

The Mark of the Ridiculous and Silent Celluloid

Some Trends in American and European Film Comedy from 1894 to 1929

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Fred Ott's Infectious Sneeze (1894)

Throughout its history silent film comedy was affected by the technology with which it was produced, the culture and mindset of the filmmakers, and the intended audience's desires. When Thomas Edison expressed interest in combining moving pictures with his phonograph in 1888, other inventors around the world were already experimenting with sequential imaging. Edison's approach to inventing was to encourage his "muckers" (technicians, machinists, and engineers) to come up with new ideas by "playing" with state-of-the art resources at his lab (Spehr 2008: 75–82, 649).

Edison Kinetoscopic Record of a Sneeze/Fred Ott's Sneeze, the studio's nineteenth film, was produced from January 2 to 7, 1894. Fred Ott was an engineer credited with making major contributions to Edison's early Kinetograph movie camera, but most film historians remember him for sneezing in an early motion picture. Initially considered a comic novelty for the way it used technical innovation to make much ado about nothing, the title of this film succinctly informs us of its content. The filming of an entire action from conflict to resolution, although only a few seconds in duration, gives the movie a kind of narrative structure. One reason this documentary is associated with comedy is that the subject's loss of bodily control, a condition that theorist Henri Bergson described as "something mechanical encrusted upon the living," makes Fred Ott a comic figure characterized by the "mark of the ridiculous" (Bergson 1956: 92).

In his *Poetics* of 330 BC, Aristotle identified a comic character as someone who bears a “mark of the ridiculous,” which enables the observer to feel superior to this individual. Where the “tragic flaw” of the dramatic hero suffers real pain that brings about the ruin of this protagonist and his followers, the ludicrous condition of the mark of the ridiculous “. . . may be defined as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others; the mask for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain” (Aristotle 1962: 194). Ott’s mark of the ridiculous was not as pronounced as a physical deformity but the loss of control during his sneeze was considered comically incongruous by the filmmakers. As a consequence the playful Fred Ott is not remembered for his accomplishments as an Edison engineer but for being human. According to silent film historian Luke McKernan, “in later years Ott was happy to claim that he was the first ever ‘film star,’ which in a way was true” (McKernan 1996).

A Plot Underfoot: The Lumière Brothers’ *L’Arroseur arrosé* (1895)

L’Arroseur arrosé (*The Hoser Hosed*) (1895), produced by Louis and Auguste Lumière, is credited with being one of the first comic sketches in the history of the cinema. The sons of a French manufacturer of photographic plates, the Lumière brothers were already versed in imaging technology when they sought to develop an alternative to the Edison Kinetograph. Using Edison’s invention as a model, Louis Lumière perfected a workable lightweight camera in 1895 that could also be converted to develop and project the footage. International recognition was achieved on December 28, 1895 when ten Lumière motion pictures, including *L’Arroseur arrosé*, were projected on a big screen to a paying audience in a rented Paris basement.

While *L’Arroseur arrosé*, like *Fred Ott’s Sneeze*, is primarily a cinematic depiction of a gag, there is enough of a rudimentary plot to characterize this film as a comic narrative. Because the gardener possesses a “mark of the ridiculous” – an incapacity for ascertaining why a hose might not function, the capacity for becoming curious, and the capability to peer foolishly into a nozzle that can douse him with water – he is susceptible to becoming the victim (comic butt) of a practical joke. When the boy (comic wit) recognizes the gardener’s mark of the ridiculous he exploits this deficiency by stepping on the hose, which sets the comic narrative into play. The incongruity of the loss of control suffered by the gardener while sprayed – something mechanical encrusted upon the living – makes this situation humorous.¹

L’Arroseur arrosé has been identified as one of the first film narratives, but the Lumières would primarily be associated with non-fiction film during their short career as pioneer producers. The documentary would, in fact, be the prevalent form of motion picture until early filmmakers determined how to use the new

medium for storytelling. In the meantime some of the most effective motion picture comedies were documentaries of comic routines already perfected for the stage.

Documentary of a Slap Shoe Hero: *Little Tich et ses “Big Boots”* (1900)

Shortly after the Lumières developed motion picture technology to compete with Edison's, the French inventor and entrepreneur Léon Gaumont attempted the same. Gaumont was able to devise a workable camera/projector by 1897, and his secretary, Alice Guy-Blaché, became the company's chief film producer from 1897 to 1906. Among the hundreds of films produced by the world's first important female film director is the delightful Gaumont comic short *Little Tich et ses “Big Boots”* (*Little Tich and his Big Boots*) (1900), perhaps the best motion picture documentation of a major turn-of-the-century English music-hall act and one of the most interesting early novelty films surviving. The renowned French comedian Jacques Tati claimed that *Little Tich et ses “Big Boots”* is “a foundation for everything that has been realized in comedy on the screen” (Anthony 1996).

A comedian with a physical “mark of the ridiculous” similar to the type of deformity associated with Aristotle's definition, the diminutive 4 foot 6 inch Little Tich was born with five fingers and a thumb on each hand and web-like flesh between these digits. While our operational definition argues that the “mark of the ridiculous” is not “productive of pain or harm to others,” Harry “Little Tich” Relph was painfully self-conscious of his. Despite this sensitivity regarding his appearance, Little Tich's comic portrayal was that of a “grotesque,” “eccentric,” “red-nosed,” or “baggy-pants” comedian similar to those that fellow English-born comics Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel, and Fred “Pimple” Evans performed on stage and later brought to the screen (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2). Tich's comedy contrasted his agility, wit, pronounced musical talents, and proficiency at mime with his incongruous physical appearance and dress. Little Tich was particularly famous for his humorous yet graceful performance in specially modified slap shoes.

Since slap shoes had been around for centuries, Little Tich literally expanded upon an old idea when he made his comic footwear longer in the 1880s. Through trial and error Tich discovered that when he lengthened his slap shoes to 28 inches he could arch his body, lean forward at a 45-degree angle, balance himself on their tips, and rise to the height of six feet, ten inches. More than a valued documentary of a unique novelty act, the 1900 film *Little Tich et ses “Big Boots”* reveals how this gifted performer projected a playful attitude in his work while exhibiting a self-conscious but convivial rapport with his audience. The fact that this French film featured an English vaudeville comedian underscores the international cross-fertilization in popular culture of this time. As is true of previous motion pictures discussed, *Little Tich et ses “Big Boots”* was filmed entirely in one shot.



Figure 1.1 A frame enlargement from *Little Tich et ses "Big Boots"* of the popular music hall comedian doing the finale of his famous routine (producer, Clément-Maurice Gratioulet).



Figure 1.2 Charles Chaplin's famous screen persona doing a variation of Little Tich's big boots routine in his 1919 film *A Day's Pleasure* (producer, Charles Chaplin).

Little Tich et ses "Big Boots" begins with the performer walking on stage from the wings and making "eye contact" with the camera/audience, which he intermittently continues throughout his performance. By looking directly at the camera Little Tich gives the impression that he is singling out and inviting each viewer to become involved in a mutually shared experience. Tich's interaction with the audience confirms that he knows the situation is silly as he cheerfully takes off his regular shoes, puts on his big boots, and does comic business with his hat. Through his glances Tich checks to see if he is still being watched and encourages the onlooker to enjoy his playful antics. A tight long shot enables the

observer to appreciate the performer's body language and facial expression while documenting this music-hall act. The action is filmed on a stage comparable to those where this comedian usually performed, and the tempo of this documentary is associated with the music synchronized to the image. Little Tich plays directly to the camera in a manner similar to the way he related to live music-hall audiences. His intent in both instances was to sell himself and his act by engaging viewers in this event and his playful attitude. At the end of the performance Tich leaves the stage and then returns to take his bow.

Comic appearance and technique aside, it should be noted that it is the engaging personality of Little Tich that sells this picture to the viewer. It should also be noted that one must be careful when making assumptions concerning the role of any surviving film in the evolution of silent film history. *Little Tich et ses "Big Boots"* is an example of a turn-of-the-century motion picture that explored filmmaking techniques that were set aside before becoming standard practice several years later. It uses an experimental synchronized sound process that would be discontinued after 1908, so the emphasis on having the performer directly address the camera while responding to indigenous music would not be commonly employed in motion pictures until the coming of the talkies in 1926–7. Tati's claim that this film is "a foundation for everything that has been realized in comedy on the screen" does not mean that filmmakers and critics have always recognized *Little Tich et ses "Big Boots"* as a model throughout film history despite its prototypical qualities.

Little Tich's music hall talents translated exceptionally well to the screen, but he preferred making direct contact with a live audience. It would be left to other artists to modify established forms of popular culture to fit the new film medium. Few were more successful at making stage adaptation cinematic than the magician turned filmmaker, Georges Méliès.

Georges Méliès, "Fantasist Filmmaker" (1896–1902)

The 500 motion pictures that Georges Méliès made between 1896 and 1913 include examples of every film genre known at this time and most of them featured Méliès as a principal performer. Many of his earliest pictures focused upon Méliès doing magic tricks. This interest in magic led to experimentation with cinematic special effects that resulted in Méliès becoming known as "the father of trick photography." In his biography of Emile Cohl, "the father of animated film," Donald Crafton cites a 1900 critic of caricature, Adolphe Brisson, as postulating that there were "... four kinds of humorist: the caricaturist proper, the parodist, the satirist, and the fantasist... The fantasist 'obeys no other rules besides his own caprice. He invents, he combines, he suggests'" (Crafton 1990: 307). This could be said of Georges Méliès.

While not exactly a comedian in the sense of a Little Tich, Georges Méliès' playfulness as a magician, his love for fantasy, and capacity for whimsy gave

his films a comic atmosphere that can still be appreciated today. The 1902 trick fantasy film *L'Homme à la tête de caoutchouc* (*The Indian Rubber Head*) is literally one of hundreds of Méliès motion pictures with this comic touch. Filmed in one shot, Méliès plays an inventor who has created a very animated bodiless rubber head, also performed by Méliès, which is inflatable when connected to a bellows. When the proud inventor demonstrates his expanding and contracting rubber head to an observer, the spectator insists upon operating the bellows himself which results in the head exploding. This troublemaker is literally kicked out of the room by the distraught inventor who is left weeping as the film ends.

Comedy, like Méliès' stage magic, is based upon incongruity – an awareness of a condition outside the accepted norm, a reversal of usual expectation, a situation or development different from what one ordinarily assumes or anticipates. While early film technology impressed viewers with its ability to document “surface reality,” this particular cinematic record consisted of silent two-dimensional black-and-white moving images that were inherently incongruous when compared to the “real world.” Besides being a master of cinematic special effects, Méliès was a pioneer in identifying how the film medium could distort “reality.” Some of the earliest film comedies exploring distortion versus documentation were produced in England.

Fantastist Filmmaking in Britain (1900–1901)

The 1900 Hepworth film *How it Feels to be Run Over* employs rudimentary trick photography to create an effect very different from Méliès' achievement in *L'Homme à la tête de caoutchouc*. Initially appearing to be a nonfiction picture, *How it Feels to be Run Over* opens on a quiet country road filmed opposite from where a horse and carriage, seen in long shot, eventually pass. Through the dust of the departing buggy the viewer is made aware of an approaching horseless carriage. Rather than follow the path of the preceding horse drawn vehicle, the occupants of the car wave for the viewer to get out of their way. The automobile continues to advance towards the camera until, at the “point of impact,” the vehicle is replaced with a black frame. Hand etched question marks and exclamation points appear on this black background followed by a succession of individual words that make up the sentence “Oh! Mother *will* be pleased.” By giving the impression that it might be a documentary, *How it Feels to be Run Over* suggests that movie audiences already expected certain cinematic conventions from their motion pictures by 1900. This film challenges the expectation that it is a documentary, and comically attempts to make the relationship between the viewer and screen subject more interactive, by trying to give the appearance that a car has run over the camera. The director of this picture recognizes that trick photography can modify the supposed reality of a documentary record and transform a “real” environment into something as “unreal” as the fantasy world of Georges Méliès.

Fascination with this new medium resulted in some early self-reflexive comedies relating to the motion picture experience itself. One example is R.W. Paul's *The Countryman and the Cinematographe* (1901), which deals with an unsophisticated film viewer on stage reacting to various movies appearing on the screen next to him. At one point this "rube" gleefully mimics a dancing showgirl only to discover that she has been replaced by an oncoming train. In keeping with the myth that early audiences were afraid they would be run over when viewing the 1896 Lumière picture *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*Train Coming into a Station*), the countryman dashes away from the advancing projected locomotive.

James Williamson's 1901 *The Big Swallow* is a particularly bizarre comedy about subject/camera/viewer relationships and the filmmaking process. *The Big Swallow* begins with the subject, played by comedian Sam Dalton, agitated but not quite directly addressing the camera. This point of view abruptly shifts as Dalton's mouth approaches the "viewer" and then the perspective changes again when camera and cameraman are seen being swallowed by the irate Dalton. The offending camera and cameraman now removed, Dalton more cordially acknowledges the "viewer" as he steps back and resumes his business even though this exchange with the audience is still being conveyed through a camera. Besides demonstrating a much more complicated exploration of the cinematic experience than *How it Feels to Be Run Over*, *The Big Swallow* suggests that some people were considering the movies as something less than a novelty by 1901, since the idea of a cameraman as paparazzi is already being addressed. Williamson's comedy verifies that the insatiable appetite of movie audiences for more interesting product would continue to propel experimentation with the medium. One way to increase audience interest was by telling stories using more than one shot.

Cut to the Chase (1907–1909)

Directed by Lewin Fitzhamon for the Hepworth Manufacturing Company in England, *That Fatal Sneeze* (1907) is one of many early silent films employing macabre humor in an attempt to satisfy the fickle movie audience's demand for something different. The "different" in this case was turning Fred Ott's sneeze into a cataclysmic affliction. *That Fatal Sneeze* begins with an uncle dumping pepper on his young nephew's dinner to make him sneeze. The boy retaliates by going into the uncle's bedroom to shake pepper on his hairbrush and clothing. The next morning the uncle is so affected by the pepper that his room shakes, and his sneezing escalates after leaving home. One sneeze knocks over a table smashing some china pots in front of a store, which results in the owner and some passersby giving chase. The man eventually sneezes so intensely that the whole world trembles and he blows up.

As film historian Simon Brown noted in his analysis for the British Film Institute, *That Fatal Sneeze* incorporates three concepts that were popular in film comedies by 1907: the practical joke (*L'Arroséur arrosé*); "... the trick film, in which the capacity of the camera to show the seemingly impossible is exploited for comic or dramatic effect [*L'Homme à la Tête de Caoutchouc*];... [and] the chase: each time the old man sneezes, causing havoc to a shop owner or a passer-by, that person joins the ever-growing crowd pursuing him" (Brown 2003–2010). Directors began using chase scenes in their films almost as soon as they started telling their stories with more than one shot. Multiple shots freed film characters from the limitations of a single setting and a chase could be particularly effective for increasing the tempo of a picture as an action built to its climax.

Louis Gasnier's *Le cheval emballé* (*The Runaway Horse*) (1907), produced for Pathé Frères, is often cited as a well executed French chase comedy. The horse in *Le cheval emballé* finds an opportunity to eat someone else's oats while his driver is making a delivery. Rather than pay for this grain, the horse and driver flee. Havoc escalates during the ensuing chase as the horse knocks over people and destroys more property until the miscreants find refuge at their stable. According to the verbal commentary provided by the British Film Institute in their video release, "The basic idea was copied by D.W. Griffith in *The Curtain Pole* [1909]."

The Curtain Pole begins with future slapstick legend Mack Sennett, playing the part of "Monsieur Dupont," rushing to replace a curtain pole he broke while visiting a home. Numerous people join in a chase after this frenzied "Frenchman" accidentally hits them with his replacement pole. Upon his return Dupont learns that his chaotic venture was for naught because the broken pole was quietly replaced during his absence. The film ends with a medium close-up of Dupont chewing his unwanted curtain pole in frustration. According to film historian Tom Gunning, "*The Curtain Pole* seems to predict the future of American film comedy by situating Sennett at the center of the film's mayhem, prophetically announcing the blend of Griffith's editing tempo with comic anarchy that Sennett concocted later at Keystone" (Gunning 1991: 132). Both directors would polish their skills at perfecting the chase and Sennett would soon replace the French as the world's pre-eminent producer of film slapstick.

Reflecting the accomplishments of Méliès and others in creating fantasy worlds on screen, the distanced camera placements in *That Fatal Sneeze* emphasize the setting more than the characters. Given that the "star" of many of the earliest films was the environment, the movie frame was treated as a kind of "picture window" featuring everything in long shot. However, as demonstrated by the medium closeup of Monsieur Dupont in *The Curtain Pole*, the people in these films also deserved attention. Audiences wanted to see engaging personalities on the screen and the actions of these performers impacted what motion pictures communicated and how. One early film star who particularly influenced new approaches to cinematic communication was Max Linder, the screen personality upon whom Mack Sennett's "Monsieur Dupont" was based.

Silent Super Star: Max Linder (1905–1912)

Born Gabriel-Maximilien Leuvielle in 1883 to a well-to-do family of wine growers in Saint-Loubès-Gironde, France, “Max Linder” first appeared in films at Pathé in 1905 after pursuing a career in theater. Linder’s comedy focused upon the inventive and often absurd manner in which his screen character “Max” coped with problems and embarrassments triggered by his particular mark of the ridiculous – the personality of a playful, and sometimes jealous, incurable romantic. Where other early film comics portrayed bizarre-looking characters wearing exaggerated costumes and grotesque makeup, Linder’s appearance was impeccable. Max’s elegant dress and polished body language were in stark contrast to the absurd situations that this character’s foolish behavior helped create.

Linder introduced his famous dapper and debonair man about town in the 1907 film *Les débuts d’un patineur* (*Max Learns to Skate*). Another early Linder film of historical note is *Au music-hall* (*At the Music Hall*) (1907), in which a drunken Max’s interaction with some bad music hall acts ends with a comic boxing match between this inebriated audience member and one of the performers. This film was actually an unauthorized adaptation of English music-hall producer Fred Karno’s sketch *Mumming Birds*, which, when performed on stage, was a self-reflexive parody of English vaudeville itself. *Au music-hall* is believed to be the first film challenged for copyright violation in English jurisprudence, but *Mumming Birds* continued to be a popular stage attraction long after Karno lost this case and the film was forgotten. *Mumming Birds* was called *A Night in an English Music Hall* when Charlie Chaplin played the comic drunk in American vaudeville between 1910 and 1913. It would also be an inspiration for Chaplin’s 1915 Essanay picture *A Night in the Show*, and the 1929 short comedy *Only Me*, which featured Lupino Lane playing all the roles.

Growing popularity allowed Linder greater control as a filmmaker. By 1909 the opening credits for *Max et la doctoresse* (*Max and the Lady Doctor*) proclaimed: “Scène de Max Linder, Jouée par l’auteur” (directed by Max Linder, starring the author). In this comedy of manners Max is embarrassed when the lady doctor in question asks him to remove clothing for an examination. Despite this awkward introduction, Max and the doctor marry and have a child. Later, when Max visits his wife’s office, he goes into a rage when she asks other gentlemen to disrobe. Linder also incorporated fantasist elements in his comedies. In *Max et son chien Dick* (*Max and His Dog*) (1912), the canine hero phones his master at work to bark a message that Max’s wife is entertaining a lover.

Separating “reality” from fantasy is something of a challenge when viewing the 1913 Linder comedy, *Max toréador*. Max demonstrates his penchant for bullfighting at the beginning of the film when passing bicyclists are treated like bulls charging his cape. To perfect his bullfighting skills Max brings a cow, with calf, to his apartment for practice. This scene shifts to a huge outdoor arena with thousands of spectators.

Max fights a real bull with ease and the excited crowd carries him on its shoulders. In one version of this film Max falls out of bed to discover it was all a dream.

Max toréador is especially fascinating for the way it incorporates documentary footage of Linder's visit to Barcelona in 1912 into a fictional narrative. Linder accepted the challenge of performing as an actual matador, and his athleticism is demonstrated in the expert manner by which he dispatches the bull. The scene of Max being carried through the streets is also documentary footage of the real Linder's reception in Spain – evidence of his popularity as one of the first internationally recognized movie stars. The bedroom footage identifying Max's experiences as a dream is not included in the French version of *Max toréador*, which concludes with a very different narrative perspective involving the triumphant matador being carried away by a crowd. David Robinson found the final subtitle in the alternative German version of this motion picture of particular interest. After falling out of bed Max gets to his feet and says, "That is the best dream of my life . . . And a great idea for a film.' He then retires again and pulls the sheets over his head as the film comes to an end" (Robinson 2008: 194). By identifying the waking figure as the director rather than the film character, this caption further blurs the distinctions and raises questions concerning how one is to separate Max Linder from his screen persona.

It is interesting to contrast Linder's work with that of the English filmmaker Fred "Pimple" Evans, a music hall performer and fantasist comedian who began making motion pictures in 1910. The character of "Pimple" was introduced in Evans' seventeenth film in 1912, and would be featured in a series of nearly 190 films made through 1918. Pimple, like Little Tich's character, wore the ill-fitting clothing of the working-class "grotesque" as opposed to the middle and upper class attire of Linder, French comedian Andre' Deed's "Boireau", and Ferdinando Guillaume's "Tontolini" in Italy. The humor of the Pimple pictures, in keeping with the rowdy nature of the English music hall, is also rather brash when compared with the whimsical French and Italian comedies. Reflective of a British film industry that was putting too little money in its films, the modest production values of these comedies are particularly glaring when compared to French and Italian pictures. A notable example of his many burlesques, *Pimple's The Whip* (1917) is a parody of the popular 1909 horse racing play *The Whip*, which also was made into an American feature in the year of the Evans production. The dramatic feature focused upon real horses, an actual racetrack, and an impressive train wreck while the Pimple film accentuated lack of same.

Particularly tacky pantomime horses represent the mounts while the train is portrayed by cardboard cutouts repeatedly pulled back and forth across the stage at odd times because the stagehands miss their cues (Hammond 2000: 64–5). To compensate for the lack of props and workable sets the actors throw themselves into the situations with an exuberance that is as absurd as the pantomime horses are unconvincing. It is not known if the "mounts" from *Pimple's The Whip* inspired King Arthur's prancing horseless knights with clacking coconut shells in *Monty*

Python and the Holy Grail (1975), but the later motion picture suggests that there is a long tradition for this type of humor in British film comedy (McKernan 2000: 7).

Ethnic Comedy and the American Character (1900–1916)

The comedy of Max Linder and Pimple was based, in part, on contrasting their incongruous characters with the French bourgeoisie and English working class. In comparison, according to Constance Rourke, a unique aspect of the character and culture of the United States is that “as a people, the Americans are said to have no childhood, and the circumstance has been shown to contain pathos as well as loss.” Without a sense of cultural evolution or memory other than the “old country,” which many Americans purposely left behind, humor became “a fashioning instrument in America . . . Its objective – the unconscious objective of a disunited people-has seemed to be that of creating fresh bonds, a new unity, the semblance of a society and the rounded competition of an American type” (Rourke 1931: ix, 8, 9). Given the lack of a recognizable overall culture for this nation of immigrants, it is not surprising that American humor of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries often focused upon ethnic and racial stereotypes as marks of the ridiculous – negative American associations with the old country, if you will.

As vaudeville historian Douglas Gilbert verified, “Irish acts predominated [in the 1880s], blackface ran a close second, and Dutch, or German dialect made an important third.” The propensity for the dominant “American stock” “to rib the Irish, the German or the Negro was to thrust at a minority[,] which generally took the jibes good-naturedly” (Gilbert 1941: 61–2). Frequently associated with “pathos and loss,” and often painful to see today, it was and continues to be debatable just how harmless or harmful this comedy was. Humor can lessen social tensions as well as inflame them and, equally paradoxically, the comedy of this time could work towards social advancement while perpetuating injury. Even as middle-class media habitually treated aliens and racial groups with derision, some ethnic performers used the same stereotypes to challenge misconception and draw attention to social injustice. By laughing at themselves a few ethnic comedians of the early twentieth century American “melting pot” invited outsiders to come to know and appreciate members of their group as people. Tensions would continue, but shared laughter might foster the recognition of a common humanity that encouraged appreciation and tolerance. A case in point is the great black American comedian Bert Williams (1874–1922).

An urbane, articulate, intelligent, and sensitive man, Bert Williams spoke perfect English, but the comic conventions of the day compelled him to perform in blackface and speak in dialect when playing a melancholy loser who could evoke an audience’s sympathy while generating laughter. His salary as a Ziegfeld

headliner equaled that of the President of the United States, but Bert Williams had to take a freight elevator while on tour when allowed to stay in the same hotel with the rest of his troupe. “In truth, I have never been able to discover that there was anything disgraceful in being a colored man,” Williams was to reflect. “But I have often found it inconvenient – in America” (quoted in Forbes 2008: vi).

Bert Williams made three motion pictures: *Dark Town Jubilee* (1914), believed lost, *A Natural Born Gambler*, *Fish*, both produced in 1916. While his two surviving films are considered disappointing when compared with his brilliant stage performances and popular audio recordings, Williams’ famous pantomime of a poker game in *Natural Born Gambler* is evidence of his talent. In jail for participating in an illegal poker game, the addicted card player mimes that he is dealing himself a wonderful hand. Far from a poker face, Williams’ countenance exhibits delight at his clearly desirable cards. Williams registers shock, dismay, and then determination when an invisible opponent appears confident about his own hand. In the end our doleful player pushes his chips towards the victor. This woebegone eternal loser cannot win even in his dreams. W.C. Fields remembered Bert Williams as “The funniest man I ever saw and the saddest man I ever knew. I often wonder whether other people sensed what I did in him – that deep undercurrent of pathos” (quoted in Forbes 2008: 298).

Many other American comedians got their start performing ethnic and racial stereotypes – Buster Keaton (Irish), Eddie Cantor (blackface), Groucho Marx (German), Chico Marx (Italian), and Harpo Marx (Irish) being examples. Audience and performer needed a shared context initially to relate to one another, but ultimately the great humorists achieved fame by tapping into some universal aspect of the human condition that transcended comic stereotypes. While Mack Sennett’s Keystone Film Studio would become famous for its unique comic personalities, it is not surprising that *Cohen Collects a Debt* (1912), *Riley and Schultz* (1912), and *Pedro’s Dilemma* (1912) were some of the earliest Keystone titles (1912).

Mack Sennett’s *Commedia dell’Arte* (1912–1917)

Mack Sennett left Biograph to make film comedies for his newly formed Keystone Motion Picture Company in the latter part of 1912, the same year that Max Linder was mobbed by adoring fans when visiting Spain. According to Lewis Jacobs, Sennett’s Keystone comedies were known for “chases which defied the laws of gravity” in “a world of vulgarity and violence, with movement, speed, nonsense and improvisation as the chief elements of his style.” This fantasist humor, “known as ‘slapstick,’ . . . springs essentially from the film medium” (Jacobs 1939: 212, 213). An art form whose importance to the advancement of screen humor should not be minimized, Mack Sennett’s slapstick has become so associated with silent film comedy that there is a perception that this director provided

the foundation for its origins – an idea very much disputed by the cinematic precedents identified in this chapter and Sennett himself.

Since Sennett's comedy was not based upon long recognized American cultural practice, even though it burlesqued current social values and featured some ethnic stereotypes, another gauge is needed to assess the characters of the Keystone comedies of 1912–1917. Italy's sixteenth-century *Commedia dell'Arte* is a potential model. Literally translated as “comedy of professional actors,” *Commedia dell'Arte* was the product of improvisation and choreography rather than the written work of playwrights, and focused upon standard plots and comic situations involving thwarted lovers, petulant masters, and rascally servants (see DiCarmine in this volume). By 1530 nomadic Italian players had introduced *Commedia dell'Arte* to France, where its characters were given different names and greater comic range.

The stock comic characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte* were identified by special masks, costumes, stylized movements, and behavior that characterized their marks of the ridiculous. The thwarted lovers did not conceal their faces and dressed in the contemporary apparel of their upper class society. Sometimes the female lover was assisted by her loyal servant Columbina, who was not faithful in love. Carefree and capable of holding her own in rough-and-tumble situations, Columbina was often defined by a sexual craving as bawdy as that of her male counterpart, Arlecchino (Ducharte 1929: 278). The robust slapstick of the *Commedia dell'Arte* centered largely upon Arlecchino's lechery, doltish behavior, crude pranks, bumbling attempts at thievery, and agile grace.

A coarse and cloddish servant and thief, Arlecchino spent much of his time lusting after the female characters. Arlecchino wore a mask of animal fur in keeping with an earthy personality, and his costume was made up of patches. In contrast to his stupidity, shabby appearance, and lecherous behavior, Arlecchino was capable of performing astounding feats as an acrobat and tumbler. His costume and personality changed dramatically over the years, particularly in France. By the seventeenth century the patches on Arlecchino's clothing had merged into a symmetrical pattern and his mask was a black strip. Now called “Harlequin” and “Columbine,” the former servants had become the lovers. Their lusty animal desires having been replaced with romantic yearning, Harlequin and Columbine were now associated with magic, fantasy, and romance rather than low comedy. At this time another *Commedia dell'Arte* Italian servant dating back to the 1500s was undergoing a transformation in both character and name. By the early nineteenth century the simple, awkward, and honest “Pedrolino” became famous in France as the wistfully tragicomic figure called “Pierrot.”

Mabel's Dramatic Career (1913) is one of many Keystone films that can be compared with the *Commedia dell'Arte*. In this picture, a rural bumpkin (Mack Sennett) has asked the serving girl (Mabel Normand) to marry him. In keeping with Arlecchino's sexual dalliances, mere minutes after giving Mabel a ring Mack is attracted to a city girl visiting their home. Encouraged by his mother, Mack boorishly breaks off their engagement. Mabel reacts violently to his rude rejection

and loses her job. Mack immediately recognizes his mistake when the city girl rejects him, but Mabel is gone and he has no idea where to find her. Unbeknownst to Mack, Mabel has found employment at the Keystone film studio.

Years later Mack stumbles into a theater and discovers that Mabel has become a movie star. After interacting with the motion picture characters on the screen in a manner reminiscent of the rube in *The Countryman and the Cinematographe*, Mack seeks out the villain (Ford Sterling) who had been harassing Mabel in the film. Mack somehow traces Sterling to the actor's home and learns, while looking through a downstairs window, that this "villain" is the father of three little children and he has married Mabel. Doused with water from an upstairs window, the unhappy lover departs as the picture ends.

Like the audiences of the *commedia dell' arte* and the Max Linder comedies, viewers came to the Keystone pictures with preconceptions about the major players. Instead of wearing masks, the Keystone men, as Lewis Jacobs noted, "were all distinguished by some preposterous make-up and abnormal individual characteristics" (Jacobs 1939: 212, 213). The young women usually wore contemporary dress and cosmetics that enhanced their attractiveness. The circumstances and setting might vary from picture to picture, but familiarity with the performers influenced audience expectation. As was true of the early Harlequin and Columbina, it was no surprise seeing Mack and Mabel play a rowdy couple whose relationship was affected by Mack's boorish behavior and sexual infidelity.

The concept of Mabel's unappreciated servant blossoming into a movie star anticipates a "Cinderella" theme that Lewis Jacobs identified in American feature films made after 1916 (Jacobs 1939: 277). The premise of an aspiring female actor becoming a star is the focus of Beatrice Lillie's *Exit Smiling* (1926), Colleen Moore's *Ella Cinders* (1926), Marion Davies' *Show People* (1928), and many other pictures. A particularly intriguing reversal of the "Cinderella transformation" can be seen in Alice Howell's delightful film short *Cinderella Cinders* (1920), produced by Reelcraft Pictures Corporation. Unlike some of her counterparts this pert celluloid daughter of Columbina is not oppressed. Cinderella is comfortable with herself so she does not seek an opportunity to blossom.

Reflecting someone who never would allow a "bad hair day" to get her down, Cinderella Cinders' mark of the ridiculous is an incredibly unkempt coiffure that looks like the victim of severe electrical shock. Cinderella is fired from her job at a greasy spoon after inadvertently flipping pancakes in her clients' faces, but finds new employment almost immediately because the wealthy Doughbill family desperately needs a cook for a party that very evening. Miss Cinders' "Cinderella moment" occurs after the Doughbills ask her to impersonate their special guest, the Countess De Bunco, who is unable to attend. When the camera unveils our new "countess" the emblematic Cinderella transformation does not transpire. Cinderella is wearing a different dress but her makeup and trademark hair have not changed. This is not someone who has undergone a metamorphosis but the Cinderella Cinders of old. By finding satisfaction with current circumstance

instead of seeking more, Cinderella is much happier than Mack at the end of their respective pictures.

Cinderella Cinders gave no indication of changing, but comic working-class portrayals were disappearing in Hollywood films by the late teens and twenties. After World War I a growing middle-class movie audience resulted in an increased production of sophisticated comedy, which influenced Mack Sennett to his detriment. Far from a new development in 1917, American middle-class film comedy had been evolving during the same period as Sennett's slapstick.

American Comedy Gets Some Manners: Flora Finch, John Bunny, Mr. & Mrs. Sidney Drew (1908–1917)

Max Linder became a model for other filmmakers around the world, including D.W. Griffith in America. Besides being the inspiration for Mack Sennett's "French" character in *Those Awful Hats* and *The Curtain Pole*, Linder influenced the "Jones family" comedy series which Griffith directed at Biograph in 1908 and 1909 (Bitzer 1971: 71). According to Tom Gunning:

The comic structure of the Jones films revolves around the proper domesticity of a bourgeois household, with Mr. Jones' infractions of propriety providing the narrative disequilibrium. The middle-class setting differentiated the series from Griffith's broad farces such as *Monday Morning at Coney Island Police Court* (August 7), *Balked at the Altar*, or *The Deceived Slumming Party* (May 27, July 14), which drew on earlier film chases and farces. It also signaled Biograph's wooing of middle-class family audiences with a form of comedy unlikely to offend their sensibilities with slapstick rowdiness. (Gunning 1991: 141)

An English-born actress named Flora Finch performed in the Jones family series. Her first film was a 1908 Biograph drama, directed by Griffith, entitled *The Helping Hand*. The next Finch picture, *Mrs. Jones Entertains*, was the second of the Jones comedies and is noteworthy for having Mack Sennett and Mary Pickford in its cast. *Those Awful Hats*, the actress's fourth film, featured Sennett's first Max Linder impersonation. After making 15 motion pictures Flora Finch left Biograph in 1910 to work at Vitagraph, where she was eventually teamed with one of the first internationally famous American film comedians, John Bunny.

In keeping with Aristotle's discussion of the comic mask "that excites laughter" by being "something ugly and distorted without causing pain," John Bunny's round and animated face was particularly capable of conveying his thoughts and feelings when reacting to the moment. Very much a physical comedian, Bunny's humor was based more on comedy of manners than slapstick. In the handful of surviving pictures from the 174 he made, Bunny sometimes plays a likable and sympathetic character despite his flaws. The nature of Bunny's performance also

affected how his films were presented. Medium or tight long shots framed Bunny's body language to best advantage, and were held long enough for the comedian to convey his facial reactions to a given situation adequately. This resulted in an intimate narrative with a moderate tempo very different from the rapid pacing of a chase filmed in more distancing long shots.

By 1911 Bunny's stout figure and round expressive face were comically contrasted with the thin and sometimes dour countenance of the physically plain Flora Finch, who was frequently cast as his wife. *A Cure for Pokeritis* (1912) begins with an exhausted and disheveled George Brown (Bunny) departing a loser from a poker game. Returning to his middle-class home Brown is confronted by his wife (Finch), and vows never to play poker again. But Brown talks in his sleep and his wife's suspicions are aroused. Mrs. Brown asks her cousin Freddie to follow Brown to his Wednesday night "meeting," and it is confirmed that her husband is still playing poker. Freddie persuades members of his Bible study group to don police uniforms and stage a raid. The wives of the miscreants are informed and once the game has been disrupted the pseudo-police withdraw, leaving the poker players to confront their spouses. Relieved that he is not going to be arrested, the film ends with Brown and his wife in a loving embrace.

Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew were two other American performers who brought comedy of manners to silent film. A member of the distinguished Drew-Barrymore theatrical family, Sidney Drew, began film acting at Vitagraph on a regular basis in 1913. Drew, like Max Linder, played a charming and witty man whose properly fitting clothing and polished demeanor suggest a respected member of middle- or upper-class society. Sidney Drew's mark of the ridiculous reflected a sudden loss of control due to falling in love, a misunderstanding, or some absurd situation. Instead of playing a shrew, Mrs. Drew portrayed a charming young woman who had won Sidney's heart. Sometimes they are unmarried and Drew struggles, often ridiculously, to win her acceptance. At other times they are a loving couple whose relationship has been disrupted by Drew's ineffectual attempts to avoid something.

An enjoyable example of their work is *Fox-Trot Finesse*, released on October 1, 1915. Ferdie Crosby (Drew) is ecstatic when his mother-in-law goes home after a long visit, but life continues to be complicated because his young wife (Mrs. Drew) wants him to dance the foxtrot constantly. The exhausted Ferdie reads about a famous performer who must give up dancing for several months due to an injury and he feigns the same. After observing her husband walking perfectly without his crutch, Mrs. Crosby shows Ferdie a letter she has written asking her mother to come visit until he is better. Ferdie sees an apparition of his mother-in-law and turns on the phonograph. The picture ends with Ferdie tearing up the letter while fox-trotting.

Goodness Gracious (released on February 7, 1914) is not typical of the later comedies that starred Sidney Drew with his second wife, even though it highlights this actor's usual refusal to take himself seriously and trademark charm. Featuring

the 51-year-old Drew as a “youth” in love with Carol Kimball Young, *Goodness Gracious* is a parody of overacting and absurd situations in film and stage melodrama that anticipates the clichés of every lampoon of the silent film made since 1914. The plots for the previous described Bunny and Drew comedies do not bring to mind the silent movie clichés of *Goodness Gracious*, nor does it take much imagination to envision how these stories might be adapted for film and television today. The quality motion pictures made between 1908 and 1917 are testaments to their filmmakers’ talents given that studios and audiences were expecting them to produce literally hundreds of physically and often emotionally demanding 10- and 20-minute movies in a very short time. One must also wonder if those films that are not so good might be manifestations of the pressure of production rather than lack of talent. Besides trying to cope with production deadlines, comedians were typecast while being expected to keep their comedy fresh and funny. Once the novelty wore off the silent comedians had to find new approaches to keep the incongruity in their comedies incongruous if they were to continue working.²

John Bunny and Sidney Drew died in 1915 and 1919 respectively, and the film careers of most of their European contemporaries had peaked or ended by the close of 1918 – a reflection of the economic devastation resulting from World War I. Hollywood profited from this loss of competition and gained an international advantage that it kept for the remainder of the twentieth century. Silent comedy would continue to be made in other countries, but the most notable films and filmmakers tended to be associated with America after 1918. Though Mack Sennett’s Keystone had gone out of existence the year before, his studio had produced a quintessential silent comedy icon comparable to Harlequin and Pierrot who was continuing to evolve.

The “Mark of the Ridiculous” of Charlie Chaplin’s “Pierrot” (1914–1918)

The son of English music-hall entertainers, Charles Chaplin’s earliest years were spent in middle-class comfort. Circumstances took a dramatic turn after Charlie was six, when Charles Chaplin Sr. refused to support his family and ill health prevented Mrs. Chaplin from earning a living. A show business career would reverse financial misfortune but Charles Spencer Chaplin, who became a master at producing comedy based upon painful autobiographical experience, was forever affected by his Dickensian childhood. Nine years after his father died from alcoholism, Charlie Chaplin gained success playing the comic drunk in the aforementioned Fred Karno sketch, *Mumming Birds*. Acutely self-conscious of the ragged and ill-fitting clothes he sometimes wore as a child, Chaplin later tapped into his embarrassment when garbing his famous “tramp.” By this time Chaplin was an immigrant in the United States. Whether the instigator of

antisocial behavior or society's victim, Chaplin's screen character was also an "outsider" in virtually every film in which he appeared. Prior to the appearance of his "Little Fellow," Chaplin was conflicted by Mack Sennett's approach to filmmaking.

Although he had no film experience, Charles Chaplin left vaudeville in 1913 to work for Sennett as a featured comic. Upon arriving at the studio Chaplin remembered Sennett telling him, "We have no scenario. We get an idea, and then follow the natural sequence of events until it leads up to a chase, which is the essence of our comedy." Chaplin was not delighted. "I hated chase. It dissipates one's personality; little as I knew about movies, I knew that nothing transcended personality" (Chaplin 1964: 146). It is not surprising that Chaplin's first Keystone, a chase picture entitled *Making a Living*, was a disappointment. As would be true at other times in his life and career, Charles Chaplin used his art to confront a personal problem. Chaplin's second picture, *Kid Auto Races at Venice*, directly addressed the challenge of making Keystone movies.

Steve Massa has observed, "A key element of the Sennett legend is that he always took advantage of any event that was happening near the studio – an auto race, an oil-well fire, or even the draining of a lake—sending his clowns with a cameraman to cavort in the proceedings" (Massa 2008: 198–9). On January 10, 1914, Sennett decided to use a "soap box derby" as a backdrop for an improvised comedy. As Fred Karno used his music hall sketch *Mumming Birds* to parody the music hall, *Kid Auto Races* satirized the filmmaking process. This comedy features Chaplin, in his famous costume for the first time, mugging in front of a "documentary filmmaker's" camera that prevents him from "recording" the event. Chaplin claimed to have been intimidated by the filmmaking process when producing his first film, but his tramp displays no such concern. The Chaplin character of *Making a Living* conformed to external rhythms, but the brazen tramp dominated the frame while dictating the pace and narrative progression in *Kid Auto Races at Venice* and every motion picture he appeared in thereafter.

Arguably a variation of the comic "grotesque" that Little Tich and Chaplin had performed in the English music hall, the tramp was particularly cinematic given his mark of the ridiculous – an erratic way of walking. Numerous filmmakers including Sennett have used the motion picture medium's ability to alter reality for comic effect. What makes Chaplin's tramp a quintessential silent comedy character is that his jerky gait is a self-reflective parody of the motion of early "movies." The tramp's awkward movement harkens back to the motion picture inventors' challenge of eliminating the flicker that prevented the first films from looking "real." Where the incorrect registration or physical deterioration of other people's motion pictures can make their work look unintentionally ludicrous, such issues are less jarring with Chaplin comedies because they bring to mind the comic essence of the tramp's locomotion.

Chaplin's "Little Fellow" is now associated with pathos and tragicomedy but, as was the case of Harlequin, the personality that initially became popular was

a brash, earthy, crude, lecherous, and unkempt figure capable of astounding physical grace. Chaplin said of his Keystone character:

His brain was seldom active then-only his instincts . . . But with each succeeding comedy the tramp was growing more complex. Sentiment was beginning to percolate through the character. This became a problem because he was bound by the limits of slapstick . . . The solution came when I thought of the tramp as a sort of Pierrot. With this conception I was freer to express and embellish the comedy with touches of sentiment. But logically it was difficult to get a beautiful girl interested in a tramp. This has always been a problem in my films . . . The girl in *City Lights* is blind. In this relationship he is romantic and wonderful to her until her sight is restored . . . I did not have to read books to know that the theme of life is conflict and pain. Instinctively, all my clowning was based on this. (Chaplin 1964: 224, 226)

Mack Sennett's post-Keystone comedies lost their vitality, in part, because a growing middle-class audience encouraged a change in approach and content that this filmmaker's art could not effectively address. Chaplin's silent comedy remained vital because he played off the dialectical and often painful encounters the tramp had with a society of which he was not a part. The "Little Fellow" was able to function as long as he performed in a world without speech. Chaplin held out longer than any other silent filmmaker, but he stopped making nontalking pictures with the tramp after releasing *Modern Times* in 1936.

The Mark of the Ridiculous and American Middle Class Silent Comedy of Manners (1915–1929)

Charles Chaplin was able to combine a music hall grotesque with fantasist film slapstick to produce an iconic silent screen character that became recognized as a symbol of irrepressible humanity. By sharing insights into the human condition, the tramp proved that a ridiculed figure could become recognized as sublime. Quoting Henri Bergson, Rourke noted that "The comic comes into being just when society and the individual freed from the worry of self-preservation, begin to regard themselves as works of art" (Rourke 1931: 12–13). Still a nation of immigrants in the 1910s, and made up of many types of people, America's middle class identified itself as "the" social standard and Hollywood comic artists responded in kind.

A particularly notable middle-class comic model was introduced to film in 1915, when Douglas Fairbanks appeared in a movie entitled *The Lamb* as the likable but ineffectual all-American boy he performed in the Broadway play *The New Henrietta*. In this play and subsequent films, the Fairbanks character, in a male equivalent of the "Cinderella moment", transcends his mark of the ridiculous by performing a heroic task that results in his being taken seriously

as a man. By the age of thirty-eight Fairbanks chose to star in such adolescent tales as *The Three Musketeers* (1921), *Robin Hood* (1922) and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924) rather than continue playing an arrested adolescent. Others would perform this character. When MGM decided to make an actual film version of *The New Henrietta* in 1920, Fairbanks suggested that Buster Keaton, who played a comic grotesque in Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle’s slapstick comedies, be cast in the Fairbanks role. Harold Lloyd profited from Fairbanks’ example in 1917, when he stopped playing grotesques to concentrate upon a white-collar character whose trademark glasses falsely implied weakness. Often portraying a youth bent at succeeding in business, Lloyd’s comic character also triumphed heroically when the occasion demanded.

With the shift away from the comic grotesque and slapstick for slapstick’s sake, the mark of the ridiculous of American comedy in the teens and twenties became associated more with a “mistake” relating to attitude and personality than physical “deformity.” Instead of concentrating upon a fantasist capacity to distort the real world, these silent comedies explored how one might cope with it. For example, while treating real cowboys and Indians as if they were living in an American frontier comparable to his obsessive fantasy, Douglas Fairbanks’ eastern “buckaroo” Jeff Hillington in *Wild and Woolly* (1917) experiences an embarrassing revelation when he learns they are not. Chaplin’s tramp elicits laughter and heartbreak in his encounters with society as he teaches his adopted son to become streetwise in *The Kid* (1921). The perils of advertising are appreciated by Harold Lloyd’s character in *Safety Last* (1923), when he is forced to change places with a “human fly” that he hired to climb a skyscraper for a department store promotion. Pragmatism and a pronounced work ethic enable a misunderstood southern engineer to overcome seemingly unbeatable obstacles in Buster Keaton’s Civil War comedy *The General* (1927), while single-handedly retrieving his beloved locomotive from the north after it has been stolen by Yankees.

Comedy of manners was on the increase in the 1920s but fantasist humor continued to be produced. Their comedy often did not lend itself to trends or imitation but the cartoon-like slapstick of Larry Semon and the surreal clowning of Snub Pollard produced notable screen moments. Where the mark of the ridiculous of Fairbanks, Lloyd, and Keaton can be linked to arrested adolescence, Harry Langdon’s character was an infant inhabiting a man’s body. Some comic heroes shared insight through clever solutions to complex and even life-threatening problems; Langdon’s clown was overwhelmingly bewildered by objects and situations that most children would ignore much less take on as crippling enigmas. The sublime comic personalities of Laurel and Hardy, Raymond Griffith, and Charlie Chase must also be acknowledged with the recognition that mere mention does not do them justice.

Proceeding with Henri Bergson’s observation that it is one thing for a “society and the individual to begin to regard themselves as works of art,” it is another

thing for those outside this society to feel the same. Judging by Lev Kuleshov's 1924 comedy, *Neobychainye priklyucheniya mistera Vesta v strane bolshevikov* (*The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*) at least two American comic figures were recognized as works of art in Russia. In this film Mr. West, who resembles Harold Lloyd's glasses character, and his sidekick Jeddy, who acts like Jeff Hillington's "buckaroo" in *Wild and Woolly*, visit Russia. Their pre-existing attitudes about communism, and cowboy Jeddy's propensity for over-reaction, create some interesting intercultural comic conflicts. The Russians are patient with these Americans, and Kuleshov claims that there is mutual understanding when the picture ends.

The principal innovative trend in silent comedy during the latter part of the 1920s, was the type of sophisticated humor found in Ernst Lubitsch's *The Marriage Circle* (1924) and *Lady Windemere's Fan* (1925). René Clair's *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* (*An Italian Straw Hat*) and *Les Deux timides* (*Two Timid Souls*), both made in France in 1928, underscore that this trend in comedy of manners was international. The clever subtitles and pronounced interpersonal engagement of the witty characters in Lewis Milestone's American feature *Garden of Eden* (1928) "screamed" for the addition of sound, and it is not surprising that this genre continued with the coming of the talkies. But even as this form of comedy manners benefited by finding a voice other types of silent comedy, and numerous popular comedians, would be "silenced" by sound.

Conclusion: The Loss of Silents

In 1926, 36 years after Edison suggested the possibility of combining his phonograph with a sequential motion image device, Warner Brothers released the feature film *Don Juan* with a synchronized musical score. Between 1927 and 1932 Hollywood and other national cinemas made the transition to sound, with most American silent filmmakers having tested their luck with the new medium by 1929. Recording both image and sound shifted the focus from *motion* pictures to *talkies*. Nonverbal communication in the cinema was never totally lost but the new technology fundamentally changed both the evolution and content of cinematic expression. The early talkies centered upon a variety of verbal "foreign" languages, so silent film comedy had been more universally accessible. Silent film's dreamlike aura was replaced by a more realistic depiction of a subject seen with indigenous sound. Incongruous fantasist effects were a thing of the past and some of the comic magic was gone. But before its passing silent comedy had become less associated with slapstick for slapstick's sake, and was increasingly identified with the exploration of social attitudes and the nature of humanity as found in the work of artists like Chaplin and Keaton. This was not a bad foundation for the future of film comedy.

Notes

1. Donald Crafton (1990), in his biography of animation pioneer Emile Cohl, identifies three different comic strips with scenarios similar to *L'Arroseur arrosé* – evidence that this film not only anticipated future film slapstick but was influenced by humor from other media of the period. Crafton cites Georges Sadoul as claiming that *L'Arroseur arrosé* was similar to a “picture story by Herman Vogel in an 1887 Album Quantin,” and reproduces both A. Sorel’s “Fait Divers,” *La Caricature*, March 12, 1887, and “Un Arroseur public,” in the *Le Petit Français Illustré*, August 3, 1889, by Christophe (Georges Colomb), as illustrations to confirm the duplication of this gag. It is Crafton’s belief that the Christophe cartoon “was certainly Lumière’s direct source.”
2. The author wishes to thank film historian Robert Arkus for bringing *Goodness Gracious* to his attention.

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