Introduction

The Comedy of Self-Reference

FOR MANY YEARS, I HAVE BEEN interested in the intelligence of slapstick comedy. For a mode of performance and filmmaking whose predicates are idiocy and failure, many slapstick comedies have a surprising ability to turn themselves inward and think—dumb movements suddenly shouldered with a philosophical cast. So much comedy involves the attempt to solve a physical problem that suddenly takes on psychological, and sometimes metaphysical, consequences: What's the best way to jump off this moving train? How do we get a piano up this flight of stairs? Can one put together a Sears home without instructions?[1] At times, this metaphysical impulse reaches toward the medium in which it is voiced. It is difficult not to be impressed by the way in which Buster Keaton rides the cow catcher of an antique train, for instance, but it can be stupefying to see that the track and its train stand as a metaphor for the cinema itself, photograph after photograph pulled across the sprockets of the projector like coal cars over railroad ties.

In the case of Keaton's *The General* (1927), this self-reference is elegant metaphor, but a remarkable number of comedies turn the camera more literally upon the technologies and the ontology of the cinema. Keaton's own *Sherlock Jr.* (1924), for instance, tells the story of a projectionist who falls asleep before his machine. It includes an extended meditation about the viewer's relationship to the plane of the film screen and about the fact that the film image is projected before its viewers as a necessary condition of its illusion. Several decades later, Jerry Lewis's *The Ladies Man* (1961), a movie that is in part about the making of television, is not only concerned with the temporality of narrative cinema (the relationship between the recorded and the live image, say) and the means by

which such images are produced, but the ways in which space, time, and characterization may be utilized to create new kinds of formal coherence. These are just a few examples of a distinctly comic form of self-reference that traverses studios, directors, and stars and that involves, in its various manifestations, investigations of the technologies of the cinema itself; of the particular narrativity of the studio-era film; of the place, nature, and transformation of the human body onscreen; of the stylistic conventions and industrial processes behind the production of the Hollywood cinema; and of the nature and effects of its photographic basis.

Although his work appears only intermittently in what follows, my interest in this subject and much of the method of this book derive from the writing of the late Stanley Cavell. Late in *The World Viewed*, in a chapter about the ways in which the cinema might be said to exhibit itself and about the relation between this exhibition and the condition of modernism, Cavell pursues a series of examples of self-reference: Cary Grant stepping out of role, in *His Girl Friday* (1940), to refer to Ralph Bellamy by name; the *mise-en-abyme* structure of Ole Olsen and Chic Johnson's *Hellzapoppin'* (1941); Buster Keaton's magnificent step into montage in *Sherlock Jr.*[2] The issue of self-reference also lies at the beating heart of Cavell's later books on film, as in his claim that the blanket that both separates and conjoins Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in their motor cabin in *It Happened One Night* (1934) can be understood as a figure for the film screen, or that Gable's character acts as a kind of director.[3] This blanket, Gable acting as a director of Colbert's "star," the photos that mark the end of *The Philadelphia Story* (1940)—for Cavell, these images suggest that "film exists in a state of philosophy," that it "is inherently self-reflexive, takes itself as an inevitable part of its craving for speculation."[4]

When I first encountered it, the idea that the action of self-reference took a particular generic and affective form in Hollywood made muddy the picture of studio-era cinema with which I was most familiar. Was there a distinct sort of self-reference, almost a modernist spirit, present in the products of the Hollywood studio system? What did this self-reference suggest for the ways in which we might interpret these films? Was there was something about the form and address of studio-era cinema that gave it a particular relation to the comic? At the end of the passage on self-reference in *The World Viewed*, Cavell gives his observation a final turn, tying it to his larger project of situating the cinema within the history and experience of skepticism: "This comedy of self-reference satirizes the effort to escape the self by viewing it, the thought that there is a position from which to rest assured once and for all of the truth of your views."[5] Were these films really capable of giving voice to the metaphysical?

The Slapstick Camera is an attempt to articulate this voice by directing some of Cavell's procedures and insights into the cinema toward a series of films to which he never dedicated sustained attention but which do very much give voice to the metaphysical. One of the book's central commitments is to Cavell's sense that there is properly no theory without first acts of aesthetic judgment, or, to use an old-fashioned word, criticism. As he says in *Pursuits of Happiness*, "If we are to find a way to speak of [the] conditions of viewing film as transcendental, we must equally find a way to speak of them as empirical, for certainly they are only to be discovered empirically, or rather discovered in what I call acts of criticism."[6] Here, the idea of the transcendental stands in for the ambitions of theory, the desire to move between the particular and the general. Although it may only matter to Cavell's most devoted readers, the distinction between theory and criticism maps onto the distinction between criteria and judgment that he makes in his work on Wittgenstein, where the underlying structure of ordinary language is understood as existing within, and not antecedent to, its intelligible use. In the realm of aesthetics, then, the word *theory* signifies the articulation of what Cavell calls the "possibilities" of an artistic medium, where these possibilities exist within or through acts of criticism and not as the ground from which criticism is undertaken. The intelligibility of any theory, in this sense, actually rests upon the agreement produced by individual acts of criticism. This book attempts to follow this insight by attempting to let individual acts of criticism tell us something about the films under aesthetic consideration.

Each of the films at issue in this book displays and articulates an interest in its medium, from the transitional feature *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (Sennett, 1914) and its concern about the nature of early film narrative to the Marx Brothers' *Monkey Business* (McLeod, 1931) and its account of Hollywood film sound to Jerry Lewis's *The Patsy* (1964) and its little excursus on the end of the Hollywood star system. Unlike the films that Cavell takes up in *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, however, these comedies do not constitute the members of a genre or subgenre. Producers and audiences did not place these films into a distinct category nor did these filmmakers or performers understand themselves as working within a distinct generic tradition (as they did with, say, the "war musical"). It also seems dubious to think of them as a genre that has become visible in retrospect, like *film noir* or Cavell's own "comedies of remarriage." It is perhaps more accurate to call slapstick comedy a *mode* of performance and filmmaking into which all sorts of genres may slip: just as a single scene in *The Winter's Tale* might be called "pastoral," a single scene (even an isolated moment of

performance) in *Bringing Up Baby* might be understood as "slapstick."[7] To be sure, for a period of time, the slapstick comedy was a genre, that is to say, a film comedy that was characterized, from beginning to end, by the tone and manner of slapstick, but producers tended simply to call these films "comedies" and let reviewers employ the descriptors "slapstick" and "knockabout" as (usually pejorative) modal terms.

Instead of serving as members of a coherent generic family, then, the comedies in this book are united by their use of a device that is recurrent within slapstick comedy considered as both genre and mode—the staging and acknowledgment of the medium itself. I call this a device and not a type of gag insofar as it can license, in cases such as *Sherlock Jr.* and *The Cameraman* (1928), the entire plot of a feature-length film, but—as most of the other examples within this book suggest—is more commonly employed to structure individual gags, like Harpo's lip-sync turn as Maurice Chevalier in *Monkey Business*, or single sequences, such as the film-within-a-film of *Tillie's Punctured Romance*. More fascinatingly, this device is not always used for the production of humor, as is the case at the conclusion of Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931). Using what is undoubtedly an unfunny term, then, I follow Cavell and call this device the comedy of self-reference, both in order to give the phenomenon a name and to distinguish it from the concept of self-reflexivity, toward which it bears some resemblance (even, in small measure, a history) but which is a mostly unproductive way of thinking about film comedies that were produced for mass audiences.

Where did slapstick comedy get its brain? Although the device of self-reference originated in part from the stage traditions from which film comedians drew, the specific formal problems that these performers faced as they sought to transpose their acts from stage to screen further help to explain the presence and nature of this self-reference and its interest in the medium of film. The self-reference of some slapstick comedy was the result of a combination of preexisting generic norms (e.g., audience address in the vaudeville act; an expectation of travesty) *and* practical problems involved in producing successful gags for the screen. Almost of necessity, many film comedians had to work on creative problems that were more like those of engineering than like those of the established arts, a fact that is visible in what Hilde D'Haeyere has called Keystone's "meta-movies," films such as *Mabel's Dramatic Career* (1913), which was shot within the actual Keystone facilities replete with its own sets, cameras, and craftspeople.[8] The adaptation of a literary or stage work to the cinema—as in, say, D. W. Griffith's adaptation of the stage play *The Two Orphans* as *Orphans of the Storm* (1921)—may have called for an understanding of how certain effects might be translated

to the silent screen, an understanding of what might be added to or subtracted from the action of the original play, and so forth, but to produce the montage sequence in *Sherlock Jr.*, Keaton actually called in a team of surveyors who plotted his movements down to the "fraction of an inch."[9] Like much classical film theory, then, these comedies ask, what can the cinema *do*?

Of course, the work of a filmmaker like Cecil DeMille also involved such an interest, even similar problems of engineering (e.g., the production of the set for *The Ten Commandments* [1923], with its seventy-foot cranes, its massing and ordering of figures on this stage), but in DeMille's case this interest worked in service of the maintenance of a different mode of audience address, one that relied more fully upon the maintenance of a coherent story world, however much it was also interested in breaking with that story to give space to spectacle. Unlike the melodrama, slapstick in its purest instances is always and everywhere an environment of distance, a fact that aligns it with the domains of film theory and philosophy of film. If *The Ten Commandments* depicts melodramatic turns of fate as if realistically, the comedies under consideration do not depict accidents, per se, as much as they depict *images of* accidents. The irony and audience address of slapstick comedy often focalizes, or makes visible, the problems of its production. These problems may remain hidden (i.e., Keaton doesn't stop *Sherlock Jr.* to say how he produces a given trick), but the problems are frequently displayed *as* problems. In other words, the presence of the gag is always in a sense also about the staging of the gag. As Kenneth Burke once wrote, "The comic frame should enable people to be observers of themselves."[10] Slapstick comedy takes place at this level of remove, the position of ironic awareness or intelligence, the sense that what is before us is everywhere a performance.

As it turns out, the idea that these comedies somehow refer to and reflect upon the cinema itself is an old one. For many early film theorists, slapstick was not a marginal case but rather a privileged site for the articulation of the specificity of the cinema. A remarkable number of early theorists prized the slapstick comedy for its utilization of techniques, motifs, and possibilities that were understood as unique to the cinema or as harbingers of more sophisticated, medium-specific future practices. Simultaneously "primitive" and wholly "new," a form that was connected to the deep history of the theater but was also exemplary of new practices and new aesthetics, slapstick film comedy served to place the cinema within and beyond various histories of the arts. In this sense, the slapstick comedy allowed these writers to conceptualize what they understood to be distinct about the cinema in historical terms, with slapstick functioning both as a placeholder for the patrimony of folk history

(a link to the past) and as a kind of spur toward the future practice of a modernist mass culture (an image of the future).

As early as *Visible Man* (1924), for instance, the critic Béla Balázs wrote of Chaplin that his "difficult but victorious struggle with practical objects is rooted in a grotesque and mocking indignation about our tool-based civilization and its estrangement from nature." Chaplin's relationship to these objects represented, for Balázs, "a childlike humanity," one that gave Chaplin "a view of the world that becomes poetic in films. This is the poetry of ordinary life, the inarticulate life of ordinary things," a life "which only children and tramps with time on their hands care to linger over."[11] Balázs's lyricism is not unusual in the European reception of Chaplin, but what is less familiar is the suggestion that Chaplin, even slapstick comedy itself, might articulate something about the cinema's specificity. "It is precisely this lingering process," he continues, "that yields the richest film poetry."[12] Like many other writers of the era, Balázs used the figure of Chaplin to place the cinema within the rhetoric of medium-specificity, a rhetoric that worked to justify the cinema's inclusion within the broader realm of the arts but also to articulate Balázs's unique project of "an inspiring theory that will fire the imagination of future seekers for new worlds and creators of new arts."[13]

Visible Man is by some accounts the inaugural instance of film theory, but almost a decade earlier, Hugo Munsterberg had employed the figure of slapstick to recount his own history of the medium. Writing in William Randolph Hearst's *The Cosmopolitan*, he used comedy as a kind of hinge between the explication of a form that he believed to be specific to the cinema and the suitability of this form for what he called "an artistic plot," a higher form of cinema that would fully realize the medium's potential. Notably for the future history of slapstick comedy, the form in question is something like the cinema's ability to join together disparate spaces. "The moving pictures," Munsterberg wrote, "allow a rapidity in the change of scenes which no stage manager could imitate":

> At first, these possibilities were used only for humorous effects. We enjoyed the lightening quickness with which we could follow the eloper over the roofs of the town, up-stairs and down, into cellar and attic, and jump with him into the motor-car and race over the country roads, changing the background a score of times in a few minutes, until the culprit falls over a bridge into the water and is caught by the police. This slap-stick humor has not disappeared, but the rapid change of scenes has meanwhile been put into the service of much higher aims. The true development of an artistic plot

> has been brought to possibilities which the real drama does
> not know by allowing the eye to follow the hero and heroine
> continuously from place to place.[14]

Munsterberg employed an imaginary "slap-stick" chase film to describe what would later be called continuity (alongside a normative claim that this continuity should be used in service of character-driven narrative) but in order to make this point, he had to acknowledge the apparent *incoherence* of slapstick continuity, an incoherence he attributes to its speed, or what he calls its "lightening quickness" and "rapid change of scenes." In Munsterberg's account, the humor of this movie derives from its ability to make visible one way in which the technology itself works. This rhetorical move aligns Munsterberg's account with the sense in which the early cinema participated in what the historian Neil Harris called the "operational aesthetic," a style or mode of presentation that encouraged "a delight in observing process," highlighted the ways in which a technology might be seen to function, and taught its spectators to "absorb knowledge."[15] In short, "slap-stick humor" serves here to explicate possibilities or effects that are specific to the medium.

Munsterberg's interest in "slap-stick" is particularly early, but the sense in which the physical comedy is of heuristic value in accounting for the specificity of the cinema, and the stronger claim that these comedies are something like purer instances of cinema, would become common to theorists and filmmakers as geographically and temporally diverse as René Clair, Lev Kuleshov, Rudolf Arnheim, Walter Benjamin, André Bazin, and Sigfried Kracauer. For decades after in the domain of film theory, the slapstick comedy worked as shorthand for a style and form that was uniquely cinematic, hence Clair's sense that "the film comedy is the type of film in which the cinema has best succeeded in being itself," or Kracauer's early privileging of the slapstick comedy because of its utilization of one "characteristic of camera reality," the "fortuitous," a motif that he believed was assigned "a major role . . . in a truly cinematic genre, the American silent film comedy."[16]

By the time that Bazin composed "Theater and Cinema" in 1951, the idea that the slapstick comedy was somehow distinctly cinematic was so entrenched in his readers' minds that he used this idea to provocatively stage his claim that the specificity of the cinema might be located not in styles and forms that possess *no* theatrical origins but in those that productively develop to "maturity" ideas that originated on the stage:

> Certain dramatic situations, certain techniques that had degen-
> erated in the course of time, found again, in the cinema, first

the sociological nourishment they needed to survive and, still better, the conditions favorable to an expansive use of their aesthetic, which the theater had kept congenitally atrophied. In making a protagonist out of space, the screen does not betray the spirit of farce, it simply gives to the metaphysical meaning of Scarpin's stick its true dimensions, namely those of the whole universe. . . . [T]he grafting together of cinema and comedy-theater happened spontaneously and has been so perfect that its fruit has always been accepted as the product of pure cinema.[17]

For Bazin, slapstick comedy did not simply utilize the capacity of the cinema to reproduce or re-present the spaces of the physical world (in "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," his example of this action is Chaplin stuck in a lion's cage in *The Circus* [1928]) but uses this capacity in order to extend "the spirit of farce" into the realm of the metaphysical, Scarpin's stick of the *commedia dell'arte* metastasizing into the objects of the world itself.

This sort of ontological inquiry more or less disappeared with the institutionalization of cinema studies in the 1960s and 70s. Critical theory inserted a new sort of distance between itself and its object, one that moved away from questions of practice and progress. In distinction to its privileged place in classical film theory, slapstick comedy all but disappears from these later texts. There are several reasons for this, but paramount among them is the turn away from questions concerning the progress of the medium. Many classical film theorists were exercised by formal and ontological questions such as, "How does the cinema make meaning?" and "What separates the cinema from the other arts?" The first question necessitated strict attention to individual texts with an eye toward guiding future practice, and the second was concerned with movement within and between the arts. Slapstick was an interesting case for both forms of inquiry: its irony and formalism made vivid the sorts of questions faced by filmmakers as they produced new works that drew upon the resources and possibilities of the medium. More obviously, slapstick texts are, in an important sense, superficial: their meaning would appear to reside almost entirely upon their surfaces; their pleasures seem to derive primarily from their form. This makes them difficult—although certainly not impossible—to read symptomatically. They rather actively resist the assignation of depth and surface out of which psychoanalytic, feminist, semiotic, and Marxist forms of film theory and criticism are formed. Shot through with formal and ideological ambivalence, it is difficult to turn them into "good" or "bad" objects.

This meant that, in the decades that followed, slapstick comedy fell between the fence posts of a more rigorous historical poetics, including accounts of the so-called classical film, on the one hand, and a series of genres that were put forth as exceptions to this classical film, on the other. Thus, in their groundbreaking *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson bracketed the distinct formal qualities of the physical comedy (alongside those of the musical) by declaring that they were explicable as the result of "generic motivation," while at the same time the genre failed to merit inclusion in the "body genres" that Linda Williams opened up for serious study in her influential 1991 essay.[18] The physical comedy's exclusion from the concerns of Bordwell, Thompson, and Stagier is a result of peculiarities in both its formal structure and its unique early production history, which was distinct from that of the emerging dramatic film and which did not share its drive toward narrative coherence that would allow for the industrial organization of Hollywood. Its exclusion from Williams's body genres, on the other hand, was the result not of a spectacle-driven indifference to narrative but to a particular spectatorial position. The genres in which Williams was most interested involve sympathy on the part of the spectator: she cries with the jilted lover of the "weepie," she screams with the victim of the horror film, she reaches orgasm with the porn star. Slapstick comedy involves no such mimicry; its interest is in the ironic distance between viewer and actor, and more broadly, between ideal and reality.

Scholarship that has sought to connect the creation and development of the cinema to the broader environment of industrial modernity has shifted this interest in formal and ideological unity and stressed instead the multiple and contradictory qualities of popular cinema. Studies of spectatorship have worked against the implication that the popular cinema created uniform reception practices, and these accounts documented the ways in which spectators of the popular cinema shaped its products to their own ends, creating sites for the formation of counterpublics and alternate ways of seeing. Much of this work has recognized that the physical comedy, which was birthed in the early, demotic days of the cinema before the formation of the studio system, has traditionally been home to both nonstandardized production processes and the expression of ideological difference. This scholarship has argued that the physical comedy was uniquely capable of reflecting certain features of industrial modernity, like the creation of new patterns of visual and auditory attention and the new existence of mechanized work processes. This is literally the case in celebrated films like the aptly named *Modern Times* (Chaplin, 1936), but it is apparent also in less self-conscious filmmaking of the

sort described by a Keystone publicity man: "Rough workers . . . like things that go bang."[19]

Finally, much of the most exciting new work on slapstick comedy has explored and recuperated the work of female comedians, whose presence has been suppressed both in the production practices of Hollywood and in its scholarly histories.[20] For all of the remarkable performances that the studio system produced (and despite the romance with which it is still publicly invested), the Hollywood studios very much foreclosed upon the diversity of the nineteenth-century American stage and provided only limited opportunities for comedians who were not white and male. This is one reason why female performances of the comedy of self-reference appear in interstitial sites: in the transitional era before the codification of narrative and stylistic norms that eventually attended the formation of studio system (e.g., Marie Dressler and Mabel Normand); in the world of early television, a "feminine" medium that pulled from the ranks of contemporary vaudeville performers (e.g., Lucille Ball and Gracie Allen); and in the more diffuse and less ideologically constrained realm of contemporary television and Internet video (e.g., Tina Fey, *Broad City*). The relative absence of female-produced comedy of self-reference in the studio era also reflects a salient fact about this form of irony: it is much more readily available to performers and filmmakers whose bodies, by virtue of their privilege, do not immediately signify difference. Buster Keaton's body may be the principle interest of his movies, and his movies may imagine him as distinct or even alienated from his peers, but the meaning of his body is almost always understood as separate from the social and material worlds that produced it, *individual*, even authorial, not burdened with the meaning of otherness.

Given its interest in articulating the work of these comedians as theory and, more specifically, as a kind of theory that possesses a historical orientation, I have sometimes thought of this book as a series of sketches toward a historical ontology of Hollywood film, one that calls back to the tradition of classical film theory and its interest in the nature and identity of the medium. The question "What sort of thing is cinema?" can seem both naive and unanswerable. Certainly, one wants to say, there is no single *thing* that cinema is; it is, after all, unknowable apart from the institutional, economic, and aesthetic contexts out of which it emerged and through which it continues to grow. Philosophical writing on cinema and photography sometimes seems ignorant of these charges, from the ideas, for instance, that (fictional) films are not artworks insofar as they are not in and of themselves representations but are instead photographs of representations, or that objects are literally visible "through" the photographs in which they appear.[21] The former insistence about

the non-art status of films is at odds with the fact that many individual movies have been taken exactly as art, from the European art cinema of the 1960s to the gallery film; the latter sense of photographic transparency is seemingly blind to the cultural and institutional contexts through which this understanding of photographs came into being. That is, these ideas can seem both to spare themselves the trouble of situating their claims historically and to contradict various common sense ideas about the nature of the cinema.

But ontological inquiry into film need not contradict common sense; perhaps more importantly, it need not be ahistorical. As Amie Thomasson has argued, artworks may be the kinds of things the natures of which are inextricable from the ordinary beliefs and practices that surround them.[22] In other words, they might not be entities about which truth claims are discoverable; what they are may instead rely upon our (usually implicit) assumptions about their very natures. And as Cavell's body of writing on the cinema has stressed, our assumptions and interest in the nature of a medium become visible in acts of criticism, judgments that can be agreed upon or refused by viewers. That is, the ontology of the cinema rests upon the categories of sense that we bring to it. It takes a community of artists and readers to bring the possibilities of a medium into being.

A historical ontology, then, would acknowledge the fact that what the cinema is has changed and will continue to change across time as its material and technological bases shift, as it comes into contact with new cultures and ways of taking it as an object, and in concert with its economic and industrial foundations. (As any art historian is well aware, what counted as the activity and products of painting in medieval Florence is not isomorphic with what counted as the activity and products of painting in twentieth-century Manhattan. The beliefs and practices that surrounded these "art worlds" are separated by great gulfs of religious belief, institutional support, technology, and style. Yet they are also not radically *dis*continuous: the Arts and Crafts movement is inconceivable without its picture of the Middle Ages.) The simple fact that our designations for these objects bear some sense of consistency suggests the need for historically inflected ontological inquiry, for a style of inquiry that respects the historicity of individual art forms but which at the same time strives to describe them in their coherence. Curiously, through its production of images of its medium, slapstick film comedy provides us with a route into this inquiry.

At stake in the relation between slapstick comedy and the Hollywood studio system, then, is what we could call its difference—from melodrama, from more naturalistic forms of filmmaking, from other modes of performance. This book often sets these comedies against one particular

model of a classical Hollywood cinema in order to broaden our sense of what these films are capable of, how they amount to a kind of philosophical practice—just as Cavell did for the "comedy of remarriage" and the "drama of the unknown woman" and just as William Rothman has done for Hitchcock (and indeed other filmmakers and genres).[23] If this sort of classical filmmaking stresses character psychology and narrative coherence, many slapstick film comedies give the appearance of doing so while preserving a sense that the comedian him or herself is not a well-rounded or realistic character and while charting new courses for the forms that individual films might take.

In fact, many of these slapstick comedies put a wrench in critical models that narrow the reach and possibilities of both classical and modernist cinemas. The slapstick comedy is above all a middle case, and its products suggest that generic difference is inadequately accounted for in the most global accounts of the Hollywood studio era. Jerry Lewis's interest in innovation, for example, is evident both in the technological sophistication with which he worked (apparent in his creation of the video assist) and in the stylistic peculiarities of his films, from their willingness to forgo the realistic depiction of space to their almost experimental interest in duration to their odd and persistent self-reference. Lewis's interest in, or articulation of, the breakdown in conviction that was present in older forms is apparent in and modulated through his peculiar anxiety and almost anti-intentional behavior, a form of behavior and clowning that is frequently staged alongside or within spaces that disclose the ontology of the cinema and its problematic relationship to other media, as in the extended business that occurs in relationship to the staging and production of live television in *The Ladies Man*.

For these reasons, this book calls back to the discourse of classical film theory by arguing that many of these comedies are themselves concerned with the ontology of film. The book works with supposition that, by moving diachronically across the studio era, we might be able to form a coherent, if also slant, account of that cinema, one that is told from the surprising perspective of the slapstick clown. As the sequence of chapters suggests, the device of self-reference was realized most fully by comedians who possessed substantial control over the production of their films and who often directed their own work. The exceptions here are directors such as Mack Sennett and Frank Tashlin who themselves had distinct comedic sensibilities, and performers like the Marx Brothers, who did not direct their own work but who fashioned many of their own jokes and gags.

Chapter 1, "Slapstick Spectators: *Tillie's Punctured Romance* (1914)," describes the formal and stylistic transformations occasioned by Mack

Sennett's burlesque of D. W. Griffith's *A Drunkard's Reformation* (1909) and it explores the particular place of this burlesque within the larger narrative economy of the nascent feature-length film, arguing that Sennett's film provides us with one account of the narrativity of the cinema of the teens.

Chapter 2, "Buster Keaton's Theory of Film," takes the book into the 1920s, developing the theoretical purchase of slapstick comedy by reading two of Keaton's feature films, *Sherlock Jr.* (1924) and *The Cameraman* (1928). The chapter argues that the automatism at the heart of Keaton's physical gags should be read as metonymic for the automatism of the cinema itself. That is, I argue that we might read Keaton as articulating an ontology of the cinema that proceeds from a sense of the cinema as constitutively automatic. After looking at some of the historical context behind this interest in automatism, I suggest that Keaton's work is legible as having articulated a sense of realist automatism, an idea that is apparent in Keaton's distinct relationship to the camera and to the screen.

Chapter 3, "Redeeming Vision: Charlie Chaplin," argues for the understanding of Wittgenstein's concept of aspect perception as a means for understanding the relationship between visual perception and ethical value. This allows me to locate a parallel concept in Chaplin's films of the teens and twenties by paying attention to the ways in which Chaplin asks his audiences to, in Wittgenstein's phrasing, see one thing "as" another. The chapter then turns to Chaplin's work of the early thirties, paying close attention to how Chaplin developed a style of comedy that attempted to resist the coming of synchronized sound. The chapter concludes with readings of *City Lights* (1931) and *Modern Times* (1936) as describing a melancholic relationship between the experience of the cinema as a series of views and an ethics of intimacy.

Chapter 4, "Bodies of Silence, Bodies of Sound: The Marx Brothers," moves the book's claim forward to the dawn of synchronized sound, situating the Marx Brothers' Paramount films (1929–33) alongside the industrial development of technologies of sound representation. In the early days of synchronized sound, the Hollywood studios dealt not simply with technical issues about how to properly equip their stages and theaters but with the issue of defining the nature of film sound itself. They sought to teach their audiences how to hear film sound, which was radically different than that of live theater. I argue that we should understand the Marx Brothers' Paramount films as parodies of this attempt at self-definition, even as they put forth their own account of the relationship between sound and image through a series of gags that incorporate and instantiate the technologies associated with the phonograph, radio, and the telephone. The chapter concludes this reading of

the Marx Brothers' relation to technologies of sound synchronization by reflecting upon the relationship between Harpo's embodied silence and the films' general verbal excess, setting the odd construction of Harpo's silence against accounts of the classicized Hollywood body.

Chapter 5, "Hollywood, Television, and the Case of Ernie Kovacs," looks at the comedy of self-reference during the two decades during which the industry achieved its most stable form, with brief accounts of *Hellzapoppin'* (1941), animation at Warner Bros., Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, and The Three Stooges. It then looks closely at Ernie Kovacs's pioneering work on network television, and its distinct interest in the fact and nature of this new medium, paying special attention to Kovacs's presentation of the synchronization of sound and image in his ABC specials of 1961 and 1962.

Chapter 6, "*Nouvelle Blagues*: Jerry Lewis," engages with Jerry Lewis's comedy, reading its firmly intermedial inheritance as deriving from his relation to the aesthetics and ontology of live television. The chapter analyzes Lewis's self-directed work in light of its engagement with the qualities of the televisual and as representing a distinct, almost modernist break with the formal conventions of studio-era Hollywood cinema. In Lewis's films, the cinema—now at the end of the studio system and in competition with television—is a site of productive performance as well as the cause of an inevitable isolation. The chapter closes by analyzing the formal ideas that Lewis brings to bear upon this tension, highlighting their affinities with the more political modernism of Jean-Luc Godard.

Finally, an epilogue takes a speculative look at recent work in slapstick comedy and its relationship to video. As a case study, it considers the *Jackass* television series and features, placing the series and the films in the historical context of the genre and arguing that the gag-structure and larger affect of their comedy is specific to their origin in video. It concludes by suggesting that the representation and meaning of the human body is radically changed in the medium of video, where not its grace but its pain is taken as the index of its reality.