

From “Ah!” to “Ha!”

**A few thoughts on Comedy
and Catharsis, Tragedy, Pity, Horror, Chaos, Wonder, and Magic**

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Abstract

This thesis begins at the partnership of humor and fear. Though the reactions they elicit are experientially disparate, one positive and one negative, these two universal traits are as comparable to each other as to the poles of a magnet. Fear is essential to humor, and humor is at once fearful and fear-ameliorating. At the risk of altering a wonderful thing by observation, this essay subsequently submits to its author's foolhardy curiosity, and institutes for his extemporization a dichotomy of the expression of fear in film and television comedy, each side typified by one of America's two silent behemoths: Charlie Chaplin, the emotive Tramp; and Buster Keaton the deadpan, the Great Stone Face.

One need only a cursory familiarity with the work of Keaton to know that his performances are as strikingly emotionless as they are divinely lissome. Likewise, one need only the capacity for familiarity to have a cursory knowledge of Chaplin's Tramp, endlessly remarked upon for his suffused pathos. The main argument I defend as regards these primary examples is approximately this: although Chaplin enjoyed a longer and undeniably more successful career, Keaton's approach to humor, precisely through its lack of expressiveness, can prove to be more enduringly funny. Debates over whose style "is funnier" can be only circular. Both clowns are radiantly funny, but they differ in their digestion of pain. The heart of slapstick is pain; it is where fear's shadow leaks through the crack under the door. When Chaplin is in pain, he expresses it. He communicates it exactly, through a sickly grimace or a grin, big and boyish. And through this expression, he alleviates the pain for himself. It is funny to watch, often uproariously so, because we are his passengers on this round-trip excursion to the verge of fear. But when pain befalls Keaton, he suppresses. He abandons us, defenseless against the agents of fear on screen. We are forced to lead the resistance and recuperation that we know must happen,

and to draw from our own wells of pain to do so – which may not be funnier for every viewer, but it is funny almost every single time.

From here, the quantifying and oversimplified dichotomy between Chaplin and Keaton is expanded into a yet-oversimplified spectrum, incorporating more extreme examples. Toward the pole of overtness lurks John Kricfalusi's nightmarish *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, in which every gesture and utterance is a hyperbolized expression of pain. At deadpan's limits we face the unbearable stillness of Swanson in Rick Alverson's *The Comedy*, a grave and nauseating exposition of the cold, quiet depravity of humor. Throughout the lengths of this gradient weaves Andy Kaufman, the self-described "song-and-dance man" whose performances, ranging from mystifyingly childish to violent and offensive, demonstrate a great layering of expressive sincerity, a mesmeric confusion of actor and act, and are invoked as a centerpiece for the final movement of this thesis.

Analytically speaking, the fruits of fear and discomfort are plucked easily from specimens such as these, which are often as upsetting as amusing. Siphoning from a previous essay of my own on the principles of magic evident in Kaufman's comedy, these examples (chiefly Keaton and Chaplin) find unification over their shared resemblance to illusion, another art form to which fear is a companion. Upon that alliance, this contrived spectrum hopes to evolve by the final page's turning into a scheme almost worthy of these great works of humor – something three-dimensional, like a curved film, a swath of the soap-bubble which passingly encapsulates our combustive life from the unfathomable darkness outside that we name death, chaos, infinity, nothingness. This thing is the totality of fear, and it surrounds, and ends only at us. In some places the bubble is thinner than in others. These are the funny spots.

I.

INTRODUCTION

When I was in the seventh grade, I fell in love. Not with Harold Lloyd or stand-up comedy or “the sound of laughter,” all of which were subsequent loves, but with a real live person next to me. Like any middle-school passion, it was all-consuming. She, naturally, had no idea about it. But I believed that if I spent all my time entrenching myself in her company, she had to eventually notice how interesting I was. Three times a year, our school’s curriculum incorporated classes that condensed all the learning of a semester into two weeks. In the January cycle of seventh grade, she signed up for the course that was most like an extension of winter break: two weeks of skiing and snowboarding, with a little education thrown in. Approaching the registration table to formally tag along, I found out that this course was also the most popular. The instructors told me sympathetically that the enrollment limit had already been reached – my suspicion has always been that it was just reserved for the cool kids. I searched for an alternate class to declare, ideally one that would make me cool enough to qualify for skiing the next year. Flipping the pages with sweaty hands, I scanned the course catalog and, miraculously, found precisely what I needed: the theatre.

The class was titled New Vaudeville and Physical Comedy Workshop. It was taught by a pair of twins, guest instructors who I have since learned are big fish in Anchorage’s comedy and theatre worlds. At the time, I knew them only as two of the wittiest and most focused people I had met. Besides teachers, they served as director and co-star of an original production that the New Vaudeville class rehearsed and staged at the close of our two weeks (ironically, I played a skier). They also screened for us some of the silent comedy masterpieces, demonstrated and led

exercises in various slapstick techniques, and introduced us to the basic schools of thought concerning the analysis of humor. Among these schools of thought, one was presented almost as an aside, with reticent curiosity more than certitude: the theory that humor comes directly out of fear. Our lecturers illustrated the behaviors of laughter (mouth opened, sharp sounds emitted, knees slapped) in comparison with those of other mammals dissuading a perceived threat (mouth opened, sharp sounds emitted, chest pounded). Citing no thinker in particular, as if the idea belonged to the underground rumoring of some Masonic lineage, our teachers indulged the hypothesis of humor as an extension of these primal exhibitions of might, as an evolutionary canal in the fight or flight instinct. Immediately, I felt both intrigued and skeptical. Finding no resonance with any other reasoning in my experience, I decided to shelve the theory until the hour when it became compatible with conclusions that I reached myself.

That hour turned gradually. Over the following years, as I began to consider the presences of fear, death, and the unknown in creative inspirations and daily motivations, comedy was integrated naturally into my thoughts. The heart of slapstick is, after all, pain. Perhaps Jerry Lewis said it best: “I do not know that I have a carefully thought-out theory on exactly what makes people laugh, but the premise of all comedy is a man in trouble.” For me, the tipping point came when I began studying Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton in a collegiate setting and discovered – contrary to all public and critical partiality I was aware of – that Keaton’s gags retained an enduring charm that Chaplin’s simply did not. At first ashamed, certain that there was something wrong with *my* operation as a comedy spectator, I eventually suspended this self-doubt and tried to address why the man regarded by all accounts the funniest to ever live should stale for me so. An answer – perhaps not the right one, but the one that has incited seventy-odd pages of research and speculation – appeared overnight: Charlie is too frank. With his coy

grinning, his huffing ire, his toad-eyed panic, he maintains an open channel between the audience and his emotions. He expresses, and, through that expression, he heals from the pain and discomfort that characterizes slapstick. Buster obstructs this feed: indications of his emotional state leak through when he allows them, but his response to each injury is left ambiguous. Mystery is scarier than candor – and scarier is funnier.

This first part of this essay retraces the sequence of thoughts that occupied me after reaching the conclusion above. Expression led me to catharsis. Catharsis led me to Aristotle and tragedy, long paired with the work of comedy. Tragedy led me to pity, which I found to be nurtured in the tragic but stifled in the comic. I explore this idea in the study of two works: *The Comedy*, a film that inhabits an uncomfortable aesthetic space between humorous and tragic; and *Ren & Stimpy*, a series that hyperbolizes the depiction of pain until a pitiful (i.e. tragic) reaction is impossible. These examples, given the displeasure that accompanies even their success, illustrate comedy's tendency to threaten and upset. I compare this with the same tendency in horror, rejoining with the original proposition of humor and fear's sibling ties. From there, I appraise comic dread further by examining three theoretical mainstays: superiority, as articulated by Sigmund Freud; automatism, as developed by Henri Bergson; and incongruity, often attributed to Immanuel Kant. I find that these historical meditations, which I study through examples from Chaplin and Keaton, also charge comedy with skirting questions of what confuses and frightens us – in other words, with glimpses of disorder. In the final sections, leaning in wonder on the example of the mercurial Andy Kaufman, I compose a theorem of my own: that comedy is a practice within another art that plays with the underbelly of sense – magic.

II.

CHAPLIN V. KEATON

The Little Tramp

The hardest I ever laughed at a Chaplin film was during the climactic scene in *Modern Times* (1936). Sought by officers both police and truant, and in desperate want of food and shelter, the Tramp and his juvenile companion, “the Gamin” (Paulette Goddard), have secured jobs as singing waitstaff at an upscale café. Rehearsing backstage before his first performance, the Tramp finds that he cannot memorize the lyrics to his song. Goddard’s Gamin solves the problem by writing the words out on his cuff. Everything is in order. Chaplin takes the vacant dance floor, strutting in his ill-fitting suit while the band behind him plays a thunderous and wily tarantella. As part of his display, he flings his arms out to either side – and, of course, both cuffs are launched off of his wrists and out of the frame, lost in the crowd. For a few seconds longer, Chaplin parades obliviously, doing a clownish backward skate and tugging on the seat of his own pants. He relaxes, finds center stage, and fixes to read his first verse. Horror steals over his face at the sight of his naked wrist. As the band patiently keeps time, he anxiously searches, reverting to his goofy scooch in order to preserve the performative illusion. The audience grows restless, and from behind them Goddard implores her partner to “Sing!! Never mind the words.”

The Little Tramp, the most iconic figure in all cinema, who had frolicked in buoyant silence for more than twenty years, opens his mouth and speaks – to be precise, he speaks absolute gibberish. It sounds vaguely Italian. A few sounds are smattered into the melodic slop from French, and probably a few other languages. But the meaning of the song is miraculously not lost on us – in fact, this is not miraculous but quite natural. As he sings his invented

nonsense, the Tramp also employs the full strength of his tried-and-true pantomime. Chaplin's pantomime was the best in movies, and for most of his life it had not failed to communicate to audiences in the playhouse nor the cinema – nor does it fail in the world of sound, as this scene proves so triumphantly. But, at the same time, we know the Tramp must sing to retain his employment and his living. Congruently, it seems that Chaplin must sing to ensure his artistic future in the sound era. After all, this was 1936, and silence was obsolescence. When the number is over and the gobbledegook fades away, *Modern Times* becomes again a silent film. The remaining scene is the last in genuine silence that Chaplin ever produced. He has made his critique of sound – with such charm and cleverness that we cannot easily call it spiteful – but he has made the transition.

The dance scene is not the first moment in *Modern Times* that we hear a human voice – although, as David Robinson points out in the Criterion DVD commentary, it is the first voice we hear that is not mediated through some form of diegetic technology (Robinson). More important is the fact that the scene entails the first and last instance in which we hear the Tramp's voice. Though Chaplin, in films before and after, is partial to unabbreviated sentiment and politics, he excludes these more burdensome ambitions from the Tramp's recital. In this scene, he fully embraces the role that was, if not the whole picture of Chaplin and if not what he wanted to be, the role he served to millions of viewers across the globe: an entertainer. Criticism of sound aside, this sequence is a unique, sheer vaudevillian marvel, precisely because of how the voice and the nonsense harmonize with the more communicative pantomime. The Tramp-waiter's performance is so applauded that he is offered a headlining position at the café, but the authorities promptly catch up to him, and he and the Gamin are forced to flee; the next morning, wondering how they will make ends meet, they trail off together down a dusty road – all in

silence, where Chaplin fossilizes his character. The Tramp remains an essentially mute figure, despite the proof of his voice that has just shattered twenty years of spectral silence and entertained us so robustly. Within and without its context, the song and dance sequence in *Modern Times* is loaded with these contradictions, which all achieve a sort of euphoric balance. The critique of sound is incontrovertible, but sound itself makes the scene so remarkable. In an extraordinary feat, this manages to be simultaneously one of the greatest scenes in silent film history and one of the greatest in sound film history – and, though seven years late, perhaps the definitive bridge between them.

For what it's worth, this is probably also my personal favorite scene in Chaplin's filmography. But none of the achievements touched on above is the reason for my laughter. The part I laugh at is when the cuffs are flung from Chaplin's wrists, and for twelve seconds he parades in ignorant confidence. During this brief passage, we see the disaster coming before he does. In the short films, the Tramp would often prance about with a similar obliviousness to any stressor, but that cherubic disregard was part of the nature of the character. Now, the stakes are understood by both the hero and the audience. But the audience knows what the hero does not: that the solution he has taken for granted has come undone, and he is bound for failure. The portent of this failure appears with such rhythmic subtlety as to seem nearly intentional, a mere balletic flourish in the waiter's showboating. We understand why he hasn't noticed the cuffs' ejection, just as we understand when silent comedy characters are deafened as an extension of the medium's limitation (unless otherwise specified, in which case we are almost always willing to permit the exception). Thanks to this refinement in the gag's presentation, we do not question Chaplin's obliviousness, nor do we doubt the consequent dismay that is about to befall him. These twelve seconds are dramatic irony at its finest, and funniest.

When the Tramp realizes his loss, and despair possesses his cheeks, the effect changes. The character has caught up to the viewer's knowledge, has recovered from this disadvantage at the cost of incurring another: by understanding his plight, he must now experience it. Our focus narrows from the whole frame – its disrupted harmony visible only to us – onto Chaplin's terror-stricken face. We no longer laugh *because* of his situation, but rather *at* him in it. On a first viewing, the transition carries with it the laughter inspired by his prior unawareness. It is indeed a funny step in the pattern of the scene, and probably a vital one, for his victory is all the richer when we grasp the inverse extremity of his anxiousness. But, speaking only from my personal experience, the few moments of his blissful unawareness are those that stimulate laughter in viewings beyond the first, and this laughter is quicker to fade after the image of terror blooms in Chaplin's countenance. It is, I think, and as I hope to argue, this very expression that betrays many of Chaplin's movies in our repeated encounters.

The Great Stone Face

Unlike the remainder of the scene, this bit of business with the cuffs is really rather Keatonesque. Its innate and formless antagonism, figuring an invisible fate; its imagistic integrity, preserving the key cause-and-effect sequence within an unbroken shot (Keaton always strove for the physical fidelity of his gags); and, most importantly, its scrutiny of obliviousness are hallmarks of Keaton's captivating style. Buster is often and aptly described as the "most silent" of the silent comedians; one would not be wrong to assume he is also the most thoughtful. His films are chess games with the universe. Such a titanic match-up requires Buster's undiminished concentration, and usually with this focus he is able to end up on top. But, sometimes, we sense that the game is not finished, and the universe's inevitability has been

inherent all along. The 1922 short *Cops* closes with Buster, unrequited in love, resigning himself to a frenzied mass of policemen; “The End” appears, inscribed on a tombstone with Buster’s hat hung on its corner. In the 1927 feature *College*, Buster’s Olympian rescue of the girl gives way to a montage in which he and she grow old and bitter together, and in the amusingly cynical final image we see a pair of graves beneath which they are presumably interred. These are the very blatant examples, and we need not read all others so pessimistically. But in every Keaton film – that is, every film that enjoyed Keaton’s creative control – there is a pervasive fear, innervating the movie, underlying virtually every gag, a fear of an indifferent world, made of forces that move always behind our backs, of an arbitrary current which we navigate by night, and cannot understand or usurp even as we operate at our greatest intellectual strength, which Keaton always is. This fear is basic, and it is so very funny.

Inevitably I must retread this picture of Buster in an added dimension, for there is another description that suits him just as snugly. As the most placidly silent hero of the silver screen, Buster becomes the frame’s gravitational center not, like Chaplin, as a result of his action and reaction, but of his action *as* reaction. Once invisible fate has made its move, shifting the conditions of the stage to some extraordinary advantage or extrapolated peril for its valiant challenger, Buster immediately begins preparing for his counter. When the trajectory of Buster and girl’s motorcycle-borne escape in *The Scarecrow* (1920) improbably whisks an intersecting clergyman into the sidecar, Keaton responds by looking at the materialized passenger, then peering up at the sky. While a passive facial expression would convey an emotional process, Keaton’s concise counteraction reveals a logical one. His surprise is evident, but so is his rational assessment of the event, which results in and is communicated to the audience by an earnest, inquisitive openness to a spiritual explanation. Though the universe seems random and devoid of

favor, and Keaton's persistent confrontation with it comprises an immutable rationality, he is unbiased enough a scholar to consider divinity when it seems the more likely intervener – in fact, not to do so would be an irrational course.

The question is opened here, economically and hilariously, and simply left open. To cut to an eyeline match from Buster's inquiring upward gaze would derail the rhythms of both the comedy and the chase. As he abandons the search, neither disappointed nor reassured, we assume the sky has offered him nothing we haven't seen ourselves. Still, until the transcendent world is ready to reveal itself, the one down here must be tended to; Buster is not finished reacting. Putting his study to rest, his next gesture must be a practical one: he asks the minister to marry him to the girl. Given the incredible and dire circumstances of the moment, this seems an outrageously impractical move, but among these circumstances are, thanks to the reverend's arrival, all those necessary to Buster's goal – and for the moment everything else can be disregarded. If there is an opportunity nestled in the frayed, downhill-tumbling tangle of fate, we can be sure that Buster will locate and seize it. Even the minister, drawn into its orbit, cannot refute Buster's logic: he does not hesitate before standing erect on the girder that attaches the sidecar to the motorcycle, and withdrawing his ceremonial text. Buster plucks a grimy nut from the chopper's engine cover and screws it onto his bride's finger. As the wedding concludes, the whole party barrels into a river; the newlyweds emerge, waist-deep in the waters, and embrace. Buster's triumph is humorously imperfect, but it is realized, as a consequence of his mindful action. When life gives Buster lemons, he studies them intimately, then produces a blue-ribbon brew – which, of course, gets slurped up by the last-place hog while his back is turned.

Fans' pet name for Keaton, "The Great Stone Face," likely stems from this compelling stillness. Whatever pummeling hail may berate him, we know the carved nobility of his

countenance will never erode into emotion. We are slightly wrong about that. In each of the films Keaton was allowed to direct between 1920 and 1929, he either begins as or matures into virtually the same intrepid explorer-inventor, the character whose endless stoicism synonymized his porkpie hat with his Rushmore face, and earned him the nicknames by which he is reverently known – including “Buster,” the professional signature that was bestowed with playful praise on young Joseph Keaton VI, co-star of the rambunctious Three Keatons vaudeville act, in recognition of his physical fortitude. But it is not quite true that Buster’s screen character was wholly inexpressive. In *One Week* (1920), for instance, when his new bride is briefly lost in the disastrous marble machine of a do-it-yourself house they are constructing, there is an anxiety evident in the way he searches for her, and a believable concern visible in his eyes when he calls out. When Buster straightens his back as a pretty lady passes him on the street in *The Balloonatic* (1922), she shrugs in disinterest, and the feeling of rejection is plain in his miniscule pout. Across all the like examples in Keaton’s directorial works, and they are few, facial expression seems to be invoked only to emphasize Buster’s emotional status toward another person, and apparently never to express a positive emotion. During his apprenticeship under Roscoe Arbuckle, where his character rapidly found its remarkable definition, Keaton experimented more with expressivity; in *Coney Island* (1917; dir. Arbuckle) he both cackles and bawls, but to no particular effect. From his very first solo short, until creative control was wrested from him at MGM, he seems resolved to reveal feeling almost exclusively through active reaction. In the 1926 feature *Battling Butler*, he recites a carefully worded marriage proposal hidden inside his hat: “Do you think you could learn to love me?” he begins. “I have,” the girl interjects bashfully. Buster looks at the rest of his notes, then shreds them. The gesture is as tender as a smile in its place would be, and triumphantly funny on top of that.

“The Great Stone Face” is a fitting moniker for Keaton because it captures the humble awe that unerringly sweeps through one watching his movies – awe at this man who is more and less than men, spawn of Zeus and a Swiss army knife, tilting at invisible windmills like a ventriloquist’s dummy struck by blue lightning, simpler but smarter than us, impassive and relentless. While Chaplin fashioned himself into a tragic hero in splendid works like *The Pilgrim* (1923) and *The Circus* (1928), Keaton was the first modern action hero, the clown prototype of John McClane. But his nature was more complicated than this: like stone (Great Stone, at least), it is forever unchanging and forever inaccessible.

There is a shot in his impeccable short *The Goat* (1921) that, perhaps more than any other in his catalog, sets Keaton apart from his contemporaries. Walter Kerr, in his exhaustive book *The Silent Clowns*, describes it as “the Keaton ‘No:’”

The camera is planted between two railroad tracks. A speeding train is headed – a long way off – directly toward us. It keeps coming at savage speed. The speed continues without slackening until the engine is directly against the camera lens. The train stops abruptly, impossibly. Keaton is sitting on the front of the engine, staring fixedly – transfixingly – at us, his eyes the glaring painted eyes of a mummy just removed from a sarcophagus, his arms folded implacably, locked. He has come headlong at us precisely as far as he can go – and no further. The relationship stops here. Keaton lives in a flatland bordering on the lens, one our senses have no power to invade; neither can he share our thickness; what separates us is invisible, though its very function is to make things visible. He has thrust himself at us to show us where “No” is. (129)

Except for a mild gag by way of a punchline when Buster lights a cigarette by holding one end in his mouth and the other against the locomotive’s scalding hull, the shot is not explicitly funny. But it is unforgettable. For Kerr it epitomizes Keaton’s relationship to the camera; for me, not too divergently, it epitomizes the mystery of this character-creation of his. He tends toward vacancy. For all his valorous confrontation with the world, he does not appear to be *of* the world. He is alien and unknown, a mutant, misplaced halfway in our visible spectrum of life. We have no reason to assume that this train would not have kept moving, Buster’s empty gaze its eternal

masthead, but for the presence of the camera on the tracks and the audience patiently peering at him, waiting to see what he does next. Though he seems to be looking back at us, his look is not like Chaplin's: he is not a performer. We don't know what he is. We laugh ecstatically at his grace in action, but the "No" argues convincingly that his basic state is, in fact, inaction.

The Keaton canvas

My grandmother is not someone I hurriedly associate with comedy, except that on a few occasions, in the cold foxhole of January, she escorted young me to presentations of the silent comedy classics at the Performing Arts Center in Anchorage, Alaska. Every sensation was heightened by the arrangement. The live orchestra glowed in the pit like a log fire. I remember where I sat audience-right, neck craned in the breathtaking auditorium-turned-cinema to behold the immense screen suspended way up high before us, like the gossamer bedsheet that dangles from the magician's somnaerial assistant. Continuously it threatened to quaver and snap our spectatorial trance. I wanted to grab it by the corner and hold it still, but I was powerless, simply too little. Someone told me once that moths are really not interested in the light or the warmth of a flame, but in the complete darkness they believe to exist behind it; whatever revelation of moth psychology lies in this hypothesis, I cannot confirm, but the notion at least intimates a proverbial truth. From my seat I could feel all the unlit, vacant space behind the movie screen, that abyssal black dimension, and I felt mortified. Then the orchestra struck its majestic harmony, and the laughter of ten hundred others and me fluttered into the room. There is no better way to watch these films, and such was how I first saw Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931) and *The Circus*, and Buster Keaton's incomparable *The General* (1926).

The hardest I ever laughed at a Keaton film was during this viewing of *The General*, because of a shot that recalls the one above from *The Goat* – besides in that they both conspicuously feature a locomotive. The image comes in the first act. Here named “Johnnie Gray,” Buster is now a train engineer in Georgia at the outset of the Civil War. A title insert informs us, “There were two loves in his life,” one being his engine, after which the movie is named, and the other his gal, Annabelle Lee, whose portrait accompanies Johnnie at the helm. Sure, absolutely; I accepted this set-up without question, and needn’t question it now, for it is quite true. I was even willing to believe that the engine surpassed the girl in Buster’s affections, which may also be true. In the opening minutes of the film, I watched the cool expertise with which he draws the train into the Marietta station, the pleasant confidence with which he greets two intrigued adolescent onlookers, the posture in his stride as he approaches the house of his beloved. All of these movements relayed Buster’s humble nobility. I had not yet, however, looked closely at his face. Around the fourth minute, he presents to Annabelle a photograph of himself with the *General*: eyes aimed slightly away rather than into the lens, his face otherwise bears the very same, listless deadpan of the image in *The Goat*. Suddenly, all the pride I had begun to associate with Buster was contradicted. Judging by this picture, he seemed not to care about anything in the world, almost least of all the locomotive we were told he loved.

I broke into one of the best kinds of laughter, one of understanding rapidly gained and lost and gained and so on, like a fragile knickknack caught and dropped and caught, back and forth, the catcher helpless to their own recurrent clumsiness but improbably successful with each retrieval, until finally it is dropped and dashed across the floor. It occurs to me now that this shot might not have been intended as a joke, but rather a simple bit of exposition, emulating the patient rigidity of actual nineteenth-century photographic portraits. But I was far from the only

person in the audience to laugh. Whatever the image's origin, the contrast it entails is funny. This laughter grows, I think, from the experience of a lengthy internal debate condensed into a couple of seconds. I must have seriously doubted, for an instant, what I had witnessed in Johnnie's body language; how could his face deceive so effectively? I was distressingly unprepared for, yet recognizant of, the phantasmagoric paradox on the screen. In the first four minutes of *The General* I learned everything I know about this character. The photograph was the damning "aha" instant, and seeing it furnished the foundation for my rapturous observance of the rest of the picture, and my ever-vacillating grasp of the Keaton riddle.

Years later I saw *The General* again. This time it was at home, from a DVD, specifically a DVD pressing whose soundtrack seemed to be an unedited greatest hits of classical compositions, pasted simply and pains-givingly across the entire seventy-five-minute feature and stifling its careful rhythms. Needless to say, my reunion with the film was botched from the start, and the nearest I could get to calling mulligan was to mute the TV when I could no longer stand it, and hope to reclaim some of my initial ardor by immersing in Keaton's visual and acrobatic preeminence. The experience was my first and strongest lesson in the cruciality of silent film score. Before this, I had noticed a diminished enthusiasm in my second viewings of certain films by Chaplin, the only silent filmmaker whose pictures I had yet been inspired to see twice. Walter Kerr describes poignantly the effect to which I attributed my disappointment: "The second time you see an old film – which is precisely itself and neither reconstruction nor approximation – not a trace of sentimental memory remains. You may fight to get it back, but you will lose. You will see your old film, in one important sense, dead" (*The Silent Clowns* 10). Kerr means to address readers who recall seeing these movies in theaters, but his point is sympathetic to how I felt,

revisiting Chaplin as one born two decades after that master clown's death. He simply wasn't as funny as a rerun.

There are treasured exceptions, the song-and-dance scene in *Modern Times* chief among them. This replayability is perhaps central to my interpretation of that sequence as one akin to Keaton. As I dared to replay some of Keaton's works, beloved after our first encounter, I was surprised to find them considerably less spoiled. Although the average gag – say, when Buster chivalrously spreads out his jacket over a curbside puddle to assist a pretty lady (the one mentioned above, who then mocked his interest) and instead the girl's ride shows up at just that moment, driving mercilessly over Buster's drenched honor – no longer thrust me to the threshold of intoned laughter, it nonetheless amused me, often highly. On the other hand I noticed that a Chaplin sequence, like the one with the malfunctioning laborer-feeding machine in *Modern Times*, which had at first obliterated my gut with laughter, could come to feel stale or overcooked. Watching that scene again, I could not help but imagine how Buster would have handled the comic abuse wrought on the poor factory worker, by this machine that is so intent on its primary function (not unlike Buster himself) of workplace efficiency that it neglects the force of its corn-on-the-cob apparatus, and unthinkingly feeds its captive a few misplaced metal parts alongside the edible fare. Chaplin's incredulous gape and panicked squirming are contributors to the overall comic spirit of the scene, but they are not its central joke, which is the behavior of the technology: its unperceived conversion to malice, from boon to brazen bull, is a frightful and hilarious scenario. Chaplin supports this analysis through his reactions without adding any new idea to it. In my mind I superimposed Buster's chiseled, though not submissive, countenance over the more relatable distress of Charlie's; I had to conclude that Buster's was funnier.

I should reiterate that Chaplin made some of my favorite films, and has made me laugh more than many other professional comedians. I do not consider him Keaton's inferior nor his superior; I have no purpose in such a claim, and the field of debate on which it would be staked is so limitless that I cannot imagine why anyone would venture there. Nonetheless, the genesis of this essay lies in a pattern that plainly favors one of these artistic mammoths over the other: in truth, as I feel progressively less tickled by a given Chaplin film, and simultaneously by the expressiveness of his emotional process, I feel increasingly compelled by a given Keaton film and by the unfathomability of his.

The action in Chaplin's movies tends to be geared toward two themes: one is the effortless malleability of his character, represented by his unparalleled pantomime; the other is his perpetually unresolved love-hate of society. Plots tend to depict the Tramp as ambivalent in his outsider-ness, rewarded for it in a picture like *The Vagabond* (1916), but more often as much an outcast in the end as at the beginning. Along the way, he strives desperately for the acquisition of some social normalcy – for integration into a workplace, for freedom from police harassment – even as he incites the havoc around him. His yearning for approval is usually surpassed by the urges coursing beneath it, those of survivalism, the needs for food and shelter. He remains always a step behind social acceptance. In *A Dog's Life* (1918) he achieves a near-fantastical American Dream finale by stealing (from other thieves) a wad of money, affording societal success through an antisocial act. Earlier in the film he is forced to filch a meal, a crime for which he is unremorseful. Misbehavior like this, in fact, typically causes him to appear pleased. He delights in biting the hand that feeds him; it is the same hand that withholds food. Then he grins coquettishly at the owner of the nipped appendage, ensuring that we laugh at his spiteful delinquency.

This is how Chaplin emotes. When he is in pain – in this case, maybe, the pain of his self-perpetuated alienation – he expresses it. He communicates it exactly, through a sickly grimace or a grin, big and boyish. And through this expression, he alleviates the pain for himself. The acknowledgement and testimony of pain permits him, in some small but critical sense, to digest it. Walter Kerr argues compellingly that the essence of the Tramp character is his characterlessness, the trait that enables his protean shapeshifting:

We shall often see him collapse inwardly with regret the moment an imposture has ended, or is about to end; there is no way of sustaining it, of committing himself to it indefinitely, and he must now return to his nothingness. The coming nothingness haunts him even as he is being his most accomplished. The pretense to commitment is, literally, achingly funny. (Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* 86)

Kerr is not positing an existentialism in Chaplin's work; this nothingness extends only as far as the Tramp's identity. As the writhing, disbelieving creature we see in the grip of the feeding machine suggests, there is some animal somethingness inside him, and it feels.

With Keaton we are less sure. The emotiveness of his face betrays him infrequently enough that we cannot know what kind of soul may or may not lie within. Qualities like dignity and nobility – we mostly project these onto the contoured canvas. Acknowledgement is rarely made of the pain that befalls Keaton. We are quicker to question him than we are to question the pain; the tumbles and proddings, the rockslides and neck-breaking torrents are all before us on screen and almost never falsified. But we would never guess that Keaton actually broke his neck performing a stunt that exists today in *Sherlock Jr* (1924). The character is so unresponsive to injury that we begin to believe he cannot feel it – or, worse and funnier, that he can feel it but cannot reveal it. In *The Psychology of Art*, Lev Vygotsky cites a fellow psychologist in identifying the three manners of psychic energy expenditure: “First, by the motor nerves, in the form of a concept or a will stimulus of motion, amounting to a higher psychic activity. Second,

by internal discharge. ... Finally, inhibition pushes part of the psychic energy into the hidden, the subconscious ... this is why energy transformed by inhibition into a latent state becomes the basis for any function of logic''' (Vygotsky). While most clowns channel the spirit of their bits into the first, the emotive, form, Keaton overall belongs to the second, if not the third. The filmmaker would adamantly refute the idea that he deliberately pursued any psychological or philosophical heights. He considered himself a worker rather than an artist. He grew up in the business of slapstick; he knew that slapstick's tenets are pain and danger, and he knew how to make them funny. The story, as it is always told, claims that Keaton learned as a battered vaudeville youngster not to suggest any emotion when he was launched across the stage or rammed through the skin of a drum. The audience would always laugh harder at a dead stare than they would at a peal of anguish or a counterintuitive pleasure-grin. They laughed then for the reason we laugh at his movies today: every twist and slip, every thump on the skull that is not matched by an emotive reaction, is an invisible wound that never heals. There is no restitution for these wounds; there is no therapeutic gesture for the clown. Buster cannot achieve even the minor abatement of pain that is offered by sharing one's sensation with other beings. Rather than expressive, he is suppressive. But we the audience have witnessed the harm incurred, and know that it must be somehow exorcised: we laugh toward some therapeutic end we cannot see. And for this laugh, we draw again and again from our own dark wellsprings, soothing us for a moment, though they are murky and inexhaustible.

III.

CATHARSIS, TRAGEDY, PITY, HORROR

Endings, happy and sad

A lack of grievance does not mean that Buster is never compensated for his troubles. Most of his features conclude with a thrilling climax and the triumphant promise of matrimony, all earned by the hero's perseverance and ingenuity. The grimmer examples cited previously – *Cops*, where the famous porkpie hat adorns a lone gravestone in the closing shot, and *College*, where the two gravestones may as well read “His” and “Hers” – need not be interpreted as truer. The worldview subtly rooted in Keaton's films suggests something nearer to breaking even: ostensibly happy, but portentous of continuing imperfection. As Buster and Kathryn McGuire are shuttled away in a submarine from certain death at the end of *The Navigator* (1924), McGuire ventures a peck on the lips of her savior. Buster is taken aback – so far aback that he spills over the steering lever and sends the vessel into a spiral. Despite the apparently (and predominantly) happy ending, we are reminded that the game of existence is still on. Further life means further struggle; so long as the man has heels to be pinched, the world will craft new pincers.

This appears to be something of a rule throughout film comedy, from Harold Lloyd's tar-snared shoes in the final frame of *Safety Last!* (1923; dir. Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor) to Joe E. Brown's historic punchline at the end of *Some Like It Hot* (1959; dir. Billy Wilder): there are no clean getaways. Far from idealistic, a Chaplin feature typically ends on a note of stark ambiguity. *City Lights* closes on the uncertainty of the Tramp's reconciliation with the flower girl, formerly blind, now sighted thanks to his intervention. *The Kid* (1921) is less suspenseful in its conclusion, but still refrains from explicating the new relationship between the Tramp and his

foster son's mother. These endings are without much of a comic bent, but they illustrate Chaplin's aversion to neatly resolved plots, evident with equal strength in his short films. The paradisiac ending of *A Dog's Life* is vastly funnier than either of the examples above, because of the one joke that it actually contains: in Charlie and Edna's superlatively homey cottage, the bassinet is filled with a litter of puppies. This miniscule stain on the otherwise immaculate portrait of conventional domesticity is enough to exclude the Tramp from our standard of supreme happiness.

With the finale of *The Gold Rush* (1925), Chaplin came as near as he ever would to rewarding his hero with unblemished success. In fact, we can argue that the little prospector, financially thriving and no longer unrequited in love, is uninterrupted in his joy. In lieu of a diegetic tax, the director inserts a bit of reflexive satire to undercut this resolution for the audience only: as Charlie and Georgia, reunited at last, pose for a tintype with a photojournalist covering Charlie's rise to prosperity, they cannot postpone a long-anticipated kiss. "Oh! You've spoilt the picture," cries the photographer. The grievance has literal meaning, but is moreover amusing for its metaphorical one: "Chaplin is telling us that he knows what we know: ideally, the picture should not end in this way. The very fact that he tells us so cancels the effect of the ending; he has warned us that what he is doing is cheerful, but not true" (Kerr, *Tragedy and Comedy* 77). Like Keaton, whose movies generally end in a manner much like "A Dog's Life," Chaplin understands that an outcome ought not to be flawless. *The Gold Rush* features probably his happiest ending, but criticizes itself in the same stroke.

Perhaps as compensation for this sweet indulgence, Chaplin ended his next film on the most confirmably bittersweet resolution of his career. *The Circus* lacks the terrific scale and historical heft of *The Gold Rush*, as well as the same degree of untempered pathos invoked in the

earlier film when Georgia misconstrues and forgets Charlie's dinner invitation, but achieves a tragic proportion in its final act. The transition from comedy to seriousness is almost instantaneous. After a mishap-ridden high-wire act that leaves him reeling, Charlie comes upon the ringleader beating his stepdaughter, the equestrian Merna, whom Charlie loves. No close shot is given (or needed) to detail the change in his composure: Charlie shuffles into the frame, sees the violence, and begins to thrash the ringleader right back with grounded purpose. He is emphatically fired. That night, Merna catches up to Charlie by his campfire and pleads to run away with him. He knows that she loves the tightrope walker Rex; rather than commit her to the tramp lifestyle, Charlie arranges her marriage to his rival. A scene the next morning affirms that her stepfather will no longer abuse her, and she remains with the circus. The carriages rumble through the foreground, shipping off for the circus's next venue, leaving Charlie behind in the barren dirt lot. We wonder how long it will be before the convoy stops and Rex and Merna realize that their friend is not on the last carriage, as he said he would be, and as we too may have believed. Somehow we know that he reached his decision well before this soft revelation. The Tramp takes a moment to digest his circus experience, finds his closure, then traipses off reliably into the background, lone in his rambling, but morally bounteous.

For all the emotional complexity in its moral knot, this is arguably the most satisfying Chaplin ending in a dramatic sense. The later films tend to alternate between open-endedness (*City Lights*, *Modern Times*) and literal or figurative death (*Monsieur Verdoux*, 1947; *Limelight*, 1952; *A King in New York*, 1957), with *The Great Dictator* (1940) the only one decidedly uplifting as it overrides film form to become social smelling salt. He never again achieved the sort of tragic compromise that completes *The Circus*. We might be pleased to see the Tramp return to his solitary vagrancy, but we are moved by his heroic generosity, arguing that there is

something worth fighting and sacrificing for, that there is meaning to our actions. For Keaton – the screen persona, at least – the wedding is the endgame. Actions seem to have no meaning larger than to overcome the challenge and get the girl. But “settling down” is itself a bittersweet gesture: it is a well-earned reward, but in another sense it amounts to giving up, a final stillness. Although his character is typified by his concentration on single tasks, we can sense how he is broadly always in search of equilibrium. The films, tantalizingly, never imply that this equilibrium is attainable.

Every Keaton follower seems at some point to believe that Buster is more invested in the challenge than he ever is in the girl. Given the impenetrability of his visage, we would be better supported in answering this question to consult the proportions and punctuations of the movies. In *Go West* (1925), Buster rejects the farmer’s daughter in favor of his dear friend, a cow named Brown Eyes; count that as one against the girl. In *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928), the predominant conflict is obviously Buster’s estrangement from his father, a briny riverboat captain whose disappointment in his collegiate, pencil-moustached son is plain. The climactic reversal of fortune consists of Jr.’s single-handed powering of Sr.’s riverboat through a cyclone to rescue the movie’s principal characters, one of whom is the girl, Kitty. The romance has been well-developed and molded neatly to the plot, but we can imagine that the film would not suffer irrecoverably were it written out completely, especially considering that the funniest sequences – Buster trying to bust his father out of jail under the sheriff’s watchful gaze, and later trying to navigate the town amidst apocalyptic gales – have nothing to do with Kitty at all. *The Cameraman* (1928), in which Buster signs onto the MGM Newsreels crew to get close to secretary Sally, foregrounds the romantic relationship, allowing it to be the most convincing and engaging in Keaton’s core library. If Buster ever cares more about the girl than the obstacle, it

must be here. But, even then, we see that the footage securing his romance and the footage fastening his professional standing are contained in the same diegetic reel. A more characteristic closing for Keaton is that of *The General*: inducted into the Confederate Army as a lieutenant in recognition of his superhuman countersabotage, Johnnie sits with Annabel Lee on one of his engine's coupling rods to conclude his ordeal with a kiss, but they are continually interrupted by the salutes of passing infantrymen. The dutiful lieutenant reorients himself and locks his arm into a cyclical sweep, now able to salute every soldier (and then some) without diverting attention from his sweetheart. There is no reason Buster cannot, on occasion, have his cake and eat it too, but only when the fates and his creativity so coincide; the future will dish up other trials, and we can only guess whether they will be edible, allergenic, or altogether fraudulent.

The point of this long-winded round-up of endings is to show that Keaton and Chaplin both resolved their pictures with some sort of narrative catharsis, be it restitution to the hero (happiness for hardship, as in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*) or restitution to the world by the hero's righteous choice (sacrifice following horseplay, as in *The Circus*). These stories benefit from a satisfaction from the narrative arc-structure that has been imprinted in our viewers' veins since, perhaps before, birth. Comedically, however, stories conforming utterly to this model must suffer for their completeness. Comedy asks that the narrative thread not be so finely whipped and fused at the end, but continue to taunt us with a few ugly frays. As Kerr writes, "Comedy is not a form that reaches conclusions. It is a form that is interrupted" (*Tragedy and Comedy* 73). Consider for contrast *Dr. Strangelove* (1964; dir. Stanley Kubrick), a film that, even beyond the English-speaking world, is almost unrivaled in its maintenance of comic reputation throughout decades and among audiences both fresh and returning. The jaundiced and bombastic irony of the movie's nuclear-detonation outro is, whether we align ourselves with the human characters or the

planet Earth, the antithesis of cathartic compensation. The end of our narrative thread is thrust into the furnace and left to boil. Humanity blunders into its destruction, with no change in character from how it blundered through the bottoms-up diplomacy of the rest of the story. Knowing the senseless cataclysm, the uproarious non-resolution, that is to come, we remain narratively unsatisfied as we rewatch the film, and are more vulnerable to laughter.

The comic catharsis

Keaton's movies are ended far more conventionally than this. If they manage to be funny the second time around, it is not for lack of a narrative catharsis. But why should we believe that catharsis belongs only in this one place? Is it not conceivable that catharsis appears each time a picture makes us laugh? It may have nothing to do with justice, but our laughter is a compensatory gesture. It is a respiratory cycle, with the clown's pain absorbed and the pleasure of laughter released.

A number of passages in Vygotsky's chapter "Art as a Catharsis" become pertinent here. First to bat, his synopsis of *empfindung*, or empathy:

According to this theory, emotions are not produced in us by a work of art, as are sounds by the keys of a piano. An artistic element does not introduce its emotional tone into us. It is we who introduce emotions into a work of art, emotions arising from the greatest depths of our being and generated not at the shallow level of the receptors but in the most complex activities of our organisms. (Vygotsky)

This is matched later with an argument supporting the authenticity of such emotions: "If at night we mistake an overcoat hanging in our room for a person, our error is obvious, the experience is false and devoid of real content. But the feeling of fear experienced at the instant the coat was sighted is very real indeed. This means that, in essence, all our fantastic experiences take place on a completely emotional basis." A stirring summit of artistic and scientific thought,

Vygotsky's analyses evoke the paradoxical superposition of art, its realm at once existing and not existing, affecting us as if real yet empowered by the restrictions placed on its reality. It doesn't matter how Chaplin felt toward the force-feeding machine in *Modern Times*, it only matters that we believe in the Tramp's fear.

Next, Vygotsky's address of the various meanings of catharsis is, besides concise, highly valuable:

Whether we follow Lessing, who understands catharsis to be the moral action of the tragedy (the transformation of passions into virtues) or Müller, for whom it is the transition from displeasure to pleasure; whether we accept Bernays' interpretation of the term as healing and purification in the medical sense, or Zeller's opinion that catharsis appeases affect, - we will imperfectly and incompletely express the meaning we assign to this term. Despite the indefiniteness of its content, despite our failure to explain the meaning of this term in the Aristotelian sense, there is no other term in psychology which so completely expresses the central fact of aesthetic reaction, according to which painful and unpleasant affects are discharged and transformed into their opposites.

We see catharsis in virtually all of these forms repeated throughout Chaplin's films. Passions invoke virtues in *The Kid* and *The Circus*, pleasure ousts displeasure in *A Dog's Life* and *The Gold Rush*, vision is restored in *City Lights* and addiction treated in *The Cure*. And in abundance we see Charlie's discharge of emotion via expression, chartering the motor nerves as Vygotsky earlier noted for their one-way expulsion from the psyche. Hounded by a menacing waiter in *The Immigrant* (1917), Charlie realizes near his meal's end that he has lost a much-needed coin thanks to a hole in his pocket, and terror crystallizes across his face. He flashes uncomfortable grins to his host between furtive attempts to scavenge his immediate surroundings for the money to pay his check. Soon he and his dining partner are approached by a boisterous and well-to-do artist hoping to employ the pair as models, and to ease negotiations he insists on paying their bill. For the sake of courtesy, Charlie puts up a little fight first – a little too much fight, under which his savior eventually cracks, pocketing his bills and continuing his pitch. Charlie's heart

plummets over his mistake. The humor drawn from this dragon's-lair scenario is bolstered by Chaplin's embellished and precisely communicative expressions of discomfort, each a minor evaporation of the discomfort in which he stews.

Our laughter, the transformation of this discomfort into its opposite, traversing impossibly the chasm between the Tramp's world and ours, is the final cathartic ritual. Though Vygotsky has not argued that pain and catharsis literally exist in the diegetic expression of a character, he has illustrated how we may emotionally interpret their release as actual, and in our own aesthetic reaction achieve the pleasure that is compensatory to the displeasure inspired in us by the very same reel of images. He has nearly completed the first half of my thesis on his own. Rounding home, he demonstrates how our response can be heightened by the absence of an apparent diegetic catharsis:

If a poet selects a rhythm whose effect is in contrast with, or opposite to, the effect of the content of his work, we perceive this phenomenon of contrast. Bunin has described murder, shooting, and passion with a rhythm of cold, detached calm. His rhythm generates an affect opposite to the one generated by his story's material. In the end the aesthetic response becomes a feeling of catharsis; we experience a complex discharge of feelings, their mutual transformation, and instead of the painful experiences forming the content of the short story, we experience the delicate, transparent feeling of a breath of fresh air.

"Cold, detached calm." Do the words not invoke the image of Keaton, braving train chases and typhoons with an air of studious serenity? The rift between his quelled rhythm and the unruly currents in motion all around him is breathtaking – and, as Vygotsky paints it, breath-giving, in our final aesthetic experience. The argument I would add to Vygotsky's is this: by denying his own expression and discharge of negative emotion, Keaton heightens not only the pleasure with which we complement his pain, but as well the pain that we ourselves contribute to this aesthetic response. Chaplin's facial contortions highlight the discomfort or agony of his situation, but also contain a degree of relief. With a joke he presents, as all clowns do, the gorge that we cross from

displeasure to pleasure. Our transport runs on the combustion of pain. Charlie combusts some of the pain himself, tracing the early steps of our flight. Buster offers no such aid. Though he marks the starting point of displeasure and inspires us to journey across the divide, he seems disinterested in our path, as if he knows some secret shortcut of which he refuses to tell. The pain that fuels us is not outlined by his own cathartic gestures; we must provide it ourselves to reach the far shore of laughter. This does not mean any specific hardship or misfortune, but the most basic, innervating stressor. As psychiatrist Mark Epstein puts it, “There is no way to be alive without being conscious of the potential for disaster” (Epstein). We recognize Buster’s peril instinctively; Keaton knew not to belabor it.

Epstein’s precise wording of the “potential for disaster” rouses an important point: “pain” can here be substituted, and perhaps ought to be, with the word “fear.” The sort of discomfort discussed above is generally one of fear; fear is what strikes us, looking down, as we shuttle across the crevasse that comedy stimulates in our emotional response. This distinction returns us to the fundamental theory that inspired this essay, and equips us for the remaining portions of it that Vygotsky has not so prosaically and convincingly laid out.

The tragic pity

A survey of comedy’s kinship to tragedy should clear the brush from our path. Aristotle’s *Poetics*, to which the fuss about catharsis is traced, is conspicuously tight-lipped about that term. In the particular passage from which it derives, some translators even elude the word “catharsis” in favor of another, such as Gerald F. Else’s “purification” (Aristotle 25). As much fog as the lecture has conjured on this front, the same passage is forthcoming in Aristotle’s definition of tragedy:

[A] process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language, which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts; enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have those emotional characteristics.

The final point, the presence of pity and fear as material to our virtual aesthetic excursion, is most useful here. The author later expounds on it, positing that successful tragedy inspires pity “towards the man who does not deserve his misfortune” and fear “towards the one who is like the rest of mankind” (38). Of these two qualities, pity immediately steps forward as the one more applicable to comedy. When the Tramp swipes a stack of muffins one-by-one, under some amusing choreography by which the vendor is always an instant too late in about-facing to catch him in the act, we surely are more apt to feel pity for the character’s hunger than fear of his crime (*A Dog’s Life*). Were Charlie to nick the cakes from someone still hungrier than himself, the action would don this article of fearfulness, and likely become more sad than funny. But the humor of the scene as it stands cannot be based on pity in total independence from fear: how would we pity the character if we lacked a sympathetic understanding of his horrible situation? Pity as an artistic device must comprise a spectatorial fear – thanks to Vygotsky, one we can classify as experientially bona fide – which may not be directed in comedy toward the clown as tragic fear is toward the tragic hero’s momentous choices, but at least toward forces active, above the surface or below, in the world of the shadow play.

This is assuming we do feel pity toward the Tramp as he snaps all those muffins into his engorging maw. After all, he is getting away with it. Why should we pity the victor? Aristotle avoids relating pity to comedy, which he calls “an imitation of persons who are inferior; not, however, going all the way to full villainy, but imitating the ugly... [T]he comic mask is something ugly and distorted but painless” (23). This is only Aristotle’s introduction to comedy,

from the extant text of *Poetics*, with its deeper investigation lost along with the discourse's second book. The definition indeed seems less than fully matured, or even simply antiquated, given modern developments like Keaton's challenge to our sensors of inferiority, and the fact that **earliest** silent comedians (Chaplin included) had no urges beside the villainous distribution of pain and mayhem. If Aristotle means to argue that we do not feel the pain of the comic performance as we do of the tragic, then we can agree; it is this pain that is rerouted cathartically into our laughter. If, however, he means to claim that pain – that the pity and fear of tragedy – does not figure into comedy, that the clown is free of pain or that we are not cognizant of it, then we must disagree. The proximity of comedy to tragedy has been reiterated well into the continuing echo of common knowledge. Of many exemplary phrasings we may select one virtually at random: from Kerr's flourishing orchard of a lifeline, here plainly titled *Tragedy and Comedy*, "Comedy at its most penetrating derives from what we normally regard as tragic" (17). The pillars of tragedy crumble only so slightly to invoke the comic. The taller and thicker they are, the funnier this erosion will be.

The Comedy and Ren & Stimpy: the power of distance

Pity and fear are foregrounded, humor and horror supercollided, and the viewer, victim, and villain alike slowly eviscerated by Rick Alverson's 2012 feature *The Comedy*. The loose narrative of the film studies a middle-aged Manhattanite who wriggles apathetically through the day by inhaling the family wealth and exhaling circumlocution. Swanson, as he is mononymously called, contorts every conversation into a comedy bit. Some of them are funny. Most others are obstructed and polluted to the degree that the comedy becomes gratuitously unfunny. A scene in which Swanson bribes a cab driver for a few minutes at the wheel is rife

with comic potential. Alverson's camera lingers somberly on the driver's mounting discomfort and his passenger's still desperation. Through careful, poignant editing and composition, the comedy festers and the scene becomes horrifying.

Tim Heidecker plays this role with a rich detachment that, in its sickening way, rivals the Great Stone Face. As a propulsor of surrealist comedy in America's past decade, Heidecker brings both the talent and the expectation for subversive humor. But like the film's technical construction, his performance prolongs the humor until it, too, is subverted. The deadpan under which Swanson perpetrates his ironic mind games is too near to the expression he bears when alone, in the movie's quiet scenes. We come to see it less as a comic mask and more as a truly ossified face. It is tempting, though probably too impulsive, to speculate that Heidecker "plays himself" in this upending of the comic persona. Regardless, *The Comedy* does benefit from Heidecker's skill and reputation in its unflinching exploration of the ninety-degree verge across which gravity switches and weighs us to seriousness rather than risibility.

As invigorating as the experience of fruitlessly grasping for genre can be, at some point it is easier to describe *The Comedy* simply as a tragic picture. Pity and fear come to dominate our experience as our understanding of Swanson develops. We see that his social abuse is motivated neither by malice nor apathy, but a despairing search for purpose. Waking up in the morning after a one-night stand, he becomes engaged in pulling on his guest's eyelids – not violently, but curiously. The action is not particularly amusing or upsetting, but only something novel, something Swanson has never seen or done before. The same novelty underlies his abstract, improvisational manner of conversation. "Normal" interaction is as distressing and meaningless to him as his alternative games are to the victims (and often to the audience). We can imagine

that, perhaps, his comic deflections were less cutting as this pattern emerged, however long before the movie finds him, but that those, too, became unoriginal and were disposed.

Swanson and his similarly aimless friends, many played by Heidecker's contemporaries and collaborators, visit a mostly vacant church and disrespect it by aping rituals, intoning sarcastic chants, and somersaulting over the pews like antsy children. Their hushed and undestructive composure leaves the desecration incomplete: perhaps their other trespasses are somehow intensified by the facetious observation of a few select rules, but they leave the space physically undamaged. Their vandalism is only psychological: if they cannot see the confusion and discomfort firsthand, they have no interest in wreaking it. They do not reject the church ideologically or uncomprehendingly, but spitefully; they rebel where they cannot fit in. Seeing this, we pity them, and are less likely to laugh at their jests.

In some of the film's sketches, Swanson mocks the employment of others (his father's nurse, a second taxi driver), but just as or more often he emulates the workers he comes across (the cabbie detailed above, a landscaping crew, etc.). Later in the movie, he is hired as a dishwasher. We know that he is financially stable, but also that he has seldom labored because of this wealth. Employment offers an opportunity for purpose and fulfillment. His listless desperation is far from wholly relieved in this work, but the clamorous kitchen where he seeks this relief is the site of two important moments. First, we see Swanson at his most recognizably human when his hand is gashed by a broken dish. His swears and cries seem undeniably real; in an immediate and animal way, they evoke pity and fear. More comically, second, there is a scene where Swanson's dry, mean wit attracts an equally dry and scathing co-worker (Kate Lyn Sheil). The subtextual sexual tension of their exchange displays a mutual victory that is rare in the film: Swanson is accepted, but the cruel and backward means by which he seeks acceptance are also,

atypically, without a victim, as the waitress is able to dish it right back. Throughout most of *The Comedy*, his kiddings are spectacles of creative self-destruction, one-sided and overlong endeavors to rend the emotionless artifice that presents them and to interact with the world in a fresh, individual way. When we laugh at the film, if we laugh, it is not without bearing witness to the uprooting in this implosion of all social convention, in particular courtesy and honesty. I submit that it is with a fear of the damage wrought on these intangible agreements that we feel amused. When we pay too much mind – rather, when Alverson, Heidecker, and the other makers of the film ensure that our attention is held beyond the comic threshold – to the casualties of Swanson’s self-destruction, then fear is coupled with pity, the laughter stops, and the smile wilts.

If *The Comedy* flirts depressingly with the limits of comic deadpan, then another production from the deep sound era represents a feverish, hallucinatory mission to the far opposite pole: the John Kricfalusi-created *The Ren & Stimpy Show*, a nightmarish and near-senseless wonder that let in the vampires while it opened doors for animated television, and whose run as a children’s program on Nickelodeon from 1991 to 1995 is still questioned. The objective of the show seems to be the consummate perversion of every all-too-wholesome *Jetsons*-era trope that plagued the *Ren & Stimpy* staff in their youths. (This is evidenced with the same gangrenous glory by Kricfalusi’s revisionist Yogi Bear short, *Boo Boo Runs Wild*.) The characters of the series – Ren, a Chihuahua afflicted by Peter Lorre-inspired lunacy; his roommate and only friend, Stimpy, a cat so profoundly stupid that he seems impervious to the physical laws of the universe; and a cyclonically rotating cast of opinionated horses, dim-witted Swedish cousins, and tank-bodied ex-con foster sons – together inhabit the underworld of the Hanna-Barbera universe. Heroism is trivialized and decency forgotten here. Nothing happens with recognizable sanity or even recognizable pace. Every moment is distended, over-

exaggerated – over-expressed. Chaplin’s cathartic gesturing is brought to its extreme, as it must in this world where existence is torture.

Most controversial of all the show’s offenses is its hyperviolence, but in the mayhem department *Ren & Stimpy* rarely surpasses the worst of predecessors like *Tom and Jerry* and *Looney Tunes*. Criticism must stem from Kricfalusi and company’s obsession with finding the divine in the depraved, with savoring the violence rather than padding it. The gesturing does this masterfully, from unearthly contortions that involve the whole body to subtle details like Stimpy’s pupils being attached to the lenses of his reading glasses. Even the soundtrack is commissioned to help the characters express their tremendous discomfort, with groaning leather and screeching glass Foley effects adding an aural dimension of diegetic agony. Yet, somehow, all of these expressive efforts are in vain. Instead of relieved, we are convinced that these gestures have imparted merely an impression of a far greater pain, one so severe that it cannot be fully communicated or compensated. Detractors are not wrong to feel put off; it is the show’s intention and comic method to upset us through sheer overexposure. Sometimes we laugh, wearily, cathartically. Other times, we simply watch in numbed fixation.

Together, *The Comedy* and *Ren & Stimpy* test the limits and the importance of emotional and psychological distance in humor. What they reveal is that if you take a comedic work and eliminate the distance that permits it to be laughable – either by crossing the distance and stepping further into the joke, or by stepping back and ushering into view the periphery, the badlands beyond the moat, whatever the comedian is shielding him or herself from – the joke quickly becomes very, very unfunny. *The Comedy* does this touchingly and sickeningly, perhaps by executing both re-distancing measures at once, drawing us intolerably near to Swanson’s isolated heart and also hemming out the context and the duration of his performances until we

have seen too much. With little more than a fast re-edit, this could be a funny film. Conversely, *Ren & Stimpy* draws us so far into the joke that watching it becomes akin to staring at the sun; our empathy, like our retinas, eventually sizzle and vanish, and we have to laugh ourselves back to sanity. In both examples, the grounds for fear are well-kept and haunting, while the grounds for pity are threatened by erosion. If so, we can take Aristotle's model and suggest that, while tragedy aims to employ both of these responses, comedy's function is to invoke fear and to suspend pity.

The suspension of pity

Consider, in your imagination if there is none nearby, an old woman falling down a long flight of stairs. The conditions are present for both fear (the imaginable pain of taking the tumble ourselves) and pity (fear on the old woman's behalf), especially if she is, say, visually impaired, or our own grandmother. If she is instead a malicious crone, our pity may be stayed and our laughter invoked at her righteous misfortune – which we must nonetheless recognize to be misfortune, and thus a potential stimulus of pity, and a current stimulus of fear (again, the thought of our own pain in her place). If, rather, this wicked hag is also the grandmother of our short-tempered employer and has been placed temporarily in our care, the sight of her plunging, vile head over evil heels, down the many stairs might yet fail to generate pity, but it could stimulate such fear as to spoil the humor of the situation. (A third party such as a moviegoer might find it uproariously funny, having themselves less of the investment that causes our own fear – in other words, having little operative pity for us.) An apparently tragic incident has become comedic and horrific in different contexts.

Now, remove those contextual details and return to the plain image of a terribly old woman plummeting down a terribly long staircase. If she happens to be a robust granny, and at the staircase's foot gets up and laughs heartily at her own spill, she achieves her personal catharsis: the call for our pity is expelled, and, reminded nonetheless of the danger of stairs, we laugh alongside her. If this unbreakable old gram falls down the stairs and laughs at herself routinely – say, every morning – by the hundredth day or so our surprise has been dulled by a sort of habituation, and with it the fear that initially amused us. If, however, she takes the fall every morning on schedule, and each time she cries out in pain, after a hundred days our pity has been gradually abated, and we might opt to sever the last of our emotional ties, raising a shield of laughter against the terrifying absurdity of her endless suffering.

For a more concrete example, we can look at Harold Lloyd's 1925 "character film" *Girl Shy* (dir. Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor). When Lloyd's supremely non-debonair stutterer retires to his cloistered attic apartment and sits at his typewriter to produce a manuscript titled *The Secret of Making Love*, we are struck right away with a surge of laughter. Although the fantasy sequences are a few yards of film away (and prove to be somewhat less amusing), it is really in this moment that the fantasy is introduced. We find a vast incongruity between the reality of his romantic exploits and the alter ego he must have devised to be the author of an instructional book on seduction. Many of the conditions for pity are present in this development, and we certainly would not be "wrong" if pity were our predominant reaction. But surely the viewer who laughs sees that the excess of this fantasy is so incongruous to reality, so immaculate and hyperbolic – and here is where the scenes that imagine Harold as rake serve as proofs to the idea that has been placed in our heads by the manuscript's name – that it cannot be fully attainable. To react with pity reveals the tragic perspective that hope is not in this case

unreasonable, that there is indeed a chance, in spite of the disparity between what is and what could be. Our laughter does not necessarily suggest the exact opposite – that all sexual and romantic fulfillment is lost for Harold (although this idea certainly could stir a laugh, provided we are able to process it pitilessly) – but the dimension of fantasy here conceived is too unlikely for our support. Following our model, then, it is primarily with fear that we apprehend Harold's inner Casanova: it might be directly sympathetic fear of our own sexual and romantic inadequacy; more broadly, it might be fear that we, like Harold, have invested exorbitant ambition in our own desires; or, broader still, it might be a fear that we can attribute to all comic incongruity – more on this to come.

***Tusk*: horror and humor**

The intimacy of comedy to horror has not been proclaimed far and wide, but I believe it is there to be found. After all, horror has proven itself to be the most easily parodied genre. Which other is so laughable in its miscarriage? Which other can boast a five-film spoof institution like the *Scary Movie* series? Surely horror has been so bullied because it is already on the very verge of humor throughout its conception and execution. A hilariously poor horror movie nonetheless presents a killer or a threat – but, by a slight tipping of the balance, one that fails to threaten us effectively. In a moment where we might otherwise scream, relinquishing our power to the hypothetical (but, per Vygotsky, experientially real) nightmare, we instead laugh, turning the tables and inflating the appearance of our own might. We have detected the threat that the film wants to frighten us with, but have not been convinced of its frightfulness. Whatever precise elements and proportions are capable of instilling fright, I cannot say, but clearly the

recipe is so fragile that successful horror ranks among the most difficult achievements in cinema. One degree too hot or too cold, and the whole batch becomes a joke.

Latter-day triumphs in the horror genre like Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996) and Drew Goddard's *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012) have found critical acclaim by deliberately infusing the humor that pulses hungrily beneath the terror, but the prevailing intention of these works has been to reflect on the tropes of the genre. As a result, the humor is often based in self-awareness, and distinguishable from the genuine scares. This is not so with Kevin Smith's *Tusk* (2014), a curiosity of a film that vanishes into the bleary line between horror and comedy by deploying a sort of decoy: the movie features two completely disparate styles of humor, one direct and the other deadpan. What we might call the film's B-plot is, although stylistically uniform with the rest of the film in Smith's new and strikingly graphic visual form, the overtly funny part. It involves a search effort for the main character endeavored by his two best friends, and the laughs here come primarily from an incognito Johnny Depp, playing a Canadian private detective who looks like Columbo and talks like Popeye, and might be considered an offensive stereotype of Québécois people were he not so profoundly and singularly odd; like his spiritual predecessor, Inspector Clouseau, he is more offensive to the human race than to any group specified within it. The character, and the scenes in which he appears, contribute significantly to the film's dramatic tension, but function more recognizably as the "comic relief." But, in fact, the A-plot already *is* comic. Its humor, though based on a premise no less preposterous than Depp's character, is presented so seriously as to be able to pass for sincere horror. Justin Long plays a scoop-hungry podcaster stranded in Manitoba who is invited, via a note posted in a dive bar bathroom, to the remote mansion of a disturbed millionaire (Michael Parks), who traps his guest and sets about

surgically transforming him into a human walrus. It is a comedy story masquerading as a horror film.

This fascinating disguise would probably not have been achievable in the directorial style that Smith practiced in earlier movies like *Clerks* (1994) and *Dogma* (1999), where his efforts seem to have been concentrated on his talents as a writer. The stylistic refashioning that began with 2011's horror-thriller *Red State*, revealing an unprecedented fluency in Smith's visual rendering of intensely serious material, persists into *Tusk*. It is united here with the filmmaker's comic scriptwriting in a way which challenges the steadfastness of two genres. Smith seems to approach *Tusk* with one attitude as a writer, and one wholly different as a director and editor. We cannot say that the movie *is* a horror or a comedy, because it carries equal potential for both, and the slightest perceptual differences between viewers will alter entirely how it is experienced. In case we have missed the humor in the film (I'll admit that I was more perturbed than amused by the millionaire's mad science, though also intrigued), Smith inserts over the credits an excerpt from the podcast sessions that inspired it, and by the sound of his and co-conceiver/producer Scott Mosier's hysterical laughter as they riff through the outline we have just seen grotesquely realized on the screen, we are enabled to laugh at it with them; we are brought "in" on the joke, and given the power to defy the threat.

The notion of humor as the positive deflection of fear is far from incompatible with the history of comedy philosophy, a cloudy pool of self-acknowledgingly incomplete solutions whose most potent mixings include the theory of superiority, expounded by Freud; the theory of automatism, invigorated by Henri Bergson; and the theory of incongruity, noted perhaps first by Immanuel Kant.

IV.

COMEDY THEORY IN HISTORY

Freud's superiority

While the tentative humorousness of works like *The Comedy* and *Tusk* have affirmed that empathetic feeling must be tempered for us to laugh at the clown, whether their clowning be willing or the unwilling, Freud claims that a form of empathetic analysis is also required in this spectatorship. Our laughter at human behavior and action, he argues, is based on a perceived contrast of effort: “[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” (242). This thought has been articulated more axiomatically as “Comedy is doing an easy thing the hard way.” The latter phrasing, in its simplicity, is quicker than Freud’s to stir memories of, say, Buster Keaton pantomiming to his jailed father that he has hidden a trove of bar-busting tools in a loaf of bread (*Steamboat Bill, Jr.*), or of Chaplin navigating the unexpected perils of his downtown apartment like a soused Indiana Jones (*One A.M.*, 1916). Even the succinct absurdity proposed by the shorter version is funny; when the very reiteration of a comic idea is itself enough to amuse us, we can trust that it bears some sort of validity.

As academic as Freud’s explanation may be, it nonetheless conveys the same basic conclusion: that we often laugh at one another when we witness an inappropriate level of effort invested in a task or a response. The less testable, but neatly quantitative, part of this theory posits that the exact disparity in energy between “how he does it” and “how I should do it,

how I did it” (278) becomes the energy we expend in laughter. (Certainly, we cannot ignore the morphological closeness between “catharsis” and this “decathexis.”) In achieving laughter at our neighbor’s moment or state of inferiority, we return to the uncensored judgment of a child, whose “motives are clear and can be stated. For instance, if someone slips in the streets and falls down we laugh because the impression – we do not know why – is comic. A child laughs in the same case from a feeling of superiority or from *Schadenfreude*: ‘You’ve fallen down, I haven’t’” (278). We may also detect this humorous discrepancy entirely within the person with whom we are comparing ourselves, should we see them descend from an apparently graceful state to one relatively inferior. For instance:

[I]n the middle of an activity which makes demands on a person’s mental powers, he is suddenly interrupted by a pain or an excretory need. The contrast which, through empathy, offers us the comic difference is that between the high degree of interest taken by him *before* the interruption and the minimal one that he has left over for his mental activity when the interruption has occurred. The person who offers us this difference becomes comic to us once again for his inferiority; but he is inferior only in comparison with his earlier self and not in comparison with *us*, for we know that in the same circumstances we could not have behaved otherwise. (243)

In such a case as the author imagines, we are no longer quite laughing at the disagreement between the effort actualized and the effort required, but are laughing instead at the sight of a debasement.

Freud does not consider – though it surely existed even prior to the “advanced” slapstick that film discovered in the 1920s – a comic situation in which we laugh at a person’s self-improvement, or superiority in comparison to their own earlier self. Up to now, we can agree with Freud’s caveat that the audience must feel superior to the clown, and that the effort seemingly devoted to an action must be greater than the effect achieved, for “[i]f 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” (242). The stunting of Keaton and Lloyd, remarkably impressive even to those of us who have not attempted to free climb a skyscraper, is one of the major attractions of their films but is not always or necessarily comic. While commemorating Keaton as an action hero, we could compile a sizeable reel of gags and sequences from his catalog that aim only to thrill, and might never have been found exactly funny. By the strictest standards of comedy, these moments are disqualified for elevating the clown above us.

Elsewhere, however, the stuntmen argue convincingly that such elevation can certainly be funny. Both Keaton and Lloyd – and Chaplin, who probably invented the joke but did not ultimately explore it with the same creativity – favored and pioneered a variety of gag based essentially on the notion that learning is funny. In Noël Carroll’s helpful taxonomy from the essay “Notes on the Sight Gag,” this type of joke would best be classified as a “solution gag.” Carroll deems this breed “rare” (39), but it appears often throughout the work of the silent geniuses: Lloyd’s *Welcome Danger* (1929; dir. Clyde Bruckman), all told a dreadful picture that might have been enjoyable had Lloyd not decided in post-production to reshoot everything with sound (Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* 336), opens with a succession of sight gags, mounting in complexity, as Harold assists his fellow train passengers. A man is struggling to get a flame from his lighter; Harold strikes a match on his shoe and lights it for him. Two gents are locked in the heat of a checkers game; after a quick survey of the board, Harold evens the score by playing a quadruple jump for red team. An infant is wailing, unattended by its snoring father; Harold spies a paper party horn in the clutches of a second, sleeping tyke, and plants it in Dad’s mouth, placating the babe with its rhythmic unrolling. None of these yet demonstrate “learning,” per se, but rather an acuity and a tidiness that we find amusing. The same is true of the solution gag’s prime and most popular example, found in a stunning shot from *The General*: while straddling

the cowcatcher of his moving locomotive and cradling a hefty railroad tie in his arms, Buster sees a second tie on the track ahead, laid by Union thieves to obstruct his pursuit. With astonishing strength and precision, he raises the first beam up and launches it downward like a spear onto the overhanging end of the second, vaulting both ties out of the train's path. He has disposed of both his burden and his obstacle by a quick-thinking and rather Herculean solution. Carroll locates the humor of this bit in Buster's mental flexibility: "[I]ts effect rests on the lightning reversal of one interpretation of the situation by means of an unexpected, economical, and effective reconceptualization of the situation. . . . If Johnnie's lifting the beam, rather than, say, trying to roll off the cowcatcher, strikes us as initially incongruous, once the beam is flung, the action strikes us as the most perfect and neatest solution available" (37). We can agree that such a reversal is funny – later, in discussing magic, this will be key – but are also reminded of Freud's theory of superiority, albeit against the gradient he describes. Here, Keaton makes us laugh not only by exercising the precise amount of physical energy required for his solution, but exercising also, like Lloyd in *Welcome Danger*, a stronger mental effort than we have.

The diversity of solution gags ranges further. Some do not necessarily demand the conscious involvement of the character: the moment in *Sherlock Jr.* when Buster's runaway motorcycle is buoyed across a potential disaster by serendipitously aligned semi-trucks might be counted as a solution gag, though it more readily fits Carroll's category of the "mutual interference gag." Elsewhere, the solution of a puzzle is given extra dimension by its pairing with the character's earlier failure to solve it, or their victimization at the quandary's hands. In *The Navigator*, Buster awakes on what he expects to be the first morning of a cruise to find himself alone on a massive ocean liner, lost at sea. He steps out from his stateroom and onto the eerily vacant deck, and a gust of wind rends his hat from his head. Ruffled, as much as Buster

could ever be, he acquires a new hat from somewhere just beyond the door. Some minutes later, he passes by the same portion of the deck; the identical framing warns us of the impending breeze. Sure enough, the hat is again swept away. Rather than startled, Buster is entirely unfazed, and without breaking stride he reaches for the hidden stash and withdraws a third hat. Through the minimalism of his physical reaction, he displays great confidence in his cognitive grasp of the situation. Suddenly we see that he has anticipated the gust that made a fool of him before. Unlike some more forgetful clowns, whose continuing ignorance is a comic source, he has learned from his experience – and this education, somewhat less than a narrative arc but somewhat more than a joke, can be comic too.

In fact, we might say that its conclusion in the solution gag constitutes a sort of catharsis: as we watch Buster's cool management of a potentially (and formerly) frustrating situation, we replay the earlier failure in our mind. Simultaneously, we see that Buster understands not only the fact of his failure but the cause of it, and now is able cathartically to transform the knowledge of that failure into future success. In the Freudian model, we are not laughing at the difference between "how he does it" and "how I do it," but rather between "how he did it *before*" and "how he does it *now*." This is an imperfect example because Buster does once again lose his hat, rather than applying his comprehension toward protecting it, but we nonetheless can see how he has amused us in being superior to his earlier self.

Overlooking such cases in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud demarcates the third category of superiority-based humor as a decline or contrast within oneself:

The other source of the comic, which we find in the transformations of *our own* cathexes, lies in our relations with the future, which we are accustomed to anticipate with our expectant ideas. I assume that a quantitatively definite expenditure underlies each of our ideas – an expenditure which, in the event of a disappointment, is therefore diminished by a definite difference. ... If I am expecting to catch a ball which is being thrown to me, I put my body into tensions which will enable it to meet the impact of the ball; and, should

the ball when it is caught turn out to be too light, my superfluous movements make me comic to the spectators. (244)

As the “victim” in such an embarrassment, we might join the spectators in their amusement, chuckling in proportion to that “definite difference.” The apparent absence of this capability in children – as well as the self-improvement mantras that associate peace of mind with laughing at oneself – implies that the process may involve a provisional abstraction, so that we laugh at ourselves as if at another. Freud passes on this opportunity to discuss the ego, but a brief division of self would more or less squarely unite his three groups of superiority comedy under the banner of laughter at a perceived or supposed Other. The doctor deems the first group (ridicule of a neighbor inferior to ourselves) the “most important genetically” (243); a curiously underexplicated comment, this assertion seems to define superiority as a Darwinian function, designating our laugh-target as socially unfit. I will try here to refrain from writing my anthropology-uneducated foot too far into my mouth, but the resemblance between a toothy grin and bared fangs, between knee-slapping and chest-pounding, between a yuk and a yip, is at least provocative.

Bergson’s automatism

Henri Bergson would seem to agree. In his volume *Laughter*, the philosopher posits that automatism in organic life is essentially comic. He begins with a hypothetical example, akin to our staircase-slaloming grandma, of a man who falls while running in the street:

[I]t is not his sudden change of attitude that raises a laugh, but rather the involuntary element in this change, – his clumsiness, in fact. Perhaps there was a stone on the road. He should have altered his pace or avoided the obstacle. Instead of that, through lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum*, the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else. That is the reason of the man’s fall, and also of the people’s laughter. (9)

The image of a hundred different clowns and their run-ins with banana peels comes to mind, each demonstrating the same principles that Bergson describes. Although Harold Lloyd brings marvelous complexity to the gag by staging his slip on the hood of a speeding trolley and cleverly justifying the banana's presence in *For Heaven's Sake* (1926; dir. Sam Taylor), we laugh for fundamentally the same reason: he has failed to account for a threat, and as a result been involuntarily impeded. Though the consequences can be more advantageous, as the vicissitudes of fate in Keaton's universe show frequently, we can pinpoint such automatism in virtually all physical comedy.

Bergson further details the significance of rigidity, and identifies three species of his theory in action:

Tension and elasticity are two forces, mutually complementary, which life brings into play. If these two forces are lacking in the body to any considerable extent, we have sickness and infirmity and accidents of every kind. If they are lacking in the mind, we find every degree of mental deficiency, every variety of insanity. Finally, if they are lacking in the character, we have cases of the gravest inadaptability to social life, which are the sources of misery and at times the causes of crime. (18)

The typology here bears the seductive scent of a progression, from the bodily abuse of the dawning Keystone fracas, through the cerebral steppes of Keaton and the imperiling obliviousness that pervades his world, to the unparalleled character work of Lloyd. This pattern pairs fluently with the observation of writers like Kerr that comedy was "reborn" alongside the birth of film, reverting to its most basic form: "Because the medium itself was new, the past, with all its knowledge of complex comedy, was in effect swept away. We, like film itself, began at the beginning" (*Tragedy and Comedy* 50). Chaplin belonged to, defined, and with *The Kid* thematically transcended the infancy of silent comedy. We could say the physical comedy of his era was the *most* physical that silent film ever saw; it was raw slapstick, all bumps and bruises,

and was funny for reminding us of the body's physical demands. Keaton suggested that the greater threat to safety was our sorry dearth of omniscience; inattention, mental inelasticity, provides the laughs in his films. And, among the three, only Lloyd could have managed to endear to us a protagonist like the spoiled hypochondriac of *Why Worry?* (1923; dir. Fred Newmeyer and Sam Taylor) in even the imperiousness with which he finally proposes to his charming nurse: "WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME I LOVE YOU?" Although Harold Van Pelham has tussled and innovated his way into our hearts – becoming, improbably, one of Lloyd's scrappiest heroes – he retains the stern assertiveness that has all along threatened to alienate us. The automatism of his character dictates the humorous shape of his profession of love.

Broadly, the gradual development of silent comedy seems to progress like this through Bergson's centers of automatism. Of course, there is overlap – enough maybe to complicate or altogether refute the notion of a gradual maturation. In Bergson's example of the tripping chap, the humor stems primarily from the automatic motion of the body and its physical repercussions, but the mind is also incriminated for not having perceived the toppling pebble. The same is true of Chaplin, drunkenly jogging on his revolving foyer table in *One A.M.*, unsure of how he landed in such a fix and barely able to keep his pace. On the other hand, when Keaton does a similar bit with a riverboat wheel in *Daydreams* (1922), he is fully cognizant of his predicament and tries to think his way out of it; the joke is only in the rigidity of his body, ensnared in a nauseating rat race with the accelerating structure. Despite his present-mindedness, the sequence is even more memorable than Chaplin's original table trot. (This might, however, be simply the marvelous masquerading as the truly funny.) We can go back even farther, to D.W. Griffith's *The Curtain Pole* (1908), a prototypical slapstick film, which invoked all three forms of automatism before

Keystone Studios had even been founded: of the body, in the destruction wrought by an unwieldy curtain rod upon innocent passersby; of the mind, in the obliviousness of the tipsy pole-owner carting his purchase across town; and of the character, in the buyer's evidently habitual digression into a pub while setting out on his errand.

Nevertheless, as silent film matured, silent comedy found more complex expressions of automatized action. In a scene from Keaton's first solo short, *The High Sign* (produced in 1920, released in 1921), Buster paces confidently about his business along the sidewalk, unknowingly on a collision course with a discarded banana peel – rather than slipping on it, his stride carries him safely over the yellow menace, and he flashes to the camera the hand signal of the secret society he has recently joined. We might read this as akin to the backup hat bit in *The Navigator*, in which we are suddenly apprised of Buster's awareness of all around him. On the other hand, we see that the joke is expressed through the flying of the eponymous high sign of the Blinking Buzzards, implying that Buster has been endowed a sort of cosmic immunity by his membership, and not that he himself possesses the bodily and mental elasticity to avoid the obstacle; it is the universe, recognizing his credentials, that steps out of *his* way. In either case, the joke works because it exploits our own automatic assumption of what happens when clown meets banana. For precisely this reason, Keaton regretted the gag – and by extension the whole picture (a very good one). He refused to release it until injury and production delay obligated him to do so the following year, and he was only satisfied when the guilty gag was off-set by another one in which he *does* slip on a second, unseen peel. Automatism influences both bits: the one that defies our own automatic expectation, which Keaton felt was a disrespect to his audience, and the remedial one that rests on his own mental inattention and physical helplessness.

One of automatism's funniest appearances is in Chaplin's *The Circus*, with an early scene that has Charlie's shapeshifting repertoire expanded to include "automaton." The imitation is not flattering; Chaplin seems to have mistrusted machines. Most critics say that Keaton was the closer skeptic of technology, but his films seem more to mock our blind-faith relationship to machines than to assert their own stance. Machines can only do what they are built for, and we would be foolish to expect a sympathy that they cannot give. If technology ever seems out to get Buster, it is only as an instrument of universal misfortune. For Chaplin, objects were more active. One of his best-known talents was for, as Noël Carroll dubbed it, the "mimed metaphor" (30), in which his uncanny pantomime leaked into the world around him, and he could transform the identity of an alarm clock or a boiled shoe in as many ways and with as much panache as he could transform himself. Objects, like people (especially the Little Tramp), are arbitrarily defined, and thus malleable. Their characters became a bit more certain in the feature films, with a cynical timbre. The feeding machine in *Modern Times* is as adversarial to the poor Tramp as he had once been to his colleagues in the Keystone stock. Charlie is strapped in, bound to the machine's whim. And, unlike the engines of Keaton whose functions are taken for granted, his mechanical captor does not perform as programmed: beyond not detecting the inedible morsels mixed in with lunch, the feeder begins to antagonistically malfunction, as the corn-cob applicator runs amok and steams into Charlie's lips. For Keaton, technology could not be counted on to be accommodating; for Chaplin, it could not be trusted even for its designed purpose. The indifference of the contraption is still its defining trait – and the one that frightens us, thus amusing us.

It is funny to watch Chaplin impersonate a machine in *The Circus* exactly because a machine is impersonal. The nearer he resembles the automaton, the nearer he appears to adopt

the indifference of the hell-raising lunch gadget from *Modern Times*. This, Bergson says, is why automatism is funny: “Society will therefore be suspicious of all *inelasticity* of character, of mind and even of body, because it is the possible sign of a slumbering activity as well as of an activity with separatist tendencies, that inclines to swerve from the common centre round which society gravitates: in short, because it is the sign of an eccentricity” (19). When the clown stumbles on the banana peel, he errs. His inattention has harmed him. Superiority comes into play as we assess “how he does it” (not mindfully) versus “how I should do it” (mindfully). But rather than laughing as a discharge of the hypothetical difference in effort, we laugh as “a sort of *social gesture*. By the fear which [laughter] inspires, it restrains eccentricity, keeps constantly awake and in mutual contact certain activities of a secondary order which might retire into their shell and go to sleep, and in short, softens down whatever the surface of the social body may retain of mechanical inelasticity” (20). Because the clown’s eccentricity is a threat to himself, it is a threat to the community. It scares us – often within a humorous threshold, but in cases like *The Comedy*, to the point that we cannot restore our security through laughter. Funny or unfunny, comedy reveals “a certain rigidity of body, mind and character that society would still like to get rid of in order to obtain from its members the greatest possible degree of elasticity and sociability. This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective” (21). The clown gives the gift of laughter by sacrificing himself in the survival of the fittest. It is no wonder that a joke must follow the marriage to conclude the picture: the clown’s marriage *is* a joke.

Yet, looking closer at *The Circus*, Chaplin’s physical rigidity is not the only reason for laughter that the scene has served up. The story has established an even stronger joke: roaming the boardwalk, destitute and hungry, Charlie is blamed for the pilfering of a wallet and watch. He and the real pickpocket, who stashed the goods temporarily in Charlie’s trousers and is

scrabbling to retrieve them, find themselves hotfooting it together from the local beat cop. Charlie loses both pursuers in a carnival funhouse, but discovers another bobby waiting outside. He finds camouflage in the front display, assuming the metallic posture and stilted choreography of the surrounding automata. His solo routine, for the reasons discussed above, is quite funny. The pickpocket emerges from the funhouse and, wielding a club, moves to accost Charlie. They wrestle momentarily, until Charlie alerts his opponent to the cop's presence. Rapidly, they both blend into the display, with Charlie lurching in broad increments from side to side, rhythmically whapping the criminal with the bat, and spreading his jaws into an exaggerated, mechanical cackle. The pickpocket, though dazed and not as animated as Chaplin, commits to the more painful role in their collaborative disguise. As Charlie automatically wallops his framer, the pickpocket automatically takes it. This appears to be textbook bodily inelasticity, particularly alarming and amusing in the thief's inability to avoid his beating. But, reduced to only that description, the situation is not yet funny – it's merely torture, which tends not to be funny. The story details surrounding this torment bring to it the humorous substance: we know *why* the crook accepts the blows. The apparent physical rigidity is actually deliberate. What looks like a breakdown in the flight or fight response is, in fact, a very complex exercise of the same process, by which the criminal has overridden his immediate impulses. He accepts the immediate pain, assuming that it would be worse to be caught. This is not an eccentricity in the sense that we should do it differently, more elastically; we laugh because we *agree* with the pickpocket. The immediate discomfort is necessary – a conclusion that implies, in the character's mind and in ours, a potential anguish that is even greater. The thought is terrifying if we isolate it. It is the unknown, the only imaginable; more on this will follow. Thankfully, *The Circus* provides enough distance from the unspoken pain that we can delight in Charlie's clockwork smacking.

Incongruity

Whatever its origins, the modern function of laughter is clearly more intricate than a process of Darwinist scrutiny. Our guffawing is not hindered by the preeminent valiance and agility of Johnnie Gray in *The General*, nor the tenacity and innocence of Harold Lamb in Lloyd's *The Freshman* (1925; dir. Sam Taylor and Fred Newmeyer), let alone by our level of respect for the performer. Still, even in these cases, the descriptor that seems to follow "clown" is most often "misfit." We rarely laugh at the man who stands tall and sees all. Comedy is about the commander's listed posture, and the enemy's host amassing behind, unnoticed.

Immanuel Kant regarded humor as an experience in which our comprehension slips furiously around an ungraspable concept, then pleasurable relaxes. This is precisely what I experienced when I first beheld the incongruity of Buster Keaton, in that humorless photograph from *The General*, and I failed to reconcile the stone face with his supposed contentment. The discrepancy was not mended, but my frustration was resolved in laughter. (I say this with the presumption that I may speculate on processes so rapid that I realized little or none of the frustration, and only the thrill of the laughter.) The particulars of Kant's dissection of humor will play a larger role in later sections. For now, this cursory citation should substantiate the rest of our familiarization with the third and final theory to be reviewed here: incongruity. In both of the hypothetical examples above, so long as our pity is effectively subdued, we are tickled by the contrast between what we expect (an officer's fit stature) and what is realized or possible (a hunch, or the stunted height of a caricatured Napoleon), and by the difference between what we perceive (encroaching danger) and what the character perceives (anything but the same encroaching danger). These contrasts are momentarily irresolvable to our cognitive juggling, and

threaten to frustrate our comprehension. When, per Kant, the tension releases, this cathartic slackening delivers our mirth.

Incongruities have been demonstrated throughout this very essay, though hopefully only in the examples: between the confidence of the Tramp's *Modern Times* revue and the meaninglessness of his lyrics; between the collapse of Buster's safety measures and the oblivious stoicism of his gaze; between the coin Charlie expects to retrieve from his pocket and the hole he finds instead; between salty Steamboat Bill, Sr. and his urbane, ukulele-strumming progeny. Freud's superiority is founded on the incongruity between "how he does it" and "how I should do it." Bergson's automatism, though maybe less dependent on it, involves incongruity often: in *The Rough House* (1917; dir. Roscoe Arbuckle and Buster Keaton), Fatty pauses while ushering a teacup of water to his flaming bed, and helps himself to an apple from the breakfast table, which he washes down with his firefighting tool. The incongruity between the raging bedroom blaze and a teacup's worth of extinguisher is doubled by the incongruity between the situation's urgency and Fatty's lazy-morning leisure. This contrast is again comically enhanced when he automatically repurposes the tap water to serve his more immediate need – inspiring a Freudian judgment of his priorities.

Arbuckle's success may have stemmed almost exclusively from incongruity. However remarkable his talents, his films suggest he was not Chaplin's equal as a performer. But his appeal was enough that, domestically if not abroad, he could be seen as Chaplin's rival. Audiences delighted in the incongruity he played: a man of titanic physique and constrained, balletic movement, of superlatively adult size and infantile disposition. When he was not making cherubic eyes at his girl or at the camera, he was displaying his extraordinary dexterity, maybe flipping a pancake up high and catching it in the griddle behind his back. Again, the defiance of

expectation is equated with humor. The comic potency of Arbuckle's incongruous character is composed of the collision between two opposing ideas, proving themselves compatible.

We find the same conflict in a type of joke favored by some artists and abhorred by others, exercised in comedy of all mediums but especially funny through the stark objectivity of the film camera: the anachronism. Keaton's first feature, *Three Ages* (1923), makes extensive use of historically displaced mores and technologies. Stone Age Buster plays golf and dictates his will to a stone-carver. Ancient Roman Buster drives a chariot with a Roman-numeral license plate and opens a gambling ring with a soothsayer's mystic dice. Earlier films surely imagined similar fare, but with its debt to D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), *Three Ages* may have been the first feature-length parody of a historical epic. Such has been the genre in which anachronistic humor has flourished, from broad lampoons like Woody Allen's *Love and Death* (1975) to direct spoofs like Mel Brooks's *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* (1993). Interestingly, though anachronisms can be and are employed in movies that strive for a serious narrative continuity, they are most of all associated with those that, in some other regard, abandon the conventions of storytelling; compare *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (1979; dir. Terry Jones) with the far looser and more popular *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975; dir. Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones). Just as the incongruity between Arbuckle's bulk and his precision is only funny when we see it actualized, an anachronism is funny at the point of the camera's factual presentation of two disparate elements, and it need not be inducted into an otherwise rational universe to amuse us. The reconciliation of the incongruous pieces is not the comic epicenter, though it is important that the camera (or the stage, or the page, etc.) confirm their coexistence. For a moment, we are consumed by the irrationality, the pairing of the unpairable, and the floor gives out beneath us. Sense has been rent. We are startled, very nearly afraid. But, if comedy has

done its job, we have one chance. Not reasoning for the incongruity, but accepting it, we reach out with the combustion of a cathartic laugh, and catch ourselves.

Disorder and the comic unknown

Under examination, any joke in the conventional setup-punchline family will display the same nucleus of nonsense. Many are, in fact, puns – even the jokes that get respect. They are linguistic crash reels, exhibitions of the shortcomings, upsets, and oversights of language. As Walter Kerr wrote, “A pun invariably registers the collapse of meaning” (*Tragedy and Comedy* 245). The best of them are convincing; the worst are reputation-wrecking. Within this, they can be as elaborate or as spare as the jokester desires. Groucho Marx, whose recorded paternity of one-liners may surpass any other comic by several digits, delivered in *Animal Crackers* (1930; dir. Victor Heerman) the first great joke in sound film history: “One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I don’t know.” Clever and economical, the joke is a rather convincing pun on the word “in.” Unlike most puns, which dissect the multiple meanings of an adjective or noun, this one exposes the imprecise syntactical arrangement of an initially unconfusing statement. Our strained transplantation of the pajamas from Groucho the gangly huntsman onto the elephant’s centuple-XL figure precipitates the tensing and relaxing of Kantian humor. But it is the pun, the verbal joke, that escorted us to this miscomprehension. Though the linguistic argument of the joke is complex, the frugality of its construction has lent to its process of deception and reversal. By contrast, contemporary comedian Norm Macdonald spins a long-winded yarn about the exploits of a Quebecois hometown hero, who ends up employed in a meager position at SeaWorld and defends his choices by saying, “Well, I think I’m serving a youthful porpoise.” The pun is not world-class; the contradictory interpretations (“youthful

porpoise” and “useful purpose”) are too far apart in form to convince us that language is in danger. But the joke is nonetheless charming for the length and depth of its biographical setup, which deceptively prime us for a more compelling conclusion – at the very least, a better punchline. If the pun itself is not funny, its incongruity with the dimension of the story is funny as a sort of anti-climax.

In this sense, Macdonald’s joke is dependent less on the language it inverts and more on the audience’s sensitivity to story-telling and joke-telling form. It reveals disorder by breaking the order of its own presentation. This is the method of the meta-joke, which has abounded in the last decades, along with general appreciation for humor as an art. By its own merits, a statement like, “A dyslexic man walks into a bra” is simply nonsensical, not especially funny – until it is placed in an environment where the “man walks into a bar” formula is well-known. The meta-joke leverages our recognition of this formula to generate half of its compound of disparate meanings, and like any other joke it convolutes our understanding in the brief, manageable manner that is conducive to humor. Another meta-joke example – “A man walks into a bar and says, ‘Ouch!’” – functions in the same way, and moreover features just the sort of double entendre that characterizes the “man walks into a bar” recipe to begin with. The joke belongs to the lineage it lampoons, that of compiling meanings to allude faintly to non-meaning and chaos behind them. But it achieves this initiation because it knows which meaning we will automatically apply to the word “bar,” and in its spoofing, underhanded swap of homonyms it derails us from this routine reading – it deceives us, using the template and its familiar order as misdirection. Musical comedy – not of the “A Boy Named Sue” or “You Can’t Rollerskate in a Buffalo Herd” variety, which are lyrically funny, but rather the sort that amuses by sabotaging its own rhythms – operates similarly: because a song is expected to be a carefully measured

performance, an aesthetic space of meticulous order, we are especially prone to laugh when the ritual fails.

On the other hand, we can also find instances where the fulfillment of order is a source of humor. Certain trajectories or “shapes” of action seem to hold an inherent dramatic potency that can be channeled in the service of laughter. Walter Kerr identifies one, which he calls the “Keaton Curve” (*The Silent Clowns* 145). Mistaken for a fugitive in *The Goat*, Buster lures a trio of pursuing policemen into the hull of a moving truck, then locks them inside and sends the van on its way; a minute later, as he strolls melancholically along the sidewalk, the same truck arrives at its destination, right next to where Buster stands, crashing into the frame and off-loading the bundle of rabid bobbies at his feet. The tidy fruition of this boomeranging is wonderfully funny. Like all of the dealings of the universe, we cannot discern whether it is purposeful or random – and neither case bodes well for Buster.

At other times, though, the world’s internal curvature is brilliantly beneficial to our hapless analyst: “Things will work out provided you plan nothing, resist nothing” (Kerr, *The Silent Clowns* 145). In *The Balloonatic*, Buster goes out hunting bear and winds up hunted by one himself – a shambling adolescent who appears more curious than bloodlustful, but who nonetheless excites tension, nearly inspiring us to call out to the screen so that Buster will notice the predator at his heels. The bear shadows the hunter through a few shots of typical slapstick obliviousness. Buster spots a poachable critter ahead, crawls toward it on hands and knees, then lies flat at the edge of a ditch and takes aim – the gun jams. A hairy snout rises up from the trench and Buster, still unaware of the first bear, finds himself nose-to-nose with a second. Carefully, he lifts his shotgun up high, then swings the stock down mightily on the bear’s noodle. At the bottom of the arc, the gun fires between Buster’s legs and kills the other. The Curve – of

the weapon and of fate – has ushered Buster into and out of peril, toward and away from death, all without his awareness. Once again, no clue is left to confirm the presence of either happenstance or providence. Both explanations are funny in their own way, and our indecision between them only multiplies their humor: either we live in a truly entropic world, or in one of structure and design to which our relationship, simply by our nature, is forever discordant.

Chaplin makes near the same observation – any comedian, perhaps, necessarily implies it. But while Keaton laced his frames with botched endeavors, absent-minded fortune, and noble vigilance, Chaplin occupied his with lashings, retaliations, and jabs. With all his transformations perfected – like the pantomimic equivalent of a stack of false passports – he is most free in the social order that either stratifies or excludes him. He criticizes and abuses society even while he tries to fit in. Buster, too, wants to secure his status and merge with the great communal current, but these motivations are perfunctory in his films; the beauty and humor lies in his hawk-eyed wrestling against the flow of nature, defying expectations and circumventing laws that, in the lazy stream of modern society, we forget to question. The difference between Chaplin and Keaton's treatment of policemen is telling: Charlie will find any excuse to bean one in the back of the skull, giddily disregarding the consequences until the irate gaze of power is trained on him, but when Buster gets on the law's wrong side it is usually just his poor luck. Chaplin mistrusted authority. He saw the arrangement of police and sovereignty in all its secular arbitrariness. For the same reason, seeing the same truth, Keaton simply disbelieved in authority. In *The Rough House*, the police literally materialize out of thin air when their services are called upon. Never again is their presence so expressly supernatural in a Keaton film, but they remain always a horde, faceless and hive-minded. They appear in waves, numbering up to the hundreds in *Cops*, to sweep Buster away without regard to his innocence. When he is defeated in love, he

releases himself to their extinguishing embrace. The cops are an extension of the universe, come to portend the chaotic darkness that lies beyond, and to reabsorb the life that has been confined in Buster's body. For Chaplin, each cop is a villain, a present and human enemy who represents the imposition of authority where it does not belong – and he is always prepared to go down kicking and biting.

My point is this: Chaplin made fun of our vices. The delinquency of his thefts and intoxications and the spirit of his horseplay, sometimes mean and sometimes satyric, demonstrate our inclination toward entropy, and at the same time our desire for harmony. We recognize the hurt behind his spite, the denial of basic needs like food and love that precipitate his misbehavior. The muffin-stealing scene in *A Dog's Life* is exciting because of the Tramp's repeated near-capture, his deft and deliberate two-step with danger. But it is funny because of his famished, homeless condition. He steals food from the table that has not saved a seat for him; in his shoes, we would trespass as well, though probably with less pizzazz. He is the hero spawned by society's failures, the master of skills that no one should need. We ought to pity Charlie, but his charisma suspends that empathy, and affords us a moment's respite in the sanctuary of laughter. When he turns to the moral high road, his movies turn to tragedy. The departing caravan at the end of *The Circus*, perhaps the most heartrending shot in his body of work, assures us that such compassion was not the stuff of Chaplin's comedy.

Likewise, Buster's greatest indulgence (easily identifiable) is also the gravest moment in all his films – at the climax of *Battling Butler*, when Buster first pacifistically suffers the relentless blows of his opponent, then abandons his objections and fights back, nearly beating the man to death. It is a rather gruesome scene, its malice rare in Keaton's pictures of valor and detached curiosity. He preferred to elude danger, or, if possible, to minimize his role in

confrontation. One of the scarce good jokes in the movies he made after his contract was sold and his creative direction sabotaged shows a flash of the old Buster: his character in *His Ex Marks the Spot* (1940; dir. Jules White) has bumbled his way into a fistfight with his ex-wife's blowhardy new husband. Not knowing how to punch, he holds his dukes out before his face and leers guardedly at his vulgar foe. The husband jabs him a few times at the bottom of the elbow, causing Keaton to clock himself in the chin. Shoved backwards, Keaton's hand slips into an empty vase, which he holds outward as he resumes his awkward fighting stance: when the husband tries the move from before, the length added to Keaton's arm now causes the vase to smack his assailant square in the nose. In a wasteland of mealy dialogue and maladroit tumbles, this gag is a reprise of the Keaton Curve: the action travels in a circuit around Keaton, through him without invigorating him, scoring his victory without requiring his involvement. It suggests – frighteningly, amusingly – that his attendance may have been unimportant; if life is order contrived against disorder, perhaps it is meaningless.

His eagerness to scuffle here yet implies a misstep in chasing Keaton's original appeal. Buster was a figure who perused existence and posed such questions through being a decidedly good person. He was not saintly, nor even personable; his blank visage denied him these labels. Rather, he excelled in the qualities that defined him as an individual against the world – those like his curiosity, his resourcefulness, and his determination. He made fun of our virtues, which are the greatest protests we can make, however hopelessly, into the stone-faced infinitude of the unknown. Once we have confronted vice, as Chaplin causes us to do, we reach an opportunity to learn and change. But no change we make could protect us from death or ignorance, as Keaton constantly reminds us. Both artists and both humors remind us that chaos may be the final end.

V.

COMEDY AS MAGIC

The song-and-dance man

None of this quite explains how an encounter with the mortifying and incomprehensible can be so joyful, nor has it demonstrably related comedy to magic as promised. Having explored the permeation of disorder into humor, this final passage is nearly underway. But, on our way out toward the less-charted seas of comic theory, we would do well to stop once more in a familiar harbor. Kant's conclusions his *Critique of Judgment* resonate promisingly with those considered above: "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*" (Kant). This italicized proclamation, underscoring the psychological (even physiological) relaxation whose byproduct is laughter, finds comedic referent even beyond the mental sabotage that humorous incongruity wreaks on the viewer. In other words, while Fatty's lackadaisical firefighting does not embody "the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing," instead leaving that evaporation of effort for our own "Understanding," there are other incongruities that *do* represent this transformation in themselves.

On the premiere episode of *Saturday Night Live* in 1975, a man named Andy Kaufman appeared on stage with a record player. He stood awkwardly, left hand twitching. He was dressed like a fish belly, in white shirt, pants, and coat with a black turtleneck peeking over the collar. Out of nerves, it seemed, he forgot to introduce himself before bending over to set the needle on the record. It began to belt the theme from *Mighty Mouse Playhouse*. The fish belly stood,

inelegantly stiff. Then, when the line arrived, he lip-synced with quixotic gusto, “Here I come to save the day!” The crowd cheered, as Kaufman reverted to his fidgeting stance. He repeated the gesture two more times. Between the second and third, he took a drink of water. In less than two minutes the bit was finished. Peals of laughter and applause can be heard in the recording of the episode, but not everyone watching was so delighted. Many were simply confused – myself among them, when I first watched the episode in 2007. Kaufman’s work is hardly less divisive today than it was during his own, short life. Artistic genius does tend to be polarizing, and, having come to understand it, I do find his Mighty Mouse routine to be the stuff of genius.

Of course, I also use the word “understand” loosely. The performance is something more or less than comedy. As I have struggled over the years to explain it, the humorous effect it has on me has unaccountably grown. My older thoughts, still valid but not complete, related the joke to fear in terms of our own performance anxiety. We consider ourselves in Kaufman’s position, unable to consummate our role in the show – or expending all of our energy with no result, like when our legs will not run in a dream – and that hypothetical fear is safely exorcised in laughter. Though I had little confidence in my analysis of such an alien ritual, I clung to the notion that its comedic essence was in the disparity between Kaufman’s apparent objective and his apparent effort: he engages every function necessary for singing except his voice. If he means to sing, which his other actions indicate, he has failed totally. Yet, he *has* performed those auxiliary other actions. What have they achieved? They are the strained expectation that is transformed into nothing. The act itself is an incongruity; it enters into our senses already tangled and impossible. Bewildering as it is, Kaufman must have seen that it would be funny, at least to those who were prepared to accept the inexplicable nature of it. Pausing to drink from the glass of water,

refreshing the one part of his body he has absolutely not used, is clearly a joke – a superb one, too.

Again, I am liberal in my use of a word: “acceptance” is not the only avenue by which we can pleurably behold the Mighty lip-sync. “Captivation” is equally available. Kaufman has incurred many appellations as a result of his undefinable body of work, among them “comedian,” “entertainer,” “performance artist,” and, at his own insistence, “song-and-dance man.” I would submit to this list one more title: magician. Whether or not he was being funny, Kaufman was endlessly conjuring new, phantasmal identities around him. Like any good magician, he knew how to read the grain of an audience and play precisely against their expectations. Like a great magician, he knew that the audience never ceased to be the audience. Seated or standing, in the club with a ticket stub in hand or at home reading the editorials at breakfast, the whole world was ready to be fooled. Kaufman never took his hands off the wool; from our blinding first exposure until all the dead ends of our inquisition, we are never sure whether he is pulling it over our eyes or innocently fiddling with it in his lap. His act was a lifelong project of transformation. He was an undersea vent, blowing smoke just often enough to be dangerous, obscured in the refracting gloom of the ocean bottom.

Kant’s use of the word “transformation” is no coincidence, nor is his further invocation of the language of magic: “It is remarkable that...the jest must contain something that is capable of deceiving for a moment. Hence, when the illusion is dissipated, the mind turns back to try it once again, and thus through a rapidly alternating tension and relaxation it is jerked back and put into a state of oscillation” (Kant). As if without realizing it, Kant has brushed across yet another theory of humor: that comedy *is* magic. Compared to the volumes on superiority, automatism, incongruity and all the rest, this notion is virtually unexplored. Comedy magic acts are always

described as “combining” the two performative arts, but at their core these are pre-combined, like conjoined twins sharing the same organs: deception, misdirection, illusion, revelation. While comedy and horror catch their separate fires from the same pilot light of fear, humor borrows from magic the lack of comprehension which the illusionist stokes into awe.

Few artists have exposed this overlap as convincingly as Andy Kaufman. If it is possible to inspire awe and laughter in absolute simultaneity, Kaufman was capable of it. One of his most popular routines either accomplishes it or comes so near that the division is immeasurable. The bit revolves around a character originally known as the Foreign Man. As with the Mighty Mouse mime, his manner is fidgety and meek. He pipes out broken English in a funny, high voice. Sometimes, he would explain that he came from an island in the Caspian Sea that sank. Kaufman would take the stage already in this character, immediately throwing suspicion over the act. This man is too ridiculous to be real, yet is introduced as “Andy Kaufman” and gives no overt indication that he is not real. The layering of identity and deception has commenced as, and even before, he appears on the stage. Typically, the Foreign Man opens with a few standard one-liners – each delivered abysmally, and punctuated with a polite, “T’ank you vedy much.” The crowd is puzzled, some intrigued and others disdainful. It is not clear whether the botched delivery is intentional. (Miloš Forman’s biopic *Man on the Moon* from 1999 depicts this confusion excellently.) In the supreme iteration of the act, the jokes are followed by impersonations. Again, these are utter failures, featuring no change at all in voice or posture. They are identifiable only because the Foreign Man announces each one (“Now I would like to imitate for ju, de Jimmy Carter, de President of de United States”) and then repeats the name as if in character (“Hello, I am Jimmy Carter, de President of de United States”). The audience laughs, still tentatively. Like the Mighty Mouse routine but more creeping, the act begins to seem intentional. We discover the

lack of a transformation where one has been promised, and are tickled to see the concept exercised with another celebrity or two.

The Foreign Man then declares, “And now I would like to do for ju, de Elvis Presley.” Acclimated to the joke, the audience laughs at this line alone; as incongruous as his impressions have been to their targets thus far, his inelastic character is still more distant from the peerless groove of the King. But, this time, the imitator does it differently. A recording intones the fanfare from Strauss’s “Also sprach Zarathustra” as he turns his back to the crowd for a dress change. He slicks back his hair. He sheds his drab sport coat in favor of a star-spangled daredevil’s jacket that looks like it was borrowed from the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. He straps on a guitar and sneers suggestively over his shoulder, betraying the Foreign Man’s rigidity. Just when we knew what to expect, we are cast again into uncertainty. Then the record switches over to a juke joint number and Kaufman about-faces with an Elvis impression that is, in a word, transcendent. He sings like Elvis. He dances like Elvis. He banters like Elvis. His act becomes, in effect, a short concert. The crowd loses their minds, cheering like they would for the King himself. The impeccability of the performance is awe-inspiring, but so is the palimpsest of deception on which it is built. And, if the routine was not clearly funny yet, the humor lands gloriously at the very end, when Kaufman descends from his chimera and closes with a familiar, “T’ank you vedy much.”

This was arguably Kaufman’s most popular act – successful enough that the Foreign Man was adapted, minus the impressions, into the character whom Kaufman played on the sitcom *Taxi*. Given this nationwide exposure, demand for the Elvis routine must have intensified, and some of its special mesmerism been dispelled. The wonder of the Foreign Man’s transformation – from maladjusted immigrant to the epitome of American cool – is set up by his evident

incapability of imitation, but is also contingent on the ambiguity of the character from the start. Familiarity diminishes our confusion, that particular vulnerability that conducts magic like mercury conducts lightning. We have to ask, and be unsure, Where is Andy Kaufman in all these layers? *Who* is Andy Kaufman? What is real? This is the basic state of magic – and, for Kaufman, of humor.

The comic deception

The next question, then, is how a marvel becomes comical. Not all illusion is as funny as Kaufman's, nor is all comedy as entrancing. Following the horror-humor model, in which we are equipped by humor against a hypothetical threat, perhaps magic gives way to comedy by failing to produce the truly awesome. The idea is supported by a wealth of sight gags that base themselves in a sort of dramatic irony. *Safety Last!* features one, with broke Lloyd and broke roommate hiding in plain view from their landlady by scrambling into their coats, hanging themselves against the wall, and tucking their legs up and out of view. The rent hound, accessing the room with her skeleton key, hardly gives a second glance to the innocuous bundles. We ourselves are not deceived, but instead are almost accomplices in the ruse, being shown how one character has been tricked by the others. And our privileged perspective need not be so exact. Arbuckle's *Good Night, Nurse!* (1918), for instance, has Fatty and his gal (Alice Lake) escaping from a nightmarish sanatorium by posing as Fatty's levitating body. First we see them brainstorming in one room, materials in hand. Two shots later, as they enter another room, the camera has rotated ninety degrees, revealing that the "corpse" consists of Fatty's head, craned back, and his boots perched on two wooden crutches held straight out, with a sheet tossed on top to complete the illusion and conceal the crouched Alice. In the shot between, the escapees cross

the hall and their smokescreen dupes doctors Keaton and Al St. John, who respectfully arrange themselves into a mourning procession. The camera, in this middle shot, shares the vantage from which the façade is convincing – but, having just seen Fatty alive and plotting, we deduce that he remains alive and that his plot has come to fruition. We may not have figured out precisely how the illusion works, but we know enough that the illusion does not work on *us*. It is one step below actually deceiving us, and thus qualifies for jokehood.

In the mini-feature *A Sailor-Made Man* (1921; dir. Fred Newmeyer), the conceited naval volunteer played by Harold Lloyd enters the recruiting office and has his straw Skimmer hat snatched and hung on a hat-stand by a stubborn sailor posted at the door. No less stubborn, but with the composure of an affluent gentleman, Harold turns back and retrieves it. Halfway across the lobby, the doorman nicks it again. Harold, puffing regally on his cigarette, returns to the hat-stand and withdraws two hats: one belonging to a recruit who entered at the beginning of the shot, which Harold places on his dome, and the other his own, which he holds behind his back. When the sailor intercepts him and swipes the decoy, Harold replaces it with the genuine article and strolls on toward the main desk. This solution gag was recycled from Lloyd's own short *Spring Fever* (1919; dir. Hal Roach). It is executed more effectively, in fact, in the earlier film, for the simple reason that the antagonistic hat-snatcher is situated in the foreground, ahead of Harold. *A Sailor-Made Man* places the doorman *with* the hat rack in the background of the frame – that is, with the “hidden” back-up hat plainly in his line of sight. The gag cannot account for how he misses the second Skimmer. In purely diegetic terms, it would work better if Harold were to conceal the hat *in front* of himself, where it would be visible to us but not to the haranguing hat-hanger. As it stands, however, what the gag discloses about the filmmakers' sense of visual comedy is more interesting than what it fails to accomplish technically. While sacrificing the

scene's diegetic integrity, they preserve the *effect* of Harold's ruse for the audience. The concealment of the hat from our view *represents* its concealment from the doorman. As the filmmakers understand, and have tried to practice, the deception must be seen in its functioning form, in order to eradicate from the audience all doubt that it can, indeed, deceive. In theory, the joke can yet succeed as blocked in *A Sailor-Made Man*; it is problematized only because we have thought about it more closely than Lloyd and company have expected, and doubt has been reintroduced. But their choice is a reasonable one: to risk the internal collapse of the gag, but retain the essence of the illusion.

Making believe

A great humorist, as well as a great magician, might be marked by a grasp of what Lloyd's crew has exercised here. If comedy and magic are the feeling of the rug being pulled away, then first the rug must be firmly laid. Visual essayist Tony Zhou, of the insightful and exhaustively researched webseries *Every Frame a Painting*, finds that legendary animator Chuck Jones favored gags with "a classic two-part structure: the first part leads you to make an assumption; the second part proves it wrong" (*Every Frame a Painting*). This is the very same anatomy found in many a magic trick, playing freely with our assumptions about physical space. Most of Andy Kaufman's career does the same with identity. But, unlike Jones, Kaufman's trademark was a salient void at the center of his act. The thrilling slippage of sense in his transformations is facilitated by the feeling that our assumptions are simply projections onto nothing. Anything and everything we assume about Kaufman is based on an invention; the bait in his bait-and-switch is a hologram. Other magicians (those of the lady-sawing tradition) and other comedians (such as Jones, and the silent clowns to whom he owed an obvious debt)

chummed with a more stable bait: our own sense of rules. Buster throws a life preserver to his floundering son in *The Boat* (1921), and it sinks. Later he drops the anchor, and watches in placid disbelief as it floats on the surface. In both of these sister gags, our assumptions are defied by a magical, opposite logic. Why this reversal should amuse rather than amaze us remains unclear. Possibly, the utility of the objects is key: the polar incongruity between the appliances' known purpose and their evident capability is upsetting, and stimulates a fear that does not stream into awe. Regardless, we can see that the gag's success depends on our staunch belief in the properties of lifesavers and boat anchors, and the usurping of that belief with photographic evidence.

More often than not, visual comedy is built on an explicit logic – one whose workings we can explain, rather than simply “feeling” when a rule has been broken. Magicians are universally praised for their ability to “make you believe,” but the comedian too is constantly pursuing our undivided faith, which their jokes proceed to bend and contradict. A joke, especially one folded into a narrative, requires an unquantifiable balance between economy and comprehensibility. The great comedians have an intuition for how much supplementary information will vitalize the joke without spoiling it. In the case of a sinking life preserver, it is none (save for the urgency of the situation). In other cases, a touch of extra development makes a world of difference. Take Arbuckle distractedly helping himself to the cup of water intended to douse the inferno in the next room. If the joke is only mildly funny, it is because it lacks our wholehearted belief in his forgetfulness. Keaton refashioned this gag for a scene in *The Boat*, in which he struggles without progress to bail out the hull of his leaking *Damfino* using a similar, puny teacup. Finally, he sighs wearily and sits down, refreshing himself with a cupful from the invading geyser. If the gag is funnier here than its iteration in *The Rough House*, it is thanks to the evidence of Buster's

fatigue. One explicit logic (work leads to exhaustion leads to rehydration) supersedes another (danger leads to action until the danger has been cleared), and because we do not doubt any of the elements involved, we laugh. Interestingly, the belief in question is not the one that the joke disproves, which is equally present in Arbuckle's version. But, in more firmly validating the teacup's re-appropriation, the joke is amplified.

The consequence of not ensuring our belief is simple: we do not laugh. Walter Kerr criticizes the use of editing gimmicks like reversed footage, which can show a throng of bathers ejected from a pool by an obese diver, or a shack in Arbuckle's *Out West* (1918) exploding and then reassembling: "It is not simply that the image is unamusing in itself; our sense of form is being insulted. We understand trickery as well as the next fellow and do not like it served cold" (*The Silent Clowns* 65). The mechanism of the illusion is too apparent – and, perhaps, too easy. Not only have we not been deceived ourselves, we have not been convinced of its potential to deceive. A slightly better gag in *Out West* has Fatty, parched at the end of a desert walkabout, appearing to drain a watering hole in a few seconds of sipping. The effect is entirely practical: no cinematic technique is implemented to achieve the image (other than the limits of the frame, which hide whatever rigging is actually at work), and therefore none is abused. The same is true for one of Keaton's jaw-droppingest gags, which shows the intrepid Sherlock Jr.'s escape from a pair of pursuing baddies by diving into his valet's midriff. We can imagine the technical clockwork of the illusion, but can cull no definite conclusion from the given image; the camera is used only to record the trick, not to create it.

But this is not to ban the camera from the kitchen. After all, the progenitor of great film directors was a magician by trade. Georges Méliès generated virtually all of the common repertoire of camera tricks, and his surviving short films remain, after more than a century, first-

class examples of cinematic illusion. Using quick, precise edits to vanish characters in plumes of smoke, and double exposures to duplicate images at will – for instance, the director’s head, cloned six times and cast as musical notes on a giant staff made of telephone wires – Méliès imagined in film the next evolution of magic. Stage deceptions are based mainly on the limitations of the audience’s vantage; from a different seat, we could see the seam of the trapdoor and our belief would be extinguished. This is the same principle followed by Keaton in his vanishing stunt from *Sherlock Jr.*, simply excluding the key information from our perspective. Cinematic deceptions, however, are based on what we assume to be the limitation of the camera: compulsory factuality. We are partially right – but where we are wrong in our assumptions, the magician reigns. In Kerr’s words, “Méliès became interested in the camera precisely because it could be made to *seem* to lie” (*The Silent Clowns* 18). The illusionist found how to bend the rules of the camera’s objectivity without breaking them.

When Arbuckle reverses film to improbably mend the obliterated cabin in *Out West*, those of us who do not laugh (unless, perhaps, at the camp of the transparent gimmick) must feel that he breaks the rules. He is not forcing the camera to lie – it cannot – but he is also not making it *seem* to lie very well. Nevertheless, his instinct is a good one: what works for magic can work for comedy. Other silent comedians dabbled in the more complicated techniques of “Méliès magic.” In *The Playhouse* (1921; dir. Keaton), meticulously framed multiple exposures are used to populate an entire theatre with duos, trios, and nontets of Buster, prompting one of the audience Busters to comment, “This fellow Keaton seems to be the whole show.” The same year, Chaplin adapted the Méliès “disappearing” technique – known as a substitution splice or “stop trick,” where the frames which would reveal the actor’s exit are plucked out to create the vanishing effect – to make an impossible number of golf balls pop out of the gullet of a dozing

vagrant in *The Idle Class*. If these gags do not mesmerize us today, it must be because we have learned to look for the seams. For my part, at least, they are funny even as I am aware of their mechanisms, while the *Out West* lean-to gag is not. The tricks taken from Méliès require patience and care, which Keaton and Chaplin clearly give; Arbuckle's is as casual as the demolition it reverses. None of these subverts the credibility of the camera any more than the others, but they vary in terms of intricacy and transparency, and this directly affects how persuasive they are. Once again, we see it is not necessary that the illusion deceive us, only that it prove itself capable.

Comedy and sublimity

Méliès' tricks are restricted in their transplantation to comedy in that they address only the physical laws of the universe – that is, the laws as we assume them to read. Slapstick shares this affinity. Many devotees to the silent clowns use “spell,” “trance,” and other language from the sorcery word bank to evoke their early encounters with physical comedy's film masters. The enchantment-like allure of Chaplin and Keaton is well documented. Yet even when infidelity to physics is not the punchline, comedy's upheavals of logic often enable it to mesmerize. This is not to say that humor is duty-bound to investigate its contiguity with illusion – after all, the frontier between them will be defined differently by each viewer, given their individual sensitivities – but instead to argue that this border does exist, and that the project of its exploration has already begun. For myself, Andy Kaufman is the pioneer and pinnacle of this mission, da Gama and Gagarin rolled into one and shuffled amongst his various fluid façades. *Ren & Stimpy*, in its finest moments, equates to a comic Viking raid, inspiring shock and humor to like degrees and rivalling Kaufman in the quest for sublime comedic absurdity: the “Happy

Happy Joy Joy” musical number from the fabled episode “Stimpy’s Invention” interpolates quotes from Burl Ives movies with a bounding nonsense tune meant to inspire bliss, and is paired with visions of Ren attempting violently to remove a helmet that compels him to feel happiness against his will. The scene, in a Kaufmanesque feat, is halfway between hilarious and spellbinding. Any particular “deception” is hard to identify in it, and if an assumption or point of logic is confronted here then it must not be an explicit one. But the effect engendered by the bizarre color-and-sound spectacle is precisely the one sought tirelessly by the illusionist – and it lasts until the moment we laugh.

However inexplicable this sequence remains, a brief wade into the fog of colors that enshrouds it can illuminate another patch of the shared ground between comedy and magic. I have not hesitated to call the state that *Ren & Stimpy* approaches “sublime.” The word is used by twentieth-century philosopher R. W. Hepburn to denote the “transformation of the merely threatening and daunting into what is aesthetically manageable, even contemplated with joy” (151). The languages of fear and magic are again invoked, and find a mutual cognate in Hepburn’s phrase for the fuel of the sublime experience, “the agency of wonder” (151). Sublimity is dreadful wonder processed into delightful wonder. Hepburn contrasts this with tragedy, in which dread remains largely dreadful in the face of crushing defeat, but is met with the ascertainment of “some positive value [that] is affirmed, even in a rare and intensified form, precisely in and through the human response to the revelation of the dysteleological side of the world. That value should be thus realized in the very shadow of its imminent annihilation – there, of course, lies the ground for wonder” (152). Comedy, unmentioned by Hepburn, occupies the liminal crevasse between these two forms of aesthetic wonder: though widely defined by happy

endings, it tends toward the cynical, dysteleological, even nihilistic; it is delight for the audience, tragedy for the clown, and dread all around.

Taking this as the true topography, the hypnotic reveries induced by the likes of *Ren & Stimpy* and Andy Kaufman cannot be laughable and simultaneously sublime. They cannot be comedy and magic at the same moment. What they can do is plant their snares in the brush along the borderline, clipping our heels and groping to fasten us to the experience of one side or the other. Comedy's traps, it seems, are the sturdier: after I have laughed once at Kaufman's mute charms (I would call them delightful) or Stimpy's mindless, geometrically confounding dance (I would not call it delightful), the ensuing laughs come loose like debris. I remain woozy, the incenses of neighboring sublimity yet coaxing me, but the landslide of humor has begun. I have broken the spell of amazement with one of amusement, fallen from the exosphere but not out of the sky. The process of humor that Kant illustrates – an oscillation in our comprehensive faculties, a cyclical tensing and relaxing – cannot be reversed. Magic, in its intention to suspend our understanding, to hold us tense, indefinitely or until a climactic slackening, has faltered and struck the first vibrating chord of laughter that rings and echoes irrevocably.

VI.

CONCLUSION

A last thought on comedy and magic

What comedy and magic hold in common deserves more of the investigation that it has long gone without. I have tried in these few pages to illustrate that the Kantian tension of incomprehension is the substance of both, as is the Hepburnian dread that underlies it. Whenever the tension breaks, and whether the break is clean or quivering, comedy emulates magic in that it establishes contact with some unnamable, ungraspable unknown. And what we do not know, we fear – or make fun of, given the right conditions. Some comedy is confusion: an anachronism is not funny inherently, but only because our knowledge conflicts with the image. The appearance of a distinctly modern-day behavior in the distant past (a Neanderthal brunch table's Lazy Susan, Rembrandt with a selfie stick, etc.) is deemed an incongruity because our understanding has failed to account for it. Our conception of history is incongruous with the vision presented, and our attempt to reconcile them constitutes the tensing and relaxing that, when it is vibrant enough, we express cathartically through laughter. Other comedy is threatening: the insinuation of a meaningless or adversarial world points to the chief of unknowns, as do the expositions of inelastic behavior and the inferiority of our neighbor if we consider these a Darwinian firewall. If death is billed more often in tragedy than in comedy, it is only because such an explicit reminder of the ultimate unknown has historically been destructive to the viewer's humor, intensifying discomfort and dread beyond the comic cutoff. It does not mean that death is not cast in comedy. As a matter of fact, it may be even more striking in its cameos. Far better than we can trust my insights into what is funny, we can trust those of a maestro like Mel Brooks: "Tragedy is when I

cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.” The proverb is usually recited to evince the necessary suspension of pity (i.e. what happens to *you* is funny to *me*), but I read it as a proposition that comedy holds doom much closer to its heart than tragedy does. As Kerr and Hepburn remind us, tragedy is characterized by the affirmation of some nirvana or virtue, attainable in humankind or intrinsic in the universe, which the tragic aesthetic defines by negation. There is hope in the tragic view of death. Comedy and magic, however, make no undue judgments of the unknown. They simply introduce us, fleetingly, manageably, to the wondrous disorder of not knowing.

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