

“The Spice of the Program”

Educational Pictures and the Small-Town Audience

“What the hell’s educational about a comedy?” asked slapstick producer Jack White in an interview toward the end of his life. “Something that was very offensive to me,” he continued, “was [the slogan] . . . ‘This is an Educational Comedy.’ There’s no such thing as educating yourself with a comedy. It’s a stupid name.”¹ The object of White’s ire? The company for which he had produced and directed two-reel shorts for over a decade—the comedy distributor with the most unlikely of names: Educational Pictures.

The company had been formed in 1915 as the Educational Films Corporation by real-estate man Earle W. Hammons, with the intent indicated by its name: to provide educational subjects for school, church, and other nontheatrical purposes. But by the late 1910s Hammons had realized little profit from this idea and began to target the commercial field, setting in motion a process of expansion that would see Educational become the dominant short-comedy distributor of the late silent era. “It did not take me long to find out that the demand [for educational films] did not exist and that we could not survive by doing that alone,” Hammons later recalled.² As early as the 1918–1919 season, Educational had begun to diversify its product lines, adding Happy Hooligan and Silk Hat Harry cartoons to its weekly program of travelogues and informational subjects.³ In April 1920, Hammons signed director Jack White and comedian Lloyd Hamilton from Fox’s Sunshine Comedies to produce two-reel comedies under the brand name Mermaid Comedies, and began immediately taking further strides into the comedy market.⁴ The program for Educational’s 1920–1921 season, which represented the company’s first year of general commercial release, included four comedy series: the Mermaids, produced by White; C. L. Chester’s animal comedies, featuring “Snooky the Humanzee”; C. C. Burr’s Mastodon brand, which produced a series of “Torchy” comedies starring Johnny Hines; and the

output of pioneer comedy producer Al Christie. In 1921, Educational picked up for distribution the Punch comedies starring Chester Conklin and Louis Fazenda, among other independently produced series. By the mid-1920s, White's production operations had expanded into what film historian Richard M. Roberts has called a "sort-of General Motors of comedy," offering one- and two-reel product lines to fit all budgets, from the top-of-the-line Mermaids (budgeted at around twenty thousand dollars each) to the mid-range Tuxedo Comedies (around ten thousand dollars each) through to the one-reel Cameo Comedies (five thousand apiece).⁵ At its most successful, in 1927, Educational's distribution network extended to some 13,500 theaters (the "widest distribution of any of the [film] companies," Hammons boasted); its output featured two of the era's most noted comedy producers—Jack White and Al Christie, soon to be joined by Mack Sennett, who switched distribution from Pathé to Educational in 1928—along with top-flight comics like Lloyd Hamilton, Lupino Lane, Dorothy Devore, and Larry Semon, as well as the most popular animated star of the 1920s, Pat Sullivan's Felix the Cat.⁶ Yet, within a few years of its transition to sound, the company's reputation had sunk. "Educational . . . has released the unfunniest comedies I have ever seen" is one typical exhibitor's report from the mid-1930s. "Another poor comedy from Educational. Why don't they stop making such stuff?" is another. "Educational should have some sort of medal for making the poorest line of shorts of the year," ran a further complaint.⁷ To the extent that the company is even acknowledged in film histories today, it is largely as a byword for the perceived wretchedness of short comedies from the early sound era. ("If one searched for a key word to describe the Educational comedies of the 1930s, the best one might be 'cheap,'" wrote Leonard Maltin in his 1972 survey, *The Great Movie Shorts*.)⁸

This chapter seeks to answer several straightforward questions: What happened? How did the most successful independent short-subject distributor of the late silent era flounder so quickly following the shift to sound? In addressing these issues, the chapter seeks not simply to provide an account of the specific missteps and obstacles that undermined Hammons's organization, but also to use that account as a test case for my broader interrogation of the historiographic models that have framed the slapstick short's sound-era decline. By and large, most historians have explained slapstick's changing fortunes during this period in one of two ways: as essentializing aesthetic history (arguing that sound killed the "art" of comic pantomime) or as a kind of social Darwinist industrial history (examining how independent producers of slapstick shorts were squeezed out by the vertically integrated majors). In pursuing my investigation, I want to unpack these models to show how their underlying premises in each case bespeak changing patterns of cultural capital in Depression-era America. The history of Educational Pictures lends itself quite well to this more expansive consideration of historical determinants: a shorts company, it shifts understanding of slapstick's fate away from the individual biographies of the feature-length clown "artists" (away, that is, from the

obduracy of a Chaplin, the hubris of a Langdon, the divorce and alcoholism of a Keaton as explanatory factors); an independent, it clarifies the complex adjustments to market conditions necessary to sustain the company’s audience against the distribution might of the majors. In both respects, it opens onto a neglected aspect of Depression-era cultural politics whose battleground, we will see, was the very terrain on which “hokum” thrived.

“AN ENTIRELY NEW FORM OF ENTERTAINMENT”:
EDUCATIONAL AND THE TRANSITION TO SOUND

Perhaps nothing is more established than the perception that slapstick’s decline was, first and foremost, a matter of aesthetics—a falling off, as it is often framed, from the beauties of comic pantomime toward the blunt physicality of, say, the Three Stooges. “To put it unkindly”—James Agee wrote in his famous 1949 *Life* essay, “Comedy’s Greatest Era”—“the only thing wrong with screen comedy today is that it takes place on a screen which talks.”⁹ The explanatory framework, we have seen, is one familiar from classical film theory, pitting the putative realism of sound at loggerheads with an idea of art and judging sound an obstacle to the expressive possibilities of comic performance.¹⁰ It is a perception that Charlie Chaplin clearly shared, declaring in 1929 that talkies were “ruining the great beauty of silence” and famously avoiding synchronized dialogue until his 1940 Hitler parody, *The Great Dictator*.¹¹ And it is a position that would be taken up in subsequent decades by critics like Gerald Mast and Walter Kerr, in language that frequently echoed the insights of film theorist Rudolph Arnheim. Silence, Kerr argued, was “the subtraction [from reality] that guaranteed films would be, so long as they remained mute, flights of fancy”—a premise that cribs from Arnheim to define silent comedy’s special artistry as a “fantasy of fact.”¹²

The argument that sound killed the art of slapstick has been a hugely prevalent one, and there can be no doubt that comic filmmakers experienced this transition as a challenge of the first order. What can be queried, however, are the terms through which that challenge was experienced and negotiated on the ground, as it were, and it is here that a closer look at Educational Pictures can prove helpful. Amid the great complexity of the company’s transition to talking pictures, two facts about the aesthetic implications of sound technology stand out. First, Educational’s leading filmmakers were primarily preoccupied not with an idea of comedic *art*—the concern of later critics like Agee and Kerr, as well as pretentious exceptions like Chaplin—but instead with sound’s implications for comic pace and tempo. Second, in the case of those exceptions, it was *sound*, not silence, to which the concept of art was most commonly attached—at least, as will be shown, during the initial phase of Educational’s transition. In both respects, moreover, these positions took place within the context of Hammons’s hesitations and missteps in adapting to sound, and it is here that analysis must begin.

The story of Earle Hammons's initial reaction to sound reads like a stereotype of the industry conservative who failed to see the new technology as anything but a passing fad—at least as Jack White told the tale. “Hammons wouldn’t go for sound when everybody else did,” White remembered. “I said, ‘This will kill us if we don’t make talkies right now.’ He said, ‘It won’t kill me. I don’t agree with you.’ He made a big mistake.”¹³ Whether or not the characterization is valid is unclear. What is clear is that it was not until January 1928 that Hammons elected to swim with the tide of technological change, by which time most of the major companies had already spent a year in a coordinated investigation of the various sound systems and were on the brink of deciding which of the competing technologies to adapt. Yet it was this exact moment that Hammons unwisely chose to beat the other studios to the punch by gambling on David R. Hochreich’s Vocafilem Corporation of America, a sound-on-disc system that the majors had refused even to consider after a disastrous trade debut at New York’s Longacre Theater just five months earlier. (The Vocafilem system had at that time been criticized for a “great deal of static” and amplifiers “a bit out of whack with one registering unusually loud and another so faintly it could scarcely be heard”).¹⁴ A little over a month later, however, Hammons learned that Paramount, First National, United Artists, Loew’s-MGM, and Universal had all decided to sign up for Western Electric’s sound-on-film technology. Not wishing to be left out of the pack, he immediately broke his Vocafilem contract and joined the Western Electric contingent.

Such ill-advised wavering ensured that Hammons lost the competitive advantage he had sought in the Vocafilem arrangement and allowed the Warners’ Vitaphone shorts to further steal their lead in the changing market. By the time Educational began releasing its first sound shorts—with Mack Sennett’s *The Lion’s Roar* on December 12, 1928—a number of the vertically integrated majors were also wetting their feet in the field of sound short production (MGM’s *Metro Movietone Acts* debuting in September 1928 and Paramount’s first sound shorts appearing the following January), while Warners had upped the frequency of its Vitaphone releases to four per week. “It was too little, too late,” White recalled. “[Hammons] allowed Warners to make at least 250 talking shorts—musicals, etc.—and when he came along a year later with a talking comedy under his arm, exhibitors said, ‘We don’t need you.’ It hurt him financially. He had a chance a year earlier for us to make sound comedies.”¹⁵

Just as important, these hesitations allowed Vitaphone to define the possibilities and potential of the early sound short, at a time when Educational could only wait on the sidelines. By the 1928–1929 season, as we have seen, Warners was already marketing its shorts in terms of a new and influential reading of distinction premised on a Broadway model of urbane sophistication; few shorts companies, Educational included, remained entirely insulated from these trends as they prepared to make the jump into sound. Yet understandably, Hammons’s organization was just as invested in trying to sustain the slapstick comedians and series that

ADVENT OF TALKING PICTURES OPENS NEW FIELD FOR SCREEN

First of Coronet Talking Comedies, "The Eligible Mr. Bangs," Is Last Word in New Screen Art.

(Prepared as advance publicity story)

That the advent of talking pictures has opened up entirely new fields for motion picture producers is evidenced by the announcement of the formation of Coronet Talking Comedies, a Los Angeles corporation, which will produce a series of six comedy playlets using one-act stage material written by well-known writers.

Distribution of the pictures has been secured by Educational Film Exchanges, Inc., and the first of the subjects, "The Eligible Mr. Bangs," is already finished and on the screen. It will be shown at the..... Theatre.....



EDWARD EVERETT HORTON.
For Electro Order No. 5732-E
For Mat (Free) Order No. 5732-M

FIGURE 16. Press sheet publicity for *The Eligible Mr. Bangs* (January 1929), the first in Educational's *Coronet Talking Comedy* series, starring Edward Everett Horton. Courtesy Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

had long been its stock-in-trade. The result, as it played out in studio publicity, was a confusing and contradictory sense of both change *and* continuity regarding the company's first sound releases. On the side of change, Educational's first sound season kowtowed to the new Broadway model by including a new line of six *Coronet Talking Comedy* playlets. Based on stage farces and starring Edward Everett Horton, the series was promoted in ways that asserted the films' theatrical associations, in diametric opposition to the older slapstick credo (fig. 16). "Subtlety, a quality long missing in short comedies, has at last arrived on the screen via the talking picture," announced the exhibitors' press sheet for Coronet's *Prince Gabby* (September 1929), a two-reel comedy about a gentleman burglar, continuing: "Screen comedy for the past two decades has been a thing of fast action, broad situations and physical 'gags.' The new talking picture permits of subtlety of expression through carefully written, clever dialogue and the artistry of the actor in delivering the spoken lines."¹⁶ Indeed, although Horton himself was no stranger to two-reel comedy (having appeared the previous season in a series of starring shorts produced by Harold Lloyd's Hollywood Productions), Coronet publicity chose to emphasize *not* his previous film successes, which went unmentioned, but his theatrical background and experience, describing him as, for instance, a "stage favorite of many up-to-date successes" and a performer "with a successful stage career to his credit."¹⁷ Theatricality was evident, too, in the films' visual design, which, with proscenium-like staging, multiple-camera shooting, and unbroken interior spaces, was seemingly designed to accentuate, rather than mask, the films' stage sources: a representative instance, *Ask Dad* (February 1929)—the second

in the series—takes place entirely in a secretary’s office, with “action” limited to characters’ entrances and exits, and an editing rate sluggish even for the early sound period (average shot length 20.7 seconds, compared to an industry-wide average of 10.8 for the period 1928–1933).¹⁸

On the side of continuity, however, were those filmmakers and observers who saw these same developments as jeopardizing the formal norms and achievements of silent-era slapstick and struggled to maintain them. The key battleground here emerged around the issue of pace—understandably, given the leaden editing tempo of such virtual theater as the Coronet shorts. Certainly, no other feature of early sound comedy drew as much specific comment from exhibitors, who remained adamant in their complaints about tempo: “The trouble is with action,” noted one Idaho exhibitor about recent short comedies. “It is slow, and the stunts are hooked together in a slow, forced manner.” “And then there’s comedy,” lamented another showman discussing recent short features. “Here’s where sound has had the most stultifying effect.”¹⁹

Such complaints were hardly limited to comedy. A number of well-known technological difficulties in synchronizing dialogue, prior to 1930, prompted a more or less continual discussion of sound’s flattening effect on tempo, regardless of genre: limited mobility for cameras housed in soundproofing blimps, limited actors’ movement before the adoption of boom mikes, deliberate and slow dialogue readings to ensure registration—all of these posed problems for what film historian Lea Jacobs calls the “rhythmic control of cinema” across live-action genres.²⁰ Yet if slapstick remained a special case (where sound had been “most stultifying”), this was because the form had come to be codified during the silent era through a technical convention that sound disallowed: a higher frame-rate for projection. By the 1920s, comedies were typically being projected at a notably faster speed than used during shooting—with a shooting rate ranging anywhere from twelve to twenty frames per second, with variation for effect, and a projection speed of around twenty-two to twenty-four—resulting in an overall buoyancy of comic movement. (Dramatic genres would be projected much closer to the shooting rate, usually at around eighteen to twenty frames per second.) Yet with the coming of sound the demands of synchronization and a stable sound pitch meant that filmic time could no longer be a flexible value; the standardization of motorized cameras and projectors mitigated against the undercranking effects on which silent comedy had depended.²¹ It was, then, not only dialogue scenes that flattened pace in slapstick, but the technological apparatus of sound cinema itself.

One can sketch some approaches to these dilemmas through a brief survey of Educational’s filmmakers. For few of Hammons’s top-producing talents were these issues so pressing as for Jack White, the company’s longest-standing producer and a filmmaker with a particular reputation for “fast action” slapstick. The transition to sound not only saw White’s return to the director’s chair for the first time since 1922—for a series of five *Jack White Talking Comedies*, beginning with the noisily titled *Zip! Boom! Bang!* (March 1929)—but also entailed the challenge of

reworking his "fast action" approach within new formal and technological parameters. "Years ago Mr. White introduced a new style in comedy making—'fast action'—meaning that something happened every minute," ran publicity for the series, before reassuring readers that "he continues his fast action in the making of dialogue pictures."²² On the one hand, this meant restricting the dialogue to bare essentials, an approach that became something of a commonplace in the era's literature on sound tempo.²³ As White put it in a press release at the time, "Fast action . . . has come to mean something entirely different since talking pictures arrived. Where in the silent comedies it meant visually fast action, it now means the . . . fast development of plot and rapidity in establishing situations. This means that dialogue for these comedies must be very carefully edited and pruned of all superfluous words."²⁴ More distinctive, however, was White's response to the genre-specific problem of frame rates, which, he later claimed, prompted him to don his inventor's cap. "I had an invention that had to do with speeding up or slowing sound," he recalled. "I had an electrical engineer draw the plan up whereby I could change speed without making the sound squeak, affecting only the tempo [of the action]. I thought maybe everybody would use it, but nobody cared for it, so I was out \$100 to the lawyer and nothing came of it."²⁵ Whether or not White ever truly tried to develop such a device is unclear; certainly, the anecdote testifies to the creative strategies through which filmmakers often doggedly sought to bend sound cinema to more familiar comic principles.

A quite different response was to offset the normalization of slapstick pacing through the expressivity of sound. Here, the soundtrack was approached less as a limitation to be transcended than as a new resource to be harnessed to the genre's established stylization of physical action. One sees something of this in Mack Sennett's first season with Hammons, where, much like White, he returned to regular directing duties for the first time in years for a series of *Mack Sennett Talking Comedies*.²⁶ Press releases from Educational's publicity offices may have emphasized Sennett's excitement at the possibilities of comic dialogue ("Dialogue," he was reported as saying, "opens to the producer of the heretofore 'silent' pictures, the immense field of verbal humor"), but, to judge from available evidence, it was the use of sound *effects* that interested him more, opening up avenues for underscoring the frenzied gags that had long defined his comic style. "Every comedy situation," he insisted, "can be immensely improved by proper sound effects, such as the roar of lions, the rumble of an approaching train or the crash of breaking dishes."²⁷ Film after film from Sennett's first season was promoted in terms of the capacity of sound effects, not fundamentally to alter the principles of comic cinema but rather to "Enhance the Effectiveness" (as one promotional article put it) of Sennett's knockabout stock-in-trade; "the sound of a starting motor, the crack of a stick over a comic's head, music or the roar of a speeding train" all now produced results "better than any comedy creation that the stage or screen has seen heretofore."²⁸ Programmatically, Sennett's first sound short, *The Lion's Roar*

(working title *Peace and Quiet*), was conceived unrepentantly as a picture about noise. As described in the earliest written draft (and followed more or less closely in the finished film):

Open up on title: PEACE AND QUIET lap-dissolve to

Close up of an old automobile going along a cobblestone street, with one rear tire off and running on the rim, making a terrific rattle

Lap to shot of a big concrete mixer in noisy action

Lap to a workman or electric riveter on new building

Lap to a general shot of busy city street, with usual noises—street car bells, auto horns, newsboys shouting papers, etc. from which—

Lap dissolve to

INTERIOR: CLARENCE'S ROOM IN CITY (DAY).²⁹

For the rest of the film, Clarence (Johnny Burke) flees the bedlam of urban life to spend a weekend in the country with his beloved (Daphne Pollard), only for his “peace and quiet” to be shattered when he finds himself trapped up a tree during a hunting trip, perched above a bellowing mountain lion. The gag here, of course, is that the country is ultimately no less free of din and disturbance than the city, but at a deeper level, Sennett was simply using sound to cock the same snook that he had been pulling for close to twenty years, creating a carnival of aural cacophony as a straightforward functional equivalent for his trademark visual chaos (fig. 17).³⁰

Needless to say, Sennett was hardly alone in appropriating sound effects to established knockabout procedures. It was, in fact, the increasingly widespread use of such effects that provoked Harold Lloyd, who had just completed production on the silent feature *Welcome Danger* (1929), to reshoot the entire film for sound. As he recalled, “Sound was just coming in, and inconsequential things were getting tremendous laughs—like frying eggs and ice tinkling in a glass. They’d howl at that. So I said, here we’re working our heads off trying to get funny ideas, and they’re getting them from these sound effects. I said that maybe we had missed the boat and should make *Welcome Danger* over.”³¹ The foundation for such an effects-laden approach had, in fact, already been firmly established by silent-era musical practice, when various noise-making devices—called “traps”—were commonly used in film accompaniment, especially in comedies. Originating in live performances like vaudeville, the “trap drummer” had been responsible for supplying sound effects in sync with the onscreen comic action throughout the silent period, using an assortment of noisemakers for this purpose, from simple coconut shells to more baroque devices.³² (A cue sheet compiled for Sennett’s silent short *Smith’s Modiste Shop* [December 1927] suggests just how elaborate such effects could be, including cues for the sound of a boy’s slingshot, a smashed ink bottle, and a meat chopping machine.)³³ The practice also—at least by the 1920s—had created significant distinctions according to cultural value, whereby “low” cinematic genres like comedy or animation were permitted a kind of anti-illusionist, nonrealist sound accompaniment (e.g., a slide whistle to accompany a slip) that would have been considered



FIGURE 17. Johnny Burke (with gun) and Billy Bevan, finding no peace in the countryside in Mack Sennett's first sound short, *The Lion's Roar* (December 1928). Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

the height of vulgarity in “serious” drama.³⁴ Thus, whereas Sennett’s early sound comedies built their soundtracks almost entirely out of *realist* diegetic effects (“the roar of lions . . . the crash of breaking dishes”), the idea of integrating more illusion-destroying “trap”-style noises was a predictable next step—an approach most notably perfected a few years later, not at Educational but at Columbia’s short-subjects division, reorganized under the supervision of Jack White’s brother Jules in 1933.³⁵ Under the stewardship of sound effects man Joe Henrie, Columbia’s shorts developed an elaborate grammar of knockabout clamor—nowhere more effective than in the shorts of the Three Stooges—translating the quick-paced stylization of silent-era comic action into violent sonic outbursts: face slaps accentuated by the crack of a whip; eye poking by two plunks of a ukulele; ear twisting by the turning of a ratchet; head bonking by a wooden tempo block; blows to the stomach by the sound of a kettledrum, all in quick succession.³⁶ (Citing just such effects, Jules White would later claim that it was the early sound period, not the silent era, that was the “Golden Age” of slapstick comedy.)³⁷

Still, it is at Educational that we see these adjustments occurring in real time—in tandem with the introduction of the technology and not a few years later, as at

Columbia—and the process sheds an often surprising light on how the company’s filmmakers used sound less to pursue new directions than to sustain and elaborate upon the old. For all the bluster with which producers like Jack White and Sennett spoke of sound as ushering in “an entirely new form of entertainment” (the quote is White’s), the reality was that the new technology was more typically called upon to shore up the established premises of slapstick filmmaking, and not only in the realm of tempo and trap drumming.³⁸ Such is the case, for instance, in Sennett’s third sound film, *The Old Barn* (February 1929), in which sound prompted a surprise return to the procedures of the comic melodrama. A founding staple of Sennett’s comic philosophy, the burlesque melodrama had flourished during the filmmaker’s late Biograph/early Keystone years as a way of tweaking the moral terms of Griffithian melodrama, blending the thrills of D. W. Griffith’s trademark race-to-the-rescue finales with the comic effect of parodic imitation.³⁹ Yet, whereas the silent burlesques had typically generated humor from characters’ misreading of *visual* signs—for instance, Mabel Normand mistakenly believing a curtain’s chance movement to have been caused by a burglar’s hand in Sennett’s Biograph short *Help! Help!* (April 1912)⁴⁰—the comic plot of *The Old Barn* supplements this with a series of misheard *aural* cues. In the film’s climactic nighttime sequence, star Johnny Burke leads the guests of a rural boarding house to an old barn to search for an escaped convict, resulting in a series of sound gags in which the would-be detectives mishear an old car’s wheezing horn as a man’s groan, a burst balloon as a gunshot, and so forth. The same principle was revisited later in 1929, in *The Constable* (August), in which small-town constable Harry Gribbon and rail agent Andy Clyde spend the night at the station to protect a shipment of money. In a protracted comic sequence—the scripting of which involved Sennett himself—the two characters come to suspect falsely that they are under attack from burglars, first when they see a curtain moving (actually caused by a kitten), subsequently when they hear the explosion of gunshot cartridges (accidentally dropped into a lit stove).⁴¹ As is typical of Sennett’s earlier burlesques, the sequence ends with the unmasking of the error and the protagonists’ embarrassment: a group of train passengers enters the station building to see the commotion, Gribbon pulls back the curtain to expose the “burglar,” and a harmless kitten is revealed. “Kitten, you’re under arrest,” one passenger snidely remarks.⁴²

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It is evident, then, that, despite sound’s unmistakable impact on tempo and pacing, the new technology *could* also function within—and even elaborate upon—canonized tropes and comic formulas. But, if this is the case, then it is equally evident that slapstick’s “decline” in the early sound era needs to be understood in terms that go beyond questions of comedic form. To a greater degree than has often been thought, sound *was* assimilable to the formal norms of slapstick film, and in that sense, what changed must also be sought outside the properties of the comic

texts themselves. Similarly, it will not do to see the various approaches discussed above solely as a matter of formal continuity versus change, the former represented in Sennett and White’s endeavors to harness sound to established slapstick technique, the latter by the “new style” of playlet comedy, exemplified at Educational by the Coronet films. Such a characterization risks obscuring the degree to which broader discourses of taste and cultural politics were also implicated in that division: change, at Educational, meant adapting short comedy to the format of theatrical farce, while continuity implied keeping faith with the knockabout credo of “fast action, broad situations and physical ‘gags.’” The coming of sound can thus be seen to have marked an intensification in long-standing divisions separating traditions of sophisticated humor from the sensationalism of “low” comedy traditions, divisions that, with the transition to sound, came to be associated with alternative uses for the new technology: sophistication was equated with the refinements of dialogue, slapstick with the immediacy of sound effects, with the noisy impact of misfiring gun cartridges as well as kettledrum bonks and the like.⁴³

It is moreover possible at this point to see more precisely how the later aesthetic readings of slapstick’s decline offered by Agee and Kerr go wrong. For they radically misperceive how the idea of “art” was located within contexts of production and reception at the time. The coming of sound was not primarily experienced as a shift *away* from comic artistry—away, that is, from the formal beauties of silent pantomime, as critics like Kerr would later argue. If anything, as publicity for the Coronet series makes clear, sound could be and was promoted as enabling a shift *toward* art, toward the “artistry” of “clever, subtle comedy” as exemplified by dialogue humor in theatrical-style farce. Correspondingly, what was feared to have been lost with sound was not “art,” but its opposite—that is, the broad, popular style of slapstick in which producers like White and Sennett had formerly specialized and which they sought valiantly to sustain in the new era. Exhibitors who lamented the impact of sound thus typically spoke not of artistry, nor of the decline of pantomime, but more straightforwardly of the need for a return to “good old-fashioned” or “dandy old-fashioned slapstick.”⁴⁴ The appropriate dichotomy for comprehending sound’s impact on short-format comedy—at least as it was experienced by filmmakers and audiences at the time—thus has very little to do with the Arnheimian division of art versus realism; rather it is the hierarchical gulf that Gilbert Seldes identified in a 1932 essay in which he divided America’s comic sensibility into sophisticated and urbane versus populist and provincial modes, a division and an essay to which this chapter will be returning.⁴⁵

“OUR PRODUCT WAS BLOCKED”: EDUCATIONAL AND THE SHORT-SUBJECT MARKET

Such, then, are the difficulties that emerge from a brief meditation on formal readings of slapstick’s decline, but similar themes soon surface, rearranged in a

somewhat different framework, from our second explanatory model, industrial history. In his economic study of the Hal Roach Studios, Richard Lewis Ward has shown how the move by the major studios into the production and distribution of short subjects during the mid-1920s, led by Paramount and MGM, effectively shut independently produced shorts out of the major-owned houses, consigning them to the less profitable terrain of nonaffiliated chains and small-town exhibitors.⁴⁶ Independent short companies survived these new economic realities only to the extent that they entered into alliances with the majors. In 1926, for instance, Hal Roach jumped at the opportunity to affiliate with Loew's-MGM and, in consequence, prospered during the 1930s. Mack Sennett, meanwhile, was less successful. Rumors that he was to enter into a new combination with Paramount had circulated since the mid-1920s but only came to pass several years later, in 1932, when Sennett jumped ship from Educational to produce a series of Paramount comedies. When Paramount declined to renew that arrangement for a second season, the Sennett studio immediately floundered, unable to find a new distributor; within months, it was declared bankrupt in federal court in Los Angeles.

Ward's analysis provides a crucial entry point for any assessment of the fate of the sound short during this period; yet, inasmuch as his focus is on the Hal Roach Studios, it understandably offers less detail on the fortunes of the independent companies that, lacking the lifejacket of major studio backing, faced a harder struggle to stay afloat within the turbulent exhibition market of Depression-era America. Initially, Educational might have seemed to be in a fairly secure position; the company was, after all, primarily organized as a distributor rather than a producing concern and, at its most successful in the mid-1920s, had developed its own network of some 13,500 theaters for its films, including contracts with major chains like West Coast Theatres, Stanley, Loew's, and biggest of all, Paramount (from which Hammons estimated his company received "one-tenth of our gross").⁴⁷ Yet that network soon proved unreliable. As early as 1927, Hammons was publicly voicing his fears that, following their shift into short-subject production, the majors would now block Educational product from their theaters. "Paramount-Famous-Lasky are going into the releasing of short subjects," Hammons explained to a class of Harvard business graduates in a series of film industry lectures organized by Joseph P. Kennedy. "It is only natural to expect that their theatre department will book all their short reels. These theatres have been a source of large revenue for our company, and we are confronted with the problem of retaining that revenue."⁴⁸ Jack White later remembered how quickly such fears were realized: "When Metro started production of shorts and comedies, all the other majors followed suit," he explained. "Our product was blocked. . . . So even though we had captured the comedy market and, by the exhibitors' own admission, had saved their shows time and time again, they had to play the majors' shorts in order to get their features."⁴⁹

One obvious tactic was for Educational to respond in kind, encroaching on the majors' bailiwick—that is, feature-length films—even as the majors were advancing

into shorts. In the fall of 1928, Educational did just that, purchasing a 50 percent interest in World Wide Pictures, a new feature distributor formed with the intent to deal “exclusively in films produced in countries other than the US.”⁵⁰ Hammons next expanded his feature interests by brokering the amalgamation of World Wide with Sono-Art Productions, an independent feature producer, in 1929. Then, in the spring of 1931, he brought another feature company into the mix, this time folding L. A. Young’s Tiffany Pictures into the Sono Art–World Wide combine. While so much expansion may not have been wise at the height of the Depression, it did result in a brief spike in investor confidence, as stock in the company jumped almost twenty points following the Tiffany merger.⁵¹ It also saw Mack Sennett’s return to feature-length filmmaking, for what would be the final time in his career. Scarcely was the ink dry on the Tiffany deal than it was announced that Mack Sennett would “produce and direct” a feature starring the blackface comedy team Moran and Mack (also called the Two Black Crows)—a move that may have been designed to placate Sennett, who was already considering leaving the Educational fold.⁵² That film eventually materialized as the eight-reel *Hypnotized*, released under the World Wide banner to favorable reviews during Christmas week of 1932. Yet it was already clear by this point that Hammons’s involvement in features was not working, as World Wide was proving unable to fulfill its exhibitors’ contracts. Soon trade press articles were reporting that “exhibitors refus[ed] to play Educational shorts because the company is . . . not releasing the full quota of World Wide features,” and Hammons eventually cut ties with the company, which limped on through the 1930s by distributing a dwindling number of imported features through states’ rights (including some classics like Jean Renoir’s 1937 *La Grande Illusion*).⁵³

If Hammons’s organization was to succeed in the business circumstances of the early sound era, then it would have to be on the strengths of its short subjects alone and their competitive appeal to exhibitors neither affiliated nor contracted with the majors. Yet, even here, the economic circumstances of the Depression provided a further turn of the screw, as independent theater owners now began embracing the policy of double billing in an attempt to boost attendance. It could hardly have been a surprise that Hammons would emerge as one of the leading voices in the battle against double bills, time and again using the trade press as a bully pulpit to denounce the practice (“The greatest evil the industry has ever known,” “an insidious evil,” “demoralizing . . . [for] our industry” are some of his quoted opinions).⁵⁴ Hammons also moved quickly to take publicity steps seemingly designed with the loyalty of smaller exhibitors in mind. One of these—a personal tour of the exhibition situation in the Midwest in 1932—left Hammons optimistically forecasting “a steady increase in grosses,” although no evidence survives to indicate exactly what cities and towns he visited.⁵⁵ Also oriented toward the small-town theater owner was a series of Educational advertisements appearing in the trade press that spring. “It Sounds Like a Bargain Once,” the ads admitted, but the more sinister truth, they implied, was that double bills were insidiously undermining family values.

One showed a cartoon family of moviegoers bored and angry at having to tolerate two features on a single bill; another implied that double features were the choice only of sinister-looking bachelors; yet another quoted a Mrs. Eunice McClure, of the Illinois Federation of Women's Clubs, claiming that double bills were responsible for making "children too weary to tell [their parents] what they have seen" and were keeping "entire families . . . away from the theatre" (fig. 18).⁵⁶

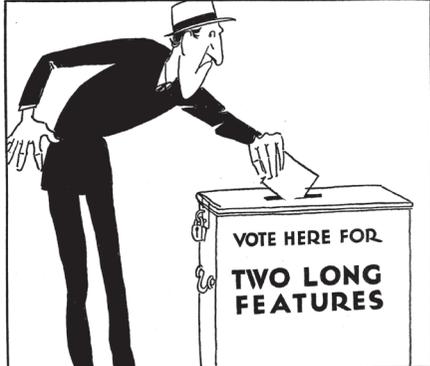
Such advertisements arguably represent the short-subject industry's most vociferous effort to exploit the rhetoric of consumer protection in opposition to duals—discussed in the previous chapter—and they did so by directly appealing to smaller exhibitors' dependence on the family trade. Unlike metropolitan theaters, which could profit by targeting specific demographics, small-town and neighborhood theaters had to attract the entire potential audience for each film; the way to do that, at least according to these ads, was to ensure "the variety that children and adults demand" by screening "a program of one good feature and several of Educational's short subjects."⁵⁷ (Educational in fact repeated this publicity strategy in the summer of 1937, with a series of four ads blaming an epidemic of "doubleitis" for everything from job absenteeism among family breadwinners to housewives' refusal to make breakfast.)⁵⁸

Hammons was also a pacesetter in advocating for diversified appeal as a front against the lure of double bills. As we have seen, the diversification of short subjects encompassed a range of intertwined motives during the early sound period: if it was initially a means for exhibitors to sustain standards of variety in the growing absence of live acts, then within a few years it had become a tactic for short-subject companies to stave off competition from duals.⁵⁹ Accordingly, in 1932, Hammons began explicitly promoting diversified programs as a way to combat "ruinous" duals, announcing for the 1932–1933 season "a program of short subjects offering . . . a greater variety of subject matter than ever before in [the company's] history."⁶⁰ A comparison with the firm's output in the two preceding seasons shows that this was not mere rhetoric. For 1930–1931, for instance, Educational's eleven series had included only three that were not live-action comedies: the animated *Terry-Toons* and *Hodge-Podge* series and the *William J. Burns Detective Mysteries*, all one-reelers. Two seasons later, the total number of series had expanded to nineteen, of which more than half were not live-action comedies: the two one-reel animated series—*Terry-Toons* and *Hodge-Podge*; two new musical series—the two-reel *Kendall de Vally Operalogues* ("World famous operas brought to the screen in tabloid form"), and Reinald Werrenrath's one-reel *Spirit of the Campus* films ("Showing the life and spirit of our famous universities, with their songs sung by the noted opera and radio baritone"); three scenic and educational series—*Camera Adventures*, *Bray's Naturgraphs*, and *Battle for Life*; the one-reel entertainment

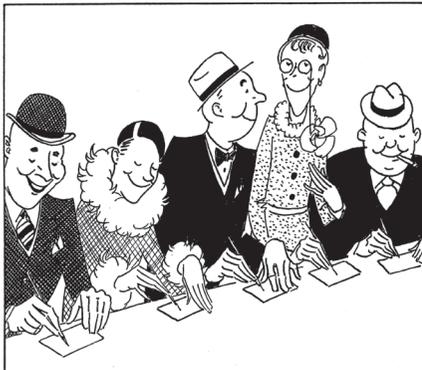
THE PUBLIC'S PREFERENCE IS CLEAR



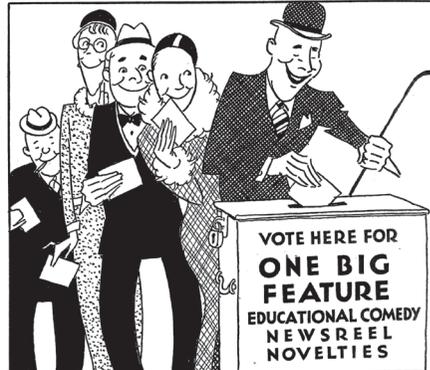
THERE IS NO CHANCE OF MISTAKING THE VERDICT



WHEREVER PUBLIC OPINION IS RECORDED, IT'S A LANDSLIDE



NEWSPAPER READERS, CLUB MEMBERS, THEATRE PATRONS, ALL GIVE . . .



A TREMENDOUS MAJORITY IN FAVOR OF THE DIVERSIFIED PROGRAM

More showmen are applying the "give the public what it wants" rule to the double feature question. More patrons are being asked to express their opinions. And everywhere the balloting is a positive demand for diversified entertainment. You'll keep your audience—and yourself—happier if you meet the public's wishes with a good variety show...one fine feature, one of *Educational's* rip-roaring two-reel comedies and plenty of novelties selected from *Educational's* one-reel pictures. Try it now and prove for yourself that it's "what the public wants."

EDUCATIONAL FILM EXCHANGES, Inc.



E·W·HAMMONS
President

FIGURE 18. One of Educational's anti-double-bill advertisements, from *Motion Picture Herald*, April 30, 1932.

newsreel *Broadway Gossip*; two series recycling silent film footage with ironic commentary from humorists Harry Miller and Lew Lehr—the serial satire, *The Great Hokum Mystery* (“It was once a thr-r-r-illing drama, but now . . . it is a comedy riot”), and the nostalgia series, *Do You Remember?* (“Memories of the Gay Nineties at their gayest. With a line of chatter by Lew Lehr and Harry Miller that will keep any audience in an uproar of laughter”); and the two-reel *Gleason’s Sport Featquettes*, a short-lived attempt to fuse the format of the sports short with comedy narratives. Moreover, of the eight live-action comic series on the 1932–1933 program, at least one departed substantially from conventional slapstick—the one-reel *Baby Burlesks* (“Satires on the big screen hits, enacted by tiny tots,” starring a four-year-old Shirley Temple in what was her screen debut).⁶¹

Yet even this bid for diversity failed to provide a toehold for the company, saddled as it was with a number of underperforming assets. Not only was the World Wide feature slate creating widespread headaches for exhibitors, but the Christie Film Company (which had returned to Educational in 1931 after three seasons with Paramount) was providing an additional drag on profitability, having unwisely invested much of its assets in the sound conversion of the faltering Metropolitan Studios. The last of the large independent short producers still outside the majors’ control, Hammons’s organization was finally forced to relinquish its independence early in 1933, when Educational’s creditors, led by Chase Bank and Electrical Research Products Inc. (ERPI), stepped in to restructure the company. Educational was required to close all of its exchanges (a reduction to overhead of some twenty thousand dollars per week) and immediately entered into a life-saving merger with the Fox Film Corporation.⁶² The company’s product would now be distributed through Fox’s distribution network, while Fox took over Educational’s existing exhibition contracts.⁶³

One positive consequence of the new arrangement, according to the trade press, was “a material rise of bookings [of Educational films] into first-runs in New York,” as Educational films now had access to Fox-affiliated theaters.⁶⁴ Crucially, though, the deal with Fox did nothing toward solving the double-feature “evil,” and Educational’s fortunes continued to trend downward as the practice spread. In 1934, Hammons began closing up the company’s Hollywood studios, first relocating about half of Educational’s production operations to its Eastern Service Studio in Astoria, then completing the move two years later. Even the majors were, by this point, caving in to the pressure of competition from double features, implementing “B” unit production strategies on studio lots and allowing some of their first-run affiliated houses to screen double bills. The lifesaver cast by the deal with Fox quickly turned into a stone as a number of the major studios, led by Paramount, now sought to cut two-reelers from their product lines.⁶⁵ “Double features ruined [Hammons],” Jack White later recalled. “[Exhibitors] wouldn’t tolerate him anymore, and they didn’t have to because they had double features. They could afford to tell Mr. Hammons and

his product to shove it.”⁶⁶ The company finally lost its uphill battle in 1938 when Twentieth Century–Fox cut ties with Educational, declaring “no market for two-reel shorts because of dual bills.”⁶⁷ There was one final misstep, when Hammons merged all of Educational’s assets with the failing Grand National Studios in another ill-advised bid for the feature market. By 1940, swamped in debt, Grand National was liquidated, and Hammons’s quarter-century involvement in the commercial film industry ended.

“IT’S OLD STUFF BUT IT MADE THE FARMERS
LAUGH”: EDUCATIONAL AND THE SMALL-TOWN
AUDIENCE

What begins to come into focus at this point is a significant structural homology linking the two trajectories of analysis thus far. For both the conventional aesthetic interpretation (sound killed the “beauties” of pantomime) and the industrial explanation (short-subject producers succeeded only through allegiances with the majors) can be seen to open onto a series of dichotomies splitting the field of short-format comedy in the early sound era. The aesthetic split juxtaposing Broadway-style sophistication against popular standards of “fast action” slapstick, the divided market pitting the metropolitan first-run circuits against second-run and small-town chains—these are related dichotomies that speak to much broader cultural divisions during this period. And it is in this sense that the fate of the early sound short finds a further horizon of interpretation within changes in the very structure of Depression-era mass culture.

One needs to return here to the growing distance separating small-town from urban moviegoing cultures, touched on in earlier chapters. In part a function of widening disparities in the context of an urbanizing nation, urban-rural tensions suffused American life in this period. Rural and small-town people had predominated within the nation’s identity at the end of the previous century (they still represented 70 percent of the nation in 1900), but had dropped to under half of the population by the 1930s—a decline that, combined with the social dislocations wrought by the Depression, intensified anxieties about the place of small-town and rural values in the mainstream of US culture. Indeed, as James Shortridge has argued in *The Middle West: Its Meaning in American Culture*, the prestige of rural states within the nation’s imaginary had already been seriously eroded from around 1920, a year that saw not only the beginning of a major agricultural recession but also the publication of Sinclair Lewis’s biting satire of small-town Minnesotan life, *Main Street*.⁶⁸ Yet, as pastoral ideals fell increasingly out of step with a modernizing society, rural residents nonetheless struggled to stake out a cultural identity as more than just “those who stayed behind.”⁶⁹ A new assertiveness was expressed in various forms of “regionalism” across the political spectrum, encompassing anything from the white supremacist nostalgia of the southern Agrarians to the

emergence of a “new regionalism in American literature”—to quote California writer Carey McWilliams—in small magazines like *Folk-Say* and *Space*, whose content often overlapped with the proletarian avant-garde.⁷⁰ As Michael Denning has noted, the appearance of inclusiveness sought by New Deal-era populist rhetoric was thus betrayed by deeper structural divisions, of which regional grassroots movements were a significant symptom.⁷¹

Within the film exhibition market, meanwhile, small-town exhibitors became increasingly vocal in their complaints about Hollywood's trade practices as they struggled to differentiate themselves and their publics within the larger cultural field. The sense of marginalization was sharpened, in the first place, by the palpable imbalance of power wrought by the transition to talking pictures. The expense of sound installation had been overwhelming for small independent exhibitors—in 1929, ERPI charged seven thousand dollars to wire theaters with five hundred seats or less—leading many to sacrifice local autonomy by selling out to larger, city-based chains, if they did not simply shutter their doors.⁷² Those that struggled through were then further hit by the economic downturn, which saw box-office revenues fall off by a third. The small-town theatrical market was decimated: metropolitan centers on the coasts were fortunate to experience closure rates of between 7 and 20 percent, but the Midwest, the South, the Plains, and northern New England lost anywhere from 22 to 48 percent of theaters.⁷³ In such a context, columns like *Motion Picture Herald's* “What the Picture Did for Me”—a forum for exhibitors' comments on current films—became a lifesaver for nonmetropolitan theater owners, a sounding board for demands for the production of films that would suit their box-office needs.⁷⁴ Economic marginalization thus played into emerging divisions of taste, as smaller exhibitors now began to forcefully complain about movies' urban bias. As J. C. Jenkins, the *Herald's* regional correspondent, complained in a 1933 article, “Smutty dialogue and nasty suggestions, illicit love scenes and the like may get a ‘kick’ from city audiences but they are kickbacks from rural communities.”⁷⁵ Whereas the initial conversion period saw film producers promoting an imaginary continuity linking small-town moviegoing to metropolitan cultural centers, the early to mid-1930s saw growing regional resistance to such strategies, as local exhibitors defiantly asserted local values, calling for films that would better suit small-town needs—action and adventure films, comedies, musicals, and “American” characters.

Of course, the rhetoric of cultural division cut both ways. Already by the 1920s, a whole new vocabulary of distinction was coming into use that disparaged rural America for the perceived naïveté and simplicity of its cultural tastes, foremost among which, indeed, was “hokum” (or “hoke”). In addition to its other connotations—discussed in my introduction—“hokum” thus crucially served during this period to crystallize many of the assumptions about the preferences of small-town audiences, in particular their supposed fondness for strong effects and overt moralizing.⁷⁶ “We—Want—Hokum!” proclaimed the title of fan magazine *Picture Play's*

1927 exposé of the tastes of rural moviegoers, continuing: “Does the average fan really like all these big, supposedly artistic films that are being made for him nowadays, or wouldn’t he much rather see a good old-fashioned melo-thriller, slapstick comedy, or rip-roaring Western film?”⁷⁷ Hokum, in this sense, implied a kind of cultural anti-modernism—a taste for “old-time” or “good old-fashioned” entertainment—and the term became a pivot around which emerging cultural divisions took shape. In the hands of *Variety’s* urbancentric writers, the word was commonly meant as a term of denigration, where the taste for “hokum” implied a kind of hayseed backwardness; yet the word was also mobilized as a badge of honor for small-town publics who resisted the suspect sophistication of metropolitan cultures—as when one Kansas exhibitor evoked the superiority of “custard pie hokum” as the “real stuff” in comparison to pretentious “Pulitzer prize plays.”⁷⁸ Hokum, in short, designated the way geography became cultural capital, expressed through aesthetic distinctions and presumptions regarding audience dispositions and tastes.

As the above reference to “custard pie hokum” suggests, moreover, comedy played a key role within this process of cultural position taking. The small-town market had long been considered a reliable one for slapstick producers (as early as 1924, Mack Sennett had spoken of the small-town audience as the “real acid test” for slapstick producers), but, as we have seen in earlier chapters, the perception of an alignment between popular humor and hinterland tastes had greatly intensified by the Depression’s earliest years.⁷⁹ Gilbert Seldes, in his aforementioned 1932 essay, *defined* popular humor as that which is “specifically adapted to the small town citizen, the rustic, and the provincial,” while Constance Rourke’s landmark cultural history, *American Humor* (1931), reinterpreted the entire tradition of US literary humor from the perspective of localism (“the very base of the comic in America,” in Rourke’s assessment).⁸⁰ Long-established hierarchies separating “low” comedy from “sophisticated” humor—distinctions that, earlier in the century, had been coded primarily in terms of class difference—were increasingly recast in relation to the small-town/metropolitan split orchestrating Depression-era mass culture. One of the earliest sociological studies of rural audiences—“Rural Preferences in Motion Pictures,” published in a 1930 *Journal of Social Psychology* by Harold Ellis Jones and Herbert S. Conrad—corroborated the general perspective, albeit by making a somewhat unscientific appeal to general observation: “An *observational* study of the responses of rural and urban audiences to comedy reel episodes shows, in the former group, a franker and more boisterous delight for the slapstick types of situation,” a preference they baldly attributed to the “psychological crudities” of rural audiences.⁸¹ The issue, then, for independent short companies like Educational was not only that the 1930s saw a weakening of the slapstick short’s industrial position; it was also the more complex process that had witnessed an emerging split in the nation’s exhibition market and a corollary change in the cultural affiliations of knockabout comedy, its increasing marginalization as small-town “hokum” within the cultural hierarchies of the period.

Of course, slapstick was hardly the only cinematic genre to take shape within these emerging taste hierarchies. Peter Stanfield's study of the 1930s western has shown how "B" westerns were conceived and organized around the assumption of a small-town audience, as evident in "singing cowboy" films that exploited the fad for hillbilly and cowboy songs.⁸² A similar situation had previously applied in radio, which, as early as the mid-1920s, had targeted the rural market with "barn-dance" musical extravaganzas, such as Nashville's *WSM Barn Dance* (renamed, in 1927, the *Grand Ole Opry*) and Chicago's *National Barn Dance*, to say nothing of the astonishing number of radio comedies with country store settings (*Lum and Abner*, *Eb and Zeb*, *Si and Elmer*, *Ike and Eli*, *Lem and Martha*, *Herb and Hank*, *Rufie and Goofie*, etc.).⁸³ In all these cases, country music and comic rube characters served as a primary means by which manufacturers and radio sponsors pitched their product to the rural working class, offering regional listeners a sense of identity and community against the traumas of dislocation, disenfranchisement, and dispossession brought on by the Depression.

Educational, too, played a similar game, particularly in the early 1930s, when its product was still largely frozen out of the metropolitan, major-owned circuits. One sees this, for instance, in the shifts within the musical short series that Educational first introduced in the 1932–1933 season: whereas the earliest of these, the *Kendall de Vally Operalogues*, had evidently gestured toward older ideals of highbrow culture—and, perhaps in consequence, had been judged "no good for the small town" by one Idaho exhibitor—Hammons's organization soon began adding more regional forms of appeal, most notably with its *Song Hit Stories* and *Song and Comedy Hits* lines, produced by Al Christie at Educational's Eastern Service Studios in Astoria.⁸⁴ The most enduring and consistently popular of Educational's musical series (lasting from the 1933–1934 season until 1937–1938), the *Song Hit Stories* and *Song and Comedy Hits* were song-filled sketches running the gamut of musical styles—from seafaring ballads in *The Bounding Main* (November 1934) to gay nineties nostalgia in *Gay Old Days* (January 1935)—but with a particular emphasis on the rural vernacular. Styles like country and western (with the ubiquitous "Home on the Range" popping up in western-themed shorts like *The Last Dogie* [November 1933] and *Rodeo Day* [September 1935]), hillbilly (in shorts like *Mountain Melody* [August 1934] and *Hillbilly Love* [October 1935], the latter featuring Frank Luther from the NBC radio series *Hillbilly Heart-Throbs*), and southern black music (with Stepin Fetchit and Lethia Hill in *Slow Poke* [September 1933] as well as numerous shorts featuring the Cabin Kids)—all contributed to the series' consistent acclaim in the *Herald's* "What the Picture Did for Me" column, where one Missouri exhibitor spoke of them as "the best of the single reels by Educational."⁸⁵

The question, then, becomes whether the imprint of the small-town market can also be traced in Educational's *slapstick* output. Certainly, approaching Educational's product from this perspective clarifies a number of otherwise perplexing developments, in particular the surprising stardom of two frequently paired comedians



FIGURE 19. Press sheet publicity for *The Constable* (August 1929), a Mack Sennett Talking Comedy, with Andy Clyde (left) and Harry Gribbon. Courtesy Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library.

who dominated Mack Sennett’s early talkie output at Educational: Andy Clyde and Harry Gribbon (fig. 19). Often cited as evidence of the tough times on which the Sennett brand had fallen, the unlikely ascendancy of these two comics might profitably be read as a revealing barometer of slapstick’s shifting cultural valences. The period surrounding the coming of sound, it should be noted, had represented a significant reshuffling within the upper echelons of Educational’s comic talent. Lloyd Hamilton, the company’s biggest star, had been barred from the screen by the MPPDA for the 1928–29 season, following a series of arrests for public drunkenness and an Arbuckle-style scandal in which the comedian’s name had been brought up in association with a nightclub shooting.⁸⁶ Next Lupino Lane—Educational’s second-biggest name and its most highly promoted comedian in Hamilton’s absence—departed the company in 1929, eventually quitting Hollywood altogether to return to his native England the following year. Nowhere, though, did this changing of the guard produce more telling consequences than on the Sennett lot, facilitating a shift toward rural characterizations and settings in the studio’s early sound output. When Sennett had begun his distribution arrangement with Educational, his leading comedian was the former Broadway performer and big-time vaudevillian, Johnny Burke, who had risen to fame on the stage for his “doughboy” routine and who joined Sennett in December 1926.

Yet Burke's relationship with the Sennett studio barely survived the transition to sound following a pay dispute. (He was the highest-paid comedian on the lot—with a weekly salary of sixteen hundred dollars by early 1929—and Sennett was infamously tight-fisted.)⁸⁷ Burke's departure subsequently cleared the way for Clyde and Gribbon, who had first appeared together as rural characters in the Burke vehicle, *The Bride's Relations* (January 1929)—playing Johnny's hick in-laws, Clyde as Uncle Ed, a "jovial type farmer," and Gribbon as the outsized simpleton Homer—and whose subsequent pairings would dominate Sennett's first year of sound production.⁸⁸

A one-time stage actor who had starred in musical comedies produced by George M. Cohan, "Silk-Hat" Harry Gribbon had in fact been a veteran of Sennett's studio from the Keystone days, initially signed in 1915 as part of an effort to hire "high-hat"-style comedians with genteel appeal. Although the subsequent decade had seen him move into features (as well as touring in vaudeville), Gribbon had reunited with Sennett for the Educational films, where, in a striking reversal of his earlier persona, he was now marketed as a specialist in small-town "boob" roles—frequently in the same "Homer" characterization first assayed in *The Bride's Relations*. Ditto Andy Clyde: a Sennett regular throughout the 1920s, Clyde's persona underwent a similar reevaluation with sound, emerging in the persona of "Ed Martin," a countrified old-man type—despite Clyde's actually being in his thirties—directly in the tradition of the cracker-barrel patriarchs then popular on radio. (The producer Jules White, for whom Clyde would subsequently work at Columbia, referred to him explicitly as a "hick" comedian.)⁸⁹

Gribbon and Clyde's first top-billed pairing was *Whirls and Girls*, released in February 1929, and they subsequently starred in no less than ten of fifteen Sennett releases over the subsequent twelve months, most commonly in films with rural themes and settings like *The Big Palooka* (May), *The Constabule*, and *The Lunkhead* (September).⁹⁰ As early as the second of these films, *The Bees' Buzz* (April), Sennett's scenarists—of whom the core team for these films was Harry McCoy, Earle Rodney, and Hampton Del Ruth—had established the basic story formula that would provide the series' framework. Clyde's "Ed Martin" character is father to an independent young woman, played by Thelma Hill, who in turn is the object of Gribbon's bumbling affections. Thelma, however, favors another, typically a "straight" juvenile lead who contrasts with Gribbon's rube-ish clown. The films thus operate within the logic of a comic love triangle, pitting Gribbon's rural idiocy against the decidedly nonrural—hence more "normalized"—traits of the rival suitor: for instance, Gribbon's "village boy" Homer versus Thelma's college sweetheart (Milton Holmes) in *The Constabule*; Gribbon's rube-in-the-big-city, Gilbert, versus another college sweetheart (Ben Alexander) in *The Lunkhead*; or Gribbon's vulgar western oil tycoon, George Palooka, versus champion California golfer Charlie Guest (playing himself) in *The Golfers* (September 1929).⁹¹ Within this structure, Gribbon's portrayal makes him unequivocally a figure of fun, and the

filmmakers seem to have lavished particular attention on making him as absurd as possible. The script for *The Big Palooka* notes how “he [Gibbon] is dressed in the loudest checked suit of exaggerated cut. The brightest tie, bull dog shoes and hair slicked down on his brow. Thelma can only stare, open-mouthed and speechless”—a laugh-getting appearance that the writers for *The Lunkhead* subsequently capitalized upon, describing Gibbon as sporting “his Sunday-best Homer outfit (as worn in ‘The Big Palooka’).”⁹² His first appearance in *The New Halfback* (November 1929) similarly marks the character’s ridiculousness. A small-town boob, Elmer Buckley (Gibbon) is introduced to class on his first day at college, only to immediately start waxing nonsensical about his favorite pastoral fauna: “People can learn a lot from the whippoorwill,” he instructs his peers. “He is a home-loving bird. I have often watched the papa whippoorwill. He starts out in the morning with a song on his lips”—whistles—“Mama Whippoorwill cheers him on”—whistles—“Where is he going? He’s going out to get mama whippoorwill some nice big worms. In the summer time he brings smooth ones and in the winter he brings wooly ones.”⁹³ For the remainder of the film his college teammates refer to him as “Mr. Whippoorwill.”

It would be a mistake to assume that Gibbon’s rube persona in any way contradicted the possibility of the films’ heartland appeal. Rube stereotypes hardly spoke only to the prejudices of the big city: quaint, bib-overalled countrymen had been stock figures of the touring medicine shows that played in village squares and small-town opera houses in the South and Midwest from the late nineteenth century, and as film historian Charles Tepperman has shown, comic rubes also appeared in silent-era instructional films directly targeting a rural audience.⁹⁴ Perhaps this is why Gibbon’s films seem to have won favor even among the communities he seemed to be ridiculing: “It’s old stuff, but it made the farmers laugh on Saturday and if it’s good enough for them it’s fine for me,” commented one Alabama exhibitor in 1935 after screening a reissue of *The Big Palooka*, the film that had done most to establish Gibbon’s “palooka” persona.⁹⁵ Certainly, the sense in which rural populations may have been able to laugh at their own stereotypes was a frequent observation in studies of small-town culture from the early sound period. For instance, Albert Blumenthal’s 1932 *Small-Town Stuff*—published under the auspices of the University of Chicago’s famed Department of Sociology—commented explicitly on the willingness of small-town citizens to make fun of themselves. “The jests of city people at the expense of small towns are proverbial,” Blumenthal wrote, “but what is not so well known is that alert small-towners are even more relentless in praising, condemning, and jesting about the small town”—a condition the author connected to a widespread fear of cultural backwardness and a desire to keep “up-to-date” with respect to “standards set by the larger cities.”⁹⁶ Perhaps, then, for rural filmgoers, characterizations such as Gibbon’s served an assimilative function by symbolizing gaucheries to be abandoned as they adapted to a modernizing nation. To laugh at their own stereotype would,

from this perspective, have been a way for heartland audiences to negotiate the pressures of modernity against fears of backwardness.

Such a reading certainly makes sense of the role played by Andy Clyde's "Ed Martin" character, an eccentric but kindly patriarch whose role in these films is to mediate the opposed suitors. Typically, Mr. Martin begins by favoring Gribbon's suit for his daughter's hand, only to turn against the Gribbon character by film's end to endorse Thelma's choice. In *The Constabule*, for instance, he initially tells his daughter to forget about her college beau and marry Homer, the local constable ("That college put a lot of highfalutin' ideas in your head that you'll have to get out," he tells her in an early version of the script).⁹⁷ Those sentiments are reversed, however, when Homer mistakenly tries to arrest his future father-in-law on suspicion of theft, leading an infuriated Mr. Martin to chase him into the distance—and out of the film—with a rifle. In such instances, Mr. Martin actualizes a relation to modernity that may have relieved audiences of their anxiety at being outpaced in an urbanizing nation: his role in brokering Thelma's romance with her city-bred boyfriend secures a place of ongoing authority for small-town values, even as the films work to circumscribe and reject the rube-ish backwardness that becomes Gribbon's burden. What Mr. Martin represents might, in fact, usefully be seen as a kind of "provincial modernity," to borrow a phrase from film historian Kathy Fuller-Seeley. As developed by Fuller-Seeley, the notion of provincial modernity addresses the ways heartland America came to accept elements of modernity by "adapt[ing them] to provincial tastes" and values, thereby allowing "some modern ideas to slip quietly in" beneath the cover of traditionalism.⁹⁸ (Interestingly, her example of this process is cinematic narrative—specifically, the way early film genres like the western offered traditionalist period representations that nonetheless also gave scope to "modern" depictions of speed, consumerism, and gender equality.) But we might also think of the dynamics of provincial modernity from the other side; that is, not simply as a camouflaging of "modern ideas" but as a prouder affirmation of the local as the necessary filter and ultimate arbiter of modernity's effects, their promise and their problems. What one finds in the Clyde-Gribbon films is thus an acceptance of the new—as represented by Thelma and her city boyfriend—*only* through its concordance with the old, through the folksy and down-to-earth approval of an old-fashioned patriarch.

That Clyde did, in fact, appeal to provincial values was sometimes indicated in the exhibitors' comments from "What the Picture Did for Me." One Kentucky showman, for example, celebrated Clyde's comedies as "good old-fashioned slapstick" and noted elsewhere that "Clyde is a real comedian, even if he is not appreciated by the younger element."⁹⁹ Although Clyde's comedies were far from universally popular, they were evidently standouts for some small-town exhibitors who described them as "always pleasing" (Anamosa, Iowa) and "as good as any they make" (Dante, Virginia), using language that invoked their appreciation of Clyde's classic American rube-fool as wise man figure: "Andy Clyde always brings laughs to our rural lads," commented one.¹⁰⁰ The amazing

longevity of his career further suggests how his comedy corresponded to the specific cultural field of sound-era slapstick. Although Sennett departed for Paramount in 1932, Educational retained Clyde's services for two seasons of *Andy Clyde Comedies*, before Clyde himself departed in 1934 for Columbia's short-subjects division, where he continued his "old man" characterization in seventy-nine starring shorts, until his departure from Columbia in 1956—the longest run for a single comic persona (as opposed to a comic team) in American film history.¹⁰¹

But Gribbon and Clyde were hardly the only Educational comedians to adjust their comic personas to the changing market for slapstick. Arguably the most remarkable of these adjustments was Buster Keaton's, in sixteen shorts released between 1934 and 1937 as part of Educational's new *Star Personality* series.¹⁰² Keaton's path into the sound era had, of course, been famously troubled, culminating in his firing from MGM at the start of 1933, by which time his reputation as a hapless alcoholic had made him unemployable at any of the major studios. Yet Keaton's turbulent career trajectory had also witnessed some surprising shifts in his comic persona. Starting from his second feature at MGM, *Spite Marriage* (1929), Keaton began appearing under the character name of "Elmer" in his films, marking a turn away from the resourceful persona of his earlier features toward a more clueless, dim-witted characterization. Although the Elmer persona initially lacked a stable social identity—a dry cleaner in *Spite Marriage*, a rich milquetoast in *Doughboys* (1930), even a taxidermist in *What! No Beer?* (1933)—Keaton would streamline the characterization in the direction of small-town "boob" roles at Educational, in such rural-themed comedies as *One-Run Elmer* (February 1935), *Hayseed Romance* (March 1935), and *Grand Slam Opera* (February 1936), as well as the hillbilly farce *Love Nest on Wheels* (March 1937), among others. At least eleven of Keaton's Educational shorts feature some kind of country or small-town setting, and many of them push toward a style of comedy that integrates physical slapstick with character types derived from rural humor traditions (fig. 20).¹⁰³

Nor can there be any doubt that Keaton's Educational films, like Clyde's, satisfied small-town exhibitors who called for a return to "good old-fashioned slapstick." "Good old Buster," wrote a Michigan exhibitor in the pages of *Motion Picture Herald*. "He's still the best pantomime comic on the screen." "Keaton's comedies are favorites [with my audience]," chimed in a theater owner from Clatskanie, Oregon, while a rural Kentucky exhibitor agreed, commenting that "Buster is always liked here."¹⁰⁴ *Palooka from Paducah* (January 1935), featuring an amusingly fake-bearded turn from Keaton as the youngest son in a hillbilly family looking to break into professional wrestling, received particular acclaim as a "comedy that is a comedy" (Eminence, Kentucky), "far above the average Educational" (Plano, Texas), and containing "more laughs than any comedy ever run" (Elvins, Missouri).¹⁰⁵ In fact, the only Educational product lines that approached the praise accorded Keaton's films by smaller exhibitors in the mid-1930s were, for the most part, even more explicit in their adaptation to rural settings and themes: for instance, the two series



FIGURE 20. In *Palooka from Paducah* (January 1935), Buster Keaton gathered members of his real-life family to play a clan of wrestling hillbillies. From left to right, his sister Louise, father Joe, mother Myra, and Buster himself. Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

featuring the blackface duo Moran and Mack, released between 1932 and 1934 (the second series abruptly terminated by Charles Mack's death), and most tellingly of all, the previously mentioned *Song and Comedy Hits* series of musical shorts. Equally popular, the eccentric dancing duo of Tom Patricola and Buster West were perhaps exceptions to this pattern, initially establishing their reputation in musical comedy shorts as a pair of love-happy, toe-tapping sailors. Yet their tenure as Educational headliners, in three series of six two-reelers between 1935 and 1938, nonetheless began to introduce telling variations: rural settings and character types began to appear with increasing frequency—as in *Happy Heels* (August 1936), the plot of which required them to “impersonate rubes” to invade a nightclub, or in *The Screen Test* (December 1936), which cast them as nimble-footed understudies in a “rural Little Theatre.”¹⁰⁶

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We seem a long way from the urban, and frequently urbane, worlds of so many 1920s comedians, yet it would be a mistake to overstate the role of these developments in Educational's product. Certainly, Educational's output was never to

any *thoroughgoing* extent reconstituted with a small-town public in mind. As with all shorts companies, variety remained the key, and throughout the 1930s, Educational sought a strongly diversified appeal for its product. The major trend in Educational's programming was in fact a continuing de-emphasis on live-action slapstick-style comedians (with only Buster Keaton really fitting the bill by the 1936–1937 season) and, correspondingly, a rising focus on musically oriented comedies (e.g., the successful West and Patricola shorts; the *Star Personality* releases featuring song and dance men like Pat Rooney, Herman Timberg, and a young Danny Kaye; and Jefferson Machamer's *Gags and Gals* pictures, part of Educational's two-reel *Musical Comedy* line). Indeed, for the 1937–1938 season, the use of separate series names for its two-reel comedies was discontinued altogether and the only official series to remain were the one-reel *Treasure Chests*, *Song and Comedy Hits*, and *Terry-Toons* cartoons.

Still, it would be no less of a mistake to dismiss Educational's rural-themed slapstick as, in consequence, a mere footnote to the history of short-subject comedy, for to do so is to overlook the strategies the company adopted in constructing and anticipating an audience during the sound era. Nor was Educational in any way alone in this respect. Other companies that remained in the knockabout game seem to have similarly taken steps to reconstitute their comic output in part for traditionally “down-market” hinterland audiences. Consider, in this respect, the sound-era career of Charley Chase, once the most dapper of men-about-town comedians, who began appearing in rustic settings in the 1930s in a number of comedies placing him in hillbilly land. Chase's experiments with these formulas began at Hal Roach, with *The Real McCoy* (February 1930), *One of the Smiths* (May 1931), and *Southern Exposure* (April 1935), and continued into his association with Columbia—where he began work in 1937 as both performer and writer/director—with *Teacher's Pest* (November 1939) (fig. 21). The first of these, *The Real McCoy*, represented an obvious attempt to capitalize on the hillbilly music craze of the time by featuring a plot requiring Charley to prove his southern heritage via his musical abilities. Unusually for a short, it received advance notice from the *Herald's* regional columnist J. C. Jenkins, who witnessed the film's production while visiting the Hal Roach Studios (“This one takes everything in the bake shop,” Jenkins promised rural exhibitors).¹⁰⁷ While this style of comedy may have been somewhat out of the norm for the Roach studios, Chase's experiments with hillbilly humor were a much better fit at Columbia: as one of the little three, Columbia—like Educational—had no stable or guaranteed access to major-owned first-run houses and, in consequence, had long targeted the bulk of its product to hinterland tastes, not only in “B”-grade westerns starring Buck Jones and Gene Autry during the 1930s but also in rural-themed slapstick shorts. In addition to its long-running Andy Clyde series, Columbia's short-subjects department had a habit of using “fish out of water” plots that placed comedians in the midst of some hillbilly feud—for example, Swedish-dialect comedian El Brendel's *Ay Tank Ay Go* (December 1936) and *Love at First Fright* (July 1941),



FIGURE 21. City slicker Charley Chase awkwardly adapts to hillbilly life in *One of the Smiths* (May 1931). The coonskin cap is a skunk. Courtesy Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

as well as Chase's aforementioned *Teacher's Pest*, which featured him as a city schoolmaster sent to teach the mountain folk readin', 'ritin', and 'rithmetic. Predictably, all of these comedies relied on exaggerated, rube-ish characterizations; still, the trajectory of the humor inevitably cut both ways, in gags that played equally on the tenderfoot clown's effete mannerisms as on stereotypes of hillbilly roughness. More than simply ambiguous, such comedies might more usefully be seen as bridging competing perspectives on the hinterlands, establishing basic comedic resources through which rural audiences may, as with the earlier Clyde-Gribbon films, have imaginatively negotiated the divided field of Depression-era mass culture.

It would be possible to continue listing examples, but the point should be sufficiently clear.¹⁰⁸ The evolutions of comic settings, formulas, and typology I have been tracing were not abstract, but took place within a divided exhibition market that prompted producers and distributors of short-subject slapstick—particularly independents, like Educational—to take full account of heartland audiences and their values. It is from this vantage point, in fact, that we can return one last time to the interpretations of slapstick's sound-era "decline" offered by critics like Agee

and Kerr. For whereas they viewed slapstick’s fate in largely aesthetic terms, this chapter has traced a complex interlocking of economic, industrial, and social factors to show that something more than aesthetics was at stake: that, ultimately, slapstick’s critical fall from grace was tethered to the fading cultural capital of the heartland populations to which it increasingly spoke. Indeed, the very notion of aesthetic decline is less useful in this respect than what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes as “banalization,” that is, the way cultural forms are devalued over time as their relation to their public changes. As Bourdieu notes, any innovation within a cultural field—and sound’s impact on film comedy certainly counts as such—has the effect of attracting those audiences most concerned with distinction and cultural capital, while the once-popular forms (say, slapstick) consequently lose distinctiveness and witness their clientele age and the social quality of their public decline: “Thus the social ageing of a work of art, the imperceptible transformation pushing it towards the *déclassé* or the classic, is the result of a meeting between an internal movement, linked to struggles within the field provoking the production of different works, and an external movement, linked to social change in the audience.”¹⁰⁹

Banalization, in this sense, refers not simply to the process whereby a cultural trend or practice becomes outmoded, but to the material transformations that underscore or facilitate that process. Bourdieu’s own (misogynistically framed) example of this process is perfume—specifically, how the great brand names forsake distinctiveness by mass marketing their product, thus driving away many of their original customers and leaving only a “composite clientele made up of elegant but ageing women who remain faithful to the perfumes of their yesteryears and of young but less wealthy women who discover these outmoded products when they are out of fashion”¹¹⁰—but it is clear that the field of short-format film comedy also fits the template. As we have seen in previous chapters, the innovation of sound was a catalyst for fresh hierarchies within the field of film comedy, pitting the sophisticated cultural capital of the new Broadway-style comic shorts against the more established slapstick style. What now becomes clear, however, is the way slapstick was in turn reconstituted as hokum, finding a new “composite clientele”—as well as new subject matter—among the middling sensibilities of small-town and heartland publics.

This, then, is the final context within which Educational’s sound-era fortunes should be situated, and it suggests, by way of a closing observation, a further nuancing of slapstick’s relation to that much-contested category of cultural experience, *modernity*. We have already seen in a previous chapter how slapstick’s claims to a kind of vernacular modernism were, by the mid-1920s, significantly qualified by new patterns of metropolitan sensibility that disparaged the form as old hat. What now deserves to be stressed is how developments in the short-subject marketplace exacerbated this displacement by aligning slapstick with alternative vectors of cultural experience that took their cue from the conservatism of the heartland.

Rather, then, than adhere to the scholarly consensus that has hypostasized slapstick as a kind of aesthetic reflex of urban modernity, it would be more fruitful to insist instead on its variable social character as a form that addressed diverse popular logics. One possible logic, to be sure, related to city-bred experiences of class and ethnic division in the early twentieth century, as well as to the impact of changing technological regimes and mechanization—all of which indeed became tropes that defined slapstick's celebrated "modernity" for much of the silent era. Yet, by the 1930s, this chapter has argued, slapstick's cultural appeal would settle along a quite different divide: the growing distinction pitting metropolitan cultural hegemony against an assertive regionalism. And it is within the context of this profound relocation of slapstick's cultural place that the genre's decline—and Educational's history—finds an ironic horizon of interpretation: no longer urban but small town, not simply an "anarchic supplement" to technological modernity but a horizon for the more equivocal registering of provincial modernity.

But the final irony, for this chapter, is this: in 1934, an Educational release received the Academy Award for best novelty short, a surprising achievement perhaps, given that the company's output had been so thoroughly consigned to the margins of the distribution hierarchy. But the film was not a comedy; titled *Krakatoa* (April 1933), it was a three-reel science documentary showing the eruption of the undersea volcano. Finally fulfilling Earle Hammons's long-abandoned mandate, Educational's one outstanding critical success of the 1930s, the film that most notably received the stamp of a critical legitimacy otherwise withheld—that film really was an educational picture.