beginning of the Renaissance. This trend is perhaps best summarized in Robert Muchembled’s *A History of Violence: From the End of the Middle Ages to the Present*;\(^{104}\)

v) The expansion of the public sphere and the widening of the overlap between the public and private spheres;

vi) The increase of leisure time as a result of industrialization and the vast increase of interest in leisure activities, particularly sporting ones which offer a wide array of

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opportunities for the redirection of aggression into performative acts of expressive violence.\textsuperscript{105}

vi) The eruption of a major cultural divide – the gradual separation of “sporting” pastimes from “theatrical” ones;

viii) The emergence of a new set of performance forms:

a) a new set of activities (acrobatics, trapeze, roller skating and bicycling) and an intensified focus on physical health;

b) A new cast of characters, the development of a new technical basis for performing them and a new focus on individualized performance styles;

c) New dramatic settings, foregrounding locations which are both semi-public and semi-private: hotels, boarding houses, schools, and especially various workplaces;

d) New structural oppositions, bringing new dramatic forms;

e) New thematic concerns, especially those featuring a revitalized emphasis on rivalry, particularly in the workplace.

The changes in sections vii) and viii) above amount to a major transformation, not only of the subject matter and forms of nineteenth-century comedy, but also, I would argue, in the way in which comedy works. This most likely comes to pass with the crumbling of the entire aesthetic-ritual framework that had turned on the opposition of tragedy and comedy, in which "comedy ends with a marriage and tragedy ends with a funeral."

These evolutions are significant enough to warrant the hypothesis of a wholesale transformation of the role which laughter played in people’s lives; that is, of a change of direction in the history of laughter. We can observe the symptoms of such a change of direction in new developments during the period in five major areas: cast of characters, typical actions, typical structures, typical themes;\textsuperscript{106} and, especially, in performance style.

The traditional movement style of the \textit{commedia dell’arte} and of the tradition of \textit{ballet-pantomime} which descended from it was grounded in dance just as literary styles are grounded in

\textsuperscript{105} This phenomenon has been intensively studied by the Leicester school of sociologists concentrating on its significance for sports studies. But I am aware of only one book which approaches it from a performance studies perspective – Rosalind Crone’s \textit{Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London} (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{106} For a detailed account of these, please see Appendix 3.
poetry. The dance forms which informed them were those of the classicism of the Renaissance and the Baroque: they were characterized by an Enlightenment conception of physicality which is the basis for Bakhtin’s notion of the “classical body.” In the comedy of the Romantic period, this conception of the body came to be increasingly parodied – by exaggeration, by distortion, or by inversion. In the work of British exponents of the character of Clown such as Grimaldi and Tom Matthews, the contortionists of British circus, the continental klischniggs and cascadeurs, and of French comic tumblers such as Henri-Joseph Antoine Gaertner, Jean Gontard and Jean-Baptiste Auriol, who called themselves grotesques, a new manifestation of the traditional balletique performance style evolved – the style grotesque.

By the last quarter of the century, this style had come at first to be supplemented and later challenged by what seems initially to have been a complementary, but increasingly became a competing style. The style excentrique, which likely began as a variant inversion of the classical style, increasingly comes into prominence, becoming associated with a new, characteristically nineteenth-century movement dynamic reflecting the new populism of the age. My research suggests that knockabout and slapstick comedy emerged out of the opposition between these two styles: the decadent grotesque style with its elitist, aristocratic associations; and the emergent eccentric style with its egalitarian ones.

These changes provide strong circumstantial evidence for a change of direction in the history of laughter. In any case, in view of the major transitions which separate the two periods, we need to imagine the essential contexts for commedia and slapstick performances as having been entirely different; and throughout this thesis I shall develop the argument that it is this difference which is crucial. If both Evaristo Gherardi and Buster Keaton (in blackface) did forward rolls while keeping a beverage upright on a tray, we are still far from being able to claim that the commedia lazzo and the silent slapstick gag are twin expressions of the same spirit. What is wonderful about the co-incidence is precisely that it obtains in two such different contexts; and it is the difference in context after all that is the crucial determinant of the performance’s meaning. Of all contexts, the most decisive one for performance is the physical context, though it is likewise the most difficult to discover; and the most decisive for violent physical performances is the way in which people actually experienced, or imagined themselves as liable to experience, actual physical violence. The shifting context of the way people in diverse societies actually inhabit and move through public spaces, though first in experience, is
inevitably the last to be noticed, recorded and analyzed. Small wonder that, until the invention of film, it was hardly considered possible, or even desirable, at all.

IV. Re-examining the Received Narrative

One of the major problems with the received narrative is that it has largely been constructed from diverse specialized points of view. By and large, theater scholars are not film scholars, and vice versa; and neither are performers, so both have a tendency to overlook crucial technical differences. The received narrative needs to be re-examined from a multi-disciplinary perspective which is favorable to the actorly – literally, the “histrionic” – point of view; one which foregrounds knockabout and slapstick not primarily as certain forms of text, and emphatically not a handful of texts as the inspired productions of a limited number of great men, but rather as styles of performance implying specific techniques, and pursuing particular performative goals.

Undeniably, by the mid-eighteenth century, that cycle in the history of comedy which was marked by the ascendancy of the commedia dell’arte had run its course. The inspiration at the root of commedia was essentially medieval – the social order to which its comic practice addressed itself (however subversively) was a feudal one. As a vital performance practice, commedia was meaningful in a context where its underlying assumptions regarding social hierarchy and the relations between ethnic, regional, and class groups could be taken seriously. By the mid-1700s, those social realities had given place to new ones which produced different dramatic preoccupations and different formal means of expressing them. I would like to suggest that the change – perhaps ‘transition’ would be a better word – in the function of comedy which I am mooting here was marked by the evolution of new physical styles with entirely new bodily dynamics at the basis of performance technique.

We might mark the end of the period defined by commedia practice at 1762, the year in which the remnants of the Théatre Italien in France (the hardiest inheritor of the commedia legacy) were absorbed into the Opéra-Comique. Although many of the features of commedia persevered into the nineteenth century in fragmented form as elements of new practices evolving in circuses and fairs, the termination of commedia’s tenure as a dominant performance style would mark the conclusion of a major cycle in the history of laughter. It seems hardly a coincidence that this development should have accompanied so wide a variety of political, social
and civil developments in European society, many of them bearing directly on the place of violence within human affairs.

This same period is marked by a decline in violent popular pastimes, which has been traditionally recognized as lasting from the mid-eighteenth through the mid-to-late nineteenth centuries. Rosalind Crone, in *Violent Victorians: Popular Entertainment in Nineteenth-Century London,*

107 gives an apt summary of the progressive hegemony of “respectable” over popular culture and what John Carter Wood has termed the “customary mentality” of the populace over this period. A parallel movement across Europe is particularly well illustrated in France, where the excesses of the post-Revolutionary period are quickly overcome by a process of progressive “embourgeoisement,” beginning with Napoleon’s reform of the theatres in 1807, and continuing through Baron Hausman’s demolition of the *Boulevard du crime* in the early 1860s and the replacement of the boulevard theatres with the *cabarets* and *cafés-concerts* of the 1870s and 1880s. The case in America is different, but not unrelated, since the Thirteen Colonies from their foundation espoused an ideologically motivated anti-theatricalism: there was no tradition to subdue. But ultimately, with the appearance of American variety theatre and its evolution into Vaudeville, the same process of “embourgeoisement” is visible at work.

I cannot concur, therefore, with what seems to be Prof. Senelick’s primary assumption that the transition from *commedia* can be represented as a continuous evolution. In fact, my own research suggests there is a fundamental discontinuity between the physical comedy of the pantomime tradition, and the impetus behind nineteenth-century knockabout; a discontinuity which is elided in Senelick’s essay by the application of “knockabout” to the work of the Ravels, Fox, and the Hanlon Brothers. As it happens, so far as I have been able to discover, neither Fox nor the Hanlons (nor, *a fortiori*, the Ravels, whose heyday preceded Fox’s by twenty years) are ever referred to as “knockabout” performers by their contemporaries. On the contrary, the wielding of billy-clubs, brickbats and hot pokers that was typical of Fox was generally referred to as “stuffed-club” business; and nineteenth-century usage maintained a strict distinction between the kind of tumbling performed by the Hanlons, and the various forms of “knockabout business” that prevailed in the circus and on the variety stage. On the contrary, several indications suggest that “knockabout business” marked the emergence of a

fundamentally different inspiration from the physicality of popular pantomime; one which was ascendant while the latter steadily declined.

Perhaps the most telling of these indications is reported towards the end of the chapter on “The Grimaldi Tradition” in M. Wilson Dissher’s seminal account of pantomime performance, *Clowns and Pantomimes*. For Dissher, that tradition was on the wane by the mid- to late 1860s. The beginning of the end, on this account, came with the importation into pantomime of popular talents from the music halls. This, according to music hall historian David F. Cheshire, began in 1879:

In 1879 an event took place which was to have a significant effect on two types of entertainment: two major music-hall stars, Herbert Campbell and G.H. MacDermott were included in the cast of the pantomime at the Covent Garden Theatre. The following Christmas their success was repeated by Arthur Roberts and James Fawn at Drury Lane. These annual appearances in pantomimes by an increasing number of major music-hall stars also introduced them to middle-class audiences…hitherto unacquainted with them except by hearsay. When these audiences began to go to the halls they demanded something other than the steady procession of striking, but indifferently staged soloists. They wanted spectacular variety with scenery, ballet and special effects…

According to Dissher, the effect on pantomime was, amongst other things, to accelerate the erosion of its traditional performance style, substituting another, quite incompatible, one:

… the red-hot poker passed into the hands of those who lacked knowledge. Harry Payne\(^\text{109}\)…deplored that those entrusted with what was “really an art” could not act. He said:

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\(^{109}\) Perhaps the most notable exponent of the character of Clown in British pantomime during the 1880s and early 1890s.
You know very well what Grimaldi was: he had all that sort of thing about him. When he stole sausages he had an expression on his face and figure. He was not a mere knockabout; no man can be a clown proper who is that. I never knock a man down unless there’s a reason for it. The only time I ever knock a man down without a reason for it is when I have missed one man and knocked the other down, for which I have always been very sorry.  

Though Payne’s remarks may seem to us to be coloured to a certain extent by professional jealousy, he is making a serious claim that there were significant artistic differences between comedy in the pantomime tradition and the practices of the music-hall performers who invaded it. Dissher underscores the point towards the end of the chapter by a quotation from another famous Clown:

“The managers,” says Will Simpson, who was at Drury Lane in 1879, “have killed the old play by engaging people who knew nothing about it. They brought in a couple of knockabouts from the music-halls to play the Robbers in ‘Babes of the Wood’ or the Policemen in ‘Aladdin’ and for cheapness made them do the Harlequinade at the end as well. It was such poor stuff that people wouldn’t stay to look at it.”

However Payne and Simpson might be inclined to claim that the difference between pantomime mayhem and knockabout was equivalent to the difference between technique and no technique, some of their contemporaries would appear to believe otherwise. This is evinced, for example, in the obituary of Joe Mac (Joseph Maccabe), a member of Britain’s foremost knockabout team of the 1880s, the Two Macs:

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He was born at Dublin, Ire., Feb. 23, 1863, and joined Mike Mac about eleven years ago [i.e., in 1882]. Knockabout business was then, comparatively speaking, fresh to England, though it had been for some time a familiar feature of American variety entertainments. Its development by the Two Macs at once struck oil, and they grew rapidly in popularity. Their performance was, of course, widely imitated…

As this quotation illustrates, knockabout was, during the nineteenth century, considered a line of business in its own right – one which must be viewed as distinct from pantomime violence, which could hardly have been “fresh to England” eleven years before the publication of Maccabe’s obituary in 1893.

This is as much as to say that, if we’re in search of a genuinely “new inspiration” in the development of physical comedy during the nineteenth century (whether in America or elsewhere), we need to look elsewhere than to the pantomime tradition. It suggests further that we may need to employ a more nuanced conceptual model for our account than that of a single, continuous evolution. On the contrary, the likelihood would seem to be that in tracing the development of “knockabout business” through the latter half of the nineteenth century, we have before us an example of an emergent tradition engaging with and, to a certain extent, subverting, an older one. I would suggest that in attempting to form an accurate idea of the stylistic characteristics of nineteenth-century physical comedy we would do best to view it dynamically – as a struggle between competing ideologies reflected in competing models of physicality.

V. “Knockabout” and “Slapstick” – A Linguistic Microhistory

To research the meanings of these primary terms, and to find some guidance on how to use them correctly, I decided to re-examine the newspaper record in order to find out how those terms were used by the people who actually used them at the times when they were originally implemented and during the period when they were current for contemporary practice. The rough contours of usage during these periods can be readily established by means of the Google

Books Ngram Viewer (https://books.google.com/ngrams). The term “knockabout” (with its variants “knock about” and “knock-about”) emerges briefly during the 1820s and again during the 1850s, and then comes into regular usage during the early 1860s – it reaches a peak during the 1930s, and subsequently declines. “Slapstick” (with its variant, “slap-stick”) comes into regular usage about the turn of the twentieth century, rapidly reaches a high point during the early 1920s, and then tails off almost as rapidly as it had risen.

V.1: THE KNOCKABOUT CHRONOLOGY – BRITAIN

What did “knockabout” signify to the people who first regularly used the term – for what purpose did they develop it, and how did its meaning evolve over subsequent decades? Who were the first “knockabout” performers, and where should we look to ascertain what first-hand records of their performances are extant? In order to answer these questions I performed an online search of “knockabout” and its variants in the most prominent British entertainment industry trade paper, the Era, through the Gale Nineteenth-Century British Newspapers database. Between the years 1855 and 1894, I found more than three thousand entries, which I recorded and broke down into two main categories according to the usages of the word: A. Descriptive; and B. Evaluative. The types of occurrence that came under the first of these two headings were typically advertisements and fell into three categories:

i) Want Ads. by managers of a) Circuses; b) Pantomimes; c) Variety houses; and d) other theatrical ventures. The sense in which the term is used in these contexts seems to be primarily generic; the manager is advertising for a kind of performance, not for a particular style of one.

ii) Want Ads. by performers seeking engagements: these again tended to specify the type of performance, but are less particular about the venue.

iii) Advertisements for the appearances of performers at specific venues, especially in the London music-halls. These occasionally contained useful capsule descriptions of acts (often quoted from reviews), and tended to emphasize the personal styles of performers by way of product differentiation. They likewise have a tendency, however, to cross the line from description to (enthusiastic) evaluation.

Evaluative usages tended to be of the same kind – cursory mentions of performers with “knockabout” applied as a (usually dismissive) epithet.
I learned by means of this survey that the earliest performers or performances explicitly described as “knockabout” occurred in the 1871-1872 theatrical season: one was a pair of circus clowns named Arkelyon and De Lacy; the other was a ballet troupe led by a performer-manager named Edward Towers. Performers billed or billing themselves as knockabouts in the following year comprise two circus clowns and a team of acrobats, Cassim and Fritz. The next season (1873-1874) yielded five circus clowns, and the next introduced the first variety-theatre team to advertise in the category: Frank Wright and Ada Rose, who are also the first British male/female team I encountered.

Throughout the period there were at least fourteen distinct subcategories of knockabout performer in Britain.113 A great many of these were blackface minstrel performers who were typically billed as “Knockabout Niggers” – their line of business, apparently, was primarily knockabout song and dance. By the 1890s the generic category of “Knockabout Artiste” had come into fashion, to a certain extent baffling my efforts at classification. Of all of these, only the two ballet troupes apparently worked in anything like the classical movement style.

An entire chapter could be written on the development of knockabout in Britain in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but for present purposes my results show that knockabout performance seems to arise in the context of British circus in the years leading up to the early 1870s and that it rapidly spreads to music hall. It reaches its zenith in the early-to-mid-1880s with the arrival on the scene of the American team of Ferguson and Mack, and in the work of the teams of Palles and Cussick, The Two Macs, and Dermot and Doyle, all of whom embarked on extensive American tours.

V.2: THE KNOCKABOUT CHRONOLOGY – THE UNITED STATES

The American counterpart to the Era for the same period is the New York Clipper. Unhappily, the Clipper for its first fifty years is not yet searchable online, and I was constrained to scan it physically on microfilm from its first extant editions in 1850 through 1894 – approximately the same period as in the Era. To my surprise, I found significantly fewer occurrences – 422, to be precise – the first of which doesn’t appear until 1876.

113 Circus clowns, music hall clowns, ballet performers, pantomimists (i.e., dumb-show performers, not necessarily performers in pantomimes), knockabout song and dance teams, knockabout acrobats, knockabout tumblers, knockabout sketch teams, Irish knockabouts, knockabout skaters, knockabout cyclists, Silence and Fun performers, man-monkeys, and burlesque pugilists.
Judging by the results of my survey, the growth of knockabout performance in America began later and gained momentum more slowly. It’s not until comparatively late that a wide variety of acrobats, tumblers and even circus performers adopt the sobriquet “knockabout.” The earliest knockabouts referred to in the *Clipper* are variety-theatre minstrel song and dance teams: Welby and Pearl, McKee and Rogers, Manchester and Jennings, and the Reynolds Brothers. By the 1874-1875 season, however, the Reynolds Brothers have already branched out into burlesque boxing; in the 1875-1876 season they are joined by the team of M. et Mme. D’Omer, who add burlesque boxing to their repertoire of dance and sword combat.

Blackface minstrelsy is evidently the matrix for the development of knockabout in the United States which flourishes, as in Britain, around the mid-1880s in the work of the American Four, the Two American Macs, Ferguson and Mack, and Topack and Steele. Out of this matrix emerge the plays of Edward Harrigan (Harrigan and Hart begin as a minstrel duo), the “Silence and Fun” acts, and the legacy of knockabout song and dance which continued into the twentieth century in the work of teams such as Weber and Fields, Kolb and Dill, and the Rogers Brothers.

In France, of course, the term “knockabout” was not in use – and in fact no term parallel to either “knockabout” or “slapstick” exists in the French lexicon. Knockabout acts, in fact, are late in becoming a staple of variety performance in France, and are experienced predominantly as foreign (i.e., Italian, British and American) importations until about the First World War.114 On the other hand, the French music-hall programme was conspicuously more explicit sexually than either its British or American counterparts.115

In Britain and the U.S.A., there were apparently three major types of knockabout activity: i) Circus Knockabout; ii) Knockabout Song and Dance; and iii) Knockabout Sketches (and plays). The former apparently developed first in Britain;116 the latter two derived, not out of the

114 C.f. Peter Leslie, *A Hard Act to Follow: A Music Hall Review* (New York & London: Paddington Press Ltd., 1978), p. 130. According to Leslie, the incorporation of “bone-crushing” specialties into revues “did not become a custom in the French music hall until after 1910.” My search of the Gallica digital library yielded only about 30 uses of the word, of which the earliest (used to describe the team of Turle and Turle, “knockabout grotesques”) was from 1890. Several more from the first decade of the twentieth century characterized the Hamilton Brothers, an American team.


116 This may explain how the author of Joe Maccabe’s obituary could be under the impression that “knockabout business” could be newer in Britain than in the U.S. when we have seen that it developed in Britain first: he apparently didn’t go to the circus very often.
commedia dell’arte tradition, but out of American blackface minstrelsy. All three seem to have expressed a sensibility which was founded on a new conception of the body, a renewed sense of men’s struggles for possession of it, and of its increased potential as an instrument of violence. My research strongly suggests three things: i) that the template for this new conception most likely arose out of the new “science” of pugilism; ii) that it drew on folk dances – possibly plantation dances – featuring violent movements of the arms and legs, and on clog and jig dancing technique;\textsuperscript{117} and iii) that the new “science” was received not as complementary, but in opposition to the old “art” of self-defense – the dueling code, associated with the “classical body” and the ballétique movement style. I shall follow up on these inferences in my seventh chapter.

V.3: THE SLAPSTICK CHRONOLOGY – BRITAIN

I then turned to the term “slapstick” (and its variants). Through the Gage Nineteenth-Century Newspapers database I learned that the term “slapstick” doesn’t occur in the English press at all until the 1920s. Any tradition therefore, which involves the performance of “slapstick” for audiences receiving it as such cannot have its roots in Britain. Whatever it was that David Garrick invented in 1763, he didn’t call it a “slapstick.”\textsuperscript{118}

V.4: THE SLAPSTICK CHRONOLOGY – FRANCE

There was a tradition in the United States that the sources of slapstick and knockabout performance were French: Kalton Lahue passes on this tradition in the form of the vague notion that “much of what Sennett did in the early Keystones can be easily traced back a few years to the influence of the French comedies” of Méliès and Pathé.\textsuperscript{119} But in fact, when Ferguson and Mack came to Paris, French audiences didn’t know what hit them.\textsuperscript{120} British pantomime was, of course, originally French in origin, and John Towsen, in Ch. 5 of his book, Clowns, emphasizes the influence of the grotesques and other physical performers such as the klischniggs on

\textsuperscript{117}Variety theatre song and dance men were frequently also pugilists.
\textsuperscript{118}He may well have called it an “épée,” or “sword” as French Harlequins often did.
\textsuperscript{120}C.f. Le Soir, Friday, July 10\textsuperscript{th}, 1885. Last evening Mr. Zidler, of the Jardin de Paris, presented to the public in open air Two American Clowns of a completely new and novel style…Two grotesque companions, dressed as countrymen …who are at the same time Acrobats of rare agility, and they certainly do the funniest and best Knockabout Act ever presented to a Paris audience …’’ quoted in The Era, Aug. 1, 1885, p. 22.
nineteenth-century clowning;\textsuperscript{121} but in an online search of French periodicals, I was unable to find any evidence for “slapstick” performance in France. According to Towsen, most of the clowns in France at the time were British expatriates.

V.5: THE SLAPSTICK CHRONOLOGY – THE UNITED STATES

On the other hand, by performing a search of American newspapers in the Library of Congress Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers database, I was able to determine three crucial things. First of all, the term “slapstick” comes into common use in America during the late 1880s, though it’s in use as theatrical jargon a little earlier.\textsuperscript{122} Secondly, throughout the first two and a half decades, it is virtually never used as a descriptive or generic term – it is almost exclusively an evaluative term which refers pejoratively, not to a coherent body of performance practices, but rather to a non-descriptive low-comedy process of “fooling around” onstage, often associated with the practice of “stalling in one” while waiting for a scene to be changed behind the main curtain. Thirdly, the word comes into frequent usage to stand for a body of performance practices around the period from 1913-1914 – and when it does it is conspicuously associated with two figures: Mack Sennett and Charlie Chaplin. But when it does it stands not for a genre of film, but a style – the expression typically used is “method.” The word is regularly applied to films in which this particular style predominates by 1914; but it is not routinely used for this purpose until three years later. Throughout this period, it retains its emphatically pejorative overtones, but is gradually transvalued through the late 1910s and 1920s.

The crucial point of origin for cinematic slapstick is a body of practices associated with blackface minstrelsy and known under the generic description of “hokum stuff.” By the mid-1910s the tradition of “hokum stuff” had already succumbed to the general amnesia to which traditions of violent physical comedy are particularly subject:

…It is doubtful whether the most inveterate of theatergoers knows what is meant by the term “hokum stuff.” It is an old-time minstrelman equivalent for slap-stick comedy. Out on what used

\textsuperscript{121} On p. 6 of Ch. 5 (available at www.scribd.com/doc/15358746/Chapter 5). Unfortunately, Towsen’s book is out of print and his chapters are not paginated continuously in their online versions.

\textsuperscript{122} For example, “slap-sticks” are included in the properties lists for the Ethiopian sketches “The Coal-Heavers’ Revenge” (Geo. L. Stout, pub. ca. 1874), “Squire For A Day” (A.J. Leavitt, pub. ca. 1875), “Gripsack” (John Arnold, pub. ca. 1876), and “Christmas Eve in the South; or Uncle Caleb’s Home” (Dan Collyer, pub. ca. 1882).
to be known as the “Tallow-Dip Circuit” “hokum stuff” was resorted to by the comedians of minstrel aggregations, in order to get their audiences into a state of high good humor …

In Jolson’s minstrel days it was customary to close the show with an afterpiece. Among the best-known farces in which “hokum stuff” was injected to the last degree may be mentioned “The Ghost in the Pawn Shop,” “Razor Jim,” “Over the River Charlie,” “Irish Justice,” “Stocks Up, Stocks Down” and “Graveyard Sam.” It may be remembered by those who saw the show that “The Mummy and the Maid” had an excruciatingly funny barber shop scene in which an electric razor was used. Lew Fields later on put a variation of this old neger act into one of his musical shows. Sam Bernard utilized some old-time “hokum stuff” in a scene in which, as the wigmaker, he hid beneath the table, and from that point of vantage worked up a ludicrously amusing scene. “Irish Justice” has done noble duty for the comedians George W. Monroe and Harry Fisher. Disguised in a variety of forms this farce has convulsed untold thousands, who little dreamed that their forefathers had laughed at the selfsame bit of “hokum stuff.”

Many of the minstrel afterpieces, known collectively as the “Ethiopian sketches,” have survived, over half of them thanks to Charles White, a minstrel performer from antebellum days, who arranged them for cheap acting editions published for the benefit of amateur minstrel companies in the last decades of the nineteenth century. They form a particularly rich source of data, constituting, in fact, the principal repository of the body of nineteenth-century American physical tropes that later re-emerged in the form of slapstick.

It was out of this minstrel tradition that the most influential subgenres of what was explicitly known as knockabout performance descended. “Acrobatic song and dance,” “eccentric song and dance,” and finally “knockabout song and dance” were initially practiced

principally by American blackface performers during the 1870s and 1880s, and it was as a variant of them that “Irish knockabout business” originated. Out of this body of practices grew a third, highly influential subgenre: the “Silence and Fun” act, a solo performance of tumbling and parlor acrobatics usually performed in a set representing a parlor or kitchen, to the accompaniment of music. “Silence and Fun” was first developed and performed in blackface by the minstrel Frank E. McNish, and then widely copied by performers throughout the United States and in Britain, where its major exponent was Alf West, into the 1890s. The American knockabout sketch, finally, straddles the divide between minstrelsy and vaudeville in the sketches of writers like Frank Dumont. The influence of Dumont’s work in particular on vaudevillian sketch comedy, and that of his predecessor, Charles White, are unknown quantities, very likely as enormous as they have been unacknowledged.

V.6: CONCLUSIONS OF THE SLAPSTICK CHRONOLOGY

Just as the transition from the old theatrical style to the new was marked not by an easy progression but by conflict and controversy, so the entrenchment of slapstick comedy in the films of the 1910s was highly contentious. Although the received narrative does not fail to allude to the contrast between physically-based silent comedy and the “genteel” comedies, it glosses over what was in fact a vigorous debate over what sort of product American studios ought to be producing. The meteoric rise of Chaplin in 1914-15 was beheld with dismay by many contemporaries, while “slapstick” continued to bear pejorative connotations into the 1920s.

This research enabled me to resolve several problems that prevented me from defining my primary research questions:

i) What was a “slapstick”? By the early twentieth century, “slapstick” had four meanings. The theatrical implement was not the two-pronged wooden bat with a space between the prongs, which clapped together when struck against some object, that was traditionally associated with continental commedia and British pantomime. That implement is

124 Buster Keaton’s father, Joe, was a “Silence and Fun man” at the time of his marriage to Myra Keaton (c.f. New York Clipper, June 16, 1894, p. 227).
125 See, for example, Dumont’s “The Lady Barber,” (Chicago: The Dramatic Publishing Co., 1897) which recasts the blackface barber act in a form more amenable to polite vaudeville.
126 There are three pages on White’s accomplishments as a singer in Gillian M. Rodger’s Champagne Charlie and Pretty Jemima: Variety Theater in the Nineteenth Century (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010).
127 For detailed accounts of each, with examples, please see Appendix 1.B.
what was known to nineteenth-century American comedy performers as a “split stick,” and was regularly included in the comic arsenals of blackface performers together with the “stuffed” (or padded) stick or club, the stuffed brick, the inflated dried pigs’ bladder (usually attached to a stick), the seltzer bottle, the off-stage crash machine (typically a bag of broken glass mixed up with other objects) and the “slapstick.”

This consisted of two curved pieces of flat wood (homemade slapsticks employed the bent wooden slats that supported mattresses in bedframes), placed tip to tip and fastened by means of a wooden handle, so that a gap remained between the middles of the slats. It was sometimes used onstage – more often in burlesque than in vaudeville – but it was usually used by theatrical percussionists for “catching the falls” (i.e., producing comical sound effects) from the pit.

ii) Did “slapstick” stand for a genre of comic film, or a style of performance? There have been several attempts to establish criteria for distinguishing slapstick as a genre (or a comic subgenre) including Jay Leyda’s “California Slapstick: A Definition” by Jay Leyda, and Charles Wolfe’s “California Slapstick Revisited.” Most, however, have come to grief on the problem of distinguishing slapstick’s structural features: slapstick, so the argument runs, doesn’t have any characteristic generic features of its own – it simply borrows those of other genres, and then subverts them. Thus, for Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, slapstick is a “mode” of comedy, like parody and satire, rather than a genre.

Contemporary usage, however, shows that “slapstick” at first typically described a manner of performance (i.e., a style). The word most often used is “method.” However, after

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128 See, for example, the props lists for A.J. Leavitt’s “In and Out,” (New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1875), Leavitt and Egan’s “The Black Ole Bull,” (New York: Samuel French, ca. 1868) and Frank Dumont’s “The Serenade Party” (Chicago: Dramatic Publishing Company, 1897), which specifies the split stick as “small...for Jacob to strike guests’ hands.” On the other hand, the slapstick is featured in John Arnold’s “Gripsack” (New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1874), George L. Stout’s “The Coalheavers’ Revenge” (Chicago: The Dramatic Publishing Company, 1875), and A.J. Leavitt’s “Squire for a Day” (New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1875).


133 C.f., for example The Evening Star (Washington, D.C.), Oct. 4, 1898, p. 12: “… Of course, the humor of the farce grows out of slapstick, rough and tumble methods, minus nearly every element of actuality, and the characters are not delineated so as to appeal to that unfailing source of laughter – one’s sense of the ridiculous…” or The
about mid-1914, the word is often used of a genre of film unfolding primarily in this style: the first unequivocal instance in *Moving Picture World* is in an Essanay advertisement from the July 7, 1914 edition (p. 143) for “Money Talks,” which describes it as “(a) side-splitting ‘slapstick’ comedy of unusual merit.” Even in the absence of other generic markers, this usage seems to me to be perfectly legitimate: there are certainly precedents for it elsewhere in aesthetic discourse, for instance, in the case of *bel canto* opera, which is only distinguished from other forms of opera by the hallmarks of the unique performance style which it calls for.

iii) *Did this style of performance pre-exist silent film slapstick?* Prior to its use in the context of film comedy beginning in mid-1914, the term “slapstick” always refers only to a manner of performance, and it is always evaluative rather than descriptive – i.e., pejorative. It is connotatively associated with a heterogeneous group of “low” live-theatre practices, but its use is nonetheless not denotative of any specific content or body of gags.

VI: The Explicit Goals of This Study

The evidence of these philological microhistories makes it possible to sketch out a skeleton history of knockabout comedy and to establish my basic expectations for an account of slapstick. To summarize my results thus far:

A. Knockabout was the primary form of physical comedy in circus and variety theatre performances in Britain and the United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although carrying pejorative overtones, the term stands for a distinct body of performance practices as well as for a kind of performance style. “Knockabout business” underwent a twin development: a first strand originated in Britain, most likely in the circus, but it rapidly spread to variety theatre. After the late 1870s it increasingly appeared in Christmas pantomime, by the casting of variety performers – but *at the time* the word is never used to designate traditional pantomimists working in the *commedia* tradition. With the possible exception of two ballet companies.

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*Evening Times* (Washington D.C.) April 25, 1902, p. 5: “... It is a brilliant comedy from the pen of George H. Broadhurst, written on the broadest possible lines, without recourse to vulgarity or slapstick methods...“

With the possible exception of two ballet companies.
a much more gradual development in blackface minstrel performances of two kinds: song and dance, and sketch. In the United States, a particular (and particularly violent) brand of knockabout performance develops as Irish Knockabout Business, which enjoys widespread popularity on exportation during the early 1880s to Britain and the continent. The international popularity of knockabout performance reaches its zenith in both Britain and the United States during the mid-1880s and continues not much abated until the 1893-1894 theatrical season, after which it rapidly declines. Despite its popularity in France as an import, indigenous knockabout performance does not become a regular feature in the cafés-concerts until late in the 1910s. Though some forms of knockabout performance have persisted until the present, largely in circuses, nineteenth-century knockabout sketch and song and dance comedy must to a large extent be regarded as lost arts.

B. “Slapstick” is an originally pejorative term which, unlike “knockabout,” does not describe a discrete body of practices, or, at first, even a specific style. It refers instead to a nondescript process of “messing about” onstage which could be associated with the type of improvisatory performances which were typically performed “in one” in order to stall for time while scene changes were made behind the curtain. During the late 1900s and early 1910s, however, largely due to the influence of Sime Silverman of Variety, “slapstick” acquires currency as the term for a style of low-comedy performance loosely associated with the rough-house of knockabout. Between 1914 and 1917, however, the term becomes current for a subgenre of silent film comedy in which the slapstick style is prevalent. Usages of “slapstick” as a generic descriptor for performances, whether on stage or screen, before 1914 should therefore be treated as back-formations in which the values which the speaker reads into slapstick style are being projected backwards into earlier periods. By 1921, it has become a term for a wide range of performance styles with a wide range of expressiveness: from the buffoonery of the average formula two-reeler to what Moving Picture World calls the “High Art in Low Comedy” of the

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135 C.f. the following letter to the editor by Fred Ray of the vaudeville team of Ray and Wood: “… If you would stand outside a vaudeville theatre and look at the people as they leave, you would never run down this class of comedy that I am trying to handle. Any audience is a fair sample; a bucket of suds on the head; sit on fly paper; a loaded slapstick and slap a custard pie… ” Variety, No. 6 – Jan. 20, 1906, “Artists’ Forum”, p. 11.
Chaplin/Keaton shorts[^136] and the feature films of what Kalton Lahue calls the “Silver Age.” Although the age of silent slapstick comes to an end in 1927-1928, numerous sound comedies continued to exploit the slapstick aesthetic. By the early 1960s, however, attempts to work in it like Stanley Kramer’s *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1963) or Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) do so in a spirit of pastiche, demonstrating that the style, and the genre based on it, have lost their currency. It’s only on the resolution of the uncertainties arising from doubt as to these issues that I am able to address my fundamental research questions:

a) **How does slapstick develop — and what is the influence of knockabout performance on that development?**

The received tradition – and the scholarship which has developed on its basis – actually implies two competing accounts.

i) On the first of these, vaudeville and music hall performances in a “slapstick” style are simply recorded on film. The recordings of these then form the basis for the development of a new genre. In support of these, the surviving early films which present vaudeville acts such as the “Gordon Sisters Boxing” and the “Japanese Acrobats,” or those which feature theatrical personnel like May Irwin or Montgomery and Stone, are usually adduced. The argument generally assumes that the importation of these performers automatically implies the direct importation of both theatrical subject matter and style. Meanwhile, the theatrical context of early films’ reception (in variety theatres and fairgrounds) determines their formal qualities and their reception: on this basis Tom Gunning famously diagnoses the “primitive” quality of early films as residing in their inherent “theatricality,” which is the defining element of what Gunning calls “the vaudeville aesthetic.”[^137]

But it’s not enough to know that some early films transcribed vaudeville performances. In order to know that for the roots of slapstick in the classical cinema to have truly been these early recordings of variety performances, we would need at the very least to know either that a preponderance of early comic films were importations of this sort (which we know not to

[^136]: C.f. *Moving Picture World*, Mar. 26, 1921, p. 412 (where the phrase is applied to Keaton’s “The Goat”), and Oct. 1, 1921, p. 574 (where the film is Chaplin’s “The Idle Class”).

be the case), or that those films which were made in this way had a recognizable determining influence on the majority of the films that, ultimately, constituted what came to be called slapstick – or at least on those that are accepted as constituting the slapstick canon. In that case, we would expect the years between 1893 and 1914 to yield a high proportion of a variety of hybrid forms that evidently narrativize variety-theatre performances in ways that can clearly be linked to the subsequent tradition. (This proportion would be one that would increase, rather than decrease, over the period 1893-1914.) At the same time, we would expect to see a significant amount of duplication between what we can discover of live performances during the period, and the filmic transcriptions of them. We should, in theory, be able to reconstruct a great deal of turn-of-the-century live performance on the basis of the cinematic record.

There are good reasons to question this account. In the first place, film producers employed scenarists for the purpose of writing photoplays from 1898 onwards. Vaudeville acts were copyrighted, and performers strongly resisted the re-presentation of their material in the new medium. It should also be recalled that performers in early film did not have the autonomy to consult their instincts and perform as they pleased. On the contrary, under the director-cameraman system, which prevailed until well into the nickelodeon era, performance before the camera was not treated as “acting” (even in the extended vaudevillian sense of the term which included virtually any display of skill). It was spoken of, rather, as “modeling” or “posing,” and required, like posing for a still photographer, strict compliance with the cameraman’s commands. Actors in early films were not at liberty to consult their instincts, and naively to employ the techniques of stage performance in what they knew to be a new and unique context. Finally, the cinematic record is nowhere near adequate to the task of recuperating the vaudeville tradition, as it would have been, if films had simply absorbed it pell-mell. The surviving cinematic records of turn-of-the-century performance are, unfortunately, both fragmentary and few.

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138 C.f. “How The Cinematographer Works” in *Moving Picture World*, Vol I, No. 41, Dec. 14, 1907, pp. 660-663, where the director gives minute instructions to his models – including the instruction to make their performances *broader* than they are inclined to do – while, on their breaks, they long for the resumption of the theatrical season at the end of the summer.
ii) On the second account, cinematic comedy develops out of medium-specific elements such as stop-motion, variations in camera scale, masking, undercranking and, after 1903-1904, editing, which characterized the “trick” and “chase” films of the earlier period. Though early comedy draws on a wide range of source materials for its subject matter, including contemporary fiction, current affairs, and comic strips, it is these medium-specific properties which have had the decisive effect on its form. This form arises as a product of the tension between spectacle and narrative or, in Donald Crafton’s terms, between the elements of “Pie” and “Chase.” It is the shaping influence of the medium itself which results in the emergence of a new comic genre at the conclusion of the “transitional period” from 1905 or so through 1912-1913; a period characterized by the development of medium-specific forms of narration, in the classical Hollywood style – one which is distinctively cinematic.

This account implies that the difference between slapstick and knockabout (if there is one) is simply a function of the difference between theatre and film as media: in effect, slapstick is mediated knockabout. But once again, contemporary usage complicates this rather facile antithesis: contemporary reviewers use both “knockabout” and “slapstick” to describe – and usually to deprecate – the productions of contemporary filmmakers. Both of these terms, indeed, remain current into the 1920s – see, for example, the review in *Moving Picture World* of Century’s “A Movie Bug” (1921), which employs both terms in a puzzling manner:

> The humor is of the knockabout sort and laughable in spots… The scenes in this were easily made and there are no big situations, but it will serve as a light slapstick subject.  

The account suggests, then, that the primary distinguishing characteristic of slapstick as a style is medium-specific, and that its origins should be sought within the film industry at the turn of the second decade of the twentieth century. This gives renewed significance to the

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traditional claim that slapstick begins with Mack Sennett and places the pivotal role of Sennett’s influence as D.W. Griffith’s pupil and as the developer of “Keystone editing” into high relief.

Unfortunately, though writers on cinema from the collapse of the Sennett studios on have not failed to acknowledge the medium’s debt to him, no systematic study has yet determined what, precisely, his contribution was in terms of cinematic style. My second research question, therefore, is related to the first:

b) Which silent film comedies are slapstick comedies – and which are not?

One of the major pitfalls in approaching this field is the common tendency to confuse “silent comedy” with “slapstick comedy.” This confusion exacerbates the difficulty of distinguishing between slapstick as a style and as a genre, and in discerning the reliance of the genre on the integrity of the style.

The first commentator to question the meaning of the term “slapstick” and to challenge Sennett’s role as “the father of slapstick comedy” was in fact Mack Sennett himself. In a 1917 interview, Sennett problematizes the distinction between “slapstick” and other forms of silent film comedy which subsequent critics have tended to blur:

**Sennett Objects to “Slapstick” As a Term to Define Film Comedy**

There will be a readjustment of terms applied to film comedies—if Mack Sennett can bring it about. Sennett, as most people know, is the inventor of what has become practically a standard motion picture term—Keystone comedy. And he objects to the use of “slap-stick” as a definition of his invention. He objects to the use of the term for any kind of comedy.

“I have been heralded as the originator of the so-called “slap-stick comedy,” he states with more or less sadness filtering through his words … “As a matter of fact, there is no such thing as ‘slap-stick’ comedy. There are two recognized types of comedy, the low comedies of the early stage days and the light comedies. The former were very popular in the old days of the stage, and with
some improvements, have enjoyed immense popularity in motion pictures.

“Who ever heard of the old-time low comedies spoken of as slapstick? No legitimate actor ever knew of such an expression. It is essentially a modern term.”

In order to follow up the implications of this line of inquiry for the study of slapstick, therefore, we need to determine what the hallmarks of the Keystone style really were and trace, if we can, how they spread. We likewise need to relate the product of Keystone and its numerous imitators to the other forms of silent comedy. Sennett’s remarks above seem to rehearse the traditional pat distinction between what Sennett calls the “low” and the “light” comedies, and what Kalton Lahue and others call the “polite” and the “rough” styles. But reviewers during the first half of the 1910s, especially in the *Moving Picture World*, experiment with a wide range of terms in search of critical criteria adequate to the developments on the screens in front of them, including “character comedy” (as distinguished from physical comedy), “pastoral comedy” (for the Rube films), “satiric comedy” (as a euphemism for “burlesque”), and “clown character farce.” As a means, perhaps, of finding a way to distinguish slapstick from knockabout films, *Moving Picture World* reviewers during the years 1911 through 1914 show a deepening reliance on two oppositions of terms borrowed from the stage: between “farce” and “burlesque” in matters of genre; and between the “eccentric” and the “grotesque” in matters of style.

Most reviewers try to see slapstick in more nuanced terms than mere binary oppositions. A 1917 review of Douglas Fairbanks’ *Down to Earth* in Philadelphia’s *Evening Public Ledger* distinguishes two forms of “slapstick” from two forms of “polite comedy”:

There are … four schools of comedy regnant today— the episodic anecdote that Sidney Drew does well, the quasi-realistic burlesque invented by Sennett, the Chaplin mixtures of violence and funny

dumb show, and the Fairbanks-Loos-Emerson comedy of satire
plus beauty and action.\textsuperscript{142}

In view of D.W. Griffith’s influence on Sennett, the \textit{Ledger’s} definition of his style by its “quasi-realism” seems to me to be particularly insightful. In distinguishing Sennett’s slapstick with its emphasis on “quasi-realism” from Chaplin’s, with its focus on the feature performer, the reviewer seems to suggest that we should be prepared to distinguish not one, but at least two forms of “slapstick” style. In doing so, he anticipates Kalton Lahue’s observation that by the 1920s slapstick comedy production\textsuperscript{143} is of two sorts: the mixture of polite and violent comedy which characterized the features of Chaplin, Lloyd, Keaton and Langdon; and the cruder “knockabout” style of the cheap two-reelers which continued to be cranked out in their hundreds by the Hal Roach, Al Christie, Fox, Paramount, Educational and Mack Sennett Studios.

Indeed, we need to be open to the possibility that from the beginning there were diverse slapstick styles. In his autobiography, Sennett acknowledged the influence of the Pathé comedies of the early period in shaping his sense of comic form.\textsuperscript{144} As conspicuous by its absence from Sennett’s account is any mention of his debt to Essanay, established in 1907 as the first producer of American comedies; the studio with which Sennett was locked in the most serious competition during the Keystone years, and which lured Charlie Chaplin away at the end of 1914. Indeed, the first films regularly advertised as “slapstick comedies” are not Keystones at all, but the Essanay “Sweedie” comedies featuring Wallace Beery. As to the principal directors of slapstick in Hollywood, a 1914 article in the \textit{New York Dramatic Mirror} citing Emily Brown Neininger (a prominent screenwriter), identifies three: Sennett, Essanay’s E. Mason Hopper, and Arthur Hotaling of the Lubin studios.\textsuperscript{145} Moreover, while the Keystone brand was still establishing its niche in the market, several defections established key personnel from Sennett’s operation at other studios: Fred Mace at the Apollo studios, Henry Lehrman at L-KO, and Ford Sterling at Sterling Films. A large number of other early “slapstick” films included those featuring Max Ascher, produced at the Joker studios, and some of the product of both the Crystal

\textsuperscript{143} (as opposed to the more inclusive category of “silent comedy”)
\textsuperscript{144} Mack Sennett, \textit{King of Comedy} (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1954), pp. 64-65: “It was those Frenchmen who invented slapstick and I imitated them.”
and Nestor studios. We therefore also need to learn what key performers and directors other than Sennett (and Chaplin) were instrumental in establishing which kind of slapstick style; and which films available for analysis today we should consult in order to discover what their own styles might have been like.

More importantly, our lack of certainty about precisely what “slapstick” consists in – and the bifurcation of slapstick comedy production into features and two-reelers in the 1920s – problematizes one of our major criteria for thinking about it in terms of an autonomous genre: the canon of “classics.” The vast majority of these are either the great features of the 1920s starring one or the other of the “Big Four,” or earlier films of theirs which are received as precedents for them. As Sennett predicts and as Lahue points out, these feature films are in a hybrid style in which the “polite” comedy is merged with the “rough.” If “true” slapstick is best represented not by this hybrid type, but by the cheap low-comedy farces of the two-reelers, it is entirely possible that the canon constitutes a mis-direction; that in tracing the true path of the history of laughter we may have to forsake City Lights for “Super-Heterodyne Lizzies.” Either way, this possibility undermines the usefulness of the canon as a guide to which comedies are slapstick and which are not.

c) What did knockabout and slapstick comedy mean to the audiences who initially received them, and for whom they constituted the cutting-edge expression of their concerns?

I’ve already complained that the issues of first importance in this inquiry are inevitably the last to be written down; in fact, throughout this project, my work has been conspicuously hampered in particular by a curious – one might even say, a tendentious – paucity of detailed documents in the reception of both knockabout and slapstick comedy. If the besetting dilemma of theatrical reconstruction is that we can never resurrect the second of the two prime constituents of a performance – the audience – how can I hope to accomplish my research’s major explicit goal?

On the one hand, my primary method must be textual analysis; though in the case of knockabout comedy I am under the unique constraint of having to reconstruct the texts in question before I can set about analyzing them. But of course, a specific event can never be recovered: one can only reassemble the raw materials of a performance, and in this the predominating tendency in the scholarship to treat slapstick performance as analogous to a speech act comes to my assistance. In some cases of circus, minstrel sketch and variety-theatre knockabout, the materials do exist to provide the more or less specific movement vocabulary
which a particular type of performance might have drawn on; to establish within a determinate range of probability its dominant syntax; to make an educated guess as to what were its predominant tropes; and in this manner to determine probabilistically what range of effects it was designed to produce in a particular context. The conclusions of this process can then be compared against what contemporary reports of the reception of the performance have survived.

d) How does the function of comedy change during this period? How do the respective functions of nineteenth-century knockabout and twentieth-century slapstick compare?

On the other hand, the method of textual analysis supplemented by traditional “reception studies” can only produce limited results – it cannot hope to recover a sense of the position of each kind of text within what Raymond Williams has called the “structure of feeling”\textsuperscript{146} of each period. In attempting to solve this problem I’ve followed the example of Roberta E. Pearson in her inspiring study, \textit{Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films}. For Pearson, we can take a step towards recuperating the place of a particular text within the “structure of feeling” of its period by studying the intertextual framework which conditions both its production and its reception:

A text … can only exist within and because of an intertextual framework. Intertextuality should not be conceived in the narrow art-historical sense of direct influence. Rather, intertextuality refers to those texts, both “traditional” ones such as books, paintings, and plays, and less tangible ones such as broadly diffused cultural conceptions, which form a framework for the reception of a particular text.\textsuperscript{147}

In the case of knockabout performance, I want particularly to discover the relationships which existed between the fictional acts of violence which transpired in circuses, mechanics’ halls and on variety theatre stages and the other acts which were performed in those venues; and between them and the real acts of violence, both actual and potential, which constituted a part of


the social environment for audiences in the nineteenth century. In the case of the slapstick films of the twentieth century, my primary interest will be twofold. On the one hand, I'll be interested to know the place of films featuring violent comedy within the total vocabulary of the preclassical and early classical cinema, as well as between those films and the variety acts and literary and artistic productions which may have conditioned the production and reception of those films. Furthermore, I’ll want to be able to reflect on their relationship to the violence of everyday life. Ultimately, I’ll want to compare the relationship between these two sets of relationships: to understand the similarities and differences between the relationship of “knockabout business” to the real-life violence of the nineteenth century and that of cinematic slapstick to the real-life violence of the twentieth.

VII. The Index

Fortunately, a vast range of extant documents of nineteenth-century popular theatre performance have been systematically collected by Allardyce Nicoll and George Freedley in their collection *English and American Drama of the 19th Century*. A similar resource for students of French popular theatricals is accessible through the Centre for Research Libraries database, and period journals and newspapers offer an abundance of contextual evidence. Attempts to codify the “vocabulary” of physical performance in film during the slapstick period are not wanting either. Apart from Noël Carroll’s “Notes on the Sight Gag” and *Comedy Incarnate*, there is Anthony Balducci’s *The Funny Parts: A History of Film Comedy Routines and Gags*, which draws on its author’s impressive experience of films, both silent and sound, to evoke a sense of how a large number of gag tropes played in both the preclassical and classical Hollywood periods. But Balducci’s study is essentially a miscellany, divided into chapters organized by empirically determined “major themes;” and Carroll’s a sort of a rhetoric, extremely useful for students of comic forms, but less so as a guide to their intertextual relationships and their use in performance. To aid me in understanding which films are most significant for the purposes of this study, and what are the dominant comedic tropes within them, and to enable me to trace the development of slapstick film comedy in both production and

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reception, what my purposes require is something more along the lines of a concordance: a reference work that will chart the occurrences of various motifs within the total oeuvre of silent film, noting each incidence of their occurrence and cross-indexing their appearances across varying contexts in such a way that they could be related to similar motifs among the extant documents of nineteenth-century popular theatre.

To provide myself with such a resource, I created an index of Physical Comedy Films to cover the period from 1893 to the emergence of slapstick in 1914. I began with the American Film Institute Catalogue, Vol. A (Film Beginnings, 1893-1910) and Vol. S1 (Short Films, 1911-1920), creating a long list of films, the printed synopses for which indicate that the films relied for their effect predominantly on physical comedy – particularly violent physical comedy. I was able to flesh out this list by adding the trade summaries and reviews of films as they appeared week by week in The New York Clipper, The New York Dramatic Mirror, Variety, Moving Picture World, and Billboard. As I proceeded, I found that certain characters, structures, story elements, gags and conventions were repeated in varying contexts, with certain repeated elements, which I have called tropes, emphasized by the frequency with which they were repeated. For each of these, I kept a separate list of the films in which each occurred. At the same time, I cross-referenced films the synopses of which indicated that they were most likely remakes of each other. I also kept lists of other films that were the most likely to provide keys to the most important intertextual relationships: of films of vaudeville acts, whether or not they included elements of knockabout or slapstick comedy; of films whose synopses indicated particularly compelling resemblances to live-theatre performances of the period (for example, the Ethiopian sketches); films that involved either black performers or white performers in blackface; films which featured particular sorts of character (the Cop, the Tramp, the Bad Boy, etc.); films which featured various sorts of dance; and so on.

VIII. Slapstick and Modernity

The nexus of problems regarding the relationship of modernity, the apparatus, comedy and performance which is articulated in Kracauer, Benjamin and Adorno’s ideas, and their masterful summation in Hansen’s book, opens the door on a deep and quintessentially human question; one which so far it has only been possible to address by a profession of faith. Is the comic impulse one which we can rely on to help guide us through the uncertainties which face us
at the threshold of the new era opened to us by the advent of digitization – or is it a chimera which has let us down in the past and which, however good it makes us feel, may delude us again? Does it supply us with an example of technology bent to the preservation and extension of what is most deeply human in all of us – or does it represent a capitulation to the dark side of our own ingenuity?

In attempting to gauge the efficacy of silent slapstick comedy for the audiences of the twentieth century, we of the twenty-first need seriously to consider the possibility – indeed, as Adorno might say, the likelihood – that there is a history of laughter which may be characterized by numerous internal tensions, conflicts and uncertainties; by frustrations, hesitations, and reversals; that it reaches a turning point during the transition from Victorian popular culture to the mass culture of the twentieth century; that this turning point reaches a crisis with the introduction of film; and that at the crucial instant, the “sense of humour” of the Western world backed down in the face of overwhelming odds and zigged when it should have zagged.
Chapter 2
From the Concert Saloon to the Two-a-Day:
The Evolving Context of Comic Performance

In this chapter and the next I will attempt to set the stage for my comparative study by examining first the changes in the context for the reception of violent comedy and, secondly, the changes in its forms which take place during the fifty years from the conclusion of the Civil War to the emergence of slapstick just at the threshold of World War I. These years witnessed a vast expansion of the entertainment industry in the United States. While the Union itself spread from the former Indian Territories to the Pacific Ocean, a multi-tiered entertainment industry developed out of the resident and touring dramatic and comedy companies, variety, pantomime and circus troupes, bringing with it a number of new forms, among them some emerging from nineteenth-century minstrelsy, which would conspicuously influence the development of slapstick cinema: the burlesque troupe and the athletic combination. At the same time, these years also brought with them a radical change in the structures of popular thought and feeling which conditioned the reception of violent comedy in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

I. The Ethiopian Sketches, Antebellum Minstrelsy and the New York Concert Saloons

In the form in which they have come down to us, the Ethiopian sketches consist of a body of some 250 or so short plays originally designed to be the “third parts” or “afterpieces” of minstrel evenings. These plays represent only a small sample of the vast number of such performances which took place between 1847 and the collapse of minstrelsy in the late 1910s. That we have any record of them at all is due in large measure to the efforts of two men -- Charles T. White and Frank Dumont, both minstrel performers -- who dedicated their lives not only to performing but to compiling records of their own and others’ accomplishments and making them available for copying by amateurs in cheap acting editions published by Samuel French, Robert De Witt, Dick & Fitzgerald, Ames’ Publishing Co., and others.150

150 For an outline of the corpus of surviving minstrel afterpieces collected by Allardyce Nicoll and George Freedley in English and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century (New York: Readex Microprint, 1965.), please see Appendix 2.A.
Just as both the American variety theatre of the 1850s-early 1880s (which evolved into vaudeville after 1887) and burlesque were developed on the structural basis of the minstrel show, so the minstrel afterpiece became the model for the closing acts of vaudeville and burlesque shows throughout the rest of the century and into the next: an evening’s vaudeville typically ended with a sketch in which the company participated above and beyond their appearances in their specialties. These sketches were very frequently either remounts or reworkings of the sketches that had formerly been used to terminate minstrel shows. Where they were not, they were demonstrably designed along the same models. Many of Dumont’s sketches bridge the gap between minstrelsy and vaudeville, and between them and numerous early films. For example, the well-known barbershop trope with its roots in French commedia (it was one of the staples of both Deburaux père and fils), was familiar in circuses during the breadth of the knockabout/slapstick period; Dumont reworks it for vaudeville in his whiteface sketch, “The Lady Barber,” (published 1897). The trope of the female barber as a variant on the repeated motif of the “untrustworthy barber” goes on to receive widespread treatment in vaudeville as well as in numerous films from the mid-1900s on.

The models on which minstrel sketches were designed were quite few in number. Many of them were farces which took a boiler-plate narrative pattern as their structural basis – for example, the structures which I have called the “Elopement scenario,” and its variant, the “Consent” scenario. Others are parodies, and adopt the structures of the objects of their comment, like many slapstick films of a later generation. Others are distinguished by formal characteristics of their own: in his chapter “Ethiopian Sketches of American Life: Skits, Farces, and Afterpieces,” William J. Mahar identifies what he happily terms a “parade” structure:

The parade play displays a variety of characters drawn from contemporary life, popular stage personalities, and classic personae from Shakespearian plays, all of whom make brief appearances highlighted by an identifying speech or action; after the audience

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151 For example, Leonard and Flynn close the show at the Westminster Musee, Providence R.I., Jan. 28 1889, in the familiar Ethiopian sketch, “A Slippery Day” supported by the theatre’s resident stock company (New York Clipper, Feb. 2, 1889, p. 747).
153 From the closing scene of White’s “Hippotheatron,” (1849) to Chaplin’s sardonic quotation of it in The Circus (1929).
had time to recognize the parody, the actor playing the particular part moved briskly off stage for a costume change and reappeared in another burlesque role.\textsuperscript{154}

The “serial” structure of the parade play is of particular interest to me since it represents an alternative to the Freytag form of narrative which is taken up with particular enthusiasm by filmmakers during the Transitional Period, and in fact constitutes a major structural “trope” which is common to both the “hokum stuff” of knockabout sketch performance and to the immediate predecessors of slapstick films – the “comics” of the 1900s.

Of the plays in the first group, a great many, and a smaller proportion of those in the second, seem to have been devised around some pronounced physical trope. In many, for example, a character is immobilized and then made the subject of a succession of attacks like a character in a shooting gallery – in Dan Collyer’s “The Milliner’s Shop,” the young lover Bob has to conceal himself beneath a table, putting his head up through it and making believe it’s a hat-block in order to be near his sweetheart Susan while evading detection by the mistress of the shop; in Dumont’s “A Desperate Situation” Peter Tanglebrain has to hide in a chest into which various other characters, unaware of his presence, fling water and flour, then club him on his emergence.

The Ethiopian sketches, like the slapstick films of the 1910s, are primarily physical texts. Most of them were improvised on the basis of a single “walk-through” rehearsal which laid down the basic physical movements and sketched out patterns of verbal exchange. Such, at least is the recollection of the old-time minstrel Lew Hawkins, reported in the \textit{San Francisco Call} in 1911:

“In ’84 I was with the Concross (sic) minstrels in Philadelphia…All the properties that were needed,” he said, “for an after piece or nigger act, as they were called, were a seltzer bottle, some flour, a slapstick, a breakaway window—a paper window with a glass crash in the rear—a phoney telegram and a table and some old chairs. Those properties did for every act.

“There was no manuscript in those days, no written parts. The man who was putting on the act would meet his support Monday morning. He would walk through the rehearsal with them. He would take the woman and say, ‘You come on here, you walk to the footlights and you say so and so.’ Then he would take the man and say, ‘You enter now and say so and so, and the woman says so and so.’ They had to try to remember their lines from that. There were sad breaks at times…”

A glance at a sample stage direction from a Dumont production of 1873 demonstrates how very often the creators of sketches were content to leave the lines themselves unspecified even as late as publication date, giving only directions for dialogue to be improvised around the action:

Enter BINGIAL L.D.F., as a ragged drunkard; at the same time MR. MOODY enters with a toothache; his jaws are tied up. MOODY screams with pain. The DOCTOR points out BINGIAL, and orders GRANGER to run him out; but BINGIAL gets out too soon for GRANGER to get hold of him. The DOCTOR and GRANGER both attend to patient; they recommend their own medicine, give him a bottle, and he exits D.F. This business is similar to 1, 2, 3...

It’s primarily to the physical motifs recorded in the stage directions of the Ethiopian sketches that we need to look for the tropes that may provide the surest guide to what audiences actually witnessed as well as to the meaning(s) which the plays held for them.

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155 Arthur L. Price, “In Vaude-Village: Its People and Its Vernacular” San Francisco Call, July 9, 1911, p. 27
II. The “Hokum Stuff” of the Ethiopian Sketches

The matrix out of which the Ethiopian sketches spring was the antithesis of the polite minstrelsy of the mechanics’ halls and opera houses where a minstrel show consisted primarily of genteel musical performances varied by neat dancing. On the contrary, they sprang from a “bad tradition” which goes back almost to the very origins of minstrelsy in America. We learn from an edition of Billboard from Feb. 1908 in an article by George Primrose\footnote{Primrose was one of the major minstrel impresarios of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.} that the first venue played by Dan Emmett, Billy Whitlock, Frank Brower and Dick Pelham when they formed the first minstrel band, was the Barlett Billiard Room, in New York’s Bowery: “a great resort then for circus people.”\footnote{One of these circus people was evidently Charley Sherwood, who is very likely the C. Sherwood whose name is to be found among the original performers of White’s “The Rival Lovers,” ca. 1855-1860.} Bartlett’s Billiard Room was apparently one of a number of downscale venues in and around the Bowery section of New York City, where performers, proletarians and other riff-raff were wont to foregather. Several of these, including some known to be those in which the earliest minstrel troupe performances took place, seem to have either been New York Concert Saloons,\footnote{The concert saloons, outside of their connection with antebellum minstrelsy, have been most ably described by Brooks McNamara in \textit{The New York Concert Saloon The Devil’s Own Nights} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).} or at least run on the same model – with the notorious “waiter girls” replete. These include Palmer’s Concert Room, where White appeared in 1844 with the “Kitchen Minstrels,” White’s Melodeon at 53 Bowery (opened in 1846),\footnote{C.f. T. Allston Brown, \textit{The Theatre in America}, in \textit{The New York Clipper}, Jan. 4, 1890, p. 710, as well as White’s obituary in \textit{The New York Clipper}, Jan. 10, 1891, p. 699.} White’s Varieties at 17-19 Bowery, and White’s Opera House at 49 Bowery. Primrose’s article suggests that there was a tension between the “downtown” minstrels of the Bowery and the uptown ones of venues like the site that eventually became the American Theatre:

Although it is conceded that the Virginia Minstrels were the first banded company, most people speak of Charley White’s company, which played the Bowery, as being the first minstrel company, and perhaps it was in point of size: while Christy’s Minstrels were considered the aristocratic organization, playing at 444 Broadway,
a place quite uptown then and much frequented by the younger Knickerbocker class.\textsuperscript{161}

White’s obituary in the \textit{New York Clipper} reveals that it was in the environment of these venues, so closely akin to the rowdy atmosphere of the Concert Saloons, that the Ethiopian sketches first developed:

Nov. 24, 1846, he opened his Melodeon, at No. 53 Bowery, at which place he gave a highly miscellaneous performance, and it was then he introduced those farces which, as concluding acts, were then so popular.\textsuperscript{162}

White himself was an accomplished dancer\textsuperscript{163} as well as an indefatigable and original researcher into plantation movement culture.\textsuperscript{164} He was likewise an enthusiastic pantomimist. Among the sketches from his tenure at the Melodeon, and at White’s Opera House (49 Bowery, opened 1854) are two American adaptations of the British pantomime. “The Mystic Spell” is a panto with dialogue in which two Bowery layabouts are transformed by a magic fairy into Pantaloon and Clown. “Scampini, An Anti-Tragical, Comical, Magical, and Laughable Pantomime Full of Tricks and Side-Splitting Transformations” was adapted “for minstrel and variety troupes” by Charles White, and first performed by White with Wood’s Minstrels. “Scampini,” a pantomime wholly without dialogue, introduces a blackface Cupid into a traditional British-style pantomime structured around the familiar \textit{commedia} version of the New Comedy consent scenario. Many of the other scripts for the Ethiopian sketches contain extended


\textsuperscript{163} According to T. Allston Brown, (“The Theatre In America,” \textit{New York Clipper}, Jan. 4,1890, p. 710) he acquired this feature of his reputation at Palmos’ Opera House and Vauxhall Gardens, then under the management of P.T. Barnum: “Here White, with Dan Gardiner, danced the first double polka in character.”

\textsuperscript{164} C.f. T. Allston Brown, “The Theatre In America,” \textit{New York Clipper}, Jan. 4,1890, p. 710 “… seeing in the natural delineation of negro character and eccentricities a mine of mirth and amusement so inexhaustible, and feeling that he had a proclivity therefor, he essayed its perfection. By a close scrutiny of negroes of all ages and characters, by studying their dialect, imitating their actions, gesture and carriage, by closely examining their tastes, peculiarities and humors, their friendships and hatreds, by noticing carefully the blending in their character of the deeply pathetic with the grotesquely and exuberating droll, by this broad and searching study, conducted with patience, care and discrimination, he, with his own already well tutored efforts, placed himself before the public as an actor of great power.”
scenes in dumbshow and appropriate as many pantomime conventions as White had opportunity to absorb. Clearly, White was ambitious to assimilate the British pantomime tradition; but he was eager also to adapt it to a distinctly American sensibility.

He also evidently had a yearning to move into a more respectable milieu, as, by the late 1850s, he did, with the opening of Charley White’s Opera House (the former Washington Hall) at 598 Broadway (1860). Finally, during the Civil War, he succeeded to the management of the American Theatre, at 444 Broadway (1861-1865). There is reason to pause before equating this move with the attainment of unqualified respectability: according to T. Allston Brown the American Theatre from 1861 until 1865 was able to boast one at least of the distinguishing features of the downtown concert saloons – the notorious “waiter girls,” much in vogue at the time. On the other hand, their presence – and the passage of the Concert Bill in 1862 – apparently did nothing to interfere with the success of the American Theatre as a venue for minstrelsy. Throughout the first half of the decade, White’s company consistently attracted the best and the brightest minstrel talents of America to become White’s collaborators: A.J. Leavitt, George Stout, James Maffitt, Ad Ryman, Dan Bryant, John Arnold – and certainly not least, John Wild, who would become a mainstay of Harrigan and Hart’s company.

Minstrelsy, as reflected in the fortunes of Charles White and his collaborators, then, follows a familiar trajectory. Like commedia before it, and like both vaudeville and film comedy afterwards, it begins as a “low” and popular pastime; it acquires a following and moves uptown in search of a more respectable audience – and more money – until eventually it acquires a distinguished cachet but at the same time loses touch with its popular base, and is supplanted by a more novel development. The effect of this process of embourgeoisement is visible to some extent on the Ethiopian sketches. Though the later plays continue to abound with physical humour, a much greater proportion of them – and particularly of those composed by Dumont – are concerned to a much greater extent with verbal wit and wordplay, and their scripts consequently seem to be compositions on the basis of literary models rather than revised records of essentially improvised performances. The sense of their having been constructed around a strong central physical trope is weaker – and, especially, the degree to which they integrate song and dance into their structures markedly tails off – this is noticeable even between the early and the middle plays of White. While still unabashedly “popular,” they display social aspirations which, arguably, compromise their roughness. At the same time, especially in the late group of
White’s plays and the early plays of Harrigan and Dumont, their rhythmic subtlety and the complexity of their construction develop remarkably.

The two major groups of Ethiopian sketches, however, have numerous common features: features which are as peculiar to them as genii and magic carpets are to the *Arabian Nights*. These features can be classified broadly according to six categories:

i) **Character types:** The featured types naturally include the familiar Jim Crow and “swell darkey” types; there are also Dutch and Irish characters (both black- and whiteface) as well as other plantation types; there are also numerous white types, occasionally lower-class, but most frequently well-to-do.

ii) **Settings:** There are a variety of typical settings in the Ethiopian sketches: occasionally the scene is a bourgeois home in which the lead comic character is one of the servants, but the majority are set in public spaces of some sort – usually workplaces, and especially various kinds of office.

iii) **Typical actions (stories):** The typical initial situation is unemployment: the protagonist is out of a job and is looking for some way to earn a living. Very frequently this situation is complicated by rivalry for the same position. At the same time, another typical situation is that of the young man wishing to marry a young woman against the objections of one of her parents or some other person in authority over her; once again, this situation is frequently complicated by the superaddition of a rivalry of some sort; and very frequently the subject of the rivalry is an occupation.\(^{165}\) Typical actions include various forms of masquerade, especially female impersonation; concealment; and engaging in contests of one sort or another, particularly contests involving some sort of performance, like the dance contests in Charles White’s “Going for the Cup” or Henry L. Williams’ “Challenge Dance.”

iv) **Objects:** Props in these plays include a large number of objects that become significant in the early film period as well. Many plays call for dummies to be substituted for characters at critical moments, particularly at the moment of explosions, which occur

with great regularity. Another favorite object is the chest or other container in which a person’s entire body may be concealed. The props lists for many plays regularly call for stuffed clubs, but less frequently for slapsticks (only about 5 of the extant plays call for these), split sticks (only one or two), or bladders. Walking sticks and umbrellas occasionally also figure as weapons.

v) **Gags:** Many of the gags are identical with those to be found in pantomime scenarios as well as in silent film comedies – for example, the “composite body gag” is to be found in A.J. Leavitt and H.W. Eagan’s “Black Ole Bull” (New York and London, Samuel French, ca. 1868), as well as in the repertoires of numerous variety comedians.\(^{166}\)

The plays feature a vast array of comical activities, especially violent ones, and many are significant because of the ways in which they reflect their context. The preferred method of physical violence is bludgeoning: the conceit of a patient’s being “cured” of some disease by being beaten with a club (by a mischievous servant disguised as a doctor, for example) is often repeated, as is that of a surreptitious lover being immobilized in a dangerous place, like a figure in a shooting gallery.\(^{167}\) Given the rowdy context in which these performances took place, there is more than a suggestion here that audiences may have been tacitly invited to make impromptu contributions to the fun by hurling some light object like a piece of bread or fruit rind at the performer so immobilized. Certainly the conclusion of George Coes’ “The Police Court” is simply inviting the audience to take part in the terminal *melée*:

**Judge:** Away with him.

*[General confusion; OFFICER goes to arrest ROMEO who throws real brick at him; OFFICER gets in front of ROMEO and back to

\(^{166}\) e.g.“Clifford and Huth, the leaders of the comic turmoil, are enabled to change their time-worn specialty … Here is an example. A very wide wife sits in her narrow husband’s lap and receives a proposal of marriage from a thick-tongued Irishman with pink hair and a baboon face. The husband’s hands are clasped in front of his wife’s waist and her arms are held behind her. The husband therefore makes her gestures. They range from invasion of the Irishman’s pockets to uppercuts that knock him out of his chair. Each one is a signal for an uproar of laughter from the audience” (*The Sun*, NY., NY. Oct. 14, 1898, p. 7).

\(^{167}\) For example, in Dan Collyer’s “The Milliner’s Shop” (New York: De Witt, 1882), or Frank Dumont’s “The Painter’s Apprentice” (New York: De Witt, 1876).
In these plays, explosions are for the first time a frequently repeated trope, as also is electrocution. The violence, however, generally stops short of death; there are one or two characters who fake their own death, but none is ever represented as killing either himself or someone else, even in A. J. Levitt’s “Cremation” (1874) in which the character Dusty is actually thrown (by virtue of a substituted dummy) into a crematorium. At the same time, however, the world of the Ethiopian sketches has a grave aspect: most of the characters live in or have experience of grinding poverty; the working world is an environment of ceaseless toil and fatigue; and the characters, like their counterparts in commedia, are usually the prey of constant, insatiable hunger and thirst – though their sexual appetites are generally easily satisfied by sentimental romance.

Plot structures: In addition to those featuring what William Mahar calls the “parade” structure, numerous plays are organized around what I have called the “Elopement” and “Consent” scenarios. Many more have the simple talion structure which they share in common with the “Bad Boy” films of the period from the late 1890s to 1906 or so: somebody does something gratuitously cruel to somebody else, against which that person retaliates, and the fun is in watching them turn the tables. Occasionally, however, the vendetta has consequences of its own which lead to further mayhem. As I mentioned in my first chapter, the characteristic conclusion to which the plays typically come is utter chaos as the wings close in – as for example at the conclusion of George L. Stout’s “The Coalheavers’ Revenge” (1868):

JOE. Let’s grease all de stoop and sidewalk wid his butter, den holler Fire! And when dey all rush out dey’ll break dar necks, and we’ll be even wid ‘em all. (They grease the stoop, etc., halloo Fire! All rush out and fall promiscuously about, while JOE and JIM throw the butter rolls.)

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169 As in the talion law of retribution, or lex talionis: “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.”
These endings often have the effect of a gesture of disavowal following on the plays’ evocation of a world which, though superficially made light of, is plagued with serious social problems. Indeed, in these plays we frequently get a glimpse of genuine and moving suffering which is swiftly displaced by a piece of extravagant buffoonery. This is especially true of the plays’ evocation of the circumstances of their blackface protagonists, which is not simple-mindedly bigoted. These characters are, by and large, not simply the shiftless chicken-stealers and watermelon-eaters of other blackface humor: many of them are honest if indigent, and if illiterate, they nevertheless cling stubbornly and in their own ways heroically to a fragile dignity of their own which the audience is explicitly required to acknowledge. Very often, indeed, the plays end on a note of reconciliation, and conclude with a traditional valediction like the final couplet of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in which the audience are explicitly addressed as “friends,” and the action of the play contained within a mutual benediction. Such, for example, is the conclusion of White’s “Uncle Jeff”:

HENRY.
Forgive him, father, for my sake. He is a clever-hearted fellow…

DOCTOR.
Well, I forgive him.

JEFF.
Den I’m satisfied—no, stop! Dere’s one thing more. I would ask if de kind fren’s before me will not give a good recommendation to

“UNCLE JEFF.”

CURTAIN\(^{171}\)

By the early 1890s the new inspiration which had fueled minstrelsy across the trajectory of a forty- or fifty-year span had run its course. As early as 1875, song-and-

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\(^{171}\) Charles White, “Uncle Jeff” (New York: Harold Roorback: ca. 1860 (?)).
dance men like Scott and Forest are already exciting positive comment by performing “without cork upon their faces,” and by the 1890-91 season prominent former minstrels like Gallagher and West, Frank E. McNish (of Silence and Fun fame), and a little later, Blocksom and Burns all make (largely unsuccessful) attempts to leave the burnt cork behind. The consequence was evidently a full-scale split within the theatrical variety industry itself whose advent could be seen approaching as early as 1891:

The straight variety companies of today are unquestionably partaking more and more of the farce comedy order, and are gradually booking in the better class of houses, while burlesque per se is gradually coming to the front in the vaudeville theatres and minstrel organizations. In the last named class of attraction the old time semi-circle of burnt cork performers is no longer seen. The Southern darkey of ten years ago is a thing of the past. It is common nowadays for a minstrel soloist to sing an Irish ballad, while the genuine colored man’s dialect is very seldom heard. A careful perusal of the past few years’ records of minstrelsy will show that class of entertainment is changing. Today thousands of dollars are spent on gorgeous stage settings and costumes. The performers appear in spangles and tights, court wigs and gowns. Will a few years change all this, and place shapely women in characters now assumed by men? Or, in other words, will Minstrelsy and Burlesque wed? This is a question no one can answer at present.

The expansion of the burlesque element within the vaudeville theatre of the early 1890s provoked increased competition on the part of various vaudevillian farceurs:

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175 C.f. The New York Clipper, April 7, 1894, p. 70.
Next year many of the troupes which have this season given an out and out vaudeville performance will add a burlesque afterpiece(177), while the present burlesque managers will considerably strengthen their companies. The following year may see even greater changes in the vaudeville business … The straight variety companies of today are unquestionably partaking more and more of the farce comedy order, and are gradually booking in the better class of houses, while burlesque per se is gradually coming to the front in the vaudeville theatres and minstrel organizations.178

These organizations adopted various strategies to enable them to compete with the emergence of burlesque. Some, like the ex-minstrel Barney Fagan or the production firms of Hallen and Hart and Rich and Harris, adapted traditional farce the better to exploit the pulchritude of female performers; others exploited strategies trading rather on product differentiation and relied for their sensational appeal on the thrills of acrobatic comedy:

“Rich & Harris, the Boston managers…will boldly unite white face minstrelsy with the feminine attractiveness of farce comedy, in a skit called “Tuxedo.” This is the idea and work of Henry Sayers, now manager of the George Thatcher Show, the principals of which will go with “Tuxedo” next season. Primrose & West, the well known minstrel firm, are also going to make another venture into this tempting field for money getting. They are the financial sponsors of the Byrne Bros. in their so called nautical comedy, “Eight Bells.” The Byrne Bros. will be remembered for their acrobatic feats, with a disjointed cab, much after the fashion of the

177 Note: this would simply have constituted a reversion to the common practice of 1880-1885, when conclusion with a minstrel afterpiece featuring the entire company was the standard way of closing an evening’s vaudeville.
Hanlons in “Le Voyage en Suisse.” Their pantomimic and acrobatic skill will no doubt be utilized for central effects in the musically named “Eight Bells.”

All-out vaudeville wars were averted by the secession from the Travelling Variety Mangers Association in 1902 of sixteen managers and theatre owners who proceeded to form the Columbia Amusement Company (or Eastern Burlesque Wheel), and the secession from the Columbia of another group in 1903 to form the Empire Circuit (or Western Burlesque Wheel). The proponents of burlesque were thus segregated from the proponents of farce who (literally) travelled in different circuits. From this point forward, vaudevillian farce-comedy typically relied to a much greater extent on swiftly-paced acrobatics, while the performers on the burlesque wheels remained the main beneficiaries of the bone-crunching knockabout legacy of the minstrels. In the meantime, other versions of marginal types, playable in whiteface – the tramp, the rube, the burglar, and the “masher” – had invaded the vaudevillian sketch repertoire; and it is these who form the models for the primary fun-makers in the “comic” films of the first decade of the next century.

Underlying this process, however, was a large-scale evolution in its major contexts – within society, within the entertainment industry at large, and within the film industry. This evolution is nowhere more clearly reflected than in the changes between the performance repertoires of the Ethiopian sketches on the one hand, and of the early film comics out of which slapstick comedy emerged, on the other.

III. Turning the Tables: Contexts for the Emergence of Slapstick

The received narrative on the emergence of slapstick posits the wholesale migration of performers from stage to screen, with “slapstick” and “knockabout” acts replete, which then become the basis for the development of cinematic counterparts. If this theory were correct, we ought to be able to test it by identifying specific knockabout and/or slapstick stage acts that have been straightforwardly committed to film and then simply retracing the process of adaptation, comparing what records remain of the reception of the original stage performances with the

exhibition and reception history of the films. That the theory is most likely incorrect, however, is best evidenced by the fact that for the 6,000 films in the Index, I was able to find reference to only one film which, on the testimony of contemporaries – and only of one reviewer – was a straightforward film version of a stage act acknowledged to be, if not slapstick, at least “low comedy.”

On reflection, it’s difficult to see how matters might have worked out otherwise. The United States Supreme Court’s “Ben Hur Decision” – that motion pictures were “pantomimes” and that they were therefore included under United States copyright law entitling the owners of theatrical pieces to royalties for the use of their material in films – was handed down in May 1908, just at the time that the length of a significant number of films began to approximate that of the average (non-headlining) stage sketch. For the stage performers of the period, an effective stage act meant an income for the rest of one’s working life; no sum could be great enough to induce a performer to part with it in an exchange whose effect would be to exhaust the market value of the property within a few months. No producer, meanwhile, could be induced to pay a sum even approaching a lifetime’s income for a property whose profitability would be so quickly exhausted. That filmmakers nevertheless helped themselves freely to portions of acts was well known, and often remarked on in the pages of the trade journals, especially The New York Dramatic Mirror and Variety. But perhaps since identifying a particular case of infringement was tantamount to making an accusation of a crime, even Variety was careful most of the time to speak only generally. But where only portions or aspects of acts are being

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180 The film is an unidentified British producer’s “Harnessing a Horse” which, on the testimony of Variety’s Sime Silverman, records the Music Hall act of comedian Will Evans, “elaborated into a picture play through the addition of a few out-of-door scenes.” (Variety, May 1, 1914, p. 21). It apparently involved a prop horse and some comedy falls of the kind often performed by the comedians at Keystone.

181 That is, between ten and twenty or so minutes; the standard length of a reel of film was 1,000 feet, or about 11 to 12 minutes, depending on the rate maintained by the projectionist.

182 Stage performers, of course, stole each others’ material all the time – the “Artists’ Forum” page of Variety was regularly festooned with their complaints about each other – but legally they were in a very different position from the film producers because of the difficulties involved in documenting an infringement during a specific performance – a difficulty which did not apply to the exhibition of a film. The piracy of materials from stage performances protected under the copyright law was indeed so essential to film production that in February 1912, Congressman Townsend of New Jersey, acting (so it was suggested) at the instance of the Edison interests, proposed an amendment to the copyright law capping the penalty for infringement at $100.00 (c.f. Variety, Feb. 10, 1912, p. 12, “Picture Men Have Joker for the Copyright Law”).

183 E.g.: “Buying a Title (Edison) … The plot is slightly reminiscent of a popular vaudeville sketch, but differs sufficiently to warrant a claim to originality” (New York Dramatic Mirror, Oct. 3, 1908, p. 8); “‘Physical Culture Fiend” (Pathé, Oct. 6) … The ‘act’ is so much better done in vaudeville … “ (Variety, Oct. 23, 1909, p. 14) “Their
exported, there is no longer any reason to suppose that any entire performances, performance practices, or indeed the performers themselves are being exported along with them. Since the early 1900s film product had been based on scenarios by hired screenwriters: these could accomplish the entire act of exportation with a notepad or simply an accurate memory.

We are forced therefore to abandon the hypothesis implied by the received narrative of a wholesale exchange of talent and expertise between the theatre and film industries. If, on the other hand, we turn our attention to isolated repeated elements of acts, the results are a great deal more encouraging: we can then identify specific commonalities, and trace influences, not only among films, but between films and contemporary stage performances of a wide variety of kinds; and not only between these, but also between these and the productions both of earlier and of later periods. This procedure indeed, reveals within the entertainment culture of the period a rich and revealing, though dauntingly vast, network of intertexts, between the lines of whose interactions can be read many of the major preoccupations of the period. When isolating these intertexts as the subjects of a virtually unlimited process of repetition with variation, I have referred to them as “tropes.” By “trope,” I mean merely a repeated figure; the more often we find a figure repeated, the more important we may infer it is.

If any of the tropes that I have isolated for critical attention can be taken as a master-figure for the dense reticulation of ironies with which the popular culture of this period is preoccupied, it must be what I have called the trope of “Turning the Tables,” which recurs in a virtually unlimited variety of forms and contexts. Perhaps the most salient figure in which it appears is in the character-trope of the bogus Count, a counterpart to the shape-shifter of myth, and the wild card, or “Joker” within the otherwise orderly list of items in the period’s lexicon. Ordinarily a person of low station, the Count is an opportunist who, in the typical narrative, seizes a chance opportunity and successfully passes himself off as a nobleman at the wealthy heroine’s garden party, supplanting her genuinely wealthy suitor in the process. As a story-

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Sea Voyage (Essanay, April 13).—This comedy story, a very good one, by the way, is modeled very closely after a well-known vaudeville sketch and also resembles a film issued some months ago by another manufacturer, which appears to have been suggested by the same sketch … “(New York Dramatic Mirror, April 23, 1910, p. 18).

Indeed, after the studios recognized that it was to their advantage to publish information about their stock companies in 1910-1911, it transpired that many film performers had no acting experience outside the film industry whatsoever; and some found their lack of prior experience an advantage in adopting an appropriate acting style.
trope, “Turning the Tables” stands for a particular kind of reversal, often involving mistaken identity, in which (for example) the householder, locked outside after midnight while investigating a noise, is arrested downstairs while upstairs the burglar gains admittance. As a setting-trope, it figures as the sanctum to which a character retires, in need of rest, only to find oneself in the midst of a bedlam as inescapable as it is intolerable. In general, the trope stands for the particular inflection of irony which pervades the popular culture of the period between the 1890s and the onset of the First World War.

There have been many other contexts in which something resembling the “turning the tables” trope has appeared, but probably none in which it has been so insistently repeated, or has so intensively characterized the preoccupations of the period; much less the particular preoccupations which concerned British, French and American producers and audiences during the first decades of the twentieth century. Just as a psychologist might focus on the recurrence of certain images in a subject’s dreams, paying the most attention to those which occur most frequently in the widest variety of contexts, and considering most carefully the forms of distortion to which their latent content is most often subjected, as the surest clue to the nature of the conflicts which are troubling the sufferer, so the formal analyst may discover in the most popular tropes of the silent film comedies of the period from 1894-1914 a sure guide to the transformations which produced slapstick comedy. Just as a person’s private oneiric vocabulary may reveal much that is otherwise hidden about them as an individual, so the oneiric language of a society may reveal much that is otherwise hidden about their aspirations and anxieties as a group. It is therefore small wonder that the “turning of the tables” trope should stand as a particularly convenient metaphor for many of the major transformations occurring at the time within the film industry, the overall turn-of-the-twentieth-century leisure industry, and the popular culture of the period at large.

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185 The Roman feast of the Saturnalia and Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* are two instances that spring to mind.
186 *I.e.*, its occurrence in the Saturnalia quite certainly did not reflect the progressive democratization of the public sphere due to the rise of a mercantile middle class; its use in *Twelfth Night* or in the *Commedia dell’arte* as certainly does, but both inflect their use of it with a profoundly negative bias (though this bias may well have been ironic).
187 For whom its typical ironies evidently diverged widely from those of the British and Italian renaissances.
IV. “Turning the Tables” in Popular Culture: The Crisis in Comedy

By early 1914, the film industry in the United States – and especially the branch of it which supplied the growing demand for comedy – was in a condition of crisis. The demand for product and the producers’ ability to supply it were so out of all proportion to each other that by February of that year the General Film Co. (the distributor for the associated licensees of the Edison patents on motion picture equipment) had proposed what were for the period a radical set of changes: the abandonment of weekly release schedules; the tiering of product into Class A and Class B releases; and, most unprecedented of all, the reissue of successful past releases to cope with the extraordinary demand.188 This crisis affected not only the production of features, but also of the shorter films. These were required both for films-only houses and to share time with live acts on the bills of the two-a-day “small-time vaudeville” houses which were proliferating across the country. The problem was not simply one of the producers being unable to cope with the demand in quantity. It was not even a question of their only being able to produce films of poor quality – even “bad” films189 can make people laugh. The problem was that the films weren’t funny. So far as the evidence of the trade reviews and synopses can inform us, they were being produced on the same models and with recourse to the same methods that had created universal delight from 1900 to 1906; but for the audiences of the early teens the comic productions of the Hollywood studios were increasingly less funny.

Much the same problem seems to have obtained in the vaudeville theatres and burlesque houses that were the principal resorts of live physical comedy during the same period. The decline of the minstrel tradition had robbed knockabout comedy of a critical distanation technique; one on which it had relied to render its grotesque effects palatable. At the same time, the pressure on all forms of popular performance to conform to standards of good taste and refinement was increasing across the entertainment industry. In vaudeville the purist policies of the United Booking Office resulted in an industry-wide policy of unofficial self-censorship, targeted primarily at content that was sexually off-color, but secondarily at any other effect that might alienate a “family” audience.190 The Columbia Wheel maintained an official censor from

188 C.f. “Revival of Old Pictures Hoped to Help Film Makers” (Variety, Feb. 20, 1914, p. 3).
189 (One might even say, “especially bad films”)
190 The use of “broad” to mean “blue” as often as it means “violent” in the context of film criticism is a legacy of the vaudeville tradition.
1903 onwards whose effect was to distinguish Columbia from Empire burlesque by the “cleanness” of its otherwise “broader” aesthetic.\textsuperscript{191} Perhaps significantly, one of the issues most frequently foregrounded in the controversy surrounding the absorption of the Western Wheel by the Eastern Wheel in 1913 was the predominance in Western Wheel burlesque of numerous particularly low instances of physical comedy; and by December of the following year, the Chicago burlesque commentator of the \textit{New York Clipper} feels confident in writing its epitaph:

\textbf{GOOD-BYE TO THE SLAPSTICK IN BURLESQUE}

… Burlesque is yielding to the uplift movement …

Of late the censors of burlesque have been extremely busy individuals. They have repeatedly put the ban on bare legs; they have trimmed the rough edges off from the rough jokes, and they have generally proved the human laundries through which burlesque has been given a thorough cleaning, until now it stands for just what it should—travesty and fun – instead of a questionable entertainment for questionable persons.

… The book of a modern burlesque show must be a book and not a foolish series of absurd and funny situations hurriedly brought forth from some actor’s memory, in which the slapstick, the seltzer bottle, and other things of this sort played an important part. Audiences will no longer laugh at such humor …\textsuperscript{192}

Considering the upheavals in burlesque at the time, the article carries a certain credence—and it reports concrete evidence for its claim in the reception of specific performances:

During the present season I have seen several of the older comedians, who in their day were looked upon as some of the most successful fun-makers of which the burlesque stage could boast,

\textsuperscript{191} Nevertheless, it is critical to understand that the form of burlesque which exercised the greatest influence over the “farce-burlesques” of silent film comedy was the “cleaner” Columbia version.

come into the Chicago Columbia, and die a slow death. Their methods and material wore a beautiful, but pathetic, border of crepe, and the audience refused to accept them…(T)he bell has tolled and the day of the old slapstick, seltzer bottle methods has passed. The audience of to-day has already sung the funeral march.\textsuperscript{193}

For the advocates of uplift in American culture, this may have represented mere wishful thinking. But many, who had everything to lose and nothing to gain from turning their backs on the old methods, had already come to the same conclusion. As early as 1907, Lew Fields had proclaimed the passing of slapstick and knockabout comedy in the publicity surrounding his first solo departure, “The Girl Behind the Counter.”\textsuperscript{194} He revisited the subject in an interview of 1910:

In the old music hall days in New York we offered straight burlesque. It had its vogue, but the vogue began to shake. When Joe and I separated and I started out on my own hook, I determined to make a radical departure. No one knew what I was up to and I was glad of it. I wanted to surprise them. My first individual production was, “It Happened in Nordland.” It was straight musical comedy, not burlesque, and when my friends saw me come on the stage, they saw a young German boy, not the traditionally old grotesque German that I had formerly been. I got entirely away from the old channel … There was no slapstick comedy. There were no suggestive lines. We just offered them a

\textsuperscript{194} C.f., for example, “Weber and Fields Separated, One in Luck, the Other Not,” \textit{Albuquerque Citizen}, Nov. 7, 1907, p. 6: “The greatest thing that has come to him … is a newly-developed talent for acting. Lew Fields is an actor and no longer a slap-stick comedian.”
brand new cargo of entertainment in keeping with the demands of
the time.\textsuperscript{195}

The most frequent criticism of the work of the burlesque comedians of the period (after
the objection that it was not “clean”) was that it was old. Prolific as they were, the writer-
director-star \textit{auteurs} of burlesque during this period – among them the legendary Matt Kennedy,
Dave Marion, Al Reeves, and the two Billy Watsons, Billy B. (on the Western Wheel) and Billy
W. (“Sliding Billy Watson,” on the Eastern) – were often criticized for simply recycling the
same material season after season. Billy B. Watson toured his specialty “Krausmeyer’s Alley”\textsuperscript{196}
for years without changing it.

Burlesque shows during this period were broadly of two kinds: two-act “musical
comedies” employing a single narrative which elapsed across an entire evening; and shows
which continued to be modeled on the three-part structure of the minstrel shows – an opening
sketch, or “first part”; an olio featuring a succession of variety acts, often including a specialty
by the lead comedian; and an afterpiece which constituted the main event of the evening, and
was known as “the burlesque.” Physical comedy routines not included in the olio usually
consisted of “bits” (of business), like the set pieces interpolated into the stories of slapstick films,
which stopped the show. Critics frequently complained of their distaste for these “bits” – Matt
Kennedy perpetrated what was received as a particularly gross one in \textit{The Tiger Lilies} (Western
Wheel) at Harry Miner’s Eighth Avenue Theatre in 1909:

It was 10:30, and the performance of “the Tiger Lilies” was about
to end at the 8th Avenue, when the male principals in the school
room scene commenced throwing bread, bananas and other things
at each other. No casualties. Immediately following four of the
men seated themselves on the floor. One pretended he (as a big
kid) wanted his “ninny” (a childish term for the milk bottle). They
gave it to him. But Matt Kennedy grabbed the ninny from his
hands. And Matt Kennedy drank it. Then Matt Kennedy, who

\textsuperscript{195} “And Not a Pair of Tights,” \textit{Arizona Republican}, Sunday, Mar. 13, 1910, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{196} A burlesque counterpart to the “Hogan’s Alley” sketches popular in vaudeville.
instead of swallowing the milk, had held it in his mouth, expectorated it at every one on the stage until his companions had left him, perhaps in disgust. If there were not so many rough necked patrons of the 8th Avenue, the audience would have left, disgusted also.\textsuperscript{197}

On the vaudeville stage, physical comedy performances continued in the same three forms that they had taken since the earliest days of the variety theatre. There were, to begin with, the song and dance men – teams like The Ward Bros.,\textsuperscript{198} the British team Heeley and Meeley,\textsuperscript{199} and the Power Bros.\textsuperscript{200} This is the group least likely, at least before 1914, to be accused of “slap-stick”; the form of description which most often occurs is “eccentric acrobatic dancing,” or the like.\textsuperscript{201} Secondly, however, there were the “comedy acrobats,” such as the Two Ahlbergs,\textsuperscript{202} Martinetti and Sylvester,\textsuperscript{203} and especially Melrose and Kennedy.\textsuperscript{204} The general run of this sort of act reproduced a pattern in use since the early days of the Music Hall knockabouts. The acrobat of the team played straight, and carried the “thrills” of the performance; his partner, in elaborate (typically called ‘grotesque’) make-up (usually whiteface clown) performed the comedy. By about 1905 this old format had been revitalized by some unique quality in his performance of the clown role by Jimmy Rice, of the team of Rice and

\textsuperscript{197} \textit{Variety}, Sept. 30, 1911, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{198} “The dancing which is of a semi-eccentric, acrobatic order, is finely executed.” (\textit{New York Dramatic Mirror}, Feb. 20, 1909, p. 12, “New Acts.”)
\textsuperscript{199} “Both are garbed in grotesque tramp make-up, and their feats of tumbling, bounding and head and hand balancing were generously applauded.” (\textit{New York Dramatic Mirror}, Dec. 25, 1909, p. 20, “New Acts.”)
\textsuperscript{200} Who provided “A prolonged amount of 'comedy' of the singing, dancing, crossfire and slapstick caliber” (\textit{Variety}, Jan. 23, 1914, p. 23).
\textsuperscript{201} A good example of the most frequent kind of exception to this rule might be a male-female team known as the Marquards, who did a “rough-house dance” modeled on one performed in burlesque by Ida Crispi and Larry McCale (“The act is saved by a sensational finish in which the couple, after a wild dance, in which they knock over ever “prop” on the stage, roll themselves in the carpet.” \textit{New York Clipper}, Aug. 12, 1911, p. 8, “A Glance at Acts New to the Metropolis by Hank.”)
\textsuperscript{202} “Two men (comedy and straight) have a knockabout routine varied with some clever equilibristic work. The comedy is on the slapstick order” (\textit{Variety}, Sept. 25, 1909, p. 15).
\textsuperscript{203} Who “closed the show with their first-class knockabout acrobatic specialty. The comedian is doing one or two falls that are heartbreakers” (\textit{Variety}, Aug. 20, 1909, p. 20).
\textsuperscript{204} “The straight worker does some brilliant acrobatic feats, and also aids his associate in getting laughs by showing great concern when his partner is about to execute some made trick. The grotesque worker is a star, his chalked face being funny of itself, and his manner of going about things being odd and laugh provoking” (\textit{New York Clipper}, Mar. 27, 1909, p. 167).
Prevost; and comedy teams across America and Europe began producing versions of their variation on it, which was known as “Bumpity Bumps.” Rice having died in 1909 (and Howard Prevost having taken up with a clown named Diers, who evidently worked entirely within the Jimmy Rice mold), the act became at once so universally familiar and so stale that by 1912 the reviewers congratulate performers on not reproducing it. These performers are frequently accused of being slapstick, or knockabout, or (horribile dictu) both: an extreme example would be the Hamilton Brothers (“comedy acrobats”) whose act came as close to what might be encountered in burlesque as was permissible on the vaudeville stage. These acts, however, seem to have been of little significance for “rough house” films, the patterns of “tricks” in which they consisted typically requiring specialized apparatuses (tightropes, trapeze, or horizontal bar) and the kind of co-operative physical interaction (hand- and head-to-head balancing, off-the-ground acrobatics) that resisted integration within verisimilar narratives and motivation as conflict.

This is not so of the group of vaudeville acts most frequently described as partaking, for good or for ill, of “slap-stick”: the comedy sketches. Just like the burlesque afterpieces, many of these largely pantomimic sketches derived also from minstrel performances, though they featured frenetic physical activity, tumbling, juggling and other forms of performance requiring a high degree of skill and precision, integrated within farcical rather than satirical narratives. Major examples of the period include the Hanlons’ “Just-Phor-Phun,” Neil O’Brien’s “Fighting the Flames,” originally a scene by Dockstader’s Minstrels; Billy Kersand’s parody

205 E.g., “The act runs so closely along the lines of that of Rice and Prevost that the temptation to imitate Mr. Rice must be very great. It is to Mr. Melrose’s credit that he resists that temptation. He is clever enough to win out on his own merits and the introduction of any of the “business” identified with Mr. Rice would be deplorable.” (New York Dramatic Mirror, Mar. 27, 1909, p. 9).
206 “(T)hey go through a routine of slap-bang knockabouts that are near acrobatics … followed by arming themselves with a couple of inflated bladders and banging each other about to their hearts’ content, the property man taking a try at them with a slap-stick … ” (Variety, Dec. 24, 1910, p. 17, “New Acts”).
207 “The plot deals with trials of A. Lee Ghit (Alfred Hanlon), who has become stranded in Jonathown, and is staying at Herr Frank Phutter’s (William J. Hoyt) Inn, and is trying to evade the payment of his board bill, resorting to all kinds of excuses to get out of his trouble in which he is assisted by Willie Lilliewhite (Fred Hanlon) and Tommy Snowdrop (William A. Hanlon), two bell-boys at the hotel, who make a great amount of trouble for the hotel keeper” (New York Dramatic Mirror, May 21, 1910, p. 25).
208 “(T)he burlesque fire company which figures as such “brave boys” in the sketch were welcomed as a sure cure for the blues… when the scene shifts to the firehouse, with its magnificent company of two decrepit fire “fighters,” the fun gets into the fast and furious class” (New York Clipper, June 4, 1910, p. 409, “A Glance at Acts New to the Metropolis”).
of it, known as “The Darktown Fire Brigade;” Malia and Bart’s “The Baggage Smashers;”\textsuperscript{209} the Robert De Mont Co.’s “Hotel Turnover;”\textsuperscript{210} the Spissel Brothers’ “The Continental Waiter” (a rough-house variation on “A Night at Maxim’s”);\textsuperscript{211} Joe Boganny’s Lunatic Bakers;\textsuperscript{212} and especially Fred Karno’s London Comedians in “The Dandy Thieves;”\textsuperscript{213} “A Night in a London Club,”\textsuperscript{214} and “The Wow-Wows.”\textsuperscript{215}

The problem confronting these acts was in many ways the opposite of the one facing the febrile improvisations of the burlesque comics. The sketches of the vaudevillian farceurs typically required large casts of performers with highly specialized skills, minutely choreographed and painstakingly rehearsed. They consequently lacked the flexibility of the

\textsuperscript{209} “As the title signifies, the smashing of baggage is the comedy peg on which the happenings hang, and there are quite a few laughs secured through their manipulation of the props. The acrobatics are of a commendable nature, and the team seemed to catch the fancy of the jury out in front. The act ran about twelve minutes.” (\textit{New York Clipper}, Nov. 13, 1909, p. 1009).

\textsuperscript{210} “The scene shows a hotel office, with the clerk’s desk and a make-believe elevator, which “runs” up and down. Buttons is right “on the job,” and when the two “kiddies” (boy and girl) appear and register, he is all attention. This is all the preliminary to the acrobatic work, which begins immediately the “kids” have registered. ¶ Ground tumbling of considerable cleverness was shown by the men, who did individual work of the applause-winning kind, and then had a joint session with a table that was capital” (\textit{New York Clipper}, May 19, 1909, p. 405).

\textsuperscript{211} “The break-neck speed of knockabout and startling falls are maintained. The stage shows a restaurant scene. A handsomely dressed young woman enters accompanied by a German. Trick work with a hatrack follows. A “drunk” takes his place at an adjoining table and becomes involved in more funny acrobatic nonsense with the waiter. The service of a meal to the German and girl works up to a general roughhouse, while the comedians keep laughter running with their amazing comedy falls and clowning” (\textit{Variety}, 1909.10.02 p. 16).

\textsuperscript{212} “There are ten men in the troupe. The stage is set as the kitchen of a bakery, while the acrobats dress in white with bakers’ caps. They enter by diving through the oven doors at the rear, and go into “Risley” work, Joe Boganny being the foot worker and using a “Risley” mat concealed as a bag of flour. This style of acrobatics is varied by ground tumbling of the best made-in-Germany brand. All of the men are exceptionally good tumblers, and there is not a pause or slip in the routine. Every minute there is a new startler, as when Boganny caught one of the little tumblers with one hand while he was in the middle of a somersault, and held him in mid-air. Another of the small members was thrown into a series of comedy falls by the leader without once taking his eyes from a newspaper, and then did a laughable imitation of a violent acrobatic fit. Boganny himself is big enough to be underdog for an Arab troupe, but does turns and somersaults with the greatest agility and accomplishes a leap over eight men, landing on head and shoulders” (\textit{Variety}, Oct. 17, 1908, p. 12, “New Acts”).

\textsuperscript{213} “An Englishman lives in the neighborhood where there have been a number of burglaries. He sends to Scotland Yard for policemen to protect his valuable collection of diamonds. A sergeant and six “Bobbies” are dispatched for this purpose. Albert Weston is the Sergeant, by long odds the strength of the sketch and a capital comedian. The policemen, of course, are the worst sort of burlesque peace preservers and much of the comedy arises from their nonsense, mostly under the leadership of Weston. The “Bobbies” later appear as burglars and rob the house with a large amount of slap stick and knockabout comedy attending” (\textit{Variety}, Mar. 19, 1910, p. 14).

\textsuperscript{214} “The funny stunts in the club, which include an amateur entertainment, were all arranged with a good eye to their laugh-provoking possibilities … “ (\textit{New York Clipper}, Dec. 24, 1910, p. 1117).

\textsuperscript{215} “…. Charles Chaplin, who is “all there” as a comedian … is an English chappy, shabby genteel, who has the “tightwad” propensity so deeply rooted in his nature that nothing much short of a blast will separate him from his “dough.” He is initiated into a secret society, a make-believe one, and this furnishes the groundwork of the story, the secret society proceedings being travestied” (\textit{New York Clipper}, Oct. 15, 1910, p. 875).
average burlesque show; there was little room in them for creative improvisation or for extensive adaptation to a wide variety of audience preferences. Of necessity moreover, their subject matter resided entirely in their form: their characters and settings were only sufficient to place familiar skill sets in different contexts, and their emphasis remained on their spectacular, rather than their narrative, capabilities. The character types they featured remained essentially grotesques, for the most part toned-down twentieth-century surrogates for the bizarre negroid man-monkeys of nineteenth-century minstrelsy. But the spectacles they offered, being based on largely the same skill-sets, suffered from a palpable sameness.

Throughout the period, a broad range of tropes comes into use in the *dramatis personae*, the settings, the typical actions and the plot-structures employed in vaudeville song-and-dance acts and sketches, burlesque openers and afterpieces, and in the films of the Transitional Era. This new “imaginative vocabulary,” though its repertoire of character-types, situations and gags overlaps to some extent with that of the Ethiopian farces, seems to represent a new centre of gravity. In the place of the Jim Crow, Dandy Coon, Wench and Southern Plantation white types of the Ethiopian sketches, a new panoply of figures centred around a dynamic opposition between groups of urban bourgeois and various economically marginalized types begins to emerge. The typical protagonist (Hubby) is no longer a shiftless proletarian or grotesque ethnic, but a middle-class male (an ambitious youth, frequently an office-worker, or a middle-aged householder) of great professional, matrimonial or social expectations, which bring him into conflict with his servants, a wide range of tradesmen, the police, the women in his life (especially his wife, “Wifey” or his fiancée and/or his actual or prospective Mother-In-Law or her surrogates in the form of a wide variety of unpleasant Aunties), and a seemingly endless horde of hungry Rubes, Tramps and Burglars that lurks on the outskirts of the diegesis.

To summarize the results of my analysis as briefly as possible: the dominant tropes of the period seem to reflect a crisis of identity or of authenticity. Though it is reflected across the range of tropes, this “identity crisis” is most frequently and most intensively reflected in the tropes falling under three major categories. The first of these is the category of gender. By far the most frequently recurring gag-trope of the period is that of cross-dressing. This is a trope which is also dominant during the Minstrel period, but its recurrence in the new context is

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216 Interestingly perhaps, my research does not demonstrate a parallel evolution in circus.
217 For a fuller account of my findings, please see Appendix 2.B.
inflected by its association with a new range of female characters who represent the antithesis of masculine desire. There are, first of all, the “beloved” characters who possess much greater autonomy than in the earlier sketches, and who frequently frustrate the intentions of their battling suitors by going off with a (hitherto unseen) third party. There are also a new range of threatening female characters: the Suffragette, the Mother-in-Law, the Lady Athlete, and the Old Maid, who often demonstrates a sexual insatiability which the male characters experience as terrifying.

The second most frequently recurring trope is that of Mistaken (social) Identity, which in these texts is usually reflected in a reversal which makes a marginal character central and a central character marginal – as for instance in the frequently recurring plot-trope of the householder who is arrested as the burglar of his own house, or in the highly popular gag-trope of the “Mirror-image,” in which a character masquerades as another character’s reflection in a broken mirror. The Mistaken Identity tropes (especially that of the Doppleganger and the Misunderstood Intention) seem most frequently to be employed in this context as forms of ordeal whose purpose is to test (but not always ultimately to prove) the protagonist’s personal integrity. In physical comedy, personal integrity is typically symbolized metonymically as physical integrity: the ordeal often takes the form of the concealment or imprisonment of the protagonist’s body within a disguise or a container of some kind (an animal costume, a suit of armour, a trunk) which is then subjected to a harrowing series of indignities. This function is complemented by a wide variety of the opposite sorts of character: characters with no integrity whatsoever who insinuate themselves into the positions of respectable persons – as I’ve noted above, the epitome of this tendency among the character-tropes is that of the Count (of No Account). One of the most radical forms of mistaken identity, however, is the substitution of a person for an inanimate object, or of an inanimate object for a person.

The third and final group of tropes reflect inversions in the private or public character of particular spaces. The most frequently occurring of these is the home invasion, in which characters who think they are alone and intimate suddenly find themselves in company. Its dynamic opposite is the expulsion, in which the householder is driven from his home into a public space (often in his pajamas: a related trope is the equally popular one of exposure, usually

218 In an action-trope which I have called the “Love-Triangle Squared.”
219 (Introduced during this period by the Hanlons).
in the form of the “No Trousers” trope). In physical comedy films, the second most ubiquitous “bodily-punishment” trope (after the myriad forms of “dousing”) is the “defenestration” trope, in which a character is violently projected from a private into a public space. But perhaps the most salient use of the trope is the one in which a character in search of a sanctum for rest and renewal, finds himself unable to escape from public life back into privacy.

What is most surprising about the recurrence of tropes within the corpus of rough-house films is the rarity with which, according to both the synopses and the reviews, the weapons traditionally associated with the comic violence of this period, actually appear. Slapsticks appear precisely three times: in a one-minute Biograph fragment of 1903 (“Levi & Cohen, the Irish Comedians”); in Essanay’s 1914 “The Joblot Recruits”; and in Edison’s (lost) 5-reel 1914 recording of the Hanlon Brothers’ theatrical extravaganza Fantasma. Whatever their incidence in stage performances, in the synopses of silent comedy films I found three references to uses of bladders, one to a banana peel, three to fly-paper, and ten to the conspicuous use of soda syphons or seltzer bottles. The weapon of choice in film during this period appears rather to be the umbrella, which was employed in a wide variety of different contexts and seemed to have a symbolic significance well beyond its utilitarian functions.

These tropes display patterns of repetition and variation across the spectrum of performance contexts of the period (burlesque, vaudeville, circus, film), and therefore represent at the same time a dense reticulation of intertexts which can provide us with critical insights into the “structure of feeling” of the age. There are, of course, some predictable, and some interesting

220 They remain ubiquitous in burlesque, but seem hardly at all in use in vaudeville, except, perhaps, on the “small time.”
221 “Battle of Bladders” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Belle of Bald-Head Row” (Goodfellow, 1907); and “Si Puts One Over” (Crystal, April, 1914).
222 “Just His Luck” (Selig, Aug, 1912).
224 A Bowery Café” (American Mutoscope Co., ca. March, 1897); “How They Fired the Bum” (AMB ca. May, 1900); “Why Papa Reformed, or Setting Back the Clock” (Edison, Sept. 1902); “Doctor’s Office” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Murphy’s Jealousy” (Selig, 1903); “Oh! Shut Up” (Edison, Feb. 1903); “The Over-Anxious Waiter” (AMB, ca. Dec. 1903); “A Shocking Accident” (Lubin, ca. 14 Nov. 1903); “On A Vacation Trip” (Lubin, 26 August, 1905); “The Topers” (AMB, ca. June 1905).
225 c.f. “A Crusty Old Bachelor” (AMB, ca April 1899); “Little Willie in Mischief Again” (AMB, ca Apr 1899); “The Hayseed’s Experience at Washington Monument” (Edison, July, 1901); “Mr. Oldsport’s Umbrella” (AMB France, Nov. 1902); “Bad Soup” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “The Wrong Room” (AMB, ca. March 1904); “A Scandal on the Staircase” (Pathé Frères, June 1904); “The Fake Blind Man” (Lubin, ca. May 1905); “Umbrellas to Mend” (Vitagraph, Feb. 1912); “The Borrowed Umbrella” (Selig; Oct. 1912); “Mollie’s Umbrella” (Lux, Oct. 1913); “The Hoodo Umbrella” (Vitagraph, Nov., 1913); “The Dream of a Painting” (Joker, Nov. 1914).
and provocative differences among the various “platforms” as to the frequency of particular tropes: chases, for an example of the former, occur more frequently on film than onstage; while, for an example of the latter, “kid” performances occur more frequently onstage than on film, and are more frequently performed by adults because of the “Gerry” laws restricting minors from being made to work after 8:00 p.m. Setting-tropes in burlesque much more typically represent exotic locales (the Moulin Rouge for Americans, Broadway for Parisiens) and Oriental spaces (a Middle-Eastern harem) than in either vaudeville or in the films of the period; but these spaces are much more apt in burlesque to be dominated (and, on the connotative level, personified) by commanding yet benevolent females, than in either of the other types of venue. Though the basic system of tropes, then, is in use across the board in popular performances, the frequency of tropes, and the typical strategies for elaborating them, are what differ from early-twentieth-century circus to burlesque, to vaudeville, and to film.

It should not be surprising to find, conversely, that filmic tropes often represent the working-out through one set of strategies of the properties of tropes handled differently elsewhere, and thus form only part of the way in which popular culture at large coped with its issues by means of particular tropes.

Many of these intertexts, of course, represent concerns that can be as easily discerned to be operative in varying degrees in the humor of all cultures and periods. Others seem on the other hand to evince particular concerns, and particular inflections of constant concerns, which are very common to the corpus of the minstrel sketches and the turn-of-the-century intertexts, but less so or not at all to those of prior or subsequent periods; and which may be regarded as to a certain extent peculiar to the period between the early-to-middle-nineteenth century and (roughly) the decades immediately following the First World War. Many or even most of these manifestly may have related forms in other systems, but as evidently are inflected within

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226 And consequently the use of adults to perform the parts of children is never complained of in the vaudeville reviews, but evokes howls of protest from the reviewers of films.
228 Examples might include the “Backfiring Scientific-Innovation” tropes (e.g. the “Love Germ,” the “Electric Shoes,” “Laughing Gas,” and so on); the “Explosive Device” tropes (“Dynamite,” the “Infernal Machine,” the “Anarchist’s Bomb”), and the “Psychological/Sensory Disorientation” tropes (“Absent-Minded,” “The Escaped Lunatic,” “Short-sighted,” and “Distracted Ambulation”), or the “Untrustworthy Professional” tropes (the “Mad Scientist”/”Dr. Dippy,” “The Untrustworthy Barber/Dentist/Doctor”).
229 As the “Love Germs” have in the magic flower in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example.
the turn-of-the-twentieth-century system of intertexts in period-specific ways.\textsuperscript{230} At the same time, this latter system includes elements (automobiles, anarchists, and the cinematic apparatus itself, for example) which distinguish its “imaginative vocabulary” from that of the Ethiopian sketches, as well as those of the pantomimes, féeries, extravaganzas and other popular entertainments of the period when minstrelsy was dominant.

Perhaps the overriding difference between the imaginative vocabulary of the minstrel days and that of the period in which slapstick emerged is that of a strategic inversion of the rhetorical roles played by the image-repertoires of popular culture and of the Church. During its first two decades the fledgling film industry faced the most powerful political opposition to its development in traditional religious institutions, which were not slow to recognize in the crude products of the early studios potential competition for sway over the moral development of American youth. Throughout the 1900s, however, the educational and moral potential of the cinema was seized on eagerly by many clergymen, some of whom ended up writing regularly in \textit{Moving Picture World}. By the early teens, the film industry found itself in a position to turn the tables on the church\textsuperscript{231} and enter into competition with it as a purveyor of spiritual uplift. After 1910, every comic type gradually acquires a serious or sentimental counterpart in the various subgenres of movie melodrama – one who typically undergoes a process of redemption.

Consequently, slapstick characters find their place within a typological structure in which every “serious” character has a comical counterpart (and vice versa); and the effect is to invest corresponding types within each major genre with the resonances of the other. Slapstick comedies and the adventures of the characters within them inevitably resonate against the sentimentally moral world-order of silent melodrama; and to this extent participate in what might be called an agenda of “secular redemption.”

\textsuperscript{230} i.e., the “Love Germs” are associated with an anxiety about technological innovation which is only a distant cousin of the anxiety about magic manifested in the folk culture which occupies the imaginative background of \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream}.

\textsuperscript{231} e.g., “The Church and the Moving Picture. Which is the Most Moral Place of the Two?” (\textit{Moving Picture World}, Vol. 7, No. 5, July 30, 1910, pp. 250-251). The article presents a series of paired dialogues subentitled: “What the Men Say,” “What the Women Say,” and “What the Children Say,” which confess the movies to be the genuine school of morality and the church to be the home of moral compromise and hypocrisy.
V. The Devil-Tropes

In opposition to these tropes, there is another group which begins to proliferate at just the moment when the burlesque and farcical strains in popular comedy are most polarized. The sudden multiplication of these intertexts, moreover, seems explicitly related to a major stylistic shift with which this study is concerned: a palpable diminution and transformation of the grotesque. We might somewhat arbitrarily locate these changes as beginning in 1907, but in fact the groundwork for this tectonic shift had been preparing throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and may indeed be said to have begun with the appearance of a profusion of texts featuring sympathetic man-monkeys which begins in 1827 with Jocko, ou le singe du Brésil.\footnote{This movement reaches a peak at some point during the 1870s, and then commences a long and gradual tailing off marked towards its end by such feature films as Baloo, the Demon Baboon (Union Features, 1913); King Kong (1933) and Mighty Joe Young (1949).} Indeed, the transvaluation and repurposing of the trope of the man-monkey, from an incarnation of evil in the medieval bestiaries\footnote{As the Northumberland Bestiary has it: “Simie vocantur Latino sermone eo quod multa in eis similitudo racionis humane sentitur … Simia caudam non habet. Cuius figuram diabolus habet qui caput habet caudam vero non habet. Et licet simia tota turpis sit posteriora tamen eius satis turpia et horribilia sunt. Diabolus inicium habuit cum esset in celis angelus. Sed hypocritus et dolosus fuit intrinsecus. Et perdidit caudam quia totus in fine peribit … “ – “Apes are called simiae in the Latin tongue because it is felt that there is in them much resemblance (similitudo) to the reasoning of humans … The ape does not have a tail. It is the type for the devil, for he has a head but no tail. Although the ape is foul all over, its posterior is very foul indeed, and horrible. The devil had a beginning when he was an angel in heaven, but he was a hypocrite and inwardly tricky and he lost his tail, because he will totally perish in the end … “ Cynthia White, From the Ark to the Pulpit: An Edition and Translation of the “Transitional” Northumberland Bestiary” (Louvain-la-Neuve: Université catholique de Louvain, 2009, pp. 94-95).} to a figure for the fundamentally benevolent, but misunderstood and suffering primate, is a defining trope of the period, linked to major, equally revolutionary developments in political, no less than biological, science. Similarly, as I shall discuss at greater length in my sixth chapter, throughout the nineteenth century, the prevailing style in physical comedy was an embodiment of the spirit of the grotesque, consisting largely in a strategic deformation of the so-called “classical body” which subjected it to either animal or demonic distortions.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the comedic grotesque, whether celebrated in “grotesque song and dance” or in sketches like that of “Gabriel Grub” (based on Dicke’s tale in The Pickwick Papers of “the Goblins Who Stole a Sexton”), tended to be more or less self-consciously, and more or less ironically, demoniac. There seems to have been connected with
them, moreover, a particular thrill, like that of the game of “Defying the Lightning.”  
Throughout the nineteenth century, these performances in a comic mode, executed in costumes reminiscent of the traditional iconographical attire of imps and devils, challenged with increasing impertinence the same popular faith in the primacy of good and the ultimate futility of naughtiness that constituted the moral polarity – the sense of an “absolute up” and “absolute down” – of the imaginative universe inhabited by the agonists of nineteenth-century melodrama.

By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, this polarity had apparently begun to crumble. Whether the decline of grotesque comedy and melodrama was the cause or the consequence of a decline of faith in this structural moral polarity is not within the scope of this thesis to attempt to decide; but my research suggests that it was associated historically less with the loss of a faith in an absolute good than with the disintegration of an “imaginative lexicon” sufficient to the task of compellingly articulating an evolving sense of human evil. By the 1907-1908 theatrical season, the cheap melodrama theatres are beginning to report conspicuous failures – these were attributed largely to the rise of the even cheaper nickelodeons and have been interpreted ever since to indicate that the latter was “better,” or that it better served an evolving taste (for the “realism” inherent in the cinematic medium).

At the same time as the popular-priced melodramatic theatres began to decline, a sudden proliferation begins to take place in comic and musical-comic productions featuring diabolical characters and imagery; and a sudden flood of “devil-tropes” sweeps across the industry, reaching its height during the 1909-1910 theatrical seasons, but continuing throughout the first half of the 1910s. The stage popularity of demonism had already spread to film in the shape of numerous French trick-films such as Georges Méliès’ “The Devil’s Laboratory” and “The Infernal Palace” (1899), “The Devil in the Schoolhouse,” (1902) “The Infernal Cauldron” (1903), “The Devilish Plank” (1904), and “The Merry Frolics of Satan” (1906); and Pathé Frères’ “The Infernal Meal” (1903), “Devil’s Pot” (1904), and “Infernal Cave” (1906). These themes were taken up in several American imitations, such as Edison’s “The Devil’s Kitchen” and “Devil’s Prison” (1902), Lubin’s “The Devil’s Amusement” (1903), and in Britain in Robert W. Paul’s “The Devil’s Dice” (1905). But the exploitation of the trope seems to have

gained a new impetus – and a new direction – with the international success of a serious play: Ferenc Molnar’s *The Devil: A Tragedy of the Heart and Conscience* (1907). Molnar’s play was greeted with a host of adaptations including, in September 1908, versions by both Edison and Biograph, the latter directed by Griffith, and featuring the Biograph company, including Harry Solter, Claire McDowell, Florence Lawrence, Arthur Johnson, George Gebhardt and Mack Sennett. But the *furore* that greeted Molnar’s play was only the beginning. Not only does a fresh wave of films, most of them of the ‘trick’ variety, arise in its wake, but throughout the next few years a steady succession of vaudeville acts, pantomimes and burlesques arise, giving rise to another wave of films based on them. In many of these, both onstage and onscreen, a harmless protagonist is as a result of one plot contrivance or another (typically a masquerade ball), mistaken for the Prince of Darkness. The increasing light-heartedness of these, of course, seems to reflect a newly derisive attitude towards the darker side of life and to reflect a new sense of the triviality of traditional resources of the image-repertoire for representing evil.

At the same time traditional “grotesque song and dance,” which throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century had already begun to manifest increasingly explicit sexual suggestiveness, began to extend the demonic in directions which exceeded the limits of the grotesque altogether. French song-and-dance and pantomime begin to feature new variations:

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238 Such as the The Strolling Players (Western Wheel) burlesque on Molnar’s play (*New York Clipper*, Mar. 20, 1909, p. 148) and Rose Sydell’s London Belles’ “The Devil” in which the Adversary is performed by Rose Sydell herself and which features a snowstorm in Hades (*New York Clipper*, May 1, 1909, p. 307).

239 As, for example, “He Went to See the Devil Play” (Vitagraph, 1909) in which “a man … goes to see Arliss in The Devil; and after the performance drinks more devil water than is good for him. Everybody he meets after that turns suddenly into his Satanic majesty, even his wife who happens to fit the character to perfection” (*New York Dramatic Mirror*, Jan. 16, 1909, p. 8).
the “Vampire Dance”240 out of which the Apache dance develops; Ma Gosse’s “La Dance Noire”;241 and especially the Salome Dance, which reverses the traditional polarity of sympathy and revulsion in the story of the death of John the Baptist. The trivialization of the received image-repertoire was continued in a number of parodies of the Salome Dance, including Malcolm Scott’s burlesque of Maud Allan’s turn on “Salome,”242 and Lubin’s parodic “The Saloon Dance” (1908).

These developments seem symptomatic of a wholesale erosion of the value system on which the grotesque paradigm was based; that is, the system which underlay a movement dynamic that had reflected a traditional opposition between “high” and “low” values. They reflect instead a new uncertainty about what the difference between the better and the worse really consisted in, and how it ought to be reflected.

To investigate the root cause of these inversions could be the subject of a thesis in itself: but for present purposes several major factors suggest themselves. To begin with, life in modern industrial societies had become a great deal less uncertain than it had been only fifty years before: the lower middle and working classes were beginning to realize the benefits of industrialization in terms of a stabilizing labour market and more plentiful leisure time. Most importantly, the entrenchment of standing military and police forces had rendered the average citizen radically less vulnerable to violent assaults, and given him or her more recourse to satisfaction in cases in which the right to security of person had been violated. These developments cannot have failed to have their effect on the average person’s standards of appropriate and outrageous conditions, and of appropriate and outrageous behaviors. Western and particularly American, popular culture entered the twentieth century with a new optimism and confidence. The revolution in popular culture was apparently bringing with it a moral renaissance in which even the Devil could become a sympathetic character; and in which those images which strove to evoke the old, vertiginous polarity of Heaven and Hell had lost their terror.

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242 “… Instead of dancing before the head of John the Baptist, Scott danced with great glee about an empty whiskey bottle, and aroused roars of laughter by his funny capers. He gets a great deal out of this grotesque dance … “ (New York Clipper, Aug. 14, 1909, p. 681).
None of this could have occurred without affecting audiences’ senses of humor or of the ends to which they found laughter useful. Concerns about comedy performances were therefore front and centre in the transformations that were being played out on popular stages during this period. We have seen already how burlesque performance found itself at the centre of an escalating polemic which pitted the “clean” against the “rough” elements in burlesque and resulted in the absorption of the Western Wheel (which favored the “rough”) by the Eastern Wheel (which favored the “clean”) in 1913.\textsuperscript{243} In vaudeville, a new prominence begins to attach itself to comedy performers. The period is marked by increasing frustration with the tameness or the sameness of the performances on the big time, and in particular by repeated admonitions to the managers on the part of reviewers (particularly those of \textit{Variety}) to spice up programmes with more “slap-stick comedy.” In one of the first of a series of articles entitled “What the Actor Must Do,” undertaken on the commencement of his feud with the UBO in early 1913, \textit{Variety’s} Sime Silverman even claims that the balance of power in the ongoing struggle between the performers and the booking agents is held by comedians, and exhorts comedians to organize as a special force within the White Rats:

Comedy acts in vaudeville, were they combined, could protect all turns playing the big time. This is not only a personal opinion, but it is the general belief of those who understand vaudeville and its inside conditions.

Comedy is the vital point of any variety programme. Any act that squeezes laughter from an audience enters under the comedy classification… Were these to get together in some way for a mutual understanding among them, the vaudeville managers would immediately find themselves blocked.

\textsuperscript{243} A development which was succeeded in the following decade by an overwhelming backlash as, by 1925, the burlesque industry had entered a decline from which it would never recover, and “burlesque” itself had come to be synonymous with “rough.”
Without comedy a vaudeville house might as well pull down the blinds on the box office ...\textsuperscript{244}

But in the evolving conditions of culture at large, many comedians found themselves uncertain and insecure in their relationship with spectators. Tastes were changing; and as a consequence, performers encountered a new unpredictability in spectators’ responses. Audience tastes were turning the tables on both producers and performers, who were hard put to know in which direction they were moving. Things which had previously been funny no longer were funny; things which had previously not been funny now were.

VI. Turning the Tables in the Entertainment Industry – Liveness, Mediation, and the Triumph of American Realism

I’d like to argue that these changes in people’s sense of humor were related to five major transvaluations expressed in discourses which conditioned the reception of entertainment at large during the period when slapstick begins to emerge, and that were reflected in specific tropes.

i) \textit{The “cultural hierarchy” discourse:} Whereas it had been axiomatic (even in America) that American product was by definition cheap and inferior, by the mid-1900s, the tables had begun to turn. In 1907 the Essanay studios were established with a double agenda: to produce Western vehicles for Broncho Billy Anderson, but equally to challenge Pathé’s dominance of the market for comedy. A recurrent trope of this period is that of the “greenhorn” – the eastern dandy, indoctrinated into effete Continental values, who comes west and is at first hilariously tormented by the community of cowboys until he either performs some feat of traditionally masculine heroism, or retaliates with surprising savagery. This trope suggests how the inversion of the cultural hierarchy discourse may have been related to a reversal in popular sentiment about what constituted “truth” and “falsity” in a person. “True” men were not europeanized dandies with refined manners; refinement only falsified a man’s character and corrupted his integrity. “True” men were diamonds in the rough whose inner reliability asserted itself through their patient suffering of life’s necessary ordeals.

\textsuperscript{244} “What the Actor Must Do,” \textit{Variety}, Feb. 7, 1913, p. 6.
ii) The “universality” discourse: Out of the “cultural hierarchy” discourse arose a “universality” discourse which was the contrary of the principle that truth was a special substance apprehensible only by the few; it was instead that which was universally understood and agreed on in their hearts by all true men. A characteristically American narrative structure emerges: the “truth” of the protagonist is tested by his undergoing an ordeal which typically results in the exposure of an “untrue” antagonist.

This latter is epitomized in comedy in the trope of “The Count” (of No Account). The Count is the representative masquerader of the slapstick period – he is typically poor and pretending to be rich; lacking in “manliness,” but seeking to marry the girl nonetheless; very frequently a waiter, a barber or a shop-clerk who has by some unlikely accident gained propinquity with the top 400. Ultimately, of course, he is exposed, but not until he has pre-emptively exposed the vanity and hypocrisy of the wealthy, cultured and aristocratic. In the melodramas which form the “serious” counterparts of the Count comedies, he is typically the pretender to the hand of the girl.

iii) The “reality” discourse. The Count films, therefore, are symptomatic of a fundamental redefinition of the common-sense understanding of reality in the popular culture of this period – one which involves the debunking of the “spiritual,” and with it the pretensions of any who locate “reality” elsewhere than in the here and now: including a string of phoney mediums, clairvoyants and hypnotists who populate both the variety stage and the movie “comic.”

iv) The “realism” discourse. At the same time, the idea of “realism” is embraced in entertainment-industry journals with evangelical fervour. Numerous films employ the Uncle Josh trope of the naïve spectator, unable to distinguish between the cinematic image and reality, wreaking havoc. A 1908 article reports the shooting up of a Pittsburg amusement house by spectator enraged by the plot entanglements of a picture: its title demands, “Who Says Moving Pictures Not So Good As the Real Thing?” The cinema is gradually positioned, by virtue of the indexical fidelity of the apparatus, as the site of “reality” against the “illusion” of the theatre. A Sept. 1910 article insists on this

245 This trope is frequently employed during the 19th century in reports of the “Metamorphose Act” (see Chapter 5 below).
fidelity as "a noticeable absence of staginess and theatricality"; in November of the same year a manifesto by Louis Reeves Harrison proclaims that photoplays "can do away with artificiality."

v) The anti-theatrical discourse. From 1910-1914, the movie trades chortle over the eradication of the cheap theatres while positioning the hegemony of their audience base as a cultural crusade which has elevated American culture a thousandfold. As a result, the period from 1908 to 1914 represents a golden age of anti-theatricalism undreamt-of since the days of Histriomastix and Jeremy Collier. In article after article in Moving Picture World during this period, the "bad actor" appears as the embodiment of the falseness, the vanity, the self-absorption and the selfish triviality of the theatrical subculture. A 1911 article by Louis Reeves Harrison describes an encounter with this type of performer in a typical "two-a-day" and labels him accordingly:

I think I saw Mr. Lowbrow one night at a picture show. He was a vaudeville performer, who was billed to do an "act in one." He came out from the wings with a smile of skull-like artificiality on his face, clapping his hands and singing "ta-ra-tum" to the prelude, as if we were all glad to see him. He had a "how-are-you-folks" manner of addressing the audience which he evidently expected would put him on intimate terms with the good-natured and thoughtless ones in the assembly; and he began, "As I was coming down the street," in a story that was all promise and no performance. When he finished, five hundred people were as silent as if he had been taking up a Sunday morning collection in

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church. His hardened smile was fadeless; he went on with another and then another, until most of us looked ghastly, as if the motion of the ship had upset our stomachs. It was then that he betrayed his quality. Glancing down at the piano-player, he said between his teeth, “These boobs don’t get me.” Luckily, I had left my gun at home …  

Reeves’ article makes clear the close relation between the bad faith that can intrude into the spectator-performer relationship and the violence that lurks not far from the surface of every social interaction which is grounded in an unstable balance of power. For the publicists of *Moving Picture World* it is from the risk of finding ourselves in such a position that the cinema delivers us. The physical presence of actors is actually a hindrance to our pleasure and a bar to our moral elevation: 

… when the lights are turned down, and we can no longer look around us while enjoying the familiar jokes of the comedian, the rattle of the clog dance or the melody the chalky soubrette sings through her teeth, the sense of hearing becomes entirely subordinated to the much higher one of sight. The variety entertainment requires no mental effort, but, when the picture play is shadowed forth upon the screen, there is a hush all over the theater, restless movements cease, there is a general effort at concentration which raises the appreciative capacity of all minds …  

The silver screen which the introduction of film first interposed between the “bad actor” and the “bad audience” was therefore performing a valuable function. Just as all subsequent technological media innovations have tended to do, the silver screen functions by i) opening gaps between contentious interest groups; and ii) bridging these gaps in

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such a way as to render their interactions technologically manageable – i.e., mediating between them. In doing so, cinematic technology was taking the place of the traditional social “interaction rituals”\textsuperscript{252} of nineteenth-century theatre culture which, it was assumed, had become inadequate to the task of managing the ambivalences of performer/audience relationships in the mass.

But this is to remind us that the management of this ambivalence is in many instances the very substance of performance itself. As Richard Schechner puts it,

In both animals and humans rituals arise or are devised around disruptive, turbulent, and ambivalent interactions where faulty communication can lead to violent and even fatal encounters … The interactions that rituals surround, contain, and mediate almost always concern hierarchy, territory, and sexuality/mating (an interdependent quadruple). If these interactions are the “real” events rituals unfold, then what are the rituals themselves? They are ambivalent symbolic actions pointing at the real transactions even as they help people avoid too direct a confrontation with these events. Thus rituals are also bridges – reliable doings carrying people across dangerous waters.\textsuperscript{253}

If live physical comedy provided a means by which performers could assist their audiences to cope with the violence of nineteenth-century life, the introduction of the cinema technologically extended those means in such a way as to make them governable in the new mass environment of the twentieth century. But in so doing, it created new circumstances of production and reception: circumstances which, for comedy, required the development, not only of a new style, but also of a new form.

Chapter 3
Turning the Tables:
Silent Film Comedy 1894–1914 and the Emergence of Slapstick

If there is something unique about what are called “slapstick comedies” that is related to their emergence at a determinate historical moment, then we must – or we ought to – be using the word “slapstick” to refer uniquely to that unique something. But no attempt to point to this unique something so far has ever succeeded: the consequence is that we’re not even very sure exactly what we mean by the phrase “slapstick film.” The conventional assumption has always been that the phrase “slapstick comedy” can be treated analogously with a phrase like “tap dancing,” in which the specific difference of the style is rooted in a particular instrument, or in some property attaching to that specific instrument, which must be present in order for the instance to obtain.\(^{254}\) “Knockabout” seems to work this way: knockabout comedy did indeed virtually always seem to involve the collisions of bodies traversing space.\(^{255}\) But my findings suggest otherwise of slapstick: paradoxically, the one thing we virtually never see in slapstick comedy is a slapstick. This poses a problem for my project of comparing knockabout and slapstick tropes. How can I say for sure of any “trope” that it can be taken as a genuine example of “slapstick”?

I. What was Slapstick?

One way is simply to study the observations of contemporaries who observed its emergence as it proceeded. Contemporary critical theory about slapstick, and the consensus demonstrated in the practical criticism of the period, indicate that the slapstick was simply taken as an emblem standing for the intersection of a small core group of comedic performance practices (any one of which on its own was an insufficient condition for slapstickism), haloed by a penumbra of associated secondary types of practice. Early slapstick comedy shared these in common with a small number of other, “adjacent” genres.

\(^{254}\) I.e., if you attempt to tap dance without having taps on your shoes, you end up doing something else.
\(^{255}\) (Though not always with other bodies).
I.1: THE EVIDENCE OF THE INDEX:

Out of the 6,000 films for which I collected data, including synopses, reviews, production information, frame enlargements and trade advertisements, only a tiny minority are actually written of by releasing production houses, distributors or reviewers as either “knockabout” (55) or “slapstick” (166). The figures look like this (there are none before 1908):

Table I.1.1 “Knockabout” Films 1907–1914:

Table I.1.2 “Slapstick” Films 1907–1914:

As these charts suggest, there are no British films released in the American market and described by American industry professionals as “knockabout” whatsoever. Neither are any films described as either “slapstick” or “knockabout” before the 1907-1908 theatrical season.

\[256\] In these categories I am including any occurrence of the word, whether it refer to a part of the film – e.g. “A comedy acrobatic act by a well-known knockabout team” (“Headline Acrobats,” (Powers, 1911) Moving Picture News, Oct. 14, 1911, p. 33 (synopsis)) or “There is an amusing moment in this of the knockabout order” (The Chief’s Predicament” (Keystone, 1913), Moving Picture World, Mar. 15, 1913, p. 1106 (review)) – or to the film as a whole, e.g. “It is a knockabout comic which isn’t really funny after all.” (“Wanted: An Artist’s Model (Lubin, 1908) Moving Picture World, Dec. 12, 1908, p. 476 (review), or “… it surely looks like murder in this knock-about farce” (“Dyed, But Not Dead” (Biograph, 1913) Moving Picture World, Oct. 11, 1913, p. 156 (review)).
The critics during this period seem to be groping for a new vocabulary with which to describe the new forms appearing on screens. They borrow some terms (e.g. “farce,” “travesty,” “low comedy,” “burlesque,” “farce-burlesque”) from theatre.257 They try to invent others (e.g. “comic,” “photofarce,” “chase farce,” “crockery-smashing farce,” “split-” or “one-reel farce-comedy,” “prank pictures” “trick pictures”). Many abandon denotation, and try to connote, rather than to describe, the sense of a new quality of humor (with usually pejorative connotations): “rough comedy,” “broad” or “coarse humor,” and, most frequently, “rough house” or “horse play.” Some rely on adjectives: the most frequently occurring is “lively,” followed by “strenuous,” “vigorous,” “boisterous,” and finally “spirited,” e.g. “the lively Essanay style.”258 Some use xenophobic euphemisms: “In the characteristic French manner,” “the usual French destructiveness and hilarity,” “one of the ordinary European freak films, full of nonsense and rapid-fire action, poor acting, and plenty of spoiled furniture,” and so on. I’ve placed these all in one group and referred to them collectively as “rough-house” films.

A number of these must really have been what contemporaries thought of as either slapstick or knockabout films.259 Others, however, may just as likely have been quasi- or partly-

257 “Clown comedy” or “Fool comedy” may belong in this category.
258 I’ve collected this group of expressions mostly by a process of triangulation: i.e., where a film whose synopsis indicated to me that it was most likely to be a film containing violent activity likely to have been intended to provoke laughter, and of two reviews one indicated more or less explicitly that it belonged in the rough-house category.
259 In addition to these, of course, are the 4,915 films I collected whose synopses suggest to the 21st-century observer that many of them also ought perhaps to be considered along with the slapstick films. But it is impossible to determine which: the critics have either not reviewed them, failed to recognize them as low comedy, or omitted to make any comment on their generic affinities whatsoever; and in the absence of a systematic definition of slapstick (granting that any such even be possible) our own direct evaluation of the synopses can only be misleading. For example, on the evidence of its synopsis the Sidney Drew vehicle “A Horseshoe – for Luck” (Vitagraph, 1914) evidently contains every feature the modern reader would associate with the most knock-down-drag-out of slapstick comedies:

"A HORSESHOE--FOR LUCK (Sept. 23).—Strolling along a suburban road, Sidney Edwards picks up a horseshoe—for luck. His luck begins immediately but it is hardly good luck. He is run over by an automobile, upsets a baby perambulator and gets into an awful row with the bystanders. At home, he and his wife stand arguing so long the cooking burns and the cat runs off with the roast chicken. Finding his son starting a sliding pond on the hardwood parlor floor, Edwards leans on the mantelpiece and severely reprimands him. The rug slips from under father’s feet and his weight proving too much for the shelf, its contents, with Edwards, crash to the floor. Later, he angrily throws the iron shoe outdoors, it lands on a policeman’s neck, and Edwards comes near being arrested for assaulting an officer. His son quietly borrows the horseshoe and then persuades Edwards, Senior, to attend his school Athletic Contest. Pa gets into more trouble and almost precipitates a riot. Then the star bout is announced, “Young Edwards” against “Toughey James,” a youth of about twice Edwards’ size. Every one except Pa cheers wildly for “Toughey,” the favorite, and the bout is on. Young Edwards is getting very much the worst of it until just before time is called, then he manages to land one stiff jolt on his opponent’s jaw. The result is amazing. The big fellow is actually knocked out, even while still on his feet, then flops over on the floor, where he is counted out. In telling his family afterwards of the boy's conquest, Edwards, Senior, becomes suspicious of the shape of one of the
slapstick:260 but where the films are lost, we can never know. Where they are not, we can distinguish them by means of the reviewers’ own criteria. In any case, the numbers for these “rough-house” films are as follows:

Table I.1.3 “Rough-house” Films, 1907–1914:

The total numbers for the same period for films from all three countries acknowledged by industry professionals to contain violent physical comedy in one form or another are as follows:

Table I.1.4 Physical Comedy Films, 1907–1914 (Britain, France and U.S.A.):

gloves, investigates, and from inside the glove pulls out – the horseshoe” (Moving Picture World, Sept. 19, 1914, p. 1670).

But on the contrary, the Moving Picture World reviewer (Oct. 10, 1914, pp. 187-188) found it “A pretentious comedy,” but nevertheless “(a) old idea well worked out” and “(a) regular laugh producer.”

260 The films that I’ve collected as slapstick include several which, by the testimony of the critics, begin in other styles or modes and then “descend” into slapstick.
These numbers occur in the context of an exponential increase in the total number of films produced in all three countries during these years; the decline in the number of physical comedy films produced between the years 1909 and 1911, viewed proportionally to a vast increase in output, is therefore all the more dramatic, while the increase which follows it is in real terms somewhat less radical than it may appear to be here. Nevertheless, these numbers help to illustrate two critical points: before 1914, the number of films contemporary commentators think of as “knockabout” and “slapstick” forms a negligible percentage of film output; but a boom period which commences in late 1912, and continues through 1913 and 1914, is associated with a sudden spike in the number of films acknowledged as “slapstick.”

We should also take note of the fact that the first of the two waves of industry activity out of which slapstick films emerge coincides more or less with the “Transitional Period” (ca. 1905 – 1912), whereas the second follows immediately in its wake.

I.2: FROM “COMICS” TO COMEDIES, 1894–1914:

As I suggested in my previous chapter, the twenty years from the inception of the film business in about 1894, through the early and transitional periods into the threshold of the classical Hollywood era, were the site of a marked evolution in the discourses surrounding the production and reception of physical comedy films. These discourses are clearly reflected in the language used by producers in describing their films, by marketers in promoting them, and by the trade press critics in viewing them, and in reporting and interpreting the responses of the public. By 1909 these critics, most of them thoroughly versed in theatre aesthetics, find themselves confronting a problem. So entirely do public responses to emerging styles of production controvert their critical expectations that they are forced eventually to retool their inherited criteria into a new critical vocabulary, and attempt to establish new canons of taste. The protagonists of this struggle – Robert Grau, writing in the New York Clipper\(^{261}\); Louis Reeves Harrison and Epes Winthrop Sargent of Moving Picture World; Frank B. Wood of the New York Dramatic Mirror; William Lord Wright of the Moving Picture News,\(^{262}\) and Sime Silverman and Frank Wiesberg of Variety – and the reviewers and editorial staff who worked beneath them, begin between the years 1906 and 1908 as proponents of a new medium whose

\(^{261}\) After 1907 many of Grau’s articles were published in Moving Picture World.

\(^{262}\) Wright was also a major contributor to the New York Dramatic Mirror.
enthusiasts saw in it an instrument for the elevation of democratic American culture in the mass to a level of sophistication unprecedented in the histories of the inegalitarian societies of the Old World. But by the middle of the transitional period they find themselves stymied by the categorical rejection of what they conceive as ‘good’ on the part of a broad sector of the American audience, and a wholehearted delectation of what is ‘bad,’ and in many instances worse – what is foreign. This paradox was most profoundly felt in the production and consumption of comedy.

Throughout the second decade of the period at hand, then, the American film industry, confronted with the same paradox as a practical problem in exploitation, explicitly concerns itself with “turning the tables” on traditional, respectable canons. Meanwhile the critics, their only partially willing accomplices, do their best to articulate, and so far as possible to theorize, an understanding of what the producers are about. They express themselves, after about 1911, explicitly in a limited number of theoretical articles, and implicitly in a vast quantity of practical reviews. The dominant motif within these practical reviews during the years from 1908 to 1912 is perhaps their exasperation with the tastelessness of audiences when low-comedy films “hit,” and their satisfaction when they “miss.” But despite the temptation which they must constantly have faced to misrepresent the evidence, they do often convincingly demonstrate that these early films missed very often and speculate interestingly on why. After 1912, with the aid of an expanded critical vocabulary, they become willing to concede that some films are conspicuously successful, and become equally interested in the reason. Terms formerly reserved for opprobrium (“slapstick” and “knockabout” preeminent among them) begin to lose some of their pejorative connotations, and, ironically, to become descriptive instead as the writers attempt to accommodate a new sensibility regarding violent representations.

At their outset, humorous films were brief, did not tell any but the most rudimentary stories, and although producers initially sought to promote them as “comedies,” they were thought of by analogy primarily not with theatre pieces, but with the sequences of humorous pictures in the newspapers, in honor of which by 1900 they were named “comics.” Amongst the films in my Index from 1894 to 1906 (which represent all those for which from all sources I could supply any form of description over and above the title) the term “comic” is consistently used (mostly by producers and advertisers) in preference to “comedy,” coming to a peak in 1902: 263

263 Indeed, the narrative form they were most usually associated with was not the ‘story,’ but the joke.
After 1905, however, the frequency with which “comic” is used declines steadily (though it does not disappear altogether) and over the next five years is gradually replaced by “comedy.” The most likely inference is manifestly that the change is the product of the introduction of longer, more complex narratives like the “chase” film after 1904, and reflects the displacement of a paradigm based on the analogy with the funny papers to one based on traditional narrative models – especially theatrical ones. During this period, then, “comic” and “comedy” are no longer synonymous (as they may be thought to be before 1904), but actually reflect competing visions of what film humor is and what it should set out to do. The competition between them is reflected in the review journalism – particularly in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, which before 1912 typically aligns itself with the resistance to the emerging comedic style:

This sort of thing is not comedy—it is merely childish silliness.

We have heard it argued that patrons of moving picture houses, as a class, always laugh at “comics” of this kind, but it is our experience that they laugh even more heartily at the better kind of comedy, and while Too Much Dog Biscuit may get a laugh here and there, it disgusts the spectator of average intelligence.\(^\text{264}\)

The publication makes the point more explicitly anent Edison’s “Whitler’s Witless Wanderings” in the same year: “This is a “comic,” not a comedy.”\(^\text{265}\)

But in real terms “comedy” itself (among the films declared by the reviewers to contain “low” physical comedy of one sort or another) undergoes a decline during this period which


continues until approximately the 1911-1912 theatrical season, at which point it commences a sharp rebound:

Table I.2.2 “Comic” and “Comedy” as Descriptors for All Physical Comedies (“Rough-house,” “Slapstick” and “Knockabout”), 1907–1914:

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Comic</th>
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<td>1914</td>
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The evidence of the review journalism of the period suggests that this rebound is driven largely by the supplementation of the comedies of the period by a new aesthetic.

During the year 1911, the producers’ search for this aesthetic is echoed by a vigorous debate that takes place in the trade journals as to what is wrong with present-day film comedies and what is to be done about it. The consensus which emerges from this debate is that the major problem is that of how to integrate the contrary dynamics involved with the spectacular and the narrative aspects of film comedy. As Frank B. Woods, the “Spectator” of the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, puts it:

There are farces and farces and comedies and comedies, and it may be expected that we will get all kinds of them in the increased production which various companies are preparing to put out. The hope will be general, however, that the extra output of humor will show improvement rather than deterioration. This can be gained only by requiring each subject, as stated above, to tell a story—not a mere series of accidents or mishaps. By employing plots even

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the chase and the smash-up and the slap-stick styles of farce may be made acceptable and welcome.267

A solution is proposed in Solax’s “Fickle Bridget” (Dec., 1911) and articulated in the publicist’s copy for that film. This proposes an aesthetic which unites the contradictory tendencies of burlesque and “straight comedy”:

Critics unanimously advocate the elimination of burlesque and slap-stick from comedies. Straight comedy, of course, “comes over” stronger with the elimination of these objectionable features. There is, however, a peculiar kind of comedy of which many producers fight shy. In that peculiar style of comedy there is a slight mixture of burlesque and slap-stick, and their application in proper measure without hurting the general scheme, is difficult. For this reason manufacturers are usually luke-warm in their reception of scenarios with those apparently objectionable features incorporated. Unless the story is “handled with care” its appearance on the screen is usually received with a storm of protest. If carefully produced, such comedies can come under the head of Satiric Comedy – or comedy with a keen edge.268

“Burlesque and slapstick” can be accommodated if incorporated into an aesthetic which places them in tension with a contrary form possessing a strong proairetic drive. In actual practice, however, “satire,” with its intellectual connotations, never became a contender for this role.269 The early months of 1912 represent instead the devising of a new cinematic dramaturgy characterized by a tension between “burlesque” and “farce.” Prior to 1906, both of these terms occupy very much the background of critical discourse:

267 New York Dramatic Mirror, June 28, 1911, p. 28: (“‘Spectator’s’ Comments”).
269 The total number of films in the Index from all three countries described by industry professionals as “satire” between 1907 and 1914 is two.
But from 1907 onwards, among those terms used euphemistically by industry professionals to connote the performance of some form of physical “low” comedy, “farce” and “burlesque” acquire increasing prominence. Though initially employed as contraries, the two terms develop an overlap:

As the “comic” paradigm of the early period, then, gives way to the “comedic” paradigm of the transitional period, reflecting the evolving narrative capabilities of film as a medium, the latter is supplemented by a specialized aesthetic, turning on a polarity between farcical and burlesque elements, which drives its resurgence after 1912. This resurgence apparently, culminates in a slapstick “boom” beginning in the second half of 1914.

The period leading up to this boom is marked in the review journalism and in contemporary theorizing by a paradoxical ambivalence on the part of commentators: a frantic experimentation with hybrid terms by means of which they sought at one and the same time both to articulate and to euphemize an emerging dramatic “quality.” These reviews acquired a standard structure: an opening sentence located the film within its primary generic group; a middle-section consisted of a plot summary emphasizing the salient aspects of the film (and
contextually further qualifying the verdict about the film’s genre); and a closing remark would typically add supplementary remarks about the performances, the mise-en-scène, the camera work, or the reception by the audience during the screening at which the reviewer was present; and they thus very frequently indicated secondary generic markers for each type of film. In the case of comedies, the primary set of terms consisted largely of a system of variants on “comic,” “comedy,” “farce,” “burlesque” and “travesty”: “Farce”; “farce-comic”; “farce-comedy”; “burlesque”; “burlesque comic”; “comedy-burlesque”; “travesty” and, in the case of two films during the entire period, “satire.” 1911, however, sees the emergence of a new hybrid (following a precursor in 1909): the “farce-burlesque” (or “burlesque farce”).

Table 1.2.5  Primary Hybrid Genres of Physical Comedy Films, 1907–1914 (Britain, France, and U.S.):

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Critics generated a broad spectrum of nonce generic forms by the apposition of names for specifically characteristic tertiary tropes (usually as prefixes) to these secondary descriptors (and to the primary ones that underlay them – “comic,” “comedy,” “farce,” and “burlesque”). The most common tertiary descriptors were: “Acrobatic,” “Trick,” “Melodramatic,” “Chase,” “Crockery-/Furniture-smashing/-breaking” or “destruction of property,” “Bad Boy,” “Clown-“ or

270 The differences between the manufacturers’ synopses and the reviewers’ summaries are frequently extremely wide, and provide a further caution against relying exclusively on the synopses as guides to the actual experience of the pictures.
271 It was this last designation that came to be regarded as the Keystone hallmark: “Undoubtedly the Keystone company stands as the peer in this particular style of picture comedy—burlesque with rapid-fire action.” (New York Dramatic Mirror, Mar. 5, 1913, p. 33) And again, “Hoffmeyer’s Legacy as (sic) farcical burlesque – that is the only name we can apply to it—possesses a humorous strain, developed principally through the acting of the various players” (New York Dramatic Mirror, Dec. 25, 1912, p. 30).
“Character-,,” and “French”\textsuperscript{272} as well (initially) as “knockabout” and “slapstick” themselves. Further stylistic specificity could be achieved by inflecting the compound generic descriptor with a stylistic descriptor: “lively,” “strenuous,” “boisterous,” “vigorous,” “spirited,” “broad,” “low,” “exaggerated,” and “speedy.” On the testimony of my Index, then, this was the matrix out of which what came to be known as “slapstick comedy” initially emerged.

I.3: THE EMERGENT COMEDIC PARADIGM

When slapstick finally did emerge, it emerged not as a single, unitary paradigm, but as only one among a wide variety of competing slapsticks; Keystone slapstick was only one distillation of the slapstick “essence.”\textsuperscript{273} For the reviewers of the period, this “slapstickism” represented the point of intersection of the new genre’s three most important secondary generic markers. Beginning about the summer of 1911, the trade reviewers begin to recant on their initial resistance and begin to ask themselves the question we have been pursuing throughout this chapter: “What is slapstick anyway?”

For Frank Woods, the “Spectator” of the \textit{New York Dramatic Mirror},\textsuperscript{274} this comedy can be defined metonymically by reference to three predominant tropes, the nature of two of which is unproblematic, but the third of which remains mysterious:

Out of 148 film subjects that got on the Merit List, 20 were comedies or farces, but not one of these was of the slap-stick, china-smashing or chase variety… There are farces and farces and comedies and comedies, and it may be expected that we will get all kinds of them in the increased production which various companies are preparing to put out. The hope will be general, however, that the extra output of humor will show improvement rather than deterioration. This can be gained only by requiring each subject, as stated above, to tell a story—not a mere series of

\textsuperscript{272} C.f., for example, \textit{New York Dramatic Mirror}’s baroque classification of Pathé’s “Down With the Women” (1910): “French burlesque farce-comedy …” (June 11, 1910, p. 17 “Reviews of Licensed Films”).

\textsuperscript{273} As reviewer Peter Milne of \textit{Moving Picture News} put it in a review of an L-KO film of 1914: “We have seen all varieties and brands of slapstick comedy that the market of today offers, but “Love and Surgery” contains more slapstickism, so to speak, than all the rest” (\textit{Moving Picture News}, Oct. 31, 1914, p. 48).

\textsuperscript{274} And subsequently one of the industry’s leading scriptwriters.
accidents or mishaps. By employing plots even the chase and the smash-up and the slap-stick styles of farce may be made acceptable and welcome. These forms of comicalities are in disrepute only because they have lost their originality.275

For Woods the definitive group of tropes are the chase-trope, the “destruction of property” trope, and “slapstick” proper, which he leaves undetermined (apparently thinking his meaning to be self-evident). An uncredited writer in the Moving Picture News a couple of months later, proposes four types of comedy:

There are comedies and comedies. The old slap stick, the chase, the type represented by Foolshead and Max are others, and then there is the comedy drama. If the type represented by Foolshead is what a manager means, he has no better embodiment. Foolshead is popular everywhere, in city or country alike. And yet, when the pictures in which he appears are analyzed they are based upon nothing. Most of his capers are posed. Clearly no one would ever do the fool things Foolshead does in every picture. But he is a favorite and his comedies are applauded almost everywhere … Then comes the slap stick comedy in which there is a deal of smashing of furniture and the destruction of much other property. But they are accounted funny by most audiences, and are wanted by mangers.

The chase was more popular once than it is now. The chase was hurt by making it too long … A short, sharp and snappy chase is a very good bit of comedy work. It deserves all the applause it usually gets. But the danger lies in stretching one too far.276

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275 New York Dramatic Mirror, June 28, 1911, p. 28 (“Spectator’s’ Comments”).
For this reviewer, the central triad of low comedy is represented by the “slap stick” proper (which in this case is equivalent to “destruction of property”), “chase,” and “clown” or “character” comedies as represented by those featuring Foolshead and Max Linder. He problematizes his discussion, however, by equivocating on this last category: he seems to conflate the improbability of Foolshead and Max’s actions with the implausibility of the scenarios in which they occur. He’s thus making (perhaps unconscious) reference to a fourth central trope which may coincide with the suppressed reference of “slapstick” in Wood’s remarks above – what we might describe (taking our cue from Muriel Andrin) as “hyperbolical physical activity” and what the practical critics of the period deride as “exaggeration.”

In late November of the same year, Leonard Donaldson of the Moving Picture News returns to the topic, employing terms which strongly echo those of the anonymous Moving Picture News columnist of that summer. He elaborates significantly on the growing appeal of “clown” comedies, and relates them interestingly to the verisimilar properties of the apparatus:

There are comedies and comedies; there is the crockery-smashing shave picture, to which I have recently referred; there is the type represented by Foolshead, Max, Tontoline and others, and there is the comedy film which contains a dramatic vein. Should the exhibitor refer to the Foolshead type as the embodiment of humor, he could not have chosen a better one. Foolshead finds friends everywhere, and his antics never fail to touch the risibilities of the most exacting audience. But let us analyze this type of film. At once we find nothing natural or commonplace; everything exaggerated. ¶ The majority of his “stunts” are posed. It is not real humor; it is the ludicrous burlesque, the portrayal of the

277 That is, the comedy of simple clown personae, not the sophisticated psychological comedies of the legitimate stage.

impossible, which creates the laugh. But Foolshead remains a favorite, and his comedies are justly popular.\textsuperscript{279}

Donaldson rather stumblingly goes on to propose that what is really funny about the “ludicrous burlesque” of performers like Foolshead is “the burlesque and the impossible,” which places audiences in touch with “the more serious side of cinematography.” Like satire, it can, if kept within strict control, be deployed to suggest a connection between the trivial, foolish extravagances of daily life and their roots in serious conditions:

But Foolshead remains a favorite, and his comedies are justly popular. ¶ Mingled with the stern realities of life there is a lighter vein. There is humor in everyday life – commonplace humor – in the street, the office and the home. This pleases us at the time of its occurrence and under particular circumstances, but thrown upon the silent screen it at once loses its power of humor. It is the burlesque and the impossible which is needed. I agree. But even in the portrayal of the ludicrous it is possible to infuse variety. This is where the comedy film is at fault; this is the reason the public are tiring of the inevitable chase and rough-and-tumble film. ¶ The comedy film helps us to appreciate the more serious side of cinematography, but it should not be allowed to predominate; it should not be allowed to degenerate.\textsuperscript{280}

Though he reduces the total number of comic forms to three and the number of “low” forms to two, Donaldson here (however awkwardly) expresses a marvelous insight: the means by which film comedies may best complement the “serious side of cinematography” is precisely by exploiting their burlesque character to outrage audiences’ expectations of the verisimilar.

\textsuperscript{279} Leonard Donaldson, “Side Light on the Cinematograph: The Comedy Film” (Moving Picture News, Nov. 25, 1911, p. 33).
\textsuperscript{280} Leonard Donaldson, “Side Light on the Cinematograph: The Comedy Film” (Moving Picture News, Nov. 25, 1911, p. 33).
Although the multiplicity of terms, the variety of their senses, the ambiguousness with which they are used, and the overlap of their meanings make precise computation impossible, the secondary terms the critics most frequently use in the widest variety of contexts when describing low comedy at this time seem to be: i) “chase-,” (as in “Lubin chase”); ii) the various synonyms for destruction of personal belongings; iii) the names of comic types and/or performing subjects (e.g. a “tramp” or “Weary Willie” farce; a Ford Sterling burlesque); and iv) mostly frustrated attempts to express an outraged sense of the violation of one’s ‘natural’ expectations as to the behaviours of bodies in space. The fact that the particular combination of core types varies from commentator to commentator suggests strongly that there was not a single slapstick paradigm, but a variety of them, probably representing a range of permutations in the proportions of their burlesque and farcical components. What is worthy of particular notice, if the constellation of these tropes really be taken to constitute the core of what is meant by “slapstick,” is that no articulation of them includes assaults on person’s bodies as a primary component of the new physical comedy.

By 1911, then, a notion of “slapstick comedy” as more than a term of mere opprobrium is beginning to emerge, and is treated in the theory of the period as residing in a hypothetical point of intersection, possibly related to hyperbolical physical activity, between three or four major tropes of physical movement. But “slapstick” has not yet become the dominant emblem for this entire class; its place in the practical criticism of the time is as frequently supplied by “rough-house,” “horse-play,” “crockery-smashing,” “chase” and so on; and the barriers to its sudden move to eminence are apparently not lifted until the theatrical year of 1913-1914. In the interim, industry developments widen the gap between the burlesque and farcical comedies of the ‘teens and the rudimentary “comics” of 1900-1909. As a result of a combination of factors – including the development of a wider variety of lenses, the reduction of the standard camera distance from twelve to nine feet, the development of specifically cinematic means of conveying nuances of expression and constructing character, and especially the consumer-driven reversal of the producers’ policy of suppressing publicity about performers – the personality and performance

281 Indeed, the anonymous Moving Picture News reviewer’s conflation of these two last tropes under the heading of ‘slapstick’ seem uncannily appropriate, since each genre has a number of conventional sets of probabilities imbricated within it (i.e., certain things can happen, and are likely to happen, in gangster films that are simply not apt to happen in horror films or children’s cartoons); and since the conventions of a “character comedy” are determined by the character of the clown protagonist.
style of the film actor emerges from obscurity to become a major factor in the success of moving pictures. From 1908 through 1911 the groundwork for this revolution is laid in the trade press through a wide variety of articles and interviews foregrounding the art of the actor and the validity of film as a medium for performance, the differences between stage and screen acting, and discussing the polemics of realism versus convention and the relative importance of words and movements.

Comedians and comedy characters occupied the vanguard of the first generation of film performers to become familiars of their audiences – indeed, Ben Turpin’s name was well publicized by 1908. A series of comedies constructed around the character of “Jones” and featuring John R. Cumpson appear from the Edison studios in 1909, while the “Bill” series begins to issue from Pathé Frères in France. The following year sees a proliferation of comedian series by all the major producers: the “Jenks” or “Jenkins” series (both Biograph and Thanhouser used the names); the “Muggsy” series at Biograph; the “Hank and Lank,” “Henry,” and “Mulcahy” series at Essanay282; Lubin’s “Jones,” “Hemlock Hoax,” and “Shorty” series; the “Davy Jones” and “Jean” (a dog) series at Vitagraph; Kalem’s “Bertie” films; and, among the Independents, the “Bonehead” films (Nestor) and the “Dooley” series (Bison). The same year in France saw the continuation of the “Bill” series as well as the introduction of the “Betty,” and “Whiffles” series and the first of a long succession of Max Linder films.

Contrary to the mythology that subsequently grew up around the origins of silent film comedy, the majority of the performers in these films, including those around whose personalities they were designed, were not vaudevillians by and large – as a rule, they were theatrical stock players who specialized in various lines of business, including high and low comedy. The composition of these companies was likewise comparatively stable; the players had contracts with the studios which ran for certain terms, and most of them retained their places in the studio stock companies for years. Each studio had companies dedicated to various lines of work – a Western company, a comedy company, and so on; and each unit consisted of a small core group of featured players organized around a director and a cameraman, supplemented as necessary from a larger talent pool under general contract to the studio.

In many of these companies – and practically all the time in comedy companies – the lead comedians were also directors, and very frequently took on the direction of their own films. In

282 Though the last consisted of only two films.
this, whether intentionally or not, the cinematic comedy companies were modeling themselves on the status quo in burlesque, where it was not the producer, but typically the lead comedian – or rather, comic – who wrote the book for the show, often composed the music or at the very least wrote the song lyrics, devised the stage business, and even staged the production. Either way, the regime in the comedy companies thus became the inverse of that established for the production of series films by directors like Griffith at Biograph. There, the actor accommodated his or her performance to the dictates of the director and/or cameraman in the service of the requirements of the scenario; at the comedy companies, the process of accommodation tended to work the other way around.

I.4: THE RESISTANCE TO ROUGH-HOUSE

When slapstick did emerge, it was received by the domestic trade press as two things which it was certainly not. In the first place, after about mid-1913, American rough-house comedy began to be received as a significant qualitative improvement on the violent comedies by continental producers which had dominated the American market since before 1904, but whose presence in American exchanges was in steady decline from 1911 through the summer of 1914.283 It was at this latter point that the onset of World War I brought about a cessation of production in France, and both Pathé and Éclair shut down their American operations; approximately three-fifths of the spike in American comedy production during that year follows the disbanding of their companies in July. But though the testimony of the synopses indicates that there evidently were fewer macabre moments in the American slap-stick films of the mid-teens than in the French films that had been such an influence on them, the testimony of the reviews suggests that the difference in degree of violence of the chases, destruction of property and hyperbolical mayhem in both was negligible.

At the same time, however, the new American rough-house comedy was also received as a reversion to the simple humor of the pre-transitional-era “comics” – precisely the period when continental models had been dominant. The reviews of 1913-1914 are peppered with remarks to this effect, e.g. “This is one of those rapid-fire, nonsensical pictures that appears to be the

283 E.g. “The Lubin company seemed to have demonstrated their ability to do French farce, and to the average American no doubt there is a feeling that it is a decided improvement on the foreign contemporaries because it is American” (New York Dramatic Mirror, “Reviews of Licensed Films,” Mar. 1, 1911, p. 31).
vogue—or ‘back to the old farce days’ –just after the (Spanish-American) war”;284 “This reverts to the old-style eccentric comedy, with rapid-fire chase scenes running through it”;285 “An old-fashioned, slap-bang comedy, featuring a couple of German comedians … “286 and so on.

An article in Variety’s issue of November 21, 1913, made the point even more explicitly. Entitled “Unfunny Funny Films Hurt,” it articulated the frustrations of exhibitors with the slipshod humorous product that was being released by producers – particularly among the Independents – in an effort to satisfy a demand for comedy films that had been burgeoning since late 1909. At the end of that year, a letter from an anonymous exhibitor, cited by Eileen Bowser in The Transformation of Cinema 1907-1915,287 had complained that the kind of serious, high-class films produced in 1,000-foot reels288 were killing his business, which relied mostly on shorter split-reel comedies:

Manufacturers should remember … that the moving picture show is essentially the poor man’s amusement and the average working man, or at least a very large percentage of him, is not educated up to the point of understanding or appreciating high class stuff founded on classic poems and similar subjects. By this I do not mean that these splendid pictures should be eliminated, but I do assert that they should be comparatively few … A few such subjects is well, but too many is bad. Comedy the public demands and a very large proportion seems to thoroughly enjoy the old Essanay slap-stick variety. Time and again the writer has, with an average audience, run a high-class comedy, thoroughly enjoying it, while the audience sat silent, save for an occasional giggle, following it with one of those absurd, knock-‘em-down-and-drag-

\[^{284}\] Moving Picture World, April 25, 1914, p. 516.  
\[^{286}\] Moving Picture World, Aug. 8, 1914, p. 960.  
\[^{287}\] (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1990), p. 179. Bowser clearly assumes that there was such a genre before 1914, and even earlier than 1908, claiming that “(t)he favoured fictional genre before 1908 was slapstick comedy“ but does not offer any evidence to support this assumption.  
\[^{288}\] He doesn’t say “by Biograph,” but it’s clear that he’s talking about films such as Enoch Arden. He later speaks of films “founded on some poem or historic incident” with which he was “not at all familiar,” suggesting that he may also be thinking of films d’art like Pathé’s “L’assassinat du duc de Guise.”
‘em-out “comedies,” with which he was thoroughly disgusted, with the audience in a howl of laughter …²⁸⁹

His comments are echoed in the *Variety* article at the end of 1913 by another anonymous exhibitor, who finds that the problem has only been effectively addressed by one film producer:

**UNFUNNY “FUNNY” FILMS HURT.**

Unfunny “funny” films are to get the gate. Films that are funny only because they are classified as comics are to be sent back to their manufacturers with a protest … One well-known movie manager… declared every company, save one, that he had done business with during the selection of films for three houses for four years had lost the trick of making movie audiences laugh… The particular complainant begged the Vitagraph, on behalf of himself and his fellow managers, to go back to the old Keystone style of semi-horse play. He cited the Keystone’s uproarious pool game film as an illustration of the sort of stuff that made his audiences rock in their chairs. … He said he had handled the output of all the syndicates during his four years’ movie management, and that to-day none of the companies save the Keystone was living up to the old laugh standards.²⁹⁰

This exhibitor’s *cri de coeur* demonstrates unequivocally how the Keystone comedies were taken as a return to the spirit of filmmaking in 1907 – that is, before the stylistic innovations of Griffith and the demands of longer formats had taken the emphasis off of what Donald Crafton has referred to as the spectacular “pie” dimension of filmmaking and placed it on the “chase,” or narrative, aspect.

²⁸⁹ “The Length of Film Subjects,” *Moving Picture World*, Vol. 5, No. 24, Dec. 11, 1909, p. 837. For Bowser, this exhibitor’s employment of “slap-stick” can be read to suggest that there was, well before 1914, a recognized genre of film called “slap-stick,” which was largely produced by Essanay. But in fact, the word is being used in its old, pejorative sense, though in a context which makes it ironic. “Stop giving us unpopular ‘good’ films,” he is demanding in effect, “and go back to giving us popular ‘bad’ ones.”

²⁹⁰ *Variety*, Nov. 21, 1913, pp. 8, 15, reprinted in *Moving Picture News* Dec. 13, 1913, p. 8 (Keystone Ad.).
But there was no actual turning back: Funny films had evolved from “comics” into
“comedies,” and these comedies were showing narrative features in common with theatrical
farce and burlesque. But if some social currents encouraged the development of the new forms,
there were others which equally opposed it. Table I.1.4 above suggests that the proliferation of
physical comedies which reaches a peak in 1909 meets with some obstacle at that point, which
asserts itself in a (relative) decline in the release of low comedies that reaches its nadir in 1911 –
or at the least, a decline in the reviewers’ willingness to acknowledge them as such. From
here, however, rough-house production evidently bounces back; and we may hypothesize that it
is this rebounding action which is associated with the final emergence of slapstick.

Of the 117 films from 1914 acknowledged as “slapstick” by industry commentators, only
29 are split-reel, while the vast majority (75) are single-reel films, and a further 12 are two-reels
or more. This fact is reasonably strong circumstantial evidence that the emergence of a
discrete genre known as slapstick is to be associated not with the perseverance of the split-reel
“comics,” but rather with the development of a new style of physical comedy suitable for formats
of intermediate length – the one- and two-reelers that became standard for non-feature comedies.

If this hypothesis is correct, it suggests in turn that the evolution of the “comic” into the
“comedy” may have provoked some resistance which, by the 1909-1910 theatrical season, was
strong enough to drive comedy production into a decline from which it did not recover until
1911. It suggests further that the development of a new form of comedy may have been
motivated by the need to circumvent or, more likely, to accommodate this resistance; while the
sudden spike in popularity in 1914 would seem to be evidence that this evolution was successful
– though it may also have been facilitated by changes in the social or industrial context. In this
case, what was operative about “slapstick comedy” must have been precisely its difference from
the comics of the pre-transitional period, rather than its similarity to them.

That some such “resistance” to slapstick was galvanized at some point during the period
1909-1911 and that it gradually diminished (though it never disappeared) between 1912 and
1914 is further suggested by the tone of the reviews. “One sees nothing but idiotic clownishness
in this picture”; “The film creates laughter among a certain class of spectators, but it is rather

291 Though the number of comedy releases of all kinds greatly increases over the same interval.
292 For only one could I find no indication of its length, but the reviews mention no fellow on the same reel, and
most others of the brand (Starlight) released through the same distributor (Warner’s) are single-reel films.
disgusting to others”; “As one sits through this eight or ten minutes of senseless, idiotic horseplay he wonders what it is all about. Never once is the spectator allowed to grasp the thread of the story, if there is a thread, and all he is treated to is a continuous show of waving arms and prancing feet by men whose features strongly resemble the chosen people. If there was any clever horseplay one might feel repaid for sitting out such a picture.”

The suggestion is strong that the matter is a resistance which the reviewers (particularly those of the New York Dramatic Mirror) have internalized, and which they have to work out in theory at the same time as the producers are solving their own problems in practice. This resistance seems to centre around four key issues associated with the “lowness” of the genre as opposed to the “high” aspirations of the medium: i) the tendency of physical gags to interfere with the forward movement of the story; ii) the tendency of the “exaggerated”/”impossible” effects inherent in the style to interfere with the advanced verisimilitude made possible by cinematography; iii) the insistent “theatricalism” in the style of physical comedians; and iv) the “unreasonableness” of physical comedy films’ approach – the absence of a “point” which might rationalize the genre’s transgressions.

These objections gained further weight in view of the inherent violence of the representations, which posed a threat to impressionable minds no doubt amplified by the verisimilar properties of the medium. Throughout this time period, various articles complain of increasing delinquencies perpetrated by young people in imitation of the Katzenjammer Kids, Mutt and Jeff, and the protagonists of other moving pictures. It was in response to the alarm stimulated by reports such as these that state censor boards were established, and the first statistical studies on the role of the movies in inciting expressive violence were undertaken.

After a national board of censorship was established at the instigation of an organization of motion picture exhibitors in 1909, the critics increasingly proposed the censorship of rough-house comedies on aesthetic grounds. In 1909, Moving Picture World protests against Edison’s “An Affair of Art” that “The passing out of such a film confirms our remarks elsewhere that a man is needed on the Censorship Board who is qualified to pass on the technical and the artistic

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293 New York Dramatic Mirror, Nov. 29, 1911, p. 30; Mar. 29, 1911, p. 33; Sept. 25, 1912, p. 29.
294 An article in the June 8, 1912 edition of Moving Picture World, p. 905 ("Oh, the Dreadful Moving Picture") comments on the impending hanging of a 19-year-old man for a murder committed the previous November, reenacting in reality "detail for detail" an incident from The Great Train Robbery.
qualities of the films in the interest of the manufacturers.” Of Pathé’s “Servant’s Good Joke,” *Variety* exclaims, “Pathe herein becomes an offender against all the ethics in presenting a subject which is as difficult to write about as it is unpleasant to look upon. There is growing need for a censor committee which censors, and the sooner this fact is taken home by the Patents co. the better it will be for the motion picture business.”

The efforts of the censors were welcomed at first by a wide majority, and though often derided, they exercised an increasingly threatening influence. Rough-house productions were particularly vulnerable on account of their treatment of the police. The rough-house comedies’ use of “burlesque police forces” in films by Lubin (e.g. “Slumberville’s Scare,”), Biograph (“Hickville’s Finest”), Essanay (“Sweedie’s Skate”), Kalem (“The Bingville Fire Department”), Selig (“The House That Went Crazy”), Komic (“Casey’s Vendetta”), Starlight (“Help, Murder, Police”), Princess (“The Dead Line”) and Sterling (“An Ill Wind,” all 1914), no less than in numerous Keystones, rendered them particularly liable to suppression by the censorship. In a 1914 article in *The New York Dramatic Mirror*, William Lord Wright cites Cora Drew, a motion picture performer and screenwriter, in voicing these anxieties:

> Miss Drew says: “Why cut out the police comedy alone, when as good and brave are still the butt and joke of slap-stick? What possible dignity can a real policeman lose through fun with a reel policeman? I believe the shoe pinches somewhere, for today, while on location, two drunken Mexicans fairly shot into the street fighting and cursing, and on the opposite corner stood two of the ‘finest,’ and they went calmly on reading their newspapers. I confess I am annoyed because several scripts have been recalled because of police feeling against ‘comedy cops.’ We are no longer

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295 *Moving Picture World*, July 3, 1909, p. 3.
296 Both the burlesque and vaudeville industries were subject to self-imposed censorships, both official and unofficial.
297 C.f. *New York Dramatic Mirror*, April 10, 1909, p. 14 (“New Films Reviewed”): “This picture, we understand, was one of those examined by the new board of so-called censors, and was condemned by them as not quite decent. There is little merit in it as a picture, but we are unable to understand by what sort of strained reasoning it can be called improper. It is about as harmless a picture as ever came out of Paris.”
298 “According to the last report of the national board of censorship of America 4,020,000 feet of objectionable film were kept from exhibition during the last year from October 1, 1911, to October 1, 1912” (*Rock Island Argus*, Mon. Dec. 23, 1912, p. 4).
a free country, and the right to do right is no longer ours if it
displeases in its method of expression. Offend is not the word. If
police were the only butt for jokes it might have some weight, but
they share and share alike with about every one but the minister.
Besides—what is slap-stick without the comedy police?”

Wright introduces Miss Drew’s remarks with a report of a police convention at which the
issue was raised in the form of a jest that might all too easily turn out to be in earnest:

The police chiefs of America held a national convention this
Summer and passed resolutions against the burlesquing of
policemen in motion picture comedies. The resolutions were
farcical, of course, even if burlesque policemen have become
rather monotonous … Cora Drew … wants to know why the film
companies have so readily dropped the comedy police. The
answer will be found above.299

In this environment, the value of simple physical sadism as a means of provoking
laughter – as articulated, for instance in Hobbes’ classical formulation of “superiority” theory300 –
fell due for revision. A Variety review of “A Day at the Sea Shore” (1908, an importation by an
unidentified British producer), asks, “Is physical violence of itself funny?” and decides that it can
be so only on specific conditions:

As a general proposition we should say not. An unprovoked
assault makes no appeal to an intelligent sense of humor. It is
funny only when surrounding circumstances make it so. American
moving picture manufacturers seem to appreciate this principle, for
they almost invariably go to great pains to devise elaborate

299 William Lord Wright, “For Photoplay Authors, Real and Near” (“Echo Answers, When?”) New York Dramatic
300 “The passion of laughter is but a sudden glory arising from conception of our own eminence.” C.f. Louis Reeves
Harrison’s review of Vitagraph’s “Pickles, Art and Sauerkraut” (Jan. 27, 1914 – two reels) in Moving Picture World,
Jan. 17, 1914, p. 27.
situations, and when a general melee of this sort is introduced it is made to arise logically out of some set of circumstances. A case in point is the film exhibited recently under the title of “Jack the Hugger,” in which a “masher” is brought to justice by his victims. This film ended in a carnival of manhandling, but the point of the physical violence was not that somebody was being hurt, but that the “masher”—always a despised creature—was getting his just desserts.\footnote{Variety, Feb. 15, 1908, p. 11.}

As time goes by, the consensus begins to move in favor of the opinion that these conditions can be satisfied, and the laughter of superiority legitimately triggered, by elements of performance. These circumstances consist less in the presence or absence of a justifying rationale than in a modified style of performance and, especially, direction:

To forecast just what is going to create laughter in a comedy is impossible; an incident that may appear foolish under some conditions perhaps will strike a person as being excessively funny under other conditions. And so it is in the present half-reel farce, acted by the Biograph players and directed by Dell Henderson. Where the burglar, first, and his pursuers, second, fall into the trough of mortar, there is an uproarious response of amusement, not because the incident is a particularly clever bit of business or even new—it is the crude method used when comedies were first screened— but because of the circumstances and the way it was brought in. People will continue to laugh at such things in screen comedies so long as they are directed properly. It is human nature to laugh at another’s misfortune. So it is that this farce scores a big laugh and consequently pleases.\footnote{New York Dramatic Mirror, “Reviews of Licensed Films,” May 7, 1913, p. 31.}
Judging by the tenor of contemporary criticism, the crucial means by which rough-house comedy adapted itself to, and overcame, the resistance to it, was the establishment of a new intimacy between audiences and performers, made possible by verisimilar innovations in screen technique. The emergence of slapstick apparently involved developing techniques which both exploited the verisimilar properties of film and tended to sabotage and even explode them.

1.5 ACCESSIBILITY AND THE ECCENTRIC STYLE

In their vigorous rejection of the frontality of rough-house comedians’ styles, the trade reviewers advert frequently to the grotesque effect of their facial expressions, their make-up, and their general physical appearance. Indeed, by this time, both in film and on the stage, grotesquerie of characterization is largely a matter of make-up and costume according with certain conventions. The overall effect of these conventions is to alienate the character from the audience – it is probably this effect of a technique that functions by being off-putting that the reviewers have in mind when they report a sense of ‘disgust.’ In the live theatre, “grotesque” becomes a term increasingly applied (most often favorably) to the sort of broad, coarse, and occasionally even off-color performance styles that were current in burlesque. Time and again, however, from early 1909 through 1912 the reviewers – particularly those on the staff of the New York Dramatic Mirror – protest with increasing stridency that in the medium of film this approach no longer works – that, indeed, it has the opposite of the desired effect and over-emphasizes the burlesque dimension of the representation. On the contrary, the critics’

303 “… a farmer woman of very grotesque appearance” (Billboard, June 3, 1911, p. 50); “There is much very rude horseplay and attempted funny tricks on the part of the police squad, but beyond a certain grotesque makeup their efforts fall very flat.” New York Dramatic Mirror, Aug. 21, 1912, p. 32; anent Ford Sterling: “The grimaces of his naturally ludicrous countenance are lent life by the grotesqueness of his mobile features.” New York Dramatic Mirror, Jan. 21, 1914, p. 33.
304 E.g. “Here is a film that portrays much destructiveness, the demolishing of a cab, the smattering (sic) of crockery, the overturning of a monument and the battering down of a house wall, etc., all of which gave it a rather grotesque comedy value.” Billboard, Feb. 11, 1911, p. 54.
305 Examples are legion after about the summer of 1909, e.g. “The rough comedy of this picture would have been more plausibly humorous if the alleged comedian who put the mustard plaster on his chest to cure a cold, had not thought it necessary to tell the camera in pantomime and grimace each thing he intended to do before doing it. The doing of the several actions would have been sufficient.” (New York Dramatic Mirror, Aug. 14, 1909, p. 15); “The lack of this farce would seem to be sufficient reasonableness; it fails to convince that it is sufficiently reasonable either in its entirety or down to the smaller actions of scenario or acting. It is forced burlesque.” (New York Dramatic Mirror, Nov. 29, 1911, p. 26); “The actors are also decidedly over-strenuous in their endeavor to make the thing immensely funny, but rather succeed in covering up what humor may be found in the situations and complications. No doubt the amateurish and cheap effect would not have resulted had they been directed to refrain from this, or selected a subject better suited for this method” (New York Dramatic Mirror, July 10, 1912, p. 32).
importations from late 1913 on of the term “eccentric” from theatrical discourse (where, with “grotesque,” it is constant throughout the period, particularly in the context of vaudevillian farce-comedy and song-and-dance) generally occur in contexts in which the spectator is called upon to sympathize in a greater or lesser degree with the comic protagonist.306

The new accessibility to the “interiority” of comedic characters made possible by the medium of film307 apparently had consequences, at first perhaps accidental, for the development of rough-house comedies. These first become evident in the macabre moments of many of the French farces, for example in Pathé’s “Poor Pussy” (1908), in which a cat belonging to an old maid is stolen by two mischievous boys, suspended from a kite and flown over the city to drop to the ground before a restaurant where pussy is made into a stew and eaten by her own mistress.308 In this burlesque of a motif of classical tragedy, it is impossible not to feel a spasm of real grief that disrupts one’s immersion in the story.309 A similar moment erupts at the conclusion of Kalem’s “The Indestructible Mr. Jenks” (1913). After discovering a potion that renders him able to survive a horrific explosion, an attempted bludgeoning by a thug, and encounters with a steam roller and a wheelbarrow-load of bricks, Mr. Jenks is finally killed by his wife’s biscuits dropping out the window on him as he returns home. The appearance of Jenks’ wife in mourning had an odd effect which the critics do not fail to draw attention to: the New York Dramatic Mirror, faithful to the rulebook as always, simply declared that “… the director went too far when he showed wifey in the final scene as a widow in black. It is far from comedy and spoils the humor of the earlier scenes.”310 But the reviewer for the Moving Picture News evidently found himself oddly, and uncomfortably, moved: “The Indestructible Mr. Jenks” is very funny, although the touch of mourning at the finale is not only a surprise, but a “jar.”

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306 “An eccentric comedy, in which the henpecked Irishman revolts.” (Moving Picture World, Jan. 24, 1914, p. 413); “This reverts to the old-style eccentric comedy, with rapid-fire chase scenes running through it. Mr. Stout and his thin wife were pleasing … “ (Moving Picture World, Feb. 21, 1914, p. 947); “Clown characters make fun by comic tumbling and eccentric actions.” (Moving Picture World, Mar. 7, 1914, p. 1237); “An eccentric comedy number, in which the chiefs of the fire and police departments love the mayor’s daughter” (Moving Picture World Aug. 8, 1914, p. 836).

307 (Including closer shot scales, but especially connected I think, with new metonymic relationships between characters and the objects with which they were associated – I’m thinking particularly of the relationship constructed between Mary Pickford and the eponymous bonnet in Griffith’s 1914 “The New York Hat.”)

308 For the full synopsis, c.f. Moving Picture World, June 20, 1908, p. 534.

309 As the New York Dramatic Mirror put it, “The humor is strained, not to say disgusting” (New York Dramatic Mirror, July 4, 1908, p. 7).

310 New York Dramatic Mirror, April 23, 1913, p. 35.
Taken by itself, this example might simply represent an aberration; but a similarly accidental misreading lies at the basis of Chaplin’s own account of the way he discovered his famous capacity for “pathos” during his year at Keystone (1914):

I can trace the first prompting of my desire to add another dimension to my films besides that of comedy. I was playing in a picture called *The New Janitor*, in a scene in which the manager of the office fires me. In pleading with him to take pity on me and let me retain my job, I started to pantomime appealingly that I had a large family of little children. While I was enacting mock sentiment, Dorothy Davenport, an old actress, was on the sidelines watching the scene, and during rehearsal I looked up and to my surprise found her in tears. “I know it’s supposed to be funny,” she said, “but you just make me weep.” She confirmed something I already felt: I had the ability to evoke tears as well as laughter.  

Through accidents such as these, I would suggest, filmmakers during the early 1910s discovered that the increased intimacy with comedy characters made possible by films tended to magnify the emotional impact of the fictive violence suffered by characters, while the mediating influence of the medium tended to diminish their concern for the bodies of performers, and to forestall the inhibiting effect of what the psychoanalysts call “hypercathexis.”

As the examples of “Poor Pussy,” and “The Indestructible Mr. Jenks” suggest, physical violence by far less extravagant than that of the knockabout era could acquire a much profounder dramatic resonance by being perpetrated on characters with whom audiences’ sympathies were more intimately aligned than was possible in the live theatre. In “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body,” Jennifer Bean cites a telling cartoon from *Motion Picture Magazine* for April 1907. Entitled “Shell Fright vs. Screen Fright,” the cartoon compares the disinterested lassitude of a “Movie Patron Hearing About the Horrible Slaughter in Europe” (he leans back in his seat, legs crossed, yawning) with the unbearable tenseness of the “Same Gent Seeing Helen Holmes Skin Her Elbow” (he sits bolt-upright, his hair on end and his toes

cursed).\textsuperscript{312} Paradoxically, the cinema permitted of a deeper engagement with characters suffering fictional agonies than with “real” ones. Slapstick comedy was thus able to acquire a depth of resonance that the broadest knockabout comedy had never had. A 1914 article by William Lord Wright in the \textit{New York Dramatic Mirror} cited the testimony of Emily Brown Neininger (“authoress of the majority of Essanay rough-and-tumble laugh-provokers”):

\begin{quote}
(T)he slap-stick comedy business is a near-tragedy in every stage of the game… it is not the funny story that makes a real laughable slap-stick comedy, but a story that borders on tragedy. When you look at one of these productions things happen so fast that you do not have time to think about what the plot might be, for it is so hidden by by-play and rough-house stuff that it is invisible most of the time. In searching for plots, the most lurid themes are the ones that work out the best, the nearer the actors and actresses apparently come to death the harder the heartless audience will laugh.\textsuperscript{313}
\end{quote}

Chaplin’s own testimony suggests the reason why the earliest American slapstick films continued closely to resemble the French rough-house films whose sadistic \textit{grotesquérie} American audiences so vigorously repudiated. The French habitus, conditioned, perhaps, by a much more atavistic cultural climate (and especially by the punitive excesses of the Bourbons), had long since primed French spectators to accept in a spirit of weird fun representations that American audiences could only interpret in a spirit of depraved cruelty. But their very tendency to misread these representations became the proving ground for a new, more ‘realistic’ style of comedy, demanding the elaboration of “physical intelligence” into a regime in which mere bone-crunching was replaced by a comparatively delicate system of expressions that at one and the same time could provide thrills, stimulate Hobbesian laughter, and yet also convey information

\begin{flushleft}

\textsuperscript{313} William Lord Wright, “For Photoplay Authors, Real and Near: ‘The Slap-Stick Comedy’” (\textit{New York Dramatic Mirror}, Aug. 5, 1914, p. 30)
\end{flushleft}
about character, express mood and emotion, and, ultimately, embody complex philosophies and articulate a profound *Weltanschauung.*

There is no point among the Ethiopian sketches (let alone the pantomimes of the Hanlons or the acrobatics of the Brothers Byrne) at which their physical business so straddles the line between comedy and tragedy. On the contrary, throughout the nineteenth century the spirits of *grotesquerie* and *excentricité* remain in balance: their blackface protagonists are bizarre figures too unlike any real person for sympathy, though not for pity. Knockabout was in this regard a sort of comedic counterpart of the moral melodrama: its personages were not primarily representations of individuals; they were essentially ethical types, iconographical figures of the nineteenth-century ideological system, which invested them with a broad range of affectual appeal, but with little depth. The verisimilar drive of slapstick, on the other hand, confined the affects *it* evoked within a much narrower range, but bestowed on it much greater depth.

II. Turning the Tables in the American Film Industry – The Rise of the Independents

The Licensed film manufacturers tended, especially at first, to associate themselves with the resistance to change, and to maintain what were for the time conservative values. In the main, it was the Licensed manufacturers whose scenarios manifested traditional ethical values; who in general tacitly supported the national and state censor boards; whose productions, like those of the UBO in vaudeville and the Klaw-Erlanger combine in the realm of the legitimate theatre, were targeted at the ongoing nurture and exploitation of family audiences; and whose comedy productions tended to be predominantly of the “polite” strain. Although Essanay had initially made its mark in comedy by producing physically-based comedies which challenged some of these policies, after about 1910 or so that studio also lightened its touch, and reviewers received its product as closer to polite comedy than slap-stick.

The rise of the Independent film producers after 1908 not only accompanied, but largely drove the emergence of slapstick, which they embraced as a weapon in their battles against the

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314 As in the case of the Big Three, so compellingly explicated by Walter Kerr in *The Silent Clowns.*
315 E.g. *Motion Picture News*’ review of “Kitty’s Knight”: “A corking good comedy, with just sufficient slapstick work in it to make the action lively” (*Motion Picture News*, Dec. 20, 1913, p. 21), or *Moving Picture World*’s of “The Rise of Officer Casey”: “It was consistently acted, considering it borders on slap-stick comedy” (*Moving Picture World*, Mar. 14, 1914, p. 1384).
Licensees, and an important aspect of their self-promotions. Indeed, the earliest use of “slapstick” as a quasi-generic denominator is what reads as a curiously self-contradictory 1911 promotion by Carl Laemmle’s Imp studio:

You have been begging us to produce some high-class slap-stick comedy on split-reels. Very well, we give you a corking good dose of it in “The Mix-up,” release Thursday, February 2nd, and “An Imaginary Elopement” on the same reel. The picture shown herewith is a climax in one of the funniest chains of silly horse-play you ever saw, and we’ll guarantee it will bring down your house with roars of delight. We’re giving you what you demand. Now see that you GET IT FROM YOUR EXCHANGE!

What exactly is meant here by “‘high-class’ slapstick comedy” is not clear – the reviewers apparently saw nothing special in the film, and didn’t see fit even to include “The Mix-up” among the fourteen films for that year which in their views were “slapstick.” But this ad suggests that from the beginning, though the emergence of slapstick was theoretically a return to a previous, “lower” form of comedy, in practice (for some producers at least) it represented the first steps at an attempt to appeal at one and the same time to audiences with both “higher-class” and “lower-class” preferences – and thus to sidestep the “cultural hierarchy” dilemma altogether in a way that was only thinkable in comedy.

At the same time, the emergence of slapstick made a virtue of the necessary co-operation during the early part of this period between the Independents and the foreign (and especially the French) producers. It resulted in an inflection of the nationalist discourse which proclaimed American films as possessing all the virtues of their foreign counterparts (including their pretensions to “higher” cultural quality), while eschewing their demerits.

\[317\] *Billboard*, Jan. 28, 1911, p. 22.
\[319\] (Resulting from the Independents’ inability from their own resources to supply sufficient quantities of product to enable them to remain competitive.)
We might break down the period from 1907 to 1914 into 3 terms: one from 1907-1909 which was characterized by the dominance of the Licensed producers; a second featuring the partition of that system with the emergence of the Independents and the establishment of the Motion Picture Distribution and Sales Company from 1910 through 1912; and a third in 1912-1914 which sees the fragmentation of the system into an open market characterized by intensified competition between the Licensed Manufacturers on the one hand and the Independents on the other – as well as the often internecine strife between the member-producers of the Universal Film Co., the Mutual Film Co., and the Film Supply Co. During the first of these terms, the dominant paradigms for physical comedy films are represented, arguably, by those featuring the ‘chase’ and ‘trick’ tropes; during the second, by the “crockery-smashing” and “chase” tropes; and, after about mid-1912, dominated entirely by films featuring the “character-comedy” or “clown” trope.

The latter two of these terms are characterized by continually intensifying competition, not to produce the “lowest” of low comedy, but on the contrary to find the most satisfying mixture of “low” and “high” elements. Evidently, the key to solving this problem ultimately turned out to reside in the popularity of individual performers’ screen personae; and, as Sime Silverman predicted of their counterparts in vaudeville, the balance of power in the triumph of the Independents over the Licensees was held by the star personalities of the film industry who emerged during this latter term. We can trace these developments as they are reflected in the responses of the critics: but I shall place “slapstick,” “knockabout” and “rough-house” in quotations as a reminder that what we are talking about is not the films as they were produced, but as they were received by contemporary professional observers.

II.1: TERM 1 – 1907–1910

Throughout this first term, the amount of Edison, Essanay, Lubin, Gaumont and Pathé product which the reviewers treat as “rough-house” steadily increases from 1907-1909. The product of Biograph, Kalem, Selig, Vitagraph and Urban, on the other hand, tails off; and the

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321 (Driven by the increasing centrality of 4-reel or longer feature films).

322 Which was succeeded by the Exclusive Film Co. after May 1914.
output of all the Licensed producers, including the European ones, drops from 1909 through 1910. (These figures should be read against the background of a total output which approximately doubles during this period.)

Table II.1.1 “Rough-house” Films by Licensed Producers, 1907–1910:

Of these, only three producers are credited with the production of “knockabout” films – Lubin, Gaumont and Pathé:

Table II.1.2 “Knockabout” Films by Licensed Producers 1907–1910:

Only Essanay, Lubin, Vitagraph and Pathé are identified as purveyors of any quantity of “slapstick”:

Table II.1.3 “Slapstick” Films by Licensed Producers, 1907–1910:
The reviewers only attribute distinctive physical-comedy styles to Essanay – the “lively Essanay style” referred to earlier – and Lubin, who early on established product differentiation by means of a distinctively acrobatic style in executing chase sequences, referred to by the journalists as the “Lubin chase.”

II.2: TERM 2 – 1910–1912

The appearance on the scene throughout 1909 of new studios, and the formation of the Independent Moving Picture Alliance in September complicates the picture considerably by the middle of 1910, adding not only several new domestic producers, but several foreign allies, including Éclair and Lux, who specialized in the production of rough-house comedies. The term from 1910 through 1912 sees a pronounced reduction in the presence on the “rough-house” film market of the Licensed producers, and a significant increase in the presence of the Independents:

Table II.2.1 “Rough-house” Films 1910–1912 (Licensed and Independent):

As this chart demonstrates, while Licensed American producers dominate the production of what are received as rough-house films in 1910, they are significantly challenged by the Independents. By 1911, the Licensed and Independent forces, both American and European, are at a stand-off due to a significant increase in the present of European product. This stand-off is maintained through 1912, in spite of a decline in the European presence, as a result of a steadily climbing presence of American Independent companies in the rough-house film market (c.f. Chart II.5.iii.a, in which the growth trend among the Independents continues, overtaking and

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323 E.g. New York Dramatic Mirror, Feb. 15, 1911, p. 30: “The efforts of the husband to get home to his supposed dying wife give excuse for a number of chase and obstacle scenes in the lively Essanay style.”

324 “There is a Lubin chase in this farce (“Woman’s Curiosity”), and … it has the usual number of falls and collisions” (New York Dramatic Mirror, Mar. 8, 1911, p. 31). Another 1911 review (of “Dobbs the Dauber”) suggests a movement-trope which may have been a characteristic: “The Lubin favorite zig-zag race is present” (New York Dramatic Mirror, Mar. 1, 1911, p. 31).
exceeding the output of the American Licensees). The lion’s share of this output, nevertheless, is that of the foreign producers among the Independents.

Table II.2.2 “Knockabout” Films 1910–1912 (U.S., U.K. and France) by Studio:

Among the Licensed producers, only Lubin produced what was spoken of as a genuine “knockabout” film during the term, as compared with four of the Independents. On the other hand, although no “slapstick” films were produced at all in 1910, Lubin, Selig, Gaumont and Pathé among the Licensees, and Imp, American, Solax, Majestic, Lux and Éclair among the Independents produce between them all the slapstick films considered noteworthy by the reviewers in the two years following; and the contribution of the Independents exceeds that of the Licensees by a small margin in each of these two years.

Table II.2.3 “Slapstick” Films 1910–1912 (U.S., U.K. and France) by Studio:

This is the period which is marked by the proliferation of comedies based no longer around the stock racial, ethnic and social “types” of the “comics,” but instead around characters with distinct personal idiosyncracies, beginning with Edison’s “Jones” series (1909), and culminating in the first series featuring internationally successful comic stars – especially Pathé’s “Max,” and Essanay’s “Alkali Ike.” (Please see Appendix 3 for a list of Comedy Character Series 1909–1914.)

By 1912 (and before the irruption of Griffith’s greatest disciple onto the scene), several directors have already begun to make their names as specialists in the field of film comedy. Many of them were already leading figures at the Licensed studios including, at Edison, Charles...
M. Seay and C. Jay Williams; at Essanay Thomas Ricketts, E. Mason Hopper, and G. M. Anderson himself; at Kalem, Hal Clements; Arthur D. Hotaling at Lubin; at Selig Charles H. France; and Van Dyke Brooke, Bert Angeles, Wilfred North and Ralph Ince at Vitagraph. At Biograph, where Sennett had already succeeded Griffith in the execution of much of Biograph’s comedy quota, late 1912 sees the initiation of a regular output of low comedies very much in the French style, directed by Dell Henderson, and largely scripted by Anita Loos.

II.3: TERM 3 – 1913–1914:

As the continued expansion of feature film production sets the stage for the loosening of relations between distributors and film exchanges into an “open market,” the producers of film comedies in the years 1913–1914 palpably arrange themselves into serried ranks in order the better to position themselves within it. By the 1913–1914 theatrical year, Edison, Selig and Vitagraph have virtually retired from the production of rough-house films altogether, Vitagraph and Edison to concentrate on the production of “polite comedies.” After Dell Henderson’s defection from Biograph in mid-year to become a mainstay of Keystone, Biograph begins also to retire from the production of comedies, the exceptions in 1914 being a small number of films featuring and directed (apparently on a more or less free-lance basis) by Eddie Dillon, who also performed and directed for Mutual’s Komic and Keystone brands during the same year. Essanay had continued to develop their comedy forces, spinning the “Alkali Ike” series off into another series featuring Ike’s friends and neighbours in Snakeville, and featuring Victor Potel, Margaret Joslin and Harry Todd. The “Snakeville” comedies increased in importance to the Essanay schedule after the departure of Augustus Carney for Universal in March 1914. In addition to the company exploiting the popularity of John Steppling and “Smiling” Billy Mason, in December 1913 Essanay introduces another dedicated to low comedy and featuring Wallace Beery, Ruth Hennessey, Leo White, and Robert Bolder, and Ben Turpin (after his return from vaudeville). Kalem, meanwhile, had established a company under Marshall Neilan and featuring Neilan, John Brennan and Ruth Roland; they soon also recruited Lloyd V. Hamilton from Frontier (March,

325 Anderson directed many of the studio’s earliest comedy films featuring Ben Turpin in 1908-1909.
326 Who had been the producer of a popular series of comedies featuring John Lancaster, a former circus clown, and one of the few film comedians who was a huge success in the role of the “happy hooligan,” Sweeney.
327 Griffith had, in the meantime, departed to produce and direct on his own account through Reliance.
328 In the role of “Sweedie,” another drag skivvy character based on O’Sullivan’s “Bedelia.”
1914), and Bud Duncan from Henderson’s company at Biograph in or about May, 1914. The most conspicuous presence in the physical-comedy market during this term, however, is Lubin, who had established their own distinctively “acrobatic” farce-comedy style as early as 1908, and who now boasted companies of *farceurs* directed variously by Arthur D. Hotaling, Romaine Fielding, J.A. Murphy and Frank C. Griffin, scripted by Epes W. Sargent himself, and drawing on a talent pool including Peter Lang, Harry Lorraine, Mae Hoteley, Billy Bowers, Frances Ne Moyer, Raymond McKee, Ben Walker, and Oliver Hardy. Pathé’s American operation, in the meantime, continued to thrive with a company under the direction of Étienne Arnaud and including Charles Morgan, S. S. Wiltse, Bert Starkey, Mildred Baring, and Margaret Baxter.

Among the Independents, whom internal factions had divided between three distributors, each competing for a market approximately half the size of that serviced by the Licensees, the market for rough-house films was dominated by the affiliates of Carl Laemmle’s Universal, closely followed by the Mutual Film Company, which numbered among its brands Keystone, as well as the other producers controlled by Adam Kessell and Charles Bauman’s New York Motion Picture Co. Against the forces of the Licensees, Carl Laemmle’s Universal had arrayed a variety of producers, each specializing in product targeted at a particular niche in the wide spectrum between broad burlesque and polite farce. By mid-June, Laemmle had brought the Independent Éclair into the Universal fold; in September of that year, the Universal forces had expanded again to include Crystal, which embarked on the production of two highly popular series of farce-comedies directed by Phillips Smalley and featuring at first Pearl White and Chester Barnett, and then, after April, 1914, Vivian Prescott and Charles De Forrest. These films covered a wide spectrum of physical styles, and often crossed the line between “rough-house” and “slap-stick.” As early as January 1913, the short-lived “Gem” brand had seduced Billy Quirk away from Solax to star in a series of films there; then in November of 1913 the Universal forces were completed by the establishment of the Joker studio, whose comic product was in charge of Allen Curtis, and whose lead comic was the ex-vaudevillian Max Asher, who, like Ford Sterling, specialized in a “Dutch” character. Asher was featured with Harry McCoy in a series of films (often compared with the “Mutt and Jeff” films) featuring the characters of

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329 As of April, 1913, there are 10,261 exhibitors in the country, of whom 6,398 are bound by agreements with the Licensed producers and 3,862 are divided among the Independent distributors. C.f. Alfred H. Saunders, “The Film Industry in America Today” (*Motion Picture News* April 12, 1913, p. 10).

330 Whither he had been enticed away from Pathé U.S. in March, 1912.
“Mike” and “Jake.” The jewel in the Universal crown was perhaps Nestor’s comedy company, under the direction of Al. E. Christie, and led by principal comedian Lee Moran.

The arrival of Keystone on the scene was unquestionably part of a long-term strategic response on the part of the Mutual interests to Universal’s intended hegemony over the Independent market. It had begun with what may have been a tactical counter to Universal’s addition of Crystal to its forces: the establishment of the (comparatively short-lived) Punch studios in late November, 1912. The Punch product featured a midget, Herbert Rice, of the (vaudeville?) team of Rice and Rosen – they were of particular interest for the purposes of the present inquiry since it seems to have been the Punch comedies which established the vogue for “clown-comedies,” though Punch itself was out of business by January 1914. In the meantime, Mutual had responded to Universal’s establishment of Joker in November 1913 by introducing the Komic brand, featuring, at first, a number of comparatively unknown stage-players, but soon attracting a number of reputable performers. Like Punch, Joker specialized in films in which “(c)lown characters make fun by comic tumbling and eccentric actions.” Mutual’s coverage of the Western brand of rough-house comedies was guaranteed largely by its association with the American Film Co. (producers of the highly popular “Calamity Anne” Western comedies featuring and written by Louise Lester), the Broncho and Reliance brands and, especially, the Majestic Film Co. Just as Universal had closed with Éclair among the foreign producers, so the Mutual had formed an association with Lux; and, just to be on the safe side, during 1914 Mutual introduced a number of domestic brands to a large extent producing variations on the Lux product – Royal, Beauty, and Princess.

The third faction was the most weakly positioned for the slapstick wars that were to succeed during the summer of 1914. By the end of January 1912, Gaumont had abandoned the MPPC, and now distributed through the Film Supply Company, together with Great Northern, Pilot, and Solax; after the dissolution of the Film Supply Co. in May 1914, these producers regrouped under the aegis of the Exclusive Supply Co., but commanded between them only a tiny fraction of the Independent market. By September 1914, Exclusive itself would be

331 Such as Robert (Bobbie) Burns, Isabel Daintry, and George Welch.
332 Including Eddie Lyons, Fay Tincher, Tod Browning, Joseph (Baldy) Belmont, Tammany Young, Charles Rice, Frank Bennett and Max Davidson.
dissolved as a result of the radical decline in productivity of the European filmmakers with the onset of World War I.

Led by the Universal and Mutual interests, by late 1913, however, the Independents have succeeded decisively in turning the tables on the Licensed producers. The chart below clearly associates the boom in “rough-house” films between 1913 and 1914 with both a dramatic decrease in European product and a significant rise in the output of the Independent studios (which continues the trend already evident in 1910-1912):

Table II.3.1 “Rough-house” Films 1913–1914 (Licensed and Independent):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S. Licensed</th>
<th>U.K./Fr. Licensed</th>
<th>U.S. Independent</th>
<th>U.K./Fr. Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the Licensed producers, however, the production of low comedies is no longer dominated by Biograph, Essanay, or Vitagraph, but by Siegmund Lubin:

Table II.3.2 “Rough-house” Films 1913–1914 By Producer (U.S. Licensed):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Edison</th>
<th>Biograph</th>
<th>Essanay</th>
<th>Kalem</th>
<th>Lubin</th>
<th>Selig</th>
<th>Vitagraph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Among the Independents, the market in rough-house films generally is dominated by the Universal interests, the Mutual tailing them by only a slight margin.334

334 This may, however, be a misimpression due to the fact that, after about March 1914, the New York Dramatic Mirror devotes considerably less space to reviews of films distributed through Mutual and the Supply Co./Exclusive than to those distributed by Universal.
Table II.3.3 “Rough-house” Films 1913–1914 by Distributor (U.S. Independent):

The dominant brand within the Universal family of companies was evidently that of Joker.

Table II.3.4 “Rough-house” Films 1913–1914 by Producer (U.S. Independent – Universal):

Among the companies distributing through Mutual, Keystone emerges during this period as the dominant presence, followed (by quite a wide margin) by Royal, whose feature comedian was Louis Simon.

Table II.3.5 “Rough-house” Films 1913–1914 by Producer (U.S. Independent – Mutual):

Judging from the testimony of the reviews, it would seem that by the end of 1913, it’s already clear that the paradigm for the emerging brand of comedy that will be the most
successful on the Independent market is that of Keystone. But the record demonstrates that the Keystone brand of physical comedy was far from the only one on the market; on the contrary, at the time of the emergence of the genre bearing its name, “slapstick” could be used for any of a variety of comedy techniques ranging from the broad pratfall of burlesque to the rigorous acrobatics of vaudevillian farce. Though in general the comedy of the Licensees tended to favor more “refined” forms of physical comedy, the traffic of personnel between studios no less than the pressure to compete on an increasingly open market and the intensified competition for presence within that market combined to place increasing pressure on them to attempt to beat the Independents at their own game.

So far as the reviews suggest, those films in which the dominant paradigm for intense physical comedy was the knockabout tradition at the time were almost exclusively Independents, as the following table suggests: Sterling and Imp (Universal) and Keystone (Mutual). Among the members of the MPPC, Biograph is the only one whose output approaches those of the Independents in either year:

Table II.3.6 “Knockabout” Films, 1913–1914 by Producer (U.S., U.K., and France):

On the other hand, among the producers of the new genre of “slap-stick comedy,” while the leaders are Keystone (Mutual) and Joker (Universal), their lead is closely challenged by two Licensed producers: Lubin and Kalem.
Table II.3.7 “Slapstick” Films, 1914, by Producer (U.S., U.K. and France):

III. The Emergence of “Slapstick”

The testimony of the reviewers is far from objective and far from complete: it offers only a rough barometer of the changes in taste which accompanied the development of slapstick comedy, and not of the changes in production which constituted it. But it does provide us with what objective production data would not: a reasonably clear understanding of how “slapstick comedy,” at its inception, was really received, and criteria for distinguishing what would have been included with it from what should not. All this makes it possible for us better to understand its relation to “knockabout comedy,” and gives us a starting point from which to examine a) the relationship of these to each other, and to their historical contexts; and b) the relationships of both to the forms of physical comedy which preceded and which succeeded them.

Why was it called “slapstick,” then? The slapstick itself was not a tool much in evidence in the work of “slapstick comedians,” any more than in the work of theatrical knockabout artists. But the sound of it must have been highly conspicuous in its use by percussionists within the spare aural environments of the nickelodeons and “two-a-days”; it would have resonated with particular harshness, and stood out with particular force, from the relatively meagre textures conjured up by piano and violin. This sound must have resonated uniquely against its moment, during the quantum leap in the “sense of humour” of the period, which took place amid a network of ironic social inversions expressed by the metaphor of “turning the tables.” Perhaps then, what it emblematizes is its own emergence as another irony: as the new

335 It may be necessary to make an exception here in the case of Western Wheel burlesque, where some “bits” employing traditional knockabout implements (seltzer bottles, “stuffed clubs,” “stuffed bricks,” bladders, and slapsticks) are referred to (pejoratively) as partaking of the nature of “slapstick.” I would submit, however, that this would be an instance of the exception which proves the rule.
“goodness” of the old “bad”; the new preeminence of the formerly retrograde; the installation of the stone which the builders rejected as the keystone of the new edifice.
Chapter 4
Trope 1 – The Ordeal: The Burlesque Prize Fight

The subject of this chapter will be what I’ve already referred to as a “characteristic form of ordeal,” belonging both to knockabout comedy and to slapstick. My underlying hypothesis is that the social values reflected in the violent performances of the *commedia dell’arte* were those of late medieval Europe and the Renaissance, and embodied a different culture of what might be called “civil violence” – particularly the relationships between specific notions of social hierarchy, masculinity, and preparedness for violent encounters. The physical technique of *commedia* evoked the context of dueling culture, and relied on a variety of conventions which were peculiar to that culture and which, by the nineteenth century, were outdated. The nineteenth century, on the other hand, was characterized by a lively and ongoing debate about the values inherent in pugilism – and the direct influence of this debate on the knockabout comedy of the Victorians was visibly reflected in the physical technique of performers.

To understand how these physical techniques influenced comic style, we have to recall that the distinction which we now habitually assume to exist between athletic events and artistic ones, between “sports” and “entertainment,” is one which was unknown to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On the contrary, all forms of leisure activity, whether competitive or not, were regarded as “sports” – and it is for this reason that nineteenth-century “sporting” newspapers typically cover athletic and theatrical events in the pages of one publication. By the same token, the notion of “acting” embraced the display of all sorts of physical skills, and was not restricted to the delineation of characters.

As I showed in my previous chapter, by the late eighteenth century the heyday of the *commedia dell’arte* performance tradition was on the wane, together with the entire Renaissance understanding of the body that went along with it, and that was epitomized in the image of the classical body. Indeed, in the work of the contortionists, *cascadeurs* and *grotesques* of the new British and French circuses, the classical body was increasingly parodied. In the meantime, changing conditions within the circuses were setting the stage for the development of a new physical style.
In the small travelling circuses which toured Britain and the United States during the first part of the century, circus clowning had been a predominantly verbal affair. Jacky Bratton and Ann Featherstone’s *The Victorian Clown* demonstrates how circus clowning during the period was restricted largely to filling in between equestrian performances with verbal “wheezes” – witticisms and mockery, poked largely at the ringmaster. Indeed, the gag book of Thomas Lawrence, dating from 1871, includes only one item outlining a physical routine. On the other hand, as the century progressed, circuses increased in size and, as the following item from the *New York Clipper* suggests, the change had a critical influence on clowns’ repertoires. By the last quarter of the century, a new regime had come into place:

“The Old Time Clown.—With the advent of the three ring shows, the singing and talking clowns (of the Dan Rice, Benj. Maginley and Bill Lake class) were thrown out of employment, they being unable to make the audiences of the immense tents hear their voices. Since then the knockabout and acrobatic clown has had a clear field, and the old clown of the old time one ring show, is today almost unknown, though his comic songs and jokes are remembered by the past generation of Circus goers…(V)ery few of the old timers remain.”

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337 “Buss. (i.e. “business”) For Tight Rope,” pp. 180-181, in which two clowns attempt to execute a tightrope routine (on the ground) and fail. The entire act is performed in pantomime; “(t)he two clowns can whistle to each other as though talking.”
338 The *New York Clipper* Jan. 25, 1890, p. 759. C.f. also “A Talk With A Clown,” *New Haven Evening Register*, Vol. XLI, Issue 100, April 29, 1882, p. 4: “‘Has the system of consolidating shows under acres of canvas made any changes in the business of the clown?’ ‘It has changed a good deal. In old times a ‘talking clown’ was the monarch of his profession. While this style was the rage Nat Austin was a great success, but the big shows killed him, and no one ever hears of him now. There is no use in trying to talk from a ring to 10,000 people, and the managers have found that out. In the big shows now, if the clown wants to make a hit in talk, he has to talk to the audience in sections … But nowadays the ‘knock-about’ clown is most in demand. I mean by that a clown who tumbles through the tricks and falls all over himself and everybody else in a clever make-belief that he can’t possibly do the feats performed by the leapers and gymnasts. Talk won’t win any more. The clown must act to catch an audience in the big tents. And it is harder work to talk or act in a ring than it is upon the stage. You don’t feel as if you were removed from the people at all. There they are all around you, and a fellow actually seems to feel the weight of the crowd when he runs into the ring, and finds the people stretching right down on him from the highest seat to the edge of the circle…’”
In searching for a new source of subject matter, the new breed of clowns had to work from the materials at hand. As one member of the venerable Bronnet family of knockabout circus clowns put it: “If we can’t make an audience laugh any other way … we knock each other about a bit; that always goes down.”

These knockabout improvisations, however, didn’t take place in a cultural vacuum – on the contrary, they went to the heart of a discourse which dominated much of the popular culture of the age. A new wave of interest in physical culture had been waxing since the mid-eighteenth century and had given rise to a new, democratized ethos governing self-defense, honor, and interpersonal violence. The classical doctrine of *mens sana in corpore sano* had taken the shape of a new interest in physical fitness, and in the beneficial psychological and spiritual effects of diet and exercise; it gave rise to a movement which proposed “muscular Christianity” as the new nineteenth-century ideal. Throughout Europe, experimentation and invention produced new ways of testing the limits of the human body: the introduction of roller skates in 1743, followed by their wide adoption by variety performers; the creation of the velocipede in 1817 by Karl Drais and its variations which appeared throughout the century; the invention of the flying trapeze by Jules Leotard in 1859 and the rapid development of a wide variety of forms of aerial performance, especially the popularization of the tightrope by Pablo Fanque (1796-1871), Charles Blondin (1824-1897), and Henri L’Estrange (ca. 1842-ca.1894).

The movement which above all epitomized the new attitude to violence in Britain and the United States was pugilism. It is perhaps difficult today to appreciate the role of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pugilism in the pacification of the public sphere; but in fact, we are today in the backwash of a similar wave of reform that took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The spread of Eastern-style martial arts represented a crucial part of the transformation of the public sphere that took place during that period; a transformation that had religious, moral and political dimensions as well, which entailed the replacement of the dominant masculine ideal by another, more civil one, embodied in a new public movement style.

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By the same token, taken in comparison with the savagery of the excesses to which the earlier *codes duello* could lead aristocratic civil combatants, and of the violent brawls which were behavioral hallmarks of the “customary mentality” among the populace, the spread of pugilism represented a decisive step in the direction of a new level of restraint and a liberation of the late eighteenth-century public sphere. The spread of pugilism is, therefore, the critical context in which the development of knockabout comedy needs to be seen.

I. The Evolution of Pugilism

Although it’s not my intention to deal exhaustively with pugilism as a mode of performance, my argument turns on a precise understanding of its historicity. Although we may be inclined to think of boxing – especially the bare-knuckled style which predominated during the nineteenth century – as essentially primitive, taken in its historical context it has to be seen in quite the opposite manner as a decisive movement in the direction of civility and away from barbarism. Indeed, the Leicester school of sociologists speak of a “civilizing spurt” that occurred in England during the seventeenth century on the heels of the “parliamentarization“ of the country’s landed classes which had as its counterpart the “sportization” of their pastimes spread out over the following two centuries; a process which ultimately produced the regulatory associations and disciplinary regimes which characterize the international sporting industry today.341 “Sportization,” in the work of this school, consists primarily in the imposition of sets of rules and restraints which give an activity the character of a game; which introduce an ethos of fair play and democratize the chances for victory.

The decisive movement away from the vicious brawling which was commonplace in previous epochs and towards some more regular approach to civil violence was taken in 1719 by James Figg, subsequently recognized as the “father of modern pugilism.” Experienced in the techniques of swordplay and stave combat, it was Figg who developed the emphasis on technique in manual combat which became the foundation of pugilism as “the art and science of modern boxing.”342 A code of rules was first formulated in 1734 by Jack Broughton (likewise the

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inventor of the first boxing glove), and remained in place until the adoption of the “London Prize Ring Rules” in 1838. Broughton’s rules introduced the practice of “toeing the line,” and dictated the conclusion of a round once one of the combatants had been knocked down; he was then entitled to 30 seconds’ rest, and a further 8 seconds to return to toe the line. Under Broughton’s regime wrestling holds were proscribed, and a fallen opponent could no longer be hit or kicked. Broughton succeeded in popularizing the new “science” among the scions of the nobility, and laid the foundation for the establishment of the Pugilistic Club at the end of the century by John Jackson. The Pugilistic Club ultimately became a space where the gentry and the commons mingled and social distinctions underwent a high degree of leveling.

The pivotal figure in the development of British pugilism is Daniel Mendoza (1764-1836). Though small of stature (he was technically a middleweight) he was able by means of a combination of agility, stamina, a speedy left jab, and a high degree of “physical intelligence” to defeat numerous much bigger men. Mendoza’s emphasis on strategy had a revolutionary impact: it demonstrated conclusively that intellectuality could supplant brute force and weight in determining the outcome of an encounter. In the meantime, the new science gained wide currency in the New World, particularly among plantation slaves, many of whom were able to achieve a large measure of self-determination, and even to gain their freedom, through the exercise of the sport. The boxing ring first became a space for the arbitration of race politics in a championship match in 1805, when the Englishman Tom Cribb defeated two American former slaves: Bill Richmond and Tom Molineaux.

The popularity of pugilism continued to expand throughout the first half of the nineteenth century in spite of official efforts to suppress it. Pugilistic clubs spread throughout Britain and the United States, attended by a lively controversy over the appropriate performance of manhood and a reevaluation of the ideal relationship between brain and brawn which raged over the introduction of the London Prize Ring Rules. These rules prohibited for all time formerly favorite brawling techniques such as kicking, gouging, head-butting, biting and low blows. The controversy intensified after the development of the Marquess of Queensberry Rules by John Graham Chambers and their introduction under the Marquess’ sponsorship in 1867. Upholders of the London Rules maintained that the Queensberry rules were unmanly, even effete; and it

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343 I.e., lining up on either side of a chalk line, toe-to-toe, at the start of a bout.
344 These were first applied in a championship match in 1839, and revised in 1853.
was not until John L. Sullivan elected to defend his championship title (unsuccessfully) against James Corbett in 1892 that they became generally accepted.

The discourse surrounding pugilism was in fact one of the first multi-media phenomena. Not only were clubs established and manuals published in book form throughout the world, but fights were reported on and transcribed in minute detail by early newspapermen. The published reports, which minutely communicated the essential data regarding the weight, diets, physiognomy and dispositions of the fighters, the geography and chronology of the encounters, then became scripts for re-enactment, observation, illustration and argument. After recording in minute detail the time and a description of the place, analyses of the physical condition of each combatant, and speculations on their comparative capabilities, these accounts would give blow-by-blow descriptions of each round as detailed as the didascalia in one of George Bernard Shaw’s plays:

ROUND 1. … Edwards’ face was also expressive of the greatest confidence and he smiled as he watched the movements of his antagonist. They sparred for some time for an opening, Edwards leading off with his left on Collyer’s neck, the latter countering on the forehead. A sharp-set-to ensued, Edwards landing heavily on the face, while Collyer got well home on Billy’s left cheek. The men then clench and after some little in-fighting, both went down, Collyer on top.

2. Both men were prompt when time was called in toeing the mark. Collyer led off and got his left on Edwards’ right cheek. The latter, retaliating with a rib roaster, and his right fair on Sam’s nasal organ, drawing the claret and gaining first blood. Sharp exchanges followed, and in the clinch Edwards threw Collyer, both going down. (Blood was visible on Edwards’ forehead, and
Collyer’s seconds claimed the first event, but it had already been decided in favor of Edwards …

This account covers forty rounds. Famous fights were reprinted throughout the century; and re-enactments came to form a regular part of public festivities. Fully illustrated technical manuals were also serialized in the sporting and entertainment newspapers.

The major championship encounters were therefore highly ideological, highly publicized events whose influence was as widespread as the opposition it faced. The April 17, 1860 championship match between the American John Carmel Heenan (at 6’ 2”/195 lbs.) and the English Tom Sayers (at 5’8”/149 lbs.) – the first international boxing championship in history – was attended with unprecedented interest, and was widely re-enacted after the two had stood at the scratch for forty-two rounds and fought to a draw, reputedly leaving Sayers with a broken left arm and Heenan completely blind. In 1861 Jem Mace’s victory over Sam Hurst for the English championship elevated him to international celebrity. Having demonstrated that he was able to win under the London Rules, Mace went on to work within the Queensberry code and was to a large degree responsible for its subsequent success; he also led the rising tide of fighters who were abandoning Britain, where pugilism had germinated and first grown, for the United States where it flourished thereafter.

The relocation of prize-fighting culture to the United States was a response to the same “civilizing spurt” that had resulted in the suppression of many other pastimes which had been popular under the “customary mentality,” such as bear-baiting and cock-fighting. From mid-century on, it would be in America that boxing culture would chiefly flourish, finding some of its greatest exponents amongst the marginal populations who found themselves most frequently parodied on the American variety stage: negroes, Germans, the Irish, and the Jews.

In continental Europe, on the other hand, boxing never took hold as in Britain and the United States until after the First World War, when it was imported largely by American

soldiers. In France, savate (kick-boxing) remained the prevailing form of physical combat, bringing French fighting techniques in for a certain amount of mockery from Americans.

II. Pugilism and Performance

Prize fighting, indeed, constituted a pastime which bridged all the major categories of performance: it was i) a form of spontaneous social behavior; ii) an improvised contest before an audience whose outcome was unknown; iii) in the form of sparring, a straightforward display of skill; iv) in the form of the rigged match, a staged but still improvised form of performance; and v) in the shape of re-enactments of famous matches as transcribed and published in the sporting newspapers, a formalized and self-conscious rehearsal of a “script.” Each of these forms, moreover, could be re-presented in parody or burlesque form.

All such performances had heavily overdetermined explicit meanings – they were displays of “manhood,” understood in a novel way as a combination of physical and mental self-discipline displayed through the dramaturgy of a competitive (or quasi-competitive) ordeal. At the same time they had implied social and political overtones, likewise overdetermined.

In spite of the illegality of actual prize matches during the nineteenth century, sparring had become a regular feature of variety entertainments in both Britain and the U.S. by the 1850s, both in the form of spectacular displays and of amateur competitions around which evenings in some concert saloons and variety halls were structured. In many of these halls, an entire evening’s entertainment would itself be contained within a competition for a prize in singing, dancing, sparring, or any other skill for which a prize could be set and a champion and a reasonable number of challengers could be procured.

346 The parallel with slapstick and knockabout variety performance in France is difficult to overlook.
347 C.f. Selig Polyscope’s distributors’ summary for its 1903 import, “La Savate:” “You all have seen motion pictures of prize fights, but this is a novelty, a French prize fight, under whose rules kicking as well as hitting for the vital points is allowable. If it was not for the fact that this was a serious battle and a knockout (which is shown), this picture should really be classed as a funny subject.” The American Film Institute Catalog: Film Beginnings, 1893-1910 (Metuchen, N.J., & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1996), p. 579.
348 C.f., for example, this review of an evening in 1873 from the New York Clipper: “GUS MILLS AND ED. MACK, clever performers who for some time past have been connected with the company which appears nightly at Harry Hill’s Variety Theatre, took a benefit there on the afternoon of the 27th ult., and had a first-rate house. They appeared in several of their acts, and were greeted with applause well merited. Those who sparred were Dooney Harris and George Siler, Mike Coburn and Tim Collins, Young Burke and Seddons’ Mouse, Upton and Pete Martin (the 2d), and the wind-up by Pete Croker and Charley Cannon. A jig-dancing contest for a massive silver cup was to
By the 1890s, the variety profession was characterized by not two, but three competing forms of company: there were the vaudeville troupes primarily consisting of talking, singing and dancing specialties; the burlesque companies, largely similar, but concentrating more intensively on erotic spectacle; and the athletic and sporting combinations, all of which presented an evening’s entertainment framing a star performance by a well-known pugilist like Bob Fitzsimmons or George Dixon, or a wrestler like William Muldoon, who, after displaying their own prowess, would typically issue challenges to local comers. These companies occasionally included prominent knockabout teams: the American Four toured with Sullivan and Dixon, Gracie and Reynolds with Fitzsimmons. Not only were some major pugilists vaudevillians, but some major vaudevillians were likewise pugilists. The most notable example is the team of Jimmy Kelly and Jerry Murphy, vaudeville headliners throughout the 1880s, with their sketches “Scenes at a Boxing-school,” “Spoiling for a Fight,” “Scenes in a Gymnasium,” “Dan Donnelly, Champion of Ireland” and “Joe Kidd.” All of these featured serious “set-tos” which were presented within dramatic frames. Another ubiquitous headline act of the 1880s were the midget brothers Tommie and Charlie McShane, who were often featured in “a rattling glove-contest” at the climax of a comedy sketch known as “The Halfway House.”

In fact, an entire theatrical sub-genre featuring pugilistic encounters begins in 1822 with the London premiere of Pierce Egan’s Tom and Jerry; or, Life in London, which features not only a boxing scene, but an encounter with a former champion himself:

In the Chaffing Crib scene, in Corinthian House, Wrench and Smith, the representatives of Tom and Regular, drew down nightly approval by a sharp but friendly set to with the gloves. Another

have taken place, and for this Johnny Barry (ex-champion), Mickey Warren, Hughey Golden and Charley Lord were entered, but no one appeared but Golden, who danced a fine jig and was awarded the cup through default. Barry was very reluctantly compelled to refrain from contesting, having sprained his foot on the preceding Tuesday, which fact was announced from the stage .... “ (March 8, 1873, p. 356).

349 For example, the John L. Sullivan Athletic Combination, William Muldoon’s Specialty and Athletic Co., Tom Connors’ Athletic and Specialty Co., George Dixon’s Vaudeville and Athletic Co., and Bob Fitzsimmons’ Specialty Co. – these mostly followed the same routes as burlesque companies.

350 Dixon was a black Canadian bantamweight and the first black world boxing champion in any division.


scene depicted Tom Cribb’s parlor, with the redoubtable champion of England supported in the chair by a host of congenial spirits. A capital ditty, sung to the air of “The Jolly Young Waterman,” was chorused stridently by one and all … “Gentlemen,” replies Cribb, “my humble duty to you. Here’s all your healths, and your families’. Bless your soul, I can claim no merit for what I’ve done; fighting comes natural like, and, thinking others must be as fond of it as myself, why, I always give them a fill of it.”

These scenes were excerpted and performed on variety bills in both Britain and the United States throughout the rest of the century. When Jem Mace first arrived in America, he played Charles the Wrestler in a production of *As You Like It* at Niblo’s Garden. The theatrical appearances of ex-champions frequently also included dramatizations of a similar kind, for example, “Sullivan the Pugilist,” and “Gentleman Jack,” which featured James Corbett after his defeat of Sullivan. A similar literature grew up around wrestling, including titles like “Wrestling Joe, or, Life at the Mines,” a “sensational drama,” and Con Murphy’s four-scene comedy sketch, “Looney the Wrestler; or, the Unknown,” presented in 1880 by the Irish comedy team of Sheehan and Jones, and into mid-decade by Sheehan and Coyne.

A third form of improvised pugilistic performance was the “rigged” match, in which at least one of the combatants adopted the strategy of pretending to be less skillful than he really was in order to deliver a surprise reversal towards the end of the bout. A columnist of the *New York Sun* for March 26, 1899 gives a participant’s-eye-view of the experience of finding yourself in such a match:

… (W)e shook hands and squared off. It was something ridiculous to see the way that young man played the gabey with his hands. I was on to him at once, but the fellows out in front weren’t. He

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totally fooled them with the clumsiness he assumed with his hands, although I dare say he mystified them a bit by the way he leaped backward like a cat every time I sent one out for him. He didn’t mystify me a little bit, though. From the minute that we shook hands I knew that I was a dead one, but I determined to do the best I could to hang on to my prestige. He wouldn’t let me get anywhere near him. He held his guard ‘way down with an imitation of awkwardness that was plain to me, but it fooled the boys out in front, as well as the two men in my corner. Every time I went after him he hopped back, dropped his hands, and ran round the ring, and the boys gave him the laugh.\(^\text{358}\)

This sort of performance often called forth derogatory comparisons with stage comedy: “‘Take a slapstick to him,” they yelled at me, and I could see a sly grin on the face of my antagonist … [359] Pugilistic “stalling” is no better respected than the “stalling in one” with which vaudeville comedians were often reproached.\(^\text{360}\)

Nineteenth-century pugilistic performance, then, covers a spectrum of performative modes along a continuum from genuine belligerence to scripted enactment. Towards the centre of this continuum, it shows a tendency towards spontaneous burlesque.

It should come as no surprise then, that the improvisations of those nineteenth-century clowns who were compelled to “knock each other about a bit,” in the expanding circuses of the second half of the century, found their exertions readily to acquire a determinate resonance; or that the burlesque prize fight should be the trope which we encounter the earliest in knockabout history. It seems to begin in earnest with the Sayers-Heenan fight: among the Classified Ads in the *Era* from Sunday, July 8, 1860 we find featured at the


\(^\text{359}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{360}\) Frank G. Menke, “Where Are the ‘Real’ Mixers? They Are All ‘Stallers’ Now,” *El Paso Herald*, Nov. 24, 1916, p. 10: “Can a man be regarded as other than a “sucker” who pays out from $1 to $10 in these days to see the hippodroming of the present day “fighters” whose only ambition is to shake down the promoters for huge purses and give in return a burlesque on prize fighting? … It is about time for the promoters to force those “stallers” to fight …”
ROYAL ALHAMBRA PALACE, LEICESTER-SQUARE.

…PART SECOND. MR. TOM MATTHEWS (The Grimaldi of the Day) … Clown, DAN CASTELLO. Burlesque on the GREAT PRIZE FIGHT a la SAYERS and HEENAN …

A review of the performance “(u)nder the title of ‘Cirque Impérial’” confirms that the burlesque was readily appreciable by its audience:

… “From the sublime to the ridiculous,” said the great Napoleon, “there is but one step.” In this instance it is verified by our passing, without pause or preface, to the burlesque on the prize-fight for the championship, à la Sayers and Heenan, between the two clowns, Dan Castello and Harry Croueste, with the two other clowns, Tom Matthews and M. Oriel as the seconds. Nothing can be more good-tempered, and nothing can be more comic, than this display of fistic skill. The knock-down blows with their results, the rush at the seconds, the striking at the air under the supposition that they have been blinded by the hits they have received, and the final round where, exhausted, they walk up to each other and blow each other down with a breath, are all done with capital humour, and elicit shouts of laughter and rounds of applause …

This particularly distinctive fight seems to have been widely burlesqued by a variety of performers throughout the next couple of years, even extending as far afield as what was then near the northwestern boundary of the United States.

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361 p. 5.
362 The Morning Chronicle (London England) Thursday, July 12, 1860, p. 3.
363 The Era reports it being performed by “Messrs. Seale and Elliotte” at Quaglioni’s Royal Dardinian Circus in Plymouth in its edition of Mar. 24, 1861 (p.12), and in an extravaganza based on Valentine and Orson featuring one Mr. Tapping, who “… as the Green Knight – especially in the fight, à la Sayers and Heenan, with Valentine – displayed considerable comic humour and ability…” Era, Sunday, April 27, 1862, p. 12.
364 A recollection in The Saint Paul Globe (St. Paul, Minnesota) from Aug. 18, 1898, p. 4, recalls that “… another time Mr. Hill and Sam Regay gave a burlesque imitation of the famous prize fight between Heenan and Sayers, which took place in England a short time before. Mr. Hill was very agile, and he and Regay put up one of the best attractions for our masquerades which was ever witnessed here.”
After 1860, burlesque prize-fights and burlesque boxing become ubiquitous both in England and America, and often form special attractions at public events. Most importantly, through the 1870s they become widely adopted by variety performers as the climactic episodes of their acts. By the mid-1880s, those knockabout performers in both Britain and the U.S. whose acts include either a straightforward or a burlesque boxing match or wrestling bout include most of the top knockabouts in each country.\(^{365}\)

What I find particularly interesting about these teams is the number of male/female duos they include: in the U.S., M. and Madame D’Omer,\(^ {366}\) Frank Goldie and Sallie St. Clair, Alice Jennings and Eddie O’Brien, Tommy Gillen and Hattie Stewart, and, especially Billy Maloney and Mabel Gray.\(^ {367}\) Other (less prominent) U.S. couples who performed a pugilistic burlesque include Tom and Kitty Brandford (ca. 1882), Billy and Mamie Williams (ca. 1885) and John J. Burke and Grace Forrest (ca. 1893). In Britain, Mr. and Mrs. Tom Major and Mr. and Mrs. Albert Martinette sustained the tradition of burlesque domestic violence at either end of the period. The “discourse on masculinity” was evidently having a collateral impact on the performance of femininity as well – just as the wave of interest in martial arts had a hundred years later.

What is curious is to find how few of the names on the list include tumblers and/or acrobats, whether individually or in groups. The great majority of the names which occur here, like the “Fighting-Couple Specialty Acts” I’ve listed above, originate rather as song and dance teams – some within minstrel combinations. This is particularly true of the teams of Sellon and Burns (ca. 1877-1886), Favor and Shields (ca. 1878-1880), Magee and Allen (ca. 1880-1885), Needham and Kelly (ca. 1879–1889), and especially the three teams in which John J. Sheehan played a part: Sheehan and Jones (ca. 1876-1881), Sheehan and Coyne (1881-1889), and Sheehan and Sullivan (ca. 1893). It was largely by these Irish song-and-dance teams that the foundations for one of the major forms of “knockabout business” – the “Irish knockabout song

\(^{365}\) For incomplete lists of the most eminent American and British variety teams which featured burlesque prize fights or wrestling, please see the Appendices.

\(^{366}\) M. D’Omer (whose real name was Michael William Dooley) died of consumption at the age of about 35 in 1879; Mme. D’Omer (whose real name I haven’t been able to find) took up the act with a Senor Renrut in “feats of swordsmanship and skill” at which he injured himself so severely that Mme. D’Omer was forced to take up with a third partner named Amann, with whom she worked until sometime during the early 1880s.

\(^{367}\) I’ve excluded John and Amy (or Annie?) Tudor (John and Stella following Amy/Annie’s death in 1887), since although like M. and Mme. D’Omer, Goldie and St. Clair, and Maloney and Gray they began by performing a variation of the “Combat Clog Dance,” they never went on to include a pugilistic encounter.
and dance” – was apparently laid. It was particularly Sheehan’s sketch “The Ash-Box Inspector” that, so far as I can discover, seems to have entrenched the formula of a brief dramatic encounter punctuated by songs and dances and winding up with a burlesque boxing match that became definitive of this style of act. But they are never themselves described as “knockabouts” – perhaps due to their more restrained physicality.

Apart from its popularity at civic festivals in circuses and fairs, in music hall, variety and (after 1888) vaudeville, the farcical pugilistic encounter appears regularly in minstrelsy and burlesque. Among the Ethiopian sketches are eight plays, the central physical trope of which is a set-to (with gloves): Charles White’s “A Lucky Job” (performed at White’s Opera House, in the Bowery, N.Y., Oct. 1857); A.J. Leavitt’s “High Jack, the Heeler,” (first performed at the Howard Athenaeum, Boston, in January, 1863); Leavitt’s “Bruised and Cured” (first performed at the Howard in 1869); Henry Llewellyn Williams Jr.’s “The Black Chap from Whitechapel” (“An Eccentric Negro Piece,” published ca. 1871); White’s “One Night in a Bar Room,” which first ran at Tony Pastor’s on Feb. 16, 1874; John Mack’s “Weston the Walkist,” (first performed at the Alhambra, San Francisco, in June, 1874); Ad Ryman’s “Julius the Snoozer, or the Conspirators of Thompson Street” (written for the San Francisco Minstrels, and first performed at their New Opera House at Broadway and 29th Street, Feb. 7, 1876); and F.L. Cutler’s “The Dutch Prize Fighter” (first performed at Clyde, Ohio, in 1886). Though they clearly represent a much larger number of plays which have not survived, these eight plays have commonalities which offer some insight into how the burlesque prize fight ‘worked’ in minstrelsy.

Perhaps the most conspicuous instance of a comical prize fight in Victorian popular theatre during the latter half of the nineteenth century was in burlesque: in William Brough’s adaptation of *The Field of the Cloth of Gold* (1868), in which Henry VIII of England and Francis I, King of France, duke it out according to the London Prize Ring rules after their lances break in the tiltyard.:  

HENRY. How say you, brother, friend, to prove our loves,  
Suppose we have a set-to with the gloves?

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368 A threatened boxing match, this time featuring another prominent pugilist of the period, the Benicia Boy, is likewise the subject of an extended gag at the climax of *B.B.: an original farce in one act* by Montagu Williams and F.C. Burnand, which in turn is parodied in Henry Llewellyn Williams Jr.’s “The Black Chap from Whitechapel.”
FRANCIS. The very thing I should myself propose.
HENRY. You won’t mind if I hit you on the nose?
FRANCIS. Delighted! Should I bung your eyes up—
HENRY. Charmed!
FRANCIS. Come, for the deadly combat, let’s be armed.

*Shake hands lovingly, & exeunt* FRANCIS, R., HENRY, L.

DE BOIS. Two to one on King Francis.

SUFFOLK. On you are!

I ne’er yet met a Frenchman who could spar.

DE BOIS. Any one else?

CONST. No sign of Darnley yet.

DE BOIS. Come, ladies, won’t you have a little bet?

*...The two KINGS enter, HENRY L., FRANCIS R., dismounted,*
*with gloves on—trumpet sounds—they shake hands and begin* 
*sparring.*

SUFFOLK. (L.) Now watch them closely. Eh, how’s that?

*(each hits the other—both fall down)*

DE BOIS. *(coming from L.)* A hit!

A very palpable hit.

SUFFOLK. *(coming from L.)* Deuce a bit.

Francis was first down, and the prize ring’s law.

DE BOIS. Prize ring be hanged! Ladies?

LADIES. A draw—a Draw!

FRANCIS. *(feebly)* Henry, old chap.

HENRY. *(feebly)* Francis, dear friend.

FRANCIS. Holloa!
HENRY. Are you alive still?
FRANCIS. Well, I hardly know.\(^{369}\)

Like *Ixion* and *The Black Crook*, *The Field of the Cloth of Gold* was an international hit which toured widely and was frequently revived throughout the rest of the century. The “leveling” allusion in the substitution of boxing for tourney, of the Prize Ring Code for the *code duello*, and the provision of heraldic fanfare for proletarian pastime, and epitomized in the movement trope of the double knockout of the two kings, was frequently singled out for appreciative comment.

The burlesque boxing match continues to be a staple of live variety entertainment throughout the early years of the twentieth century.\(^{370}\) At the same time it becomes a major, even a definitive trope of silent film comedy, as central to the slapstick aesthetic as the chase; one to which both major and minor comedians constantly return, even after the end of the period.\(^{371}\) The implication is strong that in dealing with the burlesque boxing match, we are close to knockabout comedy’s originary moment.

III. The Dramaturgy of the Knockabout Act

It’s in attempting to reconstruct – or, at the very least, to try to imagine – what the burlesque boxing match may have looked like that we encounter for the first time the tendentious reticence of the written record. In view of the care with which the genuine violence of pugilistic encounters (at the time technically illegal) were recorded in the popular press, the paucity of detailed coverage of comic stage violence during the same period becomes highly significant. Compare the sample of the *New York Clipper*’s report of the Edwards/Collyer match (p. 7) with the account of the burlesque boxing match from *The Field of the Cloth of Gold* which greeted its première:

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\(^{370}\) A particularly noteworthy instance was Bert Williams’ take on the controversial World Heavyweight Boxing championship match between James J. Jeffries and Jack Johnson (July 4, 1910) in the *Ziegfeld Follies* of 1910 at the Jardin de Paris, New York City. C.f. *The Salt Lake Herald-Republican*, Aug. 8, 1910, Section Three, p. 4: (“He is quietly and effectively funny in a burlesque of the recent Jeffries-Johnson prize fight, in which he impersonates the colored champion … “)

\(^{371}\) For example, in Chaplin’s *City Lights* (1932) and Lloyd’s *The Milky Way* (Leo McCarey, 1936).
… Neither do we read in chronicle or history that after the two kings had tournayed, the English monarch called for the gloves. So it is, however, in the most recently dramatised version, and we must do Mr. Brough the justice to say that the sparring match between the monarchs is not the least unsuccessful (sic) portion of his burlesque. On the contrary, it told immensely, and was provocative of immense laughter amongst the theatrical “gods.” Indeed, when both monarchs fall exhausted on the stage, there was a professional call of “time” from the gallery that characteristically represented the age of Sayers, of Heenan, and of Mace. We may observe of Mr. Charles Fenton and Mr. David James, who personified boxing monarchy on the Strand boards, that they did so in the most approved style. The latter artist, who represented the French King, was particularly felicitous in speech and manner…

The remarks by the reviewer for the Daily News typify the press coverage of knockabout comedy in four respects: i) The reviewer emphasizes by redundant repetition that the most important thing to convey to his readership (assuming the reviewer to be masculine) is not the performance of the boxing, but his evaluation of it as entertainment; ii) His appreciation of the performances systematically eschews analysis, or even detailed description, but emphasizes instead simply the appropriateness of David James’ performance to the subject matter at hand; iii) The reviewer is reluctant to admit that he himself was amused – it was rather the audience in general and in particular the “gods” in the cheap seats whose response is a measure of the performance’s “immensity”; iv) The humour of the fight is summarized not in terms of physical movements, but as an effect of the incongruity in the analogy drawn by the scene between the Sayers-Heenan match and political relations between England and France in the nineteenth century as epitomized by those of the sixteenth. It reports only those details of the performance (the heavy breathing, the funny falls, and the gallery’s response) that suffice to make this analogy intelligible. By contrast, the sporting report gives detailed attention to both the physical “text” of the performance and the techniques by which it is actualized. It employs an objective

and “scientific” voice to underscore the performers’ correspondingly “scientific” application of
the principles of pugilism, eschewing authoritative value judgments and inviting the reader to
close impressions of the action with the dictates of the referees, and it approaches the
overall ‘meaning’ of the event empirically, rather than by the aprioristic literary-critical method
favored by the Daily News’ reviewer. Whereas the physicality of the Edwards/Collyer match is
being carefully evoked in the one report, that of the burlesque in The Field of the Cloth of Gold is
being systematically overlooked and allowed to pass “unmarked.”

We can recognize motive as well as means behind this suppression. The comparison
with the pugilistic report reminds us that it was perfectly possible throughout the nineteenth
century for reports of comic performances to have provided detailed and comprehensive records
that would have allowed for the widespread dissemination and enjoyment of knockabout
comedy. Of course, professional performers might have resisted the dissemination of their work
in this way, since it would have formed an incitement to copying and have generated a
familiarity with it among audiences that would radically have undermined the value of the acts
which were the basis of their livelihoods.

If violent comedy was effectively suppressed, it was clearly not because it was violent;
the violence of pugilism was, on the contrary, considered acceptable and even salutary by a
sufficient proportion of readers to justify recording and mass reproduction – as many, if not
more, were equally interested in laughter. It wasn’t either simply because it belonged to the
category of “low comedy”: throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century we find the
prejudice against knockabout on this count emphatically challenged in accounts that anticipate
Moving Picture World’s verdict of “high art in low comedy” on Chaplin and Keaton – for
instance this evaluation of the work of the Two Macs from the Sporting Chronicle of Thursday,
Feb. 14, 1889:

… Never in all my experience of pantomimes have I seen any
performance that so arbitrarily and irresistibly compelled my mirth
as the performance of the Two Macs in this “Aladdin.” In all their
three “turns” there is not a shadow of a suggestion of coarseness,
and yet their work is of a class in which the semblance of vulgarity
might – and in the case of many imitators does – most easily
appear. But they have reduced this rough-and-tumble fooling of
thems to an exact science; they have elevated it to the dignity of an art; for, whilst carefully eliminating everything that might savour of bad taste, they have so polished up and perfected their every gesture and intonation that the possession of culture and refinement by the audience serves to enhance, and not to discount, the effectiveness of their nonsense. The student, to whom the commonplace jokes of pantomime are bound to appear stupid and coarse, as compared with the wit of his library, is compelled to laugh immoderately at the pure nonsense of these people’s preposterous dialogues, and the unaccustomed, robust fun of their knockabout eccentricities. What man could help laughing at the damnable reiteration with which the one performer adjusts the nose and hat-brim of his colleague, or the wild extravagance of their conjuring and acrobatic feats …

There were as evidently connoisseurs of knockabout as there were of boxing.

The anonymous reviewer quoted here makes an important inference which may suggest why performers encouraged the holding of their work in low esteem. He seems to be implying that there is inherent in the work of the Two Macs a purely physical comedy: rooted perhaps in the incongruities (“nonsense”) not of concepts, but of physical affects—affects which are stimulated largely by significant patterns of repetition (“damnable reiteration”) in the elements of

374  To explain my meaning a little further: take, for example, the pratfall at the conclusion of the “Make ‘Em Laugh” sequence in Singin’ In the Rain (Stanley Donen, 1952). Donald O’Connor as the protagonist’s friend, Cosmo Brown, runs toward a wall screen left, runs up it, and does a backflip from it to the floor. We respond with sympathetic pleasure, imagining, with the highly rhythmic encouragement of the music, how it feels to do as he does. He turns, runs upscreen (to a painted flat on the back wall of the set, screen center), runs up it, and with another backflip returns to his initial position. Then he turns screen right and runs toward another painted flat—but instead of going up, he goes through it and disappears. The “joke” here depends on the incongruity between the expectation (which we have been carefully conditioned to make) that Cosmo will go up and our perception that he goes through. This incongruity is intuitive rather than intelligible; it is based on a kinetic feeling, rather than an idea, and it expresses itself most exactly in prepositions rather than nouns or verbs—and though the humor is conditioned by the fact that Cosmo has mistaken a canvas flat for a solid wall (the reverse of the mistake we have just made as he ran up what seemed to be the negative space of a hallway), which expresses itself in a concept, what actually makes us laugh is the sudden representation of one, painful, affect (“going through and down”) as the result of a series of repetitions which led us to expect, and thus to represent to ourselves imaginatively, another, pleasurable, one (“going up and over”) at the very same instant.
the performance. In this purely physical comedy, he seems to wish to claim, there resides a high level of wit which is, contrary to the “low comedy” view, the epitome of cultivation. This wittiness flies under the radar of most audiences, eluding their tendency to try to anticipate it. He’s implying a view of knockabout comedy, as this team performs it, as fundamentally ironic; it is a mode of performance in which the audience’s own low opinion of the subject matter is being manipulated by performers with a high degree of intelligence, skill and artistic discretion.

This reviewer’s observations suggest that we should be open to the hypothesis that the paucity of documents is an effect of a resistance to reproduction on the part of knockabout comedy – a resistance which may have operated in conjunction with characteristic resistances within nineteenth-century audiences themselves as one of the necessary conditions of this brand of comic performance. We should probably assume further that it is this resistance which is the root cause of the reticence of nineteenth-century viewers and the resulting paucity of primary documents of its production and reception.

In trying to reconstruct the knockabout act, this paucity of documents puts us in much the same position as that of the student of Greek comedy trying to reassemble the plays of Cratinus from a scattering of literary fragments and broken pottery. We know that, by the early 1900s, the typical variety hall knockabout team was much on the line followed by Weber and Fields: it consisted of two men, one tall and slim, who mostly delivered the blows, and one short and stout, who mostly received them, his physiognomy dictated by the requirement for shin-, knee-, elbow-, and stomach-padding as well as a (usually leather) skull-cap and chin-guard, concealed beneath extravagant wig and beard. Circus knockabouts relied on similar equipment:

Clowns are divided into principal clowns, who sing in the first act, the jesters, or talking clowns, and then the ‘knackabouts,’ or tumblers… The ‘knackabouts’ have to be padded from head to feet, and some have pads made like a suit of underwear, into which they slip. Jerry Hopper, a ‘knackabout,’ used to be with Barnum. He was very lean, and would not face an audience without these pads. One day the boys stole them and he refused to go on …

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In the United States, by the first decade of the twentieth century, knockabout teams seem
usually to be Dutch comics, though I find no particular tendency in that direction in either British
or American variety performances from the 1870s through the 1890s. In Britain, the two
predominant types of knockabout team by ethnicity from the 1870s through the First World War
are blackface/Ethiopian and Irish/Hibernian.

Costume and make-up seem to have been divided into two broad ranges of character
type. On the one hand were “traditional” clown make-ups deriving from pantomime, whereas on
the other were clowns based on contemporary types: the rube, the tramp, the naughty
schoolboy and so on. Character make-ups of the first sort, deriving from roots in pantomime,
tend to be described as “grotesque” more frequently than the other sort, which likewise tend
rather to be called “eccentric.”

How did the typical knockabout act of the latter quarter of the nineteenth century
proceed? Most acts seem to have been broken down into three or four parts, often separated by
costume changes, of which one – usually nearest the climax of the act – very frequently
constituted a burlesque boxing or wrestling match. Here, for example, is a synopsis of a
performance of the leading Irish knockabouts Dermot and Doyle at a London Music Hall in
1882:

THE SUN … Messrs Dermott and Doyle appeared as red-haired,
ruddy-faced Irishwomen, singing of Macarty’s mare, “Off she
went.” They knocked against and jumped over each other in a
strikingly brisk manner. As a couple of funny Irishmen they sang
of “Sally Waters,” and mingled vigorous knockabout business with
their vocalisation. After that they engaged in a boxing bout, which
was exciting, and also, we should think, exhausting. Having

376 C.f. Le Soir, Friday, July 10th, 1885, quoted in The Era, July 18, 1885 p. 23. “Last evening Mr Zidler, of the
Jardin de Paris, presented to the public in open air Two American Clowns of a completely new and novel style.
Nothing more amusing than FERGUSON and MACK, Two grotesque companions, dressed as countrymen, who
look like fat hotel proprietors, and who are at the same time Acrobats of rare agility.”
377 “Lew Carroll, the eccentric comedian and Dutch knockabout performer, has as his main specialty a character
“Tramp” act, introducing a “Bum” song. He has given it with considerable effect. He has also a funny Dutch
specialty and a crazy black face act in his repertory.” –New York Clipper, July 28, 1888, p. 315.
378 The Western Figaro, Jan. 1st, 1886.—Theatre Royal, Plymouth.—“… Messrs Spry and Monti appeared as two
fat boys, made up with tall hats and big fat stomachs, short legs, and altogether looking a very comical pair …”
recovered from the effects of this fierce combat, they came on well
dressed and sang of “Beautious Caroline,” and danced admirably.
They acknowledged the hearty applause which their performance
evoked by dancing again.\textsuperscript{379}

The anonymous reviewer suggests here very strongly that Dermot and Doyle’s
“knockabout business” probably emerged out of the song and dance, with movements of the
dance drawing an extended analogy between the drag women and the horse in the song, while
physicalizing the music by paralleling patterns of repetition among the bumps and jumps with
analogous patterns among the rhythmic and melodic musical motifs. The choreography of the
dances, then, would seem most likely to have drawn on a process inverse to the one later known
as “Mickey Mousing” in film discourse, beginning with the same intuitive response to highly
rhythmic popular music that underlies mimetic phenomena such as toe-tapping, and would be
shared by their audiences – but going out of control so as to result in acts of violence. Unhappily
the reviewer leaves out two crucial details about the boxing: he doesn’t say whether it was funny
or not; and he omits to mention whether or not it was performed to music.

A leading team of acrobatic knockabouts who worked in something more nearly
approaching the traditional pantomime style was Rezene and Robini. Though they billed their
act as featuring “The Clown and the Swell,” the reviewer evidently takes it for one falling
entirely within the pantomime tradition. Working “in the most grotesque of facial make-
ups,” they performed a three-part act in which “(t)hey sang, danced, quarrelled, and made-
up while hanging from a double trapeze over the stage”:

You have seen the average funny trapezists, of course, but nothing
like these. They are a variation of clown and pantaloon. They
converse at front centre and they disagree. You wait for the result.
It comes. The clown slaps pantaloon over the chops, and pokes
him in the eye, and kicks him in the face, and slugs him on the
jugular, and knocks him down and jumps on him, and he does it
about every two minutes, and pantaloon rises up, smiling all the

\textsuperscript{379} \textit{Era}, Sat. Mar. 18, 1882, p. 4.
time. Away then they go to the double trapeze. They whirl, and swing, and balance, and with each change pantaloon gets kicked on the face, or plugged in the neck, or thumped on the back, and kicked, and plugged, and thumped and smiles serenely still.380

Here again the performance of the conflict seems to have been orchestrated in relation to the rhythmic swinging of the trapeze, but in this case the review suggests that the comedy arose out of the regularity of the repetitions: the Swell’s recoil from every blow carries him inevitably back to the same place to receive another. What he does not say is whether the movement to the bars arose out of the physical abuse – motivated, perhaps, as a chase.

What was the dramaturgical germ out of which the quasi-narratives which structured these acts was derived? The basic narrative appears to have been of three kinds.

1. Very often, the “story” of a knockabout act was, like the story lines of many slapstick films, borrowed from other performance genres:

   “… (N)owadays the ‘knock-about’ clown is most in demand. I mean by that a clown who tumbles through the tricks and falls all over himself and everybody else in a clever make-belief that he can’t possibly do the feats performed by the leapers and gymnasts.381

This formula remained a mainstay throughout the period, and was the one which underlay Rice and Prevost’s classic sketch, *Bumpy Bumps*, as late as the 1907-1908 vaudeville season in the United States. It was driven by Rice’s attempts to perform acrobatics which were evidently beyond his skill:

… One of the pair, Prevost, I believe, is the straight worker who does his tumbling in a legitimate manner and does it well. His partner, Rice, in the makeup of a white-faced clown, is the comedian of the team. He is the chap who falls about, gets mixed

up with the furniture and just misses going head-first into the orchestra pit.

As he wabbles (sic) and tumbles about he is always caught by his partner just in time to prevent a fall that would ordinarily break a man’s head or dislocate his spine …

Once again, unfortunately, crucial information is lacking in the description, which the reviewer has not thought it necessary to take note of in order to transmit the effect of the performance.

2. Secondly, a competition for mastery might arise between the two performers, the act motivated by their alternating efforts to secure the greatest appreciation from the audience. This structure, for example, seems to have underlain the acts of Bill Hickey and Sadie Nelson, Caron and Herbert, and Sweeney and Duffy, as reported by Douglas Gilbert in his book on vaudeville. This strategy seems often to have performed the important function of anticipating ambivalent audience responses to familiar material.

3. In many of the “Silence and Fun” acts, however, the performance was apparently driven by the performer’s own sheer delight in executing a series of dangerous stunts. It was an

382 “Clever Grotesque Acrobatts” *Pittsburgh Post*, Mar. 7 1907. The report continues: “The chap who is careless with himself, apparently pays no attention to his co-worker but if he is standing on a table he lets himself go backwards, sure in his own mind that he will be caught before he has time to strike the floor. When he starts stumbling backward toward the orchestra pit he does it without considering where the dropping-off place is, for he is sure that he will be stopped in time to avoid stepping off the stage on the head of the trap drummer …”

383 What were the tumbling movements that Rice tried to perform? Were they organized in a sequence of any kind? Was there a musical accompaniment to “Bumpy Bumps”? Was it rhythmic, or did it consist simply of effects? What occupied Prevost while Rice was risking his neck? And particularly – what style of movement did the team adopt? Was it naturalistic, or broadly pantomimic?


387 C.f., e.g. Era, June 25, 1892, “The London Music Halls,” p. 14: “Messrs Delmere and Kennedy, variety artists … appear first as two elderly females. Their duet merges into a dance, which is very nimbly executed. They next afford evidence of their expertness in knockabout business and the laughter of the audience increases in proportion to the apparent severity of the blows which are so freely administered. One tells the other a story, the chief point of which is an atrocious pun. The listener does not move a muscle of his face, and his companion’s novel method of producing hilarity is to inflict severe personal chastisement upon the gentleman who cannot, or will not, laugh at the pun. This is suggestive, perhaps, of the surgical operation which is said to be necessary to get a joke into a Scotchman’s head …”
exercise in sheer *jouissance*. This is evidently the case of McNish’s original “Silence and Fun” as well as of Alf West’s British versions:

**OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.** Mr West’s “Quiescent fun,” a sketch in which he does some plantation knockabout business with an air of genuine enjoyment and consummate slyness, is not only funny, but prodigiously clever. The final caper, with which, as if by accident, he came to grief on the floor, was so startling and so courageous as to evoke a spontaneous cheer.—*vide* Birmingham Daily Post, Nov. 30th, 1880.388

It’s not until the late 1880s that reviewers draw attention to the introduction of props, but through the early 1890s they become more and more conspicuous. During the 1880s in Britain, reviewers comment approvingly on the innovations of Ferguson and Mack389 and the Two Armstrongs.390 In the United States, advertisements for the team of Campbell and Shepp during the 1890s frequently extol their technical improvements.391

Staging seems usually to have remained simple enough to permit of acts performing either in one, in front of the drop curtain, or in sets. Rezene and Robini’s device of beginning with a song and dance and then proceeding to mount the double trapeze may indicate that their performances were able to begin in one to cover a scene change, but that the curtains opened following the introductory episode. Some acts, however, like that of O’Connor and Brady, seem to have called for elaborate effects:

The eccentricities of Messrs O’Connor and Brady have established that pair high in popular favour. Decidedly funny is the scene where they start singing against each other, and one gradually cuts

388 *Era*, Dec. 4, 1886, p. 27.
389 *Era*, Jan. 22, 1887, “The London Music Halls,” p. 10: “… we could not refrain nor could the audience either, from giving way to hearty hilarity at their oddities, as they dropped explosive tears upon the platform and fired milk-and-water at each other out of a practicable umbrella…”
390 *Era*, Nov. 7, 1891, “The London Music Halls,” p. 16: “…One of them comes on wearing a coat down the front of which biscuits do duty as buttons. His companion engages him in conversation, and makes a meal of the biscuits, much to the amusement of the audience…”
the others (sic) arms and legs off, and finally so inflates him with air that he soars upwards, and is lost in the mystic region of “the flies.” …

It was evidently the same spirit of jouissance that governed knockabout performance technique. The generation of the knockabout effect relied heavily on creating as compelling an impression of the violent percussion of bodies as possible. To do so effectively performers evidently relied primarily on the production of exaggeratedly loud noises.

… Messrs Maccabe and Macnally represented what may be called knockabout Irishmen. They sang, acted, and danced cleverly, but their banging, tumbling, and turning over elicited the most hearty expressions of surprise and delight from the spectators …

Rezene and Robini were apparently particularly deft in the art of providing noises which would evoke a somatic response in their audiences:

They were both extremely eccentric and energetic. The man with the whitened face played tunes on the cheeks of his companion, who had need to have the hide of a rhinoceros to bear without suffering from the slaps and thumps to which he submitted.

The vigor with which knockabout performers produced this noise, however, was apparently masked by quite deadpan reactions which may well have magnified the impression created by the violence by their contrast with the apparent quiescence of the performer:

393 *Era*, Sun. Apr. 20, 1879, “London Music Halls.” C.f. also *The Era*, Sun. Aug. 18, 1878, “The London Music Halls”: “SATURDAY MORNING AT ‘THE OXFORD … Another “trial” show was given by Messrs Petrie and Fish. Here again Mr Jennings had hit upon material of the right sort, for Petrie and Fish are deciedly a couple of the most extraordinary knockabout Niggers we have encountered in recent years. They seem altogether indifferent to blows and bumps; kicks they look upon as a luxury, and bangings and thumpings, which would in the case of any ordinary mortal be succeeded by a stretcher, the hospital, bruises and broken bones and bandages, are, by them, regarded as delicacies which are by no means to be despised…”
THE CAMBRIDGE … Favourite farceurs, too, are Rezene and Robini, a pair of ring performers and acrobats. They enter into their business with determination, and the clown who knocks his funereal-looking companion about never fails to set the house in a roar with his catch word “Look at him.” …

Performers whose style called for underplayed reactions included the Two Macs, Dermot and Doyle, and The Lang Brothers:

The Brothers Lang are funny knockabout comedians, one constituting himself a sort of lay-figure for his companion to pummel and otherwise maltreat. Even when a chair is thrown at him, it only elicits an expression of opinion that some one is moving, and he accepts with the utmost sangfroid a series of sounding smacks on the face …

But just as the setting of the performance was the very theatre in which the audience was seated, so too much of the violence to which the performers were subjected was actual physical violence which did, ultimately, eventually result in many performers suffering actual physical harm. Whereas nowadays, a “nap” is a technical term for artificially producing the noise of a stage blow by clapping the hands or slapping a performer’s chest, shoulder or thigh, “taking the nap” in the late nineteenth century meant that one simply absorbed a blow strong enough to produce a sound that would resonate throughout a noisy variety hall.

The most common spectatorial response, consequently, was a state of disbelief: time and again commentators observe that it is “difficult to believe” that the performers are not suffering pain. The spectator is shocked into and held in a state of ethical suspense, which s/he is unable to resolve in the direction of either concern or unconcern for the performer:

They seem for the moment to upset the stage, and to bewilder those upon it and those before it by banging each other’s heads or

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backs, by flying in the air and coming down with a thwack, and then, when the spectator has recovered reason, there sit the brothers looking at one another as though nothing had happened, and certainly not conveying the notion that their bones are broken or that they have received any personal injury. What we mean will be gathered perhaps if we say that one of the troupe who pretends to conduct a band has his music desk dashed in his teeth, and then contrives to “come up smiling.”

The chief aim of knockabout comedy seemed therefore to consist largely in working upon the audience in such a way as to keep them in continual suspense as to whether or not the blows were “real,” and whether or not the performers were actually hurting themselves, which is resolved at the end of the act in the direction of pleasure. The audience is provoked empathically to imagine intense physical pains only to dismiss them as merely imaginary. This form of comedy would therefore seem to have a unique theatricality of its own: unlike the absorptive illusionism of conventional stage representation, its aesthetic relies on problematizing the relationship between reality and fantasy; on continually reminding the spectator that the performer is both an imaginary character and a real, live, physically present human being.

IV. The Burlesque Boxing Match

What, then, did the burlesque boxing (or wrestling) match consist in – and what made it funny? The burlesquing procedure seems to have begun by adopting the structure of the pugilistic or wrestling encounter as it would have been familiar to its audiences, and then to have followed any combination of three basic strategies. The first was the substitution of inappropriate protagonists into a situation which conventionally called for some ideal masculine type: black people, women, dwarves, fat people, and animals of various kinds. The second strategy was to alter the setting, situating the fight in some absurd context (like the early-Renaissance lists in The Field of the Cloth of Gold). In the third, preferred, method, one or the other, or both, of the protagonists consistently break the rules, as Mason and Dixon did:

THE CAMBRIDGE … great laughter came of the appearance of those droll darkies Messrs Mason and Nixon (sic). Their knockabout business is extraordinary. That proved funny enough, but when they indulged in a wild boxing match the hilarity of the spectators knew no bounds. Their method of attack and defence were as novel as they were mirth-provoking. Every hit elicited a roar; but there were kicks besides, and these occasioned further hilarity.  

A variation on this strategy was to substitute a set of rules belonging to another genre of performance altogether, most frequently dance. All three strategies are at work in a travesty of Amy Robsart entitled Queen Bess Bamboozled and Leicester Squared which appeared as an afterpiece at the Middlesex Music Hall in January, 1891:

(T)he most important part is that of Queen Bess, played with his wonted drollery by Mr Johnny Hanson. Without the least offense or vulgarity, Mr Hanson’s impersonation of the Virgin Queen is really funny, though the fun is certainly of the broadest character. For instance, the “knockabout” habits of the Queen, as recorded in history, are faithfully reproduced; and the mingled imperiousness and amorous sentiment of her nature are amusingly suggested. The old bear-baiting at Kenilworth is replaced by a burlesque wrestling match between a bear and his master. The Queen backs Bruin, who wins the match, finally turning on the Queen and attempting to pull her off the throne. Then a minuet is danced, which has to be suspended whilst Her Majesty goes to the back to take refreshment, the dancers being obliged to stand motionless till her return. In the end Elizabeth learns of the loves of Leicester and

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Amy, and falls into convulsions, but is revived after drinking from a pail of water and being stimulated with a shower of snuff…

Reconstructed in this way out of fragments removed from their context, then, the burlesque boxing match would seem explicitly to be primarily concerned with subverting – or at least with deconstructing – the performance of masculinity. By means of incongruous substitutions among the protagonists, by interchanging spatio-temporal contexts, and by distorting the “syntax” of an event by exchanging the rules of boxing for those of some other performance type, the burlesque boxing match provides an opportunity to disassemble and to reassemble the relationship between masculinity, aggression, intellectuality, physicality, victory and defeat. This is interesting: but it isn’t enough to enable us to answer the crucial question – how did the burlesque boxing match “work”?

There is one thing we never see in critical accounts of these performances. No critic ever implies that music-hall or vaudeville knockabouts used a movement vocabulary drawn from that of actual pugilists: jargon for the various blows and parries, guards, and strategies such as occurs as a matter of course in the accounts of serious matches in the sporting papers is never once applied to these burlesques by the critics. The “physical wit” of the burlesque boxing match apparently did not require a technical knowledge of boxing to be appreciated. We can conclude that the acts, then, were not intended primarily for proponents of the “science,” and may indeed have been found most pleasing by its detractors.

Despite its ubiquity, the burlesque boxing match itself is the most frequently under-described item in the repertoire. I did not find one description on either side of the Atlantic that gave an account of the interior features of a burlesque boxing match. However, among Edison’s earliest films, recorded in the Black Maria on October 6, 1894, is one fragment which may give us some insight into at least one popular version, performed by a prominent knockabout team of the 1890s. The Glenroy Brothers were vaudevillians whose specialty was a sketch called “Fun in a Gymnasium.” They were favorites at Miner’s Eighth Avenue Theatre in New York City (shortly afterwards a major “jump” on the Western burlesque wheel). The sketch apparently

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400 The Glenroy Bros., in their sketch, “Fun in a Gymnasium, “ did some clever work, and wound up with a display of the manly art” (New York Clipper, Oct. 18, 1890, p. 502).
culminated in a burlesque boxing match, of which the Edison film, entitled “Glenroy Bros. [no. 2]” may represent a fragment. Twenty seconds long, it presents four phrases of what is apparently a somewhat longer fight. Like many knockabout acts of the period, it presents a “straight” and a “clown” character, both evidently inappropriate pugilists: the “straight” is dressed in white trousers and shirt with a black bow tie (which comes undone during the sequence); the “clown” is evidently a “Rube” character with a scruffy hair and beard, dark shirt and outsize overalls held up so high by white suspenders that his waistline is almost up to his armpits. The combat consists mostly of ineffectual sparring: none of the blows have any weight behind them, and mostly miss the mark. The Rube character interpolates several movements from entirely outside the boxing repertoire.

1\textsuperscript{st} phrase: The two combatants square off, the Straight screen left, the Rube screen right, making the classical “milling” gesture with their boxing gloves (Fig. 4.1). As the Straight crosses R in the background, the Rube in the foreground performs a cartwheel and round-off to arrive L (Fig. 4.2).
2nd phrase: The straight advances with a left roundhouse\textsuperscript{401} to the head of the Rube, who ducks, avoiding it; a splice indicates a missing beat in which the Rube has riposted with a left roundhouse of his own (which may or may not have connected); the Straight returns another left roundhouse (to the head) the Rube ducks, avoiding it; the Rube responds with a right roundhouse (to the head) and the Straight ducks; then the Straight delivers a right roundhouse and the Rube ducks. (Fig. 4.3)

Finally the Straight advances with a right jab (to the head) – the Rube ducks to avoid it, gets under the Straight’s armpit, and with a second acrobatic interpolation, straightens, lifting the Straight into the air and throwing him back on his feet. The Straight extends his right for distance. (Fig. 4.4)

3rd phrase: After another splice indicating some missing action, the Straight advances with a left roundhouse and the Rube with a right – both connect; there follow two more mirroring beats in which the Straight advances with a left roundhouse (which the Rube ducks to avoid); the Straight advances with a right roundhouse (which the Rube ducks) …(Fig. 4.5)

\textsuperscript{401} These roundhouse punches may be intended to be hooks, but they are too wide and too slow.
... and then the Rube introduces a third solecism – straightening, he lifts his right glove into the air and brings it down on top of the head of the Straight; who responds with a left jab to the Rube’s chest and a right to his armpit. (Fig. 4.6)

4th phrase: The Rube delivers a right roundhouse and the Straight a left (which is more of a jab), each to the other’s face; they double-block simultaneously; they double-block again ...(Fig. 4.7)

... and then the Rube delivers the final boxing solecism of the sequence – he throws a right backhand at his opponent’s right cheek (which the latter block with his left arm) (Fig.4.8), stepping through with his right foot so as to turn his back to him, turns, and delivers another backhand (left this time) to the Straight’s undefended and open left cheek. (Fig. 4.9)

The Straight responds with a left roundhouse (to the head), but the Rube ducks and avoids it.
Whether or not it really represents “Fun in a Gymnasium,” the fragment of a burlesque prize fight in “Glenroy Bros. [no. 2]” makes several important points about knockabout performance technique which are valid for slapstick as well. i) It demonstrates careful phrasing, which forms the basis of the timing of the sequence of gags: each of them comes at the end of a phrase consisting of 4 “beats.” It is not so rigidly phrased, however, as not to admit of some spontaneous improvisation. ii) The phrases are rhythmically marked, in order to co-ordinate the movements of the two men, but also to encourage sympathetic participation on the part of the spectators as well as to coerce their expectations. iii) The fragment demonstrates a set of structuring rhythms: first the attack-riposte rhythm which embodies what I call the “talion” structure; and second a pattern of repetition and variation which I shall refer to in Chapter 6 as the 1 – 2 – 3 – switch-motif. In this case, there are four phrases, each of which concludes with a solecism. The first three solecisms are simply inept; but the fourth is a surprise reversal. The fourth phrase bears the same structure in little: both fighters hit each other; both block each other; both block each other again; and then the Rube pulls his surprise switch.

What this analysis particularly demonstrates is important for an appreciation of both slapstick and knockabout: the source of the physical comedy here is not simply ineptitude; it is rather a surprising combination and contrast of striking ineptitude and startling aptitude.

Fortunately, some versions of burlesque pugilistic performances have come down to us with at least their textual integrity intact, and in a form which preserves at least some of their essential context. The most extended examples are those which occur as the central comic action of the Ethiopian sketches. Of these, three – White’s “One Night in a Bar Room,” Mack’s “Weston, the Walkist,” and F.L. Cutler’s “The Dutch Prize Fighter,” are sketches featuring a Dutch character who would most likely have been played in whiteface. Both “The Dutch Prize Fighter” and H.L. Williams’ “The Black Chap From Whitechapel” are self-consciously literary productions written for print in amateur acting editions, and very likely without any significant performance history.402 “The Dutch Prize Fighter” seems to be a similar reworking of both “Weston the Walkist” and A.J. Leavitt’s “Bruised and Cured” (1869). In each of these (and in

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402 Though the same may not be true of the originals on which they were based. Williams was a well-known “literary pirate,” who frequently recycled the works of other men, published and otherwise, under his own byline – c.f. http://john-adcock.blogspot.ca/2012/02/henry-llewellyn-williams-literary.html. His publications include 18 Ethiopian sketches and farces, some bearing strong resemblance to other existing sketches which we know were produced and often revived – as, for example, Williams’ “Deaf In A Horn” seems to be a reworking of Charles White’s “De Trouble Begins At Nine.”
“B.B.,” of which “The Black Chap from Whitechapel” acknowledges itself to be an adaptation) a case of mistaken identity results in an innocent’s being substituted for a professional athlete and forced to participate either in a sparring contest or a mill. In “Weston the Walkist,” “The Dutch Prize Fighter,” and in “Bruised and Cured,” after being knocked down several times, the innocent becomes exasperated, breaks the rules, turns the tables, and runs amuck – in “Bruised and Cured” and “The Dutch Prize Fighter,” wielding a (stuffed) club. In “One Night in a Bar Room,” the innocent (again a Dutchman) is inveigled into purchasing a bar which has been doing a bad business and is despoiled by the neighborhood louts who co-opt him into participating in a sparring match while they rob him of his stock; the match degenerates into a brawl, with the Dutchman bawling for the police while the furnishings fall down around him as the curtain falls or the wings close in.

What is significant about this repeated situation – the insertion of an innocent into a pugilistic ordeal? It seems to introduce an interesting tension into the audience’s participation in a sporting act: conventionally, the audience should sympathize with the most likely winner; but these plays direct sympathy instead towards the loser. The sporting event is being made into a prank or a practical joke, of which the innocent is apparently the butt. As the fight proceeds, the audience’s expectations of the rules are played off against their sympathies, but ultimately, the impossible happens: the innocent asserts himself, goes berserk; and the audience’s “reasonable” expectations of victory or defeat are thwarted; and the entire exercise is dismissed in a theatrical gesture of disavowal as a joke of which the spectators are ultimately the butts.

In each of these playlets, the physical action has strong allegorical overtones. The protagonist of each is someone who is involved in a somewhat desperate struggle for existence: Phillip Weston, who is mistaken for Weston the Walkist, is on his way to claim an inheritance which he hopes may be sufficient to set him up in a barber shop; Chris, the victim/hero of “The Dutch Prize Fighter,” has come to the wrong address to apply for a situation; Schneider, the protagonist of “One Night in a Bar Room” is looking for a safe investment and a steady income; and Sampson Card, who is taken for Squasher Cuff the pugilist (after having exchanged hats with the latter on a train) is an advance man for a circus – a notoriously unstable profession. In each of these, the protagonist’s hopes for success become bound up in the outcome of the absurd pugilistic encounter. The Ethiopian sketches demonstrate how automatically – indeed, how inevitably – the burlesque prize fight metaphorically evokes a quasi-Social Darwinist sense of
the struggle for survival. They manifest a sense of society as a vast prize ring in which each person is contending violently for a reward that may ultimately not be worth the fight.

In many cases, this spontaneous metaphorical tendency extends to the level of explicit political allegory, and further encodes the movements of the players. On occasion, emblematic devices are even employed to provide audiences with keys that will guide them in “reading” the sketch like a political cartoon.403 This allegorizing tendency is readily observable within the burlesque genre in *The Field of the Cloth of Gold*. An outstanding example, from the same year, among the Ethiopian sketches is A.J. Leavitt’s “High Jack, the Heeler” (1868).

At the outset of “High Jack, the Heeler,” we are introduced to Mr. Peaceable, a gentle and kindly fellow who has, after protracted litigation, finally attained his rightful possession of a disputed estate. In his brief opening monologue we learn, however, that four thugs in the pay of Mr. Gammon, “a pettifogging scoundrel,” are attempting to drive Peaceable from his inheritance by making threats on his life: Bill, the Biter, Mike, the Killer, Pete the Pincher, and Cully, the Cutter. As Peaceable is wondering what he can do (there is no regular law enforcement in the area), a petitioner rushes into his home seeking asylum. The fugitive is dressed in the apparel of a man of the cloth: “Broad brim hat, white curled hair wig sewed in the lining of hat, white necktie and long overcoat – preacher style.” We quickly learn, however, that he is none other than “High Jack the Heeler,” a champion pugilist who has just defeated the Huckleberry Pet by a knockout and, as he may well have killed him, is fleeing his opponent’s supporters: “HIGH JACK throws off hat, necktie and overcoat, and stands in a fighting attitude, with knee breeches, white stockings, tight black undershirt and a small American flag around his waist.” High Jack undertakes the defense of Mr. Peaceable’s patrimony. He faces each of the goons in turn, and identically defeats them, taking each by the ear (emblematically reducing him to a badly-behaved little boy) and kicking him offstage and downstairs into the coal hole, then resuming his disguise as a mild-mannered preacher. At the conclusion of the sketch, the ruffians beg for release:

*(Cries from the coal hole, Let me out, let me out!)*

403 A particularly blatant example is the stuffed club labeled “NO TRUST” in Frank Dumont’s “Vinegar Bitters” (1873), by means of which the inventor of a patent medicine defends his proprietary right to his discovery. (In attempting to ward off an extortionist, the Doctor beats up his own bodyguard.)
HIGH. You want to come out, do you? (Cries of yes! yes! yes!)
Do you think you will ever visit us again? (Cries of no! no! no!)
(To PEACE.) Let them out. (PEACE goes to L. 2 E.; they all rush out and attack HIGH JACK, who knocks them all down, old PEACE included. JACK strikes attitude while they are all down.)
I’m HIGH JACK, THE HEELER!

QUICK CLOSE. 404

High Jack is the epitome of boxing culture in the tradition established by Daniel Mendoza: a small, strong, fast-moving fellow who is able by dint of his swiftness and strategy to defeat against the odds not one but four bruisers twice his own size. The allegorical effect of this closing tableau – in which moaning ruffians and law-abiding citizen alike lie in a heap beneath the feet of this composite of bewigged preacher-man and trunked pugilist, an American flag proclaiming both his power and its source, like Samson’s hair – is unmistakable, and it impressively foreshadows the fighting parsons of many early Western films of forty years to come. The point I’d like to emphasize here, however, is the explicitness with which it associates the ideas of democracy, liberty, fear of God and the rule of law, with High Jack’s movements, and with his stance, which is that of a bare-knuckle boxer: chin and chest raised, stomach muscles contracted, fists poised, and feet flat with the weight back towards the heels. “High Jack the Heeler” 405 illustrates how in the context of nineteenth-century popular culture the body language of pugilism resonates politically with connotations of democracy, equality, and the rule of law. Indeed, physical movement and stance epitomize democratic egalitarianism run comically amuck here, 406 while the pile of bodies literalizes its leveling effect.

But the Ethiopian sketches go beyond evoking potent social and political emblems: they epitomize the burlesque boxing match as a “characteristic ordeal” of the period. The one element common to all the versions of the burlesque boxing act that occur in the Ethiopian sketches is the physical trope of “losing control,” which immediately follows on the violation of

405 “Heeler,” in American slang of this period, refers to one who follows another, e.g. a bodyguard.
406 (Just as they subvert the highfalutin behaviors of the Elizabethan courtiers in The Field of the Cloth of Gold.)
the rules during the boxing in every case. The evidence of the Ethiopian sketches adds a critical

element to our understanding of the dramaturgy of the burlesque prize fight: the figure of “going

berserk,” which is regularly related to the breaking of the rules. They give us reason to infer that

what made the burlesque prize fight “work” was the way it employed the trope of “going

berserk;” that perhaps throughout the development of various versions of the act a standard

narrative pattern evolved in which, typically, during the course of the fight, one or the other (or

both) of the belligerents, having violated the rules, lost all self-possession and ran amuck. The

fight rules were compromised at first by the intrusion of a second set of rules, like those of a
dance, or a game, to result in a breakdown into a fracas.

How might this have been made pleasurable for audiences? Most likely by the stylized

use of rhythm which, by adding an extra set of restraints, made the sport into a game. The model

of the technique we envisioned generating the knockabout dance out of Dermot and Doyle’s

rendition of “Maccarty’s Mare” might be helpful here. That began with a steady rhythm

established by the orchestra, which provoked a “toe-tapping” mimetic response in the audience.
These rhythms were then matched by complimentary movements, themselves also highly

rhythmic in nature. We know also that knockabout technique, whether accompanied by an

orchestra or not, typically entailed the production of loud percussive noises – and we know that

pugilism also entailed the rhythmical production of similar sounds. We’re in the position of

being able to make an educated guess that in some versions the audience’s sympathetic

participation in the fight was generated by the rhythmical boxing figures described by the actors

as they exchanged their initial blows; these regular percussive rhythms might then have been

exaggerated and complicated by incongruous inversions of movement407 which were intensified

until the audience was likewise carried with them to the point of going out of control. At the

same time, the “meaning” of the encounter was gradually inverted: from a “scientific” exercise

in dispute resolution by way of a breakdown to a ‘barbarous’ expression of the “customary

mentality.” The technique of the burlesque prize fight, then, must have required adopting the

stance and general movement style of contemporary pugilists, but not their particular gestural
reertoire. At the same time, it required generating the sympathetic engagement of the audience

407 In Britain, the Lauraine Brothers usually boxed upside down – c.f. Era, Nov. 5, 1887, p. 16: “BRADFORD …

STAR MUSIC HALL … The Lauraine Brothers in an ‘upside-down fisticuff entertainment,’ are amusing.” The act

was apparently known as “Fistina” (c.f., the Lauraine Brothers’ ad, same issue, p. 23).
by the initial establishment of a seductive rhythm, followed by a gradual repetition of the pattern until the audience finds itself spontaneously imagining pleasure and pain together in an incongruous juxtaposition of affects – and that, I’d suggest, is what made them laugh.

But underlying the performance as “representation” there would seem to be the added dimension of a game, or even a practical joke which is played between the performers on one hand, and the spectators on the other, and in which there is an oscillating movement of the role of “butt,” which passes back and forth between them like the ball in a football game, or the puck in a game of hockey. The audience participates by ‘rooting’ for a particular combatant, wishing to align themselves with the winner, and to avoid being associated with the butt.

In a simple two-man knockabout act – say, for example, Weber and Fields’ “Pool Table” routine, in which Meyer (the big guy) teaches Mike (the little guy) to play, the audience is interested from the outset in the outcome of the game. But it soon becomes clear that the big guy (Meyer), is cheating, and, as it were in spite of us, our sympathies are enlisted on the side of Mike; our ambivalence gravitates towards Meyer; and we find ourselves threatened with the fate of ending up aligned with the loser. The rules of the game of pool become supplemented by the rules of the trick Meyer is playing on Mike (any action Mike takes will result in his losing). This produces a tension between what we wish for and what we see coming, and an oscillation of our wishes and our fears: the more inevitable Mike’s defeat appears, the more we sympathize with him. We are caught up in his cause, as it were, against our will. As gag by gag succeeds, this tension mounts; it is reflected in an escalating performance of frustration by Mike, punctuated by an increasing series of physical assaults on him by Meyer; but the tension breaks in hilarity when Mike “turns the tables” on Meyer and escapes with all the money, leaving the enraged Meyer the butt of his own “joke.”

The audience wins after all, having participated in the game by “investing its sympathies” (in the same way as spectators of a real pool game might invest their money in the outcome); and the evolution of their engagement will be reflected in the way in which their physical responses “mirror” (or fail to mirror) the interactions of Meyer and Mike.

409 (Technically not a joke, but a “trick.”)
410 (Laughing perhaps, but also clapping, guffawing, snorting, whistling, and even just breathing and shifting or not shifting in their chairs.)
V. Burlesque Boxing and the Evolution of Slapstick

The trope of “going berserk” disappears from filmic instances of the burlesque prize fight in 1896, only to reappear in 1908 and develop through 1914. I infer that the reason that it does so is because film producers had no idea how to evoke the feeling of going berserk satisfactorily – that is, in a way that could compete successfully with the knockabouts of the stage – until after the developments in film style, especially under Griffith, that attended the Nickelodeon Boom. When they did, the burlesque prize fight rapidly resurfaced as a recurrent element of a distinct new performance practice: slapstick.\footnote{C.f. the review of “Universal Ike, Jr., in a Battle Royal” in Moving Picture World June 6, 1914, p. 1409: “… The juvenile Ike appears at a prize fight in this number and knocks out his opponent and a score or more of others who interfere. For those who like stories of the prize ring, with a strong slapstick accompaniment, this will prove amusing.”}

With Sennett’s “The Knockout,” (Keystone, 1914), the trope of “going berserk” reaches perhaps its first classical statement in film versions of the burlesque prize fight. At first blush, however, the film reads like a botched attempt to crank out the sort of romantic comedies that were already being produced by Vitagraph, Selig, Pathé and Imp. Pug (Roscoe Arbuckle) has volunteered to participate in a challenge match at the local music hall. Roscoe Arbuckle, a baby-faced fat man, seems on the surface a perfect example of the “Incongruous Contender” in the role of Pug – but in a brick-throwing encounter and brawl with a group of local toughs led by Al St. John who try to mash his girl, he demonstrates a double incongruity: he is not only funny and fat, but also fast, both on his feet and with his dukes. In fact, it is his defeated assailants who propose him for the boxing match, and who build him up to the Fight Promoter (Frank Opperman) as a contender – the locals, in turn, expectantly pack the theater. While Roscoe is limbering up, a gun-slinging gambler (Mack Swain) advises him that Pug had better win – or else.

![Fig. 4.10](image)

The match (refereed by Charlie Chaplin) is an insane *tour de force* of rulebook violations: the referee continually interferes in the match and is struck by the combatants as they flail at each other, kick each other, and use wrestling holds. (Fig. 4.10)
Ultimately, Arbuckle is supplied with the gambler’s pistols, which he commences to fire wildly, clearing the theatre and initiating a chase across rooftops, down chimneys and through suburban living rooms. (Fig. 4.11)

Hotly pursued and lassoed by the Keystone Kops, the enraged Arbuckle runs right off the end of the Santa Monica pier, drawing the unlucky Kops in after him. (Fig. 4.12)

“The Knockout” is crowded with odd features that look like mistakes but which, on analysis, turn out to be well in the tradition of the burlesque prize fight. The fight is set up by two ne’er-do-wells as a means of raising cash, one of whom (Hank Mann) misrepresents himself as Hurricane Flynn, the champion pugilist, but disappears shortly afterwards; the real Flynn (Edgar Kennedy) arrives and takes the place of the false one. But Pug’s challenge isn’t premised on the champion’s being a fake – he’s unaware of the substitution, and always intends to fight Flynn – which he does. There is likewise what seems to be an abortive subplot in which Pug’s girlfriend cross-dresses as a boy and enters the theatre to see the match; she is discovered by the champion, and during the chase there are hints of a budding romance between them: after Flynn has been shot in the bum by Pug, she runs solicitously up to him and remains with him afterwards as he joins the chase after Pug – on one occasion they are seen holding hands. But neither this subplot nor the main one is ever resolved: we never learn whether Pug is going to lose his girl to the pugilist; we don’t even find out if he gets arrested after the cops pull him out of the water, or whether he successfully explains about the gambler’s imposition on him.

These imperfections cease to read as flaws if we look at them in the context of their intertextual relationships with earlier prize-fight burlesques. The plot doesn’t resolve in the fashion of polite comedy because it has an open ending like those of many Ethiopian sketches. Instead of the conventional Freytag structure of an action which rises inevitably to a climax to be
succeeded by a falling action and dénouement, the two reels of “The Knockout” have the two-part talion structure of Ethiopian sketches like “The Coal-Heavers’ Revenge” and prank films like L’arosseur arossé: in the first reel, Arbuckle successfully defends his title to the girl (Minta Durfee) against the toughs; and in the second, they get revenge by pretending to make amends and inveigling him into being the challenger in the boxing match. As a consequence of the outcome of the first encounter, the relationship is exploded in a contrapasso – that is all. It’s a Schadenfreude story in which a chance encounter leads to a net setback. The setup of the substitution of Flynn is a convention of the subgenre which is repurposed to the new task of sidelining the heroine.

What I find particularly interesting about “The Knockout”, in view of my reconstruction of the role of rhythm in the dramaturgy of the theatrical burlesque prize fight above, is the way the puffs of smoke issue from the gun (to the accompaniment, undoubtedly, of the theatre percussionist’s slapstick or snare drum) to announce the explosion of Pug’s romance in irregular, arhythmic bursts, counterpointing the regularly accelerating editing rhythms to evoke a sensation of “going berserk.” The importance of establishing this rhythmic counterpoint apparently trumps ‘realism’: the guns continue to be fired long after their magazines ought to have been emptied. The same lofty disregard for verisimilitude which leaves Edgar Kennedy unhurt after he has been shot in the pants extends to all the other aspects of performance in this film. The acting style, particularly in the performance of “going berserk,” is intentionally presentational and evocative; it is intended not to represent a character undergoing a psychotic episode but to elicit the feeling of doing so – to provide the spectator with a somatically-rooted vocabulary for imagining what it means to “go berserk” in 1914.

But the burlesque prize fight of “The Knockout” resembles its knockabout counterpart in another particular. We observed of it that it made game of the conventional sporting event by turning it into a kind of practical joke of which the audience was tacitly the butt. By the same token, Sennett’s technique in “The Knockout,” riffing on the realistic conventions of the “fight picture,” turns them into a kind of practical joke, in which the audience’s sympathy for Fatty is aroused, and escalated, but ultimately dismissed in a gesture of disavowal like the one that concludes “Bruised and Cured.”
VI. Summary

In this chapter, I’ve taken up my claim that the knockabout sketches and slapstick films of the period from about 1860 to 1930 can be distinguished from the products of other periods by a “characteristic form of ordeal” which is typified by the burlesque prize fight. In the course of this ordeal, the “integrity” of the comic protagonist is acid-tested by being driven out of control towards its structural limit, which is expressed in the trope of “going berserk.” Since “going berserk” is not an experience which nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century performers could count on their spectators having had, the burlesque prize fight supplies them with a vocabulary for imagining it instead which draws on their anxieties about doing and suffering violence. In nineteenth-century theatrical knockabout, elements of this vocabulary are inevitably invested with political overtones that evoke dread of the return of past conditions and are “backward-oriented” (evoking the horrors of feudal codes, or the comparative barbarism of the “customary mentality”) or “present-oriented” (evoking anxieties about the destructive potential of contemporary social and technical developments).

There’s an inference to draw here that the function of these Victorian imaginings refers neither to the past nor the present, as in Benjamin and Kracauer’s ‘therapeutic’ view of comedy performances in film, but to the future. The only possible purpose of testing one’s integrity (even vicariously) must be against some further, future test: as a means of anticipating, and, if possible, guarding against, future challenges. A major function of the theatrical burlesque prize-fight may therefore seem to be as a sort of imaginative reality-testing against conditions whose coming was sensed, but not yet perceived. This proposes a view of the function of knockabout and slapstick which is more consistent with Richard Schechner’s view of theatre in The Future of Ritual:

… The fictive violence of the stage refers not to the past or elsewhere but to the future – to threats, to what will happen if the aesthetic-ritual project crashes.

In films like “The Knockout,” and in films of the Silver Age like Keaton’s Battling Butler and the build-up to the famous fight in City Lights, boxing no longer appears as a progressive,

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but a retrograde ordeal, like dueling the previous century. In a few years, it would be obsolete altogether; by the time of its use in Peter Bogdanovitch’s *Nickelodeon* (1976), it has become a quaint archaism. But in “The Knockout,” Pug’s serenity is exploded, not by a threat from beyond, but by the gun in his own hand. One has the sense that during the slapstick period, the boxing burlesque looks less to a future challenge than to a clear and present danger.
I. Nineteenth-Century Circus Knockabout: The Aesthetics of Danger

As I established at the beginning of my previous chapter, the expansion of circus companies through the late 1860s and 1870s necessitated the development of knockabout as a new style of clowning: one which relied less on verbal humor and more on a style of physical comedy appropriate to the concerns of the mid-to-late Victorian period. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, circus usage recognized two major types of clown, both of which might specialize in any of two or three major ways. The first knockabouts had to develop routines to fit the spectrum of duties required of the circus clown.

I) First, there were entr’acte, or “fill-in” clowns, who did not perform stand-alone acts, but merely provided transitions, wrangled the livestock, distracted the audience from visible manipulations of the mise-en-scène, and so on.

II) Secondly, there were the “entrée” or “entry” clowns – clowns who performed stand-alone acts that ranked equally on the programmes with the equestrian, acrobatic, terpsichorean, and other features of the circus – indeed, since most clowns began their apprenticeships in these other lines of business, these acts usually consisted of the same materials, performed for comedy.413

Either of these two major types of clown might in turn employ any of three major modes of performance, although these are variously described. On some accounts, for example that of Willan Bosworth,414 clowns were divided into three categories: a) musical; b) acrobatic; and c) “Auguste” clowns. Other accounts, including that of A.H. Kober, preserve the tripartite taxonomy, but divide it as follows:

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414 Ibid.
a) Talking clowns – amongst these should be included “Shakespearean” clowns;

b) Singing clowns; and

c) Knockabout clowns.⁴¹⁵

“Acrobatic” or “knockabout clowns” were most likely to belong to the “entr’acte” group – that is, to be relegated to the task of keeping the spectators amused between the other, more important, acts. But it seems that knockabouts might equally achieve the status of “entry clowns,” whose performances required the most highly developed acrobatic and/or equestrian skills, and appealed to their audiences across the spectrum of means.

Knockabout performance in the nineteenth-century circus was typical of knockabout generally (and unlike slapstick) in regard of the high amount of risk it entailed for the performer. A sad, but far from rare, example is that of William Merritt, known professionally as William De Lacy, whose specialty was acrobatic leaping. In June 1889, Merritt is identified in the Clipper as a knockabout clown and is announced as having signed on with L.J. Duchak’s New London Circus. We get a concrete picture of what “knockabout clowning” entailed in Merritt’s case two weeks later, when his obituary appears in the “Deaths in the Profession” column of the same periodical:

WILLIAM DE LACY (William Merritt), leaper, with Duchak’s Circus, met with a fatal accident during the performance of that show, June 15, at Fairfield, Ia., while attempting his usual feat of jumping over five horses and three men, and while in midair turning a double somersault …

The obituary goes on to describe in detail the technical difficulty inherent in Merritt’s stunt, and to propose a cause for the disaster:

This is a very difficult feat, and requires accurate judgment and close attention on the part of the performer, as he catches his knees to make the turns. In performing the last revolution Mr. Merritt seemed to lose control of himself and held too long, nearly making

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the third turn – an almost impossible feat – and, instead of landing on his feet, as usual, he fell, lighting on the back of his neck and fracturing the spinal column, thereby paralyzing the entire body.\textsuperscript{416}

This example is sufficient to demonstrate that knockabout clowning in the nineteenth-century circus often consisted in infinitely more sophisticated, elaborate, and difficult modes of performance than the pratfall of twentieth-century burlesque. In the exploitation of these dangerous acts, techniques such as insulting the audience, exaggerating the danger of the trick, and reprobating the audience for making their pleasure the occasion of the performer’s jeopardy, were all tools of the trade. Another among many examples from the period is that of the acrobat John Brougham, who embroidered his “Leap for Life” with liberal reproaches to his audiences which, in order to make them the more offensive, he delivered in the guise of a “rough” Irishman who baited the audience for their complicity throughout his act, and then cursed them roundly at its conclusion.\textsuperscript{417}

Another of these modes of performance that conspicuously foregrounded risk to the performer was one that by the beginnings of the slapstick era in film was all but forgotten, its name an obscure reference in a show-business lexicon published as a study in linguistics:

\textit{Pete Jenkins} – An old time circus act in which the ring master offered a reward for any member of the audience who could ride a certain horse. He received a response from a supposedly inebriated man who staggers into the ring and clumsily mounts the horse. After several falls the pseudo-drunk suddenly discards his

\textsuperscript{416} The New York Clipper, June 29, 1889, p. 259.
\textsuperscript{417} The New York Clipper, June 7, 1873, p. 8: “…When the music for his act strikes up, he bounds into position at once, and makes ready to jump instanter, joking in regard to the horrible quality of the music fixed-up for him, arguing that its very badness is the best thing in the world for him and his act, being as how it would lead anyone with the slightest idea of harmony to \textit{stop being the cause of it} at once. Whereat he dashes off his platform… and makes his terrible Leap for Life. As he whizzes down, a suspicion of a joke rattles through his brain in regard to its being a Leap for Death, but this, being no joke at all, causes him to keep right on ... Well, finally he arrives at his destination with a thunderin’ “bang,” muttering to his audience at the moment the stage meets him – with his eyes closed to shut out the profanity – “There now, and be hanged to you!” After making a joke about the honesty of being perfectly square about everything and Comin’ Right Down to it, he starts for home, after making a joke about the folly of a man giving himself a chance at Death every night in order that he may have a chance at Life, botheration to it all!
outer clothing and reveals a suit of flashing tights beneath. He is the star equestrian of the circus! 418

II. Charley Sherwood, Pete Jenkins, and the ‘Script’ of the Metamorphose Act

During the years in which variety performance in the United States was gradually acquiring its distinctive forms, the Pete Jenkins performance – also known to contemporaries as the Metamorphose Act – was at the cutting edge of circus. A November 1879 issue of the Clipper quotes “an old stager” as saying: “Yes, I have done ‘Pete Jenkins’ to oblige a manager but there has been only one ‘Pete Jenkins’ and that was poor Charley Sherwood …” 419 The version below, an oral recollection of the clown Albert Gaston, reported in 1909 by the Kansas City Star, seems to give perhaps the most completely fleshed-out account of the act’s dialogue that is extant. The report both begins and concludes with the claim that the version performed by Gaston and Dan Leon is the same as the one devised seventy-five years earlier by Charley Sherwood:

Not many persons of the younger generation in Kansas City ever saw a “Pete Jenkins act.” Fifty years ago every circus had that act for a headliner. And the Coulter & Coulter old-fashioned one-ring circus has the same act now, and two of the men who perform it did it thirty years ago, just as they do it today. They are Dan Leon and Gaston.

Enter the ringmaster, the clown and a horse.

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419 Nov. 29, 1879, p 281. A native of New York City, where he was born on July 22, 1823, Sherwood’s entrée into show business came in the role of Cupid at Vauxhall Garden in the Bowery, New York, under the management of P.T. Barnum. Under the name of Master Charles Champion, he became a member of the stock company at the Bowery Theatre until 1841, when he joined a dramatic company which toured through the states of New York and Pennsylvania. In the course of these tours he encountered Dan Nicoll’s Circus, which he subsequently joined, promptly attaining excellence in vaulting. It may also be during this period that he participated in the development of blackface minstrelsy in America as a jig dancer of renown. In 1846 he joined Harry Rockwell’s Circus, and prospered so with that company that by 1849 he held equity interests in the Athenaeum, Cincinnati O., the steamboat Planet, another vessel which operated in South America, and two circus companies travelling the western territories. (Perhaps “poor” because in 1879 it had been only four years since he had passed on at a comparatively early age. Sherwood apparently was in a position of some affluence at his death.)
Ringmaster, bowing to audience:

“Ladies and gentlemen, I take great pleasure in announcing Mr. Dan Leon, champion bareback rider of the world.”

Clown – Well, well, what are we waiting for?

Ringmaster – For Mr. Leon.

Clown runs to ring entrance, looks out, returns and announces:

“Mr. Leon has just fallen and sprained his ankle and cannot ride today.”

Ringmaster to clown – Then you must ride in his place.

Clown – I shan’t.

Ringmaster – What’s that, sir?

Clown – I say I can if you wish it.

The clown mounts the horse and sits astride. Just then a drunken farmer comes in from the front, trips over the ringside and pitches headlong into the ring. The ringmaster throws him out. He re-enters and, after a long dialogue, drunkenly shouts that he came to “jine out” with the show.

“If you could only ride, now, I’d give you $25 a day,” says the ringmaster.

“That’s my main holt,” answers Pete Jenkins.

“Where did you ever ride?”

“Used to ride dad’s oxen all around the barnyard,” says Pete.
He is assisted to the horse’s back, tumbles off, drags around the ring by the horse’s tail, finally gets on again, throws off hat, coat and trousers and stands revealed in spangled tights and does a skillful bareback act.

… Dan Leon says the Pete Jenkins act was invented seventy-five years ago by Charles Sherwood. Later Miles Orton and Luke Rivers did it. It is the same act today that it was then.\textsuperscript{420}

A great part of Sherwood’s contribution would seem to have been his performance of the drunk, especially his hiccupping: the author of an 1864 \textit{Clipper} article seems to be trying to indicate as much by some mimetic language of his own: “While the horse is waiting in the ring, Charley Sherwood, disguised as a drunken man, and with an innumerable number of clothes on, stumbles into the ring from the audience part of the house, falling over the banks, and requesting the master of the circle to let him ride (hic) that horse.”\textsuperscript{421} But Sherwood was apparently a uniquely fine rider; and it is equally, if not more likely, that his great talent lay in his ability to subvert the physical vocabulary of voltige\textsuperscript{422} into a series of gags.

Like so many of the Ethiopian sketches, the essence of the Metamorphose Act lay, not in its dialogue, but in its core physical trope: the riding of an apparently runaway horse. This in turn involved the performance of a “vocabulary” of equestrian maneuvers, motivated by disguising them as the blunders of an incompetent. The essential skill in “voltige,” is simply described in H.J. Lijsen’s \textit{De Hooge School} (translated by Antony Hippisley Coxe as \textit{Trick Riding and Voltige})\textsuperscript{423} as “a form of gymnastics performed either on or at the side of a trotting or preferably cantering horse.”\textsuperscript{424} Lijsen lists a number of important requirements for an appropriately trained horse; according to him

\textsuperscript{420} \textit{Kansas City Star}, Sept. 12, 1909, reprinted in \textit{Circus Scrap Book}, No. 5 (Jan. 1930), pp. 16 – 25. For alternative versions of the Pete Jenkins Act, please see Appendix 5.A.
\textsuperscript{421} \textit{The New York Clipper}, Aug. 20, 1864, p. 150.
\textsuperscript{422} Acrobatic, or trick, riding, as opposed to manège, or show riding.
\textsuperscript{423} London: J.A. Allen, 1956.
A voltige horse must:

a) Canter steadily with short even paces;

b) Keep a strict tempo the whole time;

c) Remain perfectly quiet whatever may happen on his back;

d) Never change foot even when the rider jumps on and off;

e) Gradually increase speed when the whip is moved from his tail towards his head, and slow up when the whip is held in front of him;

f) Break into a canter immediately the word ‘off’ is spoken, and the whip moved in a tail-to-head direction.  

As Lijsen proceeds to explain, a voltige surcingle – in circus jargon, a “roller” – is strapped around the horse, behind the forelegs.

Except for the roller the horse is back-backed; so carries no saddle cloth … Next, we must dust the horse’s back with rosin and rub it in … The roller has three hand grips, one on either wither and one in between. It also has two loops of leather, one on each side at the height of the rider’s foot. These are called staffs in the circus, and they should be large enough to allow the foot to pass right through.

The voltige performance is punctuated by two elementary actions – mounting and dismounting. These operate not only as elementary syntactic markers, but also function simultaneously to organize the space of the representation. “A voltige horse,” notes Lijsen,

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426 Lijsen informs us, “This is the reason that horses used in voltage and jockey acts in the circus are so often light coloured; the rosin does not show. It is also the reason why ring horses are known as ‘rosin-backs’” (Ibid., p.13).
“always moves round the ring in an anti-clockwise direction, that is on the near rein… A place should be selected on the circumference of the ring for mounting and, diametrically opposite, a place fixed for dismounting … These positions should be strictly adhered to.” In an elementary pattern (for example, during training) “(t)he horse should always make a half circle without a rider, between the dismounting and mounting points.”

Lijsen goes on to supply a brief “lexicon” of actions which a rider of average skill might employ in various combinations in the execution of a routine like the Pete Jenkins act:

Figure 5.1.a Mounting (H.J. Lijsen, Trick Riding and Voltige)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MOUNTING</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>… When running at the horse’s side, as in illustration 3, [the rider] must jump forward before leaping up. (See illustration 4.)</td>
<td>Illustration 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.1.b Mounting

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>… The voltige rider then jumps off both feet and so lands astride the withers. When sitting on his horse’s back his legs should hang loosely down. (Illustration 5)</td>
<td>Illustration 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.2.a Dismounting

Dismounting
(Illustration 6)

... In dismounting the pupil should lean slightly back, the right leg is then thrown over the neck of the horse, the hands letting go and seizing the grips again in turn, in order to let the leg pass.
(Illustration 7.)

Figure 5.2.b Dismounting

As both legs move towards the ground they should be swung forward together and land as shown in illustration 8...
The tricks which involve taking a kneeling position on the horse’s back both involve transitions in which the legs are flung out backwards, high in the air, as the rider clutches the grips:

**Figure 5.3: On Both Knees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ON BOTH KNEES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For this trick the pupil, sitting astride the horse, should start by leaning forward so that his hands on the grips take the weight, then throw both legs outstretched, up backwards as <em>high as he can</em>. As the feet reach the highest point they are brought together, but the legs open again as the body falls to regain the sitting position … When this can be successfully accomplished the pupil keeps his knees together when his legs have reached the top of the swing and brings them forward so that he lands with his knees on the horse’s quarters. The shins should follow the line of the crupper, but the feet, which remain close together, should not dig into the rump. (Illustration 9.) Before dismounting, the legs are thrown high in the air again and open to come down astride the horse. Dismounting then proceeds in the usual way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 5.4: On One Knee**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ON ONE KNEE (Illustration 10)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This trick is learnt in the same way as that previously described, but the right leg remains stretched out and held horizontally, so that the rider lands on his left knee. His back should be horizontal and his head held well up.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Illustration 9

Illustration 10
In the following trick the rider’s body is twisted so that it faces in two directions at once:

**Figure 5.5: The Scissors**

THE SCISSORS

The rider, sitting with both legs on the near side of the horse (rather as if he were riding side-saddle), maintains his hold of the hand grips, but swings his left leg up and over the horse’s crupper so that his legs are astride the horse but, as in the last trick, face the tail. Here, however, the body does not follow the legs round, since the hold on the hand grips prevents it from facing more than inwards. (Illustration 11.) After this position has been held for a little time the hands can be moved to the crupper and the movement finished as above.

Lijsen gives instructions for a variety of stunts in the basic repertoire of the voltige rider:

The leg pass; turning round; the neck and shoulder stand; the forward swing; the near-side and off-side mounts; the saddle leap, and the transversal. As the “Circus” notices in *The Clipper* through the 1860s and 1870s often suggest, once a rider and horse have developed a thorough enough rapport, horses could be trained to buck, and even to rear on command.

**Figures 5.6 and 5.7: Contemporary Lithographs**

Contemporary lithographs suggest that a wide range of acrobatics could be performed by the daring Pete Jenkins rider, and motivated as the effects of inexperience or drunkenness.

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429 For Lijsen’s detailed descriptions of these, please see Appendix 5.B.
430 *New York Clipper*, October 27, 1877.
The basic structure of the riding portion of the Pete Jenkins act, then, very likely consisted of two parts: the first would have been a number of turns, in a counter-clockwise direction, around the single ring of the big top, probably organized in phrases in which a half-turn around the ring with the performer’s body being flung around on horseback, alternated with another half-turn with the performer on the ground, running beside or behind the horse in a parody of “bounding jockey” acts in which skilled riders vaulted over and onto their horses as they ran. These apparently were organized in a climactic order of difficulty, the pace of the succession of tricks increasing at the same time. At a certain point, however, the horse would begin to canter in unbroken circles around the ring as the Jenkins performer stood and divested himself of his outer garments (flinging them, most likely, towards the centre of the ring, rather than towards the audience as in a striptease). Some contemporary illustrations indicate that the act may have climaxed in further acrobatics such as walking back and forth along the horse’s back, jumping, and even turning flips and somersaults. The most dramatic effect might well have been for this turning point in the act to be marked by a stunt in which the rider’s life appeared momentarily to be lost. However, none of the sources I’ve been able to locate give any warrant for assuming this to have been so.

It must have taken terrific acting skill as well as wonderful acrobatic and equestrian proficiency to perform these patterns with precision and safety, and yet also with spontaneity and abandon sufficient to persuade the audience that the character was in mortal danger. But the one detailed reception document that we possess suggests that the consummate Pete Jenkins performer possessed a faculty even greater than these: the ability to make the performance itself a colloquy with its audience – an act of two-way communication, with profound personal, social, political and even, for want of a better word, ritual resonances.

One of the most interesting features of the act is that, however improbable it may seem to us in view of the fact that the character is wearing an oddly disproportionate amount of clothing, it was crucial for the Pete Jenkins performer to impress himself on the audience as a “real” person; the outlandish costuming was apparently not accepted – at least during the heyday of the performance – as a mere theatrical convention. In fact, the editorial staff of the Clipper never tire of reporting instances when the deception was so good that it even fooled the local

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432 This is perhaps not so odd after all; low-life men who had been ejected from their lodgings were often compelling to carry all their worldly goods on their backs.
constabulary into arresting the performers. The same is reported of performances of “The Frolic,” as the act was called in England, where it was a specialty, for example, of Pablo Fanque. By the late 1870s, the Pete Jenkins act was so widely distributed that very few were the circuses that did not incorporate it, usually in a climactic position somewhere towards the end of the show – that is, as the primary structural element of a circus performance. However, by the First World War, the act had been largely forgotten and was only rarely performed.

III. The Reception of the Metamorphose Act

As I’ve already noted, the most common report on the efficacy of the Pete Jenkins Act was that people – and especially policemen – tended to accept it quite uncritically as a disruption of circus programmes, and to be more than willing to participate in any ructions that might ensue. This is particularly evident in the case of the most detailed document in the reception of the act which has come down to us – the account in Chapter 22 of The Adventures of

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433 C.f. The New York Clipper, Aug. 20, 1864, p. 150, cited in the Introduction, pp. 1-2. C.f. also The New York Clipper, May 15, 1875, p. 55: “HOWE’S GREAT LONDON CIRCUS performed at Louisville, Ky. on April 30 and May 1, and drew the largest crowds of the season. In regard to its extent, variety, excellence of the performance, and brilliant street display, it is one of the best shows on the road … Nearly every circus nowadays concludes its performance with a drunken chap tumbling into the ring, and, after all sorts of complications with the ringmaster, he turns out to be a very agile rider or tumbler; but the party personating the drunkard for the Great London came near getting into trouble during one of the performances here. As he was about to tumble into the ring, he was collared by a policeman and started for the door. Before reaching which, however, he said to the officer: “Nixy, nixy, pard; let me go – I belong to the show.” The officer paid no attention to his remarks, and was walking him off without ceremony, when some bystanders interfered, explained the matter to the vigilant guardian of the peace, and the performer was allowed to proceed with his act.

434 For instance with Pablo Fanque’s Circus Royal in 1869, as witness The New York Clipper, Sept. 18, 1869, p. 191: “A very amusing scene occurred at Pablo’s Circus, at Rochdale, lately, in the presence of an audience of about 2,000 persons. The performance was concluded with the old and familiar farce entitled “The Frolic,” (well known in America as “Pete Jenkins.”) Mr. Hickey, in the piece, represented a drunken countryman, and so well did his dress and manner correspond with that character that two detectives were deceived. The farce had opened, and Mr. Sweeney, acting as Clown, was frolicking on horseback, when Hickey, in true Bacchanalian style, stumbled from the gallery into the ring and demanded a ride, saying that the clown had promised it for a quart of ale. A pretended squabble ensued between the supposed countryman, the ring master, and the manager, Henry Montague, when the two latter, according to the farce, quickly called for the assistance of the police to eject the supposed countryman. To the surprise of the performers and some of the audience, two police officers rushed into the ring, declaring that they could not permit a drunken man to interfere with the progress of the performance, collared him, and although Hickey loudly protested that he was an actor and was not drunk, but acting the character, dragged him out of the circus amidst protracted roars of laughter. Mr. Pablo and Mr. Montague followed the officers out of the circus and explained the plot of the piece to the police, who then gave up their charge and laughed heartily at their promptitude and the way they had been outwitted.”
On Huck Finn’s account, the Pete Jenkins performer’s intrusion into the performance nearly results in real mayhem:

And by-and-by a drunk man tried to get into the ring – said he wanted to ride; said he could ride as well as anybody that ever was. They argued and tried to keep him out, but he wouldn’t listen, and the whole show come to a standstill. Then the people begun to holler at him and make fun of him, and that made him mad, and he begun to rip and tear; so that stirred up the people, and a lot of men begun to pile down off of the benches and swarm towards the ring, saying, ‘Knock him down! Throw him out!’ and one or two women begun to scream…

Huck’s account emphasizes the importance of the ringmaster’s pacific intervention:

So, then, the ring-master he made a little speech, and said he hoped there wouldn’t be no disturbance, and if the man would promise he wouldn’t make no more trouble, he would let him ride, if he thought he could stay on the horse. So everybody laughed and said all right, and the man got on.

By the conclusion of the act, a potentially horrific situation has been transformed into a vision of unanimity:

And then, there he was, slim and handsome, and dressed the gaudiest and prettiest you ever saw, and he lit onto that horse with his whip and made him fairly hum – and finally skipped off, and made his bow and danced off to the dressing-room, and everybody just a-howling with pleasure and astonishment.

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Unbeknownst to Huck, the very essence of the joke has been that the role of “butt” has been voluntarily (and ironically) assumed by the ringmaster:

Then the ring-master he see how he had been fooled, and he was the sickest ring-master you ever see, I reckon. Why, it was one of his own men! He had got up that joke all out of his own head, and never let on to nobody. Well, I felt sheepish enough, to be took in so, but I wouldn’t a been in that ring-master’s place, not for a thousand dollars.

The metamorphose act works, then, as a reciprocal exchange of pranks between an unknowing audience and an apparently disingenuous but hypocritically knowing performance troupe. In it, the audience’s aggression is aroused, re-channeled, and then, instead of escalating out of control, reversed on itself by an act of grace; one which resolves the tension of competition and collaboration between performers and spectators in favor of their mutual unanimity. The act has a figurational structure which is that of a kind of game, in which the audience’s aggressiveness is teased, but then redirected and ultimately transformed into pleasure.

The Pete Jenkins act as an example of what I am calling the trope of “the Juggernaut” would seem to have four essential structural elements. To begin with, there is the performative core of the act: the demonstration of the performer’s ‘skill’ which in this case consists in what is to be perceived as a very real and very violent confrontation between its protagonist and the forces governing bodies. Just as even the diegetic “Pete Jenkins” consists of a double entity, so too this skill is double – the character, at first the hapless subject of the law of inertia, turns out to be its master; at the same time, what seems to be a laughably inferior skill on the part of the performer turns out in retrospect to have been virtuosity of the highest order. Secondly, this display is set within a joke- or game-construction, in which the performance is figured as a prank, of which the audience is the butt (on some readings, through the surrogate figure of the ring-master). The joke functions by substituting an imaginary tension for the real tension of the performative event: the irruption onto the scene of the drunk and disorderly Pete antagonizes the audience, provoking their willingness to accept the prospective visual spectacle of his trampling beneath the horse’s hooves as a substitute for the display of virtuoso horsemanship they were
expecting – and thus tacitly mobilizes their *real* competitive hostility as ambivalent spectators.\textsuperscript{436} The joke is delivered, moreover, through a metatheatrical device which places the ‘reality’ of the spectacular violence in question. The performance is figured as an “interruption” of another performance and consequently as the real ‘reality.’ The regular performance—interrupted so that the performance of Pete Jenkins may be mistaken for an unwelcome reality and then “revealed” to be a performance after all—has thus eluded the audience’s attempt to anticipate it and thereby exceeded its expectations. Thirdly, the real tensions evoked by the performance allude to genuine, serious social and political tensions which are active within society at large, and which are themselves systematically related to the particular habitus of the society in question as regards violence: that is, the balance between the internal (police) use of violence in the maintenance of the peace and the external (military) use of violence which is inherent in the political aspirations of the community.

But, fourthly, the performance is configured so as to evoke a controlled simulacrum of the cycle of civil violence which is resolved in the rupture of that cycle; and the rupture of the cycle of violence coincides with the exposure of the joke. The responsibility for this rupture is in the hands of the ringmaster, who functions in a quasi-allegorical manner as a kind of ideal authority, ultimately taking the responsibility for the performance’s redemptive functions on himself and bearing away any ethical fallout. According to Twain the performance is ultimately (but unconsciously) received as a kind of exorcism of the social tensions out of which it was originally produced.\textsuperscript{437}

IV. The Comic Function of the Metamorphose Act

What then, does the “Metamorphose Act” do – and how does it do it? The answer can be given quite briefly:

i. It excites the spectator’s hostility by presenting itself as a “bad” text;

\textsuperscript{436} From their general ambivalences about performers to their specific ambivalences about “circus people,” which were pronounced, especially among rural audiences, during the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{437} Within the structure of *Huckleberry Finn*, it is in fact one of the few redeeming features in Southern popular culture and compares well with the other popular rituals with which the book is filled: the Grangerford-Shepherdson feud, the attempted lynching of Colonel Sherbourne, the obscene “Royal Nonesuch” of the King and the Duke, and the “soul-butter and hogwash” of the King’s camp-meeting oratory.
ii. It confronts the spectator with the playful representation of a succession of violent episodes (happening to somebody else) and invites his/her active anticipation (by means of his/her internal sense of “bodily intelligence”) in a spirit of dreadful ambivalence which promises to reward the spectator’s goodwill and threatens to punish the spectator’s sadism with either a pleasant or a radically unpleasant spectacle;

iii. In each episode, the expectation of an unpleasant outcome is reversed in some unforeseen manner; a repetitive pattern of dreadful expectations followed by pleasant outcomes is established;

iv. In a final substitution, the meaning of the entire event is inverted so that the disappointment of the spectator’s sadistic yearnings is transformed into the satisfaction of their humane self-esteem while at the same time gratifying their desire for extraordinary spectacle;

v. The irony of this final incongruity is transferred onto the figure of the ringmaster, who becomes a “moral lightning-rod;” the audience is ‘forgiven’ their initial hostility and invited to acknowledge their gratitude in a spontaneous (but structurally crucial) final ovation.

The goal of the Metamorphose Act, then, seems to be to excite the audience’s mere ambivalence and transform it into – or at least bring them into the service of – a display of appreciation and even affection which itself constitutes a utopian vision of “unanimity” among all those present – audience and performers alike. In accomplishing this, we might add, it resonates against characteristically nineteenth-century personal, social, political and ritual intertexts, beginning with the spectator’s own skill in riding a horse.

V. Hollywood Slapstick: Good and Bad Texts

Slapstick films generally tend to sort themselves into two major kinds which might be classed according to opposing physical dynamics – “uppers” and “downers.” Many slapstick comedies are thrilling films which excite and elate through their representations of a protagonist’s successful struggle with the (predominantly physical) forces opposing his goals; but another sort have to be described as “bummers” – they leave the protagonist at their conclusion lying on the pile of rubble caused by his destructive antics, shaking his head and wondering what hit him. We laugh at these with more or less indulgence, but our laughter has a
Pyrrhic quality, as if the act of participating in the spectacle of frustration has cost us more than we have gained from the satisfaction of having witnessed it happening to somebody else. For many spectators, it is this latter group of films that confirm the status of slapstick comedy as the quintessentially "bad text:" as if the failures portrayed in slapstick films were themselves mere symptoms of a greater failure of invention and originality on the part of the performers and filmmakers.

But in fact if we look at physical comedy itself as an ongoing exploration of the tension between the sense of the human will’s mastery over the laws governing the physical universe, and an equal and opposite sense of subjection to it, we must reflect that, in the long run, “bummers” must prevail at least almost as much as “uppers;” otherwise, each fresh manifestation of the tension in a new genre must ultimately fail. Because of the importance of the element of surprise in comedy, the law of diminishing returns operates with special rapidity within the lifecycle of each new comic style; and the likelihood of failure increases with the production of each new success. In other words, there is an inescapable tension between “good” slapstick texts like The Kid Brother and “bad” ones like “Super Hooper-dyne Lizzies;” like love and marriage, you can’t have one without the other.

In fact, for this reason, I would propose that it is incumbent on the critic of slapstick to assume some sort of distinction between different sorts of slapstick films parallel to the one Robin Wood proposes between “reactionary” and “apocalyptic” horror films.438 Just as for Wood the ending of the horror film demonstrates either a successful or unsuccessful psychic attempt to repress the threat to normalcy posed by the apparition of the monster, so the ending of the slapstick comedy represents a satisfactory or unsatisfactory attempt to cope laughingly with the threat posed to the spectator’s security by the violence alluded to in the slapstick film. This represents the main reason why I maintain we should do our best to bracket the achievements of the major stars of silent Hollywood slapstick, since throughout the twenties they worked mostly in features; and in the 1920s at any rate the Hollywood feature-film format demanded a successful resolution, requiring an exclusive reliance on the syntactical structure I’ve characterized as the “upper.” But the vast majority of slapstick comedies produced in America during the 1920s were one- and two-reel shorts, the resolutions of which were frequently

characterized by either a refusal to completely resolve the tensions between success and failure, or by “nihilistic” endings in which the resolution of the film represents a net loss to society: indeed, this is the form preferred, for example, by Laurel and Hardy.

VI. The Chase Film and the “Wild Ride”

During the nineteenth century, chases had been a staple of theatrical performances, and could be staged in several ways: in amphitheatres and hippodromes capacious enough to admit of large-scale spectacles involving the frenetic movement of large numbers of people and often also horses and equipages; around single proscenium sets; in vaudeville houses, chases could proceed through three or even four successive locales by closing in the wings in the first, second and third grooves as the characters ran back and forth across the stage; and by the use of treadmills and dioramas as they so often were later in Mack Sennett’s fun factory.

The earliest chase films, mostly single-shot affairs, were considerably less exciting. But once the foundations of the multi-shot chase have been laid with such films as “Personal,” and “Meet Me at the Fountain,” (both 1904), the cinematic chase becomes the centerpiece of screen comedy: the largest advertisements in all the trade papers are those for “The Escaped Lunatic” (Biograph, ca. Jan. 1904); “Grandfather As a Spook” (Biograph, ca. March 1904), “The Chicken Thief” (Biograph, ca. Dec. 1904), “Maniac Chase” (Edison, Oct. 1904), “The Trials and Troubles of an Automobilist” (Paley and Steiner, ca. Oct. 1904); “Willie’s Vacation” (Paley and Steiner, ca. Nov. 1904); “The Lost Child” (AMB, ca. Oct. 1904); “Duck Hunt” (Sheffield Photo Co., July 1904); and especially “The Counterfeiters” (Lubin, 11 Feb. 1905).

As we saw in Chapter 3, by 1908, the Lubin studio has bestowed its name on a distinctive “acrobatic” variant.

439 The outstanding example is the Act III chase in the Hanlon Brothers’ *Le voyage en Suisse*, which is reconstructed at length in Mark Cosdon’s *The Hanlon Brothers: From Daredevil Acrobatics to Spectacle Pantomime, 1833-1931* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009) p. 97. Many of the silent film comedians’ most inventive chases are likewise performed within single sets.

440 Including “Hooligan Visits Central Park” (Edison, July 1901); “The Hayseed’s Experience at Washington Monument” (Edison, July, 1901); “The Chicken Thief” (Lubin, 1902); “Chinese Laundry” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Down Where The Wurzburger Flows” (Edison, August 1903); “Farmer Chasing Trespassers” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “On Forbidden Ground” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Policeman Chasing Bathers” (Lubin, Jan 1903); “Turning the Tables” (Edison, Sept. 1903); and “A Scarecrow Tramp” (Robert W. Paul, May 1903).

441 The vogue continues through 1905-1906 with “ A Dog Lost, Strayed Or Stolen. $25.00 Reward. Apply To Mrs. Brown, 711 Park Ave.” (Lubin, 3 June 1905); “Raffles the Dog” (Edison, ca. July 1905); “Down On the Farm” (Edison, 2 Nov. 1905); “The Fake Blind Man” (Lubin, ca. May 1905); “Fun on the Farm” (Lubin, 18 Nov. 1905); “Photographed for the Rogues’ Gallery” (Lubin, May 1905); “Policeman’s Pal” (Lubin, ca. May 1905); “Poor Algy”
With the straightforwardly-motivated “ride-to-the-rescue” of such Griffith films as “An Unseen Enemy” (1912), and their elaboration by Mack Sennett in films like “Barney Oldfield’s Race for a Life” (1913) and “Teddy At the Throttle” (1917), the silent-movie chase reaches its classical form: a meditation on technological modernity in which speed represents an often literally salvific value. In the trope of the Wild Ride it expresses a passionate lust for life.

But its progress into its refined phase involved the escalation of a variety of thematic, narrative, and formal factors. In terms of narrative it involved, first of all, a complexification of protagonists’ motives in entering chases, and the introduction of an element of ambivalence: in many later chase films the hero’s participation is only partially voluntary – a typical example would be Larry Semon’s “The Clouddhopper” (1925), in which the chase of the villains is actually undertaken by Larry’s fiancée – he is only following her to save face. In terms of style, a heightened emphasis on speed is underlined by substantially quickened editing tempos (overall, but particularly during chase scenes). The period is likewise marked by a reduced reliance on stationary long-shots showing the protagonist’s vehicle in its headlong flight, as well as of shots from a camera mounted on some kind of dolly travelling in tandem with the chase vehicle. On the other hand, they show a vastly increased reliance on shots mounted on the speeding vehicle itself, as well as an increased contrast between long shots showing the racing vehicles and close-ups depicting the reactions of the participants. A stylistic nostalgia, characteristic of the mannerist phase, seems to be evidenced by a renewed experimentation with techniques characteristic of the cinema of attractions: for example, the use of subjective-camera mobile framings as in the old “phantom rides,” or experimentation with radical contrasts of shot scale.

On the level of mise-en-scène, there is a gradual increase in scale which had already begun in the late 1910s; a continuing proliferation of the number of vehicles involved in chases; a corresponding increase in the frequency and severity of collisions; and a widened range of vehicles employed within a single chase, frequently demonstrating an escalating pattern (for

(Edison, 5 Oct. 1905); “The Serenade” (Selig, 22 July 1905); “Three Jolly Dutchmen” (Paley and Steiner, ca. Jan. 1905); “Through the Matrimonial Agency” (Lubin, 28 Oct. 1905); “The Watermelon Patch” (Edison, 24 Oct. 1905); “The Jail Bird and How He Flew, A Farce Comedy Escape” (Vitagraph, ca. June 1906); “The Inexperienced Chauffeur” (Pathé Frères, Nov. 1906); “The Wig Chase” (Pathé Frères, 12 May 1906); “The Bicycle Robber” (Pathé Frères, ca. Jan. 1906); “Love vs. Title” (Vitagraph, ca. May 1906); “The Lost Leg of Mutton” (AMB, ca. June 1906); and “All Aboard!” (Vitagraph, June 1906).
example, from horses, wagons and bicycles to motorcycles, cars, trains and finally aeroplanes).\textsuperscript{442}

Most importantly, in terms of thematics it involved, in many films, an increasingly explicit association of the notions of “speed,” and “danger.”\textsuperscript{443} In these films the notion of “speed” – regarded since the 1880s as a distinctively American, unequivocally positive characteristic of contemporary urban culture – and the association of this notion of “speed” with a distinctively American attitude towards the place of aggression in civilized life – is undergoing a thorough revision. By the 1920s, like burlesque pugilism, the chase is expressing sober second thoughts.

Against the background of this trajectory of the chase film, a number of films seem to stand out which demonstrate a consistent set of deviations from the norm – the most important being that although they employ most of the distinguishing formal features of the chase, dramatically they are not chases – what they dramatize indeed, is simply a different form of “going berserk” – for example, in one of the earliest instances, Pathé’s “The Inexperienced Chauffeur” (1906):

An excellent example of the “cumulative chase” picture. An amateur automobilist is shown running amuck in the street. He overturns apple carts, bicyclists, baby carriages and pedestrians in his wild and dizzy flight and at each accident the victim arises and gives chase until a fair-sized crowd is in pursuit. The chase ends when the chauffeur bolts upon the sidewalk and wrecks a store. The crowd falls upon him and gets its revenge.\textsuperscript{444}

\textsuperscript{442} The foundations for this innovation are laid well within the early period: “The Serenade” (Selig, 22 July 1905) includes a foot chase which escalates to a car chase; and the chase of “Through the Matrimonial Agency” (Lubin, 28 Oct. 1905) also escalates to include automobile participants.

\textsuperscript{443} As in titles such as “Double Speed” (Sam Wood, 1920), four films entitled “Running Wild” – Jimmy Boland’s (Nicholas T. Barrows, 1921), Lige Conley’s (Norman Taurog, 1923), an Aesop’s Fables Studios version (1924) and another in the Collegians series (Nat Ross, 1927) – Jimmie Adams’ “Why Hurry?” (Christie, 1924) and “Step Fast,” (Christie, 1925), “The Mad Rush” (Albert Ray, Cameo, 1924), “Why Hesitate?” (Christie, 1925), Larry Semon’s “Kid Speed” (Larry Semon and Noel M. Smith, 1924), “Speed the Swede” (J. A Howe, 1923), “Fast and Furious” (Norman Taurog, 1924 – one of no less than six films of that title between 1915 and 1927), and Johnnie Hines’ “The Speed Spook” (Charles Hines, 1924) – not to mention Lloyd’s feature, \textit{Speedy} (Ted Wilde, 1928).

\textsuperscript{444} \textit{Variety}, 26 Jan. 1907, p. 11.
The same pattern underlies a succession of similar films all exploiting the same trope of the out-of-control conveyance, which may be a bicycle, a horse, a car, or even a washing machine. (Interestingly enough, before 1913 the majority of these really do seem to bear out the received conception of physical screen comedy as being of French origin.)

Virtually all of these films follow the same formula: a non-initiate acquires charge of a conveyance, runs amuck in it, and finally comes to a halt and is punished. By 1910, however, the subgenre seems to be losing its momentum: the number of films employing the trope annually seem to go through a marked decline. At the same time, a number of melodramas emerge – among them some serials – in which the Wild Ride is performed seriously, for thrills and not for comedy.

The influence of these serious “Wild Ride” films on the comedies is a special instance of the relationship between comic films and their sentimental-melodramatic counterparts. In the case of these, the effect is to add a gradually developing undertone of seriousness, and even gravity, to the hilarious evocation of the trope of “going berserk,” which may underlie an apparent resurgence of interest in the subgenre. Perhaps the best example comes in an early Keystone – “Mabel’s Nerve” (May 1914), which the Motion Picture World reviewers found the last word in screen comedy:

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445 The Amateur Rider” (Gaumont, June 1907); “The Near-Sighted Cyclist” (Eclipse, June 1907); “The Legless Runner” (Gaumont, June 1907); “A Restful Ride” (Gaumont, Jan. 1908); “Mr. and Mrs. Jollygood Go Tandemizing” (Pathé, March 1908); “Runaway Mother-In-Law” (Pathé, July 1908); “The Bewitched Tricycle” (Lux, July 1908); “In the Nick of Time” (Lubin, Sept. 1908); “Result of Eating Horseflesh” (Pathé, Oct. 1908); “Mother-In-Law Breaks All Records” (Pathé, Dec. 1908); “Woman Chauffeurs” (Pathé, Feb. 1909); “The Interrupted Joy Ride” (Edison, April 1909); “An Auto Maniac” (Vitagraph, April 1909); “He Couldn’t Lose Her” (Gaumont, May 1909); “Cyclist’s Horn,” (Gaumont, Aug. 1909); “The Horse and the Haystack” (Gaumont, Aug. 1909); and “The Motor Cyclist” (Raleigh and Robert, Dec. 1909).

446 Including “Gee, I Am Late” (Pathé, May 1910); “How Jones Won the Championship” (Lux, Oct. 1910); “The Phantom Rider” (Gaumont, Dec. 1910); “The Runaway Motor Car” (Pathé, Dec. 1910); “Cured” (Biograph, March, 1911); “The Motor Chair” (Éclair, Oct. 1911); “Tillie and The Fire Engine” (Hepwix, Feb. 1912); and “The Chauffeur’s Dream” (Kalem, July 1912).

447 A sampling of titles includes “Auto Smash-Up” (Gaumont, June 1912); “A Race With Time” (Kalem, Dec. 1912); “Roderick’s Ride” (Selig, Dec. 1912); “A Rough Ride With Nitroglycerine” (Selig, Dec. 1912); “The Wrong Pair” (Vitagraph, May 1913); “The Airman’s Bride” (Pathheplay July 1913); “A Perilous Ride” (Majestic, Sept. 1913); “The Last Minute” (Kleine, Nov. 1913); “The Joy Ride” (Pathé; MPW 1913.06.28 p. 1394); “Auto Polo—The New Thriller” (Pathheplay, Aug. 1913); “Broncho Billy’s Wild Ride” (Essanay, Aug. 1914); and “Bella’s Elopement” (Vitagraph, Sept. 1914). It is to these films that the Motion Picture World reviewers refer when speaking of “Wild Ride” films.

448 For example, in films like “Bumps and Willie” (Selig, Sept. 1913); “Alkali Ike’s Auto” (Essanay, Nov. 1913); “A Pair of Prodigals” (Vitagraph, Dec. 1913); “The Joy Riders” (Joker, Dec. 1913); “Going Some” (Crystal, March 1914); “A Strenuous Ride” (Lubin, April 1914); “His First Ride” (Selig, June 1914), “Spending It Quick” (Biograph, Aug. 1914); and “The Fatal Hansom” (Sterling, Dec. 1914).
"MABEL’S NERVE (Keystone), May 16.—Mack Sennett certainly had his nerve with him when he made this picture. It is so full of action and thrills that the spectator hasn’t time to draw his breath until the finish. This picture might be termed a thrilling melodramatic comedy. Mabel Normand’s gyrations on a bucking horse which finally leaps over a cliff with her, said to be 375 feet down, with a policeman who resembles Mack Sennett hanging to the horse’s tail is certainly some punch. What’s next.”

By the 1920s the subgenre has developed so far that the set of family resemblances which it bears is strong enough that one can hardly avoid postulating some kind of common point of origin which seems to underlie them all. These resemblances are strikingly reminiscent of the distinguishing features of the Metamorphose Act – so striking as to make a plausible case for viewing these films employing the “Wild Ride” trope as a reinvention of Pete Jenkins in a new media context:

1. **The protagonist finds him- or herself in circumstances which require him/her to undertake a dangerous high-speed ride involving some mode of conveyance. The nature of the ride often requires the protagonist to perform a series of extraordinary tricks or manoeuvres.**
2. **The staging of the ride is so configured that it evokes the feeling of a desperate struggle for control.**
3. **The climactic chase, against all probability, frequently incorporates actual horses.**
4. **The protagonist’s attempt to gain or retain control of the conveyance – and the conveyance’s intractability – involve his or her having to perform a variety of burlesque acrobatics and/or physical stunts (often tricked). The protagonists of these films repeatedly:**
   (a) **fall off the conveyance and are forced with much difficulty to get back on;**
   (b) **end up riding it backwards or upside down;**

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450 As in New Testament scholarship the hypothetical lost document Q underlies the pattern of resemblances and divergences between the Synoptic and Johannine gospels.
(c) clutch the vehicle with both hands while their legs kick out behind;
(d) attempt to walk upright along the vehicle under circumstances which make the simple act of walking require extraordinary effort;
(e) perform falls, flip-flaps, and other acrobatic and tumbling moves aboard the runaway vehicle;
(f) in the case of train chases, are forced to run along the top of the train in the direction opposite to that in which it is going so that, while the conveyance is thundering through the frame, the screen position of the protagonist’s image remains constant (i.e., the figure is both stationary and in motion).

5. The protagonist’s ride will frequently wreak havoc on her/his environment, and endanger a number of innocent bystanders.

6. In the course of the ride, the protagonist has a number of encounters with, and near-escapes from, serious misadventure, and typically at least one which seems momentarily to threaten his/her imminent and violent death.

7. In and through the course of the ride, the protagonist’s character is transformed and/or his/her true nature revealed.

8. The protagonist’s performance of the ride, against all probability, and, in some cases, despite its apparent miscarriage, is a success; in “upper” versions of the ride, this success is related to the transformation of the protagonist’s character. However, in “downer” versions, the success of the ride is ultimately meaningless, and this meaninglessness is related to a sense that the ride is simply a typical example of the protagonist’s maladjusted behavior.

9. In “upper” versions of the ride, the revelation/transformation of the protagonist’s true nature resolves the pivotal conflict in the story in favor of a reconciliation; but in “downer” or “bummer” versions, the comedy arises from its conspicuously failing to do so.

10. Stylistically, these films demonstrate a conspicuous use of point-of-view cinematography combined with mobile framings which usually align the audience’s optical perspective with that of the protagonist. Specifically, they rely heavily on the
use of subjective camera to evoke a sense of horror at key moments during the ride, especially at the “point of ritual death.”

These family resemblances even override the “class” distinctions between two major groups into which all of these films can be divided: the upper-class ones in which the chaos of the Ride is assimilated into a satisfying, sentimental romantic comedy feature, and the innumerable lower-class two-reelers which seem to scoff at a verisimilitude and a narrative integration of which they are simply incapable. In the former class we would situate films like *Sherlock Junior* (1924), *Girl Shy* (1924), and *For Heaven’s Sake* (1926); in the latter, films such as Larry Semon’s “the Cloudhopper (1925), Norman Taurog’s “Fast and Furious,” “The Joyrider” (Hal Roach, 1921), “Join the Circus” (George Jeske, 1923), and “Cheap Skates” (Norman Taurog, 1925), or the Monty Banks film “Racing Luck” (Herman C. Raymaker, 1924). We might also include many other films such as “Broken Bubbles” (Hank Mann, 1920), “The Steeplechaser” (Jack White, 1922 and Lex Neal, 1926; both with Lige Conley), Mack Sennett’s “Giddap” (Del Lord, 1925), and “Blue Black” (Albert Herman, 1926) with Wanda Wiley, which motivate the Ride as a sporting event: a horse race or a polo match.

As an example of a “bad” Wild Ride two-reeler of the Silver Age we might select Norman Taurog’s “Fast and Furious” (Educational/Mermaid, 1924), featuring Lige Conley, Otto Fries, John Rand, Ruth Hiatt and Spencer Bell. In the first of its two parts Lige, as the Demonstrator in a grocery store with an ill-tempered Manager and an irascible Boss with a

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451 I am here appropriating an important term of Northrop Frye’s from his analysis of the “mythos of comedy” in *The Anatomy of Criticism*. For Frye, the “point of ritual death,” is a “potentially tragic crisis near the end” of the story, which he compares structurally to the *stretto* in a fugue. [C.f. Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957) p. 179.] It typically occurs not at the height of the chase, but earlier on in it; and it signals a turning point in the protagonist’s motivation which in many cases is dramatically linked to a transformation of his/her character which will be produced through the climax. The “point of ritual death” thus marks a sudden escalation of the dramatic values figured in the chase (just as a fugal *stretto* marks the sudden heightening of the complexity of the counterpoint as the fugue enters its final section), from low comedy into high burlesque. What may have begun as a mere joyride has escalated, suddenly and with appalling absurdity, into a life-and-death struggle.

For Frye, the “point of ritual death” will often offer us a glimpse of the suffering human subject beneath the superficial lightheartedness of comedy: in Shakespeare “a clown, for instance, will make a speech near the end in which the buffoon’s mask suddenly falls off and we look straight into the face of a beaten and ridiculed slave.” Similarly the point of ritual death in the chase comedies of the 1920s will occasionally introduce a note of discordant seriousness into the comedy; we get a glimpse of the hero as a type of the desperate twentieth-century man, struggling to act meaningfully in a world in which he is the prey of mechanistic forces supposedly of his own making, but vastly beyond his ability to control them.
winsome Daughter, demonstrates a curious admixture of dexterity and clumsiness. He substitutes cement for pancake mix, tosses plates with the help of his blackface assistant Spencer (eventually smashing them all), and fits an undersized shoe to the oversized foot of a vain Old Maid. In Part II, the wicked Manager robs the Boss and makes away in a car with a gang of henchmen. Lige, witnessing these proceedings from the interior of a barrel into which he had fallen, leaps to the rescue, and the race is on. He runs to the stable and tries to pursue the miscreants on horseback but the saddle is fastened to the stable door; Lige falls to the ground and the horse runs away. Spencer arrives on a motorcycle and scoops Lige up on its handlebars, but a bump throws Spencer off and Lige careens through busy streets perched on the handlebars of a riderless motorcycle which crashes through a “Street Closed” barrier to pitch him headlong down a hill into a waiting car. Lige commandeers the car, but it disintegrates almost immediately. As the bad guys arrive at the station and mount a departing train, Lige steals another car while Spencer catches his foot in its rear bumper and is towed along behind it to be deposited in the middle of a railway switch; he narrowly misses being killed as the bad guys’ train thunders past him on the other side of the switch. Lige’s car overtakes and then steals a march on the train, and he parks it across the tracks at a crossing, gesturing to the driver to stop – but the train smashes the car to smithereens as Lige leaps from it at the last second. The trusty Spencer, however, arrives with a handcar, and the two pump away at the handle so hard that it projects Lige up onto the roof of the last car as they catch up to the train. Lige is thrown back onto the handcar, but seizes hold of the train, climbing hand over hand up the rear (his legs kicking out in the air behind him) as Spencer is pitched from the handcar into a cactus patch and runs away. Lige pursues the villains across the tops of the boxcars, but is thrown from the train. He runs to a nearby trestle bridge, however, and leaps from it back onto the train as it passes beneath. He seizes the stolen money from the villains and they pursue him back across the roofs of the boxcars as they pass through the frame. Lige jumps to the ground before an industrial station platform, followed by the bad guys, and runs along the platform and through the open back doors of a van parked at the end of it; the villains pursue him into the van; then Lige emerges, accompanied by two police officers who close and lock the rear doors of the van, which turns out to be a waiting Black Maria marked “Police Patrol.” As the Black Maria drives the villains off to jail, Lige falls off the edge of the platform into a mud puddle, still gripping the bag containing the recovered money.
With this we would do well to compare an example of a “good” Wild Ride with an “upper” ending from one of the features of a major comedy star of the same period: we could hardly do better than Harold Lloyd’s race-to-the-rescue of Jobyna Ralston at the climax of Fred C. Newmeyer’s Girl Shy (Pathé, 1924). Having discovered that Jobyna, whom he loves, is about to be married to a bigamist at her parents’ mansion in the big city, Harold runs through the dirt streets of his small town to the railroad station, but his chronic stutter is so bad that he is unable to request and pay for his ticket before the train pulls out of the station. Chasing the train along the tracks, he loses it, dashes to the street and tries to hitch rides with a succession of quirky drivers; eventually he steals a car belonging to a courting couple and rides away along a country road so bumpy that the car bucks like a broncho and is shortly ditched. Arriving in another town, he steals a bootlegger’s car, but is pursued by the plainclothesmen dogging the bootlegger; eventually he ends up riding along in the car under arrest, his hands held up – but seizing a tree branch he swings up out of the car and onto the back of a horse which carries him into the city. Throughout this sequence, frequent parallel editing creates suspense by showing us the preparations for Jobyna’s joyless marriage.

Thrown by his horse, Harold mounts the back of a passing fire engine and a car which is under tow before hijacking a street car which he races through busy streets, pitching a street-cleaner headlong into his garbage can, knocking over a woman’s parcels, and demolishing a fruit-seller’s barrow. When the boom connecting the streetcar to its overhead power cable comes loose, he climbs to the roof and reattaches it, sending the driverless streetcar speeding away down the street (to the consternation of a drunk who wakens inside the driverless car) with Harold balancing precariously on the roof. Seizing hold of the boom and dangling from it as the streetcar continues lurching downhill, he drops through the roof of a passing car into the passenger seat. Harold forces his foot down over the driver’s, pinning the accelerator to the floor of the car, which again careens through busy streets. When they’re stopped by a cop, Harold steals the policeman’s motorcycle. Throughout this sequence parallel editing shows Jobyna sadly being decked out in her bridal finery. Luxurious close-ups of her tearful eyes re-emphasize the stakes of the race.

As the wedding commences, Harold drives the motorcycle through a vegetable market and a public works ditch, scattering the labourers, then ditches the motorcycle and steals a garbage cart and wagon. He drives through a tunnel, strewing the sides of the road with the ditched vehicles of other motorists. As the horses thunder through the streets, the camera closing
up on their driving hindquarters, Harold ditches the wagon and leaps to the horses’ backs. The sequence is punctuated with smiling children cheering the hero as he gallops up the steps to the mansion, rushes in and seizes Jobyna in his arms just as she is about to say “I do.” He dashes, with her in his arms, out through the window of an upper room into the street, where he is finally able to propose to her. Amid tears of joy, the two true lovers collapse into each other’s arms.

1. & 2. Both of these films feature a protagonist compelled to struggle for control of the movement of his own body through space in order to accomplish a compelling goal. But the goal in “Fast and Furious” is conventional – we aren’t prepared to care about the financial fortunes of Lige’s Boss, and the hint of a possible flirtation between Lige and his daughter is undeveloped. He even undertakes the quest with an overblown conventional “histrionic” gesture redolent of self-parody. In Girl Shy, on the other hand, our interest in the deliverance of Jobyna is heavily overdetermined – beyond the attachment for her that has developed throughout the film, and the antagonism that we feel for her fiancé, a coincidental last-minute recognition by a customer who has happened to see the announcement of the wedding in Harold’s newspaper produces the additional information that he is a bigamist and a cad.

3. & 4. Both chases make conspicuous use of horses – in the case of Girl Shy, at both the beginning and the end of the chase. In both films, the chase follows a common escalating pattern, from older, more primitive forms of conveyance to more modern ones: in “Fast and Furious,” Lige graduates from horse to motorcycle to car to handcar to train; in Girl Crazy, Harold follows a more complex pattern which incorporates retrograde movements, going from foot to car, then back to horse, then forward to a streetcar; the film then follows a deescalating order, downgrading back to a succession of cars, then to a motorcycle, then to horse and cart, and finally to horseback. In the course of both pursuits, the protagonists execute the gamut of acrobatic tricks listed above.

5. & 7. Both chases leave a trail of wrecked vehicles in the wake of the Wild Ride. Girl Crazy is positively baroque in the extent and detail of the damage done to innocent bystanders by Harold’s pursuit of his love for Jobyna. In both cases, too, the protagonist’s inner heroism is revealed – perhaps significantly, it registers in direct proportion to the amount of damage he is willing to do to others’ persons, houses and papers in the pursuit of his goal. By the final third of Harold’s ride, even his victims are cheering him on.

452 While courting Jobyna, he is mean to Harold.
6. Both films feature a “point of ritual death”: in “Fast and Furious,” Lige momentarily looks from his car straight into the front of an approaching train and we share his optical perspective as it bears down on him. In *Girl Shy*, however, this point is demurely displaced onto the optical perspective of an unknown drunk in the careening streetcar: it is his point of view, and not Harold’s, that we share as the camera looks through the front window of the driverless streetcar at the suburban landscape speeding by. This is not an accident or an oversight: a fully realized “point of ritual death” in this chase would confuse the dramatic issues – the death of the soul which is to be averted here is Jobyna’s, not Harold’s. Nevertheless, this moment plays its customary structural function in the ride – after this point Harold ceases to be desperate and becomes determined; ceases to react to events, and starts to initiate them. His shyness (though not yet the stutter which is its principal symptom) has been overcome.

8. & 9. In “Fast and Furious,” Lige’s achievement is successful, but ultimately futile: it brings him no more than a nod from the police, and leaves him sitting in a mud puddle clutching someone else’s money. The “happy ending” is as hollowly conventional as the spirit in which the chase is undertaken. In *Girl Shy*, on the other hand, Harold is able at last to assert his manhood and redeem himself in Jobyna’s eyes. The film ends on a note of joyous reconciliation.

10. Both films employ subjective camera techniques to give the audience optical access to the characters’ experiences. In “Fast and Furious” the camera is mounted on a dolly behind (and attached to) the motorcycle on whose handlebars Lige is perched. The shot thus shows the character and vehicle from behind, in the foreground, and in the background the moving vista more or less as the character must see it. The effect of a hair’s-breadth escape is dramatically evoked by having vehicles cross the mid-ground of the frame as the character proceeds forward towards them; this effect can be considerably heightened by the employment of a longer-than-normal lens (which tends to flatten the perspective). The same effect is used at several points throughout the Wild Ride in *Girl Shy*.

But Taurog’s most dramatic effect is his evocation of the “point of ritual death” as seen by the eyes of his protagonist – an effect which is sidestepped in Newmeyer’s film.
79. 11:22 (3 sec.) LS: Another railway crossing. In the background, a clapboard industrial complex with the sign C. GANAHI overhead in the background, partially obscured by the roof of a building in the midground. Stationary framing; Oblique angle – the train tracks rise from lower R foreground to upper L midground; the road descends from R midground to lower L midground. Lige drives into frame R, and stops C, with the car in the middle of the upper of two sets of tracks in order to stop the train. (Fig. 5.9)

80. 11:25 (3 sec.) MS: The Car and Lige, seen from the same oblique angle, but at a shorter scale. He pulls the handbrake. (Stylistic solecism: 30° rule) (Fig. 5.10)

81. 11:28 (2 sec.) LS: The reverse of 79. Stationary framing: one set of tracks is at a sharply oblique angle up the R side of the frame from R foreground to R background; the other rises sharply from L midground to R background. The car is in the deep midground, C, a station house in the upper R background beside the tracks. The train steams into the extreme upper R background corner of frame. (Stylistic solecism – the axis has been crossed; the train tracks now rise from L to R, rather than from R to L as in 79) (Fig. 5.11)
82. 11:30 (1 sec.) MS: As in 80; Lige looks up L (instead of R) towards the oncoming train, reacts, holds up his hands signaling it to stop. (Stylistic solecism: because this cut violates the 180° rule, Lige’s look towards the train doesn’t match with the screen direction established in 81.) (Fig. 5.12)

83. 11:31 (2 sec.) XLS-LS Mobile framing – the camera bears down on Lige and his car, reducing the shot scale from XLS to LS: A side-on view of Lige’s car from the front of the oncoming train (subjective camera – but the POV is unattributed). The tracks run from the C foreground straight up the middle of the frame. Perspective is marked by a diagonal line of telephone poles from L background to deep LC background, and by more clapboard industrial buildings which extend from R background to deep RC background. The car is C of frame. Lige stands up so that his head and face occupy the vanishing point of the composition. He waves at the train to stop. (Fig. 5.13)

84. 11:33 (3 sec.) XLS-CU: As in 81. The train roars from the R background into the C midground. Lige jumps from the car to the midground R, and rolls on the ground as the train smashes through the car and barrels out of frame in CU in the foreground L. The debris of the car are strewn about the C foreground. (Fig. 5.14)
85. 11:36 (6 sec.) LS: Stationary framing; sharply oblique angle; frame is divided diagonally from the upper R to bottom L corners by the train. The train rushes across the C and upper L thirds of the screen and disappears from frame in L foreground. When it is gone, Lige collects himself, jumps back to his feet and steps L onto the tracks looking out L past the camera in the direction in which the train has just disappeared. (Fig. 5.15)

Taurog’s masterful work in this sequence exemplifies the stylistic priorities of the “bummer” school of short-subject slapstick filmmaking and utterly gives the lie to the film’s superficial impression of being cheap or haphazard. Once again, the mise-en-scène is messy, disorganized. The spectator’s difficulty in anchoring him-/herself amid this chaotic space is exacerbated by two formal solecisms just as the point of ritual death approaches: both the 30-degree and the 180-degree rules are disregarded, undercutting the spectator’s position of dominance over the image. The subjective-camera shot which marks the point of ritual death, however, is a perfectly composed and harmoniously balanced shot, in which the spectator’s gaze and the director’s converge on the plight of the protagonist, not as subject, but as object of an unmistakably sadistic gaze. The perspective is clearly not that of the engineer of the oncoming train – the camera is evidently positioned somewhere level with Lige’s midriff, i.e. just above the cow-catcher in the very front of the train. Significantly, this subjective-camera shot is from an unattributed point of view: that is, it is the type of shot which later became a distinguishing mark of the horror film.

Taurog’s attitude towards spatial continuity throughout “Fast and Furious” is almost entirely dismissive: Reel Two of the film abounds in discontinuities which result from the use of numerous obviously non-contiguous locations in adjacent shots. But he remains absolutely consistent in maintaining a steadily increasing tempo by restricting his use of locations to those which admit of a line of telephone poles marking the pace by running continuously down one side or another of the frame. Although the editing rhythms, taken by themselves, show no marked advance in cutting tempo, the use of the passing telephone poles to convey a sense of steadily increasing rhythm is consistent throughout the film. For Taurog the construction of a
consistent space is a secondary consideration. What is primary is the evocation of a virtually ‘apocalyptic’ sense of the passage of time.

In the comparison between “Fast and Furious” and Girl Shy, then, we have a classical opposition between two divergent paradigms for the employment of the Wild Ride trope in silent film comedy. In the former we have a “bad,” “downer” text with no big stars,\(^{453}\) that relies heavily on convention, plot- rather than character-driven, with virtually no “psychological motivation,” realized probably on a low budget amid a rough mise-en-scène through apparently negligent direction. This has resulted in a film loaded with directorial solecisms, improbable juxtapositions and patently “tricked” gags. In the latter, we have a “good,” “upper” text, featuring a major star supported by a highly compelling performance from a charismatic leading lady.\(^{454}\) Directed in a highly naturalistic mode, it subtly employs a wide variety of sophisticated cinematic techniques to rivet its audience’s attention to a most compelling drama liberally ornamented with convincingly executed but characteristic ‘slapstick’ hokum. The mise-en-scène is clean, even breathtakingly beautiful, the cinematography artistic in the extreme,\(^{455}\) and the virtuoso editing brilliantly orchestrates the movement of the action towards a rousing and even “cathartic” climax.

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\(^{453}\) (Though both Conley and Ruth Hiatt were highly reputable at the time.)

\(^{454}\) I don’t mean, of course, to suggest that “good,” big-budget films don’t sometimes have “downer” endings. Perhaps the best example of an “upper-class” Wild Ride sequence with a “bummer” ending, however, comes well after the conclusion of the silent period, with Edward F. Cline’s Never Give A Sucker An Even Break (1941). The chase from Never Give a Sucker an Even Break was released individually in the 1960s by Castle Films in a one-reel 8mm silent version entitled “Hurry Hurry.” This version can be found on YouTube at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqCllxxOfQ4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqCllxxOfQ4). In a perfectly baroque six-minute finale loaded with stunts and relying heavily on undercranking, W.C. Fields races a woman to the maternity hospital, under the mistaken impression that she is about to have a baby. In a variation on the kind of mobile shot which presents the character from behind in the foreground against the background of the terrain through which s/he moves, the film uses reverse-screen projection to present several wild subjective-camera shots as the view through Fields’ front windshield as seen from the POV of the horror-stricken woman in the back seat: the car’s headlong rush towards two other cars coming full tilt at it in the opposite direction so terrifies the woman that she faints and lies insensible in the back of the car as Fields skids around corners into oncoming vehicles, scatters pedestrians like chickens (they leap out of his path so quickly that their shoes remain in the street behind them), drives the wrong way up a ramp and through a freeway tunnel, and is hooked through the roof by the ends of a speeding fire engine’s extension ladders (on which one of the firemen executes much of the acrobatic horseplay typically performed by the protagonist in two-reel versions), to be deposited with a final crash in a heap outside the maternity hospital. Regaining consciousness, the woman protests indignantly at finding herself being wheeled down a hospital corridor on a gurney; in the meantime, Fields’ niece arrives in a taxi to find her uncle clambering out of the ruins of his car, muttering to himself how lucky he was not to have an accident. The entire episode has been a complete waste of time: Fields and his niece are even worse off than they were before, and the woman has been terrorized and outraged, rather than benefitted.

\(^{455}\) Notice in particular how the shot scales, particularly those depicting Jobyna’s grief, reduce in proportion to their proximity to the grand finale.
For all that, I think we want to pause and consider carefully whether we would prefer to think of both as genuine “slapstick” comedy; or whether we might not prefer after all to follow Walter Kerr in viewing *Girl Shy* – and, by extension, the work of the other great stars of the Silver Age – as essentially just “silent” comedy with slapstick, or even quasi-slapstick, flourishes. It’s not that both aren’t funny: both are. It’s not that both aren’t dramatic: both are. It’s not that both aren’t, in their diverse ways, carefully and artistically conceived and executed: both are. I’m not even sure whether it’s because “Fast and Furious” is primarily about violence, whereas *Girl Shy* isn’t – it’s about romance (i.e., sex). Part of it might simply be their function within a programme – by the 1920s, two-reelers served the purpose of curtain-raisers and weren’t intended to present profound experiences: they were simply intended to “loosen audiences up.” In part, it might be covered by a distinction parallel to that between “apocalyptic” and “reactionary” in horror films. But I can’t help feeling that many of these features are grounded in a different imaginative vision that that which underlies the two-reelers. I think it’s because a vital quality has been lost in the achievement of a maximally convincing, highly “realistic” film: something which only the main purpose of this chapter – a comparison with the nineteenth-century Metamorphose Act – can tease out.

VII. The Functions of Violent Physical Comedy

Before proceeding to try and do so, however, it seems appropriate to stop and inquire, now that we have some experience of the matter, what it is that the tropes of violent physical comedy uniquely do – whether in live performance, in film, or in any other medium? On the basis of this research the response would seem to be as follows:

i. *They get us to imagine pain.* This is in fact something that is very difficult to do, as the reader can verify for him- or herself if I ask them to recall a particularly painful experience in its intensity, or to imagine how somebody suffering in a particular way must feel. The typical response will be, “I can only vaguely recall,” or “I can’t imagine.” All healthy minds have innate resistances to the ideation of pain. But violent physical comedy stubbornly insists on making us represent often horrific pain to ourselves, as if we were really suffering it. We should regard this function as essentially ritual.

ii. *They get us to imagine pain in an inappropriate, absurd or playful context.* For comedy it is crucial that the pain we are ideating be both real and not real at the same time.
Perhaps this should be corrected to read, ‘(i)t must not be real, but we must be imagining it as real.’ Furthermore, the ‘reality’ of the pain must be “bracketed off” in a particular way that facilitates making game of it. This again, I would think, should be treated as a ritual function.

iii. *They confuse us about whose pain it is we are imagining.* For example, the Jenkins Act continually prompts us to use our own pain in gauging Pete’s – but then it reveals Pete’s pain to be all an illusion – it was our own pain we were thinking about after all. In more detail, we might even observe that the Pete Jenkins act confuses us about whether to engage/identify negatively with Pete (*i.e.*, in a hostile manner) or positively (*i.e.*, in an admiring manner). This time the “ritual” effect is complemented by a “communicational one” – they are constantly reminding us of something we are as constantly forgetting – that other people are at all times undergoing painful experiences just like our own.

iv. *They force us to acknowledge our pain by recognizing it in others and laughing at it* (rather, for instance, than screaming). Our laughter, in fact, betokens a recognition or anamnnesia, of something we’re all too prone to forget – we are not alone. They can thus help to reconcile us with others from whom our preoccupation with our own hurts has alienated us. This function (again, a ritual one) is a primary difference between humor and horror.

v. *They mock our pain.* By configuring it as a joke, an incongruity or an absurdity, they rob our pain of its seriousness, and even make us feel ashamed for having bestowed so much importance on it – however unconsciously. In a sense, they even punish us for having “taken ourselves so seriously” – and our willingness to submit to this process is what is known as “having a sense of humor.” This function has both ritual and communicational aspects.

vi. Finally, on occasion *they forgive us for having gotten so wrapped up in our own pain – often to the point of forgetting other people’s.* This is the major respect in which performances of violent physical comedy can be said to reconcile us to our pain; it has, again, both ritual and communicational aspects. Perhaps this is also why the Jenkins rider’s final benediction is so crucial to Mark Twain’s account in *Huckleberry Finn:* it reconciles us at the same time to each other as potential causes of our pain; as mutually implicated in it; and as fellow-sufferers from it. Consequently:

vii. *They can be used to transform painful feelings and thoughts into pleasurable ones.*
But at this point, it’s equally important for us to ask: how do the differences between the two media under discussion affect the pursuit of these aims in each? I shall try to approach this question by means of a detailed comparison throughout the following four parts of this chapter. In doing so, I shall try to keep in mind the major relevant differences between the two media, especially those which were discussed in Chapter Two:

i. In theatre, the spectator is bound by a direct ethical responsibility to the performer; there is social pressure on me, which a good performer will manipulate to our mutual advantage, to suppress some forms of responses and to exaggerate others. In film I am absolved of any direct responsibility to the image, though I may still be constrained by the sense of an indirect ethical relationship with the performer. Either way the control of the experience is no longer in the performer’s hands, but in those of the director and the institution that employs him.

ii. In theatre, I can communicate with the performer and influence the performance through my response. In film, I cannot, nor is anything analogous to a two-way “mirroring” process possible. Consequently, the kind of performance event in which “the ghost walks” is not possible in the screening of a film: instead, the goal is for the film to “get across.”

iii. In theatre the performance is, as it were, “grossly embodied,” subject to the same physical limitations as govern all bodies. Performers can hurt themselves, get out of breath, be only so visible, and so on. The cinematic “performance,” however is constructed out of elements contributed by many personnel, and is subject not to the rules governing bodies, but to those governing the projection of images. This enables my internal “embodiment” of the “performance” (my reading of it by “innervation”) to be more selective, but selective from a wider range of options.

iv. In theatre, the body of the performer is epistemologically privileged; it is more important than the other objects in the room. In film it is only one element among many of the mise-en-scène.

v. My ambivalence towards the “exhibitionism” of the performer is circumvented, since the performer never “shows” him- or herself, but is only shown by the director and the

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456 (i.e., I should not suffer myself to enjoy a snuff film or certain other forms of pornography; I should not become complicit in unethical documentary productions, etc.)
apparatus, who do not put themselves on display (even when they employ surrogates, as in the case of the film-within-a-film).

VIII. Knockabout and Slapstick: The Pete Jenkins Act and the “Wild Ride” Films

The difference between the bodily presence of the performer/character in live performance, and the corresponding absence in cinema unquestionably has consequences which make for far-reaching differences in what the two kinds of performance can actually accomplish. It is far easier for us to experience a Chaplin or a Keaton as “standing for something which is essential to all of us” than a live performer whose stubborn flesh-and-blood limitations resist translation into metaphor. For the early critic and film theorist André Bazin, presence is inevitably accompanied in the audience by an ambivalence which is indeed one of the major aesthetic differences between theatre and film as modes of dramatic representation. Citing the critic and theorist Rosenkrantz, he observes, “The characters on the screen are quite naturally objects of identification, while those on the stage are, rather, objects of mental opposition because their real presence gives them an objective reality and to transpose them into beings in an imaginary world the will of the spectator has to intervene actively, that is to say, to will to transform their physical reality into an abstraction. This abstraction being the result of a process of the intelligence that we can only ask of a person who is fully conscious.” Bazin glosses Rosenkrantz’ argument as follows:

A member of a film audience tends to identify himself with the film’s hero by a psychological process, the result of which is to turn the audience into a “mass” and to render emotion uniform. Just as in algebra if two numbers equal a third, then they are equal to one another, so here we can say, if two individuals identify themselves with a third, they identify themselves with one another.

At the basis of this fundamental difference in engagement between the two media is the essential ambivalence of the relationship between spectator and performer in live performance. Bazin uses the example of a comedian in a variety-theatre context:
Let us compare chorus girls on the stage and on the screen. On the screen they satisfy an unconscious sexual desire and when the hero joins them he satisfies the desire of the spectator in the proportion to which the latter has identified himself with the hero. On the stage the girls excite the onlooker as they would in real life. The result is that there is no identification with the hero. He becomes instead an object of jealousy and envy.

Thus, for Bazin, whereas the cinema operates by either pacifying or stimulating the consciousness of the spectator, the business of theatre is to find means of “lessening the psychological tension between spectator and actor.”\textsuperscript{457} As we’ve seen, the Pete Jenkins act accomplished this by making the spectator’s ambivalence about the performer a part of the raw material out of which the performance was composed. But the response generated by the live performance is always a personal response; always a specific one, limited to the here and now. It can never be “mass.” On the other hand, for Bazin, the cinematic image will inevitably fail to generate the kind of ambivalence which is a necessary precondition of a performance like the Pete Jenkins act.

But this involves us in the whole debate about the precise quality of the audience’s experience of the performer/character. On this issue there are a wide variety of schools of thought. On the one hand there is the psychoanalytic school, whose fundamental model for audience engagement is the unconscious process of secondary identification. On this model, some aspect of the character/performer is abstracted and the spectator’s notion of him/her becomes invested with a particular form of psychic energy known as ego-libido: on this account what the spectator is doing is attempting to incorporate the operative aspect of the performer into his/her notion of an ideal self, and the narrative in which the performer is involved into his/her notion of an ideal life. The audience experiences the physical vicissitudes which the performer undergoes in physical terms through ‘empathy.’

On the other hand, there is the cognitivist school, which maintains that we cannot reach any reliable conclusions about what the spectator is undergoing, or about what his/her

unconscious purposes are in participating in the performance by simple application of psychoanalytical dogma. Spectatorship can be satisfactorily accounted for in terms of the audience’s conscious production of a ‘reading’ of the experience. Perhaps the most thoroughly worked-out cognitivist account of film spectatorship is that of Murray Smith in Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion and the Cinema (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). For Smith, the spectator’s engagement in a film character’s experience begins with narrative: the spectator responds sympathetically to the character’s aims and objectives within the narrative, and only once his/her sympathy with the character is established (or antipathy in the case of villains) does the spectator then begin to employ his or her own sense of empathy in order to generate story information about the character’s feelings and sensations.

Thirdly, there is the phenomenological account, which differs from the two previous in that it begins, not with an ideation, but with the directly intuited physical engagement of the audience with the action onscreen, and then only proceeds to ideate it in various ways.

I would argue that in each of these approaches, the cinematic ‘performance’ is being treated as though it were somehow analogous in origin to a theatrical one – i.e., as though the performer’s presence or absence “didn’t really matter.” The theatrical performance as perceived by the spectator is an indexical signifier of a real performance which is at that moment actually going on in the space in which the spectator him-/herself is physically present. But the ‘performance’ created in the cinema is an arbitrary construction. There is no performance in the ‘real’ world to which it corresponds – and the cinematic spectator is usually aware of this. The consequence is that, however the cinematic spectator may feel subjectively, they are not ‘identifying’ or ‘empathizing’ with anything at all. The “character” with whom they are engaging doesn’t exist, even in the sense that a theatrical “character” exists as one of a theoretically infinite set of possibilities for the existence of the performer who plays it. In the cinema the character’s physicality (indeed, his/her entire “inner life”) is an imaginary construction produced spontaneously by the spectator in response to a set of formal cues on the model of his/her own self-image; it consists in other words, in neither empathy nor identification, but projection. The spectator, without knowing it, is fulfilling his or her essential desire to ‘see’ him- or herself.

On the personal level, then, the entire mode of engagement between the spectator and the performance is different in the Metamorphose Act and in the Hollywood “Wild Ride;” and this difference is a function of the differing ways in which embodiment and engagement function in
the diverse media. In live performance, engagement arises out of an initially embodied response which is wholesale, involuntary and indiscriminate – the spectator’s investment in the performance is full-bodied and selective only as a matter of degree. In the cinema, however, the opposite is the case – the embodiment of the spectator’s response arises out of his/her engagement in the narrative; it is voluntary and can be refused at any time. This is the function of what are called “media” – they give us voluntary control over our relations with other people and enable us to manage them and to be selective about how we choose to be affected.

Finally, the cinematic experience of embodiment is thoroughly selective – the spectator’s physical re-imagining of the experience is limited to an intuitive, but no longer genuinely ‘empathic’ response to those signifiers which the cinematographer photographs and the editor includes. The great innovation of film is in fact this principle of selectivity: not only the mode of engagement (empathy/identification), but its manner (through character or physicality, etc.) and its extent (by emphasizing only facial expressions, by using extreme long-shots or close-ups to make an audience concentrate on one aspect of physicality and forget the others, etc.). Filmmakers can therefore control the depth of audience engagement by simply including or excluding the signifiers of various aspects of character.

But I would argue that in the end, for the purposes of physical comedy, it doesn’t matter what your psychological model of engagement is: what matters is the way in which comic technique causes the spectator’s engagement with the character to oscillate humorously until s/he is thoroughly confused about whose pain it is on the block. Both knockabout and slapstick technique apparently include resources for doing so. Depending on what is meant by “whose pain,” we might speak of the performance as resonating on personal, social, political and even ritual levels.

IX. The “Wild Ride” – Personal Resonances and the Mechanical Doll

“Upper” features like Lloyd’s *Girl Shy* use flawless continuity techniques to evoke a compelling sense of a unified, consistent diegetic world, and invite us to engage with their characters with varying degrees of sympathy, empathy, projection, or, if you will, “identification.” But “downer-” or “bummer-” style short subjects usually do the opposite: on the contrary, the characters seem to be arbitrarily pulled together out of fragments, assembled out of the bits and pieces of various shots of repetitive situations. These representations acquire a distinctive and very amusing puppet-like nature which relies heavily on what we tend to think of
as “bad” acting. The audience is under no illusions about encountering the realistic presentation of a unique individual’s experience of a dramatic situation. S/he is “playing” with a novel sort of mechanical doll. The “mechanical doll” aspect of the two-reeler slapstick clown evokes in the audience a peculiar ambivalence – even a form of contempt – which is in every way analogous to that courted by the Pete Jenkins character at the beginning of his act. Like any toy, this slapstick clown invites us to discharge our sadistic feelings on him/her, as one might draw inappropriate faces on a paper cutout. The spectator’s response to a slapstick performance involves a complex oscillation of positive and negative feelings; of sympathy and antipathy or, in the language of the psychoanalysts, of identification and alienation, which slapstick filmmakers of the “bummer” variety skillfully exploit. In fact, it is in the shifting patterns of audience alignment that we can most readily discern the outlines of a game analogous to the reversals of the Pete Jenkins act. In “Fast and Furious,” the audience’s wish to “identify” conventionally with the protagonist in the successful pursuit of his goal is unremittingly spoofed in unforeseen ways – some of which require the (tactical) employment of stylistic solecisms (i.e. “bad” filmmaking). The “catharsis” which “Fast and Furious” pursues is a very different one from that of Girl Shy. At its conclusion, to the extent that the audience has “identified” with Lige, they find that the joke is on them.

X. The “Wild Ride” – Speed, Space and Social Resonance

Both the Pete Jenkins act and the Wild Ride have particular associations with speed. The increasing speed of the voltige horse’s circuits around the ring is both a performative and a political signifier: the speed of the horse’s galloping is synchronized with the Jenkins performer’s surprise acquisition and display of mastery. “Superior speed” was indeed one of the hallmarks by which “American civilization” had already begun to assert itself not only internally, but also internationally, by the beginning of the Civil War. But by the 1920s, the American obsession with speed as an unequivocally positive value, had begun to generate its own negation.

In her cogent and highly insightful chapter, “Car Wreckers and Home Lovers: The Automobile in Silent Slapstick,” Karen Beckman effectively contrasts a positive engagement with speed as evinced in the work of Keaton and Lloyd with a tacit opposition to the same demonstrated “repeatedly and actively” by Laurel and Hardy. But she overlooks the explicit

458 (And with the “structural mechanisms that underlie consumerism and capitalism” associated with it.)
articulation of “the Traffic Problem” by the “minor majority” of slapstick comedians – Mack Sennett preeminent among them – which Noël Carroll, among others, has correctly identified. As Carroll observes,

As the Keystone Kops run to the rescue, members of the force are continually lost, continually dropping out. The force is perpetually disintegrating. In Sennett’s race films, like *Lizzies of the Field*, the speed of the contests literally cause (sic) the cars to break up, leaving a trail of auto parts behind. Automobiles hurl through the air sending tires and gears in every direction. Part of the significance of Sennett chases involves the literalization of fears about the pace of modern life. That is, Sennett literalizes the belief that the accelerated pace of life, especially in light of the slow-paced, rural background of most of the proletarian audience, is inherently destructive; society would, like the lizzies, buckle and break apart under the intensified velocity.\(^{460}\)

As speed is a major social signifier both in the Pete Jenkins act and in the slapstick chases of the 1920s, so the space of these presentations is the major formal register on which their social resonances are felt. It therefore behooves us to contrast the formal construction of space in each. In the Pete Jenkins act, the space is circular: it is, in effect, a magic circle, and the increasing speed with which the transformed character describes that circle formally associates the act’s accomplishment of unanimity with the ‘performance’ of perfection, wholeness, completeness.

In “upper” slapstick films (as in films in general), space is linear: distance is only a function of the time it takes to get from one shot to another. Space itself is orderly; it is only Harold’s movement through it which is wild and apparently anarchic. The world which he disrupts is essentially stable, and will pick itself up and dust itself off after he is gone.

The diegeses of “downer” films, however, reflect a fundamental instability: their mise-en-scène is messy, disorderly; it abounds in unpicturesque images of partially-developed suburbs and industrial areas. It is a world which is continually under construction; eternally unfinished.

The protagonist’s wild ride which litters it with knocked-down “Danger” signs, the fragments of broken barriers, scaffolding and auto parts could, one feels, bring it all down any time like a house of cards. This sense of an incomplete, partially constructed diegesis, represented through incomplete, flawed continuity editing, gives the impression of simple cheapness, of low-budget cheesiness. But formally this has to be viewed as a skillful rhetorical technique which softens an insistent social message: the stability of society is threatened by its own preoccupation with speed: like the automobile in the hands of the protagonist, like the Hollywood entertainment factory in Never Give a Sucker an Even Break, civilization itself is like a gigantic “crazy machine” in the grip of something dangerous which is going out of control. Unlike the reassuring features which resolve in the union of the Comedian and the Girl, the “bummer” short subjects depict a universe which is hastening towards entropy.

If the Metamorphose Act, then, employed the speedy navigation of a charmed circle as a physical metaphor for social unity, the features of the 1920s replace the vision with one of twentieth-century progress hastening in a straight line towards a Happy Ending; a comfortable prospect with which the two-reelers take serious issue.

XI. Society as a Crazy Machine: The “Wild Ride’s” Political Resonances

The political resonances of the Pete Jenkins act – at least as evoked by Mark Twain – seem in some respect harmonious with those of the medieval carnival as evoked by Bakhtin: a utopian vision of inclusivity. Slapstick features would likewise seem to solicit a reading in terms of a utopian vision of sorts, insofar as the resolution of the story can be read, not metonymically, but rather according to the traditional metaphor, in which the uniting of the lovers stands as a figure for a regenerated society. There still seems to be some trace of a ritual of inclusion here as well – the hero is trying to prove himself, or redeem himself socially in order to win the hand of the Girl and achieve a respectable place in society. To that extent, they function very much like “reactionary” horror films as described by Robin Wood: whatever behavioural or social problem is signified by the comedian’s tendency to produce absurd or inappropriate actions is solved by the end of the film, and the ultimate effect is reassuring.

But in those shorts which I’ve considered under the heading of “bummers,” the problem seems to be less with the fact that the protagonist is a misfit than with society itself. Their vision is ultimately dystopian, unlike that of the Bakhtinian carnival. Very often the happy ending itself reads as arbitrary and unsatisfactory: the action of the film has raised questions, stirred
uncertainties – for example, those surrounding the problem of speed – which cannot be resolved on the personal level.

If these films seem to depreciate the fixity and regularity of space, they represent at the same time an insistence and emphasis on the priority of time. The world in these films is therefore the inverse of the one we experience: whereas in the latter time is a function of space in the sense that objects are present or absent to us in proportion to the amount of time it takes us to get to them; in the former the space of the diegesis is organized as a function of the temporal sequence of the narrative. Distance is measured in terms of rhythm and tempo; and the message repeatedly encrypted into the steadily increasing tempi of these films is that what is of the essence is time – and that it is running out.

The vision is a poetical one, but it has political consequences, because the social vision out of which it arises is horrific – though perhaps it would be better to say that it is a vision which is equally susceptible of comedic or horrific treatment. As some commentators have observed, Henri Bergson’s famous formulation of the comic as residing in the “encrustation of the mechanical on the human” is as handy a formula for the evocation of a sense of horror as of laughter – as a critical tool, it applies equally well to the Frankenstein monster as to Charlie Chaplin. The difference, as Noël Carroll has pointed out, is really only a matter of style as it affects reception: that is, of how the audience’s sympathies and point of view are aligned in order either to evoke an explicit sense of fear, or to forestall it by foregrounding the incongruity of the presentation.

Perhaps this is the reason why these films possess such a strong affinity with those of the political avant-garde of the first part of the twentieth century: particularly why we find the “wild ride” itself quoted conspicuously in René Clair’s 1924 Dadaist critique of bourgeois social and political values, *Entr’acte*. Just like the films in the “wild ride” group, *Entr’acte* sends its protagonist on an extended escapade aboard an out-of-control hearse; an equipage which, if everybody has not already used it, everybody someday will. Just like the “wild ride” films, *Entr’acte* engages in outrageous horseplay, and uses subjective camera to align the audience’s perspective with the protagonist’s while at the same time placing them within an ambiguous and

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462 I’m much indebted to Dr. James Cahill of the Cinema Studies Institute, University of Toronto, for drawing this example to my attention.
unstable oscillating pattern of alternating sympathy and antipathy. The difference here, of course, is that the protagonist is a dead corpse, stubbornly but futilely resisting its own burial and thus making a mockery of its own obsequies.

XII. Ritual Resonances of the “Wild Ride”

If the Pete Jenkins act was a drama of inclusion for the audiences of the nineteenth century; one which operated to exorcize the evil spirits generated by American expansionism, we can nevertheless not claim that it was 100 per cent efficacious: it didn’t prevent the Civil War, for example, or, apparently, even slow down its coming; nor does it seem to have accomplished anything towards easing the racial tensions which the Civil Rights Bill attempted, and ultimately failed, to address. Indeed, in relation to these aims it may even have been counterproductive, if it at least worked to soothe the consciences of the members of the dominant, hegemonic elements in American society and helped to confirm them in their faith in their own cultural supremacy. But for Mark Twain it apparently suggested a pattern, provided a cultural template, for Americans to survive their internal social, political and military conflicts, to purge them of their shame and even to revise these into something ennobling – into sources of strength and inspiration for future generations; that is, into something like a myth or a legend which can be ritually rehearsed.

The Civil War period was indeed a critical turning point in the foundation of the American *habitus* of the twentieth century. It furnished the American symbolic vocabulary with a vast array of expressions – in the language of this study, of tropes – which function as not merely descriptors but as repositories for the values and virtues they enshrine. The knocking about of a man’s body in order to facilitate the miraculous production of an unforeseen and transcendent unity – a trope not unprecedented in the cultural history of the West – thus acquires a distinctively American character, and provides a cultural resource for the benefit of future generations.

Perhaps it was, therefore, appropriate to hope that these films might have a certain ritual quality, just as their antecedents in nineteenth-century knockabout had. On analysis, both “bummer” films like “Fast and Furious” and star vehicles like *Girl Shy* can be shown without straining credulity to *rehearse* performative artifacts or templates from the past – not individual pasts, but the social past – in order to fortify Americans against the new challenges of the 1920s.
It is to this quality of rehearsal that we can attribute the essentially ritual attribute of repetition in these presentations.

But of course this is not to claim that the contents of these films are to be explained exclusively in terms of ritual, or even to assume that their ritual function is the primary one. On the contrary, the “wild ride” films of the twenties are clearly intended to operate primarily on the personal level – that is, as entertainment. Their main pragmatic function was to prepare audiences for the main pictures on the programmes of the picture palaces of the 1920s. They accomplished this end by inscribing a message in purely physical terms – not satisfactorily translatable into language – on the bodies of the audience, addressing each individual in somatic terms: “Loosen up/Open up.”

At the same time, this hypothesis must be seriously qualified as a result of the problem of presence. But it is difficult to see how there can be anything like the ritual engagement which is so prominent in the Pete Jenkins act when the Pete Jenkins performer stands up and returns the audience’s gaze, proclaiming their absolution and pronouncing a formal benediction on his exit. In the Metamorphose Act, visual pleasure and ritual fulfill each other: searching for oneself, one finds and is united with the Other through an act of playful mockery. On the other hand, a movie cannot mock a person; a movie cannot hold a person responsible; and a movie has no power to forgive.

But is there really no genuine “breaking of the fourth wall” in the cinema; no genuine possibility for the experience of a reciprocal gaze? Peggy Phelan, in her essay “Developing the Negative: Mapplethorpe, Schor, and Sherman,” suggests otherwise. Photography, though it operates within the “reproductive economy,” is nevertheless “fundamentally performative;” “To recognize oneself in a portrait (and in a mirror) one imitates the image one imagines the other sees.” In composing a shot so as to structure the audience’s gaze as an exact imitation of one’s own, a director or cinematographer may provide circumstances which will enable the spectator to make an intuitive leap: to encounter the director’s subjectivity in the course of enacting his/her own:

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463 “… the symmetrical drive of spectatorship: the desire to see always touches the desire to be seen … Unable to reverse her own gaze (the eyes obstinately look only outside the self), the subject is forced to detour through the other to see herself.” Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 147.

The performative nature of portrait photography complicates the traditional claims of the camera to reproduce an authentic ‘real’ … Reproduction within portrait photography is always a double copy: an imitation of the gaze of the other and a copy of the negative.\textsuperscript{465}

It is not unlikely, then, that at some common point within the “wild ride” film, a moment will come when the optical structure of the experience will be so heavily overdetermined that the spectator cannot fail to be confronted with the conditions for this mutual encounter; and to find it to be the point of maximum vulnerability, a point at which all humans are metonymically interchangeable one with another.

At moments like that of the “point of ritual death,” when one’s life-or-death engagement in a film is playfully deflated, the viewer can suddenly realize that his or her gaze has been anticipated and structured by another’s. One is not merely looking – one is looking back. The film bears the filmmaker’s gaze to the spectator who sees it; it ‘looks back’ at the spectator, returns his/her gaze at the same time as both gazes converge in the mutual construction of the ‘character.’ There is a hint that his situation is metaphorically the situation of us all – and it manifests the ultimate threat which underlies every act of violence. But this feature of the slapstick chase cannot be proposed of the hypothetical Spectator: it depends on an ineluctibly individual response – everything depends on the spectator’s unique ability to project his/her own perceptions intuitively into an apperception of the Other. Sometimes it will happen and sometimes it won’t. And to some people it will never happen at all. For some people, films have no ritual level, because those people are not able to respond to films on that level. But for those for whom it is possible, it constitutes the most intensive degree of “opening up.”

Taurog’s staging of the “point of ritual death” in “Fast and Furious” gives an excellent example of the way in which films of the “downer” or “bummer” class of 1920s slapstick chase films merit the parallel I have drawn between them and Robin Wood’s class of “apocalyptic” horror films. Unlike the “upbeat” features of the major comedians – which in their squeamish handling of features like the point of ritual death, show themselves parallel to Wood’s “reactionary” horror films – they use comedic technique to face up to the hidden horrors of

twentieth-century life; and in doing so, they attempt, with however qualified success, to approximate the ritual efficacy of the model to which they look back.

Moreover, they demonstrate the re-invention in a new context of a trope which has passed into disuse in an old one. What is genuinely striking about these tropes is their tendency to re-emerge in different settings, as the Juggernaut trope does again in yet another context during the Cold War. In the figure of Slim Pickens’ Major (“King”) Kong, Pete Jenkins is revived, this time in a quite literally apocalyptic image, lustily waving his hat and whooping astride the 20-megaton nuclear missile which will shortly plunge the world into nuclear night in the closing moments of Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove: or, How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Its recurrent iterations demonstrate how the motif which I have called the Juggernaut has repeatedly found expression in three distinct periods, bearing distinct sets of personal, social, political and ritual meanings.

466 Kubrick’s recapitulation of the “wild ride” motif is only one of two allusions to major slapstick tropes with which he originally planned to end *Dr. Strangelove*; the War Room scenes were at first intended to terminate in an all-out pie fight – presumably intercut with selections from the montage of mushroom clouds in which the film now terminates. C.f. Joseph Gelmis, “An Interview with Stanley Kubrick (1969)” in The Film Director as Superstar (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970, p. 309). The particular allusion is to another Sennett film – “Villa of the Movies” (Triangle-Keystone, 1917), in which Bobby Dunn rides into battle astride a giant mortar shell.
Chapter 6
Trope 3: One, Two, Three, Bounce! – Knockabout Song and Dance and the Slapstick Pie-Fight

Of all the chapters in this thesis, this chapter and the next will best illustrate why, in my opinion, given that slapstick comedy consisted primarily in a style of performance and only secondarily in a genre of film, it is necessary to be able to give a histrionic – that is, an “actor-ly” – account of why and how it’s supposed to work. The reason is that the essence of performance style resides in performance technique.\textsuperscript{467} and we cannot adequately understand the style within which a performer is working unless we know the rudiments of his/her physical technique. The task of this chapter will be to examine the historical record in order to discover what light can be shed on the fundamental characteristics of knockabout and slapstick performance technique, and particularly their characteristic employment of patterns of repetition – that is, their distinctive use of rhythm.

I. Knockabout Song and Dance

The earliest performers actually known as “knockabouts” whom we encounter in American newspapers (I’ll revert to British knockaboutism later) are not necessarily burlesque prize fighters, nor (as I discovered with some surprise) even tumblers, but song and dance men working in the blackface minstrel style. In this chapter, I’ll explore the relationship between song and dance – primarily dance – and civil violence, and attempt to estimate their influence over the knockabout and slapstick performance styles. Throughout this discussion, I’m going to take it as axiomatic that dance, as the discipline in which the potentialities of the elements of performative movement are autonomously explored and developed, is the proving ground for stylistic innovation in other performance forms which employ movement, just as poetry is the proving ground for developments in literary style, and fine art the proving ground for developments in such applied arts as theatrical set design, architecture, and even urban planning.

\textsuperscript{467}This is a fortiori so of genres like bel canto opera or slapstick comedy which are not defined by any definitive generic markers other than by the style in which they are performed.
Another premise that I’m going to take as axiomatic is the rootedness of dance technique in the performance of instrumental violence. Richard Schechner’s *The Future of Ritual*\(^{468}\) is only one among many works, to which I might refer the reader, that studies the origins of dance in tribal rituals in which the outcomes of military encounters are decided by performances between the champions of the belligerents. For present purposes, however, I’ll confine my remarks to drawing attention to the roots of classical ballet in the *ballets de cour* of Catherine de’ Medici: this topic has been covered in admirable detail by Kate van Orden in *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France* – see particularly her third chapter, “Violence, Dance and *Ballet de Cour*.”\(^{469}\) It should not surprise us therefore to find that ballet dancing, though still a popular rather than an elite performance practice, should carry with it associations of the remains of renaissance military culture, and the *code duello*. American popular dance, on the other hand, particularly jig and clog dancing, was equally associated in the popular mind as a leisure pursuit with pugilism – indeed, many song and dance men of the postbellum variety theatre were likewise pugilists, some of them as notorious for their performances offstage as on.\(^{470}\) Many pugilists were likewise song-and-dance men – for instance, Sam Collyer, one of the protagonists of the “Gallant Ring Encounter” cited in Chapter 3 of this thesis, was also a jig dancer who performed together with his sons, in addition to appearing in variety theatres as a fighter.\(^{471}\)

The development of dance in variety performances in the United States after the Civil War shows an unmistakable trajectory:

Do you recall how the song and dance of the variety stage used to be pretty, graceful and softly sentimental? Then it became gradually athletic, until at present it is almost altogether a knock-about matter …\(^{472}\)

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\(^{470}\) A good example is William Butler, of the song-and-dance team of Butler and McIntyre, who on one occasion was arrested and fined for severely punishing in an impromptu prize-fight a theatre proprietor who had impounded his wardrobe against the proceeds from a benefit performance. *C.f. The New York Clipper* Feb. 13, 1875, p. 367.

\(^{471}\) *The New York Clipper*, April 16, 1870; Collyer’s son Johnny was likewise an Indian club performer – c.f. *Clipper*, July 9, 1879, p. 111.

Somewhat more detailed are the comments of an anonymous “stage manager,” (i.e., a theatre proprietor):

There have been a great many changes in the variety business within my recollection … Song and dance business has undergone a complete revolution within a decade. Originally it was all of the neat order – that is the performers were attractively dressed and did pretty steps in a graceful manner. Then came the acrobatic style, originated by Tommy Granger, in which though the dress continued the same, the performer introduced somersaults and other tumbling feats. Then came the rough knockabout type, which has so long been popular, having been made more so by being done simultaneously by four performers.

These performances had traditionally taken the form of competitions:

One of the strongest attractions in the old days was jig dancing, something that is now seldom made a feature of by itself … One of the most attractive performances that an old-time manager could announce was a match between two jig dancers. Such a thing is almost unknown at present and it has been several years since one of these contests took place…

Indeed, the second half of the nineteenth century demonstrates an almost startling resurgence in the expression of bellicose energies through dance, which accelerates through the century’s final quarter. This seems consistent with the increased aggressiveness demonstrated by comic performances in general that Albert F. McLean Jr. describes in American Vaudeville as

473 Although I’ve done several searches on Tommy Granger, I’ve been unable to learn more than that a minstrel performer of that name was active in the New England area between the years 1875 and 1886, apparently working solo during his early years, but later appearing with the California Minstrels and Leroux and Silvo’s World’s Minstrels during their appearances in Washington, D.C.

Ritual.475 The tendency, though it is evidently under way before the war, as evidenced by the appearance of performances like “The Ruction Jig” – choreographed by John P. Hogan in 1859476 – as well as the testimony of the Ethiopian sketches, only picks up speed during the early 1870s, apparently in the wake of the international success of America’s premier song and dance duo, Delehanty and Hengler.

A variety of forms of bellicose dance performance sprang up during the 1870s. One of the most popular was a nexus of related performance types known variously as “statue clog dancing,” “combat clog dancing,” and “combat statue clog dancing.” During the 1870s it was practiced largely by male-female teams like M. et Mme. D’Omer or Billy Noonan and Alice Bateman, and involved the use of swords that were actually edged, as we learn from a report on M. Renrut, who succeeded M. D’Omer,477 and was seriously wounded at a performance during which he handled them incautiously.478 In many cases these teams also practiced burlesque prize fights. During the 1880s, however, the “combat statue clog” dance was taken over and elaborated by all the major minstrel combinations. Although the newspaper descriptions of their performances are frustratingly vague,479 they at least reveal that one of the major repeated selling points of the minstrel-combination combat clog was that, like the mayhem in “High Jack the Heeler,” its choreography was organized around a dramatic allegory:

…Pike’s Opera House./BARLOW, WILSON, PRIMROSE AND WEST’S MINSTRELS./Commencing Monday, we are to have at Pike’s a week of pure minstrelsy by this fine troupe… OUR OLIO OF SPECIALTIES… The Great Allegorical Combat Clog, with calcium light effects, by Primrose and West, Kennedy and Doyle, Fox and Ward, Peasley and Vennetta. The gentlemen presenting

475 (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1965).
477 M. D’Omer, a.k.a. Michael William Dooley, died of consumption at the age of about 35 in February, 1879.
479 They mostly recycle the copy of publicity circulars issued by the combinations themselves and designed to whet the reader’s curiosity rather than to satisfy it.
this magnificent spectacle have been selected for their proficiency
in the art which they interpret, defying competition.\footnote{480}

In the years following the paradigmatic success of Delehanty and Hengler, a profusion of
song and dance teams emerges, each featuring a more extravagant (and violent) movement style
than the last. The earliest group to emerge is the “acrobatic song and dance” team.\footnote{481} They are
followed by the specialists in what was known during the 1870s and 1880s as “break-neck song
and dance.”\footnote{482} Finally, by the end of the 1870s, we see the emergence of “knockabout song and
dance.”\footnote{483} “Break-neck song and dance” was apparently distinguishable from “knockabout song
and dance,” though teams could move across categories – usually in the direction from a less
violent manifestation of the style to a more.\footnote{484} This evidence therefore seems to agree with the
accounts of contemporaries that the pattern of increasing violence did actually occur, and was
not simply an expression of nostalgia influenced by the conviction that the world has been
gradually becoming a more, rather than a less, violent place.

The exportation of American minstrelsy to Britain was already well under way by the late
1840s, and the presence of American-style minstrel song and dance teams in England is well
entrenched by the mid-1870s when the first dedicated knockabout teams begin to appear there as
well. These seem mostly to be song and dance artists. Throughout the period from 1875-1894,
however, a wide variety of forms of “knockabout” performance begin to emerge in Britain
outside of the minstrel matrix (including knockabout sketch artists, performers in various genres
billing themselves simply as “Knockabout Artistes,” “Grotesque” and “Eccentric Knockabout
Artistes,” etc.) – beginning with “Irish Knockabout.”\footnote{485} Minstrel knockabouts comprise a large
proportion of those advertising themselves as “knockabout song and dance” performers; most of

\footnote{481} For a chart of the major acrobatic song and dance performers of the 1870s–1890s, please see Appendix 6, Chart 6.1.
\footnote{482} For a chart of the major breakneck song and dance performers of the 1870s–1890s, please see Appendix 6, Chart 6.2.
\footnote{483} For a chart of the major knockabout song and dance performers of the 1870s–1890s, please see Appendix 6, Chart 6.3.
\footnote{484} Examples include the American Four and Keating and Flynn, who begin as “break-neck song and dance” teams,
but who begin to call themselves “knockabouts” during the mid-1880s.
\footnote{485} For a chart of the major British minstrel knockabout teams of the 1870s–1890s, please see Appendix 6, Chart 6.4.
them also advertise a burlesque prize fight or wrestling match. The minstrels Crumley and De Forrest are the first song-and-dance team explicitly acknowledged as knockabout performers – a term which in Britain up to this point is reserved for application to circus clowns.

II. Neat Song and Dance 1860–1875

Acrobatic song and dance teams seem first to appear and draw comment around 1875; they are rapidly followed about 1876-1877 by the “break-neck” song and dance teams, many of whom then move on during the early 1880s to be recognized as “knockabout song and dance men.” The trajectory seems to imply a gradual accretion of techniques to the basic pattern of the neat song-and-dance as practiced by American teams like Thompson and Kerns, Egan and Evans, the Reynolds Brothers, Quilter and Goodrich, and, especially, Delehanty and Hengler.

The technique of neat song-and-dance on the variety stages of Britain and America is described in detail in a succession of primers entitled *Jig and Clog Dancing Without a Master* or *Jig and Clog Dancing Made Easy*, which were widely published throughout the second half of the century, in editions by Clifford (1864), Buckley (1869) and James (1873), as well as by the Irish “champion dancer” Dick Sands and the Canadian dancer and choreographer John P. Hogan. The essence of clog and jig-dancing techniques is the rapid transferral of the weight of the entire body among the balls and heels of the two feet in such a way that the body seems to become light and to travel unrestrained by gravity. The spectator’s attention is continually distracted from this process of weight transferral by the production of percussive sounds of various kinds – usually the tapping of the heel or toe against the floor – at the same time. This

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486 For a chart of the major British knockabout song and dance teams of the 1870s–1890s, please see Appendix 6, Chart 6.5. For a chart of the major American and British knockabout burlesque prize-fight acts please see Appendix 4.A, Charts 4.1.1 and 4.1.2

487 *New York Clipper*, Dec. 6, 1879 p. 294: “Tony Pastor’s Theatre … Crumley and De Forest (sic) excel as acrobatic song-and-dance men and knock-about comedians, and one wonders why they do not receive some serious injuries during their frolics, which are apparently so dangerous – their feats of high-kicking rank with the best that we have seen.”

488 Emerson and Clark are reported as performing “break-neck songs and dances” at Heuck’s Hall in Cincinnati O., as early as November 24, 1876 (c.f. *The New York Clipper*, Dec. 2, 1876, p. 287).

489 These have been collected in two volumes by Anthony G. Barrand and Kathryn Kari Smith (Brattleboro, VT: Northern Harmony, 1994).


491 John P. Hogan’s Original Method of Dancing for the Stage or Parlor (Illustrated), (New York: Hogan, 1888).
produces the illusion that the body has virtually been set free from its own inertia, to be guided through space solely by the will of the performer. The percussive rhythms, in the meantime, are so infectious that the spectator is prompted by his/her own sympathetic response to imagine that his or her own body is on the brink of a similar liberation from its own specific gravity, which induces a peculiar tension which is highly pleasurable – a tension between the sense of “uplift” inspired by the spectacle of the dancer; and the sense of its opposite – of the resistance and inertia of the spectator’s own corporeality. The resolution of this tension in an experience of triumph over inertia is the major source of the spectator’s satisfaction in the dance. A sense of the struggle between “uplift” and “downdrag” (if I may so coin a term) can be heightened by the performer’s use of posture: breakdown dancers alternate between a low crouch (the dominance of which is the hallmark of the plantation style), and complete rectitude (which is the hallmark of the variety-theatre style).

Figure 6.1: Posture (John P. Hogan’s Original Method of Dancing for the Stage or Parlor (Illustrated))

Over and above the distinction between formal styles are the distinctions between national styles which prevailed during the nineteenth century. Delehanty and Hengler in particular seemed to have epitomized the American style in song and dance. The response to their transatlantic appearances further suggests that what characterized this style was what British audiences found a unique combination of technical precision with a high degree of “mirroring” – in other words, their performances were apparently characterized by a uniquely intensified series of patterns of formal repetition. The following is an account of Delehanty and Hengler’s success in England, reprinted from the London Guardian:

POPULAR ENTERTAINERS – NO. XII – DELEHANTY AND HENGLER… Messrs. Delehanty and Hengler were the originators of the double-dance entertainment, and, in spite of a host of imitators, have ever taken rank in “the States” as its recognized exponents. … To commence with, their dancing is such as this country has never before witnessed. Every movement
is full of expression, and if it were possible to convey the plot of a song by a dextrous manipulation of the toes, surely Delehanty and Hengler are the men to do it. Their singing is good; their music—well, the greater part of it has been popularized in England; and thousands of people are familiar with “Shoo-fly,” or the “Big Sunflower,” who have never seen the two performers to whose musical and versifying capabilities we are indebted for those compositions. The marvelous precision with which these duettists secure the simultaneity of movement which imparts such a charm and grace to their dancing is, in its way, unique; while in the matter of costumes they display an amount of taste and neatness for which negro delineators are seldom remarkable…

Evidently, the style of Delehanty and Hengler – an influence over American “neat song-and-dance” style which continued into the next century – had three characteristics that this correspondent found definitive: i) it was reminiscent of the “posh” style of the British musical-hall lion comique; ii) the choreography of the dance expressively amplified the sense of the lyrics of the song – while the technique employed is one which foregrounds the expressive capabilities of the toes, (rather than for example, the heels); and iii) it was characterized by “charm” and “grace,” which the correspondent observes to be a function of the tightness of the patterns of formal repetition displayed in the presentation of the act.

III. Acrobatic Song and Dance: 1875–1935

By the early 1870s minstrel dance performance was breaking the boundaries of polite song-and-dance: we learn that Little Mac, the popular minstrel, was attracting attention by the novelty of spinning on his head in 1871; in the same year we learn of the dancer Tom

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493 *New York Clipper*, April 1, 1871, p. 414: “AT BRYANT’S MINSTRELS … Little Mac, in his comic essence, has introduced a new feature; he actually spins around on his head, with both arms and feet extended upward in the air. If he continues this performance for any length of time, the mythical corn of the head, often referred to by the festive darkey, may become a reality…”
McIntyre that “He is called the gymnastic song and dance man, for the reason that while dancing he throws in a somersault or two which adds considerably to the effect …”494; while in 1872 Cool Burgess is exciting remark by the extravagant eccentricities of his “Big Shoe Dance.”495 Numerous dancers were introducing a popular combination of contortion and high-kicking known as “Leg-Mania” into their performances which earned many of them the name of “grotesque song and dance” teams. (I shall return to the eccentric and grotesque singer-dancers in my next chapter.) Unhappily, none of the choreographers of the period – not even John P. Hogan – seems to have thought it worthwhile to codify the variety of ways in which one to four contemporary performers might incorporate into the dance the sort of simple acrobatics that could be performed to music, without special equipment, in one. The earliest textbook that I was able to find is a publication from 1935 by a Chicago performer-instructor named Bruce R. Bruce. Bruce’s text is a valuable resource for understanding the nuclear elements of acrobatic dance technique once it had reached its maturity.

Bruce’s book lays down two primary principles on which the entire technique of acrobatic song and dance depends. First is the establishment of what Bruce calls “position.”496 “Position” is an erect stance, in which the feet are from eight to twelve inches (not shoulder-width) apart and slightly turned out, and the body weight is distributed evenly. The key observation is that “the entire foot should be on the floor”497 – rather than only the toe or the heel. This puts technical difficulties in the way of integrating toe-and-heel dancing with acrobatic movements which have to be carefully solved. The second major injunction Bruce makes is that, in order for the performer to be able to form a single routine “without loss of coordination, time, or efficiency,” s/he must perform in what Bruce calls “swing tempo” – that is, without any “extra jumps, hops, steps, or unnecessary swinging of the arms, in short, No Double-Time.” Double-time, which involves the surrender of the body to its natural inertia, “causes

495 New York Clipper, Aug. 3 1872, p. 143: “There is nothing quiet or suggestive about Burgess’s fun; he is a caricaturist whose work is nothing if not all glare and eccentric lines. His outré style and exaggerated humor caused the audience to scream with laughter, and the wild beating about of his arms and legs, in the ridiculous movements of the big shoe dance, was encored until he was exhausted. If there is anybody on the minstrel stage who can look more comically absurd, and perform more downright fooling than Burgess, he is yet to be seen and heard.”
496 As distinguished from what a classically trained dancer would call “First position” in which the heels touch, but the toes are pointed outwards.
more inefficiency and loss of co-ordination than any other fault in advanced acrobatics.”

On the contrary, “swing time” implies that the performer is disciplined to transfer her/his inertia into the performance of a succeeding movement even in the act of recovering from the last. It is this that gives acrobatic dance the characteristic of “weightlessness” that complements the effect of transferring the weight between the heels and the toes in neat song and dance, and can extend or prolong it.

The essence of Bruce’s method, then, is to train the student to perform a series of acrobatic maneuvers in strict time – usually on a two-count or a four-count – beginning with the basics: the front roll (which, as Bruce points out, is often erroneously referred to as a somersault), the back roll, right and left cartwheels, head-, hand- and elbow-stands, walking on the hands, and the backbend in which the performer simply reaches back over his/her head, touches the floor behind his/her heels, and then straightens – a movement which requires a combination of abdominal strength and flexibility. It is in this combination of strength and flexibility centred in the abdomen that the physical technique of dance in this style resides, and which makes possible the accomplishment of the more intermediate maneuvers: the front- and back- walkover, the Tinsika (“a walkover taking one step forward on the hands”\(^499\)); the “spotter” and the “gainer” (walkovers forwards and backwards performed by placing only one hand on the floor\(^500\)), and the front and back chest roll (the momentum from which can be used to carry the body forward into head- or handstand or into a half-turn).

The virtuosity of the performer is demonstrated in what are known as the “Time Tricks:” “exercises that are executed by a snap or spring” (usually proceeding from the abdomen) “at a definite time” so that “the body is entirely in the air for a fraction of a second.”\(^501\) These include:

i) The Jerk or Mule-Kick; ii) The Round-off; iii) The Cannonball; iv) The Head-Jump; v) The Knip-Up; vi) The Head- and Hand-spring; the Butterfly; and vii) the Flip-flap. The Flip-flap in turn has a number of variants: a) the Jerk Flip-flap; b) the Twisting Flip-flap; c) the Round-Off Flip-flap; d) the Twisting Flip-flap to Hands; and e) the Cradle. The Flip-flap and the Front and

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Back Somersault are among the most advanced tricks practiced by vaudevillian acrobats, and form the nucleus of the acrobatic song and dance vocabulary.

The Flip-flap is essentially a backbend into which the performer dives backwards, but instead of straightening, brings the feet off the floor and snaps them over his/her head to land on the floor behind. As Bruce describes it:

**Position:** One: Arms at side, fingers forward, hands bent at wrist, palms parallel to the floor. Two: Bend slightly forward at the waist. Three: Sit back, swinging arms backward as far as possible and leaning backward until balance is lost. At this point swing the arms forward, up, around, and over backwards in one continuous motion until the hands touch the floor—the same swing in fast motion that we use in performing our first simple backbend; and jump backward. As the feet leave the floor, the legs straighten, the toes push back to the floor, the spine bends as much as possible, the head is thrown back as far and as hard as the performer is able to throw it. When her hands land on the floor about two and one-half feet back of the starting position, the body should be in a backbend or arched position. The hands should be only about eighteen inches from the floor when the feet leave the floor. When the hands reach the floor, the feet should be only eighteen inches from the starting point. From this position we continue with a mule-kick, making the feet land as close as possible to place where hands landed.

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502 As Mack Sennet points out, Ben Turpin’s “108” was a knockabout variation on a front somersault in which the performer apparently misses the trick.

Bruce takes the trouble to provide a careful description of the place of the somersault as the dividing line between dance and gymnastics. He even goes to the trouble of providing an intuitive “Definition Of A Somersault” for the guidance of aspirants who may have been misled by marketplace usage:

Simple rolls on the floor generally termed front or back somersaults are really no more than front or back rolls. A true somersault is a complete revolution in the air, wherein the feet go over and around the head. The performer must lose sight of the floor as the body passes over the head … Forward somersaults are performed by starting with either one or both feet; however, in acrobatic dancing, a forward somersault is generally executed by kicking one foot ahead of the other. In this manner it becomes more or less a dance step, and less of a straight acrobatic trick.\textsuperscript{504}

He provides detailed instructions for the Single Somersault; the Kick-Over Forward Somersault; the Cartwheel Somersault; the Walkover Somersault; and a somersaulting variation on the round-off known as the Baroni; as well as the Standing Back Somersault with its variations the Round-Off Flip-flap Cast Back Somersault; the Round-Off Flip-flap Half, and Two-Foot Forward Somersault; the Round-Off Flip-flap Back Flip-flap Back, with illustrations such as this one:

\textsuperscript{504}Bruce R. Bruce, \textit{Acrobatic Dancing and Tumbling} (Chicago: Baigen & Company, 1935), p. 65. Bruce adds an important caveat regarding forward somersaults and male performers on p. 78: “Forward somersaults performed with a two-foot take-off are strictly acrobatic tricks; they are best executed by men, and do not fit in a dance routine.”
In his final chapter, Bruce outlines some sample “Double Tricks;” that is, elements of routines for two performers, including the Foot-Pitch, in which Performer A does a high back somersault from the hands of Performer B; the Heel-Pitch; and the Double Frontover, in which

The performers stand, one directly in back of the other; the shorter of the two in front; take-off foot of the second girl should be placed between the first girl’s heels, both performers’ arms extended overhead. The forward girl takes hold of the second girl’s arms at the wrists, her thumbs inward; she bends sharply, pulling the second girl’s hands to the floor, and pushing them forward, never pulling them in. As they touch the floor, the first girl pushes the other one with her back, in that way helping to force her over into a limber. The second girl, or the one that just went over keeps her arms straight and is pushed up from the floor by her partner who is now holding her partner at the wrist, thumbs inward; repeat.  

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Figure 6.3: The Round-Off Flip-Flap Back, Flip-Flap Back (Bruce R. Bruce, *Acrobatic Dancing and Tumbling*, p. 105)

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505 Bruce R. Bruce, *Acrobatic Dancing and Tumbling* (Chicago: Baigen & Company, 1935), pp. 112-114. I have seen clowns perform a wrestling match that consisted of a sequence of double frontovers, each of which occupied less than a second, that lasted for almost a minute. It was one of the most stupendous moments in the theatre I have ever experienced.
When the critics comment on the effect created by acrobatic songs and dances, it is either with the same kind of admiration as they show for straight acrobatics or to comment with some surprise on the “ease and grace” of the performances. One of the few teams for which we have a reasonably detailed description of costume and style is the short-lived team of Andy McKee and Steve Rogers, who seem to have been both remarkably popular and remarkably influential within a comparatively short time, with an act which was known as the “Flip, Flap, Fandango:”

Not a word was spoken from the time they came upon the stage until they left, and during this interval the audience was kept in an

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507 “Marion and Post, in their song and dance, “The College Boys,” did some new tricks and steps in the way of acrobatic dancing. The ease and grace with which they go through their work is rarely equaled.” (The New York Clipper, Oct. 1, 1892, p. 476). Some acts apparently combined style with acrobatic skill both most fortuitously: for example, the Landis Brothers and the Four Aces (E.H. Talbert, Chas. Wayne, James Tierney and John Owens), who were among the first performers to dance on roller skates. This is certainly the claim made of the blackface team of Johnson and Bruno when they were celebrated in the New York Clipper in 1876 as “The Boneless Darkies” (The New York Clipper, Dec. 9, 1876, p. 293).
almost constant state of laughter. Their performances consisted of eccentric dancing and grotesque contortions, interlarded with excellent pantomime. They appeared in corked faces, one wearing a high black hat, a black frock coat and close-fitting black pantaloons; while the other was attired like an overgrown boy, with cap, jacket profusely decorated with buttons, and light-colored pantaloons sufficiently large to nearly envelope his entire figure. To attempt a description of the act upon paper would be futile, as it must be seen to be properly appreciated. It is one of the most novel and best that has been produced upon the variety stage since the first appearance here of the Majiltons…

But the tenor of Bruce’s remarks suggests that the critical stylistic innovation of acrobatic song and dance was the introduction of a rigorous economy of movement necessary to conserve the gracefulness of neat song-and-dance while integrating it with the strenuous physical requirements of acrobatics and ground tumbling. This same economy of movement would prove to be a distinctive feature of the performance technique of cinematic slapstick.

IV. Breakneck Song and Dance: 1876 – Ca. 1900

Within eighteen months of the appearance of acrobatic song and dance, many teams begin to cross over and become break-necks: among them, Connors and Kelly, Crumley and De Forrest, Cummings and Hines, and most notably the teams of Emerson and Clark, Goldie and Steele, and Welby and Pearl. The goal of breakneck song and dance was to exploit the danger factor inherent in the stunts in order to raise the stakes of the acrobatics and introduce a tension into performances comparable to the one we have already seen at work in both the burlesque prize fight and the Pete Jenkins act. Break-neck performers foregrounded dangerous stunts that included some risk of property damage and even personal harm: Clifford and Skelly danced blindfolded amongst eggs and watches, Fisher and Clark’s act included a fall down a flight of

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509 *New York Clipper*, May 1, 1875, p. 38.
steps,\textsuperscript{511} and Charles Hoey of Smith and Hoey broke his right knee-cap in a fall resulting from an attempt to leap over a number of chairs.\textsuperscript{512} An 1885 reviewer complains of Tierney and Wayne that they appear “in a rather hazardous breakneck song-and-dance, into which they crowd too many seemingly perilous features, inclusive of the hatchet-act, for the comfort of lady-spectators whose nerves are loose.”\textsuperscript{513} Teams such as Crumley and De Forrest likewise took “Leg-mania” to a new level.

Crumley and De Forrest excel as acrobatic song-and-dance men and knock-about comedians, and one wonders why they do not receive some serious injuries during their frolics, which are apparently so dangerous – their feats of high-kicking rank with the best that we have seen.\textsuperscript{514}

The break-neck song-and-dance men’s second major technical contribution to the repertoire was apparently what later came to be called “Funny Falls.” Welby and Pearl were the past masters of these:

Immense applause greeted Welby and Pearl in their song-and-dance performance, accompanied as it was by numerous amusing acrobatic exercises. Never did men jump higher or fall harder than these lithe and muscular fellows. They fairly shook the building as their bodies struck the stage, and the wonder was they did not cripple themselves. They were greatly admired and boisterously applauded.\textsuperscript{515}

It seems to have been the kicking which provided the bridge from self-endangerment to the enactment of aggression that led to the replacement of “breakneck” by “knock-about” song

\textsuperscript{511} \textit{New York Clipper}, Sept. 15, 1888 p. 426
\textsuperscript{512} \textit{New York Clipper}, May 28, 1887, p. 162.
\textsuperscript{513} \textit{New York Clipper}, Aug. 15, 1885, p. 346.
\textsuperscript{514} \textit{New York Clipper}, Dec. 6, 1879, p. 294. Crumley and De Forrest’s reviewers regularly stress the role of high-kicking in their performances.
\textsuperscript{515} \textit{New York Clipper}, Feb. 23, 1878, p. 379.
and dance. The first breakneck team to be recognized in the trade press as the representatives of another emergent style are Welby and Pearl, “song-and-dance men of the kick-each-other school.”

V. Knockabout Song and Dance and the Talion Motif

The central innovation in the transition from breakneck to knockabout song and dance seems to have resided almost entirely in the motivation of the action, which would most likely have taken one of the forms we postulated in the case of the burlesque prize fight: as an expression of sheer jouissance, as a parody of another form of performance, or as the consequence of the outbreak of a sudden spirit of rivalry between the performers. We might go further to imagine that the transformation might be precipitated by any one of three kinds of mishap: i) accidents; ii) pranks, or iii) deliberate assaults. These in turn provoke retaliatory responses; the initial mishap is avenged in like manner: Pearl kicks Welby; Welby kicks Pearl. Looked at in formal terms, this basic unit of violence has an elementary mirror-structure: as A does to B, B then does to A. The same structure also works as a unit of narrative which I might term the Talion structure. The same narrative unit is all too familiar to all of us from the experience of real conflict: A takes an action which affects B; B, interpreting the action as an act of aggression, retaliates. In real life this structure has a natural tendency to repeat itself which often challenges our ability to bring it back under control: A, interpreting B’s retaliation as an act of aggression, retaliates to it; and the pattern repeats itself in escalating sequence.

As a formal unit, the Talion structure has a simple binary form: 1, 2. This form might be complexified by analyzing it into a system of causes and effects: Action A causes Effect A; Action B causes Effect B (which compensates for Action A): (A)1 → 2; (B)3 → 4. The overall structure is both symmetrical and proportionate, i.e. A:B = B:A.

Knockabout song and dance evidently exploited the fact that, as a formal pattern, the Talion rhythm is identical with the call-and-response structure of dance phrases, and of the popular songs to which they were danced. Indeed, the choreography of the Ethiopian sketches

516 New York Clipper, Dec. 9, 1876, p. 295.
517 After the lex talionis or Talion Law of retributive justice: “An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth.” This basic narrative structure underlies countless “comic” films of the pre-transitional era, especially the Bad Boy films: the Bad Boy pulls a prank; the prank is punished (as in the Lumières’ L’arroseur arosé).
containing challenge dances tells us as much: in White’s “Going for the Cup” the rivalry between Old Mr. Rogers and Ikey Vanjacklen is acted out in a dance contest in which the characters dance alternate verses and their scores are chalked up as in a game.\(^{518}\) By the same token, brief, rhythmic gestures like kicks, punches and slaps could be executed in rhythm and integrated into the dance in alternate phrases or even bars. Acrobatic movements like the somersault, and the Flip-flap (for which Bruce R. Bruce gives directions in exact 4-beat rhythm) could then be motivated as reactions. The natural tendency of the Talion structure to escalate likely supplied an exhilarating forward momentum to these dances which tended to drive them out of control: in that case the dances would have manifested a compulsive tension between control and lack of control analogous to that of the burlesque prize-fight which audiences would have found both suspenseful and pleasurable. At the same time, the denaturalization of the pattern of attack and retaliation into a dance apparently had a highly comical effect.

The Talion motif, then, is a formal unit which can at the same time underlie a moment of spectacle (A hits B; B hits A), or structure a narrative. Like so many early films, many Ethiopian sketches, like ”The Coalheavers’ Revenge” also manifest a basic talion structure. Its advantages as a minimal unit of performance are obvious: it combines multiple functionality with maximum economy of movement. Its disadvantages are equally plain, however; it is readily predictable; and can easily become monotonous. It is perhaps for this reason that knockabout movement shows a particular fondness for switch motifs. In the switch motif, the 1, 2; 3, 4 pattern is set up, but then varied: 1, 2 is followed not by 3, but by something else; or 1,2 is followed by 3, but 3 results in something other than 4.

VI. The 1-2-3-Switch Motif

The 1-2-switch or 1-2-3-switch motif (there are, of course, both shorter and longer variants) is ubiquitous throughout the Ethiopian sketches (though not, to my knowledge, the polite farce of the nineteenth century), particularly in bringing off physical gags where violent action is required – for example, in this moment from “The Black Statue” (ca. 1855):

\(^{518}\) Charles White, “Going for the Cup; or, Old Mrs. Williams’ Dance” (New York: Robert M. de Witt, 1874).
JAKE goes to the Cottage in theatrical style (music), and gives three slaps with his hands. ROSE opens the door and pushes JAKE away.\(^{519}\)

Later in the play the same character is masquerading as a statue:

*Enter SQUINTUM... he turns crank to music.* JAKE deals SQUINTUM a blow which nearly prostrates him ...(SQUINTUM) goes to cottage and call the OLD WOMAN). MRS. SQUINTUM comes out ...MRS. SQUINTUM turns crank. JAKE strikes her and she falls. (MRS. SQUINTUM) (rises, screams, and calls for SQUINTUM... he turns the crank very fast when THE STATUE falls ... he picks up his cane and strikes JAKE. JAKE jumps up.\(^ {520}\)

A gag in “The Rival Lovers” (ca. 1855) has more of the character of a dance. Jumbo (“a shrewd gardener,” played by White) and Two Miller Boys are lining up to receive their wages from an old woman:

*JUMBO stands with his hand out to receive it, and murmurs at the amount, takes the same and passes up stage. One of the other MILLER BOYS presents himself for his amount... The other MILLER BOY presents himself for his wages ... Takes his money and leaves with it.]*

*JUMBO [partially behind her puts out his hand again, as if to get his pay a second time. The old woman looks about and sees him, then hastily lays the stuffed stick on his back.]*\(^ {521}\)

“Wake Up, William Henry” (1864) is an extended parody of a phrenological lecture: at its conclusion, two of the Professor’s subjects (father and son) are performing the “mirror gag.”

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\(^{520}\) Ibid., pp. 10-11.

HEMMINGWAY … Ah, ha! Sweet William, I hab got control over you at last! … *pulls off his coat and sits down in front of BILL; and every move that he makes with his hands, head or feet, BILL must imitate him. The old man is somewhat surprised and mistrusts; he gets a little angry, and, finally, thinks of a sure thing to test BILL’s sincerity.*) I golly! I think I can fool him! I got a sample ob flour in my pocket … *(Puts his hand in right pocket for the flour; BILL does same … Raises his arm once or twice; BILL does same; old man say, first time he raises his hand, “One!” the next time, “Two!” and then dashes the flour in his face; BILL does the same thing and jumps up laughing. Old man falls over, and up quickly – chases BILL off…*522

The counting, of course, is not simply for the benefit of the performers; it is a coercive cue which is used to excite – and frequently to misdirect – the audience’s expectations.

In the Ethiopian sketches, just as in knockabout song and dance, the accelerating quality of the underlying rhythms often functions to escalate the dance into mayhem: the “Hop of Fashion” concludes with a dance, which breaks down into a mêlée;523 in “Scenes on the Mississippi” (1863) a “good nigger reel” builds the action up to a pitch of excitement in which a load of freight, one of the stevedores and a can of glycerine are thrown into a steamboat furnace, precipitating a concluding explosion.524

VII. John Wild’s “One, Two, Three, Bounce”

One of the most popular of the Ethiopian sketches is John Wild’s “One, Two, Three” – also known as “Bounce,” and also known as “One, Two, Three – Bounce!” Originating in Detroit, in 1861, as “Conner’s Dramatic Agency,” “One, Two, Three” was revived many times between then and as late as the mid-1880s, and is one of the few Ethiopian sketches to be

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explicitly connected both with circus knockabout (through Wild’s appropriation of the Pete Jenkins character) and with the emerging school of “break-neck” performance:

THE TAMMANY.—… The burlesque act of the “Clodoche Troupe,” by Wild, Cummings, Cole and Gardiner, is a most laughable affair, and keeps the audience in the best of good humor, as does Johnny Wild’s break-neck act called “One—Two—Three,” which is a capital take off of Charley Sherwood’s equestrian act of “Pete Jenkins.”

“One, Two, Three – Bounce!” is exemplary of the Ethiopian sketches as primarily physical, improvisatory texts. On the surface, it’s crude, sloppy (or at least hasty) writing, calling for crude, sloppy (or at least broad) performance. It is structured around a characteristically prominent physical motif, and both manifests an unmistakable pattern of repetition (i.e., a rhythm), and calls for a characteristically brisk tempo. Like so many other Ethiopian sketches, it is explicitly about performance: it’s structured like a game; and it gives the audience a role to play as well – they get to perform “being an audience.” The stage directions not only permit, but call for improvisation of both dialogue and action around its central physical motif; and its performance history reveals that in production the sketch was elastic enough to admit of a high degree of interpolation, even to the extent of changing characters’ names and functions, and introducing radically new business.

In its printed form – arranged by Charles White after it had already been revised by Wild himself for a revival in 1875 – “Bounce!” though superficially coarse, turns out to be a complex and carefully structured piece. It has two plots: a “framing” plot which is essentially that of the first part of the Pete Jenkins act, in which the drunken lout Tom Pepper repeatedly attempts to perform and is repeatedly chased out until at last he returns and trashes the stage; and a main plot

525 The New York Clipper, May 14, 1870, p. 46.
526 In a Clipper description from May, 1874, Wild’s character has changed both name and function: “John Wild’s original sketch of “One, Two Three,” with the author in his original character of Stand on Your Head, was likewise provocative of a great deal of mirth. Col. Routh Goshen the Arab giant appeared therein as a ballad-singer, and Johnny Wild’s attempts to “bounce” him were highly ludicrous. He encircled him with a rope, and, aided by two or three others, attempted to pull him from the stage, but the effort was futile. He placed a ladder upon his shoulders, and, when he had ascended nearly to the top, found himself “bounced”” (The New York Clipper, May 16, 1874, p. 54).
– that of a parade play, in fact, in which “Mr. Conner, a Dramatic Agent” auditions a series of potential clients for the coming season. The two plots are interwoven to provide for a deft series of reversals.

At opening, Mr. Conner is discovered meditating on the dullness of business and anticipating the coming rush. He is interrupted by the arrival of Bounce, “a Servant, on his Muscle” and a hulking “darkey” whom Conner engages to eject unpromising applicants:

CONNER … Now, then, when I am bothered or annoyed by one of this class, I will give you a cue, while I am in conversation with them, whereby you will know my intention of wishing to get rid of them, and if I should say One—Two—Three, that means that you must put them out. Always be sure that I say all three of the words.

BOUNCE (listens attentively). Yes, sir, and de last one, then I hist ‘em.

CONNER. Yes: at the last sentence you bounce them without further ceremony. Chuck ‘em out, and let ‘em know you mean it. After that I think they’ll take the hint and stay away.527

The redundancy of Conner’s speeches (and Bounce’s rejoinder) is a hint to the audience: they are going to be invited to join in the counting (in fact, the script seems to assume they will whether they’re invited to or not) and they mustn’t jump the gun. Effectively, Connor is stating the rules of the game: the audience is going to be invited to identify the “bad” actors, and call for them to be thrown out.528 The first to arrive is Tom Pepper (the Pete Jenkins character, usually played by Wild himself):

528 In some productions instead of being put out through the door the performers were defenestrated: according to the New York Clipper (March 31, 1877, p. 6), “Madame Cudlos’ Arion Garden Theatre, Reading, Pa., On 19, during the performance of a farce – “Bounce” – in which several performers are thrown through a window, Sam Melville received a fall, causing a fracture of the shoulder, through carlessness (sic) of those behind the scenes who were detailed to catch him.”
Enter TOM PEPPER through D.F., very drunk, staggering, with an old segar butt in his mouth; he advances to CONNER and bumps up against him.

PEPPER. Say, do you want to hire a circus rider?

CONNER. No, sir: I think not. (PEPPER talks ad lib. and is troublesome ... BOUNCE jumps up, takes hold of him to put him out; they have quite a tussle together, and THOMAS (i.e., Bounce) finds he has got his hands full, but succeeds in running him out R. 1 E.)

Then the first of the applicants, McGinnis (“a Fresh Mick”) arrives seeking representation as a clog-dancer; but the drunken Pepper returns and attempts to hijack his audition:

Enter PEPPER, comes front and gets in the way of CONNER and McGINNIS.

CONNER (calls on BOUNCE). Here, put that drunkard out.

(BOUNCE goes for him, and in putting him out PEPPER falls down and BOUNCE falls over him, but jumps up quickly, and before he gets hold of him PEPPER has just slipped out in time.

BOUNCE goes over to his seat puffing and blowing.)

Wild/White are careful to specify that the business between Bounce and Pepper here must be tightly rhythmic, producing a rapid reversal – Pepper is there/Pepper is not there. Otherwise the audience, impatient for the fun of seeing McGinnis’ Donnybrook, will become irritated. It calls indeed for a pair of acrobats or tumblers capable of performing the movement as a double frontover, or as a front roll and/or dive by Pepper through Bounce’s legs as the latter attempts to grasp him. Our attention must not wander for a second from the moving Pepper

530 The rhythm would have to be something approximating 1 (first fall); 2 (second fall); 3 (both stand); 4 (B: grasp and P: dive, roll & exit).
and Bounce to the idle Connor and McGinnis, who only come back to life after we’ve had a moment to laugh at the thwarted Bounce. The sequence which follows after the briefest exchange is the first successful inning of the game announced in the play’s title. It has a structural role which is exactly parallel to the statement of a theme in a fugue.

The orchestra plays any clog melody. McGinnis commences to dance as awkwardly and as bad as possible. Connor gets disgusted. One–Two–Three. At the last sentence Bounce lays his hands on him and runs him out R.1 R. very briskly.

The sequence establishes the rhythmic pattern for the actions that will follow, as well as the audience’s expectations for succeeding innings of the game. Following a count of 1, 2, 3, the bad actor will be ejected, i.e., bounced. The whole phrase then, will be a count of 1, 2, 3, 4, or 1, 2, 3, – Bounce! In the meantime, a second pattern has been picked up and leads to a reversal. There have so far been three knocks at the door: Bounce’s, Pepper’s, and McGinnis.’ Now the door knocks a fourth time, and, instead of introducing a new character (as previous repetitions have led us to expect), there is nobody there; then, as Bounce turns back away from the door, Pepper re-enters and suddenly Delehingler is at the door waiting to be admitted:

BOUNCE re-enters and takes his place again; at the same moment, soon as seated, knock is heard at R. 1 E.

Connor. Thomas, see who’s at the door. (THOMAS goes quickly, and as he returns PEPPER follows him in behind him;

DELEHINGLER is behind PEPPER. BOUNCE gets well over to his seat, on turning round he sees PEPPER and goes for him, but PEPPER gets out quickly untouched. BOUNCE seated again.531

Pepper’s action here is a Bugs Bunny relocation, performed at high speed, with Pepper’s entrance co-ordinated with Bounce’s turns away from and back to the door – so that, having once disappeared, he now magically (to Bounce) reappears on the side of the room away from the

door. Once again the stage directions call for the performers to work out a way for Pepper to deke past Bounce (who is now between him and the door). The parade plot resumes as Bounce sits and Delehingler prepares to audition for Conner:

DELEHINGLER. ...(To audience) I’ll knock him silly. (He prepares himself. The orchestra plays Hamfat. He sings about two lines of a verse very badly, then runs in the patting part of the chorus, at which time CONNER sings out One—Two—Three, when BOUNCE seizes him and runs him out as quick as possible.532

The main motif has now been established and the audience’s expectation that the three-count will be succeeded by a four which will coincide with the bouncing of the bad performer has been confirmed. The next repetition, however, will issue not in another bouncing, but in another reversal: the next applicant is Mme. Nilson the great soprano (a drag role), whose well-respected talents Conner is eager to represent. During their interview and Nilson’s song, Bounce tries 3 times to eject her, but is stopped by Connor – he is jumping the gun. The audience, primed by the first two repetitions of the 1, 2, 3 – Bounce! motif, are entirely sympathetic with Bounce’s astonishment by the reversal of their expectations at the conclusion of Nilson’s performance:

(NILSON sings half a verse of “Pretty Jane.” BOUNCE makes several attempts to get hold of her, and is surprised that the boss don’t say One—Two—Three; but at the conclusion of her singing MR. CONNER tells her she is engaged. BOUNCE is astonished.)533

His astonishment results in the reversal of another pattern: at this point Pepper, having intruded 3 times, intrudes once again (i.e., a fourth); and likewise is not bounced:

PEPPER (falls in the door in F., gets up and goes out again instantly.)

Finally, “West End, a Walkist” (played, on the play’s 1874 revival, by Charles White) arrives (“very fast, straight and erect, to the centre; speaks quickly to CONNER”) to fill out the 1, 2, 3, 4-pattern of the parade plot. His arrival results in the climactic reversal which resolves both plotlines in a comprehensive gesture of disavowal.

WEST END. I can walk a mile in three minutes, or 500 miles in fourteen hours, without eat, drink or sleep. (While this conversation is going on all the other characters are getting in promiscuously from any places.)

CONNER. Just step out a little and let me see your gait. (He does so. On going round the stage first time PEPPER jumps in from the wing and falls in behind WEST END, at this BOUNCE starts for PEPPER, but they both walk so fast that BOUNCE can’t keep up with them. The other characters get in the line behind BOUNCE, and they keep up the walking in a circle. PEPPER has got off and quickly returns with an armful of all the old poles, sticks and trash he can carry, and lets it fall all about, while he himself jumps up on the table and upsets every thing. Confusion, bus., and quick close.)

The comparison I’ve made between the use of the 1-2-change /1-2-3-change motif in Wild’s play and the development of a musical theme is made advisedly. It is in fact less a play than a dance, and in production needs to be less blocked than choreographed. The rehearsal style in use by minstrel troupes would have dictated the use of stock bits of business, like laanzi, that,

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owing to their use by more than one person in physical encounters (like those of Bounce with Pepper) would have to have been precisely rhythmic. This would be all the more necessary as a result of the exaggerated pace of the play, which would have to be markedly faster than the tempo at which an ordinary person would do such things. Performance technique would perforce be based on dance technique – it would require careful diction, speed and precision – which two latter, as Bruce R. Bruce reminds us, rely on a complete absence of double-time – that is, of the sort of extraneous movements which a real person would make under the same or comparable circumstances. The comic effect of the play is absolutely dependent on the correct reproduction of its interior rhythms. To attempt to present it in a naturalistic style would not simply result in an incompetent performance; it would be a serious breach of taste – that is, a failure to appreciate and respect the formal qualities of the work at hand.

As we observed above, knockabout song and dance integrates two sets of rhythms: violent rhythms which allude to the violence of real life; and dance-rhythms which please. The goal of the performance is evidently, much as in the burlesque prize fight, to incite in the audience by an oscillation of sympathy and antipathy with the characters, an incongruous mixture of pleasure and pain. “One, Two, Three, Bounce” is therefore an example *par excellence* of one of the ways in which the aesthetics of the Ethiopian sketches and the popular dance styles of the period resemble each other. Like “One, Two, Three” – and indeed, like the parade plays generally – they both are phrased like dances, and include action that cannot be rehearsed, but has to be either choreographed or improvised along models familiar to the group.

VIII. Song and Dance and Early Film Comedies

Gags structured on the 1-2-3-switch pattern don’t seem to be a feature of many early films. In fact, they’re conspicuous by their absence until about 1911 or 1912. As I observed in my second chapter, comedies of the period from 1903-1910 in general show a marked

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537 A couple of notable exceptions, however, are the transcriptions of live performances by the *Three Acrobats* (Edison, 1899), the burlesque boxing match by the “Glenroy Bros. #2” (Edison, 1894) and *Robetta and Doretto #2* (Edison, also 1894). This film – representing a fragment from their “Fun in a Chinese Laundry” act – apparently begins with the “switch” at the end of a sequence, and is followed by the familiar pattern – the two chase each other through a revolving door at L. which turns 3 times; then Doretto switches out of the pattern and reenters through a C. door beside it. He performs a trapeze mount onto the roof above the revolving-door flat which constitutes their set while Robetta emerges through the second door as well. He pauses, unable to find Doretto, who then assaults him with a breakaway plank.
divergence from the patterns established in the Ethiopian sketches – and *a fortiori* from the aesthetics of the pantomimes and the acrobatic displays of the nineteenth-century variety theatre. On the contrary, the films of this era show a much more marked similarity to the polite farces of the French boulevards (after their sanitation in the early 1860s by Baron Hausman) and the British and American comedy theatres – comedies of manners like *Slasher and Crasher*, and *Charley’s Aunt*, for example.

The second major problem in early films (for present purposes) was what to do with the audience. As I’ve argued above, theatrical forms like those of the Ethiopian sketches had been designed around strategies for negotiating with each audience’s idiosyncratic resistances: these included coercing the audience into sympathy by directing violence at innocent characters (the burlesque prize fight); offending the audience (Pete Jenkins); giving them a role to play (“One, Two, Three”); charming them by means of overwhelmingly complex structures of repetition in costume design, movement, and music (knockabout song and dance); and exciting them by means of infectious rhythmic figures, including coercive patterns which worked to misdirect the attention and thus create surprise. Using combinations of all of these techniques, foregrounding some and backgrounding others, performers could negotiate with an audience until a satisfactory sympathy was achieved: if an audience was not sufficiently responsive to an opening strategy, another could be substituted. Most of these options were completely unavailable to early filmmakers.

Thirdly, the comedy of these earlier films rarely rises above the level of *Schadenfreude*: their appeal is straightforwardly to the appetite for seeing something undesirable happening to somebody else. Though few critical remarks regarding these early films have survived, the effect which they introduced seems to have been novel in one respect – one never reads expressed in reviews (either at this time or later) concern such as that voiced by the spectators at break-neck and knockabout song and dance displays, that the performers may have been hurting themselves. Mediation removes the interference with the pleasure of witnessing violent comedy by the intrusion of audiences’ fellow feelings for the actors. This placed the onus on early filmmakers to find some substitute for audiences’ natural empathic relationships with performers; that is, to develop different strategies for engaging the audience. Film makers had to turn to audiences’ feelings about themselves instead of about other people, for the raw materials of a new “structure of sympathy.”
Once the novelty of the apparatus itself had worn off, they had to rely on the formal qualities of the pro-filmic event, reduced to two-dimensionality and deprived of its aural component, to compete with the real thing for audience’s attention. Until the season of 1904-1905 they did so with discouraging success. But with the success of chase films such as “Personal” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1904), “The Escaped Lunatic” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1904), “Maniac Chase” (Edison, 1904), “Meet Me at the Fountain” (Lubin, 1904) and “The Counterfeiters” (Lubin, 1905), the film industry reached a turning point. Though theatrical means existed for representing chases, either through a single scene, or through multiple ones – editing provided a new means of presenting highly compelling chases past lightning changes of the most convincing of scenery in a fraction of the time audiences expected such changes to take and at a fraction of the cost. With the introduction of editing and the example of the chase, rhythm and tempo – two primary means of generating audience involvement – came under the control of filmmakers, who could now create formally complex sets of relationships between figure movement within the frame and editing rhythms.

IX. Dance Films

Of course, musical patterns and images had been incorporated since the very beginning, and all films were customarily played to music throughout the silent era. In that sense they retain a strong tie with pantomimes, which until the 1870s were likewise largely dumb shows performed to music. In addition, song slides continued to be projected at screenings for audiences to sing along to, led by a house master of ceremonies, throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. Their popularity, however, begins to slide around the end of 1907, and by 1909 they are widely regarded as intrusive and passé. The same holds true of the vaudevillian performers who were engaged by many nickelodeons to perform between the screenings of the various films on programmes – they become the objects of a vigorous polemic in Moving Picture World from mid-1907 on. In addition to these, there were a number of films, from “Trouble in Hogan’s Alley” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1900) to “Everybody Works But Father” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1905) and “Everybody Works But Mother” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, 1906), that apparently dramatized the lyrics of popular songs, and that were intended to be sung along as the film played. The Biograph summary boasts of “Everybody Works but Father” that it was “a film which covers the entire action of the verses
and choruses of a well-known song” with “175 feet in white face and 179 feet in black face”\textsuperscript{538} Other films that may well have been intended to be sung to, or which are associated with songs that nickelodeon accompanists must certainly have played to them, include for example, “On a Good Old 5¢ Trolley Ride” (Edison, 1905), “The Merry Widow Waltz Craze” (Edison, 1908), “The “Merry Widow” Hats (Lubin, 1908), “The Directoire Gown” (Essanay, 1908) and “The Sensational Sheath Gown” (Lubin, 1908), all of which were associated with fashions that were modeled in popular performances by well-known vaudevillians who performed songs about them; the songs were then marketed in the form of sheet music.

Films which feature dances on their own are extremely scanty. During the years from 1893 – 1903 those that reoccur more than a couple of times are those that feature “darkey” dancing, particularly a number of versions of the Cake Walk.\textsuperscript{539} But by 1904 or so the appeal of these seems played out, and no dance sensation – even the “Turkey Trot” – is exploited in more than a couple of brief films until 1913. At this point the tango craze results in a long list of films, in which the tango stands to slapstick comedy in much the same relation as that in which the breakdown had stood to knockabout song and dance.

By this time, filmmakers were well practised in constructing sequences with edits at regular intervals, and at co-ordinating the more erratic interior rhythms of the profilmic event with the relatively regular strophes of the splicer. But in the meantime, the camera had already been taught to dance to another tune by another, and very different, master. Even notoriously “bad” texts – like the earliest Keystone slapsticks – manifest highly regular editing rhythms including patterned alternations of long and short shots; rhythmic configurations readily conformable to the repertoires of the small groups of musicians required to play in tandem with the dance of the images on the screen.

\textsuperscript{538} AFI Catalogue, Vol. 1, p. 318.
X. The Myth of the Cinematic Pie-Fight

Of all the tropes of silent film, perhaps none has come to be more emblematic of the slapstick movie than the innovation most regularly associated with Sennett – the pie-fight. The pie fight is in theory also the most uniquely cinematic of the most conspicuous slapstick tropes since, unlike the chase, it has virtually no counterpart in theatrical tradition. One or two of the Ethiopian sketches may admit of the throwing of food by the audience; one or two call for characters to be assaulted with quantities of bread, flour, or other foodstuffs, including the slice of pumpkin pie which deflates a melodramatic marriage proposal in George W. Griffin’s “New Year’s Calls” (187-?):

Plan. In vain I have tried to forget you, but remembrance of you kept up such a hammering dat it was impossible; give, then, your consent, and let us be joined in de bonds of matrimony.

[During this speech PETER has slipped in and put a large piece of pumpkin pie in PLANEWELL’s hat, saying –]

Pet. There’s your Santa Claus! [Slips off again.

Wid. [in great agitation.] Oh! oh! dis is so sudden! so – dat – dat – I – but such is life! [Faints.

Plan. Ah, she faints! what shall I do!

[Reaches down, takes handkerchief from his hat with the pumpkin pie in it and smashes it all over her face…] 540

Lazzi involving the use of various foodstuffs as weapons or missiles are also legion in the commedia dell’arte tradition. But of the Keystone cocoanut-cream pie-fight 541 as a concerted group set-piece involving multiple players, there is no antecedent in the theatrical repertoire.

Judging by the myriad repetitions of the trope outside the corpus of existing silent slapsticks – in Three Stooges and other sound shorts, in numerous fragmentary allusions in

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541 The earliest one to be commended by the critics is in fact a lemon meringue pie-fight occurring in the 1913 Keystone “Quiet Little Wedding.”
television shows, and in large-scale pastiche tributes such as the monumental pie-fights in Blake Edwards’ *The Great Race* (1965) and Mel Brooks’ *Blazing Saddles* (1974), the cause is evidently not far to seek: to a greater degree even than the chase, the pie-fight apparently depends for its effect on a set of formal relations that are absolutely impossible outside the cinema: a counterpoint of rhythmic editing with the dialectical 1-2 structure of the profilmic event. The strophic exchange of pies in the face is punctuated – on the upbeat, as it were – by the subsidiary rhythm of the shot-reverse-shot structure. The interweaving of a “one-two-switch” pattern with a shot-reverse shot pattern is quite neatly exemplified in the first phrase of the climactic pie-fight in Chaplin’s “Behind the Screen” (Mutual, 1916), in which the studio stage-hand, Charlie, and his boss, Goliath (Eric Campbell), are pitted against each other as stand-ins in a film-within-the-film.

1. In an establishing long shot, Chaplin and Campbell are given their instructions by the director in the foreground. The background represents the playing area – it is subdivided into two halves by a prop wall and doorway perpendicular to the axis of action: there is a darker area (apparently a restaurant set) screen Left, containing a table laden with pies and two champagne bottles; and a brighter area (evidently a kitchen set) with an upstage window screen Right, and containing another table laden with pies. The director explains that Charlie’s pies are to miss and Goliath’s are to hit, and the two performers turn and walk upstage to take their places by their respective tables, facing each other through the barrier: Goliath screen left, looking rightwards at Charlie. They arm themselves with pies from their upstage tables.

2. At 00:17:25, an insert (LS) of the playing area of an adjacent set where a *film d’art* is evidently being filmed: on a dais a King and Queen, richly attired, are engaged in a dramatic scene. (4 secs.)

3. At 00:17:29, in a brief (1/2 sec.) medium long shot of the kitchen set established above, Charlie (screen centre), winds up to throw a pie following his eyeline leftwards. (Fig. 6.5)

4. At 00:17:29.5, in a rhyming medium long shot of the restaurant set Goliath, looking rightwards, ducks and straightens again. (1.5 secs.)

5. At 00:17:31, in a much briefer shot of the kitchen set, Charlie heaves his pie through the doorway, screen left. (1/2 sec.) (Fig. 6.5)
6. At 00:17:31.5, in a longer reaction shot, the pie enters from the side of frame right and smashes into Goliath’s face (– One). He reacts, wiping the cream from his eyes. (2.5 secs.) (Fig. 6.6)

7. At 00:17:34, a reverse shot of the kitchen set: Charlie winds up and heaves another pie leftwards. (1/2 sec.) (Fig. 6.7)

8. At 00:17:34.5, it connects with Goliath’s face (–Two); he reacts as before, then turns and moves the champagne bottles from the table behind (i.e., upstage of) him to one in the foreground, turns again to arm himself with a pie, and throws rightwards. (4.5 secs.) (Fig. 6.8)

9. At 00:17:39, a reverse shot: the kitchen set; Charlie is left of centre, occupying the left third of screen as before; the pie sails rightward over his head and out frame right (– Three). (1/2 sec.) (Fig. 6.9)

10. At 00:17:39.5, a long shot of the adjacent set where the film d’art is in progress: the King stands left of C on his dais (in almost the same screen position as Charlie). The pie enters frame left, and strikes him in the face. (–Switch). He reacts, his face-wiping gesture rhyming with Goliath’s. (1 sec.) (Fig. 6.10)

The entire section is organized and measured by the one-two-switch pattern marked by the throwing of the pies, and is almost perfectly proportioned. Its beats are as follows:

ONE: Charlie aims and throws and Goliath is hit (17:29.5 – 17:32.) (2.5 secs.) (Fig. 6.5); Goliath reacts (17:32 – 17:34) (2 secs.) (Fig. 6.6) [Total: 4.5 secs.]
TWO: Charlie aims and throws and Goliath is hit again (17:34 – 17:35.5) (1.5 secs.) (Fig. 6.7); Goliath reacts (17:35.5 – 17:38.5) (3 secs.) (Fig. 6.8) [Total: 4.5 secs.]

SWITCH: Goliath winds up and throws; Charlie ducks (Fig. 6.9) and the pie misses him and hits the King (17:38.5 – 17:39.5) (1 sec.) (Fig. 6.10). Goliath gesticulates and reaches for another pie (17:39.5 – 17:42 (2.5 secs.) (Fig. 6.11) [Total: 3.5 secs.]

The overall rhythm of the actions manifests a regular pattern: the One- and Two-beats are of equal duration, but on the switch-beat, the pace begins to accelerate. This rhythm is counterpointed with the editing rhythm, which adds an expressive dimension: the durations of the shots expand around the lengthening of Goliath’s movements and contract about the increasing rapidity of Charlie’s – shots 5, 7, and 9, which feature him, are all about ½-second long. At the same time, the editing is working to preserve a consistent sense of direction while integrating three contiguous locations: but this function is subordinated to that of constructing an effectively rhythmic sequence. In the meantime, the “switch” involves not simply an unforeseen action, but an unforeseen extension of the action by means of which one space is substituted for another.

It will be noted here that an important aspect of the style of the cinematic pie-fight is the placement of the cuts in relation to the beats of the actions. In shots 6 and 8, the edit and the impact of the pies against Goliath’s face occur almost simultaneously, in the second frames of each. In shot 10, however, we have about a quarter-second to register the change of location
from the kitchen scene to the King’s dais before the pie enters frame left to strike the latter. In
sequences in which a character ducks so that another standing behind will receive the missile, the
time-lag may be expected to be correspondingly longer.

It would seem that, to a greater extent than even the burlesque boxing match, the
 cinematic pie-fight is both regularly rhythmic – in that the throw-hit-counter-throw-hit pattern is
 usually in a more or less regular tempo for the convenience of the piano accompanist – and
 phrased – in that a sequence tends to be broken down into patterns of attacks, reactions and
 retaliations. In fact, in this regard the pie-fight reproduces in little the talion structure of so many
pre-transition-era “comics”; thus rendering “escalation” into a formal procedure for the
 elaboration of a trope comparable to, for example, the reduplication by a variety of voices of a
 musical theme: for example, the repetition by a variety of instruments throughout the orchestra
of the “Destiny” theme in the first section of the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth
 Symphony.542

The most common variation on the basic “talion” structure is for one person to avoid the
pie; this will have a comic effect if the repetition-pattern sets up the expectation that it will hit:
so that the profilmic aspect of the pie-fight shows a natural tendency to reproduce the one-two-
three-switch pattern of throw-hit; throw-hit; throw-hit; throw-miss. This trope can be completed
(and a complete gag formed) if the one-two-three-switch trope is combined with the trope of
“Collateral Damage”: the variation is effected by the pie missing its object and striking a
bystander, who then joins the fray. (This is the pattern that drives the escalation of the fight in
Roach’s “Battle of the Century.”) Furthermore, this version of the motif is highly generative:
the natural motivational tendency will be for the besmottered bystander to retaliate – thus
recasting the terminal strophe of one phrase as the initial strophe of the next, so that in the
 cinematic pie-fight the one-two-three-switch motif (with its shorter and longer variants) becomes
 a highly reduplicative figure with an inherent tendency towards acceleration of tempo
 (comparable, perhaps, to certain sorts of Eastern European dance) the usefulness of which for the
 staging of climaxes will be evident.

542 One might compare the profusion of aural echoes of the Destiny theme in this section, for example, with the
 profusion of visual echoes which follow the initial pie-assault in Hal Roach’s “Battle of the Century” (1927),
 featuring Laurel and Hardy.
The structural function of the pie-fight in “Behind the Screen” is the ideal example. This sequence is in fact very comparable to the *stretto* of a fugue in that four major plot strands – the antagonism between the stagehand Charlie and his boss Goliath, the romance between Charlie and the Girl, Edna, who has disguised herself as a boy in order to get into pictures, the making of two films, a comedy and a *film d’art*, and the formal subplot of an attack by the striking stagehands – all converge in it. The intercutting of scenes from the various plot-strands divides the pie-fight into phrases, as well as demonstrating a prime characteristic of “eccentric” editing: the space is constructed around the action, and the rhythm of the editing is subordinated to the rhythm of the action, rather than the other way around – that is, rather than the space being constructed first and the action inserted into it. Finally, the pie-fight exhibits a characteristic “escalating” function – it intensifies into a chase which utterly disrupts the shooting and climaxes in the explosion of the studio by the strikers’ bomb, the conclusive defeat of Goliath and Charlie’s (presumptive) escape with Edna.

In theory, the pie-fight is probably the most perfect emblem of the entire aesthetics of silent slapstick: it represents a distinctively filmic combination of intensified “realism” with a surprisingly high degree of formal organization. Small wonder, then, that this trope has come to be taken as the surpassing symbol of Sennett’s achievement.

The inconvenient historical reality here is that so far as the existing corpus of films is able to testify, the slapstick pie-fight is a myth. Indeed, beyond the two I have just mentioned (and with the exception of numerous instances of single-pie assaults), virtually no examples of the famous Mack Sennett Keystone pie-fight are known to have survived. My research suggests, indeed, that their importance to the development of slapstick may have been minimal: in the entire period from 1907 through 1914, I found references to pie violence in only 8 films, all from 1913-1914, of which only two were Keystones: “Quiet Little Wedding” (Keystone, Oct. 1913); “Mike and Jake at College” (Joker, Nov. 1913); “The Winner” (Essanay, April 1914); “Getting Vivian Married” (Crystal, July 1914); “The Joblot Recruits” (Essanay, Sept. 1914); “The Honor of the Force” (Lubin, Nov. 1914); and “Other People’s Business” (Keystone, Dec. 1914). Of these, there is testimony to concerted pie conflicts in only two: a duel in “Mike and Jake at College,” and a “lemon meringue pie battle” in “Quiet Little Wedding.”

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Steve Massa tells me “The silent comedy pie fights seem to be a major unfounded myth … In my silent comedy viewing I’ve seen many things thrown – but hardly ever pies.”

It seems to me that the source of the cliché may in fact be due to the conspicuous usefulness of the pie-fight as an image for both the stylistic and symbolic uniqueness of slapstick comic violence. I’m thinking in particular of its ironically utopian quality: it is the perfect image of a group united by its mere divisiveness, the net result of their hostilities reducing to a redistribution of sweetness: a would-be war that results only in play, figured in terms of a strenuous realism, but rigorously formalized at the same time. This, I would argue, is a distinctive characteristic of all movement in slapstick comedy: it is not simply accelerated as a result of the discrepancy between silent and sound speed or by the whim of the projectionist, but choreographed, rhythmically phrased, and carefully timed so as to function at one and the same time in a verisimilar mode, and with an abstract, dance-like quality in which the transitions between spaces are caught up in the movements of the performers’ bodies.

XI. Violence and Funny Dumb Show: Slapstick as a Performance Style

If we look a little closer, we shall find that this sequence from “Behind the Screen” affords us a splendid example of numerous hallmarks of slapstick, considered as a performance style. Many of these hallmarks conspicuously reflect stylistic characteristics which we can recognize from our acquaintance with some of the most important features of the acrobatic song-and-dance acts of the nineteenth century – but for this reason, they constitute offenses against what, by the standards of verisimilitude, “good” (film) acting ought to consist in. For this reason, I shall argue later that, in fact, slapstick consists less in a style than in an anti-style.

1. **Posing**: Slapstick style manifestly relies heavily on the rapid communication of character information. Performers are routinely called upon, particularly at the beginnings and ends of phrases of action (or “beats”) to convey their characters’ states of mind by reference to a repertoire of attitudes that function largely by convention in a sort of “emotional shorthand.” At the beginning of the pie-fight sequence in “Behind the Screen,” Goliath saunters into the scene amiably, his hands in his pockets. At the end of...

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545 Private communication to the author, Tuesday, April 28, 2015.
shot 6 he is hunched over, wiping the goo from his eyes and flinging it from him in wrath and disgust.

2. **Telegraphing the Intention.** In order to focus on the comic disproportion between aims and consequences, the audience needs to be well aware of the character’s intentions before they are put into effect. This is the inverse of the requirements of a typical verisimilar portrayal – it frequently involves an exaggerated gesture preparing for an edit on an eyeline match: as Goliath prepares to throw a pie at Charlie, he stands in profile, facing right; stoops and extends his neck forward, then partially straightens without lifting his eyes.

3. **Phrasing the Action.** Instead of flowing seamlessly from cause to effect, each action in slapstick is broken down into three parts, each of which is clearly marked: a) a beginning attitude or root position which telegraphs the intention (the counterpart of “position” in song and dance); b) the action, which is performed in relatively strict time; c) the completion of the action, marked by a secondary tableau or pose which underscores or emphasizes the results of the action, or by a return to “position.”

4. **No Double-Time.** Just as in acrobatic song and dance, every movement follows the law of minimum effort. Just exactly as much motion as is required to perform the action with the correct expression is executed, and no more. The rhythms of the individual actions rigorously anticipate the rhythmic economy of the sequence. As the pie-fight progresses, and Goliath repeatedly turns to the table behind him for fresh ammunition, he never once moves his feet, even though in reaching back to the table behind him he is turning his upper torso almost 180 degrees.

5. **No Extraneous or Indeterminate/Indecisive Gestures.** In slapstick, all actions are signifiers, and all signifiers are unambiguous. Even if indecision is being telegraphed, it is telegraphed unambiguously (as it was so often by Harry Langdon).

6. **Motivations are to be played one at a time.** For the same reason ambiguity, and with it, psychological complexity – the chief desiderata of the verisimilar style – are to be avoided. This hallmark is a prime symptom of the unique function of the slapstick style: it is clearly intended to cut off the spectator’s retreat into a “contemplative attitude” and to frustrate any attempt to adopt a position of critical aloofness; instead the spectator is compelled by every means available to participate sympathetically in the action.
7. **The Conventions of Cinematic “Realism” Should Be Selectively Violated.** To this participatory form of engagement, the ‘realistic’ conventions of the cinema frequently form barriers, so that they require selective, but systematic, deconstruction. The convention of the “fourth wall,” for example, is carefully constructed (with the collaboration of the director) in order to be exploded by the performer’s direct address to the camera.

8. **Overplaying and Underplaying Must be Proportionate and Must be Directed Towards Specific Effects.** There seems in slapstick performance to be a regular relationship between exaggeration and understatement. For example, the broadness of Goliath’s reactions in the pie-fight are inversely proportionate to Chaplin’s actions, which are (proportionately) small and fast, and occupy a correspondingly small amount of screen time. Mugging is to be encouraged in reactions, and in other places where time needs to be left for the audience to laugh – but the size of the mugging has to be in proportion to a) the size of the act to which it reacts; and b) the anticipated duration of the audience’s laughter. This hallmark suggests that a primary goal of slapstick stylization is to denaturalize the representation of violence in strict accordance with appropriate (grotesque or eccentric) aesthetic criteria.

9. **Tempo** is not determined by the depth or intensity of the character’s emotions or the mood of the scene, but vice versa. The pacing of the actor’s performance anticipates the pacing of the sequence (which in turn is determined partly by the actor’s pacing and partly by the sequence’s place in the overall pacing of the film). The primary aesthetic goal of the director is not the construction of space, but the construction of tempo.

10. **Dance Figures** such as the “nesting table” positioning of two or more people’s bodies, the simultaneous performance by multiple bodies of the same action at the same time and in the same tempo, contrary and complementary motion, are frequently used in order to intensify visual patterns of repetition (i.e., rhythms) and to further denaturalize the performance of violence.

11. **Eccentricity** – the character’s “customary attitude towards his/her environment” is thus intrinsically related to his/her ability to move at a certain pace and in a certain sort of rhythm. The eccentricity of the principal clown and the eccentricity or grotesquity of the supporting characters are thus the performative counterparts of the filmic eccentricity which reside in the director’s deployment of style, and consist in their degree of
difference from the normal. The great exception to the government of *excentricité* is in the performances of women, which is of two sorts: i) Love interests: where the Girl is the love interest of the principal clown, she manifests the ideal of the desirable woman, and is consequently co-extensive with normality at its most attractive. The Girl thus becomes the diegetic vice for the values against which the Clown is deemed “eccentric.” She cannot herself be eccentric. Indeed, in the works of some of the slapstick masters (especially Keaton), the Girl’s body becomes in part the site of the protagonist’s struggle with normality for “rectitude.” ii) When female characters are comic characters, they typically have to be characterized as not romantically attractive, to prevent them from derailing the love interest. These characters can be portrayed as eccentric – but, unlike that of the male eccentrics, their eccentricity works entirely to reaffirm the values of normality, and does not function, as the eccentricity of the male comedian typically does, to critique them. This is even the case with successful principal comediennes such as Fay Tincher, Bebe Daniels, and Polly Moran.

XII. The One-Two-Three-Switch Pattern and the Efficacy of Slapstick

My argument in this chapter has been to the effect that what we have in the history of this motif is a case of perseveration – a rhythmic motif, most likely originating from some sport, and perhaps even from the reduplicative feint-feint-feint-jab structure of boxing, becomes formalized as an integral part of the minstrel dance vocabulary, and thence enters the theatrical movement repertoire, from which it becomes appropriated into the movement vocabulary of the slapstick cinema. But in the course of this appropriation, the motif becomes inextricably intertwined with a medium-specific technical property which changes the way it functions. If so, this gives us the opportunity of acid-testing the “homeopathic remedy” claim for the efficacy of slapstick, as argued by Benjamin (amongst others), by the application of a specific, concrete model.

How, then, are we to imagine that slapstick performance, and in particular the 1-2-3-switch pattern, might have functioned as a “cure” for the “mass psychoses” brought about by the industrialization of the twentieth century? Taking their cue from Walter Benjamin, a theoretical dramaturg (I’m using the term in Lessing’s sense as a theatrical counterpart for “musicologist”; a dramaturg who is primarily a theorist) might construct an example as follows: an average early-twentieth century person finds him- or herself compelled in various ways to internalize the
rhythms of their mechanical environment; they have to force themselves to be conscious of the frequency and the rapidity with which streetcars travel through the streets, and modify the tempo and the rhythm of their walking when crossing the street to avoid being run over. At work in a concern which employs typical Fordist organization they have to perform long series of identical movements which must not be interrupted on pain of one’s being replaced by another of any number of identically skilled members of the workforce. As the deadening rhythm of the repetitive action acquires increasing hold over the subject’s conscious mental activity, an equal and opposite unconscious wish to go berserk, disrupt the whole process and be replaced will enter into a mental tension with the conscious thought, producing something like a neurotic state. At the movies, the subject will find the unconscious wish formally gratified in the 1-2-3-switch motif which alludes a) to the deadening repetition; b) to its disruption; and c) to the penalty of replacement, which is robbed of its horror by being experienced in a mood of play in which the forbidden wish can be readily disavowed. The result is a burst of laughter which (at least momentarily) loosens the hold of the internalized repetitive work-structure over the subject’s normal mental processes by de-purposing them: in Kantian terms, by redirecting their purposive drive towards “free play” of purposiveness without a purpose. The effect is cathartic: the nation which is populated by a mass of individuals suffering from identical (or at least analogous) complaints will be similarly liberated; and the neurosis of the nation which expresses their collectivity will be “cured.”

A theoretical dramaturg taking his cue from Theodor Adorno, on the other hand, will respond that this “cure” is only an appearance: in fact, it is itself a symptom of a deeper problem than the worker’s discontent. The relief brought to the suffering neurotic proletarian is only sufficient to enable him/her to go on suffering and being neurotic. Far from “subverting” the exploitative industrial system which makes the labourer a neurotic sufferer, the comic representation only abets the further entrenchment of the exploitation, propelling both worker and capitalist towards a future conflict which the worker’s imagination is not being trained to prepare him/her to deal with. On the contrary, this person’s imagination is being sidetracked and disabled.

From this response, then, we may well carry away the following principle: the mere fact that an artistic practice arises in response to a social condition doesn’t necessarily imply that it successfully deals with that condition. Artistic practices can fail; they can be co-opted, they can be coerced – and no one need ever object or even know, because after all, it’s all only in fun.
But in fact, a strong argument can be made against this entire approach to the role of the 1-2-3-switch motif in the efficacy of slapstick comedy. Taylorist modes of production continue throughout the industrialized West through the 1950s and 1960s; but slapstick comedy – and with it, the 1-2-3-switch motif – doesn’t, except arguably in cartoons whose primary audiences consist of people who have no experience of working on an assembly line. The rhythmic employment of physical gags drops out even in shows that otherwise make conspicuous use of familiar slapstick tropes like *I Love Lucy,* it becomes a period device (e.g. in films like *Singin’ in the Rain*). In fact, by the 1960s numerous films conspicuously attempt to pastiche slapstick – the best example is Stanley Kramer’s *It’s a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* (1964) – and fail to the extent that they are unable to replicate its essential rhythmic drive.

I would also advance a further objection to the entire notion of cinema as a systematic application of “shocks” to the twentieth-century viewer’s nervous system for the homeopathic purpose of inuring him/her to the shocks of real life – principally through editing. Slapstick comedy, because it incorporates the “shocks” of editing with the diegetic “shocks” of the profilmic event, might be thought *a fortiori* to provide an example of what is maintained by the Modernity Thesis. But in fact it does the opposite. The example of Chaplin’s “Behind the Screen” demonstrates that when editing rhythms fail to coincide with the visible percussions of the battle, they function as mere “beat markers,” which express little beyond the variations in tempo within the scene. Their rhythmic effects are always supplementary to those of the profilmic event. When edits do coincide with the beats of the action, they disappear altogether: and the distinguishing feature of the Hollywood style is indeed this very “invisibility.”

On the other hand, the fact that core techniques like the “1-2-3-switch pattern” can pass so swiftly out of currency is perhaps the best evidence I can bring in support of my own major argument that the contexts in which comedy functions can, and continually do, change: that techniques which are funny in one context can lose their effectiveness in the transition to another.

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546 See, for example, the episode from the show’s first season, entitled “The Ballet” (CBS, Feb. 18, 1952), in which the physical comedy of Lucy’s performance of the “Slowly I Turned” bit depends on our awareness of the contrast between the behaviour of her burlesque persona and the way in which she normally moves.
Chapter 7
Trope 4 – Why Krausmeyer Couldn’t Sleep,
or, The Passion of Pantaloon

How do large-scale cultural changes – like the ones I described in Chapters 1 through 3 – manifest themselves concretely in the minutiae of actual performances -- in the extension of a hand, in a particular method of executing a turn, in a particular style rendering a fall on one’s backside comic? In what way can the movements of our bodies become the watermarks of our cultural environment? I have already argued that knockabout comedy was peculiar to the nineteenth-century because it dealt in uniquely nineteenth-century terms (moral and political allegory) with uniquely nineteenth-century concerns (industrialism, Darwinism, “embourgeoisement”), and drew on a uniquely nineteenth-century movement vocabulary (pugilism, voltige and manège, acrobatics, popular dance). And I have also argued that slapstick comedy is peculiar to the twentieth century in that it deals in uniquely twentieth-century terms (moving picture image culture) with related twentieth-century concerns, drawing on a movement vocabulary which can be regarded as the twentieth-century counterpart of knockabout. What I have not accomplished so far is to articulate the essential quiddity of the knockabout and slapstick movement styles: to identify their principal differences and similarities, and to articulate, if possible, their relationship to the function of physical comedy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I have, however, already laid the groundwork for this phase of the discussion by establishing the contexts in which knockabout and slapstick were meaningful, and in sketching out my understanding of the transition between them.

In my first chapter, I attempted to give a sense of the state of comedy performance before the emergence of knockabout and after the decline of slapstick; I also tried to summarize the major transformations in laughter culture which take place in the interim between them, and to relate them to the social changes that are usually taken to characterize the period. In my second chapter, I narrowed my focus to the context of popular culture, and advanced the theory that the contexts in which the emergence and decline of knockabout comedy and the emergence of slapstick that succeeded, can best be summed up with reference to five major discourses – five major trends in the cultural climate. In my third chapter, I located the emergence of slapstick in its precise historical context as a response to what I called a “crisis in comedy” which obtained at the time. I suggested that the precipitating cause of this “crisis” may have been a comparatively
sudden, or at least, unanticipated change in people’s appetites for humor; and I advanced the hypothesis that the principal symptom of this change was a sudden proliferation of “devil-intertexts” in popular culture, commencing in 1907 with the premiere of Molnar’s *The Devil*, and coming to a head around the 1908-1909 theatrical season, to be followed by a tailing off which is not yet complete a hundred years later.

At exactly the same time there emerges a new optimism reflecting a conviction that tastes in entertainment have reached new heights, reflecting a new plateau of civility which might be associated with a wider distribution of wealth, a better-regulated relationship between the labor and commodity markets, and an increase in both prosperity and leisure time. Many popular entertainments begin to reflect a lightening of conscience and a loss of dread. Older, less enlightened forms of performance such as the popular melodrama with its vertiginous moral polarities, but also blackface minstrelsy, vaudevillian knockabout with its broad ethnic humour, and the excesses of late-nineteenth-century burlesque begin to wear thin; all the major branches of the entertainment industry agree to submit themselves to censorships and each voluntarily undertakes a thorough moral purgation. In the midst of this new commonwealth, the old emblems of Death and Hell that had formerly functioned to coerce unwilling populaces seem suddenly to have acquired a delightful irrelevance, as if they were no longer necessary to keep the engine of society turning; as if the very ideologies they served had been exposed, less as fictions, perhaps, than as mere irrelevancies. The birth of cinema, on this view, did more than provide humanity with a new pair of eyes: it opened them on a brave new world.

I. The Ghost Walks: The Goal(s) of Performance

What can have been the effect of all of these changes on performance technique? The major effect for acting technique – in the sense of “acting” as a physical representation of a character in a dramatic narrative – has already been expertly described by Roberta Pearson in *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films*, and she summarizes it most happily as a turn from an “actorly” (“histrionic”) style to a “verisimilar” style. Pearson herself is far too methodical a scholar and too disciplined a thinker to fall into the trap of mistaking this transformation of performance styles for the replacement of an “untrue” or “unreal” style by a “true,” or “real” one. On the contrary, she is usually careful to place any adversion to the notion of an independent “reality” within scare quotes, and prefaces
her methodical distinction of the “histrionic” and the “verisimilar” with a most appropriate
citation from Steven Heath’s *The Nouveau Roman*: “For a particular society … the work that is
realistic is that which repeats the received form of ‘Reality.’ It is a question of reiterating the
society’s system of intelligibility.”\(^{547}\) Heath’s remark suggests that we should look for the
difference between the “histrionic” style (or styles, since there were many more than one) of the
nineteenth century and the “realistic” one(s) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries
in the ontological presuppositions that underlay them: for example, in the difference between a
belief that “real Reality” is ultimately transcendent, and a belief that it is ultimately imminent in
our experience. It was the former presumption which underlay the performance discipline of the
nineteenth century; and the transition to a physical poetics grounded on the latter seems to have
been a long process – but one that defined the stylistic differences between knockabout and
slapstick comedy.

A part of this process was a massive overhaul of the entire notion of “acting” which was
taking place at the same time. It is not simply that there was a change in the canons of
performance, not simply that the criteria by which performances were judged became inverted,
but that the mere aims of performance, the contexts of performance and the understanding of
what constitutes performance, were all undergoing a thorough revision. This revision included a
narrowing of the field of activities constituting “acting” in three major respects:

i. The primary major component of this narrowing consisted in the opening up of a schism
between “theatrical” and “sporting” events. The opening up of this schism appears in the
increasingly separate coverage of sporting and theatrical affairs in both daily and weekly
newspapers and the modes of address in those papers which increasingly direct reportage
of sporting events towards a masculine readership, and reportage of “theatrical” events
toward their female counterparts.

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\(^{547}\) (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), p. 20. At the same time, because the terms “actorly”
(“histrionic”) and the “verisimilar” have for her the logical force of opposites (whatever is not “histrionic” is
“verisimilar,” and *vice versa*), her work can be viewed as incorporating an anti-theatrical bias which is perfectly
appropriate to the period and subject matter of her study. The manifestation of this bias is intensified by her
distinction between two sorts of “histrionic code”: a “checked” one, in which it may be supposed the actor’s innate
tendency to perform excessively is under control, and an “unchecked” one, in which the actor has been allowed to
follow his/her natural inclinations (with catastrophic results). This latter distinction, in fact, has the effect of
undermining the prior one: the distinction between the “verisimilar” and the “checked histrionic” and between both
and the “unchecked histrionic” all reduce to a simple question of the measure of ‘excess’ in a given performance.
ii. A secondary major component of this narrowing includes the gradual reduction of the types of performance which qualify one as an “actor.” Before the 1880s in both Britain and America, any theatrical performer qualifies as an “actor,” including singers, dancers, acrobats, tumblers, monologists, specialty performers, and so on. From the 1880s through the 1930s, however, these other senses gradually drop away.

iii. A third major component of this narrowing refers to the actor’s technique. Throughout the nineteenth century, acting technique might range from pantomime through broad physical caricature and clowning to the essentially vocal techniques of elocution and lyric or operatic singing. From the 1880s through the 1930s, however, the term “actor” is increasingly restricted to mean a person who imitates a second person in order to provide a third with the illusion that s/he actually is that person.

The consequences of this revision for audiences were correspondingly wide-ranging. The much broader range of activities included in the category of “acting” called for a correspondingly wider range of competencies on the part of nineteenth-century audiences than their twentieth-century counterparts.

i. The gradual eruption of a schism between sporting and dramatic events points, first of all, to a major cultural shift in the efficacy of dramatic, or at least theatrical, performance. With the development of a theatrical habitus calling for the darkening of auditoria, the immobilization of the audience, and the widespread promotion of a contemplative spectatorial attitude, theatrical events lose their usefulness as outlets for the surplus aggression of young men and the performance of acts of expressive violence. By 1910, an occurrence like the Astor Place Riot of 1849 is quite improbable; but another like the massacre at the Munich Olympics of 1972 is all too inevitable.

ii. The restriction of “acting” to the narrowest possible interpretation of the Aristotelian conception of mimesis leads to the adoption of a theatrical regimen that privileges character psychology and thought, (i.e. aspects of theatre that are primarily linguistic)

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548 (An ideological conflict over British and American conceptions of democracy precipitated by a dispute over the encoding of these conceptions in the performance styles of the actors Macready and Forrest.)

549 (For Aristotle, mimesis includes flute-playing – presumably because to a compulsively literally-minded person it suggests the singing of a bird.)

550 (In Aristotle’s terms, ethos and dianoia.)
over spectacle\textsuperscript{551} and physicality; it thus led to a false distinction between the live theatre (often referred to in \textit{Moving Picture World} as the “talking” theatre); and the cinema as the appropriate site for action; and hence to the misconception that theatrical plays were by definition “sound-led,” while photoplays were “image-led.” This in turn led to a view of the theatre as a place removed from the real, active business of life, which the cinema resolutely confronted.

iii. As a consequence of the reduction of audiences’ expectations of live performance, we find that popular audiences of the early-to-mid-nineteenth centuries had a wide variety of competencies which for us are highly surprising: ordinary people considered themselves informed connoisseurs of Shakespearean drama, opera (which, indeed, had begun as a popular entertainment in Italy), poetry, oratory and recitation, equestrianism, and various forms of dance including folk dancing. In the transition from the more allegorical “histrionic” style of the nineteenth century to the “realism” of the twentieth, however, as the range of performance types constituting an evening’s entertainment gradually narrows, the competencies of audiences are correspondingly impoverished.

Over the course of this cultural transition, a change in the major explicit goals of performance is discernible. In nineteenth-century dramatic journalism, emphasis is placed on the construction of a group experience of one or another character, in which the individual spectator participates. The apogee of this type of experience is perhaps best articulated as the “vortex” motion described by Canadian theatre theorist Roy Mitchell, and characterized by the anthropologist Victor Turner as a “liminoid” state of “flow.” In the nineteenth-century theatre, the custom whenever this state was achieved was to say, “the ghost walks” – it was a show-business idiom which indicated that the presence in the theatre was more than the sum of the spectators and performers present: the intercourse between them had conjured up a sense of an additional Presence. The form of experience that is being alluded to here, then, would seem to be of a quasi-mystical sort; perhaps analogous to the raising of a spirit by the will of the group at a séance.

Cinematic discourse, on the other hand, tended to debunk all such notions – in fact, the explicit subject matter of many early film comedies is the exposure of a phoney “medium” (with the rhetorical effect of further entrenching a “true” one). The paradigm in \textit{Moving Picture World}
for the successful accomplishment of a performance works rather on the analogy of station-to-station, and, ultimately, of person-to-person communications. This effect relies primarily on the indexical character of the presentation, with particular emphasis on the various aspects of mise-en-scène:

About the highest meed of praise one can give a film is … (i)t “went over.” It “got across.” It “took.”

Now, just what is meant by the term? what is “getting over” or “going across”? … The reason so many photoplays fail utterly in getting across is due to one thing—unnaturalness. It may be unnaturalness of the vehicle, it may be unnaturalness of the plot, it may be unnaturalness of the acting, it may be – frequently is – unnaturalness of scenery, and it may be some minute detail which stands out in the spectator’s mind as utterly unnatural.  

The contrast between the ultimate goals of performance in the two media contexts could hardly be better epitomized: in the one instance a quasi-supernatural group effect is aimed at, in which the individual spectator (somewhat ecstatically) participates; in the other the summum bonum is a quasi-communicational effect which addresses the individual spectator as a detached witness or judge of the veracity of the representation.

II. Comic Performance Styles in the Nineteenth Century

I can’t help reading Pearson’s tacit assumption that the wide range of nineteenth-century performances styles can be appropriately collapsed into the “histrionic” category as an unconscious symptom of the impoverishment I mentioned earlier. Even within the relatively restricted field of “melodrama,” there were in the nineteenth century a variety of national traditions and styles which were vigorously asserted against each other in popular discourse (i.e., that were meaningful to different groups of people), not to mention sub-varieties of styles appropriate to the various melodramatic subgenres. In the remainder of this chapter, I’d like to return the focus of my argument to the genre of physical comedy, the adaptation of which to the

new media context of early film posed special problems, which are not entirely intelligible within the binary opposition of “histrionic” (*i.e.*, “bad”) acting versus “verisimilar” (*i.e.*, “good”) acting.

In my opening chapter, I reported the conclusion of my “Slapstick Chronology” that, for both contemporary producers and audiences, the term “slapstick” was evaluative and not descriptive before 1914, but after about June of that year it was increasingly used primarily to denote filmmaking in a particular style, or “method.” It was only after about 1917 that the term acquired a fixed meaning which referred to a genre of comic films made in that particular style. The essence of style, however, is technique; that is to say, there is no style of production or performance which is not grounded in a distinctive technique or set of techniques. In seeking to understand the quiddity of slapstick film, therefore, we need to ask, “What are the distinguishing features of the technique on which it was based?”: *i.e.*, “How is it like, and how is it unlike other forms of technique?” Clearly, slapstick is a type of clowning essentially unlike, but perhaps not unrelated to, the primarily balletic style of the *commedia dell’arte*. As a distinctively twentieth-century form of violent physical comedy, it seems inevitable that slapstick’s closest antecedent should be the knockabout comedy of the nineteenth century, which survived alongside it into the twentieth, and together with which it was frequently classed. If the two styles really are cognate in this way, therefore, they must be grounded in technical similarities.

Consequently, in the previous three chapters, I have labored to reconstruct so far as possible three major aspects of the knockabout style: in my examination of the burlesque prize fight in Chapter 4, we observed the structuring of the performance as a contest which becomes a game in which the rules are complicated to the point of disruption; we likewise observed the use of certain “coercive” rhythmic patterns which invite the audience member to participate in the game by an interior, empathic employment of “physical intelligence.” In Chapter 5 we examined a typical example of circus knockabout in which, again, the spectator is stimulated to compete mentally with the performer to the disadvantage of the latter in the performance of a physical skill with which the average spectator will have a strong competency of his or her own. We likewise drew attention to the curious fact that this sort of performance sets out, not to “charm” the audience member, but rather to generate his/her antipathy for the purpose of maximizing the dramatic impact of the reconciliatory *envoi*. The Metamorphose act therefore presents itself, like the burlesque prize fight, as a “bad” performance which is apt to disappoint the audience, but succeeds, when it succeeds, in doing the opposite – in pleasing her or him instead. In Chapter 6
we examined the technique which underlay the popular but lost art of knockabout song and dance, and discovered three crucial technical principles: i) the avoidance of “double-time”; ii) the structural importance of returning, after the execution of each movement, to “Position”; and iii) the regular employment of a particular pattern of “coercive rhythm” – the “one, two, three switch” pattern, with its variants. By finding counterparts for each of these within the corpus of slapstick films, and by comparing the employment of each of these techniques within its own context, we were able to reach the preliminary conclusion that slapstick technique differs from knockabout technique primarily in that it consists in the selective adjustment of various aspects of the latter to the new media environment of early classical filmmaking; and that as such, in each case it represents a compression and an intensification of knockabout’s underlying technical principles. This, we might guess, represents a strategy of compensation for the decreased sensory intensity of a two-dimensional mediated as opposed to a three-dimensional live experience. The primary difference, then, between slapstick and knockabout will have to be some function of the difference in the properties of the two media.

In this regard, I think Pearson’s distinction between the “histrionic” and the “verisimilar” is highly useful -- indeed, crucial -- for the understanding of the development of screen comedy. The difference of slapstick from knockabout -- and here I believe I am in perfect agreement with contemporary understandings of the “improvements” in films since the early period -- is clearly that the former is in an at least partially verisimilar mode, whereas the latter was broadly, unashamedly, histrionic – i.e., “actorly.” But in the case of slapstick the “histrionic” and the “verisimilar” cannot be treated as contraries, since slapstick was both; this is the fundamental meaning of the Evening Public Ledger reviewer’s insight that Sennett’s style was essentially “quasi-realistic.”

If we examine the technical basis of meaning-construction in nineteenth-century physical comedy we can therefore use the insights we may gain as an optic which will enable us to distinguish the technical essence of the slapstick style. This will in turn provide us with criteria for discriminating between what is and what is not slapstick, which will in turn furnish us with critical tools for approaching and, where necessary, revising any faults in the slapstick canon and pantheon which may have arisen as a result of the distorting effect of historical contingencies, like the five discourses which I addressed in Chapter Two.
III. The (Neo-) Classical Body and the Baroque World View

In opposing the “carnival grotesque” to the “classical body” Mikhail Bakhtin, being a literary critic and not a performance scholar, is unable to distinguish between pre-medieval and post-medieval conceptions of the “classical.” There is a certain equivocation in his use of the word: it is unclear whether he is thinking of the body as conceived by classical performance theorists such as Demosthenes and Cicero, or by the Renaissance and Enlightenment theorists whose notions of “classical” aesthetics informed the neo-classical doctrines of the Baroque period and laid the foundations for the “classical” performance styles of song, dance and elocution which developed during the Enlightenment. For the purposes of this thesis, I shall confine my discussion of the (neo-)classical body to a summary of its pertinent characteristics as they relate primarily to the technique of these three arts, and a description of their place within the Enlightenment world-view.

In classical dance, the critical features of technique are: i) the symmetrical vertical alignment of the body; ii) “Turnout” – that is, the rotation of the legs outward from the hips; iii) the pointing of the toes such that the ball of the foot carries a slightly larger percentage of the total body weight than the heel; iv) a 5-position schema for footwork; v) the lowering of the shoulders in dynamic opposition to a corresponding upwards movement of the neck; vi) and “pulling up” – the contraction of the muscles of the lower abdomen in such a fashion as to raise the upper torso without adding muscle tension in the shoulders and chest, to enhance the overall alignment of the body, and thus to exploit maximum torque in executing turns. The same posture was the foundation of classical speech and singing, and formed the basis of fencing technique. This physical dynamic optimized the speed, swiftness and economy of physical motion, endowing the dancer or combatant with highly superior physical capabilities; and bestowed the speaker or the singer with unusual and even phenomenal resources of vocal tone, resonance and volume.

Moreover, it made the body into a walking allegory of the metaphysical order of nature: by its privileging of the vertical axis it demonstrated that in proportion as the body is directed towards “higher” things, the more closely it approaches its own internal perfection and the more completely it realizes its inherent capabilities. It thus furnished an object demonstration of the difference between the “fallen” or “low” human nature, and the exalted nature which lay concealed within it, and could be released through various forms of discipline. Classical
performance thus tacitly enacted a moral allegory in which Art, by raising humans above the ordinary, brought them closer to God; this “uplift” was an experience in which the audience could share by sympathetic participation. This reading of the phenomenology of the classical body remained a fundamental premise of “serious” performance – and was the imaginative underpinning of the rhetoric of cultural hierarchy – well into the first half of the twentieth century, long after the metaphysical system which informed it had been generally abandoned.

Comical movement technique consisted in the systematic distortion of the (neo-) classical body and aimed at parodying the received reading of it. In practical terms, it was necessary for the physical adjustment to be minimal in order to allow for freedom of movement. This involved the selection of physical adjustments requiring the minimum of effort but producing the maximum effect. Throughout the nineteenth century two basic modifications of the classical body came to form the basis of two diverse repertoires of comic technique – that is, of two distinct “histrionic” styles: the style grotesque and the style excentrique. Each of these came replete with an allegorical framework that posited itself as the antithesis of the system of meaning incarnated in the (neo-) classical body.

IV. Grotesque and Eccentric Stylization in Nineteenth-Century Physical Comedy

The two most frequently recurring terms used in nineteenth-century sporting and theatrical periodicals to characterize the styles of comic performances are “grotesque” and “eccentric.” The use of these terms, however, is far from systematic, and, with one exception, I have been unable to find specific reference texts furnishing definitions and concrete examples of how the various genres of performance might typically be adapted to either style. Once again, there seems to be a tendentious silence in the historical record on this subject. Neither are the terms always used as contraries: though they seem so in some contexts, in others they are not: and very frequently throughout the period from 1860 through the early1900s, we

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553 Some other qualitative descriptors for knockabout performances in both Britain and the United States are: “comic,” “rough,” “neat,” “Hibernian” (for Irish), Caledonian (for Scottich), “nondescript,” (of a blackface team), “burlesque,” “novelty,” “funny,” and “sensation” or “sensational.” None of these convey as concrete an idea of the styles of such a wide range of performances as “eccentric” and “grotesque,” which are used of virtually every aspect of popular performance, from circus clowning to minstrelsy, from acrobatics to equestrianism, from pantomime to song and dance.

554 I.e., Delsarte’s special use of the eccentric as a category within his system.
find them used together: for example, an advertisement in the *Era* for Oct. 13, 1878, identifies the team of Vincent and Russell as “Eccentric Knockabout Grotesques.” Both, however, are about equally applicable to knockabout performers and performances, and seem to be employed to characterize them equally.

The most likely explanation would seem to be that the two styles are intrinsically related, not only by their similar resonances against the associations of the classical body, because one may very likely have developed out of the other, with the result that they retained a family resemblance to each other which may have been either more or less decisive in any particular case.

It also seems likely that, as the period progressed, the use of the two terms became more and more associative and less and less descriptive, so that by the conclusion of the silent film period, they were more or less meaningless for any but a handful of performers and critics for whom they retained a specific technical meaning.

IV.1 THE *STYLE GROTESQUE*

Before about 1840 or so, the dominant comic style is that of the *grotesque*, which we have already encountered in the form of the circus performers (*grotesques*), *klischniggs* and other contortionists who appear in French popular performance in the first half of the nineteenth century. It’s apparent that for the Romantics, up to this point, the *style grotesque* is viewed as the antithesis of the Enlightenment notion of the sublime in a more or less binary opposition, as witness Victor Hugo’s epochal manifesto:

> In the new poetry, while the sublime will represent the soul as it is, purified by Christian morality, the grotesque will play the part of the human animal. The first-named type, freed from all taint of impurity, will be endowed with everything that is beautiful and attractive … The second type will take to itself everything that is ridiculous, ugly, inferior mentally or physically. In this partition of humanity and of creation, all the passions, the vices, and crimes will fall to its share; licentiousness, sycophancy, gluttony, avarice,
perfidy, and hypocrisy will be its attributes … The beautiful has but one type; the ugly has a thousand …

The *style grotesque* is the dominant comic style for physical performance throughout the early part of the nineteenth century, and has a shaping influence on British pantomime even in the portrayals of the lumpish Clown – for example in this famous lithograph of Grimaldi:

This picture makes evident the common features of the pantomime grotesque and the (neo-) classical body: the figure is erect and almost perfectly symmetrical, the stomach tightly contracted, the toes pointed and the weight distributed forward onto the balls of the feet and the toes. It is an image which justly celebrates the vertical axis as the defining aspect of the human – but it deviates significantly from the “classical body” at several points: the shoulders are hunched forward, the neck tense and the chin raised; the pelvis likewise is slightly thrust forward so as to emphasize the groin – deviations which mark the animal in process of emerging from the human at several points.

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These deviations, then, form the minimal technical markers of the grotesque style, which is simply a slight modification of the classical body. The performer adopts a second-position *relevé* stance, with the abdomen contracted and the knees and toes turned outward and the heels lifted from the floor; then, without introducing tension into the shoulders, lifts the arms so that the hands are at chest height and then extends them outwards, while taking the majority of the body’s weight on the balls of the feet and the toes. By then extending the neck slightly forward while drawing the shoulders backward, a new root position is formed which presents a grotesque parody of the initial classical pose, suggesting a monstrous body which is like a composite of a person and some sort of bird of prey. As this posture with the neck thrust slightly forward makes it impossible to walk while remaining on point in an out-turned position, it becomes necessary, in order to move effectively, to raise the knees more than usually high, once again begging comparison with the footwork of an animal rather than a human being. The same posture can be made the basis of a compelling man-monkey with a few obvious adjustments. A common second position which in practise often functioned as the dynamic opposite of the first was to drop the heels to the floor and bend the knees and the waist in a forward crouch, with the elbows extended backward and the chin forward.

These grotesque root postures, then, while continuing to privilege the vertical axis, emphasize the tendency downward rather than up, and thus carry with them demonic connotations which are the reverse of the connotations of the erect (neo-) classical form. In a well-trained performer, however, in spite of the additional strain which they place on the neck- and shoulder-muscles, the modifications required are minimal and convert the signifying function of the figure into its own opposite with surprising suddenness and efficiency. What is really striking about the “grotesque body” is the way in which it transforms the environment around it, connoting an overpowering and ambiguous energy in which the body is caught up and by which it is distorted and even disfigured. This of course is most likely an effect of the way in which it inverts the resonances of the body’s vertical axis. The attached picture powerfully evokes the comic style of grotesque song and dance.

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556 British clowns Tom Matthews and Harry Payne would often vary this root position by turning the toes and knees *inward* and the heels out.
The “grotesque song and dance” teams of the 1870s – 1900s are the missing links between acrobatic acts like those of the Ravels, the traditional pantomime and acrobatics of George L. Fox and the Hanlon Brothers, and the grotesqueries of early film. They began with the sensational success of the Clodoche Troupe, “four male French dancers named Clodoche,

\[557\] The New York Clipper, June 9, 1877, cover.
Flageolet, Normande, and La Comete.” A rage for “Clodoche dancing” (which was related to the can-can) resulted in its becoming, by the 1880s, a disreputable form of dance popular in burlesque. The success of the Clodoche Troupe was followed up swiftly by that of the Majiltons – Frank, Charles and their sister Marie – who were prominent in the success of the Black Crook when it was revived in 1870. With the work of the Majiltons, grotesque song and dance becomes powerfully associated with diabolism: their feature act was entitled “Les trois diables”; at Christmases they performed an adaptation of Dickens’ tale of “Gabriel Grub; or, The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton”; and they likewise performed a “goblin operatic spectacle” entitled “Ding Dong; or, the Pretty Laundress of Lutzen.” This association was kept up by the numerous teams who continued to spring up throughout the rest of the century: the Phoites, the Lorellas, the Hogan Brothers, the Three Droles, the Brazziers, and the Three Marvelles.

Numerous knockabout performers began as grotesques: they include The American Four, Kelly and O’Brien, Frank E. McNish of “Silence and Fun” fame, Johnson and Powers, Hines and Blossom, and Lamont and Ducrow, who were known as “The Happy Hottentots.” The 1899 Edison film “Three Acrobats” features a French grotesque song and dance team, the Buffons, whose act, on their initial appearance in America in 1894, was described by reviewers as “somewhat after the style of the two Majiltons.”

IV.1.a: AFFINITIES

The style grotesque, therefore, has profound affinities with the pre-Romantic continental world-view. It expresses negatively the same view of a vertically hierarchized world-order, and evokes the dark or demonic side of that order – indeed, on the order of physicality, grotesquerie presents the embodiment of what Northrop Frye would call the ‘demonic parody’ of that world-view. In the meantime, its closest affinities as a style of movement are with ballet and with classical swordplay – especially with rapier and sabre technique. As a comic style, it was most nearly akin to the acrobatics of the circuses and fairs and especially to pantomime – indeed, self-
professed “grotesques” like the Vokes family in Britain and the Phoites and the Lorellas in the United States migrated easily back and forth between pantomime and variety performance all their lives.

IV.2: THE STYLE EXCENTRIQUE

By the mid- to late 1840s, however, a second means of parodying the “classical body” begins to achieve popularity in blackface minstrelsy.\textsuperscript{563} Certainly, according to the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}, the figurative use of the word “eccentric” to mean “Deviating from usual methods; odd, whimsical,” occurs from the mid-1600s onward.\textsuperscript{564} This use in turn derives from its primary meanings in geometry, in which context it is used of a circle which overlaps, but is not concentric, with another circle, and in Ptolemaic astronomy, where it denotes “an orbit not having the earth precisely in its centre.”\textsuperscript{565}

If, beginning from the classical relevé position described above (with the heels together, in first position rather than in second) the performer simply drops the heels and lifts the balls of the feet so that the entire body weight is transferred back to the heels, the body will suddenly demonstrate a tendency to wobble like a bowling pin; it will lose its upward tendency, and the most important vectors will be forward, backward, and, to a lesser extent, to either side. If, while attempting to walk, the performer maintains the classical “turnout,” then once again, it will become necessary either to lift the knees abnormally, or to rock the hips so that the upper torso will tend to revolve around a second centre independently of (and in contrary motion to) the rocking of the hips. That is to say, the performer’s body will have a tendency to go into and out of balance in a physical analogue to the movement of an eccentric planet.\textsuperscript{566}

There is special reason to believe that the idea of “eccentric motion” had a peculiarly nineteenth-century resonance owing to a contemporary mechanical contrivance which was integral to the working of most engines, and in particular, of steam locomotives:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{563} I have been so far unable to verify that the style excentrique actually originates in the context of American blackface minstrelsy – it is only within that context that I have encountered the earliest examples I am aware of.
  \item \textsuperscript{564} \textit{OED} 2\textsuperscript{nd} Ed., Vol. 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{565} Ibid.: “(afterwards sometimes used in a Copernican sense: an orbit not having the sun precisely in its centre.)”
  \item \textsuperscript{566} A splendid example of the transition back and forth between a classical \textit{balletique} and an eccentric style is given by Ann Miller in Frank Capra’s \textit{You Can’t Take It With You} (1938).
\end{itemize}
2. Mech. A circular disc fixed on a revolving shaft, some distance out of centre, working freely in a ring (the *eccentric strap*), which is attached to a rod called an *eccentric rod* by means of which the rotating motion of the shaft is converted into a backward-and-forward motion. Its most frequent use is for working the slide-valve of a steam-engine…

But perhaps the best reason for the widespread distribution of the notion of “eccentric” movement was its centrality to the Delsarte system, in which it formed one of the three principal categories of expressive movement: the Normal; the Eccentric; and the Concentric.

If *grotesquerie* connoted a spiritual realm turned upside-down, the *style excentrique*, on the contrary, had an opposite connotation: it emphasized the mechanics of balance; the body as a material object with an incongruous centre of gravity of its own. This resonance was not lost on the earliest minstrels, who developed the “eccentric business style of negro” along this very line. Not surprisingly, one of the foremost proponents of the type was Charles White.

If we examine the character and costume descriptions for the roles played by White in the Ethiopian sketches either written or “arranged” by him for publishing, we find that the most frequently recurring item of apparel for blackface characters in his wardrobe was a pair of “big shoes.” Big shoes, are, of course, quintessentially eccentric because they force the performer to lift his toes as he walks, forcing his body weight back onto his heels – fat men are a common eccentric type for the same reason. The pair of big shoes occurs, indeed, in company with a “bamboo cane” in the costume requirements for the two earliest extant sketches published by White, and in both of whose original cast lists his name occurs: “Going for the Cup” (1847), and “The Policy Players” (1847, revived 1863). In the former of these, as “Old Mr. Rogers,” who cheats his way through a challenge dance with Master Juba, he wears “Gray wig and beard, large, loose pants, long nigger vest, large drab coat, high loose collar, and handkerchief; old white hat, large slave shoes and bamboo cane.” In “The Policy Players” his costume is

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567 *OED*, 2nd Ed. Vol. 5.
570 Charles White, “Going For the Cup: or, Old Mrs. Williams’ Dance” (New York: Robert M. De Witt Publisher, 1874) p. 2. The costume suggests a performance very much like the one given in two Biograph “Foxy Grandpa”
virtually identical: “Gray wig and beard. High collar. Loose cravat. Ancient hat. Long overcoat. Large loose pants. Comical vest. Large shoes and cane.”\textsuperscript{571} A fragment of dialogue from “Jealous Husband” (1856) suggests that for White, big shoes were a touchstone for his character.\textsuperscript{572} White’s parts, moreover, frequently gave him occasion to dance in his “big shoes”; indeed, the “Big Shoe” dance was a favorite specialty which gained widespread popularity and continued to be offered by eccentric dancers well into the next century.\textsuperscript{573} As for White, he continued performing the big-shoed eccentric character into the mid-1860s – the shoes remain a requirement for the role of Judge Birch in “A Night in a Strange Hotel” (1865) – and quite probably for a long time thereafter.

But during the final quarter of the century, there are two major points of contrast between the eccentric song and dance performers and their grotesque counterparts: first, the label “eccentric” is rarely used regularly – only a small number of teams are consistently referred to as “eccentric.” One more frequently reads of minstrel performers being commended for their renditions of “Ethiopian eccentricities,” but during the latter quarter of the nineteenth century one rarely reads of a performer being labeled as having an eccentric style. Secondly, very few of those performers who are at all regularly identified as “eccentrics” end up crossing over to become knockabouts. In fact, only the team of Van Leer and Barton, who don’t come on the scene until 1896, really fit into this category.

IV.2.a: AFFINITIES

In grotesquerie the predominant effect is the contortion of the body in response to some otherworldly spiritual or psychological force with which it has to struggle for control. The point of comparison against which the extremity of this struggle is registered is the classical body as reflected in the style of classical ballet. The style excentrique, on the other hand, emphasizes the

\textsuperscript{572} Charles White, “Jealous Husband” (New York: Robert M. De Witt, 1874), p. 5: “Yes; and when I used to try to kiss you what a poke you used to give me in the nose, and then I used to kick you wid my big shoes; didn’t we hab fun then – didn’t we tho’?”
\textsuperscript{573} A version of it is performed in army boots by Dick Van Dyke in Season 1, Episode 5 (“Oh, How We Met on the Night That We Danced,” Oct. 31, 1965) of the Dick Van Dyke show.
physical and mechanical properties of the body: its susceptibility to inertia, its balance, and the smooth interrelations of its parts. The struggle for control obtains between the inhabitant of the body and the natural, rather than supernatural, forces that govern its movements. Although it would seem that the eccentric style originates as a variation on the grotesque style (in which the classical body is parodied simply by dropping the weight onto the heels), the primary affinity of the style seems rather to be with the manifestations of the healthy body in sport and entertainment, and especially with popular forms of recreation such as clog and jig dancing and pugilism, than with an abstract and elevated metaphysics.

In fact, the period from 1880-1910 presents a marked evolution in the popularity of the eccentric style. During this evolution, the point of comparison against which the bodily struggle for control is registered seems to change: the standard is increasingly the “public body” as performed by the community at large and as reflected in the spectator’s own sense of rectitude. I would guess that the gravitation away from the use of an abstract paradigm and toward a concrete one – which occurs at the same time as the schism opens up between “art” and “sport” in recreational activities – had a similar effect on the performance of the grotesque, whose popularity seems to wane on American and British stages as that of the eccentric waxes. It is possibly to this gravitation of the standard against which the comic deviation is measured that some writers are referring when they claim that the performance of comedy during this period becomes more “realistic.”

In nineteenth-century theatrical tradition, therefore, both the grotesque and the eccentric styles are dynamic: they are grounded in the body’s struggle to gain or to regain rectitude against certain forces which interfere with it, and make it comic. In the tradition of grotesquerie, the forces against which a body struggles for rectitude are spiritual, or moral, or social, i.e., psychic forces. In the tradition of excentricité, on the other hand, they are personal, physical and even mechanical forces. Since his famous definition is unquestionably inapplicable to the style grotesque, it is no doubt comic performance in the style excentrique that Henri Bergson has in mind when he speaks of the comic as a consequence of the “encrustation of the mechanical upon the living.”

574 French comic performance, on the other hand, continues to be dominated by the style grotesque well into the twentieth century.
Both are essentially negative states as deviations from the structuring absence of a classical “norm.” Each, therefore, is associated with a corresponding quality of horror: the grotesque with the overwhelming of the human by the spiritual; the eccentric with the undermining of the human by the material.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the grotesque style remains the reigning comic form. But by the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, its influence is clearly in abeyance. “Satanic” representations are burlesqued with greater and greater avidity, and the “Clodoche” trend in grotesque dance evolves in the direction of an aggressive and even defiant secularism: the Apache Dance, the Vampire Dance, “La Danse Noire,” and especially the “Salome Dance,” became the new sensations as the styles favoured by such groups as the Three Lucifers and the Satanelle Trio gave way to those of Coccia and Amato, Ma Gosse and Maud Allan. By 1910 the use of the adjective “grotesque” use no longer suggests the “classical body” as a structuring absence; it is used informally (when it is used at all) of the facial expressions, make-up, and costumes of burlesque performers (and occasionally of low-comedy vaudevillians). On the variety stages the prevailing comic movement style is the eccentric, be it in song and dance, sketch comedy, or acrobatics.

Likewise in American films, while grotesquerie retreats into the background during the transitional era, the use of “eccentric,” (which remains a supplementary category throughout the early and transitional periods) is quite stunningly foregrounded after late 1912. Until then, like its counterpart, it’s used exclusively as a descriptor for elements of mise-en-scène. This is still the case when it occurs in the synopsis of a Solax film of 1912, “The Hater of Women”; but a new direction is struck in a review later the same month in “Comments on the Films” in the same publication. The film, significantly enough, is an early Keystone – “Hoffmeyer’s Legacy”:

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576 For example, it characterizes the Americus Four’s “eccentric burlesque of the cake walk” in Biograph’s “Burlesque Cake Walk” (1897); Lina and Vani’s “eccentric comedy acrobatic work” in Biograph’s “Lina and Vani” (1897); the movement of the titular conveyance in “Eccentricities of an Adirondack Canoe” (Biograph, 1900); the performance of “Gibson, the Eccentric American Actor” (Pathé, May 1902); the above-mentioned performances in Méliès’ “The Ballet Master’s Dream” and “The Up-To-Date Spiritualism”; and the “Eccentric Tight-Rope Walker” (Pathé, Oct. 1904), “Eccentric Waltz” (Pathé, Oct. 1904) and the “Eccentric Burglary” of the Sheffield Photo Co. (ca. July, 1905).

577 C.f. Moving Picture World, Vol. XIV, No. 10, Dec. 7, 1912, p. 1014: “… the fourth arrival is a young eccentric girl, who has sworn that she will never marry a man unless she falls in love with him at sight. Bob Burton has read this eccentric remark in the paper … “
"HOFFMEYER’S LEGACY” (Keystone), December 23.—A legacy of five hundred dollars leads Hoffmeyer and his wife into a series of eccentric situations. They are pursued through the streets in night attire, and are haled into court, where the judge fines them the exact amount of the legacy.\footnote{Moving Picture World, Vol. XIV, No. 13, Dec. 28, 1912, p. 1293 (Italics mine).}

The extension of the use of “eccentric” here to characterize an aspect of film form\footnote{The term “situation” was approximately co-extensive with what would later be meant by “scene.”} is an important step in the direction of applying it to cinematography in an explicitly formal sense. During the years 1913-1914 the process continues as the term comes into frequent and even constant use, predominantly in the contexts of reviews of films also deemed to consist essentially in mere “horse-play,” “rough house,” “knock-about” and “slapstick.” In March of the next year, the Moving Picture World reviewer extends this technical use of “eccentric” (associating it at the same time with what I have called the “cultural hierarchy” and “national” discourses) in an analysis of Keystone’s “A Strong Revenge” (March, 1913), which it diagnoses as “A funny situation, which suffers from overacting, in imitation of the French eccentrics.”\footnote{Moving Picture World, Vol. XV, No. 11, March 15, 1913, p. 1106.} A review of Imp’s “Leo’s Love Letter” from the same month associates both with knockabout: “A French eccentric comedy, in which Leo chases a love letter about the streets, knocking over tables, etc. A typical knockabout picture.”\footnote{Moving Picture World, Vol. XV, No. 13, March 29, 1913, p. 1337.} Essanay enters the eccentric game with “Alkali Ike and the Hypnotist” (June 1913), whose “clever and eccentric situations” its synopsis proclaims to be “excruciatingly funny,”\footnote{Moving Picture World, Vol. XVI, No. 11, June 14, 1913, p. 1164-1166.} while the World reviewers three weeks later declare it to be “of the roughstuff order.”\footnote{Moving Picture World, Vol. XVI, No. 17, July 5, 1913, p. 47.} Most importantly of all, a review of Essanay’s “Alkali Ike’s Misfortune” (May 1913), has already gone on to extend the technical term to include cinematic style, calling the film “A lively farce in which eccentric camera work furnishes a very laughable climax.”\footnote{Moving Picture World, Vol. XVI, No. 11, June 14, 1913, p. 1136 (My italics).}

Throughout the synopses and reviews for the following year, during the gestation of “slap-stick” in its quasi-generic sense, the relationship between violent physical comedy and formal “eccentricity” becomes ever more intimate. For example, in January Lubin’s “Married
Men” finds itself described as “An eccentric comedy, in which the henpecked Irishman revolts. The chase scene works up some amusement of the slap-stick type.” The term “eccentric comedy” indeed almost becomes a generic signifier on its own account.

At the same time a number of reviews begin to succumb to the familiar recidivist pattern – physical comedy is something that people used to do, rather than something they are doing now. The newly-fledged “eccentric style” becomes instantly old in the minds of the Moving Picture World savants – for example in a review of Sterling’s “Trapped in a Closet” (Sept. 1914): “This comic film reverts somewhat to the old-style eccentric. Two men are hauled away in a wagon, locked inside a wardrobe. The police follow and there is a lot of wild revolver firing.” Likewise the World reviewers find of Crystal’s “Liferitis” (Oct. 1914) that “(t)he photography is good and the scenes, which follow the old style eccentric comedy, are fairly amusing,” and similarly of Joker’s “Off Agin On Agin Finnegan” (Oct. 1914) that it is “(a) good example of the old style eccentric comedy.”

The same critics are by no means slow to note the emergence of the eccentric as an innovation in cinematographic style. Nor do they fail to commend the “eccentric camera work” in Frontier’s “Pretzel’s Baby” (April 1914), Essanay’s “High Life Hits Slippery Slim” (April 1914), or Warner’s “Shot in the Fracas” (Dec. 1914), and “Waddling Willie” (Warner’s/Pike’s Peak, Dec. 1914). But what does it mean to characterize a film style as “eccentric”? How are we to understand the term in reference to the earliest slapstick films?

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586 Moving Picture World, Vol. XXI, No. 12, Sept. 19, 1914, p. 1646 (My italics.)
589 (“The eccentric camera work helps it; but it is rather slight in true fun value.”) Moving Picture World, Vol. XX, No. 2, April 11, 1914, p. 214.
590 (“This is a combination of the ordinary Western comedy with eccentric photography and chase scenes”) Moving Picture World, Vol. XX, No. 5, May 2, 1914, p. 672.
591 (“It is an offering of a popular kind just now, rough and speedy with eccentric camera work to make running comic”) Moving Picture World, Vol. XXII, No. 10, Dec. 5, 1914, p. 1385.
592 (“Eccentric camera work materially adds to the fun and it is a very fair comic offering”) Moving Picture World, Vol. XXII, No. 13, Dec. 26, 1914, p. 1842.
V. Mack Sennett and the Keystone Style

As his autobiography informs us, Sennett was both a musician and a comedian. He was one who was well aware of the coercive power of rhythm, and he had an overwhelming awareness of theatricality. His experience as a performer in burlesque, moreover, seems to have impressed him with a particularly powerful sense of the efficacy of the “bad text.”

At the same time, during his apprenticeship at the Biograph studio between the years 1908 and 1911 he became the first and perhaps greatest disciple of D.W. Griffith, the innovator of the continuity editing style, which became the foundation for Hollywood naturalism. Sennett cannot have failed to be conscious both of Griffith’s frustrated theatrical aspirations and of the consequences of the latent anti-theatricalism of his experiments with cinematic style. As his autobiography makes clear, he developed the ambition of becoming for comedy what Griffith was in process of making himself for melodrama. Sennett’s apprenticeship with Griffith provided him with the conceptual tools and stylistic competencies that equipped him uniquely to lay the groundwork for the development of a new style of comedy suited to a new media environment, but, like Griffith, relying on models deriving from nineteenth-century practices.

In setting about his task, Sennett had a particular problem to solve in addition to those I discussed in Chapter 2. Silent comedy performance relied on a twofold innovation. First, it required the development of a movement style appropriate to the ‘verisimilar’ requirements of the apparatus; in particular, one that could be submitted to the extraordinary restrictions of cinematic naturalism while setting performers free to work – as comedy typically requires, but as the stylistic imperatives of excentricité and grotesquerie demanded – in contrast with behavioral norms rather than in imitation of them. Secondly, it called for the development of a cinematic technique that would liberate the performance from the restrictions of the frame while systematically locating the performance within a suitably constructed diegetic time and space. In evolving the Keystone style, he developed a new way of creating a “bad” text – one that was able to be both performer-centred (“histrionic”) and “verisimilar” – hence, “quasi-realistic.”

In developing the Keystone style, therefore, Sennett turned Griffith’s method of cinematic representation inside out – and this turning inside-out is primarily what is meant by

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593 As may be guessed, I personally don’t feel that the question of whether or not he was a “good” comedian is relevant to this point. He may have lacked both charisma and photogénie, but he had a profound sense of theatricality and an instinct for the absurd that enabled him to exercise an influence over the fortunes of comedy in the twentieth century second only to a few.
calling a production technique “eccentric.” Griffith’s technique called for the construction of a stable diegetic time and space independently of and prior to the movement of the performances through it. The unity of the action is indeed a function of the director/editor’s construction of time and space. As Pearson skillfully demonstrates throughout Chapter 4 of *Eloquent Gestures*, the “interaction of signifying practices” in the Griffith Biographs is organized around the establishment of a “diffuse, discontinuous causality” which makes possible the dominance of character- rather than action-centered signifiers and results in a strengthened sense of internal motivation. This focus on “character,” in turn, is of the essence in the reduction of the “histrionic” performance to the “verisimilar.”

What Sennett’s attitude was towards this fetishization of the “verisimilar” in Griffith’s work has never been documented. He cannot have failed, however, to recognize its implications for the practice of comedy; and in practice, he resisted it with all the vigour at his command. In the organization of the Keystone studio, he created a performer-centered environment on the model of a burlesque troupe in which production protocols were subordinated to the instincts and idiosyncracies of himself and his chief creative personnel – most of whom were themselves performers promoted from the ranks. More importantly, he created a style characterized by i) an unstable, erratically structured time and space in which the movements of temporal rhythms repeatedly trump spatial continuity; ii) the systematic disruption of linear causality, and most importantly iii) the organization of diegetic time and space around the performances of the characters and not (as in Griffith’s Biographs) the other way around. At the same time, he famously resisted the privileging of star personalities and performers, favouring a system of collective creativity over which he alone exercised unquestioned control.

The films of Keystone which, during the early years of the Classical Period, furnished the template for what came to be known as “slapstick comedy,” represent a curious stylistic mélange at two levels. First, at the level of performance, characters range from the energetically naturalistic (Mabel Normand is usually to be found working in this style), to the discreetly eccentric (Sennett’s own rural boobs are often enacted in this mode), to the broadly eccentric (as in the case of Roscoe Arbuckle or Chester Conklin). At the same time, the films are populated largely by grotesques – usually in the role of villains – whose antics are typically motivated as

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594 With the assistance of his business manager.
595 (With the conspicuous exception of Mabel Normand.)
parodies of selected conventions of the melodramatic stage – a particularly good example is furnished by Chaplin himself (ordinarily the arch-excentrique), substituting for Ford Sterling in “Mabel At the Wheel.” In fact, a typical strategy of these early Keystones is to pit a “good” protagonist, played in a “verisimilar” or moderately eccentric style, against a “bad” antagonist played in a grotesque style motivated as melodramatic parody. By means of this compromise, Sennett was able to exploit the dramatic resources of the traditional grotesque style while positioning his product as progressive and new-fangled.

Secondly, however, as the Moving Picture World reviews suggest, the Keystone touch was evoked largely through a wide range of “eccentric” devices in which verisimilitude is subordinated to the task of evoking comic types, moods, and effects. A reasonably straightforward example is 1914’s “Love and Bullets” (directed by Roscoe Arbuckle) in which the protagonist, played in a quirky eccentric style by Charlie Murray, is threatened by an eerie “Trouble Mender” who, puffing up his chest and glaring at him through gargoyle eyes, tells him, “The best thing for you is to die.” This mysterious stranger is characterized partly in terms of “melodramatic” gestures and a fixed, somnambulistic gaze, pantomime trap-work (the entrance to his office is a revolving wall), and Méliès-style trick effects: he appears and disappears in a puff of smoke (by means of a long dissolve) and conjures up two henchmen (through stop-motion). Undercranking throughout and several precipitously rapid cuts during the culminating chase by the Keystone Kops are crucial supplements to the “eccentric camera style” of “Love and Bullets.”

Indeed, although this is more properly the subject of a full-length study, I feel it incumbent on me here to offer a brief list of what I would regard as the principal hallmarks of the “eccentric” Keystone style:

1. **Tempo** – The primary aesthetic end of the filmmaker is not the construction of space, but the organization of tempo. To this primary end, all other purposes (especially the construction of space) are subordinate.

2. **Undercranking** – Though this must have begun as a convention of projection rather than of cinematography, the establishment of a shooting rate of frames per second slower (and therefore less well-defined) than that used for films in other genres seems to have been a feature of Keystone films from the very beginning.

3. **Trick Photography** – The use of stop-motion, dissolves and other cinematographic properties in these films is highly and characteristically ambiguous. Though they tend to
be read (from a later perspective, accustomed to much more sophisticated techniques of image-manipulation) as inept attempts to convincingly manipulate the boundaries of the actual, these tricks read with equal likelihood (and greater consistency) as gestures of disavowal of the entire aesthetics of the “well-made” film. I would argue, therefore, that their flaws and imperfections – just as were the notorious flaws and imperfections in the scenic effects of the stage pantomimes of the nineteenth century – are stylistic hallmarks which invoke an appeal, not to the ability of the medium to compel assent even to the fantastic, but to the goodwill of the spectator to revert to his/her own imagination; to “Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts”596 – that is, as quintessentially theatrical gestures.

4. Creative Geography – One of the most frequent hallmarks of the Keystone style is the construction of an action across two clearly non-contiguous spaces; across two spaces which, apart from the action which traverses both, have nothing in common. The brick-throwing contest in the first reel of “The Knockout” is a perfect example, combining three locales which cannot all be contiguous: a rural setting before a country house where Roscoe and Minta are flirting; to its immediate right the yard between what look like several warehouses with a pile of bricks before the one at screen right (but which may be farm buildings); and, to the immediate right of that, a cigar store. None of these locales shares any common element with any of the others; and there is good reason to suppose that in actuality they are far from contiguous. All that unites these elements is the consistent screen direction of the actors’ eyelines and movements through them. The overall impression which this creates, however – of an environment which is barely holding together – is perfectly appropriate to a film which will culminate in an act of “going berserk” by a character whose world suddenly falls apart around him.

5. Creative Pragmatics – Just as the diegesis is patched together, so the actions which unite the various locales are themselves often presented as stitched-together affairs. The most conspicuous example of this is in the construction of a single action, like falling from a cliff, in several shots: for example, in “Dollars and Sense” such a fall is performed by showing first a long shot of the edge of the cliff and the hero (an actress cross-dressed as

a boy cross-dressed as a girl) going over the edge; an extreme long shot of the side of the mountain between the top and the base of the cliff with a body appearing from the top edge of frame and falling to disappear through the bottom edge of frame, followed, after a brief reaction shot of some other characters, by a medium long shot of the hero on the ground between two rocks, reacting to the fall. It may be that at some point in time a shot like this did actually read as “realistic” to certain kinds of naïve spectator – but to the majority of spectators it is manifestly a trick: another quintessentially theatrical gesture on the part of the filmmaker.

6. **Tight cutting** – Very frequently during an exchange of missiles, a cut between a shot of a missile leaving one space to another shot of its entering another space will occur so abruptly that one has no time to register the change of locale, or even the entry of the object into it. One character throws, another falls, and it is only subsequently that one registers that the fall is the result of the throwing of the brick. Just as in the case of “creative geography” and “creative pragmatics,” one feels that there must have been some mistake: the print from which the current copy has been made must have been broken and spliced together again just at the point of the original edit. But if we examine these moments closely, we find that the edit has simply been performed after the exact frame in which the object leaves the first locale and before the exact frame in which it enters the second. What seems like a mistake or a sign of “bad filmmaking” is simply the result of a ruthless excision of every frame that does not foreground action. Whereas a filmmaker like D.W. Griffith will take things at a much slower pace, ensuring that the spatial relations between the two locales are understood first, and the action perceived second, the Sennett style has dictated the reverse procedure. The action is apperceived first, and the construction of time and space must organize itself around it.

7. **Rapid pacing** (in the mise-en-scène) – The effect of undercranking is typically accentuated by making the pro-filmic event as fast and as rhythmic as possible.

8. **“Busy framings”** – In order to underscore this effect, the background of frames will often be filled with extraneous, rhythmic action to preserve a sense of tempo during static scenes; for example, in “Fatty’s Minnie-He-Haw” (Roscoe Arbuckle, 1914), as Fatty sits and eats dog meat with his fiancée and her father, the Indian tribe in the background gyrate to the sound of an indian drum.
9. **Regularly rhythmic cutting**—For films whose *mise-en-scène* seems so evidently slapdash, the editing rhythms of Keystone films are highly regular and follow highly uniform patterns, regularly speeding up during chases, but continually alternating sequences of short shots with longer ones (in which the interior rhythm of the pro-filmic event sustains the tempo of the sequence). The “One-Two-Three”-pattern (with its variations) is much in evidence throughout these films.

10. **Refusal**—Very often, however, the pattern will be unfulfilled, or its completion will be postponed, just as in the example of John Wild’s “One, Two, Three” the pattern of performing-and-being-bounced, established by the performances of McGinnis and Delehingler, is postponed in the case of Nilson but completed at the finale on the reappearance of Pepper.

11. **Grotesque effects**—What might, more broadly speaking, be described as “grotesque effects” are to be found aplenty in these early Keystones— for example, in “Dollars and Sense” (Walter Wright, 1916) a pet kitten is ground into sausages inside a player piano; still animate, the sausages find their way into the kitchen where they are eaten by the heroine’s father. Indeed, the world evoked by these films frequently transgresses good taste— but does so in a spirit of *jouissance* much like that which motivated the excesses of the knockabout Silence and Fun men and burlesque prize fighters.

12. **Cruxes in Signification**—What I mean by this rather unsatisfactory phrase is that a frequent component of slapstick style is the crossover of an element from the connotative order to the denotative one—or perhaps rather from the “hermeneutic” level of narration to the “proairetic” one—so that *expressive* and even *symbolic* elements become literalized into *narrative* elements. Take, for example, the climax of Sennett’s “Shot in the Excitement” (1914), in which a cannon ball is shot at Alice Howell and Eddie Cline, who run from it in terror. The cannon ball becomes metaphorized into a character as it chases after them; but then the metaphor turns into a literal fact—the cannon ball character (there are actually two of them) starts to behave like a regular character, chases the villain over the edge of a cliff, leaps after him, and explodes. Perhaps a better way of putting it is to say that an element from the paradigmatic axis (an expressive metaphor) crosses over onto the syntagmatic axis (and becomes an actor). In Chaplin’s *Modern Times*, a similar sort of thing happens when the Tramp, in jail, eats some food onto which he has sprinkled a liberal dose of cocaine, thinking it to be a condiment such as salt, or
grated cheese. As the convicts are all marched back out of the refectory, his delirium is expressed in a mannerism of spinning in a full circle as he walks, to convey a sense of his dizziness. But the spin is not a mere expressive convention; it becomes an event which causes a twist in the plot: as all the other prisoners return to their cells, he turns the wrong way and walks out of the building, unnoticed. The Tramp is thus at liberty and available to return and foil an escape attempt.

Rather than an exclusive reliance on either an “eccentric” or a “grotesque” style, therefore, what characterizes these films above all is a complex “quasi-realism” which brings these two paradigms into conflict with each other so that each functions as the negation of the other. A protagonist coded in terms of the eccentric will find himself either at odds with an antagonist coded in terms of the grotesque, or in a situation redolent of *grotesquerie* in much the same manner as the uncanny “inns where no man sleeps” of early film.

The counterpart of this “quasi-realism” in the slapstick actor’s movement vocabulary is the disappearance of the “classical body” as the measure of the excess or deficiency of the performer’s actions, and its replacement by a new standard, deriving, most likely, from its burlesque inheritance. The earliest slapstick films, like many of the Ethiopian sketches, are typically burlesque romantic comedies, structured largely around the Elopement and Consent scenarios. The burlesque typically consists in the substitution of the slapstick clown for the romantic hero of the cinematic melodrama or romantic comedy. The measure of the slapstick clown’s absurdity is his comparative inappropriateness as a partner for the Girl. The paradigm suggested by these romantic heroes is a new model, based on the example of the matinee idol, and reflects a new masculine ideal: an empirical one based no longer on a transcendent aesthetics, but instead on women’s expectations of the normal, desirable man.

To summarize: the comic performance style of the nineteenth century was dominated by *grotesquerie* which resonated against the structuring absence of the (neo-) classical body; this style was supplemented by the *excentrique* style which throughout the century steadily gained in popularity. The mid-1900s, however, see a turn which is related to the profusion of devil-intertexts beginning in 1907, and which has two major effects: first, the abandonment of the (neo-) classical body as a major structuring absence, and second, the withdrawal of the *style grotesque* into the background. The period during which slapstick film comedy flourished represents the triumph of the eccentric style, which by this time resonates no longer against the Classical body, but against what Delsarte might have called the Normal. This transition was the
microcosmic expression in terms of physical technique of a social evolution which saw, on the macrocosmic level, the establishment of twentieth-century industry and leisure, the abandonment of nineteenth-century idealist accounts of the world order, the attainment of a new sense of individual autonomy, and the disintegration of traditional notions of the demonic.

From this fertile ground sprang the slapstick comedy, with its ironic but ultimately utopian vision of the “pie-fight of life:” full of conflict and even discord, but ultimately harmonious and sweet to the taste. It was a vision which persevered in spite of a World War (itself ironically epitomized as a “War to End All Wars”) for thirty years, until the emergence of new vision of the demonic, more appalling – because more “verisimilar” – than any that had ever been thought possible before. 597

In the years following the conclusion of World War II, we can see the comic style of the twentieth century retracing its tracks and changing direction once again. By the mid-1950s the “eccentric” style in the performances of quasi-slapstick artists like Lucille Ball in the United States and Norman Wisdom in England is merely vestigial: it lacks most of the defining characteristics of silent slapstick (its disciplined physicality, its rhythmic drive, its quasi-verisimilar mode); and the major innovations in physical performance during the 1950s and 1960s mark a move back in the direction of the grotesque – from the spastic abjection of Jerry Lewis to the Artaudian absurdities of Monty Python. By contrast with the desperation with

597 The grotesque/eccentric duality doesn’t vanish, however, without producing one final masterpiece in Chaplin’s strategy for his deployment of the trope of the Doppelganger in The Great Dictator. He uses it to encode his twin performances as the innocent and naïve Jewish barber and Adenoid Hinkel, the megalomaniacal Dictator of Tomania; creating of the former the quintessential eccentric (conflated with the trope of the Escaped Lunatic), ironically guided by a moral centre utterly foreign to the shambles which Hinkel’s maniacal policies have made of Tomania; and of the latter a textbook example of a half-human, caught up in a psychic conflict of which his blind narcissism is the chiefest symptom. As the Barber, Chaplin the performer walks on his heels, in his characteristic waddling step, typically following a horizontal trajectory, and continually makes 180-degree and 360-degree turns first in one direction, then in the other. As the narcissistic Hinkel, Chaplin compulsively fingers his tummy to make sure it is tucked in, poses with his chest and chin raised exaggeratedly high, and adopts would-be balletique stances in which his body weight is distributed forward onto his toes – he likewise compulsively rocks forward onto the balls of his feet throughout. At intervals, however – during his initial speech and during the first scene with his secretary – his speech degenerates into animal grunts and his neck juts forward like that of some animal of prey. His typical trajectory is vertical – he falls down the stairs, engages in a contest with Napaloni to see whose barbershop chair can go farther up, and the famous dance with the world-globe balloon (and the shot in which he literally “climbs the wall” which precedes it) take place entirely along a vertical axis. In another quasi-dance in the very next scene, as if to emphasize the contrast between Hinkel’s bizarre psychology and the barber’s quirky physicality, the latter’s movements as he shaves a client, moving back and forth from the screen Right side of the chair to the sink at screen Left, physicalize the musical phrases of Brahms’ Hungarian Dance #5. Nowhere is there a more apt illustration of the use of grotesque and eccentric stylistic features – or of their contrasting associations, transplanted from their Victorian origins into a twentieth-century modernist setting – than in this film.
which these wrestle with the paradoxes of the Nuclear Age, the innocent improvisations of the slapstick clowns read as irrelevant and naïve.

VI. Pantomime *Grotesquerie* – The “White Night” Trope and the Passion of Pantaloon

What was it all about, then, anyway? How were the styles of knockabout and slapstick deployed to evoke distinctive *qualities* of laughter? To propose a solution for this problem, I’d like to make a final comparison of a common trope from the corpus of knockabout sketches and early trick films in which, as we have seen, an important aspect of the emergent slapstick style was already epitomized.

As I noted in my second chapter, one of the dominant tropes during the whole period from the emergence of knockabout to the decline of slapstick is that of the sanctum where no peace is to be found – in the words of the title of a 1903 Méliès comic, “The Inn Where No Man Rests.” Among the Ethiopian sketches are a large number in which a protagonist arrives at a place of rest and refreshment – typically a hotel or boarding house, but also in an insane asylum and even a haunted house – in search of a bed for the night. Tormented by a succession of bizarre disruptions, the protagonist is unable to get any rest. The ending, as always, is “going berserk,” as befalls the two blackface ne’er-do-wells Sam and Jake in White’s “The Ghost”:

*A hideous noise from orchestra. Dark stage, constant rappings.*

*The gong strikes; the ghost rises through trap, walks towards JAKE, then steps backward to R2R, gong sounds again. Dangling skeleton appears in L.D. F., red fire, the ghost makes a bow, and then the whole body disappears up in the flies on the opposite side.*

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598 As in “A Night in a Strange Hotel” (Charles White, 1865); and “Good Night’s Rest” (Charles White, 1874).
599 As in “Pompey’s Patients” (Charles White, 1873) and “Pleasant Companions” (Frank Dumont, 1880), which share the familiar parade structure, and which, according to Andrew Davis in *Baggy Pants Comedy: Burlesque and the Oral Tradition* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), form the basis for the perennial burlesque sketch, “Crazy House.”
600 As in “The Ghost” (Charles White, 1863).
SAM jumps through the window, JAKE falls rolling on the floor, terribly frightened, and screaming for help! help murder, etc.\

In Charles White’s “Good Night’s Rest,” a “Weary Traveler” (originally performed by White himself) checks in to an inn and spends the night terrorized by a mischievous monkey, who darts between his legs, scatters the items on the traveler’s table, steals his food, clothing, and luggage, and jumps up and down on him in his bed, only to disappear every time the landlord arrives in response to the traveler’s increasingly desperate cries for assistance. Finding no cause for the alarm, the landlord threatens to eject the traveler for causing a disturbance if he cries out again until, finally persuaded of the monkey’s presence, the landlord equips the traveler with a club and gives him permission to slay the cause of his trouble; however, the traveler only succeeds in pulling off the monkey’s tail.

It’s not difficult to recognize in this repeated figure of the Sleepless Night a trope deriving from the commedia dell’arte tradition, which was typically used to precipitate the climactic resolution: the old miser (typically Pantalone or, in the pantomime tradition, Pantaloon) opposes the union of the two lovers (originally Lelio and Isabella, but in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century pantomimes Harlequin and Columbine) who conspire to keep him awake all night. Reduced to helplessness following his sleepless night, he is no longer able to resist and finally gives his consent. In the course of this ordeal, frequently, Pantaloon is punished by losing everything: his money, his good name, and even his fiancée. Indeed, the “monkey business” of “A Good Night’s Rest” is strongly reminiscent of that in one of White’s two extant attempts at Americanizing the pantomime tradition: Scampini “an anti-tragical, comical, magical, and laughable Pantomime full of tricks and side-splitting transformations.”

In this latter, entirely in dumb-show, Scampini, the lover of Lucindina (“the beloved Bride”) torments Donutine (“the opposing Parent,” performed, again, by White himself) just as the monkey torments the Weary Traveler, until Donutine actually slays him.

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602 I.e., when the cause of his opposition is his own wish to marry Columbine, often established in order to emphasize the Oedipal aspect of the triangle, as his ward.
DONUTINE … goes to 1 R.E., gets loaded gun, and immediately returns, and discharges the same at SCAMPINI, who, on being shot, rolls and dies extravagantly. DONUTINE goes to him, steps crosswise over him, picks up his leg as if to feel his pulse in the heel of SCAMPINI. SCAMPINI pushes him away with the other foot. DONUTINE then places his hand on SCAMPINI’S breast, which swells out with a tremendous swell; after which, he pounds SCAMPINI’s head on the stage … DONUTINE, being now satisfied that he has subdued SCAMPINI, feels haughty, and proud of his triumph. Suddenly he reflects on the mischief he has just committed, and pantomimes that if known he will be hung. He instantly falls on his knees and prays …

Scampini then comes back to life; he and Lucindina ask again for the consent of the defeated Donutine, who gives it; and the piece ends in a parody of a wedding-feast.

Behind what I’m calling the trope of the “White Night” lie the vestiges of a New Year ritual in which the Old Year in the form of a degenerate old man is beaten and driven out in order to make way for the arrival of the New Year baby. The figure of renewal and regeneration which underlies it is often manifested dramatically in what I have elsewhere described as the “Yuletide Recognition” associated with something like the “Point of Ritual Death,” in which a character, brought to the lowest ebb of his fortunes, has a vision of the Void in the face of which he surrenders, resulting in the transformation of the vision into one of Plenitude. Perhaps the most popular employments of the Yuletide recognition are those made in tandem with separate elaborations of the trope of the “White Night” by Charles Dickens: first, in the story of “The Goblins Who Stole a Sexton” in chapter XXVIII of The Pickwick Papers, and then, in Dickens’ ultimate exercise in the pantomime grotesque, A Christmas Carol.

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605 (Personated by Herod in many medieval versions.)
607 (i.e., Death, Castration, the Jungian Nigredo, or the Lacanian Real, depending on your philosophical preferences)
608 So misnumbered in the original edition; the story is the same as that which formed the basis of the Majiltons’ Christmas pantomime, “Gabriel Grub.”
*A Christmas Carol* is indeed a reasonably straightforward novelization of a Christmas pantomime, with the transformation of the characters back into their *commedia* counterparts left out, and Scrooge playing the part of the old miser Pantaloon who withholds his consent (and, more importantly for Dickens, his blessing) from the union of Fred (Harlequin) and Scrooge’s Niece (Columbine). The ordeal he undergoes, in which his paranoidal self-centredness is submitted to a succession of vigorous attacks by Marley’s Ghost and the Three Spirits, represents, in fact, a psychologized version of the physical beatings administered to Gabriel Grub throughout the nightmare of the tale in *The Pickwick Papers* (and to Scrooge’s prototypes in *commedia*). The transformation of Scrooge is prototypical for the comedy of the nineteenth century: through his ordeal he is liberated from the grip of the psychic forces that imprison him within himself to make a grotesque of him to become “ex-centric” – that is, the centre of gravity of his emotional life is no longer in himself, but in others. This is the same movement made by Gabriel Grub, though in the case of the latter the transformation is effected by the subjection of the protagonist to a unremitting sequence of kicks up the backside from the King of the Goblins and his retinue – alternating with a succession of *tableaux vivants* in which Gabriel beholds men and women patiently undergoing the inevitable hardships of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century life with faith, hope, and charity.609

Needless to say, the “Yuletide Recognition” is a conspicuously anti-realistic feature – hence its appropriateness only to particular contexts. In the “real” world, misers don’t give up their money, or their hold over other people’s fortunes; the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the cycle continues until economies descend into depression, at which point a war will generally arise to redistribute wealth, restore prosperity and decimate the young adult male population. Seasonal rituals are intended to reverse this process by opening up the possibility of an intervention in the “natural” progress toward entropy by a supra-natural agency: this sort of narrative, therefore, is the antithesis of the “realistic” narrative.

In Britain, the custom with pantomimes was to keep them strictly seasonal, and to perform them exclusively at those points of the year associated with the major feasts of the Christian calendar: Christmas and Easter. On the other hand, the United States followed the French practice of performing them all year round and subjecting them to a rigorous

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secularization, as in the case of the most popular American pantomime of the nineteenth century, George L. Fox’s *Humpty Dumpty*: in fact, until the decline of pantomime performance in the U.S. during the 1890s, scores of troupes led by Fox, James Maffitt, Tony Denier and their many imitators, combed the continent all the year round. By the 1870s, a slightly different working of the White Night trope forms the structural core of the Hanlons’ *Le voyage en Suisse*, which enjoyed phenomenal popularity well into the earliest decades of the twentieth century. In the play’s second act, the servants Bob and John prevent the consummation of the heroine Juliette’s forced marriage to Corgoloin, the aged blackmailer of her uncle. They repeatedly break into the Pullman car of their honeymoon train, where Corgoloin persistently tries to lure his bride to bed, eventually derailing and destroying the train. The same comic trope is still at work in film early in the sound era in *It’s A Gift* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1934) with W.C. Fields.

VII. Why Krausmeyer Couldn’t Sleep: The “White Night” Trope in Early Films

By the 1890s, the hundreds of pantomime troupes that combed the United States during the 1870s have dwindled to the merest handful. But to judge by the evidence of the surviving synopses, pantomime *grotesquerie* continues to be the dominant aesthetic in the comedy of early films before the Transitional Period: especially those of French origin produced by Gaumont, Pathé and Méliès, and the imitations of them produced principally by Edison, American Mutoscope and Biograph, and Lubin. It’s important, however, to be discriminating in this context. In general, the French “trick” films that produce what we might wish to call a “grotesque” effect do seem to have some features in common with the *grotesqueries* of nineteenth-century theatre: many of them foreground explicit associations with spirits, goblins, and diabolism at large, with macabre contortions, dismemberments and decapitations, and

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610 E.g. “The Haunted House” (Lubin, Aug. 1899); “Spirits in the Kitchen” (Biograph, May 1899); “Clown Dining at the Infernal Palace” (dist. Edison, Mar. 1900); “Ghosts in a Chinese Laundry” (Biograph, Aug. 1900); “Photographing the Ghost” (G.A.S. Films, Mar. 1900); “Pluto and the Imp” (dist. Edison, Mar. 1900); “Spooks at Schoole” (Biograph, ca. Sept. 1900); “A Terrible Night” (Biograph, ca. April 1900); “Tramp in the Haunted House” (Biograph, ca. June 1900); “Uncle Josh in a Spooky Hotel” (Edison, ca. Mar. 1900); “Visit to a Spiritualist” (Lubin, Apr. 1900); “A Visit to the Spiritualist” (dist. Edison, Mar. 1900); “The Haunted Pawnshop” (Robert W. Paul, May 1902); “The Devil in the Schoolhouse” (Méliès, May 1902); “The Haunted Dining Room” (Edison, Sept. 1902); “Clown’s Mixup” (Jan. 1903); “The Enchanted Basket” (Méliès, June 1903); “Lovers and the Imp” (Edison, Oct. 1903); “The Apparition” (Méliès, Oct. 1903); “The Cake-Walk Infernal” (Méliès, June, 1903); and “The Up-To-Date Spiritualism” (Méliès, 1903).
encounters with skeletons, nightmares and nightmarish experiences in *unheimlich* “homes-away-from-home,” and disturbing magical transformations.

The “White Night” trope is exploited throughout the early period in a succession of films like Pathé’s “A Frightful Night” (Nov. 1905). In these films the apparatus itself takes the place of the ghosts, goblins and man-monkeys of the Christmas pantomime and the variety stage:

A traveling knight arrives at a hotel and after handing his sword to the lackey takes off his clothes and goes to bed. No sooner is he under the sheets than he jumps up fully clothed, his garments having magically returned to his back. He then determines to sleep in his clothes, jumps into bed, which at once moves from under him, and he lands on the floor. The knight spends a horrible night; all sorts of unpleasant things happen to him to prevent his sleeping and in the end there is an explosion which brings down the building in ruins. The knight stands astounded among the debris.

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611 E.g., “The Cremation” (Biograph, Apr. 1899); “The Maniac Barber” (Biograph, Aug. 1899); “A Midnight Fantasy” (Biograph, ca. Sept. 1899); “The Startled Lover” (Biograph, Apr. 1899); “Accidents Will Happen” (Biograph, ca. Sept. 1900); “The Chinese Rubbernecks” (Biograph, Aug. 1900); “The Clown and The Alchemist” (Edison, Nov. 1900); “A Quick Recovery” (Biograph, July 1901); “The Statue of William Tell” (Méliès, July 1901); “The Clown with the Portable Body” (Méliès, 1901); “Wonderful Feats of Vivisection” (Méliès, May 1902); “Barber Up-To-Date” (Jan. 1903); “The Cook’s Revenge” (Méliès, 1903); “Up-to-Date Surgery” (Méliès, Feb. 1903); “Pierrot’s Mystification” (Pathé, June 1904); “Tit for Tat; or, A Good Joke On My Head” (Méliès, Feb. 1904); and “Extraordinary Dislocation” (Pathé, 1906).

612 (I.e., uncanny).

613 E.g., “The Haunted House” (Lubin, ca. Aug. 1899); “Strange Adventure of a New York Drummer” (Edison, ca. June 1899); “A Terrible Night” (Biograph, ca. April 1900); “Tramp in the Haunted House” (Biograph, ca. June 1900); “Uncle Josh in a Spooky Hotel” (ca. March 1900); “Another Job for the Undertaker” (Edison, ca. May 1901); “Such A Headache” (Edison, July 1900); “The Fat and the Lean Wrestling Match” (Méliès, ca. Dec. 1901); “Undressing Under Difficulties” (Robert W. Paul, May 1902); “The Haunted Dining Room” (dist. Edison, Sept. 1902); “The Horrible Nightmare” (Edison, May 1902); “The Inn Where No Man Rests” (Méliès, June 1903); “Casey’s Nightmare” (dist. Edison, Oct. 1903); “A Dope In Difficulties” (Edison, Oct. 1903); “Eating Dinner Under Difficulties” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “The Apparition” (Méliès, Oct. 1903); “The Ballet Master’s Dream” (Méliès, Dec. 1903); “Going to Bed Under Difficulties” (Méliès, 1903); “The Enchanted Wardrobe” (Pathé, Oct. 1904); “A Frightful Night” (Pathé, Nov. 1905); and “A Night Off” (Lubin, July 1906).

614 E.g. “The Cremation” (Biograph, ca. April 1899); “The Clown and the Alchemist” (Edison, ca. Nov. 1900); “Hooligan Assists the Magician” (Edison, ca. Nov. 1900); “X-Rays” (Méliès, April 1900); “The Darktown Comedians’ Trip to Paris” (Méliès, May, 1902) and “The Cabinet Trick of the Davenport Brothers” (Méliès, 1903).

615 AFI Catalogue, p. 384.
Among the earliest American films are some which draw on this trope, evidently substituting camera tricks for the pranks of characters – for example, in Lubin’s “Why Krausemeyer Couldn’t Sleep” (Aug. 1899):

… Krausemeyer is first seen entering the room, led by the porter, who charges him for the room and also for his services…(O)ur Teuton friend divests himself of all his clothing and tumbles into bed, cuddling up for a good snooze. The famous Jersey mosquitoes now get in their work, assisted by a number of residents usually found in the beds of a country inn. The occupant of the bed twists and squirms until utterly disgusted, he leaps to the floor and grasping a towel proceeds to kill a few of the ”skeeters” on the wall …Hans puts his boots on to protect his feet, but an unusually large “skeeter” attacks his face. After driving him away he settles down and thinks himself safe, when a rat deliberately runs across the floor and steals his sheet, the only covering he has. Exasperated beyond endurance, Krausemeyer arises and throws the chairs about the room in his anger and awakens the porter, who fires him from the room, caressing him occasionally with his boot by way of emphasis.616

The expression for the effect created by these uncanny “trick” films, however – in the American press at any rate – is usually “mystical” rather than “grotesque”; and as the period wears on, in films such as “A Dope in Difficulties” (Edison, 1903), “In A Hurry to Catch the Train” (Pathé, Oct. 1904), and “A Night Off” (Lubin, July 1906), the “uncanny” effect is increasingly motivated as a way of expressing the drunkenness, disorientation, or unconsciousness of the protagonists: that is, it is attributed to a material, rather than a spiritual, cause. Meanwhile, in the synopses of this period, and in such press commentary as invokes the notion, grotesquerie remains a stylistic category which is applicable to performance, and

616 AFI Catalogue, p. 1187.
occasionally to *mise-en-scène*, but never to the operation of the apparatus. The category of the grotesque as it was understood during the nineteenth century never quite manages completely to negotiate the transition from the theatre to the cinema.

In a way, this is hardly surprising, since the entire aesthetics of the grotesque is essentially anti-naturalistic and consequently a stumbling block in the path of the development of the continuity style – indeed the aesthetics of the “trick” films of Méliès, Pathé, Gaumont and their American imitators are inherently discontinuous, and turn on the disruption of the apparently orderly diegetic world. On the other hand, films relying primarily on the trick effects made possible by specific cinematographic properties (e.g. undercranking and, to a lesser extent, stop-motion) do remain crucial aspects of silent film comedy style. Many films indeed, employ the “grotesque” effects of the trick films to create the kind of unstable, discontinuous diegetic world which is such an important stylistic aspect of “bummer” slapstick comedies like “Fast and Furious.” The French formula of an eccentric protagonist set loose in a grotesque world, in fact, remains in constant use throughout the silent period.

The repurposing of the trope of the “White Night” from continental ballet-pantomime suggests that what is going on here is that the slapstick film is trying to provide a counterpart to the “Yuletide Recognition”: to align the spectator through innervation with a cinematic protagonist who is put through a horrifying ordeal, beaten almost to death, and then recalled to life: to evoke, in little, a vision of void which inverts, as one emerges from it, into one of plenitude. In doing so, if enjoyed in the right spirit, it brings forgiveness, and even makes reconciliation a practical possibility. The laughter which attends this recognition might be called the laughter of the Everyday Christmas.

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617 In “An Exciting Finish” (Biograph, Sept. 1899), it refers to the make-up and costuming of the kitchen-maid; in “The Serenade” (Biograph, May 1899) to those of the two minstrels; in “A Darktown Dance” (Edison, March 1900) it describes the action; in “Why Curbew Did Not Ring Last Night” (Biograph, Sept. 1900) it describes the appearance of the heroine; in “The Haunted Pawnshop” (Robert W. Paul, May 1902) it describes the apparition which concludes the film; in “Aerial Billiard Playing” (Pathé, April 1906) it describes the poses struck by the performers; in “A Clown’s Love Story” (Vitagraph, Dec. 1907) it describes the appearance of the protagonist (a clown); and in “Grotesques” (Pathé, Sept. 1908) it describes the costumes of the miniature figures produced by superimposition.

618 In some instances, on the other hand, the protagonists of these films – including the trick films of Méliès – are specified as working, not in a grotesque, but in an eccentric style. For example the dancing-girl who appears in “The Ballet Master’s Dream” (Méliès, Dec. 1903) “executes a very remarkable step in an eccentric dance”; and the protagonist of “The Up-To-Date Spiritualism” is specified as a “comique eccentric.”
VIII. Slapstick and Laughter

This returns us to the question with which we began this inquiry, and which we were forced to postpone on the discovery that, so far as the historical record is concerned, slapstick consisted in a characteristically modernist style of the performance of violent physical comedy – literally, a “method” – that was not established until 1914. What we have discovered is that this “style,” or method, is of an oddly composite nature, incorporating a “verisimilar” style with either of two “histrionic” styles and playing them off against one another. What we actually have in slapstick, then, is less of a style than an anti-style: one which strains to give the effect of (quasi-) “realism” by the mutual negation of self-conscious stylistic paradigms. In just the same way “method acting” also functions as an anti-style: it consists in a technique for stripping away the hallmarks of other stylistic approaches in order to create a sense that the performer “really is” the character. If you strip away all the illusions, reality is what’s left.

In slapstick, on the other hand, the illusions – that there is something wrong, either with the world, or with the individual who doesn’t fit into it – are deployed either to balance each other or to cancel each other out. In the course of a series of absurd substitutions, the individual tries and succeeds or fails in finding a dynamic equilibrium which enables him/her to achieve his or her proper rectitude. In the course of these adventures, s/he suffers pain, which the spectator recognizes and acknowledges in laughter. In and through this comic suffering, like Scrooge during the “White Night” of Christmas Eve, the protagonist is brought to a momentary nigredo and has a glimpse of his/her own “real reality”; a vision in which the spectator is invited to share by participating in the game through the internal, empathetic employment of his/her own “physical intelligence.”

Where we don’t have this mutual opposition of a misfit protagonist and a mad world – that is, of the twentieth-century cinematic counterparts of the nineteenth-century eccentric and the grotesque – we have “silent,” rather than “slapstick” comedy, since it is by playing the grotesque and the eccentric deviations from “normal” uprightness off against each other – both at the level of performance and on the level of production technique – that slapstick films make game of the pains which men and women undergo in pursuit of their equilibrium – a dynamic state of adjustment in which the demands of both the world inhabited by the will and the world inhabited by the body are equally satisfied. The deviation from one plunges the individual into the grotesque; the deviation from the other into the eccentric: either involves us in unwished-for
pain. By evoking and negating these pains, slapstick assists us – in its quasi-verisimilar way – not only to recover from them, but even to make them the basis of an imaginative vocabulary by means of which we can anticipate and forestall further pains to come. It evokes painful experiences as metonymic symbols in a game-structure in which the audience draws on their “physical intelligence” to match wits with the protagonists and the directors of slapstick films, and attempt to anticipate successful tactics of problem-resolution by a non-normative subject in disintegrating and apparently insane world. In so doing it becomes an active and embodied, but characteristically twentieth-century, discourse on “rectitude.”

This discourse is one that can only take place in the context of a system of gestures of disavowal; it is a necessarily “bad” text, featuring humiliation and pain, which only a few will confess to being able to read. But read in the right spirit, like the Yuletide recognition, its assaults drive the audience out of their isolation; confuse them about the location of the problem by an oscillation of spectatorial sympathy; mock them into relinquishing grasp on their sorrows; and pardon them for treasuring them. Furthermore, it transforms the spectator’s experience of the void into a promise of plenty, and proposes an imaginative vocabulary for the realization of that promise.

This then, is what I meant by the claim in my first chapter that the progress of laughter “reaches a turning point during the transition from Victorian popular culture to the mass culture of the twentieth century; that this turning point reaches a crisis with the introduction of film; and that at the crucial instant, the ‘sense of humour’ of the Western world backed down in the face of overwhelming odds and zigged when it should have zagged.” The brief period from about 1912 until the early 1930s represented a change of direction following on the playing-out of the knockabout style; the innovation of film occurred at the beginning of a window during which it was possible to imagine, in the absence of any figure for the human embodiment of absolute evil, that history had reached a point at which the problem of evil might be solved “just in the nick of time”; that human destructiveness could be woven into the fabric of a utopian vision without rupturing its texture. We reverence the purity of that vision in the work of the great slapstick comedians. It is inscribed, not in any verbal formulation, nor in any of their ideas, but in the motions of their bodies. We can acknowledge it, while recognizing at the same time that for us it is no longer tenable.
Chapter 8
Knockabout and Slapstick in Comic Theory

Our historical survey has supplied us with four key terms by means of which to approach the problems posed by our inquiry into the ‘functions’ of knockabout comedy in the late nineteenth century and slapstick comedy in the early twentieth. We encountered those terms in the form of two opposed pairs that express defining tensions: the stylistic tension in knockabout between the “histrionic” categories of grotesque and eccentric, and in slapstick of the “verisimilar” versus both; and, in slapstick, the generic tension of burlesque-versus-farce. These have enabled us to articulate our claim that there is a change of form in the performance of comedy which provides circumstantial evidence in support of the claim that a change in its function occurs at the same time. However, it is still incumbent on us to show how these new key terms contribute to our understanding of knockabout and slapstick. Our argument depends on our tracing the connections between the workings of comedy in theory and its practical manifestation in the various forms we have encountered in our analyses, in order to solve our main problem, and prove our major claim.

That was the theoretical difficulty that we postulated with the idea of a “history of laughter” to complement our understanding of the history of performance: whether we can mediate the antinomy of the totalizing, ahistorical view of laughter and comedy (they never change; they’re always doing the same thing, even using the same jokes); and the progressive view (they are constantly adapting themselves to changing circumstances). Solving this difficulty might involve our showing how, though similar concerns are articulated comically and laughingly throughout human history, they are a) articulated in different contexts, to different purposes; and consequently b) inflected in different ways.619

619 For example, Mary Beard (c.f. http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/on-joking-tickling-and-cracking-up-humour-in-ancient-rome-1.2982922) proposes that a characteristic concern of 4th-century C.E. Roman laughter is that of identity, and she implies that the articulations of it in the Philogelos may (so far as we can tell) generally be inflected so as to suggest a search for identity or for a reliable way of signifying one’s identity; and we have noticed that the slapstick-knockabout period is also preoccupied with questions of identity. But in the latter it takes place within the context of the accommodation of the Western World to an expanding public sphere in which the space allotted to the particular individual is narrowing; which is not a context for the Romans of the 4th century C.E. Moreover, the concerns of the knockabout and slapstick comedians are inflected by eccentric and/or grotesque stylistic features which emphasize concerns not of discovering identity, but of testing its soundness; with the functional replaceability of persons of various identities by other persons with other identities; and, especially, with a concern about how far the identities of individuals extend (i.e., to their bodies? To the bodies of persons related to
The “laughter culture” of all ages has apparently always included three major types: largely personal and social laughter which provides some sort of curative release; largely social and political laughter of derision, and the largely speculative laughter of incongruity. We have ventured to suggest that the efficacy of knockabout and slapstick also indicates there may be a fourth type – ritual laughter – which is capable of incorporating all the others. A helpful theoretical approach to laughter, therefore, might be one which takes a negotiational perspective: which examines laughter culture as residing less in the predominance of particular functions than in different alignments of a plurality of functions. That would have the advantage of enabling us, for example, to understand and to theorize the coexistence of cruel and destructive laughter with trends whose compatibility with the “civilizing process” is easier to see. It might also enable us better to accommodate some empirical complexities of reception theory, since it suggests a line of approach to the problem of multivocality: i.e., while the appeal of a particular joke to one person might reside in its usefulness to a particular need on his/her part to feel superiority, the same joke might be valuable to another because it purges him (or her) of anxiety related to the same issue; while for a third the humor of the gag might reside simply in its appeal to the incongruousness of discerning any form of inequality between persons who are essentially equals.620 Most importantly, to attempt to incorporate the plurality of comic procedures and forms of laughter within a negotiational perspective might even enable us to theorize what otherwise seems to be a constantly perplexing paradox: that every totalizing theory of laughter seems to presuppose another one which contradicts it. That is as much as to say that, due to the nature of laughter itself, laughter theory must of necessity take a dialectical approach.

619 them by various genitives (“My wife,” “My baby”, etc)). To their possessions? To their habitual environments ((their homes, workplaces, etc.)?). 620 The same is true of the variety of roles by means of which it is possible for people to engage in comic performances: for example, to draw on Freud’s taxonomy of “roles” in the performance of a joke: some people prefer to take the position of “teller” of the joke, others prefer to play the role of “receiver,” and, strange though it may seem, some people often find it strategic to perform the role of “butt.” Although Freud doesn’t speculate on this issue, our example of the Pete Jenkins performance demonstrates how these roles may be recombined, transferred back and forth among the participants in a performance, and so on.
I. Physical Comedy in Theory and in History

As I’ve already mooted in Chapter 4, the testimony of the historical record, so far as it can be pieced together, is that the performance and reception of knockabout comedy apparently presupposes some form of “innervation” principle. But invoking this principle can be highly contentious because of its habitual association in the work of some writers with the much-abused psychoanalytic concept of “identification.” “Innervation,” so runs the argument, is the sign and symptom of a comprehensive association by the spectator of the spectator’s self with that of the performer/character—a complex association with both conscious and unconscious components, typically understood as “identification,” and necessarily involved with a cathartic model of spectatorial pleasure. For some commentators, therefore, the complexity of “identification” facilitates the importation into reception study of a number of notions which are both highly speculative and strongly disputed.\(^{621}\) In order to remain on firm ground, such commentators prefer to restrict the conversation about audience engagement to the operation of empirically verifiable agencies: in the case of Murray Smith, for example, to a combination of “sympathy,” “empathy,” and “alignment.”\(^{622}\)

At the heart of the problem of “innervation,” then, is the issue of audience involvement in the performance. Now, as it happens, Freud’s own account of physical comedy—which is, indeed, with those of Bergson and Lipps, the only detailed attempt to theorize the physically comic which has received any form of general currency—does not invoke the notion of “identification,” but relies instead on the experientially verifiable ground of “empathy.” For Freud all that is necessary is for the spectator imaginatively to ‘put him- or herself in the place’ of the performer in order to interpret his or her movements. This imaginative ‘empathy’ will be sufficient to stimulate in the spectator an internal ‘imitation’ of the movements of the performer which is the same in kind, but different in the quantum of energy invested in it, as the movement of the performer. For this internal imitation— the notion of which is of long descent, deriving ultimately from the classical notion of a *sensus communis* by means of which individuals

\(^{621}\) It’s also frequently complained that they supply easy answers to difficult aesthetic issues at the cost of submitting aesthetics to the authority of other disciplines.

organize and understand both the movements of their own bodies and those of others – Freud coins the term “ideational mimetics.”

For Murray Smith, however, even this is going too far. Smith argues that there is no reason to suppose that such an act of empathy is necessary at all times to interpret the information presented in a dramatic action:

If we say, ‘I imagine jumping from the top of the building’, we imply that we represent this event to ourselves, as it were, from the ‘inside’: I imagine, for example, the view I would have as I fall, the nauseating sensation I experience as my body picks up speed, and so forth … By contrast … in ‘imagining that I jump from the building’, I do not represent the event to myself with any of (the) ‘indexical’ marks of the imagined action – for example, transporting myself imaginatively into the appropriate position. I do not place myself ‘in’ the scenario, so much as entertain an idea, but not from the perspective (in any sense of the term) of any character within the scenario.623

It is a sufficient condition for the reception of any narrative that its motivations be conceptually intelligible:

In understanding ‘why the protagonist’s response is appropriate or intelligible to the situation’, it is only necessary that we have what we take to be, at that moment in the course of the narrative, reliable information about the traits and states of the character, and about the situation in which the character is placed. In sympathizing with the protagonist I do not simulate or mimic her occurrent mental state. Rather, I understand the protagonist and her context, make a more-or-less sympathetic judgment of the

character, and respond emotionally in a manner appropriate to both the evaluation and the context of the action.624

But “innervation” doesn’t imply that I mentate the *entirety* of the fictional character’s presumed experience – only the *part* of it comprising the feelings it would stir in me if I were undergoing it. So it is not contradictory to suppose that I might entertain more that the mere *idea* of a character’s experience in order to empathize with them. On the other hand, if it seems ungenerous to spend the duration of a film withholding one’s empathy from its personages and satisfying oneself instead with the pleasure of judging their characters, it is nevertheless impossible to deny that there are some spectators who habitually behave very much like that; and many more who do so on occasion. For the moment, it is sufficient to observe that Smith does not (and cannot) claim that *nobody* responds by empathy, but only that *he* doesn’t – in logical terms, not that it is *impossible* for empathy to form the basis of an audience’s response, but only that it is *not necessary* in all cases. Second of all, the kind of non-intuitive response that Smith has in mind depends rather on the generation of concepts by a performance, than of intuitions (i.e. affects, feelings or sensations). But we have already advanced the claim that at least a significant part of the comedy of slapstick is achieved by the evoking incongruities of *feeling* which have the effect of shaking the spectator in order to get him/her to “loosen up.” On the other hand, we have also observed that it is another integral part of slapstick’s formal operations to “throw the audience out” of their intuitive engagement in their narratives – often by techniques that violate the conventions of film realism like breaking the fourth wall, posing, and systematically reversing the audience’s ‘realistic’ expectations and occasionally placing them in the position of the butt of a joke. At such times – for example, in the case of the “point of ritual death” in the Wild Ride – the spectator is intended to *comment* on his or her own relationship to the text. In sum, slapstick seems to solicit a form of spectatorial engagement which oscillates between poles of involvement and estrangement; between uncritical “innervatory” participation and detached, conceptual, contemplation.

As it happens, the laughter theory in which the Freudian approach is grounded is only a distant cousin of the “catharsis” theory which underlies his account of jokes. Indeed, it bears a closer resemblance to traditional classical and Hobbesian “superiority” theories based on a

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624 *Engaging Characters* (pp. 85-86).
comparison of the resources of the performer with those of the spectator; and, on the contrary, Freud’s account draws specific attention to the fact that the comic, on his view, is scarcely able to deal with powerful emotions – the kind that require serious effort to keep them under control.

Freud’s laughter theory, on the other hand, also positions itself against contemporary theories which account for laughter on the basis of an “oscillatory” movement of the attention such as derive from the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant. Kant’s theory has undergone a recent revival of interest in sketches by theorists such as Tom Gunning, according to whom “Kant … describes laughter as a psycho-physiological reaction, in which the body and mind operate like a machine breaking down.” Gunning goes on to cite Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*:

The mind looks back in order to try it over again, and thus by a rapidly succeeding tension and relaxation it is jerked to and fro and put in oscillation. As the snapping of what was, as it were, tightening up the string takes place suddenly (not by a gradual loosening), the oscillation must bring about a mental movement and a sympathetic internal movement of the body.625

Freud’s account does not turn on such an “oscillation of attention backward and forwards between contrasting ideas,” and he confesses that for his system such an account would seem “incomprehensible.” But at the same time, he points out that in practice such an account might easily turn out to be compatible with his own;626 and we have discovered on our own account that knockabout acts apparently did often turn on systematic misdirections of attention – like the 1-2-3-Switch motif – and sympathy – like the Pete Jenkins Ride, or the burlesque boxing act – that seem designed to exploit some sort of oscillation-principle; some sort of exchange of the roles of joker, witness and butt. Our approach, therefore, involves reconciling three distinct approaches: the figurational approach with its notion of “catharsis” as tension and release of the sort that occur at sporting events; the Freudian approach, with its principle of “innervation”; and the Kantian approach with its notion of the comic as residing in a formal oscillation.

626 “… in a comparison between contrasts a difference in expenditure occurs which, if it is not used for some other purpose, becomes capable of discharge and may thus become a source of pleasure.” Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 248.
II. Knockabout Comedy in Theory

In each of the cases of the burlesque prize fight, the Pete Jenkins ride, and knockabout song and dance, we observed that the overall act took the form of a game. This game was not dissimilar to a sporting event in that it was based on the arousal of competitive energies, with the difference that the competition exists at two levels: i) between the performers; and ii) between the performers on the one hand and the spectators on the other. The performance had the character of a game or even a practical joke of which the defining tensions were escalated through an oscillating movement of the role of “butt.” In some instances, this movement is concretized in the passing back and forth of a symbol, which I might term the *reatus*.\(^\text{627}\) a “McGuffin,” analogous to the “puck” or “ball” in a sport,\(^\text{628}\) but which is often to be avoided, rather than desired – for example, a hot potato, or a ticking bomb.\(^\text{629}\) The possession of that *reatus*, therefore, is understood to coincide with being the loser of the game, and corresponds to being forced to adopt the role of the butt in the actantial structure of the tendentious joke as Freud describes it – as in the example of Mike and Meyer in Chapter 4, in a pattern very similar to the “oscillation” pattern of Kantian aesthetics.

As we saw in Chapter 4, numerous aspects of the technique of knockabout performance (as we are able to reconstruct it) seem to have been conspicuously calculated to elicit an intuitive, mimetic response. Performers routinely played to the accompaniment of highly infectious popular music; they structured their routines by repetitious patterns of movement; and they struck the floors, walls, settings, their equipment, and each other’s bodies so as to produce loud sounds which audiences reported as having powerful somatic effects. Indeed, these effects seem universally to have typically provoked a response which evoked another state of

\(^{627}\) Borrowing a term from the Catholic theology of reconciliation underlying the doctrine of Purgatory.

\(^{628}\) For example, the large fish containing fifty dollars in silver in A.J. Leavitt’s “A Remittance From Home” (New York: Robert M. de Witt, 1875) or the violin in “Mrs. Didymus’ Party” by George H. Coes (Boston: Walter H. Baker, 1870); in early film, the basket or perambulator containing the lost baby (“Mrs. Bargainday’s Baby,” Georges Méliès, 1910) or the “Infernal Machine” (“Love and Dynamite,” Keystone, 1914).

\(^{629}\) E.g., “The Millinery Bomb” (Vitagraph, 1913).
ambiguous oscillation: one in which concern for the performer’s well-being and skeptical disbelief suspended each other. For the purposes of the present study, then, the Freudian approach appears to present the most appropriate starting point in our quest for the “meaning(s)” of knockabout. This is the theory of the “expenditure of psychic energy,” articulated in Chapter 7 of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*:

We shall choose the comic of movement, because we recollect that the most primitive kind of stage performance – the pantomime – uses that method for making us laugh. The answer to the question of why we laugh at the clown’s movements is that they seem to us extravagant and inexpedient. We are laughing at an expenditure that is too large.

The reason that this results in laughter is that our ‘empathetic’ engagement in the performance has provoked us to make a more or less involuntary comparison:

(H)ow is it that we laugh when we have recognized that some other person’s movements are exaggerated and inexpedient? By making a comparison, I believe, between the movement I observe in the other person and the one that I should have carried out myself in his place. The two things compared must of course be judged by the same standard, and this standard is my expenditure of innervations, which is linked to my idea of the movement in both of the two cases.

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630 “Either Rezene or Robini is ever ready with his hand or handy with his foot. How one avoids hurting the other we need not inquire; there is one thing they cannot avoid, though – that is, making the audience laugh …” *Era*, Sept. 19, 1891; c.f. also *Era*, Sat. Nov. 26, 1881: *The London Music Halls,* quoted in Ch. 3, p. 30, n. 55.
We’re going to have to stop and come back to this point later on, for as the attentive reader will already have realized, Freud is making an oversight here which is going to affect the suitability of his entire theory for knockabout. But in the interests of clarity, we should pursue his first major point to its conclusion before backtracking. Freud goes on to ground his estimate of the excess in the pantomime clown’s movements in his own intuitive sense of how his body operates in space: “I have acquired the idea of a movement of a particular size by carrying the movement out myself or by imitating it, and through this action I have learnt a standard for this movement in my innervatory sensations.”\(^{633}\) These sensations are exactly the same in quality as would accompany the actual movement; the difference is simply that the quantity of energy expended is infinitely smaller:

When, now, I perceive a movement like this of greater or lesser size in someone else, the securest way to an understanding (an apperception) of it will be for me to carry it out by imitation, and I can then decide from the comparison on which of the movements my expenditure was the greater … Ideation or ‘thinking’ differs from acting or performing above all in the fact that it displaces far smaller cathectic energies and holds back the main expenditure from discharge.\(^{634}\)

For Freud, laughter is a nervous function by which excess psychic energy is discharged: it operates in the service, therefore, of some principle of psychic equilibrium. Freud articulates his ‘innervatory’ theory of laughter in a succinct paragraph:

When, I repeat, a particular movement is perceived, the impulsion is given to forming an idea of it by means of a certain expenditure of energy. In ‘trying to understand’, therefore, in apperceiving this movement, I make a certain expenditure, and in this portion of the mental process I behave exactly as though I were putting myself in


the place of the person I am observing. But at the same moment, probably, I bear in mind the aim of this movement, and my earlier experience enables me to estimate the scale of expenditure required for reaching that aim. In doing so I disregard the person whom I am observing and behave as though I myself wanted to reach the aim of the movement. These two possibilities in my imagination amount to a comparison between the observed movement and my own. If the other person’s movement is exaggerated and inexpedient, my increased expenditure in order to understand it is inhibited in statu nascendi, as it were in the act of being mobilized … it is declared superfluous and is free for use elsewhere or perhaps for discharge by laughter. This would be the way in which, other circumstances being favourable, pleasure in a comic movement is generated – an innervatory expenditure which has become an unusable surplus when a comparison is made with a movement of one’s own.635

But Freud observes that a direct comparison between the performer and oneself is not the only method employed in the physically comic – if it were, then the secret of physical comedy would indeed always boil down to Hobbesian superiority. But according to Freud, we can also abstract from the comparison between others and ourselves by using our capacity for ‘empathy’ to compare two successive physical states in some other person. This opens avenues to two additional forms of the comic: the comic of situation and the comic of expectation. In the comic of situation “the pleasurable difference in cathectic expenditures is brought about by external influences”636 – as when we see a professor, deeply immersed in his academic interests, suddenly forced to abandon them in order to go to the bathroom. In the comic of expectation, the preparation for an action turns out to be disproportionate to the amount actually required – as when an unwitting stage-hand puts too much effort into lifting a false dumbbell marked “1,000

lbs.” and ends up falling over backwards. In both cases, a comparison takes place – but this time it takes place entirely within oneself, and consists in a comparison of the energies one would exert oneself in the same circumstances. The comedy of situation and the comedy of expectation thus afford examples of forms of physical performance in which incongruity rather than superiority is the operative criterion for the performatively evocation of laughter. These incongruities, moreover, do not have to be ideated in order to be funny; they can be simply intuited. For example, in the case of the stage hand the incongruity between his effort (to straighten up) and its result (falling down) is experienced first, and only ideated (“understood”) afterwards (if at all). It is for this reason alone that we can speak of this comedy as being genuinely “physical.” The “meanings” at play here can be expressed only awkwardly in words: in English they are better represented by the prepositions “up” and “down” (and the intuitive relationship between them) than by subjects and verbs (“I/he stood”; “I/he fell”).

The distinction between the comic implying a comparison between the other and oneself and the comic of situation and expectation (which is between two states, before and after, as represented in the other, but as intuited within oneself) thus lies conveniently parallel to the distinction between two primary elements of slapstick film – its “sensational appeal” (as emblematized in the “pie” of Donald Crafton’s essay) and its narrative drive (as emblematized in the notion of “chase”). The suggestion here is that “pie” and “chase” are both elements which were present in knockabout comedy, but which were distinctively developed in cinema in the course of the emergence of slapstick. Indeed, we have already seen how both are latent in what I have called the “talion” and “1-2-3-switch” rhythmic motifs.

For our purposes, Freud finally gets into trouble when he considers the case of the intellectual energies of the pantomime clown. Here, at first blush, the apparently lesser expenditure of mental energy by the pantomime dolt yields Dr. Freud the same sense of his own superiority as the dolt’s greater expenditure of physical energy in the earlier instance. C.f. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 258.

It might be argued that the concept of “causality” is implied here; but in fact, the expectation is based on the Kantian notion of cause-and-effect as a structural condition of experience, not as an idea.

The comic that is found in someone else’s intellectual and mental characteristics is evidently once again the outcome of a comparison between him and my own self, though, curiously enough, a comparison which has as a rule produced the opposite result to that in the case of a comic movement or action. In this latter case it was comic if the other person had made a greater expenditure than I thought I should need. In the case of a mental function, on the contrary, it becomes comic if the other person has spared himself expenditure which I regard as indispensable.


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dismisses the hypothesis that might seem to follow, that what is operative is the quantitative difference in energies, on the reflection that, as “a restriction of our muscular work and an increase of our intellectual work fit in with the course of our personal development towards a higher level of civilization,” physical energy and mental energy are to be expended and conserved in inverse proportions: “By raising our intellectual expenditure we can achieve the same result with a diminished expenditure on our movements.” What is yielded in either case on the part of the spectator in making the hypothetical comparison with the performer amounts to an excess which needs to be ‘blown off’ in laughter. But this leads Freud to a conclusion which is problematic for the usefulness of his theory to the formation of a nuanced appreciation of physical comedy:

Thus a uniform explanation is provided of the fact that a person appears comic to us if, in comparison with ourselves, he makes too great an expenditure on his bodily functions and too little on his mental ones; and it cannot be denied that in both these cases our laughter expresses a pleasurable sense of the superiority which we feel in relation to him. If the relation in the two cases is reversed – if the other person’s physical expenditure is found to be less than ours or his mental expenditure greater – then we no longer laugh, we are filled with astonishment and admiration.640

This passage poses a problem for Freud. As the records of numerous knockabout performances which I have quoted above641 show, knockabout performers very often apparently impressed their audiences both with their superior expenditure of their mental resources and with their superior command of their physical energies. And the effect, according to the records, was

(for nonsense and stupidity are inefficiencies of function). In the former case I laugh because he has taken too much trouble, in the latter because he has taken too little.” Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 255.

641 In Chapter 4.
regularly not merely one of admiration and astonishment – it was also, and apparently at the same time, one of laughter.\textsuperscript{642}

The problem which is posed for the theory of knockabout comedy here is in fact only the second of three. The first was encountered at the point which we earlier passed over regarding Freud’s notion of the source of the common standard by which the relative quantities of the performer’s and the spectator’s expenditures of energy are to be judged. A third problem is raised by the fact that, in the case of knockabout, the actions with which the spectator is imaginatively engaging are usually violent ones – actions which one ought to repudiate and the innervatory delectation of which one ought to eschew. In their case, the energy which is left over after the comparison is not “surplus”; on the contrary, it ought to be getting deployed in the suppression, rather than the expression, of a favorable response, or perhaps in the expression of an unfavorable one.\textsuperscript{643} If the laughter represents, as in the case of a joke, an economy on the expenditure on inhibition,\textsuperscript{644} the violence does not become comic – our laughter would have to be interpreted to represent unqualified hostility. But on the contrary, some of the spectators of knockabout performances reported that they laughed ‘in spite of themselves.’ In order to account for the phenomena of knockabout performance, therefore, the Freudian theory needs either to be supplemented or qualified.

To begin with, we need to re-examine Freud’s assumption that “the two things compared must of course be judged by the same standard, and this standard is my expenditure of innervations, which is linked to my idea of the movement in both of the two cases.” Whereas it may do for clinical practice, this remark is ill-attuned to the practical realities of the theatre, which are more complex than the simple binary relationship proposed by Freud. It would in fact be odd and incongruous to apply to the movements of a character in a ballet-pantomime standards deriving from an experience of one’s own movements through space in real life. What is curious about Freud’s observations of pantomime clowns is that they betray not the slightest

\textsuperscript{642}See, for example, the comments of the anonymous review from The Sporting Chronicle, Thursday, Feb. 14th, 1889, cited in The Era, Apr. 20, 1889 which describes his delight at the “damnable iteration” of the Two Macs, Ch. 3, p. 22, n. 32.

\textsuperscript{643}I.e., if the action that is being engaged in is a shameful one, the cathexis of my “innervation” of it is not ‘free’ once the comparison is complete – it should be assimilated within my experience of disapproval or disgust, just as it would in real life. In real life, if I see somebody doing something violent, I don’t estimate the difference between the expenditure of energy on the perpetrator’s part and my own; I either run away, or intervene. That is, my ‘innervation’ becomes subsumed within my “fight or flight” reflex.

\textsuperscript{644}I.e., of “unconscious” aggression.
awareness of style. If our own innervations were our constant guide in estimating the expenditures of energy of performers, the movements of the pantomime clown would grow more and more excessive as time went on and our laughter would grow heartier and heartier as we approached old age – which (perhaps sadly) we know not to be the case. Each of us knows that his or her own capacities have their individual peculiarities which make them unreliable measures as to the capacities of others; and in order to rationalize the comparison we make use of some reasonable standard beyond ourselves. When we wish to compare ourselves with others, we measure our deviations from the reasonable standard and then theirs. We compare the differences, and whoever is further away from the standard is the one who is judged either more excessive or more deficient, whether physically or mentally. When we are done we laugh (or not) accordingly.

But it will further be objected that the theatre is not always reasonable – it may even be argued that that is why we need it. The ballet-pantomimes of the nineteenth century could never have been the places of enchantment that they were if stage representations obeyed all the same rules as the mundane world outside them. On the contrary, pantomime movement was highly stylized, and solicited measurement against a different standard than the mere average capacities of the majority of everyday women and men. Ballet-pantomime movement technique created an environment in which, as a rule, bodies appeared in general to be less prone to the limitations of inertia: lighter, able to travel more quickly and to change direction more promptly, much more responsive to the promptings of the will and much less hampered by the resistances of the physical world; and, especially, much more capable of spontaneous but coordinated and harmonious group movement. It was above all in contrast to the physical standard implied by such a *mise-en-scène* that Clown and his cohorts were to be derided as clumsy, ungainly and inept; and the individual spectator in concurring with this verdict, unconsciously (and, I expect, wishfully) imagined him- or herself to approximate all the more closely to this imaginary ideal standard.

But nineteenth-century ballet-pantomime was by no means unique in this regard. Every genre of performance carries with it conventions of movement whose intuitive adoption by the spectator is the precondition for receiving the pleasures of the spectacle.\(^{645}\) This is not less so,

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\(^{645}\) i.e., In order to enjoy a musical, you have to accept (and adjust your expectations to) certain conventions about how people’s movements express their feelings; if you can’t, you won’t enjoy musicals.
but rather more, in the case of the genres favored by twentieth- and twenty-first century media: though they often require a so-called “realistic” style, each of these genres is based on a set of assumptions about the “reality” which they are intended to re-present which are reflected (‘encoded,’ if you will) in their mise-en-scène. Every genre of performance, indeed, has a “realism” of its own which is reflected in its style; a set of assumptions which govern its conventions. The spectator of taste is always required to intuit that “realism” by means of a sensitive engagement with its style, and accommodate their “realistic” expectations to its conventions. It is this sensitive engagement and accommodation which seem to be lacking in Freud’s hypothetical account of the “primitive” pantomime clown.

To modify (and to complicate) Freud’s basic specifications for the standard in accordance with which the physical comedian’s expenditures (be they physical or mental) are to be judged deficient or excessive: the standard is not simply “my expenditure of innervations, which is linked to my idea of the movement in both of the two cases.” It is rather “my estimate of my expenditure of innervations, which is linked to my idea of the movement in both of the two cases as modified in my imagination by the particular conventions governing movement which are expressed in the mise-en-scène of the particular (theatrical) representation.” This makes it possible to appreciate the value of one of the insights afforded us by our historical survey of knockabout performance. It suggests that the “conventions governing movement” in the ballet-pantomime were precisely those emblematized in the standard of the “(neo-) classical body”; and that the prevailing styles of deviation from this standard – the “grotesque” and the “eccentric” – therefore also functioned as criteria for comparison between the spectator’s self and the other. The “grotesque” performer was grotesque and the “eccentric” performer eccentric not absolutely, but by comparison with the classical norm – but in respects in which the spectator’s self might also be grotesque or eccentric (that is, habitually excessive or deficient in certain regards) – only more so.

I’d like for the moment to defer considering the second problem posed by Freud’s articulation of his theory – the problem that in some cases the comparison of physical excess or

647 This might also suggest a way of resolving the question of why some performances typically described as “grotesque” were often described as “eccentric” and vice versa: since the matter of excess and deficiency is partly relative to the spectator, one man’s grotesquerie might easily be another man’s eccentricité.
mental deficiency sometimes favors the performer but nevertheless provokes laughter – and instead consider the third, which may now prove less intractable to solution: the problem that the entire system of “innervations” ought to be jammed by the fact that the actions under consideration are violent ones in which the spectator should be reluctant to participate, even imaginatively. It might be objected that audiences know the representation is not “real” and that the destruction is only “pretend,” but that would be to miss the point: the point is not the reality of the representation, but the reality of the affect it provokes. Audiences are being asked to respond to the violence of the representation as if it were real – that is, with affects like those that really accompany real violence. These affects are mostly frightful, painful, and highly unpleasant; moreover, we have already observed that their nature is such that people naturally resist ideating them. It would therefore require additional conditions (like, for example, those of a sporting contest, or a military setting) to make the expression of these feelings acceptable – and even the veriest football hooligan would hesitate to call them pleasurable. In any case they could still not become comic (since – at least according to Freud, but he seems to be right in this – the comic is generally inimical to powerful serious affects).

The problem is only partly solved if we observe that knockabout performance typically did have the character of a sporting event; not only in the conduct of the characters to one another, but also with regard to the conduct of the audience. Spectators were encouraged to participate in knockabout performances on as many levels as possible and to be as active as possible, even (as we have seen in the case of the Pete Jenkins ride) to the extent of rolling up their sleeves and descending into the ring for a dust-up. But this is only half of the solution, since it does not cope with the disruptive quality of the affects typically associated with violence, and that must inevitably to some degree be stimulated by violent representations. The other, and the more important half, is supplied by an unwritten, unexpressed convention of knockabout, fundamental to the nature of comedy itself: in words of Aristotle which echo those of the Hippocratic Oath, its fundamental goal is to “cause no harm.” The violent aims of knockabout comedy are therefore, by convention, always inhibited – they never cause harm. Violent actions,

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648 “As for Comedy, it is (as has been observed) an imitation of men worse than the average; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind, the Ridiculous, which is a species of the Ugly. The Ridiculous may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain.” (Italics mine) – Aristotle, *De Poetica*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 1459.
therefore, are always disproportionate and distorted, the quantum of their destructive effect reduced to zero.

This is the primary practical axiom of knockabout comedy: in knockabout comedy, destructive energies are always aim-inhibited. That is to say that, in the case of a destructive intention, the relationship of cause and effect will always somehow be disrupted. This is necessarily the case, because if the act of destruction that is the subject of the performance were to take its logical and proportionate effect, the first thing that would be destroyed would be the performance. Instead, the moment of destruction is eternally deferred; the energies of one violent gesture are simply sublimated into the generation of another – this is the theoretical requirement that motivates the technical feature of “swing time.”

For this reason – that knockabout style requires a continuous transfer of energies which are never consumed in the fulfillment of their violent purposes – it becomes necessary to qualify our first practical axiom by means of a second: nevertheless every action must have a proportionate reaction; and though this reaction may not (indeed cannot) necessarily be equal and opposite, the quantity of energy it manifests will always be recognizable as a distortion or displacement of the energy of the initial action. The continuous transfer of energies is the theoretical requirement that motivates the technical features of “no double time,” and the proportionate exaggeration or distortion of actions and reactions.

The first practical axiom must seem paradoxical or self-contradictory, particularly when we consider that in general knockabout comedy seems to teem with gratuitous violence. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 I have gone to some lengths to demonstrate how knockabout performances incorporate acts of aggressiveness at every level – even the relationship of the typical knockabout “artiste” to his audience is so managed as to maximize, rather than to minimize, its fundamental ambivalence; and it has been a working assumption of mine that these acts of aggression are regularly related to real acts of violence in which performers and spectators have been involved in their real lives. But in spite of the fact that the records show that knockabout performers routinely hit each other, kicked each other, jumped up and down on each other’s bodies and buried axes in each other’s heads, and although these acts of violence may have expressed real destructive energies on the part of performers and excited real destructive

649 One which may in fact be useful in distinguishing it from the violent physical comedy of earlier periods – say, for example, the comedies which were performed in France as part of the Grand Guignol.
sympathies on the part of their audiences, no destructive intention behind any act of aggression in knockabout comedy is ever fulfilled; instead, in every case either it is thwarted, misdirected, reversed, or inverted, or else the link of cause and effect between the (genuine) destructive intention and its aim is disrupted – by exaggeration, understatment, parody, caricature, or displacement – and made absurd.

If correct, this reflection should make it much easier to understand why knockabout comedy sets out to stimulate powerful aggressive urges, but never satisfies them. It creates a “safe zone” where, as part of the compact between audience and performer, no harm will be done, then proceeds to raise expectations of tremendous physical harm and reduce them to nothing, as in the Kantian formulation of humor. The goal is clearly to arouse energies that are somehow bound up in hostile associations, and release them in laughter. But what is still difficult to understand is why the audience should feel pleasure and laugh on the arousal of these energies, rather than feel frustration and anger. How are the energies thus aroused made redundant, and directed towards discharge in laughter?

Freud himself seems to anticipate the movement of our argument here; for he himself provides the raw material of the solution. The ideation of an action in “innervation” has two aspects – its quality and its quantity – both of which receive representation in the “innervation.” The quantity of the energy in the original action receives separate somatic representation in terms of what Freud calls “ideational mimetics,” which are coded in terms of spatial metaphor – in this case, as “large” or “small”:

… (P)hysiology … teaches us that even during the process of ideation innervations run out to the muscles, though these, it is true, correspond to a very modest expenditure of energy. Now it becomes very plausible to suppose that this innervatory energy that accompanies the process of ideation is used to represent the quantitative factor of the idea: that it is larger when there is an idea of a large movement than when it is a question of a small one. Thus the idea of the larger movement would in this case in fact be the larger one – that is, it would be the idea accompanied by the larger expenditure of energy.
Direct observation shows that human beings are in the habit of expressing the attributes of largeness and smallness in the contents of their ideas by means of a varying expenditure in a kind of ideational mimetics...⁶⁵⁰

In its “ideational mimetics” the act of performance acquires the secondary character of an act of communication:

If a child or a man from the common people, or a member of certain races, narrates or describes something, it is easy to see that he is not content to make his idea plain to the hearer by the choice of clear words, but that he also represents its subject-matter in his expressive movements: he combines the mimetic and the verbal forms of representation. And he especially demonstrates quantities and intensities: ‘a high mountain’ – and he raises his hand over his head, ‘a little dwarf’ – and he holds it near the ground. He may have broken himself of the habit of painting with his hands, yet for that reason he will do it with his voice; and if he exercises self-control in this too, it may be wagered that he will open his eyes wide when he describes something large and squeeze them shut when he comes to something small. What he is thus expressing is not his affects but actually the content of what he is having an idea of.⁶⁵¹

The notion of “ideational mimetics” offers us a significant insight into the inner workings of knockabout comedy. It suggests that, in knockabout comedy, the magnitude of the energy attaching to the quality of the idea may be displaced into the quantity of energy invested in the action that expresses it, in such a way that the whole cause-and-effect sequence it fits into

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becomes absurd. The first example that pops to mind that the reader might be familiar with is that of Chaplin in his short, “The Bond,” in which the magnitude of the Tramp’s antagonism towards the Kaiser is displaced onto the exaggerated size of the huge mallet with which he strikes the Kaiser over the head, his own expression remaining conspicuously deadpan. But this oversized action is matched with an equally and oppositely undersized reaction: instead of being utterly obliterated, the Kaiser merely staggers and falls. The audience’s (thoroughly genuine) hatred of the Kaiser has been mobilized by allusion; but the (allegorical) act of violence which expresses this hatred makes itself tacitly ridiculous by distorting the proportions of cause and effect in the attack, and expressing the one by hyperbole (overstatement) and the other by litotes (understatement). The aim (of killing the Kaiser) has been inhibited (and can only be satisfied by the audience’s buying enough war bonds to finance an invasion of Germany). In the meantime, the energy aroused by the allusion to this inhibited aim and quantified within the mise-en-scène in the size of the Tramp’s mallet (in a fashion analogous to the ideational mimetics of gesture), is now free to be discharged in laughter at the absurdity of the means by which it has been represented.652

The notion of ideational mimetics, then, is crucial for an understanding of a genuinely physical comedy – that is, of a comic technique which does not simply physicalize concepts that might as easily be expressed in words, but a mode of expression, with a syntax of its own, for meanings that cannot be expressed in any other way. As Freud suggests, it draws on meanings which are closer to intuitions than to ideas: to feelings which are better expressed in terms of adjectives and adverbs – big, small, high, low – and above all in prepositional expressions: to, from, up, down, over, under, forward, backward, sideways; in-the-way of; out-of-the-way of. It draws, moreover on proportional relationships between them: “as far down as (the other is) up,” “more under than toward,” and so on. As I observed above, these relations of contrast, opposition and incongruity find mental reflection not in concepts, but in intuitions, and are highly intractable to verbal articulation. In language, our expressions for them hardly make sense; but in physical performance, they are primary.

652 In order to verify this from one’s own experience, of course, it is necessary to hate the Kaiser; and this observation offers us a further insight, perhaps, into the reasons why the humor of so many knockabout and slapstick comedy films proves so elusive to twenty-first-century spectators.
This solution to the third of our problems (the problem of how aggressive energies can be aroused and reduced to nothing so as to provoke laughter rather than frustration) proposes a means to the solution of our second problem. That was the problem of how activities which, according to Freud, should frustrate laughter by provoking astonishment and admiration instead, often actually cause us to laugh.

We observed that for Freud, laughter is a nervous reflex which operates to discharge excess psychic energy. If an audience harbors hostile – or even merely ambivalent – feelings towards a performer, those feelings will require a quantum of energy to keep them suppressed. If the audience, then, can be made suddenly to abandon their hostile attitude, the quantum of energy required to suppress it will suddenly become excess. But the circumstances need to be such that the discharge will be in the direction of laughter and not some other way. (Freud himself gives a brief taxonomy of the preconditions for the comic.\textsuperscript{653}) One way might be if the performance of the astonishing “trick” is subsumed within the absurd displacement of energy onto the “ideational mimetics” manifested within the performance, the result will be laughter rather than admiration. For instance, if one clown leaps towards the throat of another with murderous intent but slips, inadvertently performs a somersault in mid-air, and lands upside down in head-to-head balance with the clown he had (apparently) intended to kill, the marvelous quality of his stunt will read as a hyperbolically exaggerated diversion of the destructive intention from its aim – one more or less proportional to the amount of energy originally invested in the destructive idea.

But in the Pete Jenkins act, for example, the wonder and astonishment evoked by the equestrian’s performance is the hyperbolic counterpart of the audience’s initial hostility toward Pete; but it is turned into laughter by the reduction of the whole performance to a practical joke of which the audience is (tacitly) the butt. The act, that is, is an example of what I might call “playful deflation.” It arouses ambivalent feelings, and then makes their negative component redundant. This will be a positive condition, conducive to the production of laughter, so long as a) the joke is received as good-natured; and b) the audience “takes it in good part” – i.e., so long as they “have a sense of humour” about the whole affair; in nineteenth-century terms, so far as

they are able to adopt an attitude of humility and good will. In that case, their negative energies can be sublimated into laughter: and that is the true “subtext” of the performance.

It therefore seems essential to the knockabout act that, whatever its surface features, its underlying structure should have been that of a game between the audience and the performer(s). By the end of the act the audience member has realized that the intention of the game has been simply the procuring of his (or her) own pleasure; that is, the same one as brought him or her into the theatre. But in the meantime, the spectator’s sympathies have been so arranged that s/he now finds him- or herself a member of a community of pleasure, rather than an isolated consumer in quest of it.

In the trade journalism, it frequently appears that the music hall or the vaudeville palace becomes a kind of allegorical symbol for a form of utopia: a place where the frustrations which tend to isolate the spectator are transformed, and which provides him or her with the opportunity of experiencing a tacit reconciliation with others in a community of feeling. In some cases, as in the one I mooted of the Pete Jenkins ride, the knockabout act can represent an act of grace which pronounces a tacit forgiveness and exorcism of the angry energies which the spectator has unwittingly brought in. Even if it fails to have this ritual effect, it may nevertheless accomplish a critical act of communication: it may remind the spectator that he or she is not alone. But where the community of “goodwill” is securely enough established by the end of the performance, the audience may even accept the vision of it at the price of having been forced to accept the role of “butt.” And, as we have already observed, in the case of the Pete Jenkins act, and in other knockabout performances like the Weber-Fields “violin routine,” the deflation of the audience is often softened by aligning them with a third party – an “innocent bystander” who functions as their surrogate in accepting the role of “butt”– for example, the ringmaster as he is positioned by the end of the Pete Jenkins performance, or the orchestral violinist who is enticed into surrendering his Strad.

On the other hand, as a corollary, we should conclude that knockabout comedy is clearly not intended for everybody. It is a high-stakes game and in consequence highly risky; it requires a performer who can confidently walk a very thin line between success and failure. It is often as likely to miss as to hit: if you are not feeling oppressed by a superfluity of your own hostile or (what amounts to the same thing) self-pitying feelings, and are not suppressing a sense of isolation and abandonment by the rest of the world – or, on the contrary, if you are all too much
so – knockabout comedy will most likely repulse rather than attract you. Because its meaning is embodied and not conceptual, the joke will be incommunicable to you.

Knockabout technique, to summarize, is not only absurd, but it is even, to a certain extent anti-rational, since its whole possibility lies in adherence to its fundamental axiom which resides in the strict denial of a fundamental tenet of rational discourse: indeed, it rigorously denies the validity of cause and effect for the case of acts of violence. It is fundamental to its nature to represent the impossible; to submit the possible to fantastic (but proportional) distortions; and in so doing to substitute the performance’s governance by the laws of physics with governance by the rules of human sympathy. But though the physical vocabulary and emotional resonances of the knockabout act are broad, they do not run deep. Though knockabout technique insistently alludes to the real violence of life, it studiously avoids reawakening it – its resources are not sufficient to deal with deep personal pain. Though we occasionally read – as in the “damnable iteration” review – that some audiences have acknowledged and admired the sophistication of knockabout comedy, none report that it has touched in a curative way on deep feelings of loss.

For Freud, this fact is explainable as a consequence of the difference between comedy and humor.

It is a necessary condition for generating the comic that we should be obliged simultaneously or in rapid succession, to apply to one and the same act of ideation two different ideational methods, between which the ‘comparison’ is then made and the comic difference emerges. Differences in expenditure of this kind arise between what belongs to someone else and to oneself, between what is usual and what has been changed (for someone else), between what is expected and what happens.

Humor, on the other hand, is incompatible with comedy, because it confronts what the comic avoids – the unpleasant side of life:

… (W)it humor it is no longer a question of two different methods of viewing the same subject-matter. The fact that the situation is dominated by the emotion that is to be avoided, which is of an unpleasurable character, puts an end to the possibility of
comparing it with the characteristics of the comic and of jokes. Humorous displacement is in fact a case of a liberated expenditure being used elsewhere – a case which has been shown to be so perilous to a comic effect.\textsuperscript{654}

Ultimately, for Freud, what is accomplished through performance, whether it be the telling of jokes, knockabout comedy, or more dramatic forms of humor, is a wishful return to childhood – a temporary “regression in the service of the ego” to a refreshing state of play:

The pleasure in jokes has seemed to us to arise from an \textit{economy in expenditure upon inhibition}, the pleasure in the comic from an \textit{economy in expenditure upon ideation} (upon cathexis) and the pleasure in humor from \textit{an economy in expenditure upon feeling}. In all three modes of working of our mental apparatus the pleasure is derived from an economy. All three are agreed in representing methods of regaining from mutual activity a pleasure which has in fact been lost through the development of that activity. For the euphoria which we endeavour to reach by these means is nothing other than the mood of a period of life in which we were accustomed to deal with our own psychical work in general with a small expenditure of energy – the mood of our childhood, when we were ignorant of the comic, when we were incapable of jokes and when we had no need of humor to make us feel happy in our life.\textsuperscript{655}

For Freud, therefore, the ‘meaning’ of knockabout comedy is backward-looking: it is to be found in a fantastical, and temporary, return to the lost happiness of childhood.


I can’t help wondering, however, if this is really enough to explain the function of knockabout, or to account for its popularity. The smashing and banging of bodies about the play-space seems like an odd way to celebrate the innocence of childhood. Knockabout comedy in general seems to be much more concerned with confronting the harsh side of life than with avoiding it – it just takes care to compromise its harshness. There is a temptation here to walk into the trap that Freud so deftly avoids – to propose some sort of ‘carthartic’ hypothesis for knockabout as a sheer “burning-off” of the spectator’s “pent-up” frustrations; an opportunity for the vicarious satisfaction of sadistic impulses through some sort of mechanism of “identification” – in short, a reversion to a naïve superiority theory.

But in that case, what our discussion has derived as the primary axiom of knockabout style would make no sense. It would not make sense for every such representation to inhibit the accomplishment of the violent idea, to make superfluous the energy invested in it, or to distort and make ridiculous its consequences. If knockabout comedy were intended to function in this way, the distinction between its fictive violence and the violence of sport would disappear. But our historical research has demonstrated that knockabout violence very likely did emerge out of sporting events to develop in a different direction – down the by-paths of the burlesque wheels and vaudeville circuits, rather than along with modern professional sports.

III. The Function(s) of Knockabout Comedy

Clearly, the knockabout comedy of the nineteenth century resonated on a wide spectrum of levels, on a variety of registers, on each of which it functioned as both act and communication. In Chapter 5 I found it useful to distinguish four of these: personal, social, political and ritual. If, on the personal level (as ‘entertainment’), knockabout provided the spectator with a refreshing return to childhood play, we have also seen that it reminded him (or her) that s/he was not alone: that the violence s/he suffered and the pain s/he endured was an inevitable, if unnecessary, fact of life. But it seems to me that the address of knockabout is not primarily to the individual. The Dutch and Darkey types of the knockabout stage speak as figures for one social group to another; and audiences responded from pit and balcony as members of races, classes, gender and age.

656 In support of this line of argument we might well advance the evidence that the persistence of non-aim-inhibited expressive violence in professional sports continues to be a source of concern – one which is growing as we proceed into the twenty-first century, rather than declining.
groups. Within these groups, the acts seem to have been calculated to foster mutual affirmation
and reconciliation; but they left sad rifts to grow between them – by the first decade of the
twentieth century, black, Jewish and Italian interest groups had begun to protest their
representation onstage. The register on which knockabout primarily resonated seems to have
been the political one; and the mode in which it primarily ‘spoke’ was that of allegory: in the
tension between the Grotesque and the Eccentric was embodied the antagonism between the old
aristocratic world of the classical body and the “customary mentality” and the new one of
democratization, embourgeoisement, and “muscular Christianity.” It spoke with particular
candour, so far as possible during the nineteenth century, of sex: the number of male-female
burlesque pugilist teams testifies to its willingness to include women in its meditations on the
violence and pain of life.

As we have seen, the typical knockabout performance was structured as a group game;
one which typically had a grain of narrative incorporated in it. It set up an oscillating movement
of conflicting energies which proceeded either towards some kind of “breakdown,” or to its
avoidance by some inspiring feat. This “breakdown” was typically imagined in terms of a
collapse of the rules and a descent into chaotic mayhem and was represented in thoroughly
allegorical terms. We are reminded once again of the function of performance as ritual proposed
by Richard Schechner: “The fictive violence of the stage refers not to the past or elsewhere but
to the future – to threats, to what will happen if the aesthetic-ritual project crashes.”657 Looked at
from this point of view, the “entertainment value” of knockabout performance might better be
viewed as ritual: as a group reversion to the mood of childhood for the purpose of retrieving
forgotten energies in order to arm oneself for a confrontation which is yet to come: a process in
every way analogous to (but not necessarily the same as) the psychological refreshment which
the individual derives from dreams. In its heyday, the knockabout comedy of the nineteenth
century, then, seems to have dealt in the terms of aggressive political allegory of a coming
apocalypse which it faced, by and large, with confident optimism and faith in the capabilities of
the human body.

IV. Slapstick Comedy in Theory

We have been able to approach knockabout comedy by a single avenue, but because of its dual nature, this is not the case with slapstick. We have to approach it instead from two directions – viewing it on the one hand as a performance style (which optic will foreground its similarities with knockabout); and on the other hand as a genre of film (which will emphasize the differences between them). Before turning to this task, then, we might find it well to recapitulate and enlarge upon the understanding of the differences and similarities between slapstick and knockabout that we have achieved thus far.

IV.1: KNOCKABOUT AND SLAPSTICK: DIFFERENCES AND SIMILARITIES

We said earlier, then, that knockabout was a primarily theatrical performance genre, and that its use for some films (which continues until the 1920s) was evidently analogical. "Slapstick," on the other hand, is a term for a film genre whose specific difference is the form of physical performance to which its style was peculiarly adapted. Knockabout and slapstick are alike in that they employ a common range of ethnic “clown characters,” associated with tendencies towards hyperbolical physical expression (the Dutchman, the Italian, the stage Jew, and of course the blackface “Darky”). But slapstick clowns evolve beyond these types into characters whose personalities, though simple, evoke surprising profondeurs of feeling. Ironically, knockabout comedians often employed slapsticks, whereas slapstick comedians typically did not; and while physical violence was usually the central activity in knockabout comedy, it was not recognized as one of the principal distinguishing features of cinematic “rough-house”; on the contrary, the “ideational mimetics” of slapstick film extend far beyond the body to incorporate a wide range of interactions between a surprising array of features within a surprisingly elastic mise-en-scène.

As a matter of history, we noticed that the period during which knockabout comedy was the dominant performance genre comes to an end with the separation out of it of two distinct tendencies – one in the direction of burlesque, which involved a much heavier and “grosser” physical stylistics, and another in the direction of vaudevillian farce with a much lighter and more “acrobatic” performance style. On the other hand, the cinematic criticism of the years

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658 (Since in films there are no actual bodies being knocked about.)
immediately preceding the emergence of slapstick film comedy in 1914 reflects a reconvergence of the burlesque and the farcical styles after a separate development. This recombination is contemporaneous with the shrinkage, fragmentation and decline of both the burlesque industry and “polite” vaudeville a little later; as well as an expansion of the “big small time,” or “two-a-day” circuits of theatres – best exemplified by the entertainment empire of Marcus Loew – which featured various combinations of live and cinematic attractions. It’s likewise associated with the proliferation of studios dedicated to the production of comic films by the Independent producers as an integral part of their strategy to wrest dominance of the film industry away from the members of the MPPC in the mid-teens. Thus this early industrial convergence attends the aesthetic reconvergence of farce and burlesque.

Against the received account of slapstick film as a straightforward appropriation of theatrical techniques to films, I have argued, following the example of Charlie Keil, that the development of cinematic slapstick represented a new departure beginning from the specificity of film, drawing on theatrical models to solve problems as they arose. Sennett had apparently worked for a couple of years in stock burlesque, and Billie Ritchie, a Karno alumnus, had also featured in touring burlesque; Ford Sterling had apparently played his “Dutch” character in vaudeville; Max Ascher had likewise been a vaudeville Dutchman, Ben Turpin a vaudeville acrobat, Herbert Rice a (probably) vaudevillian midget, Fred Walton a member of a troupe of vaudevillian physical comics, and John Lancaster a circus clown. But as many and more had not: Fred Mace, around whose talents Keystone was originally organized, though he had been featured in musical comedy, was not; nor were most of the other performers who were among those earliest featured in the “character-“ comedies of the early 1910s: Billy Quirk, Herbert Pryor, John R. Cumpson, John Brennan, Peter Lang, Billy Mason, John Steppling, Marshall Neilan, Hughie Mack, Chester Barnett, Charles De Forrest, and especially some of the comedians first described as engaging in “slapstick” – Augustus Carney, Wallace Beery and Leo White among them. Those among these last who had had any theatrical experience whatsoever had not been physical comics at all, but character players in repertory companies.

659 By the end of the silent period (i.e., the early 1930s) the entire system of burlesque “wheels” has effectively disintegrated.
Slapstick comedy takes the Griffithian melodrama as its starting point, and inverts its aesthetics: instead of constructing a consistent diegetic space which organizes both the subordinate construction of a time-scheme and the performances of the characters, the “eccentric” cinematic style begins with the character’s action, constructs a time-scheme around it, and subordinates the construction of space to the maintenance of tempo. It borrows the game-structure of the knockabout act and uses it as a template for the relation of text and spectator: the construction of the diegesis becomes a game in which the spectator’s earnest participation can occasionally be subverted to render him (or her) the butt of a piece of “playful deflation.” In order to reconcile the “ideational mimetics” of physical comedy technique with the verisimilar requirements of the cinema, slapstick appropriates extreme physical types from the variety theatre and the melodrama and motivates their behavioral extravagances as parody or burlesque.

Nevertheless, writers on cinema such as Lauren Rabinowich, Linda Williams, Jennifer Bean and Mary Ann Doane, have all given us ample demonstration that the theory of innervation can be as fruitful starting point for the study of slapstick as it is for the study of knockabout; and may, indeed, shed valuable light on the differences, as well as the similarities, between them. Just as in knockabout comedy, by means of visually rhythmic images, rhythmical editing, and musical accompaniment, the slapstick filmmaker relies for many effects on arousing patterns of sympathetic feeling in the spectator.

Like the burlesque prize fighter, the Pete Jenkins rider, or the executants of the knockabout song and dance, the protagonist of the slapstick film usually has a project which s/he is discovered in the process of attempting to accomplish, whether it be in establishing a spousal relationship (Fatty’s case at the outset of “The Knockout”), a career (Lige’s case in “Fast and Furious”), or simply holding down a job (like Charlie in “Behind the Screen”). Typically, however, just as in the case of knockabout violence, something occurs to disrupt the relationship between cause and effect in the comic’s life, so that their efforts to advance fail to accomplish the desired goal, or even result in a setback. In cases where the audience knows what has gone

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661 By contrast, however, writers such as Noel Carroll, Tom Gunning, Donald Crafton and Peter Krämer, prefer to avoid accepting presuppositions about audience reception which stem from other disciplines, and focus instead on “visual elements” (i.e., on elements of cinematic style, especially aspects of *mise-en-scène*, including Keaton’s physical performance) that will enable them to avoid becoming entangled in “allegorical interpretations.” C.f. Noël Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate: Buster Keaton, Physical Humour and Bodily Coping* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007) Introduction, p. 2

662 On the contrary, of course, the protagonist’s aim may as frequently be to *avoid* doing these things.
wrong (for example, Buster Keaton’s *One Week*, in which we are aware from the start that the villain has switched the labels on the boxes containing the parts of the prefab house which Buster is to build for his young bride), the audience becomes engaged in the additional game of anticipating how the protagonist is to solve each of the particular puzzles he faces, discover and solve the main problem, and turn the tables on the villain (where applicable).

Very often the game is complicated by the presence of what I’ve referred to above as a *reatus* – an object or a position either of unconditional desire or of unconditional avoidance: a valuable or incriminating “McGuffin,” an explosive device, a pie in the face, or simply a position of maximum vulnerability (like the edge of a cliff) – which is the structural equivalent of the ball in a football game or the puck in a hockey game. In such cases, the game acquires a secondary dimension – the audience has to anticipate where the *reatus* is going to end up and avoid finding themselves aligned with the loser. In sequences like these (the pie-fight of Chapter 6 is a perfect example), the Kantian “oscillation” effect alluded to by Tom Gunning seems to be at play, but with a difference – instead of being reduced to nothing (which would produce only bathos), the oscillation has to be spectacularly climaxed – and it is generally at such climaxes that something like what I called in Chapter 5 a “point of ritual death” is encountered. These two methods of superimposing ludic audience-involvement structures on spectacular ones would seem to be a further point of similarity between knockabout and slapstick “methods” of comedy.

Sometimes, we might add, the problem is with the protagonist himself; and sometimes it is with his (or her) situation or, in broader terms, his or her environment. In either case, just as in knockabout comedy, by means of visually rhythmic images, rhythmical editing, and musical accompaniment, the slapstick filmmaker relies for many effects on arousing patterns of sympathetic response in the spectator. In this case, it seems equally likely – and the notoriously infectious physicality of slapstick performers may help to confirm this – that once again a principle of comparison between the performer and the spectator is at work, in a form of innervation peculiar to the reception of slapstick film. But just as in the case of knockabout we reasoned that, *tace* Freud, the comparison with the pantomime clown couldn’t be direct, but must be mediated through some kind of a physical ideal, so it seems *a fortiori* necessary to invoke some other kind of a mediating standard in the case of slapstick, since the movements of a cinematic clown are abstracted a further degree from those of real life: they are presented in two dimensional images that represent the outcomes of an invisible process of selection, the space through which they move is the product of editing techniques, the “reality” of which they are a
part consists largely in a set of generic conventions, and so on. The body which we need to imagine in order to mediate the comparison between ourselves and the clown is a uniquely cinematic body, therefore. Out of this similarity with knockabout comedy, therefore, there derives a difference, which poses us a problem: whence do we derive our sense of this cinematic ‘ideal’?

A second problem arises out of another difference that emerges from another similarity. We’ve observed that knockabout technique made free use of “clown” characters, some of whom were legendary in their time: the Two Macs, Dermot and Doyle, and perhaps none more than Jimmie Rice of Rice and Prevost, whose whiteface clown character was so widely copied by other performers that *Variety* reviewers treated thefts of “Bumpity Bumps” as consisting primarily in appropriations of Rice’s character and relationship with his acrobat. In Chapter 3, moreover, we noted that the emergence of slapstick was strongly correlated with a steady increase in the popularity and importance of “clown” characters so that the “character comedy” came to form a major subgenre of “rough-house” films. In fact, the compulsive quality of the charisma of many slapstick performers is legendary – the major comedians especially inspired not simply *mimesis*, but a sort of outright, nervous, reflex imitation. But nobody imitates anybody whom he does not admire; and this admiration represents another form of comparison between performer and spectator which operates to the latter’s disadvantage, but which is experienced as pleasurable.

A third problem emerges not from a similarity, but from a difference. We have said that in general, though knockabout comedy apparently excited a much broader range of affects in its audiences, its appeal did not run very deep. Though it constantly alluded to aggressive ideas, it did so only to conjure up a playful mood reminiscent of the carefree days of childhood. It did not have the resources to approach deep feelings of pain; and, indeed Freud supplies us with a theoretical justification for insisting that anything like a “cathartic” effect is inconsistent with the physically comic as it was manifested in nineteenth-century knockabout performance. But, on the other hand, this is the very distinguishing characteristic of the “high art in low comedy” of

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664 This ‘nervous’ imitation, moreover, is apparently distinguishable from, though it seems very probably related to, the kind of ‘affected’ imitation that star personae of all kinds, especially in films, engender. In the latter case, the imitators are wishfully attempting to compensate for something that they are not; in the former, they are apparently giving compulsive expression to something that they are.
slapstick film: according to Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, it was able to make some of the greatest depths of twentieth-century feeling uniquely accessible to body comedy – perhaps for the first time in history. How are we to understand this?

A final difference presents us, for once, with no problems – and may in fact help towards the solution of the ones we have encountered. It appears that knockabout comedy was rooted in a determinate movement technique which required the performance of violent actions in such a way as to displace the quantity of energy attached to their aims onto the “ideational mimetics” surrounding the acts themselves. It seems regularly to have involved the performance of a “character” of a minimal type, but not necessarily a character in any particular dramatic situation. Knockabout technique could therefore be incorporated with a wide range of other performance techniques: you could have knockabout singers and dancers, knockabout acrobats, knockabout tumblers, knockabout farceurs, knockabout trapeze artists, knockabout burlesquers, knockabout circus clowns, and so on. Slapstick comedy was evidently to be distinguished from knockabout, therefore, in a fourth major respect: it was not simply a movement technique, but an acting technique which regularly presented a character (though, as in knockabout, frequently of the most minimal kind) in a particular sort of dramatic situation in a particular sort of setting. These characters were likewise to be found performing typical actions; and the structures of these actions dictated that they tend also to have typical outcomes. We are also in a position to claim (on the basis of the outcomes of our work in Chapter 7) that slapstick technique was, like its counterpart in Griffithian melodrama, a more verisimilar method than that of nineteenth-century knockabout. Our major research question in this case, once again, is simply – how does the comparison of aims and intentions of slapstick technique with that of knockabout help to clarify the meaning of these slapstick films, and the function they performed within the early twentieth-century entertainment system? Is Freud’s hypothesis of comedy as a pleasurable regression to the attitudes of childhood, which we mooted as acceptable for knockabout, equally useful as the basis for an approach to slapstick?

665 The manner in which this was done being a function of the relative grotesquerie or excentricité (or other characteristic) of their styles.
666 Or, rather, anti-technique.
IV.2: THE GROTESQUE AND THE ECCENTRIC – SLAPSTICK COMEDY AS A PERFORMANCE STYLE

By the early 1910s, the cinema no longer needed to refer beyond itself, either to the funny papers or to the popular stage, to guarantee its own intelligibility: by selecting, repeating escalating and refining a system of tropes, it had provided itself with an imaginative lexicon and a syntax of its own. The primary intertexts for comedy films are no longer vaudeville sketches or cartoons – they are other films, both silly and serious. It clearly drew on models borrowed from the knockabout stage: the arousal and exploitation of an ambivalent audience attitude; the employment of a subtextual game-structure which pits the audience against the performer; coercive rhythmic devices that structured both performance and response; and a small repertoire of recurrent characters and gags. It appropriated also the two axioms of physical comedy: it must do no harm; and its “ideational mimetics” must be proportionate. But it employed all these within a formal framework of its own, conditioned by a different system of embodiment.

Our historical inquiry in Chapter 2 has at one and the same time prepared us for an inquiry into the nature of slapstick as a performance style and enabled us to solve a major historical question: Given that knockabout performance still existed during the 1910s, why was it necessary to evolve a different style with a different name? It cannot be that “slapstick” was simply an adaptation of “knockabout” to the exigencies of the early classical cinema – the term “knockabout” continued in straightforward use as a term for a kind of film just as it had for a kind of theatrical performance. But what we discovered during Chapter 2 was that the period during which knockabout was the dominant paradigm for the popular performance of comic violence was separated from the emergence of slapstick by a vast shift in the values of physical signification which had taken place in the interim – parallel symptoms of this shift were the transvaluation of the repertoire of gestures in the melodramatic lexicon, a profusion of ironic “devil-intertexts” which signified the dissolution of one pole of the scheme of values which classical movement had embodied, and the emergence from the tradition of “grotesque song and dance” of a wide range of newly sexualized dance styles, some of which were also violent.

In the course of this transition the structuring role of the “(neo-) classical body” seems to have declined, and its place to have been taken by a new physical ideal based on emerging notions of “normality.” Judging by the changes in their employment as critical concepts, the grotesque and the eccentric seem throughout this period increasingly to have been estimated as departures, not from an abstract “classical” ideal, but from a pragmatic “natural” one. In its use
by professional critics of the period, “grotesque” is restricted more and more to the burlesque context, and it seems to describe behavioral excesses that we would nowadays associate less with the demonic or the animal and more with the “abject.” Usages of “eccentric,” on the other hand, seem largely to connote a peculiar economy of effort – the sort of economy, perhaps, that was associated in the popular imagination with mechanization – but which was often farcical in that it came to nothing.

As a style, we have said that slapstick resided in a body of techniques for the construction of a character – a “clown” character – which we may now go on to describe as consisting essentially in a particular physical disposition towards the environment which manifested itself in a characteristic “attitude” which could be readily mimicked by the audience; whose mimicking was (evidently) an essential part of the reception process, and which apparently had deep psychological reach, so that its infectiousness continued to be felt long after the conclusion of the film. The energy dynamics of that “attitude” we can now hypothesize as residing in some dynamic relation between the eccentric and the grotesque – considered not as residing in excesses or defects of cathexis by comparison with the classical body, but rather by comparison with a hypothetical normal or average body of some kind. Our experience of this body’s actions takes place within a dramatic context characterized by a polarity between the extremes of burlesque (understood to coincide more or less with the abject) on the one hand, and farce on the other.

But the character that is being constructed here is, it must be confessed, a character of an odd kind – in many ways the opposite of the sort of character that is typically constructed by means of acting technique. Like the blackface, Dutch, and Hebrew characters of the nineteenth-century stage, it consists mostly in a disposition to a certain sort of movement; but it conspicuously lacks even the qualified individuality of these admitted stereotypes. Not only has the slapstick clown-character no determinate particularity, but it carries none of the marks of a personal history – or, for that matter, of a personal destiny. Their actions, moreover, typically seem to express attempts to establish an identity of some sort; but they are always frustrated in the achievement of it. Chaplin’s tramp is by no means unique in that his identity consists

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667 The image of Matt Kennedy sitting in a puddle of spilt milk, sucking it from his “ninny” and spitting it about the stage is perhaps sufficient illustration; but there are many others. C.f. Variety, Sept. 30, 1911, p. 22.
precisely in not having an identity: the same can be said of Keaton’s “Zero” character and Harold Lloyd’s “glasses” character; but it is most conspicuously true of the host of “minor” comedians who never succeeded in establishing star personae. The efforts of these characters are typically bent to the purpose of achieving a personal status that will give them a place in the world – and they are eternally failing to find it. This is perhaps because of a fundamental ambivalence which all of them share towards identity itself – their efforts are bent as strenuously towards avoiding its limitations as towards accomplishing its distinctions. Indeed, it is perhaps for this reason that the merely minimal quality of these characters is most frequently associated with the “universality” of their appeal. This is why I have mooted in Chapter 7 that what the “method” of slapstick amounts to is an anti-style: the construction of a quasi-character around the dynamic, physical relation of a body to the environment, whose tantalizing psychological incompleteness inveigles the spectator into participating sympathetically in an endless, unachievable quest for completion.

Perhaps this is why the primary physical vocabulary of these characters is that of ground tumbling. The “ideational mimetics” of slapstick performance persistently problematize the effort to locate oneself in space, consistently overturning our incorrect practical assumptions according absolute values to the relative (“prepositional”) qualities of “up,” “down,” “behind,” “before,” “above,” and “under” – presenting us with an often bafflingly incongruous series of directional innervations which carry us both toward and away from a root “position” of “rectitude.” As I have ventured to demonstrate at a comparatively basic level in Chapter 6, but has been demonstrated with much greater acuity by Noel Carroll, the cinematographic properties of the early classical cinema furnished an array of resources capable of extending the slapstick film’s capability for elaborating on these “ideational mimetics” to the limits of the medium’s capacity for representing space and for representing “rectitude” in the slapstick lexicon as the most unstable position of all. This may seem like an “eccentric” paradox, but in fact it has an inverted reason of its own: during an earthquake it is the most upright buildings which are the first to fall. The diegesis of the “bummer” school of slapstick comedy is a world in the process of coming down about one’s ears; and this diegesis represents the generic marker to which the “slapstick method” of constructing character is the most conspicuously well-adapted.

What is missing from this account of the slapstick style, however, is in fact the chief characteristic by means of which slapstick is to be distinguished from knockabout: its ability to incorporate into its comic representations some means of arousing and coping with depths of feeling in its audience. To stick momentarily with Freud’s terms, what is missing here is a sense of slapstick technique as a form of humor. The characteristic “attitude towards his environment” which is the hallmark of the slapstick comic’s style is not simply a means of producing incongruities in its “ideational mimetics.” As Freud might say, it represents a characteristically humorous attitude towards pain on the part of the slapstick protagonist – s/he is afraid of it, runs from it, deals it out indiscriminately to those who deserve it; frequently encounters it – but is virtually never seriously affected by it. This is perhaps the corollary of the primary axiom of knockabout, which slapstick shares: just as no violent intention is ever completely carried out, so no act of violence is ever conclusively suffered. Most of the time, the slapstick protagonist’s reactions to violence are so caricatured as to deprive it of its reality altogether – the fact of physical suffering is, in slapstick, stylized out of existence:

When a silent comedian got hit on the head … (t)he least he might do was to straighten up stiff as a plank and fall over backward with such skill that his whole length seemed to slap the floor at the same instant. Or he might make a cadenza of it – look vague, smile like an angel, roll up his eyes, lace his fingers, thrust his hands palms downward as far as they would go, hunch his shoulders, rise on tiptoe, prance ecstatically in narrowing circles until, with tallow knees, he sank down the vortex of his dizziness to the floor and there signified nirvana by kicking his heels twice, like a swimming frog.669

What Agee is talking about here would seem most likely, in the context of our argument, to be a transformation and a displacement of energy exactly parallel to the transformation of the destructive impulse in knockabout, and one which is as axiomatic to the slapstick performance

style as its counterpart in knockabout. Freud’s remarks on humour assist us in appreciating the similarities and differences that are at work here:

We have seen … that the release of distressing affects is the greatest obstacle to the emergence of the comic. As soon as the aimless movement does damage, or the stupidity leads to mischief, or the disappointment causes pain, the possibility of a comic effect is at an end … Now humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that interfere with it; it acts as a substitute for the generation of these affects, it puts itself in their place. The conditions for its appearance are given if there is a situation in which, according to our usual habits, we should be tempted to release a distressing affect and if motives then operate upon us which suppress that affect in statu nascendi. … The pleasure of humour, if this is so, comes about – we cannot say otherwise – at the cost of a release of affect that does not occur: it arises from an economy in the expenditure of affect.670

The creation and performance of humour is a liberal art in that it enables the development of more and more options in the habitual disposition of our affects, or feelings – for example, the economy of self-pity, or of despair, in the request of the condemned convict on his way to the block for a scarf, lest he catch cold.671 We can thus view the expansion of the province of humour as a reciprocal effect of the civilizing process: “The species of humour are extraordinarily variegated according to the nature of the emotion which is economized in favour of the humour: pity, anger, pain, tenderness, and so on. … (T)he kingdom of humour is constantly being enlarged whenever an artist or writer succeeds in submitting some hitherto

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unconquered emotions to the control of humour, in making them … into sources of humorous pleasure.”

Humor and comedy, then, for Freud, are theoretically compatible after all: the pleasure of the one consists in “an economy in ideation (cathexis),” the pleasure of the other in “an economy in expenditure upon feeling.” But the presence of the strong affects aroused by humour are potentially disruptive of the comic precisely because they cannot simply be “laughed off”: “(W)ith humour … (t)he fact that the situation is dominated by the emotion that is to be avoided, which is of an unpleasurable character, puts an end to the possibility of comparing it with the characteristic of the comic and of jokes. Humorous displacement is in fact a case of a liberated expenditure being used elsewhere – a case which has been shown to be so perilous to a comic effect.”

But in fact, Freud has already shown that in theory exceptions are possible:

Humour may, in the first place, appear merged with a joke or some other species of the comic; in that case its task is to get rid of a possibility implicit in the situation that an affect may be generated which would interfere with the pleasurable outcome. In the second place, it may stop this generating of an affect entirely or only partially; this last is actually the common case since it is easier to bring about, and it produces the various forms of ‘broken’ humour – the humour that smiles through tears. It withdraws a part of its energy from the affect and in exchange gives a tinge of humour.

We have already seen that the course of the development of slapstick comedy was marked by some unexpectedly untoward moments where what was intended as mere burlesque unexpectedly – perhaps due to some property of the apparatus – resonated deeply with a jarring effect, as in the case of the “touch of mourning” at the conclusion of “The Indestructible Mr.

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Jenks,” or in Chaplin’s pantomime of his starving children in The New Janitor. Throughout the mid-teens, the technique of slapstick increasingly alternates humorous economy of affect with sudden, direct evocations of powerful – though tactfully general – feeling, addressing anxieties of loss, harm and even death. It’s precisely because these characters are so minimally drawn that the discontents to which their adventures so humorously allude can so readily be alternately economized and indulged in. From 1913 onward, slapstick comedy increasingly develops as an anti-technique for the presentation of characters whose comic personae are specially adapted to walk a comic tightrope across a widening abyss.

The principle of economy of affect suggests the theoretical necessity of another technical requirement we noticed while listing the stylistic hallmarks of slapstick – the alternation of exaggeration and deadpan. Deadpan, in fact, fulfills two functions: a) as a requirement of the principle of proportionality in “ideational mimetics” (as in “The Bond,” where the quantity of Chaplin’s anger at the Kaiser is reflected in the size of his mallet but not in his facial expression); and b) as a way of “shifting between registers,” from the broadly histrionic to the verisimilar.

At the same time, what this line of reasoning suggests is that it was precisely the fact that the human figure is not ontologically privileged on screen as it is on stage, that made the “high art in low comedy” of slapstick possible. In the live theatre, Kracauer might argue, the personalities of the performers were too compelling, the shifting of the audience’s emotional gears too demanding, and the performer-spectator compact too constraining, to admit of the kind of “broken laughter” – the rhythmic navigation between low and high emotional registers – that it became slapstick’s peculiar power to evoke.

IV.3. BURLESQUE, FARCE, AND FARCE-BURLESQUE – SLAPSTICK COMEDY AS A GENRE

How, then, are we to read the narratives in which these quasi-characters typically become involved? Throughout the course of this dissertation we’ve had frequent occasion to take note of the fact that as a cinematic genre, slapstick comedy consistently demonstrates some highly specific affinities. First and foremost, of course, is the peculiarly intimate relationship between the slapstick comedy and the Western: indeed, among the earliest slapstick comedies to be recognized as such are Western rough-house farces that differ from their urban counterparts only in their setting. There is likewise an intimate relationship between the development of slapstick and the development of the detective genre, which focuses on the exposure of some compelling
guilt, and of which the early slapstick film frequently functions as a parody. On the distaff side, we find that slapstick comedy has a double affinity with the Griffithian melodrama: an indirect one by way of “polite comedy”676; and a direct one, by way of the sub-subgenre of the “melodramatic burlesque.”677 Most important of all, throughout this dissertation, has been the recurrent evidence of a profound relationship between the slapstick comedy and the early horror film.678

Both the Western and the mystery story foreground the role of establishing a right relationship with violence in the process of character-formation, and both involve the punishment of a deficiency or an excess. The “dude” who eventually develops a more adaptive persona that enables him to avenge himself on the Western bully is initially “punished” for his defective masculinity by a series of outrageous pranks; while the detective who exposes the guilt of the mysterious malefactor is typically spoofed by the excessive aggressiveness of his parody self, who finds that the guilt he is seeking to expose and punish either doesn’t exist at all or is his own. These indeed represent two extremes between which the slapstick hero typically vacillates.

We’re in a position to suspect, then, that the typical plot of the slapstick movie may also be based on a fantasy of character-formation, concerned with establishing a right relation to the violence of the surrounding world. But conditions in that world are typically such that the slapstick protagonist cannot solve his problem either by embracing violence (as in the Western) or by categorically rejecting it (as in the mystery). That is, in the confrontation with violence the slapstick protagonist finds himself face-to-face with an “enigma” parallel to those which confront children and which are explained by Freud through the concept of the “original fantasy.” We are confirmed in this suspicion by the parallel affinities of slapstick, which we have established independently, with two of the most notoriously “low” “body genres”: melodrama and horror.

The connection between slapstick and these genres, and the relation between the “body genres” and the “original fantasy” has already been traced and argued in detail – most succinctly

676 Which frequently turns, as melodrama does, on the suffering of a female heroine (though the suffering of the polite-comedy heroine is conspicuously less spectacular).
677 (In which the value of the heroine’s suffering is reduced to zero).
678 It is impossible not to note that the fortunes of the two film genres, from the early 1910s through the 1930s, are in many ways parallel. After about 1935 however, their trajectories diverge significantly: the horror film steadily gains in both sophistication and popularity until by the first decades of the present century it has become the dominant youth genre; and the slapstick film lapses into obsolescence by 1947.
by Linda Williams in her seminal paper, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess.” Of slapstick, Williams argues as follows:

There are, of course, other film genres which both portray and affect the sensational body—e.g., thrillers, musicals, comedies. I suggest, however, that the film genres that have had especially low cultural status—which have seemed to exist as excesses to the system of even the popular genres—are not simply those which sensationally display bodies on the screen and register effects in the bodies of spectators. Rather, what may especially mark these body genres as low is the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female. Physical clown comedy is another “body” genre concerned with all manner of gross activities and body functions—eating shoes, slipping on banana peels.

It has to be admitted here that Williams’ criteria for the ‘low’ are hardly exhaustive, and may even invite a charge of tendentiousness: the ‘low’ genres are by no means coextensive with those that exploit the bodies of women; there are other criteria for lowness (improbable simplicity of narrative, sentimental vulgarity, violent ideological partisanship, for example); and there are genres which rely on some degree of “involuntary mimicry” by the spectator which are not generally conceded to be particularly ‘low’ (such as the adventure story). Conversely, it has to be admitted (as I think Williams would willingly admit in any case) that there have to be “low” genres besides the three posited in “Gender, Genre and Excess,” and that there must therefore be room for a much less symmetrical schema than that proposed in the essay, in which each possible form of infantile “enigma” (sexual desire, sexual difference, selfhood) is “solved” by means of an “original fantasy” (seduction, castration, family romance) which is endlessly repeated in fantasies underlying the perversions (masochism, sadism, sado-masochism), each

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with a temporality of its own (“on time!”, “too soon!”, “too late!”), and each of which also informs the representational strategies of the three “low” film genres (porn, horror, the “women’s weepie”) investing each of them with their respective temporality.

The usefulness of Dr. Williams’ criteria for accommodating film studies to issues of gender is undeniably great; and I am therefore all the gladder to be able to demonstrate that it is unnecessary to renounce it in order to realize the implications of her theory for slapstick, while at the same time pointing out that it is unnecessary for the sake of symmetry to deny slapstick a place among the ‘low’ genres – even though it typically avoids visiting its characteristic effects on the bodies of women:

Nonetheless, it (i.e., “physical clown comedy”) has not been deemed gratuitously excessive, probably because the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown. Indeed, it is almost a rule that the audience’s physical reaction of laughter does not coincide with the often dead-pan reactions of the clown. 681

In fact, it is simply not true that the slapstick comedy “has not been deemed gratuitously excessive”; on the contrary, the testimony of the criticism throughout the years between 1907 and 1914, and throughout the rest of the silent film era 682 insists that slapstick comedy, like every instance of physical comedy both before and since, is so typically deemed gratuitously excessive that wishful attempts to declare it out of date, defunct, irrelevant and beneath critical notice – and therefore to pass it “unmarked” – periodically recur with rhythmic regularity. On the other hand, our detailed inquiry into the “mimetics” of physical humor enables us to respond that the audience’s physical reaction of laughter is, for reasons which are now clear to us, inversely proportional to the often dead-pan reactions of the clown. We find the slapstick comic’s performance humorous in proportion as it seems to us to manifest an economy of affect.

This insight in turn enables us to appreciate fully the perversity of the typical representational strategy of the slapstick film. Instead of aiming at a directly proportionate

682 As is to a very limited extent documented in my “Slapstick Chronology.”
spectatorial response premised on verisimilitude (within the conventions of each genre), the slapstick comedy aims at an inversely proportional spectatorial response premised on a “quasi-realism” which occasionally even violates our expectations based on naïve verisimilitude. That is, slapstick comedy constitutes a capriciously verisimilar and on occasion even anti-realistic cinema.

But it should not therefore surprise us to find in slapstick comedy a profound relationship to two of the genres covered in Dr. Williams’ essay – to melodrama on the one hand, and to horror on the other – or, perhaps, even to note a more distant relationship to the third. Indeed, this can be done on a common-sense basis, without recourse to psychoanalysis: it is enough to observe that slapstick comedy is rather about violence than about sex; in fact it is only about sex insofar as sexual intrigues are apt to conduce to comical displays of violence. On the other hand, this comparison with Dr. Williams’ depth-psychological schema promises two potential insights. The first is the suggestion that in slapstick comedy we find an “unrealistic” counterpart to the “realism” of the horror genre – which brings support to our argument from an unexpected quarter. In “Horror and Humour,” Noel Carroll traces the numerous isomorphisms between the horror and comedy film genres by comparing the generic marker of each – the monster and the clown – and finds them structurally identical. The difference, for Carroll, can be expressed in a simple equation: comedy = horror minus fear.

… we do not regard potentially horrific figures in comedy as horrific because comedy is a realm in which fear, in principle, is banished in the sense that typically in comedy serious human consideration of injury, affront, pain, and even death are bracketed in important ways. Comedy, as a genre, is stridently amoral in this regard. Within the comic frame, though injury, pain, and death are often elements in a joke, we are not supposed to dwell upon them, especially in terms of their moral or human weight or consequences. Most frequently, we do not attend to or even apprehend the mayhem in jokes or slapstick comedies as having serious physical or moral consequences. And as a result, fear and

fearsomeness are not part of the comic universe from the point of view of the audience.⁶⁸⁴

Carroll’s comparison demonstrates, indeed, how readily reconcilable are the cognitivist and the psychoanalytic perspectives on this topic:

Freud claimed that humor involves a saving or economy of emotion. Perhaps I can commandeer his slogan for my own purposes and say that the emotion in question is fear, which disappears when the comic frame causes the burden of moral concern for the life and limb of comic characters to evaporate.⁶⁸⁵

If we rest with Carroll’s view, however, we are still at a loss to understand why slapstick comedy should so insistently – and so repetitively – allude to the fears and pains of real life; not only past and present, but to come. Why does it so insistently confront the spectator with images that allude to the horrors of modern life – though always under circumstances in which the seriousness of their consequences is eluded – “just in the nick of time”?

This suggestion that slapstick comedy possesses a cliffhanging temporality of its own – one which, indeed, it shares with such other genres as the adventure story and the cartoon – proposes a second insight. By incessantly alluding to the deepest, most ancient pains and fears of real life in a context which makes all pains and fears automatically absurd, slapstick comedy enables us to overcome our innate human resistance to the task of recalling pain, without going to the opposite extreme and reliving it – otherwise the inevitable consequence of renewing associations to memories which are too highly charged with emotion. In so doing, it makes those emotional energies redundant and capable of discharge, and the bearer of them susceptible of reconciliation – if he or she so choose.

If this account is correct – and if I am also correct in positing that the specific difference of slapstick comedy (what makes it able to be humorous) is the ontological de-privileging of the human form which is characteristic of film – then slapstick represents the first instance in history when the sort of depths of anger, frustration and pain that are so manifestly reached by

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films like those of Chaplin, Keaton and Lloyd, became accessible to humorous treatment in physical comedy. It was a completely new departure, from a brand-new technological basis, without precedent in the history of performance.

This cliffhanging temporality – “just in the nick of time!” – is therefore, after all, inevitably bound up in a cathartic reading of film genres which, I suspect, Williams would maintain is the inevitable consequence of mimesis (in the sense of “involuntary mimicry”) as the fundamental paradigm for its reception. The mimetic/cathartic view on its own implies that the spectator has necessarily become involved in an equally ‘involuntary’ (hence unconscious) play of “identification” and “alienation” between the clown and his antagonist; a game which produces an oscillation of sympathy and antipathy between the two in which what I call the reatus, thrown back and forth among them like a hot potato, is something integrally related to (masculine) identity itself. There’s a suggestion here that the horror subgenre which slapstick comedy most closely resembles is the slasher film, the reception of which (according to Carol Clover) likewise turns on an oscillation of embodied subject positions between varying degrees of conscious or unconscious sympathy and antipathy for the Final Girl and the Monster. Like these, the eccentric clown of slapstick comedy and his (more or less) grotesque antagonist, seem to represent opposing players in a repetitive game which must inevitably terminate in a breakdown.

The generic underpinnings of slapstick in pre-Oedipal fantasy may therefore be regarded as residing less in their relation to a particular catastrophe than in their relation to the quality of repetition with which the fantasy revisits the primal scene – as Williams puts it:

Of course each of these genres has a history and does not simply “endlessly repeat.” The fantasies activated by these genres are repetitious, but not fixed and eternal. If traced back to origins each could probably be shown to have emerged with the formation of the bourgeois subject and the intensifying importance to this subject of specified sexualities. But the importance of repetition in each genre should not blind us to the very different temporal structure of repetition in each fantasy. It could be, in fact, that
these different temporal structures constitute the different utopian component of problem-solving in each form.\textsuperscript{686}

Similarly, the plurality of generic models on which slapstick is based might be viewed as containing in themselves different temporal structures constituting the different dystopian component of problem-solving in each of their forms. The “just-in-time!” of slapstick is conditioned by the forms of repetition characteristic of the major genres which constitute it or which it has informed: farce, burlesque, and romantic comedy. We might view each of these as related to the success or failure of the recapitulation of the fantasy.

Farce. As Alenka Zupancic argues, “Comedy’s affinity for repetition is an established fact, and repetition is among the most prominent comic techniques … As the other side of repetition as technique, there exists … repetition as constitutive of the comic genre as such.”\textsuperscript{687} Although Zupancic is working in the context of a Lacanian/Deleuzian attempt at a general theory of comedy, her approach here is highly consistent, not only with the present approach, but with more traditional literary-critical theories of comedy such as that proposed by Northrop Frye and already cited in Chapter 1. In that chapter we observed that traditional comic form possessed a ternary structure which elaborated a fantasy of a social repetition – the return of a golden age in the form of the renewal of a kingly line – which for Frye is linked to the repetitious cycle of the seasons as the “Mythos of Spring.” According to Zupancic, however, for the purposes of comedy, two types of repetition are possible – good repetitions which, like the mythos of spring, bring change and renewal, and bad ones which simply conjure up ghosts:

\ldots one could say that this is a repetition of the “trace of the event” which “resurrects” its emancipatory power in the new circumstances. Here, repetition is in the service of the new; resurrection of the dead, as Marx puts it, serves the purpose “of finding once more the spirit of revolution, not of making its ghost walk about again.” On the other side, there are also empty repetitions … repetitions as “ghosts” (and “farces”) … what is

\textsuperscript{686} Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” \textit{Film Quarterly}, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), p. 11.
involved in the issue of farce is not simply the relationship
between a first apparition (as the original) and its repetition but,
rather, the relationship between two types of repetition and the
possible originality they imply. When we are dealing, to put it
bluntly, with a “good” repetition, the old form is repeated in the
function of producing something new. This is what is lacking in
“bad repetitions” …

“Bad repetition” is the repetition of farce: it leads nowhere, but simply goes on forever. To the twenty-first century reader, this structure is perhaps the most recognizable in the episodic structure of the Road-Runner/Coyote cartoons which consist in a series of unsuccessful attempts on the part of the Coyote to kill and cook the Road Runner; in which there is no progression, and which end exactly where they began. The reader of the current thesis will recognize this pattern in the “talion” structure of many early film comedies, as repeated in the episodic structures of many comedies of the classical Hollywood era, in which a character appears up the road, goes through a sequence of ordeals, and then disappears down the road again. These films often, however, are hopefully inflected – many of them succeed by their mere absurdity in conveying the insane conviction that the same cause, repeated often enough and undertaken hopefully enough, may one day actually result in a different effect.

Burlesque. In many slapstick comedies, however, this repetition culminates not hopefully, but in disappointment and even disaster. In some the characters’ ambitions are permanently frustrated; in others their means of achieving their ends and even the environment that sustains them, are destroyed; and the net result is a setback, the net effect a meditation on the vanity of human wishes. The character of the repetitions in this case is that of entropy; a gradual winding-down of energy which ultimately deposits the hero amidst the ruin of his hopes. This entropic effect is in one sense the antithesis of farce – instead of leading forward to nowhere, it leads backwards to the abjection of the infant. This is the respect in which the nihilism of these “bummer” comedies comes the closest to that of what Robin Wood calls the “apocalyptic” horror film; but this nihilistic effect is simply the reductive logic of burlesque carried to its inevitable conclusion.

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We are thus confronted by a final difference-within-similarity between knockabout comedy and slapstick. We had occasion to observe earlier (Chapter 3), that though knockabout comedy is a style, rather than a genre, of performance, its enthusiastic reception by audiences nevertheless seemed to us to be consistently motivated by its usefulness as a means of envisioning and preparing oneself emotionally for a breakdown of some sort – personal, social, political, perhaps even spiritual – perhaps even (since as we also observed, its essential expressive modality was that of allegory) all four, each to be viewed as a metonym for the others. This breakdown, however, was one which tended to be figured as impending, rather than returning – that is to say that knockabout is about a breakdown that may happen, but which has not yet happened.

With regard to slapstick, on the other hand, we are now hypothesizing that the various kinds of slapstick film each are structured around repetitions of a breakdown that has already occurred; and this draws our attention afresh to the typical grotesquerie of the mise-en-scène in slapstick farce-burlesque. The world through which the typical slapstick short moves is far from the complete and picturesque world of the romantic features; it is rather a world in disrepair, in process of reconstruction; a world awaiting its renewal in the person of a genuine hero. In place of the hero, who should arrive but the slapstick clown -- a character who distinguishes himself rather by his inadequacy to the ideal than by his ability to embody it.

To judge by the farce-burlesques of the early 1910s, then, the mythos of slapstick is not the mythos of traditional comedy at all – it is, on the contrary (to invoke Frye’s system for a final time), the mythos of winter: irony. It is a story which takes place among little men, in the wake of the fall of the great; a midwinter’s tale, told, like its antecedents in ballet-pantomime, between Christmas and the end of Lent, during which the hero of the mythos of spring may be coming, but never actually comes. The typical slapstick comedy of the early period thus retains a binary structure which marks it in traditional terms as incomplete. The protagonist tries to achieve something and fails, and is either worse off than s/he was before; or else is doomed to repeat the same failure until the end of time.

Romantic comedy: With the resolution of the First World War, however, and the emergence of a new confidence in the political destiny of America, throughout the 1920s the slapstick feature film is progressively elaborated until it acquires something approaching the traditional comic form, but with a conspicuous difference. Throughout the late 1910s and especially in the “slapstick” features of the 1920s, farcical repetition begins to lead away from
burlesque once more. In films such as Lloyd’s *Girl Shy* or Keaton’s *Our Relations*, the comic repetition ultimately leads in the direction of what Zupancic would call “good repetition” – and in so doing tends back towards the ternary structure of the old New Comedy. This was a form of slapstick to which the Chaplin character, despite many attempts, ultimately proved intractable; and it was successful for Keaton only on occasion; but it became the stock-in-trade of Lloyd (who, after all, originally had come from a background in legitimate stage comedy).

The repetition of pre-Oedipal fantasy as a structural determinant of slapstick films of the 1920s, therefore, manifests two distinct dystopian, and only one utopian, structures, in each of which the “just-in-time!” is differently inflected: the futile “just-in-time!” of burlesque, the ironic “just-in-time!” of farce, and the triumphant “just-in-time!” of romantic comedy.
Chapter 9
Conclusion: The Laughter of the Everyday Christmas

The reception of both knockabout and slapstick comedy is repeatedly figured in the critical commentary as an experience of violent transformation which is ironically encountered as an object of horror and greeted with “roars,” “shrieks,” “shouts” and, especially, “howls.” This experience aimed at generating laughter of a distinctive kind – laughter that, in the words of Leonard Donaldson, mingles the lightness of the quotidian with the gravity of the eternal “stern realities of life”; laughter which is both “commonplace” and “impossible.” In Chapter 7 we were able to describe this laughter as that of the “Everyday Christmas” – the laughter of surrender in the face of utter frustration which paradoxically renders the bleakness of the void into a vision of plenitude. The dramatic contexts out of which this laughter arises are typically far from saccharine or sentimental; on the contrary, they are rich in an irony which is both felt and enacted within the relationships between performers and audiences. But if slapstick and knockabout laughter are thoroughgoingly ironic, they are nevertheless far from cynical: on the contrary, both imply a highly progressive confidence in the adaptability of laughter to the radical changes which are being brought about during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by industrial, social and scientific progress. Though each is conservative in its attempt to preserve favorite tropes from previous periods, both knockabout and slapstick comedy aggressively seek to adapt these figures to the evolving circumstances of performance in increasingly mass-social contexts.

As we have said before, primary among these contexts is the deepening entrenchment of what Max Weber has called the modern “military-industrial complex,” and the institutionalization of organized violence in standing police and military forces as the defining element of modern industrial society. The emergence of knockabout laughter appears in this context as an ambiguous reflection of and response to the civilizing process, analogous to sports, which it strongly resembles: whether it take the form of burlesque boxing or equestrianism, knockabout song and dance, or acrobatics and ground tumbling, knockabout comedy resides essentially in the competitive display of a physical skill – one which typically degenerates into

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mere mayhem (as sporting events themselves very frequently do). But there is a primary
difference: in the transition from sport to theatrical performance, the definitive tension of the
sporting event – its drive towards an inevitable conclusion in either victory or defeat for the
performers – is de-emphasized, and the tension between pleasure or displeasure for the audience
is re-emphasized in its place. Though the form of the contest may be retained, the structuring
drive towards the achievement of mastery is inhibited, and often explicitly renounced; the
exercise of strength and skill is repurposed instead towards the provision of spectacular pleasure.
As the examples of the burlesque boxing act, the Pete Jenkins act, and the knockabout song and
dance suggest, this strategic restructuring typically involves the insertion into the performance of
a germ of narrative: the disruption of the rules of boxing, the subversion of the authority of the
circus ringmaster and the burlesquing of the refinements of neat song and dance are all motivated
as expressions of tensions within the personalities and relationships between the performers, and
between them and the spectators.
The typical knockabout act, then, manifests most of the dynamics of the typical sporting
event as they might be unpacked in a figurational analysis:
1. The overall polarity between the opposing performers;
2. In acts structured around explicit contests, the polarity between attack and defense;
3. The polarity between co-operation and competition between the performers;
4. The polarity between co-operation and competition within each team (in the case of
larger performance teams like the American Four);
5. The polarity between the external control of performers on a variety of levels (for
example by managers, lead players, cast-mates, stage managers, masters of ceremonies,
spectators) and the flexible control which the individual player exercise on himself or
herself;
6. The polarity between affectionate identification with and hostile rivalry towards the
opponents on the part of the audience;
7. The polarity between the enjoyment of aggression by the individual performers and the
curb imposed upon such enjoyment by the act-pattern
8. The polarity between elasticity and fixity of rules. But the typical knockabout act contributes five essential tensions to this dynamic:

9. The polarity between the primary set of rules and the secondary set which complicates them;

10. The polarity between the “reality” and the artificiality of the violent representation;

11. The polarity between the physicality and the mentality of the contest;

12. The polarity between contention of each performer for the mastery of the performance, and the submission of either to the other in the process of achieving “victory” (i.e., “success” as performers); and

13. The polarity between contention of the performers and the audience for the mastery of the event, and the submission of either to the other in the process of achieving victory.

Indeed, the nineteenth-century knockabout act might almost be defined as a sporting event into which these five tensions have been introduced, and in which they supervene over the goal of achieving victory in the sport. But this difference is quite a conclusive one, since it results in the knockabout act’s producing an effect which is quite the opposite of the “catharsis” of tensions in the sporting event. While the constitutive tensions of both forms are organized around the drive for mastery, the sporting event resolves its peculiar tensions into experiences of either defeat or victory – each of which functions as a kind of nervous “catharsis” for player and spectator alike, whose interests are united by a straightforward process of empathy. The resolution of the knockabout act, however, relies on the relinquishing of the drive for mastery altogether: it is only in the renunciation of mastery over the performance that the performer “succeeds” and it is only in the surrender of specular mastery over the event (and over his own body) that the audience member is enabled to succumb to the hearty guffaws proceeding from within his own body. This entails a highly complex and inverted process of empathy in which the relative interests of spectator and performer have been wittily problematized.

It makes sense, then, to view knockabout comedy as a reflection of the civilizing process comparable to sport, and most likely associated with its emergence throughout the eighteenth century. As a performance of violent if pleasurable physical activity it is refined by the addition

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of numerous arbitrary restraints which have the double effect of reducing the violence of the event and sophisticating its effect by the addition of an intellectual or speculative dimension. We can therefore guess that one of the functions of knockabout comedy is, like that of sports, to provide an outlet for aggressive energies – that is, ultimately, to contain them. Unlike professional sports, however, which frequently erupt into genuine (expressive) violence (i.e., which prove unable to contain the energies they have aroused), theatrical performance fictionalizes the conditions under which violent energies are awakened, making them redundant and discharging them in the form of laughter. The theatrical framework is a more fragile, and therefore less effective means of containment than the sporting one: the instant the violence of the representation becomes genuine, the performance is at an end. For this reason, the restraints which the conventions of knockabout performance place on aggression are much more stringent: in addition to the “rules of the game” (of the boxing match, display of voltige, or acrobatics) knockabout technique interposes secondary sets of rules – of dance, of music, and especially of dramatic sympathy – to complicate the contest; it brackets the contest by the absolute interdiction of harm; and it further distances the violence by placing a question mark against its actuality.

But at the same time, knockabout comedy – perhaps for the first time in history – represents a turning-away from the material violence associated with the drive for mastery embodied in the conduct of sporting events. On the contrary, in knockabout comedy, material violence is insistently placed in contexts in which it must register as bizarre and inappropriate; instead of appealing to a simple sense of Hobbesian superiority, knockabout performance style subjects the violent impulse to a systematic process of comparison in which it must inevitably appear as incongruous, with a typically grotesque effect. Knockabout thus proposes a symptomatic reading as betokening a discovery in the mid-nineteenth century that material violence was no longer a necessary or inevitable part of life; on the contrary, knockabout comedy relies on the production of a sense that the violent act is absurdly gratuitous; that codes of masculinity emphasizing the capacity for violence are out of place; and that energies dedicated to anticipating, identifying and dealing with violence are suddenly redundant. Like the fox-hunting of the previous century, knockabout comedy, however “primitive” it may seem to the twenty-first century observer, represented a step forward in the civilizing process. In these regards, rather than simply reproducing contemporary advances in sporting culture, it tacitly ironized and resisted them.
For this reason, it is not difficult to see, in a period during which the mere donning of boxing gloves was derided as effeminate, why the exact description and analysis of knockabout comedy may have been so consistently elided in contemporary literary culture. Knockabout comedy represented a paradox: while on the one hand appearing to espouse the changing social construction of masculinity, it associated it with deep – and deepening – anxieties regarding the persistence in the public sphere of instincts to mastery which from the dawn of time have proved both disruptive of the social project and highly resistant to containment. This function of knockabout comedy is not one that could be achieved explicitly by means of words: it is one which could only be accomplished wordlessly by means of the language of the body. In this, knockabout furnishes an example of an alternative criterion for the “lowness” of genres of bodily performance – they give expression to convictions which are deemed unworthy of articulation in words.

At the same time, as it tacitly proposes an alternative to the integration into popular culture of the material violence of sports, knockabout comedy opens an assault on a second front directed at the symbolic violence of Victorian society. In knockabout comedy, the material violence of the stage typically concretizes more abstract forms of oppression in theatrical tropes that are linked indexically to it: for example, the threats of Bill the Biter, Mike the Killer, Pete the Pincher and Cully the Cutter against Mr. Peaceable are indexically linked to the machinations of Mr. Gammon, and represent Gammon’s aggression against Mr. Peaceable’s title to his estate – that is, to the extension of his identity in the social world. This in turn stands for a common trope in the knockabout lexicon – the attempt to deprive the innocent of house and home, often with the complicity of the social order, by means of legal chicanery. High Jack’s successful defense of Mr. Peaceable’s patrimony, on the other hand, by the American flag which is the centrepiece of his costume, quite explicitly associates the brawler’s defense of Mr. Peaceable’s patrimony with the democratic principle of equality before the law; and the battle royal in which the defense consists acts as a figuration of the struggle of propriety versus privilege. As we saw in the case of the Metamorphose act, the battering of Pete’s body astride the bucking horse is a figuration of the audience’s own ambivalence towards Pete – itself a product of Pete’s challenge for the right to occupy the performance space and to monopolize the audience’s attention; by the same token the ill will of the spectators generated by the “bad” performances of “One, Two, Three, Bounce” is figured in the act of throwing the performer bodily out of the door.
In the tropes of knockabout comedy, the right to occupy a particular space, the right to perform a distinctive role, the right to dress in a particular manner or to behave in a particular way – the right, in fact, to engage in any kind of performance that can be reproduced on a stage – repeatedly becomes contested in a manner that is clearly metonymically related to common disputes over comparable pretensions towards distinction in real life. The Ethiopian sketches thus provide a rich lexicon for the figuration of symbolic violence – usually in the form of exploitation – in bodily terms. Acts of symbolic aggression are typically figured here through material violence in three major ways: as pranks (motivated by ill will);\(^{691}\) as “accidents” resulting from the collision of competitive interests;\(^{692}\) but most often as occasions of justifiable retaliatory violence\(^{693}\) – in particular to acts of theft\(^ {694}\) or extortion.\(^ {695}\) By “bodying them forth” in farcical physical conflicts, the knockabout act arouses the tensions related to these common disputes, places them in incongruous contexts, marks them as superfluous, and allows for their renunciation and the discharge of the energies associated with them in laughter.

Seen from this perspective, knockabout comedy would appear symptomatic of a response to a second effect of the civilizing process – the extension of the “chains of interconnectedness” through society and the consequent multiplication and complexification of power-relations accompanying especially the growth of the middle class. The Ethiopian sketches in particular testify to the increasing entrenchment of these power-relations in the coercive structures of civil society, to their increasing recourse to the oppressive presences of the police and the military, and an increasing pervasiveness of ill-will in a body politic whose cohesion is largely compelled and involuntary rather than voluntary and free. In the development of knockabout comedy we can see at work the redirection of the comic spirit towards the task of containing discontents that are proliferating in proportion to the increasing regimentation of nineteenth-century society; that is, in effect, to increasing pressure on the individual to maintain, and to defend, his own distinctive position in social space against the hegemony of the group.

\(^{691}\) C.f., for example, George Griffin’s “New Year’s Calls” (187-?).

\(^{692}\) For example, as in George H. Coes’ “Our Colored Conductors” (1874), Frank Dumont’s “The Rival Barber Shops” (published 1880), George Stout’s “Rival Tenants” (1870), or George W. Griffin’s “Troublesome Servants” (published 186-?).

\(^{693}\) As, for example, in “The Coalheavers’ Revenge” (George Stout, 1868), where the concluding mêlée is precipitated by Dr. Cureall’s cheating the titular characters out of their rightful wages.

\(^{694}\) C.f., for example, Charles White’s “Malicious Trespass; or, Nine Points of the Law” (1864).

But the efficacy of knockabout comedy would not appear to stop with simple containment. As the example of the Pete Jenkins act suggests, the laughter of knockabout typically associates the renunciation of violence with an experience of community – that is, with the rudimentary experience of an essentially utopian vision in which the divisive function of violence has been turned back against itself in deference to a manifestation of a greater social unity. In this case, the function of knockabout laughter is not simply the containment of violent energies, but their reformation: the redirection of human aggressiveness towards constructive, rather than destructive, ends. But in this, knockabout laughter occupies a fundamentally ambiguous position. So far as it tends towards the containment of renegade aggression, it works in the service of the social status quo; but so far as it works towards the liberation of the social subject and the redirection of institutional aggressiveness, it functions to subvert it: it becomes, in effect, a social indetermination principle which restores choice, and therefore freedom, to the individual’s occupation of a position within the social field. The ultimate purpose of knockabout comedy is, like that of humour, liberal: it aims at the enlargement and further enfranchisement of the public sphere. As Freud observes, “(T)he kingdom of humour is constantly being enlarged whenever an artist or writer succeeds in submitting some hitherto unconquered emotions to the control of humour, in making them, by degrees … into sources of humorous pleasure.”

Ultimately, then, it functions to increase the realm of what is publicly communicable through laughter, and, by so doing, to increase the realm of freedom itself.

Knockabout comedy, then, furnishes us with an illustration of Mark Twain’s claim, cited in my introduction, that cultural ideas circulate in and through the bodies of performers, often with greater efficacy than through words:

It is almost fair and just to aver (although it is profanity) that nine-tenths of all the kindness and forbearance, and Christian charity and generosity in the hearts of the American people to-day, got there …through dramas, and tragedies, and comedies on the stage.

and through the despised novel and the Christmas story ...and NOT from the drowsy pulpit!\textsuperscript{697}

Indeed, the embodied communication of cultural understanding may, and perhaps must, precede its articulation in language, forming, in A. E. Whitehead’s phrase, the “imaginative background” out of which the literary and social heritage of a culture may emerge. This in turn enables us to understand how the “bad actor” may come to function as the barometer of good will within a society, and consequently to work, in practise, much as Nietzsche claims of the philosopher, as “the bad conscience of his time.” The body of the actor is the primary register of what may be spoken, what may only be expressed physically, and what may not be uttered at all within a given polity in any given period. But in this case, it is clear that the conditions of communicability are not constant at all times; neither has the expansion of the “kingdom of humour” steadily increased – on the contrary, its extent clearly fluctuates, growing in some respects at some times, contracting in other respects at others. The decline of nineteenth-century melodrama in the face of the development of twentieth-century American realism is a good example of the way in which the emergence of one regime may result in the loss of gains achieved under its predecessor.\textsuperscript{698} It is the frontier between the realms of what may and may not be expressed within a society that is the special province of the actor, and especially the comedian specializing in burlesque.

If knockabout comedy represents several degrees of remove from the indelicacies of the “customary mentality,” the comedy of the slapstick film represents several decisive further steps in the direction of refinement. First of all, it replaces the direct presence of the violent fact with its remove to a fictional time and place; it interposes the silver screen between the profilmic act and the spectator’s experience of it; and it substitutes one of the most jarring signifiers of the violent moment – its distinctively brutal sound – with the stylized sound effect from whence it derives its name. Furthermore, it introduces the requirement that the moment of violent spectacle should be thoroughly integrated within a more or less complex narrative, and subserve

\textsuperscript{697} The New York Clipper, Feb. 4, 1871, p. 348.

its system of values. In so doing, it makes violence the subject of almost conscious contemplation, developing it in tandem with a system of other film genres which make conspicuous use of violent representations, and which continue into twentieth-century popular culture the re-adaptation of gender roles to the adjusted conditions of contemporary life with regard to violence – especially the western, the detective film, and the horror film.

The western is concerned with necessary violence; the horror film with violence which is somehow inevitable, but nevertheless not necessary. As we saw in Chapter 5, however, slapstick and knockabout seem to be concerned primarily with troubles that are not so deep as to require abreaction, but that are associated with trivial frustrations and resentments – troubles that the sufferer experiences as unnecessary but unavoidable. This would seem to be slapstick’s primary inheritance from knockabout: it deals not with the serious violence that is best discharged through the more powerful tensions generated in the performance of sport; but with the capricious violence of everyday life. The distortions of the “ideational mimetics” of knockabout repeatedly render the tacit judgment on the suffering to which they allude: “This is stupid and unnecessary.” But in this respect, knockabout and slapstick represent a refinement of laughter which is only possible on a wide scale following the “civilizing spurt” of the seventeenth century; laughter appropriate to a sensibility that no longer accepts civil violence as an inevitable fact of life. This in turn calls for a reappraisal of the role of masculinity in such violence; and therefore also for a similar reappraisal of the role of femininity as the stakes in the game.

The technical task involved in the creation of any film genre resides in the construction of an optical perspective associated by convention with a social or political point of view from which the narrational values of the genre make sense. (For example, the Western has at its core a particular set of stylistic conventions associated with an ideological perspective from which the genocide of the indigenous population of the American continent during the late nineteenth century is an acceptable and even heroic undertaking.) This is as much as to say that the visual pleasures provided by the different varieties of film genre are all inextricably imbricated in the struggles which for Bourdieu constitute the essence of symbolic violence:

The categories of perception, the schemata of classification, that is, essentially, the words, the names which construct social reality as much as they express it, are the stake par excellence of political struggle, which is a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of
vision and division, i.e., a struggle over the legitimate exercise of what I call the “theory effect.”

By means of its ability to appropriate the theory effect, film is able also to function, like language, in the service of symbolic power.

But at the core of slapstick’s aesthetic inheritance from knockabout lies a repudiation of any perspective from which the violence of quotidian life makes sense. On the contrary, the aesthetic logic which underlies the technique of “eccentric camera work” implies the rejection of semblance and the construction of an imaginative world that signifies by virtue of its difference from the diegeses constructed in the legitimate film genres. At the same time, slapstick performance style functions likewise by creating a system of differences from performances in a verisimilar mode as well as from the conventions of movement in the real world. Because slapstick aims at the production of laughter rather than at the production or reproduction of a vision; because it functions through an embodied quasi-discourse rather than through language; and because its technique is grounded in the reproduction of difference rather than similarity, it is in a position to adopt a globally oppositional strategy and function precisely by reversing the theory effect.

In slapstick laughter, social meaning – the meaning that is inscribed on the body as the articulation of the “sense of one’s place,” meaning that is constructed largely with the complicity of language – is suddenly and radically contradicted; in its place the meaning that is latent within the body re-emerges. Uncontrollable laughter marks this reassertion of the primacy of physical meaning in the spectator’s sensory economy and the restoration of an organic balance. The meaning that is latent within the structure of the human body itself represents a common inheritance: it is the empirical ground of Kantian “intersubjectivity” and forms the organic basis of Jung’s notion of a “collective unconscious.”

**Goodwill.** It is perhaps the greatest symptom of a paradigm shift occurring at the end of the nineteenth century – but also of an increasing sense of the need for the retrenchment of good will – that the period sees a sudden radical increase in anti-theatricalism and a proliferation of complaints against “bad actors” which is ultimately mediated by the interposition of the silver screen between performers and audiences. At the same time, the evidence of the “Devil-

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intertexts” suggests that at about this time the civilizing process itself in the West may have
reached a new plateau, calling for a redrawing of the lines between the unspeakable and the
speakable. The same period seems to have brought with it a significant change of emphasis in
the way in which people experienced and understood aggression. Unlike slapstick comedy,
knockabout performance primarily represented expressive violence in terms of actual physical
assaults. But as we saw in Chapter 3, the trope of violence against actual persons’ bodies is only
a minor component of slapstick: as in many of the Ethiopian sketches, aggression is more
frequently figured symbolically through theft, while the most characteristic form of material
destruction in slapstick is “crockery-smashing”– that is, the destruction of the extensions of
people’s bodies in social space – violence against their articles of clothing (especially hats), their
personal possessions, and ultimately against their homes and their cars. In this way, slapstick
discreetly concretizes the ubiquitous symbolic violence that must otherwise remain latent and
invisible in twentieth-century life in order to defuse them. By giving concrete imaginative
realization to the conflicts which are the products of the theory effect and tacitly reversing the
divisions which underly them, slapstick comedy produces a form of laughter in which the mere
destructiveness of the spectacle becomes a paradoxical assertion of goodwill. By upsetting the
compulsive power of the theory effect, slapstick laughter enables us to reimagine our
participation in the body politic as a free and voluntary act.

As we learned in Chapter 3, slapstick comedy differs from most knockabout comedy
mainly in that the narrative impulse which is supplementary in knockabout is primary in
slapstick. A major secondary contrast resides in the fact that slapstick isn’t primarily concerned
with the display of a spectacular skill as knockabout is: it’s mostly concerned with the
fulfillment of the comic protagonist’s “project” – to get the Girl, to hold down a job, to maintain
a home, to acquire some wealth. In place of this spectacular skill is the protagonist’s
“characteristic physical attitude towards the world,” as a result of which, in one way or another,
this project always seems to end up as a kind of performance: whether it be figured as the
achievement of a (personal or social) identity, of social status or of a wish to stand in some sort
of relationship to others, the slapstick clown’s chief concern is with successfully managing his
circumstances so as to perform some kind of “rectitude.” But this aim typically involves him in
a desperate struggle for control, especially control over his own body, which regularly results in
sight gags which a) are the primary registers of the slapstick comedian’s difference as a
character; and b) which function to derail the progress of the narrative – that is, the aspect of the performance which is most readily translatable into verbal patterns.

Slapstick comedy thus adds three further key tensions to its distinctive dynamics:

14. The tension between spectacle and narrative;
15. Within the polarity of narrative, the tension between burlesque and farce;
16. Within the subpolarity of burlesque, the tension between high burlesque and low.

The diegesis of the typical slapstick film is a concrete literalization of Bourdieu’s “symbolic struggle of all against all.” Any character’s attempt to establish an independent identity is by definition a proclamation of distinction which is an offense to some other character’s sense of equality. In “The Knockout,” Fatty’s innocent wish to spend a peaceful day with Minta is an offense to the pugilistic layabouts’ dignity which provokes their retaliation; in “Fast and Furious” the prosperity of Lige’s Boss provokes his Manager to rob the store, which in turn provokes Lige’s heroics; in “Behind the Screen” Goliath’s arrogant assertion of his prerogatives provokes Charlie to pelt him gratuitously with pies. In each of these cases the materially violent retaliation plausibly concretizes a conflict provoked initially by the assertion of symbolic power arising out of a distinctive difference. But in each the damage to people’s bodies is minimized and in most cases elided altogether; what is supplied instead is damage to the characters’ dignity arising out of their attempts to occupy particular spaces within the social field and to array the rest of the *dramatis personae* around themselves according to the social differences signified in the movements of their bodies. In slapstick films, these differences represent the fault lines out of which fictive violence usually erupts. It is the characters’ attempts to assert themselves, to draw boundaries around themselves, and to establish territory – particularly as figured in the possession of women, but also in authority over environments and in the manipulation of cars – that provide the dramaturgical engines which drive their stories.

As an (anti-)technique of acting, then, slapstick performance aims at reproducing, not some kind of similarity between the spectator and the subject of the performance (the “character”), but a specific and significant difference (or system of differences) between them.\(^0\)

This concentration on the reproduction of difference (rather than similarity) most likely emerges from slapstick’s roots in burlesque, and can be of two kinds – or perhaps it is better to adopt a

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\(^0\) Of course, in order for the performance to register as difference rather than as mere otherness, an underlying similarity of some kind will inevitably be implied.
topographical metaphor and say that it can move in two directions at more or less the same time—“high burlesque,” in which “low” subject matter is treated in an inappropriately elevated style\textsuperscript{701} and “low burlesque,” in which elevated subject matter acquires homely treatment.\textsuperscript{702} It is evidently the low burlesque strain which provided the aesthetic basis for the transition from the farce-burlesques of the 1910s to the ironic romantic comedy features of the 1920s. Within the various narrative tensions enumerated above, then, slapstick comedy demonstrates a preoccupation with two further dimensions of character production:

17. The polarity between (social) difference and similarity;
18. The polarity between (social) equality and distinction;

Slapstick performance, therefore, aims at a mode of engagement which is the polar opposite of the “identification” solicited by acting techniques in verisimilar styles. Instead, it functions in a manner much more like Brechtian alienation. It antagonizes our “sense of one’s place”; it mobilizes our symbolic antipathies and triggers our competitive hostility for the purpose of turning them topsy-turvy. But it does so, not in the manner of satire, in order to discredit one point of view in order to establish another in its place, but in the manner of burlesque in order to discredit in principle all possible points of view. For this reason, the subversive work of the burlesque element in slapstick moves in two directions: from the bottom up (low burlesque); but also from the top down (high burlesque). It is therefore insufficient to view slapstick unilaterally as a “working-class” critique of the “dominant class” (i.e., the bourgeoisie).

This, at any rate, seems to be Bourdieu’s assumption regarding slapstick, since he seems entirely to overlook its exceptional function as a mode of artistic expression:

It is no accident that … there is practically no questioning of art and culture which leads to a genuine objectification of the cultural game, so strongly are the dominated classes and their spokesmen imbued with a sense of their cultural unworthiness.

In a box he elaborates:

\textsuperscript{701} The melodramatic parodies of the early teens are perhaps the best examples in the slapstick repertoire.
\textsuperscript{702} The method of the “high art in low comedy” of many shorts of the late 1910s and early 1920s, particularly those of Chaplin and Keaton.
Nothing is further from such objectification than the artistic denunciation of the art which some artists go in for, or the activities grouped under the term counter-culture. The latter merely contest one culture in the name of another, counterposing a culture dominated within the relatively autonomous field of cultural production and distribution ... to a dominant culture; in so doing they fulfill the traditional role of a cultural avant-garde which, by its very existence, helps to keep the cultural game functioning.\footnote{Pierre Bourdieu, \textit{Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste}, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 250.}

On the contrary, the function of the “high art in low comedy” of slapstick is precisely to expose as a mere game, so far as it can be exposed, the entire polarity between high and low culture and the operation of the theory effect on which it is premised. It is perhaps indeed for this very reason that the achievements of the slapstick comedians were idealized chiefly by the European avant-garde, as we observed in Chapter 5 of René Clair’s debt to the Keystone chase in \textit{Entr’acte}. But, for reasons that will appear below, slapstick’s function of exposing the culture game remains invisible so long as we insist on reading it as unilaterally, rather than multilaterally, “subversive”; and on treating the “vision” at the heart of the Everyday Christmas as the expression of a singular point of view rather than as the expression of a spirit which is fundamentally agnostic with regard to all “visions” – even utopian ones.\footnote{In token of an illustration I might offer the following reading of the concluding moment of Chaplin’s \textit{City Lights}: the Tramp has, at the cost of much suffering, bestowed the power of sight on the blind flower girl, who is now able to occupy a position of some distinction as the proprietress of a flower shop. But her attainment of conventional sightedness has in a sense blinded her; she is unable to recognize her benefactor in the tattered outcast before her. In the process of touching him, however, to pin a flower on his crumpled lapel, she suddenly realizes who he is: through the subversion of her vision by her power of touch, she becomes able to “see through” the social differences which separate them and to recover the love she had lost without prejudice to her newfound autonomy. Their closing exchange, tactfully rendered through title cards that emphasize the inadequacy of the words they contain, hints at their mutual achievement of a “vision” which transcends all visions: “You can see now?” “Yes, I can see now.” – Charles Chaplin, dir. \textit{City Lights}. Charles Chaplin, Virginia Cherrill, perf. United Artists, 1932.}

If the knockabout comedy of the late nineteenth century worked largely allegorically, within a sophisticated and multi-tiered system of meaning, to contain pressures that were felt largely between social groups, it was at least progressive. Though viewed with concern on its
emergence as a potential atavism, it embodied forward-thinking ideals of egalitarianism, democratization, *embourgeoisement*, and, within certain parameters, individual autonomy. If the world-view which it embodied, and the utopian vision that came with it, were on the verge of dissolution, knockabout comedy worked to reassure audiences that they could face whatever came with confidence and faith, so long as society retained its cohesion through group professions of goodwill and a mutual reliance on Grace. The disruption of play by violent fantasy was always temporary, avoidable, idiosyncratic. Individuals might go berserk and shake the edifice to its foundations, but the closing of the curtain on the resulting *melée* regularly reaffirmed the stability of the framework.

The earliest slapstick comedies seem intended to work much the same way, but as their peculiar stylistics become entrenched, they begin to signify in a very different manner. Rather than functioning smoothly as allegory, the slapstick trope becomes a complex and dissonant metaphor, addressing the individual rather than the group, and resonating, like the allegory, on a variety of registers at the same time, but not always in self-consistent or harmonious ways. If knockabout comedy was in essence progressive, the conservative tendency seems to dominate in slapstick – at least in its burlesque polarity: it manifests more anxiety about the future, and seems to revive key knockabout tropes to repurpose them as a means of forestalling change. As the “structuring absence” behind its physical stylistics moves from the (neo-) classical ideal to that of the “normal,” “reality” itself begins to become grotesque. If the approach towards the real taken by the romantic comedies of the 1920s is ultimately reassuring, that of the short subjects that incline more towards farce is one of critique; the burlesques one of tacit warning. Unlike its predecessor of the nineteenth century, much slapstick comedy articulates a “bad feeling” about the twentieth: it questions the direction in which civilization is headed; its piles of smashed autos and battered bodies function, symptomatically, to critique the direction of the “civilizing process” itself. With a few conspicuous exceptions, however, the comedy featuring the “eccentric” hero abandons this change of direction during the 1930s; as the nuclear anxiety of twentieth-century culture escalates, and with it society’s capacity for

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705 Chaplin’s *The Pilgrim* (1924) is perhaps not a bad example: because of the ubiquity of violence, the escaped convict, set free at the end of the film, can find refuge neither in freedom (in Mexico) nor in imprisonment (in the U.S.A.).

706 For example, Sennett’s *Lizzies of the Field* (1924).
producing superfluous (senseless) violence, the grotesque begins to re-emerge in the foreground of new comic forms as well as in other, adjacent, genres such as horror.

I. Sex and Slapstick

But there is an elephant in the room here: the problem of gender. We observed that the movement to longer, more narrative, cinematic formats was contemporaneous with a threefold shift in the popular tastes for comic performance: a secularization and trivializing of the notion of the demonic, attended by a proliferation of what I have called “devil intertexts”; a redefinition of the eccentric and the grotesque styles attending a vast diminution in the influence of the “classical body” and an increase in that of the “normal body”; and the development out of the tradition of grotesque song and dance of newer, more conspicuously sexualized dance styles, beginning with the can-can in the mid-1800s and culminating in the Salome dance, the apache dance, and the tango craze of the 1900s and early teens. These developments also attended a vast expansion of the presence of performing women in popular culture, many of whom (like the female members of the “Fighting-Couple” acts, female athletes and especially boxers like the Gordon Sisters, and women protagonists of burlesque like Rose Sydell, May Howard, and Ida Crispi) were far from averse to physically violent display.

If slapstick comedy in the classical Hollywood period is largely a boys-only club, this represents a significant change of direction: the “comics” of the 1900-1907 period as unhesitatingly involve female characters of a wide variety of types, both sympathetic and antipathetic, in violent physical outrages as their male counterparts. These female types indeed represent the culmination of several decades of enhanced female presence on variety stages: as we noted in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, female performers are almost as ubiquitous as burlesque boxers (especially on burlesque stages), knockabout and grotesque acrobats, singers and dancers, and as characters in the Ethiopian sketches as men are. We’ve seen however, through the example of Pathe’s “Poor Pussy” (1908) that outrages on female types are prominent among the objects of a growing distaste for continental forms of comedy that characterizes the

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707 “Wifey,” the “Other Woman,” the “Bad Girl,” the “Bathing Beauty,” the “Athletic Girl,” and especially the termagant types Mother-In-Law, the Suffragette, and the Old Maid.
708 They were often, of course (though not always), performed by men in drag.
period in America after 1907-1908. Before the 1909-1910 season, “rough-house” comedy is, I would argue, moving in the direction of including violence against women among the forms of unnecessary coercion that are fair game for physical comedy.

However, we observed in Chapter 2 that the development of rough-house comedy throughout this period is not steady and incremental; on the contrary, during the 1909-1911 season, to judge by the decline in both the manufacturers’ scenarios and the critics’ acknowledgements, it seems to encounter a vicissitude which we called “the resistance to rough-house,” and which asserts itself in a sharp decline in the production of comedies which either the critics or the manufacturers acknowledge as violently physical. During the same period the industry becomes highly concerned with censorship: as we saw in Chapter 2, the period from the late 1890s on was marked by a steady conviction that the standards of culture in the United States were rising and that the “threshold of repugnance” for “low” forms was descending. In vaudeville, burlesque, and live theatre, self-censorship was accepted and generally practiced and popular support for state censorship of the film industry was widespread; but the respective editorial policies of Moving Picture World (which, by and large, supported the Licensed manufacturers) and of Moving Picture News (the organ favorable to the Independents) suggest that though a censorship was tacitly supported by the members of the Trust, the chief producers of slapstick viewed its approach with alarm, and were keen to forestall it.

As the industry pulls out of this valley in 1912-1914, there is a significant change in the way in which female characters are incorporated into physical comedy films: cross-dressing films, as well as films in which male comedians portray female characters throughout, begin to undergo a sharp decline which continues throughout the rest of the period – they don’t disappear by any means, but by 1915 or so, cross-dressing has lost its position as by far the dominant trope in physical comedy films. Increasingly, female characters withdraw from the mock-battles waged by silent comedians, occupying rather the role of the stakes of their outcomes. When they are involved in mayhem, it is largely in the role of “collateral damage;” there is very little room for autonomous feminine physical aggression in classical slapstick,\(^709\) which brackets the problem of masculine violence against women altogether.

\(^709\) A conspicuous exception is perhaps the character of Bebe Blair in Frank Capra’s Long Pants (1927) with Harry Langdon; but her climactic scene, in which Bebe brutalizes her (female) rival and dies in a shoot-out with her faithless ex-husband, is played for melodrama and not for comedy.
As I noted, however, in Chapter 6, the female body comes to occupy an important structural position as the stylistics of slapstick performance develop – it is the body of the Girl which proposes to the viewer the ideal standard against which the Clown’s physicality is to be judged “eccentric.” The body of the Girl thus comes to occupy a position analogous to that of the chorines in the old ballets-pantomimes; with the difference that, whereas those had served to put the spectator in mind of the classical ideal, in slapstick, the Girl becomes the embodiment of the “normal.”

In slapstick, femaleness is also a structuring presence as regards genre, since burlesque, farce, and romantic comedy each bring with them conventional versions of a feminine ideal from which all manifest trace of threat has been removed: the (tacitly phallic) Mother-seductress of burlesque; the innocent Friend of farce; and the impossibly pure Beloved of romantic comedy. In relation to each of these the farce-burlesque hero is in a curiously pre-sexual relation – owing, it would appear, to the pre-Oedipal nature of the underlying fantasy. In spite of (perhaps indeed, we may suspect, because of) its preoccupation with violence, the slapstick farce-burlesque no less than the romantic comedy, is naïvely sentimental to the point of reducing sex to the merest vestige: what remain are various kinds of abstract feminine ideal which serve to contain female desire, rather than giving rein to its more oppositional tendencies.

Richard Schechner proposes that body comedy always consists of a dialectical relationship between three elements, none of which is entirely compatible with any combination of the other two:

In the triadic relation of laughter to violence to sex one corner of the triangle often is hidden. Slapstick connects laughter to violence, romantic comedy connects laughter to sex, sadomasochism connects violence to sex. Sometimes all three corners are visible as in Aristophanic comedy or in the antics of Hopi mudhead clowns, who are obscene, cruel, and funny all at once …

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The emergence of slapstick represents a decisive change of direction in the form this “triadic relation” will take for the next fifty years – away from the incorporation of women’s bodies into its vision of violent, comical catharsis and back towards a status quo in which women become the signifiers of the standard by which the comic is discerned. Slapstick and (to a lesser extent) knockabout are two examples of a stylistic economy in which laughter is the keynote, violence its dominant, and sex is restricted to an overtone.

II. The Uses of Physical Comedy

With these reflections we come – at last – within sight of the goal of our inquiry. We are now able to distinguish body-comedy as genus from its species of knockabout and slapstick. We can do so first, by referring to the contextual differences which inflect them: in the case of knockabout comedy i) the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century “sportization” of violent pastimes; ii) the “democratization” of the public sphere against the background of industrialization; iii) the demise of the Enlightenment Weltanschauung and its embodiment in the “(neo-) classical body;” and iv) the decline of performance forms with their roots in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and the advent of new ones foregrounding a new emphasis on physical culture, often employing new skills, like pugilism, and new equipment (trapezes, horizontal bars). In the case of slapstick, i) the arrival of technological modernity and the advent of “mass” society; ii) the changes in the cultural context epitomized in the “five discourses” of Chapter 2 as they affected increased opportunities for recreation; iii) the decline of the Victorian Weltanschauung and the replacement of the “classical” by the “normal Body” as a structuring absence in the reception of movement; and iv) the introduction of the cinema, bringing with it an ontological de-privileging of the human body as a side-effect of cinematography. We can do so second, by distinguishing different modes and objects of address: in the case of knockabout, which operates largely in an allegorical mode and tends to address itself to social groups; and in the case of slapstick, which operates in a more symbolic mode, and tends to address itself to spectators as individuals. We can do so thirdly by distinguishing different dominant tendencies towards certain goals: in the case of knockabout, a progressive tendency to reassure, and to contain; and a conservative tendency to reassure in the case of slapstick romantic comedy, but to critique in the case of slapstick farce; and to tacitly admonish, as in the case of slapstick burlesque.
This view tends to justify us in our assumption, borrowed from the epigraph of Mikhail Bakhtin’s study of Rabelais, to the effect that there is a “history of laughter” which it would be “interesting to write”; as well as in our guess that the story thus to be written would be an account of the function of laughter in various ages as part of a larger “civilizing process” – one which can be characterized in general as a dynamic process proceeding in waves and with numerous hesitations, backslidings and changes of direction – by means of which the violence of society comes increasingly under the control of governments and is institutionalized in its twin “executives” – the police and the military.

By investigating the natures of knockabout and slapstick, we had originally hoped to arrive deductively at a sense of their function, but we discovered early on that we couldn’t: our conclusions could only come as the result of a historical survey. As we have worked, therefore, we’ve kept a list of hypotheses about the functions of the several forms of physical comedy, and found (reassuringly) that many of them overlap with some widely accepted theories of media function in general; and in those respects can be approached from both ritual and communicational perspectives. We have from time to time hypothesized (or implied) that body-comedy can function:

1. *As a Means of Transmitting a Society’s Ideas about “Reality,” about Violence and about the Relationship between Them* (Communicational/Ritual) (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 9);
2. *To Draw Attention to the Amount of Superfluous Violence Generated by Society* (Communicational) (Chapters 8, 9);
3. *As a Correlative of the Civilizing Process* (i.e., providing means of adapting to its effects) (Ritual/Communicational) (Chapter 8);
4. *To Critique and/or Correct Trends in the Civilizing Process.* (Communicational) (Chapter 9);
5. *As a Means of Correcting for the Errors and Omissions of Verbal Comedy.* (Ritual/Communicational) (Chapters 1, 4);
6. *As a Means of Anticipating Cultural Deficiencies that May Lead to Violence* (Ritual/Communicational) (Chapters 2, 4);
7. *As a Means of Meditating on Violence and Pain.* (Communicational) (Chapter 5);
8. *As a Prophylactic against Pain.* (Ritual) (Chapter 5);
9. *As a Means of Recovering from Pain or from Our Anxieties about Pain.* (Ritual) (Chapter 5);
10. As an Act of Communication about Pain. (Communicational) (Chapter 5);
11. As the Embodiment of a Shared Weltanschauung (Communicational) (Chapter 7);
12. To Provide an Imaginative Vocabulary for Anticipating the Future, or for a Utopian (or Dystopian) Vision (Communicational) (Chapters 4, 6, 8);
13. As “Playful Deflation.” (Ritual) (Chapter 7);
14. As Means to Reconciliation. (Ritual) (Chapter 5);

And finally,
15. As a Means of Recovering Something that Has Been Lost (Ritual).

In his Commentary on Aristotle’s “Poetics” (1570) Ludovico Castelvetro makes one of the first of many attempts to give a taxonomy of the “pleasurable objects” whose apprehension provokes laughter. He begins with four categories, the first of which might well refer to “broken laughter” – the kind we found particularly appropriate to slapstick comedy: “We are pleased when we see, for the first time, or after an absence, persons who are dear to us, and acquire or recover things which we value highly ... The things that are dear to us are civil honors, jewels, possessions, good tidings – in short, everything that becomes ours after we have desired it long or ardently.”

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Castelvetro’s laughter theory suggests a reason why slapstick comedies of the burlesque and farcical varieties work so hard in order to situate their playful extravagances in the midst of a world so thoroughly characterized by lack, and to evoke such deep feelings of loss in the midst of their incongruous games. As Freud argues, they return us to the playful scenes of our childhood; but they do so not simply as an escape from adulthood, but with a further goal in mind, which I would argue may be: in order to retrieve something which we then possessed which we need to recover for present purposes. But what might that something be?

I would argue that what we recover, when pain is turned to pleasure and violence to laughter, must be precisely what that violence has really robbed us of in the first place; and that can be nothing but the innocence we had before we suffered it; and with it, a significant dimension of our freedom. The damage which is done when others hurt us is precisely that it makes us wish to hurt them back; it is this that traps us within the escalating cycles of aggression that comprise a good part of what we ironically think of as “civilized” life. Unlike the legitimate

instruments of social coercion, which can only threaten us with further violence, the fictive violence of stage and screen works to compensate us for the loss of our innocence and to restore to us a sense of it – as the indispensible psychological condition of our freedom. What knockabout and slapstick laughter ultimately achieve is to undo the work of the civilizing process whenever it has impinged on our freedom instead of increasing it.

It’s easy, however, to see that this will not be the function of comedy in all societies and at all times. Not all societies are democratic societies; very few societies in history so far have been premised on the practical necessity of the personal freedom and autonomy of the individual. It is also easy to see, then, that comedians’ pursuit of this function will be sometimes subversive and sometimes not, depending on the justice of the individual case. The laughter of slapstick and knockabout is of a specific, not a generic kind. Consequently, it can be mistaken; it can be misdirected; and it can be misappropriated; like both religion and politics, it can be employed to vitiate people’s freedom rather than to enhance it.

III. The Wisdom of Body Comedy

In the permutations throughout history of the “triadic relationship between laughter, violence and sex,” we find a blueprint for a dialectical account of body comedy such as we have been searching for. We can use it to support our account of why the theory of slapstick and knockabout may not obtain for other societies; and why its technique may not be valid for performers in other comic styles and at other times. In this it will help to explain a problem that has obstructed this inquiry all along. Throughout this investigation, we have been continually thwarted and frequently astonished by the regularity with which body comedy has been allowed to do its work invisibly and unacknowledged, and allowed to pass “unmarked.” We have noted how comic technique even seems to dictate connivance at the erasure of its own traces. We noted how even the nineteenth-century sporting and entertainment journals that reveled in detailed accounts of gory pugilistic battles routinely elided the parodies of those same battles that were regular features of circuses and fairs. We have noted how even the detailed dancing manuals of the minstrels omit the smallest instructions as to the performance of acrobatic, eccentric and knockabout song and dance; and how we have been forced to try to reconstruct the minstrels’ original “hokum stuff” by minute examination of the didascalia of the Ethiopian sketches. Perhaps it is understandable if audiences underrate physical comedy: we have seen
that knockabout performance technique, and the stylistic techniques of slapstick film systematically encourage them to do so. But it is strange to think that performers should too.

Pierre Bourdieu supplies us with the critical premise we need to understand this exasperating reticence; and to guess at the reason why knockabout and slapstick are so often mistaken for forms of barbarism – as cultural atavisms associated with “primitive” theatre and film respectively. If the function of slapstick and knockabout is tacitly to expose and redress the symbolic violence of civilized life, it is to betray a secret which lies at the heart of civility itself:

Culture is a stake which, like all social stakes, simultaneously presumes and demands that one take part in the game and be taken in by it; and interest in culture, without which there is no race, no competition, is produced by the very race and competition which it produces. The value of culture, the supreme fetish, is generated in the initial investment implied by the mere fact of entering the game, joining in the collective belief in the value of the game which makes the game and endlessly remakes the competition for the stakes … It is barbarism to ask what culture is for; to allow the hypothesis that culture might be devoid of intrinsic interest, and that interest in culture is not a natural property – unequally distributed, as if to separate the barbarians from the elect – but a simple social artifact, a particular form of fetishism … The struggle itself thus produces effects which tend to disguise the very existence of the struggle …

Knockabout and slapstick comedy, we have said, mutely but stubbornly adverted to what could not be spoken; they insistently directed attention to the excess (i.e., unnecessary) aggression which was generated and exploited by society. They also tacitly exposed the unnecessary (i.e., capricious) failures of political and economic systems to operate with real justice and their complicity in the universal, mutual coercion of each by everyone else – and consequently, in effect “asked what culture was for.” Just as the struggle continually disguises

its own existence, so the comic attempt to cope with its fallout consents in the denial of its own agency.

The technique of physical comedy dictates that there are indispensable preconditions for laughter which are incompatible with explicit polemics: the establishment of a light and pleasant mood, an expectation of fun, a strict avoidance of serious attitudes, a refusal to draw attention to the comic comparison, and especially the arousal of unpleasant affects. Instead, the technique of physical comedy dictates that the performer never directly engage with the violence of modern life, but rest content with quietly frustrating its ends in every possible way. Comic performance in this regard is a kind of practical wisdom: it deals with violence and injustice not with more violence and injustice, but by patiently, invisibly, undoing their work. We may surmise that it precisely for this reason, before the invention of the cinema, that it was always content, where possible, to avoid ‘reproduction’ and to pass into obscurity “unmarked.”

Postscript: A Meditation on a Bladder

According to *Moving Picture World*, an early Lubin “cumulative chase” comic (“The Tale of a Pig,” 1908), features a stereotypical Rube who catches a pig, puts it into his carpet bag, and sets out to carry it home.

While talking to a friend a balloon passes over the city. The anchor of the balloon hooks in the carpet bag and in an instant up go balloo (sic) and pig. The rube chases after the balloon incidentally falling over everything and bumping into everybody in his way. The crowd is getting larger and larger. Suddenly the balloon explodes and comes down over the excited crowd. The rube takes his pig and smilingly walks away. Length, 395 feet.  

The outlines of this story are substantially those of Pathé’s “Poor Pussy” (also 1908, and released in the U.S. about a month afterwards): they seem simply to be male and female versions – though the differing elaborations of the trope say much about the differences in the American and French *habitus* regarding “rough-house”. But the most startling and salient feature of each is its insistent reference to the “lower bodily strata” of each character by almost explicit genital symbolism: the woman in the Pathé film is punished for her narcissistic absorption with her own “pussy,” while the man wreaks havoc with the “pig” concealed in his “bag.” These genital signifiers both are involved in disruptive scenarios by their literal

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714 *Moving Picture World*, May 23, 1908, p. 463.
715 *POOR PUSSY.*—A woman is seen feeding her cat and is as attentive to it as though it were a child. When puss finishes her delightful repast the mistress prepares to take a journey. Getting kitty ready, she puts her in a basket and while she is preparing her own toilet the maid enters and takes the basket containing the cat and starts away down the street. She has not gone very far when she meets the idol of her heart, a policeman, who takes her for a stroll. They sit on a bench and she lays the basket beside here (sic) and in the height of their love making two mischievous boys steal the cat and place a rock in the basket instead. They take poor pussy and tie her to a kite and away she goes high up in the clouds. After dangling in midair for some time she finally drops in front of a restaurant,. The proprietor, who is standing outside, grabs the cat in high glee and takes her in to the chef, who soon converts poor pussy into a most delicious rabbit stew. ¶ The woman in the meantime misses the cat and follows the bad boys and the kite. Finally, tired and worn out, she drops in to the café and orders some of the rabbit which appears on the bill of fare. The proprietor goes to the kitchen and dishes it up and while there he has a quarrel with the cook, who, for revenge, comes into the dining room and tells the woman of the fate of her cat, and proves his assertions by producing the fur. The woman, wild with rage and sorrow at the loss of her pet, attacks the cook and his employer, and is soon avenged, for she breaks everything in the place, giving both men a terrible beating. 459 feet (*Moving Picture World*, June 20, 1908, p. 534).
“connection” with a form of bladder. Both pussy and pig become attached to aerial balloons – an eighteenth-century refinement of a toy deriving ultimately from the stuffed pigs’ bladder of primitive ritual.\footnote{716} Like the bladders of the rough-house comedians of the stage, these balloons produce comical chaos among the \textit{dramatis personae} below, while at the same time they sublimely sail across the sky, potent symbols of an absurd and multi-levelled conflation of the “high” and the “low.”

Of the prehistoric ceremonies which first employed this symbolism there is very little trace. By historic times all that remained of them seem to be games, like the \textit{episkyros} of the Greeks or the Roman \textit{harpastum}– one of several games which employed the first inflated ball, the \textit{follis}; from whenceforth the inflated bladder was inseparably linked with “folly.”\footnote{717} But among the Inuit Yup’ik people in western Alaska until the mid-twentieth century a festival known as \textit{Nakaciug} – the “bladder festival”\footnote{718} – was still celebrated at the winter solstice. According to Yup’ik Eskimo shamanism, the bladder is the seat of an animal’s soul:

In mid-winter Eskimos from Kodiak to Point Hope celebrated various forms of the Bladder Festival to honor those animals killed the preceding year. The bladders of all the seals killed during the year were inflated and hung up on a line across the front of the gasgiq (the men’s house, used as a community gathering place for ceremonies) or attached to spears hung horizontally in the gasgiq. The animals’ spirits were thought to reside in the inflated bladders and the villagers carried out ceremonies, performed songs and dances, and told stories to entertain and pay respect to these animal spirits … On the last day the hunters attached their bladders to their spear shafts and gathered at a hole in the ice. Ripping open the bladders, the hunters thrust the bladders below the waters. The

\footnote{716} Wikipedia (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toy_balloon) gives an illustration of a balloon made from a pig’s bladder from the Luttrell Psalter (early 14\textsuperscript{th} century), and a painting by Peter Perez Burdett of “Two Boys Blowing a Bladder by Candle-Light” (ca. 1773).


animal spirit’s return to the sea meant it would be reborn, tell other animals of the respectful treatment it had received, and willingly be killed in the future to serve the needs of the hunter.719

Eric Dunning reports that early prototypes of football using inflated animals’ bladders were played at medieval European religious festivals: at Shrovetide, Christmas, and Easter.720 According to Robert Muchembled, in these games, the ritual symbolism of the ball likewise related festive violence with the return of the sun:

… All over Europe the young men of two villages, or, in a town, those of a parish, competed with the married men in sporting contests of great brutality focused on a ball that was closely contested for hours on end over the whole of a territory. In England and France, injuries were far from rare, and there was even the occasional fatality in the course of furious mêlées in which there was only one rule: to win … The victors believed that a good harvest would follow, an interpretation which suggests an ancient fertility rite designed to ask, in the depths of winter, for the return of the sun, represented by the ball.721

The inflated bladder was the common symbol of the “culture of violence” which characterized the medieval world in both its secular and sacred aspects. The Play of Herod on the Eve of Epiphany from the Ordinary of the cathedral at Padua demonstrates how comic violence infiltrated the medieval liturgy:

During the concluding parts of Matins, Herod and his chaplain, clad in untidy tunics and carrying wooden spears, erupt into the

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choir, where Herod throws his spear into the choir and then, in a rage, reads the ninth lesson. During the reading Herod’s ministers attack the bishop and other members of the choir with an inflated bladder before attacking the lay men and women in the nave. Herod joins in these antics until the reading of the Genealogy ...

If the slapstick is the epitome of the “Crazy Machine” of the twentieth century then surely the bladder is its counterpart for the grotesque body of the centuries before. As quintessential comical weapons, both aptly emblematize the futility of violence: they “do no harm,” but are resonant, and make significant noises – the impersonal whack of the slapstick, and the hollow thud of the bladder both proclaiming the vanity of folly and the folly of vanity. To strike someone with either is both an act of performative efficacy and communication: it proclaims the receiver “it,” like the children’s game of “cooties”; it passes on an ostracism which, though it exists solely by convention, is nonetheless real, and can be painful. But the striking action confers with its shame the power of passing on the ostracism – so that it never comes to rest, but is continually transferred, like the destructive energy of the typical knockabout act.

But there are differences within this similarity. In its tendency to bounce, the bladder displays both a natural attraction for the vertical axis and a marvelous organic resiliency by which it travels between its extremes of high and low. In the Ethiopian sketches, the inflated bladder mounted on a stick is a preferred instrument for making a fool of someone or driving a “bad performer” from the stage; on the other hand, it is occasionally substituted for a person’s head, the seat of their personality. By contrast with this resiliency, however, its burst skin embodies the most trenchant pathos. In Charles White’s “The Sausage Makers” (1865), two apprentices are throwing everybody in sight into a sausage machine:

Enter POLICEMAN R. 1 E. He seizes PETE and SAM; they have a scuffle in the way of some rough and tumble business. All three are clinched, fighting, when POLICEMAN has been forced to the wing of L.2E. PETE and SAM grab the bladder headed dummy, throw it down C., and jump on the head and burst it; they then pick it up and throw it in the machine, turn the crank quick, when the skeleton of a POLICEMAN appears at the top of the sausage machine. Both get frightened, shout, and run about terrified.726

As in Yup’ik shamanism it can stand for the soul; in the graceful arc followed through the air by the trajectory of a football it can symbolize the transit of the sun and embody the sublimity of a god.

The lower abdomen, the seat of the bladder, is also the seat of human balance and agility – as we have seen, the studied isolation and hyperdevelopment of the abdominal muscles is the foundation for the classical body and the technical basis of acrobatic movement. As we saw in Chapter 6, the performance techniques of knockabout and slapstick demand a high degree of strength and flexibility in the abdominal muscles, not simply in order to perform such tricks as forward rolls, somersaults, flip-flips and frontovers, but to perform them in specific expressive rhythms. Control over the bladder and the area surrounding it is the core index of bodily control. If the bladder becomes unduly inflated, it inhibits the body’s capacity for free motion. Its inclination to evacuate itself autonomously (with humiliating consequences) is one of the primary reflexes in the fight-or-flight response.

As a trope of performance, the bladder demonstrates how in much physical comedy the usual order of signification we understand in the term “embodiment” is turned topsy-turvy: in the usual metaphor, the concept forms the tenor of which body becomes the vehicle – for example, in the figure of Britannia, it is the idea of empire that comes first and the body of a woman which expresses it. This is also the order of signification in a reading of cinematic reception such as Murray Smith’s – the image is ideated first, and the act of empathy which embodies it comes second. But in the performance of physical comedy, the feeling is what

comes first: the action of intellection which follows it is only a secondary articulation of the laughing response. For instance, in the example (in Chapter 8) of the stage hand who invests too much energy into lifting the prop dumbbell and falls, the primary meaning is physical, and is expressed in the comparison between an anticipated feeling of “up,” and an actual experience of “down.” The incongruity here is physical first, and only conceptual afterward. The same comparison is set up by the use of a 1-2-switch pattern in my example (Chapter 4, note 371) of the conclusion of the “Make ‘Em Laugh” sequence from Singin’ in the Rain: Cosmo’s third and final run takes him not “up,” but “through” the wall: and it is the incongruity between an expectation of “up” and the experience of “through” that makes us laugh; the realization that Cosmo has jumped at a flimsy flat instead of a solid wall comes afterwards.

This reversal of the order of signification in embodiment is the essence of what I have called, throughout this thesis, the “histrionic” approach. On this view, the “imaginative vocabulary” of physical comedy refers primarily to a system of core meanings which is already inscribed in our bodies, and which is articulated variously in various tropes. It is the patterns of similarity and difference, of consistency and congruity, among these felt ‘meanings’ which constitute physical performance as an act of signification – this is the reason you have in some sense to “be there” in order to “understand” – which means, in this instance, to “get the joke.” This, at any rate, seems to me to be the most likely means of accounting for cases of the re-invention and re-emergence of physical tropes, without reducing them to cases of either conscious or unconscious revival. There is no reason for assuming that metaphors like the “composite body trope” are any more than new expressions of possibilities which permanently reside in the body itself; which can re-emerge spontaneously at any time to be reworked and repurposed in new given circumstances.

We might speculate that the most essential elements of this “imaginative vocabulary” must be the physical tropes that are most widely distributed, and that appear in the widest range of metaphors: of these, for us, the prime example must be the “fall.” In the oscillation between “falling down” and “standing up” are contained most of the major metaphors that structure our experience of life’s antinomies – its absurd incongruities of exaltation and abjection, of growth and decay, of life and death. We renew this oscillation in the structures of each of our lives; we rehearse it in each day’s journey from sleeping to waking and back.

The period when “standing up” and “falling down” have been concerns for humankind has been of comparatively brief duration in the grand order of things – only about seven or eight
million years. But the turning point at which it began – when the earliest hominids made the decision to stand upright and walk on their hind legs alone – was the decisive moment in the evolution of humanity. The ages that succeeded brought with them the development of human rationality, but only as the culmination of a complete reorganization and redevelopment of the structure of the body – and especially of the spinal column and pelvic region. This redevelopment is inscribed in the structure of our bodies today: the flexible lower lumbar region, the relatively broad human sacrum, the development of the gluteus maximus into the largest muscle complex in the human body, and the development of the quadriceps into the muscles that play the primary role in forward propulsion. This development reduced the exposure of the anus but increased that of the groin, putting people’s primary sexual characteristics on permanent display. The advent of rectitude, which introduced the primacy of vertical balance to human physicality, at the same time made these characteristics the central objects of a pervasive sense of shame. Rectitude and shame became the extremes of a moral polarity for which the vertical axis has been the primary physical metaphor ever since.

The condensed bladder-symbolism of “A Tale of a Pig” and “Poor Pussy,” then, might refer to more than the vestiges of the “carnival grotesque” in early-twentieth-century popular performance. They may recapitulate, in comical form, a seven-million-year development that had come at last to a fork in its road. But for what purpose; and to what end?

Among the traditional functions of ritual are many that have to be called “magical.” Just as the Bladder Festival attempts to bring the future under control by guaranteeing a good next year’s hunting, the harvest festivals of early medieval Europe aimed at guaranteeing good planting next season. The Christmas and New Year Festivals of the old calendar revived the Old Year in the person of the ancestors of Pantaloon for the purpose of bringing in a good New Year in the form of the progenitors of Tiny Tim. These “performances” magically revived not just personal pasts, but the past of the community, and of the race. This may sound like “mere superstition” (if there can be such thing as “mere superstition”), but for Marvin Carlson, the very purpose of the semiotics of the theatre is to activate the “dynamics of cultural memory itself”:

Theatre, as a simulacrum of the cultural and historical process itself, seeking to depict the full range of human actions within their physical context, has always provided society with the most tangible records of its attempts to understand its own operations. It is the repository of cultural memory, but, like the memory of each individual, it is also subject to continual adjustments and modifications as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts.\(^{728}\)

In the nineteenth-century theatre the sign of a “good” repetition was the “walking of the ghost;” a successful revival and readjustment of the cultural inheritance of the group as expressed in the shared physical experience of its collectivity. We have said that the filmic equivalent of the ghost’s walk was an act of successful communication, the verbal marker for which was the sign, “It got across.” By the same token, the trope of the bladder suggests how the vertiginous exaltation of the first bipedal hominids may have succeeded in “getting across” not a spatial gap, but a temporal lacuna millions of years wide between them and the slapstick audiences of the early twentieth century.

But, we may repeat, to what purpose? In a larger figure, if “cultural memory” is active at all times, how do we account for the emergence, disappearance and re-emergence of the same tropes as ages pass? The answer proposes a second “magical” function of the theatrical ritual: as Richard Schechner reminds us, the memories and dreams in our cultural heritage are stirred, not only to remobilize the past, but to predict the future: they have, as it were, a “prophetic” function which can “speak “ through people’s feelings; through the articulation of their anxieties in theatrical tropes. The men and women of the nineteenth century stood (though they didn’t know it) on the brink of a technological revolution – one which boded a transformation perhaps as profound as that which took place when the first hominids stood up on their hind legs. The most ancient tropes in the physical repertoire acquired new life in a sudden profusion of new forms of physical culture. By the 1870s these had coalesced into a new form of comedy; one which rehearsed all the old tropes in new contexts and unprecedented ways. With the advent of

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film, the physically human entered into a new, virtual dimension; and in so doing it opened a new chapter in history on which humanity has only just embarked.

The substitution of the (organic) bladder by the (mechanical) slapstick, then, represents an epochal turn in physical comedy: away, perhaps, from the extension of our bodies upward, and towards their extension outward into a virtual world. The keynote of this extension must be not embodiment, but its dynamic opposite: the ex-bodiment of physical metaphors by their extension into conceptual space. Already in innumerable video games, the twenty-first century inheritors of Pete Jenkins wreak havoc in purely virtual worlds. As twenty-first century media retrace the boundaries of our identities, the core tropes of body comedy may serve as our imaginations increasingly function to keep us in feeling touch with the meaning of being-in-the-world, while extending our reach beyond its limits to affirm new dimensions of freedom in laughter.

The bladder is the appropriate totemic “ritual object” in the sense that Benjamin is thinking of in the Artwork Essay: it is a figure in which all the primary tension-balances of body-comedy converge. Viewed from this perspective it becomes the emblem of a third “magical function” of body comedy; one by means of which we can transform ourselves and each other so as to be fit to occupy the new world which is opening out before us.
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Appendices

APPENDIX 1.A. THE RECEIVED NARRATIVE: A TEST

In this Appendix, I’d like to demonstrate how I used my index of Physical Comedy Films from 1893-1914 to propose some tentative answers to my outstanding questions about the development of slapstick film comedy. The first major trope of my comparison is that of the burlesque prize fight. In both live performance and on film boxing was often associated with wrestling, so I have followed suit. My list of “pugilistic/wrestling” comedies for 1893-1914 includes 84 films. The patterns among the 84 films in this sample were remarkably illustrative of the general results of my analyses of the 6,000 films in the Index. Based on their synopses, I grouped the films into nine categories:

i) transcriptions of excerpts from pre-existing theatre, circus or ring acts;

ii) actualities and staged actualities;

iii) films which evidently narrativize pre-existing theatre, circus or ring acts;

iv) films which apparently have been devised on the basis of live-theatrical models, or which incorporate episodes apparently based on live-theatrical models;

v) films which rely on specific cinematographic properties for their effect (“medium-specific films”);

vi) films in which the burlesque boxing match appears as one of a number of episodes which are categorically structured (i.e., in which the overall structure relies on a specific cinematographic property, i.e., editing);

vii) films in which the boxing match is integrated into a dramatically structured narrative;

viii) films with patterns recurrent through the Index (tropes) in virtue of which they bear substantial resemblance to specific Ethiopian sketches; and

ix) films with recurrent patterns by which they bear substantial reference to other films, especially other pugilistic films.

x) In order to trace the continuing influence of blackface minstrelsy in general, I kept a tenth category of films in which either black characters, or white performers wearing blackface, or white characters who end up in blackface, figure.

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729 Though I kept track of a few samples of serious or melodramatic “fight” films, none of these are included here.

730 It should be recalled that this procedure can only be quasi-statistical, since neither the sample which comprises the index, nor any of the sub-samples consist of random selections.

731 Since before 1909 the average length of a film is less than twelve minutes, and live acts lasted a minimum of a quarter of an hour, there are no transcriptions of complete acts in the sample.

732 (There is, inevitably, and unfortunately, a great deal of overlap here with the previous category. When in doubt, I have included the same title in both).
My results, in chart form, for all comedies in which boxing matches figures, were as follows:

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Expressed as proportions of the total number of eighty-four titles, and bearing in mind that due to overlaps and duplication, numerous titles occur in more than one category, my overall results were as follows:

i) Transcriptions: \( \frac{15}{84} = 17\% \)
ii) (Staged) Actualities: \( \frac{9}{84} = 10\% \)
iii) Narrativized Transcriptions: \( \frac{11}{84} = 13\% \)
iv) Theatrically Influenced Inventions: \( \frac{14}{84} = 16\% \)
v) Medium-Specific Inventions: \( \frac{5}{84} = 6\% \)
vi) Categorically Structured Plots: \( \frac{11}{84} = 13\% \)
vii) Dramatically Integrated Plots: \( \frac{24}{84} = 29\% \)
viii) Specific Extra-Filmic References: \( \frac{2}{84} = 2\% \)
ix) Intra-Filmic References: \( \frac{9}{84} = 10\% \)
x) Blackface Films: \( \frac{7}{84} = 9\% \)
Unhappily, this could not be executed as a strictly statistical study for two reasons. First of all, the sample has not been produced at random; it is based on a selection of data with a pronounced bias—I have deliberately included some films and deliberately excluded others. Secondly, due to the nature of the subject matter, the categories into which the films are here arranged are not discrete: it’s perfectly possible for a film to end up in multiple categories, as several of them do.

Consequently, these results are not useful for an exact quantitative study, but they can give a rough probabilistic idea of the relative importance of the number of films in each category to the whole, within the various phases of the period.

i) I found that transcriptions of pre-existing acts dominated at first but tapered off throughout the first half of the period, and did not figure at all after 1910.

ii) Actualities and staged actualities, though they begin to figure a little bit later than the transcriptions, seem to come to prominence in 1903 as the popularity of the stage transcriptions begins to tail off. Nevertheless, by the 1904-1905 season, they too, cease to be a major presence on the chart, and no longer figure after 1908.

iii) I found a substantial number of films which set actions that could readily be recognized as acts borrowed from stage performance (roller skating, fighting-couple sparring, and other matches featuring stock stage character types) in narrative settings; these appear in 1903, and continue through 1914. Though it required some discretion, I was able by and large to distinguish these from films (in group iv) whose scenarios were apparently devised for film but which employed theatrical models.

iv) This group was the second largest in the sample, and taken together with group iii) form the largest group in the sample (25); this might be interpreted as tending to support the thesis that the group of “adaptations of theatrical performances” was most influential on the development of silent comedies and silent slapstick films. But this may be an illusion produced by the fact that the categories overlap and that several films fit in both of them: this inconvenient circumstance is a result of the fact that, after 1901-1902, recycled subject matter might as easily have come from other films as from stage (or anywhere else). The actual number of different films in groups iii) and iv) from 1900-1907 only comes to about 7.

v) On the other hand, though in the years between 1900 and 1905 medium-specific films (mostly by Méliès) are a consistent, and likely very influential, presence, they too drop out of the picture after the years in which the nickelodeon boom is beginning to get under way. During this period, the scene begins to be dominated by longer films which are structured either

vi) categorically (as successions of episodes), or

vii) in full-fledged dramatic form, with more nuanced character types, stakes borrowed from other dramatic genres (such as melodrama), and genuinely climactic story construction.

viii) I found only two films, however, that I could relate to specific theatrical intertexts: “How Murphy Paid His Rent” (Lubin, 1903) which, in the figure of the Dutch landlord having to
engage in a sparring match in order to secure the payment that is due him repeats a trope from Charles White’s “One Night in a Bar Room” (1874); and “The Professor’s Trip to the Country,” (Vitagraph, 1908) which, in its use of the trope of mistaken identity (whereby the Professor is substituted for a boxer), makes a concrete reference to John Mack’s “Weston, The Walkist” (also 1874), and, ipso facto to Cutler’s “The Dutch Prize Fighter” (1885).

More importantly, these results do indicate that the primary assumption of the received narrative – that early films simply took over a variety of genres from stage performance and then adapted them wholesale to the new medium – however plausible, is impossible to prove. The number of films which apparently place stage acts in narrative contexts is only about 7 – but the number of films which almost certainly do so is only 3 (the two which refer to Ethiopian sketches, and Pathé’s Max Linder vehicle, “Max Has the Boxing Fever” (1911)). The number of actual films in the sample that might either represent narrativizations of stage acts or reworkings of earlier films (which were themselves transcriptions of stage acts) is only about 11/84 (= 13%); a proportion which we would hesitate to claim as decisively high. On the other hand, the data that I could find to support the contending claim – that film comedy arose primarily out of medium-specific properties – is even less impressive, including only 5 out of 84 films, and none at all after 1905.

What I find most interesting about this study – and most suggestive for the relationship between theatrical and film performance – is in the shifting movement of repeated elements of performance which I have referred to as tropes. (For a more complete account of my analysis of the tropes of early film comedy, please see Appendix 2.B.) By 1910, the characters, situations, actions, conventions and gags of silent film comedy represent a stable, self-contained signifying system which refers increasingly to itself rather than to anything beyond. For example, several films in the subsample which use the trope I’ve called “The Love Triangle Squared” base the story of a comic pugilistic encounter resulting from the rivalry of two men for the hand of a woman, on expectations deriving from films in which a gallant young pugilist wins the hand of a girl (and pays off the mortgage), as in “The King of the Ring” (Selig, 1909) and “The Winning Punch” (Imp, 1910). Instead, in “The Merry Widow Takes Another Partner” (Vitagraph, 1910), “A Left Hook” (Reliance, 1911), “Friendly Neighbors” (Powers, 1913) and “The Evolution of Percival” (Vitagraph, 1914), the beloved either jilts the rivals and goes off with someone else altogether, or else rejects him because he is not a gentleman.

Some stage tropes are to be found in cinema from the start and others not until later. For example, the trope of the “Incongruous Contender,” one of the main burlesquing strategies of the trope in theatre, is likewise ubiquitous throughout the silent film period to 1914. But the trope of “going berserk,” which I found decisive for the significance of the theatrical boxing burlesque, is conspicuous by its utter absence from the film index until after 1907, when it occurs in four (or

733 It might also be the other way around – the point is that the Vitagraph film, Cutler’s sketch, and Weston’s sketch are linked in an intertextual strand by means of a common trope.

734 (Which uses roller skating to complicate the rules).

735 Particular emphasis is laid in early film on animals, and especially on women as incongruous (but surprisingly plausible) protagonists of a pugilistic encounter – this, again, takes up on a trend which was noticeable in the variety theatre context (though not, apparently, in the farces of the legitimate theatre).
possibly five) films: “Monday Morning in a Coney Island Police Court” (Biograph, 1908); “The Would-Be Champion” (Raleigh and Robert, 1909); “Order in the Court” (Reliance, 1912); “Universal Ike, Jr., in a Battle Royal” (Universal Ike, June, 1914); and “The Knockout” (Keystone, 1914).

What these patterns suggest to me is that there may have been two distinct waves of theatrical input into the development of film comedy: a first wave, from 1893 to 1903 or 1904, when early films included theatrical performances amongst the various objects of their fragmentary though beguiling reproductions. These failed, however, due to the limitations of the apparatus in its early forms, to compete commercially with their flesh-and-blood counterparts. The tables began to turn after the development of editing (and other medium-specific properties), beginning with such “chase” films as “Personal” (Biograph, 1904), “The Chicken Thief” (Biograph, 1904), “The Escaped Lunatic” (Biograph, 1904), “Maniac Chase” (Edison, 1904), and “The Counterfeiters” (Lubin, 1905). Only with the development of the rudiments of continuity editing could such defects as silence and two-dimensionality – in a word, mediation – be made into virtues. Not until after the establishment not only of a cinematic “grammar” and “vocabulary,” but of a system of intertextual relations among film-specific plot-, character- and structure-types does there come any need for a fresh importation of new theatrical personnel into the film industry. But by this time, film practice must have been so deeply entrenched that there could be no question of theatrical practice determining its form. On the contrary, performers had to learn how to adapt both their skills and their scripts for the new medium. Chaplin’s “A Night in the Show” (Essanay, 1915), for example, doesn’t even approximate the Karno sketch, “Mumming Birds,” on which it is based, either in scenario, staging, or structure: Instead, it reconstructs the sketch from the ground up in a way which is specifically filmic, constructing space through the use of reverse angles and making virtues of the limitations of silence and two-dimensionality.

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736 A production of D.W. Griffith’s which included Mack Sennett among the cast.
737 Evidently a reworking of the Biograph film.
738 Some references in the early editions of Moving Picture World suggest that producers during the 1909-1910 season were still struggling to solve the problem of audiences’ dissatisfaction with film as a potentially autonomous entertainment medium. See, for example, “The Moving Picture vs. Vaudeville,” Moving Picture World, Feb. 26, 1910, p. 288.
739 An importation which Sennett in particular promoted.
741 For example, during the singer’s performance, when some incongruous instrument would have had to be used to provide the voice, for a comic effect.
742 For instance when Chaplin’s “Swell” character strikes a match on a bald man’s head using a rough surface fixed to it on the side away from the camera.
APPENDIX 1.B. MEANINGS OF “SLAPSTICK”

As actually used by people during the period from the 1880s to the first decade of the century, the term “slapstick” had four meanings:

a) It denoted an instrument constructed as described by an anonymous columnist in The Bohemian in 1909 and reprinted in The Washington Herald as follows:

… it may be explained that a slapstick is an instrument made of two barrel staves and a flat handle. By means of stout nails or bolts the sterns of the barrel staves are fastened to the handle. This brings their forward ends into juxtaposition, but makes them miss actual contiguity by the space of from three-quarters to seven-eights (sic) of an inch. It now becomes apparent that if the completed slapstick be grasped by the handle and brought smartly down upon some solid or semisolid object, the two staves will come togethed (sic) with a sharp click. In the hands of a skilled virtuoso, this click takes on a thousand varieties and meanings…

This instrument was conspicuous among the resources of theatrical pit percussionists and, later, of the accompanists of films in fairground and nickelodeon exhibitions.

b) This tool (or the one described in item c below) is frequently cited in the newspapers of the period as in use as an instrument of mischief by hooligans at public events, in college hazings, and even at weddings, the employment of which becomes increasingly objectionable during the early 1900s, resulting increasingly in their being prohibited.

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745 C.f., for example, “Taming the Midway,” The Washington Times, June 30, 1901 (“Noisy “Ballyhoos” are now frowned upon and it is feared that the tum tum, the sleighbell, and the slapstick may be banished. . . ”); “A Severe Initiation,” Alexandria Gazette, Philadelphia Pa., June 11, 1901, p. 2; “WEIGHING IN THE CLERKS. A Form Of Hazing That Is In Vogue in the Post Office Department at Washington,” The Evening Star, Washington, D.C., April 4, 1903, p. 18; “DIED AFTER AN INITIATION. Dental Student’s Death Under Investigation” The New York Sun, Nov 9, 1903, p. 1; “VICTIM OF COLLEGE HAZERS PROBABLY CRIPPLED FOR LIFE” The St. Louis Republic, Nov. 26 1904, p. 1; “Coney’s Mardi Gras Ends in Rowdyism” The New York Times, Sept. 23, 1906, p. 6; “Woman and Her Varied Interests,” East Oregonian, July 1, 1913, p. 2: “… Mayor Fred N. Tynes and Director of Public Safety W.A. Hutchins have passed an ordinance prohibiting all the time honored slap-stick stuff that has heretofore accompanied weddings . . .”;
The issue may have been exacerbated by reports of incidents in which serious injury resulted from slapsticks being modified to fire gun cartridges.  

c) Some cartoons of the period show what seems to be a single (rather than a double) flat stick shaped like a paddle, which may represent a household instrument like a carpet-beater. In some, the implement would seem to be as much as two and a half or three feet long; in others, it’s only the size of a rolled-up newspaper.

![Fig. A1.B.1](image)

d) “Slapstick” was frequently used by sports journalists as slang for a baseball bat. The metaphor being drawn here would seem to be not with the theatrical noisemaker, but with the beating tool; it would seem to imply that the primary connotation of “slapstick,” as a substantive, was of a weapon – playful perhaps, but not a toy, and all too apt to go out of control.

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746 Several issues of papers from early June, 1908 give the obituary of James Murphy, a clown working at the New York Hippodrome, after he died “from injuries received when experimenting with a cartridge in his slapstick” (C.f., the *Willmar Tribune*, June 3, 1908, p. 2). In a particularly notorious case in 1911, a man suffered spinal injuries after a torpedo cartridge was inserted into a slapstick with which he was then struck across the back. “SUES FOR INITIATION HURT: New Jersey Man Seeks to Recover $10,000 from the Woodmen,” *The Bennington Evening Banner*, May 3, 1911, p. 4; *The New York Sun*, May 6 1912, p. 3; C.f. also “Ouch! How Dare You Spank Me – You Brute!” Screamed Mrs. Osborn at the Initiation Ceremony as She Bowed Before “The Queen” at the Lodge Altar and the Official Slapper” Hit Her a Smarting Blow with the “Slapperitis” – and She Sues for $20,000 for Her Injuries,” *The Washington Times*, 8 Jan. 1922, p. 47. The full-page article includes a picture of the “Slapperitis” (“Which is Built Like a Slapstick on One Side, But with a Blank Cartridge Inserted to Explode at the Moment the Blow Is Struck”); and *The New York Evening World*, Dec. 1921, p. 1.

747 C.f., for example the cartoon, “The Cheerful Primer” in *The New York Evening World*, May 7, 1907, p. 14. (Fig. A1.B.1) The slapstick in this instance is clearly a single flat stick.

748 C.f., for example, “PHRASEOLOGY OF BASEBALL. Some of the Queer Terms Adopted by Sporting Writers,” *The Evening Times*, Washington D.C., Sept. 23, 1896, p. 3.
APPENDIX 2.A. THE ETHIOPIAN SKETCHES OF CHARLES T. WHITE AND FRANK DUMONT

White’s and Dumont’s devotion to minstrelsy demonstrates a sense of commitment which suggests that they saw minstrel performance in a light that comes unexpectedly to those of us whom the race politics of minstrelsy make uncomfortable. White and Dumont apparently saw it as more than a mere way of making a living, or of scrambling for stardom: they apparently saw it as a vocation. White dedicated his life to editing (“arranging,” as the acting editions put it) his own and others’ works and making them available for re-presentation. He undertook the writing of a history of minstrelsy, according to T. Allston Brown, the project was frustrated by a theatre fire which consumed his archive – c.f. The New York Clipper, Jan. 4, 1890, p. 710.\footnote{According to T. Allston Brown, the project was frustrated by a theatre fire which consumed his archive – c.f. The New York Clipper, Jan. 4, 1890, p. 710.} and was entrusted by his contemporaries – T. D. Rice, for example – with the preservation of their own materials for the benefit of posterity.\footnote{Ibid.} Dumont was likewise a historian of minstrelsy and an advocate of its performance: in 1899 he published a valuable resource for both the dissemination and the study of minstrel performance, “The Witmark Amateur Minstrel Guide and Burnt Cork Encyclopedia”; and on his death in 1919 he left a major legacy in the form of the Frank Dumont Minstrelsy Scrapbook 1850-1902, available through the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.\footnote{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Dumont}

The corpus of extant plays breaks down, with some overlap, into two major groups: those written between the years of 1847 and about 1875, and those written afterwards.\footnote{The vast majority of these have been collected by Allardyce Nichol and George Freedley in English and American Drama of the Nineteenth Century and are available on micro-opaque cards through most university library systems. Several more sketches have eluded the collection and have had to be tracked down separately: for example, an amateur acting edition of one of the most popular, “Razor Jim,” is only available through the University of Chicago.} Each group is dominated by one of these two major figures: the pre-1875 group by White; the post-1875 group by Dumont. The vast majority of the first group consists either of plays by Charles T. White himself, written for performances at the theatres of which he was “stage manager” (i.e., producer) or of plays by fellow minstrels, associates of the companies he managed, including John Arnold, Dan Bryant, Dan Collyer, J. Griffin Hall, A.J. Leavitt, Leavitt and H. W. Eagan, James Maffitt, Ad. Ryman, George Stout, F.K. Wallace, Ad Weaver and John Wild. Two are early sketches written for the Theatre Comique at 514 Broadway by Edward Harrigan. There are also several Dutch sketches by John Mack, D.L. Morris, Larry Tooley and White himself, as well as a handful of Irish sketches by Sam Rickey and Master Barney. Of these, all those not written by White himself are asserted to have been “arranged” by him for publication. In addition to these, there are several groups of sketches by other notable minstrels of the period, and published independently of White’s influence: several by George H. Coes which he performed in company with his partner, Luke Schoolcraft; another larger group by George W.H. Griffin for Bryant’s Minstrels; another group by J.C. (“Fatty”) Stewart, a popular actor-manager in Philadelphia; and two by Henry L. Williams, the notorious “literary pirate,” which are asserted to have been performed by Wood’s and Bryant’s Minstrels.
White’s plays seem to fall naturally into three groups. First, there are the ante-bellum plays presented at the Melodeon (1847-1849), at White’s Varieties, 17-19 Bowery (1852-1854), at White’s Opera House, 49 Bowery (1854-1857), or at the former Chinese Rooms, which became the notorious “Melodeon Concert Hall” (1856(?)-1860(?)). A second group seems to follow a move uptown, beginning with the opening of Charley White’s Opera House (the former Washington Hall) at 598 Broadway (1860), even further uptown than the coveted American Theatre. There follows a long list of plays from what probably represent White’s glory days during the Civil War, first presented under his management at the American Theatre, 444 Broadway (1861-1865). After this period, he apparently leaves the stage for some time, to reappear as a member of Hooley’s Minstrels “after a protracted absence.” There follow a number of plays from the golden age of post-bellum minstrelsy, first performed under White’s or Josh Hart’s management of the Theatre Comique at 514 Broadway, (1869-1875), which subsequently became the scene of Harrigan and Hart’s great successes. By this time, White had achieved eminence among the minstrel men of his day, though his financial position appears to have remained precarious: in 1878 he opens a restaurant at 30 East Thirteenth Street, New York City, amid some speculation that the enterprise presaged his retirement from the profession. The restaurant seems, however, to have been an unsuccessful venture; though he publishes no further sketches throughout the 1880s, White returns to become a player in the legitimate theatre and during the 1880s ends his days as a member of Harrigan and Hart’s repertory company at Harrigan’s Theatre (on the east side of Broadway near Astor Place).

The second group, overlapping to some extent with the first, is dominated by the plays of Frank Dumont from 1872 through (publication date) 1897. These seem mostly to have been written for appearances in various cities throughout the U.S. by Duprez and Benedict’s Minstrels, but they include some written for the Theatre Comique while it was under White’s management and others written during the 1880s for various troupes, including the San Francisco Minstrels, Duprez and Benedict’s Minstrels, Carncross and Dixey’s Minstrels, Cameron’s Minstrels, Lew Dockstader’s Minstrels, and, finally for Dumont’s own minstrel company after he acquired the Eleventh Street Opera House in Philadelphia in 1895-96. Dumont’s plays are markedly wittier and more self-consciously literary in character than those in the first group: Dumont gives the impression that he is deliberately writing in an established style. In addition to the plays of Dumont are numerous others, including a group by one A. Newton Field for presentation by a company at the Opera House, Clyde Ohio, which included Field as a member – one per year from 1876 until 1880 (when there were two). All of the rest are literary productions intended primarily for publication, and for which there is no performance history: sixteen more by Henry L. Williams; one by Clinton De Witt, the publisher; five Dutch plays by the team of McDermott and Trumble; seven by one F. L. Cutler, published in Clyde, Ohio; and five more by one J. Barnes. There are also numerous single productions by various individuals throughout the period, continuing as late as 1915.

754 Though T. Allston Brown informs us that White’s early ventures as a performer were highly remunerative, White may have suffered a severe reversal of fortune in 1866 with the destruction of 444 Broadway by fire on the 15th of February, 1866. Allston Brown informs us that “(a)t the burning of 444 Broadway, he lost much valuable “stuff” that he had been collecting for a History of Minstrelsy.” C.f. The New York Clipper, Jan. 4, 1890, p. 710.
755 New York Clipper, June 29, 1878, p. 110.
FIRST GROUP

I. (First) Presented at White’s Melodeon, NYC (1846-1854)

i) Going For the Cup; or Old Mrs. Williams’ Dance (by C.W.) – 1st perf. 1847 [White, Dan Emmett, Neil Hall, Master Juba]


iii) Guide to the Stage (by C.W.) – 1st perf. 1849 [White, J. Carroll, J. Huntley]

iv) Hippotheatron; or, Burlesque Circus (by C.W.) 1st perf. 1849 [Original cast not listed; revived 1862 at American Theatre, 444 Broadway with White, Harry Leslie, Chas. Gardner, Lew Simmons, John Wild, Bob Hart, “Messrs. Leslie & Simmons” & Mast. Tommy (Ryan?)]

II. (First) Presented at White’s Varieties, 17-19 Bowery NYC (1852-1854); White’s Opera House, 49 Bowery, NYC (1854-1857); or at the former Chinese Rooms, lately the home of Buckley’s Minstrels, 539 & 541 Broadway (“west side above Spring street”), a.k.a. the notorious “Melodeon Concert Hall” (1856(?)-1860(?)); or at Charley White’s Opera House, (the former Washington Hall) 598 Broadway, NYC (1860):

i) The United States Mail (by/arr. C.W.) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1852-1854 (30 min. 16 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. Warwick, Mrs. Barnett, Rose Merrifield]

ii) The Mischievous Nigger (arr. C.W.) – White’s Serenaders (@ White’s Varieties (?)) – ca. 1852-1854 (27 pp.) [Mr. C. Hite, Mr. France, Mr. E. Wise, Mr. Pilgrim (+ 2 female members – Miss Peveril, Mrs. Merrifield)]

iii) Sam’s Courtship (by C.W.) – White’s Opera House, 1852 [Mr. James Carroll, Mr. L. Donnelly, Mr. C. White]

iv) Oh, Hush! or, The Virginny Cupids (arr. C. White) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1854-55 [Mr. C. White, Mr. E. Deaves, Mr. W. Corriston, Mr. H. Neil, Mr. J. Huntly]

v) Damon & Pythias (by C.W.) – (as perf.) White’s Opera House, Nov. 13, 1854 [Mr. J. Carroll, Mr. Chas. White, Mr. J. Neil, Mr. J. Budworth, Mr. G. Wood, Mr. Florence]

vi) Hard Times (by Daniel Emmet, arr. C.W.) – (1st perf.) White’s Opera House, Oct. 12, 1855 [Mr. Charles White, Mr. J. Carroll, Mr. J. Neil, Mr. T. Norton, Mr. D. Emmett, Mr. W. Vincent]

vii) The Mystic Spell, A Pantomime (arr. C.W.) White’s Opera House, Oct. 1855 (35 min., 15 pp.) [Mons. Lamaitre, Mr. C. White, Mr. Budworth, Mr. Vincent, Mr. Wambold, Mr. Carroll, Mr. Sexton]

viii) Jealous Husband (arr. C.W.) (perf.) White’s Opera House, April 25, 1856 [Mr. J. Carroll, Mr. L. Donnelly, Mr. Chas. White]
ix) Villikins and His Dinah (by/arr. C.W.) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1856-1860 (30 min., 16 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. Evans, Mr. Budworth, Mr. J. Carroll, Mr. W. Vincent.]

x) Old Dad’s Cabin (by/arr. C.W.) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1856-1860 (25 min., 12 pp.) [Mr. White, Mr. Carroll, Mr. Budworth, Mr. Vincent]

xi) Uncle Jeff (arr. C.W.) -- White’s Serenaders, ca. 1855-1860 (21 pp. 40 min.) [C. White, Mr. Carroll, Mr. E. Wise, Mr. J. Sivori, Mr. C. Fox, Mr. Sexton, Mr. Vincent]

xii) Mazeppa, an Equestrian Burlesque – White’s Serenaders, 1861⁷⁵⁷ (45 min., 12 pp.) [Mr. E. Wise, Mr. J. Neil, Mr. Fox, Mr. Mecker, Mr. Vincent, Mr. Carroll, Mr. C. White, Mr. Donnelly]

xiii) The Black Shoemaker (provenance?) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1861 (25 min. 9 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. Campbell, Mr. C. Fox, Mr. J. Bedworth (sic), Mr. Sexton, Mr. Vincent]

xiv) The Black Statue (arr. C.W.) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1855-1860 (30 min., 12 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. Carroll, Mr. Budworth, Mr. Wood, Mr. Sexton, Mr. Vincent]

xv) The Coopers (by/arr C.W.) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1855-1860 (30 min., 14 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. Lamaitre, Mr. Carroll, Mr. Budworth, Mr. Vincent, Mr. Sexton, Mr. Wambold]

xvi) The Hop of Fashion (arr. C.W.) -- White’s Serenaders, ca. 1855-1860 (30 min., 17 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. Fox, Mr. Neil, Mr. Donnelly, Mr. Carroll, Mr. Vincent, Mr. Wise]


xviii) The Sham Doctor (by/arr. C.W.) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1855-1860 (15 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. J. Carroll, Mr. E. Wise, Mr. C. Fox, Mr. M. Sexton, Mr. W. Vincent]

xix) The Virginny Mummy (arr. C.W.) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1855-1860 (17 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. Carroll, Mr. Wise, Mr. Sexton, Mr. Sivori, Mr. Vincent]

xx) The Wreck (arr. C.W.) – White’s Serenaders, ca. 1855-1860 (30 min. 16 pp.) [Mr. C. White, Mr. Carroll, Mr. J. Budworth, Mr. Lamaitre, Mr. Sexton, Mr. Vincent]

xxi) Thieves at the Mill (by C.W.) -- White’s Serenaders, ca. 1855-1860 (25 min. 17 pp.) [J. Carroll, C. White, C. Fox, E. Wise, M. Sexton, W. Vincent]

⁷⁵⁷ According to T. Allston Brown, “Mazeppa” was first done at 444 Broadway on May 20, 1861 (New York Clipper, Dec. 28, 1889, p. 694).
III. Other Early (i.e. antebellum) Sketches:

i) Laughing Gas (arr. C.W.) Wood’s Minstrels, 1858 [Mr. Bob Hart, Mr. Geo. Christy, Mr. Chas. White, Mr. J. Wambold, Mr. Billy Burke, Mr. M. Sullivan, Master Tommy]


iv) Jack’s the Lad (George W. H. Griffin) (Performed by Hooley, Campbell & Griffin’s Minstrels), Niblo’s Saloon, Broadway NYC (Aug. 27 1860-April 1, 1861)

IV. (First) Presented under White’s Management at the American theatre, 444 Broadway, NYC, 1861-1865 (Wartime Sketches):

v) Malicious Trespass; or, Nine Points of Law (by C.W.) (as 1st perf’d.) June 24, 1861 [Mr. C. White, Mr. Bob Hart, Mr. M. Turner]

vi) Rigging A Purchase (A.J. Levitt, arr. C.W.) (as perf.) Sept. 16, 1861 [Mr. Billy Quinn, Mr. Chas. Gardner, Mr. M. Turner]

vii) Wake Up, William Henry (arr. C.W.) (as perf.) March 24, 1864 [Bob Hart, L. Simmons, Chas. White]

viii) Young Scamp (Add Weaver, arr. C.W.) (as perf.) April 21, 1862 [Mr. Add Weaver, Master Barney, Mr. Bob Hart]

ix) Fisherman’s Luck (by C.W.) (1st perf’d.) April 21, 1862 [Bob Hart, Chas. White]

x) The Black Chemist (by C.W.) (as 1st perf’d.) June 16, 1862 [Bob Hart, Charles White, J. Pierce (?)] [Chas. White, Josh Mulligan, H. W. Eagan]


xii) The Mutton Trial (James Maffitt, arr. C.W.) (1st perf’d.) 1863 [Charles White, Nelse Seymour, Billy Burke, James Wambold]

xiii) The 100th Night of Hamlet (arr. C.W.) (perf.) April 3, 1863 [Chas, White, J. Wambold, Jas. Quinn, J.H. Whiting, Mr. J. Myers, Mr. W. Simpson, Mr. E. F. Gorman (?), Master Tommy]

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758 According to T. Allston Brown, the company was Hooley & Christy’s Minstrels – Griffin was among the personnel. They disbanded in Jan. 1860, and “Hooley, with nearly every member of the company, went on a traveling tour … “(Hooley & Campbell’s Minstrels removed here from 585 Broadway on Aug. 27 1860, and remained, presumably, until April 1, 1861, when Lloyd’s Minstrels commenced a season in the space.)
xiv) Black Ey’d William (by C.W.) (as 1st perf’d.) April 27, 1863 [Charles White, Bob Hart, T.J. Riggs, J. Wambold, Miss Howard]

xv) Siamese Twins (arr. C.W.) (perf.) May 23, 1863 [T.G. Riggs, J. Wambold, Bob Hart, EnN. Slocum, Master Tommy]

xvi) The Ghost (by C.W.) (1st perf.) Aug. 10, 1863 [Mr. Charles White, Mr. John Wild]


xviii) The Recruiting Office (by C.W.) (1st prod.) 1864 [Chas. White, Bob Hart, John Meyers, James Wambold, John Wild]

xix) Stupid Servant (by C.W.) (1st prod.) 1864 [Bob Hart, Charles White]


xxi) De Trouble Begins At Nine (provenance??) (as played) 1865 [Lew Simmons, Charley White]


xxiii) Storming the Fort (by C.W.) (1st perf.) Jan. 23, 1865 [Chas. White, John Wild, J. Wambold, W. Simpson, Dick Ralph]

xxiv) The Streets of New York (by C.W.) (1st prod.) March 13, 1865 [Charles White, John Wild, Wm Simpson, J. Whiting, Mr. Gorman, Mr. J. Myers]

xxv) A Night In A Strange Hotel (arr. C.W.) (as perf.) April 3, 1865 [Mr. Chas. White, Mr. John Wild]


V. Other Wartime (1861-1865) Sketches:


ii) Pete and the Peddlar (F.K. Wallace, arr. C.W.) (1st Perf’d) Harrison’s Minstrels, Germania Hall, Leavenworth Kansas, 1863 [Sam Harrison, Mrs. S. Harrison, F.K. Wallace]

iii) Sublime and Ridiculous (adapted by Geo. Coes) (San Francisco) (1st perf.) 1864 by the San Francisco Minstrels [Walter Bray, Billy Birch, Geo. H. Coes]
iv) The Live Injun; or, Jim Crow (Dan Bryant, arr. C.W.) (Bryant’s Minstrels, Mechanics’ Hall 472 Broadway) (1st perf.) 1865 [Dan Bryant, Nelse Seymour, T.B. Prendergast, Dave Reed, Master Tommy (Ryan)]

VI. Originally Performed at the Theatre Comique, Broadway, New York in 1867-1869:


VII. (First) Performed under White’s or Josh Hart’s Management of the Theatre Comique, 514 Broadway, NYC (1869 – 1875):


ii) The Last of the Mohicans (J.C. Stewart) (as 1st prod.) May 1870 [J.C. Stewart, George H. Coes, Josh Hart, Miss M. Hardy]

iii) Hemmed In (J.C. Stewart) (as 1st prod.) July, 1870 [Josh Hart, Add Ryman, J.C. Stewart, Miss M. Hardy]

iv) The Two Black Roses (J.C. Stewart) (1st prod.) September 1870 [J.C. Stewart, George H. Coes, Lew Rattler, Billy Hart, Miss M. Hardy]

v) Eh? What Is It? (J.C. Stewart) (as 1st prod.) April 1871 [J.C. Stewart, Lew Rattler, George H. Coes, J. Myers, Miss M. Hardy]


viii) Gripsack (John Arnold, arr. C.W.) (perf.) Sept. 1873 [Mr. Frank Kerns, John Wild, D. Kelly]

ix) The Fellow That Looks Like Me (Oliver Deurevarge, arr. C.W.) (perf.) Oct. 20, 1873 [Mr. J.S. Crossen, Miss M. Gorenflo, Mr. Frank Kerns]


xii) The Editor’s Troubles (Edward Harrigan) (1st perf’d.) Dec. 8 1873 [Mr. J.F. Crossen, E. Harrigan, John Wild, Charles White, D. Kelly, R. Hall]

xiii) The Two Awfuls (Frank Dumont, arr. C.W.) (1st perf’d.) Sept. 28 1874 [Mr. John Wild, Frank Kerns, James Crossen, M. Williams, James Bradley]

xiv) Pompey’s Patients/Lunatic Asylum (arr. C.W.) (as perf’d.) Oct. 6, 1873 [Mr. John Hart, John Wild, J.A. Graver, J.F. Crossen, R. Hall, J. Bradley]
xvi) African Box/Magician’s Troubles (arr. C.W.) (1st perf’d.) Dec. 29, 1873 [John Wild, Chas. White, Jas. Crossen, J.A. Graver, Master Martin]
xvii) Three Strings to One Bow (arr. C.W.) (perf.) Jan. 5, 1874 [Frank Kerns, John Wild, James Bradley, Robert Hall, Miss Kitty Tilson (sic)]
xviii) The Stage Struck Couple (by C.W.) (as perf.) Feb. 23, 1874 [Mr. John Wild, Mr. D.A. Kelly, Miss M. Gorenflo]
xix) The Bogus Injun (arr. C.W.) (perf.) March 2, 1874 [Mr. E. Harrigan, J.F. Crossen, John Wild, G.L. Stout, Chas. White, Mrs. John Wild, Miss Kitty Tilston (sic)]
xxi) The Lunatic (Frank Dumont, arr. C.W.) (1st perf’d.) Nov. 23, 1874 [Mr. John Wild, Mr. Chas. White, Mr. J.F. Crossen]
xxii) The Rehearsal; or, Barry’s Old Man (Sam Rickey and Master Barney, arr. C.W.) (as perf’d.) Feb. 1875 [Mr. Sam Rickey, Master Barney, Wm. Barry, Geo. Stout]
xxiii) Port Wine vs. Jealousy (William Carter, arr. C.W.) (1st perf’d.) Feb. 8, 1875 [Mr. John Wild, William Carter, Miss Amy Roberts]
xxiv) The Porter’s Troubles (Edward Harrigan) (as 1st perf’d.) April 12, 1875 [Mr. Ed. Harrigan, Mr. Tony Hart, John Wild, James Bradley, J.A. Graver, J.F. Crossen, G. Stout]

VIII. Other early Postbellum Sketches (First) Performed at other venues, 1866-1875:

i) Glycerine Oil (John Arnold, arr. C.W.) (perf.) San Francisco, 1866 [Revived, Hooley’s Opera House, Brooklyn, Oct. 26, 1872, with Mr. G. Griffin, John Mulligan, Archy Hughes]

ii) Obeying Orders (John Arnold, arr. C.W.) (1st perf’d.) La Belle Union, San Francisco, May 21, 1866 [Mr. Fred Spring, Ned Buckley, Henry Spriggs] [Revived, Theatre Comique, NYC, 1870 with Geo. H. Coes, Lew Ratler, J. Myers]

iii) The German Emigrant; or Love and Sourkrout (by Larry Tooley, arr. C.W.) (First Performed at ) Metropolitan Theatre, Washington, D.C., June 1867 [Mr. Larry Tooley, Geo. L. Hall, Miss Hannah Birch, Mr. Dick Parker]


v) The Dutchman’s Ghost (by Larry Tooley, arr. C.W.) Pittsburgh Theatre, November, 1867 [Larry Tooley, Eugene Gorman, Chas. Benedict, Mr. Ready, Miss Clara Burton]

vii) High Jack, the Heeler (A.J. Leavitt, arr. C.W.) (1st perf'd.) Howard Athenaeum, Boston, Jan. 1868 [Mr. J. Taylor, Mr. Pierson, Mr. A.J. Leavitt, Mr. Collins, Mr. Guion]

viii) The Black Ole Bull (A.J. Leavitt & H.W. Eagan) (??) (Trimble’s) Varieties Theatre, Pittsburgh, Pa. (no date given, but the cast are all in the DP for The Blackest Tragedy of All (May, 1868) [Johnny Wild, H.W. Eagan, H. Williams, J. Edwards]

ix) Blinks and Jinks (A.J. Leavitt & H.W. Eagan) (as perf'd.) Tony Pastor’s Opera House, NYC (no date given, but the DP are the same as for Black Ole Bull/Blackest Tragedy of All) [H.W. Eagan, Johnny Wild, Billy Sheppard, A.J. Leavitt]


xi) The Coalheavers’ Revenge (Geo. L. Stout) (as 1st perf’d.) Howard Athenaeum, Boston, Dec. 21, 1868 [G.L. Stout, H. Bloodgood, A.J. Leavitt, J. Gaynor, J. Buckley]

xii) Bruised and Cured (A.J. Leavitt, arr. C.W.) (as perf'd.) Howard Athenaeum, Boston, Sept. 13, 1869 [Mr. A.J. Leavitt, Mr. J. Buckley]


xiv) In and Out (A.J. Leavitt, arr. C.W.) (1st perf'd.) Howard Athenaeum, Boston, Nov. 8, 1869 [A.J. Leavitt, J. Buckley]


xviii) A Remittance From Home (A.J. Leavitt, arr. C.W.) (1st perf'd.) Howard Athenaeum, Boston, Jan. 21 1871 [Mr. H. Bloodgood, Mr. A.J. Leavitt, Mr. William Danvers, J. Buckley, D. Harkins, T. Lane]

xix) Bad Whiskey (Sam Rickey and Master Barney, arr. C.W.) (as 1st perf'd.) Globe Theatre, NYC, Oct. 1871 [Sam Rickey, Master Barney, Lew Cole]

xx) The Three Chiefs (J.C. Stewart) (as perf'd.) Athenaeum, 585 Broadway, NYC, 1872 [Mr. Prescott, Mr. Howard, J.C. Stewart, Geo. Coes, L. Schoolcraft, Joe Lang]

xxii) The Elopement (J.C. Stewart) (perf.) (Fox’s) American Theatre, Philadelphia Pa., 1874 [Mr. J.C. Stewart, Mr. W. Danvers, Mr. Jno. E. Ince, Mr. Chas. Youle, Mr. (sic) Leo Gordon]

xxiii) The Wrong Woman in the Right Place (J.C. Stewart) (1st Perfd.) Fox’s American Theatre, Philadelphia Pa., 1874 [Mr. J.C. Stewart, Mr. J.E. Ince, Mr. Fulton Myers, Miss (sic) Leo Gordon]

xxiv) One Night In A Bar Room (arr. C.W.) (as perf’d.) Tony Pastor’s Opera House, 201 Bowery NYC, Feb. 16th, 1874 [Mr. Larry Tooley, C.F. Seabert, F. Girard, Wm. Barry, Mr. J. Lang]


xxvi) Cremation (A.J. Leavitt, arr. C.W.) (1st perf’d.) Olympic Theatre NYC, Oct. 12, 1874. [Mr. J. O’Neil, Joe Lang, E. Blitz, G.W. Reed, W. J. McAndrews, A.J. Talbot, A.J. Leavitt, Mr. – Cronin, Miss Emma Miles]

xxvii) Ambition (Sam Rickey and Master Barney, arr. C.W.) (as 1st perf’d.) Metropolitan Theatre, 588 Broadway, NYC Dec. 1874 [Mr. Sam Rickey, Geo. Coes, Luke Schoolcraft, Jas. Bradley, Mr. H. Schwicardy, John Wild, Master Barney]


xxix) A Slippery Day (Robert Hart, arr. C.W.) (as 1st perf’d.) Alhambra, San Francisco, Feb. 14, 1875 [Mr. Bob Hart, John Robinson, Chas. Reed, Sam Rickey, Little Mac, Mr. B. Sherwood, J. Smith]

xxx) 3, A.M. (J.C. Stewart) (as 1st perf’d.) Park Theatre, Brooklyn, Oct. 19, 1875 [J.C. Stewart, W. H. Lansing, Mr. Coffer (?), Miss Kate Elberti (?)]

xxxi) The Coming Man (A.J. Leavitt, arr. C.W.) (as 1st perf’d.) Howard Athenaeum, Boston, Oct. 18 1875 [Harry Bloodgood, A.J. Leavitt, Harry Hunter, N. D. Jones]

xxii) Scenes in Front of A Clothing Store (Frank Dumont) (as perf’d.) [Carncross Minstrels] Philadelphia Pa./San Francisco Minstrels at their Opera House, NYC (1877-1880)

xxxiii) Hunk’s Wedding Day (G.W. H. Griffin) (published 1874 – no cast or venue information)

xxxiv) The Black Crook Burlesque (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin and Christy’s Minstrels], (5th Avenue Opera House, New York)\(^{759}\)

xxxv) New Year’s Calls (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin and Christy’s Minstrels]; (at the 5th Avenue Opera House, New York)

\(^{759}\) In From Traveling Show to Vaudeville: Theatrical Spectacle in America, 1830-1910 (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), Robert M. Lewis reminds us that Griffin and Christy’s Minstrels were installed at the 5th Avenue Opera House, 2 and 4 West Twenty-fourth Street, N.Y., by February 1867, when they produced their burlesque of The Black Crook.
xxxvi) No Cure, No Pay (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin and Christy’s Minstrels: Griffin, Geo. Christy, Geo. Percival, Fred Abbott]

xxxvii) Nobody’s Son (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin and Christy’s Minstrels: G.W.H. Griffin, Geo. Christy]

xxxviii) Othello, A Burlesque (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin and Christy’s Minstrels – Griffin, Geo. Christy, Otto Burbank, C. Henry, Geo. Percival]

xxxix) Quarrelsome Servants (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin, Geo. Christy, W. W. Hodgkin]

xl) Rooms to Let Without Board (G.W.H. Griffin and Tony Denier) (5th Avenue Opera House) [Griffin and Christy’s Minstrels];

xli) Rose Dale (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin & Christy’s Minstrels]; (5th Avenue Opera House)


xliii) The Ticket-Taker (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin and Christy’s Minstrels: Frank Leslie, Geo. Christy, G.W.H. Griffin]

xliv) William Tell (G.W.H. Griffin) (5th Avenue Opera House) [Griffin & Christy’s Minstrels (No cast names)];

xlv) Sports on a Lark (G.W.H. Griffin) [Griffin & Christy’s Minstrels: Griffin, Geo. Christy, J.T. Boyce]

xlvi) Troublesome Servant (G.W.H. Griffin) (5th Avenue Opera House, New York) [Griffin & Christy’s Minstrels; G.W.H. Griffin; Geo. Christy];

xlvii) Les Miserables (G.W.H. Griffin) [Bryant’s Minstrels: Dan Bryant, Neil Bryant, G.W.H. Griffin]

xlviii) An Unhappy Pair (G.W.H. Griffin) [Bryant’s Minstrels: Dan Bryant, Neil Bryant, G.W.H. Griffin]

xlix) The Hypochondriac (G.W.H. Griffin) (Published 186-? – No cast or venue information)

IX. Other later postbellum sketches (first) performed at other venues, 1876 and afterwards:


ii) The Crowded Hotel; or, the Tricky Nig (J. Griffin Hall) Patterson Hall, Baltimore, March 15, 1882 [Mr. Harry C. Alförd, Chas. H. Bockmiller, Aquilla A. Baldwin, J. Griffin Hall, Harry McAuley]
SECOND GROUP

X. Frank Dumont Sketches:


ii) Who’s The Actor (As Originally Performed by) Duprez & Benedict’s Minstrels, at the Academy of Music, Cleveland, Ohio, June 14th, 1873. [Jas. T. Gulick, Geo. H. Edwards, Lew Benedict, Frank Dumont]

iii) My Wife’s Visitors (Originally Produced by ) Duprez & Benedict’s Minstrels at Wood’s Theatre, Cincinnati, Ohio, Aug. 15, 1873. [Mr. J. T. Gulick, Sam Price, Geo. H. Edwards, Frank Dumont, Frank Kent, Joseph Fox, W. Ward]


viii) The Lunatic: (First Performed at) Theatre Comique, 514 Broadway, NYC Nov. 23rd, 1874. [John Wild, Chas. White, J.F. Crossen]

ix) The Two Awfuls (pub. 1876) (first performed at) The Theatre Comique, N.Y., Sept. 28th, 1874. [Mr. John Wild, Frank Kerns, James Crossen, M. Williams, James Bradley]


xii) Gambrinus, King of Lager Beer: Duprez and Benedict’s Minstrels, Jackson, Mich., July 21st, 1875. [Jas. T. Gulick, Lew Benedict, Frank Dumont, Ben Standway, Master H. Lino, Mr. L. Maloy, Mr. L. Dunn, Mr. D.H. Smith, Mr. Frank Kent]


One Night in a Medical College (Originally Performed) by Duprez and Benedict’s Minstrels, Gloucester, Mass., April 5th, 1876. [J.T. Gulick, Geo. H. Edwards, Sam Price, D.H. Smith, Frank Dumont, Master Lino, Messrs. Fox and Ward, Mr. Frank Kent]

Helen’s Funny Babies: Carncross & Dixey’s Minstrels & Duprez & Benedict’s Minstrels, both Sept. 17, 1877 (also San Francisco & Bryant’s Minstrels)

[Revived by Bryant’s Minstrels and San Francisco Minstrels, both Oct. 15, 1877 (cast lists supplied in script)]

Absent Minded (pub. 1881) ca. 1877-1880 Birch & Backus’ San Francisco Minstrels , at their Opera House, NYC [(no cast list supplied) Charley Backus and Billy Birch; other member at the time were Bob Hart, H.W. Frillman, George Powers, Chas. Gibbons]

Election Day (pub. 1880) ca. 1877-1880 San Francisco Minstrels, at their Opera House, 29th St. & Broadway, NYC [A.C. Moreland, Frank Dumont, Jas. Johnson, Geo. Thatcher, Billy Birch, Geo. Powers, F. M. Ricardo.]

The Rival Barber Shops (pub. 1880) ca. 1877-1880 (Originally Produced by) the San Francisco Minstrels, at their Opera House, NYC [A.C. Moreland, Billy Birch, Chas. Backus, Geo. Powers, Jas. Johnson, Frank Dumont, John Martin]

Whose Baby Is It (pub. 1880) ca. 1877-1880 (Originally Produced by) the San Francisco Minstrels, at their Opera House, 29th St. and Broadway, NYC [Billy Birch, Charley Backus, F.M. Ricardo]


A Desperate Situation (pub. 1881) Birch &Backus’ San Francisco Minstrels, at their Opera House, NYC [(no cast list in script)]

The Wonderful Telephone (As Performed by) The San Francisco Minstrels , at their Opera House, NYC, Nov. 10, 1881[(no cast list in script)]


The Sulphur Bath (pub. 1884) San Francisco Minstrels [E.C. Moreland, Chas. Backus, Bob Slavin]
xxvi) Dodging the Police; or, Enforcing the Sunday Law (Frank Dumont) (perfd.)
Carncross’ Opera House, Philadelphia Pa., Aug. 29, 1887 [Hughy Dougherty, Press Eldridge, John E. Murphy, L.C. Mettler, J.J. Raffael, Carl Rudolph, Charles Turner, Fred Dart, Melville Jansen]

xxvii) Other People’s Troubles (Before 1890\textsuperscript{760} -- pub. 1897) Produced by Cameron’s Minstrels [Frank Dumont, Lew Dockstader, James Quinn, Fred Dart]

xxviii) The Serenade Party; or, The Miser’s Troubles (Before 1890\textsuperscript{4} -- pub. 1897) Cameron’s Minstrels (?) [E.N. Slocum, Hughey Dougherty, Will Walling, Fred Dart]


xxxii) Too Little Vagrants, or, Beware of Tramps (pub. 1897) [As performed by Dumont’s Minstrels (Harry C. Shunck, Merrill Rudolph, Hugh Dougherty, Dave Foy)]

xxiii) The Lady Barber (Copyright, 1897) (Cameron’s/Dumont’s/Dockstader’s Minstrels???)[Bob Slavin, Frank Dumont, Ed. French, George Powers]

XI. SKETCHES WITH OBSCURE OR MINOR PERFORMANCE HISTORIES

**Henry L. Williams:**

i) Challenge Dance (As performed by) Bryant’s Minstrels [Dan Bryant, J. Newcombe, Henry Leslie]

ii) Dar’s De Money (Originally performed at) Wood’s Minstrels’ Hall, New York, U.S. ???? [Frank Brower, Eph. Horn]

**A. Newton Field:**

i) The Pop-Corn Man (As performed at) the Opera House, Clude, Ohio, January 23d., 1876 [A. Newton Field, C.P. Robinson, Frank West, F. Lawrence]

ii) School (As performed by the) Opera House Company, at Clyde Ohio, April 1th., 1878 [A Newton Field, W. Leroy Stark, Frank Lawrence, W.H. Arlin, Will Reynolds]

\textsuperscript{760} Fred Dart (“the well known female impersonator of Carncross’ Minstrels”) died on March 30, 1890 in Philadelphia.
iii) Those Awful Boys; An Ethiopian Farce in One Act (As Performed by) the Opera House Co., Clyde O., Oct. 10th, 1879 [W.L. Stark, A. Newton Field, W.H. Arlin, F. West, Frank Rogers]

iv) Other People’s Children (Copyright, 1880)[(no cast list in script)]

v) Twain’s Dodging (as performed at the) Opera House, Clyde, Ohio, 1880 [A. Newton Field, W.H. Arlin, Jerry Hunt, Frank West]

F. L. Cutler:

i) The Musical Darkey (Copyright 1884) First performed at Modale, Iowa [E.M. Marvin, F. L. Cutler]

XII. LITERARY EXERCISES WITH NO APPARENT PERFORMANCE HISTORY:

Henry L. Williams:

i) De Black Magician; or, the Wonderful Beaver (Copyright 1876)[(no cast list in script)]

ii) Go and Get Tight! (Originally Published in the New York Clipper, April 15, 1876, p. 20) [(no cast list in script)]

iii) Bobolino The Black Bandit; A Musical Farce (Copyright, 1880)[(no cast list in script)]

iv) The Darkey Sleepwalker; or, Ill-Treated Ill Somnambulo (Copyright, 1880)[(no cast list in script)]

v) The Moko Marionettes (Copyright, 1880)[(no cast list in script)]

vi) The Black Forrest (Copyright 1882)[(no cast list in script)]

vii) The Lime-Kiln Club in an Uproar (Copyright 1891)[(no cast list in script)]

viii) Dancing Attendance (Copyright 1894)[(no cast list in script)]

ix) Wax Works at Play (Copyright 1894)[(no cast list in script)]

x) Love and Lockjaw (Copyright 1895)[(no cast list in script)]

xi) The Black Chap From Whitechapel (No Info)[(no cast list in script)]

xii) Deaf – In A Horn (No info)[(no cast list in script)]

xiii) Dem Good Ole Times; or, Sixteen Thousand Years Ago (No info)[(no cast list in script)]

xiv) Sport With A Sportsman (No Info)[(no cast list in script)]

xv) The Three Blacksmiths (No Info)[(no cast list in script)]

Hall, J. Griffin:

i) The Bogus Talking Machine; or, The Puzzled Dutchman (Copyright 1876)[(no cast list in script)]
De Witt, Clinton:
i) Gentlemen Coons’ Parade (Copyright 1879) [(no cast list in script)]
ii) Johnny, You’ve Been A Bad Boy (Copyright 1879) [(no cast list in script)]

McDermott and Trumble:
i) All in Der Family; A Dutch Sketch (Copyright 1875) [(no cast list in script)]
ii) A Dark Noight’s Business (Copyright 1875) [(no cast list in script)]
iii) Dot Mad Tog; A Dutch Sketch (Copyright 1875) [(no cast list in script)]
iv) Dot Madrimonial Adverdisement; A Dutch Sketch (Copyright 1875) [(no cast list in script)]
v) Dot Quied Lotgings; A Dutch Sketch (Copyright, 1875) [(no cast list in script)]

Cutler, F. L.:
i) That Boy Sam (1878) [(no cast list in script)]
ii) Hans, the Dutch J.P. (Copyright 1878) [(no cast list in script)]
iii) Old Pompey (Copyright 1883) [(no cast list in script)]
iv) The Dutch Prize Fighter (Copyright 1886) [(no cast list in script)]
v) Cuff’s Luck (Copyright 1888) [(no cast list in script)]
vi) Kitty and Patsy; or, The Same Thing Over Again (Copyright 1897) [(no cast list in script)]

J. Barnes:
i) The Nigger Night School (Copyright, 1896) [(no cast list in script)]
ii) Doctor Snowball (Copyright, 1897) [(no cast list in script)]
iii) The Darkey Breach of Promise Case (Copyright 1898) [(no cast list in script)]
iv) The Darkey Phrenologist (No info) [(no cast list in script)]
v) The Black Barber; or The Humours of Pompey Suds’ Shaving Saloon (No Info) [(no cast list in script)]

Sheddan, W.B.:
i) The Joke on Squinim (The Black Statue, Revised) (Copyright, 1883) [(no cast list in script)]

Wenlandt, Oliver,
i) The Nigger Boarding-House: A Screaming Farce in One Act and One Scene for Six Male Burnt-Cork Characters (Copyright, 1898) [(no cast list in script)]
Russell, C. Wolcott
i) The Water Melon Cure, Knock-about Farce in one Act (Copyright, 1912) [(no cast list in script)]

Tees, Levin C.,
i) A Red-Hot Massage: An Ethiopian Farce in One Scene (Published 1915) [(no cast list in script)]
APPENDIX 2.B. THE TROVES OF EARLY SILENT FILM COMEDY

By “tropes” I mean simply any element which I find repeated within a performance, or from one performance to another. As a result of the way in which, during the first twenty years of the film industry, producers regularly recycled materials from other media as well as each other’s stories, the corpus of silent film comedies is a dense reticulation of intertextual references, or tropes, like these. After 1900 and before 1910, filmic occurrences of these repetitions might as easily refer to the farces of the legitimate theatre, to variety theatre, to contemporary literature or to comic strips as to other films on the one hand, or, on the other, to “real life.” After 1910, however, I found that films which relied heavily on familiar materials, and which referred outside themselves, as it were, tended to refer rather to other films than to theatrical or literary originals. In particular, after 1909, as means of engaging audiences in complex, serious narratives develop, film comedies seem increasingly to refer to them, rather than to theatrical farces or variety-theatre routines. I found that these tropes fell into 6 categories: A) Character-tropes or -types; B) Settings; C) Object-tropes; D) Action-tropes or -types; E) gag-tropes; and F) structural tropes. I’ll try to summarize my results here as concisely as possible, pausing only to point out occasions where my results departed significantly from my expectations.  

A. Character-tropes or –types:

Not surprisingly, the most frequently recurring character type by far is the Cop; it is also the most highly ambiguous, as well as the most variable in terms of function. The Cop is not invariably a figure of fun in these films, and his authority is not invariably “subverted”; often, indeed, it is the very source of the comedy’s satisfactory resolution. The Cop (and this is as true of the other major Character-tropes) seems to be protagonist, antagonist, tritagonist (in any form from ally of the protagonist to accomplice of the villain), or bystander with equal frequency.

The next most popular Character-tropes are all marginal masculine figures (some with female counterparts) representing an incompletely socialized masculinity. The most popular is the Bad Boy (in a variety of sub-types including the Dilatory Messenger Boy, the Mischievous Office Boy, the Newspaper Boy, the Butcher’s Boy, the Grocery Boy, and so on. Throughout the late 1890s and early 1900s the Bad Boy, it seems, can be interchanged with a Bad Little Girl, but the occasions on which this happens are comparatively rare (I found 9 films between 1893 and 1896 that used a Bad Little Girl to do work that might as easily have been accomplished by a Bad Boy. Bad Boys and Girls are sometimes substituted by Mischievous Young Men or Accident-Prone Young Women. The Bad Boy, however, declines in popularity after about 1908, while the next most popular figure – the Hobo, or Tramp –increases in popularity during the same period. The next most frequently recurring figure is that of the Rube, or Farmer – but here it occasionally requires discretion to distinguish between occasions when a Farmer constitutes a Rube figure.

761 N.B.: I base my observations here on mere frequency of occurrence, that is, on a naïve tally of the number of films in which tropes occur. I have not paused to consider what function a trope plays, or its relative importance within a particular story; or even the relative quantity of screen time it occupies.
and occasions when he doesn’t. Like the Bad Boy, the Rube also has a female counterpart, frequently named Mandy, who occurs much less often than the male, and usually in his company. Another type, like the Hobo, who initially seems to occur in a supplementary capacity but acquires eminence after 1910 is the Burglar, who appears with increasing frequency after 1899, and eventually becomes the character most frequently used in the structural role of the *deus ex machina*. As the paradigmatic criminal figure, the Burglar is often figured as a Thief, a Purse-snatcher, and sometimes as a Confidence Trickster or Sharper. Some minor variants of these inadequately socialized males are The Old Roué; the Dude, or Dandy; the Escaped Convict and the Escaped Lunatic; the Inebriate; and the Masher. These are as ubiquitous as the others, and some – like the Escaped Convict and the Inebriate – become major tropes by the 1920s. Indeed, a cultural history of the period 1900-1920 could very well be based on the fluctuating frequencies of these figures alone.

Another whole group of figures is based on the bourgeois family unit. The most popular characters are the Young Lover (M) and the Young Lover (F) or the Beloved, which recur throughout the period almost as frequently as the Bad Boy. They have negative counterparts in the Jealous Lover (M) and the Jealous Lover (F) which, however, do not recur with anything like the same frequency. I found it impossible to restrict the parental characters to two categories because the evidence of the synopses makes it clear that they stand for different aspects of parental archetypes at different times; and the same is true of the spousal characters. Consequently, for the former, I found a group of tropes including the Beloved’s Father, the Beloved’s Mother, Papa, Mama (where the protagonist is a Bad Boy or Bad Little Girl), Auntie, the Eccentric Uncle or the dreaded Mother-in-Law. For the latter I found a particularly rich system of tropes including the Fiancé, the Fiancée, Mr. Newlywed, Mrs. Newlywed, Hubby, Wifey, the Lady of the House, Mr. Henpeck, Mrs. Henpeck, the Unfaithful Husband, the Unfaithful Wife, the Jealous Husband, the Jealous Wife, the Other Woman, the Other Man, the Old Lady/Grandma, and the Old Man/Grandpa. This group put together is vastly larger than any other group or single trope, including the Cop.

It becomes even larger when associated with the wide variety of servant types that are typically members of the bourgeois household including the Maid/Housemaid; the Cook (sometimes male, but usually female and named Bridget); the Butler; the Valet; the Washer-Woman/Scrub-Woman; the Gardener, and, very rarely, the Watchman. The domestic farces which are particularly popular from 1903-1906 are usually based on conflicts between this group of figures and the previous one.

Another large group of figures form what might be called the Workplace Group. The most common of these are the Office figures and include the Boss; the Boss’s Wife; the Office Clerk/Bookkeeper (typically but not invariably M), the Office Typewriter/Stenographer

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762 This suggests an underlying relationship between the Rube figure and the Darkey figure of blackface minstrelsy – black females are typically also named Mandy.

763 Obviously I’m here treating Auntie and the Eccentric (and usually rich) Uncle as displaced Mother- and Father-tropes.

764 There is a fascinating – and quite large – group of films in which the Fiancé is late for his wedding and gets later the harder he strives to arrive on time. This group of films bears a striking resemblance to certain forms of recurrent anxiety-dream.
(typically but not invariably F), and the Office Boy, who is typically a Bad Boy of the inattentive type. The second largest group of Workplace figures are the Farm types who are typically rural variants on the Bourgeois Family types: the Farmer (who is typically, but not always, a Rube), the Farmer’s Wife, the Farmer’s Daughter, and sometime the Farmer’s Son; the Hired Man; and the Milkmaid or Dairy Maid. A third group is constituted by the Urban Entrepreneurs: a quite large array of would-be bourgeois tradesmen – the Hotelier; the Restaurateur; the Saloon Keeper; the Butcher; the Baker; the Grocer; the Haberdasher/Miller (often a Jew); the Pawnbroker (virtually always a Jew), and the Landlord. Amongst these is an interesting group of comical/untrustworthy types who are supposed to perform services that call for the physical performance of functions requiring a great degree of trust – the Untrustworthy Doctor, the Untrustworthy Dentist, and the Untrustworthy Barber (one or two films feature Untrustworthy Manicurists as well).  

A fourth group of Workplace types is represented by various sorts of urban proletarian: first of all the ethnic types with their typical trade associations – the Dutchman (usually a shopkeeper, especially a butcher), the Irishman (usually a laborer; typically a hod-carrier), the Irishwoman (typically a cook or a washer-woman); the Scotchman, the Chinaman (usually the proprietor of a laundry), the Jew (usually a merchant), and the Italian. There is a long list of urban proletarians typed according to their occupation – the Bill-poster, the Bricklayer, the Postman, etc. The most sympathetic of these are the stooges of the entrepreneurial types: the Waiter, the Furniture Mover, the Bill-Collector and the Rent-Collector.

A fifth group is a wide array of female types typified according to their accessibility to masculine desire – this category shows a particular tendency to overlap with others. On the one hand, you have the Pretty Girl; the Bathing Beauty; the Office Typewriter; the Nursemaid; the Actress; the Vamp; and the Burlesque Queen (in ascending order of dangerousness). On the other hand you have the Fat Girl; the Old Maid; the Mother-in-Law; the Female Prohibitionist (a.k.a. Carrie Nation); and the Suffragette (in ascending order of resemblance to the Castrating Female archetype).

I’ll skip over a miscellaneous lot of pugilists, army types, artistic and intellectual riff-raff and particularly two very interesting and surprisingly frequent tropes – the Professor and the Photographer -- and make final reference to two marginal groups that occur ubiquitously but without particular frequency throughout the period: Physically Extreme types (especially Fat

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765 The services of each of these requires the explicit performance of a high degree of trust by their customers – the dentist’s patient and the barber’s client place their bodies prone in front of the initiate and present what amount to the most vulnerable parts of their bodies for inspection.

766 These are not unique to Sennett – they are active as early as 1898, and often behave much like Lorelei, or Wagner’s Rheinmaidens: c.f. “The Dude’s Experience with a Girl on a Tandem” (American Mutoscope Co., ca. Aug. 1898); “The Fat Man and the Treacherous Springboard” (AMB, ca. Sept. 1898); “He Caught More Than He Was Fishing For” (American Mutoscope, ca. Sept. 1898); “How Farmer Jones Made a Hit At Pleasure Bay” (American Mutoscope Co., ca. Sept. 1898); “A Poor Landing” (American Mutoscope, ca. Sept. 1898); “Queer Fish That Swim In the Sea” (American Mutoscope Co., ca. Sept. 1898); “The Tramp’s Last Bite” (American Mutoscope Co., ca. Sept. 1898); “The Tribulations of an Amateur Photographer” (AMB ca. Sept. 1900); “What the Bathing Girls Did to the Kodak Fiend” (AMB, ca. Sept. 1900); “Hooligan and the Summer Girls” (Edison, July 1901); “Hooligan takes His Annual Bath” (Edison, July 1901); “The Interrupted Bathers” (Edison, ca. Oct. 1902), “Captured” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Escaped” (Lubin, Jan. 1903).
People); and the Blackface characters (both male and female, and ranging from children to aged characters). I was surprised to find that characters in these two groups shared many of the same characteristics (lack of industry, insatiable appetites) and typically functioned analogously to each other (e.g., as objects of a pursuit, etc.). The Blackface characters bear little if any relationship to the protagonists of the majority of the Ethiopian sketches. They are creatures entirely of convention -- scarcely ever sympathetic, and with few interests other than chicken-stealing and watermelon-gorging. Between them the two types represent the limits of the depth to which the other characters may fall if they fail to succeed in facing their challenges. They therefore perform a thankless but structurally critical function – they embody what is at stake in the ordeals which the main characters must undergo.

But the most common character trope of all is a sort of Wild Card trope – one which trumps all distinctions, social, class, race and even gender – that of the Doppelganger. Comedies in which the Doppelganger is the operative character trope occur quite soon after 1903, but proliferate after 1909, and their use becomes a distinguishing characteristic of silent film comedy which continues to dominate until the very end of the period. At any time, any character in this set may find him- or herself to be functionally interchangeable with some other character in this set, and prone to a sudden dramatic reversal of position: Mr. Henpeck may be mistaken for the Burglar and hauled off to jail; the Tramp may suddenly find himself the King of the Cannibal Islands; a Waiter may find himself the favored candidate for the hand of the Beloved, an heiress. But in this shifting and radically unstable social topography, any reversal of expectation is possible -- even the Fat Man may ultimately win the hand of the Pretty Girl.

Related to the trope of the Doppelganger, but not co-extensive with it, is the silent film era’s manifestation of the Trickster/Shape-shifter archetype, embodied in the trope of the Count (of No Account). (For more on the Count, please see Chapter 2, pages 96 and 116.)

B. Settings:

The geography of these films is continuous with that of the literature of the previous centuries, and is based primarily on two tensions: the tension between the urban (the town) and the rural (the country); and the tension between the private (the home) and the public (the workplace). Many of the most critical encounters occur in places which represent a threshold position where the two overlap: the street, semi-private institutions like shops, restaurants, doctors’ and dentists’ offices etc.; and especially places where stakes of the opposition are the highest, e.g. places where the extremely private and the extremely public can most easily come

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767 C.f., for example, –“The Dyspeptic and his Double” (Kalem, Aug., 1909); “The New Chief” (Lubin, Dec. 1909); “Aunt Maria’s Substitute” (Imp, Apr., 1910); “An Interrupted Honeymoon” (Essanay, Mar. 1910); “A Midnight Cupid” (Biograph, July 9 1910); “An Easy Winner” (Gaumont, Sept. 17 1910); “A Lunatic At Large” (Vitagraph, Sept. 24, 1910); “How Jones Won the Championship” (Lux, Oct 1 1910 p. 772); “Reggie’s Engagement” (Lubin, Dec. 10,1910); “Whiffles’ Double” (Pathé, Feb. 18, 1911 p. 374); “His Brother’s Double” (Lubin, Nov.18, 1911, p. 574); “My Double and How He Undid Me” (Feb. 23, 1912 p. 708); “Uncle’s Visit” (Imp, Nov. 1911); “Merely A Millionaire” (Selig, Jan. 1912); “Identical Identities” (Essanay Feb. 1913); “Every Double Causes Trouble” (Pathé, Aug., 1913); “Two Little Dromios” (Than houser, Jan., 1914); “Whiffles’ Double” (Eclectic, Sept. 1912); “Easy Money” (Kalem, Sept., 1914); “Twins and Trouble” (Edison, Sept. 1914); “Doubles Bring Troubles” (Eclectic, Oct. 1914); “Netty or Letty” (Vitagraph, Nov. 1914); “Bunny’s Little Brother” (Vitagraph, Nov. 1914).
into conflict – especially in dormitories like those of boarding schools, boarding-houses, hotels and apartment-houses.

In the earlier films (before about 1905), the relationship between character and setting is quite unproblematic: setting is simply an extension of character and conflict only arises when a character is transferred from his/her appropriate setting to an inappropriate one – i.e., when a Rube goes to the big city or an urban type tries to take a vacation in the country. But beginning with a group of French films from as early as 1903, this relationship becomes increasingly problematized: the conflict faced by a protagonist increasingly escalates into an adversarial relationship with his entire environment, as a result of which one or the other is inevitably destroyed; and as I hope to demonstrate in Chapter 6 of this thesis, this theme of conflict between the individual and the environment is a quintessential aspect of slapstick comedy.

C. Object-tropes:

Perhaps the most astonishing result of my labors in constructing the Index was a realization of the richness of the employment of images in the early comic cinema, which I am tempted to call “metaphorical,” but which it is much more proper to refer to as “metonymic,” in the sense of a figure of speech in which one expression or image is patently being put in the place of another. I suppose the reason I’m tempted to invoke the category of metaphor is that in so many films after 1910, once an image has undergone the process of substitution, the metonym then takes on a life of its own, and behaves according to its own logic, rather than that of the thing whose place it has taken. Ultimately, however, the work of the comedy is to separate the tenor from the vehicle once again and restore the difference which is fundamental to the integrity of each.

This topic is so broad that it ought to be the subject of an independent study; so, instead of attempting to be comprehensive and systematic, I’ll content myself with offering what are for me some of the most salient examples. In earlier films – before 1907 or so – the use of objects as stand-ins for the people who own them is prominent: in fact the metonymic strategy of these films is to treat ownership as the primary meaning of the genitive. Consequently people’s possessions become extensions of themselves, and the ordeals through which these early films put their protagonists are typically wreaked on the possessions, rather than the people. The most conspicuous example I can think of is in the trope of the Hat – men’s hats symbolize their “dignity” and are consequently treated with an excess of indignity, while women’s hats typically symbolize the extravagances of their personalities and are disfigured accordingly. Clothing similarly functions as an extension of the individual, and pranks against individuals are frequently executed by means of attacks on their clothing. As a variation of this, in the trope of “Wear These For My Sake,” the Young Lover (M) involuntarily offends the Beloved by sending her some floral ornament which an inattentive Messenger Boy exchanges for a parcel of pajamas coming back from the cleaners, giving the Beloved a distorted impression of which precise aspect of her person the young man in question wishes to adorn.

768 E.g. “Armor Vs. Armour” (AMB, ca. June 1899); “Through the Telescope” (G.A.S. Films, April 1903); “A Crushed Hat” (AMB, ca. March 1904); “Misadventures of a Hat” (Pathé Frères, 1905).
Possession-imagery is complicated by several tropes which are concerned with exchange and circulation. In the trope which I call “La Ronde,” a prized possession (often an old coat containing a cache of money, bonds, or valuable documents) is exchanged through a succession of hands while being madly pursued by the original owner.\(^\text{770}\) (In a great many versions of the “La Ronde” trope, the object which circulates is a baby in a basket which has been exchanged for a piece of merchandise.\(^\text{771}\)) In the reverse trope of “the Cat Came Back” (the title of a popular song of the period which, like “Everybody Works But Father” formed the subject matter of a film) an unwanted object which a person is trying to dispose of keeps returning to him/her with maddening regularity.\(^\text{772}\) Another repeated trope is the trope of “the Collar Button,” in which the obsessive search for a trivial item (which, like grandma’s glasses, turns out never to have been lost in the first place) results in the destruction of the whole environment.\(^\text{773}\) These last two tropes seem after about 1911 to coalesce in the trope of the “Hoodoo”: the unlucky object which brings a curse with it, which one cannot rid oneself of.\(^\text{774}\)

Another object which, though it appears in one or two instances early in the period,\(^\text{775}\) only becomes repeatedly used after 1912 is the “Infernal Machine” – often referred to in the synopses as such, but also as dynamite, a bomb, or nitro glycerine. (It’s at the same time that the corresponding character trope of the Anarchist or the Black Hand\(^\text{776}\) makes its first appearance.) During the 1910s, the Infernal Machine becomes a preferred trope for themes touching the Vanity of Earthly Wishes when, as so frequently happens, it is substituted for some desirable object.

What astonished me most was the rarity with which, according to the synopses, the weapons traditionally associated with the comic violence of this period actually appear. Slapsticks appear precisely once, in a one-minute Biograph fragment of 1903: \textit{Levi & Cohen, the Irish Comedians}. Whatever their incidence in stage performances, in the synopses of silent comedy films from 1894 to 1914, I found three references to uses of bladders,\(^\text{777}\) one to a banana peel,\(^\text{778}\) three to fly-paper,\(^\text{779}\) and ten which employed a soda syphon or seltzer bottle.\(^\text{780}\) The weapon of choice

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\(^{770}\) E.g. “Troubles of a Coat” (Pathé, 1908); “The Fur Coat” (Imp, 1910); “Ring of Love” (Solax, 1911) “The Tale of A Coat” (Lubin, 1914).


\(^{772}\) E.g. “And His Coat Came Back” (Pathé, 1909); “A Troublesome Satchel” (AMB, 1909); “The Hoodoo” (Pathé, 1910), “Billy’s Troublesome Grip” (Solax, 1912); “The Hoodoo Umbrella” (Vitagraph, 1913).

\(^{773}\) E.g. “The Lost Collar Button” (Vitagraph, 1906), “My Wife’s Gone to the Country” (Essanay, Aug. 21, 1909); “My Wife’s Away” (Komic, 1914).

\(^{774}\) E.g. “The Hoodoo” (Pathé, 1910); “The Hoodoo Hat” (Kalem, 1912); “The Hoodoo Umbrella” (Vitagraph, 1913).

\(^{775}\) C.f., for example, “Casey and His Neighbor’s Goat” (Edison, 1903).

\(^{776}\) (I.e., a \textit{mafioso})

\(^{777}\) “Battle of Bladders” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Belle of Bald-Head Row” (Goodfellow, 1907); and “Si Puts One Over” (Crystal, April, 1914).

\(^{778}\) “Just His Luck” (Selig, Aug. 1912).


\(^{780}\) A Bowery Café” (American Mutoscope Co., ca. March, 1897); “How They Fired the Bum” (AMB ca. May, 1900); “Why Papa Reformed, or Setting Back the Clock” (Edison, Sept. 1902); “Doctor’s Office” (Lubin, Jan.
during this period was the umbrella,\textsuperscript{781} which occurred in a wide variety of different contexts and seemed to have a symbolic significance well beyond its utilitarian functions. But this may – indeed must – have changed after 1914.

The last major group of objects that attracted my attention was a system of inanimate humanoid objects with which protagonists change places with almost rhythmic regularity throughout this period: dummies, robots, scarecrows, statues, cigar-store Indians, effigies, and suits of armor among them. These seem to me to have a structural centrality to physical comedy because, together with the chase (of which, because they require the immobilization of the character, they form the dynamic opposite, and into which they are regularly interpolated) they manifest the outer limits of the range of actions the characters can perform, and so express a tension between absolute movement and absolute stillness. Just as the tropes of the Fat Person and the Blackface characters do on the level of character, this tension expresses on the level of mise-en-scène the stakes of the protagonist’s ordeal; the flight from immobility and death, which is also a flight towards them.

\textit{D. Action-tropes:}

Consequently, the action-tropes of pre-slapstick silent film seem, like the setting-tropes, to occur at the intersection of two related dynamics: the dynamic of activity versus passivity; and the dynamic of mobility versus immobilization. Both would seem to be functions of a characteristic preoccupation with control – control over one’s own body and its movements, and control over the movement or stillness of other bodies which may affect the action or repose of one’s own. The action-tropes of this period, therefore, are fundamentally concerned with re-negotiating traditional configurations of power in social relations; and this concern is characteristically expressed through reversals of position which are as sudden as they are radical. The tramp finds himself suddenly mistaken for the mayor (who is his identical twin); Mrs. Henpeck inverts the traditional order of authority in the household which Mr. Henpeck seeks to reassert instantly by getting himself hypnotized; the “masher” finds himself forced to dress as a woman and suddenly becomes the object of a frenzied pursuit by a gang of other mashers. The foreground concern of control over one’s own body becomes the site for an intense dialogue over power-relations which readily erupts into violence.

\textsuperscript{781}C.f. “A Crusty Old Bachelor” (AMB, ca. April 1899); “Little Willie in Mischief Again” (AMB, ca Apr 1899); “The Hayseed’s Experience at Washington Monument” (Edison, July, 1901); “Mr. Oldsport’s Umbrella” (AMB France, Nov. 1902); “Bad Soup” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “The Wrong Room” (AMB, ca March 1904); “A Scandal on the Staircase” (Pathé Frères, June 1904); “The Fake Blind Man” (Lubin, ca. May 1905); “Umbrellas to Mend” (Vitagraph, Feb. 1912); “The Borrowed Umbrella” (Selig; Oct. 1912); “Mollie’s Umbrella” (Lux, Oct. 1913); “The Hoodoo Umbrella” (Vitagraph, Nov. 1913); “The Dream of a Painting” (Joker, Nov. 1914).
Typically, then, the protagonist of these films embarks on some project which involves striking the correct balance between activity and passivity, between stillness and movement, which will put him or her in a position of control. That project will then become problematized and be turned into an ordeal, typically with the result that the protagonist’s project is frustrated, or that s/he even suffers a net setback and ends up with less control over his/her destiny that s/he had when s/he began. The most common trope in this category in the period from 1903-1910 is that of the Professor who invents some miraculous scientific innovation for increasing people’s control, either over their environment, over others, or over their own bodies, which goes haywire. This innovation is very frequently problematized by getting into the hands of a Bad Boy, who makes it the instrument of a sequence of pranks. Sometimes, however, the protagonist is simply trying to live his/her life, a project which is frequently subjected to a second major form of problematization: the person becomes the victim of a preoccupation or a physical affection which disrupts their self-control, bringing them into physical conflict with their environment and/or everybody around them. One major form which this preoccupation/affection may take is the uncontrollable desire to engage in some dangerous form of virtuoso performance—acrobatics, roller skating, or highly expressive dancing—at an inappropriate place and time.

Very frequently, however, the project is success in love, and the standard way of problematizing it is for the romance to escalate into a competition with a rival. Conventionally, the rival is equally qualified to possess the Beloved with the protagonist, so that there is nothing to choose between them: they are functionally equivalent, and therefore identical. In fact, by the end of the typical narrative, they end up as a sort of compound protagonist. According to the logic of comedy in this style, then, neither of the contestants can succeed. Consequently, the most frequent of the romance-tropes is what I call that of the “Love Triangle Squared”: while the two would-be lovers are contending for the hand of the Beloved, she is off getting married to a hitherto-unknown third party, collapsing the agon into a side-issue, and its protagonist and antagonist into a compound character who is simply left in the cold. As popular here are versions of the “Consent” scenario and the “Elopement” scenario which I’ve mentioned above.

The preoccupation with the body and with getting and maintaining control of it manifests itself in several groups of films concerned with quasi-scientific forms of what was known at the time as “psychic research:” there are, therefore, categories of films in which Spiritualism, Hypnotism, Phrenology and Somnambulism (all of which were controversial hot topics at the time) are investigated (and, typically, debunked). The form of typical project in the context of which most of these investigations occur is that of the Cure; and in this category can be included conventional medical and dental experimentation with invasive surgery and various forms of sedative. Ultimately, of course, the Cure turns into another ordeal which challenges, rather than promoting, the patient’s chances of survival.

The Chase Trope is introduced as early as 1901, but only picks up momentum in 1904 with the introduction of multi-scene chases in “Personal,” “Meet Me At the Fountain,” et. al. It receives a tremendous fillip, of course, with the introduction of mobile framings in the early 1910s, and continues to be progressively elaborated through the rest of the silent period. The

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782 Perhaps the most famous (and most-often-duplicated) example is Vitagraph’s “Liquid Electricity” (Sept. 1907).
783 Often, indeed, they are best friends, neighbors or in some other way counterparts for each other (i.e., doppelgangers).
Chase Trope should really be read as the involuntary counterpart of what in its voluntary form is the ordeal of the Race, in which the protagonist displays exceptional control and wins. Chase/Race films therefore teem with spontaneous analogies for Life, viewed (through the optic of “muscular Christianity”) as a version of the Battle of Life, reduced here to a game. The antinomy of the Chase/Race trope is “Going to Jail,” which, like its counterpart in the board game of Monopoly, means the character (at least temporarily) loses the game. “Going to Jail” therefore becomes one of a number of symbolic expressions of the idea of death – it typically means the character, like a captured chess piece, is removed from the board. “Going to Jail,” as in effect the most radical form of misfortune that can overtake a person, likewise often occurs the most suddenly: in the repeated trope of “Substituted for the Perp” a householder investigating a break-in is himself arrested in place of the Burglar.  

It is possible, however, to return from death: as we’ve seen, a recurrent character-trope from 1904 on is that of the Escaped Convict (with his spiritual counterpart, the Escaped Lunatic); meanwhile a large number of films from some of the earliest on figure either a symbolic or actual resurrection – beginning with “A Wake in Hell’s Kitchen” (Biograph, ca. July 1900) and continuing to the very end of the period – Chaplin’s tramp goes in and out of jail a number of times in his last two silent films, and the Barber of The Great Dictator (1940) is an escapee from an asylum for casualties of the Great War. It finds its counterpart in the trope of Attempting to Commit Suicide (and usually failing), which I found surprisingly plentiful, particularly after the transitional period.

There is a large body of films, going back to the earliest days of silent film comedy, in which the protagonist’s project is not to escape some sort of asylum, but, on the contrary, to find a place of quiet and repose – typically in a location at the intersection of public and private, and frequently of town and country: if indoors and not at home, then in a hotel; if outdoors, then in a park. These films indeed, seem often to present the wildest contrasts between stasis and kinesis in the imaginative vocabulary of silent-film comedy.

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784 C.f., for example, “The Burglars in the Wine Cellar” (Georges Méliès, May 1902); “Burglar’s Escape” (Edison, Oct. 1903); “The Jail Bird and How He Flew, A Farce Comedy Escape” (Vitagraph, ca. June 1906); “A Burlesque Highway Robbery in Gay Paree” (Georges Méliès, Jan. 1904); “Bill Butt-In and the Burglars” (Kalem, 1907); “A Kindhearted Gentleman” (Pathé, 1908); “Almost a Hero” (Powers, Aug., 1910); “Mrs. Brown’s Burglar” (Majestic, Dec. 1913); “Bill’s Board Bill” (Kalem, Jan. 1914); “Too Many Cooks” (Powers, Jan. 1914); “My Wife’s Away” (Komic, Feb. 1914); “Harold’s Burglar” (Crystal, Feb. 1914); “The Plumber and Percy” (Komic, Feb., 1914).

785 C.f. “Hattie’s New Hat” (Lubin, May 1913); “The Foreman of the Jury” (Keystone, May 1913); “Matrimony’s Speed Limit” (Solax, June 1913); “The Zulu King” (Lubin, June 1913); “Sleufoot’s Seventh Suicide” (Pathe, Sept. 1913); “Tweedledum Insures his Life” (Powers, Sept. 1913); “Flaming Hearts” (Vitagraph, Nov. 1913); “The Suicide Pact” (Biograph, Dec. 1914); “Sophie Picks A Dead One” (Essanay, Feb. 1914); “A Quack and the Would-Be Suicide” (Melies, April 1914); “Oh, What’s The Use?” (Joker, Sept. 1914); “At Three O’Clock” (Sterling, Aug. 1914); “Love and Business” (Joker, Dec. 1914).

786 Examples include “Why Papa Cannot Sleep” (American Mutoscope, Dec. 1896); “The Mischievous Monkey” (AMB, ca. 1897); “Why Krausemeyer Couldn’t Sleep” (Lubin, ca. Aug. 1899); “The Farmer’s Troubles In A Hotel” (Lubin, Sept. 1902); “A Lively Night” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Uncle Josh In a Spooky Hotel” (Edison, ca. March 1900); “Another Job for the Undertaker” (Edison, ca. May 1901); “Such A Headache” (Edison, July 1901); “Going to Bed Under Difficulties” (Pathé Frères, May 1902); “Casey’s Nightmare” (Edison, Oct. 1903); “The Inn Where No Man Rests” (Méliès, June 1903); “A Midnight Episode” (Méliès, 1903); “Spring Cleaning” (Williamson & Co., May 1903); “A Peaceful Inn” (Pathé Frères, April 1908); “When Ruben Comes to Town” (Edison, Aug. 22, 1908); “Impossible to Get Sleep” (Pathé Frères, Dec., 1909); “A Quiet Boarding House” (Essanay, May, 1910); “No Place
My research showed me that the violence tropes arrayed themselves similarly along axes of action and passivity, and motion and immobility. It was surprising to me to discover that the most frequently recurring act of violence was not one that involved any form of physical percussion, but defenestration – sometimes of objects (which then typically strike some passerby), but usually of people’s bodies. The second most frequently recurring kinetic violence trope was that of giving or getting a Dousing, or of Falling or Being Pushed into a Body of Water (with giving or receiving a Thrashing not, however, far behind). Very frequently the Ordeal takes the form of organized ritual aggression, as in a Pugilistic Encounter, or a Duel.

The most frequently recurring immobilization trope apart from “Going to Jail” is to become imprisoned within some form of container: Locked In A Chimney, a Couch, a Cupboard, Closet or Coal Bin sometimes, but (in an unusual group of tropes which combine motion and imprisonment) more often in a Trunk, Valise, Basket, Barrel, or Parcel, which is subsequently thrown out of the window, pushed downstairs, loaded onto a truck (from which it falls), and so on.

E. Gag-tropes:

As the ubiquity of the Doppelganger among the Character Tropes may suggest, the most common gag tropes all seem to have to do with questions of identity. Particularly after 1912-1913, a considerable body of films are structured around the Role Reversal trope, in which men and women exchange their customary functions in the workplace and at home; what did surprise me was to learn that Cross-Dressing – and especially Female Impersonation – was by far the most frequently recurring Gag Trope for this period. It is quite closely followed by another Substitution Trope: the Substitution of an Inanimate Object for a Person (or vice versa), which characterizes a long list of titles from “A Bad (K)Night” (American Mutoscope and Biograph, June, 1899) to “The Egyptian Mummy” (Vitagraph, Dec. 1914). Recurrent Gag Tropes involving regaining control over one’s body include the Toothache Trope; the Somnambulism and Hypnosis Tropes; and the gag of the Composite Body. I likewise found three instances of the Mirror Gag, in which a person seems to have become alienated from his/her own reflection. The loss of identity was likewise frequently figured by the removal of a person’s clothes, as in the No Trousers trope, and is interestingly connected with the notion of rebirth, or at least renewal, in the “Clothes Stolen While Swimming” trope.

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Like Home” (Selig, Nov. 26 1910); “A Quiet Evening” (Reliance, Oct., 1911); “A Quiet Boarding House” (Eclipse, Aug. 1912); “A Quiet Place to Read” (George Kleine/General Film Co., Dec. 1913).

787 E.g., “The Laundress and the Lady” (Kalem, Nov. 1913); “Emancipated Women” (Kalem, Dec., 1913); “The Pride of the Force” (Majestic, Dec. 1913); “It May Come to This” (Crystal, Jan. 1914); “In the Year 2014” (Joker Jan. 1914); “Votes for Men” (Victor, Feb. 1914); “When Men Wear Skirts” (Kalem, Aug. 1914); “Snakeville’s Blind Pig” (Essanay, Dec. 1914).

788 C.f. “Almost A King” (AMB, ca. Dec. 1903); “Pat’s Breeches” (Champion, July 1912); “The Wildman” (Essanay, Sept. 1912); “Gee! My Pants” (Pathé Frères, Sept. 1912); “Alkali Ike’s Pants” (Essanay, Sept. 1912); “Si’s Surprise Party” (Solax, Oct. 1912); “Jake’s Hoodoo” (Majestic, Jan. 1914); “His Royal Pants” (Nestor Feb.
Finally in the course of my research I encountered six major kinds of structural organization in films from 1893 through 1914, proceeding from the less to the more complex throughout the period:

i) *The Basic Schadenfreude Structure*: An aggressive incident, an accident, or a prank, simply happens and the film is over.

ii) *The Basic Talion Structure*: This is a symmetrical, binary action in which an initial aggressive action or violent accident or prank leads to a retributive action/accident/prank which restores the balance (so that the net outcome is a draw). In this category I would include films in which the prank backfires so that the aggressor ends up hoist with his own petard. Either way, the structure can be simply repeated, so that it goes on forever. (This pattern is still in use in the Bugs Bunny and Road Runner cartoons of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.)

iii) *The Modified Talion Structure*: An aggressive action or violent accident or prank leads to a retributive action/accident/prank which leads to consequences which set one of the combatants further back than s/he began (so that the net outcome is a setback).

iv) *The Parade Structure*: An aggressive action/accident or prank is repeated, and repeatedly leads to the same conclusion. (Many chase films fall into this category.)

v) *The Episodic Structure*: An aggressive action/accident or prank is repeated, but leads to a variety of (different) reactions.

vi) *The Combined Parade & Episodic Structure*: Finally, in this compound structure, an aggressive action/accident or prank is repeated in a pattern which is readily reconcilable (by accumulation) with the Freytag structure of a rising action which proceeds to a climax, followed by a denouement.

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1914); “That Terrible Kid” (Lubin, March 1914); “Without Pants” (Crystal, Mar. 1914); “Fleeing From the Fleas” (Kalem, July 1914); “Whiffles’ New Profession” (Pathé Frères, Mar., 1914); “How He Lost His Trousers” (Lubin, July, 1914); “The Trouserless Policeman” (Méliès, July 1914); “A Substitute for Pants” (Kalem, August 1914); “He Wanted His Pants” (Lubin, Nov. 1914).

790 “The Tramp and the Bather” (AMB, ca. June 1897); “The Interrupted Bathers” (Edison, Oct. 1902); “Captured” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Escaped” (Lubin, Jan. 1903); “Turning the Tables” (Edison, Sept. 1903); “The Swimming Party” (Kalem, Feb. 1912); “A Doctor For An Hour” (Edison, Nov. 1912); “Fixing Father” (Kinemacolor, Jan. 1913); “O! What A Swim” (Selig, Sept. 1913); “Bill’s Career As A Butler” (Edison, Oct. 1913); “Sleuths Unawares” (Vitagraph Oct. 1913).
APPENDIX 3: COMEDY CHARACTER FILM SERIES 1909–1914
(United States, France and Britain)

The foundations are laid for these in 1909 in the “Jones” series by Edison, featuring the popular comedian John R. Cumpson, and by Pathé Frères’ more violent “Bill” series. The rest of the term is characterized primarily by the vast expansion in the range and numbers of these “character-” or “clown-” comedies:

1910:
U.S.A.:
--The “Jenks/Jenkins” series (3 or 4 films) (Biograph)
--The “Bumptious” series (Edison) (John R. Cumpson)
--The “Muggsy” series (Biograph)
--The “Davy Jones” series (Vitagraph)
--The “Hank and Lank” series (Essanay) (Augustus Carney, Victor Potel)
--The “Hemlock Hoax” series (Lubin)
--The “Jones” series (Edison; Lubin)
--The Mulcahy series (2 films) (Essanay)
--The “Henry” series (Essanay)
--The “Jean” series (dog) (Vitagraph)
--The “Shorty” series (Lubin)
--The “Bertie” series (Kalem)
--The “Bonehead” series (Independent -- Nestor)
--The “Dooley” series (Independent -- Bison) (Charles Avery)

France:
--The “Max” series (Pathé) (Max Linder)
--The “Betty” series (Pathé)
--The “Bill” series (Pathé -- continued)
--The Whiffles series (Pathé)

Perhaps the most important among these are the Max Linder comedies and Essanay’s “Hank and Lank” films, featuring Augustus Carney, who achieved his greatest popularity in 1911-1913 in the character of “Alkali Ike.” This was essentially a series of what were then known as “Western comedies” that featured a generous measure of rough-house comedy. It is not until 1914, however, that this group of films is described retrospectively as constituting “slapstick.”

It is largely the popularity of these and the Max Linder films which fuels the vast growth in “character-comedies” which succeeds during the next two years. The total number of series, and especially the number of new series, significantly declines during 1911:

791 The name is also used in one or two experimental attempts at comedy during the same year by Thanhouser.

792 James S. McQuade, “The Awakening at Snakeville,” “One has only to whisper it, that Alkali Ike will be seen shortly in another of his side-splitting slapsticks, in order to awaken widespread interest. This latest goes under the title “The Awakening at Snakeville,” and takes two full reels; although, for my part, I would prefer to have the fast and furious fun condensed in one.” (Moving Picture World, Dec. 20, 1913, p. 1390).
1911:
U.S.A.:
-- The Bumptious series (Edison -- cont.)
-- The Alkali Ike series (Essanay – cont.) (Augustus Carney, Victor Potel)
-- The Davy Jones series (Vitagraph)
-- The “Mutt and Jeff” series (Nestor)
-- The Desperate Desmond series (Nestor)
-- The Tightwad series (Nestor)
France:
-- The “Jiggers” series (Gaumont)
-- The “Bill” series (Lux)
-- The “Matilda” series (Lux)
-- The “Max” series (Pathé – cont.)
-- The Whiffles series (Pathé)

But it rebounds conspicuously in all three of the subject countries during 1912:

1912:
U.S.A.:
-- The Alkali Ike Series (Essanay) – cont. [Augustus Carney]
-- The Billy McGrath series (Essanay – with John Steppling)
-- The Katzenjammer Kids Series (Selig)
-- The John Bunny Series (Vitagraph)
-- The “Desperate Desmond” series (Nestor – cont.)
-- The “Tightwad” series (Nestor)
-- The Bedelia Series (Reliance) [Anthony O’Sullivan]
-- The Billy Quirk Series (Solax)
France:
-- The Arabella Series (Lux)
-- The Gontran Series (Éclair)
-- The Jimmie Series (Gaumont – cont.)
-- The Calino Series (Gaumont)
-- The Zigoto Series (Gaumont)
-- The Max Series (Pathé – cont.) (Max Linder)
Britain:
-- The Percy Series (Eclipse)

The increasing importance of comedies built around the personal eccentricities of individual characters (and reflecting, in their style, the performers’ own characteristics) is accompanied, naturally enough, by the parallel emergence, within the nascent Hollywood star system, of a pantheon of performers and directors. By 1911, Pathé Frères has opened an American studio and is featuring Billy Quirk, a young comedian somewhat in the Max Linder mould, formerly a junior member of the comedy company at Biograph. Lux commences two highly successful and long-running series featuring its “Bill” (1911 – 1912) and “Arabella” (1912-1913) characters, and Edison continues with its series of films (beginning in 1910) again featuring Cumpson, but this time in the character of “Bumptious.”
By 1912, the Licensed studios evidently begin to adapt en masse to the new fashions in screen comedy: Essanay broadens its comedy production by introducing a series of pictures featuring the character of “Billy McGrath” played by the popular farceur, John Steppling, a few of which cross the line from polite comedy into rough-house (and, very occasionally, “slapstick”). Selig presents another series featuring personages from the funny papers, “the Katzenjammer Kids,” and Vitagraph commences two series around the personae of performers of enduring popularity: the Sidney Drew series of polite comedies, and the Bunnygraphs featuring John Bunny and Flora Finch, which would remain among the most popular of Hollywood product until Bunny’s death in 1914. Though these too were, on the whole, “polite comedies,” in one instance one of them calls forth a verdict of “rough-house” from the reviewers. But the most significant developments in low comedy during this period occur among the American independents. In 1911, the Nestor studio leaps to the fore with three series, two of them based on popular comic strips: the “Mutt and Jeff” series featuring Sam Drane (Mutt) and Gus Alexander (Jeff); and especially the first extended series of films based on the trope of melodramatic burlesque – the “Desperate Desmond” series, based on Hershfield’s comic feature of the same name. The newly-formed Reliance studio produces the first of a series featuring another graduate of the Griffith school at Biograph, Anthony O’Sullivan, in a decidedly low-comedy series of “character farces” based on his drag impersonation of the skivvy Bedelia. Interesting enough, the Keystone farces excite no particular response from the reviewers in the first few weeks following their appearance in September, 1912 -- except perhaps for the usual reflex condemnation of their “senseless, idiotic horseplay.”

The years 1913-1914 see an exponential increase in the in the number of comedy series developed (with overwhelming predominance) around distinctive “clown” characters, but many also foregrounding communities or locales (e.g. the Essanay “Snakeville” and Kalem “Hicksville” series).

1913
U.S.A.:
--The Binks series (Imp) [Charles De Forrest]
   --n.v. Vitagraph also has a recurrent character named Binks
--The Calamity Anne series (American) [Louise Lester]
--The Pearl and Chester series (Crystal) [Pearl White & Chester Barnett]
--The Baldy Belmont series (Crystal)
--The Sweeney series (Selig) [John Lancaster]
--The “Red Sweeney” series (Kalem)
--The Bob series (Lubin)
--The “Leo” series (Imp.)

793 “Chased By Bloodhounds” (c.f. New York Dramatic Mirror, June 26, 1912, p. 27).
794 In 1913 the strip was also presented in vaudeville in a live version featuring George Topack, formerly of the knockabout team of Topack and Steele, and one of the premier knockabout artists of the 1890s. C.f New York Clipper, Dec. 27, 1913, p. 15 (“New Vaudeville Acts”): “Desperate Desmond.”/ CASINO, BROOKLYN, DEC. 21. “Written around the well known character pictures that have been appearing in a New York Sunday paper for some time, George M. Topack is presenting a satire on ‘Desperate Desmond.’ The act from beginning to end is full of laugh getting lines, the situations are extremely funny, and the members of the cast are up to the mark.”
--The Cutey series (Vitagraph) (Wallie Van)
--The Bunnygraph (Vitagraph) (John Bunny); Bunnyfinch (John Bunny; Flora Finch)
--The Bingles series (Vitagraph) (James Lackaye)
--The Sandy and Shorty series (Vitagraph) (Robert Thornby and George Stanley)
--The Mike and Jake series (Joker) (Max Asher, Harry McCoy)
----The Freckles series (Powers)

**France:**
--The NewlyWed series (Cartoons) (Éclair)
--The Pat series (Lux)
--The Arabella series (Lux)
--The Max series (C.G.P.C./Pathe)

**1914:**
**U.S.A.:**
--The “Bill” series (Komic)
--The “Andy” series (Edison)
--The “Bess the Detectress” series (Joker)
--The “Boob” series (Rex) (Robert Z. Leonard)
--The Calamity Anne series (American) (Louise Lester)
--The “Charlie” series (Crystal) (Charles De Forrest)
--The “Snakeville” series (Essanay)
--The “Cuckooville” series (Frontier)
--The “Hicksville” series (Kalem)
--The “Fatty” series (Keystone) (Roscoe Arbuckle)
--The “Fatty” series (Kalem) (John E. Brennan)
--The “Fatty” series (L-KO, 1914-1915) (Fatty Voss)
--The “Fatty” films (Vitagraph) (Hughie Mack)
--The “Ham” series (Kalem) (Lloyd Hamilton)
--The “Ham and Bud” series (Kalem) (Lloyd V. Hamilton, Bud Duncan)
--The “Izzy” series (Reliance) (Max Davidson (??))
--The Mike and Jake series (Joker) (Max Asher, Harry McCoy)
--The Pretzel series (Frontier) (Lloyd V. Hamilton (??))
--The “Red Head” series (Selig)
--The “Shorty” series (Broncho) (Shorty Hamilton)
--The “Skelley” series (Biograph) (Charles Murray)
--The “Pat Casey” series (Essanay) (Eddie Redway)
--The “Heine and Katrina” series (American) (George Field and Ida Lewis)
--The “Patsy Bolivar” series (Lubin)
--The “Buster Brown” series (Edison)

**France:**
--The “Bill” series (Lux) (cont.)
--The “Whiffles” Series (Pathe) (cont.) (M. Prince)
### APPENDIX 4.A. BURLESQUE PRIZE FIGHT PERFORMERS

4.1. Representative American and British Knockabout Burlesque Prize-Fight Acts:

#### 4.1.1. United States:

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<td>M. et Mme. D’Omer</td>
<td>Reynolds Bros.</td>
<td>Barlow Brothers</td>
<td>Barlow Brothers</td>
<td>M. et Mme. D’Omer</td>
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<td>M. et Mme. D’Omer</td>
<td>Gorman Bros.</td>
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<td>The Fowlers</td>
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<td>Reynolds Bros.</td>
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<td>M. et Mme D’Omer</td>
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<td>Johnson and Powers</td>
<td>Johnson and Powers</td>
<td>The Four Eccentrics</td>
<td>Maloney and Gray</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Four Eccentrics</td>
<td>(Johnson &amp; Swain)</td>
<td>Maloney and Gray</td>
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<td>The Four Eccentrics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edwards and Walton</td>
<td>Maloney and Gray</td>
<td>Maloney and Gray</td>
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<td>Jennings and O’Brien</td>
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<td>Maloney and Gray</td>
<td>Thatcher and Adair (Combat Clog Dance)</td>
<td>Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Maloney and Gray</td>
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<td>O’Brien</td>
<td>(diss. sometime after Aug. 1888)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Me and Him</td>
<td>Fitzgerald and Kelly Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Jennings and O’Brien</td>
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<td>Euson and Queen Jennings and O’Brien</td>
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<td>Granite Dix’s Vaudeville and Athletic Co.</td>
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<td>Fitzgerald and Kelly Speck Brothers</td>
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<td>“Gladiatorial Combat Statue clog”) Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Wm. Muldoon’s Athletic and Specialty Co.</td>
<td>George Dixon’s Vaudeville and Athletic Co.</td>
<td>Robetta and Doreto</td>
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<td>Lively and Howard Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Glenroy Brothers</td>
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<td>Fitzgerald and Kelly Burke Brothers Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Fitzgerald and Kelly Goldie and St. Clair Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Palles and Cusick</td>
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<td>Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Goldie and St. Clair Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Moran and Murphy</td>
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<td>Gillen and Stewart Jennings and O’Brien</td>
<td>Needham and Mack</td>
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<td>Hector and Lorraine Jennings and O’Brien</td>
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<td>Stewart and Gillen</td>
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<td>Goldie and St. Clair</td>
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### 4.1.2. Great Britain:

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<td>Mason and Dixon</td>
<td>Mr. &amp; Mrs. Tom Major</td>
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<td>Ferguson and Mack (wrestling)</td>
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<td>Russell and Stanley</td>
<td>Dermott and Doyle</td>
<td>Dermott and Doyle</td>
<td>Palles and Cussick</td>
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<td>Ferguson and Mack (wrestling)</td>
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<td>Palles and Cussick</td>
<td>Palles and Cussick</td>
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<tr>
<td>Palles and Cussick</td>
<td>Kelly, Murphy and McMahon</td>
<td>Glynn, Kelly and Bland</td>
<td>Bros. Aldean (Will and Joe)</td>
<td>Payce and Payce</td>
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APPENDIX 4.B. BURLESQUE PUGILISM AND THE BURLESQUE DUEL

The social meanings which may be inscribed physically in the elements of a performance, are perhaps best made explicit by means of comparison and contrast with the elements of other, comparable performances within the same context. In the case of the pugilistic encounter and its burlesque forms, the most pointed contrast for the purposes of Victorian popular culture would be the duel, and its burlesque forms. As a counterpart to the discourse on the waxing vitality of pugilism as an expression of the emerging egalitarian sensibilities of the industrialized West, an equally lively one was sustained on the waning legitimacy of dueling as a means of conflict resolution. Both discourses were, of course, aspects of a metadiscourse on the concept of honour, whose changing status during the nineteenth century was the subject of radical dispute. In France and Britain, this discourse found its way into numerous dramatic representations, both serious and farcical, throughout the century.

Attitudes towards dueling, and the code duello which underlay it, had changed in the new social environment. By the late eighteenth century, the culture of street violence which was a hallmark of the “customary mentality” had significantly declined. Though dueling was technically illegal and victorious combatants were liable to prosecution for murder, European courts, traditionally sympathetic to the honor code that underlay the practice, had habitually been lenient; but by the mid nineteenth century, a vigorous anti-dueling movement had arisen in England, and expressed itself with particular vehemence in 1840 when the Earl of Cardigan was acquitted of homicide after a duel. 796 The dueling controversy was intrinsically connected with the notion of social inequality: the right to carry weapons was a traditional prerogative of the nobility which was legally denied to commoners. Consequently the protests against Cardigan’s acquittal were expressed as evidence that in England there was “one law for the rich and another for the poor.” 797 On the Continent, and particularly in France, the anti-dueling movement was slower to gain ground, but was entrenched in most countries by the early twentieth century. 798

In America, dueling was less of an issue as a result of the Second Amendment to the Constitution, which was designed originally to address the inequities of European custom. In the Southern states, however, the late-medieval code of honor which underlay Continental dueling practice was sustained in the custom of the feud, which also came under increasing criticism in the American press and in American popular culture. 799

The treatment of the duel in British and American farces of the period is significantly both similar to and divergent from the burlesquing of pugilism. One of the most popular examples in both countries throughout the entire knockabout period is John Maddison Morton’s one-act farce Slasher and Crasher, which was first produced at Burton’s Theatre in London in 1848, and subsequently moved to the Olympic and the Royal Adelphi; it was still being revived regularly in

796 The last duel between two Englishmen on British soil took place in 1845.
797 The Times (London, England), Thursday, Feb. 18, 1841, p. 4.
798 The last duel fought in France, however, was as recent as 1967.
799 The classic example of anti-feuding polemic is the account of the Shepherdson-Graingerford feud in chapters 17 and 18 of Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.
the 1920s. The play was first presented in New York in 1851, and rapidly became a favorite, frequently revived throughout the last half of the century and into the years preceding the First World War. The pattern of *Slasher and Crasher* has remained typical of the treatment of the duel as a subject for satire, not only in theatre, but also in film, from its initial appearance to the present day.

*Slasher and Crasher* uses the parody duel as the main engine for resolving an instance of the “consent” version of what I’ve called the “elopement scenario.” As the play opens, Sampson Slasher and Christopher Crasher, the lovers of the sister and niece of ex-Trumpet Major Benjamin Blowhard of the Inniskillen Dragoons, are discharged by Blowhard on the grounds of “unmanliness,” Blowhard having discovered that Slasher has suffered an affront which he has failed to avenge, while Crasher is a pacifist and past president of the Uxbridge Anti-Dueling Society. With the assistance and support of Lieutenant Brown of the Marines, his rival for the hand of Blowhard’s niece Rosa, Crasher attempts to conspire with Slasher (who will have none of it), to stage a mock duel in the sight of Blowhard which will rehabilitate their reputations in Blowhard’s eyes, and procure his consent to their respective marriages. After a careful rehearsal of the formalities of the *code duello*, the duel (which follows a typical regressive pattern: it begins with pistols and then, when these malfunction, falls back to swordplay) results in Slasher (who has fortified himself with alcohol) going berserk and almost murdering Blowhard himself:

*Slash.* [Without.] Where is he?

*Crash.* Ha! [Bolts through window at L.C. Slasher runs wildly in, sword in hand.]

*Slash.* Where is he, I say! [Cutting and slashing about him – picks up Slasher’s hat, and runs his sword several times through it.] Where is he?

*Crash.* [Runs sword through chairs, sofas, &c.] Ha! [Pointing off, as if seeing Crasher and bolts through windows after him.]

*Blow.* Zounds, what a desperate dog!

*Dinah.* Brother support me – [Falling into one of Blowhard’s arms.]

*Rosa.* Uncle, catch me—[Falling into the other. A noise of broken glass without.] [Cries of ‘Murder!’ “Stop him!” &c., repeated. *Crasher, minus his coat tails, jumps in at window, R., followed by Slasher. *Crasher runs off at wing, L., followed furiously by Slasher.]

*Blow.* Stop I say! [Crash of broken crockery.] Damme, there goes the crockery! [Crasher, without his wig, runs in at L.D., followed by Slasher. *Crasher runs behind Blowhard.]

*Slash.* Aha! Now I’ve got him! [Waving his sword.]

*Crash.* [With desperation.] I’m desperate! Come on! [They throw themselves into melo-dramatic attitude, and begin to fight, a la “Bradley and Blanchard,” having Blowhard between them.]

*Blow.* [Shrinking, and trying to get out of the way] Holloa! Zounds—

*Slash.* Take that, sir! [Lunging, and hitting Blowhard. They both begin lungeing at Blowhard, who tries to avoid them.]

*Blow.* Confound you – be quiet, can’t you?

*Crash.* You doubt our courage, do you? [Flourishing his sword, wildly.]
Slash. You think us cowards, do you? [Flourishing his sword, wildly.]

Blow. No, no – I don’t!

Crash. Then prove it—[Giving Blowhard another poke.]

Slash. Yes, sir—prove it—[Thrusting.] consent to my marriage—

[Another thrust.]

Blow. I will – I do!  

Blowhard’s rigid adherence to an outworn code of honor and the fetishization of “manliness” which underlies it (with distinctly homo-erotic undertones) is exposed as a compensatory cover for his own cowardice. On the other hand, Slasher’s near-hysterical phobia for anything approaching civil violence is exposed as grounded, not in cowardice, but in a fear of the violent energies within himself and as the product of a desperate struggle to retain control of them. The desperation of Slasher’s struggle for control is contrasted throughout the play with the suave self-possession of Lieut. Brown, the Marine.

Slasher and Crasher is a critical intertext for forming a sense of the “structure of feeling” out of which the burlesque boxing match emerges. It takes up the theme of “going berserk” in the context of the discourse on dueling in a manner exactly parallel to that employed in the Ethiopian sketches with regard to pugilism. But there are two crucial differences: and they are related. In the Ethiopian sketches (with the exception of “High Jack the Heeler”), it is the violation of the rules that results in the protagonist’s loss of control – but in Slasher and Crasher, as usual in parody duels, the rules are scrupulously followed to the letter. The pandemonium that results is the product of the inherent insanity of the rules themselves: it is their rigidity and formality in the face of life-and-death stakes that is barbaric, and that typically pressurizes the protagonists into exaggerated displays of spontaneous aggression. The controls which they place on the expression of destructive energies is implicitly criticized as too great. Symptomatically, then, the dueling parodies of the nineteenth century, as typified in Slasher and Crasher, are complaining of a weight of conservative tradition, rather than progressive “science,” which has come to weigh too heavily on the individual; in the face of the increased effectiveness of institutional deterrents to civil violence like the police, the customs of former days are experienced as both onerous and anachronistic.

APPENDIX 5.A. THE PETE JENKINS ACT


Ringmaster and clown come into the ring. The ringmaster says “Ladies and gentlemen, I take pleasure in announcing the appearance of “Mademoiselle La Rosa, the world’s most accomplished equestrienne, in her sensational bareback act”. A magnificent horse is then led in. Suddenly an attendant rushes in from the pad-room, whispers something to the ringmaster which shocks him. Turning to the audience the latter announces, “I am sorry, ladies and gentlemen, to be obliged to announce that Madamoiselle (sic) La Rosa has been taken ill and will not be able to appear tonight.” Then a seedily-dressed man arises from a seat among the spectators. He seems to be under the influence of liquor. He shouts: “This show is a fake. I come here to see that lady ride, and I won’t be humbugged.” With this he starts for the ring. All the while he carries on a running conversation with the ringmaster. “You seem so smart,” says the ringmaster, “I suppose you think you can ride?” “You bet I can,” the stranger replies and starts for the horse. The ringmaster tries to restrain him, saying: “That horse is dangerous; I warn you that you will be hurt.” But the man ignores the warning. He takes off his coat and goes through the business of clumsily mounting. At last, after an effort, he reaches the horse’s back, pulls a bottle from his pocket, takes a drink and then makes believe he has difficulty in riding. Then the man’s clothes start to fall away from him. In a moment he stands revealed, clad in tights and spangles. He proves to be a graceful and accomplished rider.

The great early-nineteenth-century clown and circus manager Joe Pentland himself is cited as having performed a version of the act; having “disguised himself as a drunken sailor and

… shouted from the seats that he could ride “that danged fat nag.” Amid the jeers of ringmaster and audience the sailor mounted the circus animal, only to fall off repeatedly. But while the audience still jeered at him the sailor doffed his uniform and rode superbly in spangled tights …

Even Dan Rice, the great Shakespearean circus clown, is credited with having performed the routine:

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“Disguised as “Pete Jenkins, from Mud Corners,” the redoubtable [Dan] Rice staggered into the circus ring and, after clinging clumsily to a loping principal horse or resinback, shed countless coats, vests and pantaloons before, properly costumed for circus equestrianism, he pirouetted and somersaulted amazingly.”

Charley Sherwood’s inspiration for Pete Jenkins probably came from the London Fairs by the medium of Joe Pentland. A Clipper article from Sept. 25, 1875 cites William Hone’s recollections in The Every-day Book.

(T)he clown got up, and rode with many antic tricks, till, on the sudden, an apparently drunken fellow rushed from the audience into the ring, and began to pull the clown from the horse. The manager interfered, and the people cried, ‘Turn him out!’ but the man persisted, and the clown, getting off, offered to help him up, and threw him over the horse’s back to the ground. At length the intruder was seated, with his face to the tail, though he gradually assumed a proper position, and, riding as a man thoroughly intoxicated would ride, fell off; he then threw off his hat and greatcoat, and his waistcoat, and then an under-waistcoat, and a third, and a fourth, and more than a dozen waistcoats. Upon taking off the last, his trousers fell down, and he appeared in his shirt; whereupon he crouched, and, drawing his shirt off in a twinkling, appeared in a handsome fancy dress, leaped into the saddle, rode standing with great grace, received great applause, made his bows, and so the performance concluded.

Thomas Frost’s book, The Old Showmen and the Old London Fairs, likewise documents the antecedents of many contemporary American popular performance traditions in continental theatricals. His account of the “flying wardrobe act” contributes some useful notes on its delivery in the British tradition:

The whole concluded with a countryman who, suddenly starting from the ring, desires to be permitted to ride, which is at first refused, but at length allowed; he mounts, and after a short time, beginning to grow warm, pulls off his coat, then his waistcoat, then another and another to the number of thirteen, at last with much apparent modesty and reluctance his shirt; having done this, he appears a splendid rider, and after a few evolutions, terminates the performance. This rider’s name was Price.

It was after transferring to Pentland’s circus that, in 1851, with Pentland in the role of Clown, and one Capt. De Camp as the ringmaster, Sherwood adapted what had hitherto been known as

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803 (London: Tegg, 1845)
804 The New York Clipper, Sept. 25, 1875, p. 204.
the “flying wardrobe act” into Pete Jenkins. As his obituary\textsuperscript{806} insists, Sherwood was the leading American exponent of the Pete Jenkins act, and several other testimonials to be found within that publication support the notion that this performance was, at least originally, to be identified with him.\textsuperscript{807}

\textsuperscript{806} \textit{New York Clipper}, Dec. 25, 1875.

\textsuperscript{807} A playbill for Wheeler, Hatch and Hitchcock’s Circus from July 1864, bills him as follows: “Among the conspicuous talent of this equestrian troupe is the far-famed SHERWOOD FAMILY / including the inimitable PETE JENKINS by MR. CHAS. SHERWOOD. This act is performed by Mr. Sherwood only.” – \textit{New York Clipper}, May 30, 1874, p. 68. C.f. also \textit{The New York Clipper}, Oct. 31 1868, p. 238, where a review of Sherwood’s appearance with the European Circus “on the lot on Thirty-fourth Street, near Broadway” on Oct. 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1868, likewise identifies the act as uniquely his own: “Charley Sherwood’s act of “Pete Jenkins” is one of the most pleasing acts of the kind put in a ring and is always well received. Charley is immensely funny as Pete.”
APPENDIX 5.B. FROM H. J. LIJSEN’S *TRICK RIDING AND VOLTIGE*.

THE LEG PASS
The pupil, sitting astride, throws his right leg over the horse’s neck as if to dismount, but as soon as the leg reaches the near side he leans on both grips and passes the right leg under the left and back over the horse’s quarters to regain the astride position …

TURNING ROUND
In this trick both legs are thrown high and outstretched in the air, as for kneeling, but the legs are crossed at the top of the swing so that the left leg falls on the off side and the right leg falls on the near side. As the legs come down the rider lets go of the grip so that his body follows its natural movement and turns to face the tail. The hands are immediately placed in front of the body on the horse’s crupper. He then throws his left leg up and over the horse’s neck, letting his left shoulder follow in the same direction so that he turns left about and lands in the ring on both feet, beside the horse and facing the direction in which it is moving …

FORWARD SWING
The pupil kneels on both knees, but holds the grips so that his fingers face outwards. He then places his right shoulder in front of the roller, letting his head drop down as far as possible on the near side of the horse’s neck. Next he throws his legs high up and over so that he lands in the ring on his left foot, which should be a little in front … This movement can also be made inwards, the rider starting with both feet on the off-side of the horse; and also backwards, in which he lands behind the tail.

NECK AND SHOULDER STAND
The movements here are similar to the forward swing, but the rider does not hold the grips, he tucks his fingers under the rear edge of the roller. When his right shoulder rests on the base of the horse’s neck, he throws his legs up and holds them straight in a vertical position.

NEAR-SIDE MOUNT
This is made in the same way as mounting astride, but the right leg is not thrown over the horse’s back, both legs remain on the near side, as if one were riding side-saddle.

OFF-SIDE MOUNT
In this movement both legs are thrown over the back of the horse and remain on the off side.

SADDLE LEAP
The rider runs alongside the horse, his right hand resting on the horse’s near quarter. He then makes a high jump, taking off with his left leg; when he reaches the highest point he swings his right leg forward over the neck of the horse to land astride.

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TRANSVERSAL (From off foot-hold)
The right foot is placed in the off *staffè*. The rider, putting his weight on the right foot, lets go of the left grip and flings his left leg over first the crupper and then over his right leg, turning his body as he goes so that he lies with his back across the bottom of the horse’s neck. The top part of the body is lowered down towards the ground and the left arm stretched towards the sawdust.
## APPENDIX 6: REPRESENTATIVE AMERICAN AND BRITISH SONG AND DANCE TEAMS

### 6.1 American Acrobatic Song and Dance Teams:

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<td>Fox &amp; Ward</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Four Diamonds</td>
<td>Goss &amp; Fox</td>
<td>Goss &amp; Fox</td>
<td>Goss &amp; Fox</td>
<td>Goss &amp; Fox</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fox &amp; Ward</td>
<td>Thomas Granger</td>
<td>Thomas Granger</td>
<td>Thomas Granger</td>
<td>Thomas Granger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goss &amp; Fox</td>
<td>Griffin &amp; Marks</td>
<td>Griffin &amp; Marks</td>
<td>Griffin &amp; Marks</td>
<td>Griffin &amp; Marks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas Granger</td>
<td>Manchester &amp; Jennings</td>
<td>Manchester &amp; Jennings</td>
<td>Manchester &amp; Jennings</td>
<td>Manchester &amp; Jennings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manchester &amp; Jennings</td>
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<td>Manchester &amp; Jennings</td>
<td>Manchester &amp; Jennings</td>
<td>Manchester &amp; Jennings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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809 Foley and Wade are acknowledged as “acrobatic song and dance men” as early as May, 1873 (c.f. *The New York Clipper*, 17 May, 1873, p. 55).
### 6.2 American Break-neck Song and Dance Teams:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1874–1875</th>
<th>1875–1876</th>
<th>1876–1877</th>
<th>1877–1878</th>
<th>1878–1879</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emerson &amp; Clark</td>
<td>Emerson &amp; Clark</td>
<td>Crumley &amp; DeForrest Cummings &amp; Hines Emerson &amp; Clark Petrie &amp; Fish Welby &amp; Pearl</td>
<td>Crumley &amp; DeForrest Cummings &amp; Hines Emerson &amp; Clark Petrie &amp; Fish Turner &amp; Geyer Welby &amp; Pearl</td>
<td>Crumley &amp; DeForrest Cummings &amp; Hines Emerson &amp; Clark Goldie &amp; Steele Petrie &amp; Fish Turner &amp; Geyer Welby &amp; Pearl</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crumley &amp; DeForrest Emerson &amp; Clark</td>
<td>Emerson &amp; Clark</td>
<td>Crumley &amp; DeForrest Emerson &amp; Clark Gallagher &amp; West Goldie &amp; Steele Keating &amp; Flynn (Petrie &amp; Fish)</td>
<td>Welby &amp; Pearl</td>
<td>Big Little Four Crumley &amp; DeForrest Emerson &amp; Clark Gallagher &amp; West Goldie &amp; Steele Keating &amp; Flynn Mason &amp; Lord (Petrie &amp; Fish) Welby &amp; Pearl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerson &amp; Clark</td>
<td>Gallagher &amp; West Goldie &amp; Steele Keating &amp; Flynn (Petrie &amp; Fish)</td>
<td>Welby &amp; Pearl</td>
<td>Big Little Four Emerson &amp; Clark Gallagher &amp; West Goldie &amp; Steele Keating &amp; Flynn Mason &amp; Lord Petrie &amp; Fish Welby &amp; Pearl</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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810 N.b. Petrie & Fish embark on a European tour in 1878, from which they do not return until 1883.
### 6.3 American Knockabout Song and Dance Teams:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1879-1880</th>
<th>1880-1881</th>
<th>1881-1882</th>
<th>1882-1883</th>
<th>1883-1884</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>American Four</td>
<td>American Four</td>
<td>American Four</td>
<td>American Four</td>
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<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
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<tr>
<td>1884-1885</td>
<td>1885-1886</td>
<td>1886-1887</td>
<td>1887-1888</td>
<td>1888-1889</td>
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<tr>
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<td>American Four</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
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<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
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<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
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</tbody>
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811 By this time, Welby and Pearl are no longer identified as breaknecks, but as knockabout acrobats.
812 Emerson and Clark break up in March, 1888, to reunite briefly in 1891. In the meantime, Morton Emerson has teamed up with James Cook to form a knockabout song and dance team, while Willis Clark teams up for the same purpose with one Fisher, also in 1888.
813 Keating and Flynn begin advertising themselves as knockabouts in this year.
### 6.4 British Minstrel Knockabouts, 1875-1894:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>American Four</th>
<th>Australian Trio</th>
<th>Blocksom &amp; Burns</th>
<th>Comedy Four</th>
<th>Cooper &amp; Lovely</th>
<th>Emerson &amp; Cook</th>
<th>Keating &amp; Flynn</th>
<th>Topack &amp; Steele</th>
<th>VanLeer &amp; Barton</th>
<th>Welby &amp; Pearl</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1889-1890</td>
<td>American Four</td>
<td>Australian Trio</td>
<td>Blocksom &amp; Burns</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Cooper &amp; Lovely</td>
<td>Emerson &amp; Cook</td>
<td>Keating &amp; Flynn</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>VanLeer &amp; Barton</td>
<td>Welby &amp; Pearl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890-1891</td>
<td>American Four</td>
<td>Australian Trio</td>
<td>Blocksom &amp; Burns</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Cooper &amp; Lovely</td>
<td>Emerson &amp; Cook</td>
<td>Keating &amp; Flynn</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>VanLeer &amp; Barton</td>
<td>Welby, Pearl &amp; Keys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1892</td>
<td>American Four</td>
<td>Australian Trio</td>
<td>Blocksom &amp; Burns</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Cooper &amp; Lovely</td>
<td>Emerson &amp; Cook</td>
<td>Keating &amp; Flynn</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>VanLeer &amp; Barton</td>
<td>Welby, Pearl &amp; Keys</td>
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<tr>
<td>1892-1893</td>
<td>American Four</td>
<td>Australian Trio</td>
<td>Blocksom &amp; Burns</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Cooper &amp; Lovely</td>
<td>Emerson &amp; Cook</td>
<td>Keating &amp; Flynn</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>VanLeer &amp; Barton</td>
<td>Welby, Pearl &amp; Keys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893-1894</td>
<td>American Four</td>
<td>Australian Trio</td>
<td>Blocksom &amp; Burns</td>
<td>Comedy Four</td>
<td>Cooper &amp; Lovely</td>
<td>Emerson &amp; Cook</td>
<td>Keating &amp; Flynn</td>
<td>Topack &amp; Steele</td>
<td>VanLeer &amp; Barton</td>
<td>Welby, Pearl, Keys &amp; Nellis</td>
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</tbody>
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814 The Australian Trio become the duo Gallagher and Griffin after the suicide of Miss Ada Devere in October, 1892.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sipple &amp; Dickens (American)</td>
<td>Lisburn &amp; M’Coy</td>
<td>Henderson &amp; Stanley</td>
<td>Carlin &amp; Price</td>
<td>Spry &amp; Monti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gates &amp; Hallam (American)</td>
<td>Belmont &amp; Evans</td>
<td>Cyrus Walling</td>
<td>Snowdon &amp; Leslie</td>
<td>Handford &amp; Spry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walling &amp; Russell Smith &amp; Hawkins (“real blacks”)</td>
<td>Colvil &amp; Edwards</td>
<td>Brothers Tullott</td>
<td>Brothers Barber</td>
<td>The Three Jeffs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hasberrie &amp; Raynor</td>
<td>Sisters Dashwood</td>
<td>Calvert &amp; Clifford</td>
<td>(Snowdon, Leslie, &amp; Percy)</td>
<td>(The Two Tough ‘Uns)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vern &amp; Volt</td>
<td>Nish &amp; Martin</td>
<td>Harry Walker</td>
<td>Wade &amp; Waller</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three Jolly Coons</td>
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<td>Ray, Dwight &amp; Ray</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leonard &amp; Pine</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lisburn &amp; McCoy</td>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sandford &amp; Kenyon</td>
<td>The Australian Trio</td>
<td>The Jolly Coons</td>
<td>Fisk &amp; Fletch</td>
<td>Sandy &amp; Carl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colvil &amp; Edwards</td>
<td>Hasberrie &amp; Raynor</td>
<td>Reynolds &amp; Lewis</td>
<td>The Three Carnos</td>
<td>Colvil &amp; Eduard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Brothers Saker</td>
<td>The Original Carnos</td>
<td>Hasberrie &amp; Raynor</td>
<td>Hartley &amp; De Mar</td>
<td>Sipple &amp; Dickens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spry &amp; Monti</td>
<td>Wade &amp; Waller</td>
<td>Fisk &amp; Fletch</td>
<td>Evans &amp; Brighton</td>
<td>Beaumont &amp; Burton &amp; Little</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Jolly Coons</td>
<td>The Brothers Saker</td>
<td>Scully &amp; Morrell</td>
<td>The Brothers Summers</td>
<td>Albert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jake Stuart &amp; Fred Adams)</td>
<td>The Jolly Coons</td>
<td>Colvil &amp; Eduard</td>
<td>The Black Macs</td>
<td>Hasberrie &amp; Raynor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Three Jeffs</td>
<td>The Three Jeffs</td>
<td>(The Two Tough ‘Uns)</td>
<td>Sandy &amp; Carl</td>
<td>Bishop &amp; Vale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert &amp; M’Cane</td>
<td>Beaumont &amp; Burton</td>
<td>Two Fletchers</td>
<td>Waters &amp; Kelly</td>
<td>Stuart, Adams &amp; Cony</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elliott &amp; Renson</td>
<td>The American Team</td>
<td>Brothers Willan</td>
<td>Beaumont &amp; Burton &amp; Little</td>
<td>Lisburn &amp; O’Marr</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nish &amp; Martin</td>
<td>Churchill and Osler</td>
<td>(Acrobatic)</td>
<td>Albert</td>
<td>The Buffalo Boys</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bennett &amp; Harley</td>
<td>Dale and Royston</td>
<td>Beaumont &amp; Burton &amp; Little</td>
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<td>The Niagara Boys</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890–1891</td>
<td>1891–1892</td>
<td>1892–1893</td>
<td>1893–1894</td>
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<td>Ashley &amp; Beach</td>
<td>Keeffe &amp; Keffran</td>
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<td>Burton &amp; Albert</td>
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<td>Bunth &amp; Bond</td>
<td>Fisk &amp; Fletch</td>
<td>Colvil &amp; Eduard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hartley &amp; De Mar</td>
<td>Hartley &amp; De Mar</td>
<td>The Niagara Boys</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mason &amp; Dixon</td>
<td>Colvil &amp; Eduard</td>
<td>Hartley &amp; De Mar</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brooks &amp; Duncan</td>
<td>M’Kay &amp; Grant</td>
<td>Fardell &amp; Willis</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Cool Clezy &amp; Ted</td>
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<td>Wade &amp; Waller</td>
<td>Wills</td>
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<td>Discord &amp; Howard</td>
<td>Black Cookey</td>
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<td>The Niagara Boys</td>
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<td>Finlay &amp; Rankin</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Vincent &amp; Hart</td>
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6.5 British Knockabout Song and Dance Teams 1875-1894:

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<td>Smith &amp; Hawkins</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(“real blacks”)</td>
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<td>Harrison</td>
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<td>Bennett &amp; Harley</td>
<td>Passmore Brothers</td>
<td>Lewis &amp; Benson</td>
<td>Fredericks &amp; Drew</td>
<td>Wilkinson &amp; Green</td>
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<tr>
<td>Topack &amp; Horner</td>
<td>The Brothers Juan</td>
<td>The Parellis (Fred. &amp; James)</td>
<td>Thomas &amp; Newton</td>
<td>Saker &amp; Dice</td>
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<td>Joe Alberto &amp; Sara</td>
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<tbody>
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<td>Wilford &amp; Willis</td>
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<td>Chippendale &amp;</td>
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<td>Brothers</td>
<td>Bunth &amp; Bond</td>
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<tr>
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<td>The Majiltons</td>
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<td>The Clodoche Troupe</td>
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<td>The Girards</td>
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<td>The Phoites</td>
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815 From 1880-1883 the Girard Brothers team up with Seamon and Somers to form The Four Grotesques.
816 The Four Grotesques (Seamon, Somers and the Girard Brothers) travel to England with Sam Hague’s minstrels and disband there 5 months later, the Girards returning to America – cf. *New York Clipper* May 31, 1890, p. 183.
### 6.7 Eccentric Song and Dance Teams (U.S.) 1875-1900:

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<td>McKee &amp; Rogers</td>
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<td>Andy &amp; George McKee</td>
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818 Thomas and Flora Lorella are both killed in a theatre fire in Philadelphia, April 28, 1892 (c.f. New York Clipper, May 7, 1892, p. 131).
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<td>Cronin &amp; Wild</td>
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<td>Van Leer &amp; Barton</td>
<td>The Olifans</td>
<td>Van Leer &amp; Barton</td>
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819 They disband in this year (c.f. The New York Clipper May 23, 1891, p. 521), reunite in April, 1892 (c.f. New York Clipper, April 30, 1892, p. 127), and continue with slightly different personnel into the next century.
Copyright Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lesley Gowers of J.A. Allen, publisher, for permission to use the extracts and illustrations from H.J. Lijsen's *De Hooge School* (translated by Antony Hippisley Coxe as *Trick Riding and Voltige* and published by J.A. Allen in 1956).

I thank Jack Hardy of Grapevine Video, both for permission to reproduce frame enlargements from Norman Taurog’s “Fast and Furious,” and for Grapevine’s generous offer of a remastered version of the film from which to make my enlargements.

I would also like to thank Steve Massa for his generous permission to cite our private correspondence in Chapter 6.