

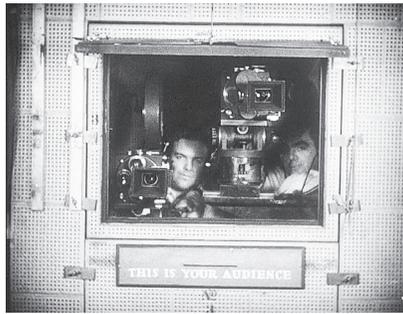
## “The Stigma of Slapstick”

### *The Short-Subject Industry and Its Imagined Public*

In June 1929, the Vitaphone Corporation produced a remarkable short, *Don't Get Nervous*, which cannot but strike a viewer for its reflexive engagement with the problems of representation and address confronted by so many early sound shorts. Like other Vitaphone reels of the time, it consists of a vaudeville performance—here, a solo or one-act by comedian Georgie Price—staged frontally before the Vitaphone cameras. Yet what makes for distinctiveness is the way its opening varies the standard format to offer a seeming “behind-the-scenes” glimpse at the short’s production. *Don't Get Nervous* begins with a couple of shots showing the crew preparing Vitaphone’s Brooklyn soundstage for filming. Next, in the third shot, Price strides in and, in a state of agitation, demands to see “Mr. Foy” (ex-vaudevillian Bryan Foy, the actual Vitaphone unit supervisor), who is in turn ushered in and, in medium two-shot, asks Price what’s upsetting him (fig. 7). “What’s upsetting me?” Price responds, and he lists the problems:

This studio. Thousands of fellows running around. All this excitement. Hanging lights. Hanging microphones. Folks fixing things around here. You know it’s different in the theater. In a theater there’s a wonderful audience. As soon as I walk out on the stage, I start to sing. I can look at their faces and tell whether they’re with me or not. But here it’s different. There’s no atmosphere. No audience. No nothing. I’m nervous about it, Brynie [Foy’s nickname].

“Oh, aren’t you foolish,” Foy replies, breaking the fourth wall to point toward the camera. “Why, you’ve got a real audience right here.” Does he mean us, the geographically and temporally dispersed movie audience? Apparently not, for the film now cuts in a reverse shot to present a technological apparatus: the Vitaphone camera booth, two operators peering out, upon which is affixed the sign “THIS IS YOUR AUDIENCE” (fig. 8) The framing of the booth, which fills the image, creates a starkly



FIGURES 7–9. Bryan Foy (left in the first shot) provides an onset audience to calm Georgie Price’s concerns about performing for the Vitaphone camera. Frame enlargements from *Don’t Get Nervous* (ca. July 1929).

VIDEO 2. Clip from *Don’t Get Nervous*.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.28.4>



reduced sense of depth that underlines the abstract impersonality by which Price is so clearly discomfited. Back to the two-shot: “You call that an audience?” the comedian complains. The penny drops for Foy. “Oh, I see. You want a real flesh-and-blood

audience,” and he invites the crew to assemble on one side of the Vitaphone camera to serve as an on-set “flesh-and-blood” harbinger for Price’s ultimate audience in movie theaters (fig. 9). His concerns allayed, Price begins his act for the assembled crew, and the short proceeds in standard fashion—only now with the understanding that Price is performing *not* for the camera but for the assembled technicians and stagehands, who have become proxies for the film spectator (vid. 2).

There are issues of no small critical interest here, foremost among which is surely Price and Foy’s endeavor to reproduce the “liveness” of the vaudeville stage within the time and space of a filmic performance. “Canned” vaudeville such as Vitaphone’s imposed a total separation of the time-space of an originating performance from the time-space of its reception, and with that, the withholding of the “atmosphere” of copresence upon which vaudevillians thrived.<sup>1</sup> But *Don’t Get Nervous* attempts to manage those concerns by overtly altering the framework within which Price’s routine occurs. The camera as the impassive tool of a merely mechanical inscription is displaced by the stagehands, whose presence thus folds the moment of performance and its reception into a single space (the Brooklyn studio); the spectator of the film is, consequently, asked to view the performance not as a technologically mediated separation, but instead by identifying imaginatively with the surrogate “live” audience that has been implanted within the space of the film’s production. What is explored here are not only the performance conditions necessary to alleviate Price’s discomfiture, but also the conventions of filmic representation needed to acclimate viewers of early talkie shorts to vaudeville-style presentations in which, as film historian Charles Wolfe notes, the “relationship between actor and the audience [was] by necessity imaginary.”<sup>2</sup>

Although these themes will emerge tangentially in the following pages, they are not the paths that will primarily be pursued in this chapter. For I would like to engage Price’s perplexity about his audience in a way that is at once more material in social terms and more metaphorical in terms of the film industry’s broader insecurities about *its* public: Who was the imagined audience for sound cinema after all? And how were industry assumptions about the moviegoing public manifest in the production and marketing strategies adopted by short-subject producers? From this perspective, the confounding slogan confronted by Price below the camera booth’s window—“THIS IS YOUR AUDIENCE”—and his uncertainty about whom he should be performing for become signifiers of a broader impenetrability that baffled the short-subject industry as it sought to eke out a role for itself within changing film industry practices both before and after the upheavals of the Depression.

Any cultural industry will of course operate with a certain idea of the public for its product, but there are two vectors through which that idea may be approached. There is, first, the empirical “who” of the public, the actual audience

for the industry's products (women/men, young/old, etc.), as this might be determined by, say, a statistical analysis. But there is also an "imagined" public or, perhaps better, an "idea" of the public as rhetorically framed by that industry, as hailed by a particular address. What I have in mind here is the way any culture industry will communicate with its imagined public in terms of projected social values and intentions—for instance, by addressing itself to consumer fantasies, nationalist fears, civic ideals, and so on. Such a public, as Michael Warner has argued, is best thought of not as a statistical entity but as a "space of discourse" that "exists only . . . by virtue of being addressed," or as a "social space created by the . . . circulation of discourse."<sup>3</sup> In the matter of the film industry following the coming of sound, there are in this respect two main points. First, the Hollywood industry had by this point long understood the empirical "who" of its audience in terms of the rather nebulous concept of the "masses"—a socially and ethnically heterogeneous white audience whose imaginary cohesion rested on the structural exclusion of nonwhite Americans.<sup>4</sup> This assumption of a mass audience was well established within the industry's self-idealization as a democratic art and would be further enshrined during the 1930s, in studies like Margaret Thorp's *America at the Movies* (1939), which posited sound cinema as a new form of shared symbolism, spanning differences of class, generation, and region (but still not race).<sup>5</sup> The second point: there was a clear transformation, before and after the impact of the Depression, in the nature of the studios' *address* to that mass public, a shift in the ideation of the "masses" as the object of Hollywood's discursive rhetoric. As film historian Catherine Jurca has argued, Hollywood's marketing strategies of the latter 1930s witnessed a concerted effort on the film industry's part to reconceive its relation to its public: in the earliest years of sound, the Hollywood studios had characteristically addressed itself to a public envisioned in terms of hierarchical separation across urban/regional lines, but around the mid-1930s, this hierarchical model came to be replaced by a more equivalential one, which conceived the moviegoing public in civic terms, united in the era's populist imaginary.<sup>6</sup>

These two modes of address implied very different constructions of the mass audience—the former inflected by Jazz Age hierarchies of taste and the top-down dissemination of metropolitan-style entertainment, the latter by New Deal-era ideals of civic spectatorship and the construction of shared popular identities. Both, further, bookended the operations of Hollywood's short-subject sector during this period, where they were enshrined in the competing market strategies adopted, first, by Warner Bros. for the launching of its Vitaphone sound shorts and, second, a decade later, by MGM's revamped short-subject unit under Jack Chertok. In this chapter, accordingly, I want to use Hollywood's changing conceptions of its public as a thematic for tracking the broad contours of the short-subject industry's development during these years and the position of the slapstick short within them. The goal is to offer a historical understanding of the short-subject

industry as structurally connected to Hollywood’s evolving imaginaries of the “masses” and the varying patterns of social difference and distinction that they sought—or, in the case of slapstick, now failed—to regulate and manage.

“SOUND CAME ALONG AND OUT WENT THE PIES”:  
VITAPHONE’S BROADWAY STRATEGY AND THE  
DELEGITIMIZING OF SLAPSTICK

Writing in March 1930, the *Exhibitors Herald-World’s* Broadway columnist, Peter Vischer, offered a witty description of developments in short-subject comedies since the coming of sound. “Sound came along and out went the pies,” Vischer began.

No longer was it possible for the average American male mind, aged 14, to enjoy the spectacle of features emerging from a gouey [*sic*] crust or to project himself, figuratively, into the person who was giving the other person, usually a Mr. Milktoast, a lusty boot in the slats. No sound had come in and the day of the [vaudeville] act arrived.

Mr. Picture-Goer, for his comedy entertainment, had to watch a vaudeville actor play the banjo and sing songs that should have been burned years ago. . . . Then came another change. Producers woke up to the fact that acts were not exactly hot; that what might be considered the novelty of sound was no excuse for bum vaudeville. They began to put into the production of their short subjects the same happy robustness that marked them before the microphone reared its trembling magnet before the stuttering player.

Pies actually came into use again. Now you can hear them plop, as well as see them squash. Not that pies are prevalent today; but the spirit that prompted them is. Short comedies have retrieved their schoolboy virility. They are alive, brusquely humorous and often broad. They are productive of belly laughs rather than wan smiles. And that’s what they should be.<sup>7</sup>

“Sound came along and out went the pies”: Vischer’s thumbnail sketch productively recasts the challenge confronted by slapstick filmmakers of the early talkie era. What in retrospect has appeared to later critics as a linear teleology of decline is presented here as a restructuring of what we have called, following sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the “field” of film comedy production. The concept of a field is in fact directly relevant to the present analysis; for, as developed by Bourdieu, it encourages consideration of how any sphere of cultural endeavor comprises a structure of individuals and groups—for instance, filmmakers and studios—“placed in a situation of competition for legitimacy.”<sup>8</sup> Reading Vischer through Bourdieu, the innovation of sound can thus be seen as introducing a new axis across which struggles over legitimacy were waged, bringing about the “day of the vaudeville act” in talkie shorts that, at least temporarily, threatened to dethrone slapstick as the dominant format of comedy shorts. It is, accordingly, on the terrain

of legitimacy—of cultural value and worth—that analysis of sound’s impact on the short-subject sector will begin: How was the technological innovation of sound yoked to the question of cultural value? And how was this manifest in the “day of the vaudeville act”?

As it was in shorts that sound was initially introduced, these are questions that lead in the first instance to the studio that most successfully spearheaded the talkie revolution: Warner Bros. With its first program of sound-on-disc Vitaphone shorts accompanying *Don Juan* on August 6, 1926, Warners had initially sought to impress by appealing to traditional highbrow standards: the overture from Wagner’s *Tännhäuser*, performed by the New York Philharmonic; tenor Giovanni Martinelli’s aria from *I Pagliacci*; sopranos Marion Talley and Anna Case performing music by Wagner, Dvořák, and Beethoven—with only Roy Smeck’s solo on the Hawaiian guitar offering lighter musical fare. The model here was to frame technological innovation as a source of cultural dissemination, as became explicit in the evening’s opening short, in which Will Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), described sound cinema’s promise. Sound film, Hays stiffly asserted, would exercise “an immeasurable influence as a living, breathing thing on the ideas and ideals, customs and costumes, the hopes and the ambitions of countless men, women, and children.”<sup>9</sup> Extending a rhetoric of technologically enabled uplift that already informed radio broadcasting, Hays asserted that “the motion picture is a most potent factor in the development of a national appreciation of good music” and defined sound cinema, like radio, as a medium capable of transcending geographic dispersal: “Now that service will be extended as the Vitaphone shall carry symphony orchestrations to the town halls of the hamlets.”<sup>10</sup> Hays’s words were fully in line with Warner Bros.’s promotional discourse, which elsewhere described the Vitaphone as a force of cultural democratization that would make “available to audiences in every corner of the world the music of the greatest symphony orchestras.”<sup>11</sup> Nor was this just rhetoric. No other studio invested as heavily in opera during the initial conversion period as Warners, which boasted an exclusive contract with the Metropolitan Opera House granting rights “to engage any of [its] singers and musicians.”<sup>12</sup> Between 1926 and 1932, Warners produced a total of some sixty-five opera shorts—most of which were completed by the end of 1927 and held for later release—while other studios produced just a handful of similar films.

Yet despite these initial highbrow endeavors, signs of variation in Warners’ strategy were manifest as early as the second program of Vitaphone shorts (October 7)—which showcased more popular, comedy and jazz-oriented routines by Al Jolson, George Jessel, the double act of Willie and Eugene Howard, and songstress Elsie Janis, foretelling the shift to a policy of Broadway-style variety that would soon come to dominate Vitaphone’s output. Music from the leading big band orchestras; monologues and two-acts by big-time revue stars and vaudevillians; comic and dramatic playlets; and a wide assortment of novelty performers, such as the five-year-old torch

singer Baby Rose Marie and Sol Violinsky's simultaneous playing of the violin and piano—these would become the preferred performance types, and for the 1928–1929 season, Vitaphone refurbished its Brooklyn production stages (the old Vitagraph studios) the better to tap the Broadway talent pool. By 1929, publicity for Vitaphone was drastically minimizing sound technology's initial association with opera and classical music to foreground forms of entertainment in line with the rhythms of big city life, even retitling its series *Vitaphone Varieties* to that end. As Charles Wolfe has noted, "The decision to retitle the series 'Vitaphone Varieties' . . . formally acknowledged" the change in strategies, marking a shift toward an aesthetic "derived from vaudeville, with a premium placed on the diversity and novelty of ten-minute acts grouped together in various clusters."<sup>13</sup>

The importing of the era's leading "cuckoo" stage comedians, examined in the previous chapter, really begins with this "Broadway strategy" on Vitaphone's part, and our discussion there consequently sheds light on the cultural identity that was thereby being claimed for sound cinema. It would be a mistake, for instance, to assume that Vitaphone's shift from opera and classical music to a Broadway model can be characterized as a shift across the axis from "high art" to "popular" standards, since the very notion of Broadway-style entertainment was a symptom of the displacement of those very distinctions. As outlined in the previous chapter, New York's Jazz Age ethos of cultural rejuvenation encouraged an alternative interpretation of distinction than that through which the genteel classes had formerly sought to police the boundaries of culture. Rather, the Broadway revues and nightclubs of the 1920s were testing grounds for a newly secular entertainment culture wherein Victorian ideals of restraint and self-discipline ceded to an insouciant and expressive metropolitanism.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, performers captured by the Vitaphone belonged not to the realm of what had once been working-class variety or cheap vaudeville, but to the showier firmament of musical revues that had emerged from the pioneering efforts of New York nightlife entrepreneurs like Florenz Ziegfeld and Jesse Lasky to repackage variety for the urbane "peer society." The emphasis in the marketing of the Vitaphone shorts was thus, by around 1928–1929, firmly on notions of urbane exclusivity and distinction ("Vitaphone links your theater to Broadway . . . Broadway—Mecca of millions now round the corner resort of all America, thanks to Vitaphone!"), establishing a strategy of appeal that spread swiftly throughout Hollywood during the early sound era.<sup>15</sup>

As a publicity tactic, this "Broadway strategy" provides further evidence of New York's ascendancy as the nation's barometer of, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's turn of phrase, "what was fashionable and what was fun."<sup>16</sup> But it also reaffirms the shift toward a new paradigm of cultural hierarchy in which class and ethnic difference were increasingly overlaid by sectional associations, enshrined in the emergent division separating metropolitan sophistication from small-town hokum. What further deserves to be stressed, however, is how these developments thereby altered the rhetoric of cultural uplift in relation to the uses of mass media: whereas

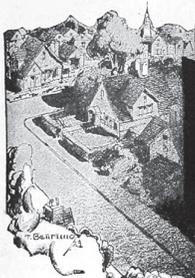
late Progressive Era reformers had advocated what might be thought of as a *trickle-down* model of cultural dissemination, which used mass media to bring “high” culture to the “masses,” Jazz Age discourses favored a *broadcast* model, which conceived of mass media—first radio, then cinema—as a means to close the cultural “gap” created by distance from metropolitan centers.<sup>17</sup> It is thus significant that an earlier class-based language of uplift that, during the single-reel era, had sought to transform the nickelodeon into, for example, “The Poor Man’s Elementary Course in the Drama,” was now framed in *spatial* terms that celebrated Vitaphone as a means of transcending the “miles that used to separate you from the Street of Streets.”<sup>18</sup> As one ad from this period announced, “Broadway has burst Manhattan’s boundaries. . . . No longer must you travel to New York to see the greatest stage attractions. Just—Step around the corner . . . and you’re on Broadway!” (fig. 10).<sup>19</sup>

The emerging Broadway strategy was also likely a strategic response to changing market conditions. Before 1927, the majors could afford to invest in a variety of productions suited to a range of tastes, but, as Paul Seale has argued, a sudden decrease in profits in 1927 led to an industry-wide downscaling and concentration on surefire profitability.<sup>20</sup> It is evident, for example, that the turn away from conventionally “highbrow” fare resulted in broader success for the Vitaphone reels, at least to judge from one early historian of sound, Fitzhugh Green, whose 1929 study, *The Film Finds Its Tongue*, explains how operatic shorts often faced popular disinterest: “Audiences manifestly liked the vaudeville shorts better than they did the operatic ones, and Sam [Warner] and the Manhattan crew began making vaudeville acts and dance orchestras in preference to the heavier stuff.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, a majority of the short-subject producers that made the move into sound for the 1928–1929 season opted to follow Vitaphone’s Broadway strategy rather than its initial highbrow aspirations: MGM, for instance, had its *Metro Movietone Acts* (featuring “vaudeville stars or teams”), Universal its “vaudeville novelties,” and Paramount an in-house series of *Paramount Talking Acts* (“produced with the cream of screen stars and of Broadway talent combined”), among many others.<sup>22</sup>

Nor was it only through canned variety and revue acts that the Broadway ethos left its mark on short subjects. Also significant were a number of dialogue-oriented shorts adapting theatrical sketches for the screen, and here, too, Warners was at the forefront. In June 1927, Warner Bros. had opened a new Vitaphone unit in Los Angeles, where supervisor Bryan Foy and writers Hugh Herbert and Murray Roth launched a series of *Vitaphone Playlets*—two-reel, all-talking adaptations of “refined” comic and dramatic sketches, of a style commonly featured on the legitimate stage and in big-time vaudeville. As Charles Wolfe has noted, Vitaphone’s playlets were distinct from the more frontally staged vaudeville and presentation shorts, where the human figure was placed front and center before the camera; instead, the playlets turned the actors’ performances “inward,” harnessed to a self-contained fictional world.<sup>23</sup>

Broadway has burst Manhattan's boundaries. The world's most famous thoroughfare is 3,000 miles long now... No longer must you travel to New York to see the greatest stage attractions. Just—

**Step around the corner...**



**...and you're on Broadway!**

HERE ARE SOME OF THE SIGHTS OF BROADWAY THAT VITAPHONE HAS BROUGHT "JUST AROUND THE CORNER."

 AL JOLSON—great actor and singer who has made the Vitaphone "Talkies" a real success.	 MAY WELLS—great Broadway actress who has made the Vitaphone "Talkies" a real success.
 THE HOLBY GENTS—most popular musical comedy in New York.	 SOPHIE TUCKER—Broadway singer who has made the Vitaphone "Talkies" a real success.

"Vitaphone" is the registered trademark of the Vitaphone Corporation

Once Broadway brought millions to New York . . . Now Vitaphone is bringing Broadway bodily to millions throughout the land.

Thousands of theatres showing Vitaphone pictures form this new and greater entertainment highway—running through hundreds of cities—carrying the thrill of this magic main street from Times Square to the Golden Gate.

For Vitaphone brings you the living voices of headline stars who were once Broadway's exclusive property. And now COLOR, coupled with Vitaphone, breaks the last barrier between you and Broadway at its best.

With the introduction of FULL NATURAL COLOR, by the amazing Technicolor process, Warner Bros. and First National Vitaphone productions will give you

everything the stage can offer—its cyclonic dancing choruses, the flaming color of its glorified revues, its fabulous beauty ensembles in all their glory of costumes and settings.

Come downtown tonight—to the Vitaphone theatre nearest you. Get all the thrills of a night on Broadway—at motion picture prices . . . Make "going to a Broadway show" an every-week event . . .

Look forward to a score of celebrated musical comedy hits which Warner Bros. and First National will film this season exactly as they appeared behind the footlights of famous New York theatres.

Only one thing to make sure of—The sign outside must say "VITAPHONE"! For Vitaphone is the first and foremost of all talking screen devices. It is your guarantee of perfect tone, perfect reproduction—perfect entertainment!



# VITAPHONE

LOOK FOR THIS NAME WHEN YOU'RE LOOKING FOR TALKING PICTURE ENTERTAINMENT. YOU'LL FIND IT ONLY ON WARNER BROS. and FIRST NATIONAL PICTURES

When you write to advertisers please mention PHOTOPLAY MAGAZINE.

FIGURE 10. Advertisement for Vitaphone from *Photoplay*, October 1929.

But the playlets were also distinctive in proposing an alternative indicator of distinction within sound comedy from that offered by the presentation shorts. Whereas the latter often brought to the screen exponents of the lunatic vogue so prized by metropolitan tastemakers, the comic playlet testified to the lingering hold of an older, genteel model of plot-based “situation” comedy, for which sound was harnessed in the service not of cuckoo wordplay but of polite wit and character-based humor. Taking the baton, for instance, was Educational Pictures, which put a series of *Coronet Comedy* shorts starring Edward Everett Horton into production in late 1928. “Today, the all-talking Short Feature comedy has virtually brought a re-birth of humor on the screen,” declared publicity for the third of these, *The Right Bed* (April 1929), describing the films as “farce playlets similar to the one-act plays seen for years in vaudeville.”<sup>24</sup> More or less identical discursive strategies were also in play in promotion for the Christie Film Company, which entered talkie production around the same time with a prestigious distribution deal through Paramount. Long associated with the situation style of screen comedy, the Christie company soon began emulating the Vitaphone playlet as a way of consolidating its brand identity. As indicated by early publicity, the Christie talking shorts would include “short features adapted from stage plays” by well-known Broadway playwrights, produced under a policy of “cast[ing] them with stars from both stage and screen.”<sup>25</sup> Scripted dialogue, in this conception, was to provide the royal road for a style of screen comedy that would forgo the vulgarities of physical knockabout, as studio head Al Christie himself explained:

The field of comedy type of entertainment was limited before. After all, there were just so many different ways in which a man could be knocked down or lose his trousers and I think myself movie audiences were getting pretty fed up on this kind of striving for laughs. . . . [By contrast,] the new style of entertainment holds the audience interest far more. It has always good construction to get the interests of the audience by promising something and then working up to it. This can be done far better with the addition of good dialogue.<sup>26</sup>

Less predictably, these efforts also informed Christie’s production of a series of six “negro stories” with all-black casts, adapting white southern writer Octavus Roy Cohen’s “Darktown Birmingham” stories from the *Saturday Evening Post*. With a cast drawn from Harlem’s Lafayette Players Stock Company, including Spencer Williams, the films corresponded to better-known shorts from this era in appropriating black performance to sound technology, such as Vitaphone’s Expressionist-influenced *Yamekraw* (ca. June 1930) and RKO’s Duke Ellington vehicle, *Black and Tan* (December 1929).<sup>27</sup> But they differed in recruiting black voices to the gentrification of sound comedy: rife with comic malapropisms and verbal misapplications, the films were sold to audiences in terms of the putatively literary pleasures of “original Negro talk” and praised for a “vocalized form” that may have correlated with the cuckoo taste for verbal nonsense.<sup>28</sup> (Certainly it was in cuckoo terms that one of the

era's most acclaimed humorists, Richard Leacock, advocated the "higher ground" of what he called "Negro talk": "The humor of Negro talk moves on to higher ground when it turns not merely on sounds but on sense . . . and satirizes the Negro's fondness for long words, by which he confuses length of sound with depth of meaning."<sup>29</sup>

The Darktown shorts may have departed from a Broadway model in the strict sense, yet they shared in the relationship linking sound's advent to the perception of slapstick's delegitimization: a straight line runs from Christie's disparagement of the "limited" appeal of people losing their trousers to the *Motion Picture News* critic who celebrated the Darktown series' success with audiences who "appreciate clean comedy without custard pies."<sup>30</sup> Already marginalized by the metropolitan trend of cuckoo humor, slapstick thus found itself downgraded once over by the ascendancy of the comic playlet and other sound-enabled comedic forms. The process again follows the model described by Bourdieu, who notes how any innovation within a given cultural field (e.g., sound) inevitably constructs a new polarization—what might be called "rehierarchization"—such that formerly dominant forms (e.g., slapstick) are demoted through a process of "social aging."<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in the case of slapstick, this social aging was immediately apparent as trade press articles began to ask questions like "Is old-fashioned slapstick to vanish?" virtually from the moment of sound's dissemination.<sup>32</sup> It was the opinion of Fitzhugh Green, for instance, that with sound, "slapstick passed out of date. It was too crude for 'pictures' that were acquiring tone and polish."<sup>33</sup> Such reports of slapstick's immanent doom were of course exaggerated, speaking rather to struggles over the definitions and hierarchies of comedy that sound made possible. Within the changing position takings that reshaped the field of comedy production following sound, slapstick had not so much begun its exit as become a kind of "low other" in relation to which new forms of screen comedy were being defined.<sup>34</sup> It is symptomatic, moreover, that assertions of slapstick's passing lasted only as long as sound's novelty permitted such new position takings. Once the initial waves caused by sound had been weathered, short-subject comedy at the major studios soon settled back into something like its accustomed slapstick form—even at Warners, where, as we have already quoted Peter Vischer's metaphor, "pies actually came into use again." In 1931, for example, Bryan Foy left the short-subject unit at Warner Bros. and was replaced by Sam Sax, under whose supervision the short-subject division returned to generically defined film series that, by the following year, included slapstick.<sup>35</sup> Nor was this in any way a surreptitious or sheepish reentry: the vaudeville and revue stars who quickly burned through their stage repertoire in sound shorts—discussed in the previous chapter—created a space into which veteran slapstick performers and filmmakers rushed to reclaim lost territory. Vitaphone's new series of *Big V Comedies*, for instance, boasted perhaps the most noteworthy coup: the return to the screen of former Keystone comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, signed to work at Vitaphone's Brooklyn studios following a twelve-year absence imposed by the MPPDA in the wake of an infamous 1921 scandal.<sup>36</sup>

But other studios similarly began to rehabilitate silent-era troupers around this time, albeit to less industry attention. Beginning in 1932, RKO substantially expanded its slate of live-action slapstick two-reelers, adding new series lines with star performers like Hal Roach stalwart Edgar Kennedy and, for the next season, erstwhile Sennett regulars Harry Gribbon and Tom Kennedy; Columbia Pictures did much the same, reorganizing its shorts division to become a home base for silent-era veterans like Charlie Murray, Andy Clyde, Harry Langdon, and many others.

Yet we will here briefly anticipate the theme of this book's final chapter by noting how slapstick's "return" was already, by this point, edged with nostalgia. The industry's Broadway strategy may have been short lived, but it rendered unmistakable the slapstick short's passage toward datedness: previous slapstick conventions were now cast as throwback comedy, its pleasures those of yesterday. Publicity for Arbuckle's Vitaphone shorts thus insisted that comedy had not changed since the "old days," as though the appeal of sound slapstick lay in its direct continuity with the gags and comic devices that had defined screen comedy two decades earlier.<sup>37</sup> The film industry's initial efforts to integrate the early talkie public around an assumed Broadway standard may not have eradicated slapstick, but it *did* align film industry practice with urbane hierarchies of evaluation in consigning slapstick to the temporal logic of the good old days.

"A STATE OF MORAL COLLAPSE": THE  
SHORT-SUBJECT INDUSTRY AND THE EXHIBITION  
LANDSCAPE OF THE 1930S

But the fact that it now had the irrevocable connotation of being "old-time" was only one consequence for the slapstick short of the industry's sound-era reshaping. Also relevant were contestations over exhibition practice that spoke to ambivalences around the industry's self-conception as a particular type of service. Here, we introduce what would become a new term in Hollywood's conception of its public as the industry now tested the cultural and political waters of the New Deal: the image of the filmgoer as a type of "citizen consumer." The concept of the citizen consumer derives from the work of historian Lizabeth Cohen, where it describes the rhetoric of civic-minded consumption and consumer rights that accompanied the economic reforms of Roosevelt's first term.<sup>38</sup> It was an ideal that was embedded in a number of the New Deal's keystone programs and acts, not least being the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), passed into law in 1933, which enlisted consumer representatives as members of some of the code authorities and established a Consumer Advisory Board to give consumers a legitimate voice in the federal government's efforts to foster recovery. And it was an ideal that informed grassroots concerns about film industry business practices, too, spawning a series of contestations over Hollywood's role as a mass culture industry: as we will see, contentious exhibition practices like double billing, small-town

audiences’ complaints about movie morality, Hollywood’s “Broadway strategy”—all of these were increasingly debated and discussed in a new language of consumer protection. “Have we one public or many publics?” was thus the telling complaint of one small-town exhibitor speaking for heartland audiences who resented the presumption that Broadway-style entertainment should constitute a national “mass” standard. (The essay was titled “Broadway and/or United States.”)<sup>39</sup> From the perspective of consumer advocacy, culture industries like Hollywood were increasingly assessed and critiqued on a model of public service, for which the mass audience, to reverse one of Theodor Adorno’s most famous barbs, was envisioned no longer merely as their object but ideally as their subject.<sup>40</sup> Controversies over film exhibition in this way became an opening through which a newly civic model of the film-going public began to be asserted, with significant upshot for the economic and entertainment function of short subjects on exhibitor programs.

To see how this came to pass, it will be necessary first to explore at some length the changing and contested place of “variety” as a film industry standard during the conversion period. By the late silent era, Richard Koszarski notes, “the experience of viewing a film [had become] far different from what it would be at any time before or since. Exhibitors considered themselves showmen, not film programmers.” The feature film attraction constituted “only one part of . . . [an] evening’s entertainment,” which regularly included live stage presentations featuring professional dancers, comedians, operatic and popular singers, as well as short comedies, newsreels, and travelogues—all to provide the variety and heterogeneity that had long served as an American entertainment standard.<sup>41</sup> Silent-era movie-going was thus, Koszarski suggests, essentially a theater experience rather than a film experience, inasmuch as live acts gave each show the irreducible singularity of a one-off performance.<sup>42</sup> Yet sound short subjects threatened to make the practice of live presentations obsolete. The very *raison d’être* of Warner Bros.’ pioneering Vitaphone shorts had been to provide smaller exhibitors with a cost-cutting substitute for presentation acts. Soon, industry insiders and commentators were voicing a death-knell chorus. As slapstick producer Jack White bluntly asserted in 1929, “Short dialogue comedies will kill the presentation racket. . . . [T]he thing is obvious, it speaks for itself.”<sup>43</sup> In a similar spirit, Martin J. Quigley, then editor of the *Exhibitors Herald-World*, declared, “The short subject, with dialogue and music, . . . makes possible the return to an all-film policy which would not otherwise be possible. Pictures for picture houses is the best policy for the industry at large.”<sup>44</sup>

One may of course wonder who Quigley had in mind as the “industry at large.” For the truth is that these developments ultimately served the interests of producers far more than exhibitors: theater owners had in many cases embraced live presentations as a way of differentiating their shows from competing theaters, while the major studios had sometimes discouraged the practice because they diverted potential film rental revenue to live performers. Here, then, was a way in which the

substitution of sound shorts for live acts could consolidate power in the producers' hands. But it was also a way of standardizing spectatorship and the viewing situation. The notion of spectatorial "distraction" so famously evoked in Siegfried Kracauer's description of silent-era movie palaces—when live performers, orchestral music, and lighting effects contributed to a moviegoing experience that dispersed spectators' attention throughout the space of the theater—soon became a thing of the past.<sup>45</sup> With the gradual disappearance of live acts, moviegoing became a more exclusively filmic experience: the three-dimensional space of the movie theater was now fully subordinate to the two-dimensional space of the screen; equally, the local and neighborhood orientation of much silent-era film exhibition, when theater owners had drawn upon regional networks of live entertainers, was increasingly constrained in the face of Hollywood's nationwide reach.<sup>46</sup>

These shifts in exhibition practice and programming did not, of course, come into immediate effect; elaborate stage revues continued to be booked as a mark of distinction for prestige houses into the early 1930s, and rural theaters featured live "hillbilly" musical acts through much of the decade.<sup>47</sup> That the writing was on the wall for live acts was nonetheless clear when Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel, the picture palace impresario most responsible for promoting blended programs of live and motion-picture entertainment, himself swore off the strategy in 1930, announcing to a group of Universal salesmen that "the day of merging the so-called presentation idea with the picture is past."<sup>48</sup> The paradox, however, was that sound short subjects were now looked upon to provide the very variety that they themselves had been largely responsible for taking away. Though programs of shorts had accompanied feature programs since the silent era, the changed circumstances of sound-era exhibition now caused exhibitors to pay closer attention to short-subject selection to ensure a balanced program in the absence of live acts. "The difference between the old silent shorts and the present-day talking shorts is almost like night and day," declared exhibitor Charles E. Lewis. "Previous to the sound era, shorts were better known as program fillers. Today, they are granted the more appropriate title of program builders."<sup>49</sup> The year 1931 seems, in fact, to have marked a dawning consciousness in this regard, as industry insiders and showmen began to advocate vocally for the value of varied bills of short subjects, using trade journals as a sounding board to share strategies for "plugging" their shorts. "Never in my long career as a theatre operator has the short subject been of such vital importance as it is right now," declared E. A. Schiller, vice president of Loew's. "The development of talking pictures . . . [has] raised the so-called 'shorts' to a program-importance they never had before."<sup>50</sup>

Yet far from pumping new life into the short-comedy field, these trends simply added competition. The silent-era dominance of slapstick shorts and newsreels was now roundly dislodged by increasingly varied classifications of short-subject genres, prompting Terry Ramsaye, in *Motion Picture Herald*, to enumerate with astonishment the "tremendous array of specialty products of appeal,

travel, adventure, sport, historical and musical lore, compressed tabloid screen vaudeville, the delicious extravaganza of whimsical magic in the animated cartoon, personalities, nature studies, novelty in fashion and color, and serialized drama” in recent short subjects.<sup>51</sup> One symptomatic genre was the “musical revue,” effectively a film substitute for a live prologue that, not coincidentally, thrived simultaneously with the prologue’s decline. As exemplified by series like MGM’s two-strip *Colortone Revues* (“Brilliant Tabloid Musical and Dancing Entertainment”), such films were musical shorts whose thin—often bizarre—narrative premises served simply as rationale for a series of spectacular musical performances, as in, for example, *The Devil’s Cabaret* (December 1930), wherein Satan tries to make Hades a more appealing destination by putting on cabaret acts for its denizens.<sup>52</sup> Also typifying this rapid burgeoning of new genres was the sports short, a category that sprang almost from nowhere around 1930 to quickly become a mainstay of short-subject programs. The popular success of Pathé’s six *Football with Knute Rockne* shorts in the 1930–1931 season prompted a land rush for other sports figures in instructional shorts, the most successful of which were golfer Bobby Jones’s *How I Play Golf* and *How to Break Ninety* one-reelers for Warner Bros. (1931–1933). Such shorts were, moreover, microcosms of the strategies of diversified appeal that more broadly defined the short-subject industry during this period. The Bobby Jones series, for instance, typically involved Hollywood glitterati bumping into Jones on the course, thus combining sports instruction with “behind-the-scenes” peeks at stars at leisure (James Cagney, W. C. Fields, Edward G. Robinson, and Loretta Young all made appearances in the Jones series).<sup>53</sup> Others were even stranger hybrids, such as Vitaphone’s 1930 bridge short *Milton C. Work, “The International Bridge Authority,”* which integrates sequences of bridge instruction into a domestic comedy about married couples quarreling over their card playing.<sup>54</sup> The quest for variety was, indeed, pursued with a delirium that bespoke a catch-as-catch-can approach to audience interests: outside of golf and bridge shorts, one now also found such series as MGM’s *Fisherman’s Paradise* (“depicting the mighty thrills of deep sea fishing,” 1931–1932), Educational’s short-lived series *As a Dog Thinks* (“human interest stories about dogs,” 1933–1934), and RKO’s *Dumb-Bell Letters* (one-reel compendia of odd letters received by American businesses, 1934–1935).<sup>55</sup> The ratio of live-action slapstick series to other short-subject lines released by the major studios immediately began to decline in the face of such diversification—from around half of all series released in 1930–1931 (not including newsreels) to around a quarter and dropping just five seasons later. Meanwhile, animation was enjoying an upward arc of popularity that made it by the mid-1930s the favored short-subject genre among general audiences—a position that it retained for the remainder of the studio era.<sup>56</sup>

Variety was no end in itself, however; it was also a tactic in the face of what quickly came to represent an unprecedented threat to the short subject’s economic and industrial viability. I mean here to refer to the exhibition policy of double billing,

which began to proliferate as one among a number of strategies introduced by theater owners reeling from the crisis of the Depression. (Others included prize games like Bank Night, which was a lottery system, and Screeno, a kind of bingo.)<sup>57</sup> The practice of exhibiting two features on a program was not unheard of during the silent era, when it was largely confined to theaters in the Northeast and Southwest; but it became widespread among Depression-era exhibitors, particularly independents, who sought to bolster dwindling box-office receipts by offering audiences more for their money. In 1931, some eighteen hundred theaters had instituted double bills, representing one-eighth of all theaters then operating in the country; five years later, however, *Film Daily* estimated that the proportion of theaters regularly featuring dual bills was now over half (eight thousand out of what was now around fifteen thousand movie houses nationwide).<sup>58</sup> The havoc wrought on the market for two-reelers was huge: with a double bill consisting of two full-length pictures and a newsreel, exhibitors were finding little room for two-reel films (which typically played from seventeen to twenty minutes). “The average two-reel comedy, they say, will be passed up for a one-reel cartoon, or some other subject which can be shown in less than 10 minutes.”<sup>59</sup> As early as 1931, it was reported that lower rentals due to increases in double featuring were forcing short-subject producers to pare budgets to Poverty Row levels, with “the average spent on a two-reeler . . . around \$25,000”—a drop of about ten thousand dollars compared to pre-Depression prices.<sup>60</sup> (In fact, the report likely underestimated the extent of budgetary cutbacks, at least to judge from those studios for which budget documentation remains extant. At RKO, for instance, production costs for most short-subject series were closer to twenty thousand dollars per picture during this period, while the company’s popular Edgar Kennedy *Average Man* shorts were commonly brought in for a scant fifteen thousand dollars each. Columbia’s short-subjects division similarly kept budgets to around fifteen thousand dollars per short throughout the 1930s.)<sup>61</sup> By 1935, the prognosis for short subjects had become even direr, prompting the *Herald* to anticipate that the “days of the two-reel comedy are fast drawing to a close.”<sup>62</sup> Bold predictions of the “vital importance” of shorts quickly shriveled in the face of exhibition practices that rendered such importance moot.

The specific and varied strategies through which individual short-subject companies confronted this challenge will emerge in part 2 of this book. For the present, I want to simply indicate how industry figures who opposed double bills often made use of the rhetoric of consumer protection that was one of the hallmarks of New Deal-era economic reform—how, that is, the defense of variety programs comprising single features and shorts was mounted as a matter of consumer rights. There is no question that such appeals were in the main alibis for the economic interests of the film industry’s power bloc: the vertically integrated majors viewed the “double feature evil” primarily as injurious to profit margins; high-end exhibitors and large theater chains similarly saw it as a matter of unfair competition and price gouging on the part of smaller houses. Much time and money was in consequence expended in the form of public surveys and advertising campaigns that sought to appropriate the

rhetoric of consumer protection for the battle against double bills. A case in point was provided by one M. B. Horwitz, general manager of the Washington theater circuit in Cleveland and Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio, who was “ardently opposed to the double feature policy.” In March 1932, he polled patrons at his flagship theater, The Heights (“one of the most representative first-run suburban picture houses in Cleveland”), for their opinion on double bills, claiming to do so in the name of the public’s interest: “Rarely is the public—the final consumer—taken into consideration insofar as participation in these discussions is concerned. The distributor and exhibitor have adopted a ‘know-it-all’ attitude regarding double features.”<sup>63</sup> The results confirmed Horwitz’s own preference, with 76 percent of those polled voting for single features with an assortment of shorts. (Tellingly, the only exhibitors who demurred from Horwitz’s subsequent Cleveland-wide petition against duals were “a few scattered theatre owners in remote sections of the city”—a likely reference to the smaller neighborhood houses, for whom double billing was a much-needed economic lifeline.)<sup>64</sup> A year later another interested party, Henry Ginsberg, general manager for the Hal Roach Studios, successfully lobbied the MPPDA to administer a nationwide questionnaire on the topic to organizations of “educators, women’s club[s], . . . parents’ associations, editors, professionals, civic leaders and others”; when the results indicated an astounding 90 percent opposition to double features, Roach’s publicity director, Lew Maren, aggressively telegraphed syndicated newspapers and trade publications to run the results.<sup>65</sup> Among those questionnaire replies that did see partial publication, notes were sounded that were already becoming commonplace in the arsenal of rhetorical weapons against double bills: namely, that double features imposed mental strain, made family attendance impossible, and were out of step with moviegoer preference. “It is tiring,” “Double features are exhausting,” “The mind is not refreshed, it is cluttered,” “It leaves a confused impression,” “It is too great a strain on the spectator,” and “Double features are not relaxing” were typical replies, as was the insistence that “double features are objectionable to families who try to pick a ‘family picture.’”<sup>66</sup> A Mrs. Thomas G. Winter of the Hays office summarized the questionnaire responses by insisting on theater owners’ responsibility to their public:

The double feature may have served a temporary purpose when there were myriads of people who were anxious to get as much as they could. But what is happening? The over-long program leaves them with headache, eyache and a confused and tired memory to carry away, instead of a clear vision. . . . Many of our correspondents say they have given up going to the theatre rather than endure this over-long and incompatible show, and particularly are keeping their children away.<sup>67</sup>

This kind of rhetoric only became more widespread in following years, marking the emergence of a new construction of the moviegoing public that mirrored the larger reconceptualization of the role and rights of the consumer during the years of the Great Depression. Rumbblings of consumer discontent in the face of producer interests had begun to be felt across all sectors of the economy as early as

the mid-1920s, as expressed in best-selling books like Stuart Chase's *The Tragedy of Waste* (1925) and Chase and Frederick J. Schlink's *Your Money's Worth* (1927), but they greatly intensified as the Depression worsened, leading economists and social activists to call for new standards for consumer representation that would be enshrined in the economic philosophy of the NIRA. In the film industry, consumer discontent was hardly limited to debates about the double features, but registered across a number of areas—most impactfully, of course, in concerns about the movies' moral influence that resulted in the formation of the Production Code Administration in July 1934. That the double bill represented an early flashpoint in these processes is nonetheless of crucial importance for the concerns of this chapter, since it suggested a new way of framing the entertainment value of short subjects. Put simply: if duals were damaging to the public good (because they supposedly prevented family viewing, caused mental strain, etc.), then balanced programs of shorts and single features could be vindicated in the name of civic responsibility. It makes sense, then, that the resolutely anti-dual editor of *Motion Picture Herald*, Martin Quigley, regularly included in his publication the opinions of "public leaders" opposed to the practice—such as J. W. Hanson, principal of Rosville Union High School in California ("I favor one good feature supplemented by news reels, scientific reels, exploration, etc.") or Grace Morrison, president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs ("One *good* feature picture, a short comedy, a short travel or educational film and the newsreel gives to my way of thinking a properly balanced program"), or James E. West, chief executive of the Boy Scouts of America (who accused double bills of "preclud[ing] intelligent selection of one's entertainment" and eliminating "the motion picture as a feasible source of recreation for children").<sup>68</sup> We will see in the next chapter how one short-subject producer-distributor, Educational Pictures, launched a series of ad campaigns that similarly encouraged variety programming in the name of family values.

Yet the path to securing the continued viability of short subjects against double bills remained a fraught one. No amount of appeals to consumer protection seemed to abate the legal setbacks faced by the double bill's opponents, and by decade's end, the institutional framework on which the short subject's economic viability depended was in tatters. Despite sustained lobbying against the practice on the part of the vertically integrated studios as well as the Motion Picture Theatre Operators of America, the National Recovery Administration (NRA) officially legalized double bills when the Code Authority for the motion picture industry addressed the issue in August 1934—a ruling that was seen as a victory for the "little fellow" (i.e., independent theater owners).<sup>69</sup> The NRA also weakened the major studios' ability to strong-arm bookings of their shorts. Whereas previously exhibitors had often been forced to accept many more major-studio short subjects than they could reasonably play—a form of block-booking known as "full-line forcing"—the Motion Picture Code now conceded a more equitable arrangement: distributors could only force shorts in proportion to the number of

rented features.<sup>70</sup> Nor did the vertically integrated majors gain headway when they began to introduce clauses in exhibitor contracts to prevent their films from being screened as part of double features. In late May 1934, Harry and Louis Perelman, owners of two independent theaters, filed suit in the US District Court in Philadelphia against all companies using anti-dual clauses, charging “distributor discrimination in the enforcement of anti-double feature clauses.”<sup>71</sup> When the judge eventually sided with the plaintiff that December, the major studios responded by appealing to the US Circuit Court of Appeals, which nonetheless upheld the Philadelphia court’s ruling in January 1936. The studios continued to appeal—MGM most stubbornly—but by 1938 the writing was on the wall: as exhibitor Frank H. “Rick” Ricketson admitted that year in *The Management of Motion Picture Theatres*, “The double bill, as an evil, . . . cannot be eliminated by distributors’ contracts, exhibitors’ arbitration boards, new codes, or any other route that has yet been explored.”<sup>72</sup> The marketplace upon which short subjects competed was thus, by the mid-1930s, one that had seen the concept of variety programming change from industry standard to exhibitor choice. The legacy of changing exhibitor practices in the 1930s was to have left the short-subject industry in what one critic diagnosed as a “virtual state of moral collapse.”<sup>73</sup>

#### “SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT”: THE EDUCATIONAL USES OF SHORT SUBJECTS

What emerges from the foregoing section is a twofold change in the rhetoric used to advocate variety programming during the 1930s. First, there was a shift in the meaning of variety from the “virtual Broadway” paradigm of the early sound era to a new conception that linked variety to ideals of consumer protection. Second, accompanying this, there was an emergent change in the industry’s construction of the public for its films, from an object of the dissemination of metropolitan culture to a civic public of citizen consumers. (The two changes were, in fact, strictly correlated.) This emergent rhetoric admittedly had some troubling implications for slapstick producers, since rough-and-tumble physical comedy was not the kind of entertainment upon which claims to civic responsibility could readily be founded. (When “public leaders” like principal J. W. Hanson advocated the value of shorts, they did not have the Three Stooges in mind!) The short-subject industry’s ongoing bid for validation thus had the effect of reframing the marginalization of slapstick—no longer, as in the immediate period following sound, judged inferior in relation to a Broadway style of comic playlets and metropolitan wit, but rather out of fit with the privileging of what the *New York Times* called “educational and instructive” shorts.<sup>74</sup>

All of these themes played out loudly in what became something of a last-ditch effort on the part of a major studio to create a renaissance in the short-subject field.

It was no coincidence that the studio in question was the very one that had struggled most stubbornly against duals: Loew's-MGM. No coincidence, too, that the company launched an ambitious revamping of its shorts selection almost simultaneously with the failure of its appeal against the Perelman ruling in January 1936. By this point, Hal Roach was winding down his distribution arrangement with MGM, and the studio took the opportunity to radically rebrand its shorts. Under Jack Chertok, head of the shorts division since 1935, MGM now burnished its short-subject offerings by introducing a growing number of what it described as "informative" product lines: the long-running *Crime Does Not Pay* reenactments of true crimes (1935–1947), *Historical Mysteries* on topics such as the fate of the *Mary Celeste* and the escape of John Wilkes Booth (1937–1938), Carey Wilson's *What Do You Think?* pictures investigating psychic phenomena (1937–1941), as well as a *Soldiers of Peace* miniseries celebrating medical improvements that have "made this world a safer, healthier, happier place in which to live" (1938).<sup>75</sup> Even comic shorts were conscripted to this instructional rhetoric, albeit in motley, in the form of the popular *Pete Smith Specialties* (1936–1955), in which Smith lent wry commentary to documentary topics of wide-ranging general interest, and the Robert Benchley "How to" series (1935–1940, 1943–1944) on the frustrations of daily life. Slapstick, meanwhile, was reduced to a single product line, the *Our Gang* series, now one-reelers, which MGM took over from Roach upon the latter's departure. To read MGM's own press releases, however, one would have imagined that slapstick had been entirely excised—so frequently was the form evoked as the evolutionary lower rung against which Chertok's more educational aspirations rebounded. As the studio's own bimonthly short-subject guide, *MGM Shortstory*, confidently declared in 1939: "Pointing to the strides made in the past year or two, MGM believes that shorts, finally rid of the stigma of slapstick, are in a stronger position today than at any time since the advent of double features"—despite the fact that the studio was still offering twelve *Our Gang* one-reelers every year.<sup>76</sup> "Let's keep our shorts educational," enjoined critic Allen Saunders, in an editorial consigning slapstick to an anticipated future as a museum relic. "Let's leave the custard pie, the philandering husband situation and the pratt fall to the movie museum" (fig. 11).<sup>77</sup>

Once again, a rhetoric of betterment informed these efforts, as with Vitaphone's first sound shorts a decade earlier; only now that rhetoric was shaped not by discourses of cultural taste and distinction but by social democratic notions of what film scholars Haidee Wasson and Charles R. Acland have termed "useful cinema."<sup>78</sup> The analogy that Chertok liked to draw for MGM's shorts was thus not with Broadway sophistication but with nonfiction literature and magazines. "Shorts are to the motion picture audience what non-fiction material is to the readers of magazines. . . . They are informative, and some of them have a moral. Although they are told as entertainingly as possible, they leave the audience with something to think about."<sup>79</sup> "I don't know about the public of 1928, or of 1918,"

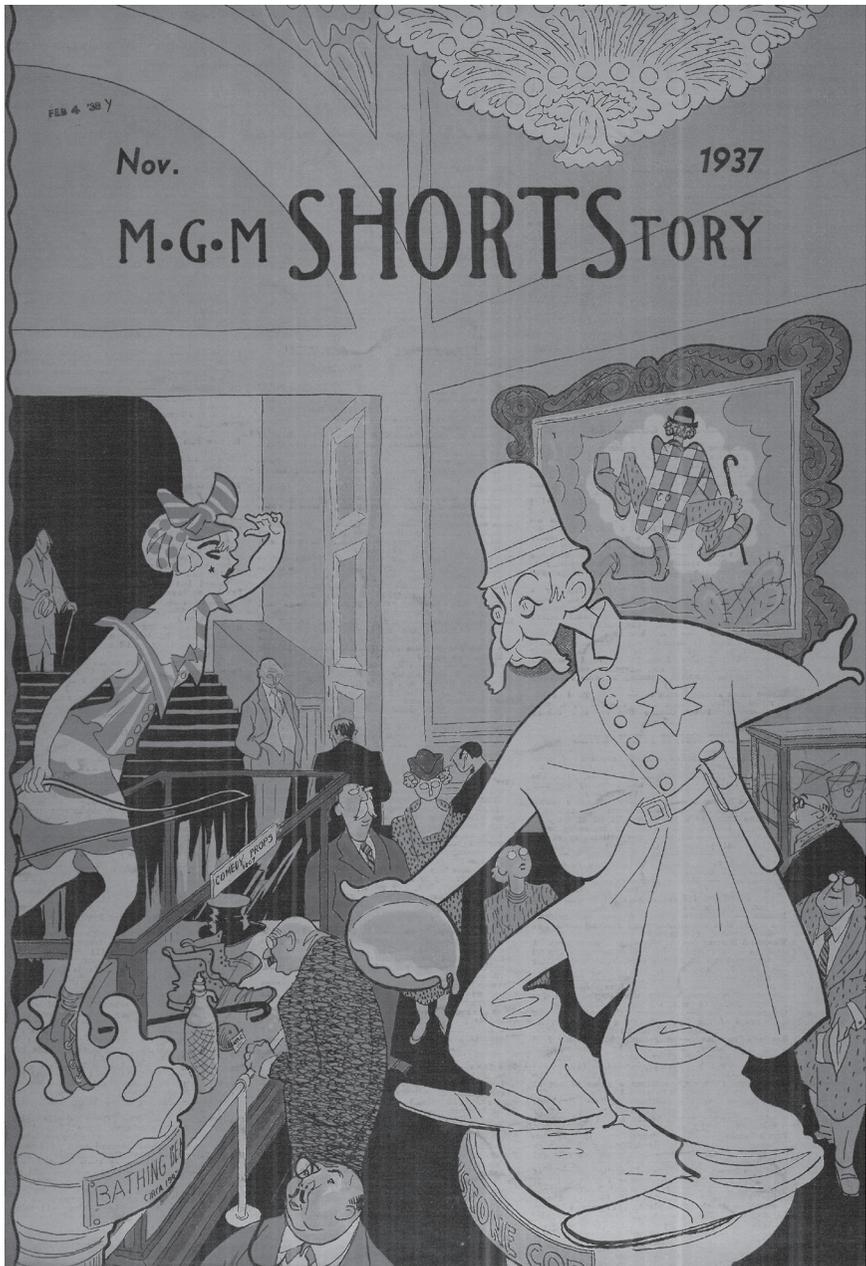


FIGURE 11. The cover of the November 1937 issue of *MGM Shortstory* envisions slapstick as a museum exhibit. Courtesy Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

Chertok claimed around the same time, “but the public of 1938 likes to extract information from short subjects.”<sup>80</sup>

Chertok’s commitment to “informative” subjects on historical and moral themes corresponded to what was an emerging golden era in the classroom use of film, in which commercial short subjects played an unexpectedly prominent role. A growing body of recent scholarship on educational film has shown that the sites of film viewing significantly expanded through school classrooms in the 1930s as progressive educators seized upon film’s promise as a means of implanting the citizenship skills needed to sustain democracy.<sup>81</sup> Of course, such initiatives were fueled foremost by specialist companies and public agencies; yet the commercial industry found reason enough to accommodate itself to these endeavors, too, particularly following the public relations crisis precipitated by the censorship debates of the early 1930s.<sup>82</sup> The MPPDA had made initial gestures toward educational goals in 1931, when it sponsored the formation of the Committee on Social Values in Motion Pictures, which produced the *Secrets of Success* series of twenty short subjects “about interesting people and how they behave.”<sup>83</sup> These efforts were subsequently strengthened following the movie morality protests of 1933–1934, at which point the MPPDA’s attention fell firmly on commercial shorts as the ideal format for burnishing the industry’s pedagogical commitments: unlike features, shorts could be screened in schools with minimal impact on theatrical box office and were, furthermore, tailor-made to the constraints of classroom schedules. Accordingly, in September 1936, the MPPDA established an Advisory Committee on the Use of Motion Pictures in Education, whose members began a well-publicized process of reviewing noncurrent shorts with a view to building an inventory for school use. Outside of the Advisory Committee’s efforts, the MPPDA also worked with the Commission on Human Relations film project of the Progressive Education Association, which, under the direction of Alice Keliher, similarly sought to develop a catalog of short subjects and truncated features, to be used for what Keliher described as “the study of our problems of human relationships.”<sup>84</sup>

It is against the context of these initiatives that developments in MGM’s short-subject lineup need to be situated. Certainly, no series of shorts was so frequently singled out for pedagogical value as MGM’s. The studio’s *Crime Does Not Pay* line received particular praise, in fact, for two episodes on the dangers of driving under the influence: *Hit and Run Driver* (December 1935), which Keliher’s Commission on Human Relations included in its catalog to illustrate the “human problems involved in drunk driving,” and *Drunk Driving* (October 1939), which prompted an approving letter to Chertok from a New Orleans pastor of the First Baptist Church.<sup>85</sup> Keliher also reserved special approval for the *Soldiers of Peace* series, using one of its entries as self-explanatory justification of her commission’s faith in the educational possibilities of commercially released films: “There is no reason why films being shown currently in the theatres . . . should not be used for discussion by schools, clubs, and study groups of all kinds. Why should not the

MGM short, ‘That Mothers Might Live,’ [April 1938, on Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis’s fight against puerperal fever] be the subject of discussion for high school and college science and hygiene classes?”<sup>86</sup> Nor was MGM at all reluctant to boost these educational uses. “We don’t make any of our pictures directly for school children,” Chertok once admitted, adding, however, that “in every short subject we try to inject some educational value, and all may be seen by children of school age with advantage.”<sup>87</sup> Indeed, the *MGM Shortstory* at times read more like an educational brochure than an entertainment catalog, featuring articles and letters penned by notable progressive educators, including Keliher herself, Cleveland Public Library director Marilla Waite Freeman, and the motion picture chairwoman of the Texas Federation of Women’s Clubs, Marietta Brooks. (Even J. Edgar Hoover contributed a piece—titled “Combating Crime through Movies!”—in praise of the *Crime Does Not Pay* series.)<sup>88</sup> Together, these and other writers helped craft a new narrative of the short subject’s evolution, one whose path was expressed not in terms of the language of cultural distinction and hierarchy—as with publicity for the early Vitaphone shorts—but rather as a coming-of-age tale that emphasized civic ideals of instruction and intelligence. MGM, one *Shortstory* contributor noted, has “speculatively [begun] to put a few intelligence-vitamins into the diet of that long under-nourished and undeveloped specimen—the short subject. . . . Lavished with attention and treated with intelligence, the short, once an orphan, [has] stepped out to become the industry’s fair-haired child.”<sup>89</sup> Added another: “The short subject has metamorphosized [*sic*] from a comic section to a short story. In short, the short subject is growing UP!”<sup>90</sup>

Was MGM sincerely seeking an educational address for its shorts? The school market could hardly have represented more than a negligible source of profits for a company of MGM’s stature. (Films released through the Advisory Committee—renamed Teaching Film Custodians in December 1938—were sold at a rental rate of fifteen dollars per year or thirty dollars for three years.)<sup>91</sup> Yet symbolic importance here outweighed any genuine pedagogical commitment. What mattered was the public goodwill that the appearance of such civic-minded endeavors could vouchsafe, as well as the implied justification of the shorts’ value as program builders. The movie morality debates may well have been weathered, but the film industry remained buffeted during this period by waves of bad publicity requiring ongoing public relations efforts: the Justice Department’s continued investigations of the studios for antitrust violation, exhibitor complaints about stars who were deemed “poison at the box office,” trade press reports describing “public nausea” and “nationwide . . . pessimism about the movies”—as historian Catherine Jurca notes, this was an array of problems unmatched even by the decade’s earlier controversies.<sup>92</sup> Previous contretemps over double-billing and immoral films may have been flashpoints for an emerging rhetoric charging the industry with irresponsibility, but by the mid- to late 1930s, these rumblings reached a crescendo that forced industry-wide emphasis on ideals of public service and civic edification, of which

MGM's rebranded shorts lines were but one symptom. Elsewhere, the industry's newfound civic credentials were loudly proclaimed during an unprecedented 1938 public relations campaign, titled "Motion Pictures' Greatest Year," in which the industry aggressively sought to countenance public disenchantment by promoting the idea that it was now the values of the "average movie-goer" or "Joe Doakes and his girl" that were the industry's mandate—as though the public was itself a collaborator in the industry's success.<sup>93</sup> Within the industry's feature film output, meanwhile, a democratic commitment was also palpable in what Jurca has provocatively characterized as the "death of glamour"—a decisive shift in long-standing Hollywood publicity practices that had formerly promoted stars as "idols of consumption" toward a "just folks" approach that presented stars as mirrors of the general public and featured them in family-type films.<sup>94</sup> In all these ways, the urbane self-image which the industry had initially projected in the early sound era was ceding to its "populist self-fashioning" as a force for civic cohesion.<sup>95</sup> The story of Hollywood's changing conception of the mass public over the course of the 1930s thus pivoted around a rhetorical switch in Hollywood's position within long-standing divisions between cultural elitism and cultural populism: a mode of mass cultural organization formerly organized on a logic of *difference* (on a hierarchizing rhetoric of metropolitan sophistication) was being replaced by a more civic-populist logic of *equivalence* (predicated on an assumed correspondence between industry product and the entertainment needs of the "ordinary" citizen).<sup>96</sup>

Still, it was arguably the short subject that provided the most sustained model for these new types of address, the ideal low-cost test balloon for projecting the industry's claims to civic-mindedness, and not only at MGM. Writing optimistically about the "Two-Reeler's Comeback" in 1941, *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther offered a survey of "adult content" in shorts as a broad-based trend that promised better fortunes for the short-subject industry as it entered the new decade.<sup>97</sup> He pointed to a more informational style of travelogue, such as travel writer Lowell Thomas's *Going Places* for Universal, which no longer offered merely "picture postcard" surveys (a "sort of review of monuments and mausoleums which invariably did a sunset fade with 'and now the time has come to say farewell to old Name-Your-Country'") but rather expressed "political and economic point[s] of view." He pointed to the launching in 1935 of *Time* magazine's *March of Time* newsreels, distributed by RKO, as an "experiment in cinematic journalism"—a "sort of editorial newsreel with perspective" that had become "one of the most popular and influential fixtures on the screen." And he lent his voice to the chorus of praise for MGM's *Crime Does Not Pay* series, which had already spurred imitators at other studios (such as Universal's one-off three-reeler *You Can't Get Away with It!* [November 1936]).<sup>98</sup> "As a direct result of these and other more recent efforts," Crowther concluded, "shorts today are indisputably superior in quality to any that have gone before. More money and brains are being devoted to them, and

they are of infinitely greater variety. . . . It has been a long road for shorts, with a stretch through a dark valley. But now they’re on rising ground.”<sup>99</sup>

“THE ZANY CREATURES THAT PEOPLE THIS EARTH”:  
 NEW DEAL-ERA POPULISM AND THE COMEDY  
 SHORTS OF ROBERT BENCHLEY

Yet the renewed emphasis on instruction is only one way civic ideals colonized the short subject during these years. I therefore want to return to the question of comedy to draw some observations about the links binding changing forms of Hollywood’s self-presentation to associated forms of comedic representation. It is no doubt a fluke of history that a single humorist would play an important part in short-subject comedies across each phase of the developments so far discussed in this chapter; still, it is a fluke that sheds crucial light for tracing these links. The humorist in question was *New Yorker* writer Robert Benchley, who was first brought in front of the motion picture camera in 1928 to film *The Treasurer’s Report* (ca. May 1928) for the Fox Film Corporation, but subsequently went on to win great acclaim for his “How to” series for MGM, beginning in 1935 and lasting through 1944.<sup>100</sup> Over the course of the 1930s, I want to show, Benchley’s comic persona changed in ways that corresponded to Hollywood’s New Deal-era civic refashioning. It was a change that first registered when the former *Life* drama critic took up residence at Chertok’s rebranded short-subject unit, first in a one-off, *How to Sleep* (September 1935), released through the *MGM Miniatures* line, and subsequently in his own series; and it was a change that was often remarked as Benchley continued to broaden his media presence across the decade. By the end of the 1930s, in addition to his MGM shorts, his regular magazines and newspaper columns, and his frequent collections of essays, Benchley also hosted his own nationwide radio show on CBS, *Melody and Madness* (making him the sixth most popular radio personality on the air, according to a *Radio Daily* poll), and lent his likeness to newspaper and magazine advertising campaigns promoting everyday goods like General Mills food products and Serta mattresses.<sup>101</sup> The change in Benchley’s persona, furthermore, was always described in the same way, as a passage from Benchley’s early reputation as a “smart” literary wit in the 1920s to a new, mass media identity as a Depression-era “average man.” As Chertok himself put it, once Benchley had been “just a comic fellow appealing to sophisticated audiences”; now he was “becoming the average man to the public, which extends all over the country.”<sup>102</sup> In a career that embodied the trajectory describing the changing dynamics of American culture, Benchley’s initial reputation as a “smart humorist” thus began to shade into a new identity as a “down-to-earth humorist,” his early fame as among the era’s most celebrated New York wits now leavened with a more populist appeal, in line with the film industry’s own “just folks” civic appeasements.<sup>103</sup>

Benchley's "becoming average" partook in a broader preoccupation with "averageness" and the values of the "ordinary" citizen that provides one key to understanding the era's changing cultural politics. The construction of identities in support of the New Deal had required a political language capable of bringing a heterogeneous social reality toward an imaginary equality; it found this in the concept of the "Common Man" and its cognates ("Joe Doakes," "John Q. Public," etc.), all of which became synecdoches for a national culture held in common. Historian Warren Susman pinpointed the 1930s as a time when many in the United States made the effort to characterize and adapt to a shared "American Way of Life," as scholars and intellectuals from Constance Rourke to Van Wyck Brooks sought in their writings to explain the significant cultural and historical values, experiences, and attitudes that the nation's citizenry was said to hold in common.<sup>104</sup> It was during this period, too, that developments in the social sciences—notably, the launching of George Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion in 1935—gave credence to the idea of a "typical" or "average" American as a cultural arbiter lending imaginary stability to the period's social upheavals.<sup>105</sup> The "average American" was in this sense at once a statistical guarantee and a normative ideal for a nation committed to the recovery of a basic unity. Yet what was further at stake in the particular case of Benchley—and what makes his evolving persona more than just a symptom—was the role humor played in modeling this commitment. The passage from "sophistication" to "averageness" as terms of Benchley's appeal corresponded not only to broader patterns of cultural discourse but also to competing modes of rhetoric in Benchley's humor in the years immediately before and after twentieth-century capitalism's greatest crisis—on the one hand an absurdist rhetoric that enacted forms of semantic and symbolic distinction (under the rubric of sophistication), on the other a populist rhetoric that withheld such differentiations (under the rubric of averageness). What the trajectory of Benchley's development can ultimately provide, then, is a case study of how Hollywood's participation in the changing coordinates of Depression-era mass culture might further be unpacked through an analysis of comedic form, that is, of technical features within the field of comedic expression whose implications nonetheless extended beyond that field.

Few humorists had fared as well as Benchley on the waves of Hollywood's initial appropriation of metropolitan culture to sound cinema. He was not the only *New Yorker* wit recruited to shorts during the conversion period—Donald Ogden Stewart, for instance, starred in a couple for Paramount in 1929, *Traffic Regulations* (ca. February 1929) and *Humorous Flights* (April 1929), and Alexander Woollcott would later show up in the novelty short *Mr. W's Little Game* (June 1934)—but Benchley was the first, and it was the critical acclaim of his early film appearances that made possible his colleagues' later, more poorly received shorts. Benchley's debut, *The Treasurer's Report*, is in fact of no small historical interest in that it preserves an extremely popular live sketch he had first developed in 1922, when he

and members of the Algonquin circle staged an amateur revue entitled *No Sirree!* A parody of a nervous speaker, the one-man sketch featured Benchley as the treasurer of a Kiwanis-type civic organization who is asked to give the group’s financial summary. Despite intending it as a one-off, Benchley was subsequently invited to perform “The Treasurer’s Report” in Sam Harris and Irving Berlin’s *Music Box Revue* of 1922–1923. He next went on to tour the routine at vaudeville houses and, finally, submitted to Fox executive Thomas Chalmers’s requests to perform it before the Movietone cameras at the studio’s Astoria sound stages. As Benchley later recalled:

I guess that no one ever got so sick of a thing as I, and all my friends, have grown of this Treasurer’s Report. I did it every night and two matinees a week in the Third Music Box Revue. Following that, I did it for ten weeks in vaudeville around the country. I did it at banquets and teas, at friends’ houses and in my own house, and finally . . . made a talking movie of it. In fact, I have inflicted it upon the public in every conceivable way except over the radio and dropping it from airplanes.<sup>106</sup>

The filmed version of “The Treasurer’s Report” received extraordinary critical acclaim for a short, prompting some critics to write as though the film single-handedly justified the coming of sound. “[Mr. Benchley] is, by all odds, the best excuse for the talkies that has been yet invented” was the opinion of one critic.<sup>107</sup> “Robert Benchley Shows That All the Talking Pictures Need Is TALENT,” yelled a headline in *Screenland*, in preface to a full-page transcription of the film’s monologue.<sup>108</sup> *Variety* meanwhile observed that the film “has scored more laughs than anything ever turned out in talking shorts.”<sup>109</sup> That a one-reel subject could thus be represented as the talkies’ salvation should not, however, be surprising: Benchley’s reputation as the vanguard of urbane literary humor was perfectly suited to the film industry’s strategies of metropolitan distinction during the conversion period. Fox subsequently capitalized on Benchley’s debut by signing him for five more shorts at five thousand dollars apiece, this time to be filmed in California, where he completed another satire of public speaking—*The Sex Life of the Polyp* (July 1928), in which he awkwardly discusses the titular creature’s mating habits at a women’s luncheon—and then a number of more conventionally plotted short comedies.

Benchley’s initial film appearances did not, however, extend beyond the period of the talking picture’s novelty. Benchley’s relation to the industry remained at this point that of an East Coast outsider who, in 1931, apparently stirred executives’ ire by describing Hollywood as “a flat, unlovely plain, inhabited by a group of highly ordinary people” and “the dullest and most conventional community of its size in the country.”<sup>110</sup> During the first half of the 1930s, in fact, Benchley largely withdrew from film work, his Hollywood endeavors now limited to a handful of cameo roles, occasional script doctoring, and a one-off short subject for Universal, *Your Technocracy and Mine* (April 1933), in which he again performed his awkward

lecturer shtick. Regardless, his debut appearances remain as luminous examples of early sound Hollywood's endeavor to harness what Gilbert Seldes dubbed the "cuckoo school" to its metropolitan rebranding, case studies for a form of humor predicated, as we have seen, on the art of "suspend[ing] the fancy between . . . incompatible [meanings]."<sup>111</sup> Take, for example, an excerpt from *The Treasurer's Report* in which, after some awkward initial pleasantries, Benchley's treasurer begins to race through his financial statement:

During the year 1926—and by that is meant 1927—the, er, Choral Society received the following in donations: BLG—five hundred dollars; GKM—five hundred dollars; Lottie and Nellie W.—two hundred dollars; “In memory of a happy summer at Rye Beach”—er, ten dollars; proceeds of a sale of coats and hats which were left in the boathouse—fourteen dollars and, er, fourteen dollars. And then the Junior League gave a performance of “Pinafore” for the benefit of the fund which, unfortunately, resulted in a deficit of three hundred dollars. Then we took in from dues and laboratory fees \$2,345 and fifty-five, no, seventy-five cents—er, making a total of receipts amounting to \$3,645.75. This is, of course, all reckoned as of June.

Now in the matter of expenditures, the, er [*Benchley distracted by waiter clearing up in front of him*]*—*in the matter of expenditures, the club has not [*clears throat*] been so fortunate. There was the unsettled condition of business and the late spring to contend with, er, resulting in the following rather discouraging figures, I am afraid. Er, expenditures \$20,574.85. Then there was a loss, owing to several things of \$3,326.80, carfare \$4,452. And then Mrs. Crandall's expense account, when she went to Baltimore to see the work they are doing there, came to \$119.50, but I am sure that you will all agree with me that it was worth that to find out, er, what they are doing in Baltimore. . . .

Now, these figures bring us down only to October. In October my sister was married, and the whole house was torn up, and in the general confusion, er, we lost track of the figures for May and August.

What we can begin to detect in *The Treasurer's Report* is what one literary scholar of the time celebrated as Benchley's quality of “slightly made inconsecutiveness . . . the humor of the incongruous and the inconsecutive carried to its nth power,” here manifest as a strategy of *enumeration*.<sup>112</sup> The humor here resides not in the simple fact that the math is wrong, but rather in the way the lecturer's enumeration finds itself stretched across a heterogeneous series of categories that don't quite “agree”: a *reason* for a donation is listed as though it were the *agent* of the donation (“In memory of a happy summer at Rye Beach” included as though of the same ontic category as the named donors “BLG” and “GKM”), a source of loss is introduced as a kind of negative or inverted profit (the Junior League's benefit performance), the chaos of a wedding party the cause of disappearing numbers. The system of language, in its headlong flow, here becomes the element in which Benchley's narrator tries to hold these dissymmetries together, his rush of words trying to ward off the presentation's dissolution into the free play of nonsense. Here, one might say, nonsense is on the horizon as something to be

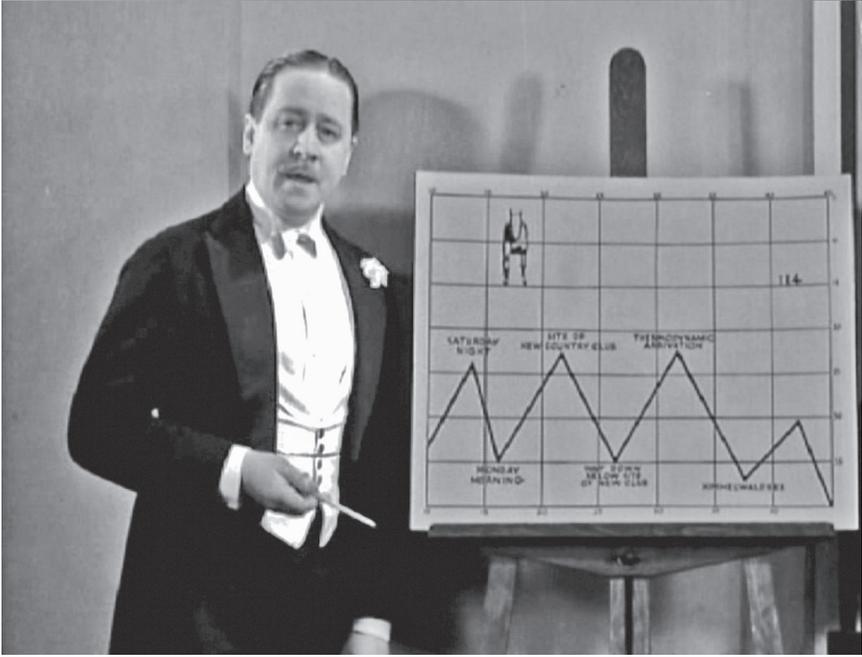


FIGURE 12. Robert Benchley’s “informational” chart in *Your Technocracy and Mine* (April 1933). The annotations read, left to right, “Saturday night,” “Monday morning,” “Site of new country club,” “Way down below site of new club,” “Thermodynamic arrivation,” “Himmelwaldsee,” and “114.”

guarded against, an ever-present risk that discomfits the lecturer’s presentation; in other shorts from this early period, however, nonsense more notably overtakes matters, a case in point being Benchley’s one short for Universal, *Your Technocracy and Mine*, in which he attempts to explain the Depression-era social-engineering buzzword of the film’s title. (The opening intertitle situates the film in the context of debate over this widely satirized concept: “A few more words to add to the general confusion by an expert who isn’t quite sure about the whole thing himself.”) Here, the enumeration is woven around a line graph that evades the lecturer’s ability to pin it to any clear signification (fig. 12). To quote from the monologue:

Now this ought to make it a little clearer what I’m driving at, and ought to bring home to you the importance of the situation to you. This chart represents the output of energy of one man over a period of one year. Here [points to first peak] is the energy available on Saturday night, and here [points to first trough] the energy available Monday morning. These are all, of course, figured in energy-determinants—as here [third peak] you will see thermo-dynamic arrivation. Thermo-dynamic arrivation means, er—well, you know what thermo-dynamic arrivation means. Er, now here [second peak] is where—is the site of the new country club where the lockers and showers are going to be.

And down here [*second trough*] is a place way down below the site of the new country club. All of this here is made land—the river once came all over this. Now from here [*third peak*] we went down the mountain [*moves pointer down to third trough*] to a beautiful little town in the valley named Himmelwaldsee, where we rested after our long walk and partook of the cream and cakes with which that section of the valley abounds. There's no place to go from here [*fourth peak*] so we—no sense in going way up here—we might just get stuck here for the rest of the night, so we won't do anything more with that. Now here [*points top left*] is—represents—the horse-power available in the State of Ohio alone; this is just a front view, you see. Er, over here [*points top right*] seems to be a loose number that doesn't have any connection with anything. I think that's just 114 and we'll just call that 114 and let it go at that.<sup>113</sup>

The line graph is first read by Benchley as a symbolic representation plotting a straightforward variable (“the output of energy of one man”) against scientific-sounding nonsense (“energy determinants”/“thermo-dynamic arrivation”). Yet the lecture comically switches to an iconic register of interpretation, whereby graph space is literalized, first as geographic cross-section (“down the mountain”), next as perspectival representation (a “front view” of horse-power in Ohio). The absurdist exercise here consists in forcing incommensurable systems of signification (symbolic/iconic) into an impossible dialogue (graph/cross-section/view): like the “loose” number “114,” all signifiers in such a situation become floating signifiers from whom the very possibility of meaning is deferred.

The “incompetent lecturer” model in these and other of Benchley's early shorts has precursors in earlier traditions of humor. Norris W. Yates's critical analysis of Benchley charts a connection linking his early short subjects to the late nineteenth-century practice of the comic lecturer, as exemplified in a number of so-called literary comedians who created naïve or foolish personas for their writings and performances—for instance, David Ross Locke in his alter ego as Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby.<sup>114</sup> But Benchley's specific device of the comic enumeration, particularly in *Your Technocracy and Mine*, might also remind us of Michel Foucault's famous opening to *The Order of Things* (1966), where the author quotes a passage from Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges that describes a “certain Chinese encyclopedia” in which animals are classified into the following groups: “(a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) *et cetera*, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.”<sup>115</sup> “The monstrous quality that runs through Borges's enumeration,” Foucault adds, “consists . . . in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed. . . . Where else could they be juxtaposed except in the non-place of language?”<sup>116</sup> Mutatis mutandis, might one not claim that the bewildered quality that runs through Benchley's incompetent enumerations resides in the fact that any meaningful key to make sense of the data has

gone missing? In such a circumstance, it is only within the “non-place” of a system of language, whether in the abstract space of a visual graph that lacks a key or in the rush of words through which Benchley’s lecturer struggles to keep one step ahead of the collapse of his own presentation, that these data can be juxtaposed and combined. The very act of enumeration achieves a power of “mad inconsecutiveness” all its own, unfurling a series of errant signifiers that fail equally to designate a broader concept (e.g., technocracy) or to clarify an actual state of affairs (e.g., a club’s finances) and that, as such, obey the absurdist logic of untethered sense.

But the “cuckoo” Benchley who first appeared in shorts in the late 1920s was not quite the “average” Benchley who would rule the MGM short-subject roost through the latter 1930s. Here, it is vital to reemphasize that the years of Benchley’s expanding media presence in the 1930s were also years in which the cultural politics of metropolitan exclusivity were chastened by a new commitment to a kind of civic populism—that is, to the ideal of a “people’s culture” whose potent framework was provided, we have seen, by a new emphasis on the rights and needs of the “ordinary” citizen. And ditto Benchley, whose humor now exemplified a displacement of “good” taste as a term of his earlier appeal toward a configuration of “mass” taste that invoked an imagined American commonality.<sup>17</sup> Three significant shifts, accordingly, distinguish the newly minted populism of his lecturer persona. First, in pace with developments in his writing, there was now a move away from pseudo-scientifically oriented topics (*Sex Life of the Polyp, Your Technocracy and Mine*) toward daily routine and leisure (e.g., *How to Start the Day* [September 1937], *How to Raise a Baby* [July 1938], *How to Watch Football* [October 1938], etc.). Not that this was a new direction for Benchley, who had long specialized in exasperated accounts of quotidian frustrations; what was distinctive was the degree to which this emphasis now saturated his film work, while his higher flights of absurdism were consigned to the more limited public for his writings. Second, whereas his first Fox shorts had him lecturing to a diegetic audience, the MGM shorts have Benchley giving his lectures direct-to-camera—that is, directly to the filmgoer—a formal switch that abstracts from the exclusive soirees and after-dinner speeches of his earlier appearances. Third and finally, the films now include comic visualizations of the situations that the Benchley lecturer describes, with Benchley himself appearing in them as their put-upon protagonist (commonly under the character name Joe Doakes, described by one critic as “a typical, good-natured, credulous, often-blundering American”).<sup>18</sup> In place of the earlier stratification of social roles dividing Benchley from his audience (both the diegetic audience and the implied viewer), there is now a more complex structuring that collapses stratification into an assumed identity: Benchley is presented not only as a lecturer but also as somebody who experiences the same frustrations that he attributes to his audience. The populism of Benchley’s address thus involves the discursive positing of some annoyance that serves as a



FIGURES 13–15. Benchley’s MGM films typically feature a direct-to-camera presentation, in which Benchley himself appears both as lecturer on life’s petty annoyances (13) and, in the accompanying comic visualizations, as fellow sufferer (14, 15). Frame enlargements from *How to Sleep* (September 1935).

term linking Benchley (whose frustrations are depicted in the comic visualizations accompanying his lecture) to the implied audience (whose same frustrations are assumed by the lecturer). Not only, then, are his screen lectures *about* “the customs and habits of Mr. and Mrs. Everyday America,” but he himself *becomes* an everyman as his audience’s onscreen surrogate (figs. 13–15).<sup>19</sup> What becomes primarily important to the rhetorical operations of his comedy is, then, no longer an absurdist enumeration of incompatibles but a recognition of shared identities.

“The popularity of his shorts,” one magazine profile explained, “is doubtless due to his formula of placing himself in situations which everyone in the audience has already experienced.”<sup>120</sup>

But it is not only the form of his address that has changed here, but also the very modality of humor within the shorts. Benchley may have unwittingly put his finger on the change when he described his new “average man” persona in a 1939 interview, shortly after the launching of his nationally syndicated CBS radio variety program. “‘It is not a question of being a mirror of the times,’ Mr. Benchley explained, ‘but of holding a mirror to nature and permitting man to play the clown he so frequently is. . . . I had to annihilate the specter of smart humorist that trailed me and, in a nutshell, *be just myself or any other of the zany creatures that people this goodly frame, the earth.*’”<sup>121</sup> The key term here is *zany*, as a category of comic behavior that literary theorist Sianne Ngai, in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, has linked to the permanent mutability and role playing that defines labor in modern capitalism—and that Benchley’s comment here posits as the very cornerstone of a shared populist identity in Depression-era America.<sup>122</sup> “All Aboard for Dementia Praecox” was thus the rallying cry for a comedic manifesto published by Benchley in 1934, for which he adopted the pose of a broken-down everyman plagued by “defective judgment,” “retarded perception,” “restrictions in the field of attention,” “lack of motor skill,” and “stupor.”<sup>123</sup> What seems significant here is the way Benchley’s zaniness thereby anticipates a performance mode that, according to Ngai, would flourish primarily in later decades—that strained style of incessant doing that links, say, Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957) to Jim Carrey in *The Cable Guy* (1996)—only here used to translate Depression-era America’s ideology of “averageness” into comic material. It is Ngai’s contention, for example, that zany comedy finds its historic corollary primarily in the experience of “immaterial” labor within the post–World War Two/late-capitalist economy. The way in which information and service sector employees are required to “put affect to work” by performing “friendly reassurance” to customers; how flexible capitalism requires an “absolute adaptability” on the part of its workers, for whom performing a role and doing a job are often one and the same thing; how such a situation moreover places a premium on activity in its own right, irrespective of its material productivity—all of this, Ngai further argues, points to a contemporary “becoming-woman” of post-Fordist employment that takes on qualities paradigmatically associated with domestic work.<sup>124</sup> Zaniness is nothing more nor less than the aesthetic reflex of such a situation.

Yet it is here that the resonance with Benchley’s MGM shorts becomes quite inescapable, and it is perhaps no coincidence that Benchley’s Joe Doakes everyman is—like the “original” zany, the housewife—primarily a figure of the domestic sphere. Only a handful of times do we ever see Doakes at his workplace—for instance, in the opening minutes of *An Hour for Lunch* (March 1939), *Home Early* (May 1939), and the later *Important Business* (April 1944)—but even then it is only in the context of him *leaving* his office, thereby confirming the general pattern.

Elsewhere, he is shown bringing home a litter of puppies for his family in *How to Train a Dog* (July 1936), spending an evening at home while his wife goes out in *An Evening Alone* (May 1938), caring for an infant in *How to Raise a Baby*, growing vegetables in his backyard in *My Tomato* (December 1943), among other house-bound situations. We thus begin to see how, despite Ngai's periodization, zaniness may also have lent itself to a satirical examination of the Depression-era preoccupation with averageness. The zany behaviors of Doakes register a patriarchal perspective on the ways the pursuit of averageness seemingly enmeshed middle-class masculinity in a bewildering set of performances centered upon the private sphere as a site of affective labor.

Perhaps the best translation of these themes in Benchley's filmography comes in *The Day of Rest* (September 1939), whose humor hangs on the conceit of the reversibility of work and rest. In this film, the Joe Doakes character is depicted in his endeavor to enjoy a relaxing Sunday, only to find that relaxation requires a series of performances distinguished from work only by their nonproductive quality. "Working in the so-called garden is another form of so-called relaxation on Sunday," Benchley's narrator wryly informs us at one point; "Moving things up and down from the attic is considered a form of relaxation for Sunday morning," at another. Later, Doakes takes his family out in the automobile for a picnic only to find himself in a traffic jam with "ten thousand other people . . . all headed for the same thing": "The result," we are told, "does not come under the head of relaxation." But it is not only the zaniness of incessant activity that links "relaxation" to the idea of labor, for it further transpires that relaxation is a skill that must be learned, involving above all a sense of timing: one must, in other words, be trained in the labor of efficient relaxation. It is in this sense that the narrator comments at various points that Doakes's "mind has not adapted itself to the idea of relaxation" or that he "doesn't know how to relax," as becomes apparent when Doakes fails to adjust his alarm clock for his weekend lie-in, rises too late to get first dibs on the Sunday paper, or sets out for a picnic at an inopportune time. The conclusion is inevitable: if rest and relaxation turn out to be hard work, then perhaps work is the real respite. As the narrator intones over images of an enervated Joe Doakes struggling to enjoy a game of badminton with his son:

Just think of that nice cool office where he works during the week. A comfortable swivel chair with an electric fan going. A nice water cooler in the corner. This idea that Sunday is a day for strenuous exercise is undermining the health of our nation. It is tearing down the heart tissues of our manhood. And is probably propaganda started by the fascist or communist nations to make our men unfit for military service in case of war. Besides you look so silly doing it.

If, as Ngai comments, the aesthetic of zaniness "is really an aesthetic about work," then this becomes visible in Benchley's MGM shorts in the cross-coupling of rest and labor in New Deal-era America's pursuit of averageness.<sup>125</sup> And this,



VIDEO 3. Clip from *The Day of Rest* (September 1939).

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.28.5>



ultimately, would seem to be the broader lesson of Benchley’s tongue-in-cheek pedagogy, not just in *Day of Rest*: that leisure and labor, two modes of activity that seem separated by a number of sociological divides, are in the final analysis more alike than different (vid. 3).

It is, then, crucial to insist, with Ngai, that the situation in such shorts is not merely one of physical bombardment—of the frustrating effort of moving things around in the attic, for example—but also, and perhaps most centrally, of a kind of affective strain, of the need both to work at relaxation and to put relaxation to work as a performance of suburban “comfort,” for this clarifies the distinctions separating Benchley’s MGM shorts from a more straightforwardly slapstick mode. To be sure, the Depression-era preoccupation with the average could be and was explored as slapstick. A case in point is RKO’s long-lasting *Average Man* series starring Edgar Kennedy (1931–1948), which offers a productive counterpoint to Benchley’s MGM work. Both series embodied averageness in the figure of a white suburban patriarch (according to Louella Parsons, author Sinclair Lewis claimed that the RKO series was based on his 1922 novel *Babbitt*).<sup>126</sup> Yet the Kennedy series’s very first installment, *Lemon Meringue* (August 1931), signaled the intent to do so in a traditional slapstick vein, culminating in a pie fight. Other initial entries in the series continued to stitch the conventionalized tropes of slapstick into the representation of “average” life and leisure: the second in the series, *Thanks Again* (October 1931), revolves around Kennedy’s mishaps with transportation

technologies, here an airplane; the third, *Camping Out* (December 1931), involves a standard “hunting trip” slapstick plot, and so forth. Nor was Kennedy alone in this respect: the slapstick depiction of average life was also prominent in other short-subject lines featuring embattled suburban patriarchs—for instance, the long-running Leon Errol series, also at RKO (1934–1951), as well as Columbia’s Walter Catlett (1934–1940), Charley Chase (1937–1940), and Hugh Herbert (1943–1952) shorts. But this was not exactly the path of Robert Benchley, whose short subjects for MGM proposed an alternate strategy of comedic representation. Whereas slapstick tends paradigmatically to devolve into what Umberto Eco calls the “comic effect”—that is, a kind of laughter that originates from the viewer’s attitude of separation and distance vis-à-vis a hyperbolically physicalized clown—the zaniness of Benchley’s humor worked to establish a more equivalential chain binding viewer and viewer’s surrogate (Benchley/Doakes) in a shared acknowledgment of quotidian grievances—of the hassles of being unable to find, say, the perfect lamp to read a book (*How to Read* [August 1938]), or the perfect temperature for a shower (*How to Start the Day*), or the perfect seat to watch a movie (*A Night at the Movies* [November 1937]).<sup>127</sup> Neither slapstick clown nor sophisticated absurdist, the Benchley of the mid- to late 1930s established a matrix out of which averageness emerged in comic form as an inclusive term of address and an object of civic identification.

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Where, though, does this discussion of Benchley leave an understanding of the relation linking comedic forms to the operations of cinematic mass culture? The early parts of this chapter identified two modes of the film industry’s address to its public: on the one hand, a rhetoric of difference and distinction, as associated with the marketing of metropolitan sophistication; on the other, a more civic-egalitarian rhetoric of equivalence, associated with the industry’s New Deal-era refashioning. But both of these, it can now be seen, were enacted in precisely corresponding ways in the evolving strategies of Benchley’s humor—the logic of difference manifest in the differential rhetoric of absurdism, in the cuckoo enumeration of incompatible signifiers; the logic of equivalence in the imputed solidarity of zany averageness in his “How to” shorts. Changes in Benchley’s modes of rhetoric and address in this way corresponded to and were coterminous with changes in the industry’s imaginary of the mass audience.

Thus did the humorist who had once poured scorn on Hollywood as a place inhabited by “ordinary people” end the decade as one of the nation’s preeminent spokespeople of civic ordinariness. Jack Chertok pointed to this trajectory when he described, as we have seen, how Benchley was “becoming the average man to the public . . . rather than just a comic fellow appealing to sophisticated audiences.”<sup>128</sup> But Chertok’s was, by the late 1930s, just one of many voices to lionize the humorist

as the nation’s favored interpreter of quotidian annoyance. Despite having “a reputation as being a ‘smart’ comedian,” one commentator noted, Benchley now “mirrors the average man.”<sup>129</sup> “One fact is certain,” a critic in the *New York Sun* added, “[Benchley] is forever mimicking Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public,” observing that the humorist now “disclaims being a sophisticated wit at all.”<sup>130</sup> To be sure, Benchley’s “How to” shorts performed their civic pedagogy in motley; still, they did so in a way that acknowledged, rather than merely ridiculed, the idea of a shared commitment to “averageness” through which Depression-era identities were conceived.

Changes in Benchley’s comic persona were in this way intertwined with the embattled trajectory of the short subject during the 1930s as object lessons in the variant forms in which the “masses” were imagined by the era’s culture industries. To quote one of the founding insights of cultural theory: “There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses”—ways of seeing, moreover, that became palpable in the short subject’s changing modes of address and the forms of comicality it sustained.<sup>131</sup> The development of Benchley’s film roles appears, from this perspective, not as a merely personal evolution, but as a reflex of broader film industry endeavors to develop nonslapstick comedic forms pertinent to these different “ways of seeing.” Still, as the example of RKO’s *Average Man* series reminds us, not all companies were quite so quick to give up the slapstick ghost, and in part 2 of this book we will examine in detail how three producers/distributors of slapstick shorts negotiated the changing position takings that reshaped film comedy during these years. How did these companies adapt their operations to a film industry market in which they were increasingly marginalized? What did the “stigma of slapstick” entail for firms that continued to specialize in the genre? It is to these questions that our analysis now turns.