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Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy

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Whether judged by production statistics, contemporary critical acclaim, audience popularity or retrospective opinions, it is abundantly clear that the American silent film comedy was flourishing in the mid-twenties, rivaling drama as the dominant form of cinematic expression. My aim in this essay is to rethink the function of the gag in relation to the comic film as a classical system. I seek not to examine or catalog all the possible variations of the gag (as joke, as articulation of cinema space or as thematic permutations) but rather to examine its operation in the slapstick genre.

Let us introduce the subject by way of an amusing account of a screening of Charlie Chaplin films in Accra (Ghana, Africa), reported in the New York Times in 1925:

It was a film from the remote antiquity of filmdom; a film from the utter dark ages of the cinematograph, so patched and pieced and replied that all continuity was gone; a piebald hash chosen from the remains of various comedies and stuck together with no plot. Just slapstick. But Charlie had survived ever that, and how they did love it!

The anecdote provides several insights into both the reception of films in a non-western culture and the status of film comedy in its "golden age." Most important for us, it expresses the opinion that this assemblage of Chaplin shorts is primitive, in the view of the reporter, because it lacks continuity. The writer intuitively distinguishes between linear aspects of film (plot, narrative, diegesis) and nonlinear components (spectacle and gag). Take away the story and what do you have left? "Just slapstick."

Much criticism of silent film comedy still hinges on the dichotomy between narrative and gag. Gerald Mast remarks in The Comic Mind that Max Linder's film Seven Years' Bad Luck "is interested in a gag, not a story to contain the gags or a character to perform them," or that the plots of Sennett's Keystone films "are merely apparent structures, collections of literary formulas and clichés to hang the gags on." In such statements, there is an implicit valorization of narrative over gags. These films are flawed because the elements of slapstick are not "integrated" with other elements (character, structure, vision, cinematic style—Mast's criteria).

In this reading of film comedy, slapstick is the bad element, an excessive tendency that narrative must contain. Accordingly the history of the genre is usually teleological, written as though the eventual replacement of the gag by narrativized comedy was natural, ameliorative or even predestined.

While viewing dozens of short comedies from the teens and twenties in preparation for the Slapstick Symposium, it became clear that there was no such selective process operating. On the contrary, slapstick cinema seems to be ruled by the principle of accretion: gags, situations, costumes, characters and camera techniques are rehearsed and recycled in film after film, as though the modernist emphasis on originality and the unique text was unheard of. Unlike "mainstream" dramatic cinema, which progressed rapidly through styles, techniques and stories, nothing was discarded in slapstick.

Camera tricks perfected by Méliès and Zecca are still in evidence a quarter-century later; music hall turns that were hoary when Chaplin, Linder and Keaton introduced them to cinema in the teens were still eliciting laughs by those clowns and others at the end of the silent period. We are forced to ask, if gags were so scorned, then why did the gag film linger on for so long, an important mode of cinematic discourse for at least forty years? And is there not something perverse about arguing that what is "wrong" with a film form is that which defines it to begin with?

The distinction between slapstick and narrative has been properly perceived, but incorrectly interpreted. I contend that it was never the aim of comic filmmakers to "integrate" the gag elements of their movies. I also doubt that viewers subordinated gags to narrative. In fact, the separation between the vertical domain of slapstick (the arena of spectacle I will represent by the metaphor of the thrown pie) and the horizontal domain of the story (the arena of the chase) was a calculated rupture, designed to keep the two elements antagonistically apart. In Narration in the Fiction Film, David Bordwell asks, "Is there anything in narrative film that is not narrational?" My answer is yes: the gag.

If we examine typical Hal Roach two-reel comedies from 1925 and 1926, we find a laboratory for what some film analysts have described as the series of symmetries and blockages that define the systematics of classical American cinema. At the same time, it is important to differen-
tiate these films from the contemporaneous feature. While at first the narrative structures of the shorts may resemble condensations or abridgments (features with the boring bits taken out), the high concentration of gag and spectacle defines the genre as unique. Among other features, the frequent intrusions of spectacle produce a kind of narrative lurching that often makes the plots of slapstick comedies distinctly incoherent (and delightfully so).

**The Pie**

Let us first look more closely at those nonnarrative gag elements that the term slapstick usually encompasses. This usage is appropriate when we consider the origin of that word, referring to a circus prop consisting of two thin slats joined together, so that a loud clack is made when one clown hits another on the behind. The violent aural effect, the "slap," may be thought of as having the same kind of disruptive impact on the audience as its visual equivalent in the silent cinema, the pie in the face. In fact, very few comedies of the twenties really used pies, but nevertheless their humor in a general sense frequently depended on the same kind of emphatic, violent, embarrassing gesture.

The lack of linear integration that offends some slapstick commentators can trace its roots to popular spectacle. For example, in his 1915 home correspondence manual, Brett Page advised would-be vaudeville writers that their scripts must account for the actors’ business. He meant the visual, nonverbal performance component, "done to drive the spoken words home, or to 'get over' a meaning without words." His pupils learned that:

So large a part does the element of business play in the success of the two-act that the early examples of this vaudeville form were nearly all built out of bits of business. And the business was usually of the "slapstick" kind. (p. 98)

Page defined slapstick as physical gags, and consistently emphasized its nonverbal nature:

Every successful two-act, every entertainment-form of which acting is an element—the playlet and the full-evening play as well—prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that what audiences laugh at—what you and I laugh at—is not words, but actions and situations. (p. 108)

Page easily generalized and shifted his focus from the nonverbal to the nonnarrative. About the vaudeville sketch he wrote,

**The purpose of the sketch is not to leave a single impression of a single story. It points no moral, draws no conclusion, and sometimes comes to an end quite as effectively anywhere before the beginning of which it does terminate. It is built for entertainment purposes and serves no other purpose, and entertainments purposes that end the moment the sketch ends.** (p. 147)

Recalling the African projection of the fragmented Chaplin films, the movie might have been incomprehensible as a narrative, but it worked fine as a filmic sketch, an assembly of nonverbal gags. Such an aesthetic of spectacle for its own sake is clearly inimical to the classical narrative feature, but not at all hostile to slapstick cinema of the teens and twenties.

Again, we can use this concept to discriminate between the comic shorts and the comic feature. The latter purposefully (and more or less successfully) sought to produce an "integrated" spectacle. Certainly *The General* and *The Gold Rush* are exemplary in their attempt to set the hero's struggles within a determinant Griffithesque historical fiction. But when one examines the two-reelers, even late in the twenties and well into the sound era one finds a preponderance of anarchic non- and quasinarratives that pass for movie stories.

Generally, there is a simple plot which frames the gags, with an opening premise and a closing scene which provides a resolution. The gags may or may not be thematically related. Whether this is a narrative depends on how insistently one defines it. I argue that despite a weakly structured set of causes and effects, many of these films remain, at best, quasinarratives. Although the shorts emulate feature film narrative structures, the audience is scarcely aware of it, navigating the film from laugh to laugh as though enjoying a sketch. This is gag-driven cinema.

There can be no concrete definition of a gag because it is marked by affective response, not set forms or clear logic. Further, gag and slapstick are not synonymous. Slapstick is the generic term for these nonnarrative intrusions, while gags are specific forms of intrusions. Like verbal jokes, to which they are closely related, gags have their own loose structures, systems and "fuzzy" logic that exist independently of cinema. The gag may also contain its own microscopic narrative system that may be irrelevant to the larger narrative, may mirror it, or may even work against it as parody. "Sight gags," those that depend primarily on visual exposition, still have characteristic logical structures, the same that one finds in multiple comic strips. Think, for example, of the gag in *Jes' Passin' Through*, a Will Rogers film from 1932, produced by Hal Roach and directed by Charles Parrott (a.k.a. Charley Chase). We see a hobo checking the gates of houses for the special chalk tramp-sign that indicates whether there is a mean dog inside. One can easily see how the sequence could be presented
effectively as a wordless comic strip. In the first two frames we would see images of the tramp eschewing those yards with the mark on the gate (the exposition of the nonhumorous part of the joke that vaudevillians would have called the "buildup"); in the penultimate panel we would see him fleeing a yard through an unmarked gate with a dog in hot pursuit; the final panel would show him adding his own beware-the-dog sign to the gate. Whether this corresponds to a "punch line" depends on how much visual/narrative information is perceived, and how the viewer's expectations are subverted.

Other examples of "comic strip logic" might be mistaken identity gags (accomplished by fluid montage and parodic sight line constructions) such as the one that begins the Charley Chase film Looking for Sally (1925): from a ship's deck, the arriving hero waves to a girl on the dock whom he incorrectly assumes to be his fiancée; she waves back, not to Charley (as he thinks) but (as we see) to her friend on another deck. (See also Chaplin's A Dog's Life for the same gag.)

Also commonplace are camera tricks, for instance, double exposures and animation, that exploit the film medium's capacity of disrupting the normal vision that the narrative depends on for its consistency and legibility. Manipulation of cause and effect—for example, when a little action produces a disproportionate reaction—is another form of cinematic excess characteristic of the sight gag. It is important to remember that the narrative content of the gag may be nil—for example the jarring close-ups of Ben Turpin's eyes. Such cases are illustrations of what Eisenstein called "attractions," elements of pure spectacle.

Writing in 1923, Eisenstein defined the "attraction" as: "every aggressive moment in [the theater], i.e. every element of it that brings to light in the spectator those senses or that psychology that influence his experience."48 Eisenstein also referred to those moments as "emotional shocks," and insisted that they are always psychologically disruptive (for example, the gouging out of an eye). He contrasted the attraction to the lyrical, that being the part of the presentation readily assimilated by the spectator. Probably referring to The Kid (1921) he notes that the lyrical may coexist with the disruptive attraction, for example, the "specific mechanics of Chaplin's movement." In slapstick comedy, I am claiming, there is a variant of this concept: the "lyrical" is the narrative, functioning as the regulating component; the "attraction" is the gag or, again in Eisenstein's words, the "brake" that has to be applied to sharpened dramatic moments.49 In another context, Tom Gunning has described early cinema (pre-1906) as a "cinema of attraction:"

Gunning's observation is astute; the disruptive gags of slapstick can be regarded as anachronistic manifestation of the cinema of attraction. I disagree, though, with his unwillingness to polarize the two components. While other genres work to contain their excesses, this opposition is fundamental to slapstick. Furthermore it is carefully constructed to remain an unbridgeable gap. In this sense it is not underground, but instead overt, flagrant and flamboyant.

The Chase

Let us look briefly at the other component, the Chase, or the narrative dimension of film comedy. Again, rather than examining specific narrative structures, it is enough for our purposes to say that the narrative is the propelling element, the fuel of the film that gives it its power to go from beginning to end. (To continue the automotive metaphor, one would say that the gags are the potholes, detours and flat tires encountered by the Tin Lizzie of the narrative on its way to the end of the film.) Film narrative has been the subject of considerable recent scholarly exposition, and rightly so. But its other, that is, those elements that block narrativity—the Pie—has been dismissed as textual excess, if it has been considered at all. Although, in the twenties, actual chases were more frequent than pie-throwings, I am also using the term Chase metaphorically, suggesting the linear trajectory of the narrative in general, not a specific instance. The term includes many characteristic plots, such as pursuing a criminal, retrieving a lost object, restoring a family, and—most importantly—reuniting a separated couple in a presumed marriage. Of course the same themes predominate in dramatic films as well, and we should bear in mind that, as Gunning, Eileen Bowser, Andrew Horton and others have noted, the line between comedy and melodrama can be very fine. One thinks, for example, of Anita Loos's claim that she tried to turn the
screenplay of Griffith's *The Struggle* (based on *Ten Nights in a Barroom*) into a comic farce, while the film that Griffith made from the screenplay turned out to be a "serious" temperance melodrama. The disruptive elements, the parodic "attractions" concocted by Loos, were recuperated by Griffith's narrative priorities.

**So Much for Theory . . .**

When Steve Neale writes of "the emergence of terms like Fate, Chance and Destiny," or "a character's mistaken perception, or lack of knowledge," instead of melodrama, he could just as well be discussing *His Wooden Wedding*, a short produced in 1925 by Hal Roach, directed by Leo McCarey, and starring Charley Chase. 14

Rich playboy Charley is marrying Katherine (Katherine Grant) on Friday the 13th. The date is a portent of the loss of stasis that is about to occur, and an explanation, couched in the uncanny, of several aspects of bad luck that will inevitably mar the wedding: the best man (unknown to Charley) is Katherine's rejected suitor, who is spiteful and, besides, would like to steal the diamond engagement ring. He plants false knowledge, in the form of a note to Charley informing him that his fiancée is not what she seems: "Beware! The girl you are about to marry has a wooden leg." By coincidence (extraordinary in life, but typical in fiction), Katherine sprains her ankle just before the wedding, causing her to limp down the aisle, apparently substantiating the outrageous rumor. Charley shouts "Stop! I've been engaged to a girl with a wooden leg—-I must break it off." When he confronts Katherine in her room after the aborted wedding ceremony, he is unaware that he is actually speaking to a manikin.

In the course of his explanation, her leg falls off and he walks out.

Drowning his sorrows in a bottle of wine, Charley then boards a cruise ship to forget Katherine's presumed treachery. On board he discovers the plot, recovers the diamond, and turns the boat around to meet Katherine, who has learned independently of the hoax and is following the ship on her father's yacht. When she arrives, Charley and the rival are struggling in the water. She strips down to her bathing suit to save Charley and, when the villain is hauled aboard, she displays her very real bare leg and uses it to kick him back into the water, thus cancelling the effects of his libelous false knowledge with this empirical demonstration of her corporeal integrity.

What is especially interesting, and also very typical of many shorts of the period, is the manner in which the apparent narrative closure, eliminating the villain, is not really final. There is a coda reunion scene as the lovers pose in an embrace. The formal tableau ending suggests that the symmetry of the narrative is insufficient by itself to properly close the film.

It is as though the narrative's validity must be confirmed by subsuming it into spectacle showing that the initial promise of order—the protagonists' marriage—will be fulfilled. To put it another way, the man and woman must be rejoined and visually wed before they can be wed in the later fiction, the one after the film ends, the one the spectator (not the filmmaker) creates. 15

Also typical of comedy as well as melodrama is the insistence on a woman's body as the site for restoring natural order through heterosexual coupling. In this reading, the imagery in Chase's film is essentially a castration nightmare: the revelation to the groom on his wedding day that his bride has a horrifying lack (a symbolic missing leg) and an intolerable replacement (the metonymic wooden member). Charley contemplates his future children and the family dog all sporting peg legs, as if the wound were a genetic flaw passed on by the wife. The woman is being projected as the scene of the man's fears and anxieties concerning familial responsibility and sexual performance. Only when the threat of the woman's repugnant phallic intrusion into their relationship, the despised wooden leg, is removed ("broken off") can the wedding—of flesh and not of wood—take place.

This film is an excellent example of how gag and narrative interact and regulate each other by means of a lively dialectic. One cannot help but compare the complex system of alternation of spectacle and diegesis to the same systems observable in Eisenstein's films of the period. While space does not allow a thorough analysis, we can point out some of the ways in which gags disturb the narrative.

The film's opening scenes of wedding preparations provide the armature for an "instant" narrative form, since viewers understand the protocol of such ceremonies. But expectations for a normal unfolding of events are soon derailed. Instead of providing background information on the story or characters, the intertitles make gratuitous jokes that interfere with our comprehension: "The happy bridegroom—So excited he telephoned the minister to bring along a shotgun and a good bird dog." The verbal content diverts the narrative rather than advancing it. The rival's note about the wooden leg similarly challenges the viewer to rationalize a motive for its effect. Why would the rival choose this particular lie (instead of the "usual" marital impediments: bigamy, secret lovers, dreaded diseases, racial taint, illegitimate children)? Would not even the most priggish of grooms already be aware of this physical trait of his fiancée? Would having a prosthesis really be sufficient grounds for halting a marriage? To "explain" Charley's motives, the viewer sees a subjective vision of Charley's family in the future; but what Charley imagines is biologically impossible. However improbable, it nevertheless convinces him to interrupt the wedding. The spectacle of the wooden-legged family also halts
the deployment of the ready-made narrative of the wedding ceremony. In a trope that will be replayed several times in the film, a small action (the bogus note) prompts a massive and irrational overreaction (the cancellation).

But the disjunctive titles are inserted into a very ordinary mise-en-scène quite typical of any 1920s feature (complete with characteristic matchcuts, eyeline matches, and so on). The exception is when Charley looks at the camera and performs his signature “slow burn,” for instance when the manikin (whom he has mistaken for Katherine) loses her leg.

The advancement of the wedding ceremony is frequently halted by Charley’s inappropiate actions: he attempts to shake the hand of an old friend, he is distracted by the crying mother-in-law-to-be. And fate intervenes when Katherine sprains her ankle. When Charley exits the wedding, the restoration of the narrative commences by way of a triple pursuit structure. Katherine, learning of the hoax, follows Charley; the rival pursues Charley to get the diamond; and Charley seeks the diamond (and thence Katherine). These three motives are articulated in parallel montage sequences.

Each pursuit has its own trajectory, which is protracted by fate’s intervention: The rival retrieves the diamond, but loses it to Charley in a hat mix-up; Katherine and her father pursue Charley but keep just missing him; Charley finds the diamond but loses it in a woman passenger’s clothing. Neale’s description of melodrama structure is once again applicable here:

The constantly changing and apparently arbitrary course of events articulates and intensifies these vicissitudes, and, in turn, is motivated by them. Blockages, barriers and bars to the fulfillment of desire are constantly introduced as events change course.

There are running gags involving hats (thrown overboard, blown by wind, knocked off). There are sight gags (the manikin) and spatial gags (the double door keyhole in the woman’s stateroom). An example of another kind of block is Charley’s subjective insert, in which he fantasizes the “future,” set in faraway 1934. While the viewer understands the diegetic time to be in the character’s future, the diegetic tense is nevertheless the present. For, though it takes a few seconds to unfold on the screen, for Charley, the vision is an instantaneous flash of clairvoyance. The confusion of tense is something like the effect of the temporal lapses in musicals.

Special effects also break into the diegetic world. When the boat swerves there is a cut to a small model ship, hilarious in its obviously. Similarly, the effect of the ship’s turning is done simply by having the actors lean in one direction and fall over. A splice creates the effect of Charley picking up a full decanter of wine and setting down an empty one.

Many of the gags are based on inversions of normal logic. As mentioned, small actions that spark big reactions are a leitmotif. When Charley’s servant tosses his suitcase out the window it destroys a parked car; the policeman tells Charley he cannot park his car on the quay, so he pushes it into the ocean. There is also the truncated syllogism. The joke is set up as a set of logical relations, but the expected conclusion does not follow. Charley throws his hat (with the diamond in it) over the ship’s rail, and it returns three times. But when he throws the captain’s hat it sails away. These subversions of logic undermine the viewer’s ability to match effects with causes.

The most elaborate set piece occurs when Charley entices the woman passenger to dance the Charleston with him in the hopes of shaking loose the diamond. This important scene is semidiegetic; that is, it furthers the narrative in a crucial way—it produces the object of the chase, the diamond—but it is also predominantly a spectacle, and the sequence which provokes the most belly laughs in viewers. Again there is a humorous failure of logic. The dancers’ contortions become more frenetic and gymnastic, causing the woman to shed first her watch, her powder puff, then her brassiere. This progression ad absurdum is anticlimactically cut short when the envelope containing the diamond falls out, and Charley strolls out without a word, as though the episode never took place.

The three pursuits wind down, but are again prolonged by inserting a spectacle—Katherine’s exposed leg—and by the “business” of kicking the rival back into the water. By the time the final closure is achieved, sealed with a kiss between the betrothed, the audience experiences relief, but also a temporal waste, a temps perdu because the “story” has been set back to a time before the film began (the plans for a new wedding have to be made). All that transpired was “excess”—slapstick.

The opposition of Pie and Chase may be outlined in a chart:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Pie”</th>
<th>“Chase”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gag Titles</td>
<td>Glance-object editing style</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inappropriate actions (Charley recognizes old friend as he walks down the aisle)</td>
<td>Expected chain of events (structure of wedding ceremony)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fate (sprained ankle)</td>
<td>Triple pursuit:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mistaken perception (cane for leg)</td>
<td>• Katherine → Charley</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subjective insert (temporal confusion)</td>
<td>• Rival → diamond</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Charley → diamond</td>
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Gunning cites the dance sequence as an example of the recovery of gags by narrativization. True, the purpose served by the scene is to retrieve the engagement ring from the “virgin wilderness of the old maid’s underclothes,” but at what lack of economy! The same function would have been satisfied by Charley’s finding the ring on the deck. Instead the woman is presented in such a way as to reward the audience’s desire to see an old maid making a shimmying spectacle of herself. The abruptness of Charley’s desertion after he gets the ring is funny in part because his offhand gesture points up the irrelevance of the ring to the narrative; it’s a MacGuffin. It is the diegetic content of the scene (ring as object of the chase) that becomes the excessive part of the elaborate joke.

Gunning also rightly notes that my chart contains several elements (such as truncated syllogisms) that, as inversions, are possible only through the gag’s deceptive assimilation of narrative form. He points out that parodies of narratives are still narratives “in which narrative logic is not so much ignored as laid bare.”

No one will argue that His Wooden Wedding is lacking in parody. Charley’s “courting” of the old maid, for example, is a parody of his courtship with Katherine and its vicissitudes (the woman’s agility contrasting with Katherine’s lameness). But again, I maintain that in these instances, the tail really is wagging the dog! To say that the gags’ assimilation of narrative structure is laying bare the illusionist invisibility of the fictional mechanism is simply another way of saying that spectacle is here “containing” narrative, and not the other way around. The “message” of this and other slapstick films is that the seeming hegemony of narrative in the classical cinema is being assaulted by the militant forces of spectacle. The film’s multiple narrative closures are overly redundant, even by classical standards. The obstacles mounted by fate are overcome, but not at the cost of annihilating the impact of the gags. It is the non sequitur components of the humor that we recall best—as in one of Brett Page’s ideal sketches. Like the wedding of the title, the absorption of all the disruptive elements by the narrative never takes place.

If there is a controversy here, it may be resolved simply by asserting that while films generally are not all-or-nothing, spectacle-versus-narrative propositions, there are certain cases that encourage the viewer to see them in just this binary fashion. Don Key, Son of Burro (Roach, 1926) is a good illustration of the slapstick genre’s awareness of its own ambivalent attitude toward narrative containment.

The “story” of the film is minimal: a movie writer enters a producer’s office to pitch his screenplay. As he speaks, the actions of his screenplay appear as a series of vignettes, separated from the main narrative by conventional dissolves. These usually denote another narrative level.
(dream, fantasy, and so on), but in this case, the vignettes show us the writer's fiction.

The joke is that the writer's "story" is only a succession of sight gags and business that ultimately fail the test of a narrative: there is no cause and effect, no consistent pattern or development of the represented events. The "episodes" vary from the surreally strange to the hilariously funny. In one sequence the leading lady's boyfriend is getting a shave. Every time the barber applies the razor, a dog runs up to the chair as though begging for a bone. The barber explains, "He's such an optimist. Once he got an ear."19

As best as can be reconstructed, the writer's "story" begins with a boy who has a chimp as a baby-sitter. They live next to a den of lions. An old, ugly playboy (Jimmy Finlayson) is spying on the girl and her boyfriend. There is a bank robbery, and a sheriff who chases the bandits over railroad tracks and fields. The chimp runs away with the boy, and the playboy falls into the lion's den. All this is punctuated with numerous "pie" elements: Finlayson's constant mannerism of looking at the camera; the chimp's victimization by a pesky duck; Finlayson's kissing the chimp instead of the girl; and extensive animated effects: Finlayson's beating heart, the robbers' car careening around a curve on a cliff; a strange car that bucks off the passengers.

As the writer tells his incomprehensible tale, we cut back to the reactions of the producer and his flunkies. His assistants appear with a sledgehammer, a bomb, and a bow and arrow and ask their boss, "Now?" The producer replies, "Not yet," and finally dismisses the writer. (He shoots the next writer who walks in without even listening to his screenplay.)

The film recounts vividly the antagonism between slapstick business and the institutional drive to subdue it to the demands of Hollywood. By showing plural interpretations of the "screenplay," the film exploits the viewer's conflicting associations. On the one hand, the writer's gags are truly funny, his sight gags successfully crafted; on the other, his film will never be produced (existing only as an unrealized fiction). For the writer it works, for the producer it fails, but we can see it both ways: successful as a comic spectacle; a flop as a movie melodrama.

We can see it binocularly because we know the parameters of film narrative. Our de facto orientation is that of the producer. But unlike him and his yes-men, we do not reject the writer's proposal because of its nonconformity; we relish it precisely because it flaunts conventions of Hollywood storytelling. Certainly this is parody. And the film finally "recuperates" Hollywood by throwing out the writer. But like inadmissible evidence at a trial, the point of the film was understood, and lingers subversively in the minds of the viewers. Slapstick gags are more effective than melodramatic tears.

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**Conclusion**

It may be that the tendency to suppress the antinarrative elements of film history results from a hasty overclassicism of actual Hollywood output in the 1920s. Richard Koszarski has reminded us that cinema in the twenties was *an evening's entertainment.*20 The slapstick short took its place among the travelogues, cartoons, 3-D novelties, sing-alongs, live prologues and musical performances. Like these expressive forms, spectacle "attraction" was the primary characteristic; narrative was greatly diminished, if present at all. Some features—*The General* is a good example—even contained color sequences that were narratively expendable, but contributed visual novelty.

One way to look at narrative is to see it as a system for providing the spectator with sufficient knowledge to make causal links between represented events.21 According to this view, the gag's status as an irreconcilable difference becomes clear. Rather than providing knowledge, slapstick misdirects the viewer's attention, and obscures the linearity of cause-effect relations. Gags provide the opposite of epistemological comprehension by the spectator. They are atemporal bursts of violence and/or hedonism that are as ephemeral and as gratifying as the sight of someone's pie-smitten face.


19. The desire to produce longer films in the period 1907 to 1909 produced some exceptions to this rule, and a number of films linked together a series of one-shot gags all created by the same device. Vitaphone produced a number of these, such as The Thieving Hand, (1908) or Liquid Electricity (1907).

20. “The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiarity, the inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life.” Bergson, “Laughter,” p. 117. If, in this section, I tend to agree with Bergson’s connection of the comic with the mechanical, I would stress two differences between our approaches. First, I see this as a historical phenomenon of an age saturated with the mechanical, and secondly, by my citation of Kleist and Twain indicate, I do not agree with the sentence that follows above: “Consequently it [the mechanical nature] expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and events.”


22. Kerr, Silent Clowns, pp. 144, 149.


24. Crafton, “Pie and Chase.”


28. In ways that are different from each other (and different from my own viewpoint) both Bergson and Carroll also discuss the role that absentmindedness or inattention plays in comic gags. See Bergson, “Laughter,” pp. 155–56, 187, Carroll, “Sight Gags,” p. 30.


33. Twain, “Life on the Mississippi,” p. 298. I thank Louis Schwartz for directing my attention to this Twain story.

5. Gag, Spectacle and Narrative

1. This somewhat grizzled text requires a bit of explanation. In early 1985, Eileen Bowser proposed a "Slapstick Symposium," which would be held in conjunction with a congress of FIAF (The International Federation of Film Archives). Those of us in the New York vicinity were able to preview a selection of films at the Museum of Modern Art. Ms. Bowser’s concept, original and elegantly simple, was that each presentation would be not just a paper, but rather a running commentary integrated with projections of complete films. This was spectacularly successful as live performance at the symposium, which took place May 2–3, 1985, but proved nentlesse when the time came to produce written papers. Besides the shift from an informal verbal mode to written discourse, the presenters/authors had to cope with the inaccessibility of the films for many of the readers.

Meanwhile I was asked to re-present the talk at the Columbia University Seminars at the Museum of Modern Art. I was fortunate to have Tom Gunning, who had participated in the Slapstick Symposium, as my respondent on November 14, 1985. His reactions, suggestions and criticisms, as well as those of others at the symposium and the seminars, were incorporated into the 1988 publication of the proceedings.

Since 1985, of course, the slippery banana peel has been the subject of much serious study, and likewise the study of narrative and narration in cinema has developed. Although I considered writing a completely updated revision for the present anthology, I ultimately rejected the idea. Nevertheless, I have made some changes of emphasis which I believe will clarify some muddiness in the original.

I would like to dedicate this essay to Eileen Bowser, on the occasion of her retirement from the Museum of Modern Art in 1993.


5. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 53. Bordwell’s answer is also yes, but qualified. Such elements are “excess” (citing Kristin Thompson’s analysis of Ivan the Terrible) and “whatever its suggestiveness as a critical concept, excess lies outside my concern here.”


8. Carroll’s distinction between verbal and visual jokes (“Notes on the Sightgag”) is generally, but not always, valid. He argues: “Sight gags differ from verbal jokes. Verbal jokes generally culminate in a punchline that at first glance is incongruous by virtue of its appearing to be nonsense. . . . One is initially stymied by the incongruity of the punchline, which leads to a reinterpretation of the joke material that makes it comprehensible. Sight gags also involve a play of interpretations. But with sight gags, the play of interpretation is often visually available to the audience simultaneously throughout the gag: the audience need not await something akin to the punchline in a verbal joke to put the interpretive play in motion” (p. 27). There are many examples of gags that deliver just such a “punch” due to a surprise cut or change in mise-en-scène, prompting a reinterpretation analogous to the one Carroll describes in verbal humor.


15. The throwaway function of marriage in this film is another good way to distinguish the short from the feature. In *His Wooden Wedding* it is a perfunctory motive, almost a gag in itself; in Keaton’s Seven Chances it is a “narrativized” orchestration of delays that build in intensity. Horton notes that “Most screen comedy concerns romance . . . of one form or another, and romance requires personal compromise and social integration, as traditionally represented in the final marriage” (“Introduction,” *Comedy/Cinema/Theory*, p. 11). The lack of character development, a hallmark of the slapstick short, precludes all but the most brusque references to social integration, whereas the feature foregrounds character development.

16. The passenger is a stereotypically sexist “old maid” character.


18. In a melodrama—or in an “integrated” comedy feature like *City Lights*—the “lost time” of the story is not wasted, because there has been some intangible gain. For example, a character may have gained maturity, or self-knowledge, or may have survived a rite of passage, or two people’s affection may have grown into love. In slapstick the characters are cartoonlike and the plots too shallow to encourage the kind of empathy that leads to melodramatic recuperation. In slapstick shorts, lost time is seldom recovered.

19. Thanks to Peter Demetz for translating the Czech titles on the print back into English for me.


7. Hollywood Romantic Comedy


9. David Bordwell has posited film viewing as a dynamic psychological process, manipulating a variety of factors, among them “prior knowledge and experience: Everything, from recognizing objects and understanding dialogue to comprehending the film’s overall story utilizes previous knowledge.” David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p. 33.


