

“The Cuckoo School”

Humor and Metropolitan Culture in 1920s America

April Fool’s Day, 1923: The Palace Theatre at 47th and Broadway is hosting National Vaudeville Artists’ Week, a fundraiser for the Keith-Albee Organization performers’ union. On the bill are such luminaries as singer Sophie Tucker, Ben Bernie and His Orchestra, musical comedy two-act Herb Williams and Hilda Wolfus, contortionists the Luster Brothers, “nut” comedians Sam Dody and Sam Lewis, and others.¹ It is Dody and Lewis, we will imagine, who will make a particular impression on one member of the audience that night.

No description of Lewis and Dody’s performance that night has been located. But we know from extant reports and phonograph recordings that their act from this period typically consisted of a single song—“Hello, Hello, Hello!”—extrapolated to include a variable number of stanzas, each one ending with the triple salutation and interrupted with absurdist asides. They come onto the stage, lifelessly grunt a gibberish refrain, introduce themselves with deadpan affect—“I’m Mike,” says one, “I’m Ike,” the other—and launch into a verse, delivered less as a song than as a matter of fact.

Just the other night
 Right near from here,
 We saw a funny sight:
 A couple they were dispossessed;
 The wife stood there in tears.
 That’s the first time they’d been out together in twenty years.
 Hello, Hello, Hello!
 Hello, Hello, Hello!
 You can’t milk a herring.
 Hello, Hello, Hello!

Sticking to their toneless voices, they reintroduce themselves (“I’m Mike,” “I’m Ike”) and commence another verse:

We filed our income tax.
 And there is where
 They pull such funny cracks.
 They asked us “What’s a post office?”
 We answered there and then,
 “That’s the place that Scotchmen go to fill up fountain pens.”
 Hello, Hello, Hello!
 Hello, Hello, Hello!
 Fish don’t perspire.
 Hello, Hello, Hello!

Without any apparent interest in their own performance, the two continue this way for the rest of the act, adding stanza upon stanza in an apparent effort to show, as one reviewer put it, that “the limit in the number of extra verses to a song has not yet been reached,” before abruptly ending, as flatly as when they started.² “[One more] final statement of complete nonsense,” one writer put it, “wholly incongruous, uncalled for, beside the point where there is no point”; one more affectless “Hello, Hello, Hello!” and they retire.³ The audience is beside itself with laughter.

Let us now cast as our impressed theatergoer none other than Gilbert Seldes, the iconoclastic former editor of the New York–based cultural journal *The Dial*, who was then in the process of writing his pioneering *The 7 Lively Arts* (1924). We do not know with certainty whether he attended that night, but we do know that (1) he saw Lewis and Dody perform their “Hello, Hello, Hello!” routine at some point prior to the publication of *The 7 Lively Arts* exactly a year later, (2) the National Vaudeville Artists’ show was the duo’s last New York appearance until August of the following year, again at the Palace, and (3) Seldes was an inveterate devotee of vaudeville, so it is no stretch to place him there—if not exactly on the April 1 opening night, then likely at some point that week.⁴ We also know that the essays he was preparing for *The 7 Lively Arts* include some of the most important writing on popular comedy, stage and screen, from this period. Seldes’s effort in that landmark book was to bring what he called the “lively arts”—including slapstick film, comic strips, and vaudeville—into the same field of criticism as the canonized arts. Not only was there no intrinsic “opposition between the great and the lively arts,” he contended there, but also the latter were “more interesting to the adult cultivated intelligence than most of the things which [today] pass for art”—a thesis that Seldes would expound upon in now well-known chapters on vaudeville performers Fanny Brice and Al Jolson, on the slapstick films of Charlie Chaplin and the Keystone Film

Company, on George Herriman's Krazy Kat ("Easily the most . . . satisfactory work of art produced in America"), among other topics.⁵ The popular arts, Seldes believed, demanded recognition as genuinely vernacular forms whose achievements had been obscured by the "bogus" aesthetic values of the "genteel tradition."⁶

But the Seldes who perhaps attended the Palace that April night did so not merely as an influential proselytizer, but also in search of new directions. In later years, he would characterize the 1920s as the "last flowering of our popular arts," but the worm was already in the bud in the essays he was then preparing.⁷ The 7 *Lively Arts* piece on Keystone is a case in point: nothing in cinema's early development, Seldes averred, had been more suited to the medium's expressive means than Keystone-style slapstick, whose "freedom of fancy . . . [and] roaring, destructive, careless energy" could "appear nowhere if not on the screen."⁸ Yet the form had of late been overtaken by the "poison of culture."⁹ The selfsame genteel tradition that had obscured recognition of the popular arts had installed itself in the creative ambitions of their practitioners. "Its directors have heard abuse and sly remarks about custard pies so long that they have begun to believe in them, and the madness which is a monstrous sanity in the movie comedy is likely to die out."¹⁰ Nor was this a stand-alone example. Throughout the book, Seldes seems caught in the dilemma of expressing enthusiasm for cultural objects that repeatedly disappoint his image of them. As though trying to plug a leaky dam, he celebrates the Follies-style revue but chastises those of its directors who introduce "element[s] of artistic bunk"; he qualifies his encomium of Jolson by dismissing the "second-rate sentiment" of his Mammy songs; he favors vaudeville for its "damned effrontery" of genteel tradition while in almost the same breath lamenting its "corrupt desire to be refined," and so on.¹¹ The Gilbert Seldes who encountered Lewis and Dody circa April Fool's Day, 1923, was a critic primed to place faith in a comedic duo whose very uniqueness promised to break this cycle of compromise.

And so it was that the team came to occupy a key position in an essay that Seldes next began to prepare, not for 7 *Lively Arts*, but for *Vanity Fair*, in which he identified a new current in American comedy. The essay's title and the current it describes were one and the same: "The Cuckoo School of Humour in America," published in May of 1924, one month after his book's release (fig. 1).¹² Describing a "certain madness" in contemporary comicality, Seldes there made Lewis and Dody the central and longest example in a litany of modern absurdism extending through the diverse work of vaudevillians Joe Cook and Ed Wynn, Algonquin litterateurs Robert Benchley and Donald Ogden Stewart, songwriting team Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, and sports journalists and humorists Arthur "Bugs" Baer and Ring Lardner, and exemplified in the "equivocal nonsense" of song titles like "Yes, We Have No Bananas" and "When It's Night-Time in Italy, It's Wednesday

The Cuckoo School of Humour in America

A Not-Quite-Profound Analysis of the Increasingly Dada Strain in the Cleverness of Our Fun-Makers

By VIVIAN SHAW

AT the present moment, no musical show in New York is complete unless it possesses the following joke:

A: Didn't I meet you in Buffalo?
B: I never was in Buffalo in my life.
A: Neither was I. Must have been two other fellows.

Of course, a great deal depends on the manner of saying the last few words. They can be said apologetically, or casually, or as if illuminating a puzzling question. In most cases, the result is funny. Of the four thousand men and women now employing the joke in order to earn a living, probably not more than two thousand are aware of its psychological basis, or know that it has been used in text-books of philosophy to illustrate some particularly provoking dilemma. It is really a sort of extended pun, which, as Santayana says, suspends the fancy between two incompatible but irresistible meanings.

"The meaning doesn't matter if it's only idle chatter," says Buntorne, in the Gilbert and Sullivan opera; and that idea seems to be gaining ground with the American arts. A certain madness—or, if you prefer, irresponsibility—is the mark of one mode of humour at the moment; and that it isn't new is obvious, because it makes you think at once of *Alice of Wonderland*. In that book, there is a remorse-



ARTHUR "BUGS" BAER

The creator of "The Family Album" in the Hearst Sunday newspapers is an American humorist whose style recalls nothing so much as the humour of Falstaff's companions. His companions are wildly exaggerated; his metaphor is brilliant and effective. He always leaves out the expected, and is so fantastic, so irresponsible, and so funny as to be a veritable master of "cuckoo humour"

into a funny stanza. Not very funny at that. And, at the end, they say their hellos again and utter a final statement of complete nonsense, wholly incongruous, uncalled for, beside the point where there is no point. This final point is as follows: "Worms have no expression, or fishes don't perspire; Hello Hello Hello."

The two singers are extremely good in handling this cuckoo material; they stick to an almost toneless voice; one says, "I'm Mike"; the other, "I'm Ike", without the faintest show of interest in the proceedings. It's all rather like reading a rhymed statement of fact. And it is incredibly funny. Here is a specimen stanza of a song, as intoned by them:

And just the other night
Right near from here,
We saw a funny sight:
A couple they were dispossessed;
The wife stood there in tears—
That's the first time they'd been out
Together in twenty years.
Hello, Hello, Hello!
Hello, Hello, Hello!
Hello, Hello, Hello!
Hello, Hello, Hello!

This is so good a stunt in vaudeville that it has been promptly worked into a revue. In *Kid Books*, Mr. Ziegfeld's latest musical revue, the material is elaborated and a quartet sings

FIGURE 1. Vivian Shaw, "The Cuckoo School of Humour in America," *Vanity Fair*, May 1924.

Over Here," as well as in what he identified as a vogue for "shaggy" jokes. It is with such a joke that the essay begins:

At the present moment, no musical show in New York is complete unless it possesses the following joke:

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B: I never was in Buffalo in my life.
A: Neither was I. Must have been two other fellows.

Of course, a great deal depends on the manner of saying the last few words. They can be said apologetically, or casually, or as if illuminating a puzzling question. In most cases, the result is funny. Of the four thousand men and women now employing the joke in order to earn a living, probably not more than two thousand are aware of its psychological basis, or know that it has been used in text-books of philosophy to illustrate some particularly provoking dilemma. It is really a sort of extended pun, which, as Santayana says, suspends the fancy between two incompatible but irresistible meanings. . . .

A certain madness—or, if you prefer, irresponsibility—is the mark of one mode of humour at the moment; and that it isn't new is obvious, because it makes you think at once of *Alice of Wonderland* [sic]. In that book, there is a remorseless logic; but it is a logic which exists in another world: a logic of the fourth dimension.¹³

But it is in Lewis and Dody that the purest "delight of nonsense" is to be found, and Seldes spends a full four paragraphs describing their act. "I do not recall any

previous practitioners of such songs [as 'Hello, Hello, Hello!'], nor have any rivals achieved the combination of apparent dullness with insanity," he concludes. "In any case, the type of nonsense is now associated with the name of Lewis and Dody," who, by Seldes's reckoning, had already spawned "about half a dozen" imitators.¹⁴

Written under the pseudonym of Vivian Shaw, the essay was no doubt something of a test balloon: the diverse examples of cuckoo humor contravene Seldes's endeavor, in *The 7 Lively Arts*, to corral comedic innovation exclusively to the side of the popular arts, even as the essay also brackets off cinema as a source of these new directions. For one thing, what Seldes meant by the "cuckoo school" was primarily a verbal or literary style—manifest as a "nonsensical juxtaposition of words"—which, as such, left silent motion pictures unsurprisingly untouched. True, "comedy plots [in film] are occasionally ludicrous, and once in a while you get entertaining visualizations of 'looking daggers' or 'seeing stars'"—Seldes seems to be thinking here of director Del Lord's fondness for animated effects in his work for Sennett around this time—"but these are not quite the same thing."¹⁵ For another, the advent of the cuckoo style represented a shift in the cultural vectors of comedy. Neither vernacular nor genteel, the new style of "irresponsible madness" provoked Seldes instead to draw analogies with contemporary modernism, pointing to "the increasingly Dada strain in the cleverness of our fun-makers" and "an unintentional Dadaism."¹⁶

We will have cause to return to Seldes's assessment of the cuckoo school shortly. For the present, it is enough to note how his assessment bespeaks not simply the beginnings of a shift in the direction of American humor but also an emerging transformation in the idea and location of the "modern" in respect to comedy. The popular-festive mode of Keystone-style slapstick that so impressed critics who chafed against the constraints of "great art" was, Seldes feared, being reclaimed to those same constraints; in turn, the laurels of comedic modernity—once claimed by slapstick as a form whose "galvanic gestures and movements were creating fresh lines and interesting angles"—were being relinquished to the newly "Dadaist" spirit of the cuckoo wits.¹⁷ Nor was Seldes the only observer to catch the change in the comedic winds. Critics on the lookout for emerging directions in comicality in the 1920s generally equated the new with the nonsensical. This was a period when commentators began enthusiastically inventing terms like the "New Nonsense," the "Larger Lunacy," the "Higher Goofyism," or "Humor Gone Nuts," in Donald Ogden Stewart's felicitous phrase, to describe a style whose "moonstruck quality," another wrote, rested on "utterly fey *non sequiturs*" and "puns of monstrous absurdity."¹⁸ But slapstick no longer excited such enthusiasms. The theater critic George Jean Nathan, who had described Chaplin's *A Dog's Life* (April 1918) as "tremendously superior at almost every point to much of the vulgar low comedy of such as Shakespeare," could barely stifle a yawn a decade later at the same comedian's now "inelastic technique" and overreliance on the sentimental themes "of a bygone day."¹⁹

All of which will likely come as news to those scholars who, in recent years, have elevated silent-era slapstick film as a vanguard of cinematic modernity. Without differentiation as to period, scholars have understood silent slapstick as a genre linked to the rhythms of “the piston [and] the automobile,” providing an “anarchic supplement” to the systematization of modern mass culture.²⁰ Slapstick’s modernity has in this way been cast in the image of a kind of inverted Fordism, as a carnivalesque reflex against assembly-line routinization and technocratic rationalization whose trajectory extended from the simplest trick devices of early gag films (hoses, pieces of string, jerry-rigged umbrellas) to the “uproarious inventions” of Sennett-style slapstick and beyond.²¹ What is more, these readings have been buttressed by the insights of European avant-gardists and cultural critics of the period—the famed Frankfurt School, in particular—whose scholarly popularization has informed a consensus understanding of slapstick as a preeminent cultural form for negotiating, through laughter, the pressures of modern subjectivity.²² “One has to hand this to the Americans,” the German critic Siegfried Kracauer wrote in 1926. “With slapstick films they have created a form that offers a counterweight to their reality: if in that reality they subject the world to an often unbearable discipline, the film in turn dismantles this self-imposed order quite forcefully.”²³ But no mention is made here of the fact that, by the mid-1920s, the front lines of comedic innovation had moved elsewhere, and a curtain is drawn on the chorus of complaints that the era’s leading slapstick clowns—Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harry Langdon, and Harold Lloyd—were out of step with critical and public tastes. If, then, in what follows, I choose to dissent from these influential Frankfurt School readings, this is less on the assumption that they were in some absolute sense “wrong” in their assessment of slapstick’s cultural resonance; rather, in a more relativist spirit, it is to propose that slapstick’s *claim* on modernity—its claim to a laughter that was, if one may say so, of its moment—was being displaced and disavowed within comedic hierarchies of the 1920s.²⁴ From this perspective even an imagined conjunction—that chiasmus of critical reevaluation that may or may not have passed through the figure of Gilbert Seldes on April Fool’s Day, 1923—may hold clues to a major comedic reconfiguration whose forms would filter across the mediascape of the 1920s, as this chapter will explore.

“TO BE URBAN BY BIRTH AND PREFERENCE”:
METROPOLITAN CULTURE AND THE
MODERNIZING OF MIRTH

We begin with a basic taxonomy of comic creativity: the division between the clown and the wit, which I want to use as a way of sketching the changing social contexts of humor production during this period. Etymologically, “clown” signifies a “rustic

booby," a simpleton, the reverse of the savvy townspeople who is the "wit."²⁵ There are several distinctions embedded in this binary; simplicity versus sophistication, physical horseplay versus droll wordplay, country versus city, and so on. And an initial point to be made is that a major current of comedic innovation in the 1920s entailed the displacement of the clown and the ascendancy of the urbane wit as an engine of comedic renewal. "[Until 1895, our] chief humorists long had been rustic or western," argue Walter Blair and Hamlin Hall in a seminal study of literary humor. "Many of them during the years 1895 to 1915 were country-born but became city dwellers. Beginning about 1915, our most famous humorous writers were to be urban by birth and preference."²⁶ The result, as critic Carl van Doren pointed out in 1923, was a clustering of "town wits"—"licensed jesters of the town" who "promulgate the jests, discuss the personalities, [and] represent the manners of New York"—including critics and columnists like Franklin P. Adams, Robert Benchley, Dorothy Parker, and Alexander Woollcott, to whom new periodicals like *Vanity Fair* (founded in 1913), *College Humor* (1921), and the *New Yorker* (1924) lent a platform.²⁷

Such a shift stands as an obvious reflex of urbanization, as the corollary of an era in which, as the 1920 census had shown, the rural-urban balance tilted decisively toward the latter. But it also bespeaks the role that humor came to play in giving definition to new patterns of class sensibility and distinction within the era's city life. Sociologist Paula Fass has spoken in this connection of the "peer society," a constellation of middle-class, college-educated city folk who came of age with the nation's urban culture.²⁸ This peer society was, in the first instance, a symptom of the growing role of schools and colleges in industrial society: whereas previous generations of children had been nurtured into family-based value systems (in turn inflected by multigenerational practices of ethnic and class belonging), the generation of the 1920s grew up in an environment dominated by peers, with whom they spent increasing time in a variety of formal and informal school- and college-based activities. Between 1900 and 1930, Fass notes, college enrollments tripled and high-school enrollments increased more than sixfold; the result, she argues, was to secure a transition from family membership to the performance of social roles as the framework within which middle-class identity was articulated.²⁹ The appeal of city living, in this context, was to provide a setting within which these new, extrafamilial modes of identification could be continued after graduation: city life—its mores and its eccentricities—became a kind of second campus for middle-class urbanites who learned to couch their class privilege in the language of urbane sophistication. Peer connections gave humor periodicals like the *New Yorker* the "flavor of an alumni reunion" among Ivy-educated writers, while the magazine's signature "Talk of the Town" section gave readers access to a clubby perspective on the local scene.³⁰ *College Humor* similarly boasted of its exclusive appeal to a young, college-educated, and urban readership ("We start with the premise that our current readers

are educated”), while the *New Yorker* flagged its urbane credentials in continuous disparaging references to the “little old lady in Dubuque.”³¹

The discriminatory impulses that spurred these wits to throw barbs outside the metropole also led them to repudiate the regional humor traditions that had flourished there. It was in such a spirit, for example, that Harvard-educated Bostonian and then-*Life* drama critic Robert Benchley published “The Brow-Elevation in Humor” in 1922, in which he disparaged earlier traditions of regional dialect humor (when it was “considered good form to spoof . . . surplus learning of any kind” and when “any one who wanted to qualify as a humorist had to be able to mispronounce any word of over three syllables”), advocating instead a literate approach that would address itself to, rather than ridicule, an educated mind-set.³² The journalist Franklin P. Adams, who published under the acronym F.P.A., was on this count the superior of Mark Twain, Benchley concluded. (F.P.A. himself similarly used Twain as a whipping boy for measuring the superiority of the new, urbane set, claiming sports journalist and essayist Ring Lardner to be a keener observer than Twain and a “better hater of the human four-flusher as he is.”)³³

The modernizing impulse that took shape from this process of comedic position taking has been characterized in various ways.³⁴ For literary scholar Ann Douglas, the *New Yorker* style of humor shared in the broader metropolitan sensibility of what she calls “terrible honesty,” an irreverent hostility to older sentimental pieties that became a generational style for American moderns. “Think of Dorothy Parker publicly skewering a young man who announced he ‘could not bear fools,’” Douglas writes. “‘That’s funny,’ [Parker] replied, ‘your mother could.’”³⁵ For others, the peer society found its distinctive voice in the genre of “little man” humor, tales of the quotidian distresses of city life in which *New Yorker* writers and city columnists excelled.³⁶ The humor of the peer wits in this sense has come to imply at least two complementary dynamics: on the one hand, a gesture of urbane differentiation, enshrined in a terse and cultured style that abjured the ethical imperatives of Victorian gentility even as it rebelled against the studied ingenuousness of regional humor; on the other, a gesture of club-house affiliation, in the commitment to experiences (little man humor) and values (Benchley’s “signs of culture”) in which middle-class city folk recognized their commonalities.

Yet it would not be altogether correct to comprehend this new humor purely in terms of these characteristic distributions of tone and material; also relevant are the formal processes of wit in which the new metropolitan cohort’s self-conscious spirit of renewal became concrete. Consider, for example, the famous “optimist” joke that ran repeatedly in early issues of the *New Yorker*, a two-line joke told backward (“A man who can make it in par.” “What’s an optimist, Pop?”).³⁷ Typically understood as editor and founder Harold Ross’s attack on well-worn humor conventions, the joke exemplifies a style of logico-linguistic nonsense beloved of the urbane wits. What many of these humorists shared—and what in fact united them with the broader cuckoo style of “equivocal nonsense” identified by Seldes—

was a proclivity for what semiotician Paolo Virno has dubbed the “entrepreneurial joke.” Characteristic of entrepreneurial joking, Virno avers, is the formal impulse to deploy or rearrange semantic resources in new and absurdist ways, to recombine or disorder elements of linguistic praxis in a fashion that stretches beyond—or even outright contravenes—ordinary codifications.³⁸ Cameo examples of the technique are found in the enumeration of semantic items that do not “fit” within a given category (a favored technique of Robert Benchley, as in the quip from his 1921 essay “All About the Silesian Problem,” where we learn that the Silesian government consists of three classes: “The nobles, the welterweights, and the licensed pilots”), in the nonsensical variation upon the same verbal material (as in Donald Ogden Stewart’s 1928 “How We Introduced the Budget System into Our Home,” which closes with a line that redeploys the term “budget” in an illegitimate way: “Any budget caught smoking will be instantly expelled”), as well as in a penchant for metaphorical overreach (as in the adventuresome comparisons of sports writer “Bugs” Baer, who wrote of a knocked-down fighter that “his face looked like a slateful of wrong answers”).³⁹ We also see this semantic playfulness, in an immediate way, in the titles of Benchley’s literary humor collections from this period, such as *No Poems, or Around the World Backwards and Sideways* (1928), *From Bed to Worse, or Comforting Thoughts about the Bison* (1934), or, a title meant to confuse booksellers, *20,000 Leagues under the Sea, or David Copperfield* (1928). Frequent *New Yorker* commentator Frank Sullivan meanwhile provided what amounted to a metacommentary on this style in his 1928 essay “Should Admirals Shave?” which takes semantic disorder as its explicit theme. An investigation into the reasons behind the putative “loose talk” of navy admiralty unwarrantedly petitioning for war, Sullivan’s essay uncovers the cause to be the “imprisoned words” caught in the admirals’ bushy beards:

“These imprisoned words,” [I explained to the admiral,] “have remained in your beard indefinitely. A word is very tenacious of life. It lives for years; for centuries, especially when nourished in the cozy warmth of a beard. Now, you must also realize that all these accumulated words have mingled with the newly-arriving words as each new speech coursed through your beard. . . . So that your speeches have really been hash.”

“Hash?”

“Yes, hash. Portions of old speeches mixed indiscriminately with your new speeches. That’s why they made no sense.” . . .

“By George,” he exclaimed, “I never thought of that.”

“By George who?”

He thought that over for a moment.

“By George, I guess you’ve got me there,” he said. “I don’t know what George I say ‘By George’ about.”

“Sloppy diction,” I rebuked. “Lazy mental processes. Don’t do it, my good man. Settle upon one George and stick to him.”

“I choose George Herman Ruth [i.e., “Babe” Ruth],” said the admiral.⁴⁰

It was accordingly in terms of a conflict between the sense and the forms of language that new directions in American humor asserted themselves, not without controversy. “Philosophically, our modern American humor is utterly nihilistic,” was the dismayed opinion of MIT English professor Robert Rogers, in a lecture given in 1932. “Logic has no validity, the laws of cause and effect are a washout. The world is an *Alice in Wonderland* world”—the Carroll reference, again—“where even logic is dream logic and everything is unexpected.” “This kind of humor cannot be written by plain people,” Rogers added, in a telling acknowledgment of the peer society’s class orientation. “It is the fruit of a rather extreme type of modern education, plus a considerable knowledge of modern art and science.”⁴¹ The Canadian humorist Stephen Leacock expressed similar reservations—despite being something of a hero to the *New Yorker* circle of writers—when he disparaged their predilection for nonsensical wordplay as mere “mechanics”: “Humor resting on words alone is only for the nursery, the schoolroom and for odd moments. . . . It reaches its real ground when it becomes the humor of situation and character.”⁴²

Leacock’s advocacy of “situation and character” betrayed the continued, if waning, sway of older, genteel theorists of laughter like George Meredith and W.M. Thackeray, who had advanced an ethical-humanist vision of humor in keeping with Victorian ideals of self-discipline and moral improvement.⁴³ Yet there were other literary observers who proved more willing to follow new trends in reappraising the value of nonsense. Perhaps the most notable intervention in favor of the lunatic vogue came from New York radical intellectual Max Eastman, whose 1936 study, *Enjoyment of Laughter*, constitutes one of the only fully formed theories of laughter to emerge from this period in American letters. A spirited, if ultimately rather quibbling, rejoinder to Sigmund Freud’s “release” theory in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Eastman’s study posits childhood pleasure in nonsense not, as with Freud, as a psychogenetic stage *prior* to humor—to which state humorous expression seeks to restore us—but rather as the latter’s essential seed; put another way, he reads the toddler’s uninhibited pleasure in verbal play as humor’s origin and not its destination. “Freud’s great sin against humor, and against the art of enjoying it, is that he makes it all furtive. He thinks, as we have seen, that there is no humor in the playful nonsense of children, and that humor arises only when grown-up people elude their ideals of rationality and other inhibitions.”⁴⁴ By contrast: “The first law of humor is that things can be funny only when we are in fun,” and that “‘being in fun’ is a condition most natural to childhood”—a vantage from which Eastman reevaluates nonsense not as “pre-” humorous but as humor’s purest expression.⁴⁵ Eastman’s leading examples of nonsense? Lewis Carroll (again), *New Yorker* writers Donald Ogden Stewart, E. B. White, and James Thurber, and Broadway comedian Joe Cook. Eastman’s commentary on Cook’s 1930 humor book, *Why I Will Not Imitate Four Hawaiians* (also the name of the comedian’s

most famous routine), exemplifies his understanding of nonsense as a restoration of childhood play.⁴⁶

Let us read a bit of Joe Cook’s *Why I Will Not Imitate Four Hawaiians*, that book which he talked off impromptu, in the presence of a stenographer, much, I imagine, as a child talks nonsense to himself but aided by the presence of his elders.

THE STORY OF MY LIFE—SO HELP ME

First of all, I am worth millions of dollars. The fact that I was born in a private family proves that my parents must have been well-to-do. My tender age, at the time of birth, created quite a bit of favorable comment. I was the only child in kindergarten that chewed tobacco. The parents of all the other little boys and girls begged me to teach their children this delightful habit. Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to swim the English Channel. . . .

Does the statement, “Gertrude Ederle was the first woman to swim the English Channel,” contribute anything of . . . relevance to Joe Cook’s *Life—So Help Me*[?]. . . I asked the author why he put that phrase in, and he said: “It just came into my head and I saw that it was funny—I don’t know why?”⁴⁷

In keeping with the operative procedures of cuckoo wit, linguistic matter is here displaced from the register of signification to that of form: the Ederle line has nothing, in terms of meaning, to commend its humor beyond the purely formal and syntactic disconnect with what precedes it.

There was, to be sure, a relation with literary and artistic modernism here that has not gone unrecognized. Scholars of American humor have long acknowledged the presence of e. e. cummings behind Don Marquis’s *archy and mehitabel* tales, written in the voice of a cockroach (archy) who is the reincarnation of a writer of lower-case free verse. More recently, literary scholar Sanford Pinsker has noted the affinities between T. S. Eliot and James Thurber and between James Joyce and S. J. Perelman.⁴⁸ Still, this was an uneasy relationship, in which literary modernism excited the nonsensical proclivities of the New York wits less in a spirit of homage than in a kind of bemused travesty—what historian Leonard Diepeveen usefully dubs “mock modernism.”⁴⁹ Don Marquis was perhaps the columnist to have worked most consistently in this parodic vein, not only in the *archy and mehitabel* series from his “Sun Dial” column, but also in stand-alone pieces in which he contributed doggerel verse commentary on the poets of the hour, such as the early piece “The Golden Group” from 1915:

“Peppercorns and purple sleet
 Enwrap me round from heat to feet,
 Wrap me around and make me thine,”
 Said Amy Lowell to Gertrude Stein.

“Buzz-saws, buzzards, curds and glue
 Show me my affinity for you.

You are my golden sister-soul,”
Said Gertrude Stein to Amy Lowell. . . .

And Hermione harked to them, rapt, elate:
“And aren’t they all of them simply great!
Of course, the bourgeois can’t understand—
But aren’t they wonderful? Aren’t they grand!”⁵⁰

But others of the peer society’s esteemed wits also contributed to the genre—including F.P.A., Thurber, and White—each of whom found in artistic modernism a provocation to heighten their ludic play with linguistic form, only now in the direction of satire.⁵¹ It is in fact in such mock modernism that we see cuckoo humor’s paradoxical relation to the orbit of modernist reinvention: what the era’s leading wits and tastemakers commonly embraced in the field of comedy they just as frequently condemned in the field of serious literature. The same Max Eastman who approvingly cited Joe Cook’s non sequiturs in his *Enjoyment of Laughter* did not extend similar courtesy to modernist literature in his 1931 study, *The Literary Mind*. Developing a position more famously struck in his well-known 1929 *Harper’s* essay “The Cult of Unintelligibility,” Eastman there pretended to a sympathetic analysis of a passage of what he termed “Gertrudian prose”: “I was looking at you, the sweet boy that does not want sweet soap. Neatness of feet do not win feet, but feet win the neatness of men. Run does not run west but west runs east. I like west strawberries best.” After some serious discussion, the kicker comes when Eastman reveals the passage to be not authentic Stein but “the ravings of a maniac cited by Kraepelin in his *Clinical Psychiatry*.”⁵² “Every one who has composed poems knows how often he has to sacrifice a value that is both clear and dear to him, in order to communicate his poem to others,” Eastman summarizes. “Abandon that motive, the limitation it imposes, and you will find yourself writing modernist poetry”—or, one could add, cuckoo humor.⁵³

The further risk in charting this link with literary modernism, however, is that it makes the cuckoo style appear too rarefied a field, so it is important to recall that the tendency toward this style of linguistic and logical play cycled widely, through both “sophisticated” and “popular” arts. Seldes’s foundational “cuckoo” essay was perspicacious in this regard: the author’s deep-seated commitment to popular forms made him uniquely attuned to the expansive ambit of contemporary nonsense, not merely as the argot of Algonquin humorists but as part of a new metropolitan vernacular that filtered through the New York humor scene. Nor, moreover, should we deduce from this a “trickle-down” dissemination—as though peer society wits like Robert Benchley originated a style that was subsequently enshrined in popular ditties like “Yes, We Have No Bananas.” What was occurring, rather, was a mutation of cultural hierarchy in which New York’s newfound preeminence overflowed the conduits of older class cultures. Newly fascinated

by their own resources, American moderns were precipitating what Ann Douglas describes as a “shift in cultural power from New England to New York”; from “reform-oriented, serious-minded, middlebrow religious and intellectual discourse to the lighthearted, streetwise, and more or less secular popular and mass arts as America’s chosen means of self-expression.”⁵⁴ In such a climate, cuckoo humor was hardly end-stopped in the performance of the peer society’s cohesion but enjambled with discursive registers that informed the topsy-turvy heteroglossia of metropolitan life in other ways—in the double entendres and coded play of the nascent pansy craze, in the chaotic subversions of language of Jewish Broadway stars like the Marx Brothers (about whom more to come), even in the racial polyphony of jazz itself.⁵⁵ We need to think of the 1920s as a decade in which former class-based divisions pitting “genteel” against “popular” cultural spheres were being reorchestrated in terms of cultural geography, remapped onto new divisions separating the metropolis from the hinterland.⁵⁶ What the peer wits achieved was less the wholesale invention of a new style than its adaptation to changing coordinates of distinction: the “new nonsense” became, in their hands, one of the whetstones against which the contours of metropolitan distinctiveness were sharpened. Our next task will be to revisit our opening taxonomy to ask where this revolution in the nation’s *wit* left the critical evaluation of some of the nation’s most recognized *clowns*, on both stage and screen. On whom, in short, did the light of metropolitan favor still shine?

“MOST OF THE CRITICS HAVE HAD A HAND IN
WRITING THE SHOW”: CRITICS, COLLABORATORS,
AND 1920S BROADWAY COMEDY

A first answer: not the slapstick comedians of feature-film fame. It is not well enough recognized, for instance, that all of the since canonized clowns of the silent era—Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, and Langdon—lost a step circa 1927–1928. All of them made expensive and boundary-pushing films during this period, respectively, *The Circus* (1928), *The General* (1927), *The Kid Brother* (1927), and *Three’s a Crowd* (1927), and all four garnered bemused reception and disappointing box office.⁵⁷ *The General*, for example, was Keaton’s most ambitious feature, a period piece which, at a price of nearly a million dollars, was the costliest film the comedian ever made. Although Keaton scholars have debated whether it made that money back, less debatable is the critical pasting the film received. “The fun is not exactly plentiful,” Mordaunt Hall wrote in the *New York Times*. “Here [Keaton] is more the acrobat than the clown.”⁵⁸ Analogous complaints were lodged against *Three’s a Crowd*, Langdon’s first attempt to direct himself and a box-office disaster. “For some reason or other Mr. Langdon has gone intensely tragic,” wrote the critic of the *New York World*. “He appears to have forgotten for the time all he has ever learned of the value of movement and life in the making of comic pic-

tures.⁵⁹ Chaplin's *The Circus* meanwhile may have done considerably better business (almost two million in domestic rentals by the end of 1931: he was Chaplin, after all) but in retrospect is recognized as a troubled production that the comedian preferred to forget.⁶⁰ Marketed as "a low-brow comedy for the highbrows," the film also marked a subtle shift in the comedian's critical evaluation.⁶¹ Reservations were now openly voiced about the very pathos that had won the comedian his early acclaim. "Slapstick, by now, had become 'highbrow'; and Chaplin's pathos had been much praised," biographer Theodor Huff claimed. "So it is possible he overdid [it]."⁶² The film effectively marked the end of Chaplin's contemporaneity. Finally, Lloyd's *The Kid Brother* fell unexpectedly flat right out of the gate, opening to widespread audience disinterest almost everywhere except New York and Los Angeles. As per Keaton's *The General*, *The Kid Brother* was an expensive, southern-set period comedy (a comedic reworking of the 1921 melodrama *Tolable David*); as per Chaplin with *The Circus*, Lloyd was so crestfallen that he consigned the film to obscurity, even omitting it from his later compilation picture, *Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy* (1962). The point here is not to measure the merits of these films on the basis of their initial box office, but simply to note the general perception of the time that the most visible keepers of the "roaring, destructive" slapstick flame of the 1910s had blown it out.

The examples of Chaplin, Lloyd, and the "intensely tragic" Langdon are most instructive here. In appealing to pathos and sentimental melodrama, all three clowns were locked into standards of genteel appreciation that had fueled slapstick's growing acclaim in the 1910s—Chaplin's in particular—only subsequently to be foresworn by metropolitan critics of the 1920s.⁶³ "Charlie Chaplin has been gravely injured by reading discussions . . . of his tragic overtones" was thus the opinion of noted *New York Telegram* columnist Heywood Broun in 1928, while theater critic George Jean Nathan, as we have seen, disparaged those same overtones as the outmoded baggage of a "bygone day."⁶⁴ Nor was it only among urbane tastemakers that these comedians were now losing ground. Metropolitan critics who abjured an older sentimentalism as a block to modernity were, for a brief but crucial moment, in wholehearted agreement with hinterland publics who had long scorned the same as pretentious imposture. Such, at any rate, was the clear suggestion of a 1927 *Picture Play* essay, stridently titled "We—Want—Hokum!" which spoke up for small-town audiences whose preferences for the "good old days of slapstick" had been betrayed by the aspirations of the form's leading practitioner.

The baggy trousers, the wisp of a cane, the stunted mustache and the monstrous shoes used to induce nothing short of hysterics in the great mass of the American public when Charlie was appearing in lowly two-reelers. But then he read someplace that the high art of his comedy lay in his ability to bring tears to the eyes. So he went

in for eight reels of throwing pathos, when the bigger half of his public would much rather see him hurl custard pies.⁶⁵

The Circus was, then, hardly the first of Chaplin’s films to falter with his public: the author of the *Picture Play* piece cited the evidence of numerous “small-town exhibitors who got a big bill but small patronage out of running ‘The Gold Rush,’” including a Michigan exhibitor who “asserted that his customers paid to see Charlie in comedy, not drama” and an Arkansas theater owner who declared that Chaplin’s “idea of comedy and my patrons’ idea aren’t the same.”⁶⁶ The most acclaimed slapstick artist of his generation was suddenly losing credibility on both sides of a newly emergent divide pitting the “high-hatted” metropolis against small-town “hokum.”

Nor was there much hope for metropolitan tastemakers in returning to slapstick’s earthier sources. The plaudits formerly showered on burlesque low comedy in the 1910s by vanguard intellectuals like Nathan (who, in 1919, celebrated burlesque as the only true expression of “national humor”) were plausible only as nostalgia by the late 1920s, as burlesque theater began its shuffle into unmistakable decline.⁶⁷ Changes in the economic structure of burlesque were forcing the tradition into banality. Prior to the 1920s, most burlesque companies operated as touring shows on circuits (“wheels,” they were called): a performer could get a whole season out of a small set of new sketches and routines, performed each week in a different city and to a different audience. But by the mid-1920s, this business paradigm was displaced by “stock” burlesque: the theaters that once would have booked touring shows now found it cheaper to hire their own in-house companies and stage their own productions. Necessity thus became the mother of repetition: formulaic sketches and borrowed routines were an inescapable crutch for comedians who now had to come up with six to eight skits on a weekly basis. “There was nothing wrong with a new comedy scene,” burlesque historian Rowland Barber pointed out in *The Night They Raided Minsky’s*. “But it couldn’t be *invented*. It had to be patched together out of bits of old bits from old burlesque shows.”⁶⁸ Of course, popular theatrical forms like burlesque had always relied on this kind of “passed along” comedy material, but the shift to stock seems to have turned familiar comforts into critically irredeemable staleness. Seldes himself, writing in 1932, confessed to being dismayed by the “appalling monotony” that had by then settled on the form.⁶⁹ Even within their own domain, burlesque comedians now had to vie with the yawns and rustling newspapers of audience members (mostly working-class men) who were there primarily for the striptease dancers and scantily clad chorus girls.

Faced with the deterioration of the cultural reference points in whose name they had first sought to *épater le bourgeois*, taste-making critics relocated their enthusiasms to contemporary performers in whose work they perceived a kind

of reflexive or baroque engagement with the legacy of variety past. In Broadway comedians like Ed Wynn (in his persona as the “perfect fool”) or Joe Cook (the “one-man vaudeville show”), critics of 1920 perceived a kind of “innovative nostalgia” that not only corresponded to their own deep awareness of variety tradition but also excited their entrepreneurial spirit of cultural reinvention.⁷⁰ The best-known example is unquestionably the Marx Brothers, who, it is crucial to insist, were first and foremost a metropolitan phenomenon of the Broadway stage in the 1920s before they were a mass phenomenon on the nation’s movie screens in the 1930s. Already by the time of their breakout success in the 1924 revue *I’ll Say She Is!* the brothers had perfected stage personas as a kind of reflexive bricolage of the accrued weight of vaudeville convention—Chico’s blending of novelty piano playing with an Italian immigrant routine, Groucho’s acerbic one-liners and eccentric song and dance, Harpo’s conflation of mute pantomime with the red-headed costuming of the stage Irish. For the New York critics who first encountered them in *I’ll Say She Is!*, the Brothers thus impressed initially as a kind of zany palimpsest of comedic archetypes.⁷¹ Writing in the *New York Herald*, critic Percy Hammond celebrated Groucho as a “nifty composition of all the humorous clowns, from William Collier down or up, as your taste may suggest.”⁷² George Jean Nathan struck a similar note: “The Marxes stem directly from [Harry] Watson, [George] Bickel and [Ed Lee] Wrothe and the various other comic teams that adorned the burlesque stage thirty years ago when it was at its zenith.”⁷³ Algonquinite Alexander Woollcott meanwhile focused on Harpo—with whom he fell in love—placing him within the lineage of “that greater family which includes Joe Jackson and Bert Melrose and the Fratilini [*sic*] brothers, who fall over one another in so obliging a fashion at the Cirque Medrano in Paris.”⁷⁴

More significant, though, than the terms of their initial reception on Broadway is how critical admiration spawned creative collaborations harnessing the team to the contemporary absurdist vogue. As comedy historian Frank Krutnik notes, the success that the Marxes enjoyed as stars of Broadway—and which they subsequently carried over to Hollywood—“owe[d] a great deal to the alliance between these veteran vaudevillians and an elite group of New York intellectuals.”⁷⁵ An unofficial patronage system was emerging in which the era’s critics and litterateurs not only bestowed critical approval upon but also entered into creative partnership with those comedians who best answered to their tastes. The success of *I’ll Say She Is!* resulted in a series of teamings with the city’s leading literary humorists and critics, including the *New York Times* drama critic George S. Kaufman (who cowrote the Marxes’ follow-up Broadway shows, *The Cocoanuts* [1925] and *Animal Crackers* [1928], both of which were adapted for the team’s debut films, in 1929 and 1930 respectively) and, subsequently, *New Yorker* humorist S.J. Perelman (who provided the team with their first original film scripts, for *Monkey Business* [1931] and *Horse Feathers* [1932]).⁷⁶ While their breakout success with *I’ll Say She Is!* was, in Krutnik’s words, a “direct product of vaudeville’s entertainment culture,”

their subsequent vehicles—both on stage and on film—inventively reshaped that culture in line with the sensibilities of New York litterateurs.⁷⁷ Kaufman’s famous quip backstage at a performance of *The Cocoanuts*—“I may be wrong, but I think I just heard one of my original lines”—may have expressed exasperation at the brothers’ inveterate ad-libbing, but there is little doubt among Marx Brothers biographers that his scripts provided a more polished frame for their shenanigans as well as superior wordplay and absurdist puns.⁷⁸ Perelman, meanwhile, recalled Groucho’s admiration for his use of language. “I knew that [Groucho] liked my work for the printed page, my preoccupation with clichés, baroque language, and the elegant variation.”⁷⁹ Critical responses to these collaborative endeavors accordingly registered a notable change. No longer lionized as the bricoleurs of past tradition, the Marxes were now roundly embraced in the idioms of comedy’s lunatic modernity. Of *Animal Crackers*, critic John Anderson of the *New York Evening Post* described how the team “parade their giddy hallucinations all over the stage, and make their show the most cockeyed of worlds, a comfortable padded cell wherein playgoers may roll about in happy delirium.”⁸⁰ Robert Benchley celebrated Groucho’s punning as the product of a “magnificently disordered mind which has come into its own,” while Gilbert Seldes echoed the language of his earlier cuckoo essay in describing the brothers’ “totally irresponsible” barrage of “absurdities, lunacies, quips, puns.”⁸¹

Nor were the Marxes unique in following this trajectory. A 1924 *Time* article placed the brothers among a much larger cohort of former vaudevillians who were finding favor among “erudite commentators” for their leading roles in Broadway revues, such as Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough, Joe Cook, Leon Errol, W. C. Fields, and Charlotte Greenwood—to name only those listed who would go on to be recruited to talking pictures.⁸² Of note here would be Joe Cook, arguably the most acclaimed solo vaudeville comedian of all time, whose career evolved in a kind of one-man parallel with the Marxes’. An extraordinarily versatile performer, Cook first came to vaudeville fame in the mid-1910s in a twelve-minute solo skit titled “The Whole Show” that was possibly an inspiration for Buster Keaton’s *The Playhouse* (October 1921): a compressed burlesque of an entire vaudeville show, the bit involved Cook performing every act on the bill himself, trapeze, magic, wire walking, and so on, even to the point of interacting with himself as a song and dance team—in other words, precisely the kind of reflexive pastiche of variety tradition that first drew critics’ attention to the Marx Brothers.⁸³ By the close of the 1920s, he was established as the nation’s preeminent “voice of lunacy,” celebrated for his famous “Why I Will Not Imitate Four Hawaiians” nonsense shtick (in which he explained why, though adept at imitating two Hawaiians, he drew the line at any more),⁸⁴ and a Broadway star of musical comedies like *Rain or Shine* (1928) and *Fine and Dandy* (1930, scripted by Donald Ogden Stewart). The parallel in fact only comes apart with Cook’s transition into feature film roles, which

he did not sustain beyond a 1930 Frank Capra–directed adaptation of *Rain or Shine*. But in failing to establish a durable presence in early sound features, Cook would prove more the exception than the rule among his Broadway peers, as the next section explores.

“I COVET THE WATERMELON”: CUCKOO HUMOR AND EARLY SOUND CINEMA

The migration of New York’s cuckoo generation of the 1920s to mass media like talking pictures dramatically raised the stakes for these clowns and litterateurs. What the pages of the *New Yorker* and the Broadway stage could do for the privileged few, the media could do for the masses: cuckoo humor would now conscript the entire nation for its audience. Radio was one pathway to the nationwide spotlight: several Broadway veterans became early radio stars, often as emcees of variety programs that mixed music, comedy, and advertising—Eddie Cantor for the *Chase and Sanborn Hour* (starting 1931), Jack Benny in the *Canada Dry Program* (1932), George Burns and Gracie Allen for the *Robert Burns Panatella Program* (1932), Ed Wynn for the *Texaco Fire-Chief Program* (1932), and many others. Alexander Woollcott became the “Town Crier” for CBS in 1929, while F.P.A. took up duties as a regular panelist on the popular talk show *Information, Please* in 1938. But it was in film that these performers’ expanding media reach marked a true turning point in the history of American comedy. Commercial network radio was, after all, a relatively new medium (dating to the 1926 launching of NBC Red): it had no pre-existing tradition of comedy and comedians. In film, by contrast, the arrival of the cuckoo clowns was immediately recognized as a changing of the guard: Hollywood invested heavily in the idea that the innovation of sound would allow it to bring Broadway-style entertainment to the moviegoing masses. In a 1930 essay, “Speaking of Talking Pictures,” stage producer Edgar Selwyn complained how “motion picture moguls have combed the stage of its good players, have baited the best with juicy contracts and have left the Broadway mart as dry of excellent actors as a glass eye.”⁸⁵ Film scholar Henry Jenkins’s essential 1992 study, *What Made Pistachio Nuts? Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, gives a sense of the scale of change:

In one week, Metro offered contracts to no less than seven cast members of Joe Cook’s musical comedy, *Rain or Shine*. Cook hired Ted Healy and His Stooges to replace some of the departing cast members, only to lose them to Hollywood as well. . . . By 1929, Fox alone had more than two hundred stage-trained people under contract; the full scale of recruitment would be hard to estimate. . . . Hollywood [also] bought the rights for many of the period’s most popular musical comedies, including *Sally* (with Marilyn Miller and Leon Errol), *Poppy* (with W.C. Fields), *The Cocoanuts* (with the Marx Brothers), *Rio Rita* (with Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey), *So Long Letty* (with Charlotte Greenwood), *Whoopee* (with Eddie Cantor), *Simple Simon* (with Ed Wynn), and *Rain or Shine* (with Joe Cook). . . . The hope was that these stars and their stage successes

would represent presold commodities, already familiar to the urban audiences who were the dominant market for the early talkies.⁸⁶

The early sound period has thus come to mean two things in the historiography of film comedy: the displacement of the genteel, sentimental mode favored by the major 1920s slapstick clowns and the corollary advent of a new style of crazy or “anarchistic” comedy derived from the Broadwayites’ stage repertoires. In fact, both aspects remain inadequately contextualized. For one thing, the argument that sound-era comedy superseded a gentrified slapstick tradition overlooks the degree to which this displacement had *already taken place* within metropolitan cultural hierarchies of the 1920s. From the perspective of the metropole, cinema’s preeminent clowns were already denigrated as the *passé* others against which the cuckoo modernity of the new cohort of literary wits and Broadway comedians was secured. Changes in the ranks of Hollywood comedians simply concretized at the level of mass media a change in critical priorities that had already happened. A second observation concerns the historiographic adequacy of the aesthetic categories used to explain the anarchistic mode, although here my claims are necessarily prefatory to the close reading that presently follows. It is Jenkins’s influential contention, for instance, that the anarchistic mode of Wheeler and Woolsey, the Marx Brothers, and others was shaped by the “vaudeville aesthetic” that these Broadway performers brought with them to their screen vehicles. For Jenkins, the vaudeville aesthetic connotes a performer-centered mode of theatrical representation whose emphasis on show-stopping virtuosity and display was at loggerheads with the more verisimilar, illusionist aesthetic of classical film narrative: an “aesthetic based on heterogeneity, affective immediacy, and performance confronted one that had long placed primary emphasis upon causality and consistency, closure and cohesiveness.”⁸⁷ For all its productiveness, however, the notion of *a* vaudeville aesthetic flattens a near fifty-year theatrical tradition of stage variety into a general, undifferentiated category and in consequence fails to explain the very difference it is called on to illuminate. Why, for instance, did vaudeville’s legacy imprint itself in such radically different ways on, say, the silent-era comedies of a Buster Keaton versus the sound features of the Marxes? A historical poetics of early sound comedy should rather attend to the particular inflections that gave comedians and humorists of the 1920s their distinctive flavor and that they subsequently brought to film. If the first step in our project has been to locate those inflections within the specific terms of the era’s cuckoo vogue, the second will be to comprehend early sound comedy *in those terms* and not simply as an epiphenomenon of the catchall category “vaudeville.”

I now, therefore, want to continue this investigation by focusing on a double act, Clark and McCullough, that was at the very forefront of the New York theater’s cuckoo ranks in the 1920s and subsequently signed to appear in short-subject comedies, first at Fox (1928–1930), then at RKO (1930–1935) (fig. 2). Little remembered today, Bobby

Clark and Paul McCullough in fact rivaled the Marxes in popularity on Broadway in the 1920s and early 1930s, when they starred in major “book” shows like *The Ramblers* (1926) and, their biggest hit, the 1930 revival of George Gershwin’s *Strike Up the Band*. In many ways, Clark and McCullough’s careers indeed mirror those of the Marx Brothers, and not just because of parallels in their costuming (Bobby Clark painted eyeglasses on his face, just as Groucho painted a fake mustache). Both came up through the tiers of variety entertainment to land starring roles in revues during the 1920s; both won the imprimatur of the peer society’s acclaim for their absurdist reworking of low comedy tradition; both were snapped up by major studios—Fox and Paramount, respectively—eager to capitalize on their metropolitan cachet. Yet, where the Marxes’ features preserved continuity with the team’s stage repertoire—by direct adaptation of their theatrical successes and continuing collaborations with New York litterateurs—Clark and McCullough had a far bumpier road at Fox, which failed to secure adaptation rights for their Broadway shows and consigned them to short subjects with writers who, Clark later complained, were a poor fit for the team’s unique style of absurdist incoherence.⁸⁸

Originally from Springfield, Ohio, Clark and McCullough had entered show business in their teens, not as comedians but as acrobatic tumblers in minstrel shows and circus. Their physical training nonetheless made them well suited to vaudeville comedy, which they began to assay in the early 1910s, first as a tramp dumb act, then as a verbal two-act featuring ludicrous animal impersonations. As a four-part profile of Clark, published in the *New Yorker* in the summer of 1947, explained:

Clark had taken to doing imitations. Most of these concerned little-known animals from the south of some country or other. “An antediluvian oyster, from the south of Bolivia!” he would shout. “Call your special attention to the rigidity of its muscles.” Then he would fall down in a limp heap. Springing up, he would elaborate on the species, crying, “A *wild* antediluvian southern Bolivian oyster calling to its *mother!*,” after which he would voice a series of horrendous caws, gargles, brays, and moose calls. Clark had added cigars to his props, both on and off duty, and he developed a trick of shifting one around in his mouth to punctuate sentences. “Now, an amphibious creature,” he would announce, “found only in the southern Malay Peninsula and the surrounding arch-” (flipping the cigar across his mouth) “pelagoes.”⁸⁹

With their move to burlesque in 1917, the team soon developed the personas and stage presences that they would subsequently carry through “unchanged” (according to the *New Yorker*) to Broadway when they achieved breakout success in Sam Harris and Irving Berlin’s *Music Box Revue* of 1922: Clark was the duo’s lead, a “terrier” of a comic performer, who would develop frenetic bits of prop comedy out of his ever-present cigar and cane, while McCullough’s role as stooge entailed little more than following his partner around laughing.⁹⁰ The *New Yorker* profile described Clark’s characteristic stage entrances: “He sprints on from backstage, brandishing his cane and crouching low, . . . then he rushes to the footlights and



FIGURE 2. Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough. Photo by White Studio © Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

spits his cigar in the general direction of the audience. He catches it, replaces it in his mouth, and spits it out several more times. As a rule, he misses it once, then, with his cane, takes several vicious cuts at the nearby members of the cast.”⁹¹ The duo also updated their vaudeville tramp personas, doffing moth-eaten racing coats to become what McCullough later described as “shabby genteel”: “Now a tramp has no

dignity,” McCullough explained, “and false dignity is one of the best comic themes. So instead of playing two down-and-outs, we shifted into playing two fellows on the way down, but still putting up a bluff.”⁹² Their passage through the Broadway scene of the 1920s was subsequently capped with the record-breaking book show, *The Ramblers*, at the Lyric Theater, for which Bobby Clark (still “smell[ing] of the tan-bark arena,” according to the *Times*) received critical acclaim as “one of the most adept stage humorists I ever saw” and the “funniest [comedian] in New York.”⁹³ “He makes low comedy high art” was the opinion of one critic, who thereby confirmed in Clark’s nonsense a prestige that the film industry would next try to seize for itself.⁹⁴

That the duo was first consigned to short subjects at Fox, rather than features, reflected no backsliding on that cachet. During the critical years of the transition to sound, shorts were no second-tier support, but rather vital test balloons in the film industry’s endeavor to import metropolitan entertainment styles to film (as will be further discussed in the next chapter). Shorts insulated stage comedians and literary wits from the pressures of narrativity that a feature-length film would have imposed, and thereby preserved a space for performances of cuckoo routines that were, in any case, best suited to modular form; in brief, shorts became a first port-of-call in the remediation of metropolitan humor as mass media content. This is evident from the large number of absurdist monologues directly transposed from the stage into short subjects, such as Robert Benchley’s *The Treasurer’s Report* (ca. May 1928, also discussed in the next chapter), Joe Cook’s *At the Ball Game* (ca. July 1928), and Jay C. Flippen’s *The Ham What Am* (ca. July 1928), as well as in the verbal cross-talk of double acts like Al Shaw and Sam Lee (*Shaw and Lee in “The Beau Brummels,”* ca. September 1928; *Going Places*, June 1930) and George Burns and Gracie Allen (in *Burns and Allen in “Lamb Chops,”* ca. October 1929), whose wordplay turned on puns, riddles, false syllogisms, and syntactic confusions. (“When were you were born and if so, for instance, if?” asks Shaw in *The Beau Brummels*. “Between nine and ten,” Lee responds. Shaw: “That’s too many for one bed.”) But shorts also became testing grounds for comedians to explore the affordances that the new medium of sound cinema offered for the filmic extension and extrapolation of cuckoo principles.⁹⁵ A luminous example is provided at the start of Burns and Allen’s *Lamb Chops*, in which cuckoo conventions of verbal disordering are matched with a disorienting approach to cinematic space: the duo search around a living room set on the conceit that they are looking for their “missing” audience, whom they eventually “discover” by looking and gesturing directly to the camera. “There they are, right there, that’s them. Say hello to everybody.”⁹⁶ In a cinematic analogue to the team’s comedic wordplay, the materiality of the cinematic signifier (here, a sound stage) supervenes upon and derails the sense (a living room) that it would ordinarily convey.

It is, then, a loss to the history I am tracing that so little of Clark and McCullough’s work at Fox survives. Of the fourteen shorts they completed between

1928 and 1930, including some of three and four reels, only one, *The Belle of Samoa* (ca. February 1929), still circulates, and even this is largely built around footage from an extravagant musical number that had been deleted from *The William Fox Movietone Novelties of 1929*.⁹⁷ (Another short, *Waltzing Around*—released in early 1929—is held by a private collector.) What evidence there is nonetheless suggests that Fox initially handled the Clark and McCullough series in a manner befitting the duo’s prestige, assigning them experienced comedy directors (Norman Taurog, Paul Parrott, and Harry Sweet) and spending lavishly on the films, “with none said to have cost less than \$50,000” (over three times what Vitaphone was spending on its shorts).⁹⁸ It is also clear, moreover, that the films were, in the main, a series of reproductions of routines they had perfected on the stage, both big-time and burlesque. “Many of their movies,” explained the *New Yorker* in its retrospective of Clark’s career, “were adaptations of skits they had done in vaudeville, burlesque, or musicals.”⁹⁹ Sometimes these borrowings were quite direct: the team’s first two-reeler, *The Bath Between* (February 1929), was a straight adaptation of a hotel-room sketch the comics had first performed in the *Music Box Revue* back in 1922 (the only surviving script material for this film is tellingly labeled “Their Original Vaudeville Skit”), while other shorts directly lifted jokes from their stage successes (as when *The Diplomats* [February 1929] included some verbal byplay from *The Ramblers*: “How much is a minute steak?” “A minute steak, sir, will cost you five dollars.” “Then bring up a couple of split-second sandwiches.”)¹⁰⁰ More commonly, the team worked variations on routines they knew from the burlesque playbook: *Waltzing Around* provides an absurdist spin on a burlesque boxing skit; the first part of *Belle of Samoa* is structured as a “con game” routine in which Clark tricks a harem guard into a deceptive wager; and *Beneath the Law* (ca. February 1929) plays out as what in burlesque was called “Irish Justice,” a generic term for the courtroom sketches that had been popular since minstrel days.¹⁰¹ As the *New Yorker* profile explained, “[*Beneath the Law*], Clark believes, is the closest approach, thus far, to transferring burlesque successfully to the screen”:

In it, Clark was the judge who had been arrested for immorality. Every time an attorney opened his mouth, Clark smacked him with a bladder and yelled, “You’re trying to inject hokum into this case!” A knock-down, drag-out fight at length developed, involving not only the attorneys and the judge but the jury and the spectators; it was stopped by a suggestion that the stripper do her act for the judge in chambers. Then the judge and the girl made their exit. The short ended when Clark, after a suitable wait, opened his office door and cried, “Case settled out of court!”¹⁰²

These are suggestive hints, to be sure, but there is little enough to suggest anything more than the mimesis of a purely theatrical experience with which early sound shorts have so often been charged. The real achievement of the team’s film career would await their subsequent tenure at RKO—after their successful Broadway return for *Strike Up the Band*—when they now had to develop original

material for their shorts (most often in collaboration with writers Ben Holmes and Johnnie Grey). Rather than simply submitting older stage routines to the logic of an adaptation, as at Fox, Clark and his team now set about revising two-reel comedic convention in the disorderly image of the duo's lunatic stock-in-trade. They achieved this through a formal approach that was more in keeping with the workings of a kind of absurdist game than with the emplotments of comedic narrative. Scene structure in the best of the RKO shorts often invokes a form of play governed by entirely extemporized rules, as though in pursuit of strange new forms of comedic sport. *Jitters the Butler* (December 1932), for example, has a scene in which the boys are conversing with one another while, for no reason, running counterclockwise around a table. A butler enters the room, briefly joins them for a couple of orbits, and then brings them to a halt. "You can't do this. You can't run round the room this way." "Alright," answers Clark, "We'll run this way," and the trio recommences the game, this time clockwise. Unlike normal games, which are governed by a set of preexisting rules, the game form that Clark and his writers developed at RKO tended toward what the philosopher Gilles Deleuze once described as an "ideal" game, for which "there are no preexisting rules, each move invents its own rules; it bears upon its own rule"; and it did so in a way that, at its extremes, would steer the diegesis toward the collapse of any representational verisimilitude.¹⁰³ In a scene from *Love and Hisses* (June 1934), a young man, Harry Knott, is in an office with two private detectives—Clark and McCullough—whom he has hired to stage the abduction of his betrothed, Bunny Bender, so that the two lovers may elope. Bunny telephones to go over the details of the plan and Harry reassures her of the detectives' proficiency. The game that ensues is simple: every time Harry uses a metaphor to describe the detectives over the phone, the duo literally enact the metaphor in question. "They're right on their toes," Harry explains in reference to the duo's readiness, prompting the detectives to "strike toe-dancers' attitudes, raise themselves in the center of the floor, and pirouette," as described in the final script.¹⁰⁴ "We're chinning it over now" (i.e., talking over the plans)—and the pair "leap in the air, grab the cross arms of the chandeliers and quickly chin themselves on the bar [i.e., perform chin-ups] a couple of times."¹⁰⁵ What is up to this point a silly literalness next begins to disentangle the very fabric of the film's fictive coherence. "They can't miss—they're sure fire," Harry reassures Bunny—at which point the detectives pull out their revolvers and shoot at a portrait of Napoleon. Cut to a close-up of the picture: Napoleon fantastically comes to "life," turning to the boys to ask, "Who said so?" (an effect seemingly achieved by placing an actor behind a cutout in the set wall behind the frame). Finally, the topper: "Oh, she did?" continues Harry on the phone. "Well, I'll bet there's a nigger in the woodpile." Clark's detective gingerly pokes at a pile of logs next to the fireplace, from which there bursts a black child who "rushes madly from the scene."¹⁰⁶ (This racist gag is cut from extant prints, which derive from television release versions prepared by RKO in the 1950s.) The systematic process of the game is to introduce into the



VIDEO 1. Clip from *Love and Hisses* (June 1934).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.28.3>



film a principle that eventually overrules the coherence of its verisimilitude, here summed up in the impossible materializing of linguistic metaphors (vid. 1).

At a larger, plot-wide scale there is a related predilection for what might be thought of as comedic “puzzles” that elaborate the consequences of a single ridiculous premise, often involving a character governed by an overriding fetish or fixation: a butler motivated solely by the pleasure he takes in being kicked in the pants in *Jitters the Butler*, a pet pig addicted to mints in *In a Pig’s Eye* (December 1934), or a judge with a positively erotic yearning to eat watermelon in *Love and Hisses* (working title: “I Covet the Watermelon”)—each of which inserts an entirely alien component into ordinary conventions of motivation and psychology. Verisimilitude is here dismantled by the Rube Goldberg–style mechanics of a narrative riddle: How might a pig’s mint addiction derail a business deal between an inventor and two phony counts? How might a man’s desire to eat watermelon be made to resolve the prohibition on Bunny and Harry’s marriage? (The answer? The detectives mislead the judge into declaring his love for Bunny’s mother by tricking him into thinking he’s talking about a watermelon.) As with Clark and McCullough’s “game” approach to comic business, what the RKO team here installed was a system for derailing fictive sense that once again permits of a Deleuzian reading. In one of his late texts, “Bartleby; or, The Formula,” the philosopher defined the narrative tactics of Melville’s 1853 story as the working out of a “formula,” similarly linked to a protagonist’s fixation (the scrivener’s “I prefer not to”) whose elaboration hollows

out the representational system of the fiction, of causes and effects, plausible behaviors and their motivations. Bartleby's repeated refusals, Deleuze notes, introduce a kind of blockage or foreign element into the cogs of storytelling convention, the effect of which, like Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis in Kafka's novella, is to submit narrative instead to the working out of a puzzle: "What counts," he writes, "is that things remain enigmatic yet non-arbitrary: in short, a new logic, definitely a logic, but . . . without leading us back to reason."¹⁰⁷ Something of this may be found in the Clark and McCullough short *Snug in the Jug* (November 1933), whose plot seems to have been conceived from the outset to produce this kind of conundrum. The earliest sketches by writer-director Ben Holmes carefully outline the premise of a narrative double bind: Clark and McCullough play recidivist prison inmates who, each time they are released, are advised to steer clear of their nemesis Slug Mullen (played, in the finished film, by Harry Gribbon); each time, however, they immediately encounter him and are returned to jail. Here is Holmes's outline for the film's opening, from a draft dated June 29, 1933:

1. The judge hammering, smiling "thirty days." LAP DISSOLVE.
2. EXTERIOR PRISON ENTRANCE. Warden ushers Clark and McCullough out—short dialogue "Free again—keep away from Slug Mullen—nemesis, etc." Clark and McCullough exit.
3. DESERTED STREET NEAR PRISON. Slug Mullen with pocketbook, meets Clark and McCullough—gives them pocketbook—exits. Clark and McCullough examine contents. Policeman in—drags them out. LAP DISSOLVE.
4. The judge, smiling, raps "sixty days." LAP DISSOLVE.
5. EXTERIOR PRISON DOOR. Warden again ushering Clark and McCullough out—short dialogue "Free again—keep away from Slug"—ten dollar gift. McCullough doesn't want it. Clark chastises him—they take money—exit.
6. EXTERIOR VEGETABLE AND FRUIT STORE. Slug Mullen attempting to force racket on owner. Italian owner objects. Slug throws grapefruit through window. "That's only a sample of what you're going to get." Owner throws vegetables. Clark and McCullough enter—throw vegetables—pumpkin through window. Policeman in—Clark and McCullough arrested—dragged out. LAP DISSOLVE.
7. The judge smiles, raps "ninety days." LAP DISSOLVE.
8. EXTERIOR PRISON. Once more Warden ushers Clark and McCullough out—free again—gives them money—bethinks himself of job—gives them job tacking cards. Clark and McCullough exit.¹⁰⁸

The boys can only stay out of prison by avoiding Slug Mullen, but it is only in prison that he can be avoided. How, then, to avoid Slug and be free? In the initial outline, Holmes cheats on the dilemma by removing one of its horns: the duo opt out of freedom by finally electing to live in jail (the "only place they can

avoid Slug Mullen”).¹⁰⁹ Two days later, in a draft continuity dated July 1, Holmes cheats again, this time by dissolving both horns: the film ends with Slug *and* the boys in jail. But it is only with the final script, a week later, that the writer keeps faith with his own riddle. As in the initial outline, the duo escape into prison to avoid Slug only to find, in a twist on the draft continuity, that Slug is *already* there waiting for them. The final script details that twist and its ensuing action as follows:

78. INT. PRISON—DAY

FULL SHOT—The same cell in which Slug Mullen has been locked. Clark and McCullough entering the cell. From the inside, Clark reaches his hand out, locks the door and throws the keys down the hall. Clark beats on the iron bars with his cane.

CLARK

Well, Blodgett—at least we’re safe from Slug Mullen.

MAC

You said it.

CUT TO

80. INT. CELL—DAY

CLOSE SHOT—Clark and McCullough standing near the bunks. Slug Mullen raises himself into view from the top bunk, glares down at them.

SLUG

Oh yeah!

A big take from Clark and McCullough as they see Slug.

CUT TO

81. INT. JAIL—OUTSIDE CELL—DAY

Clark and McCullough rush forward toward the CAMERA, apparently running right through the iron bars. They stop in the foreground. Slug leaps down from the bunk after them, rushing up against the iron bars, and nearly knocks himself out. Clark and McCullough laugh.

CUT TO

82. INT. JAIL—OUTSIDE CELL—DAY

CLOSE SHOT—Clark and McCullough as they gaily call to Slug.

CLARK AND MAC

(giving the cross fingers to Slug)

Stone walls do not a prison make

Nor iron bars a cell.

They go gaily, skipping down the hall, as we

FADE OUT.¹¹⁰

Clark and McCullough here become possessed of a kind of crazy or magical excess that violates the very spatial alternatives (in jail/out of jail) on whose exclusivity the foregoing action has depended. Which is to say that the conundrum of Slug’s inescapability is finally resolved, not within the framework of what is permitted to narrative, but by the materiality of the medium itself; that is, in a special effect that allows the duo to pass through the iron bars of the prison cell (figs. 3 to 5).



FIGURES 3–5. Clark and McCullough pass through the iron bars of a jail cell. Frame enlargements from *Snug in the Jug* (September 1933).

The early sound vehicles of Hollywood’s Broadway cadre indeed abound in moments like this “magical” jailbreak, in features as in shorts: a tattoo of a dog on Harpo’s chest suddenly barking (by virtue of an animated special effect) in the Paramount feature *Duck Soup* (1933); W. C. Fields on the receiving end of a faceful of fake snow every time he opens the cabin door in the Sennett two-reeler *The Fatal Glass of Beer* (March 1933); a bust coming to life to join the villains’ laughter in Wheeler and Woolsey’s *Diplomaniacs* (1933). Whereas conventional classical filmmaking sought to make textual signifiers cohere around the illusion of a fictive reality, early sound comedy evinced what Henry Jenkins has called an “expressive anarchy” that played with those very signifiers as a source of amusement.¹¹¹ But in light of the foregoing, it seems clear that this anarchy is to be understood not simply in the effort to bring a generalized “vaudeville aesthetic” to film—Jenkins’s position—but rather in the endeavor to remediate the more specifically absurdist forms of the cuckoo vogue in filmic terms: expressive incoherence on the scale found in these films belongs less to vaudeville per se than to the lunatic inflection of 1920s humor that turned toyingly to the possibilities of its own media of expression, dismantling signifying processes into pure form.¹¹² The paradox, next to be considered, is that the film industry had thereby invited a transposition of comedic codes whose implications for filmic ones would not long be tolerated.

“KEEP THEM DOING SLAPSTICK GAGS”: THE DEMISE
OF CUCKOO HUMOR IN MOTION PICTURES

What does it say about the conditions of early sound-era filmmaking that Clark and McCullough never made the splash that their Broadway reputation promised? There can be little question that their start at Fox was badly mishandled. At a time when the team might easily have graduated to features, Fox failed to secure rights to their stage hit, *The Ramblers*, which was instead picked up by RKO and shot as *The Cuckoos* (1930), starring that studio’s then-resident cuckoo team of Wheeler and Woolsey (this being prior to Clark and McCullough’s own tenure at the studio). Nor can there be any question that their subsequent stint at RKO failed to smooth the team’s relations with the Hollywood studios. As the *New Yorker* profile explained, Clark

is still badly soured on Hollywood; he has never felt right about the place since the team’s last appearance there, early in 1935. Signed by RKO after a spell of Broadway shows, the two men . . . were met at the station by a band and cheering section and carried bodily into the office of the president. “Here they are, Chief!” cried a hysterical press agent. “*Clark and McCullough!*” “Ah, yes,” said the executive with a clammy smile of welcome, “the dancers.”¹¹³

Clark’s evident resentment notwithstanding, it was not the perception of mistreatment but a more tragic event that ended the team’s screen career—and,

indeed, the team itself—when McCullough committed suicide in 1936. After a hiatus of several months, Clark would return to the stage as a celebrated solo performer, eventually acquiring a reputation as “the last of the great clowns,” but returned to the screen only once, for the *Goldwyn Follies* of 1938.¹⁴

None of this, however, speaks to the paradox that came to settle over their work in film: that, despite the initial fanfare, the cachet of their screen appearances eventually slipped far below that of their stage reputations. Three-time Clark and McCullough RKO director Sam White addressed precisely this dilemma in a later interview: “The thing about Clark and McCullough was that when you directed them on the set, they were hysterical, especially Bobby. I used to think that the scenes I was making would split my gut. When we got it on film, it wasn’t funny. They just never came off funny. They exuded some chemistry in person that never came off on the screen as it should have.” The only way he and the unit’s other directors (including future musical helmer Mark Sandrich) “could ever make them funny was to keep them doing slapstick gags all the time.”¹⁵ Some of the later RKO shorts testify to this shift in approach, the absurdity of the team’s expressive incoherence replaced by a more straightforward physical freneticism.¹⁶ A case in point would be the team’s final film, *Alibi Bye Bye* (July 1935), which revisits the burlesque “hotel scene” they had already used for *The Bath Between* at Fox and *The Gay Nighties* (June 1933) at RKO, albeit with a switch of emphasis that belies the apparent continuity: whereas the earlier RKO short generated humor from the deliriously implausible escalation of a detective’s efforts to apprehend a burglar (culminating in a machine-gun shootout and motorcycle chase through the hotel’s corridors), *Alibi Bye Bye* reclaims the team to a more straightforwardly knockabout vector, bodies in motion running from room to room. (The film, notes slapstick historian Steve Massa, “probably set the record for the most doors slammed in any farce film.”)¹⁷ The stage versus screen paradox of Clark and McCullough’s career is, then, perhaps best framed less in terms of the imponderable of the team’s failure to “register” for the camera than in terms of the particular challenge of sustaining innovations in one medium (in Clark and McCullough’s case, variety theater) in the different institutional circumstances of another (film): despite their inventiveness in adapting two-reel comedy to their cuckoo stock-in-trade, Clark and McCullough’s creative development remained prey to the proclivities of filmmakers who had cut their teeth on the conventions of an earlier era. Sandrich, for instance, had first come up the ranks in the late 1920s as a director of silent two-reelers starring Lupino Lane, one of the British stage’s preeminent exponents of music hall-style acrobatic pantomime; Sam White was the youngest of the White brothers, whose careers as slapstick producer-directors—discussed in more detail in chapter 5—dated to the Keystone era. “Making them funny,” for filmmakers like these, often meant a return to straight slapstick.

Yet the case of Clark and McCullough would signify nothing more than a single instance of creative tapering if it did not mirror a pattern exemplified across all the

cuckoo comedians recruited to Hollywood. Even though Hollywood’s transition to sound depended heavily on Broadway humorists for short subjects in its initial stages, as the 1930s progressed, cuckoo reflexivity increasingly gave way to more conventional comedic emplotments. What animation historian Nic Sammond has noted of cartoons during this era held for live-action comedy too: sound film soon came to demand the “spatial enclosure” of narrative space—that is, a return of classical standards of narrative construction that consigned these trickster figures to coherent fictive worlds in which mayhem was now directed inward, within the world of the fiction, rather than outward, at the framework of the fiction’s coherence.¹¹⁸ Within the standard histories, the transition is symbolically marked by the Marxes’ passage from Paramount to MGM, from the anarchistic excesses of the finale to *Duck Soup* to the more gentrified romance plots of *A Night at the Opera* (1935) and *A Day at the Races* (1937). But the pattern was first and most vividly drawn in the case of those comedians hired to the maw of live-action shorts—like Clark and McCullough—where the very pace of production more quickly forced a turn to narrativization. The trajectory emerges clearly, for example, in vaudeville comedians George Burns and Gracie Allen, who first appeared in film before the Vitaphone cameras in the late summer of 1929 to perform their celebrated cross-talk act, “Lamb Chops,” their stage staple since 1926. Subsequently signed to Paramount, the duo proceeded to make eleven short films between 1930 and 1933, requiring a team of writers to come up with a scripting strategy that could accommodate this dramatically increased pace of production. The approach taken was to locate Burns and Allen within familiar fictive environments—drugstores (*Pulling a Bone*, January 1931), hotels (*100% Service*, August 1931), hospitals (*Oh, My Operation*, January 1932)—which provided a basic framework for their trademark wordplay even as they confined that wordplay to the bounds of narrative verisimilitude. Burns and Allen’s characteristically “cuckoo” disregard for cinematic illusion in the earlier shorts—the way they would puncture the enclosure of cinematic space by waving at the camera or calling attention to the sound stage—seems to have simply vanished midway through their Paramount series in favor of a more rigorous diegetic coherence.¹¹⁹ The trajectory was also exemplified by Robert Benchley in his six films for Fox between 1928 and 1929: his first two—*The Treasurer’s Report* and *The Sex Life of the Polyp* (July 1928)—were absurdist monologues delivered direct to camera, the former based on a stage routine he had developed in 1922, the latter developed from a number of early essays (“The Social Life of the Newt,” “Do Insects Think?,” and “Polyp with a Past”); the remaining four were more familiarly plotted comedies that adapted Benchley’s essayist persona to the narrative paradigms of middle-class “situation” comedy (learning to drive, gardening, etc.).¹²⁰

But the example that comes closest to Clark and McCullough, despite great differences in performative style, is that of Ted Healy and his Three Stooges. First cast into the limelight in Broadway revues like J.J. Shubert’s *A Night in*

Spain (1927) and *A Night in Venice* (1929)—where they were variously billed as “Ted Healy and His Racketeers” or “Ted Healy and His Gang”—Healy and the Stooges were infamous for running ragged over the fictive coherence of their librettos: Healy would serve as emcee, the “Racketeers” as interlopers who would haphazardly barge into scenes to disrupt Healy’s efforts to manage proceedings. (For *A Night in Venice*, for example, the Stooges were first introduced as hecklers planted in the audience whom Healy invited onstage to wrestle a man in a bear suit. The “unsightly fellows spent some 15 long minutes slapping each other’s faces . . . following which one of the slappers wrestled with the bear and had his clothes ripped off.”)¹²¹ Signed to film—first at Fox for the Rube Goldberg-scripted feature *Soup to Nuts* (1930), then, three years later, at MGM for a series of five two-reel comedies and cameos in feature-length musicals—Healy and his team were initially cast in films that structurally replicated their revue appearances. Showbiz settings provide a framework for nonintegrated song and dance numbers (some performed by frequent MGM costar Bonnie Bonnell, others consisting of recycled footage cut from the studio’s features), while the Stooges maintain their stage function as nonsensical agents of unmotivated disruption, showing up out of nowhere to spray Healy repeatedly with water in *The Big Idea* (May 1934) or bursting on stage to yell and shout over Healy’s rendition of “Dinah” in the revue short *Plane Nuts* (October 1933).¹²² This is slapstick, true, but, as in the team’s stage turns, it is a slapstick “gone cuckoo” by virtue of its intrusion into an alien representational context, by the pure mechanism of a random intrusiveness that rebels against any representational sense (fig. 6). And it was precisely this quality that would be sacrificed in the Stooges’ move to Columbia Pictures, sans Healy, in 1934, where they commenced a quarter-century run in almost two hundred short subjects, making them the quintessential emblems of slapstick’s sound-era legacy. As will be explored in more detail in chapter 5, the path to Columbia had the effect of placing the Stooges in the hands of veteran comedy filmmakers like Del Lord, whose creative enthusiasms lay rather in the throwback direction of Sennett-style roughhousing. As if the jailers had locked up the cells, the Stooges were now shut off in their own slapstick universe, their instinct for nonsensical chaos channeled into conventional slapstick fiction rather than disordering the sense of the fiction from without.

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A reference to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu brings this chapter home: the introduction of any innovation into a given field, he argues, is never a matter of a “pure confrontation with pure possibles” since it depends on the “system of possibilities” that already defines that field (the interests of the various agents involved in the process, the legacy of techniques and approaches bequeathed by the past, as well as the production processes in which works are caught up).¹²³ In the field of film comedy, the innovation of sound may be said to have



FIGURE 6. The Stooges appear only three times in *The Big Idea* (May 1934), first marching into Healy’s office with trumpets from which they spray him with water, second the same thing with French horns, third with tenor saxophones, with no explanation of who they are or what they are doing.

opened a window for experimentation (for testing “pure possibles”) that the industry’s practices and proficiencies (its preexisting “system of possibilities”) quickly pulled shut again. The media diffusion of cuckoo humor might in fact be said to have met its Waterloo in motion pictures three times over—in its clash with swiftly reestablished standards of narrative enclosure, in the comedic preferences of directors who had learned their trade in the silent era, and especially in shorts, in the rapidity of production processes that exhausted the cuckoo comedians’ fund of stage material. The unimpeachable modernity of Broadway clowns and humorists may have rendered the conventions of silent slapstick passé, but it could not dispatch them. Like a dead planet, the comedic templates of an earlier era continued stubbornly on their path, even pulling Broadway challengers like Clark and McCullough and the Marxes into their orbit.

Not that the cuckoo style completely disappeared from film. It staged a couple of last hurrahs in two Universal-produced anarchistic features, both released in 1941: W. C. Fields’s *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (Fields’s last script) and the screen adaptation of Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson’s zany Broadway revue, *Hellzapoppin’*. It also sustained a shadow existence as a means of class characterization in the

Depression-era screwball style, for which absurdism became a fictive marker of upper-class lifestyles—whether negatively, as the sign of the elite’s irresponsible dissociation from the real world (in *My Man Godfrey*, 1936), or, more positively, as the sign of their repudiation of moribund class rituals in a supposedly democratic spirit of play (e.g., *Holiday* or *You Can’t Take It with You*, both 1938). Nor, moreover, would it be fair to single out cinema for blunting the edges of American revue comedy’s leading lights. What was true of early sound comedy, for example, was also true of commercial network radio, whose parallel birth (with the 1926 launch of NBC Red) was similarly nurtured by Broadway talent. Similar to their short-subject confrères, radio comedians were forced to come up with representational frameworks designed to generate new comic material for shows broadcast on a weekly or even twice weekly basis. Some succeeded—like Jack Benny, who, in collaboration with writer Harry Conn, developed a framework featuring recurrent characters interacting in changing comic “situations,” thereby anticipating the format of the television sitcom.¹²⁴ Others failed—like Robert Benchley, again, whose short-lived show *Melody and Madness* (1938–1939) saw him cede script control of his monologues to sponsor-assigned writers whose formulaic gags, one critic averred, “could have been delivered by any radio comedian.”¹²⁵ The lessons to be drawn from motion pictures are, in this sense, incomplete without acknowledging the broader pattern of cuckoo humor’s commercially driven media spread and the changing semiotics of comedic representation that each medium produced. In network radio as in synchronized sound film, the Depression-era mediascape was fueled by the appropriation of leading metropolitan comedians who greased the wheels of new and evolving media platforms, even as their distinctive personas were thereby reshaped and sometimes dissipated.

What remains to be underscored, however, is the unusually prominent role that shorts played within these processes. It was in the field of live-action comedy shorts, I have suggested, that the mass mediation of the cuckoo style was first auditioned; in shorts, too, that the endeavor first comprehensively broke down. In that missed connection was already foretold the field’s future identity: no longer a fertile terrain for the leading edge of comedic innovation but, we will see, a home for veteran slapstick filmmakers to grow old together; put another way, a refuge from the very modernity that cuckoo humor had once described. The next piece in the puzzle requires that we turn to the short-subject sector as a whole to consider how it took shape from changing industry strategy during Hollywood’s rough ride through the Depression.