Comedy/
Cinema/Theory

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Edited by
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Comic Occasions

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> *Let the wise and philosophic*
> *choose me for my wisdom's sake.*
> *Those who joy in mirth and laughter*
> *choose me for the jests I make.*
>
> Aristophanes, *Assemblywomen*

> *Nobody's perfect.*
> Joe E. Brown, the closing line of *Some Like It Hot*, upon learning that his bride-to-be (Jack Lemmon) is a man

Beginnings: The Unbearable Lightness of Comic Film Theory

Matters comic have recently begun to receive systematic and theoretical attention (see Selected Bibliography). But a few years ago only one broad survey, the late Gerald Mast's *The Comic Mind*, had been devoted to the subject of film comedy. His study wisely recognized the danger of the "swamp of abstract debate on the nature of comedy and the comic" and provided us with some broadly useful concepts about film comedy, especially in terms of the "comic climate" that cues viewers to expect comedy "even if we do not know what Comedy is" (9).

Nevertheless, his analysis of comedy in terms of eight comic *structures* and what he calls "comic thought" appears incomplete and restrictive in light both of theoretical work available in film, literary, and dramatic studies and of theoretical perspectives that have proven fruitful since 1979. Jerry Palmer (20–21) has recently detailed these main shortcomings. The difficulty in trying to locate the comic in plot structures, as Palmer rightly identifies, is that "the plot structures either are not specifically funny, not specific to comedy in any sense of the word, or they are not in fact plot structures, but refer to the minimum unit of comic plot, the individual joke or gag" (28).

No plot is inherently funny. Put another way, as we shall see, any plot is potentially comic, melodramatic, or tragic, or perhaps all three at once. Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, for instance, is constructed on what Mast identifies as comic structures 3 and 4: the reductio ad absurdum in which a sin-

gle mistake produces utter chaos and an investigation of the workings of a particular society that compares the responses of one social group or class with those of another. And yet apart from the tragic irony that Oedipus does not know who he is, and the use of "jokes" within several scenes based on the audience's superior knowledge, everyone agrees the play is not a comedy.

No totalizing theory of comedy has proved successful. The vastness of the territory, which includes the nature of laughter, humor, the comic, satire, parody, farce, burlesque, the grotesque, the lyrical, romance, metacomedy, and wit, precludes facile generalizations. As Harry Levin has recently written, "If there were any single generalization that could be applied with equal relevance to Chaucer, Mark Twain, Evelyn Waugh, Milan Kundera, Milesian tales, Jewish jokes, banana peels, mechanical toys, content analysis, laugh counts, broadcasts, cartoons, monkeys, hyenas, and tickling it would be much too sweeping for any plane but that of pointless platitude" (6).

Furthermore, there is a historical bias against a close and serious consideration of comedy. That comic films seldom win Academy Awards even though comedy reigns at the box office (six out of the top ten selling films in 1988) is only the latest example in a long history of criticism that has viewed comedy as inferior to other genres in Western culture. Since Aristotle designated comedy "an artistic imitation of men of an inferior moral bent" (12), it has escaped the close schematization that the epic and tragedy have undergone in Western literary theory.

And let us not forget one simple reason comedy has escaped close scrutiny: the comic is enjoyable. Why risk destroying pleasure? This is particularly true when a closer examination may well reveal a much darker subtext/context. As one critic notes of happy endings in Aristophanes' comedies, for instance, "If the only way to achieve this happy ending is to invert the order of the world, then there is something seriously wrong with world order as it stands" (McLeish, 76).

But it is just such a double awareness that this collection aims to provide. Such fresh perspectives can lead to increased pleasure and, yes, to even further laughter.

Comedy/Cinema/Theory wishes to broaden the theoretical and critical horizons regarding the study of film comedy. These chapters are not encyclopedic. Nor are they focused only on film comedy, for issues related to comic theory often apply equally to literature or drama or other expressions of the comic. Also many familiar comic films and personas are absent from these discussions. And some of the chapters have been commissioned because they go beyond the accepted comic canon: the inclusion of Alfred Hitchcock (Dana Polan, "The Light Side of Genius"), the Three

Stooges (Peter Brunette, "The Three Stooges and the (Anti-)Narrative of Violence"), and Jerry Lewis (Scott Bukatman, "Paralysis in Motion").

Furthermore the collection is divided into two simple parts—those chapters that are more weighted toward theoretical issues and therefore use a variety of examples from films to support the discussion and those chapters that more clearly use theory to illuminate particular films. The majority of the chapters concern American comedy because Hollywood has traditionally exerted a dominant influence on world film comedy. André Bazin suggests just how critical a role comedy plays within American cinema itself:

> Comedy was in reality the most serious genre in Hollywood, in the sense that it reflected, through the comic mode, the deepest moral and social beliefs of American life. (35)

Rather than limit the book to merely Hollywood comedy, however, each part is "capped" with a chapter on comedy from foreign cinema to suggest how comedy can be and has been approached from very different perspectives abroad.

The Sunny Side of the Street: Comic Perspectives

I wish to provide a brief context for the chapters that follow and to suggest additional perspectives from which comedy and film comedy might usefully be observed in future studies. Because too much theoretical writing on comedy from Aristotle to Freud has been essentialist ("The comic *is* . . ."), the following remarks are meant to be nonessentialist ("The comic *can be seen as* . . .") and thus open-ended. "The point is," writes Albert Cook, "to probe its [comedy's] depths, not to chop it into portions" (31).

Consider, for instance, how often comedy and tragedy (or, in Hitchcock's view, "suspense") blend into each other. Remember that at the end of Plato's *Symposium* Aristophanes and Socrates remained awake discussing how comedy and tragedy probably had similar origins. Both developed out of ritual celebrations for Dionysus, the god of drama and wine, and both involve, through differing routes, insight into the limitations and capabilities of human potential. "The great works of comic writing [and we can add film] have extended the range of our feelings," says George McFadden (243). More than a dramatic or literary genre, comedy has been viewed in recent years as a particular *quality* (McFadden) or vision, as Robert W. Corrigan holds when he explains that "comedy celebrates his [man's] capacity to endure" (3).

Two recent studies stand out as particularly useful. David Marc in *Comic Visions* takes a contextual/cultural perspective in analyzing television comedy and suggests that contemporary American "mass culture" can be seen as a comedy, albeit laced with ironic and even tragic overtones. In speaking of Norman Mailer's protagonist Rojack in *An American Dream,* Marc notes, "The capacity to experience, even for a moment, the comic beauty of America as 'a jeweled city' before falling prey to the tragedy of the poison gases lurking beneath the surface is what allows Rojack to keep his sanity" (9). Within this context, Marc suggests that American television offers two distinct forms of comedy: stand-up comedy and situation comedy. And as he notes, "Aesthetically at odds, these two genres of mass humor form a Janus face of American culture" (12) because stand-up comedy champions individualism and at least potentially radical ideologies, whereas situation comedy favors the status quo and social consensus. In part, Marc's book is useful for film studies because it does designate a difference between the territory carved out by film and the territory mapped out by television in American culture (neither of the two television genres has become the staple of American film comedy).

Also valuable for our purposes is Palmer's semiotic reading of film and television comedy in *The Logic of the Absurd.* Semiotics allows Palmer to read the signifying systems of comedy in their artistic shapes and organic forms. Put simply, semiotics permits us to better grasp *how* comedy works. But from the start, Palmer's investigation rightfully sweeps aside several issues that have troubled those who have pondered the comic in the past. He remarks, for instance, that laughter is no guarantee of humor (30) for it may also come from nervousness in the face of danger, grief, and so on.

Palmer's close attention to how comedy is constructed and functions also leads him to see the "double" possibility of the comic as conservative or subversive or even both at once, depending on the audience and context. As Palmer notes, semiotics can explain conservative and subversive structures within a joke, but it "is not capable of telling us whether jokes about Irish stupidity contribute to racial prejudice against the Irish" (86).

For a broader point of view, we need to search beyond semiotics. Others, such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, who have written on the theory of comedy have viewed comedy not as a genre but as a special form of "games" (195). Rather than attempting to circumscribe comedy, Wittgenstein describes it as a form of gamelike activity (like language itself) in which we can discover "family resemblances," a network of similarities that can be noted and discussed. He further suggests that such a nonessentialist view allows us to "draw a boundary for a special purpose" (section 69). In a similar vein Johan Huizinga writes provocatively about humans as *Homo ludens,* and various psychiatrists have linked comedy to "creativity" in

general. Child psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott goes beyond Aristotle's observation that a baby becomes "human" around the fortieth day when he or she begins to *laugh*. According to Winnicott, a child is an "individual" by age one because at that time he or she begins to separate as well as combine fantasy and "reality" through *play*, thus constructing a "personal world" (7).

Comedy, creativity, play. These boundaries suggest a combination of control and freedom, an awareness of stated or implied rules/codes, and the imagination/fantasy to manipulate them. They also point to *pleasure* as Sigmund Freud describes in his analysis of wit, jokes, and dreams (224), no matter what aims are attributed to the comic (moral or otherwise). And as psychoanalytic theory from Freud to Jacques Lacan and beyond helps us understand, much of that pleasure has to do with temporarily suspending the "rules" of adulthood and returning, albeit symbolically, to an earlier, pre-Oedipal state. Indeed, the realm of comedy is similar to and intersects with the traditional realms of carnival and festivity, time periods when the rules and regulations of a society are briefly suspended.

A. Van Gennep, Victor Turner, and others have more precisely identified this condition as "liminality": that space of freedom between the set rules of a society (Turner, 23). Comedy evokes such an in-between state. A work that is identified in any way as comic automatically predisposes its audience to enter a state of liminality where the everyday is turned upside down and where cause and effect can be triumphed over and manipulated. Comedy thus can be partially described as a playful realm of consecrated freedom.

Back to Basics

Noël Carroll's chapter, "Notes on the Sight Gag," and Peter Lehman's chapter, "Penis-size Jokes and Their Relation to Hollywood's Unconscious," suggest the minimal units of comedy: gags (visual) and jokes (verbal). Let us consider these twin basic elements of comedy more closely.

Arthur Koestler's overlooked concept of "biosociation" and comedy is useful in helping us understand the basis of film comedy. Building on Henri Bergson's mechanistic theory of the comic and Freud's analysis of jokes and the unconscious, Koestler takes an even broader view. He observes that comedy (verbal and physical) involves the joining of "two or more independent and self contained logical chains," which creates biosociation: a "flash" (release) of emotional tension upon their intersection in the reader/viewer's mind (30). This observation helps us consider the nature of the junctions among the multiple signifying chains within a film: dialogue/image/nonverbal sound/music.
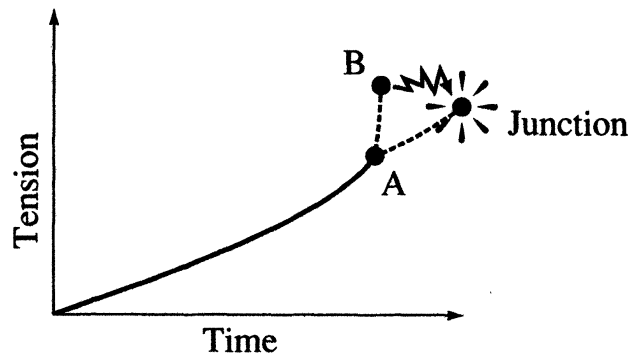
Comic biosociation

Furthermore, biosociation helps to differentiate comic from noncomic forms. No flash occurs in tragic and melodramatic structures. Rather, the narrative is constructed to involve the audience's concern (anticipation/emotion) throughout. Comedy, on the other hand, is constructed to suggest several logical chains (Koestler's phrase) that create a mixture of surprise and anticipation when they suddenly cross. Koestler diagrams various examples of such comic biosociation. The figure presented here is typical for any comic exchange (joke/gag). Elaborating on Freud's description of "economy" in humor, Koestler defines biosociation more precisely:

> One cannot tell two stories simultaneously. At "A" the narrator must leave the first association train, and let it follow its course along the dotted line as automatic expectation in the reader's mind, while he himself starts the second train at "B" and conducts it towards the crash. *This second train has to move very fast lest the first should meanwhile lose its steam, and the flash cease to be a flash.* (31)

Let us borrow from Woody Allen to see this process in practice. Woody has said in his early stand-up engagements when asked if he believes in God, "I believe that there is an intelligent spirit that controls the universe, except certain parts of New Jersey." The biosociation is the sudden flash of recognition as "A" (the theological question) and "B" ("certain parts of New Jersey") collide.

Although Palmer makes no reference to Koestler, his semiological reading of comedy is almost identical. Palmer is, however, even more precise in his study of what happens in a joke or gag. Borrowing the Greek term *peripeteia* (reversal) from discussions of tragedy, he suggests that a gag/joke results from a peripeteia, which thus evokes both surprise and anticipation when a pair of syllogisms leads to a contradictory conclusion (42). The fact that a joke or gag is concerned with two syllogisms has to do with the intersection of the *plausible* and the *implausible*.

In the Woody Allen example the syllogisms would be:

1. "Do you believe in God?" is a common theological question (major premise).

2. Allen's concluding phrase "except certain parts of New Jersey" (minor premise) appears to run contrary to any concept of an omnipotent being.

3. Conclusion: the answer is implausible because of its apparent contradiction.

And yet we are simultaneously aware of a second set of possibilities:

1. New Jersey is viewed as something of an industrial and cultural wasteland, particularly by staunch New Yorkers.

2. An intelligent spirit, particularly one housed in a New Yorker's body, might indeed choose not to associate with New Jersey.

3. Therefore the answer has an element of plausibility.

Therefore, as both Koestler and Palmer suggest, an understanding of the "double vision" of jokes and gags is inseparable from an appreciation of the structure and effect of humor and comedy in general. Palmer states that "when the spectator decodes a gag (syntagm), he does so by seeking a paradigm or paradigms that 'make sense' of the syntagm" (110). It is this flash of awareness in Koestler's terms, or the appreciation of the simultaneously plausible and implausible syllogisms in Palmer's view, that helps explain how by trying to "make sense" we are suddenly thrown into a third level of insight.

Comedy and the Deconstructive Spirit

I have previously stated in my review of Gerald Mast's study that no narrative is inherently comic. But I am now in a position to suggest that comedies are interlocking sequences of jokes and gags that place narrative in the foreground, in which case the comedy leans in varying degrees toward some dimension of the noncomic (realism, romance, fantasy), or that use narrative as only a loose excuse for holding together moments of comic business (as in a Marx Brothers' film).

The work of Jacques Derrida can take us even further in a study of film comedy and narrative. Derrida clearly views his critical activity as an outgrowth of many who have gone before him including Georg Hegel, Edmund Husserl, Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. At its base, Derrida's activity has a subver-

sive thrust similar to comedy's (especially the carnivalesque) subversion of norms. Jonathan Culler describes deconstruction as an attitude of *play* that exposes how a text "undermines the philosophy it asserts" (240). Derrida expresses himself even more revealingly:

> To risk meaning *nothing* is to start to *play* . . . and first to enter into the play of *différance,* which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a *center* movement and textual spacing of differences. (14; emphasis my own)

In a sense Derrida takes Wittgenstein's concept of language as "game" (play) to its extreme. The result is an attitude that mirrors Heraclitus— "All is flux"—for our contemporary world. All hierarchies, power, and constructs are shown to contain the traces of *différance,* of their own overthrow, negation, destruction. Such an attitude toward texts suggests the need for playfulness in creators and audience and the double awareness Palmer speaks of. For deconstruction shows, as Geoffrey H. Hartman explains, "the sense of a serious, unending game, both in the writer who plays language against itself and in the reader who must uncover without losing track, the gamut of language" (1).

Let us be more specific as we consider film comedy. Derrida's writings do suggest how interwoven play is with the serious and the serious with play. To be *Homo ludens* is to be *aware:* to be alert to others and to alternatives, probabilities, possibilities, and chance (that major factor in games of every sort). Thus, play and discipline go together. Not to be aware is to be a victim, a fool, a braggart, a dictator.

Deconstructive attitudes help us to appreciate those filmmakers who use comic elements to play "against the grain" in numerous ways. Even though Jean-Luc Godard has been much analyzed, far too little attention has been paid to the *comic* dimension of his "disruptive" cinema. He has been restlessly obsessed with exploring and exposing cinematic *language,* attempting to reach what he calls "zero" in various ways. Godard has at times sounded much like Derrida when pronouncing that his films are not films but *attempts* to make films. Certainly by classical definitions Godard is not a "comic" filmmaker (no happy endings, for instance). But in the expanded sense of play and the comic as an ongoing, multifaceted critique (which, as Hartman suggests, is pleasurable), Godard can be more clearly revealed as working in the realm of comedy.

Derrida is fully aware of the irony of using language to expose language. Godard does likewise: he explores film language with film. What makes each of them *Homo ludens* is that instead of despairing that there are limitations to expression (language/film) and turning to suicide or silence, they have chosen instead to continue expressing themselves and thus

to play. In such a perspective, a "happy ending" is not an important criterion for identifying the comic. Neither, strictly speaking, is the evocation of laughter (although there are some very funny moments in Godard). What emerges is the pleasure Godard takes in subverting traditional film narrative and codes of articulation, what Derrida refers to as "joyous Nietzschean affirmation."

Deconstructive theory also points to the ludic role of the viewer. Rather than being a passive member of the audience, the viewer who "plays" is actively involved. From Derrida's position, there are no observers because there are no fixed subjects or "selves" (identities), only *participants*. Such an attitude coincides with much of reader-response theory, which makes similar claims for the existence of "the text" as depending in large part on the active recreation of it in the mind of the reader/viewer (who is also in constant flux, as Heraclitus would remind us). The comic has always depended on a special relationship between creator and viewer/reader, a bond described as "a state of *conspiratorial irony*" (McLeish, 17) in Aristophanes' plays and, by implication, in all comic works. More specifically, this means that whereas tragic and melodramatic texts tend to hide their artifice in order to involve the audience emotionally, comic texts tend to acknowledge the presence of the reader/viewer (the frequent direct address of Aristophanes' characters to the audience, Chaplin's glances at the camera, or Woody Allen's opening direct-camera monologue in *Annie Hall* [1977]) and therefore reveal the texts' artifice. This self-consciousness of comedy helps establish the amount of "distance" required for the unfolding characters and events to be taken as ludic rather than tragic. Although tragedy can employ soliloquies, we rarely find an Oedipus, Willy Loman, or Citizen Kane speaking directly to the camera and thus to *us*.

Beyond simply speaking of the comic as a form of play, therefore, deconstruction points to comedy as an intensified version of language and behavior. Traditional comic theory has spoken of comedy as social and tragedy as individual. These more recent perspectives are more precise. Like language and "texts" in general, the comic is plural, unfinalized, disseminative, dependent on *context* and the intertextuality of creator, text, and contemplator. It is not, in other words, just the *content* of comedy that is significant but also its "conspiratorial" relationship with the viewer (reader). Such a conspiratorial relationship is explored by Stephen Mamber in his chapter, "In Search of Radical Metacinema," particularly in regard to parody.

Tragedy is also necessarily dialogic (a system of interrelated discourses among creator/text/contemplator). But as I have already established, tragedy (and other noncomic forms) seeks to isolate or at least reduce the number of "discourses" in order to imply a sense of "fate" and inevitability as opposed to an awareness of potentiality and "unfinalizedness" (Mikhail

Bakhtin's term). And tragedy has traditionally performed this role by effacing a direct awareness of contact between creator and contemplator.

Pre-Oedipal and Oedipal Comedy

Traditionally we think of two major divisions of comic characters: antagonists (*eirons*) and the butts of jokes and gags (*alazons*). More recently, such classical theory has been sharpened by Harry Levin, who sees these types as *playboys* (the ludicrous: those with whom we laugh) and *killjoys* (the ridiculous: those whom we laugh at). The breakdown of traditional comedy in the twentieth century and the establishment of so-called meta-comedy can be seen, in Levin's terms, in the merging of these two main comic types. Figures in the works of Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, James Joyce, and others are both ludicrous and ridiculous, playboys and killjoys simultaneously. Jerry Palmer, on the other hand, establishes four types of comic character (167–168): the everyday joke teller who has no "character"; the stand-up comic with a consistent public persona; the stereotypical character "positioned according to needs of the punch line"; and the fully drawn comic character.

Naturally, what I have said of gags and narrative holds true of character as well. As the comic character moves away from the "purity" of the simple gag or joke, other noncomic elements increasingly become involved in the makeup of the character's identity. Clearly we know none of the Keystone Kops as individuals, whereas Robin Williams in *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1987) emerges as a complex figure, part wise fool, part romantic activist caught up in a war he neither fully embraces nor rejects.

Two further distinctions help us proceed even further in determining the potential of comic characters. It is common to see a family division between Aristophanic (old) comedy and Shakespearean (new) comedy. More specifically, scholars such as Northrop Frye have seen this division as one between a social/political/intellectually pointed form of comedy (Aristophanic) and a romantic, emotional, and relational form of comedy (Shakespearean). Frye calls the latter the comedy of "the green world" (215).

In light of developments in psychoanalytic theory, however, it seems more useful to speak of Oedipal (accommodation, compromise, social integration) comedy and pre-Oedipal (wish fulfillment, dreams) comedy. Freud speaks of the comic as a sudden adult regaining of "the lost laughter of childhood" (224). If we consider children in their pre-Oedipal phase—that is, before they have confronted and resolved their Oedipal conflicts and thus integrated a sense of self with the needs of socialization with others—Aristophanes emerges as our only pure example of a form of comedy in which wish fulfillment without parental or social hindrance is clearly seen.

In most of Aristophanes' surviving comedies, a middle-aged adult goes through three stages: he or she is dissatisfied, dreams up a plan to cure that dissatisfaction, and then carries out that plan to a successful resolution. The final phase is a glorious celebration of the character's success. Lysistrata (*Lysistrata*) ends war by organizing a successful sex strike, Trygaios concludes his separate peace with Zeus (*Peace*), and Agorakrites (*Knights*) rids Athens of a pesky demagogue. A wish and a fulfillment. If, as several critics suggest, comedy in general produces pleasure and a sense of "euphoria," no comedy has been so wide open and euphoric as the brand practiced by Aristophanes. I will speak later of the festive elements of old comedy, but here let me say that Aristophanes' works present characters who dream incredible fantasies (Cloudcuckooland in *The Birds*) and, with only minor "blocking" episodes (*agons*), realize those fantasies, thus transforming all of society. Such is the stuff of stage comedy but also of childlike wish fulfillment.

If we apply this division to cinema, we see how rare this Aristophanic orientation in comic characterization has been. Most screen comedy concerns romance (new comedy) of one form or another, and romance requires personal compromise and social integration, as traditionally represented in the final marriage. Such comedy is therefore Oedipal or, as several of the chapters here that employ Lacan's terms suggest, such comedy exists in the realm of the *symbolic* (awareness of self and the beginnings of language use) as opposed to that of the *imaginary* (close bonding with the mother and no control of language).

The characters, no matter how much they have turned the everyday world upside down during the narrative, must act like "adults" to the degree of committing themselves to each other and thus to life within society. They change; society remains the same. They may have had their flings and fantasies and acted them out (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the rest of William Shakespeare's comedies), but in the end, order is restored, and the rules of society are maintained. From Chaplin through screwball comedy and on to Woody Allen in American film comedy, no matter how nutty or carried away the characters become, commitment to heterosexual partnerships ultimately means that some Oedipal resolution must emerge. For Chaplin, rejection rather than acceptance is most often the conclusion—thus the image of the lone Tramp in the final shot. In the sophisticated world of screwball comedy, the conclusion may project the couple's zany behavior into the future (*His Girl Friday* [1940], in which Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell must once again postpone a honeymoon to cover a hot story), while still showing that both individuals have modified their desires to be in tune with each other. And Woody Allen can at times push Oedipal comedy to the limit, as he does in *Bananas* (1971), which ends not with a traditional wedding but with Woody in bed with his wife, making love live on national television as Howard Cosell provides a

"blow-by-blow" description. Even though such behavior seems to many to fall close to pre-Oedipal, we recognize that Woody and his mate are returned to a real locale—Manhattan, where the unusual is often the norm—and that if such an ending is not an Oedipal *resolution,* it is at least the beginning of a compromise!

Regarding pre-Oedipal examples, we can turn to those comic filmmakers less involved with the "emotional" realm of Oedipal comedy and more attracted to what has traditionally been labeled "farce," "slap-stick," and even "anarchistic comedy." The Keystone Kops are prime candidates, as are the Marx Brothers and much of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, Bud Abbott and Lou Costello, the Three Stooges, and in more recent cinema, Mel Brooks. Even the surrealist comic-satirical films of Luis Buñuel can benefit from being considered from a pre-Oedipal perspective. For the implications of this state allow us to see that in films such as *Viridiana* (1961), *Tristana* (1970), *Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972), and *Phantom of Liberty* (1974), Buñuel, as a surrealist, intends to destroy *playfully* the compromises and thus the ideologies and repressions that he sees afflicting Western culture. Precisely because these comedies are less rooted in the everyday world, we can come to understand the mechanisms by which they are often more funny and more "liberating" than Oedipal comic works.

William Paul broadens our understanding of Chaplin's cinematic character by discussing a "pre-Oedipal" topic, "Charles Chaplin and the Annals of Anality." Scott Bukatman finds much of Jerry Lewis's near hysteria in Jerry's inability to fully enter the realm of the symbolic, or Oedipal. Ruth Perlmutter, on the other hand, adds to our appreciation of Woody Allen's polyphonic talent ("Woody Allen's *Zelig*") by demonstrating how the point of Zelig's chameleonlike adaptability in *Zelig* (1983) is in fact a comic parody of a Jewish-American desire for complete assimilation within American culture—a state, of course, that defeats Oedipal resolution and individuation.

Carnivalesque vs. Literary Comedy

Pre-Oedipal comedy has much in common with a spirit of carnival. Yet another set of boundaries within comedy (which thus affects the kinds of characters inhabiting the narratives) is between the comic that evolves from folk festivals and street humor, on the one hand, and from literature, on the other. In his influential study of medieval and Renaissance folk comedy, *Rabelais and His World,* Mikhail Bakhtin speaks of the liberating effects of European festive folk culture, as seen most clearly in the many festive occasions that fell under the heading of carnival. Bakhtin has aided us in more clearly realizing how "universal, democratic, and free" such

carnivalesque laughter was for "the people" in preindustrial and precapitalistic cultures. Carnival, Bakhtin reminds us, was a time of sanctioned freedom when through masquerading, role reversal, games, eating, drinking, and making love, almost any behavior was permitted (short of murder and so on). "Renaissance laughter was," he writes, "one of the essential forms of the truth concerning the world as a whole, concerning history and man" (66). (That such freedom was a thousand-year-old blending of pagan and Christian elements that could lead not only to personal and social release but also to revolution has been further documented by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie.) Bakhtin has helped refocus our understanding of comedy through his discussion of carnival laughter by explaining both the all inclusiveness of carnival (what he terms *grotesque realism*) and the deep *ambivalence* of it. Such "laughter degrades and materializes" (20), he notes, holding that even the themes of abuse, death, and dismemberment as well as the scatological lead to "the world's revival and renewal" (7) by establishing an unfinalized state of *becoming*.

Few films deal directly with carnival, although as I discuss in my chapter, "The Mouse Who Wanted to F—k a Cow," Dusan Makavejev's films come as close to the spirit of carnival as any films ever made. But Bakhtin's critique has far-reaching consequences for our closer evaluation and appreciation of film comedy, as many of the chapters here suggest (Brunette, Fischer, Horton, Paul, Perlmutter). Of course, we can see immediately that there is much in common between pre-Oedipal and carnivalesque comedy. Aristophanes embodies as much "street" festivity as he does wish fulfillment. Building comic forms from the festive celebrations from which comedy developed, Aristophanes had the privilege of working with a living tradition of social release that we in contemporary times have almost wholly lost. But the pre-Oedipal and the Oedipal cross in carnival laughter, as we see in Shakespeare's comedies. C. L. Barber's excellent study, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, convincingly depicts the living carnivalesque conventions from which Shakespeare was able to fashion his "green world" comedies.

Bakhtin's perspective enables us to see the carnivalesque backgrounds of Chaplin (vaudeville), Keaton (vaudeville acrobat), and W. C. Fields (vaudeville juggler) as well as the general "nonliterary" backdrop of silent comedy forms and filmmakers from Mack Sennett to early Frank Capra. The Keystone Kops, after all, lived and romped *in the street,* receiving their sanctioned freedom not from the Catholic church feast day calendar but from Mack Sennett himself, who, like those practitioners of another carnivalesque form, commedia dell'arte, raised improvisation to an artistic peak. Clearly the Marx Brothers work, joke, and "destroy" in a carnivalesque freedom and frenzy as well. For them, every day is a holiday, uncontrolled by society's schedules and norms.

The pure fun of the carnivalesque seems apparent. Yet it is Bakhtin's insistence on the high seriousness of such release that is also worth studying. Even though Federico Fellini is usually labeled a surrealist or social satirist, a consideration of his work in light of carnival laughter and festive forms should prove even more illuminating. His concern for clowns, whores, grotesques, circuses, and nonlinear construction of narrative is in part a reflection of Italian festive culture. *Amarcord* (1974) begins with a village festival burning "old man winter," a framing scene that thereby casts the entire film as an outgrowth of a village celebration of death and renewal. The depth of feeling and nostalgia generated by Fellini, on the other hand, is a result of his awareness not only of the passing of time but also of the clash of such a traditional festive world with the nonfestive demands of contemporary European culture.

"Literary" comedy began with the Romans as the carnivalesque elements were separated out and the "well-structured" plays of Terrence and those who followed remained. Certainly when film turned from the silent image to the sound movie, much of American comedy (and, one suspects, that of other countries as well) derived directly from playwrights shipped to the West Coast to reproduce on film the kinds of success they had enjoyed on the stage. At its best, as in the screwball tradition, Hollywood comedy has managed a tricky balance between the carnivalesque and the literary. As Brian Henderson suggests in his chapter, "Cartoon and Narrative in the Films of Frank Tashlin and Preston Sturges," nobody wrote better comedy than Preston Sturges, and yet much of our pleasure in watching and rewatching *Lady Eve* (1941), *Miracle at Morgan Creek* (1944), and *Hail the Conquering Hero* (1944) derives from the loony bevy of "street" folk, complete with their dialects, malapropisms, and puppet show–like movements, who inhabit his films.

William Paul and I make use of Bakhtin's approach to suggest how the sexual (the "lower bodily stratum") is represented or repressed on the screen. Ruth Perlmutter examines Woody Allen's carnivalesque sense of parody. She traces how all of modern history becomes the plaything of his Jewish protagonist's frail or nonexistent sense of identity. Peter Brunette also finds that Bakhtin's remarks help explain how the Three Stooges work against any "logical" sense of narrative as Hollywood has traditionally constructed it.

Class Consciousness and Comedy

What are the political relations between comedy and society? Bakhtin clearly roots his theory of carnivalesque laughter in culture and history. "Every act of world history was accompanied by a laughing chorus," he remarks (474). Thus for him, folk humor is universal and has never been

"merged with the official culture of the ruling class" (474). To a large degree, therefore, an analysis of the carnivalesque in its many manifestations and implications is a study of class conflict, of hierarchies of power, of the need for group celebration and individual expression. The kinds of broad-based dialectical studies of literature practiced by such observers as Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson surely can aid a closer comprehension of cinematic comedy as well.

If comedy has often been described as a dramatic and/or narrative form ending in triumph, then the proverbial "happy ending" of Hollywood narratives bears scrutiny as a conscious or unconscious ideological requirement in a highly commercialized culture and industry. Is it an accident that film comedy may be capitalistic America's finest cinematic hour? And on a broader scale, what implications can we draw from the split between popular tastes and critical acclaim (particularly in the form of the Academy Awards) when year after year comedies such as *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) (comedy-adventure-romance), *Ruthless People* (1986), and *The Naked Gun* (1988) top the box office charts only to be snubbed at Academy Awards time.

"Arretez cette comédie!" (Stop this comedy!) orders the marquis at the height of the confusion in Jean Renoir's *La règle du jeu* (Rules of the Game, 1939). "Which one?" replies the butler, ironically named Corneille, as a multitude of sexual "gag sequences" are in full swing before him.

So much of comedy does depend on perspective. And the dialectical critique of the range of possible perspectives that a Marxist or politicized orientation offers is definitely of value. In Renoir's comic drama (which ends with the hero's death rather than marriage), romantic and sexual interests abound between the upper class of aging aristocrats and the pretentious nouveaux riches, among the servant class, and in the combinations in between. The latter is depicted by two figures outside the highly class structured French society on the verge of World War II: Octave (played by Renoir), who describes himself as a parasite on his wealthy friends, and Marceau, who enjoys poaching other men's wives as well as their game. As presented by Renoir, every character is part of one farce or another. Which farce to focus on does depend, as the majordomo wryly suggests, on one's point of view. A Marxist perspective need not dwell only on the obvious social dichotomies.

On the aesthetic level a Marxist "boundary" helps us to see that the breakdown of the comic formula based on classical romantic comedy is in part due to the increasingly fragmented sense of the old order in the interwar period of the 1930s. Following in the distinguished comic French tradition that includes Pierre Carlet de Marivaux, Georges Feydeau, and Victorien Sardou, however, Renoir shows a modern hero (trans-Atlantic

pilot-adventurer), André, who ends up as a fool for love on the ground in matters of the heart and so becomes a victim of the rules of the game of aristocratic behavior. A politicized point of view could indicate that although classical Athens could tolerate Aristophanes' sharp but inventive comedies, those in power in France in 1939 were too fragile and sensitive to allow Renoir's razor-sharp critique to be screened (it was not seen in France until after World War II).

Charles Eidsvik's chapter on European leftist comedy ("Mock Realism") makes us aware that a political viewpoint is always ambiguous or double-edged. What seems a radical leftist comedy to one generation may seem conservative propaganda to another. And socialist regimes believing in the value of labor and the perfectability of the individual are, as Eidsvik demonstrates, every bit as much easy targets for comedy as are puritan cultures of the past.

Feminism and the Comic Perspective

We can also observe the implications of a politicized view of comedy through a feminist lens. Joe E. Brown's splendid response in Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* (1959) when he learns that by marrying Jack Lemmon, he will be marrying a man—"Nobody's perfect"—suggests the complicated and intriguing (in all senses) topic of gender and comedy. As Lucy Fischer admirably discusses in her chapter, not only are women's mothers often missing in film comedies; an integrated sense of women or "woman" in general is also distorted, masked, and repressed in much of the comic (patriarchal) tradition. Because so many women writing about film (and literature) see their discourse as a "counter-history, or re-vision" (Doane, Mellencamp, & Williams), like much of comedy itself, their writing has necessarily existed in a "space" outside, around, and in opposition to the implied and stated norms of patriarchal society.

A feminist perspective necessarily involves a critique of the comic film canon. Beyond the facile observation that most comedies, like most films in general, have been made by men, and perhaps almost exclusively from a male perspective (the so-called male gaze), lies the more challenging work of examining how gender is used and abused in comedy and how other forms of comedy more sympathetic and less repressive of human potential (male or female) might be constructed. (I am here acknowledging the strongly felt conviction of many feminist critics that it is not enough to simply criticize but that at an ideological/aesthetic level new possibilities should be identified and encouraged.)

The playful consideration of gender is evident in our Western tradition beginning with Aristophanes; consider the productions of *Lysistrata, Assemblywomen,* and *Thesmophoriazousai* in particular. But Aristophanes

was hardly a feminist, and his comic treatment of gender was a means to an end rather than the goal itself. We remember, for instance, that all actors at the time were male; thus, Aristophanes could count on the added irony in a comedy such as *Lysistrata* that while "women" were staging a protest against their men who are off at war, the women were being played by men all along. This assumption of female roles is familiar to us in Shakespeare's times as well. And we should note that such a "men in drag" tradition has been a standard one in film comedy also, from the silent comedies through such classics as *Some Like It Hot* and on to the 1980s, which witnessed the forefronting of the question of gender in films as diverse as *Tootsie* (1982), *The World According to Garp* (1982), *Working Girl* (1988), and *Big Business* (1988).

We need more carefully considered feminist studies to suggest how much of a change these more recent films indicate or how much they may still be solidly within the partriarchal comic tradition. Linda Martin and Kerry Segrave in *Women in Comedy*, for example, detail how American comediennes since the early days of vaudeville have had to fight against a strong sexist bias against women in comedy; "Comedy is aggressive and hard," they write, and "women are not supposed to be hard" (21). Thus, most comediennes have had to get laughs by being much more self-disparaging than their male counterparts.

Tootsie, for instance, does bring out such lines as Dustin Hoffman's comment near the end, "I was a better man as a woman than I was when I was a man." Yet the film is told from a male point of view, is made by men (director and writers, except for Elaine May who was one of eleven who worked on the project!), and presents a conventional "romantic" ending in which the female lead, Jessica Lange, is clearly involved with another man, Hoffman, before we see her having a chance to live fully on her own.

Some women filmmakers with comic talent have begun to appear in the American commercial cinema. Susan Seidelman, director of *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985), is clearly one example behind the camera, and Bette Midler has emerged as a representative of strongly self-assured women in films such as *Outrageous Fortune* (1987), *Big Business* (1988), and *Beaches* (1989).

How far women have to go, however, in the world of Hollywood comedy can be seen in the case of Whoopi Goldberg. A film such as *Jumpin' Jack Flash* (1986) allows Whoopi room to do what she does best as a spirited black woman with a sharp tongue: talk tough and dirty to those men (mostly white) who attempt to put her down, take advantage, or make unwarranted advances. But there is a double danger here. One concerns narrative: for despite all her streetwise New York independence, the film's narrative requires that she finally soften, compromise, and walk off with a . . . white man in what is a traditional romantic (Oedipal) comic Hollywood ending. There is also the danger that in capitalizing on Whoopi's

acid tongue, the film never allows her to be more than a negative concept of "woman." All we know is that she can outargue, outcurse, and outthink (she is a computer expert) the males who surround her. Is she a New Woman or a Tough Man? It can be said that the *elasticity* of the Hollywood system is evident here. The potentially threatening force presented (black/ strong/intelligent female) is allowed a certain amount of "free play" but is ultimately integrated into the traditional patriarchal social and aesthetic norms of a "happy" romantic ending.

Finally, a feminist perspective could aid us in viewing such a film as an update of the screwball comedy tradition. Even though the films in this tradition usually highlight the union of a couple from divergent social classes (aristocracy and the middle class in most cases), *Jumpin' Jack Flash* accomplishes the same task according to race, with, one might add, an ironic twist. The white male is not American, but British.

It is perhaps fitting to end an overview of feminism and comedy by returning to origins. Feminist commentators might well make more use of studies, such as those by Jane Ellen Harrison, into the origins of the celebrations and ceremonies dedicated to the god of comedy and tragedy, Dionysus. Dionysus was twice born: of Semele, his mother, and of Zeus (placed in Zeus' thigh for protection), his father. Tragedy grew from the tradition of dithyrambs, group lyric praises to Dionysus, and comedy from phallic songs sung by a *komos*—that is, a band of male revellers. In actual fact, both the dithyrambs and *komos* served a similar function: they were group (thus social) invocations (sacred and profane) to Dionysus for rebirth, fertility, and protected growth to maturity.

But who is Dionysus? It is significant that he is not a Greek god but an Asian one and that instead of being a patriarch, as is Zeus the "father," Dionysus is always represented as a *kouros*, a young man who is masculine as well as delicate and feminine (he has, for example, long, flowing, golden hair). Analysis of these rituals further shows that in addition to being a *kouros*, Dionysus is represented as a *son*. Thus, in their origins both comedy and tragedy are concerned with a form of initiation rite that aids Dionysus in moving from a sphere of influence associated with the mother (Semele and, by extension, the matriarchal cultures that preceded classical Greek culture) to that of the father, Zeus. This "second birth" is thus necessarily symbolic and mimetic: hence drama. Jane Harrison sums up by relating the Dionysus cult to an earlier *kouros* cult from Crete:

> Both are the reflection of a group religion and of social conditions which are matriarchal and emphasize the figure of Mother and Child. The cardinal doctrine of both religions is the doctrine of the New Birth, and this doctrine is the reflection of social initiation. (49)

Dionysus, the twice-born god, offers us a double vision. In origin, comedy and tragedy—that is, drama as an aesthetic form—are about "growing up": we view the movement from the biological and emotional connections with the mother to the socialized world of the father (the realm of the symbolic). Comedy and tragedy are also, it would appear, about the evolution of Greek culture from matriarchy to patriarchy.

Certainly none of this discussion of the ritual origins of comedy may seem directly related to Burt Reynolds's Good Ole Boys comedies, Jerry Lewis's "hysterical" farces, or Cantinflas's (Mario Moreno) long reign over Spanish-language comedies. Yet from a theoretical viewpoint, such ancient patterns of gender behavior do have contemporary implications that should not go unexamined.

That's Not All, Folks!: Comedy on Film

The boundaries I have discussed are not established by treaties. In practice, we would do well to draw from several perspectives at once. Indeed, these chapters reflect such challenging merges of theoretical influences. Much of the preceding exploration has necessarily treated comedy in general, with specific examples drawn from cinema. But it remains for us to ask what is there *specifically about cinema* that may contribute to comedy and the comic.

Film comedy is deeply rooted in the comic traditions of the cultures in which it is produced as well as in the tradition of film comedy itself (Luis Buñuel imitates Buster Keaton in several key sequences in *Un Chien Andalou* [1928], for example). But there is at least one aspect of film that has helped to shape film comedy. I am speaking of film's ability to destroy and manipulate time and space for its own purposes. If, as I have suggested, much of the comic involves fantasy, festivity, wishes, attempts at wish fulfillment, a turning upside down of the norms of everyday society, and thus a joyous, free-wheeling sense of pleasure and freedom, then the ability to "play" with time and space offers the comic filmmaker an almost limitless spectrum of possibilities. From the comic surrealism of Keaton's *Sherlock, Jr.* (1924), in which the movie projectionist protagonist is buffeted about by the changes in "locations" while he attempts to climb into a film from the movie theater (a concept that Woody Allen more recently played with in *The Purple Rose of Cairo* [1985]), to the carefully controlled soundtracks to Jacques Tati's French social farces, cinema as a medium has made possible what a Giovanni Boccaccio or a Ben Jonson could only dream about.

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