

Destroy, She Said.

Objects and Subjects in Silent Slapstick Film

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Abstract

It is the aim of this project to demonstrate how slapstick in the silent films of the 1910s and 1920s undermines the centrality of the human subject. To achieve this, the project follows three interlinked lines of investigation. First, by drawing on over a hundred comic short films of cinema's silent era, it creates a map of slapstick's vocabulary and traces how matter, things and machines transform and transgress boundaries between humans and objects. Beyond investigating slapstick's building blocks and comic strategies, it also challenges traditional narratives focused on male, Hollywood comedians by integrating the stories of female and European comediennes. Finally, by means of artistic practice it reanimates and re-circulates elements derived from this tradition and asks about its relevance today.

In doing this work I take up a number of theoretical positions. I am challenging a linear, historiographical interpretation of silent comedy. Furthermore, I resist the traditional categorisation of the films into subgenres, like the *European grotesque* or the comedy film of the *Transitional Era*. Instead I focus on formal rather than historical links between tropes in the films. This text follows its own taxonomy, shifting the focus to an in-depth study of the agency of objects and destruction across silent film comedy. The conflation of historic film categories and periods allows me to rearrange the archive and engage comedians from different times and continents.

By increasing the visibility of non-human bodies as powerful agents in my writing and practice, I engage with urgent ecological questions and technological acceleration. I argue that early comic film puts forward micro-political practices like notions of kinship with objects that can be appropriated to address these pressing issues. By focusing on the interconnection between entities over individualism, I place the project within the line of inquiry put forward in the philosophical project of Posthumanism. The thesis seeks to dismantle the Western hierarchical structure, which places the human atop the 'Great Chain of Being'.

While laughter is disregarded as automatic and complicit with patriarchal ideology by feminist theorist such as Mary Ann Doane, this thesis reclaims the unruly, wild female body as capable of rejecting objectification and challenging gendered oppression in real terms. Laughter grants

sudden insights and thoughts, as George Bataille and Wyndham Lewis have argued. Its ruination of meaning can rupture dialectical thinking and generate new thought. The project therefore argues against an understanding of comedy as a social corrective, as proposed by Henri Bergson.

I engage these positions in my artwork through material and discursive practices. Through a body of new work consisting of films, objects and performances I show objects to be recalcitrant and unwilling and thereby challenge notions of human control. Drawing on comedy's fascination with archetypal objects and questions around elasticity and rigidity, I work with liquid rubbers, plastics including TPU and PVC, and helium. By collaborating with experts, including Foley artists and cloud scientists, I invite other voices and practices into the work so that new lines of thought can emerge between objects and words, reason and silliness and between technology and nature.

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Author's Declaration

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

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1 Introduction

This project investigates a body of European and American silent films from the 1910s and 1920s, most of which are slapstick comedies. Through translating and transcribing this collection of films in my writing and artwork I discovered that slapstick upsets the traditional hierarchy of empowered subjects and obedient objects. Things and humans shape-shift, losing their fixed contours and switching roles: comediennes explode into dusts clouds or liquefy while objects outperform their human counterparts, hijacking action or guest-driving narratives. Nature and machines refuse to act according to human will, troubling the notion of human self-determination. Based on these observations a number of Western philosophical presumptions about the nature of comedy can be challenged: instead of relying on a logic of inversion and degrading everything high and ideal, the films' more nuanced redistribution of powers function according to ethical principles. They focus on the shared materiality of all things, rebalance gender roles and cast marginalised figures like the maid or the tramp as their leads. By privileging the agency of non-human objects these films contribute to the current struggle across cultural, political and philosophical disciplines to redefine the relationship of the human to the environment.

By foregrounding female performance this thesis contributes to the feminist project of recuperating women's achievements in cinema's past. The paradigm shift brought about by New Film History in the 1970s in understanding early film as an alternate cinema to the Hollywood code also influenced feminist film historiography. It instigated an archaeology of women's contributions in front of and behind the camera, as well as its female audiences.¹ Such excavations have often followed stars like Clara Bow or Marie Dressler, but have continued to neglect the comediennes of early cinema (1907-1915), who emerged before the star system. I

¹ This project aligns itself with the undertaking of scholars like Maggie Hennefeld (2018), Claudia Preschl (2009) and Heide Schlüpmann (1999) who are working to make female achievement in film visible. If one speaks of slapstick in relation to silent cinema, the *Kings of Comedy* Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd are always named; however, the comic shorts of the *Transitional era* with women in the leads find little attention.

want to make visible neglected films, some of which, including episodes from the *Cunégonde* (1911-1913) and *Kri Kri* (1913-1915) serials, have not yet been discussed in print.² Through bringing in the testimony of long forgotten European comediennes such as Sarah Duhamel, Lea Giunchi and Ossi Oswald, I expand and restore the diversity of sources for silent comedy's strategies. By examining episodes from the little-viewed serials *Lea* (1910-1915), *Rosalie* (1910-1914), *Léontine* (1910-1914), and *Tilly* (1910-1915) alongside performances by European comedians Bigorno, Little Moritz and Karl Valentin as well as established stars such as Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle I upset the hegemonic narrative of slapstick as a male, American phenomenon.³ European early comedy remains undervalued and little discussed. At *(Another) Slapstick Symposium* (2006), film scholars barely mentioned the impact of European comedies, continuing to privilege American Slapstick's cultural influences and comic innovations. Gilbert Seldes' notion that slapstick existed 'in the United States alone' and arose 'without sources in the past' continues to haunt slapstick anthologies.⁴

The time span of my investigation resists being confined to the traditional periodisation of early cinema (1907-1915), and chiefly draws on examples from silent slapstick from 1910 until around 1930, at the onset of sound film. Furthermore, I approach the material from this period formally, seeking to identify a common thematic genealogy across the genre rather than charting a linear narrative of historical progress. Historical context is far from irrelevant, as we will see, but analytically we privilege an approach which isolates particular comic vocabularies and strategies across the period rather than seeking to account for change. According to Freud a joke reveals more about the social life at a given time than it does about particular people. Jokes are vehicles for expressing unconscious thoughts; 'the numerous little slips and mistakes which people make -- symptomatic actions, as they are called [...] are not accidental'.⁵ Beyond indicating what some of these 'slips and lapses' might reveal about the time of their inception, I want to argue that the continued laughter at slapstick points towards similar issues around object-and subjecthood, gender and class today, at a new anxious and tentative moment of social and technological transition.

² In the early decades of cinema the on-screen characters frequently identical with the names of the lead actors – as is the case with Italian comedienne Lea Giunchi who is referred to as 'Lea' in the films. I adapt this tradition using comedian's forenames throughout the thesis also to distinguish between for example the comic persona of Charlie and the comedian Chaplin.

³ Claudia Preschl (2008) and Maggie Hennefeld's (2018) recent publications which are the most comprehensive introduction to date.

⁴ Seldes (1957), p. 14. Despite the recent interest in Early Film, anthologies rate early European short comedies with no more than a paragraph: 'The comedies of French manufacturer Pathé Frères continued to score well on the American market during this period' (King (2009), p. 40.

⁵ Freud (2006), p. 62.

In the light of the current ecological, technoscientific and neoliberal condition, questions of human oversight over the consequences of their interaction with the environment through the exploitation of natural resources have become increasingly urgent.⁶ These pressing challenges force a renewed consideration of the place of the human in the world. Instead of assigning the human a place atop the 'Great Chain of Being' as a divine creation above animal, vegetable and mineral life, the relationship between self and world must be reconceptualised with an ethical awareness of the non-human: purpose, sentience and agency - the ability to act in such a way as to produce particular results - are not exclusive to humans.⁷

Bruno Latour argues that objects have lost their rights with the creation of the Enlightened subject. The object-subject divide into humans and non-humans, society and nature is an invention of liberal humanism, which banished hybrid objects by separating them into 'social' and 'natural' spheres.⁸ The desire to challenge an anthropocentric world-view, and to address our post-human condition, drives this project to tackle some of the assumptions of liberal humanism and go beyond its premises.⁹ By investigating slapstick's attacks on Enlightenment's universal values of rationality, scientific dogma and the Cartesian body/mind dualism, alternative strategies of knowing and doing emerge.

By situating object-subject struggles in kitchens, parks or pies, slapstick makes them relatable. Objects act as companions, body extensions and prosthetics or take on humanoid characteristics in the case of Buster's lazy train.¹⁰ Such anthropomorphisms show objects as sentient and make similarities between us and our surroundings visible, as Jane Bennett has argued (2010). Through demonstrating how kinship is developed across the object-subject divide we

⁶ The debate around the Anthropocene, coined by atmosphere chemist Paul Crutzen in 2000, entangles human history with geological Earth time and argues that the human impact on the earth accelerated at the onset of the eighteenth century. Although the term may have helped crystallise debates around climate change it has neglected its interrelated political and economic influences. Hence Donna Haraway suggesting Capitalocene and Chtulucene might be more fitting terms. Haraway (2015) pp. 159-65.

⁷ Latour speaks of 'actants' which he defines as human or non-human sources of action that have the capacity to modify other entities. See Latour (1996), pp. 369-81; see Alaimo (2017), p. 415, for the definition of agency. The expression 'Great Chain of Being' recurs throughout the literature that concerns itself with the post-human condition, including Katherine Hayles (1999), Donna Haraway (2017) and Rosi Braidotti (2013). There is no space here to draw out in depth the different strands of recent philosophy including Speculative Posthumanism, Transhumanism, and inhuman approaches. Suffice to say this study is closely aligned with what is often referred to as Critical Posthumanism, which sets out to challenge an anthropocentric standpoint and participates in the ongoing deconstruction of humanism.

⁸ Latour (2015), p. 180.

⁹ Note here concerns raised by what has in critical theory been subsumed under the term 'posthuman condition' which seeks to critique the current rework the position of the human and challenge traditional percepts as discussed put forward by Donna Haraway (2015), Rosi Braidotti (2013), Karen Barad (2007).

¹⁰ The concept of ecology is no longer politically-semantically charged with nature, it has come to 'designate the collaboration of a multiplicity of human and nonhuman agents' Hörl (2017), p. 3.

become sensitised and open to non-human forms of vitality.¹¹ These new forms of solidarities in what Guattari termed ‘micro politics’ can be used to address environmental issues.¹² Also the excessively tearful, crumbling or sweating bodies in slapstick emphasise the human as multiple, porous and tied up with matter. The flow of foodstuffs in and out of bodies and exaggerated metabolic effects reject the idea of humans as discrete, insular entities. Objects and subjects become entangled and their boundaries are constantly blurred, evoking Karen Barad’s concept of ‘agential intra-actions’ –which posits that phenomena are produced through their dynamic relations with other entities.¹³ It is the continuous ruination of boundaries, identities and genders in slapstick that brought me to appropriate the title of Marguerite Duras’ novel *Destroy, She Said* (1969) for this thesis. In Duras’ novel and eponymous 1970 film a slow destruction of the bounds of personhood and identities occur. Characters are interchangeable and also gendered notions are abandoned in her liberal use of ‘he’ and ‘she’.

Our investigation into how slapstick undermines traditional categories of human and object relations will also, by necessity, be a study of gender. Silent comedy frequently satirised and parodied contemporary gender roles in which women were objectified. As Katherine Hayles and Rosi Braidotti have pointed out, a decentring of the human cannot occur from a disembodied, non-gendered perspective.¹⁴ Nowhere perhaps is objectification as contested as when discourses of feminism encounter those of pleasure and comedy. Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1973) famously called for the ‘destruction of pleasure as a radical weapon’ to counteract the objectification of women as bearer of the look in the visual codes of mainstream cinema.¹⁵ Her position is in line with Henri Bergson’s understanding of the comic as a degrading force and has been echoed widely. For example, Mary Ann Doane argues that even impulsive laughter at a sexist joke ‘colludes in the

¹¹ See Bennett (2010), p. 98.

¹² Felix Guattari (2000), p. 51 calls for strategies beyond laws and bureaucratic programmes to address environmental issues through ‘micropolitical and microsocial practices, new solidarities and new analytic practices’.

¹³ Undermining Cartesian causality and the Cartesian division between subject and object, she shows phenomena to be produced, become determinate and meaningful only through agential intra-actions. Barad uses physicist-philosopher Niels Bohr’s theory of the atom to set up her theory of agential intra-actions, which defines agency not as something someone has but as an enactment. See Barad (2007), p. 141ff. and Barad in Kleinman (2012), p. 76 ff.

¹⁴ It is crucial to emphasise the achievements of feminist thought of the 1970s on radical materiality, which has been omitted in the work by male philosophers associated with Object Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism. As Rosi Braidotti (2013) proposes: ‘You don’t think with the mind; you think with the entire fleshed existence. So [the speculative realists] start from an assumption about correlationism that is overdetermined by a number of deletions and flagrant bibliographical omissions. It is a very narrow point.’ See also Hayles (1999), p. 2 ff.

¹⁵ Mulvey (1975).

maintenance of the systems of sexual oppression which support its meaning'.¹⁶ Undoubtedly joking culture can be violently sexist and degrading. However, to embrace 'humourlessness' and 'killjoy' attitudes as a device to counter patriarchy and shield women from degradation comes at a great loss.¹⁷ I want to argue against such refusals to laugh and propose that female laughter can be empowering and challenge ideology and oppression. Laughter has been celebrated across recent positions in feminist discourse, including Kathleen Rowe's writing on the figure of the 'unruly woman' whose grotesque corporeality and laughter destroys symbolic constraints and shatters normative regulation.¹⁸ Such thinking is rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque - although his study of medieval folk humour remains itself conspicuously empty of female laughter, not unlike Freud's tendentious jokes which can only be enjoyed in the absence of women.¹⁹ This study recuperates moments of female comic excess. When Helene Cixous speaks of Medusan laughter as '(t)hat which is ours breaks loose without fearing any debilitation (...) laughs exude from all our mouths'; such laughter is key to the comic performances of Ossi, Lea, Rosalie and Cunegonde. They are no passive objects on which jokes are played but rather drive comic action through destruction or physical assaults on their environs and male counterparts.²⁰ This does not mean that women are not subject to sadistic violence, as Maggie Hennefeld has pointed out, but they strike back surprisingly often.²¹ When Preschl and Hennefeld distinguish between 'slapstick bodies' as tormented by their inability to conform to the physical and social laws of their environment, and 'carnavalesque bodies' that revel in their own physical degradation, I find these distinctions difficult to uphold: gender fluidity and attacks on etiquette stretch across what has previously been labelled 'slapstick' and the 'European grotesque', blurring such orderly classification.²² Against reduction of the comic to the handmaiden of moral utility or boundless celebration of its carnivalesque utopian potentials, I propose that slapstick invokes a spectrum of laughter that cannot be pinned down to a singular function.

¹⁶ See Bergson (1900); Doane (1991), p. 41.

¹⁷ See more recently Sara Ahmed (2014) on 'humourlessness' and Lauren Berlant (2017). Female laughter continues to be repressed: in 2014 Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Bulent Arinc cited moral corruption and said, 'She will not laugh in public'. His remarks were met with thousands of Turkish women posting images of themselves laughing, see BBC News (2014).

¹⁸ Rowe (2011), p. 877.

¹⁹ See Mary Russo (1994) for a rebuke of Bakhtin's exclusions of women; see Freud (1960), p. 118 on smutty speech. Bakhtin emphasizes the regenerative, positive and collective capabilities of the grotesque yet also writes that the grotesque is based on 'degradation... the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level,' creating unity between body and earth (1984), p. 19.

²⁰ Cixous (1976), p. 878.

²¹ Hennefeld (2018).

²² See Preschl (2008) and Hennefeld (2018), p. 14 ff.

Instead I propose that George Bataille's understanding of laughter as a form of ruination of meaning is crucial to understanding the films. Bataille has declared his philosophy to be a philosophy of laughter, which operates through forms of 'backwardation' – referring the known to the unknown. By pushing an affective emotion in the place of dialectical method, he challenges the traditional ties of philosophy to reason and wisdom.²³ For Bataille laughter is not simply a thoughtless affect, its visceral convulsions can shatter established boundaries of experience, reason and knowledge. This is also mirrored in Wyndham Lewis' conception of the 'wild body'. He writes in 1927:

It is the chasm lying between non-being, over which it is impossible for logic to throw any bridge that, in certain forms of laughter we leap. We land plumb in the centre of Nothing.²⁴

The ruination of reason through laughter can produce intellectual and social insights for Lewis and Bataille. In silent comedy, I argue that ruination occurs not only through laughter but destruction that permeates the films on multiple levels where it also creates productive encounters and insights. Comic violence is the oldest ingredient of slapstick performance, be it in the Commedia Dell'Arte brawls between Pantalone and Arlecchino or the beatings of Mr. Punch in the Punch and Judy shows.²⁵ Yet in knockabout, physical comedy the assaults rarely have lasting effects: slapstick comedians bounce back, affirming Aristotle's principle that comedy must be devoid of pain.²⁶ Rampages and violent collisions are often generative: after smashing up an entire household Lea is dismissed from housework and allowed to read; elsewhere, runaway Buster leaps from a mountain slope onto a tall tree, which, just in the process of being felled, gently tips and delivers him unscathed to safety.²⁷ Pratfalls are constant but the comedians rebound quickly.²⁸ The films at hand, then, set up moments of what Latour has termed 'iconoclasm' – the open ended and unsettling destruction of things, symbols and language.²⁹

²³ See Bataille (1981), p. 90 ff.

²⁴ Lewis (1970), p. 244.

²⁵ This violence has been surveyed in cartoons by Esther Leslie (2002), pp. 104-7.

²⁶ Gutwirth, (1992), p. 29.

²⁷ *Lea e il gomito* (1913), *Seven Chances* (1925).

²⁸ Verhoven (2003), p. 254. Indeed, I would suggest that the pratfall resembles Freud's conception of 'fort da', which provides reassurance that the 'fall' can be remedied. 'Fort-Da' refers to words that Sigmund Freud heard his grandchild say and means 'Gone!' 'There!' and the satisfaction the child derived from vanishing objects and their subsequent reappearance, repeating the act of loss gleefully. See (1922), p. 14.

²⁹ Latour (2015), p. 16.

Slapstick lends itself to an investigation into Enlightenment humanist concepts not only because it attacks its tenets of logo-centric thinking, metaphysical philosophy and reason, but because its anarchic forces undermine symbolic and linguistic registers. I further want to propose that the material violence of slapstick has been over-emphasized at the expense of its ruination of language and figures of speech. For Benjamin, the relationship of language and things is constitutive: rather than being an instrumental tool for communication, human language emerged from translating the thing-world's own language.³⁰ Affected by our surroundings we mirror things in our actions and habits; we are 'distorted by similarity'.³¹ As human receivers we interpret by means of mimesis. Things speak: we are the addressees. Benjamin's view overturns conventional object-subject roles, which assign agency to an active human speaker who refers to a passive thing-world.³² In slapstick films this power of objects to dictate action is easier to discern as its human protagonists must respond in physical, material ways. An attempt to articulate the silent comedian's distinctive movement vocabulary is at the heart of this study.

A more nuanced understanding of the character of 'speech' will help us interpret the language of slapstick further. Words therefore have weight too, and are not only abstract or immaterial.³³ What J. L. Austin has termed 'performative utterances' go beyond their literal meaning or truth value and have the power to alter a social reality or personal status. Promises, declarations or commands are 'speech acts' that go beyond the symbolic function of language and become instruments of action.³⁴ Utterances can cure and curse: in magic or religion words have the potential to kill or to save, as Isabelle Stengers has written, and thereby affect our physical well-being directly.³⁵

Although there is little dialogue in the films, language pervades slapstick.³⁶ Images and language constitute each other, whereby slapstick images employ or condense idiomatic turns of phrase literally. Semantics are prerequisite to the construction of many visual gags and situations; when cold water is poured on aspiration, or heroines and heroes get into deep waters or onto thin ice, are pie-eyed or have beans in their ears, gags are often direct translations of proverbs as well as pointed, hyperbolic derivations.

³⁰ See Benjamin (1979).

³¹ Benjamin (1979), p. 109 ff.

³² See Kathryn Busch (2006).

³³ See J. L. Austin (1975), p. 116 ff, 121, 139.

³⁴ Language is more reliant on the idea of material than we pretend: a word can send chills down our spines. In rituals, magical speech is used to incite a supernatural force to act, as Marcel Mauss (1972) argues; language here does not represent – it is contagious and transfers without delay. Objects can possess immaterial powers too. As an anthropologist, Mauss also argues that in a gift giving society, a gift ties its receiver into an exchange, creating a form of influence, or 'mana' as it is called in certain Pacific communities, a term signifying sacred impersonal agency.

³⁵ Stengers (2011), p. 369.

³⁶ Intertitle cards sometimes contain puns, as in Buster Keaton's *Our Hospitality* (1923).

The movement of destruction stretches from the physical texts of the films via laughter to the cinematic apparatus' capacity to ruin, if we follow Walter Benjamin's argument.³⁷ In his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he proposes film to be a prism capable of refracting and exploding the entire prison-world of our 'offices, furnished rooms, saloons' so that they now avail themselves for rumination and political action.³⁸ The ruination for Benjamin occurs through a collapse of distance, as the space of the body would not be respected by a new economy of nearness harnessed by film. This collapse of space between subject and apparatus celebrated by Benjamin as creating potentially revolutionary Spielräume – rooms for play – has been accelerated by the current digital age. Being-in-relation is the new paradigm and data we might have deemed personal is now exploited by pattern analysis and profiling online as feedback patterns between us and the world are altered.³⁹ Beyond examining the relationships between objects and subjects, and attempting to open the historic material to different audiences and futures, this project then stakes a claim in cinema's capacity to create change in the real world.

Method

By studying how matter, objects, humans and technology behave in the films I propose that it is possible to distinguish patterns and harmony in the chaos: we can expect the unexpected. That such categorisation and law-making cannot be comprehensive or impervious to inconsistency makes it more exciting. Following Latour I have attempted to 'pursue' and 'track' objects. Instead of uncovering and deconstructing objects, I shadow them and observe their shifts using metonymic, allegorical practices.⁴⁰

A fascination with ordering the workings of comedy film into a series of laws is common in past commentary. Such studies include Noel Carroll's *Notes on the Sightgag* (1996), Brian Dillon's *Another Mess: Nine Theses on Slapstick* (2007) and artist Andy Holden's performative lecture and film, *Laws of Motion in a Cartoon Landscape* (2011-2015), which brilliantly demonstrates

³⁷ As Hansen (2004), p. 30, has shown, Benjamin's concept of innervation and the productive potential of cartoon violence were edited out of the unrevised ur-text of his influential text written in 1936 and published in its final version in 1939; a lost German version was finally published in 1989.

³⁸ On the one hand, film advances insight into the necessities governing our lives by its use of close-ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by the exploration of commonplace milieus through ingenious movement of the camera; on the other, it manages to assure us of a vast and unsuspected field of action' Benjamin in Hansen (2004), p. 22.

³⁹ See Franke (2014).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

the laws of cartoon physics. Holden, however, has worked backwards to corroborate an extant canon of cartoon laws. Rather than starting with a hypothesis and then searching for evidence to confirm it, I focused on collecting evidence first. I watched films in spurts and batches, listing and grouping my observations. After periods of making, reading, and watching additional films, and as I found new material or insights which refuted previous findings, I adjusted and regrouped the lists, so as to refine and advance my findings and research question. This way of working has allowed me to develop the research in tandem with the practice, to which we will return later. In this process of sorting and mapping I have come to realise that slapstick resists being classified, purified or civilized: it defies dualistic systems of order. Rather than adhering to distinctions between male/female, object/subject its strategies are fine-tuned and operate by degree. Slapstick is a slippery term to which not even labels like 'physical' and 'violent' will stick. It abounds with hybrid monsters that refuse to slot neatly into categorisations of object or subject and in which the smallest thing can cause an echo and expand in networks to maximum effect.⁴¹ The impulse to discipline slapstick, to comprehensively taxonomise and order it by defining its laws is a futile undertaking, as the genre's premise rests on incongruity and surprise. This does not mean that trying to do so leaves us empty handed.

If sorting and translating are - according to Latour - the fundamental acts of modernity, slapstick stretches our attempts to create subdivisions and systems to their breaking point.⁴² Its heritage, stemming from a historically deep stage culture, refers us back to premodern practices.⁴³ Perhaps slapstick's attacks on modern values of purity and order testify to a more complex relationship to modernity than is typically laid out by film scholars.⁴⁴

The scarcity and incompleteness of the earlier film reels in the film archives makes comprehensive quantitative assumptions about the nature of comic film impossible. 'Up to 98 percent [...] depending on the country' of film material before 1915 has been lost.⁴⁵ Although the legacies of American slapstick, including Fatty Arbuckle and Mabel Normand, are well preserved, access to European comic shorts remains restricted to film festivals like Il Cinema Ritrovato in Bologna and film archives. By sifting through dozens of films of the Jean Desmet Collection at the Eye Archive in Amsterdam, researching early film trade journals and fan

⁴¹ Bryant (2011).

⁴² Latour (2015), p. 64.

⁴³ David Robinson (2001), p. 41 has discusses similarities between Chaplin and the clowning traditions passed down from medieval Italy to British pantomime. However, Bryony Dixon points to the difficulty of attempting to create an ancestry and 'gag-ography' due to the scarcity of sources, King (2010), pp. 21-36.

⁴⁴ Miriam Hansen (1994), Ben Singer (2001) and Tom Gunning (1995) have examined cinema in the context of urban modernity. See also King (2010), pp. 114-36 on Keystone's 'uproarious inventions'.

⁴⁵ Preschl (2008), p.49.

magazines on microfilm at the Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin and screening films at British Film Institute I have gathered my own archive of observations on slapstick. Access to recently restored and digitized historic films has enabled me to watch forgotten performances and attempt to rebalance the discourse. Beyond these primary resources, platforms like YouTube and Vimeo have widened my access to source material and given me a newly broad vantage point on which to build my interpretation and argument. This widened access means it is an exciting time in which to research early film, and I have fully exploited the opportunities provided by new digital archives as well as extensive, traditional archival research in several countries.

Archives are living things, dependant on interventions as Derrida suggests.⁴⁶ Critically reframing narratives by placing the teller – myself - firmly within the production of new narratives means taking responsibility for the subjective fabrication of my own archive and the erasures and desires it encompasses.

My writing about the films has multiple objectives. I participate in the recent efforts of numerous writers to ‘amplify... the noise of objects’ through creating ultra-vivid descriptions.⁴⁷ I have attempted to reflect the experience of viewing the footage through appropriating cinematographic techniques in my writing.⁴⁸ This thesis progresses by means of rapid crosscuts, montages and favours a sober language, lingering on surfaces and avoiding diversions into psychological character motivations.

This text also functions as an archive of its own: it forms a directory of slapstick strategies for my own experimental practice as an artist. Through testing and appropriating strategies I aim to achieve new knowledge that feeds my practice. By applying them to my own videos, sculptures and performances, I hope to demonstrate how their focus on destabilising anthropocentric narratives makes them meaningful and urgent today. I want to make this material speak outside of the films’ historic and archival context. Especially in the case of the little viewed European films with women in the lead, there is a danger of producing a counter-history only within the echo chambers of feminist discourse - a canon predominantly written, reviewed and read by women. By working through the material and displaying findings in a fine

⁴⁶ See Derrida (1995).

⁴⁷ Bogost (2012), p. 34.

⁴⁸ Cinema influenced writers including Franz Kafka in his novel *Der Verschollene* (1927) and Alfred Döblin in *Watzeks Kampf mit der Dampfturbine* (1918) to adapt writing styles that appropriated cinematic techniques, lingering on surfaces and avoiding in-depth psychological character descriptions. I have adapted some of their strategies in my writing.

art context I aim to generate a discursive engagement outside of the disciplinary-specific and specialist academic context, opening them up to possible future adaptations. I take recourse to the practice and its relation to the writing in more detail in the practice section. Beyond introducing some of the works that I have developed in tandem with the research, I hope to give insights into my methodology and collaborative working practices.

*

Let us take a look at the journey through the argument. The first chapter examines the building blocks of slapstick's worlds by looking at water, food and smoke. These elements, all crucial parts of slapstick's vocabulary, represent energies and flows, which move both from within and without the body, and undermine traditional assumptions about the atomised body.

The second chapter investigates the agency of objects and how comedians shape shift and metamorphize. By dismantling the understanding of the objects in the films as passive props we can begin to discern a range of object behaviour: whereas canes may be complicit companions or prosthesis, malicious objects outright refuse to co-operate with humans. Not only objects are unstable: male and female comedians slip between genders and classes without discipline and punishment, transgressing and trespassing traditional boundaries.

The third chapter considers built spaces. From the destruction of drawing rooms to revolutionary behaviour in kitchens, the rooms in which the action takes place are far from mere passive backdrops to the films' actions.

The fourth chapter considers how images of nature are twisted and reconfigured in slapstick film and melodrama. Slapstick's complex relation to the Romantic project is explored further as we consider artificial mountains, strong winds and humanised trees. The comediennes' mock essentialist views of women as being in unity with nature and finding kinship in animal companions.

Finally, in chapter five we explore how humans and machines vie for dominance over each other. Machines come apart slowly or are imitated by Ossi and Lea who use their guises for further transgressions of social norms. Utopian elements of machine-(wo)man relationships are played out. At the end of our journey, we will have demonstrated how silent comedy playfully but firmly dethrones human subjectivity, and in its place dreams of a commonwealth of entangled humans and objects which is worth fighting for.

2 Matter

Introduction:

If one really thinks about the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such.

Gayatri Spivak⁴⁹

It is no longer I who expel, the "I" is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border? Julia Kristeva⁵⁰

Before we turn to examine how slapstick film upsets traditionally conceived relations between objects and subjects, and nature and machines, we need to examine its basic material building blocks, including water, food and dust. By especially following the way that these elements move within and without human bodies, we will see how slapstick questions traditional gendered assumptions about the unity and identity of the body. I also want to challenge Henri Bergson's theorisation of the comic as tied to mechanic inelasticity, which is related to ugliness, rigidity and stereotypes. Indeed, this develops a line of Western thought which goes back to Aristotle.⁵¹ Instead of considering the comic as a degrading force 'disparaging ordinary humankind' and evaluating it according to how well humour suits social ends, I want to consider its transformative capabilities. While Bergson juxtaposed the repetitive mechanic quality of the comic with the heterogeneity of organic life, I emphasise how slapstick animates matter. Matter is portrayed as alive and with agency, challenging our anthropocentric standpoint. As a first example, I turn to ask how water is such an essential building block, and how its transformative qualities affect the relationships between things and humans.

Pollution between categories is a crucial trope in slapstick comedy. Water, spit, soup and dusts are used materially and symbolically to explode social patterns or counterpoint authority.

⁴⁹ Spivak in Barad (2007), p. 153.

⁵⁰ Kristeva (1982), p. 4.

⁵¹ Aristotle understands the ludicrous as a subspecies of the ugly and anchors it in social existence and moral utility. Wilhelm von Schlegel and George Meredith in his *Essay on Comedy* 1877 inherit this outlook as discussed in Gutwirth (1993), p. 30 ff.

Disorder and formlessness are tapped into as sources of power to overthrow hierarchical constructs; substances that have no place in our social system become the focus in comic film.

Mary Douglas in *Purity and Danger* (1966) examines how societies construct culturally specific systems of categories. Things that escape those categories, or matter which appears 'out of place', emerge as taboo. These may include animals considered taboo in the Old Testament, which don't adhere to the natural taxonomies outlined in Jewish law, or revulsion-inspiring viscous fluids which escape modern divisions between gas-liquid-solid. I want to argue that what Douglas termed 'matter out of place' has the capacity to relocate the distribution of immaterial or spiritual power. The breakdown of barriers between self and other that occurs in a variety of experiences from phobia to horror Julia Kristeva has described as 'abject' also occurs when we watch a face get cream-pied – only to comic effect.⁵² In the following I want to better understand how such disturbances in identity are retrieved from the margins and put to play in slapstick film.

2.1 Adulterations (Water)

2.1.1 *Tears & tides*

In the world of early film comedy, water is always near, but rarely in drops or trickles. Forget Viola Dana's crystal tear drops: water shoots from people's faces, flooding houses.⁵³ Its abundance makes it instrumental to gelling transformative processes in slapstick worlds. Water is vibrant matter; it operates not as an obedient tool in the comediennes' hands but has alchemic powers. It changes environments, people and things, replacing old taxonomies with new orders.

In *Rosalie et Léontine vont au théâtre* (1911), the large Rosalie and lank Leontine are sitting in the auditorium loudly expressing their grief at a dramatic death on stage. Water pours from their eyes in such exceeding quantities it seems their bodies are emptying themselves entirely. Their soaking wet hankies - wrung at eye level - ruin the theatre performance and spray those sitting nearby. The motif of people crying rivers occurs at the same time in comic strip culture:

⁵² Kristeva (1982).

⁵³ Her tears feature prominently on the poster for *Blue Jeans* (1921).

Windsor McCay's little Nemo's tears submerge the entire house until it swims away, with its inhabitants perched on the rooftop.⁵⁴

The image of lachrymose women mirrors and mocks their supposedly ungovernable emotions and susceptibility to irrational responses when in public. During the suffrage campaigns, the political behaviour of women was deliberately tied to hysteria, showing them as overflowing, tidal and bound to extreme mood swings.⁵⁵ Their emotions are contrasted with the atomised, disciplined and self-contained, insular male bodies. Powerful and threatening metaphors of being lifted off one's feet and swept along by the free flow of oceans or drowning were essential to the identity of the German Freikorps soldiers, as Klaus Theweleit has shown. The young men active in the years immediately after the Great War, shaped by imperial military institutions and a culture of violence, defined their bodies as individuated and in opposition to the female body. Theweleit describes their dualistic view seeing the world as "them" and "us", male and female, hard and soft, solid and liquid'. In writings associated with the movement metaphors of the oceanic were tied to the women and communist political tide – the Freikorps sought to contain or define themselves against. They rallied against the 'Red Flood' 'the raging 'Polish torrent', 'the wave of Bolshevism'.⁵⁶ Love 'flows' in an anthology of worker's poems, Oskar Maria Graf writes:

Beloved! My arms are drunken revellers
Who know the taste of wine!
Girl! Raging storm at sea! Hurricane!

And Karl Bröger:

O ocean of desire I have sailed!
O dark, mysterious, deep yawning sea!⁵⁷

⁵⁴ *Little Nemo in Slumberland* (1908).

⁵⁵ Caricatures in *Punch* magazine and large media outlets are testament. 'One does not need to be against women's suffrage,' the London Times editorialized in 1908, 'to see that some of the more violent partisans of that cause are suffering from hysteria. We use the word not with any scientific precision, but because it is the name most commonly given to a kind of enthusiasm that has degenerated into habitual nervous excitement.' See Gilman (1993), p. 320.

⁵⁶ Theweleit's examples range from novelists like Wilhelm Weigand to a captain from the Iron Division, Theweleit (1987), p. 229 ff.

⁵⁷ Theweleit draws on the *Reclaim Worker's Poetry* anthology by poets who were fascist sympathisers or whose poetry was appropriated by the proto-fascist thinking or Nazis, often against their will as in the case of Oskar Maria Graf and Heinrich Bröger. See Theweleit (1987), p. 382 ff.

Braving the streams like rocks and damming and disciplining the flows, the integrity of the state or autonomy of the Freikorps's own body would be defended with an annihilating violence. That water was tied to enemy images in proto-fascistic thinking underlines its antagonism to the supposed Enlightened, phallogocentric ideal of a discrete, atomized man - and affirms water's capability to connect and contaminate.

While the term 'woman' was applied to anything fluvial and limitless and placing it as 'other' as Theweleit has shown, Astrida Neimanis in her recent writings on 'Hydrofeminism' reclaims the idea of women as fluvial and inseparable from the flows and ebbs of the natural world. She posits the body as part of a larger circulation of a Hypersea and speaks of water as medium, conduit and mode of connection. Crucially, her text starts setting out that 'we are all bodies of water' and aims at undermining biological essentialism that casts women as 'uncontainable'. Trinh Minh-Ha's suggestion that women's fluids - menstruation and lactation - can be a well spring for writing, creativity and life must be expanded to an understanding that all bodies have reservoirs to be tapped and also equally depend on water for their existence.⁵⁸

2.1.2 Weepies

*The raging stream is called violent
But the riverbed that hems it in
No one calls violent.*⁵⁹

The capacity to expertly elicit tears was popular practice in cinematic ventures. Weepies entitled *A Fool There Was* (1915) and *True Heart Susie* (1919) were drawing large audiences and floods of cash, as Ben Singer has shown.⁶⁰ In camp tales of romance, such tear-jerkers portrayed heroines in situations of heightened sensational tragedy. Terminally-ill friends, men who are impossible to love, sacrifice, hardship, illness, loss: women-victims and housewives not killed by the plot would meet adversity with resilience, bravery and, once alone, tears. In *Rosalie et Leontine vont au Theatre* female lachrymosity itself becomes subject to laughter and the ideal of stoic resilience in the face of adversity is lampooned. Emotional containment and composure are exploded by Rosalie and Leontine's comedy tears, celebrating the coarse, common status of laughter. Their excess, met with anger by those sitting nearby, ends in a full on physical

⁵⁸ See Neimanis (2012), p. 85-97.

⁵⁹ Brecht in Theweleit (1987), p. 229.

⁶⁰ See Singer's illuminating chapter 'Sensationalism and Urban Modernity' (2001), p. 59-100.

scramble – eggs flying, cracking and mixing with their tears.⁶¹ Such an adulteration of water is common in many slapstick contexts as we shall see. Where women's fluvial bodies and tears are commonly linked with irrational and sentimental behaviour, this set of associations is overcome in slapstick film.

2.1.3 *Boys too*

The film *Rosalie et Leontine vont au Theatre* shows women as *Störer* - a German legal term for persons disrupting public peace and order. The incapacity to control undisciplined bodies is not limited to women but is frequent in male performances in slapstick films - boys cry, too. Masculine heroism ends in tears for Kri Kri, who howls in front of his crashed plane, and the tramp sheds so many tears at a cinema his trousers are blotched and he appears incontinent.⁶² Although in many early rough and tumble films we laugh at crying men, shedding tears can also help the men get what they want and solve conflict: manly composure (and a strict verdict) crumbles at a court of justice when a young servant speaks of his love for Cunegonde. The wardens are incapable of suppressing their empathetic sobs. Laurel and Hardy also use their tears strategically to placate a policeman and escape punishment. The anti-type to an armoured, impenetrable man whose shame, animosity are buried deep is embodied by Stan Laurel whose nerves are constantly teetering on the brink of breakdown as he expresses his misery at worldly injustice with his trademark upside down smile.⁶³ When comedy men embrace their aqueous, leaky bodies as permeable and overflowing instead of atomized and self-sufficient, it often plays out to their own advantage, creating a world in which overcoming gender stereotypes is rewarded. In these performances mucus and tears soak and soften rigid gender constructions.

2.1.4 *Shape shifter*

Since the first film comedy in history, *L'Arroseur Arrosé* (1895), men and women getting soaked in full dress abound: uniforms, suits and wedding gowns lose their shape; hairdos are ruined. When buckets are emptied over unsuspecting subjects, or flung into admirer's faces, water alters the physical and psychological state of the persons it comes into contact with; it strips

⁶¹ M.J. Michelet evocatively describes the viscosity and vital fecundity of the sea, in his chapter *The Milky Sea* (1861), p. 114-27.

⁶² *Kri Kri imitia i voli di Pegoud* (1914), *A Film Johnny* (1914).

⁶³ *The Finishing Touch* (1928).

their authority and capacity to pursue their affairs - or the offender.⁶⁴ In *Tilly and the Fire Engine* (1911) the two young girls Tilly and Sally hijack a hose, wetting a group of cyclists and keeping a squadron of fire fighters at bay.⁶⁵ While water's capacity to blind, arrest, sweep people off their feet or make slippery is extensively used for comic effect here, its violent flipside rapidly becomes apparent when it is used by authority against civilians. Water jets became a means of crowd control for the first time during the Berlin *Blutmai* (1929), and during the release of the contested anti-war movie *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), which shows the bruising but also destabilizing effects of water jets and wetness on our sense of selfhood. Water is a crucial building block to the slapstick cosmos not only because of its transformative and morphological qualities but because it has the capacity to rapidly turn us into objects.⁶⁶

The capacity of water to shape shift means it facilitates different forms of violence and destruction. It often appears to soften the pain of a blow or a tumble: Buster drops into his wife's bath through a hole in the roof, Louise crashes fully clothed into her bathtub and the sales personnel in *The Garage* (1920) pile into a tub, all of whom emerge drenched but otherwise fine.⁶⁷ Fatty and Edgar's punches and kicks are scuppered by the slippery floor and – after falling into a rain tank – their angry shouts are reduced to bubbles.⁶⁸ The materiality of water, then, lends itself to comedy, which as Aristotle said must 'not imply pain'.⁶⁹

In *Cunégonde reçoit sa famille* (1912) the maid's attempt to clean the house escalates into total destruction as water is used excessively. Upholstered chairs and the piano alongside books, plants and paintings are all eagerly wetted and scrubbed. Buckets of water are flung into cabinets, flushing out and shattering china shelf-by-shelf. No distinction is made between insides or outsides and object surfaces are treated the same. Their price, use, and sentimental value are not recognised or respected: when a painting is subjected to the same watery treatment as the floorboards, the maid does away with distinctions in care. Things are physically deconstructed into their constituent components and relegated to their mere materiality – they are treated without nuances. Things are bankrupted and brought into

⁶⁴ *Little Moritz demande Rosalie en mariage* (1911), Rosalie and Moritz alongside their wedding party fall into subterranean sewers, *The Blacksmith* (1922), Buster fills a gentleman's hat with water, *Mabel's Wilful Way* (1915), a policeman gets soaked by Fatty.

⁶⁵ *Tilly and the Fire Engines* (1911).

⁶⁶ The German release of the anti-war movie *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) in Berlin was met with mass screening disturbances by members of the NSDAP, so called 'WaWe's - water cannons used as crowd control. This is frequently cited as first deployments of water cannon. Spiegel Online (2011).

⁶⁷ *Go West* (1925).

⁶⁸ *Fatty's Tintype Tangle* (1915), also Fatty pretends to drown putting a pipe in the middle of a pond, *Good Night, Nurse!* (1918).

⁶⁹ Gutwirth (1993), p. 29.

liquidation in the legal sense of the word: their assets are stripped, divested and redistributed in the viscous sea that now encompasses the living room.

The circular movement of polishing or sweeping together, a movement that embodies the ever-repeating nature of housework, is here exaggerated and sped up. Object-life is fast-forwarded; things are swept *away* or mopped *up*.⁷⁰ Things are made to shine through a film of water. The liquification of contours affects the stature and dignity attached to things and people: the soaked policeman's uniform in *Tilly and the Fire Engine* (1911) macerates and softens his authority.

Spray meanwhile can be a softer form of violence; when Lea soaks her infatuated boss with club water there is a cheeky cooling of male desire.⁷¹ And underwater, stuff congeals, creates a primordial soup in which objects and subjects float alike.⁷² As matter morphs, evolves and disintegrates, new alliances form.

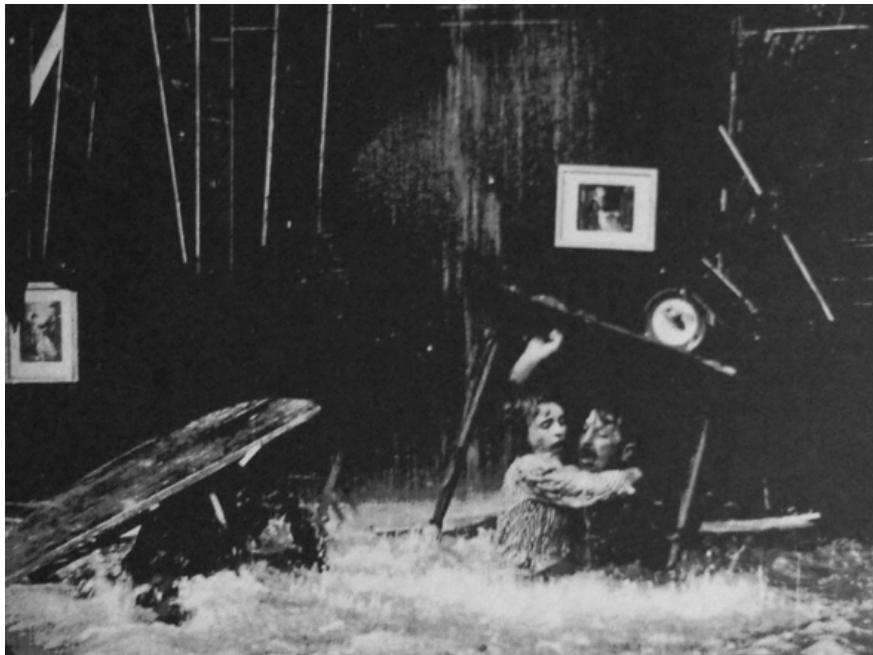


Fig. 1. *Le Bateau de Léontine*. Pathé frères, 1911, Frame enlargement.

In slapstick, when deluges cascade down opulent stairwells creating giant slides, or water poured from ceilings and kitchens is turned into pools used for boating, the liquid not only lifts

⁷⁰*Le Bateau de Léontine* (1911).

⁷¹*Lea si diverte* (1912).

⁷²*Cunégonde reçoit sa famille* (1912).

objects out of place but intoxicates those in its midst.⁷³ Ceaselessly overflowing, it touches everything and everyone: chairs, pots and pans, plates, people are hoisted and begin to float without trick technology. Things are elevated, buoyant, out of place. If water makes heavy, soaks bodies and immobilises those in pursuit, it simultaneously mobilises, drives away and brings forth.

Having examined water and tears spilling out of bodies and over objects, making their outlines disappear, we now turn to examine bodily fluids that are perceived as more impure, and usually hidden in Western bourgeois habitus influenced by court etiquette and self-restraint.⁷⁴

2.1.5 *Sweating, sneezing, spitting*

Fatty emits all sorts of bodily fluids on his first outing with his bourgeois wife and mother in law; loudly blowing his nose, sneezing onto Mabel's beautiful gown and suddenly sweating and undressing.⁷⁵ He collects every drop of his wife's kiss, wipes his finger in a circle around his mouth - then licks it as elsewhere Tilly distributes very wet kisses: spittle and sneezes are very much present to the joy of some and chagrin of others.⁷⁶ While Fatty fails to impress his new relations, Bigorno's fever sweat has transformative powers: he sneezes and sweats excessively, attracting the homeless as a source of heat in his winter village and melts the snow in his garden solely with his bodily heat.⁷⁷

The absence of a crucial piece of equipment - the handkerchief - is met with resourcefulness: throughout the films noses and mouths are wiped on a plethora of things ranging from a horse's tail, a tailcoat's tail, a tie, braids, an evening dress on a mannequin, a doormat, and another restaurant customer's serviette to the cloth just used to wipe restaurant tables.⁷⁸ Rosalie uses her broom as a tissue and Fatty snorts into the towel he has just washed.⁷⁹ The tramp wipes his

⁷³ In *Le Bateau de Léontine* (1911), *Rosalie en ménage* (1911) and *Cunégonde reçoit sa famille* (1912), kitchens, stairwells and living rooms are submerged and in *The Playhouse* (1921) a massive deluge bursts from a small on-stage aquarium, sweeping the fleeing audience off their feet and turning the orchestra pit into a pool filled to the brim.

⁷⁴ The sociologist Norbert Elias analyses how the European habitus was moulded by courtly etiquette, shame and repugnance; see Elias (1978).

⁷⁵ *That Little Band of Gold* (1915).

⁷⁶ *Fatty's Tintype Tangle* (1915), *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914).

⁷⁷ *Bigorno soigne son rhume* (1912).

⁷⁸ *The Bell Boy* (1918), *Good Night, Nurse!* (1918), *The Fireman* (1916), *The Butcher Boy* (1917), *The Floorwalker* (1916), *His Trysting Place* (1914), *The Rounders* (1914), *Caught in Cabaret* (1914).

⁷⁹ *Ravalement précipité* (1911), *Mabel and Fatty's Wash Day* (1915).

dirty hands on a cook's hair and apron, as well as someone else's beard.⁸⁰ Rather than being excluded from view, in slapstick grease and slime are rubbed in and blasted out. The excessive spreading of mucus over and into all sorts of persons and objects also demarcates and defaces – belongings are spoiled – but also elevated: Patouillard honours his love's handkerchief like a trophy, smelling and holding it tight.⁸¹

In Friedrich Vischer's *Auch Einer* (1870), the protagonist simply referred to as A. E. criticises historians for distorting world history 'without thoroughly acquainting [themselves] with the accompanying catarrh that played a role in its essence, development, and individuality'.⁸² A. E. re-reads Shakespeare's *Othello*, relating every major turn of the drama to physiological conditions such as the scratching, itching of a 'hellish flu' and Othello's incessant 'harrumphing, coughing, endless nose-blowing'. His decision to choke Desdemona is related to his own suffocation '[h]e is on the point of asphyxiation, and so, in the fury of his struggle for life, this frantic seething of the brain, he becomes a devil: I shall suffocate, so then should you'. The final straw then is a lost object: 'The handkerchief! The handkerchief!' This cry - he has obviously mislaid his own - shows which object has become the sole concern of his increasingly deranged imagination, 'projecting A. E.'s own troubled relationship with demonic objects.'⁸³ For A. E. progression in life is stifled by constant absence of basic things. Scientific progressivism and optimism are turned on their head, snot prevents humanity from reaching higher consciousness.

Water and fluids then transform environments and relations. But they also bring into question the status of the body as unified and discrete entity. Rosalie's tears and Bigorno's sweat show how flows of matter and energy move freely within and without the body undermining hierarchies and even changing seasons.'

2.2 Beans!!

Water and slime are not the only lively and powerful agents to appear in slapstick film - food is an operator that directly influences human behaviour and shows the human body as part of a

⁸⁰ *The Fireman* (1916), *His Trysting Place* (1914).

⁸¹ *Patouillard amoureux* (1911).

⁸² Vischer (1936), p. 43. A.E. is the main character in Friedrich Vischer's formerly widely read humorous German novel from 1870 in which he coined the turn of phrase 'Tücke des Objektes', which means 'thing-maliciousness'.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

larger metabolism, which ingests and thereby merges with its environment. For Friedrich Nietzsche the agency of nutrition, place and climate is "inconceivably more important than everything one has taken to be important so far ... [i.e.,] 'God,' 'soul,' 'virtue,' 'sin,' 'beyond,' 'truth,' 'eternal life.'⁸⁴ The central role of food in the films confirms its role as life-matter, non-sterile – it is an alive ur-substance. Yet from the banal, transformative capacities of food to generate new human tissue when ingested to its psychosocial effects, most of its metabolic operations occur invisibly within the intestines, the pancreas and kidney.⁸⁵

To make food's affective powers visible they must be externalized from the digestive tract. Slapstick films show the transformative capacities of food by placing it in assemblages with the civic ritual of etiquette, the body, violence and by creating time lapses.

2.2.1 *Etiquette*

Ingestion occurs in excessive or minuscule amounts: an infinitesimal mis-measurement of ingredients can tip a seemingly balanced situation into mayhem with catastrophic endings – anticipating the explosion of Monsieur Creosote in Monty Python's *Meaning of Life* (1983) following the notorious wafer-thin mint.⁸⁶ The tramp's perpetual hunger leads him to eat all sorts of things not meant for ingestion, whereas viscous, creamy edibles land in eyes, ears and noses but rarely enter bodies through the mouth in the usual manner. The transfer of food from the plate via eating instruments to behind the teeth is in constant jeopardy.

As its visceral qualities are explored, food loses its status as a special, precious substance. It is joyously taken out of the context of the refined limitation of the bourgeois ritual of eating. Food is stolen, nibbled secretly, swallowed greedily in large chunks without chewing, bitten off behind backs or licked and returned.⁸⁷ The Enlightenment obsession with hiding and containing fluids as well as the careful assignment of instruments to particular foods is exploded. Food oozes, drips and besmirches; it is smeared over faces, table cloths, bums, walls, furniture and balding heads.

⁸⁴ Nietzsche in Bennett (2010), p. 45.

⁸⁵ See Bennett on an overview of sociophysical effects of foods (2010), p. 39-51.

⁸⁶ *The Star Boarder* (1915), the tramp raids the kitchen of his boarding house and helps himself to outrageous amounts of food from a shared plate, Mr. Creosote is fed by headwaiter John Cleese in *The Meaning of Life* (1983).

⁸⁷ *Caught in Cabaret* (1914), *His Trysting Place* (1914), the tramp bites into somebody else bread roll and returns it innocently *Mabel's Busy Day* (1914), *Gentlemen of Nerve* (1914), *Mabel's Wilful Way* (1915), *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914).

If a Western bourgeois dinner table in an early-twentieth-century household presents a web of signs that are legible only by those in the know, this semiotic system is scrambled, its nodes pried apart and muddled when the tramp makes a rose palatable by putting salt on it. The material grammar of foods - the sour lemon juice, the bounciness of orb-like apples or the slime of undercooked egg yolks and their frangible shells - is constantly blasted out of its syntactic framework. When a paper streamer lands on the tramps' plate amongst spaghetti he unwittingly nibbles it as if it were the same thing. Representative shapes are squashed to mush in a fiercely physical world where stable symbolic references are squeezed and cracked.

Instruments pertaining to food are mishandled, mismatched and contaminated. Knives and forks are wiped on sleeves, thick chunks of baguette are dunked into tea, knives are used instead of forks and spoons and fingers for buttering bread.⁸⁸ Master flipper Fatty tosses an omelette over his shoulder, onto his boot, kick-flipping it back up into the pan.⁸⁹ Mabel stuffs her mouth with pralines but is caught and returns the spittle-covered balls.⁹⁰ The tramp leans into beans, elsewhere into soup.⁹¹ He wears food- a sausage chain, which dangles from his breast pocket, a stolen sandwich on his head beneath his hat - and knowingly sits down on a pie to hide it.⁹²

Through putting food where it doesn't belong and handling it inappropriately, the comedians make visible underlying codes of polite behaviour. By spitting onto and licking foodstuffs or spilling and leaking them they place matter out of place - they create dirt. Mary Douglas writes:

where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements.⁹³

This heterogenous comingling of categories is furthered when food is shared complicitly with animals in the films: the tramp gnaws on the same bone as a dog in *The Gold Rush* (1925) and in *A Dogs Life* (1918), treating him as equal whilst Mabel and Fatty jump fences to share their ice creams with a brown bear.⁹⁴ Matter out of place contaminates boundaries between the living

⁸⁸ *The Immigrant* (1917), *The Butcher Boy* (1917).

⁸⁹ *Fatty's Tintype Tangle* (1915).

⁹⁰ *Mabel's Wilful Way* (1915).

⁹¹ *The Immigrant* (1917), *The Fireman* (1916).

⁹² *In the Park* (1915), *Caught in Cabaret* (1914), *The Star Boarder* (1915).

⁹³ Douglas, (1966), p. 35.

⁹⁴ *Mabel's Wilful Way* (1915).

and inanimate matter, mixes amorphous elements and ‘impinges on the tidy insularity of a person’, in Christian Enzenberger’s words.⁹⁵

The creation of dirt, as Enzenberger has remarked, is also a question of amount – larger quantities of matter out of place are no longer considered dirt. Slapstick, then, contradicts Henri Bergson’s assertion that comedy operates through exaggeration: rather than resorting to spilling and spreading large quantities for maximum effect, the comedians fine tune amounts to make them qualify as dirt.

2.2.2 *Metabolic mechanisms*

The power of food and drink to transform and change the state of our human bodies is shown in *The Gold Rush*: ingesting a good meal instantly strengthens the tramp. Once the last bone has been licked clean he is ready to fight. Equally, alcohol immediately results in drunkenness – even in anticipation before a drop has been drunk!⁹⁶ Delays between cause and effect are cut. The metabolic mechanisms are sped up into absurdity. Food affects mood and self-confidence. It is an operator, or as Michel Serres says, a ‘thermal exciter’ shifting the equilibrium of energetic distribution.⁹⁷ The congealing of edible matter and the human body can generate superhuman abilities – or objectify humans. The tramp’s unhappy face as he ingests his shoe or swallows a whistle is testament to this. When he involuntarily hiccups as his body attempts to expel the unwanted thing, the whistle’s tune disrupts a concert and attracts dogs of all shapes and sizes.⁹⁸ The man becomes what he ate, a whistle.

Non-edible objects are ingested solely on the basis of their visual resemblance to food. A stepped into piece of filth is scooped from the sole and licked and shoe laces eaten like spaghetti.⁹⁹ Amidst a crowd on dusty ground, the tramp picks up what he thinks is a cigar. In trying to light it he discovers it is a sausage that he then happily eats.¹⁰⁰ Swallowing isn’t always easy and gulps don’t always go down well: spasmodic contortions, burps and congestions are part of the process of taking in. The tramp gargles drinks before swallowing.¹⁰¹ The backwash of

⁹⁵ See Christian Enzenberger's *Expanded Essay on Dirt (Grosserer Versuch iiber den Schmutz)* in Theweleit (1987), p. 385.

⁹⁶ *Hard Luck* (1921).

⁹⁷ Serres (2007).

⁹⁸ *City Lights*, (1931).

⁹⁹ *The Butcher Boy* (1917), *The Gold Rush* (1925).

¹⁰⁰ *Mabel's Busy Day* (1914).

¹⁰¹ *Caught in Cabaret* (1914).

leftover drinks are mingled into indistinguishable amalgams and downed.¹⁰² Mouths are for tasting the world, and not just what's served up on a platter.

2.2.3 *h-angry*

Food, then, is an agent in more than one way: it has the ability to change peoples' dispositions to extreme effect but also serves to give physical expression to its (non)effects. Frustration at being prevented from eating is commonplace. In *My Wives' Relations* (1922), Buster, sitting at a packed table is asked to pass on bread, butter, beans, salt, butter and pepper simultaneously from right to left, and left to right. Crisscrossing the screen is a muddle of desires, appetites and arms; he is unable to eat what is in front of him. Much to his ire Blacksmith Buster must hammer flat his lunch on his anvil to look busy as his boss enters.¹⁰³

Power relations slip: Buster finds himself upset or hangry – a portmanteau describing a feeling of irritation deriving from hunger - showing the control of human temper to be dependent on the ingestion of temperate substances in their vicinity.¹⁰⁴

A hot broth in *Le Torchon Brule* (1911) is the cause for a violent fight between Rosalie and her husband and a boy is thrown overboard by a cruel captain for spilling coffee in *The Love Nest* (1923).¹⁰⁵ Perhaps the greatest escalation of food-based anger occurs in *Shoulder Arms*, where, wearing a gas mask to survive the stench, the tramp hurls a piece of Limburger cheese from his barracks like a grenade. With predictable improbability it lands on a German officer's face, blinding him and causing the conflict of war to escalate. Food items do not just have metamorphic effects within bodies, they tie into the macrocosm of processes of energy exchange. Elsewhere, gluttony itself can be fatal in McCay's film cartoon *How a Mosquito Operates* (1912). The animal sucks itself so full of blood its inflated body explodes.

The ready-to-handness of food means it is easily objectified into a weapon. Pepper is dispensed in clouds causing sneeze attacks, a spoon of soup is flicked with precision into an eye or a large cabbage hurled - knocking an actor off stage.¹⁰⁶ The tramp uses the malleability of dough to fashion a lasso and a bat to smack his enemy, pre-empting Adenoid Hynkel's snapping of an

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ *The Blacksmith* (1922). Instead of eating edibles, bodily orifices here serve as containers of food: mouths are like pockets and become hiding places and vessels for transportation.

¹⁰⁴ Different sources are said to be the origin of the term – the OED states it emerged in the 1950s

¹⁰⁵ *The Love Nest* (1923).

¹⁰⁶ *His Trysting Place* (1914), and entangling him in the scenery into *The Haunted House* (1921).

elastic spaghetti into the face of the Italian general.¹⁰⁷ While slapstick draws on an ancient tradition of pelting eggs or vegetables at authorities as a means of humiliation, its custard pies also continue to inspire pieing or flanning off-screen in perhaps the most direct political impact of the genre. Whereas the *entertainment* in comic shorts like *Mr. Flip* (1909) or Mack Sennett's Keystone productions was multidirectional and subjected anyone to cake treatment, political patisserie became more refined and exclusively directed upwards in the social hierarchy against pomposity throughout the twentieth century.¹⁰⁸ Politicians, economists, celebrities or other figures of authority became popular target amongst activists. When cream cakes successfully strike their target, they enter bodily orifices and erase distinct facial features.¹⁰⁹ Whilst a cake attack is certainly humiliating and embarrassing, perhaps such a blurring of boundaries between subject and world is not perceived as horrific and abject because its substance is delicious; 'we only use the finest patisserie', regular pie-wielder Goldin has said, deposing pies lovingly instead of simply throwing them.¹¹⁰

Slapstick food is applied with the aim to insult rather than injure. Hardy gently pours soup over his rival, and in a caring gesture he places the empty bowl on his semi-bald head: first making the man's head resemble a spilling egg yolk, then serving it up.¹¹¹ An unlucky ice cream vendor is force-fed one of his own ice creams by Mabel and Fatty, until the cone protrudes from his nose, turning him into a snowman.¹¹² Humans also turn into fountains: Patouillard attempts to stop a bottle of champagne from covering a city with bubbles by using his foot as a cork and the tramp's routine of twisting one ear and spitting out water in an arc - then twisting the other and discharging more with less pressure regularly turns him into a gargoyle.¹¹³ Anthropomorphism is inverted here as humans are reconfigured as objects. It is important to note that these transformations are not violent but gentle and deliberate, challenging slapstick's reputation as a violent rough-and-tumble comedy; the temporary suspension of personhood when Charlie freezes into a lifeless statue of stone occurs entirely voluntary - without Medusa's deadening glance.

¹⁰⁷ *The Pawn Shop* (1916), *The Great Dictator* (1940).

¹⁰⁸ Pie-throwing became such a staple in slapstick it became practically synonymous with it. In Laurel and Hardy's *Battle of the Century* more than 3000 pies were thrown.

¹⁰⁹ And protesters anarchist groups like PIE or T.A.A.R.T. which honoured the pie as a call to arms in their namesake acronyms (PIE stands for people insurgent everywhere). BBC News (2000).

¹¹⁰ Goldin in BBC News (2000).

¹¹¹ *That's My Wife* (1929).

¹¹² *Mabel's Wilful Way* (1915).

¹¹³ *Bouteille de Patouillard* (1911), *A Film Johnny* (1914), *The Bell Boy* (1918), *The Balloonatic* (1923), *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928), *The Floorwalker* (1916), *Caught in Cabaret* (1914) When the tramp and Fatty are punched in the belly, one emits an illicitly consumed drink, the other ice cream respectively.

Having examined the transformative capacities of water, foodstuffs and ingestion to turn subjects to stone, humans to whistles or laughable blobby cake faces, we have demonstrated how human subjects are constituted by the ingestible matter that surrounds them: humans are more in need of the environment than it is of them. As we have seen, slapstick focuses on bodily orifices neglected in Western etiquette, showing the ease with which matter moves from without to within the human subject determining degrees of aliveness and self-determination. Matter is fuel, generating human mood and energy levels in quasi-alchemic processes - even slightly unbalanced digestive processes upset the ideal of the human body as an atomized, empowered individual in charge of his surroundings.

The difficulty in distinguishing the materiality which makes up the human body from that of its environments is played with especially in man-object hybrids when in Charlie's table dance, he skewers two bread rolls on forks and swings them like legs and feet under his chin. This is a case of prosopoeia, the rhetorical device of inhabiting another person or object, acted out physically: he enlists the power of objects to create a figure that transcends representation and confuses human form. The assemblage resembles painter Archimboldo's sixteenth-century puzzle portraits: their transformative compositions metamorphose elements from seemingly distinct realms of art and science as Chaplin makes different categories of classification - human and inanimate - slip fluidly.

2.3 Dusts, Smoke and Powder

We have seen how in slapstick water, food, slime and muck, by moving in and out of bodies, entangle subjects with the world. Where ingestion is the most intimate form of taking in what is outside and has immense effects on the flows of bodily energy, dusts and fine particles are no less transformative, as we shall see. Testament to the ceaseless crumbling and disintegration of the world around us, dusts can blur the clean and sharp edges between bodies and things, smudging the outlines of discrete entities. Dusts' amorphous formlessness means they can get anywhere, they are - as Steven Connor describes - quasi-choate substances whose diffuse and scattered body is difficult to delineate itself.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Connor (2009).

Like slime and fluids out of place, dusts in our everyday life are subject to extensive routines of control: we regularly separate dust from our body and environments or filter it from the air. The films – by contrast – put focus on powders and celebrate their generative capacities.

In slapstick, tiny particles are given large powers: they have the capacity to curb the execution of the law, blur boundaries between the dead and the living or ridicule the presence of a higher spiritual presence. Bordering on the invisible, the featherweight particles, which emanate from every object, point towards the distribution and spread of things, asking where a body stops.

2.3.1 *Smoke, steam and cardboard clouds*

Smoke or compressed steam mixed with chemicals was an important part of nineteenth-century magic and phantasmagoria spectacles. Likewise, in early cinema, steam would emanate in puffs from vessels in *feeries* - fantastic displays focused on transformations similar to stage mechanisms – like in Georges Melies' *La Danse du feu* (1899) or *Le Palais des mille et une nuits* (1905). In magical transfiguration acts smoke would be complicit in tricking the eye by spreading an ominous opacity.¹¹⁵ Such displays of occult powers are met with pragmatic responses when in *A Night at the Show* (1915) the tramp gets hold of a fire hose and soaks the magical stage fires, extinguishing the dramatic display. His water jet floods the magical fires, dampening the theatrical atmosphere of mystery and wonder. By taking theatre smoke as a sign of a real fire and combating it with the appropriate physical means, the tramp eradicates any suggestion of a spiritual presence.

When swirling dusts or eddies of smoke evoke the presence of supernatural beings (Dracula and Satan are said to transport themselves in mist as Connor has shown) in *The Haunted House* (1921), the cloak of an actor dressed as the devil is accidentally incinerated in a fire place.¹¹⁶ Creating a spectacular smoke trail as he races off, the fire amplifies the actor's guise and ameliorates his previously mediocre act: he now successfully terrifies others. Slapstick emphasises smoke as a basic material processes and exposes its said powers to conjure up mythical beings as a hoax. Slapstick actors can thus be said to be participating in a project of demystification. It is important to note, however, that demystification in slapstick is devoid of the self-importance from a position outside of ideology: the tramp after soaking the stage subsequently sprays himself and everyone else in the audience, undermining his own dignity. Instead of uncovering ideology, 'mystification' must here be understood in Henri Lefebvre's

¹¹⁵ See Uhlirova (2013), p. 118 ff.

¹¹⁶ Connor (2009).

sense, implying a prank, jest or trick in which the audience is aware of the conventions rather than innocent and duped in the performance.¹¹⁷

Also, depictions of fantastic otherworldly places are rendered physical, touchable realities, leaving little room for ambivalence: when Buster is shot and killed in *The Love Nest* we see painted cartoon clouds pass him by during his ascent to heaven. Heavy cardboard clouds also flank his rising and descent in *The Haunted House*, confining dream worlds and even perceptions of heaven and hell to materiality.

Mystical appearances and smoke clouds are shown to be the effect of material greed when a gang of bank robbers attempt to protect their loot by laying smoke bomb traps and dressing up as ghosts to deter unwanted guests. Yet things go awry when too many different people stumble into the house. Bank clerk Buster, his suitors and a random troupe of stage actors dressed in fantastic costumes activate traps and accidentally create their own tricks until the bank robbers themselves believe the house to be haunted. Careful timing of magic tricks is paired with comic timing when Buster picks up a large vase which explodes in his hands, disintegrating into a puff of smoke and pile of rubble. Whilst Buster can see no one around and ascribes the event to ominous metaphysics, in a cross cut we are shown his suitor outside the house, who fires a shot through a window. The materialisation of persons or objects out of nowhere, as well as the dissolution of solid objects into thin air when Buster jumps on top of an actor dressed as a demon and is left fighting his cloak as he walks off is shown to be dependent on chance and his accidental position in space rather than a mysterious supernatural force.

When seemingly metaphysical events are reduced to their material cause and demystified, this does not deter from their potency: dusts and smoke are powerful actors which interact with humans and have capacity to make us jump, run, hide, shiver and see things that are not there.

2.3.2 *Smoking*

While smoke and dusts are reduced from their lofty spiritual position in slapstick and affirmed as powerful material agents, smoking also has large powers in quotidian interactions. Instead of creating an aura of detachment, as in the chain-smoking cool persona evoked in images and films like *Pandora's Box* (1929), smoke in slapstick acts as an irritant – often with immediate physical consequences.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Critique of Everyday Life, p. 136 ff.

¹¹⁸ See Helmuth Lethen (1994) on a culture of distance and cool conduct in Weimar Germany.

The tramp and Fatty use all kinds of body parts – sometimes his own but often others’ – to serve their smoking habits. Bums, bald heads, feet and necks are used to light their matches.¹¹⁹ Mouths become ashtrays.¹²⁰ By lighting cigarettes off the bodies of others they degrade them into mere objects that provide friction - acts that provoke allergic reactions. Empowered by a fence the tramp puffs thick smoke through the wire mesh into a group of people, relying on physical instead of social barriers to restrain their revenge, or blows mouthfuls of smoke into a trombone making the musician at the other end cough, spittle and swear.^{121,122} Smoking is a means to exaggerate masculinity to excess: when the tramp in *A Film Johnny* (1914) lights a cigarette by shooting at it he combines aggression with cool detachment.¹²³ Wealthy Fatty exhales smoke onto those around to demonstrate power and take up more space.¹²⁴ Sloterdijk describes the child blowing a soap bubble and seeing part of itself ‘excorporated’ in the bubble’s brief afterlife. Breathing spreads the body and decentres it: exhaling smoke makes visible the expanse of bodily boundaries.¹²⁵

Wafting smoke seemingly materialises into a trail of cloth when a lady’s puffy white tulle dress catches fire from the tramp’s cigar – the smoky fire appears simultaneously as an extension of her dress and its destroyer. Dematerialising the fabric and taking over the function of a veil, it points towards matter as a cloud of atoms and molecules - as if zooming in on the cloth at microscopic level.¹²⁶ The play on the opacity of a lady’s dress and her being clouded in smoke leaves us unsure where one thing begins and the other ends: materials are all clouds of different density. Very dense indeed is the hand that hits out at the tramp as he tries to smother the fire on the lady’s *derrière*.

2.3.3 Powder and dusts

When Buster starts dusting a lady’s naked shoulder with his tablecloth, clouds of powder rise. Fatty’s mother-in-law also emits powder puffs, appearing to crumble and disintegrate upon touch.¹²⁷ The bodies appear as temporary assemblages, ready to succumb to the workings of the

¹¹⁹ *In the Park* (1915).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Gentlemen of Nerve* (1914).

¹²² *A Night in the Show* (1914).

¹²³ *A Film Johnny* (1914).

¹²⁴ *Fatty’s Tintype Tangle* (1915), *That Little Band of Gold* (1915).

¹²⁵ See Sloterdijk (2011), p. 17.

¹²⁶ *City Lights* (1931).

¹²⁷ *That Little Band of Gold* (1915).

life cycle and readily pulverized. Dry and brittle, the bodies of the heavily made-up women are porous and do not end with their skins.¹²⁸

Plundering her mistress' dressing table, Cunegonde lies on so many layers of powder her face is entirely whitened, resembling a clown-like death mask. The refined gestures of female *toilette* are contrasted with brash and approximate application.¹²⁹ She handles her visage like an object, piling on powders, perfumes and potions. Instead of using the powder to even out her skin and making it appear younger, its application here speeds up the process of aging to the point of decay. Powder in Cunegonde's hands evokes dust and death instead of beauty. She counterpoints the smoothing out of the uneven skin surface to make it appear perfect and whole by showing a body that dissipates and disintegrates and is both 'in' but also 'of' its environment. That human and non-human materialities mingle underlines the ethics of slapstick: instead of degrading humans by spraying them with earthy matter and dirt we see humans to be already polluted and part of a non-hierarchical ecology.

Dust is a shapeshifter. Whilst it can evoke shapes and beings that are not present it also has the capacity to make invisible and hide objects or subjects under a blanket. Being itself formless, it can give form to other things but also dissolve them. Connor writes

Thus, dust, itself formless and edgeless, can both dissolve form and disclose it, like the snow that, in the right amount, can give to things a magical new clarity of outline, but passing beyond that point erases every landmark beneath its featureless drifts and dunes.¹³⁰

Miniscule dust particles swirl in turbulent air and veil a policeman's sight, giving Laurel and Hardy a crucial advantage over the law: a small moment of unrest - shaking out a carpet - has disproportionate and immaterial consequences, clouding justice.¹³¹ When the tramp blows powder from a box into his rival Fatty's face and sneezes into a powder casket in *The Circus* (1928) he blinds others and himself, rendering them defenceless and without control.¹³² Similarly contours blur in a feather snowstorm emanating from a pillow fight amongst the inmates of a mental hospital or in the butcher shop, where Fatty launches bags of flour like smoke bombs, that envelop the entire space in thick white dust.¹³³ Like fireworks, the fog adds

¹²⁸ This question is raised by Haraway (1991), p. 178.

¹²⁹ *Cunégonde aime son maître* (1912), *Cunégonde femme du monde* (1912).

¹³⁰ See Connor (2009).

¹³¹ *Liberty* (1929).

¹³² *The Masquerader* (1914).

¹³³ *Good Night, Nurse!* (1918).

drama and entirely whitened clerks stumble about in a barely recognisable landscape of shop displays and counters as if they were in a snowdrift.

The tiniest material unit has the capacity to instigate total chaos, and it can also generate a Sisyphean task: refusing to be contained and removed, the tramp's attempt at gathering dust in a goods storage merely causes the particles to swirl upwards and settle again on the surfaces of things.¹³⁴ That attempts to clean and purify end in redistribution and propagation is perhaps no surprise in slapstick's non-sterile spaces, where nothing is static or ever really comes to rest.

The white dusts and flakes drifting across the screens mark the limits of the visible; reducing dust into signal noise, they also point towards the materiality of the cinematic strip, itself prone to specs and scratches. Slapstick's handling of matter reaches into the filmic tissue and unsettles representational reality, showing itself to be a space of contingency. Invoking the physical projector and pigments on the surface of the film – in a Sennett film a girl wearing a red dress falls into a pool and re-emerges in a blue one – slapstick playfully puts forward the apparatus as the producer of phenomena that reaches into us, further blurring the boundaries between object and experiencing subject.¹³⁵ Slapstick here also prequels structuralist experiments pushing the limits of film like Guy Debord's *Hurlements de Sade* (1952) and Anthony McCall's beams of light that become visible with dust, showing film itself to be far from immaterial but reliant on physical processes.

*

By considering how water, foods and particles cross bodily boundaries, we have challenged the idea that the human form is an active, discrete entity surrounded by passive and dull matter. Human bodies are permeable, porous and brittle, forming parts of larger assemblages. Our material environment is powerful and directly impacts human sentiment, the capacity to act in a controlled manner and to see the world clearly.

The degradation and ugliness discerned in comedy by Aristotle and Bergson is inverted as matter out of place is not disregarded as waste in slapstick but celebrated and shown as intrinsically human. Bergson's focus on repetition, inversions and rigidity as key to the comic is countered as slapstick shows a universe of vibrant, lively matter that does not behave according to dualistic and mechanistic principles: overflowing it escapes prediction or quantification, it

¹³⁴ *The Pawn Shop* (1916).

¹³⁵ See D'haeyere (2013), p. 32.

cannot be reduced to physico-chemical processes. Slapstick matter is dynamic, self-directed and creative; it is full of the *élan vital* against which Bergson positioned his theory of comedy.

By drawing attention to both the material qualities of water, slime, food, dirt and dusts and to how these elements are socially coded, controlled and charged with meaning, the comedians show how they don't neatly fit into natural, social or cultural categories. Slapstick is a valuable practice that tears down the boundaries between constructs of nature, culture and self that Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, Karen Barad and Felix Guattari amongst others have called for. Slapstick may well be a part of the microsocial and micropolitical acts Guattari calls for to address environmental change: it highlights the active role of non-human materials and cultivates the ability to discern non-human vitality.¹³⁶ By undermining the idea of a lively human that creatively acts on passive matter it disperses power and shows the world to be driven by a myriad of actants. Liveliness, furthermore, is not reduced to the elemental building blocks of slapstick but extends to the wilful objects that we examine in the following chapter.

¹³⁶ See Guattari (2000), p. 51 and Bennett (2010), p. 2 and p. 14.

3 OBJECTS + SUBJECTS

Introduction:

The objects used in the films belong to the family of what is formally known as theatrical property: they are a part of everything movable on a stage or on a set. In slapstick props amount to more than is implied by the English connotation of 'support'; rather they fit the German term Requisite – a term based on the Latin *requisita* - meaning things that are 'necessary', as they are essential to the performances and take up key parts in the films. As Harris and Korda have argued the term prop describes:

‘an object placed beneath or against a structure’. The latter meaning certainly resonates with the tendency to regard stage properties as theatrical prostheses, strictly ancillary to and “beneath or against” the main structure, the play text.¹³⁷

In slapstick objects are expanded, transformed, re-imagined and brought to life, outgrowing themselves. Instead of being *accessoires* – the French term for props - subsidiaries caught within and adapting to the logic of a superstructure, they outperform their human counterparts, hijack action or guest driving narratives.¹³⁸

When speaking of props in the following I want to stick to the broader term 'object', which evades both the restricted sense of 'prop' and the vague, grander connotations linked to the term 'thing'. Whereas stage props are often created especially for performances, evoking musty backstage rooms stuffed with all sorts of well-worn items, speaking of 'things' refers to broader issues or matters. Also, 'things' are already charged with agency, as art critic W. T. J. Mitchell writes:

objects are the way things appear to a subject – that is with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template ... Things, on the other hand ...(signal) the moment when the

¹³⁷ Harris and Korda (2001), p. 1.

¹³⁸ See Margolies, p. 3.

object becomes the Other, when the sardine looks back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny.¹³⁹

To be able to discern instances when objects leap or slip into the thing world and assert themselves, I must therefore use the more neutral term objects. Speaking of objects also allows us to make connections to objects across disciplinary boundaries, including in fine art, semiotics or what Callon and Latour termed actor-network theory (ANT).¹⁴⁰ In keeping with the approach of ANT I want to challenge heroic narratives of innovation and focus on relationships and heterogeneous, collective processes of creation between humans and non-humans.

I want to propose that by going beyond the Enlightenment, humanist constructs of subjects' mastery over objects, a logic of objects takes over in slapstick comedy. This means challenging the liberal Enlightenment humanist precept of the bounded human subject that controls and utilises nature and objects and re-thinking non-human others as having formative powers of their own.

Rather than simply inverting traditionally conceived relations between objects and subject, a spectrum of nuanced gradations between lively objects and deadened subjects can be identified. By restoring to the object its sovereignty, and by listening to what it has to say, I propose to apply a taxonomy that captures the gradations between weak and wilful objects and subjects in what follows. Power relations are inherently unstable.

Departing from the definition of slapstick as common, physical comedy, I want to ask how comic violence is employed in a multitude of (non-violent) ways. I also ask how non-physical strategies figure in remaking subject-object relationships. Despite the inherent violence of slapstick's alternative worlds, these are often utopian and ideal, founded on ethics and truth. Finally, how are these films prequels, anticipating the discourses around object-oriented ontologies today?

Slapstick, rather than upturning the subject-object hierarchy and replacing it with an inverted model beholden to the original categories, shifts relations to a more horizontal network of relations between subjects and objects. This then doesn't mean that objects are now *only active* – they still can be acted upon and transformed, just as human subjects are.

¹³⁹ Art critic W. J. T. Mitchell in Bennett (2010) p. 2.

¹⁴⁰ See Margolies (2016), p. 3.

We will examine what Jiri Veltrusky called the ‘action force’ of things and the affordances they invite or misdirect – by considering three basic object-subject relationships: first, we look at relationships where objects are animated by subjects. Objects comply, they are weak and bend to the comedians’ often ingenious will (a bed is constructed to fold into a piano, or a pile of money turns into a bouquet). By looking at stereotypical props like Charlie’s cane we also consider companionship and symbiosis between objects and subjects.¹⁴¹ Next, we consider wilful objects, (things refusing to break when thrown) and object-meanness described by the German idiomatic expression *Tücke des Objektes*. Things maliciously turn against humans, actively entrap and push the hapless hero into a spiral of chaos, hurt and destruction (doors are frequent offenders, hitting people or refusing to cooperate at crucial moments.) Finally, we consider the instability of subjects, how subjects turn into objects or slip freely between genders.

Throughout, the golden principle of comedy is incongruity. It figures in the degree of complicity of any object: expect light, get heavy.

3.1 Weak objects: object to object transformation

It is hard to over-emphasise the physicality and force exerted by the large sets of melodrama in silent films of the 1910s. From the giant Roman structures in *Cabiria* (1914) to the palaces in *Intolerance* (1916): the pompous, over-sized and opulent visual vocabulary of the *mise-en-scene* outshine the films’ narratives, dwarfing its performers. Yet film decor did not have to be vast or spectacular to have impact: especially in comic shorts with actions only vaguely laid out in advance, the set and objects within could emancipate themselves from to-be-looked-at backdrops to active agents, dictating and directing filmic action, inscribing themselves centrally into the film.

In what might best be described as a moment of estrangement, during the comic shorts our understanding of objects is weakened, bent, then turned. In the hands of the comediennes, objects are transformed without even changing their primary properties. As reviewer Harvey O’ Higgins (1917) remarked:

¹⁴¹ See Veltrusky (1964), p. 88.

[Chaplin] would see the shoelace as anything from an angleworm to a string of spaghetti and see it and relate himself to it so convincingly that he made you see it as he did.¹⁴²

As the OED explains, an object is defined by its visible and tangible qualities and relations with other objects: we recognise a vase from its distinct shape, size and material quality and because we have seen it holding flowers many times. Lea, Rosalie and Ossi casually undo these learned associations. Objects appear in a new light, suddenly switching roles or carrying out new functions: Rosalie's pan becomes a paddle in her flooded kitchen and her mop a weapon for destruction. Indeed, the frequent transformation of table legs into bats and vases into projectiles in the early comedies has changed my personal relationship with these objects: whenever I now see a vase, I picture it flying.

Lea, Rosalie and Ossi are disobedient to the "dictate of objects" Latour describes in his *Sociology of a Few Mundane Artefacts*.¹⁴³ Latour calls the assigning of tasks to non-human objects the *distribution of competences*: man-made objects have been invented to take over tasks that humans would otherwise have to laboriously carry out: the revolving door makes the porter redundant; or, on a more essential level, doors prevent us from having to tear a hole in a wall and close it each time we want to enter a room. This allotment of duty, however, is not a simple command from an empowered subject to passive object – it comes with a 'trade off', argues Latour.¹⁴⁴

In return for its services, the door wants to be treated correctly; it demands skilled behaviour on the side of its human user. Interacting with the technologies that surrounds us requires training, discipline and reliability, behaviour imposed on the human body by non-human objects.

The comediennes refuse outright to adapt to prescribed behaviour, both disobeying objects' dictates (by utilizing them the wrong way) and making them dysfunctional (by defacing or shattering them). Ossi does both in one go when she spectacularly sends her shoes flying into her dressing table in *Ich möchte kein Mann sein* (1918).

What Hannah Arendt describes as infectious charm of the private home and 'modern enchantment with "small things" (...) within the space of their own four walls, between chest and bed, table and chair, dog and cat and flowerpot' a bourgeois infatuation with hand-sized and

¹⁴² O'Higgins in Robinson (2001), p. 221.

¹⁴³ Latour (1994), p. 225.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

easy-to-handle things is constantly troubled by Lea and Ossi.¹⁴⁵ Flowerpots and vases especially are not handled with care but abused, defaced or destroyed. Instead of increasing intimacy by holding close or caressing them, or by taking delight in their sight, shape and feel, objects are hurled away and shattered, doing away with any comfort of homeliness. Such objects are also frequently signifiers of class, and in this respect too they are shattered on the floor as destruction itself is celebrated as a value and a way forward.

Pets also play a part: instead of keeping their masters at home, Rosalie's monkey and Fatty's dog, Luke, lead them up chimneys, through fences, onto ruins and into fountains, away from the comforts of domesticity. Domesticity is often associated with particular objects and their traditional functions but, as we shall see, these associations too are destabilised in the hands of slapstick comediennes.

Indeed, the mutually delimited spheres between peaceful domestic objects and weapons of war do not hold, as objects and artworks are made to transgress their designated function. Exposed to torrential rain in the trenches, Doughboy Charlie snatches a gramophone horn in *Shoulder Arms* (1918) from nearby his bunk bed as his underground barrack floods. When water level rises, he uses it as a snorkel and continues sleeping submerged by water. He also domesticates weapons of war: he uses the enemies' gun as a beer bottle opener and cigarette lighter.

When the tramp rests on a covered war memorial, he is awoken by its unveiling for "Peace and Prosperity" in front of a great crowd.¹⁴⁶ In a double move the tramp transforms artwork-to-bed and veil-to-tent. By resting in the lap of the monumental soldier statue, the tramp demilitarises the group's iconography and turns the warrior into a *pietà*. In a set of carefully crafted sequences Chaplin destructs the rigid pomposity of the military and replaces it with an emotive image of suffering and compassion.

Far from being static, embodied symbols, objects here occupy dynamic and complex positions that slip up our preconceived intertextual associations. Through the transformation by human players, the objects are charged with conflicting meanings, twisting our readings of them as textual signifiers. Although in this section we discuss benign, complicit and 'weak' objects,

¹⁴⁵ Arendt berates the effect of homely things that keep people away from the public sphere. She writes '[w]hat the public realm considers irrelevant can have such an extraordinary and infectious charm that a whole people may adopt it as their way of life, without for that reason changing its essentially private character.' See Arendt (1958), p. 52.

¹⁴⁶ *City Lights* (1931).

dominated by subjects to the extent that they are destroyed, a sense of their object-power and the crucial role in animating action and constructing meaning already emerges.

3.1.1 *Flat pack + flip flop: submissive objects*

Unlike the lyrical transformations of objects or their (trick-) animation, one species of objects in slapstick has built-in transformative capacities. In *The Scarecrow* (1920) the lower part of a wooden gramophone base hides an oven, the upper part a gas stove tucked underneath the turntable, engineering two different objects into one. Keaton skilfully fishes out the record with a stick and hangs it up on the wall above. While the rhythm of dismantling the entertainment machine and treating the record like a kitchen device sets housework to the rhythm of a jazz tune, the object itself pre-empts the flip-flop, mid-century furniture promoted by Hugh Hefner.¹⁴⁷ Buster has perfected this male domesticity of object transformation. Pre-empting the post-war bachelor pad in which no help from a housemaid is needed, he flips the bed into a piano, the sofa into a sink, or spray-hoses the table with its plates stuck on. The single man can handle it all on his own. Sadly, no woman enters to be wowed by his transmogrifications.

These inherently unstable objects are submissive and willingly change, making it possible for men to handle the household without the help of women. Although objects here complicitly fold up and away according to the will of their masters, they demonstrate the capacity of objects to replace and supplant human labour. Although in the case of housework this may be a very welcome change, the transfer of capabilities always also involves a trade off in the form of a redistribution of skills and knowledge away from human agency. An extreme case of this is emerging in the contemporary smart home which knows our habits and daily rituals better than we do ourselves. The Internet of Things is only a natural extension of the versatile, intelligent agency bestowed on objects by slapstick comedians.

3.1.2 *Objectifications of objects: bills*

Money – perhaps the most powerful object in the world outside of the screen – is much less powerful in slapstick. Instead of transactions involving goods and services, money is entangled in purely physical transformations. Buster expertly counts money by listening to it: he

¹⁴⁷ See Preciado (2014).

understands its flips and flutters.¹⁴⁸ It is imbued with romance and intoxication when the tramp smells a bunch of bills like roses or attempts to take a bath in it, repeatedly.¹⁴⁹

Money is not always treated with the veneration its exchange value and social promise commands. Its status as alchemic matter and its capacity to be swapped for almost any substance or thing is forgotten. During a fight or flirtation, bills are handled as if they were mere paper or even a physical nuisance.¹⁵⁰

A toppled pot of glue combined with stacks of dollar bills reverses the conventional attraction of people to money: customers and employees try desperately to detach themselves from the notes, which are sticking to their entire bodies. Clinging to fingers, the money refuses to change hands.¹⁵¹ In *The Bell Boy* (1918) competing gangs of bank robbers batter each other with sacks of money - physical victory here counts for more than cash.¹⁵² Money rains down forming islands of notes.

This focus on the corporeal substance of money challenges the weightlessness and abstraction of the capitalist economy, what Karl Marx addresses in his critique of commodity fetishism.¹⁵³ The appearance under capitalism that value is made by the exchange of objects, rather than the social processes of labour, is challenged by slapstick comedians who re-entangle this weightless view of the circulation of capital and commodities. By showing money to be part of social processes they question the abstract and alienated appearance of the economy and value attached to the money form.

While the value relation of money, instead of being a standardised measurement, fluctuates wildly from one instance to the next, its flows and processes of exchange are shown to be no less real and tangibly rooted in social interactions. Money is folded and rapidly vanishes into pockets; it also inexplicably disappears from them – there is always a pickpocket higher up in the skill hierarchy.¹⁵⁴ A tip switches pockets thrice as Fatty and Buster both nick it.¹⁵⁵ The tramp's trouser pockets are vast spaces of promise - frequently and insistently searched; mostly they are empty of the stuff they are hoped to contain. If they are filled they do not remain so for

¹⁴⁸ *The Haunted House* (1921).

¹⁴⁹ *The Floorwalker* (1916).

¹⁵⁰ *The Haunted House* (1921).

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *The Bell Boy* (1918).

¹⁵³ Marx (1976), p. 163.

¹⁵⁴ *The Haunted House* (1921), *The Immigrant* (1917).

¹⁵⁵ *The Bell Boy* (1918).

long: when the tramp pockets money during gambling, he generously transfers it into his beloved Edna's jacket pocket. However, it is not long before he extracts some back for himself.¹⁵⁶ Buster nonchalantly throws the notes given to him by his love interest into a haystack. However, as soon as she turns to leave, he dives after them, rummaging.¹⁵⁷

For the sociologist Georg Simmel (1903), money translates the many-sided diversity of things into something homogenous while simultaneously distancing people from those things.¹⁵⁸ In slapstick, money's relationship to things is complex, and fluctuates in real time. Exchange value rockets or plummets as money's meaning moves between symbolic, material, and sentimental registers.

When broke Buster drags his last belongings into a pawnshop and sells them for a few small coins, he realises he has forgotten to retrieve his shaver and a photograph of his mother. The broker happily sells them back to him. Buster is penniless again but with a fraction of the belongings he brought in.¹⁵⁹ Elsewhere, a scoundrel comes up to the tramp thinking he is an easy victim and starts searching his pockets. The tramp reciprocates and finds more than his adversary – a cigarette and lighter. When a thief steals sausages from his pocket, the tramp simultaneously fishes out a purse from the thief's pocket.¹⁶⁰ In these zero-sum games losses and wins are precisely balanced, the opponents are rightfully punished as justice is restored.

Marx (1844) describes money as 'the alienated ability of mankind': its distorting powers can turn masters into slaves, images into reality and hate into love.¹⁶¹ Yet in slapstick these transformations are constantly short-circuited or lead into nothing – money is only a thing-in-itself. Slapstick is not interested in money's properties as the universal medium of transformation, it has its own creative practices of shape-shifting. Perhaps this is why money itself is so often transformed and objectified in the films, or why bills keep dissolving into thin air.

As we shall see, objects other than money show greater character stability and higher degrees of autonomy, taking charge and transforming humans. Let us now look at some examples of this.

¹⁵⁶ *The Immigrant* (1917).

¹⁵⁷ *The Blacksmith* (1922).

¹⁵⁸ Simmel (1971), p. 422.

¹⁵⁹ *Go West* (1925).

¹⁶⁰ *In the Park* (1915).

¹⁶¹ Marxists (1844).

3.2 Companions & Character Extensions

Let the whole universe be for me, in relation to my body, what the stick of a blind man is in relation to his hand.¹⁶²

Let's begin with the most(ly) complicit, supportive and benevolent object type: the cane or walking stick. Canes are constant and instantly recognisable object-companions to Buster, the tramp and Fatty, forming an extended part of their comic personas which travel with them on almost every step of the way. These props are a highly sensitive part of physical performance and form, and are the antithesis to the Hitchcockian McGuffins – inert motivational devices that drive plots.¹⁶³ Whereas a McGuffin is an object that is pursued by the protagonist throughout a film – a pair of gloves or the lighter – its nature is usually not important.¹⁶⁴ Whereas a McGuffin is often conspicuous through its absence, slapstick objects are overly present, like the canes and hats, which commonly accompany our characters.

3.2.1 *Canes & hats*

The tramp's cane is his permanent companion. It is antenna, tool, weapon and expressive bodily extension, an (in)animate partner accompanying him throughout his endeavours. Its presence and lack of independence at times bugs the tramp; freeing up his hands is a recurring challenge: his breast pocket is his favourite place to store the cane.¹⁶⁵ Alternatively, he dangles it from servants' arms, or finds openings to hold it upright, like the upturned horn of a trombone.¹⁶⁶ Similarly Fatty attempts to use his mother-in-law's arms and décolleté as a hook for storing his own cane – to perilous effect.¹⁶⁷ Canes resemble additional limbs, their touch is met with the same consequences as the touch of a human hand.

Versatile like Swiss army knives, the walking sticks take on different functions: in the tramp's hands the cane turns into a hook when he clamps it under his arm upside down, and cunningly lifts Mabel's skirt as he moves; it serves for defence or aggravation, as when the tramp uses one to smack down another gentleman's hat.¹⁶⁸ Elsewhere it is strategically employed for bringing

¹⁶² Simone Weil (1956), p. 19.

¹⁶³ The term McGuffin was coined by Angus MacPhail, see McArthur (2003), p. 21.

¹⁶⁴ In *Blackmail* (1929) and *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

¹⁶⁵ *Getting Acquainted* (1914).

¹⁶⁶ *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914).

¹⁶⁷ *That Little Band of Gold* (1915).

¹⁶⁸ *Blackmail* (1929), *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

items closer or fishing for things out of reach: ladies' purses, hats for collecting money, even the recalcitrant Edna is caught by the tramp's cane and drawn towards the registry office when she tries to escape.¹⁶⁹ Canes act like physical extensions to the body, resembling a low-fi version of *Inspector Gadget's* telescopic arm.

Canes at times gain human traits and become disobedient like an unruly limb flexing, as when it taps against the tramp's back, causing him to keep looking around.¹⁷⁰ Elsewhere in a snowy landscape the cane becomes a third leg of little help, which pushes into deep snow drifts, further destabilising an already struggling Buster. Like artist John Baldessari's photograph from the *Repair/Retouch series: An Allegory of Wholeness (Plate and Man with Crutches)* (1976), in which he juxtaposes two images – one where we see a man with an amputated leg on crutches and another where the leg has been drawn back on – the concept of the wholeness of a body is ridiculed: both Buster and the man in Baldessari's photograph are not (or no longer) in need of crutches or a walking stick as an aid.

The cane not only upsets preconceived percepts about the relationship of parts to wholes, artifice and organic form, it dilutes the boundaries between the body and things as well as subject and world. Like a blind man navigating his surroundings with his stick, Charlie's cane has become incorporated and determines his physical and ontological experience of the world. Beyond an instrument for interactions or a companion the cane is an extension of self. Merleau-Ponty writes:

(T)he blind man's stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight (...) To get used to a hat, a car or a stick is to be transplanted into them or, conversely, to incorporate them into the bulk of our own body.¹⁷¹

The self, then, is not fixed in a single reified body but is distributed across different (physical) nodes, as Haraway writes.¹⁷² Charlie's cane is integral not only to his appearance but forms a

¹⁶⁸ *Getting Acquainted* (1914), *In the Park* (1915).

¹⁶⁹ *City Lights* (1931), *The Immigrant* (1917).

¹⁷⁰ *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914).

¹⁷¹ Merleau-Ponty in Barad (2007) p. 157.

¹⁷² See Barad (2007) for a discussion of Donna Haraway's 'situated knowledges'. p. 47.

passage point via which his identity flows. Through the cane he engages in practices of knowing and encountering the world, and the cane enhances his experience turning him into a cyborg.¹⁷³

While we might normally think of prosthetics as a replacement for a dysfunctional part rather than an addition, this difference is troubled in slapstick. Hats are not only emblematic extensions of comic characters, they stand in for them: the tramp's iconic shabby bowler, Buster's self-made, felt pork pie hat, Laurel's flat-brim, high crown derby hat and Hardy's curved-brim, small derby emphasise the comedians' personas and bodily shapes. The hat exaggerates the gap between the tramp's social standing and his City Gent aspirations, stretches skinny Laurel further up whilst making large Hardy more rotund still. Hats are blown off by winds or air-conditioning propellers, removing dignity and inviting chases. Buster catches his in mid-air, quicker than the wind that blew it off.¹⁷⁴ Precisely because these hats become so tightly associated with their owner's characters and their status and personality, they are able to stand in freely for their human carriers. Thus when hats are constantly flattened, sat on by men and women, or become victims of serial destruction as in *A Night at the Show* (1915), where the tramp sits on no less than four hats including his own, the link with their wearers is never far behind.¹⁷⁵

The bond between subjects and objects peaks in *Rosalie et ses meubles fidèles* (1911). Rosalie cannot pay the rent and her belongings are seized and brought to a pawn shop to be sold. When she passes the shop, recognises and touches them, they begin to move and scuttle along the street, following her back to her house through stop motion photography. But objects are not always benign.

3.3 Objects in Charge; Things Develop Human Characteristics

We now turn to consider the powers objects wield over subjects, examining how they further decentre human subjectivity and take away their control, and the struggle of humans to retain power through destruction.

¹⁷³ See in particular the deleted scene from *City Lights* (1931) in *Unknown Chaplin* (1983).

¹⁷⁴ *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928).

¹⁷⁵ *Gentlemen of Nerve* (1914), *His Musical Career* (1915).

3.3.1 *Personified house > objectified Lea*

In *Lea e il gomitolo* (1913) roles of human subject and non-human object are inverted: When Lea turns into an instrument of destruction, the house, now her adversary, fights back: entangling the rampant woman in curtains, tripping her up, stubbornly resisting to move, fall, break or tear, the house halts and slows Lea's efforts. Object obstacles refuse to be subject to her will, with mattresses and cushions seemingly pushing her away whilst the tablecloth fetters and blindfolds her. Objects join forces with gravity's laws, making her tumble as if she were a plaything. Yet Lea persists. Applying her body first as a lever, then as a weight, she overturns and topples interiors into unrecognizable chaos.

Bestowing objects with a will of their own – not always aggressive – is turned into a more explicit comic strategy still in the *Rosalie* serial. In *Rosalie et son phonographe* (1913), object behaviour goes beyond what Joanna Lowry terms 'propping up' or supporting actors in their role.¹⁷⁶ Instead of functioning as a crutch or visual aid literally everything in the film turns around the phonograph: from its moment of delivery to the end of the film all on-screen movement physically revolves around the musical apparatus.

First *Rosalie* shows us, the cinema audience, how proud she is of her new purchase, a phonograph. Then she carries the large clunky object from room to room in her house, hugging it tight and showing it to the kitchen maid, then a sick old gentleman, and even taking it out to a café for a new audience, each time setting it down, cranking it, making it play.

The anticipation of the on-screen audience, indicated with overbearing gestures in each sequence, is not disappointed. Once running, the phonograph spits out little animated black and white notes. As if by magic, tables, chairs, cupboards, jars, beds, pots and pans – everything in the room but the music machine itself – become mobile. The objects start twisting, turning, circling, performing a disorderly dance. Some are anthropomorphised to the extent that they begin to couple: two chairs interlock their backrests, leaning in towards each other in a temporary romance. People are moved in the same stop-motion technique as objects, stiff and static, getting beamed across the room by cross cut techniques as a consequence of the music streaming. Object–subject hierarchies are abandoned and levelled out by the inaudible sounds: for once, slapstick's world moves in harmony and accord, humans not fighting objects and objects not hitting back.

¹⁷⁶ Lowry (2009).

Perhaps gramophones invite friendly and resentful treatment usually reserved for other subjects because of their human resemblance. The golden ear-like opening, brass or tinfoil elbow, leather belting and winding crank handle are modelled on the human body. They are powerful extensions of the human voice and have transformative capacities: in George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1913) a gramophone turns a cockney flower-girl into well-spoken lady. The sound machines in silent films - despite being mute - are powerful objects. As such, they invite abuse and annihilation: in Karl Valentin's stand-up sketch *Record Store* (1934) he mishandles, sits on and falls onto heaps of the fragile, expensive disks, even slipping a piece of broken record into his mouth, as if to hide the *corpus delicti*. Rosalie too first dances with the gramophone, only to later throw it out of the window.¹⁷⁷ The capacity of gramophones to dictate rhythm, transform and animate humans and objects is countered with its destruction at the hands of the comedians.¹⁷⁸

3.3.2 *Conspiring and mean objects / objects turning into things // perverse maliciousness*

A. E., the main character in Vischer's *Auch Einer* (1879), describes objects as inherently malicious and 'lurking', hoping to deceive man. The instant the 'moral force of man's gaze' declines and attentiveness weakens, objects 'pounce on' the subject like a wild beast.¹⁷⁹ Accordingly, it is not Buster's irresponsible carelessness that topples the glue pot in *The Haunted House* and causes it to stick people, objects and surfaces together. Rather, the glue pot is part of an object-conspiracy: '[a]nd like the tiger in the first moment when he, unobserved, sees and with a sling of rage falls on his unfortunate prey, so is it with the accursed object'.¹⁸⁰ A. E.'s descriptions also match blacksmith Buster's misfortune when all his tools are stolen by a magnet attached above his working place:¹⁸¹

The object with its devilish humour especially loves to play hide and seek. Just as good, caring, protective nature paints some animals the same colour as the ground on which

¹⁷⁷ *Rosalie et son phonographe* (1911). In *Should Married Men Go Home?* (1928) Hardy lands on a freshly placed display of discs, jumping around because of a crab that has found its way into his trousers until the discs are nearly ground to dust.

¹⁷⁸ A gramophone also enlivens the automation Olympia with a voice in E.T.A. Hoffman's *Der Sandman* (1816).

¹⁷⁹ Vischer (1936) p. 31.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p. 30.

¹⁸¹ *The Blacksmith* (1922).

they live and forms them in the likeness of that upon which they feed so that they are harder to find than their enemies [...] such is the procedure of the demons: for example a red-brown glasses case conceals itself on red-brown furniture.¹⁸²

Rather than declaring himself blind to objects, A. E. proposes that the world is ruled by demonic matter that outsmarts him. No goblins and house elves are at work here – supernatural forces that may have been complicit in hiding or stealing things are not part of A. E.'s enlightened view. This also holds true for slapstick's world: very rarely do animistic causes determine object-subject slippages. Instead things themselves possess agency to baffle humans. This places the enemy demon closer: no invisible external force is to blame. The objects at hand that the comedienne must interact with every day may bite them or lash out at any time.

Heidegger writes: '[a]nything which is un-ready-to-hand in this way is disturbing to us, and enables us to see the *obstinacy* of that with which we must concern ourselves[...].'¹⁸³ Nowhere are the anti-productive forces of matter more visible than in slapstick, where heroes despair in the face of a chewing gum ball machine, which both embarrasses them and slips them up.¹⁸⁴

In *One A.M.* (1916), bedroom quarrels turn into bed quarrels when Charlie swears at and wrestles with a muscular, electric fold-up bed, which teases him with its crisp white linen only to reject and counteract his desire for rest in a series of malicious manoeuvres: folded against the wall it appears jammed and refuses to be pulled down to offer the basic precondition for rest - a horizontal plane. Or feigning complicity, it relents before it suddenly folds up into a claustrophobic cage and smothers him between its cushions and blankets, only to eject him suddenly. It lurks waiting until he has resigned his efforts, and as he attempts to rest on the bare floorboards it comes crashing from its upright position, pinning him down. Defeated, he finally goes to bed in the bathtub.

Georges Perec (1974) describes the particularities of how we like to use beds: alone, lengthwise, sharing with a maximum of one other person. He writes:

The bed is thus the individual space *par excellence*, the elementary space of the body (the bed monad), the one which even the man completely crippled by debts has the right to

¹⁸² Vischer (1936) p. 31.

¹⁸³ Heidegger (1972), p. 102.

¹⁸⁴ *Two Tars* (1928).

keep: the bailiffs don't have the power to seize *your* bed.¹⁸⁵

That Charlie is deprived of using his bed thus amounts to an inhumane cruelty, as seizing a person's bed violates human rights and is beyond state power, which further stresses the demonic barbarism of Charlie's ruthless bed.



Fig. 2. *One A.M.* Lone Star Corporation, 1916, Film still.

3.3.3 *Disarm doors!*

Inherently silent, dead-pan and mobile, doors are the perfect foils for humans in slapstick film – like wooden slats on hinges they resemble the original ‘slapstick’ that could be clapped together, as described at the outset of this study.

Few pieces of furniture display more violence than doors. With a 90 or 180-degree range, house and flap doors continuously bash heads, kick bums, break noses.¹⁸⁶ They administer full-body slaps, turning the area around them into battlefields, piling up with bodies. Elevator doors close on peoples' noses.¹⁸⁷ Doors make arrests and lock their supposed operators in or out. They act like guardians to the house, rejecting or ejecting unwanted users but also stubbornly malfunction, barring access to those who should have it, locking in others who must escape.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁵ Perec (1997), p. 16.

¹⁸⁶ *Caught in Cabaret* (1914), in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914) Marie gets bashed in bum by swinging door.

¹⁸⁷ *The Blacksmith* (1922).

¹⁸⁸ *Caught in Cabaret* (1914), *Hard Luck* (1921).

The reinforced doors of a walk-in safe catch the trousers of bank clerk Buster, entrapping him so he must wait until the next morning for the timer release.¹⁸⁹ Doors withstand human violence when they are banged against and assaulted with hands, feet or shoulders.¹⁹⁰

That doors really have the capacity to be devils, as described by A. E., becomes clear in their treatment of lovers. Doorframes are frequent courting territory - but fail to aid the ambitions of on-screen lovers.¹⁹¹ In *Good Night, Nurse!* (1918), a door resists being relegated to backdrop - propping Buster up while he flirts with nurse Fatty until it suddenly opens. In an attempt to bar entry to a jealous husband, Buster slots his arm through the fixtures replacing a bolt. With his face braced for impact, he waits but the door decides to swing inward. Instead of his arm bolting the door, his elbow operates as a hinge, supporting the door's movement and inviting the angry husband in.¹⁹²

Bill Brown argues that '[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us.'¹⁹³ The object - in this case a door - asserts itself, entering a new relationship with humans and its environment. The role of doors in slapstick is best understood when we relate them to Heidegger's understanding of things. In Old High German the word 'thing' signified 'gathering', specifically 'a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter'. By exploding their utilitarian character the doors cease to be objects of instrumental value to humans and open up a contested space - not unlike the items discussed at the gathering 'thing'.¹⁹⁴ By understanding things as gatherings that link the material object with social gathering they gain performative associations and are shown to be interrelated with their environment. The nature of things cannot be distilled by breaking them down into constituent elements; things gather-up, come-together and come into presence in a manner that cannot be understood from the calculated, perspective of technological anthropocentrism. Slapstick's objects - by refusing to function obediently - point towards this intimate ecology, they show us that they cannot be dislocated from their environment and that the understanding of a thing is intertwined with an understanding of the world.¹⁹⁵

The degree of independence of an object cannot be measured in its recalcitrance. Especially in

¹⁸⁹ *The Haunted House* (1921).

¹⁹⁰ *Neighbors* (1920)

¹⁹¹ Long good-byes are held by lovers in open doorways in *The Fireman* (1916), *The Playhouse* (1921), *The Bell Boy* (1918), *The Immigrant* (1917).

¹⁹² *The Frozen North* (1922).

¹⁹³ Brown in Schweitzer and Zerdy (2014), p. 3.

¹⁹⁴ Heidegger (1971), p. 172.

¹⁹⁵ See also Laurence W. Howe (1993) p. 95.

Buster Keaton's feature films, objects seem to conspire not against but in favour of him in impossible chains of coincidence. When the house front falls onto Buster in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), sparing him thanks to the positioning of the window frame, any pretence of a world based on causality is killed off. Baudrillard emphasises the fetish that 'illustrates the profound objection we entertain towards normal causality, towards the derisory prevention of assigning a cause to each event and each event to a cause (...) The fetish performs this miracle erasing the accidentality of the world and substituting for it an absolute necessity.'¹⁹⁶ In Buster's world things rarely operate like fetishes - the 'accidentality' and contingency of their state and place in time and space is constantly underlined.

Objects destabilise the subjects that interact with them. For Baudrillard objects are like mirrors:

[An object] can fascinate and seduce the subject (...) because it radiates no substance or meaning of its own. The pure object is sovereign, because it is what breaks up the sovereignty of the other and catches it with its own trap. The crystal takes revenge.¹⁹⁷

The sovereign potency of an object to seduce and envelop a subject in its 'fatal strategy' of seduction makes the transcendental subject disappear, and is of particular relevance to Keaton's films.¹⁹⁸ His transformations of objects are not just the product of his promethean inspiration and ingenuity but they reflect the object's own capacity to adapt and morph. The sovereign objects in Keaton's world don't just reassure the subjects of their will, knowledge or power. Rather they refract - through uprooting causality - what in classical Hollywood cinema would be a story of a subject asserting its will and manipulating the world by using tools and technologies to his or her own needs.

3.4 Subject to Subject Transformations: Weak Gender

Up until now we have considered how objects are transformed and destroyed by subjects as well as, inversely, their power to transform subjects. At this point I want to take a further step and look at the inherent instability of human subjectivity and identity itself, asking how they

¹⁹⁶ Baudrillard (1990), p. 114.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 115.

¹⁹⁸ See Trahair (2007), p. 92.

metamorphose and self-destruct. I wish to argue that slapstick not only subverts and inverts existing categories of human subjects and passive objects. Its implications bring into question the set of categories which are traditionally deployed to analyse this web of relations. Gender, traditionally at the core of how subjective identities are formed and defined by individuals and wider society alike, is not spared by slapstick's comic subversion. By considering how Cunegonde, Asta Nielsen, Kri Kri – amongst others – slip between identities and assert powerful roles without punishment, I want to address how unsettling gender constructs of male and female is rewarded in slapstick. Following an analysis of male and female strength and weakness in relation to power and subjectivity, I move on to ask with Sianne Ngai how characteristics traditionally associated with disempowered objectivity like passivity and cuteness can be used as a means to wield power over subjects.

3.4.1 *Loose characters: female metamorphosis*

Across the *Rosalie*, *Leontine* and *Cunegonde* serials, characters are slippery and unstable: Cunegonde may be introduced to us as an ugly maid or a bourgeois housewife in establishing shots that lay out social hierarchies.¹⁹⁹ Playing under the same character heading she can be a beautiful, assertive lady, the caricature of a dirty maid or a deranged old spinster.²⁰⁰ She adjusts her physiognomy accordingly: as a servant she sticks her bum out, pushes and retracts her head in a birdlike manner and wears flat shoes.²⁰¹ Her hair is greasy and unkempt in a rough central parting and she wears loose, unfitting, old-fashioned clothes. She paints her eyebrows high, posits her face at unflattering angles so that the camera films up her nostrils. However, even within the temporary parameters of each episode she constantly crossdresses. From woman to man, lady to horse-cart driver, maid to mistress, she shifts not only genders but a range of power relations and identities.²⁰²

Lois Fuller's costuming in her serpentine dances turns her into a deity, the night, the firmament, through what Jody Spelling calls a triad of 'display, transformation, transportation.'²⁰³ However, Cunegonde gets stuck in the midst of her changeovers: as a servant dressing up as her mistress the process of metamorphosis is played out at length but remains incomplete. The costume is

¹⁹⁹ She is a maid in *Cunégonde aime son maître* (1912), *Cunégonde reçoit sa famille* (1912), *Cunégonde femme du monde* (1912) and a bourgeois housewife in *Cunégonde femme cochère* (1913), *Cunégonde jalouse* (1912).

²⁰⁰ *Cunégonde aime son maître* (1912), *Cunégonde jalouse* (1912).

²⁰¹ *Cunégonde aime son maître* (1912).

²⁰² Ibid; *Cunégonde femme du monde* (1912). Such crossdressing is also the subject of Jean Genet's play *The Maids* (1947) in which servants change into the clothes of their employer.

²⁰³ Sperling in Uhlirova (2013), p. 83.

crudely constructed as she empties a jewellery box, overburdening her hands with bling rings. She sticks fake hair parts inaccurately on her head, giving herself away as an impostor to any careful observer.

She presents herself alternately to us and the mirror, showing each mis-arrangement as a gag whilst her motions remain excessive and contrary to her costume, so that the process of disguising is constantly undermined.²⁰⁴ Her bodily performance undoes her transmutation. Whereas Fuller uses fabrics, motion and coloured lighting to transform herself, Cunegonde has an inherently unstable and hybrid filmic identity. In flux between a maid and a lady she doesn't convincingly fill either role, reminding us that gender and status are inherently unstable constructions, as well as closely interconnected.

3.4.2 *Crossdressers: women as men*

Film historian Geoff King has suggested that female masquerading appears less frequently in film comedy because '(m)ale masquerading as female generally provides more fertile ground for comedies in patriarchal societies, in which the male is usually taken as the neutral unmarked norm.'²⁰⁵ The increased visual incongruity and 'additive' aspect of men having to apply make-up, wigs creating a more 'active process of transformation' in comparison to the women who must conceal breasts, long hair, 'creating a less immediate source of comedy'. For King a woman 'cross-dresses because she wants to be taken seriously; [a man] generally cross-dresses because he doesn't.'²⁰⁶ Female crossdressing is the more 'rational' choice because she gets greater access to power, and is therefore less funny. King's characterisation of costumes as access to power does not hold for slapstick's heroines who switch rapidly between roles, drawing attention to differing forms of power or simply slip into men's clothes for their amusement.

Dorrit Weixler's performance in *Fräulein Piccolo* (1914) relies precisely on the difficulty of slipping quickly into the character of the page boy Piccolo and the chaos she wreaks by using her differing positions of power. Upon her return from an all-girls school she must help out at her parent's hotel and cover for both the chamber maid and the page boy who have run away together. Her quick changeovers between maid and page boy require her to apply a wig each time she is to be a boy and undo her hair and change clothes, as she uses her girl charms to flirt with the guests and her page boy persona to dissuade them, or at times violently reject suitors

²⁰⁴ *Cunégonde femme du monde* (1912).

²⁰⁵ King (2002), p. 141.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*; King cites Kirk & Heath (1986) p. 9.

by throwing a suitcase or slapping them to different effect. Much of the comedy lies in the changeovers themselves, as it takes equally as long to turn into herself as into the role of Piccolo.

The joyous transformation into a man – despite some difficulty of getting into evening attire - is exploited also by Asta Nielsen in *Das Liebes-ABC* (1916), where she sets out to teach her dull fiancé how to seduce a woman. In the theatre she is soon surrounded by women who sit on her lap and with whom she exchanges kisses, maximising pleasure in her role as a gentleman. Ossi Oswald's attempt to win her guardian's heart in *Ich möchte kein Mann sein* (1918) also involves an excursion into queerness, as she swaggers in male evening attire into a ballroom where she flirts, seduces and kisses her unknowing custodian Mr. Kersten, and uses her temporary trans-identity to implicate him in homosexual behaviour. Mr. Kersten continues to like Ossi when she is back to wearing girl clothes, showing her power over the man to be independent of her gendered appearance.

That the women can operate in both male and female identities without severe punishment is astonishing.²⁰⁷ Although order is generally restored at the end of the films, the young women also get what they want: Ossi her man and Asta a husband who has learned to play her game. Dorrit, Asta and Ossi's crossdressing does not lead to them being taken more seriously as men nor do they catapult them into a position of respectable power. Instead they use their costumes for excursions to explore gender differences, and finally assert themselves as women.



Fig. 3. *Das Liebes-ABC*, Saturn Film, 1916, Film still.

²⁰⁷ Asta marries her fiancé at the end, see also Doris Weixler in *Fräulein Piccolo* (1914).

3.4.3 *Men as women*

Built sets and props function as aids to the transgressions in identity. When serial crossdresser Fatty takes the role of a flirtatious female nurse, the doctor Buster responds by mirroring his moves; feigning shyness as they shoot desiring glances across the hallway.²⁰⁸ They increasingly utilise the hospital's wood-panelled walls as screens for their desires, poking their fingers into their mouths and prodding the door frame and walls. Fatty caresses his environment, sweeping along the walls in the process of seduction, drawing inspiration from the behaviour of early cinema's grand divas. If much of the transformation's success is owed to Fatty adapting an innocent persona that clashes with his massive body, Laurel's crossdressing as Hardy's tight-lipped wife in a skimpy, sexy dress is foiled by his prudish miserable face, which plays out as frumpish.²⁰⁹ By contrast, the tramp looks beautiful dressed in a white gown, and his extrovert camp advances meet with success among the men.²¹⁰ A large fox muff, which he uses for giggling into, supports his transformation into demure female persona.

Although slapstick is at its most erotic when these men play women or women play men, these transgressions are short lived: in *Kri Kri e Lea militari* (1913), Lea crossdresses as a soldier to join her effeminate lover but gets bored with the disciplinary demands of military service and is soon cast out alongside Kri Kri. The transformations are not permanent, rather resembling the excursions in traditional travesties or "temporary transvestite films".²¹¹ Whilst the crossdressing might be transient, the shortcomings within characters to conform to gender stereotypes or ideals are often more deeply rooted. Kri Kri's constant failings - from slouching or resting on duty to heartily kissing his comrade for the guard change - are intrinsic to his effeminate character. Despite his indiscipline he is no less loved by beautiful Lea, who does not mind his weakness.²¹²

3.4.4 *Female strength: treating men as objects*

If by crossdressing the characters often flicker and change identities, female strength and violent retaliation are a constant, especially in the comic shorts of the 1910s. Flirtatious tit-for-

²⁰⁸ Fatty also crossdresses to trespass into a girl's school to see his lover. In *Coney Island* (1917) he puts on a woman's bathing clothes and flirts with another man.

²⁰⁹ *That's My Wife* (1929).

²¹⁰ *A Woman* (1915).

²¹¹ Straayer (1986), p.403.

²¹² *Kri Kri e Lea militari* (1913).

tats go wrong, as leading men turn into the butts of jokes and are dominated by their female counterparts. When the tramp kicks Mabel in her bum, she laughs, flicks her summery dress and coquettishly lures him closer to slap him so hard he slumps down a wall. She also reacts with sternly to an approaching male customer: when he cheekily picks up a sandwich and rubs it over her cheek she instantly batters him and kicks his bottom.²¹³ In *The Balloonatic* (1923), Buster gets punched by his love pursuit Phyllis Haver, who believes he is stalking her, while Fatty is kicked heftily in the face by a lady he tries to save but inadvertently undresses.²¹⁴ Suspecting infidelity Phyllis gives her husband a good beating with her umbrella, and forces the drunken tramp away from her bed with a cane and drags him about by his leg.²¹⁵ Equally, Minta gives Fatty a good revenge-beating after he hits and pushes her about, throwing him to the floor and slapping him against the door until he sinks to the ground.

These are not cantankerous, hysterical women – Phyllis, Mabel, Marie and Minta defend themselves, fighting for their rights as wives or workers.²¹⁶ They explode the fantasy figure of the eternally happy housewife, as described in Betty Friedan and Silvia Federici's writings, by pushing men into their places, making clear that their companionship, house work and smiles are not free but must be earned.²¹⁷ Their violence then is not simply a degradation of men or an act of empowerment that lifts the women out of their own subordination as the 'Other' to men's position as transcendental and Absolute subjects, as described by Simone de Beauvoir.²¹⁸ Women's roles here do not respond to and actualise male constructions of the dutiful feminine as wife or mother. They are no simple inversions of what Luce Irigaray terms the phallographic and symbolic order: Mabel's Mickey, Phyllis and Lea are 'concrete, corporeal and sexual subject[s], rather than an abstract, neutral, fabricated, and fictitious'.²¹⁹ They disrupt their status as incidental accompaniments to their men and their will over the cultural and social conditions that associate them with immanence.²²⁰

²¹³ *Mabel's Busy Day* (1914). While Iris Young in her essay *Throwing Like a Girl* (1990) points out that many women approach physical activity tentatively and uncertainly because the 'woman lives her body as object as well as a subject', Mabel moves with determination when she smacks her lazy and demanding husband.

²¹⁴ *The Balloonatic* (1923); *Good Night, Nurse!* (1918).

²¹⁵ *His Trysting Place* (1914); *The Rounders* (1914).

²¹⁶ *The Fatal Mallet* (1914).

²¹⁷ In *Wages Against Housework* (1975), Silvia Federici demands the happiness of the housewife be rewarded. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan's essential study of the unhappiness of housewives in mid-century America, the idea that their lack of fulfilment, neurosis and anxieties are down to too much education is rubbished.

²¹⁸ de Beauvoir (1974) dxxxv.

²¹⁹ Luce Irigaray (2000), p. 26.

²²⁰ See de Beauvoir (1974).

Women are not only physically strong, they equal or outdo husbands in their jobs: when Cunegonde's husband is sick she takes his cape and hat and drives his cart through the city. Petronille takes over her husband's horse in the Grand Steeple Chase after he has fallen off. Dressed in his trousers she is victorious.²²¹ Once again, slapstick questions and destabilises a set of equivalences – between clothes, status, power, virtue – dependent on traditional gender constructs.

3.4.5 *Male weakness & sub persona infantis*

Male weakness is a staple of the *Kri Kri* and *Little Moritz* serials and it is manifested and encountered in different ways. Small comedians are frequently combined with larger women like Rosalie or Lea, both of whom tower over their counterparts just like Marie or Phyllis dwarf the tramp. Although both comedians and comediennes are often mismatched and fail to conform to gendered ideals, women's unseemly strength is often compatible with being beautiful: Patouillard's gorgeous wife in *Patouillard a mange du homard* (1911) holds him effortlessly in her arms, laughing.²²² After Laurel fails to deal with a shop assistant, the sylph-like Ruby kicks the man hard in his leg and gives him a 'brain teaser'.²²³ Italian comediennes Lea Giunchi and Gietta Morano are both attractive and dominant at work and at home.²²⁴

Men's strength on the other hand fluctuates; it can be massively amplified or decreased in a moment. When his boss gets aggressive in *The Pawn Shop* (1916) the tramp initially seems keen to fight; stepping forward, drawing his sleeves, chin up in combative mode but suddenly his motions lose strength and he starts swinging his legs and directing his limbs in playful manner - a seamless transition from fight to dance. This shift is repeated later when a policeman sees the tramp pummelling a colleague who he has ensnared in a ladder. Under the policeman's gaze his punches turn soft and kicks are suddenly directed sideways as if part of a decorous dance routine.²²⁵ Conversely, Little Moritz becomes incredibly strong following multiple humiliations as a lover and sportsman. In a boxing club, he beats down his sparring partner and everyone else present, then moves on to trash Rosalie's house to get his way.²²⁶

²²¹ *Pétronille gagne le grand steeple* (1912).

²²² *Patouillard a mange du homard* (1911).

²²³ Ruby Blane in *Two Tars* (1928).

²²⁴ *Lea si diverte* (1912), *Lea e il gomito* (1913).

²²⁵ *The Pawn Shop* (1916).

²²⁶ *Little Moritz demande Rosalie en mariage* (1911).

Yet physical strength is not the only type of power explored in relation to gender. Beyond subjects slipping into and inhabiting other gendered identities or women outright objectifying their male counterparts, the power of powerlessness or indeed the voluntary taking up the guise of an object is a frequent theme in the films.

The subversion of male identity and the destabilising of its association with strength is also played out by a further kind of strategy: infantilization. At times the impersonations of femininity and childhood are linked, as the actions of Cunegonde's husband show. Indeed men often adopt characteristics of weakness typically associated with women when attempting to escape punishment: after his botched escape, Cunegonde's husband plays cute looking up at her with puppy eyes, smiling avidly, giving her compliments, obediently following her orders.²²⁷ His strategy backfires: if, as Sianne Ngai (2012) writes, we want the things we perceive as cute to be as close as possible to us to the point of squishing, crushing, smothering them, Cunegonde enforces increased spatial intimacy following her husband's enfeebled behaviour, and confines him to her immediate physical reach. What Ngai terms as the 'eroticisation of the powerless' in the desire to 'belittle or diminish them further', is taken to the extreme by slapstick's women who overplay their responsibility for their unruly, drunken, dumb men, infantilising them by making sure they stay where they are seated on park benches, in theatre boxes, or on a beach.²²⁸

The evident powerlessness of cute things and our perceived agency over them conversely means they exert power over us. Like commodities designed to make demands of us like David Foster Wallace's "*Mr. Squishy*", whose plump childlike cookie face engages us with its evident helplessness, comediennes and comedians appeal to the protective reflexes of others, only to exploit them the next moment.²²⁹ Fatty's boyish cuteness, his chubby cheeks and soft bodily contours contrast to his violence and cruelty when he throws knives, bricks, punches. The boy-man can shift not only age but transform into a shy, chubby, likable outsider girl as he manoeuvres between hetero -, homo - and trans- figures via his amorphous body.

English comediennes Tilly and Sally's sweet doll-like appearance in white dresses and braids gets them out of trouble time and time again as they feign powerlessness and complicity with Victorian laws of chastity, embodying what Wyndham Lewis has termed 'Sub Persona Infantis':

²²⁷ *Cunégonde femme crampon* (1912) She captures her fugitive husband with an improvised lasso and draws him up several floors, scolding him as he breaks down on his knees begging for forgiveness. When he writes her a note that he is leaving she only cries very briefly and instantly tracks him down. She is both stronger and more quick-witted than him but her longing for proximity and assertiveness tinge her every action as paranoid.

²²⁸ Ngai (2012), p. 3.

²²⁹ *The Immigrant* (1917). Ngai (2012), p. 72.

When a feminine figure in a costume symbolising the tenderest years, clinging to a protective arm, in some pastiche of an antiquated relationship, catches sight of a floating mass of air-balls and, capering ecstatically, pleads with her companion, "Oh! Pease, pease, do buy me an air-ball: that lovely gween one!" a situation of probably Mousterian antiquity is reproduced for whoever happens to be observing the display. It is unfortunate, but there it is: people manufacture such pictures and situations out of their sexual interplay, or to serve a social rather than sexual vanity.²³⁰

Lewis chastises not only the child-like lisp but the renunciation of political agency that comes along with the rejection of adult speech. Posing as a child taps into values associated with the Victorian cult of the child, which shrouded childhood in spiritual sanctity and moral seriousness, and triggers a maternal proprietary dynamic through which children or little people alike are 'culturally positioned as an object, not a subject'.²³¹

Acting child-like, however, is often not a true subjugation in slapstick film but a guise to trick power structures without openly challenging them. Tilly and Sally get what they want - to hang out with the boys and wreak havoc through an entire town - and to be perceived as angels at a sickbed in the end, doubling their pleasure and reward.

*

Edmund Burke writes that women calculate for imperfection to be perceived as beautiful: 'women are very sensible to this; for which reason they learn to lisp, totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness and even sickness.'²³² Indeed, such strategies are sent up in slapstick film through role reversal: as we have seen, men act distressed whereas women are shown to be strong and beautiful. Women on the other hand through their lively and spirited protests and capacity to shape-shift, their violent outbursts are able to advance their own interest and overpower the dominant patriarchal order.

Outmuscling their male counterparts, Asta Nielsen, Ossi Oswalda, Mabel Normand, Dorrit Weixler, Lea Giunchi, Sarah Duhamel - amongst others - presented (female) audiences with

²³⁰ Lewis (1926) p. 69.

²³¹ Perish in Thompson (1996), p. 190.

²³² Burke (1990), p. 135.

comic performances that were distinctly their own.²³³ That we often laugh with the women and not about them, reclaims laughter as a desirable female trait, emancipating it from the popular press that had degraded laughter as crude, hysterical, unfeminine and outright dangerous. Their celebration of gender instability and its slipperiness not only speaks of the seismic changes occurring in the household at the time the films were made, but could be read to occupy a poignant place amongst current debates.²³⁴ The subversion of gendered boundaries is joyful and continuous - the women and men are not arrested or contained within guarded gender categories. Cunegonde morphs incessantly throughout the episodes of her serial, finding ever new ways of transgressing norms and playing them off her adopted identities without ever stagnating in a fixed identity. This flow enables her to tap into different experiences, promoting the perhaps undervalued qualities of incessant becoming and inherent instability, all too often neglected in the hardened fronts surrounding the debates of third-wave identity politics.²³⁵

As we have seen, slapstick decentres and destabilises traditional categories of human agency. Indeed, the gendered subject lies at the heart of normative representations of human agency, and it is for this reason that we have given ample space to considering how both female and male actors unsettled its status and associations. Gender's fluidity goes hand in hand with the real of object's dethroning of the human agent. The normative equivalence between masculinity and agency only emphasises the effective connection between these comic strategies further. In this case too, silent comedy's visual vocabulary and use of object-meanness and complicity questions the traditional categories used to define relations between human agency and passive objects: from gumball machines to malicious beds, objects are wilful and have the power to dominate subjects. Having considered the subversive weakness of weak men and passive agents, let us turn to the ways that slapstick makes slippery the boundaries between human subjectivity and the spatial environment itself.

²³³ See Koebner, Liptay (2006).

²³⁴ Henefeld (2018) p. 4 f.

²³⁵ See transgender activist rapper Mykki Blanco, who has repeatedly spoken out about there not being 'a singular transgender narrative', Mixmag (2017).

4 Species of Spaces

Introduction:

In the previous chapter we explored how individual objects – sometimes complicit, sometimes malicious – possess powers that can attack the dignity and personhood of humans and how subjects in slapstick morph and change. There I suggested that the dethroning of human agency can be viewed favourably, as it represents us as entangled in the larger ecology of non-human things in which we live and to which we are indebted. I now want to focus on how gestures of destruction and unruliness by subjects against their very environments can generate new and contingent spaces.

When objects congregate into powerful assemblages – making up living rooms, kitchens or public spaces like park benches in the city – they code territories and create strict frameworks of action. Constellations of objects generate self-organising systems that enforce hierarchies, as Deleuze and Guattari have argued.²³⁶ When the comediennes struggle against seemingly banal objects like vases, or transgress thresholds like windows, such acts show that spaces not only exist materially; they are constructed through actions. Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1974) has argued that space is not a passive backdrop for human actions but actively produced by economic, cultural and political forces and must be contested as such:

Pressure from below must therefore also confront the state in its role as organiser of space, as the power that controls urbanization, the construction of buildings and spatial planning in general. The state defends class interests while simultaneously setting itself above society as a whole, and its ability to intervene in space can and must be turned back against it, by grass-roots opposition, in the form of counter-plans and counter-projects designed to thwart strategies, plans and programmes imposed from above.²³⁷

²³⁶ See Deleuze and Guattari (2013).

²³⁷ Lefebvre (1974), p. 382 ff.

By rebelling against the disciplining force of their environment through destruction and transgression the *comédiennes* also torpedo the structures that constitute subjectivity: by refusing to be docile bodies within domestic environments the *comédiennes* effectively deterritorialise their homes, that is to say they weaken the ties between culture and place that condition them. We might compare resistance to this kind of conditioning to the type described by Foucault (1975) in his study of penal institutions. When architecture produces subjects, it has a particular stake in how gender is constructed: it is through its codification and classification of space, through admitting some bodies whilst barring others, through making visible and invisible and conditioning dependant on a person's sex, that the *comédienne's* rebellion against its order gains much wider implications.²³⁸ Their revolt against their environment becomes resistance against the modes in which gender is constructed and policed. Furthermore, the attack on architectural structures addresses the massive social, political and economic shifts of the time in which the films were made. It must be read as a continuation of the militant acts of destruction conducted by the suffragette movement, which promoted women's rights by means of violence and protest but also humour.²³⁹ Suffragettes often campaigned in the open air to target new audiences and were trained to diffuse threatening situations by laughing along to hostile jokes, formulating quick witted reposts and ridiculing male criticisms of their lack of domesticity. To undermine claims they were 'militant' and operated with a 'terrorist touch' they replicated such tactics as Krista Cowman has shown. To lobby Downing Street, Olivia Smith and Edith New chained themselves to the fence and were able to speak for some time before the police were able to detach them. In court Olivia Smith stressed the WSPU's commitment to non-violence a stating: 'I did not hurt the fence. I did not hurt anybody', rendering the borrowed political tactic ridiculous.²⁴⁰ Fences and thresholds fare less well in the comedies, where they are often reduced to rubble through rampant smashing.

By combining both violence and humour, and by setting into motion, transforming and re-functioning their environment, the *comédiennes* make us see them anew, showing the agency of spaces as well as human individuals, and marking the boundaries between objects and subjects as a fluid continuum.

I am especially interested in how in slapstick scenic elements are used to order space and to collapse spaces into each other, engineering physical montages and live palimpsests. Instead of

²³⁸ See *Sexuality and Space* (1992), in particular Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender' pp. 327-89.

²³⁹ For the use of humour by suffragettes, see Krista Cowman's (2007) brilliant study of 'silly' behaviour of and humour by the Women's Social and Political Union 1903-1914. Further Mariann Lewinsky devised a programme on suffragettes for the festival *Il cinema Ritrovato* 2008 in Bologna. See Lewinsky (2010).

²⁴⁰ Smith in Cowman (2007), p. 270.

simply inverting order into disorder, however, a spectrum of orderliness can be discerned in these comic strategies. In the following we will see how spaces as forms of social control are challenged and their ideological and symbolic readings become unfixed.

4.1 Unsettling the Setting

4.1.1 *Drawing room action*

Although at the outset of comic scenes the world surrounding the comediennes appears ordered, it is the ensuing chaos and destruction that makes visible the strict taxonomy of early-twentieth-century bourgeois interiors.

Initially, pillows rest on the divan, busts and vases sit dutifully on the mantelpiece or table. Ornamental dining chairs wait kneeling to hold their sitter's behinds, to stiffen and straighten their backs, while also performing as extended adornments of the body. Hierarchy abounds: the carpet is underneath the dining table, which is underneath the tablecloth, which stands under the hanging chandelier. Everything is dressed to impress, only glimpses of objects' functionality are visible: the table's ankles just peek out under the tablecloth, the floor only shows through a few bare patches.

On top of the hierarchy of things present are objects that have no function whatsoever, simply hoping to be noticed. As reminders of taste, these objects of vanity grace table tops and mantelpieces. Predictably, these objects are the first to fall victim to the comedienne's smashings. When Lea is found reading by her parents who depart for the evening, they reprimand her to do her knitting. Lea soon loses her ball of wool and in search for it climbs on top of a large cupboard which falls over and during her increasingly frantic search through the house busts vases, destroys chairs, tears down curtains and overturns beds. Ossi Oswald goes on a similar rampage smashing up vases and busts, and throwing cushions. Both women are reprimanded but also rewarded with what they wanted: Lea gets her book back and Ossi gets to marry a prince.²⁴¹

²⁴¹ *Lea e il gomitolo* (1913), *Die Austern Prinzessin* (1919).

The bourgeois drawing room is no accidental setting for many of the *comediennes'* joyful escapades of destruction. As space where the family could 'withdraw from the rest of the household for greater privacy', dedicated to holding the 'softest and finest furnishings,' it would have been filled with desirable and precious mirrors, carpets and curtains.²⁴² As the centrepiece of the house, the drawing room played a double role, at once demonstrating taste and status to visiting guests, whilst also epitomising the house's sheltering function, 'allow(ing) one' as Bachelard notes, 'to dream in peace'.²⁴³

The shattering of signifiers of this place – artworks, table, trunks and chairs - comes close to undoing the house as *stabilitas loci*, a stable construction which 'gather(s) what is known.'²⁴⁴ Especially in *Lea e il gomitolo*, the house's grid-like organisation, which according to Norberg-Schulz exerts 'centralisation, direction and rhythm,' is counteracted and criss-crossed by objects and bodies out of place.²⁴⁵

The geometry of this space is ordered along a vertical and horizontal axis and is revealed to be a container: Lea's destruction undresses and makes visible the underlying boxlike structure of the house, which, like the nonhuman objects described above, conditions and directs the life of its human users.



Fig. 4. *Lea e il gomitolo*, Cines, 1913, Film still.

²⁴² Bryson (2010), p. 202.

²⁴³ Bachelard (1964), p. 64.

²⁴⁴ Norberg-Schulz (1974).

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

4.1.2 Exploding kitchens

Domestic and commercial kitchens in the world of slapstick films, and in accordance with early twentieth-century bourgeois culture, are mostly spaces of invisible labour, occupied by servants, women and children. Although their layout seems functional and serene they house the potential for explosive action and destructive mayhem. Revolutionary ambitions are harboured in kitchens and bearers of competing ideologies conspire and orchestrate takeovers from this hidden space of common status. Food and drink are not the only stuff brewing in slapstick's kitchens: transgressive misbehaviour, maltreatment of objects and struggle against extant power structures or food etiquettes are daily fare.

Perhaps the heat, working speed and strict social hierarchies mark kitchens out as spaces of especially explosive violence. The constant kicking of maids, cooks and waiters by home or restaurant owners shows a darker side to slapstick.²⁴⁶ Servants are judged on the basis of their utility and efficiency, turning them into tools which must function seamlessly within the system of kitchen utensils.²⁴⁷ Physical performance is rewarded or reprimanded, further degrading the servants. Involuntary objectifications, reinforced through a top-down order, show comic transformations at their most negative.

Kitchens enforce this discipline or punish even without human intervention. As powerful personified assemblages they lash out at clumsy workers or unwanted guests: when lazy Charlie is forced to attend to hearth and baby for a moment he is pummelled and hurt by every kitchen appliance in the vicinity, burning his legs, bum, hands, and elbow.²⁴⁸ In *The Pilgrim* (1923), a rolling pin repeatedly hits the tramp on his head as he unsuccessfully tries to store it on a shelf, undermining his flirtations with Edna. Instead of instruments for human aid, kitchen utensils turn into instruments of torture, refuting Aristotle's claim that comedy must not show pain.²⁴⁹ To turn to more recent examples in film, Martha Rosler's martial use of kitchen utensils in *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) – her stabbing, slashing, hammering, grating with almost automatic gestures – complements and develops the violence of kitchen tools that once attacked the tramp. The kitchen here is openly shown to be a place of violent, disciplining action whose tools – although

²⁴⁶ *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914), *The Immigrant* (1917) and especially early Keystone productions.

²⁴⁷ *Modern Times* (1936).

²⁴⁸ *His Trysting Place* (1914).

²⁴⁹ See Gutwirth (1992), p. 30.

small in size - have powerful effects. We might add to this tradition an even more contemporary example, Mona Hatoum's *Grater Divide* (2002), where a seven-foot cheese grater turned room divider, points towards the violent spatial division and affective forces at play within kitchens.

In *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914), Marie Dressler's oversized body refuses to comply with the regimented processes that make up kitchen work as she drops pots and bowls, knocks down fellow waitresses and spills drinks. Her clumsy movements endanger each passing plate. The kitchen seems too small for her, she lacks the nimbleness and rhythm required to slip between waiters, cooks and crockery. Her over-spilling physical performance resembles a bull in a china shop. Where typically in classical Hollywood comedy and melodrama a woman's body itself is the site for restoring natural order, a woman's body is here the unruly element of destruction, and its incompetent out-of-placeness is celebrated with laughter.²⁵⁰

Perhaps because objects are less precious in kitchens than in drawing rooms, destruction comes in multiples; in *Die Puppe* (1919), the apprentice hurls stacks of plates towards his master in pursuit. Whether upsetting order accidentally – like Marie – or by choice like the apprentice, the comedians also undermine efficiency and repetitive dull work. Indeed, in the Bull Pup Beach Restaurant kitchen, Fatty refuses to segregate work and pleasure. He casually flips knives and eggs over his shoulder and through his legs and catapults food, which Buster catches neatly behind his back. Skill and pace make Fatty's rhythmic cooking resemble a performance as he refuses to segregate work and pleasure. By dunking and extracting every dish from the same pot he upsets the strict protocols of cooking. Using his body as a practicable physical tool – he treads out dough with his shoes – he subjects traditions of making food taste good to his personal hierarchy of importance: a camp show in which all is subject to rhythm.

Meanwhile in the restaurant, Buster starts dancing competitively with a female entertainer and carries on inside the kitchen. He applies stylised Arabic moves to his plate-carrying, which inspires Fatty to break into his own dance. Fatty attaches a dustbin to his belly and puts a colander on his head with two plates as breasts, thereby metamorphosing into a housewife. The discovery of a band of sausages inspires a snake dance routine à la Theda Bara. The mutation of kitchen duties into elated dance and collapsing of gender distinctions occurs through the reconfiguration of the utilitarian into the ornamental. Excessive and graceful movement blooms within the sparseness of the kitchen and brings the exoticism of a holiday into the workplace. Taylorism and the practice of scientific management of work flows is sent up by the worker-dreamers without refusing to work: rather the comedians launch an attack on the rational,

²⁵⁰ See Crafton (1995), p. 113.

efficient handling of objects by making visible their inherent instability. They unsettle the idea of efficient capitalist production by doubling down on the idea of what a performance is by simultaneously engaging in play and fulfilling their obligations with accuracy and speed.

These conclusions recalls artist Guy Ben-Ner's video work *Moby Dick* (2000). Using his kitchen as a tragicomic set to create vignettes of Melville's novel he turns the tiled green floor into the sea and the kitchen sink into the bar whilst his daughter Elia takes on various roles. Dissolving boundaries between studio practice and domestic duties he re-imagines everyday objects and challenge the invisible, repetitive and tedious labour of being a stay-at-home parent, proposing the fictive, imaginative and transformative as a means of transportation and escape. Like the tramp's attempts to elevate Edna from her kitchen duties by hanging a roll of dough around his neck like a garland, and air-playing a ladle like a ukulele, these imaginings are non-violent means to undermine the disciplining force of domestic or workplace architecture.²⁵¹

4.2 Thresholds & Boundaries

4.2.1 *Looking out, listening in*

Although rooms are often sealed off, this does not mean that we never see openings in the sets. If it is important to the comedic sequence, inside-outside relationships are carefully choreographed: Ossi sits by the window, looking out, and Rosalie stands in the corridor, listening in.²⁵² The positioning of the comediennes in these in-between spaces is crucial to the gags. As Oswalda is discovered in her window frame by a bunch of boys on the street whom she laughingly flirts with, this clearly signifies a forbidden interaction with the outside world. Beyond visually interacting and displaying herself, she exchanges conversation and even sends little sweets flying into the boys' mouths like kisses, literally reaching out to touch the world beyond the window-frame. This threshold-flirtation shows she is untameable even if kept inside the seemingly protected domestic realm, using every possible means to play with the imposed spatial confinements.

Similarly, Rosalie is perched in the corridor listening in on Little Moritz's conversation with her father, as he asks for her hand. In an architectural set-up that resembles a split screen – the men to the right, Rosalie to the left – Rosalie performs a kind of gestural emotional subtleting to the

²⁵¹ *The Pawn Shop* (1916).

²⁵² *Ich möchte kein Mann sein* (1918), *Little Moritz demande Rosalie en mariage* (1913).

conversation. As her father angrily bangs on the table and Little Max jumps up high from his seat, she does the same in the corridor as if connected by some invisible force. Rosalie is not only visually on the threshold, squeezed to the side of the picture, but takes up the role of a mediator to the audience, grotesquely over-exaggerating reactions of agreement or disagreement any eavesdropper (including the seated viewers) might have. She is an audience before the audience, lens and mirror, magnifying and reflecting at the same time.

4.2.2 Windows

Windows often show the simultaneousness of different worlds within one shot. Their rectangular shape echoes the format of the screen and set a film within the film. Cosy, domestic warmth projects out onto cold street life. Wealth is displayed next to poverty: proximity does not mean solidarity. In *Hard Luck* (1921) a hungry, penniless, lonely Buster sits on a trashcan and looks longingly into a hotel kitchen. Light, life, food are practically within reach - yet the glass window is an insurmountable barrier. The perverse proximity heightens the difference between what Buster can see and what he can touch (or ingest). Instead of connection, windows stand for distance, longing. Novalis writes that 'everything at a distance turns into poetry: distant mountains, distant people, distant events: all become romantic.'²⁵³ In the city, spatial distance between people and personal space is collapsed, but social distance is not; a panopticon of worlds can be seen but not entered.

Windows reframe things; their capacity to obstruct, obscure and edit leads to misunderstandings. Buster uses a window to his advantage for a con. He cuts a gunman out of a life-size advert and places it in front of a saloon window - a cardboard sidekick to back him up as he collects money from those inside.

In Caspar David Friedrich's *Woman at the Window* (1822), a lady in a luminous green dress stands with her back towards us. This pose is a common motif in nineteenth-century painting. Women look out onto the world from enclosed spaces. In slapstick windows are understood as holes, exits and escape routes; rather than projecting desires onto landscapes, the comediennes project themselves. The non-angelic *Engelien* is sent to bed but instantly clambers out the window, balances on the ledge and jumps into her lover's arms. Tilly and Sally break out through their bedroom window by knotting sheets together so they can descend unseen and a window is the ultimate escape route for a grieving Rosalie who jumps out but fails to die. In

²⁵³ The Met (2011).

German “*Sich aus den Fenster lehnen*” - to lean out of the window - means to stretch what one is allowed to do. The onscreen action thus captures in a speech figure the link between architectural features and codes of social propriety and rules.

Laurel and Hardy don't just lean out of windows; they smash them, reducing their lyrical connotations to nil as they treat them as holes in the wall. In the course of yet another tit for tat battle lamps, armchairs and a collection of vases litter the representative front lawn of a residential bungalow. In turn, parts of the front garden have ended up in the living room. This attack on the division between inside and outside, private and public, joyfully overturns the tenets of petit bourgeois order.²⁵⁴

Once again, non-violent and non-physical means are part of slapstick's vocabulary: Buster appears to be cleaning a pane of glass in a phone box only to reach through and mime cleaning it from the other side.²⁵⁵ Our belief in the pane of glass is shattered without the production of a single shard.

4.2.3 *Fences and walls*

The function of fences and walls to segregate spaces but also to enforce social boundaries physically is predictably a prominent point for attack in slapstick. Because fences and walls not only police space, but also reproduce the ideologies and laws which enforce private property, trespassing and vandalism is always also directed against private property itself. Latour has argued that the Enlightenment conceptions of law, which segregates the rights of lively and inert matter, has led to the harmful divide in our thinking between subjects and objects. Property thus appears as an apt site on which such divisions can be contested, as well as the unassailability of subjectivity itself.²⁵⁶ The liberal premise that private property, defined by law and enforced through the physical marking of barriers and borders, generates advanced civilizations and economic development is put to the test in slapstick.²⁵⁷

The fence dividing two tenement blocks in *Neighbors* (1920), rather than separating land and people, becomes a site for the exchange of messages through a knothole: it facilitates the lovers' secret get-togethers. Later, a wooden slat attached to the fence is used by Buster to batter figures of authority – both his unwilling, future father-in-law and the police – and finally

²⁵⁴ *Le Torchon brûle* (1911).

²⁵⁵ *The Bell Boy* (1918), Fatty does the same with a car window in *The Garage* (1920).

²⁵⁶ Latour (1993).

²⁵⁷ Kirk (1993).

facilitates the escape of the happy couple. If personified, the fence here takes up the role of a social matchmaker and agent that brings together rather than segregates, whilst turning against the law.

Instead of ensuring the dignity and integrity of his personhood, Hardy's fence undermines his standing. Attempting to follow Laurel, who has leaped elegantly across his garden gate, Hardy gets unhappily entangled in his fence, falls and flattens it entirely.²⁵⁸ Its purpose as an obstacle to the intrusion of other persons is perfectly inverted as it trips up its owner. Buster constantly finds himself on the wrong side of the law and the fence, which are often used interchangeably: he is in big trouble in prison as his adversary Edward bends an iron barred gate apart, one pole at a time.²⁵⁹

A wall is spectacularly ruined when a tram interrupts a party by crashing into a hotel saloon, violently bringing the outside in.²⁶⁰ Elsewhere, theatre backdrops depicting *veduta* or oceans crash from their fixtures and ruin fictional stage worlds.²⁶¹ An angered Fatty throws two scoundrels and a piano through a brick wall.²⁶² Such making permeable of spatial boundaries, or ruination of fictional worlds, is also used on the cinematic screen itself: the fourth wall separating audiences and action is pierced with winks and looks to camera. Famously in *One Week* (1920) we see Sybil Seely scrubbing herself in a bathtub as she accidentally drops her soap. When she bends out of the bathtub to retrieve it the cameraman's hand obscures the lens as she winks at us. Something similar happens when Fatty begins to undress in full view and suddenly discovers us the audience, as he instructs the camera to be lifted upwards.²⁶³

Hard divisions, then, are not only softened between subjects and objects as we have seen in the previous chapter. Spatial boundaries too, which delineate property and uphold the law, become porous. Walls, windows, fences fail to create distance in a world that refuses the idea of stasis, order and partitions between categories. By testing our relations to a universe filled with objects, buildings, visible and invisible power structures, machines and natural forces, these films propose that we are not situated where humanist, Enlightened philosophy has placed us, as individual subjects in control and at the centre of things. By unsettling the scaffolding structure of divisions between objects and subjects, male and female, private and public that

²⁵⁸ *The Butcher Boy* (1917), Buster gets stuck in fence. In *Neighbors* (1920) the fence is symbolic separator and retardant for the love story.

²⁵⁹ *Convict 13* (1920).

²⁶⁰ *The Bell Boy* (1918).

²⁶¹ *The Playhouse* (1921).

²⁶² *Leading Lizzy Astray* (1914).

²⁶³ *Coney Island* (1917).

form the basis of our law and social order, Slapstick reminds us of the precarity and artifice of these constructs, and that our world operates according to a logic that ultimately eludes us.

4.3 Symmetry // Doubling and Infiltration as a Form of Destruction

4.3.1 Axial symmetry

As we have seen, the ability of architectural structures such as thresholds, windows and walls to divide order, to support the law, protect property and uphold the dignity of personhood is routinely undermined. Rebellion against physical and social segregation can take different forms in slapstick: from violently crashing a tram into a salon to undoing the fourth wall by simply fluttering an eyelid, the strategies of subversion operate on a sliding scale, taking material and immaterial, violent and non-violent forms. Where on one end of the spectrum we have seen unruly destruction of signifiers of status in living rooms, we now turn to consider how order and symmetry of human bodies formally within the picture frame functions to subvert pomposity and the dignity that places humans above the thing world.

In *The Bell Boy*, the camera frames two hotel clerks as they run up a central staircase, their motions in perfect sync. They split in symmetry on the landing - one going right, one left - each vanishing behind a door and re-emerging with two suitcases, which they hurl towards the other. The suitcases cross in mid-air, are caught and carried down in joint descent. Later, they dive in synchrony behind a counter, and their two heads reappear in bandit masks. A vertical axis is also key to the fire drill organised around the fat captain and his fire engine. The crew of eight men - four on each side - jumps into the fire engine and raise their hats to complete the mirrored choreography.²⁶⁴ Like in *The Bell Boy*, uniforms are key to creating a coherent image, to enhance the geometric order and motion within the shots.²⁶⁵ By flattening the image and stylizing human motion, the centre-framing and strict symmetry of the *mise-en-scene* stresses exceptionally clearly the artifice of the film, which now resembles a comic strip. This tactic has since become the signature of Wes Anderson's recent comedies such as *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (2009)

²⁶⁴ *The Fireman* (1916).

²⁶⁵ Bordwell and Wölfflin have termed this 'planar or planimetric composition'. See Bordwell (2007).

or *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (2014).²⁶⁶ The perfect synchronicity of human movement evokes Bergson's understanding of the comic as arising in rebellion from the mechanical element encrusted on the living.²⁶⁷ By revealing the camera to be central to the execution of the scene it implodes the cinematic illusion no less than Sybil's wink of an eye explodes the diegetic space.

The tableaux-like images form the perfect foil for the tramp or bell boy Buster's tumbles and fights. The careful set up is not just a prelude to the punchlines, it is a gag in itself. For example a fixed camera is central to the sight gags when a man and woman's attempt to flirt on a couch is interrupted by a jealous Fatty, who, sitting in their midst uses his large body to intercept their lines of vision.²⁶⁸ Bodily masses of men walking or marching are a popular hiding place from enemy pursuit: Buster falls into line amongst a group of policemen so that the viewer can still see him but his suitors cannot - until the camouflage of geometry collapses and the chase goes on.²⁶⁹ No disruption or destruction renders these synchronized or geometric movements funny; rather, it is the orderliness of an escape into an ornamental, decorative constellation that creates a risible tension with the urgency of the situation. The ornament is here not beautiful but made functional as geometry is relegated from its role as an abstract aesthetic category, used within art forms like dance or painting, to an action-laden, slapstick chase.

The aesthetics of geometric order employed in the films resemble what Susan Sontag identified in her analysis of Leni Riefenstahl's film productions of the 1930s as a 'preoccupation with situations of control (...) the turning of people into things (...) the transactions between mighty forces and their puppets'.²⁷⁰ Yet where these formal elements are used in Riefenstahl's films to promote idealism, fascism and totalitarian regimes, they create the opposite effect in slapstick: the choreography of bodies in the chase scenes evoke ideal beauty through symmetry but this formal harmony serves basic purposes or desires. That rogue comedians with physical quirks like fatness or shortness are central to these orderly formations and displays of discipline undermines the inherent connection between beauty-as-ideal and beauty-as-truth. Comediennes then not only rebel against order, they infiltrate it and its ideology to ruin it from the inside out - making it another milestone in their flattening of hierarchies. Breaking through the oppositions of production/destruction the strategy here is truly anarchic: the effective and

²⁶⁶ In Ernst Lubitsch's *Die Austernprinzessin* (1919), centre symmetry recurs, already displaying the 'Lubitsch touch'.

²⁶⁷ Bergson (1911).

²⁶⁸ *He Did and He Didn't* (1916).

²⁶⁹ *The Garage* (1920), *Seven Chances* (1925), a contrast of physical sizes is exploited for comic effect also by Laurel and Hardy, Rosalie and Little Moritz and in Liesl Karlstadt's round boisterous appearance next to Karl Valentin's long skinny body.

²⁷⁰ Sontag (1975).

nihilist, Benjamin writes, enters in Hegelian fashion ‘into his opponent’s strength in order to destroy him from within’.²⁷¹ According to a paradoxical reversal and a criss-crossing of polar opposites disorder is created through order. It is this oxymoronic strategy of revolutionary nihilism or *Umschlagen* – paradoxical reversal - of one into the other, which must be radical but never consistent, that Benjamin sought to employ against the aestheticisation of politics.²⁷²

4.3.2 *Up, down- horizontal*

Staircases are platforms to showcase and dramatize encounters or mishaps. Beyond their utility, they represent wealth or squalor and embody order or even spiritual virtue. Friedrich Mielke – a leading scalatologist - writes that mounting staircases is not only a physical process but a psychological one; the staircase enforces its intrinsic laws on the person using it by controlling their gait.²⁷³

In some of the films this interplay of body and stairs involves extreme physics. The central stairwell in *The Haunted House* can, in the blink of an eye, have its steps folded away by a mechanical dial and be turned into a smooth slope for expelling unwanted visitors. Buster’s attempts to ascend or descend fail, an experience that enters his unconscious: he dreams he is climbing the many steps to heaven’s door where Peter rejects him, turning the steps into a slide which deliver him straight to hell. The downward movement directly invokes metaphysical order by placing the heavens above and pandemonium below, conflating symbolic and filmic order. The opposite division of space applies when Buster intermittently tumbles down three floors to street level, then into a coal cellar, where he finds a priest who marries him and his fiancée in the black dusty subterranean space.²⁷⁴ Gesturing upwards as a beam of light falls onto the scene through the pavement supply entrance, the priest mutters the highest blessings and stresses that physical downfall can bring spiritual elation.

To speed up motion, stairwell banisters turn into slides, operating as fast tracks that can even be used both ways.²⁷⁵ The capacity of film to reverse its direction and undo gravity is key in slapstick. More recently Mark Wallinger’s looped video work *Angel* (1997) - in which he walks on the spot at the bottom of a moving escalator reciting verses of St. Johns Gospel applies this logic to a speech act: his odd pronunciation reveals the words have been spoken backwards and

²⁷¹ Walter Benjamin (1971), p. 481.

²⁷² Löwy (1985).

²⁷³ Scalatology is the study of stairs and stairwells according to Mielke (1966), p. 1.

²⁷⁴ *Neighbors* (1920).

²⁷⁵ *He Did and He Didn't* (1916), *The Electric House* (1922) per reverse play- sliding upwards is possible.

are replayed forward, so that the video's end becomes its beginning. His initial descent on the escalator is thus turned into an angelic ascent – slipping up our initial reading of the film and exposing the system of spatial coordinates that are a part of our moral judgements and metaphysical belief systems, based on an ancient symbolic order. The stairwell's function as a bridge between high and low is also upended in *The Floorwalker* (1916), where the tramp tries to escape down an upward moving escalator, pursued by his enemy whilst both remain at arm's length on the same spot. This Sisyphean image of running without getting anywhere – inverted by Buster Keaton's perpetual tumble on the spot on a moving stairwell in *The Electric House* (1922) - suspends the belief that movement, sweat and hard work always equates progress. Up or down trajectories here are not inverted but bent into circles and cycles – subjecting bodies to spinning cogs of modern machine motion, the effects of which we examine in more detail later.

Upwards movement – associated with ascension in society, moral purity and economic success - is constantly undermined not just by its inverse, downwards motion, but by comediennes flipping into horizontal positions and refusing to move at all. William Davies writes:

What if the greatest threat to capitalism, at least in the liberal West, is simply lack of enthusiasm and activity? What if, rather than inciting violence or explicit refusal, contemporary capitalism is simply met with a yawn?²⁷⁶

Instead of climbing job ladders, slapstick's anti-heroes celebrate fatigue and active disengagement in the workplace, using objects in their vicinity for support: Buster falls asleep during working hours and the tramp carefully turns a piano into his bed.²⁷⁷ They snooze on stage, in boats, circus carts or in a projection booth.²⁷⁸ Rosalie and Léontine too rest and snooze whilst they are on the clock.²⁷⁹

While staircases are a directional tool for exploring hierarchies, park benches offer a poetics and politics of laziness. Yet Keystone park benches are contested spaces and solitude for reading or snoozing never lasts, as violent authority, dogs and beautiful women interrupt the peace. The restricted possibilities of the set turn the park bench into a primary instrument of transformation, comic ingenuity and imagination. Forming obstacles or axes for chases, they keep suitors at bay.²⁸⁰ This horizontal distancing turns lopsided as the benches morph into see-

²⁷⁶ William Davies in Olma (2016), p. 65.

²⁷⁷ *His Musical Career* (1915).

²⁷⁸ *The Playhouse* (1921), *The Rounders* (1914), *The Circus* (1928), *Sherlock Jr* (1924).

²⁷⁹ *Un Ravalement précipité* (1911).

²⁸⁰ *Coney Island* (1917).

saws, levers, catapults, ejecting those seated upon them.²⁸¹ Bench sitters are knocked out by flying bottles or bricks, their bodies drooping backwards, cascading sideways or slouching forward in uncivilised postures.²⁸² Benches offer intimacy and a place for rest for outcasts, different genders and classes, all are on the same level both visually and socially, if only for a moment.

Directional orientation within the picture pane visually locates the comedians in relation to their place in society, but without any of the lasting moral implications tied to the symbolic order. Contrast this, for example, with the German Expressionist film *Die Freudlose Gasse*, where Asta Nielsen's descent into the butcher's basement turns her into a fallen woman. Yet descent in the comedies is never irreversible.²⁸³ Indeed, they often appear happiest where just they are stretching out refusing to take up that proud upright position, unique to humans, that supposedly places us above everything else.

*

By examining drawing rooms, kitchens, windows and thresholds like fences, as well as directional up and down movements in this chapter, we have seen how spaces exert an active and disciplinary ordering force that is made visible and subverted in a multiplicity of ways. When objects congregate into powerful constellations - like in a bourgeois living room- the claustrophobic powers of such assemblages not only to prescribe behaviours, postures and movements, but also to constitute identity are rebelled contested and reconfigured. While in expressionist films like *Die Freudlose Gasse* (1925) or social realist films like *Sprengbagger 1010* (1929), urban environments over-determine the fates of characters that live within them to the point of their death, the comedians here rebalance power by showing built space to be porous and permeable. Slapstick's representation of space therefore resists mechanical interpretations of the environmental and social determinism, theories of which were so popular in the nineteenth century. But furthermore, as we have seen, where spatial hierarchies reflect forms of bourgeois, capitalist, and gendered order and values, slapstick responds by physically subverting and breaking down such markers. These acts provide powerful moments of critique of gendered and class power and status.

²⁸¹ Ibid; *Wished on Mabel* (1915).

²⁸² *In the Park* (1915); Park films were especially cheap to produce, which is why the park benches make such frequent appearances in early Keystone films. Robinson (2001), p. 114 ff.

²⁸³ See Eisner (1980), p. 111 ff.

By smashing up and destroying the gridded order of the house, breaking through walls and escaping out of windows, the comediennes don't simply do away with order but step into a dynamic engagement with the world. Rather than perceiving their environments as threatening and alienating they infiltrate its structures by temporarily adapting its guises - entering into geometric and disciplinary formations (falling into pace with a police squadron) or transforming architectural features like windows or park benches. The comedians show architecture and assemblages of humans and objects as plastic matter that can be reconfigured at will. Their smashing of interiors creates chaotic scenes, littered with fragmented objects, that resemble the abstraction of cubist paintings or evoke the Dadaist jumble of speech acts with its deliberate depletion of meaning. Their attacks on the physical world always also extend into symbolic, spiritual and social dimensions and transform constitutive environments into spaces of contingency. This smashing then shows destruction not in its pure negative form or as the antithesis to the good and godly act of creation. They make room for the new. To use Walter Benjamin's words on *The Destructive Character*, 'what exists he reduces to rubble - not for the sake of rubble, but for that of the way leading through it.'²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴ Benjamin in Wohlfarth (1978), p. 48.

5 Nature

Introduction:

By the mid-1910s, cinema-goers had seen hordes of clowns tumble across the silver screen: comedy fatigue was spreading. Rough and tumble action, the old pie-in-face routines had to become more complex to keep pulling in audiences. Furthermore, cinema programming had changed: instead of a sequence of short films, feature length reels were in demand. Keaton and co had to turn, twist and pinch their subjects and objects for longer. Large machines were exploited for visual gags in unprecedented (and often unrepeated) ways: wind machines were used to destroy entire set towns built to scale, steamboats and historic locomotives were bought and sunk in streams.

The inflation in scale extended to the film's locations. If the public desired to be transported by the cinema from the ennui of their hometowns, Keaton, Chaplin and Mabel were happy to indulge them.²⁸⁵ From the snowy landscapes of *The Frozen North* (1922) and *The Gold Rush* to countryside idylls in *Mickey* (1918), slapstick's men and women bring comedy into nature. They upset romantic images of natural tranquillity and serenity. The figure of the explorer and tourist are lampooned at length in *The Adventurer* (1919), *The Balloonatic* and *The Navigator* (1924), films that show the troubles its audiences are spared by staying in their seats. Their heroes don't fare well in the wilderness; they crash land in trees or nearly drown. Hungry, small men are lost in vast sceneries, while strong women like Phylis and Mabel assert themselves in nature. Yet the comediennes unsettle the essentialist tales of feminine unity with nature which was such a common theme in contemporary romantic and melodramatic film. Slapstick ridicules the awestruck and romanticised imagery of a wild nature, to be conquered by brave pioneering men or women laid out in Arnold Franck's proto-fascistic mountain films and in D.W. Griffith's dramas.²⁸⁶ It undermines assumptions about nature as pristine and in opposition to the artifice of civilisation.

²⁸⁵ See Preschl (2008), p. 20 ff.

²⁸⁶ Griffith did also produce some slapstick films as Barry Salt has argued - although his most memorable work was not in this genre. See Salt in Rob King (2008), p. 34 ff.

Friedrich Schlegel writes '(m)an is free because he is the highest expression of nature'.²⁸⁷ This romantic notion of self-determination is empirically tested throughout the films to differing effects. In the following I want to examine how slapstick shows humanity's place at the top of the natural order to be insecure and contested by powerful natural forces. Yet at the same time slapstick achieves moments of surprising harmony. Such unity, however, is best achieved not through asserting the self but through working with natural forces. Once in accord with nature, the comedians are at their most powerful.

There are other elements of romantic thought on nature which slapstick, does not reject, and may even be said to accentuate.²⁸⁸ The romantics wanted to cultivate and educate aesthetic sensibilities in a world increasingly ruled by reason.²⁸⁹ Slapstick comedy follows the romantic desire to look at things and see beyond their common meaning and use. Novalis writes:

To romanticise the world is to make us aware of the magic, mystery and wonder of the world; it is to educate the senses to see the ordinary as extraordinary, the familiar as strange, the mundane as sacred, the finite as infinite.²⁹⁰

Indeed, through their practice of transformation, through reclaiming the marginal as essential and at times achieving unity with nature, the comedians can be said to partake in a version of the Romantic project. Yet they dispense with the male, heroic individualism and distorted mythical ideation associated with the movement, as we shall see.

Slapstick adapts strategies of romancing – enlisting the power of symbolic images, anthropomorphising nature and challenging dualistic thinking - but not from the standpoint of anthropocentrism. Buster and Charlie employ their creative forces destructively, as we will see. Ruinations often occur in a non-physical and non-violent manner: rather than going against material things themselves, comedians here turn against ideologies, iconoclastically exploding the learned symbolic and allegorical register of images.

²⁸⁷ Beiser (2006), p. 153.

²⁸⁸ Paul O'Kane amongst others has linked the tramp's roaming explorations of LA to the figure of the flaneur. For him, Chaplin's championing of society's greatest loser into the world's most recognized figure is a romantic gesture in its rebellious defence of the marginalized and unprivileged. See O'Kane (2017), p. 140 and Jörg Heiser (2006).

²⁸⁹ Safranski (2009).

²⁹⁰ Beiser (2006), p. 24.

5.1 Mountains

In *Seven Chances* (1925) Buster bolts through moors and along mountain passes. Meanwhile Charlie marches through a snowy mountain range in *The Goldrush*. Yet Buster's light-footed climbs and Charlie's tumbles form counter images to the heroic self-assertion associated with nature and mountain films.²⁹¹ They contrast to the patience and effort of the ascent which are signs of silent self-discipline in mountain films like *Der Heilige Berg* (1926) by Arnold Franck with Leni Riefenstahl.²⁹² Mountains are a place of *amor fati* – chance and danger. In Franck's films the displays of physical endurance in the face of adversity emphasise a binary attitude towards humans in opposition to nature. It is no accident that white mountain ranges, presented as spaces of 'purified action', were appropriated and idealised in Nazi mythology. They invoke the mythological icy land *Ultima Thule*, where the idealised Aryan supermen are said to have once resided.²⁹³ Indeed Riefenstahl herself, who stated that mountains symbolise struggle, went on to produce the most notorious of Nazi Germany's propaganda films, *Triumph des Willens* (1935).²⁹⁴ Mountains in Franck's films are sites of asceticism distant from the influences of modern, mechanized life. However, the comedians show the artifice of nature and its technological mediation, as we will see. Their speedy ascents and downward slides offer barely any time to contemplate the sublime.

Whereas in sensationalist mountain films the thrills and grand scenic vistas rely on diegetic realism - from taking the camera into the landscape and using real horses, real water and real snowy mountains - the mountains in the opening scene of *The Gold Rush* could not be more obviously artificial. Painted rocks and fake snow canyons renounce any attempt to liken the film world to the natural world. If Franck's preoccupation with surface realism disguises the labour involved in capturing its scenography, Chaplin and Keaton openly utilise tricks and insist on revealing the difference between the nature within their films and the nature out there. They play no part in furthering the escapism from the mechanisation and urbanization of the 1920s.²⁹⁵ Paradoxically the fakeness of their landscapes, or the disavowal of their beauty through the use of very rapid shots, does not stand in the way of naturalism in slapstick film, as we will see.

²⁹¹ On the German mountain film genre see Esther Leslie (2016), p. 122 ff.

²⁹² Krakauer in Leslie (2016), p. 125.

²⁹³ Leslie (2016), p. 136.

²⁹⁴ Ibid.

²⁹⁵ See Leslie (2016), p. 122- 52.

The real violence and death dealt in what Ben Singer (2001) termed blood-and-thunder sentimental melodrama are softened in comedy; having kicked a rock Buster soon finds himself in the midst of an avalanche, trying to dodge the rolling rocks by anticipating their tumbling trajectories. He constantly fails to avoid them. The power of nature-as-adversary is mocked here too: the papier-mâché stones render each collision soft, bouncy and barely dangerous.²⁹⁶

Slapstick heroes struggling in storms, rivers or snowy mountains share not only their (albeit fake) grand natural environments with their melodramatic counterparts. They are also subject to similar twists of fate. Clayton Hamilton observed in 1911:

[In] melodrama... the incidents determine and control the character. In both tragedy and comedy, the characters control the plot (...) Life is more frequently melodramatic than tragic (...) Much of our life - in fact by far the major share - is casual instead of causal (...) Nearly all the good or ill that happens to us is drifted to us, uncommanded, undeserved, upon the tides of chance. It is this immutable truth-the persistency of chance in the serious concerns of life and the inevitable influence of accident on character - that melodrama aims to represent (...).²⁹⁷

In fact, chance and shocks create a metaphysical constant in slapstick comedy as well. Its protagonists are flotsam and jetsam, badgered and bullied by invisible forces. Sometimes they simply appear in the wrong place at the wrong time: in *The Adventurer* a policeman, tired from a manhunt along steep coastal slopes drops into the sand, taking in the beauty and tranquillity of the beach, the rocks, the sea. Suddenly the sand begins to stir behind the back of the man. A head emerges from the perfectly smooth surface: Charlie, the fugitive. Still covered in sand he looks around only to recognise the dire timing of his emergence.

Yet where sudden fateful events lead melodrama's heroes to freeze into ice blocks or hang for hours on ropes until they die, the plights of slapstick's heroes are reversible.²⁹⁸ Charlie, for example, pretends to be frozen stiff to jump up when offered a free, warm breakfast.²⁹⁹ Slapstick comedians not only satirise and lampoon the grandiosity of cinematic melodrama; their films make their own artifice visible, the bathos of which undermines romantic images of nature as something awe-inspiring and opposed to civilisation. The effect is to draw attention to our own complex and mutual entanglement with nature, and to what in reality are the much more

²⁹⁶ *Seven Chances* (1925)

²⁹⁷ Hamilton in Singer (2001), p. 52.

²⁹⁸ *Der Heilige Berg* (1926).

²⁹⁹ *The Gold Rush* (1925).

blurred lines between modern civilisation, and the natural world. Slapstick also points towards the reductive manner in which culture constructs nature: as Elizabeth Grosz has shown, culture impoverishes our idea of nature by highlighting and magnifying only aspects that interest us.³⁰⁰



Fig. 5. *Seven Chances*, Buster Keaton Productions, 1925, Film still.

5.2 Russian Mountains³⁰¹

Culture scripts the natural; it writes it, divides it, manufactures it in socially useful, palatable, and expected forms. Elizabeth Grosz³⁰²

Slapstick's nature resembles the illuminated, fake nature of amusement parks which provided the thrills of going up and down without the sweat involved in physically scaling the real thing. As a space that reconfigures images of nature and celebrates its own artifice, it is not surprising that they formed a popular backdrop for slapstick escapades.³⁰³ History, romance and adventure were re-scripted so as to be experienced from close-up: San Francisco earthquakes, the burning of Rome, eruptions of Vesuvius would be repeated at regularly scheduled intervals. Visitors could take a *Trip to the Moon* and play in waves that obeyed electric tides - all within

³⁰⁰ Grosz (2005), p. 48.

³⁰¹ Russian Mountains were a predecessor to roller coasters. *Les Montagnes Russes* appeared in Paris in 1804 for which small wheels were put under sleds on a slope. Pescovitz (2014).

³⁰² Grosz (2005), p. 45.

³⁰³ Marie Dressler performed nonsense jokes here a daily basis. See Koolhaas (1994), p. 46.

the space of an hour. The plethora of settings and activities such as sliding, flying, riding and sunbathing might have been so attractive to filmmakers because it allowed for a rapid journey through situations and backdrops without having to rebuild film sets.

Fantastical attractions like *Chute the Shoots* and the *Chilkoot Pass* speed up the descents of mountains slopes and provide productive confusions between real and constructed nature for the comedians. Buster, Mabel and Fatty respond to the artifice of the amusement parks as if they were the real things they represented: on the *Witching Waves* attraction, a false simulation of the sea, Alice begins to gag from seasickness and Buster - who has been dealt a blow - hangs on to a prop buoy as if to save himself from drowning. He extends the cinema audience's suspension of disbelief to a third space, distressed at sea in the midst of green oceanic waves.³⁰⁴

Amusement parks were part of the new public sphere in which social encounters and physical proximity became permissible in unprecedented ways, as Rem Koolhaas has shown. People were happily pushed onto each other in the *Human Roulette* and rides like the swivel house, creating intimacy and breaching the isolation imposed by modern cities.³⁰⁵ Slapstick exploits these sets of romancing for conflict: Buster fares badly when he spontaneously shares a boat ride with a young woman.³⁰⁶ We see them vanish into a proscenium shortly after and re-emerge from the dark, Buster dishevelled with a black eye. Waiting for another woman in front of the *House of Trouble* ride, he is floored when she flies into him from a slide, getting too intimate too fast.

As a setting, the amusement park therefore has strong affinities to slapstick's own concerns, and its attitudes towards the natural environment. They both draw attention to their artificial nature and artifice, while providing opportunities for comedians to muddle the categories traditionally used to distinguish between nature and the built environment, and nature and technology.

³⁰⁴ *Coney Island* (1917).

³⁰⁵ See King (2010), p. 35.

³⁰⁶ Coney Island featured radical social experiments and technological innovations: Dreamland's Midget City created an alternate moral space in which promiscuity, nymphomania, homosexuality and fast marriages were encouraged and Martin Couney's Baby Incubator put prematurely born babies on display for paying audiences, revolutionising neonatal technology. BBC News (2016).

5.3 Drifting

In *The Navigator*, Buster's appearance in his massive juggernaut costume puzzles the islanders, who refrain from killing a girl, but his stint as the hero is short-lived: the girl rescues them both by inflating his suit and uses him as a boat to paddle away on. In similarly supine ways, Buster finds himself adrift in the stormy Pacific or carried down rivers by strong currents.³⁰⁷ He is ejected, stranded, or falls from the sky in random, unknown places. Attempts to regain control of his trajectory fail: when his canoe overturns, he drifts along the river with his legs pointing skywards.³⁰⁸ Elsewhere he finds himself walking in thin air when the basket under his hot air balloon breaks or trying to swim in too shallow a riverbed, where no matter how much he moves his arms and legs his body grounds him to the spot.

In *The Balloonatic* Buster's survival skills are outdone in elegance and efficiency by his rival female counterpart. While Phyllis skilfully fishes with a rod, Buster laboriously herds fish into a dam, before running it dry and collecting them. She hunts, he gathers. His insufficient measures are constant: starving, Buster takes aim at a rabbit but cannot bring himself to shoot it or tries to empty a flooding boat with a teacup. Whilst some of these images of incompetence are clichéd and easy to decode, others are more adventurous: when Buster in *The Navigator* nearly drowns after his own diving suit is filled with water, he swiftly cuts across the suit's midsection so that a deluge of water emerges. What Deleuze reads as a birthing scene, further emasculating Buster, is in fact a contingent image.³⁰⁹ Without acting as a metaphor and offering a concise substitution of a thing with attributes associated with another, the image sprawls and invites different interpretations; I for one thought of Buster as spineless throughout the rescue effort, so it should only be right that he turns out to consist of water. Once again, the plural significance of the slapstick comedian's metaphors, and his incompetence in the natural environment, undermines and destabilises the powerful romantic associations between the wilderness and human conquest.

In D. W. Griffith's drama *Way Down East* (1920), drifting is easily decoded as surrender and loss of control by Gish's character Anna. One hand stretched out, her hair already half submerged in icy water, the semi-conscious Anna travels downstream on an ice float towards the inevitable waterfall. Watching water flow, lamenting the unstoppable passage of events and time, is an image maximised in melodramatic film where troubled women not only gaze out onto water but

³⁰⁷ *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1928), *The Balloonatic* (1923), *The Boat* (1920).

³⁰⁸ For a contemporary re-enactment, see Himzo Polovina (2014).

³⁰⁹ Deleuze (2013), p. 160.

also enter the floods, often to be carried away by them. Both Gish's character and Gloria Hope's Teola in *Tess of the Storm Country* (1922) play with this familiar trope. They are morally troubled, both in desperate situations having had illegitimate children and hope for salvation in the floods. At the sight of deep water Teola's face switches between extreme expressions of fear of drowning, regret and faintness. Her expressions are intercut with images of the flowing stream, setting up a direct dialogue between woman and nature; her plunge then resembles an agreement or a concession, as if she were following a call of the water. Similarly Gish, exhausted from being blown about by a snowstorm, appears relieved by the sight of the lakes and uses her last strength to reach their edge, as if driven by some primal instinct. Nature here takes the lead: Teola loses ground; equally Gish's motionless body is transported downstream. That the women surrender control over their lives to a higher natural power and are still fatefully rescued gives their failed suicides the qualities of a ritual: finally, as if cleansed and redeemed by the water, they are saved. The women and nature are at one.

Implications of rebellion against tradition are inscribed in the landscape that surrounds the actresses itself: Gish's lone figure in the white snowstorm casts her as forlorn and far away from the warmth of civic society. In slapstick, by contrast, it is precisely this disconnect that is embraced. This is the case in *Mickey*, where Mabel relishes the freedom nature affords her by being away from the constraints of bourgeois society. And in general the relationship of women with water in comedies could hardly be more different: Mack Sennett's *Bathing Beauties* were lively and athletic, physically competent and capable of performing fancy dives.³¹⁰ They embodied the new woman of the jazz age. If the liberation from the heavy gowns Victorian bath dress simultaneously established and typecast a new body ideal of athleticism and youth, it also opened up different possibilities of movement and female comportment outdoors. Mabel Normand joyfully dives into water from rocks by the sea and briskly traverses ravines in *Mickey*. During romantic encounters on tree branches or a garden rendezvous she is never still or serene: her lively unrest is infectious. Her movements are the antidote to the balletic, fairy-like motions of Mary Pickford in *Cinderella* (1914) or the dream girls lampooned in Chaplin's *Sunnyside* (1919).

The essentialism that shows women's metaphysical oneness with nature in Griffith's melodramas is transposed to a purely material level in the comedies: in *Mickey* we first encounter Mabel clambering out of an earth hole in the ground. Covered with dirt she clutches her equally dusty cat. To escape a suitor she climbs over a roof but gets entangled in vines on a

³¹⁰ The bathing beauties appeared between 1915 and 1929 in Sennett productions, see D'Hayere (2008), p. 210.

pergola, which form a messy wreath in her hair and garland her dress with flowers. These adornments attach themselves to her rather than through her deliberate arrangement. Marie Dressler's flirtations with the tramp in *Tillie's Punctured Romance* also lampoon the idea of women at harmony with nature. She leans her large body uncomfortably against a tree trunk, mimicking the contrived poses proliferated on cigarette postcards or in photoplays to promote actresses and their films.

Whilst melodrama's actresses drift and float, allowing themselves to become subject to the environment's own rhythms and motions, the comediennes undermine traditional and gendered associations with natural symbolism. Nature is fun and sensuous rather than threatening, but it is also spiky and scratchy and any attempt to make oneself look beautiful in nature is down to careful arrangement and hard work.

5.4 Companion Species

In early film as well as photo cards or promotional films stills women are often seen in companionship with animals: baby lions, goats, foxes, tigers, leopards, rabbits and snakes adorn the on-and off-screen personas of actresses. Like avatars they impersonate and amplify the actress' savage or innocent characteristics: a tiny rescue kitten emphasises Mary Pickford vulnerability in the *Pride of the Clan* (1917).³¹¹ Animals and women are enmeshed through costumes and makeup. Lidia Quaranta's eye-lined lids resemble her sleepy leopard.³¹² Netted spider-web gowns, coiled metal serpent bras, antler headbands, octopus gowns: all these costumes, often changing at staggering speed, turn the women into shape-shifting sirens, deceitful vamps, primitive and barbaric, waiting for prey.³¹³

Whether typecast as dangerous vamps or as fresh-cheeked, life-affirming country girls, women are consistently tied to the natural and the primitive.³¹⁴ Whilst it may appear that the association with the animal kingdom, especially dangerous animals within film and fashion, helped liberate and reclaim female desire, it also created an image of unity between woman and

³¹¹ See Johnson (1916).

³¹² In *Cabiria* (1914).

³¹³ See Fraser (2013), p. 193.

³¹⁴ As Donna Haraway has shown citing Gulf Oils advertising of the white British Dr. Jane Goodall's hand touching that of a chimpanzee ties into Western Iconography of the white hand as instrument to save nature and prevent human alienation with nature. This narrative excludes place and people of Tanzania, where the encounter happens, (2017), p. 69 ff.

nature which separated and singled them out as irrational creatures beyond the progressive, rational, machine-driven world of men.

Comedy however did not accept these gendered associations uncritically. The vamps' exaggerated gestures and costumes, and the libidinized relationship between animal and femme fatal, is for example undermined by Mabel's desperate fight with a plumed duster against a lion, which she fails to contain, tame or command. Set within a film studio, the beast attacks the crew and leaves the film studio in tatters in *The Extra Girl* (1923). In *Mickey* meanwhile the photogenic qualities of animals account for little when Mabel tries to feed her donkey a belt (so as to hide the means of her impending punishment by her father), fights a squirrel that decided to take refuge up her trouser leg and carries her dog about like a sack. Despite treating animals roughly rather than cuddling them, there is companionship between species when Mabel puts her life at risk to rescue her cat, and takes a beating and nearly a bullet to protect her dog. Instead of being aesthetic accessories or costume extensions, animals mobilise her. A horse, for example, shows her to be a superior rider to her male counterparts and capable of outrunning a car on horseback.

Whereas in early silent melodramas and epics women and nature are shown in a continuum and in harmony with nature, Mabel's relationship with animals is more nuanced. She must assert herself, fight wild animals, protect her dog or show mastery over cattle and horses.

5.5 Wind

Extreme weather bends trees to breaking point and rattles houses until they fall apart in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* (1928), for which Keaton hired six large Liberty-motor wind machines to generate gales on demand in a town near Sacramento, some 300 miles north of LA. Heavy gusts force involuntary crossings and transversals of objects and subjects: characters good or bad blow over. Structures shift. The grid-like order of towns collapses as streets break away and buildings shatter. Gardens and roads are obliterated by debris, matter is whisked up and reshuffled into changing constellations. Ships rip loose, even gravity is undone as houses take off and fly- there is no place to find shelter.

Throughout film history wind is often used as a trope indicating impending change – like the rustle of the curtains in *Thelma & Louise* (1991).³¹⁵ It is not subtle atmospheric foreboding which is displayed in Keaton's film. The wind is the action and goes straight from 0 to 12 on the Beaufort scale. Trash swirls around Buster, the infamous house front collapses around him and markers of the civilized world crumble as telegraph cables snap and electrocute. Buster's path through this whirl of objects resembles a science-fiction scene of a flight through an asteroid field. As nature conspires to produce this object rain only luck and cunning ensure survival.

However, whilst storm gales push humans involuntarily down streets in *Steamboat Bill Jr.*, the tramp asserts himself in the face of nature's adversity in *The Gold Rush*. When he learns that the doors at each side of the house can function as a wind channel, he confidently flushes his adversary out. Although wind sometimes serves to illustrate the inner turmoil of characters through natural beauty, here it has a purely mechanistic function.³¹⁶ The tramp channels his understanding of natural laws into a functional force to bust his adversary.

The image of nature as passive and inert, waiting to be transformed by humans is equally disturbed as that of nature as all relentlessly dominant. The natural order is lively and in perpetual variation. Slapstick comedians attack the boundaries of what is defined as nature, complicating its relation to culture. They challenge nature as constant and unchanging element against which culture elaborates itself.³¹⁷

5.6 Trees

One non-violent example of how slapstick undermines romantic symbolism occurs in Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918). Within the hyper-violent environment of the battlefield, he turns not against the German enemy but the heritage of romantic images associated in particular with German culture.

In an attempt to spy on the enemy, Charlie stands camouflaged as a tree stump in a clearing, when a German commander approaches in search of fire wood. He looks on fearfully at the unfolding situation in a chain of all-too-human reactions that nevertheless increase his tree-likeness. First, he freezes stock still in terror, then his arms start shivering, causing the

³¹⁵ D.W. Griffith shows atmospheric gusts of wind in corn fields or trees or it playing with the hair of his heroine for example in *An Unseen Enemy* (1912).

³¹⁶ See *The Wind* (1928).

³¹⁷ Elizabeth Grosz (2005) p. 46 ff on the nature/culture binary.

costume's leaves to rustle as if they were animated by a breeze. To personify a tree and portray it as fearful undermines the majestic quietness, fortitude and nobility ascribed to oaks in romantic German poetry. In the works of Novalis and von Kleist, trees whisper and dream; they are peaceful, mute witnesses which however cannot intervene.³¹⁸ Charlie's tree stump sprints as fast as he can, jumps, hides, crawls into underpasses and kicks and hits its enemy. Deceitful and tricky, he does not represent traditional romantic virtues.



Fig. 6. Caspar David Friedrich's *Lone Tree* (1822). Fig. 7. Chaplin in *Shoulder Arms* (1918).
Fig. 8. First World War tree trunk spy outpost, Imperial War Museum collections.

The powers of mythic woods, whose monotony and vastness is said to bewitch travellers and lead them in circles in the Grimm Brother's fairytales, are used to the tramp's advantage. Whereas the oak tree painted by Caspar David Friedrich, standing battered and defiant, has become a popular symbol in modern Germany to signify a people that have survived many storms, Charlie's lone spy tree uses it against them.³¹⁹

However, this subversion of lyrical representation can be read in other ways, as his tree costume also makes reference to existing contemporary warfare strategies.³²⁰ From 'dazzle ships' and camouflaged tanks to replica tree trunks, nature was often imitated during the Great War to hide men and machinery, turning soldiers into small grassy hillocks, ships into glittering waves or blending tanks into greenery. Nature is grafted onto machines, transforming them into scenic additions to the landscape and achieving a literal superimposition of notions typically thought as opposites. To contemporary audiences, many of whom would have been soldiers, the

³¹⁸ For example, in Novalis' *Die Blaue Blume* in zur Linde (2009), p. 56. Kleist also describes the oak trees as being so 'quiet', they 'listen to what she thinks'. In Armin, leaves possess 'whispering voices' whilst in Brentano trees whisper, dream - even embrace and kiss. As mute witnesses they are peaceful and associated with longing. zur Linde (2009), p. 58 ff.

³¹⁹ See for example the use of the oak imprinted on the Deutsche Mark coins, representing survival and rebirth. MacGregor (2015), p. 164.

³²⁰ See a brief overview of camouflage in WWI on the Imperial War Museum website <http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/5-facts-about-camouflage-in-the-first-world-war>.

sequence in *Shoulder Arms* would perhaps have been funny because it highlights the prospect of being in an environment that is both natural and deceitful: what can be more terrifying and traumatic than a suspicion of landscapes, seeing in every tree or lump of grass a potential enemy? Although Chaplin flips the nightmare as he assigns the little tree a truly heroic role, he succeeds in creating an ambiguous, flickering image: the tree loses its shape as a symbolic signifier evoking nationalist, Romantic sentiment as it switches states, appearing as fearful, shivering soldier or cocky attacker or firewood.

Although Charlie's tree evokes idiomatic figures of speech like 'barking up the wrong tree' or 'not seeing the wood for trees', at no point is a direct translation from image into language possible. This contrasts with the Marx Brothers' gags, in which objects or language clichés are regularly substituted for words: the doorman of a speakeasy demands a password, upon which Harpo pulls out a sword and a real fish and instead of saying the word 'sword fish'.³²¹ Roland Barthes writes that 'what liberates metaphor, symbol, emblem from poetic mania (...) is the preposterous (...) The logical future of metaphor would therefore be the gag'.³²²

I believe slapstick to be so powerful precisely because, as in the case of Chaplin's tree, it creates metaphors that cannot be perfectly decoded or understood. Its strategy is rarely illustrative. Instead, by destroying and unsettling images lodged in the what Benjamin termed 'the image stock of humanity' - by ridiculing trees as serene, peaceful and enduring - the comedians open up spaces of possibility and indeterminacy.

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We have seen that slapstick comedy worked in a whole range of ways to explode the traditional romantic representations of humanity's relationship to nature which were so dominant in contemporary cinematic melodramas and mountain films. As we have seen, such imagery could have troubling political consequences, as the creators of films which championed a particular heroic conception of human struggle over nature found an affinity with fascism. Our comics eschew the quest for awe before nature and instead revel in the open artifice of the mechanised, ersatz natural worlds of the modern amusement park. They privilege bathos over the conquest of nature's summits, seas and unknown lands. Instead of seeing nature and culture as opposites, slapstick comedians draw attention to their muddle and mediated integration. And where

³²¹ *Horse Feathers* (1932).

³²² Barthes in Mellencamp (1990), p. 72-3.

contemporary romanticism sought to underpin traditional constructions of virtue through associations with natural symbols, comedy worked to lampoon and undermine these.

By placing comedic acts in nature the convergences and discrepancies between Romantic idealism and slapstick's own romanticism become more pointed and visible. Throughout the foregoing, we have stressed slapstick's opposition to the powerful contemporary currency of romantic images and conceptions of nature, especially its celebration of the human conquest of nature, and the equation of this with liberty. Charlie's frightened tree, for example, ridicules the Romantic personifications of nature by physically inhabiting a tree stump. By materialising a poetic image he disempowers the Romantic gesture of enchanting the world through a creative speech act. However, even if his transformations invert Romantic practices by turning atmosphere into action (as we have seen, wind also becomes a tool to knock back his adversaries), they still remain rooted in a broader Romantic tradition of seeing beyond the common meaning in things.

The comedians also targeted gendered associations that show femininity as earthy watery, and primitive. They ridicule essentialist ties between the feminine and nature as contrived without dispensing with nature. They redeem both the feminine and the natural as active forces. They forge new bonds of kinship and take companionship between the species seriously, in the way that Haraway has called for. As Haraway has argued stories of cohabitation and cross-species sociality are crucial in our technoscientific world to create more livable and hopeful naturecultures: "Run fast, bite hard!"³²³

³²³ Haraway (2003), p. 4 ff.

6 MACHINES

Introduction:

Where previous chapters have investigated the agency of matter, inanimate objects and nature in silent comedy, here human-machine interactions come into focus. Slapstick, in its staging of car and train crashes, tackles a specifically modern experience of fragmentation, speed and mobility. By imbuing powerful machines with emotions while at the same time making humans move like automata, the films rupture the divide between humans and technology and plunge into crisis the concept of technology as a passive tool. Slapstick speculates about how individuals are incorporated into a new mechanic culture by adapting its habits and patterns of thought.³²⁴ By mapping what machines might become the comedians also reflect on what the human is or might be.

Simultaneous feelings of empowerment and disempowerment produced by the second industrial revolution (c. 1870-1914), whose effects were felt at the time of the films' making, also speak to our current transition into a digitised world in which large data transfers and cyber-physical systems are increasingly replacing human labour across industries.³²⁵ By casting machines as starring characters – whether trains, steamboats or cars – silent film ensured that the role played by technology was no longer that of an intermediary comic device, playing a joke on another human subject, but instead placed centre stage as powerful agents. Although accidents occur frequently in the in the films, they are never a celebration of annihilation and violence like Marinetti's founding crash for futurism. Instead, intimacy between humans and machines is created through rendering machines humanoid or incorporating technology within human bodies. By showing technologies as bodily extensions or sensing beings, slapstick foreshadows current debates about machines that listen to us or follow us around – and how they might be encountered.

³²⁴ Marx (1858).

³²⁵ Schwab (2015).

This chapter also engages further with Henri Bergson's theory of the comic as 'la mécanisation de la vie', as the mechanic encrusted on the living.³²⁶ His identification of the comic as defined by automatism, repetition, rigidity stereotype and the ugly is complicated in the films: hybrids and cyborgs like Keaton's humanoid train, or the wilful and cheeky mechanic dolls played by Ossi Oswalda and Lea Giunchi rupture Bergson's view of the mechanic as parasitic and contrary to what is human.³²⁷ Not only does comedy foreground the human within the machine. It also demystifies it, revealing and explaining its inner parts. Georges Bataille has argued laughter is the 'ruination of meaning'. The physical destruction of machines that rely on logic is a counterpart to this process, a direct attack on the tenets of reason.³²⁸ By rendering the known to the unknown, we are afforded the possibility of seeing the world anew.

I want to examine the broader and complex dynamics of contemporary interaction between trains, cars, ships and humans. This was a critical moment of technical and social transition, a context to which contemporary film explicitly responded. In this way we can see how contemporary film was part of a wider set of experiences of and responses to rapid technological change. We will then be better placed to ask how comedy used these common experiences to question the role of machines in society, their ontological status, and their relations with humans. In particular, we will question with our comedians the opposition between hard, efficient, mechanical bodies, and soft, irrational, organic ones. Comediennes used mechanical action to question contemporary fears and fantasies about the making of gendered and compliant bodies. Let us now turn to an emblematic moment in the history of film's fascination with the machine world.

6.1 Crash

Images of approaching trains are said to have terrified early cinema audiences. Maxim Gorky wrote gloomily of *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895), one of the earliest Lumière films:

It darts like an arrow straight towards you – watch out! It seems as though it is about to rush into the darkness where you are sitting and reduce you to a mangled sack of skin... and destroy this hall and building... and turn it into fragments and dust.³²⁹

³²⁶ Bergson (1911).

³²⁷ Ibid, p. 19.

³²⁸ Bataille in Trahair (2008), p. 16.

³²⁹ Gorky in Christie (1994), p. 15.

Gorky's violent account is startling: how could the gently slowing train in the Lumière film - observed from a safe distance - be perceived as a destructive, deadly force?³³⁰ Perhaps the myth that early cinema audiences fled their seats at the sight of an approaching train stuck because it spoke to the ubiquitous presence of railroad accidents in the popular imaginary. 'The first thing that everyone who sees a train approaching in a fiction film thinks, is surely: 'Oh, now there will be a mishap,' E. W. Trojan wrote in 1919 in the *Film Kurier*. The catastrophic train derailment at Gare Montparnasse in 1895 - widely reprinted as a photograph - recounts without the need for captions the drama of the train running into the station: surrounded by dust and debris, the locomotive's nose is dug into the Place de Rennes, having crashed through the thick wall after careening thirty meters across a concourse and overrunning the stop buffers. The force unleashed by technology is palpable in the image: the train not only attacks the station but destroys its framework of reference. The outward force speaks of the misdirection of the steam machine's energy, which turns both on its environment, its operator and against itself.

Technology's primary task is to store and secure resources and commodities for humans to prevent accidents and unforeseen shortages. Here it is upended.³³¹ The railroad - an instrument of rationalisation, tying territories far more closely together into a social and economic grid as well as ordering time by creating precise railroad schedules - fails to immunize humans against sudden change. Instead of liberating humans from *physis*, fate and accident, railroad crashes like the catastrophe at Montparnasse showed technology's potential to produce a new type of bang, the industrial scale accident.³³²

In Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*, the intoxicating adventure, ecstasy, speed and violence of the accident are glorified as a cleansing force.³³³ Yet this exalted celebration of accidents and explosions is deflated in slapstick. Especially in Mack Sennett's films, cars crash frequently but their destruction is rarely libidinous or an expression of hygiene or freedom. Pathetic looking carcasses of the Ford Model T litter the roads, land in treetops or fall into the Pacific.³³⁴ Cecil Hepworth's *How to Stop a Motor Car* (1902), a policeman is torn into pieces by a car and but then magically, in stop-motion, reassembles himself. In comedy, as Jean Paul Sartre writes, the accident is redeemed:

³³⁰ The founding myth has been put to scrutiny by the film scholar Ian Christie (2018).

³³¹ Heidegger (2013).

³³² See Schivelbusch (2014), p. 129-131. Modernity's powerful shocks were mediated and rendered pleasurable in the cinema, as Georg Simmel (1903) has shown.

³³³ Marinetti (1909).

³³⁴ See Bowser (2010).

Accident, excluded from tragedy, reappears, in comic constructions, as the negative principle par excellence: it is accident that sentences man and declares him impossible (...) A human being affirms himself as a sovereign being with the conviction that he is capable of acting on the world and governing his own life. Accident steps onto the scene to denounce his illusion: the world is allergic to man, the comic gives witness of a process of rejection (...) Man is lost in advance unless an accident saves him.³³⁵

For Sartre, accident is paradoxical in that it crushes the sovereignty of man and at the same time restores him; instead of destruction the accident serves advancement. This is key to slapstick, whose accidents never kill, even if someone gets run over.³³⁶ Benjamin describes this double movement of destruction and restoration as *innervation*, an unblocking of paralysis and psychic obstacles and an opening of possibilities for a reconfiguration of subjectivity.³³⁷ By examining the crash, we examine not just how machines comes apart but moments in which a reconfiguration of human subjectivity is possible.

6.1.1 *Anti-accidents and gentle machines*

Forces of technological cataclysm celebrated by Marinetti in the sound poem *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1912) are also cushioned and slowed to a maximum or frustrated entirely in slapstick. The progress of the locomotive in *Our Hospitality* (1923) is constantly stifled: an unwieldy donkey and a herd of cows force the 'Iron Monster' to reroute and stop.³³⁸ When the carriages finally reach their destination, Buster's dog has overtaken it on foot and the locomotive has gone missing. It turns up soon, chasing behind the rest of the train, botching the iconic drama of arrival.³³⁹ The incompetence of the machine is furthered by the exaggerated compression springs of the train which keep it bouncing up and down en route and curb its forward motion.

Instead of crashing machines, slapstick carefully and slowly picks at the nuts and bolts holding apparatuses together. Laurel and Hardy destroy Franz Reuleaux's (1875) ideal of a machine's

³³⁵ Sartre in Horton (1991), p. 131.

³³⁶ *How it Feels to Be Run Over* (1900).

³³⁷ Benjamin in Hansen (2004), p. 321.

³³⁸ Laconically described in the inter titles as 'Onwards sped the iron monster towards the Blue Ridge Mountains' (OH 15:42).

³³⁹ Which formed the subject of *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1895) or the photograph of the Gare Montparnasse mentioned earlier, as well as artists' painted renditions of the subject including Monet's *Le Gare Saint-Lazare* (1877).

hard body, in which each part sits firmly in its place, disciplining energy to the maximum.³⁴⁰ In their presence cars constantly collapse yet the arcs of destruction of a single object are so stretched out that they seem to last forever: Laurel and Hardy step back mid-attack to observe a spoiler they have pulled off. In the *Two Tars* (1928) tit for tat battle, a whole queue of cars is dismantled with delightful lethargy and care in an escapade that last more than half of the film time.

The Futurist vision of trains as virile, deadly projectiles, which penetrate virgin landscapes, or the fear of a ruination of the American pastoral idyll described in Leo Marx's *Machine in the Garden* (1964), are undermined in *Our Hospitality* and *The General* (1926). Rather than showing the annihilation and jumble of time and space through montages or crosscuts, Keaton associates linear narrative with the train's progression and lays out space as an orderly continuum.³⁴¹ In *The General* the train crosses the pictorial plane from right to left and returns along the same track for the second half of the film – its rigorously engineered symmetry tying narrative and filmic apparatus together. The doubling of events of the chase as Buster encounters obstacles twice – once mounting them on his way out and again on his way back – makes each potential collision predictable. The symmetry of film and forward motion made me believe the film I was watching might rip and perish alongside the locomotive in its final spectacular crash off a collapsing bridge.³⁴²

If in *The General* the collision is delayed until the last metres of film, expectations of seeing a crash are constantly frustrated in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924). Unaware that his driver has long ago fallen off the vehicle, Buster races through the city perched on the handle bars of a motorcycle. That the constant near-deaths and lucky escapes are not down to the human driver's capability but are sheer coincidence, undermines Futurist phantasms of male capability. Progress is not in the hands of heroic daredevils in speeding machines, but dependent on forces that individuals have little bearing on.

³⁴⁰ Franz Reuleaux (1875) argues that new machine ensembles implemented immense technical discipline, signalling the end of free play of elements within the machine. In Schivelbusch (1992), p. 20 ff.

³⁴¹ See Heinrich Heine's (1843) writing on the radical perceptual break achieved by the railroad, which meant that 'the mountains and forests of all countries are advancing on Paris'. Heine in Christie (1994), p. 17.

³⁴² The binary motion driving the train, which consists of a self-perpetuating up and down movement through combustible matter, is rescaled and applied to the film's narrative in slow motion, which goes back and forth. In other words, contemporaries' growing acquaintance and fascination with the machine world recast the form and rhythm of cinema itself. Mechanisation seeps into the film on every level; driving the plot, turning interlocking cogs and reels of different sizes so that the attempt to return the girl, the locomotive and win the war are all reliant on the smooth running off the same piston.

6.1.2 Kinship

Buster appears half human, half machine in his diving suit which, inflated by air, turns into a buoyant rescue raft. Elsewhere, he cuts holes for his legs into a canoe, showing human and machine merging into a cyborg. Keaton's transformation of surrounding objects speaks both to the fundamental human capability of making the world around us habitable and our reliance on technology for survival. As philosopher Bernard Stiegler has argued, only the externalisation of an inner world has made possible the formation of the human, the capacity to build an infrastructure of objects, tools, and social institutions enabling our continued existence.³⁴³ By showing our dependence on objects whilst also pointing towards the sovereignty of objects, the relationships of master and slave, technology and human are complicated.³⁴⁴

Marx (1844) argued that the nature of capitalist labour means we are not able to control freely the externalization of human ideas and creativity, and that we are therefore alienated from the essential practice which makes us human. Slapstick counteracts this alienation by means of creative transformation and by disassembling, short-circuiting and simply displaying machine logic. Film funnies engage from their outset the 'how to' curiosity of audiences by means of what Tom Gunning calls 'operational aesthetics'.³⁴⁵ In *L'Arroseur Arrosé*, the workings of cause and effect in a device are made visible: when a gardener waters plants with a hose pipe, a boy steps on the water pipe, the gardener inspects its nozzle, the boy releases the blocked pipe and the gardener gets soaked. However, if in the film the roles of each human and non-human agent are clearly laid out in a sequence of action, these parts are increasingly interchangeable and fluid in the slapstick films of the 1920s. Effects precede their causes, while the device, the mischief-maker and the butt of a joke suddenly switch roles. Human and mechanic error recur. Obstacles upset the logic of cause and effect just as things suddenly cooperate when we expect them to go wrong. Power is never quite where it seems, grounds shift as it is hard to follow who or what dominates whom.

Thorstein Veblen describes the machine process as a 'severe and insistent disciplinarian' that reduces the workman's intellectual life to 'the standard units of gauge and grade'.³⁴⁶ This

³⁴³ Stiegler (1991).

³⁴⁴ Baudrillard (1990), p.121-122.

³⁴⁵ Tom Gunning (1995), p. 88 ff.

³⁴⁶ Veblen (1904), pp. 91- 104.

assertion is exploded by Buster's ingenious reflexes and highly imaginative solutions in *The General*, adapting himself to the machine's motions and need for unobstructed passage with Euclidian grace. Far from the machine alienating Buster from his engagement with the surrounding world, greater demands are made on his intelligence and ability to respond. Veblen writes that '(m)achines throw out anthropomorphic habits of thought' - however Buster and Charlie are confronted with machines that are mischievous and with a will of their own: Charlie is consumed and swallowed by the cogs and wheels in *Modern Times* (1936) which appears like a giant digestive tract.³⁴⁷ The anthropomorphism is taken further in *Our Hospitality*, where the train is given a glug from a teapot or dreamily makes its way off-rails.

Paul de Man has proposed that anthropomorphism halts metamorphosis, foreclosing and referring us to a fixed identity:

[anthropomorphism] freezes the infinite chain of topological transformations and propositions into one single assertion or essence, which, as such excludes all others.³⁴⁸

Yet it might also be argued, that it extends our sensibilities to the environment, creating ties that help reverse alienation from the environment. Anthropomorphism 'strikes a chord between person and thing' argues Bennett: rather than instating/establishing a hierarchy by casting a technological thing in the human image from an elevated position, to anthropomorphise can mean to test the resonances and similarities. It can catalyse sensibility, by helping us to empathise with or recognise (technological) objects as kin.³⁴⁹

Bergson's paradigm is transposed into its opposite - the living is grafted onto the mechanical; cars take off and begin driving on their own, like in *Hot Water* (1924). In *Get Out and Get Under* (1920), Harold Lloyd is in despair of getting his car working. He takes out a syringe and shoots it into his arm. He disposes of the drug in the tank, and the car - suddenly energized - becomes animated and erratically races off without its owner. As Gunning has pointed out, the term 'animation' derives from the Latin *anima*, 'spirit' or 'breath'. The car is not only shown to possess emotions but is bestowed with incorporeal essence and appears as no less than human.³⁵⁰

Buster's consistently unemotional reaction to crashes or catastrophe further blur the boundaries between human and mechanic. There is no struggle, rage or fight when his

³⁴⁷ *The Electric House* (1922), *Modern Times* (1936).

³⁴⁸ de Man in Johnson (2008), p. 190.

³⁴⁹ de Man in Bennett (2010) p. 120.

³⁵⁰ Gunning (2001).

steamboat - still intact - glides under water as he motionlessly and unflinchingly stands on top of it until only his cap floats in the ocean.³⁵¹ His stoicism and quiet acceptance of catastrophe amounts to subjective empowerment.³⁵² Buster's mechanic response together with his machines' display of human exhaustion confound what it means to be human or machine.

The fluid, changeable power relations between humans and machines make it impossible to predict the laws that govern the films: the second law of thermodynamics - the principle of entropy - is upset when the latter part of the train drives on without its locomotive in *Our Hospitality*. Newtonian laws are shown to only apply at certain moments.³⁵³ Instead of astronomy, a field in which - as Norbert Wiener explains - the activity of planets would conform to Newtonian mechanics as their velocity, masses, position can be determined slapstick's world resembles the imprecise science of meteorology, where the sheer range of variables and their possible interaction exceed what can be modelled and interpreted. The number of particles - or comedic agents - makes it impossible to determine the universal laws from a Newtonian point of view.³⁵⁴

By focusing on the unexpected and unpredictable responses of machines, early comedy elides the distinctions between humans and machines, while calling into question our ability to model and predict the course of the world according to scientific laws. In order to explore how these insights suggested by early slapstick have wider application, I now want to make a contemporary analogy. The playful questioning of physics and programming in so-called machinima suggests that slapstick provides a valuable heritage for contemporary filmmakers and artists.

6.2 Intermezzo: Machinima and Digital Twins

Keaton's use of trains as the ground for gags resembles a similar kind of mischievous play which has emerged in the contemporary media of our own day.³⁵⁵ Since the mid 1990s, machinimists

³⁵¹ Beckman (2010), *The Boat* (1921).

³⁵² Miller (2015), p. 149.

³⁵³ Buster manipulates the floor indicator dial of an elevator so that it flies through the rooftop in *The Goat* (1921).

³⁵⁴ Wiener (1984), p. 33.

³⁵⁵ I adapt the term 'mischief makers' and some of the below examples from Jaroslav Svlech's brilliant article 'Comedy of Contingency: Making Physical Humor in Video Game Space' (2014).

have used computer game graphics in real time to record, edit and post films generated within games via platforms such as YouTube and Machinima.com. Getting millions of views for their entertaining films they 'perform' their characters within engine-driven platforms like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), upsetting the laws programmed into the games' narratives.

By selecting games that work in a single player mode, operating within open worlds and encouraging physical interaction rather than tightly timed missions, users are able to explore and follow unscripted actions. In their skilful teasing of virtual objects gamers unsettle sceneries, test human-machine relations and create counter images that are a direct heritage of slapstick's antics.

Can the *Spielräume* - spaces for play - which for Benjamin offer the possibility of opening fields of action, spill from film-making into platforms for gaming? What happens when physical slapstick humour is transposed onto virtual avatars in simulated spaces?

In *How to Stop the Train Singleplayer* (2015), player Metahelion creates a collage of repeated actions in *Grand Theft Auto*: his character abandons a car, a large bus and even a cargo plane on the tracks in front of a tunnel just as the freight train is scheduled to appear.³⁵⁶ The carefully staged collisions yield surprising results: instead of the expected explosions and wreckage, most vehicles fail to break. Suddenly weightless cars are catapulted skywards and traverse the screen in impossible ballistic curves. When neither train nor a tractor give way, they interpenetrate and enmesh. Elsewhere a heavy dump truck twists, jiggles and glides through rocks. Object contours shift as they come apart and magically re-assemble, forming collages with their surroundings. Putting into friction various laws programmed into *Grand Theft Auto's* world requires processing powers beyond the capacity of the game's physics engine. Neither train nor vehicles or rocks are programmed to break creating the ultimate collision of hard bodies: here indeed we laugh at the rigidity of a thing as Bergson suggested.

The game engine's failure to realistically simulate a situation that wasn't foreseen by the game makers results in a fantastic jumble not only of object shapes but also of the laws governing the system they are posited within. A tow truck is made to operate like an extra-large slingshot as it hurls the car tens of metres into the air.³⁵⁷ Cars land in impossible limbos - on top of electric wires or balanced on their noses; their crashes successfully transpose Mack Sennett's Keystone legacy of car crashes to Los Santos, a virtual version of LA.

³⁵⁶ *How to Stop The Train Singleplayer* (2015).

³⁵⁷ *TOP 150 FUNNIEST FAILS IN GTA 5* (2017).

Creating these glitches requires patience and skill, like performing slapstick stunts as Švlech (2014) has pointed out: only the right key combination timed correctly will allow a player to penetrate the *Grand Theft Auto* train driver's cab. The patience pays off: grounds of control and power shift radically when algorithmic governance is distorted and relations between things are no longer subject to correct mathematics. The gamers, by moving the intended goalposts of the constructed universe, become its designers too.

By continuing to coax out crazy and wilful characteristics in machines and explode systems of cause and effect, Machinima upholds slapstick's legacy. By attempting to reroute the immense energy of trains or making cars fly off cliffs *en masse*, comedic strategies and motifs remain the same. By upsetting the logic of the game and finding weak spots in its programming, Machinimists rupture the illusion of the game world. The flows of zeros and ones relayed as information are shown to be produced across physical and fallible computing machines. That slapstick can take on a disembodied form, that slaps and slips can be keyed and coded into virtual space and continue to be funny, shows that the term applies to an abstract set of qualities rather than merely denominating a physical type of rough and tumble comedy, as I proposed at the outset of this study.

In the final section of this thesis I want to examine how Rosalie, Lea and Ossi play with the liveliness and rigidity of their bodies, bringing into play the key elements Bergson identified as essential to the comic. Their gestures create a vocabulary of non-verbal signs and do away with language. Erratic and exuberant motions upset aloofness and cool behaviour associated with human authority and efficient work. The comediennes draw attention to their bodies as discursive and use them with remarkable eloquence. Where Buster Keaton short-circuits the logic of machines and Machinimists show the programming of their game worlds to rely on fallible calculating machines, the women draw attention to their bodies as technologies for enunciation. By understanding their physical movements we also better understand the types of information that they relay or undermine.

6.3 Movement, Gesture, Locomotion: Female Androids & Robotic Eyes

6.3.1 *Movement as non-linguistic language*

Bodily movement in slapstick film does not simply accentuate emotions, it is a codified and integral part of a character's performance that can be read as a form of non-linguistic language. In the *Rosalie* and *Petronille* serials Sarah Duhamel's movements explode gendered conventions of female decorum. Her freed body is at times reminiscent of the dance of the contemporary, avant-garde dancer Isadora Duncan. Duncan's objective was to move away from the concept of the ballerina, who would merely be executing stage instructions, to an artistic persona who fashions and directs her own movements, unrestrained by pointed shoes or a corset. Their exuberance seems to protest the cultural, political restraints inscribed not just in women's bodies, but in any body.

Rosalie's bodily expressiveness extends from facial grimaces and bulging eyes to her agile, large body as she flees an angry mob and jumps over walls, races down alleys or throws herself out of windows. Her movements are swift and, as she dances around rooms, she is strong and determined when she overturns tables, throws large pieces of furniture out of the flat or attacks her partner Little Max.³⁵⁸

Rosalie's violent expressiveness could be viewed through the lens of Artaud's *corps déchirant* – a 'tearing', 'rending', 'affecting' body.³⁵⁹ For Artaud the body's voice, gesture and movement are the primary vehicles of meaning that can suspend the logic of linguistic and social structures. The expressive capacities of theatre are located in a language outside of words.³⁶⁰ Classical hierarchies are reversed when language is made subordinate to the body. Derrida suggests that the Artaudian *mise en scene* is 'the visual and plastic materialisation of speech' and 'the language of everything that can be said and signified upon a stage independently of speech, everything that finds its expression in space, or that can be affected or disintegrated by it'.³⁶¹

³⁵⁸ *Rosalie en ménage* (1911), *Rosalie et Léontine vont au théâtre* (1911), *Le Désespoir de Pétronille* (1914).

³⁵⁹ Timothy Scheie in del Rio (2010), p. 172.

³⁶⁰ del Rio (2010), p. 165.

³⁶¹ Ibid p. 167.

Rosalie performs a consistent set of movements – not unlike dance patterns – which form a kind of gestural mapping that could be read as an alphabet of bodily signs. The compressed energy emanating from her performance exemplifies Artaud’s notion of theatre as ‘passionate overflowing, a frightful transfer of forces from body to body’.³⁶² Rosalie’s eruptions of violence also embody his critique against the coherence, abstractions and generality of rational speech and are a revolt against what Wright termed ‘the violence done to the body by the inscription of the law’.³⁶³

Her body is not defined in relation to others and her expressive motility is the antithesis to the didactic, rationalized, distanced approach put forward in Brechtian *Gestus*. Unruly and grotesque, her body stands in opposition to conventional features of female movement, enunciating kinetic patterns and rhythmical performance specific to her.

6.3.2 *Administering embraces and masquerading as mechanical dolls*

Italian Lea Giunchi in *Lea Bambola* (1913) and German Ossi Oswald in *Die Puppe* also show the creative and critical range to be found in emphasising the linguistic potential of their own bodies. In these films they subvert the existing iconography of android eyes and female mechanic dolls, a heritage developed especially around nineteenth-century renditions of the Pygmalion myth. The dream of crafting perfect artificial women after one’s own conception, as formulated in Ovid’s telling of *Pygmalion*, experienced a surge in popularity in nineteenth-century culture that spilled over into the production of early cinema.³⁶⁴

Rodin’s *Pygmalion and Galatea* (1889) and Edward Burne-Jones’s *Pygmalion cycle* (1875-1878) portray Galatea in keeping with the ideals of the perfect (Victorian) woman: unattainable facial expressions, distant gaze, weak, fair and exquisitely beautiful in appearance. The pre-Raphaelites emphasised sensuousness and softness: Burne-Jones’s Galatea stands head-tilted in classical pose, grasping jewellery and fumbling with her wall of hair in gestures of meekness or embarrassment. Meanwhile, the Galatea in E. E. Kellett’s book *The Lady Automaton* (1901), a humanoid robot bestowed with an interactive phonograph, is hailed as superior to real women because she ‘hath no temper (...) and hath no tongue’, giving ‘faithful repetition of words rather than producing the distortions of female gossips’.³⁶⁵ In Bernard Shaw’s Galatea from *Pygmalion*

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Wright (1989), p. 17.

³⁶⁴ Wosk (2015), p. 22.

³⁶⁵ published in *Peasons Magazine* (1901) in Wosk (2015).

(1914), Eliza's gutter mouth cockney is replaced with a genteel accent through the training of phonetics professor Higgins, even if Eliza finally won't be silenced.

If most renditions of the Pygmalion myth focus on the representation of the woman as meek, docile and timid, the desire also to control what women say or how they speak in Kellett's and Shaw's stories is striking. Her voice is literally taken, constructed or tampered with. Yet whilst in Kellett's narrative the maker directly ventriloquizes his creation, in Shaw's play Edwardian codes of conduct and speech are critically played on by the lively, spirited character of Eliza.

Despite the fact that in silent film the women are mute, Lea Giunchi and Ossi Oswald's performances are far from passive. Utilising what Mallarmé has termed an *écriture corporelle*, the comédiennes physically enunciate rebellion.³⁶⁶ They fluently switch between different vocabularies of body language, mocking traditional conventions of movement by interchanging mechanic stiffness with grotesque movements or the corporeal language of the vamp. Europe's silent comédiennes not only explore the expressive range and anti-authoritarian implications of the gestures of the body; they also take on and explicitly subvert one of the most popular male fantasies of contemporary culture.

6.3.3 *Die Puppe*

In Ernst Lubitsch's romantic comedy *Die Puppe*, Ossi Oswald secretly takes the place of a mechanical doll, which has been modelled to look like her. Her mechanic performance and stifled smile convinces even her father, the famous doll maker Hillarius; yet distractions and bodily needs increasingly interfere with her performance as a doll, as she is sold off to rich Lancelot in a marriage coup.

Staging a kaleidoscope of real-girl-disguised-as-machine situations, classic renditions of the Galatea myth are undermined. The Ossi doll is no supplement to man created after his image of femininity. Instead, Lancelot is increasingly confronted with Ossi as not only the author of her own actions but also pulling the strings to influence his narrative. In a crucial scene at the beginning of the film, Hillarius presents the groom to be with a group of female Galateas: a dozen mechanic dolls march towards Lancelot - raising their legs like *Ziegfeld Folly* girls.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁶ Mallarmé (1897) speaks about dancer's movement repertoire as poem without scribal apparatus. Mallarmé (2007), p. 129 ff.

³⁶⁷ *Ziegfeld Folly* was a revue in New York (1907-1931) where girls would often perform in synchronous movements as a chorus.

However, the collective girls, programmed to charm their customer with their military style parallel movements, clicking in time to an invisible command, don't have the seductive effect expected. Instead of succumbing to the erotic appeal of the long-legged collective, Lancelot retreats in disgust, exclaiming 'how rude!', demanding a doll with 'solid character'. Lancelot's expression, although surely intended to garner laughs for its prudish nature, puts into words the uncanniness of the female automata, who instead of staying in stereometric formation break the line and begin molesting him.

Objectification is pushed to the limit when Lancelot attempts to use Ossi as a cloak stand, which she protests by throwing the coat at him twice. Ossi only fails the Turing test when she shrieks at a mouse running over her toes – revealing finally that she is human. Henri Bergson's statements on laughter and its relation to the mechanic, at least in this case, is affirmed by Ossi's behaviour. She embodies what Bergson termed the 'mechanic encrusted on the living' as she switches between the pliability and elasticity of human movement to suddenly administering her embraces with the rigidity and mathematical precision of an automaton, her motions lacking sensitivity and suppleness.

Ossi's unsuccessful suppression of unwilled gestures – all too human - exposes the body's capacity to embarrass her through the expression of inclinations and eccentricities beyond her conscious control. Falling out of character, the comediennes suddenly exhibit insufficient rigidity: they cough, sneeze, show thirst, hunger or the need for affection.



Fig. 9. *Die Puppe*, Projektions-AG Union, 1919, Film still.

When Bergson proposes that laughing is a means of reasserting the difference between persons and mechanisms, he also hints towards great contemporary fears of the increasing impact of technology. Following the initial fascination with automata during the eighteenth century, where mechanical humanoid entertainment toys were popular at court, the systematic roll out of the industrial revolution and the rise of powerful working machines brought about fears of losing control. Machines posed a threat and were perceived as a 'harbinger of chaos and destruction'.³⁶⁸ Furthermore, as Andreas Huyssen (1981) proposes, through a complex process of projection and displacement, fear of female sexuality was conflated with the otherness of the machine. The machine woman then presents a double male fear, which is exploited in the films for laughter.

Whilst most female robots have been created in the form of young attractive women, built around Victorian ideals of purity, innocence and perfection, like in *An Animated Doll* (1908), *The Inventor's Secret* (1911) and *The Automatic House* (1915), which features an automatic maid, the creations lend themselves to moral tales of destruction, havoc and chaos. In *The Mechanical Man* (1921) by André Deed, evil villainess and adventuress Mado controls a giant, super-powered 9 ft 8 robot, causing mayhem with its huge blow torch hands and massive body.

Constructed around what Silvia Bonvenschen calls 'imagined femininity,' both female 'ideal types' - the innocent virgin and the dangerous vamp - are determined by their sexuality.³⁶⁹ Whether created as innocent object of desire or threatening robot femme fatale, the Pygmalion myth is a warning tale of creating a woman that is built to serve but ultimately subsumes its maker. Initially an unthreatening and lifeless object, which the men can control and dominate as an extension of her maker, Galatea has a power or charm over him, despite her subordinate and passive demeanour. Technology - like robotic women - is constructed to serve and fulfil desires yet is ultimately without a master, a double danger Ossi knows to turn to for laughs.

Die Puppe inverts the Pygmalion myth's classic narrative: instead of the immobile stone statue Galatea coming to life, Ossi, a lively, spirited woman, emerges and is stifled and immobilized by Edwardian codes of conduct. If in most renditions of the myth Galatea's maker is blinded, madly in love or destroyed, marking a turning point from one extreme to the next - from *femme fragile* to *femme fatale* - Ossi's behaviour is marked by ebullient happiness and kindness.

³⁶⁸ Huyssen (1981), p. 203.

³⁶⁹ Bonvenschen in Kolb (2009), p. 15.

In the Italian short *Lea Bambola*, a young man is obliged to marry against his will, so that he hatches a plan with his true love, Lea. Lea is introduced at the wedding party disguised as a mechanical doll in a big box, amuses the guests with her somersaults and takes the place of the bride.

Lea's doll performance contrasts with the over-determined movements and rigidity of Ossi: in exaggerated, soporific passivity she slumps and slouches like a sack. Gravity draws her off chairs and she can't keep balance standing. Her floppy and staggered movement within the setting of the drawing room not only stages the joyful mocking of society's fascination with objectified women but also antagonises classic movement regime.³⁷⁰ Locked into aristocratic culture and values, classical ballet's step and movement repertoire reflected grace, dignity and nobility through the upright position of the dancer. Bodies disciplined to carry out pointe work would evoke images of the ethereal and a floating lightness and elevation as if the rules of gravity did not apply. Lea's lack of form stands in opposition to the idealized, strong ballerinas, whose pale physiognomy suggest a frailty supported by the stylised artifice of their movement. In different ways therefore, Ossi and Lea's mechanised performances break down perceived divisions between human performers and machines, while playfully questioning limiting constructions of womanhood. They reclaim expressions of female autonomy through their parodies of male fears and fantasy of sexual control.

6.3.4 *Gesture vs. action*

Our female automata also raise questions about the very nature of human and mechanical actions. Actions as goal-directed, functional motions or forces are reconstituted as meaning-bearing signs. Determinate motions are ruptured by the comediennes in disguise, whose bodies twitch and jerk spasmodically. Functional elegance and machine power are ridiculed and disassembled as the comediennes confound actions with gestures, malfunctioning at crucial moments.³⁷¹ For example, the act of a greeting activated by a button controller disguised on the back of Ossi's dress is turned into a pointed social gesture when her outstretched hand fails to meet that of Lancelot's father.

Ossi develops tics reminiscent of the convulsions of glitching computer bodies; her disjointed motions are out of sync with the world. Wires are crossed and complicated between command

³⁷⁰ See Kolb (2009) on female types in nineteenth-century Romantic ballet and the ideological framework of academic ballet, p. 51 ff.

³⁷¹ Pittman (2014).

and response: small inputs or activations - such as hand-cranking her motor too vigorously – result in disproportionately large gestures, a disjunction of cause and effect continuously exploited for laughter.

There was also a broader contemporary context for these explorations of motor movement. Our comedies emerged at a moment of radical rethinking about the vocabulary of movement. For parts of the Western cultural avant-garde an articulation and inclusion of mechanized movement was occurring, especially in dance. Marinetti envisaged a dancer performing the Shrapnel, the machine gun and the aviatrix on the background of ‘organized noises’ in his futurist manifesto:

We must go beyond muscular possibilities and aim in the dance for that ideal *multiplied body of the motor* that we have so long dreamed of. One must imitate the movements of machines with gestures; pay assiduous court to steering wheels, ordinary wheels, pistons, thereby preparing the fusion of man with the machine, to achieve the metallicity of the Futurist dance.³⁷²

Instead of achieving Marinetti’s hailed fusion of machine and (wo)man – metallicity and erotically charged in the manifesto – in the comedies this marriage creates nothing but smoke, short circuits and flicker. Both the faux-mechanic Ossi and her real mechanic counterparts quiver inelegantly between human form and robot. The comediennes are trapped in the stop-motion principle which can also be seen in the dance of Nijinsky’s angular and stylized moves. The laws of two-dimensional geometry define Nijinsky’s every gesture, evoking figures on ancient vases or friezes. Despite resembling classical Greek art, his movement appears steeped in technology as the poses he comes to rest in are often not beautiful but ungraceful and unflattering like snapshot photographs.³⁷³

Large circle, zigzag or figure-of-eight – Irene Castle’s hugely popular *castle walk* dance – are all motions performed by crowds of actors in *Die Puppe*. And yet these geometric shapes, invoking a military apparatus, are blurred and messed with through the bawdy liveliness of the running bodies. *Die Puppe* and *Lea Bambola* anticipated pioneering German modern dancers such as Anita Berber and Valeska Gert, who performed scenes from Berlin’s 1920 s city life and

³⁷² Marinetti (1917).

³⁷³ Kolb (2009), p. 129.

technology, emulating stamping machines, planes, traffic lights and the cinema. Gert said, 'my rhythm became pounding until I stamped like a machine'.³⁷⁴

Yet as much as utilitarian functionality and industrial production was embraced by some of the artistic avant-garde, the undeniable fascination technology and its impact on the contemporary world held also provoked ambivalent feelings. Ideas emerging from Nietzsche's philosophy of Vitalism took a negative stance towards industrial modernization, fears that would become sharpened during the 1920s *Neue Sachlichkeit*, and articulated in the film *Metropolis* (1927).³⁷⁵ The accelerated, intensified and interrupted motion enacted by the film's heroine, Maria, perfectly expressed the very fears the comediennes were trying to subvert.

Comic films, as we have seen, responded more ludically to these anxieties. Lea and Ossi's eschewing of any decorative or extraneous movement and their reductionist approach of breaking tasks down into smaller components, essential to industrial management, also pokes fun at the carefully choreographed sequences of poses performed by vamps like Gloria Swanson or Theda Bara in melodramatic film of the time.³⁷⁶ The vamps mutate into Galatea statues and back, isolating poses and stillness to create 'moments of heightened beauty or meaning.'³⁷⁷ Slow motion worked as an instrument for visual pleasure as the vamp would constantly negotiate the tension between stasis and motion to dramatize her screen image.

Beyond mockingly playing on representations of women in cinema as objectified ornaments or technological servants, the comediennes utilize specificities of the cinematic apparatus itself for cheers and laughter. The jiggered tremors and shudders of the actors mirror the camera shutter and invoke the imperfect flickering quality of early film projection, whilst the excessively stiff idling poses of Ossi and Lea's automata refer us back to the cinematic apparatus as dependent on the photographic image. The cranking movement used to wind up Ossi also mirrors the cranking of the film camera, doubling the animation effect as both doll and image must be wound up for us to see the inanimate Galatea come to life.

Lea Bambola and *Die Puppe*, then, are reflections on femininity, technology and female iconography, which play with and subvert characteristics specific to cinematic representation and the filmic apparatus for cheers and laughter.

³⁷⁴ Kolb (2009), p. 182.

³⁷⁵ See Nietzsche in Bennett (2010), p. 53 ff.

³⁷⁶ Kolb (2009), p. 183.

³⁷⁷ Fraser in Uhlirova (2013), p. 195.

*

Slapstick grasped with great clarity the ambiguous combination of promise and threat which mechanisation offered. It affirms the violence of modern industrial scale accidents and the power machines wield over humans. However, the accident can be a productive event that can rupture and reconstitute subjectivity. The films complicate straight-forward readings of control being linked to linear human progress. Machines are tamed and anthropomorphised; and different types of intimate relation between humans and machines were produced. By engaging 'operational aesthetics' and the how-to curiosity of audiences in its mechanical contrivances slapstick demystifies and reverses alienation of complex technological processes and shows scenarios in which humans and machines act gracefully and in kinship together. Slapstick finally collapses the distance of technology as an alien other when Ossi and Lea's dolls confound gestures with actions and enmesh mechanical motions with lively pliability to reach a posthuman empowerment. Their focus on physical performance reveals the human body as a technology capable of producing signs and shows technology to be equally and essentially human, not something alien to it.

Fears of disempowerment produced by the Machine Age can be related to our current shift into a digitised world. The acceleration of technological processes and their far reaching social and environmental consequences have made necessary a rethinking of the distribution of technological agency. The potential consequences of misreading the distribution of powers among increasingly knowledgeable and intelligent technological objects is arguably much higher than underestimating the agency of the other spaces, matter and objects we have so far considered.

Slapstick offers glimpses of the enormous powers that are possible when human interests are aligned with the working machines, imagining what Moews has called, 'a mechanical and human paradise.'³⁷⁸ This paradise, dreamed at a moment of intense technological change, imagined alternatives to contemporary modes of productions, and its disciplined manufacture of labouring and gendered bodies. Ford and Pygmalion are overthrown, and in their place arises a new and productive, if not always peaceful, commonwealth of humans and machines.

³⁷⁸ Moews (1977), p. 215.

Conclusion

‘The eye licks it all up instantaneously,’ Virginia Woolf wrote about the cinema in 1926. Yet the grey images seemed simple and stupid to her. For Woolf, no thoughts are triggered by this new art form, which keeps our senses pleasantly occupied but does not exceed the obvious and the petty: a string of pearls, a vase, a boat. Placated, we are transported without moving, are shown violence and action only so that we can return to our ordered lives. Instead, Woolf eagerly awaited the colour, sound and dream architectures of a future cinema.³⁷⁹

This discussion has attempted to argue differently. Silent slapstick was a terrain of perhaps unsurpassed innovation that stirs us to think. Its practices and strategies hold their own even in today’s cultural, political and philosophical debates. Slapstick harnessed silent cinema’s lack of spoken dialogue to create a new visual vocabulary of bodily interactions, which it used to explode learned notions of the order and place of objects and subjects in the world. The films examined have nothing in common with Woolf’s understanding of cinema as a ‘parasite’ of literature: they happily abandon narrative to revel in explosions of dust clouds and observe surprise transformations between genders. The comedians engage everyday objects and make us see them anew: what a boat is – or what can be a boat – is put up for debate.

Slapstick film of the 1910s and 1920s showed objects to matter beyond their function as props that aid human action. Obstinate, malicious and un-ready to hand they challenge and destabilise clear master-slave constructs. By restoring to objects their sovereignty and making them pre-eminent to the films, the human ceases to be at the ontological centre point. Matter appears as an active, vibrant force that can neither be purified nor reduced to mechanistic principles. As we have seen, water has the capacity to dissolve authority and snot prevents higher consciousness, jeopardising social hierarchies and even the tenets of metaphysical philosophy. The comedians soak, blur and spray the outlines of discrete bodies. Through reasserting the importance of matter to all thinking and doing, slapstick sketches out an alternative networked ecology to the vertical hierarchy of liberal humanism. In our own time of ecological ruin, such alternatives are far from being only playful suggestions. This discussion has consistently drawn new critical implications from slapstick’s universe, which can inform ethical thinking about our changing relations with the environment.

³⁷⁹ Woolf (1926), pp. 381 ff.

At the same time it is crucial to underline that slapstick does not employ a simple logic of inversion, degrading everything high and ideal to produce a mere mirror image of the world it critiques. In this sense it does not conform to the notions of the comic and carnivalesque put forward by Bergson and Bakhtin.³⁸⁰ Slapstick's objects are not all-powerful and its subjects are not eternally degraded; the films dispense with such dichotomies, which would ultimately still affirm a dualistic world view. Instead, a nuanced spectrum of what or who has agential power comes into play. Fixed categories and binary divisions between genders and objects and subjects are undermined through strategies of kinship and the anthropomorphism of objects. Slapstick comedians are quasi-scientists: they empirically test objects, are flexible in their habit. They are open to paradigms of thought that are not constrained by rational, logical thinking but engage other forms of tacit knowledge. Through sensory apprehension and through tasting the world with their mouths they garner an understanding of it that goes not only beyond the logical but also the visible. Their laughter further ruptures social conventions and familiar notions and has the capacity to generate new thought.

Success and progress are not, as slapstick's contemporaries in cinema and letters so often asserted, down to individual – and male – ability. Rather they are dependent on collaborative practices. By stepping back and abandoning the position of the human knower who addresses a known object, the manufactured separation between self and world can be redressed. The comedians demonstrate that every action has consequences – often beyond our cognition. Kick a thing and it will kick back: Buster stumbles over a small rock and finds himself in an avalanche. The films make visible intra-actions, they demonstrate with graphic clarity how objects and subjects are symbiotically formed by the networks they exist within.³⁸¹ In this ecology not only things but also signs have an operative power beyond representational dimension: they shape material processes. When money is used materially as a weapon, or art is made into something utilitarian as when the tramp sleeps on the lap of the sculpture, such actions challenge the idea of semiotics as based on human language. They show how other forms of enunciation are capable of crystallising subjectivity.

Although human control is constantly undermined, the films are not governed by total chaos and anarchy. Indeed, the redistribution of power functions according to ethical principles: the disempowered maid, the marginal figure of the tramp and the discarded cigarette can and will bring the house down. Destruction occurs on multiple levels and is just as often non-physical,

³⁸⁰ Bergson (1911) and Bakhtin (1984), p.72.

³⁸¹ As Barad (2001) and Latour (2015) have argued.

turning against images including those nourished by romanticism and even proto-fascist ideology. In these ways slapstick's decentring of human subjectivity in fact expands human potential, rather than narrowing it.

Indiscipline is also rewarded. Women and men shape-shift; they crossdress and assert characteristics associated with other genders. Although these slippages are temporary, the transgressions pay off when, for example, Ossi and Asta get the men they set out to catch. Women's bodies are especially unruly, as they metamorphose and shape-shift, sometimes getting stuck in the midst of their changeovers. They turn violently against their environments, shattering drawing rooms, upsetting order in kitchens and disavowing unity with nature. They reject both the space of bourgeois domesticity and nature as a realm of unreason. Their rampages make explicit how the objects that surround us police, codify and produce our behaviour and being.

That objects wield power over humans is an elementary assumption in my practice as a sculptor and filmmaker. My work understands both cinema as sculptural and sculpture as a filmic practice: both mobilise a viewer to adapt different viewpoints in time. Both map physical and emotional spaces and both entangle imagination and thinking with bodily processes. Through encircling objects like a cloud, or capturing a spinning asteroid, I explore what new understanding can be gained by moving around or into objects, or by following them. I argue that through pursuing and tracking objects they can be made visible as multiple and complex. The attempt to relinquish a priori knowledge of what an object is or can be, then, spans both this discussion and my practice.

By decentring the place of the human in the wider world, slapstick confronts key questions concerning technology's relationship with the human body. It is for this reason that I have considered it a critical inheritance for my own practice. It implies a valuable ethical proposition. By seeking the alien within the human, and making visible the liveliness and agency of nonhuman objects, slapstick has helped me to recognise the shared materiality of all things. And by taking a new approach to the tacit values and philosophy of silent comedy, we are better able to imagine an alternate ecology and future, as equal citizens among the republic of things.

Appendices

Positioning the Practice

The text below provides an elucidation of my practice across different media in the years 2013-2018 to position the work in relation to the concerns around human agency that drive this project. It forms a description of and reflection on my working processes and the materials used. I hope to ground the more research-based, theoretical and historical discussions of the thesis in the everyday activities I carried out in the course of this project. The text takes the form of an extended artist's statement. I draw out some of my working methods and general concerns and then introduce individual works. They are grouped in a manner that allows me to show some of the connections between them: the first section observes direct interventions with the historic archival material from silent films that are discussed in the thesis, starting with the digital work. The second section describes projects in which the relationship between cinema and objects were explored in a wider sense and strategies derived from silent slapstick including the recalcitrance of objects and anthropomorphisms are tested.

This project consists of a series of articulations, some of which are language-based and take written form, whilst others are conveyed through non-verbal media.³⁸² While the thesis discusses object agency through text, my work across installation, film, animation, Foley and motion capture technologies circulates it in physical and virtual spaces through exhibitions and uploads. Both thesis and the practice draw on the same archive of silent films. Boundaries between practices of writing, archival work and making were increasingly confounded in the course of the project: the thesis became performative, advancing the text through montage and cross-cuts; Foley artists read silent films like textual scripts and movement routines were reperformed as *écriture corporelle* – bodily writing. Writing and making are indebted to one another, they evolve in tandem as the below text sets out. Consequently, my aim to amplify the noise of objects and reanimate the body of silent films was enacted both through the writing and the making.

³⁸² Images or objects may not be reliant on human language but they are still highly articulate processes, Haraway writes. To articulate is to imbue with meaning - discourse is only one of many forms articulation. See Haraway, p. 113

In this project I have set out to redeem some of the lost and buried strategies, characters and aesthetic aspirations of pre-sound cinema, which sketched out an alternate trajectory of a cinema whose wishes and hopes were left unrealised with the onset of the Hollywood system in the mid-1910s.³⁸³ My re-examination of early cinema follows the advice of Walter Benjamin and Alexander Kluge: to avoid feeding the culture industry with 'bad new' artefacts, to avoid recreating existing, tired aesthetics and oppressive social relations, authentic renewal can sometimes best be reached through a conscious detour via the past.³⁸⁴

Such a renewal of different *Nachleben* - afterlives - means to dissociate the concept from belonging solely to individual, biological entities. Films preserve movements and moments in time. I treat them as time capsules of material that can be opened and messed with, pulling characters, sounds, movements and objects from them. By showing the films to Foley artists, game programmers and writers and engaging in conversations about them, they continue to resonate, entering different phases of life, growth and inheritance. Through my work with the silent film comedienne Sarah Duhamel's avatar to writer Hillel Schwartz' sound script for the Italia short *Lea e il gomito* (1913), I add to their genealogy. By re-circulating and reanimating the material, the works become texts in their own right: translations are part of the 'afterlife' of an original text and recreate value, as Benjamin has argued.³⁸⁵

The experimental and pioneering approach to filmmaking in the pre-sound era made me think of using emerging technologies including infra-red motion capture, photogrammetry, CAD modelling as well as 3D printing in various materials. I print digital shape models which I cast in two-part moulds, combining manufacturing with computer-based processes. These techniques are also a means to update slapstick's borrowings from the mass assembly line - exploited perhaps most famously in Chaplin's *Modern Times* - to the current fourth industrial revolution in which cyber physical systems take over the production of goods and services.

I advance my practice through collaboration and by inviting other voices into the work. 3d modellers, writers, dancers and Foley artists have spurred conversations that widened my limited personal frame of reference.³⁸⁶ My engagement with experts - sometimes pro bono but often hired - mimics professional project management strategies where knowledge is combined and responsibilities are shared. Such a cross-disciplinary approach also levels hierarchies

³⁸³ King (2008).

³⁸⁴ Benjamin and Kluge in Pavsek (2013), p. 17.

³⁸⁵ Benjamin in Busch (2016), no page.

³⁸⁶ Donna Haraway (2015) has spoken of sympliosis - making-with rather than auto-pliosis, self-making.

between practices associated with the sciences, humanities and arts by showing them to be equally capable of producing new knowledge. Beyond human actors, I want to make the technological carrier or medium present, to show information as entangled with embodied, underlying infrastructures. The processes are open-ended, develop over several years and are ongoing, anchoring works both in the physical and digital realm.

Watching films, like writing, is essential for making my own films, objects and performances.³⁸⁷ Films generate concrete ideas that I appropriate. I go through spurts of watching dozens of films over prolonged periods of time. My viewing practices vary - sometimes I replay a single scene many times and take notes, others I skim-watch. The films can also be a component of my working process or an installation: for *Storm Exercise* (2018) I assembled film scenes into a visual script to guide the Foley artists – and in *Destroy She Said* (2016) the comedy film *Lea e il gomitolo* was projected above the performers on a screen. While watching films online I had control over their scale and playing speed. However, Youtube or Vimeo would create further suggestions based on their viewer metrics and algorithmic content recognition. Such sophisticated systems managed via artificial intelligence use entirely different parameters from traditional film archives. For example, the YouTube algorithm selects which videos ‘surface’ to a viewer with the goal of maximising long-term viewer engagement. Time spent watching a video, re-watches, keywords, click-through rates, likes and dislikes in viewer feedback are all reflected in the archive that is presented. As audience retention is key, less entertaining or dense content will be left out and forgotten.

The online archive presented to me, then, was far from impartial – rather it would persist on certain choices whilst filtering out others. I realised that the accessibility of Keaton and Chaplin’s films increased their impact on my work. This is something I have attempted to challenge by creating a broader archive that considers in detail the films I watched locally at the BFI, EYE and the Deutsche Kinemathek. However, it also made me think about how this online archival bias based on viewer metrics could be reflected in my making. As internet platforms replace traditional physical institutions in how they bundle information and grant access policed by a set of normative rules, their mechanised processes remain nebulous. By understanding the coded architectures as sites that exercise power I became interested in appropriating and displaying their workings. Through character building, animations, games engines and motion capture technology I extracted elements from the silent film archive and

³⁸⁷ Also viewing practices, reflection and conversations with other artists are crucial to the advancement of my work – see exhibition section below.

uploaded them to Mixamo, Youtube and Sketchfab to better understand the complex implications surrounding dissemination, ownership and affordances of these digital platforms.

Part I:



Sarah Duhamel .obj, Janina Lange, 2015, .obj file of digital model in Maya software, screen grab, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.

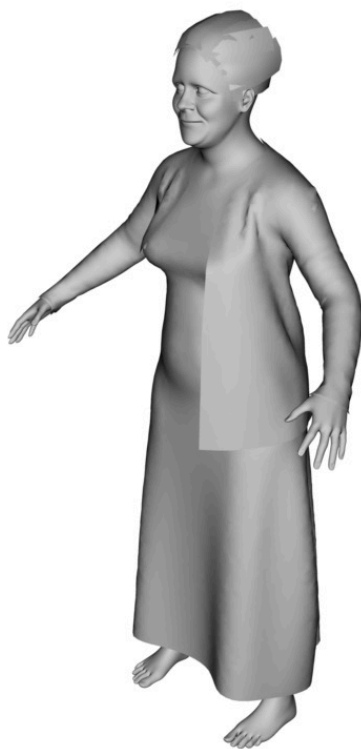
Sarah.obj, 2015

To digitally reanimate Sarah Duhamel, the French silent film comedienne, I created an avatar based on her likeness. The comedienne's digital doppelganger was subsequently uploaded and made publicly available for download on Mixamo. The process of building Sarah as an .obj file involved software including 3DMax, Maya and ZBrush.

Sarah's face and physique could not be further from that of the generic default characters stocked in online character libraries in late 2015, so I had to enlist the help of a character designer. He approximated her face and body based on images from film stills. Sarah's 3d avatar consists of a mesh and is fully rigged - bestowed with an internal skeleton, which consists of a hierarchical set of interconnected bones. The kinematic equations used to control and animate Sarah are derived from robotics. Sarah is a chain: each bone is connected by joints and constrained by its connection to other links.

Her digital resurrection complicates Sarah's existence: who owns her now and how is her presence distributed? When speaking of digital afterlife, what constitutes aliveness in this disembodied space? Although Sarah's digital replica uploaded to the cloud and is currently a low-resolution replica, such an appropriation raises ethical questions about how memory and afterlives are managed online, as her digital twin is whisked up and transported into unknown territory and engaged in unknowable interactions. However, such a reboot might also be understood as an extension of her legacy as an actress into the 21st century: after all, her prosthetic online existence enables auditions in the video game and animation industry, where she might receive further roles. The avatar of Sarah remains problematic and cannot be understood in simple terms of a memorialisation or illicit appropriation, as it is unclear who or what benefits whilst click farms and platforms may now monetise her digital self to their own gains.

This work will develop further to include commercial digital services like Enterni.me which uses social media to create Digital Ghosts – artificially-intelligent avatars. Enterni.me creates high definition avatars and chatbots that converse with family members after a person has died. While the platform uses AI to assemble messages of the deceased based on their social media profiles, I want to use interviews and excerpts from scripts as a feed for this next stage of Sarah's afterlife, where she may learn to speak again.



Sarah.obj

OBJ 3D File - 11,5 MB

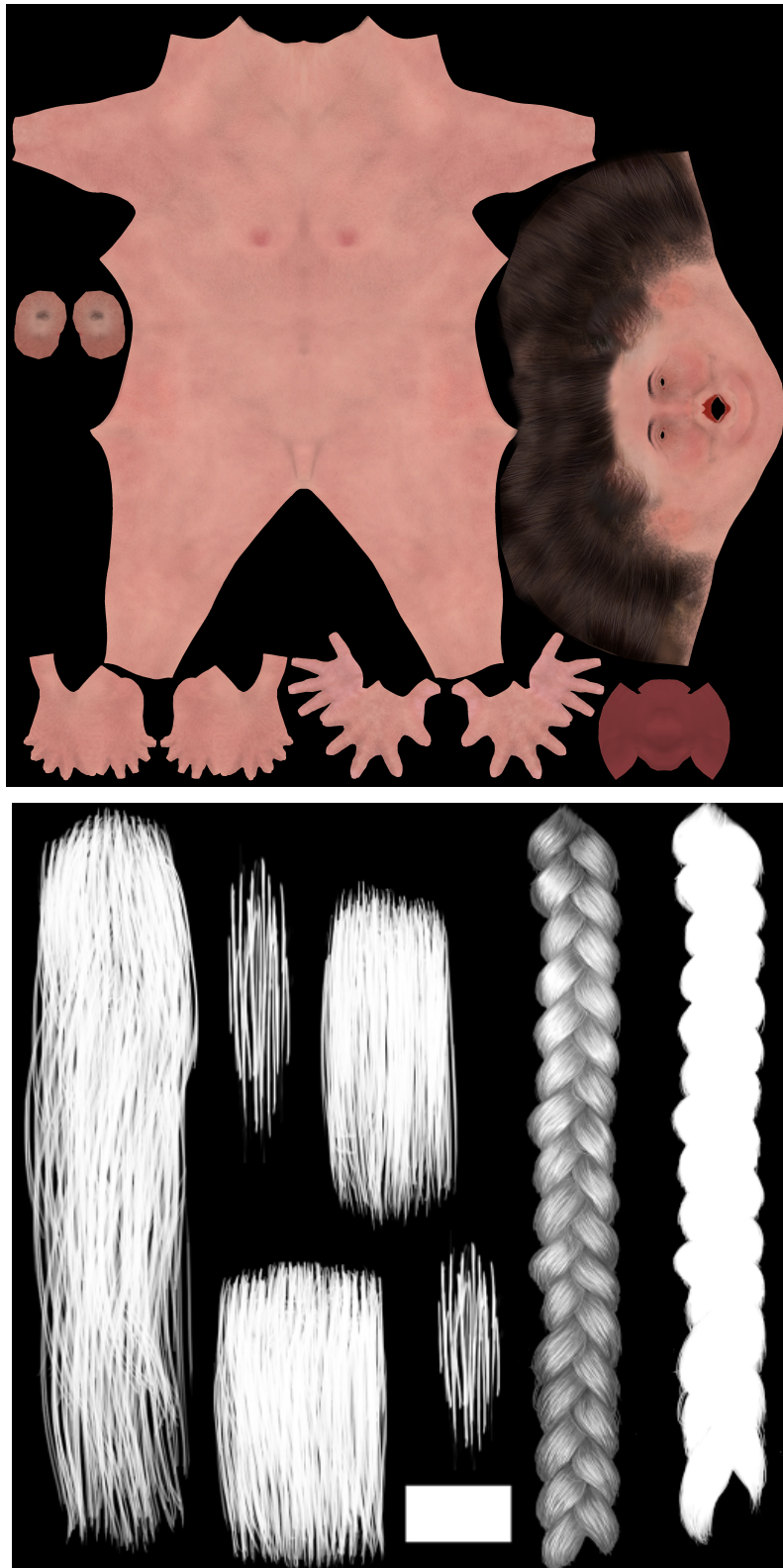
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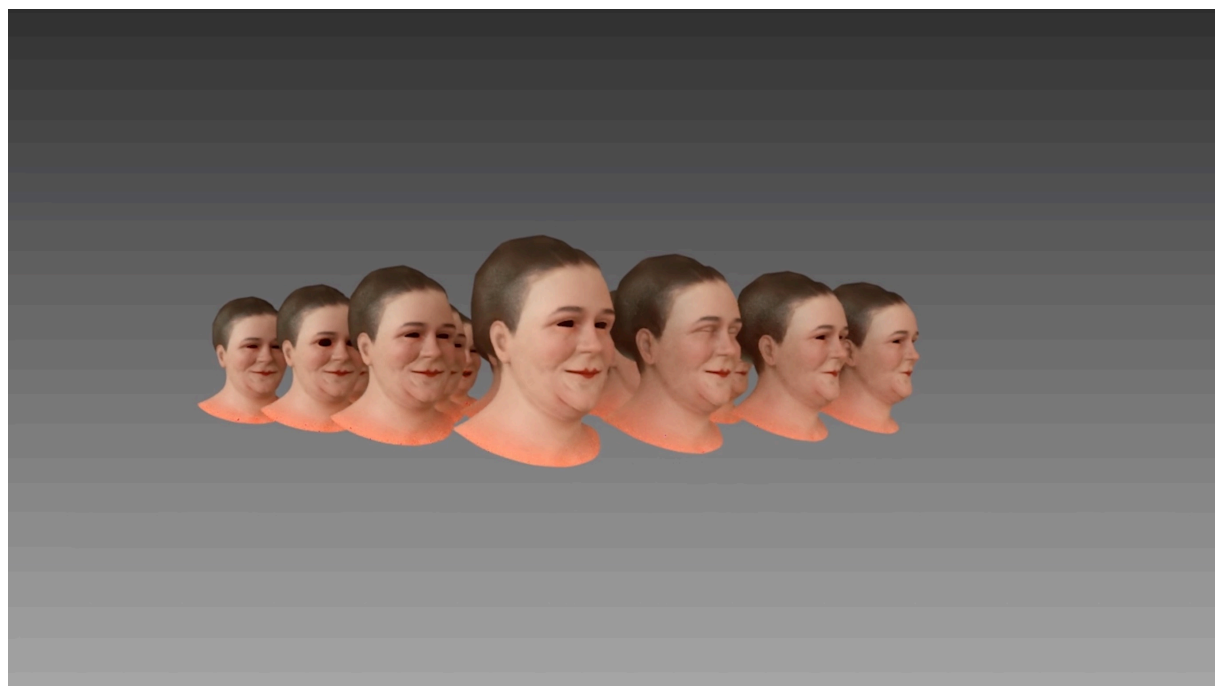
Last opened Tuesday 3 March 2015 at 20:38

[Add Tags...](#)

Sarah Duhamel .obj, Janina Lange, 2015, .obj file of digital model, screen grab, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.



Sarah Duhamel .obj, Janina Lange, 2015, skin and texture maps in 3DMax for digital model, screen grab, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.



Sarah Limbo, Janina Lange, 2015, HD animation, colour, no sound, 00:04:12mins, film still, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.

Sarah Limbo (2015)

Link: <https://vimeo.com/319691584>

Password: Limbo_15

Using Sarah's avatar, we created the animation Sarah Limbo (2015). In the film she explores the laws of physics within the Autodesk Maya workspace in a series of interactions with her environment.

Sarah is placed on the software's default grid 'scene' in sparse surroundings: found objects downloaded from online warehouses include a teapot, a cooking pan, a table, kitchenette and a light switch. The backdrop is functional featuring no ceilings or walls. Like early film sets the room is constructed to appear complete from a single, fixed camera perspective. However, the illusion of an immersive space is immediately ruptured as the mobile camera curves around her using rotational twists on Motion Paths. The camera also moves through objects. Facial expressions from frowns to smiles are modelled onto a series of Sarah's heads that hover in proximity to her workspace in the animation. They have to be engrafted on her body each time she is made to change emotion. Each of her smiles, then, leads to a defacto decapitation.

The film reflects the discoveries made whilst interacting with the animation software. For example, instead of bouncing off a table the cooking pan entrenches itself within it. Sarah dips her hand through the surface of the teapot, grasping thin air. I discovered that objects don't dent or break spontaneously in this 3d workspace. Every action has to be pre-planned: shards must be modelled, so that once hurled to the ground the pot can fall to pieces. In the simulation we miscalculated the fall so that our pot self-destructs in mid-air.

An understanding of the difficulty of moving objects within this workspace emerged while making the film. Sarah refuses to move in a humanoid manner: each wink of her eye must be programmed frame by frame. I discovered that motion and emotion translated only with great resistance from the comedienne's expressive film performances into Maya 3d animation software. It is a hostile environment to the physicality of her ebullient performances. Sarah has the same properties as an object in this space - any appearance of aliveness must be painstakingly evoked through movement. To find a solution to this problem, I began to research motion capture technology.



Sarah Limbo, Janina Lange, 2015, HD animation, colour, no sound, 00:04:12mins, film still, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.



Sarah Limbo, Janina Lange, 2015, HD animation, colour, no sound, 00:04:12mins, film still, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.



Sarah Duhamel Movement Archive, Janina Lange, 2015, Kinect sensor, tv screens, source video, green screen, laptop, avatar, performance by Pepa Ubera, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.

Movement Archive, 2015 –(ongoing)

To understand how human movement might be extracted from the comedienne's onscreen performances into virtual animations I began to research motion capture technology. Instead of using mocap libraries like Mixamo, Sketchfab or TrueBones to download ready-made off-the-shelf motions for my purposes, I was interested in how movements might be extracted from the historic films I was researching. This project has run through several iterations: Sarah Duhamel Movement Archive and *Moving Past Present: Digitally reanimating the Gaiety girls* (2016). It is still ongoing at the moment of submission of this thesis.

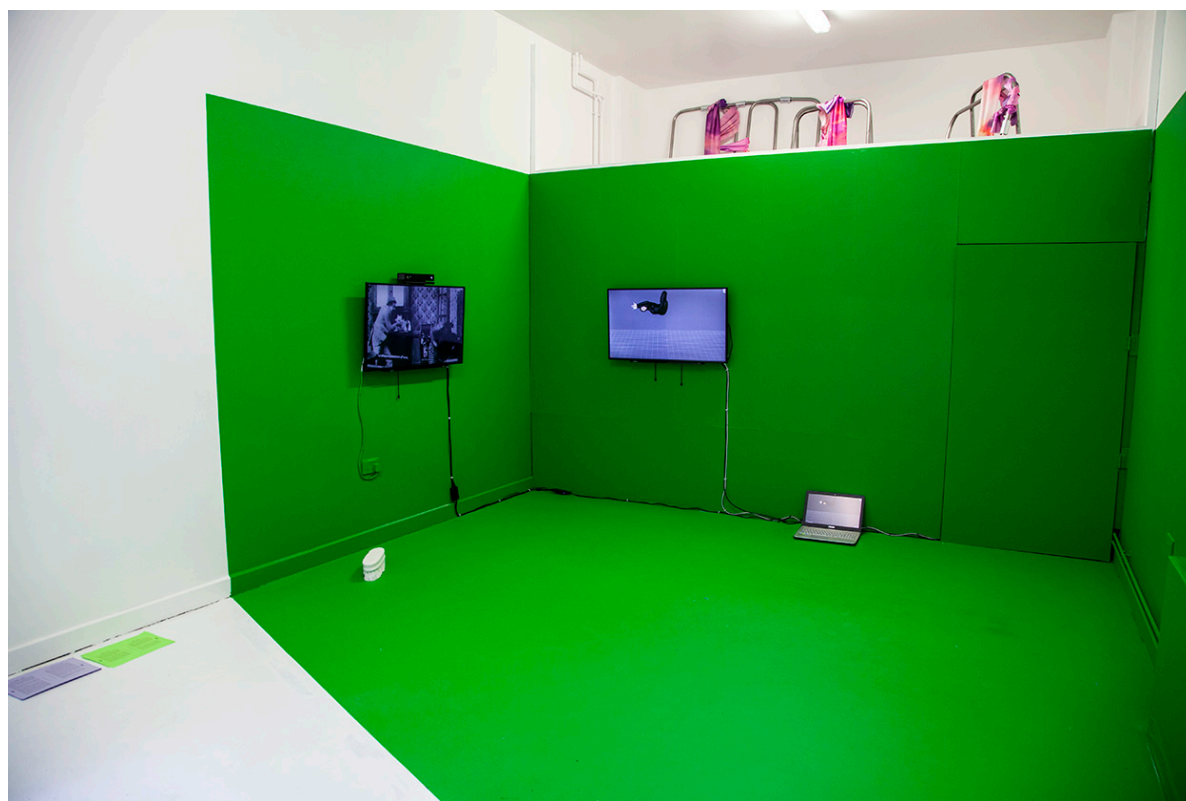
The aim to shift movements from early films into 3d animations or games engines required various steps. In 2015 at the outset of this project no commercially available software could directly extract the movements from 2d images and export them so that they could be engrafted on a 3d model. This meant that a detour via a physical performer who would re-enact the movements had to be made.

To start with, I screened rare films at the Eye Archive in Amsterdam and the BFI to identify and distil motion sequences first of Sarah Duhamel and later of other performers. Then I isolated, slowed and magnified a series of movements that included dance routines, expressions of

despair, joy, laughter, anger, flirtation, crying, longing. The clips were edited together to function like notation systems or a script for the re-performers.³⁸⁸

Sarah Duhamel Movement Archive, 2015-16

For the Sarah Duhamel Movement Archive I drew on movement vocabulary from the *Petronille* (1912-1914) and *Rosalie* (1911-1912) serials. I engaged in conversations and a series of rehearsals with dancer Pepa Ubera who agreed to perform for a life motion capture session at the Barbican Conservatory for the TECHNE Kinesis and Stasis Un-conference and later at Green Ray gallery for the Oh Super(hu/wo)man! exhibition curated by Gabriella Acha. It was important that a live audience should witness the moment of transition during which the historic gestures were replayed, re-enacted and recorded as a rite of passage into the new digital life of the motion vocabulary.

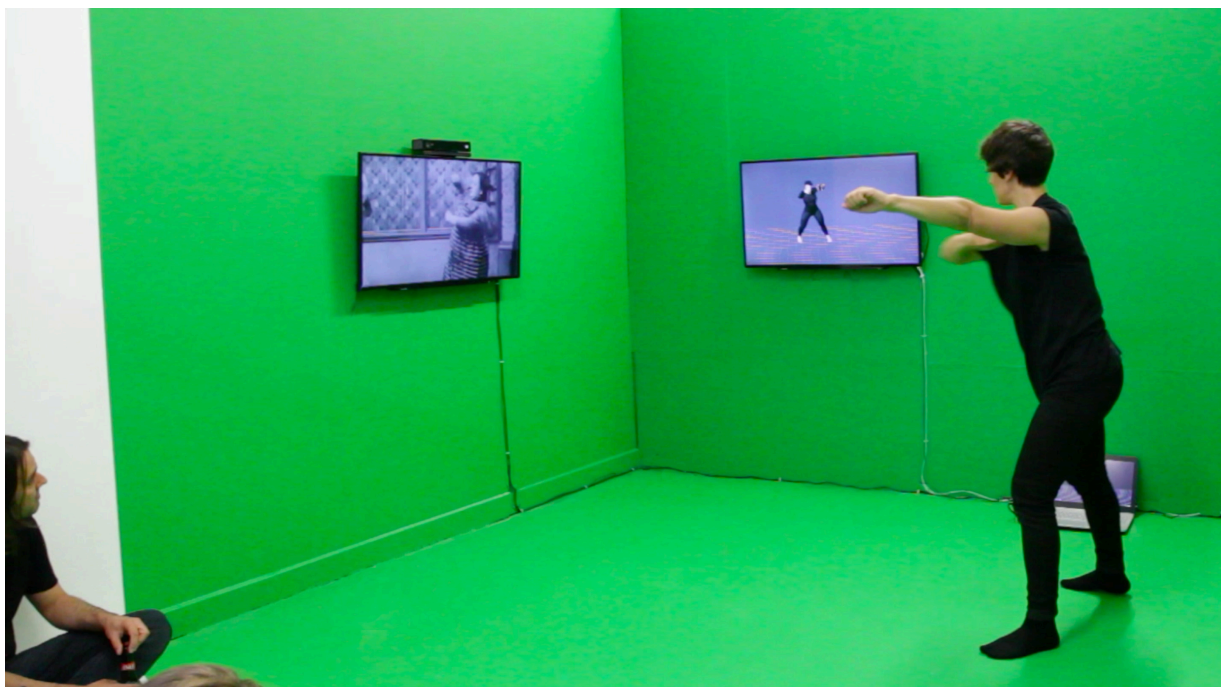


Sarah Duhamel Movement Archive, Janina Lange, 2016, Kinect sensor, tv screens, source video, green screen, laptop, avatar, performance by Pepa Ubera, photograph by Gabriella Acha, 2016.

³⁸⁸ Beyond viewing and editing the films, writing formed an important part of understanding how the expressiveness of the comediennes created a movement vocabulary specific to silent **film** as discussed in the Movement, Gesture, Locomotion chapter p. 109ff.

The set up consisted of two flat-screens, a Windows run laptop with Brekel Pro Body and Motion Builder software and a Microsoft Kinect device. Kinect is a technology initially developed as a means of interacting with Microsoft's Xbox games consoles.

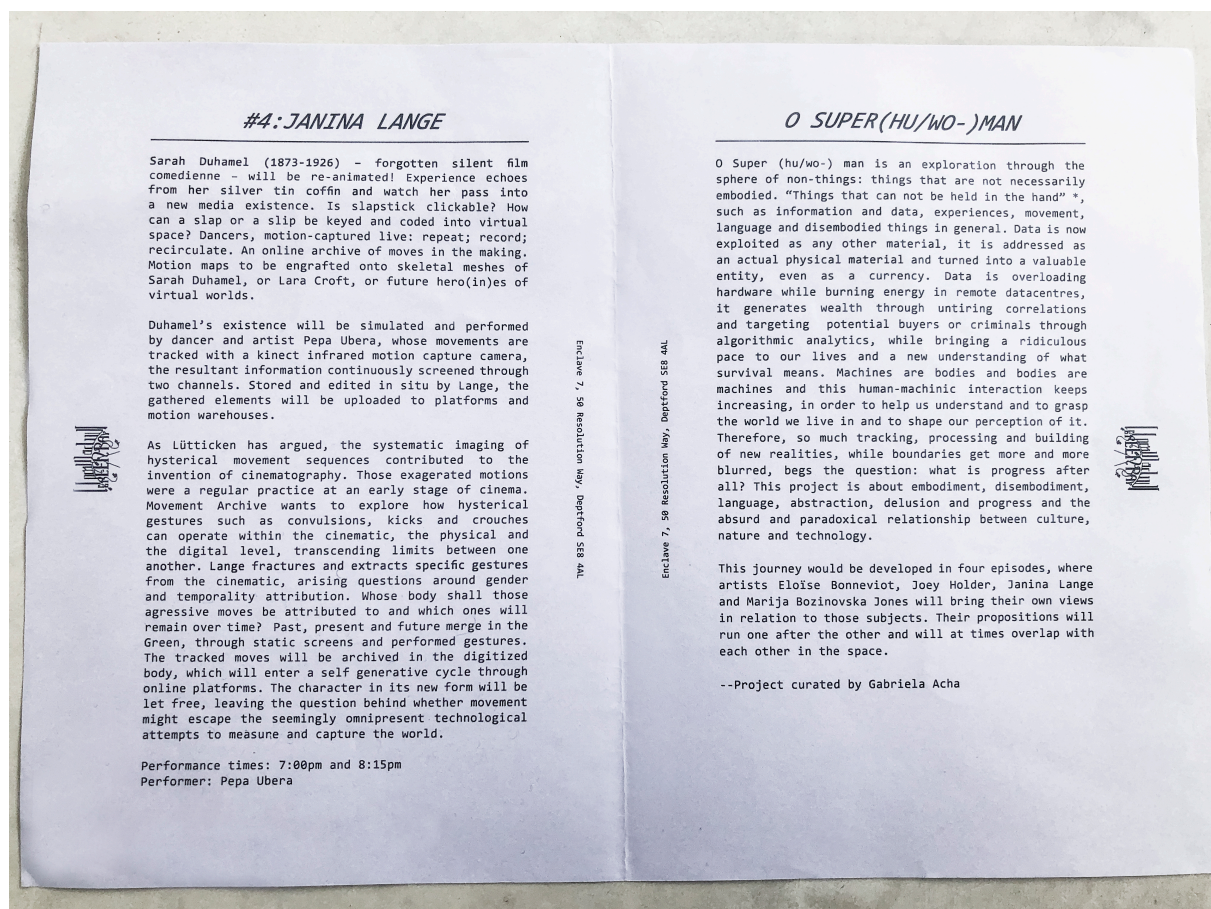
In the gallery space one of the screens was showing the source film with the historic performance and the other an avatar of Sarah Duhamel. The avatar is locked to the dancers movements during the recording. In between performances viewers could interact with the device and avatar themselves.



Sarah Duhamel Movement Archive, Janina Lange, 2016, Kinect sensor, tv screens, source video, green screen, laptop, avatar, performance by Pepa Ubera, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.



Sarah Duhamel Movement Archive, Janina Lange, 2016, source video, film still, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.



Sarah Duhamel Movement Archive, Janina Lange, 2016, press text, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.



Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, Kinect sensor, source film, tv screen, projector, lighting, avatar, performance by Meghan Treadway, photograph by Rob Gallagher, 2016.

Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, 2016

Links:

<http://www.ego-media.org/moving-past-present-digitally-reanimating-gaiety-girls/>

https://sketchfab.com/moving_past_present

For the Play festival at King's College in October 2016 I was commissioned to create a performance by the EgoMedia Project.³⁸⁹ Historian Dr. Rob Gallagher initiated the collaboration and suggested unearthing some of the performances of the Victorian Gaiety girls, who were early media personalities and performed locally at the Strand's Gaiety Theatre. We screened various surviving films of Ellaline Terris and Constance Collier - two Gaiety girls who worked across comedy and melodrama the BFI archives. From the footage I distilled a source film containing about a dozen movement routines which actress Meghan Treadway rehearsed and re-performed. The spatial set-up within the former King's Anatomy Museum resembled a timeline: at one end a TV flatscreen was playing the historic movement sequences, which were matched and re-performed by Meghan, whose movements were recorded and engrafted live on an avatar of Ellaline projected onto a screen at the far end. The transmission of movement did not function without stutter or glitches, as performer and digital avatar fell in and out of sync as the technology inscribed itself in the recordings. The performance lasted over an hour.

³⁸⁹ EgoMedia investigates the impact of new technologies on practices of self-presentation and digital biographies. See <http://www.ego-media.org/about/>

Programmer Moses Attah coordinated the recording, which entailed aligning the physical and virtual bones of performer and 3d model within the Brekel and Motionbuilder softwares. The recorded movement sequences were then uploaded by Moses onto the open source platforms Sketchfab and YouTube. Viewers could follow this process by looking over Moses' shoulder or via an iPad which was locked to the Sketchfab archive website. These platforms function as free online libraries to game animators and designers. Since their upload the movement routines have been viewed many times and also downloaded.

The Anatomy museum also contained historic postcards of the actresses that we had bought on Ebay, as well as their biographies and a series of posters whose text Rob Gallagher devised.



Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, Kinect sensor, source film, tv screen, projector, lighting, avatar, performance by Meghan Treadway, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.



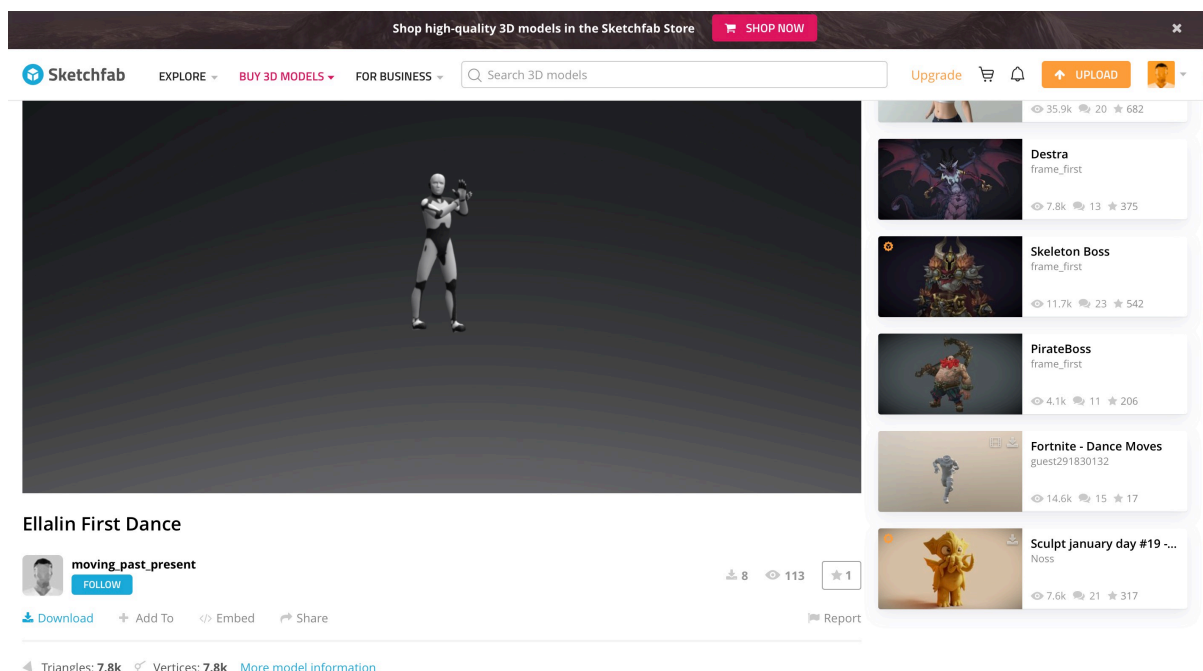
Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, historic video entitled 'Painters Dance' source: BFI, source video for performance re-enactment, screengrab, photograph by Janina Lange 2016.



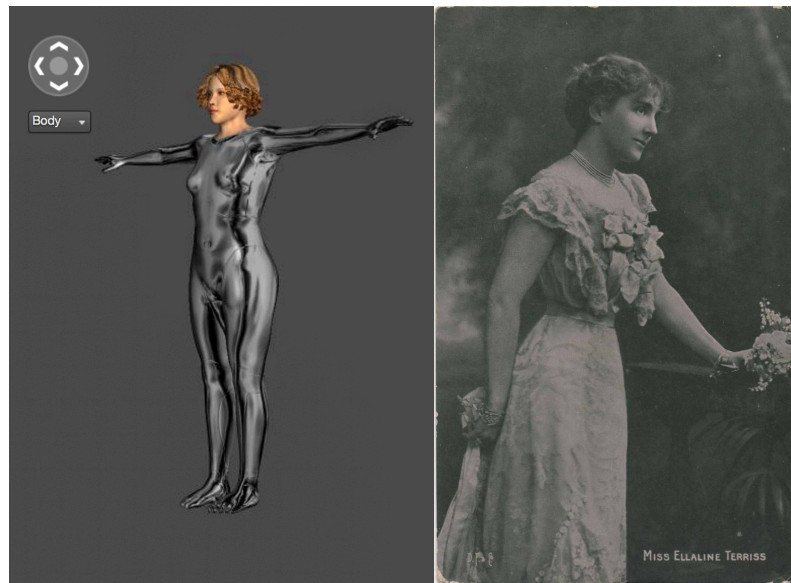
Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, Kinect sensor, screen, projector, source film, tv screen, lighting, avatar, performance by Meghan Treadway, photograph by Rob Gallagher, 2016.



Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, Kinect sensor, source film, tv screen, projector, lighting, performance by Meghan Treadway, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.



Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, Sketchfab archive online, screen grab, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.



Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, Ellaline Terris' avatar, historic postcard, screengrab, photograph by Janina Lange.



Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, historic postcards, Ipad on Sketchfab website, books, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.

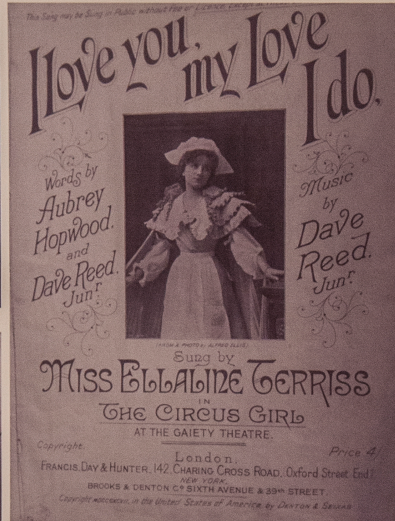
Branded Selves



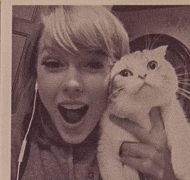
Ogden's cigarette card portrait of Collier.



Souvenir volume of colour photographs of *The Shop Girl's* cast, 1895.



Sheet music for 'I Love You My Love I Do', sung by Terriss in *The Circus Girl*, 1896.



Taylor Swift Instagram selfie with cat, 2015.



Terriss in Henry Irving's *Cinderella*, 1893.

'I was photographed three times a week by Downey, for which I received a settled income... Two famous dressmakers, one in London and one in Paris, dressed me for nothing, and a famous English designer called her models after me and made my clothes at a very nominal fee... My picture advertised all sorts of wares, and face creams and soaps, and I gave advice in all the papers on how to keep healthy and beautiful and young. If I had followed the regime I laid down, I could never have finished in the twenty-four hours...'
 Constance Collier, *Harlequinade* (1929)

Described by Stephen Gundle as 'the world's first branded showgirl', the Gaiety Girl had to maintain her brand identity both onstage and off. Edwardes 'carefully selected, groomed and glorified them, providing lessons in elocution, singing, dancing and fencing... Tanning was forbidden in order to preserve an aristocratic whiteness of complexion and make-up was never worn off stage. The girls were reputedly always polite and very well-behaved.' The Gaiety team also had a keen eye for promotion and co-branding opportunities, contracting Girls to photographic studios, advertising in show programmes, working endorsements of businesses like Harrods and Thomas Cook into productions, licensing sheet music and arranging discounts for their charges at restaurants only too keen to have the cover star of this week's *Sketch* dining with them. Technological breakthroughs (like the development of half-tone plates, which allowed for the cheap reproduction of high quality monochrome images) turned the Girls into recognisable faces even for those who had never set foot in the theatre, disseminating their signature attitudes, expressions and poses. Privileging beauty and 'personality' over theatrical skill (while they did dance and sing, the main purpose of the Gaiety's chorus was to 'decorate the stage and respond with individual mannerisms to what was going on around them') and reputedly auditioning hundreds of aspirant icons a week, Edwardes' methods represented a step toward the industrialization of the star system.

If this regime represented the application of assembly line principles to theatre, shows like *The Shop Girl*, *The Girl from Kays* and *Our Miss Gibbs* also saw musical comedy stars portraying working women at a time when, as Tracy C. Davis notes, real shoppirls were expected to present themselves like performers - polite, presentable, 'personable' and sexually appealing. Some saw such jobs as more glamorous and dignified than manual labour; others argued it was demeaning to be forced not just to work but to act like you were enjoying it. In other words, if the Gaiety Girls anticipated the age of Instagram influencers, personal branding and online 'micro-celebrity', they also played a part in laying the groundwork for what scholars like Arlie Hochschild and Angela McRobbie have called a culture of 'emotional labour' and 'passionate work'. In the post-Fordist workplace as on the late-Victorian shopfloor, it has become an unwritten condition of many jobs that employees should serve both as assets to their employer and as embodiments of a corporate identity - especially if those employees are 'girls'.

Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, poster written by Rob Grallagher, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.

Moving past present: digitally reanimating the Gaiety Girls

The Gaiety Theatre's musical comedies were the toast of late Victorian London. Performed just across the road from what is now the King's Strand campus, plays like *The Shop Girl* and *A Runaway Girl* combined comic songs, lavish costumes and spectacular dances, trading on the allure of the theatre's glamorous chorus of 'Gaiety Girls'. Even as the plays' plots betrayed anxiety over women's independence, those 'girls' used them as stepping stones to artistic careers, aristocratic marriages, Hollywood roles and even parliamentary office. With their meticulously crafted public personae, their lucrative merchandising deals and their innovative transmedia collaborations, Gaiety alumni like Constance Collier and Ellaline Terriss helped to draw up the blueprint for modern celebrity.

For this year's festival, artist Janina Lange will take us back to the Gaiety with an immersive experiment in digital biography. Drawing on archival materials and employing motion capture technologies usually used for videogaming, *Moving past present* will map the movements of a live performer onto a virtual Gaiety Girl, before giving attendees the opportunity to take to the stage themselves.

Developed in collaboration with King's researchers from Strandlines, an online portal celebrating 'lives on the Strand past, present and creative', and Ego-Media, a research project exploring digital self-representation, the project reimagines the Gaiety Girls as avatars to explore questions of identity, gendered embodiment and playful performance.

JANINA LANGE (*1986 in Berlin) lives and works in London and Berlin. After studying Fine Art at Chelsea College of Art in London and gaining a MRes in Cultural Studies at the London Consortium, she is currently working on her practice-led PhD at the Sculptural Department of the Royal College of Art in London. Her works have recently been on show at Bluecoat for the Liverpool Biennial (2016), Kunsthalle Exnergasse (2016), Studio RCA (2015) and in a solo show at Heit (2014). Lange is recipient of the TECHNE: AHRC scholarship, current artist-in-residence at CW+ and has been selected for the Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2016. Upcoming shows will be held at Richmix and the ICA.



Image: Gaiety glove – photograph by Janina Lange, illustration by Dudley Hardy

Digital installation & performance
19.00-20.30 Thursday 20 October 2016
Anatomy Museum, King's Building, Strand Campus

Presented by Ego-Media and the Centre for Life-Writing Research

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Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating The Gaiety Girls, Janina Lange, 2016, Play Festival catalogue publication, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.

As well as contributing to the scholarship of early comic film by building likenesses of the comediennes and re-telling their stories in scripted animations, I want to recirculate them on public platforms. As the #GamerGate scandal has shown, there are digital architectures in gaming that are hostile to women and exclude female voices. Infiltrating such environments is an urgent undertaking.³⁹⁰ By extrapolating the comediennes unruly movement vocabulary from the films and making them available for further application they take on new afterlives and continue to explode codified frameworks and architectures with appropriate decorum, albeit in an updated environment. It is currently impossible for me to track who has downloaded the movements and where elements from the comic performance might have ended up. Perhaps this dissolution of control and setting free of the characters comes closest to creating new life forms. However, motion capture technologies are rapidly becoming more accurate and cheaper to obtain. Applications and softwares including RADiCAL are now capable of reading movement in 2d images and converting them to .fbx files. I would like to further this project in future iterations by continuing to disseminate the unruly movement vocabulary of the early film comediennes and divas.³⁹¹

³⁹⁰ The Guardian (2018).

³⁹¹ Elif Rongen of the Amsterdam Eye Institute recently pointed me towards the Labex Art Laboratory in France, led by Céline Gailleurd. This is a crossdisciplinary project on Italian silent films seeking out responses to cinema across painting, sculpture and new technologies, which I will get in touch with to compare notes.



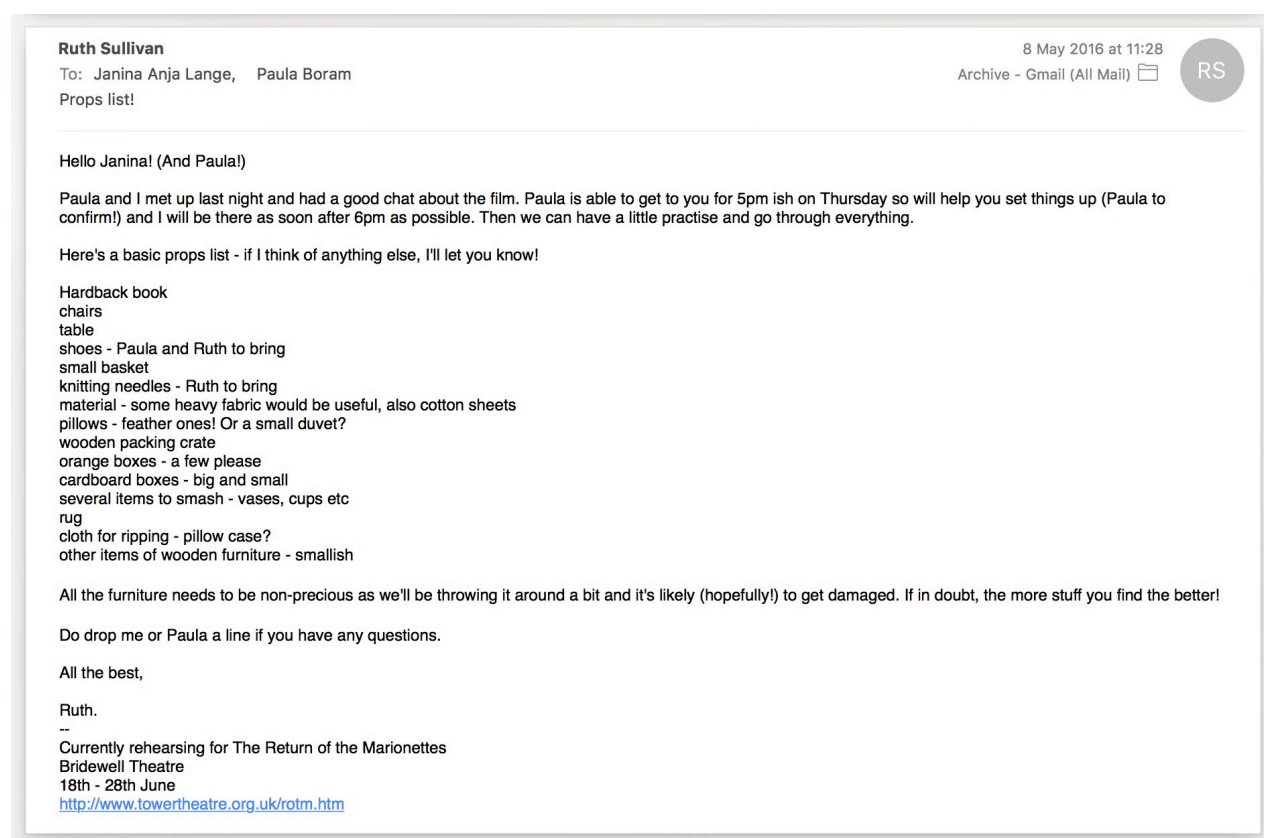
Destroy She Said: Sound Silent, Janina Lange, 2016, Foley performance by Ruth Sullivan and Paula Boram, hardback book, chair, wooden palette, small baskets, knitting needles, fabric, feathered pillow, orange boxes, cardboard boxes, vases, photograph by Mette Boel, 2016.

Destroy She Said: Sound Silent, 2016

This was my first collaboration with professional Foley artists Ruth Sullivan and Paula Boram. Foley artists work in film postproduction, re-recording ambient sounds that could not be captured during the shoot of a film. Working in studios called Foley pits they recreate sounds of footsteps, creaking doors or animals with everyday objects. This work requires a high level of tacit knowledge of objects as well as a feel for rhythm and timing, as they have to create noises like footsteps in sync over the course of an entire take. The sounds are then layered and remixed to make them sound realistic.

For Destroy She Said: Sound Silent (2016) I invited Paula and Ruth to create Foley for rambunctious silent film *Lea e il gomito* in real time at a live event. They emailed a list of required objects based on the film, which I collected from skips and hunted down in charity shops. Paula and Ruth also brought along several objects that are a part of their permanent kit, including a men's shirt that makes a good rustling noise.

The objects were set up on the stage in front of the screen and wired with mics to the surround sound at the RCA's Dyson lecture theatre. After some brief rehearsals the room was opened to the audience, who could watch *Lea e il gomitolo* with live ambient sound. It was important that the Foley artists should be women, repeating and doubling the dynamic action performed by silent film comedienne Lea Giuncih on screen. In addition to making the objects within the films audible, I wanted to foreground the undervalued and hidden processes of sound postproduction in film.



Destroy She Said: Sound Silent, Janina Lange, 2016, Email with props list, screen grab, photograph by Janina Lange, 2019.



Destroy She Said: Sound Silent, Janina Lange, 2016, Foley performance by Ruth Sullivan and Paula Boram, photograph by Mette Boel, 2016.



Asta Nielsen's *Suffragette*, Janina Lange, 2015, black and white video, no sound, 00:02:47mins, film still, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.

Asta Nielsen's *Suffragette*, 2015

For Asta Nielsen's *Suffragette* I asked professional lip reader Judith Harter to read out the dialogue from sequences of the silent film *Die Suffragette- Mimisches Schauspiel* with Asta Nielsen from 1913.³⁹² The film is based on Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst and the British Suffragette movement for the votes of women. I chose two key scenes where the main character joins the movement and later is torn between her convictions as suffragette and her personal life and love. Through extreme magnification, slow motion and repeated readings, Harter was able to transcribe what was said. It became apparent that the scene had no scripted dialogue so the spoken words - improvised and jumbled, were Asta Nielsen's own. I displayed her words in the form of subtitles on a second screen next to the original sequence in an exhibition at the Riverlight Studio in London.

³⁹² Judith Harter, the lip reader, had come to my attention for her TV lip reading of football players.

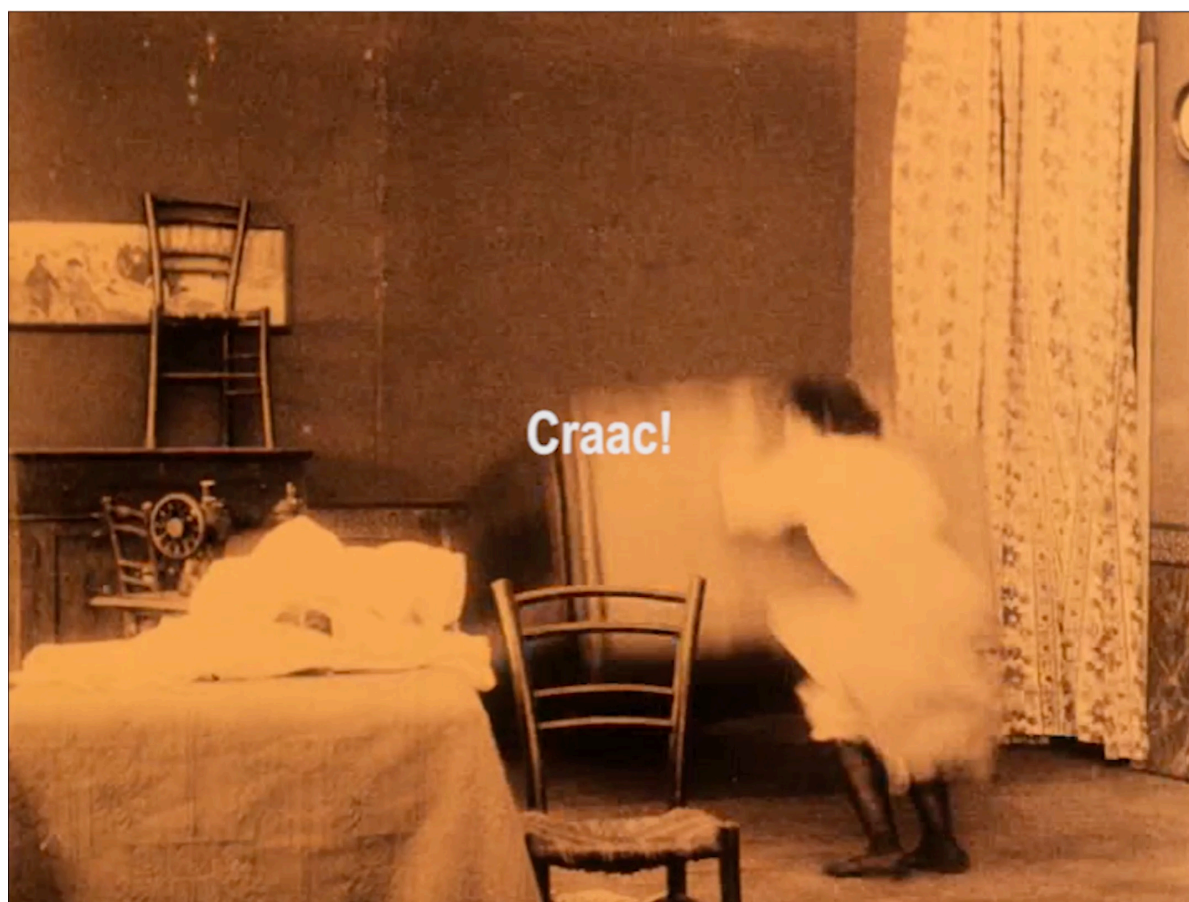
Lippendolmetscher-Auswertungen zu zwei Szenen aus "Die Suffragette"
- für Janina Lange -

Zeit	Wer spricht?	Was wurde gesagt:	Bemerkung:	Hinweis:
00:03 - 00:05	Eine Frau mit dem "Hut" zum Boten(?)	Hallo, du kommst rechtzeitig zur Post		Die Frauen hinten sind nicht zu verstehen
00:19 - 00:21	Mutter zu Nelly, die Treppe hochkommend (über die Schulter gesprochen)	Ich mache dich bekannt.		
00:24 - 00:27	Frau mit "Hut" händeschüttelnd	Hallo, herzlich willkommen im Büro		
00:30 - 00:32	Nelly's Mutter	Ich habe ihnen allen etwas zu sagen.		
00:32 - 00:35	Nelly's Mutter	Ich habe gesagt, dass du heute zu uns kämst		Danach wendet sie das Gesicht ab, Mundbewegung nicht mehr sichtbar
00:35 - 00:38	Nelly's Mutter	Meine Tochter - dann mit Handbewegung zur Brust sagend: Ganz stolz		
00:37 - 00:43	Frau hinten, mit dem Kopf lebendig nickend zeitgleich mit der Frau mit "Hut"	Ah, herzlich willkommen. Herzlich willkommen! Ah! Nelly, ah, herzlich willkommen		
		Frauen sprechen durcheinander, jede einzelne Person anfokusieren! Frau ganz links nicht zu verstehen		
00:43 - 00:50	Frau mit "Hut"	... für die Tadem(?). Ich spreche doch für die ... (Tadem? noch nicht zu verstehen) : Hier ist meine Tochter!		
00:50 - 00:51	Frau mit "Hut" zur Frau links empörend wendend	Mach dich doch nicht ein, du (Gosch?)!		
00:54 - 00:55	Frau mit "Hut" spricht "geschürzt", nicht alles zu verstehen			
0:59 - 01:00	Frau mit "Hut"	Komm, mach doch mit!		
01:10 - 01:12	Frau mit "Hut"	JA! (bestätigt die Aussage der Nellys Mutter bekräftigend) - dann zur Frau links "RUHIG, Du!" - dann wieder zu Nelly: JA! Ja.		
00:43 - 00:43	Nelly	Na ja, aber		
00:45 - 00:47	Nelly	schon, ich denke, ich kann mich jetzt sehr gut (wird unterbrochen - daher kein kompletter Satz)		
00:49 - 00:54	Nelly	Na ja... na ja... na ja... na ja...		
00:54 - 00:58	Nelly	Na ja, aber ich weiß nicht (dann dreht sich ihr Kopf um, Lippenlesen nicht mehr möglich, dann hin zu ihrer Mutter), was ich denn machen soll.		
00:59 - 01:15	Nelly	Na ja... na ja... na ja, aber... na ja... ja, aber...		
00:43 - 01:15	Frau hinten zwischen Frau mit "Hut" und Nelly	Ja, natürlich - aber, aber! - Ja! - ja, aber jetzt! - Also, ja! - Ja! - Ja - Ja, wir wollen, WIR! - Ja!		
01:07 - 01:15	Nellys Mutter Sie war vorher nicht zu verstehen, da das Gesicht immer abgewandt von der Kamera	Ich habe dir gesagt, wir müssen für die Freiheit, für uns... (Satz nicht vollständig ausgesprochen) Du kannst nicht nein sagen! Du darfst nicht!		
01:15 - 01:24	Zwischentitel			
01:25 - 01:25	Nelly	Ja, klar!		
		Frauen sprechen durcheinander, Lippenlesen nicht möglich (Filmqualität hier überbelichtet)		
01:26 - 01:27	Nelly	Jetzt erst recht!		
01:27 - 01:29	Frau mit "Hut"	Jetzt stramm stehen!		
01:30 - 01:32	Nelly auf dem Stuhl	Hände ausgebreitet: ... Votes for Women! Ich demonstriere gern mit!		
01:33 - 01:34	Nelly auf dem Stuhl	zu Mutter: Was war das? Für was?		

Asta Nielsen's Suffragette, Janina Lange, 2015, dialogue notation by lip reader Judith Harter, screen grab, photograph by Janina Lange, 2018.

A Scrutatorio, 2015

I asked the writer Hillel Schwartz to script sounds for the comic short *Lea e il Gomitolo*. He responded by creating a transcript of both ambient objects noises and spoken dialogue. Schwartz uses Italian Futurist nonsense words and his own neologisms, which I placed as subtitles in the films.

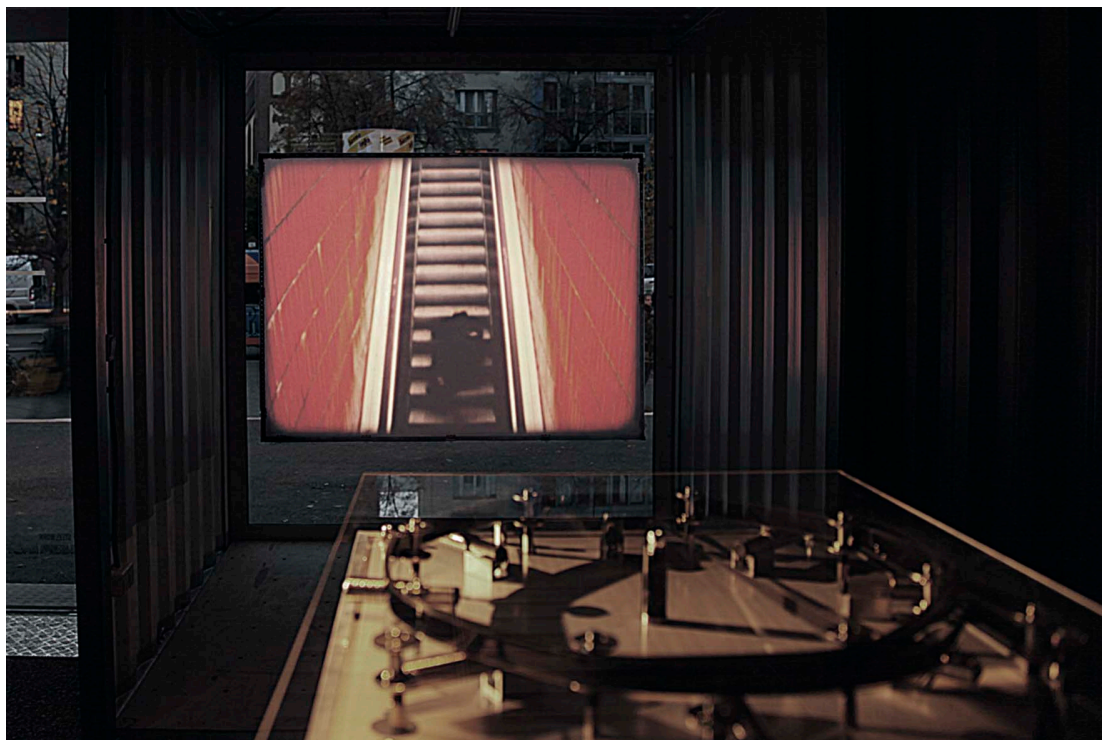


A Scrutatorio, Janina Lange, 2015, text by Hillel Schwartz, black and white video, no sound, 00:04:36mins, film still, photograph by Janina Lange, 2015.



A Scrutatorio, Janina Lange, 2015, text by Hillel Schwartz, black and white video, no sound, 00:04:36mins, film still, photograph Janina Lange, 2015.

Part II:



Perpetual Tumble, Janina Lange, 2013, looper, 16mm film, colour, no sound, 00:03:15mins, photograph by Josh Crowley, 2013.

Perpetual Tumble, 2013

For *Perpetual Tumble* (2013), I worked with a professional stuntman to create a film of a Sisyphean tumble on a moving escalator. I chose a Berlin S-Bahn station that had a good vantage point from above and relatively good light. The stuntman was padded in protective gear, which we hid under his clothing. He positioned himself and adapted the pace of his fall to the motion of the upward moving escalator, which made him tumble on the spot. The material was shot on a Canon Mark II, transferred to 16mm film and shown on an especially constructed looper.³⁹³ The revolving body's circular movement is transferred into the exhibition space by the motion and trajectory of the filmic strip. The looper's clicking noises evoked and mimicked the machine noises of escalator, creating a live soundtrack.

Making the apparatus not only visible but essential to the work's reception created an entanglement between the film, filmic text and the apparatus. The projector turned into a

³⁹³ I had hoped to shoot on film but had to let go of the idea for budget reasons.

sculpture and aesthetic object in space. This exploration of and convergence of filmic and sculptural elements was furthered in the production *Shooting Clouds* (2014-2015).



Spring Stones, Janina Lange, 2013, compression springs, boulder stones, dimensions variable, photograph by Janina Lange, 2013.

Recalcitrant Objects: Spring Stones and Lazy Ladder, 2013

Tropes of futility were also explored in a series of Recalcitrant Objects, which revolve around comic elasticity and the inversion of the laws of gravity. For *Lazy Ladder* (2013) I cast a builder's ladder in a two-part mould process using silicone and powder pigment. The bendy, heavy ladder comes to rest in a different pose each time I place it. Its lethargic qualities were inverted by the *Spring Stones* (2013) installation. Boulders of different shapes and sizes are raised on compression springs. These objects were placed on or next to plinths as if they had leapt off. Some of them are sensitive to movement and pick up the vibrations of approaching footsteps, bouncing animatedly when a viewer comes near.



Lazy Ladder, Janina Lange 2013, silicone, pigment, hook, 45x120x7cm, photograph by Janina Lange, 2013.



Shooting Clouds, Janina Lange, 2014-2015, HD video, colour, no sound, 00:05:12mins, photograph by Gernot Seeliger, 2014.

Shooting Clouds, 2014-15

Shooting Clouds is an installation consisting of a projected HD film of a cumulus cloud and a cast of a 3d print measuring approximately 32x32x25cm. The film was shot 2000 metres above ground out of a helicopter circumnavigating a cloud. At a speed of 180 kph it took 5 minutes and 15 seconds to circle the cloud, the exact duration of film shot at 30 frames per second on a Black Magic camera. The footage was then used to define 140,000 data points and coordinates. By using Agisoft Photoscan software, a 'point cloud' was computed and subsequently printed in resin. Due to the constant process of change in the cloud, the effort of translating a 3d structure - especially one that oscillates between materiality and immateriality - via two-dimensional film and computer simulation into a physical, static object is inevitably splattered with translation errors. The process of appropriating the cloud contains abbreviations of perspective at all stages, on technological as well as linguistic levels. In the end the cloud emerges as an object whose symbolic and semantic significance is as blurred as the referent object itself.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁴ Prepared in collaboration with cloud scientists of the Max Planck institute in Hamburg and assembled with the 3d modelling team at the Technical University Berlin, the photogrammetric technology used for geomapping solid structures like houses was pushed to its limits. The experiment was humbling, the difficulty of mapping weather - and showing that clouds to date remain impossible to be captured in their entirety.

The continuous loop of the film – and the flight path circling the cloud like a person might walk around a sculpture in space – also draws on the anti-narrative structure of early film and proto-filmic devices. The motion suggests observation but circular movement also implies futility and lack of progress – tropes frequently invoked in slapstick: circular motion abounds in the films, whose heroes run on the spot without getting anywhere.³⁹⁵ Indeed the idea for *Perpetual Tumble* emerged from viewing Buster Keaton falling on the spot of a moving stairway in *The Electric House*.³⁹⁶ *Shooting Clouds* is a less direct adaptation, but nonetheless taps into slapstick heritage, thinking through the relationship between efficiency, endurance and absurdity. The inexorable effort of the undertaking to capture and compute a real cloud and the disappointing aesthetics of the result create a friction. Modernity's omnipresent project to taxonomise and map the world is pushed to its limits.³⁹⁷



Shooting Clouds, Janina Lange, 2014-2015, HD video, colour, no sound, 00:05:12mins, film still.

³⁹⁵ For example, Buster is trapped in a milling wheel in *Steamboat Bill Jr.* or Fatty and Buster run on the spot in a car wash with a revolving floor.

³⁹⁶ See again Charlie running on the spot of an escalator in *The Floorwalker* (1916) trying to escape. The experience of working with a stuntman brought ethical questions to light. Unable to perform the stunt myself I had to ask someone else to put their physical well-being at risk, an experience I would not want to repeat.

³⁹⁷ The spatial dimension of the project – making a floating object earthbound - mirrors a key directional movement in silent comedy: the downward fall. In making the intangible tangible, the failures of current technology to grasp and capture a fleeting, complex natural phenomenon became apparent.



Shooting Clouds, 2018, Janina Lange, HD video, colour, no sound, generators, screens, projectors, photograph by Mona Casey and Tadas Stalyga, 2018.



Shooting Clouds: Cloud Cast, Janina Lange, 2015, bronze cast of 3d nylon print, 35x40x27cm, photograph by Gernot Seeliger, 2015.



Mithra & Toutatis, Janina Lange, 2016, heat welded pvc, helium, inkjet print, 60x45x59cm, photograph by Janina Lange, 2016.

ROIDS, 2016-17

Throughout the ROIDS and Colliders series I was working with objects that are elusive and cannot be accurately represented.³⁹⁸ Like the cloud, these objects resist capture even through seemingly powerful technological means. The term resistance, fittingly, is contained both in the English term 'object' and the German translation thereof- Gegenstand- which literally signifies 'against' and to 'stand'.

ROIDS is a sculpture series consisting of free floating inflatables, ranging in diameter between 40x50x45cm and 230x250x180cm. The transparent structures are heat welded out of Thermoplastic polyurethane and are based on 3d shape-models of asteroids that I obtained from NASA. The inflatable sculpture's behaviour is unruly and infused with anthropomorphism. Filled with a mixture of helium and air so that the inflatable floats in equilibrium, its path is determined by collisions with architectural elements, other artworks and people in the space. The inflatables defy curation and seem to have a will of their own. Once released they describe random orbits for indeterminable flight times. Almost human, they are tricky to photograph and

³⁹⁸ In Buster Keaton's dream sequence in *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) he elegantly jumps from the cinema auditorium into the screen and partakes in the action. Yet the translations of cinematic strategies of objects in this project are never smooth - objects get stuck half-way in transition or metamorphoses and remain incomplete.

search for possible escape routes. The idling, meandering, almost silent slow motion of the ROIDS eludes our rushed modes of consumption and ingestion. Their slowness even as they head towards a collision is quietly funny: we see a catastrophic crash coming but they carry on unperturbed.³⁹⁹ Even though I willed them to be independent, they are frustrating and a struggle to deal with, self-destructing at the first opportunity or being too lazy to fly.⁴⁰⁰



Roid 16 Psyche, Janina Lange, 2017, heat welded tpu, helium, air, 220 x180cm, photograph by Neta Cones, 2017.

³⁹⁹ Like Buster in the motorcycle scene of *Sherlock Jr.* (1924).

⁴⁰⁰ The joke is on me.



Colliders, Janina Lange, 2017, photoluminescent pigment, resin, dimensions variable, photograph by Janina Lange, 2017.

Colliders, 2017

Colliders (2017) are small-scale resin casts infused with photoluminescent pigments which skip and bounce into random positions. They are based on 3d shape models of asteroids at a ratio of 1: 5000,000, small enough to fit comfortably in the hand. They are thrown into the exhibition space on the opening night to bounce into untidy and chaotic constellations, turning the gallery floor into a sky. While sculpture has sometimes been accused of being what one stumbles over while trying to step back and look at a painting, asteroids could be seen as the unwanted clutter of outer space. They upset the celestial order - a vacuum believed empty and clean until the late eighteenth-century - by describing imperfect trajectories and tumbles amongst the Newtonian order of stars and planets in perpetual motion.⁴⁰¹ They are kin with slapstick's unruly bodies that constantly rebel, spin in unexpected directions and come crashing into other bodies. The

⁴⁰¹ Golia (2015), p. 13 ff.

papier-mâché boulders in Keaton's *Seven Chances* made me think especially about chance and prediction and fantasies of catastrophe and brought me to work with and research lightning.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰² He kicks a rock on top of a mountain slope and triggers an avalanche of boulders he must predict and evade their tumbles. This surreal scene in which a horde of objects - triggered by his own idle action, generates a chain reaction to chase him is emblematic of slapstick's take on the relationship between humans, objects and environment: nature can at all times treat us like a play thing.



Strike, Janina Lange, 2018, bronze cast of fulgurite, 18 karat gold, 240 x 1 x 1 cm, photograph by Tim Bowditch, 2018.

Strike, 2018

Intense heat of lightning striking the ground sinters the sand into fulgurites. For Strike I scanned and cast the internal shapes of the naturally formed glass tubes, which I bought on eBay. As well as objectifying an invisible, dispersed force - electricity - the object awaits its own destruction: made of bronze and plated with highly conductive gold the cast is installed in an upright position, ready to attract a second lightning strike.



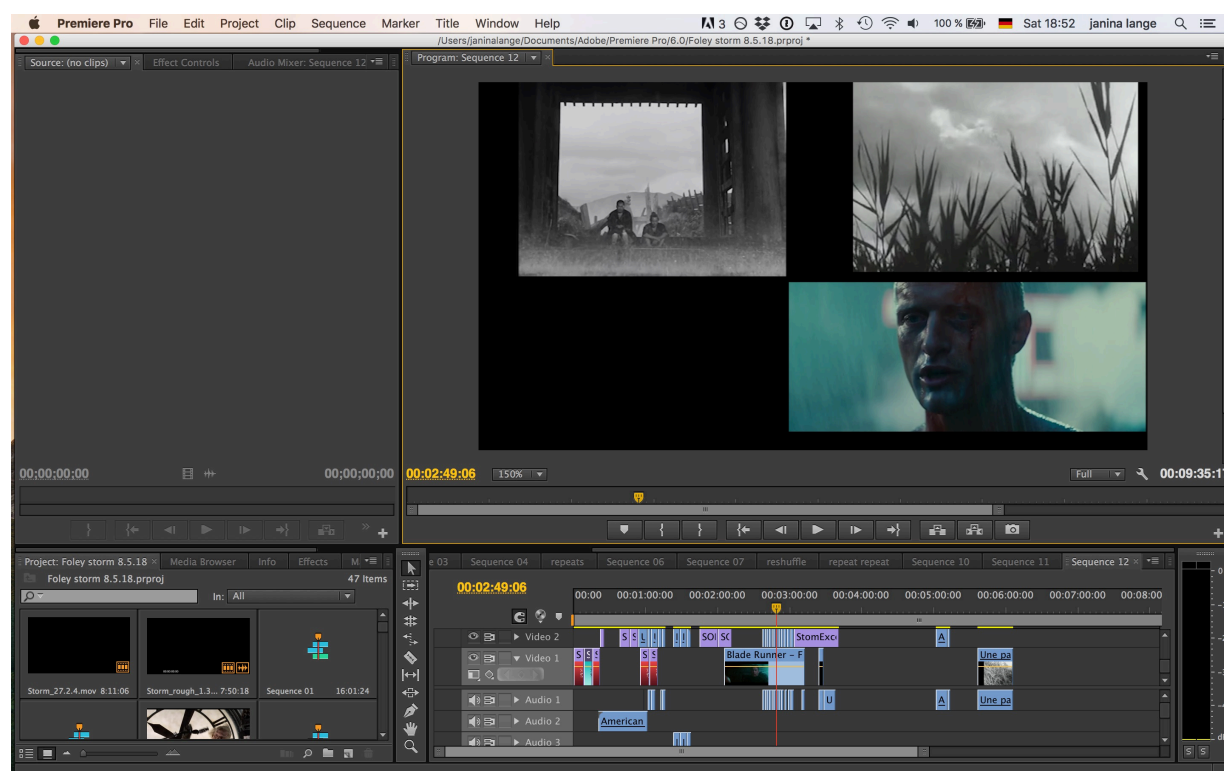
Eddy, Janina Lange, 2017, performance, duration 15 minutes, plastic bag, newspapers, umbrella, sheets, artificial flowers, letters, camouflage, cans, x-ray, performance by Paula Boram, photograph by Jacob Wolff, 2017.

Eddy (2017) and Storm Exercise (2018)

For Eddy (2017) and Storm Exercise (2018) I collaborated with several Foley artists. I asked Ruth and Paula – both Foley veterans - to generate noises of a storm for a performance.⁴⁰³ As a script (which we later abandoned) I edited storm scenes from over 40 different films together, including *The Goldrush*, *Mary Poppins*, *Steamboat Bill Jr.* and *The Wind*. The Foley artists provided a list of objects they needed based on the films: an umbrella, cardboard boxes, a slinky, a wooden fold-up chair, a fork, a plate, water bottles etc. Storm Exercise was more ambitious than the previous performances in bringing four Foley artists together, each working with multiple objects and layering the noises in real time. Gallery audiences were invited to watch but also listen with their eyes shut to amplify the rupture between what we see and hear: the fold-up chair shaken by Paula sounded like shutters flapping in the wind, a string of beads being raised and lowered mimicked rainfall. Following the performances the objects were left where they had been used. I was given permission to broadcast a recording of the storm noises on a weekly basis via the public-address speaker system of the Whitgift shopping mall in Croydon,

within which the gallery – Turf Projects – was located. The noises would fill the large mall and play, preceded by the standard announcement jingle, out of every active speaker in the mall, into shops like M&S, Flying Tiger, in corridors and the underground loading bays. The mall, that has a surface area of almost 120000 square metres, faces demolition. The noise of the storm, as it might be used in a film, foretells imminent destruction.

The work rests on a series of transformations: wind- an invisible element that manifests itself audibly only when it interacts with something physical, was made present in the gallery space through the handling of objects. Foley artists, whose sound work is part of the invisible (and least funded) apparatus of the film process, performed on a brightly lit stage and their actions and trade secrets were made visible. Despite this double demystification an illusion and projection could be achieved through the suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience, especially by closing their eyes.



Storm Exercise, Janina Lange, 2018, storm film sequences for Foley rehearsals in Premiere Pro, screen grab by Janina Lange, 2018.



Storm Exercise, Janina Lange, 2018, vhs tape, slinky, cardboard boxes, aquarium gravel, folding chair, glass, plastic water bottles, metal box, enamel plates, fork, performance by Ruth Sullivan, Bridget Whiting, Jack Baxter, Paula Boram, photograph by Tim Bowditch, 2018.



Storm Exercise, Janina Lange, 2018, Foley artist Ruth Sullivan, photograph by Tim Bowditch, 2018.



Storm Exercise, Janina Lange, 2018, vhs tape, slinky, cardboard boxes, aquarium gravel, folding chair, glass, plastic water bottles, metal box, enamel plates, fork, performance by Ruth Sullican, Bridget Whiting, Jack Baxter, Paula Boaram, photograph by Tim Bowditch, 2018.



Storm Exercise, Janina Lange, 2018, vibration speakers, recorder, dimensions variable, photograph by Tim Bowditch, 2018.

Word Count: 39217

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- Mabel, Fatty and the Law*, 1915. Directed by Roscoe Arbuckle. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Mabel's Busy Day*, 1914. Directed by Mark Sennett. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Mabel's Dramatic Career*, 1913. Directed by Mark Sennett. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Mabel's Married Life*, 1914. Directed by Mark Sennett. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Mabel's Strange Predicament*, 1914. Directed by Mabel Normand. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Mabel's Wilful Way*, 1915. Directed by Roscoe Arbuckle. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Mary Poppins*, 1964. Directed by Robert Stevenson. USA: Walt Disney Productions.
- Masquerader, The*, 1914. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Meaning of Life, The*, 1983. Directed by Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam. UK: Celandine Films, The Monty Python Partnership and Universal Pictures.
- Mechanical Man, The*, 1921. Directed by André Deed. Italy: Milano Film.
- Metropolis*, 1927. Directed by Fritz Lang. Germany: Universum Film.
- Mickey*, 1918. Directed by F. Richard Jones and James Young. USA: Mabel Normand Feature Film Company.
- Milling the Militants*, 1913. Directed by Percy Stow. UK: Clarendon.
- Mister Smith fait l'ouverture*, 1914. Directed by Jean Durand. France: Gaumont.
- Modern Times*, 1936. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: Charles Chaplin Productions.
- Mr. Flip*, 1909. Directed by Gilbert M. Anderson. USA: The Essanay Film Manufacturing Company.
- My Wife's Relations*, 1922. Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. USA: First National Pictures.
- Navigator, The*, 1924. Directed by Donald Crisp and Buster Keaton. USA: Buster Keaton Productions.
- Neighbors*, 1920. Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. USA: Joseph M. Schenck Productions.
- Night in the Show, A*, 1915. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: The Essanay Film Manufacturing Company.
- One A.M.* 1916. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: Lone Star Corporation.
- One Week*, 1920. Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. USA: Joseph M. Schenck Productions.

- Onwillige dienstmeisje, Het*, 1912. Director unknown. France: Lux.
- Our Hospitality*, 1923. Directed by Buster Keaton and Jack Blystone. USA: Joseph M. Schenck Productions.
- Palais des mille et une nuits*, 1905. Directed by Georges Méliès. France: Star-Film.
- Patouillard a mange du homard*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Lux.
- Patouillard a une femme jalouse*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Lux.
- Patouillard a une femme qui veut suivre la mode*, 1912. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Lux.
- Patouillard amoureux*, 1911. Directed by Emile Cohl. France: Pathé Frères.
- Patouillard fait du Sandow*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Lux.
- Patouillard ordonnance par amour*, 1911. Director unknown. France: Lux.
- Patouiller paie ses dettes*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Lux.
- Pawnshop, The*, 1916. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: Lone Star Corporation.
- Pétronille gagne le grand steeple*, 1912. Directed by Roméo Bosetti and Georges Rémond. France: Eclair.
- Pilgrim, The*, 1923. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: Charles Chaplin Productions.
- Playhouse, The*, 1921. Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. USA: Joseph M. Schenck Productions.
- Polizia moderna*, 1912. Director unknown. Italy: Cines.
- Pride of the Clan, The*, 1917. Directed by Maurice Tourneur. USA: Mary Pickford Company.
- Puppe, Die*, 1919. Directed by Ernst Lubitsch. Germany: Projektions-AG Union.
- Ravalement précipité, Un*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères.
- Rosalie a la maladie du sommeil*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères.
- Rosalie en ménage*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères - Comica.
- Rosalie et Léontine vont au théâtre*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères.
- Rosalie et ses meubles fidèles*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères - Comica.
- Rosalie et son phonographe*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères.
- Rosalie n'a pas le choléra*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères - Comica.
- Rosalie verhuist*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères.
- Rounders, The*, 1914. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Scarecrow, The*, 1920. Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. USA: Joseph M. Schenck Productions.
- Seven Chances*, 1925. Directed by Buster Keaton. USA: Buster Keaton Productions.
- Sherlock Jr.* 1924, Directed by Buster Keaton. USA: Buster Keaton Productions.
- Shoulder Arms*, 1918. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: Charles Chaplin Productions.
- Should Married Men Go Home?* 1928. Directed by J. Wesley Horne and James Parrott. USA: Hal Roach Studios.

- Singe de Pétronille, Le*, 1913. Directed by Roméo Bosetti and Georges Rémond. France: Eclair.
- Sprengbagger 1010*, 1929. Directed by Carl Ludwig Achaz-Duisberg. Germany: Terra-Filmkunst.
- Star Boarder, The*, 1914. Directed by George Nichols. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Steamboat Bill, Jr.* 1928. Directed by Charles F. Reisner. USA: Buster Keaton Productions, Joseph M. Schenck Productions.
- Suffragette, Die*, 1913. Directed by Urban Gaad. Germany: Projektions-AG Union.
- Sunnyside*, 1919. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: First National Pictures.
- Tess of the Storm Country*, 1922. Directed by John S. Robertson. USA: Mary Pickford Company.
- That Little Band of Gold*, 1915. Roscoe Arbuckle. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- That's My Wife*, 1929. Directed by Lloyd French. USA: Hal Roach Studios.
- Thelma & Louise*, 1991. Directed by Ridley Scott. USA, UK, France: Pathé Entertainment.
- Three Ages*, 1923. Directed by Buster Keaton and Eddie Cline. USA: Buster Keaton Productions.
- Tillie's Punctured Romance*, 1914. Directed by Mack Sennett. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Tilly and the Fire Engines*, 1911. Directed by Lewin Fitzhamon. UK: Hepworth.
- Tilly in a Boarding House*, 1911. Directed by Hay Plumb. UK: Hepworth.
- Tontolini e le due vecchie zitelle*, 1911. Directed by Ferdinand Guillaume [?]. Italy: Cines.
- Top 150 Funniest Fails in GTA 5*, 2017. Directed by Red Arcade. Norway: YouTube
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0kvxFEE2H0c>)
- Torchon brûle, Le*, 1911. Directed by Roméo Bosetti. France: Pathé Frères - Comica.
- Tragedia di Kri Kri, La*, 1913. Director unknown. Italy: Cines.
- True Heart Susie*, 1919. Directed by D. W. Griffith. USA: David W. Griffith Corporation.
- Two Tars*, 1928. Directed by James Parrott. USA: Hal Roach Studios.
- Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*, 1902. Directed by Edwin S. Porter. USA: Edison Manufacturing Company.
- Unknown Chaplin*, 1983. Written and Produced by Kevin Brownlow and David Gill. UK: Thames Television.
- Vagabond, The*, 1916. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: Lone Star Corporation.
- Ventilateur breveté*, 1911. Director unknown. France: Pathé Frères - Comica.
- Way Down East*, 1920. Directed by D. W. Griffith. USA: D. W. Griffith Productions.
- Wind, The*, (1928) Directed by Victor Sjöström. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer.
- Wished on Mabel*, 1915. Roscoe Arbuckle. USA: Keystone Film Company.
- Woman, A*, 1915. Directed by Charles Chaplin. USA: The Essanay Film Manufacturing Company.

Databases & Collections

Early Film Websites

Eye Film. Last accessed September 9, 2018.

<https://www.eyefilm.nl>

Filmporta. Last accessed July 24, 2018.

<https://Filmportal.de>

BFI Collections Search. Last accessed September 4, 2018.

<http://collections-search.bfi.org.uk/web>

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<http://www.domitor.org>

Giornate del Cinema Muto. Last accessed October 14, 2016.

http://www.cinetecadelfriuli.org/gcm/ed_precedenti/screenings_db.html

American Feature Film Archive. Last accessed October 13, 2016.

<http://www.afi.com/members/catalog/default.aspx?s=1>

The Bioscope Last accessed May 15, 2018.

<http://thebioscope.net>

Women in Film Websites

Women Film Pioneers Project. Last accessed August 24, 2018.

<https://wfpp.cdrc.columbia.edu>

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<http://birds-eye-view.co.uk/film-festival/past-programmes/>

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<https://womensfilmandtelevisionhistory.wordpress.com>

Women & Film History. Last accessed February 11, 2018.

<http://www.wfhi.org>

Women and Silent British Cinema. Last accessed August 12, 2018.

<https://womenandsilentbritishcinema.wordpress.com/the-women/>

Image Archives

National Fairground Digital Archives. Last accessed October 11, 2016.

<http://cdm15847.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15847coll3>

DLR. Last accessed August 24, 2018.

<http://www.dlr.de/media/desktopdefault.aspx/tabid-4986/>

Mary Evans Picture Library, Last accessed July 24, 2018.

<http://www.maryevans.com>

Conferences, Symposia and Public Events

Under Her Eye: Women + Climate Change, British Library, London, 2018.

IFFR: 47th International Film Festival, Rotterdam, 2018.

Stummfilm um Mitternacht, Babylon, Berlin 2017.

Green Screens and Film Colour (convened by Janina Lange), cross school group, Royal College of Art, 2017.

Techne Student Congress: Platforms and Interfaces, London, 2017.

Resistance Seminar, (presentation of paper: 'Administering Embraces Mathematically and Masquerading as Mechanical Dolls', Janina Lange), convened by Aura Satz and Yve Lomax, Royal College of Art, London, 2017

'Hello World!', (student led event convened by Janina Lange and Anna Adahl), Royal College of Art, London, 2017.

Techne Student (Un)conference: Kinesis and Stasis, (Janina Lange performance with Pepa Ubera), Barbican, London, 2016.

Inhuman Symposium, Fridericianum, Kassel, 2016.

Il Cinema Ritrovato, Bologna, 2016.

Techne Student Congress: The Sound of Research. Selsdon Park Hotel, Croydon, 2016.

The Colour Fantastic: Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema. Conference, EYE Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, 2015.

Radical Philosophy Conference, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2015.

Il Cinema Ritrovato, Bologna, 2014.

Permanent Collections and resources

Babelsberg Film Studios, Potsdam, Germany.

BFI National Film Archives, London, UK.

BFI Mediateque, London, UK.

BFI Reuben Library, London, UK.

The British Library, London, UK.

British Library Newspaper Archives, London, UK.

The British Museum, London, UK.

Colour Reference Library Royal College of Art Special Collections, London, UK.

Danish Film Insitute, Copenhagen, Denmark.

Deutsche Kinemathek, Berlin, Germany.

Deutsche Luft-und Raumfahrt Aerospace Center, Berlin, Germany.

Eye Film Institute, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Eye Library, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

Fridericianum, Kassel, Germany.

Fondazione Cineteca di Bologna, Bologna, Italy.

Harvard Film Archive, Cambridge, USA.

Henry Moore Foundation, Leeds, UK.

Haghefilm Digitaal, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

The Hepworth Wakefield, UK.

Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden.

Museum Ludwig, Cologne, Germany.

Museion, Bolzano, Italy.

The National Fairground Archive, Sheffield, UK.

Royal College of Art, London, UK.

Staatsbibliothek, Berlin, Germany.

Sculpture Research Library Henry Moore Foundation, Leeds, UK.

Tate Liverpool, UK.

Tate London, UK.

Exhibition Catalogues

Carolina Museum of Art, *Defying Gravity: Contemporary Art and Flight*. Raleigh, USA, 2003.

Documenta 13, *The Book of Books*. Kassel, Germany, 2012.

Generali Foundation. *Animismus: Moderne hinter den Spiegeln*. Vienna, Austria, 2011.

La Biennale di Venezia, *All the World's Futures*. Venice, Italy, 2015.

Manifesta, *Manifesta 9: The Deep of the Modern: a Subcyclopaedia*. Genk, Belgium, 2012.

Matt's Gallery. *Hayley Newman: Performancemania*. London, UK, 2001.

Museum Ludwig. *Here and Now: Home Visit*. Cologne, Germany, 2016.

Museum Ludwig. *Haegue Yang: ETA*. Cologne, Germany, 2018.

Museum Ludwig. *Rosemarie Trockel: Post-Menopause*. Cologne, 2005.

Royal College of Art. *Everything Is Sculpture: Immaterial Constructions/Material Realities*. London, UK, 2018.

Tate Liverpool, *Sarah Lucas*. Liverpool, UK, 2005.

Tenderpixel. *Patten: 3049*. London, UK, 2018.

The Design Museum. *California: Designing Freedom*. London, UK, 2017.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Like Life: Sculpture, Colour and the Body*. New York, USA, 2018.

The Curve, Barbican Centre. *Roman Signer: Slow Movement*. London, UK, 2015.

The Dyson Gallery. *SightUnseen*. London, UK, 2017.

Van Abbemuseum, Maria Eichhorn: Aktiengesellschaft. Eindhoven, Netherlands, 2007.

Verein zur Förderung von Kunst und Kultur am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz e.V. *Olga Lewicka: Cloudicity*. Berlin, Germany, 2016.

Verein zur Förderung von Kunst und Kultur am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz e.V. *Tegel: Speculations and Propositions*. Berlin, Germany, 2013.

White Cube, *Christian Marclay: The Clock*. London, UK, 2010.

Whitney Museum of American Art, *Whitney Biennial*. New York, USA, 2014.

Exhibitions

Alicja Kwade: PHASE. König Galerie, Berlin, 2017.

Awst & Walther: Be Water. Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin, 2017.

Camille Henrot: 9th Berlin Biennale. KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, 2016.

Catherine Story: Shadow. PEER, London, UK, 2017

Cy Twombly in Dialogue with Franz West. Museum Brandhorst, Munich, 2015.

Documenta 14. Curated by Adam Szymczyk. Kassel, 2017.

Ed Atkins: RIBBONS. Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, 2014.

Eddie Peake: The Forever Loop. The Curve, Barbican Centre, London, 2015.

Haegue Yang: ETA. Museum Ludwig, Cologne, 2018.

Here and Now: Home Visit. Museum Ludwig, Cologne. 2018.

Hito Steyerl: HellYeahWeFuckDie. Skulptur Projekte Münster, 2017.

InHuman. Curated by Susanne Pfeffer. Fridericianum, Kassel, 2015.

Jean Desmet's Dream Factory: The Adventurous Years of Film (1907-1916). EYE Filmmuseum, Amsterdam, 2014.

Julia Frank & Jacob Wolff: Golden Lane, Art Lacuna. London, UK, 2017.

Jumana Manna: A magical substance flows into me. Chisenhale Gallery, London, UK, 2015.

Lydia Ourahmane: The you in us. Chisenhale Gallery, London, UK, 2018.

Magali Reus: As Mist. South London Gallery, 2016.

Maria Lassnig. Tate Liverpool, Liverpool, 2016.

Martin Kippenberger & Maria Lassnig: Body Check, Museion, Bolzano, 2018.

Michael Dean: Sic Glyphs, South London Gallery, 2016.

Mona Hatoum. Tate Modern, London, 2016.

Monica Bonvicini & Sterling Ruby. Kunsthalle Mainz, 2013.

Playing by Heart. Curated by Stefan Kraus, Ulrike Surmann, Marc Steinmann, Barbara von Flüe. Kolumba, Cologne, 2015.

Pamela Rosenkranz: Our Product. Pavilion of Switzerland, 56th International Art Exhibition, Venice, 2015.

Seecum Cheung: The Dutch Window. Grand Union, Birmingham, 2017.

Slip of the Tongue. Curated by Danh Vo. Punta della Dogana, Venice, 2015.

Roman Signer: Slow Movement. The Curve, Barbican Centre, London, 2015.

As an Exhibitor

Alt_CPH 18 – Overexisting. Factory of Art and Design, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2018.

Silent Stage. Curated by Mona Casey and Tadas Stalyga, Yaga Gathering, Lithuania, 2018.

1+1=3. Curated by Elisa Barison and Davide Bevilacqua, Museion, Bolzano, Italy, 2018.

Low Batt. Turf Projects, Croydon, UK, 2018.

Low Batt, performance. Turf Projects, Croydon, UK, 2018.

The Ultimate Kudamm Tour. Walkative convened by Jaspar Joseph Lester, Berlin, Germany, 2018.

Transmission. Minshar Gallery, Tel-Aviv, Israel, 2017.

SightUnseen, Curated by Christina Mamakos, Dyson Gallery, London, UK, 2017.

Alpha Isis Eden: Listening Event, performance. Invited by Laura Oldfield-Ford, Showroom, London, UK, 2017.

Bloomberg New Contemporaries, ICA, London, UK, 2016.

Oh Super(hu/wo)man. Curated by Gabriella Acha, Green Ray, London, UK, 2016.

Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the face. Curated by Simon Elson and Christian Ganzenberger, Klemm's Galerie, Berlin, Germany, 2016.

I'm Every Woman. KH7, Aarhus, Denmark, 2016.

Moving Past Present: Digitally Reanimating the Gaiety Girls. PLAY Arts & Humanities Festival in cooperation with the Ego Media project, King's College, London, UK, 2016.

Research Wip. Royal College of Art, London, 2016.

New Work. GAP, Glurns, Italy, 2016.

Bloomberg New Contemporaries. Bluecoat, Liverpool, UK, 2016.

Wolken/Clouds. Curated by Simon Elson & Christian Ganzenberg, Arnoldi-Livie, Munich, Germany, 2016.

Über die Unmöglichkeit des Seins. Curated by Hannah Beck-Mannaghetta & Lena Fliessbach, Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Austria, 2016.

Movement Archive. Techne Un-conference, Barbican Conservatory Terrace, London, UK, 2015.

Why Would I Lie? Dyson Gallery, London, UK, 2015.

Shooting Clouds. Curated by Leonie Radine, Heit-Gallery, Berlin, Germany, (09-10/14).

Artists residencies

CW+ Chelsea Westminster Hospital, Imaging Department, Artist in Residency, London, UK, 2016-2017.

GAP 'Studio Artist in Residence', South Tyrol, Italy 2016.