Hokum!
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INTRODUCTION

2. Edna Ferber, Cimarron (New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1929), 207.
I am grateful to Paul Babiak for uncovering this reference.
13. Ibid., 71.
15. Ibid.
18. Rudolph Arnheim, Film as Art (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957 [1933]), 109, 111.
20. Ibid., 337–38.
30. For the relevant portion of the Motion Picture Code, see “Complete Text of the Code,” *MPH*, December 2, 1933, 32. Although the NIRA codes were declared unconstitutional two years later, the major studios continued to permit varying degrees of exhibitor selection in the booking of short subjects, and none made shorts contingent on feature rentals. A 1938 *Motion Picture Herald* article collates the major distributors’ approaches to short-subject bookings, ranging from the liberal (Twentieth Century–Fox: “If a particular operating policy calls for no shorts, then we do not insist on shorts”; MGM: “Where a theatre [does] not use shorts the company [does] not demand their purchase”) to the harder sell (RKO: “Accounts are persuaded to take as many as they can absorb”; Universal: “Our salesmen naturally try to sell as much of our short subject product as possible”). “Federal Invitation Answered; Steffes Sees New Divorce Bill,” *MPH*, October 1, 1938, 17–18.

35. Ibid., 124.


41. I am indebted to Frank Kelleter for insisting on this point to me.

42. On Bourdieu’s concept of “social aging,” see ch. 3.


46. Mack Sennett anticipated the anthology trend by a decade with his own slapstick compilation film, *Down Memory Lane*, released by Eagle-Lion in the summer of 1949.


**CHAPTER 1. “THE CUCKOO SCHOOL”**


3. Vivian Shaw, “The Cuckoo School of Humour in America,” *Vanity Fair*, May 1924, 46. The preceding description of Lewis and Dody’s performance is based partly on this essay (discussed further below), as well as on the team’s 1922 phonograph recording of *Hello! Hello! Hello!* (Columbia A3783). Thanks to Michael Cumella for making this recording available to me.


6. Ibid., 295.


9. Ibid., 32.

10. Ibid., 20.

11. Ibid., 142, 179, 221–22.


13. Ibid., 46.

14. Ibid. One of the teams influenced by Lewis and Dody may well have been Al Shaw and Sam Lee, whose performances in early sound shorts—first at Vitaphone, in *The Beau Brummels* (ca. September 1928) and *Going Places* (June 1930), subsequently in a one-off for MGM, *Gentlemen of Polish* (June 1934)—could similarly be described as a “combination of apparent dullness with insanity.”

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.


24. Slapstick’s claim to modernity was qualified by the mid-1920s in another way, too, albeit one that received no commentary from observers of the time; namely, slapstick had long ceased to be a welcoming venue for female clowns who challenged normative constructions of gendered deportment. As film historian Steve Massa explains, “The heyday of the female slapstick clowns had been in the Teens, when Fay [Tincher], Alice Howell, Louise Fazenda, Gale Henry, Polly Moran, etc., all emerged and had their own starring series. In the early 1920s, the mode had changed to leading ladies (Dorothy Devore, Alice Day, Wanda Wiley) who could perform physical comedy and all the more eccentric women had to find new venues—Louise Fazenda, Gale Henry, and Polly Moran migrated to character roles in features, Alice Howell retired and Fay [Ticher] found refuge at Universal.” Steve Massa, *Lame Brains and Lunatics: The Good, the Bad, and the Forgotten of Silent Comedy* (Albany, GA: BearManor Media, 2013), 169. During the first decade of sound shorts, the number of female-led comedies dwindled further still to a single season of Louise Fazenda comedies at RKO (1930–1931), a series starring vaudevillian Lulu McConnell at Paramount (1931–1932), a “mini-series” of two Polly Moran shorts at Columbia (1936–1937), and, most notably, five seasons of Hal Roach shorts pairing Thelma Todd first with Zasu Pitts (1931–1933), then with Patsy Kelly (1933–1936). An insightful analysis of silent-era female clowns and changing ideologies of femininity is provided by Kristen Anderson Wagner, “Pie Queens and Virtuous Vamps: The Funny Women of the Silent Screen,” in Andrew Horton and Joanna Rapf, eds., *A Companion to Film Comedy* (Malden, MA: John Wiley, 2013), 39–60.


31. Quoted in ibid., 34.


34. The notion of “position taking” I derive from Pierre Bourdieu, who uses it to describe the process whereby new literary movements demarcate themselves through a stance of rejection and exclusion with regard to previous traditions and their publics: “When a new literary or artistic group imposes itself on the field, the whole space of positions and the space of corresponding possibilities . . . find themselves transformed because of it: with its accession to existence, that is, to difference, the universe of possible options finds itself modified, with formerly dominant productions, for example, being downgraded to the status of an outmoded or classical product.” Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 234.


37. See Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor*, 43, for a brief discussion.


45. Ibid., 3. If this is ultimately a rather quibbling distinction, it is because Eastman’s model is otherwise identical to Freud’s. Barring the issue of whether nonsense “counts” as humor (Freud, no; Eastman, yes), both theorists comprehend enjoyment of humor as fundamentally atavistic.

46. See n. 82 on the Hawaiians routine.


50. Quoted in ibid., 218.

51. Examples would include Franklin P. Adams, “The Conning Tower,” *Chicago Evening Post*, April 9, 1913, 8; and “To the Neo-Pseudoists,” in *By and Large* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1914), 84; James Thurber, “More Authors Cover the Snyder Trial,” *New Yorker*, May 7, 1927, 69; and E. B. White, “Is a Train,” *New Yorker*, October 27, 1934, 26—all found in Diepeveen, *Mock Modernism*.

56. The process exemplifies what Pierre Bourdieu has dubbed the “social ranking” of geographical space. “[A] group’s real social distance from certain assets must integrate the geographical distance, which itself depends on the group’s spatial distribution and, more precisely, its distribution with respect to the ‘focal point’ of economic and cultural values. . . . Thus, the distance of farm workers from legitimate culture would not be so vast if the specifically cultural distance implied by their low cultural capital were not compounded by their spatial dispersion. Similarly, many of the differences observed in the (cultural and other) practices of the different fractions of the dominant class are no doubt attributable to the size of the town they live in.” Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 124.
58. Mordaunt Hall, “The Screen,” *NYT*, February 8, 1927, 21. Tom Dardis claims, “The domestic gross was only $474,264, over $300,000 less than his previous film, *Battling Butler*.” Dardis, *Keaton, the Man Who Wouldn’t Lie Down* (New York: Scribner, 1979), 145. However, Dardis is comparing apples to oranges here, since the cited *Battling Butler* gross is worldwide.
63. On metropolitan critics’ revolt against sentimentalism, see Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). Chaplin’s embrace by genteel critics has been widely observed but is best contextualized in Maland, *Chaplin and American Culture*, chs. 1 and 2.
66. Ibid., 20–21.


71. This palimpsest quality was neatly foregrounded in a group routine from the show in which, looking for acting jobs, they all in turn gave imitations of Gallagher and Shean. The brothers would adapt the bit for the film *Monkey Business* (1931), in a series of imitations of Maurice Chevalier. (There is, incidentally, a family in-joke in the version of this sketch from *I’ll Say She Is*: Al Shean was the Marx Brothers’ uncle.)


75. Krutnik, “Mutinies Wednesdays and Saturdays,” 97. I am indebted to Krutnik’s superb analysis for some of the interpretive framework of this and the previous paragraph.

76. Already by the time of the Broadway production of *Animal Crackers*, these creative alliances were drawing amused commentary among the critics’ peers. Writing in the *New York Review*, Colgate Baker wondered aloud whether the Marxes’ critical adulation betrayed a suspicious conflict of interests. “The most enthusiastic Marxian fans and shouters are the drama critics (with one exception), the drama editors and the columnists (without any exception). The fact that most of the critics, editors and columnists have had a hand in writing some of the show, of course has nothing to do with their feelings. The spirit of altruism that prevails these days, the detached, calm, unbiased poise of our criticism is too well known that maybe the boys are unconsciously influenced in their motivation—perish the thought!” Colgate Baker, “The Marvelous Marx Brothers and ‘Animal Crackers,'” *New York Review*, Dec. 22, 1928, n.p., *Animal Crackers* clippings file, BRTC. The “one exception” mentioned by Baker would seem to be the *New York World* critic St. John Ervine, who, among Manhattan’s critics, published the lone condemning review, in “The New Play,” *New York World*, October 25, 1928, n.p., *Animal Crackers* clippings file, BRTC.


83. “Joe Cook a ‘Whole Show,”’ n.s., April 11, 1916, n.p., Joe Cook clippings file, BRTC.

84. An article on Cook’s 1942 retirement recalls the genesis of this famous bit. “His best known gag was his debate with himself as to whether he would imitate four Hawaiians. He recalled once that he had conceived it while playing in Akron, Ohio. He started it by saying, ‘I will now imitate two Hawaiians’ and then ‘monkeying around’ while playing a ukulele. Then he said: ‘I could imitate four Hawaiians, but I won’t.’ Then, realizing he would have to tell the audience, now warmed up, why he wouldn’t, he said: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, you have just seen me imitate two Hawaiians, so why should I do four Hawaiians and show up those who can do only two Hawaiians and possibly be the cause of losing their positions? It’s a principle with me.’ When even the orchestra laughed, Mr. Cook realized the gag was good. He kept it and elaborated on it.” “Joe Cook Quits Stage Because of Poor Health,” NYHT, February 5, 1942, n.p., Joe Cook clippings file, BRTC.


87. Ibid., 278.

88. Clark recalled his experiences with Hollywood writers in misogynistic terms: “Clark insisted that he sit in on the writers’ conferences, and his experiences there left a mark on him. He would look polite and interested while the former conductor of a bird column for an Arkansas weekly and a female author of a libidinous best-seller outlined a number of hilarious suggestions, then quietly reply, ‘No.’” “Profiles, III—Up from Moose Jaw,” New Yorker, September 27, 1947, 40.


94. Dunley, “The Ramblers.”

95. The notion of “affordances” is derived from Ian Hutchby’s approach to medium-centered criticism. According to Hutchby, “Affordances are functional and relational aspects [of media] which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object.” As such, affordances open a “third way between the [constructivist] emphasis on the shaping power of human agency and the [realist] emphasis on the shaping power of technical capacities.” Ian Hutchby, “Technologies, Texts, and Affordances,” *Sociology* 35, no. 2 (2001): 444.

96. On this aspect of Burns and Allen’s sound shorts, see Charles Wolfe, “‘Cross-Talk’: Language, Space, and the Burns and Allen Comedy Film Short,” *Film History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 300–312.

97. Release dates for Clark and McCullough’s Fox shorts are difficult to pinpoint. The trade press offers exact dates for only two, *The Bath Between* and *The Diplomats*, which are listed in *Motion Picture News*’s regular “Complete Release Schedule” column as having both been released on February 17, 1929. *Film Daily* lists seven—*Belle of Samoa, Beneath the Law, In Holland, Knights Out, The Medicine Men, The Music Fiends,* and *Waltzing Around*—as “Releases for First Three Months of ’29” (“What the Field Has to Offer in Shorts,” March 31, 1929, 20), but does not give further specifics. It is possible that these seven were made simultaneously available to Fox exhibitors.


100. “Bath Between,” August 30, 1928, 20th Century–Fox Script Collection, USC. Clark and McCullough’s *Music Box* routine involved two hotel rooms, a connecting bathroom, and the risqué encounters between the duo, who occupy one room, and a beautiful wife and her violent husband, in the other. The skit soon became a classic in the burlesque playbook, performed by subsequent burlesque double acts like Smith and Dale. On the hotel scenes of burlesque, see Davis, *Baggy Pants Comedy,* 215–20.

101. On con games and courtroom sketches in burlesque, see Davis, *Baggy Pants Comedy,* ch. 10 and 228–33.

102. “Profiles, III,” 42. Extant script materials at the New York State Archives show that Clark here misremembered the film’s ending: the film in fact closes on the spectacle of the police trying to break into the judge’s chamber while, within, we hear the judge and Clark and McCullough express enjoyment of their private dance (“Oh, boy, ain’t we got fun!” etc.). Dialogue script, *Beneath the Law* (“dialogue as taken from screen”), undated, New York State Archives.

103. Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense,* trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1969]), 59. Something of this approach is forecast in one of Clark and McCullough’s earlier Fox shorts, *The Music Fiends* (ca. February 1929), whose plot has the boys mistakenly hired as musicians for a society lady’s swanky party. In a lengthy routine as they prepare their recital (four script pages out of a total of twenty-one), the duo persuades their host to move the piano to different spots around the room in an effort to find the “perfect” lighting (because too bright light “hurts [McCullough’s] ears”), causing all manner of furniture destruction and physical inconvenience. (By the time the recital starts, the piano is jutting out of a broken window with the host propping
up the instrument’s leg base.) As would become more prominent at RKO, the routine is structured as a game whose conditions of play are governed only by the whim of the players: “Now where do you want it?” Clark repeatedly asks, to which McCullough responds in turn, “Turn it around and I’ll show you,” indicating a new location each time. Dialogue script, The Music Fiends (“dialogue as taken from the screen”), undated, New York State Archives.

104. Ben Holmes, “Clark and McCullough #3,” final script, June 19, 1933, 4, RKO.
105. Ibid., 5.
106. Ibid., 6.
108. Ben Holmes, “Clark and McCullough #4,” story outline, June 29, 1933, 1–2, RKO.
110. Ben Holmes, “Clark and McCullough #4,” final script, July 8, 1933, 47–48, RKO.
116. Some qualification is called for here since even their earlier shorts had occasionally fallen back on some of film slapstick’s most hackneyed plots—as in, for instance, the Fox two-reeler Detectives Wanted (July 1929), which follows the “haunted house” template popularized by Harold Lloyd’s Haunted Spooks (March 1920). The distinction I am drawing lies rather at the level of physical performance and comic “business,” which begin to take on a fairly standard knockabout sheen in Clark and McCullough’s later work.
119. See Wolfe, “‘Cross-Talk.'”
120. “The Social Life of the Newt” is from Benchley’s Of All Things (New York: Henry Holt, 1921); “Do Insects Think?” and “Polyp with a Past” from his Love Conquers All. Benchley’s shorts are discussed at greater length in the next chapter.
122. It was common practice in the Healy/Stooge MGM shorts to make use of musical numbers scrapped from feature films. The “The Turn of the Fan” sequence from Nertsery Rhymes (July 1933), for example, was lifted from the uncompleted 1930 musical The March of Time; a choral dance from The Big Idea was abandoned from the Joan Crawford musical The Dancing Lady (1933); and the “I’m Sailing on a Sunbeam” song from Hello Pop! (September 1933) recycled from It’s a Great Life (1929).
CHAPTER 2. “THE STIGMA OF SLAPSTICK”


5. As Margaret Thorp summarized these themes: “The movies are furnishing the nation with a common body of knowledge. What the classics once were in that respect, what the Bible once was, the cinema has become for the average man. Here are stories, names, phrases, points of view which are common national property. The man in Cedar Creek, Maine, and the man in Cedar Creek, Oregon, see the same movie in the same week. . . . The movies span geographic frontiers; they give the old something to talk about with the young; they crumble the barriers between people of different educations and different economic backgrounds.” Thorp, America at the Movies (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1939), 271–72.


11. Vitaphone promotional booklet, undated, ca. 1926, WB.

12. Vitaphone Corporation to John T. Adams, September 14, 1926, WB.


18. Quotes taken from Joseph Medill Patterson, “The Nickelodeons: The Poor Man’s Elementary Course in the Drama,” Saturday Evening Post, November 23, 1907, 38; advertisement for Vitaphone, Motion Picture Classic.


21. Fitzhugh Green, The Film Finds Its Tongue (New York: G. B. Putnam’s Sons, 1929), 87. According to Green, the appeal of operatic and classical shorts was further hampered by regional taste cultures, a problem that became especially marked after 1928, when Warners began to allow exhibitors to choose freely from the catalog of Vitaphone reels. “Talkie shows [now] had to be booked more like vaudeville than like pictures . . . Some cities liked the opera numbers; others wouldn’t stand for them. Western and southern states in particular objected to highbrow stuff. Those first numbers that had been necessary to launch the thing in New York did not go over so well in the back country” (83).


24. “Short Talking Comedies Are Rapidly Becoming Favorites,” press sheet for The Right Bed (April 1929), 2, EPS. The Coronet shorts are discussed at greater length in the following chapter.


27. On Yamekraw, see Fleeger, Sounding American, 43–52. The Darktown shorts were not the only black-cast short-subject series from the conversion period: in the summer of 1929, Pathé produced six two-reel comedies starring the vaudeville team of Buck and Bubbles (Ford Lee Washington and John William Sublett), released in the 1929–1930 season.
32. “Speaking Briefly of Comedy,” *EHW*, February 9, 1929, 40.
35. Warners’ own stockholders’ reports give an interesting perspective on the shift. Up until 1930, those reports regularly included a list of the “outstanding artists of the screen and of the operatic, legitimate and vaudeville stage appearing in ‘Vitaphone Varieties’ of short subjects”; but in the 1931 report, any reference to “outstanding artists” was replaced by a straightforward listing of series. See the annual reports dated August 30, 1930, and August 29, 1931, WB.
37. “‘Times Have Changed but Not Comedy,’ Says Arbuckle,” press sheet for *Hey Pop* (August 1932), 2, BRTC. Worth noting, too, is Arbuckle’s recycling of plot situations from earlier comedies, both his own and other comedians’—the way, for instance, that the grocery store scenes of *How’ve You Bean* (June 1933) replay the opening of Arbuckle’s debut Comique short, *The Butcher Boy* (April 1917), or how the bomb-in-a-cake narrative of *In the Dough* (November 1933) revisits the plot of Charlie Chaplin’s *Dough and Dynamite* (October 1914).
40. “Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object.” Theodor Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered,” in *The Culture Industry*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 2002), 99.
42. In his study of picture palace impresario Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel, Ross Melnick proposes the concept of the “unitary text” to define the silent-era moviegoing experience as a “collective textual event” that was “authored” by the theater manager. See Melnick, *American Showman: Samuel “Roxy” Rothafel and the Birth of the Entertainment Industry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 8–23.
52. Advertisement for MGM shorts, *EHW*, June 29, 1929, insert.
54. A noted authority on bridge, Milton Work entered into a contract with Vitaphone in the fall of 1929 to appear in instructional bridge shorts. The idea to use domestic comedy as a framework seems to have been his own. See Milton C. Work to Nathan Vidaver, August 29, 1929, WB.
“Most Trade Leaders Denounce Double Featuring as a Menace,” MPH, November 21, 1931, 32.

RKO budget data has been averaged out from the many short-subject production files held at the RKO Studio Collection, Performing Arts Special Collections, University of California, Los Angeles; Columbia budget statistics from “Lists—Costs,” JWC.


“76 Per Cent of Patrons Ask for Single Bills and Shorts,” MPH, April 2, 1932, 25.

Ibid.

“Public Protests Double Features; Suggests Shorts as a Stimulant,” MPH, March 25, 1933, 11. See also the correspondence between Lew Maren and Thomas Gerety, dated March 2 and 18, 1933, Files—1930s, HRC.


“Public Protests Double Features,” 11.


“Duals Ruling Called Aid to Little Fellow,” Motion Picture Daily, August 17, 1934, 1, 6, quoted in Rhodes, “’The Double Feature Evil,’” 61.

For the relevant portion of the Motion Picture Code, see “Complete Text of the Code,” MPH, December 2, 1933, 32.

“Philly Dual Bill Case Continued to May 17,” Film Daily, May 9, 1934, 2.


The “moral collapse” quote is from Bosley Crowther, “Two-Reeler’s Comeback,” NYT, October 26, 1941, SM19.


Quote taken from Herman Boxer, Temporary Complete Dialogue Continuity, “Return to Life,” August 5, 1938, 19 pp., MGM Shorts Collection, AMPAS. The Soldiers of Peace and What Do You Think? films were released through the “MGM Miniatures” line.


The concept of useful film, Wasson and Acland explain, ‘overlaps with, but is not equivalent to, similar terms such as ‘functional film,’ ‘educational film,’ ‘non-fictional film,’ and ‘non-theatrical film.’ We define useful cinema to include experimental films and a variety of didactic films that are fictional as well as non-fictional, narrative as well as non-narrative. The concept of useful cinema does not so much name a mode of production, a genre, or an exhibition venue as it identifies a disposition, an outlook, and an approach toward a medium on the part of institutions and institutional agents.’ It is thus not a historically specific designation but a category that encompasses a range of functional conceptions of cinema as a pedagogical medium. Wasson and Acland, “Introduction: Utility and Cinema,” in Wasson and Acland, eds., Useful Cinema (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.


See, for example, Eric Smoodin, “’What a Power for Education!’ The Cinema and Sites of Learning in the 1930s,” and Charles R. Acland, “Hollywood’s Educators: Mark

82. One very proximate impetus here may have been a desire to counteract the bad press brought by the publication in 1933 of Henry James Forman’s *Our Movie Made Children*, an alarmist condensation of a series of Payne Fund Studies on motion pictures’ influence on America’s youth. On the Payne Fund Studies and their ensuing controversy, see Garth S. Jowett, Ian C. Jarvie, and Kathryn H. Fuller, *Children and the Movies: Media Influence and the Payne Fund Controversy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

83. Secrets of Success Manual, quoted in Kridel, “Educational Film Projects of the 1930s,” 216. The Secrets of Success films were composed of excerpted scenes from noncurrent commercial features.


93. Jurca, “Motion Pictures’ Greatest Year (1938),” 350–52. See also Jurca, *Hollywood 1938*, ch. 3, for a more detailed examination of the “Motion Pictures’ Greatest Year” campaign advertising.


96. The terms “logic of difference” and “logic of equivalence” are derived from Ernesto Laclau, for whom they describe opposed poles of social and political structuration. See his essay, “Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor,” in Laclau, *The Rhetorical Foundations of Society* (London: Verso, 2014), 53–78.


100. The MGM series was interrupted when Benchley briefly switched his allegiances to Paramount, where he appeared in nine short subjects between 1940 and 1942.


108. Screenland, November 1928, n.p., RBS.


110. Robert Benchley, “A Possible Revolution in Hollywood,” Yale Review (Autumn 1931): 101, 103. Benchley’s celebrity as the leading figure of urbane East Coast humor in fact bespoke a significant contradiction in Hollywood’s own cultural position taking during the early sound period, insofar as the film industry was seeking to appropriate the cachet of a sensibility that itself held the industry in considerable disdain. The best-known instance of that contradiction is unquestionably provided in the career of Ben Hecht, who once described Hollywood in the pages of the New Yorker as “the Waterloo of America’s mental progress.” Hecht was persuaded to work for the industry, however, when fellow New Yorker contributor Herman Mankiewicz famously wrote him to explain that “millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots.” Ben Hecht, “America’s Waterloo,” New Yorker, July 18, 1925, 6.

111. Vivian Shaw, “The Cuckoo School of Humour in America,” Vanity Fair, May 1924, 46.


113. Benchley’s later short, How to Vote (September 1936), reuses material from this speech.

114. Norris W. Yates, Robert Benchley (New York: Twayne, 1968), 95–96. One could also add other notable postbellum humorists who worked in this vein, such as George Horatio Derby (in his persona as John Phoenix), Charles Farrar Browne (as Artemus Ward), and even Samuel Clemens (as Mark Twain).


116. Ibid., xvi–xvii.

117. The dichotomy of “good taste” versus “mass taste” I derive from Jennifer Lynn Peterson, Education in the School of Dreams: Travelogues and Early Nonfiction Film (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 112–16.

118. “A Fifteen-Year Debut,” NYHT, October 27, 1940, 3.

120. “Robert Benchley,” Spot, April 1941, 11.
125. Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories, 188.
129. “Meet Mr. Benchley,” Listeners Digest, April 1939, 67, Robert Benchley clippings file, AMPAS.

CHAPTER 3. “THE SPICE OF THE PROGRAM”

4. The name “Mermaid Comedies” seems to have originated in reference to the bathing beauties in one of White’s early comedies for Educational. “I went to Balboa and made a picture about bathing beauties,” White explained. “New York chose to call the entire series Mermaids. They didn’t ask me; they just went ahead and made the main title ‘Mermaid Comedy.’” White in Bruskin, The White Brothers, 73.
10. See my introduction.


17. “Edward Everett Horton Has Star Role in Talking Film” and “Talking Pictures Make Horton Big Comedy Favorite,” press sheet for *Ask Dad* (1929), 2, EPS. Although Horton is today best remembered for the “sissy” overtones of his work in Depression-era features, his Coronet shorts instead generally cast him as something of a ladies’ man who, variously, steals the affections of the secretary his son intends to marry in *Ask Dad*, commences a dalliance with a young woman before his divorce has been finalized in *The Right Bed* (April 1929), and writes love sonnets to other men’s spouses in *Trusting Wives* (June 1929). The apparent exception here, interestingly, is the very first in the series, *The Eligible Mr. Bangs* (January 1929), which hints at the queer dimension to his later persona by casting Horton as a “girl-hater” whose “indifference to unmarried girls . . . [is] caused by his fear of being trapped into marriage.” “The Story,” press sheet for *The Eligible Mr. Bangs* (1929), 1, EPS. In general, queerness never achieved the (admittedly coded) visibility in shorts that it did in feature films in the early sound period, even though many of the character actors most associated with sissy or pansy roles in features had first passed through sound shorts (e.g., Horton and Franklin Pangborn at Educational; Grady Sutton at Roach; Eric Blore in presentation acts at Vitaphone and MGM). On queer representation in Depression-era Hollywood, see David M. Lugowski, “Queering the (New) Deal: Lesbian and Gay Representation and the Depression-Era Cultural Politics of Hollywood’s Production Code,” *Cinema Journal* 38, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 3–35.


26. Sennett had contributed uncredited directorial chores on a number of his productions in the 1920s and had helmed in its entirety the eight-reel feature, The Good-Bye Kiss, in late 1927 (distributed through First National the following year). He had not, however, performed regular directing duties since 1914.

27. “Mack Sennett Sees Sounds as Big Help to Short Comedies,” press sheet for The Bees’ Buzz (1929), 2, EPS.


29. “Peace and Quiet,” 1, The Lion’s Roar, Production Files, MSC.

30. The notion of “functional equivalence” derives from David Bordwell, who uses it to examine the classical cinema as a “paradigm,” that is, an array of formal norms and devices that readily substitute for one another. “Both the alternatives and the limitations of the [classical] style remain clear,” he writes, “if we think of the paradigm as creating functional equivalents: a cut-in may replace a track-in, or color may replace lighting as a way to demarcate volumes, because each device fulfills the same role. Basic principles govern not only the elements in the paradigm but also the ways in which the elements may function.” David Bordwell, “An Excessively Obvious Cinema,” in Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema, 5.


33. Altman, Silent Film Sound, 385.

34. As early as 1911, Moving Picture World’s music columnist had commented on the distinction, noting: “Much liberty is allowable in comedy pictures . . . but in the straight dramatic pictures sound effects should be made to imitate as nearly as possible the real sounds which would naturally be heard in a real scene such as the picture portrays.” Quoted in Altman, Silent Film Sound, 238.

35. For more on Jules White and Columbia’s short-subjects division, see ch. 5 of this book.

36. On the use of sound effects in Columbia short comedies, see Ted Okuda and Edward Watz, The Columbia Comedy Shorts: Two-Reel Hollywood Film Comedies, 1933–1958 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1986), 42–43. By around 1939, continuity scripts at Columbia occasionally included specific instructions on Foley effects. An example would be the continuity for the Stooges’ Oily to Bed, Oily to Rise (October 1939), which includes capitalized instructions for, e.g., a “RASPING SCREECH” when a saw runs over Curly’s head, “SOUND OF BASS DRUM” when a door hits him in the rear, and an “OLD-FASHIONED HORN” and “LITTLE FRENCH HORN” when Moe, Larry, and Curly bop each other on their noses. Final draft script, February 6, 1939, 5, 8, 28, Oily to Bed, Oily to Rise, JWC.


38. “Jack White Uncovers New Entertainment in Talkies.”

40. The same misapprehension—with Normand again doing the misapprehending—forms the basis of the Arbuckle-directed Keystone two-reeler *Mabel and Fatty’s Married Life* (February 1915).

41. Sennett’s scripting suggestions for this sequence are recorded in the story conference notes dated June 28, 1929, *The Constabule*, Production Files, MSC.


44. The quoted phrases are from “What the Picture Did for Me,” *MPH*, June 17, 1933, 49; September 9, 1933, 46.


47. “Financial Statements,” *Film Daily Yearbook 1928* (New York: Film Daily, 1928), 806; Earle W. Hammons in Kennedy, ed., *The Story of the Films*, 168. Although its chief interests were in distribution, Educational had operated studio facilities for its producers since the early 1920s. The company formalized its production interests in 1927 by reorganizing itself as two companies—Educational Film Exchanges, Inc. (representing its distribution network), and Educational Pictures, Inc. (representing its production operations). Throughout this book, I have followed established film historical practice by using “Educational Pictures” to refer to the company as a whole.


49. Jack White quoted in Bruskin, *The White Brothers*, 119. When the *Film Daily Yearbook* of 1928 polled over thirty “leaders of the industry” on their predictions for the coming year, the vice president of Christie Studios, Charles Christie, used the forum to complain about precisely this issue: “Last season the terrific struggle in the two-reel comedy field was not a matter of product but a matter of bookings, and the leaving out of comedies in the bigger theaters. . . . The product is there. All that remains is getting comedies back on the screen in the houses where they have been left out.” “Leaders See Prosperity for 1928,” *Film Daily Yearbook 1928*, 510.


52. “Sennett to Direct Feature,” *MPH*, May 16, 1931, 26; “Sennett to Stay with Educational Despite Rumors,” *MPH*, March 21, 1931, 19. *Hypnotized* was not the only Sennett feature


54. “Hammons Strikes at Double Bill Evil,” *MPH*, December 26, 1931, 10; “Forecast for 1932,” *Film Daily Yearbook* 1932 (New York: Film Daily, 1932), 41. Educational also sought to combat the double bill trend by unveiling plans in late 1931 for a series of three- or four-reel *Mack Sennett Comedy Featurettes* that could be rented in place of a second feature. The plan did not come to pass, however, and the films were ultimately released as regular two-reelers. See “Shorts of Three and Four Reels Planned by the Big Producers,” *MPH*, December 12, 1931, 25.

See also ch. 4 on Hal Roach’s similar experiments with the three-reel format during this period.


56. Advertisements for Educational, *MPH*, April 2, 1932, 45; April 16, 1932, 47; April 30, 1932, 37; May 7, 1932, 35.


58. The “doubleitis” ads can be found in *MPH*, July 3, 1937, 85; July 17, 1937, 107; July 31, 1937, 101; and August 14, 1937, 121.

59. See ch. 2.


61. All quotes in this paragraph are from the advertisement for Educational’s 1932–1933 program, *MPH*, July 2, 1932, 43–48.

62. It is not entirely clear why Hammons failed to affiliate with a major studio distributor sooner. As early as 1927, during his lecture at Harvard, Hammons was asked precisely this question, answering: “We have been approached several times on that subject, and I had to decide no.” His subsequent explanation is vague but implies that his hands were tied by theater chains with substantial interests in Educational’s exchanges. “When we first produced pictures ourselves, we released through independents on a percentage basis, but we did not get the percentage we were entitled to. We finally opened our own branches. I went to the big theatre chains in the various districts. Here in this New England territory Mr. Gordon owned the biggest chain of theatres. I sold him a forty-nine per cent interest in this particular exchange, retaining a fifty-one per cent interest. In Chicago we went to Balaban and Katz and sold them a forty-nine per cent interest in that exchange.” Hammons also seems to have felt that affiliation with the majors was simply not necessary for Educational’s corporate health. “The business we have received from the Famous Players theatres has been about one-tenth of our gross. We are in thirteen thousand five hundred theatres. Such a combination as you speak of might be a good thing and it might not. It is really a debatable question. I am not always sure in my mind that I have made
the right decision. I hope time will prove that I have.” By 1933, the decision was clearly the wrong one. See Kennedy, ed., *The Story of the Films*, 167–68.


64. “Educational Increases First-Run Bookings,” *MPH*, May 6, 1933, 31.

65. See “Fewer Two-Reelers in 1935–36 Due to Duals,” *MPH*, April 27, 1935, 30: “Following Paramount’s decision of one week ago to abandon the two-reeler in favor of singles, until the prevailing double feature trend subsides, Columbia, Metro, Radio and Universal gave consideration to a similar solution of the double feature problem as it affects short subject sales.”


73. Figures cited in Fuller-Seeley, “‘What the Picture Did for Me,’” 188.

74. On the history of this column, see ibid., 186–207.

75. “Broadway and/or United States,” *MPH*, June 3, 1933, 19.

76. On this association of hokum, see Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment*, 82–83. See also my introduction.


78. “Hokum Still Best, Says Fox Ad Chief,” *MPH*, February 6, 1932, 25. Universal Pictures head Carl Laemmle noted this ambivalence in a curious letter to *Exhibitors Herald-World* in which he asked for readers’ help in defining “hokum”: “I have heard people apply the term Hokum as something good; others apply it as something bad. Because of this tremendous and radical difference of opinion, it seems to me that this industry should decide for itself what Hokum is and should give that definition to the dictionaries as a contribution from the moving picture industry. . . . Will you help me?” “What Does ‘Hokum’ Really Mean? Carl Laemmle Wants to Know,” *EHW*, August 24, 1929, 26.


81. Harold Ellis Jones and Herbert S. Conrad, “Rural Preferences in Motion Pictures,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 1, no. 3 (1930): 420–21 (emphasis added). Similarly, film historian Henry Jenkins has shown how Hollywood’s “Broadway strategy” played very differently in urban and regional markets, with the ethnic-themed performances of Ziegfeld stars like Eddie Cantor meeting significant resistance from hinterland audiences. Henry Jenkins,


85. “What the Picture Did for Me,” *MPH*, January 26, 1933, 68.

86. For more information on the Hamilton scandal, see Anthony Balducci, *Lloyd Hamilton: Poor Boy Comedian of Silent Cinema* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), chs. 16 and 17.

87. Information on Burke is taken from his clippings file, BRTC, and from the contracts and agreements between Mack Sennett, Inc., and John E. Burke, February 6, 1929, and December 15, 1929, Contract Files—Biography, MSC.

88. Script, no title, December 4, 1928, 2, *The Bride’s Relations*, Production Files, MSC.


91. The designation “village boy” is taken from “The Constabule,” press sheet for *The Constabule*, 1, EPS.


99. “What the Picture Did for Me,” *MPH*, July 15, 1933, 84; and April 7, 1934, 83.
100. “What the Picture Did for Me,” MPH, August 19, 1933, 55; “What the Picture Did for Me,” MPH, February 3, 1934, 71; and “What the Picture Did for Me,” MPH, n.d., n.p., Columbia—Clippings, JWC. A comparison with Will Rogers would seem to suggest itself, since both Clyde and Rogers offered variants on the “wise rube” tradition during this period. Yet what distinguished Rogers’s comedy was, of course, the political mileage he drew from that tradition, using the fool’s simplicity and fair-mindedness as a vantage point to evoke an inclusive left-wing populism. See, for instance, Lary May, The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), ch. 1. Only once did Clyde’s comedies approach overt political critique, and from a very different ideological perspective, in the later Columbia short, Share the Wealth (March 1936). See ch. 5, n. 86.

101. Clyde’s “old man” persona thus appeared on movie screens consistently for a twenty-seven-year period, from 1929 to 1956, just besting Chaplin’s twenty-six-year stretch from Keystone’s Mabel’s Strange Predicament in 1914 to The Great Dictator in 1940.

102. At a time when Educational’s roster was becoming particularly depleted of name comic talent—the increasingly alcoholic and financially troubled Lloyd Hamilton having been let go in 1931, while Sennett departed for Paramount the following year—the Star Personality series was announced late in 1933 with the intent of signing up “the big names of radio, stage, and screen . . . to reinforce Educational’s established favorites.” Advertisement for Educational, MPH, November 11, 1933, 37. The series was also evidently designed to make the best of Educational’s partial retrenchment to the East Coast by using the opportunity to sign up New York–based talent. (Early stars in the series, for instance, included the CBS radio comedy double-act “Easy Aces”—husband and wife team Goodman and Jane Ace—and Broadway comics Joe Cook and Milton Berle.)

103. The eleven films are, in order of release, The Gold Ghost (March 1934), Palooka from Paducah (January 1935), One Run Elmer (February), Haysseed Romance (March), The E-Flat Man (August), The Timid Young Man (October), Three on a Limb (January 1936), Grand Slam Opera (February), Blue Blazes (August), Ditto (February 1937), and Love Nest on Wheels (March).


108. Another example—albeit a far less successful one—would be Hal Roach’s proposed series of seven shorts starring southern humorist Irvin S. Cobb in 1934–1935, to be released as part of Roach’s All-Star comedy line. A kind of Kentucky-fried version of W. C. Fields-style domestic comedy, the series proved so unpopular with exhibitors that it was ended after only four films, one of which was not even released to theaters.


110. Ibid., 255.
CHAPTER 4. “I WANT MUSIC EVERYWHERE”

1. Annual Report, August 31, 1928, Files—1930s, HRC.
2. “Hal Roach Getting Equipment to Set Comedies in Sound,” EHMPW, June 9, 1928, 67; “Hal Roach Allies with Victor for Sound Production,” EHMPW, October 13, 1928, 32. Irrespective of Loew’s-MGM’s guidance, however, Roach seemingly had faith early on that sound was the future. Even prior to the above-quoted report, the company had invested in sound-on-disc musical tracks with synchronized sound effects for its shorts, beginning with the April 1928 Our Gang release, Barnum and Ringling, Inc.

9. Doane to Roach, November 27, 1928, Files—1930s, HRC.
10. Ibid.
12. Lynch to Roach, February 13, 1930, Files—1930s, HRC.
13. Hal Roach Comedy Team to Do Victor Song Record,” EHW, June 1, 1929, 45; “W.W. Clark and Hal Roach Discuss All-Musical Films,” EHW, June 22, 1929, 142. Although tests of “Honey” were recorded on April 27, 1929 (with Leroy Shield on piano), Todd was eventually removed from the production of Dad’s Day and no phonograph was made. Studio logs, April 29, 1929, www.leroyshield.com (accessed September 18, 2012). The Hal Roach Studios did, however, successfully launch a series of musical shorts a few years later, for the 1933–1934 season. The “Schmaltz brothers” films are discussed later in this chapter.
14. Lynch to Roach, October 29, 1930, Files—1930s, HRC.
15. Roach to Lynch, November 5, 1930, and Lynch to Roach, May 12, 1931, Files—1930s, HRC.
17. A case in point is offered by Mack Sennett, whose unsuccessful attempts to capitalize on the song tie-in vogue for the Educational short Radio Kisses (May 1930) required cold-
calling music publishers to gauge their interest in his self-penned tunes (cowritten with comedian and gag writer Harry McCoy). Sennett received three rejection letters, one of which criticized the songs for “too much repetition.” Herbert E. Marks, Edward B. Marks Music Co., to Jed Buell, May 13, 1930; J. M. Davis, Triangle Music Publishing Co., to Jed Buell, May 13, 1930; Chas. Lang, Bibo-Lang Music Publishers, to Jed Buell, May 15, 1930, Radio Kisses, Production Files, MSC. It is tempting to hypothesize that the rejections fueled Sennett's brilliant takedown of the theme-song trend in the Arthur Ripley–scripted Hollywood Theme Song (December 1930): there, a small-town hero (Harry Gribbon) constantly bursts into songs that comment on his actions, accompanied by three musicians who lug their instruments after him wherever he goes. Sennett subsequently hit the musical jackpot the following year when he signed two performers from Gus Arnheim's Cocoanut Grove orchestra in 1931: Irish tenor Don Novis and then up-and-comer Bing Crosby. The resulting Crosby shorts, in particular, typify what historian Katherine Spring calls the “star-song attractions” of the conversion era, when films often served as vehicles for stars to perform their trademark songs: Crosby's debut Sennett short, I Surrender Dear (September 1931) thus includes his song "I Surrender Dear," while his second, One More Chance (November 1931), prominently features “Just One More Chance.” See Spring, Saying It with Songs, 24–29 and ch. 3.


20. Sound engineer Elmer Raguse himself implemented a kind of jerry-built version of wall-to-wall underscoring early in 1930 by mixing preexisting commercial records into the soundtracks of the studio's releases, albeit with no concern for synchronization: a record would be played twice, changed for a new one, which would in turn be played twice, and so forth, until the end of the film. My thanks to Richard W. Bann for clarity on these early scoring initiatives.

21. Cutting continuity, undated, Another Fine Mess, Production Files, George Stevens Collection, AMPAS.

22. Shield to Ginsberg, April 11, 1935, Leroy Shield correspondence, 1932–1937, HRC.

23. Schreuders, liner notes from The Beau Hunks Play the Original Laurel & Hardy Music, 4. The specifics of the mixing technology used at Roach are unclear: Piet Schreuders comments that “It is believed that [Shield's tunes] were all recorded directly onto film, copies of which were then stored in a kind of jukebox, a machine holding up to fifty or sixty film loops at any one time. A sound operator could bring up a tune at the touch of a button.” Schreuders, liner notes from The Beau Hunks Play the Original Laurel & Hardy Music, vol. 2 (Movies Select Video, 1993), 4.

24. In this respect, underscoring practice at Roach mirrored early experiments with incidental music at other studios around this time. As Michael Slowik notes, music was conceived “not as an object to be molded and reworked to fit with specific actions or lines of dialogue but rather as an autonomous entity that should coincide in a segment-by-segment manner.” Michael Slowik, After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era, 1926–1934 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 94.


27. Henry Ginsberg to Leroy Shield, October 15, 1935, Leroy Shield correspondence, 1932–1937, HRC.

28. Hal Roach to Leroy Shield, February 18, 1936, Leroy Shield correspondence, 1932–1937, HRC. This letter was in response to a telegram dated two days earlier in which Shield explained: “IN DECEMBER HENRY GINSBERG WROTE ME THAT YOU WERE GOING TO ESTABLISH A MUSIC DEPARTMENT I ANSWERED SAYING I WOULD LIKE TO COME OUT STOP HAVE HEARD NOTHING FURTHER BUT WOULD LIKE TO WORK FOR YOU VERY MUCH.” Leroy Shield to Hal Roach, telegram, February 16, 1936, Leroy Shield correspondence, 1932–1937, HRC.

29. Matt O’Brien to Leroy Shield, April 23, 1936, Leroy Shield correspondence, 1932–1937, HRC.

30. Spring, Saying It with Songs, ch. 5.

31. Ibid., 123.

32. On The Squall, see Slowik, After the Silents, ch. 3. Slowik also notes that early part-talkie films often featured extensive underscoring of dialogue scenes.

33. Steiner's early scores date to the 1931–33 period, during his time at RKO, in films like Symphony of Six Million (1932), Bird of Paradise (1932), and King Kong (1933).


35. See ch. 3.


38. Hatley quoted in Skretvedt, Laurel and Hardy, 197.


40. Review of Berth Marks, MPN, October 5, 1929, 1264. The pacing of action sequences lacking dialogue was a widely acknowledged problem during the conversion period, drawing specific commentary from one of the earliest advocates of background scoring, Welford C. Beaton, editor of Film Spectator. Prior to the popularization of underscoring, Beaton wrote in 1932, an action sequence without dialogue unfolded “like something that had died and
was following its own hearse.” Welford Beaton, *Know Your Movies: The Theory and Practice of Motion Picture Production* (Hollywood, CA: Howard Hill, 1932), 85.


42. A reference to one of Bourdieu's more trenchant observations in his 1992 study *The Rules of Art* can perhaps sharpen our understanding of the factors at play here. As he suggests there, the autonomy of any field of production—let us say, slapstick cinema—ensures that, in the works produced in it, any contextualizing historical change—be it social, political, or, in the case of sound, technological/industrial—will always be filtered through the configuration of values and norms that already exist within that field. “The direction of [any] change depends on the state of the system of possibilities (conceptual, stylistic, etc.) inherited from history.” Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 205. One cannot, that is, point simply to the convergence of film and music industries as a “cause” of which certain scoring practices were isolatable “effects” without also taking into account the “system of possibilities”—established norms of craft, etc.—within the various filmmaking fields that in turn shaped the direction of musical innovation. If the slapstick short was the first field of live-action filmmaking to witness the institutionalization of musical underscoring, then this was because sound's advent had created pressing problems relating to comedians' performative craft to which music could lend resolution.

43. Hal Roach to Felix Feist, October 6, 1927, 1926–1928, HRC.

44. Financial statement, April 25, 1932, in Hal Roach Studios, Inc., Company Minutes, September 21, 1931 to November 25, 1932, 67, HRC.


49. Hal Roach Studios, Inc., Company Minutes, June 25, 1927 to August 25, 1931, 193, HRC.


53. Ward, *A History of the Hal Roach Studios*, 82–83. The other two features were *The Outsider* (1931), a British film, and *Flirting with Fate* (1938), which was produced by David Loew, son of Loew’s founder Marcus Loew.

54. The challenge of feature-length slapstick has been a frequent area of investigation for film scholars, albeit typically with a focus on the silent era. See, for instance, my book *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), ch. 3, as well as Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik, *Popular Film and Television Comedy* (London: Routledge, 1990), ch. 6. Such discussions have tended to center on the tension between gags, understood as forms of narrative disruption or delay, and the demands of narrative clarity and progress. See also, on this tension, Donald Crafton, “Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick

55. “Jailbirds,” unidentified clipping (presumably UK); and “Jailbirds,” unidentified clipping (presumably UK), *Pardon Us* clippings file, BRTC.


58. Added Scenes (6 pp.) for production F-2, Laurel and Hardy—Scripts and Production Material, Hal Roach Studios Collection, AMPAS.

59. Felix Feist to Henry Ginsberg, August 25, 1932, Files—1930s, HRC.

60. Laurel and Hardy had already cameoed in the nonnarrative, revue-style MGM feature *The Hollywood Revue of 1929* (1929), in which they performed inept conjuring tricks. The team’s appearance in *The Rogue Song* seems to have been the result of a last-minute decision, made midway into the film’s two-month shooting schedule. According to production reports, shooting on the film lasted from August 22 to October 18, 1929; Laurel and Hardy were brought in for a test on September 21 and shot their scenes in early October, most filmed separately from the main cast. Despite this, the duo received third-place billing in credits and publicity for the film, following Tibbett and love interest Catherine Dale Owen. See Daily Production Reports and Main Title Billing, *The Rogue Song*, Box 109, MGM Collection, USC.


63. Crafton, *The Talkies*, 320. It is further possible that MGM also had in mind RKO’s 1929 musical *Rio Rita*, which also features a subplot with two comedians. The RKO film was based on the 1927 Broadway musical of the same name, which had originally united Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey in secondary roles that they repeated for the film version. (They were in fact the only principals from the original play to also appear in the movie.) Based on the success of that film—RKO’s biggest box-office hit until *King Kong* (1933)—Wheeler and Woolsey went on to a successful career as comic stars at RKO until Woolsey’s death in 1937.


65. Ibid., 6, 19 (emphasis added).


68. Douglas, *Terrible Honesty*, 355

69. Ibid., 358.


72. As Altman writes, “Government is simply a question of proper marriage, and, conversely, marriage is but a question of proper government. In order to develop this plot literally, nearly every operetta tradition has recourse to the creation of small, imaginary kingdoms run—as in former times and distant states—according to a personal type of reign. The importance of the government/love metaphor and plot connection explains the regularity with which every operetta chooses its characters from the upper aristocracy or royalty. . . . Gilbert and Sullivan give us Japan and the Mikado, Offenbach a series of closed principalities from Gerolstein to Hades, Lehár contributes Marshallia, Luxembourg, and the Orient, and every subsequent Viennese composer follows his lead.” Altman, *The American Film Musical*, 149.

73. The historic development of operetta in fact confirms the clown’s narrative marginalization. By the time of the Viennese operetta vogue of the early twentieth century, the revue elements that had been so much a part of the older operetta tradition were thoroughly out of place in stories focused on romance and governance, such that Franz Lehár would typically confine comic spectacle to a handful of duets involving the clown and soubrette, usually just three per operetta. Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 231.


77. “Mop and Broom Handles at Premium Because of this Game,” *Babes in Toyland* pressbook, 6, BRTC.


79. Dialogue Cutting Continuity, *The Devil’s Brother*, April 21, 1933, 9, MGM Scripts Collection, AMPAS.

80. This comic device of mismatching voices must have tickled Roach’s filmmakers, who decided to repeat it for the duo’s performance of “The Trail of the Lonesome Pine” in their 1937 feature *Way Out West*. 


84. Janney quoted in Skretvedt, Laurel and Hardy, 304.

85. It appears that Paramount, too, had some interest in adapting the Herbert original, at least to judge from existing studio files from the early sound period that include an undated synopsis of the operetta’s plot. Synopsis by Marion Valentine, “Paramount Synopses, 1929–1938,” Howard Estabrook papers, AMPAS.


87. “Studio Transformed into Fairyland for Laurel-Hardy Feature,” Babes in Toyland pressbook, 3, BRTC.


93. “Studio Transformed into Fairyland,” 3. The Toyland set was indeed elaborate, requiring two joined sound stages to house a structure 250 feet wide by five hundred in length. “World’s Largest Soundstage Houses Colorful Street in Wonderland,” Babes in Toyland pressbook, 5, BRTC.

94. “New Laurel and Hardy Feature-Length Picture Has Spectacular Scenes,” Babes in Toyland pressbook, 3, BRTC.


98. Roach quoted in Skretvedt, Laurel and Hardy, 335.

99. Comedian and director Larry Semon’s Wizard of Oz (1925), with Semon as the Scarecrow, probably deserves mention as an earlier example. But the film was far less successful, and its distributor—Chadwick Pictures—was bankrupt before the film’s initial run was complete.

100. Budget figures from Ward, A History of the Hal Roach Studios, 211.

101. In New York City, it continues to screen for these holidays on the station WPIX (as of 2015).


**CHAPTER 5. “FROM THE ARCHIVES OF KEYSTONE MEMORY”**


5. The reissue market for short silent comedies opened up in the early 1930s when the Van Beuren Corporation began releasing Chaplin’s Mutual shorts (1916–1917) through RKO. Over the decade, the market built to a point at which industry observers began to speak of a definite “trend,” with new companies formed precisely for this purpose. See, for instance, “Trend toward Revival of Old Slapsticks,” *MPH*, June 1, 1940, 51.

6. “Keystone Cops Return,” *MPH*, July 25, 1931, 24; Vitaphone advertisement, *MPH*, September 14, 1935, 4–5. Finlayson’s and Cook’s careers with Sennett both postdate the Keystone period (1912–1917). Although the famous cops had been largely retired since the Keystone days, they had been occasionally revived in Sennett films up to the close of the silent era in two-reelers like *Smith’s Picnic* (December 1926) and *Love in a Police Station* (December 1927).


8. On undercranking in silent comedy, see also ch. 3. Although the initial offerings in the Taxi Boy series indeed featured the promised spectacle of elaborately crashing taxicabs (in particular the first, *What Price Taxi* [August 1932]), budget cutbacks at the Roach Studios eventually necessitated a smaller scale, with Ben Blue and Billy Gilbert doing what sometimes amounted to a thinly veiled Laurel and Hardy impersonation. The series was not renewed for a second season.


18. The series, which ran only for the 1932–1933 season, consisted of what *Motion Picture Herald* described as “old newsreel shots [i.e., actualities] of important events back in the gay old ’90s,” with voiceover commentary supplied by Lew Lehr. James Cunningham, “Asides & Interludes,” *MPH*, October 8, 1932, 33.


20. Film scholar Haidee Wasson describes the language with which MoMA’s first circulating programs were greeted: “Films were described as being ‘primitive,’ ‘archaic,’ and ‘rare’ and as ‘lost treasures,’ ‘relics,’ ‘antiques,’ and ‘ancient thrillers.’ Films were ‘unearthed,’ ‘resurrected,’ ‘reborn,’ and ‘embalmed.’ The film ‘veil’ had been lifted. The Film Library became an ‘asylum for film’ and a ‘sanctuary against time.’ Only forty years after the first projected films, the cinema had acquired the sense of wonder and discovery usually reserved for objects of lost civilizations and faraway cultures.” Haidee Wasson, *Museum Movies: The Museum of Modern Art and the Birth of Art Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 172.


22. On the “Great Hokum Mystery” series, see also ch. 3. Consisting of clips excerpted from the private collection of the late Abram Stone, the “Flicker Frolics” films seem to have been released in at least two batches, in 1936 and 1942, the latter for nontheatrical exhibition.


27. I am here paraphrasing Pierre Bourdieu’s discussion of the “social aging” of cultural forms: “Fossilized artists are in some way old twice over, by the age of their art and their schemas of production but also by the whole lifestyle of which the style of their works is one dimension.” Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 150.


34. On the White brothers’ childhood in Edendale, see Bruskin, *The White Brothers*, Book I.

35. Richard Schmidt, “Interview with Jules White,” *Journal of Popular Film* 6, no. 1 (1977): 45. The *Dogville* comedies were not the only all-animal parodies from this period: Tiffany had a *Chimp Family* series (1930–1932), including western spoofs like *The Little Covered Wagon* (September 1930) and *Cinnamon* (October 1931).

36. “Columbia to Make Shorts,” *MPH*, July 23, 1932, 93. Production stats derived from “Lists—Costs” and “Lists—1934–1958,” JWC. Budgets for short subjects at Columbia remained stable at around $15,000 for most of the 1930s, before creeping up to an average of just over $20,000 by the mid-1940s.


40. “Meyers [sic] Produces Comedies,” *MPH*, October 14, 1933, 26. The Catlett films were perhaps the most sporadic of Columbia’s series, with just six entries released between 1934 and 1940. Two of the films—*Get Along Little Hubby* (June 1934) and *Static in the Attic* (September 1939)—exploit the same basic domestic situation as the Edgar Kennedy shorts: husband, wife, and annoying in-laws.


44. See ch. 1.

45. On Healy suing for use of the name “Stooge,” see Steve Cox and Jim Terry, *One Fine Stooge: Larry Fine’s Frizzy Life in Pictures* (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House, 2006), 37. The circumstances surrounding Healy’s death have drawn much speculation. What is known is that he died on December 21, two days following a drunken fistfight at the Trocadero on Sunset Boulevard, where he had been celebrating news of his wife’s pregnancy. (His assailant has been reported variously as Wallace Beery or Albert “Cubby” Broccoli, the future James Bond producer.) The postmortem examination concluded, however, that foul play was not a factor, and that Healy’s death was due to toxic nephritis brought about by chronic alcoholism. See Cox and Terry, *One Fine Stooge*, 43–46; Jeff Lenburg, Joan Howard Maurer, and Greg Lenburg, *The Three Stooges Scrapbook* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing, 1999 [1982]), 13–17.


47. Salary information taken from Cox and Terry, *One Fine Stooge*, 71.

48. William S. Holman (studio manager) to Jack Cohn, February 23, 1935, Columbia correspondence, 1935–1950, JWC. Production on *Three Little Pigskins* took five long days, totaling seventy hours work, whereas the Stooges’ previous Columbia productions had been brought in within four. Production data taken from “1933–1934 Two Reel Program” and “1934–1935 Shorts Program,” Columbia—Lists, ca. 1934–1958, JWC.

“Jules’s stuff was very violent,” Ed Bernds explained. “That was just his way of doing it. His stuff was just violent. He used a lot things I didn't like and never used: the finger in the nose; ice tongs in the ears.” Bernds quoted in Cox and Terry, *One Fine Stooge*, 47.

Howard quoted in Cox and Terry, *One Fine Stooge*, 41–42.


The two films not directed by White were the series pilot, *Pest from the West* (June 1939), and *So You Won’t Squawk* (February 1941; see n. 61 below), both directed by Del Lord.


Schmidt, “Interview with Jules White,” 44.


The allowance for Keaton’s pictures was reduced for the 1940–1941 season to fifteen thousand. Production costs calculated from budgets in the folder Columbia—lists (costs), JWC.


The only one of his later Columbia shorts in which Keaton did not appear with Ames was *So You Won’t Squawk*. A short comedy remake of the Joe E. Brown Columbia feature *So You Won’t Talk* (released the previous year), the film does not appear to have been written with Keaton in mind, which perhaps accounts for Ames’s absence. (Unlike other scenarios in the series, the Keaton role is at no point referred to in the script as “Buster” or “Keaton”—instead, “Eddie.”) “So You Won’t Squawk,” Final Continuity, October 18, 1940, JWC.

“What the Picture Did for Me,” *MPH*, May 25, 1940, 60.

“The Taming of the Snood,” final continuity, February 8, 1940, JWC.

“What the Picture Did for Me,” *MPH*, July 13, 1940, 37.


This articulation of the narrative/slapstick distinction as a contrast between Keaton’s two female costars—the conventionally pretty Appleby versus the rough and brassy Ames—can also be found in *Nothing but Pleasure* and *The Taming of the Snood*. It relates to the long-established tradition in American comedy that permitted women to be laughable only to the extent that they deviated from classical standards of beauty. See Henry Jenkins, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), ch. 9; Kathleen Rowe, *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).

“General Nuisance,” final continuity, March 5, 1941, JWC.

Carroll, *Comedy Incarnate*, 5, 10 (emphasis added); Tom Gunning, “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy,” in Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, eds., *Classical
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71. Gunning discusses these kinds of objects in his essay “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths,” where he sees them as precursors for the mechanical devices of later silent comedy. “Such devices,” he writes, “provide the central heritage that early film comedy hands on to later silent comedy, from Lumière’s garden hose . . . to Chaplin’s assembly lines and Keaton’s locomotives.” (Gunning, “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths,” 98.) I am arguing, by contrast, for a distinction between the tools of early comedy and the machines of later slapstick, a distinction that, following Mumford, I locate in the object’s degree of automatism vis-à-vis its human operator. See also Tom Gunning, “Mechanisms of Laughter: The Devices of Slapstick,” in Tom Paulus and Rob King, eds., Slapstick Comedy (New York: Routledge, 2010), 137–51, esp. 150n10.


77. Maxine Block, “Hollywood Cavalcade,” Photoplay Studies 5, no. 18 (1939): n.p., Hollywood Cavalcade clippings file, AMPAS. Keaton’s only work with the former Keystone impresario in fact came in the sound era, in the Educational short The Timid Young Man (October 1935), on which Sennett worked as director for hire, having abandoned his studio operations to bankruptcy two years earlier.

78. Exhibitor reports from “What the Picture Did for Me,” MPH, December 21, 1940, 53; May 25, 1940, 60; and April 4, 1942, 55 (emphasis added in all instances).


80. “What the Picture Did for Me,” MPH, April 18, 1936, 72; and February 26, 1938, 60. In a similar vein, Stooges director Ed Bernds later recalled how the team’s shorts were previewed only “in relatively unsophisticated places” like Glendale, still a relatively rural suburb of Los Angeles. Bernds, Mr. Bernds Goes to Hollywood, 296.


82. Doherty quotes Universal producer Stanley Bergman in 1931: “We cannot make comedies that the children frown upon while the grown ups laugh. . . . That has been one of the great evils of the talking picture, and we must see that there are no more long-faced kids curled up in theatre chairs while some sophisticated two-reeler or other is being projected in front of their fathers and mothers.” In Thomas Doherty, “This Is Where We Came In: The Audible Screen and the Voluble Audience of Early Sound Cinema,” in Melvyn Stokes and Richard Maltby, eds., American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era (London: BFI, 1999), 152–53.
86. New Deal–era redistributive economics also came in for ribbing in the Andy Clyde Columbia short, *Share the Wealth* (March 1936): a small-town mayoral candidate (Clyde) runs for office on a “share the wealth” platform only to change his mind and flee town when he inherits fifty thousand dollars.
87. Jules White’s own copy of the *Horses’ Collars* script has “Stooge #3” handwritten on the title page, suggesting that the film may in fact have been intended for slightly earlier production. Corrected script (29 pp.), *Horses’ Collars*, undated, JWC.
90. The concept of ideologeme is most fully developed in Jameson’s classic text, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), where it is defined as a “historically determinate conceptual or semic complex which can project itself variously in the form of a ‘value system’ or ‘philosophical concept,’ or in the form of a protonarrative, a private or collective narrative fantasy” (115).
91. On the “bomb under the bed” and “ghost in the pawnshop” plots, see Hilde D’haeyere, *Dislexicon of Slapstick Humor, Funny Cinematography, and Very Special Effects* (Ghent, Belgium: MER. Paper Kunsthalle, 2011), 8, 25. On the recycling of gags in film slapstick, see Bryony Dixon, “The Good Thieves: On the Origins of Situation Comedy in the British Music Hall,” in Paulus and King, eds., *Slapstick Comedy*, 21–36; and Anthony Balducci, *The Funny Parts: A History of Film Comedy Routines and Gags* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012). It is worth adding that Columbia’s veteran filmmakers often took this recycling to shamelessly self-plagiarizing extremes, mining their own back catalogs not just for basic comic situations but for entire plots. Del Lord, for example, utilized the identical narrative of a Taxi Boys short he had directed for Roach, *Wreckety Wrecks* (February 1933), for the El Brendel short *Ready, Willing, but Unable* (May 1941). Clyde Bruckman’s script for the Andy Clyde short *Andy Plays Hookey* (December 1946) was simply a two-reel condensation of *The Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935), a W.C. Fields feature directed by Bruckman. At times, the unit’s top brass seemingly advised caution, as when a proposed race-to-the-rescue climax for a Stooges’ short was jettisoned after Jules White noticed that “H. Lloyd did most of this” (in the 1924 feature *Girl Shy*). At others, more caution would still have been wise: Lloyd in fact eventually sued Columbia after Bruckman copied scenes from Lloyd’s *Movie Crazy* (1932)—which, again, Bruckman had directed—for the Three Stooges short *Loco Boy Makes Good* (January 1942). The annotation “H. Lloyd did most of this” is in “Oily to Bed, Oily to Rise,” unused script for chase scene, n.d., JWC. On Lloyd’s suit against Columbia, see Okuda and Watz, *the Columbia Comedy Shorts*, 32–33.


100. “Laurel and Hardy Reach Pinnacle of Success” and “Laurel and Hardy Success Due to Co-operation,” in *Pardon Us* pressbook, 4, BRTC.

101. “Our Relations’ Marks 10th Year Together for Laurel and Hardy Team,” *Our Relations* pressbook, 5, BRTC.

102. “Laurel and Hardy Success Due to Co-operation,” 4.


105. “Cash and Carry,” fifth draft script, April 28, 1937, 2, JWC.

106. Ibid., 8–9.

107. Ibid., 32–33. This is not quite how the actual film ends. Curly’s line “Gee, Mr. President, you’re a swell guy” is moved to the end after Moe violently corrects his misunderstanding of clemency. Moe then adds, “You said it,” and the film fades out with the Stooges saluting the commander-in-chief.

108. This failure of resolution is nowhere more pronounced than in *Loco Boy Makes Good*, in which the boys put on a nightclub show to raise money to cover the widow’s mortgage. The film’s nightclub scenes degenerate into a chaos that utterly fails to complete the charity motif, instead concluding abruptly with Curly whirling an escaped skunk around his head, the actual plot seemingly forgotten.


112. Production data derived from “Lists—Costs,” JWC.
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1. Program, *Hollywood Cavalcade* clippings file, AMPAS.
3. Which is to say that the films’ historiographic mode is that of comedy, as one of the four modes of emplotment in traditional historical writing identified by Hayden White (the others being romance, tragedy, and satire). See White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).
6. See ch. 5.
11. The concept of “interpreted” nostalgia is suggested by Fred Davis, who proposes three “orders” of nostalgia: first-order or simple nostalgia (“a positively toned evocation of a lived past”); second-order or reflexive nostalgia (characterized by “empirically oriented questions concerning the truth, accuracy, completeness, or representativeness of the nostalgic claim. Was it really that way?”); and third-order or interpreted nostalgia (characterized by “analytically oriented questions concerning its sources, typical character, significance, and psychological purpose. Why am I feeling nostalgic?”). Fred Davis, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 18, 21, 24.

23. “4 Clowns,” MPH, June 17, 1970, n.p., 4 Clowns clippings file, AMPAS. Youngson’s When Comedy Was King cost around $100,000 to produce and, within six months, drew some $218,000 in domestic rentals alone. “Youngson Anthologies of Silents Continue Showing Coin Potential,” Variety, October 14, 1960, n.p., Robert Youngson clippings file, AMPAS.


27. According to Sergei Eisenstein, the potent effect of cartoons stemmed from their quality of “plasmaticness”; that is, the way in which cartoon figures behave “like the primal protoplasm, not yet possessing a ‘stable’ form, but capable of assuming any form.” Sergei Eisenstein, Eisenstein on Disney, trans. Jay Leyda (London: Methuen 1985), 21. On miniaturization, see my earlier discussion of Babes in Toyland (1934), ch. 4.

28. See the Blackhawk Films Collection, AMPAS. Of the approximately hundred letters in the collection—on topics ranging from queries about silent versus sound speed, print care, and the like—twenty-five are substantively concerned with the company’s live-action comedy releases.


31. Ibid., 151 (emphasis in original).
