

“From the Archives of Keystone Memory”

Slapstick and Re-membrance at Columbia Pictures’ Short-Subjects Department

The mood of retrospect seems indeed the soundest of possible instincts, fulfilling a purpose against which almost every large force in the country seemed to war upon, that to take root.

CONSTANCE ROURKE, *AMERICAN HUMOR* (1931)

If anybody else says it’s like old times, I’ll jump out the window.

BUSTER KEATON, IN *LIMELIGHT* (1952)

If one asks the naïve question “When was American film comedy’s golden age?” one encounters the paradox that there has only ever seemed to be one answer: the silent era, specifically sometime between the ascent of Chaplin in the mid-1910s and the coming of sound. Often cited, James Agee’s eloquent 1949 *Life* essay, “Comedy’s Greatest Era,” is a turning point in this regard, a nostalgic paean that, once and for all, elevated silent comedy as a symbol of the past glories of popular culture. “Anyone who has watched screen comedy over the past ten or fifteen years is bound to realize that it has quietly but steadily deteriorated. As for those happy atavists who remember silent comedy in its heyday and the bellylaughs and boffos that went with it, they have something close to an absolute standard by which to measure the deterioration.”¹ It is a remarkable rewriting of slapstick comedy. Agee’s essay was crucial in establishing Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, and Langdon as a kind of Mount Rushmore of comic achievement—the “four most eminent masters”—and it did so, we have seen, by appreciating slapstick in formal terms as an art of pantomime (see the introduction). No longer is the form criticized, as it once had been, for its vulgar intertexts in cheap amusements or its appeal to working-class

“friends of burlesque.”² Rather slapstick is reified outside of the network of social relations in which it had initially found meaning and celebrated for the abstract artistry of physical form, for the “beauties of comic motion which are hopelessly beyond reach of words.”³

Of course, golden ages are always contingent constructions, invented, never discovered. I want to begin this chapter by tracing the outlines of a different slapstick nostalgia that emerged almost two decades prior to Agee’s famous essay, more or less immediately following the transition to sound. The nostalgic idea of silent slapstick as a source of pantomimic beauty may have belonged to Agee (and later to Walter Kerr and others), but it certainly did not belong to the early 1930s, which cherished its own, more rambunctious memories of the form. Back then, it had been the rougher-edged style of early Mack Sennett shorts, not the refinements of later silent-era slapstick features, that stood for the genre’s achievements; nearly all the silent clowns could be, and were, misremembered during this earlier period as roughhousing pie-throwers, not pantomimic artistes. “What might do this country a lot of good is a return engagement of those old custard pie throwing pictures that Chaplin used to be in,” the *Motion Picture Herald* declared in 1932, in approval of one exhibitor’s decision to run a reissue of Chaplin’s actually quite un-custardy *A Dog’s Life* (April 1918).⁴ A taste for what was now described as “old-time” comedy spurred many distributors to reissue 1910s-vintage comedy shorts and many production companies to release pastiche recreations.⁵ The early 1930s thus witnessed at least two efforts to bring back to the screen the “original” Keystone Cops, as in a reunion of sorts: the first, the comic melodrama *Stout Hearts and Willing Hands* (June 1931)—the debut entry in RKO’s *Masquers Club* series of two-reel burlesques—brought together “the original Keystoneers . . . Ford Sterling, Chester Conklin, Mack Swain, Hank Mann, Jimmy Finlayson and Clyde Cook”; the second, the Vitaphone short *Keystone Hotel* (August 1935), featured, to quote one ad, “the whole kaboodle of old-time favorites in a new 2-reel custard opera! . . . the Keystone gang in all their pie-eyed glory!”—again, Conklin, Mann, and Sterling, but also former Bathing Beauty Marie Prevost and cross-eyed comic Ben Turpin.⁶ A similar move to tap the “old-time” comedy market came from the Hal Roach Studios, which, in 1932, launched a series of “Taxi Boy” comedies, planned as a throwback to the freewheeling, car-crashing comedies that Sennett had helped make popular. A letter from Roach studio executive Henry Ginsberg to MGM’s New York distribution office indicates that the series was begun “because we need good slapstick comedy,” and the films were promoted in kind. “The good old days of slapstick are back again!” declared an ad for the series in July 1932. “Isn’t it the truth that short-reel comedies owe their original development to good, hearty belly laughs that rock an audience. No polite little laughs in this series. . . . Hal Roach estimates there will be 100,000 taxicabs ruined during the filming of this series. *That gives you a general idea!*”⁷ Initial entries in the series constituted perhaps the most faithful continuation of the silent slapstick style outside of Chaplin’s

1930s features: hired by Roach to helm the series, former Sennett director and stunt specialist Del Lord reintroduced the distinctive undercranking of silent-era comedy, shooting action sequences silent with sound effects and sparse dialogue dubbed in later.⁸ The return of the "good old days" of slapstick was also seemingly announced that same year by the release of the Paramount feature *Million-Dollar Legs* (1932), a throwback farce starring W.C. Fields together with a cast of Sennett veterans—Turpin, Mann, Vernon Dent, even Andy Clyde—and direction from Sennett regular Eddie Cline, "the old maestro of slapstick days." "Good old-fashioned lowdown farce of the Sennett-Christie-Chaplin school," opined Leo Meehan in *Motion Picture Herald*.⁹

What does it mean that silent-style slapstick was so quickly revisited early in the 1930s in the form of what was called "old-time," "old-fashioned," or "good old-fashioned" comedy? This chapter seeks an understanding by looking in detail at the short-subject manufacturer that would come to be most closely allied with the emerging throwback market: Columbia Pictures' short-subject division. Famous today as the near quarter-century home of the Three Stooges (1934–1958), the Columbia short-comedy unit built its reputation as one of the industry's chief sustainers of earlier slapstick traditions. At a time when Sennett's studio was teetering on the verge of bankruptcy and Roach was wetting his feet in features, unit head Jules White relaunched the Columbia shorts department as a refuge of sorts for slapstick veterans who were now finding fewer places to work. Columbia sound engineer—and later shorts director—Ed Bernds recalled the situation: "Mack Sennett was about to close up shop; he hadn't been able to cope with the transition to sound, and Hal Roach, deciding that two-reelers had no future, was converting to feature films. Many talented people—writers, directors, and comics, refugees from the Mack Sennett and Hal Roach studios—were available," and many chose to continue working at Columbia's lot at Sunset and Gower, where they sustained the style of an earlier era in slapstick's history.¹⁰ Viewed from this perspective, the Depression-era emergence of the "old-time" comedy market might be approached as an episode in the labor history of slapstick clowns, who flocked to Columbia in the face of a film industry that offered them sharply reduced employment opportunities.

But the reconstitution of slapstick in a throwback mode also speaks to a basic change in what might be thought of as slapstick's *social temporality*. Most theorists of comedy have assumed a kind of simultaneity linking comedic expression to social experience; that is, comedy has been thought to offer a symbolic articulation of social tensions and transformations contemporary with its expression. For anthropologist Mary Douglas, for example, social change coexists with all joking as the latter's precondition. "A joke is seen and allowed when it offers a symbolic pattern of a social pattern occurring *at the same time*," she writes.¹¹ But if this is the case, what sense can be made of the pleasures of a form of comedy that survived—was, indeed, commercially recycled beyond—the social context that produced it?

What was the appeal of a style of “old-time” slapstick that even one of Columbia’s most accomplished short-subject directors, former Educational producer Jack White (Jules’s brother), confessed to not finding funny because “they had done that twenty years before”?¹² The issue here would be uninteresting if it were simply a matter of old jokes. Also at stake, I will argue, is the way Depression-era American culture seemingly found nostalgic resonance in the populist comic styles of an earlier era and yet, in so doing, irrevocably transformed their legacy. As a live, contemporary form in the 1910s, Keystone-style slapstick had once constituted a class-coded carnivalizing of existing social relations, a distinctively plebeian gesture of social inversion; reappraised as throwback in the 1930s, slapstick would fall out of the present and into the flattened and undifferentiated past of “good old-fashioned” fun, where comedians and styles that were once quite incompatible (e.g., Chaplin and pie throwing) could now be conflated nostalgically with one another, consecrated as a tradition, and hence neutralized.

“A TWO-REEL OUT-AND-OUT SLAPSTICK MACK
SENNETT-TYPE COMEDY”: JULES WHITE AND
SLAPSTICK REVIVALISM

The first task of an interpreter of the “old-time” slapstick trend is to situate it within what was a broader fabric of nostalgic sentiment during this period. The word “nostalgia” was first coined as a medical term in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer, from the combination of the Greek words *nostos* (return) and *algos* (sickness), to name the condition of homesickness he observed in young Swiss soldiers serving abroad. Two subsequent displacements would give the term its modern meaning in the passage through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First, the link with a lost place (*homesickness*) started to shade into the idea of an idyllic lost time; second, the term’s clinical meaning in the context of psychiatry and military medicine was joined by a more everyday usage, the idea of nostalgia as something like a “mood” beginning to take over from its reference to a medical condition.¹³ Indeed, despite sociologist Fred Davis’s oft-quoted claim that nostalgia did not enter popular vocabulary until after the war—and despite theorist Fredric Jameson’s influential association of nostalgia with the “cultural logic” of late capitalism—it is clear that the modern conceptualization of nostalgia in fact developed much earlier in twentieth-century America.¹⁴ The emergence of a market for cultural nostalgia should be dated not to the 1950s, as Davis assumes, but to the 1930s: already by the beginning of that decade, the concept had entered common usage as a term of positive appraisal in journalistic criticism (to celebrate, say, the “note of poignant nostalgia” of a piece of music or the “pleasantly nostalgic” mood of a stage production, to quote from *New York Times* reviews).¹⁵ More significantly, it is also during the 1930s that we see the first evidence of a self-conscious “decade nostalgia” set upon the styles of a particular past era—specifically,

the "Gay Nineties." As film historian Christine Sprengler has noted, the late Victorian era "invaded the cultural consciousness and, in the early 1930s, provoked reflexive thoughts on nostalgia itself."¹⁶ Sprengler cites a 1933 *New York Times* article, titled "Victorian Days That Beckon Us," in which journalist P.W. Wilson explained how "along with on-sweeping modernism is a looking backward, a nostalgia for a bygone age and, of all periods . . . it is the Victorian Age toward which longing eyes are more and more directed."¹⁷ Throughout the prewar years, feature films from Mae West's *She Done Him Wrong* (1933) to the James Cagney-starring *The Strawberry Blonde* (1941) fed into the "Gay Nineties" nostalgia market; even short-subject series like Educational's *Do You Remember?* exploited the fad.¹⁸ So prevalent was the trend in film as to draw complaining comment from *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther, who critiqued the growing "tendency toward nostalgic retrospection." "We have no bone to pick with nostalgia and honest sentiment; they can make for strong dramatic effects," Crowther allowed, adding, "But there has been an apparent inclination to overdo the hearts-and-flowers . . . [which] strikes us as being a distinct and deplorable retrogression in film."¹⁹

But the "Nineties" was not the era's only privileged object of retrospect. It is remarkable, for instance, how quickly the legacy of silent cinema itself came to be treated as a fondly remembered, albeit lost object during these years. Previous scholarship has linked this nostalgia for the silent screen to the launching of the Museum of Modern Art's first circulating film programs, beginning in 1936, which provoked an enormous response in the popular press. Certainly, the work of Iris Barry's Film Library at MoMA, and its initial programs, "A Short Survey of the Film in America, 1895-1932" and "Some American Films, 1896-1934," cannot be underestimated in fueling a nascent public interest in earlier cinema.²⁰ Still such museological initiatives are best seen as symptoms, rather than sources, of this dawning sense of the medium's past: at almost exactly the same time as Barry's initiative, industry observers were pointing to a trend of remaking "well remembered films" from the silent era, including, for instance, RKO's remake of the Italian studio Ambrosio's landmark *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1908, remade in 1935) as well as Fox's version of D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1919, remade in 1935) and a British version of the same director's *Broken Blossoms* (1921, remade in 1936), among others.²¹ Virtually simultaneous, too, was the emergence of a proto-camp fascination with the outdated styles of early film: the same types of nickelodeon-era one-reelers that Barry sought to reclaim for serious-minded attention were already being reissued as comic relief, often with derisive commentary, in short-subject series such as Educational's *Great Hokum Mysteries* (1932-1933), Vitaphone's occasional *Movie Memories* (1933-1934), and the Stone Film Library's *Flicker Frolics* (1936, 1942).²² Such mockery notwithstanding, Hollywood evidently came to realize that there was a growing market for its own past as the decade progressed. The close of the 1930s saw the release of Twentieth-Century Fox's *Hollywood Cavalcade* (1939), a "marathon romance" starring Don Ameche and Alice Faye,

set against the backdrop of early Hollywood (discussed in more detail in this book's conclusion), as well as a *March of Time* special on the history of American cinema, compiled in collaboration with the Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art.²³ MGM announced a never-completed feature titled *Nickel Show*, which would have traced the "history of theaters from the old 'store show' days to the era of luxurious picture palaces," while, also in 1939, Columbia Pictures' New York chief, Jack Cohn, launched the "Picture Pioneers" club to bring together industry veterans for the purpose of "swapping reminiscences and promoting good fellowship."²⁴ Little wonder that one critic noted how Hollywood, "long adept in glorifying any subject or personality," had of late been "indulging in a little self-glorification" of its own past.²⁵

Slapstick comedy, though, remained the thin end of this throwback wedge. It was unique in having entered a cycle of "old-time" reissues and pastiche recreations some three to four years prior to the broader market in film history of the mid- to late 1930s, and it was the *only* presound genre to be specifically singled out for such treatment (there was no comparable market for, say, "old-time" westerns). The speed with which slapstick became an object of nostalgia can most straightforwardly be explained through the transformations to the comedy field wrought since the coming of sound. "Nostalgia thrives . . . on the rude transitions rendered by history," wrote Fred Davis in his classic study, *Yearning for Yesterday* (1979), and the diffusion of sound was certainly rude enough for most slapstick filmmakers and their audiences.²⁶ Still, a more nuanced understanding would interpret such nostalgia not as a simple reflex of "rude transition" per se, but rather as a symptom of slapstick's changing position within the field of cultural production. We have seen (chapters 1 and 2) how the first wave of short-subject talkie comedies generated new hierarchical distinctions separating sophisticated metropolitan humor from what was now viewed as outdated "hokum" comedy. We have also seen (chapter 3) how slapstick's designation as "hokum" further implied a kind of slackening of the form's social currency, an inversion of the form's relation to modernity linked to its allegiance with the squarer sensibilities of the heartland. It is as though slapstick was becoming old thrice over: old in the basic sense of the advancing biological age of its practitioners; old in the sense of outdated, through the emergence of new comic styles; and old by association with marginalized taste cultures constituted by a conservative cultural remove.²⁷ Nostalgia, in this sense, stood for a kind of affective logic whereby the "old" could be reinvested as "old-time," outdatedness reclaimed as surplus value; it was, in other words, the very process through which slapstick, as a residual form, nonetheless sustained a lingering place within the mass cultural market.

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It is within this context that Columbia's short-subjects unit first gained a reputation as a refuge for slapstick old-timers who found work there at the downside of their careers. Later in the unit's history, Jules White would be more willing

to sign younger comedians like Johnny Downs or Sterling Holloway, but at the start, the unit's stars were a veritable parade of veterans: Charlie Murray (who turned sixty-two the year of his Columbia debut), Andy Clyde (forty-two), Harry Langdon (fifty), Charley Chase (forty-four), and Buster Keaton (forty-four) all starred or costarred in their own series; Polly Moran (fifty-three) and Slim Summerville (fifty-one) each were featured in Columbia shorts on two-picture deals; while Sennett veterans Bud Jamison (forty) and Vernon Dent (also forty) appeared in countless secondary roles. (Already by the mid-1930s, industry observers noted how Jules White was seemingly on a mission to corner "virtually all the comedians whose antics are suitable for short subjects.")²⁸ And then there were the behind-the-camera talents. Columbia gag writers Felix Adler and Arthur Ripley, directors Harry Edwards and Del Lord had all worked for Sennett in the 1920s; writer-director Clyde Bruckman had collaborated with many of the great silent comics, including Harry Langdon, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton, with whom he codirected *The General* (1927); and former Educational comedy producer Jack White—Jules's brother—contributed directing duties at Columbia under his alimony-escaping pseudonym "Preston Black." Few comedy units were as well positioned to exploit the throwback market as Columbia's.

Still, silent comedy was never an undifferentiated field, and the throwback aspect of Columbia's product needs precise delineation. What is clear in this respect is that the formal achievements of 1920s-era slapstick counted for very little in shaping Columbia's house style, despite the presence in White's unit of some of the most notable comedians from that decade (Langdon, Chase, Keaton). The very qualities that have led later critics and historians to place a premium on the late silent era—the successful integration of slapstick with narrative values, the pantomimic virtuosity of the era's master clowns—all of this was occluded at Columbia in favor of the "roaring, destructive, careless energy" (the phrase is Gilbert Seldes's) of earlier, Keystone-style slapstick.²⁹ For example, Jules White's reliance on violent sight gags is notorious, nowhere more so than in the films he directed for the Three Stooges. But it is possible to see in this a return to the frenetic physicality of early 1910s "pie and chase" comedy, particularly in the tendency of the Stooges films to allow violent spectacle to derail narrative coherence and causality.³⁰ (Compare any of the Stooges shorts with a Sennett-directed early Keystone like *The Fatal Mallet* [June 1914], where a narrative of romantic rivalry serves simply as a springboard for an escalating sequence of excruciatingly violent knockabout. "The picture, purporting to be nothing other than a mélange of rough-house happenings, . . . proves that hitting people over the heads with bricks and mallets can sometimes be made amusing," commented the critic for *Moving Picture World*—words that could describe almost any of the Stooges films.)³¹ At a time when other short-comedy units had abandoned the roughhouse style of 1910s comedy, White's department preserved a space throughout the 1930s and 1940s (and even into the 1950s) where such residual comic traditions could be sustained. "Columbia was a two-reel out-and-out slapstick Mack Sennett-type of comedy,"

commented Jules White in a late interview: “Mack Sennett’s was the training ground supreme. That was the comedy college of all time. What we learned was how to steal from Mack Sennett . . . and rewrite it.”³² White also insisted on the importance of physical horseplay and roughhousing to his approach to comedy: “If we removed the knockabout aspect from these comedies it would have taken away their appeal. Their flavor would be gone. . . . It’s like with westerns: take away the cowboy’s six-shooter and there’s no gunplay; without gunplay, it’s a lousy western. The same applies to slapstick comedy: no slapstick, no laughs.”³³

Biography is relevant here, since Mack Sennett’s Keystone studio was quite literally part of the landscape of Jules White’s childhood. The Whites (originally Weiss) were Hungarian Orthodox Jews who had emigrated to the United States in 1904, eventually settling in Edendale, California, one of the early centers of moviemaking in the Los Angeles area. Home to the Keystone Film Company, Selig Polyscope, Bison, Broncho, and, briefly in 1915, Hal Roach’s Rolin Film Company, among others, Edendale provided work out of school for the four White brothers (by seniority, Jack, Jules, Ben, and Sam), making childhood memories inseparable from recollections of early Los Angeles film culture, Keystone in particular. Jack remembered cutting his teeth as an office boy and kid actor at Keystone; brother Jules recalled a youthful prank that almost burned down the Mack Sennett studio; while Sam, the youngest, remembered selling newspapers to Sennett employees.³⁴ Jules’s subsequent career path followed his older brother’s, leading him to work at Educational, first as assistant film editor, then, by the mid-1920s, as a full-fledged director for the Mermaid and Cameo product lines. By the time of the transition to sound, the major studios’ shift into short-film production had placed a premium on behind-the-camera organizational talent, and Jules found himself recruited to MGM to help organize its short department in 1929, then to do the same at Columbia. During his MGM stint, White directed several in Pete Smith’s *MGM Oddities* series and, with director Zion Myers, created the *Dogville* comedies—spoofs of then-popular films featuring canine casts (“All-Barkie” comedies, as they were promoted), including titles like *The Dogway Melody* (December 1930), *So Quiet on the Canine Front* (January 1931), and so on. All-animal casts had previously appeared in silent-era comic series in the form of Hal Roach’s *Dippy-Doo-Dads* comedies (1923–1924) but, in White’s and Myers’s hands, represented an ingenious solution to the challenge of sound filmmaking: toffee on the *Dogville* dogs’ tongues made their mouths chomp repetitively, allowing for easy dubbing both in English and for foreign-language markets. Asked in later years to name the favorite of his short-subject series, White did not hesitate to answer “the dog things” (fig. 33).³⁵

But it is fair to say that the major impact of White’s approach to comedy rested not with masticating canines but with his subsequent work at Columbia Pictures. Founded in 1924 by Harry Cohn, Columbia had established itself by the beginning



FIGURE 33. Dogs in military training in *So Quiet on the Canine Front* (January 1931), one of White's early "All-Barkie" comedies for MGM.

of the sound era as one of the "little three" major studios, alongside Universal and United Artists—so-called because these companies did not have exhibition chains. Lacking a network of theaters, Cohn's organization obviously had little obligation to offer contracted exhibitors a full program, and the studio's involvement in short subjects had, until the early 1930s, focused primarily on the distribution of independently produced shorts. At the beginning of the decade, for instance, Columbia was handling Walt Disney's *Silly Symphonies* cartoons, Charles Mintz's *Krazy Kat* series, and Photocolor's *Color Sensation* musical comedies, although it also produced its own *Columbia-Victor Gems*, featuring vaudeville and musical stars, and the entertainment news weekly, *Talking Screen Snapshots*. Yet, if the lack of a theater chain inevitably placed short subjects at a low priority, Columbia's minor-league status also meant that there was little to lose by exploring genres that the vertically integrated studios were ignoring or downplaying. Slapstick shorts precisely fit the bill in this respect, and in the summer of 1932, Cohn signed the team of White and Myers to reorganize the studio's short department to emphasize cheaply produced live-action comedy: productions would be budgeted at bargain-basement levels of fifteen thousand dollars apiece, with shooting schedules of four to five days.³⁶ White later recalled his first encounter with Columbia's legendarily tyrannical head:

I walked in[to Harry Cohn's office] and got just about abreast of the piano when Cohn says, "Hey, White. Can you make the funniest comedies in the picture business?"

I stopped cold and faced him. "Hey, Cohn. Can you make the best features in the picture business? Wait a minute, don't answer, I've seen them." I turned around and

started to leave. I got just about halfway to the door and he hollered at me, "Hey, where the hell you going, come back here." . . .

I said, "You still want to talk to me?"

"More than ever. I like a man that's got the guts to stand up and say what he's thinking."³⁷

Despite White and Myers's previous experience together at MGM, things got off to a series of false starts at Columbia. Initial trade announcements of the new short-subject unit were followed just two weeks later by rumors of the unit's disbanding—apparently owing to a conflict over the famed vaudeville team Smith and Dale, assigned to White and Myers's unit by the New York office. (The trade press reported the conflict as a matter of scheduling; Jules White recalled it as a more sensitive issue: "I refused to work [with Smith and Dale]. I thought their type of Jewish comedy was demeaning and undignified.")³⁸ Reports of the unit's demise were in fact premature; even so, White temporarily quit in frustration the following year, having failed to produce a single film. Now under Myers's solo stewardship, the short-comedy division eventually sputtered into production on its first film on September 29, 1933, with its initial series falling in line with broader industry trends toward variety appeal.³⁹ First to commence release was the *Musical Novelties* series of musical comedy shorts, performed in rhyming dialogue under the direction of songwriter Archie Gottler (the sixth of these, *Woman Haters* [May 1934], was the first Columbia film to showcase the talents of the Three Stooges, there billed as "Howard, Fine and Howard"); next, a series reuniting the aging leads from Universal's *Cohens and Kellys* films, George Sidney and Charles Murray; and third, a line of domestic comedies seemingly patterned on Edgar Kennedy's *Average Man* shorts, featuring the bespectacled and befuddled Walter Catlett.⁴⁰ White's absence was nevertheless short lived; he returned to head the unit by the end of 1933—at Myers's request—and immediately set to work steering the short-subjects division firmly toward a throwback style of knockabout. The following year saw the launching of a number of full-bore slapstick series: the Three Stooges shorts (now in their own official series), along with the Andy Clyde (1934–1956) and Harry Langdon lines (1934–1945). Subsequent seasons rounded out the decade by adding more veteran performers: the pairing of former Keystone and Fox Sunshine comedian Tom Kennedy with erstwhile Cameo comic Monte Collins (1935–1938); Swedish dialect comedian El Brendel (1936–1945); Charley Chase (1937–1940), fresh from being let go from Roach; and Buster Keaton (1939–1941), who, following his series at Educational, had been biding his time as an MGM gag writer. Reviewers were quick to recognize Columbia's throwback house style: thus, the Stooges' *Ants in the Pantry* (February 1936) was described as featuring "[gags] from the archives of Keystone memory," while the Collins and Kennedy short *New News* (April 1937)

contained "gags of the kind familiar in Sennett's best years."⁴¹ One exhibitor in Newport, Washington, waxed nostalgic in describing Andy Clyde's *He Done His Duty* (December 1937): "This was one of those old genuine comedies from those days when you say, 'Do you remember when?'"⁴² Diverse as White's comedians were in style and approach, they would all be stamped with the trademark style of old-time roughhousing he helped nurture at Columbia.

"LANDING ON THE FLOOR WITH A THUD":
THE AESTHETICS OF SLAPSTICK ATAVISM

A closer understanding of that atavistic trademark might usefully be approached by comparing the comedians at Columbia whose style had seemingly *least* to do with one another: the Three Stooges and Buster Keaton. Together, the Stooges and Keaton might be taken to designate almost opposed ends of the spectrum of styles within the American slapstick tradition, its highs and its lows. Whereas the Stooges' violently physical comedy has become for many a fitting emblem for slapstick's sound-era decline, Keaton's reputation—alongside Chaplin's, Lloyd's, and Langdon's—has come to define the pantomimic achievements of the previous decade, Agee's celebrated "greatest era." And whereas the Stooges have been seen as poster children for the throwback roughhousing favored by White, Keaton's work at Columbia is more usually dismissed as the unfortunately botched result of incompatible work methods and comedic philosophies—the disappointing offerings of a once great slapstick artist reduced to making assembly-line knockabout shorts, "alien to the true Keaton style."⁴³ What these comedians shared, however, was the experience of having to reshape their comic styles in interaction with work processes on the Columbia lot, with Jules White's tastes and creative agenda as well as those of his writers and directors. And although those experiences were very different, in both cases they resulted in a recursive or backward movement in the comedians' respective slapstick styles: a hopscotching over performative modes they had learned and mastered prior to their times at Columbia, and a restoration of comedic principles associated with an earlier moment in slapstick's development.

To begin with the Stooges (fig. 34): we have already had cause, in the first chapter, to discuss the team's earliest appearances in sound film—in particular, their five shorts with Ted Healy for MGM (1933–1934)—as examples of early sound comedy's indebtedness to Broadway's "cuckoo" vogue.⁴⁴ What changed in their comedy following their jump to Columbia Pictures was seemingly quite simple: no more Ted Healy. The Stooges had in fact long chafed at Healy's paternalism in controlling payments and contract negotiations and had even briefly quit the act as early as 1930, angered by his successful efforts to prevent Fox from granting the trio their own contracts. Despite reuniting in 1932, the Stooges quit Healy permanently when their MGM agreements came up for renewal on



FIGURE 34. Production still from the Three Stooges' *Healthy, Wealthy and Dumb* (May 1938). "HEALTHY, WEALTHY AND DUMB" © 1938, renewed 1966, Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

March 6, 1934, signing with Columbia on a one-picture deal for *The Woman Haters* less than two weeks later. (The separation proved to be a contentious one, with Healy filing an unsuccessful lawsuit seeking to prevent the use of the name "Stooges" in connection with the trio's subsequent pictures. Healy died, following a fight in a nightclub, in 1937.)⁴⁵ But with Healy more was lost than simply the boss's role in orchestrating the Stooges' mayhem. Also gone was the revue-style framework for which Healy had served as wisecracking master of ceremonies. Although *The Woman Haters* had featured rhyming dialogue set to music, the legacy of the Stooges' origins in musical revues in fact proved to be one of the major structuring absences of their post-MGM work: sans the revue-style framework of song and dance numbers, all that remained was the rowdiness with which the Stooges had previously punctuated their patter with Healy. Then as now, reviewers who described the Stooges' shtick at Columbia typically evoked its unbroken, relentless momentum. "Their routine," commented one, "is informal, inane and uninhibited. It's a series of eye-jabbing, head-thumping, nose-tweaking antics threaded on a string of rapid-fire chatter and embellished by double and triple takes"; "The Three Stooges," added another, "keep up a

running fire of gags and atrocious puns, interjecting the verbal onslaughts with their familiar . . . antics, such as gouging the fat boy's eye, etc."⁴⁶ The social trajectory of the Stooges' comedy, in their passage first from stage to screen, and then from MGM to Columbia, might thus be characterized as a gradual transition from what had been the symbolically dominant pole (revue-style comedy) to a symbolically dominated one (unadulterated physical slapstick), from a style of comedy that enjoyed significant metropolitan cultural capital to one whose capital was in decline. There is, then, here a reverse development in comic style, a move "back up the path" to an earlier—"lower"—moment in slapstick's development, prior to its incorporation as an element of spectacle in Broadway revues.

Sprung from this backward step, the Stooges' films thus became flag bearers for the throwback comic style that became Columbia's, and Jules White's, hallmark. They were only the third regular series launched under White's tenure (following the *Musical Novelties* series and the George Sidney and Charlie Murray shorts), as well as the unit's first truly slapstick comedies. Shortly after their debut in *The Woman Haters* in May 1934, Columbia signed the trio for an additional seven shorts for the 1934–1935 season at a thousand dollars per film (paid to the entire team, not individually), to ascend to fifteen hundred dollars by their seventh.⁴⁷ Their third film for Columbia, *Men in Black* (September 1934)—a spoof of the MGM/Clark Gable hospital drama *Men in White* (1934)—brought White's fledgling unit unexpected endorsement in the form of an Academy Award nomination, leading to further salary negotiations. Jack Cohn, who supervised studio finances from New York, initially refused to raise the team's salary to the suggested price of two thousand dollars a picture, but a letter dated February 23, 1935, from studio manager William S. Holman convinced him they were worth it. "In the first place," Holman reasoned,

we feel quite certain that those boys will be able to and will sign almost immediately some place else. Accordingly, if we follow your suggestion we can be fairly certain that we will lose them entirely.

In the second place if we were able to get the Stooges at \$2,000 a picture, which we told you we thought we might do, they would not be as expensive for us as Andy Clyde now is and they would in reality cost us no more than Langdon does.

The rate for Clyde is now \$2,000 and his last two pictures go to \$2,250, while Langdon is now at \$1,500 with an option of two more pictures at \$1,750. With both of these comedians we have to spend additional money for one or more supporting players, while with the Stooges we are getting three leads for one sum; therefore, as far as costs go, this price for them would not be out of line. Furthermore, we find it easier to get stories for these boys and also that their pictures on the whole are cheaper to make. Eliminating the football picture [*Three Little Pigskins*, December 1934] which went overboard largely because of weather conditions, their other three subjects have averaged under \$12,000 a piece in cost, which is almost one thousand dollars less than the average for the other two-reel subjects. Also, the general feeling here is that their pictures are a little better and a little funnier than the general run of our two-reelers.⁴⁸

So convinced was Jack Cohn, in fact, that he raised the offer to \$2,500 per picture for eight shorts. The Stooges signed.

Such early success doubtless helped cement the Columbia short-subject unit's overall orientation toward live-action comedy, establishing the series as a boot camp of sorts for the unit's emerging style of intensively physical, throwback slapstick. It was director Del Lord who was perhaps the first fully to unleash the boys' destructive energies, regularly helming the Stooges' shorts between 1935 and 1945. As sound engineer (and future Stooges' director) Ed Bernds recalled: "When the Stooges came to Columbia, despite their year at M-G-M, they were still essentially vaudeville performers, using stand-up verbal routines; even their hitting and slapping routines were done vaudeville style." Under Lord, however, the Stooges' slapstick style became more expansive, replete with the stunt sequences in which the director had previously specialized at Sennett: "[Lord] brought them into the world of sight gags, special effects magic, and outrageous . . . stories"—as, for instance, in the barrel-chasing climax to *Three Little Beers* (November 1935), filmed on the streets of Edendale, Lord's old stomping ground.⁴⁹ A further turn to the destructive was added in their shorts under Jules White, who began directing them in 1939. Many of White's filmmakers later recalled how he pushed the Stooges to play up the direct, unmediated violence that was already part of their established stage repertoire.⁵⁰ Although typically White sought total control over the shorts he helmed, this was not the case with the Stooges; as he later recalled, he "permitted more ad-lib with the Stooges"—in particular, allowing Moe and Curly to develop elaborately violent tit-for-tats across lengthy, unbroken takes—and granted the team significant creative input into scripting.⁵¹ Moe Howard later described the Stooges' role in scripting their shorts in a 1973 interview:

Basically, we wrote about ninety per cent of the films we did on what they call a treatment basis. Our scripts were usually twenty-nine pages and we always wrote a nine-page treatment embodying what the background would be and different pieces of business and that kind of stuff. And then we'd turn it over to a screenplay writer who would put it in shooting script form. Then of course, we'd take the first draft of that and we'd take it back and put the speeches where they belong because you couldn't have Larry using any tough language to me because that's not the way we'd operate, you see? We'd change the dialogue and put the words where they belong and to whom they belong and then they'd take it back for a second and final draft, shooting script.⁵²

The Stooges' working experience at Columbia was evidently characterized by a harmony of creative interests: on the one hand, a comedic trio whose style, absent the interplay with Ted Healy, was ripe for relaunching as "pure" physicality; on the other, a behind-the-camera team whose creative enthusiasms lay in the similarly retro direction of Sennett-style roughhousing. The same, though, can hardly be said of Buster Keaton, whose ten shorts at Columbia constitute perhaps the

most critically reviled and neglected films in which he ever appeared. The critical consensus on these films has been damning: the ten Columbia shorts represent "the absolute bottom" of Keaton's career in films; they are "among the worst of his pictures" or "the worst comedies he ever appeared in."⁵³ Keaton himself shared the assessment, describing the films as "cheaters" ("movies thrown together as quickly and cheaply as possible") and claiming to have quit Columbia (in late 1941) when he "couldn't stomach turning out even one more crummy two-reeler."⁵⁴ Unlike other former silent stars at Columbia—Charley Chase, Harry Langdon—Keaton did not contribute much to the scripting of his shorts beyond preparing some routines in advance (he had, by contrast, coauthored all his silent comedies). And unlike the Stooges, Keaton's working relation with Jules White—who directed all but two of his Columbia shorts⁵⁵—was less a matter of collaboration than of submission. Colleagues later recalled how White forced his silent-era stars to fit his conception of comedy by didactically instructing them on how scenes were to be performed. "Jules was an abortive ham," noted one colleague. "How could anyone have the audacity to show Buster Keaton or Harry Langdon how to do a scene? Imagine!"⁵⁶ White himself later explained this "audacity" in cruelly unsentimental terms: "They [White's lead comedians] all took my direction. They had to cause they were on their way down."⁵⁷ The gap separating Keaton's Columbia work from his achievements of the 1920s was thus cemented in his relation with an authoritative director-producer, Jules White, whose roughhouse inclinations harkened back to an earlier era. Ed Bernds recalled the disparity: "[Keaton] was good when he had a chance to be good. . . . But he was done in by . . . improper use of his talents. White's pace was frantic, but Buster's comedy required a more deliberate pace."⁵⁸ Financial limitations further compromised Keaton's ability to make these films his own, with budgets initially set at \$15,750 per short.⁵⁹ As Keaton recalled:

All of the energy and ingenuity of the director . . . [was] concentrated on the saving of money. . . . Several times I urged Harry Cohn, president of Columbia, to let me spend a little more time and money. I explained that on a larger budget I could turn out two-reelers that he could sell instead of giving them away as part of a package. Cohn, whose company was doing great without my suggestions, was not interested.⁶⁰

Indeed, in Keaton's case, White not only contributed directing duties but was also responsible for the decision to pair Keaton with comedienne Elsie Ames in many of the shorts (fig. 35). Beginning with Keaton's fifth Columbia short, *The Taming of the Snood* (June 1940), Keaton's films were explicitly conceived and produced as costarring pictures in which Keaton would play foil to Ames, a dancer whom Columbia was building up as a brash comedienne somewhat in the Martha Raye mold (and who, not perhaps coincidentally, was at the time in an affair with White). Production files from this period are typically headed "Buster Keaton with Elsie Ames" (or some similar variant), and the films were even occasionally listed in the trade press as "Keaton & Ames" comedies.⁶¹ The decision to partner



FIGURE 35. Production still of Buster Keaton and Elsie Ames in *The Taming of the Snood* (June 1940). “THE TAMING OF THE SNOOD” © 1940, renewed 1968, Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

VIDEO 5. Clip from *The Taming of the Snood*.

To watch this video, scan the QR code with your mobile device or visit
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/luminos.28.7>



Keaton and Ames seems to have been made following the production of *Nothing but Pleasure* (January 1940), the third in the series, in which Keaton had briefly appeared with Ames in a variant on one of the comedian’s favorite routines: the famous scene from *Spite Marriage* (1929) in which he tries to put a drunk woman to bed (later performed with his wife Eleanor on tours in the 1940s and 1950s). Audience response to the sequence seems to have been positive—an Alfred, New York, exhibitor wrote *Motion Picture Herald* that “the part where Buster was trying to pick up the girl was especially good”—and the pairing quickly became policy.⁶² For Keaton and Ames’s first “official” outing as a duo in *The Taming of the Snood*, director Jules White and writers Clyde Bruckman and Ewart Adamson closely followed the template of *Nothing but Pleasure*: as in the earlier film, the pair’s comic interactions are largely limited to a single, strenuously physical scene,

again based on an earlier Keaton routine. The routine derived in this instance not from Keaton's previous filmography but from his family vaudeville act, the Three Keatons, for which he and his father Joe had performed a violent acrobatic act on, under, and around a table. (Joe Keaton was, in fact, often billed as "The Man with the Table.") In the film, Buster visits an apartment to deliver a hat; inside, he meets the maid, Hortense (Ames), who prances around, becomes drunk, and wrangles Buster onto a table. It is worth quoting sections from the shooting script's lengthy (three-page) outline of the ensuing action; here is the beginning:

41. MED. SHOT—AT END OF TABLE

Buster stands Hortense up then turns to pick up the hat. Hortense gets a bright idea [penciled: "tries to get up on table backward—jumps, falls"]. She lifts one foot, places it on the edge of the table, then reaches down, picks up the other foot to place it also on the end of the table, which naturally throws her. Just as it looks like she is going to hit the floor [this is penciled out], Buster whirls and catches her ["catches her" also penciled out]. He stands her up again beside the table. Her legs are wobbly and suddenly give way as she does the splits in a semi-collapse. Buster picks her up, straightens her out again and her legs start to go again. This time as she sinks, she reaches behind her to steady herself and grabs Buster by the back of the neck. As she continues to go down she pulls Buster over her shoulder. He lands on his head. For a second they look at each other. She laughs giddily, then gets to her feet. Buster is a trifle dazed. Hurriedly Hortense goes over to Buster and picks him up. Buster's legs are now wobbly and he starts to do splits. She straightens him up once more. [Last three sentences are penciled out and replaced with "he picks her up on his shoulder—she smashes his nose. He sits her on table"] . . .

And here are the elaborate acrobatics of the routine's finale:

55. MED. LONG SHOT

Buster is behind Hortense [him standing, her sitting on the table] and as she whirls around with her legs outstretched, pivoting on her fanny, her legs catch Buster in back of the knees, throwing his legs out from under him, and he lands on his fanny on the table, facing Hortense, the soles of his feet pressed against hers. Hortense's knees are in the air. She laughs giddily. She is having a swell time. Buster is beginning to burn up. Hortense, laughing hilariously, now suddenly straightens out her legs and the pressure shoves Buster off the table backwards. He lands on the floor on his neck. Slowly he starts to turn over, sits for a second angrily.

56. CLOSE SHOT—HORTENSE

She sees the lamp shade on the table and decides she will put it up on the chandelier. Picking it up she stands up.

57. LONG SHOT

Buster is slightly under the table where he sat up, and now as he turns over and starts to get up, his back catches the end part of the table, raising it. Hortense's (DOUBLE) feet go out from under her and she slides off the table on her fanny, landing on the floor with a thud on top of the hat. Buster hurries to her and picks her up.⁶³

All this is remarkably close to the finished picture, providing unmistakable evidence that Keaton himself participated in the film's scenario preparation (who else would have known the routine?) (vid. 5). And, once again, it is this sequence that seems to have provided audiences with the film's standout scene: "Buster Keaton is never funny," wrote a dour exhibitor from Onalaska, Washington, but "this one is good. Credit to the 'drunk act' put on by the girl."⁶⁴

Is it possible to suggest that, rather than detracting from Keaton's comic talents, as most Keaton scholars have argued, these moments with Ames instead supply the films' genuine significance for understanding the aesthetics of Columbia's "old-time" house style? Commentators often equate the Keaton-Ames partnership with the comedian's early 1930s work with Jimmy Durante at MGM—in *The Passionate Plumber* (1932), *Speak Easily* (1932), and *What! No Beer?* (1933)—but this is an observation that can be queried.⁶⁵ True, like Durante, Ames played wisecracking vulgarian to Keaton's mild-mannered simp, but where the Durante-Keaton contrast worked on a primarily *verbal* dimension (Durante was no knockabout comedian), the Ames-Keaton pairings are additionally distinguished by rambunctious and violently *physical* interaction. Frequently cast in roles of secondary narrative importance, Ames played characters who served simply to precipitate extended, elaborately choreographed slapstick sequences, not to advance the plot. If the gags in Keaton's earlier silent comedies are, as Noël Carroll observes, commonly task oriented, centered upon the display of Buster's "bodily intelligence" in overcoming physical obstacles, then slapstick in the Keaton-Ames films loses this purposive vector and is displayed purely for its own sake.⁶⁶ For instance, in *General Nuisance* (September 1941), the ninth in the series, Keaton plays Peter Hedley Lamar, Jr., a wealthy dandy who joins the army to impress a nurse (played by Dorothy Appleby; the plot is taken from Keaton's 1930 MGM feature *Doughboys*); what the film foregrounds, however, is a slapstick subplot in which Dorothy's gold-digging friend, Amabel (Ames), unsuccessfully attempts to woo Peter for herself. There is thus a discrepancy between the two women—Appleby's character serving as narrative "goal" and motivation versus Ames as agent of slapstick misdirection⁶⁷—which generates one of the best comic sequences in both the film and the series: Keaton's clog dance with cuspidors on his feet. Entirely segregated from the Dorothy narrative, the sequence begins with Peter polishing cuspidors at the army camp; Amabel enters with an accordionist and serenades Peter, who takes up the melody and sings insults back at her ("Your teeth are not quite like the stars shining bright/ But I bet fifty bucks they come out every night"). It is again worth quoting the script:

At the end of the song Amabel grabs Peter and they go into a very nice Minuet. . . . Suddenly during the dance Amabel jerks Peter, who falls, Amabel dancing away from him and coming back again. . . . And now they go into a waltz. . . . In this routine Amabel and Peter waltz and the business of Amabel and Peter getting their arms all twisted up, the slapping routine, etc., until they separate, Peter flying across the room hitting the

wall. Amabel comes in and goes into a pose. Peter picks her up in a semi-ballet step. He lifts her up and as he lets her down, she stomps on his foot. Peter grabs his foot and begins to jump up and down. Amabel starts clapping in Russian tempo. . . . Amabel and Peter go into their Russian routine, ending with them doing leaps in opposite directions, CAMERA FOLLOWING PETER, who leaps into the cuspidors.

55. INSERT—PETER'S FEET

as they land in two of the cuspidors.

56. LONG SHOT

Peter now resumes the dance . . . as Amabel and he go into the clog waltz. During this an M.P. enters, comes down beside them and as Amabel and Peter separate in a series of turns, Peter gets the M.P. and waltzes with him while Amabel runs around him, trying to signal to Peter. Finally Peter sees that he has the M.P. and goofily dances away from the M.P., CAMERA PANNING WITH HIM. Peter hits the pile of cuspidors, ending up in a heap.

57. CLOSEUP—PETER

amidst the cuspidors.⁶⁸

We can more closely approach an understanding of Columbia's house style by asking, Is there a "mechanics" to the comedy of these sequences? It has been a commonplace of Keaton criticism, for instance, that the gag structure of his silent films is in some sense "mechanical" or a symptom of technological modernity. Carroll, for instance, examines the style of Keaton's *The General* as embodying the "mind of an engineer," a pragmatic mentality focused on the "*mechanics* rather than the heroics of his physical encounters with things"; for Tom Gunning, meanwhile, Keaton's "operational aesthetic"—the display of mechanical processes in his gags—provides a paradigmatic instance of slapstick's intersection with the modern age.⁶⁹ But such judgments can be applied to the Columbia shorts only with significant qualification. For, as the showcase sequences with Ames illustrate, what counts in the Columbia films is less Buster's "mechanical" interaction *with objects* than an interaction *between characters mediated by objects*: Buster, Elsie, and a Murphy bed in *Nothing but Pleasure*; Buster, Elsie, and a table in *The Taming of the Snood*; Buster, Elsie, and a pile of cuspidors in *General Nuisance*.

The difference between tools and machines can clarify this distinction. As Lewis Mumford wrote in *Technics and Civilization*, "The essential distinction between a machine and a tool lies in the degree of independence in the operation from the skill and motive power of the operator: the tool lends itself to manipulation, the machine to automatic action."⁷⁰ But this is also one way of identifying the specificity of Columbia's hallmark comic style in relation to Keaton's silent-era accomplishments. Whereas Keaton's comedies in the 1920s incarnate a *mechanical* way of seeing—one preoccupied with the interaction of physical objects and human bodies in a more or less automatic process (e.g., the famous image from *Daydreams* [November 1922] in which Buster is trapped inside a boat's side paddle wheel, like a hamster on a treadmill)—then his Columbia shorts more commonly approach physical objects as *tools*

to be manipulated in direct, frequently roughhouse interactions between characters. This is evident in its most basic form in moments of typical Jules White-style violence, when, for instance, Buster knocks out soldiers with logs of wood in a recurrent gag from the Civil War comedy *Mooching through Georgia* (August 1939) or uses a fork to fire mashed potatoes into the mouth of his ex-wife (Ames, of course) in *His Ex Marks the Spot* (December 1940). But it is also clear in the more choreographed sequences with Ames discussed above, in which physical objects function not as moving parts in an automatic or task-oriented process, but as inert material that either links the characters as a connective device (the table as both tool and topography of violence in *Taming of the Snood*) or serves as a direct extension of the bodily performance (the cuspidor clog dance in *General Nuisance*). Of course, historically, this use of a physical object as a tool—not a machine—for knockabout action has its paradigmatic instance in the “slap-stick” itself, a device from *commedia dell’arte* composed of two wooden slats and used to hit people (in Italian, a *battacio*). But this example again forcibly confirms how Columbia’s house style led its starring comedians—Keaton no less than the Stooges—“back up the path” to an earlier modality of slapstick performance, one for which the mechanical dimension of physical comedy was not yet fully articulated, where the emphasis was instead on the interaction of human bodies, and where physical objects were employed straightforwardly as tools within that interaction (the hose of *L’Arroseur arrosé* [December 1895], the mallet of *The Fatal Mallet*, the supposedly ubiquitous pies and banana peels).⁷¹ The distance that divides Keaton’s Columbia shorts from his silent-era work is thus measured by a shifting modalization in the performer’s comic relation to the material world of objects: no longer an assimilation of the body to a mechanical environment, but an appropriation of physical objects to human relations, even of the most brutal kind.

*

According to Pierre Bourdieu, it is the destiny of all cultural forms that age to see themselves “thrown *outside* history or to ‘pass into history,’ into the eternal present of consecrated *culture*.” Historical variation within any given tradition is flattened into an undifferentiated field in which trends and schools once considered incompatible are barely even recognized as distinct; appreciation of that tradition instead becomes governed by what Bourdieu calls “transcendent and eternal norms,” a unifying mode of perception that subsumes the dialectics of historical difference to a single static sameness.⁷² The taste for “old-time” slapstick was just such a sensibility, and over the course of the 1930s, it dragged the particularities of distinct slapstick styles from the silent era into the gravitational field of Sennett-style comedy, as though all of the great slapstick stars had once despoiled themselves in a world of brick throwing and crazy chases. A Chaplin film like *A Dog’s Life*, we have seen, could thus be thought of as a “custard pie throwing” picture. Keaton himself was often mistakenly thought of during this period as a veteran pie thrower—according to one report, the “Carl Hubbell of cinema pie-pitching.”⁷³ (A player for

the New York Giants, Hubbell set a major league record of twenty-four consecutive wins by a pitcher in 1936 and 1937.) Only a mode of perception for which slapstick had been consecrated to a flattened past could celebrate, for example, Harry Langdon, in Columbia's *Sue My Lawyer* (September 1938), as a "past master of . . . old-fashioned slapstick," just as only a mode of appreciation that blurred out historical variation under the blanket designator of old-time comedy could describe the style of Keaton's Columbia performances as being "in the manner to which, lo these many years, he has accustomed us."⁷⁴ The process is akin to what sociologist Barbara Myerhoff describes as "re-membering," the way in which nostalgia often seeks a "reaggregation of [a group's] members," an imaginary configuration of individuals who come to be associated in popular memory with a given historical event, process, or, in the case of silent-era slapstick, cultural tradition.⁷⁵ It was symptomatic, then, that during the 1930s Keaton was erroneously re-membered as a former graduate of the Keystone Film Company—a misperception that seems to have begun in journalist Gene Fowler's myth-making and error-ridden "biography" of Mack Sennett, *Father Goose*, published in 1934, and that, by the end of the decade was treated as more or less established fact.⁷⁶ For a cameo as himself in Fox's *Hollywood Cavalcade*, for instance, Keaton played a veteran of the swaddling days of Keystone-style slapstick, supposedly the first comedian ever to throw a custard pie (something he had *never* done in his silent days). The error was further perpetuated in trade press accounts, even in an educational supplement of *Photoplay Studies* devoted to the "real" history behind *Hollywood Cavalcade*, wherein it was baldly claimed that Mack Sennett had "invented" the "sad-eyed comedian."⁷⁷ Keaton's Columbia films might, in this sense, be thought of as the aesthetic corollary of this process of re-membering—a series of shorts that aligned Keaton with a performative style alien to his own silent films but perfectly fitting the dominant perception in the 1930s of what silent slapstick had been.

So it should come as no surprise that appreciation of Columbia's short-subject series was primarily oriented toward the pleasures of nostalgia. Even a cursory survey of *Motion Picture Herald's* "What the Picture Did for Me" column confirms that Keaton's Columbia shorts attracted audiences precisely for their nostalgic appeal. Theater owner Pearce Parkhurst (Beverly, Massachusetts) informed readers that "this *old timer* [Keaton] still means something at the box office." W. Varick Nevins III, a theater owner from Alfred, New York, agreed: *Nothing but Pleasure*, he wrote, proved that "the *old time* comedians still have something the new ones don't." A somewhat less favorably inclined exhibitor, from Hay Springs, Nebraska, was surprised that audiences still found Keaton funny but conceded that *She's Oil Mine* (November 1941) had nonetheless been a success: "Just why an audience would go for this *old time* slapstick is more than we could figure out, but it seemed to bring out a lot of laughs."⁷⁸ It is telling that, of over two dozen exhibitors' reports on Keaton's Columbia shorts, only one expressed a totally unfavorable response (to *Mooching through Georgia*), and, furthermore, that that report came from the

only big city exhibitor to comment on the series (the manager of Chicago's Plaza Theater): "OK for the children. A bit too silly for the adults. We received a big kick out of just this sort of a comedy fifteen years ago."⁷⁹ Regional distinctions separating small-town from metropolitan cultures were thus buttressed by a kind of temporality of taste; for, as the "What the Picture Did for Me" column shows, all the praise for Keaton's Columbia shorts came from small-town and rural exhibitors who valued their atavistic style as "old-time," while the only criticism came from a metropolitan theater owner who disparaged such atavism as outdated ("fifteen years ago").

A similar pattern is clear in relation to the Stooges, whose marketability was likewise defined in terms of the throwback tastes of small-town and neighborhood moviegoers to whom Columbia, lacking its own first-run houses, had long targeted its output. Of a film like the Stooges' *Hoi Polloi* (August 1935), the manager of the Niles Theatre in Animosa, Iowa, thus described the trio's comic style as "knock down, drag-'em-out" hokum, adding that "they [i.e., audiences] love it in the small towns on Saturday night," while an exhibitor in Lincoln, Kansas, praised the Stooges for finding "more ways to make people laugh than a farmer has coming to town."⁸⁰ As the Iowa exhibitor's comment indicates, small-town theater owners commonly arranged weekly schedules so that Stooze comedies played on Fridays and Saturdays, when downtown was crowded with rural folk, and they encouraged others to do the same. "By all means play all of the Stooges comedies," one Minnesota exhibitor recommended to his peers. "We play them on weekends on Friday and Saturday." The manager of the Palace Theatre in Exira, Indiana, agreed, noting: "When better comedies are made, Columbia and the Stooges will make them. . . . Play them on the week-ends and watch your audience really get a good laugh."⁸¹ Children, in particular, responded favorably to the Stooges' shorts, making the pictures a particular boon for neighborhood exhibitors dependent on the family audience. The dialogue-heavy style of sophisticated talking shorts may well have alienated the kiddie trade, as historian Thomas Doherty suggests; but Stooze-style physicality was evidently an easier sell.⁸² "Hard to get the kids out as they want to see [the Stooges] two or three times," commented E. F. Ingram of the Ashland Theatre in Alabama, an opinion with which many other exhibitors agreed.⁸³ "This trio of comedians are . . . nine-tenths of my box office appeal for the kids," noted the manager of the Gem Theatre in Logan, Utah. "You can have your Marx Brothers and your Laurel and Hardy, but give me just one feature-length Stooze picture and I'll be out of the red for a good while."⁸⁴

What should hold our attention here is how Columbia's slapstick stars were only ever perceived to appeal to one side of a series of assumed cultural schisms: to children more than adults, to small-town moviegoers more than urban sophisticates. There was, then, a kind of structural homology mapping the social characteristics of Columbia's brand of throwback comedy onto those of their Depression-era fans, for both were, in a profound sense, *untimely*. Practitioners of a style of slapstick

culturally situated in the past, Columbia stars like the Stooges and Buster Keaton became the objects of enthusiasms that were similarly marked by the "untimely" social positions of their users—whether children (defined through their presocial sensibilities) or heartland filmgoers (associated with the ambivalences of "provincial modernity"). Old-time comedy, as practiced at Columbia, thus marked a kind of temporal displacement linking the social position of its audience to a throwback cultural form. The next section considers how such untimeliness was not simply an issue of comic style but also governed Columbia slapstick's relation to the historical situation and populist ideologies of New Deal–era America.

"AN ARENA OF LIFE WHICH WE DON'T
UNDERSTAND": THE THREE STOOGES AND NEW
DEAL-ERA POPULISM

The Depression, no historian would disagree, brought the specter of the disenfranchised to the very center of American politics. It would thus seem an era suited to an earlier style of slapstick comedy, whose typology of clowns had long gravitated toward the marginal classes: to comic hoboes, befuddled immigrants, and the like. The destitute tramps that Keystone had put on screen in the 1910s, for instance, continued to hold sway in the political and social realities of the early 1930s, when unemployment reached 25 percent of the workforce while others received only a tiny number of hours of work per week. This, one might have expected, surely yielded opportunities for slapstick representation.⁸⁵ Yet even in the populist efflorescence of that decade, when so many agitated for an engaged popular art, slapstick remained strangely out of step with the times. Slapstick's aging had the effect of altering what I described earlier as its "social temporality," its ability to engage the social and cultural forms of the present as comic material. Old gags and formulas could only with difficulty be adapted to the changing ideological forms of American cultural life in the 1930s.

The films of the Three Stooges suggest this quite well. Few of the era's comic teams belonged so directly to slapstick's typology of disenfranchisement as the Stooges, who came to film already familiar to vaudeville audiences and theatergoers under a variety of lumpen designators ("Three Lost Souls," "Ted Healy's Racketeers," etc.). Early on, in fact, Columbia's screenwriters evidently sought to place the team in situations engaging the hardships of Depression-era life—for instance, *Three Little Pigskins*, which starts with the trio panhandling for cash; *Pop Goes the Easel* (March 1935), where they beg passersby for work; and *Movie Maniacs* (February 1936), in which the team is introduced riding the rails. There were also examples of direct political intertextuality in films like *Cash and Carry* (September 1937), which ends with the Stooges receiving a pardon from FDR, or *Healthy, Wealthy, and Dumb* (May 1938), whose plot satirizes New Deal–era tax laws.⁸⁶ Yet for every Stooge film that made a direct contemporary reference, there were far more that

retreated into the abstractions of genre parody and costume farce. A slippage from contemporary settings to the occasional period comedy occurred very early in the Stooges' Columbia career, far more so than in any comparable comedy series from the period: already by their fifth, *Horses' Collars* (January 1935), the Stooges were branching out into spoof westerns; their sixth, *Restless Knights* (February 1935), was a medieval comedy; and their eighth, *Uncivil Warriors* (April 1935), Civil War slapstick.⁸⁷ All told, around a quarter of the forty-three Stooges shorts released in the 1930s placed the team at some kind of exoticizing distance, whether temporal, in, for instance, medieval comedies, or geographic, as in the Egypt-themed horror slapstick, *We Want Our Mummy* (February 1939); in such instances, there was a shading from the clown as figure of social disequilibrium toward disorder of a more abstract or even formal type, genre parody here eclipsing social content in seeming anticipation of the 1940s features of Abbott and Costello. Along similar lines, fan magazine and trade press profiles, although few and far between during their years at Columbia, painted the Stooges not as social satirists but as clownish figures of a quasi-mythic past. In one such, a 1938 interview in the *New York Daily Mirror*, the Stooges were sarcastically presented as upholders of the antiquated legacy of antebellum southern gentility: "Gentility and politeness were supposed to have died with the old South after America's Civil War," Moe Howard there claimed. "My brother, my partner and I simply felt that 'Bleak House' should not have entombed the only 'model of deportment,' so we devoted ourselves, all three of ourselves, to the cause of greater gentility."⁸⁸ Such evocations of timelessness would only be invoked more seriously in later years: "Like 'Old Man River,'" commented the *Los Angeles Daily News* in the early 1950s, "those wacky purveyors of slapstick, the Three Stooges, 'just keep rollin' along.'"⁸⁹

Yet the question of social temporality perhaps comes into sharper focus if we approach the Stooges' films not only in terms of their settings and contemporary references, but also in relation to the comic *situations* that provided the plot frameworks for their comedy. This is because, like all narrative forms, conventionalized comic situations inevitably bear the traces of the social contexts—the attitudes, assumptions, and worldviews—within which they were originally generated. It thus becomes possible to read even the most rudimentary plot device as a condensed distillation of specific forms and moments of social experience—akin, in this respect, to what Fredric Jameson has dubbed "ideologemes," those zero-degree narrative conventions and clichéd plot devices that survive as fragments of former ideologies.⁹⁰ The slapstick tradition was, of course, replete with inherited devices, so much so that many acquired trade nicknames: the "bomb under the bed" plot (premised on alternating scenes between an unaware comedian and a situation of growing peril) or the "ghost in the pawnshop" (in which a clown is stalked by a menacing figure, mistakenly assumed to be a ghost).⁹¹ Bears, lions, and gorillas on the loose; tramps who enter society; marital infidelities in adjacent hotel rooms; visits from decorators/builders/piano deliverers; millionaire benefactors revealed

as escaped lunatics: such comic devices circulated so often that it is easy to mistake them as universal rather than historical forms that, in many instances, outlasted the social contexts they originally symbolized.

A case in point would be the basic master plot of so many of the Stooges' two-reelers: the disruptive entry of the lumpen onto the world of the elite. As Moe Howard himself glossed the formula, "We subtly, the three of us, always go into an area of life which we don't understand. If we're going to go into society, the picture opens on us as garbage collectors."⁹² Time and again, regular Columbia writers like Adamson, Adler, Bruckman, and Elwood Ullman constructed narratives requiring that the Stooges transgress the boundaries dividing the dispossessed from the world of culture and privilege: they are, alternately, carpenters who inherit a Fifth Avenue dress salon and stage a fashion show (*Slippery Silks* [December 1936]), insect exterminators hired as society escorts (*Termites of 1938* [January 1938]), or telephone repairmen mistakenly employed as psychiatrists for a thrill-seeking society woman (*Three Sappy People* [December 1939]). Such situations were hardly original to the Stooges. As a basic slapstick situation, this "intrusion plot" gave expression to a geography of class segregation that had long served as a comedic imaginary for articulating workers' fantasies of revenge against their own exclusion. Born of the widening social contrasts of the nineteenth century, the trope had first entered popular narrative not as material for comedy but as a device of working-class dime novels like George Lippard's *New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* (1853) or Frederick Whittaker's *Nemo, King of Tramps* (1881), which structured social space as a polarized landscape of privilege and destitution. But it also supplied a framework that proved adaptable to turn-of-the-century comedy, both on the vaudeville stage and, subsequently, in early cinema, allowing for numerous comic interactions between its two contrasting poles: on the one hand, workers, hoboes, misfit immigrants; on the other, millionaires, society matrons, and other "respectable" types. Nowhere, in fact, was this more pronounced than at Jules White's beloved Keystone Film Company, whose films of the mid-1910s developed an entire slapstick topography in these terms, consisting of mansions and street corners, ballrooms and saloons, swanky restaurants and hash houses—precisely the topography that White's Stooges would come to inhabit twenty years later.⁹³

If this can rightly be described as a populist motif, then it was so crucially as a class-based, *plebeian* populism—that is, an allegorical and affective figure for articulating workers' experiences of disenfranchisement in a class society and the fantasies such disenfranchisement spawned. (Literary historian Michael Denning, in discussing nineteenth-century dime-novel fiction, describes these fictive figures of social cleavage as the "dream-work of the social.")⁹⁴ Doubtless the theme remained politically and socially symbolic following the 1929 economic crash; still, its derivation belonged to the more violent class antagonisms of an earlier period, to the decades that saw the earlier Depression of 1873 and the spread of

poverty, unemployment, riots, and worker militancy—the Great Railroad Strike, the Haymarket bombings—in the years that followed.

By the time of Roosevelt's New Deal, however, this class-based populism had been complicated by the emergence of a more inclusive rhetoric. "During the period from 1935 until the end of World War II," historian Warren Susman writes, "there was one phrase, one sentiment, one special call on the emotions that appeared everywhere in America's popular language: the people."⁹⁵ Thus, whereas the populism of the earlier period was founded on a principle of division—the dispossessed versus the powerful—the New Deal spurred the emergence of a mainstream liberalism that, as we have earlier seen (chapter 2), tended to empty divisions of ethnicity, race, and class into the imagined civic solidarity of the "common man." A well-known example of this shift is provided in Kenneth Burke's controversial suggestion at the 1935 American Writer's Congress to shift the language of the left from "the worker" to "the people," arguing that "the symbol of 'the people' . . . point[s] more definitely in the direction of unity."⁹⁶ But the rhetoric was hardly limited to literary debates. Susman continues: "Thus Carl Sandburg gave us *The People, Yes*; the WPA projects offered Art for the People and The People's Theater; Frank Capra provided a series of enormously successful populist films in praise of 'the little man'; and John Ford, most significantly in a number of films made near the end of the 1930s, rewrote American history in mythic and populist terms."⁹⁷

To insist on the prevalence of "the people" as an ideological motif is clearly not to suggest that the politics of class conflict were somehow dissolved under Roosevelt's New Deal. In an important corrective to Susman's reading, Michael Denning has warned against confusing the era's populist rhetoric with its populist practice: the rhetoric may have been inclusive, but politics on the left remained class-based and labor-oriented.⁹⁸ Still, granted the distinction between rhetoric and reality, there remains little question that a unifying mythos of "the people" *did* significantly influence the dominant cultural forms during this period, and what that mythos spurred, in part, was a new kind of "folk nationalism" predicated less on class militancy than on utopian themes of collaborative solidarity and cooperative aid. The turn to these themes remained open to a variety of inflections: great ideological fissures existed between conservatives who viewed the burden of mutuality primarily as a matter for individual philanthropy versus New Dealers who advocated federal action. Most mainstream Hollywood output followed more conservative winds in endorsing only the former, in sentimental narratives dramatizing purely individualized responses to social and economic inequity. This was the era, for example, in which charity was exemplified in Hollywood features in Shirley Temple's unstinting capacity to soften the hearts of the wealthy to bring their aid to the disenfranchised, and solidarity in Will Rogers's plain-spoken, intuitive intercessions against prejudice and injustice.⁹⁹ Laurel and Hardy meanwhile became icons of Depression-era companionship whose star personas split the difference between cooperative ideologies of assistance and individualist notions

of up-by-the-bootstraps endeavor: on screen as in their reported off-camera lives, they helped (or tried to help) *each other* without depending on the help of *others*. Describing the career paths that led to their success, one MGM pressbook thus explained that "it was a long grind, they knew of no one who could pull a string here or a string there. Their success is entirely due to their own efforts," while in the next breath insisting that "Laurel and Hardy Success Due to [Their] Co-operation."¹⁰⁰ While their films—both features and shorts—explored such mutuality as comedy, with its attendant frustrations and squabbling, their off-screen personas embodied mutuality as a fully perfected ideal. "It is an actual fact and matter of record that Stan and Oliver have not had a single disagreement" was the unlikely claim of a puff-piece for their 1936 feature *Our Relations*.¹⁰¹ "I don't know offhand any two actors who share equal starring honors with as much grace and apparent unselfishness as do Laurel and Hardy," Roach director Paul Parrott was elsewhere quoted as claiming.¹⁰²

It barely needs saying that no such companionate depictions were ever given of the Stooges, whose press coverage instead emphasized how their hostile on-screen interactions carried over into their actual lives. "The private life of the Three Stooges is a subject we've wondered about for years," began a 1938 profile in the *New York Times*. "The first question we asked, when we finally had got two of the Stooges together, was pretty obvious: 'Don't you boys ever get on each other's nerves?' Moe . . . promptly answered: 'Yes.'"¹⁰³ Sentimental New Deal-era themes gained little purchase, apparently, from the Stooges' rowdy plebeianism; still, much of the interest of the team's films from this period lies in the way they occasionally registered the tension between these ideological frameworks, inventing provisional resolutions to the gap between them. These two populist paradigms, the sentimental-inclusive versus the plebeian-confrontational, which from the standpoint of changing class ideologies might be seen as historically distinct, could nonetheless be elided at the level of slapstick representation. In the classic, Keystone-style version of the intrusion plot, for instance, the lumpen clown creates a disorder that aggravates and exasperates, leaving the privileged classes to look on aghast at the destruction, but in a handful of Stoooge films from the 1930s, the team creates a disorder that *binds*, unexpectedly uniting the opposed classes in a carnivalesque spirit that belies the rigidity of social rituals and distinctions. That is, there is confrontation, but a confrontation that generates a peculiarly inclusive disorder. In two instances, *Pop Goes the Easel* and *Three Sappy People*, the Stooges' irruption precipitates a vortex of escalating slapstick energies that ends up dragging the privileged willingly into its orbit. Thus pretentious artists acquit themselves with gusto in a clay fight with the Stooges in *Pop Goes the Easel*; society dinner guests answer the Stooges' pie-flinging antics with yet more pie flinging in the climax of *Three Sappy People*: in such instances, all hierarchies, all differences are erased in a shared spirit of enjoyable chaos. *Hoi Polloi* meanwhile adapts the intrusion plot into a kind of Stoooge version of *Pygmalion*. Convinced that

environment, not heredity, shapes social behavior, Professor Richmond (Harry Holman) bets a colleague he can take three trash collectors (the Stooges) and turn them into gentlemen. After much training, the boys are brought to a society event where they prove the professor's thesis, albeit by inverse: despite their best efforts at acting dignified, the Stooges' presence at the party has the consequence of bringing everyone down to *their* level. Stooge-style roughhousing spreads like a virus, from guest to guest. Society matrons start telling their husbands to "spread out," respectable men begin jabbing one another in the eye; by the end, it is only the Stooges who bear themselves with some semblance of comportment as the party degenerates into a free-for-all. From the final pages of the script:

FULL SHOT—GUESTS PUMMELING EACH OTHER

Into the melee walk the three stooges. They have canes on their arms and are carrying top hats.

CLOSER SHOT—THE STOOGES

They look at guests superciliously.

LONG SHOT—GUESTS SOCKING EACH OTHER

They are being knocked down, clothes are being torn off, etc.

CLOSE SHOT—THE STOOGES

MOE

(turning to boys)

My dear fellows—this is our punishment for associating with the hoi polloi.

LARRY

The self-same thoughts are mine concerning our unhappy situation.

(he turns to Curly)

What sayest thou? . . .

CURLY

(hastily)

The vicissitudes of one's circumstances in these surroundings makes it well nigh impossible to state one's feelings.

In the preceding as each stooge makes his initial speech . . . they put their top hats on jauntily, tapping them with one hand to set them at right angle.

CLOSE MOVING SHOT

as the Stooges start walking toward the exit. They are suddenly stopped by the two professors and another man.

RICH, LOVETT, & MAN

(chorus) (holding their fists in front of them)

Do you see that?

STOOGES

(chorus)

We do.

Professors and man haul off and do the roundhouse blow and drive top hats down over the Stooges' eyes. The boys start yelling as we

FADE OUT.¹⁰⁴



FIGURE 36. The elite reveal an unexpected solidarity with the Stooges in *Hoi Polloi* (August 1935). "HOI POLLOI" © 1935, renewed 1963, Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc. All Rights Reserved. Courtesy of Columbia Pictures.

The comedic dynamics of class conflict are here dissolved into the unifying Depression-era theme of "the people." The intrusion plot serves no longer as a vehicle for comedic revenge on the world of privilege, but rather as a deconstruction of that privilege and proof of an underlying sameness (fig. 36). In their strained efforts to wear the mask of the elite, the Stooges unwittingly uncover a kind of knockabout solidarity that unites the classes: *All the World's a Stooge*, indeed—the title of one of the team's 1941 two-reelers.

But no single entry in the team's filmography better dramatizes these torsions and transformations than the aforementioned *Cash and Carry*, which explicitly yokes the intrusion plot to the theme of charity. The film's narrative effectively puts Stooge-style chaos in the service of charitable aid: the Stooges reduce a mansion to ruin as they search for buried treasure to finance a young boy's leg operation. Images of dependent children—crippled, starving, or both—had been central terms of charitable ideologies since the Progressive Era, and their resonance continued during the Depression. (Roosevelt himself helped maintain a rehabilitation institute for crippled children close to his presidential retreat in Warm Springs,

Georgia.) What distinguishes *Cash and Carry* in fact is the way the writers, Clyde Bruckman and Elwood Ullman, couch the narrative in loaded political symbols. The film begins, for instance, with a comedic representation of Depression-era impoverishment, as the Stooges return from a failed prospecting trip to their home in the city dump. In a draft of the first scene, Bruckman and Ullman explicitly locate the Stooges' residence in one of the "Hooverville" shantytowns built by homeless people during the period (so named after the president whose economic policies were blamed for the economic crisis) (fig. 37).

MED. SHOT—DUMP HEAP

There is a large pile of tin cans, alongside of which is constructed a make-shift tin 'HOOVERVILLE' shack. There is a stove pipe running at a crazy angle from the roof; smoke pouring from it. The Stooges drive into foreground, the car bucking; spits a couple of times and with a BANG comes to a stop.¹⁰⁵

Entering the shack, the Stooges find it has been occupied by a crippled young boy and his sister, who are saving money for the brother's medical bills in a tin can. The script next includes a quip addressing the banking collapses of the early Depression years and the economy's recovery under Roosevelt:

MOE

You shouldn't leave your money lying around in a tin can. It oughta be in a bank!

LITTLE BOY

But will the bank give it back? . . .

CURLY

Oh, sure! They didn't used to—but they do now.¹⁰⁶

This optimistic sense of a turnaround—"They didn't used to, but they do now"—is subsequently fulfilled in the film's conclusion, which offers an explicitly realized endorsement of the current president. In an example of somewhat creative geography, the Stooges accidentally tunnel from the mansion's basement into the United States Treasury, whereupon they are arrested and brought before FDR himself (an actor, back toward the camera). The president not only offers the Stooges clemency for the break-in but also agrees to arrange personally for the young boy's operation (fig. 38).

PRESIDENT'S RECEPTION OFFICE

There is a huge pair of doors, on front [*sic*] of which wait several dignified gentlemen in formal afternoon attire. A secretary comes through the doors.

SECRETARY

I'm sorry gentlemen, but the Senate Sub-committee will have to wait—the President is in conference.

He turns and opens the huge doors, starts to exit CAMERA TRUCKING [*sic*] WITH HIM THROUGH AND INTO the 'President's Office,' disclosing the President seated at his desk—back to CAMERA. FACING CAMERA in front of the President

are the three Stooges, the girl and the crippled boy. (Note: We see only the President's back at all times.)

MOE

... and that's the way it happened Mr. President.

PRESIDENT

Oh, I see—

(turns to little boy)

Well, Jimmy, I shall arrange personally for your operation!

The group are elated, particularly Curly, who steps up to the desk and very intimately says to the President.

CURLY

Gee, Mr. President. You're sure a swell guy!

The President turns toward the Stooges.

PRESIDENT

... and as for you!

Curly jumps back in line as the Stooges stand, apprehensively.

PRESIDENT (continuing)

... in view of the extenuating circumstances I find it possible to extend you executive clemency.

CLOSEUP—CURLY

He reacts.

CURLY

Oh, Mr. President, please—not that!!

MED. SHOT—STOOGES

Moe jabs Curly in the stomach. Curly looks at Moe then back at the president.

CURLY

... but if that's your best offer, we'll take it.

We see the president chuckle as his shoulders heave in amusement. The Stooges elatedly wave goodbye, pick up the kid and start out of the office.

FADE OUT¹⁰⁷

The initial specters of hardship and Hooverville are thus dissipated before the redeeming presence of Roosevelt himself, rendering the film's narrative a quasi-allegory of the nation's recent trajectory from collapse to recovery. Written in the spring of 1937, the film surely draws color from the short-lived optimism of those months, when Roosevelt's policies had helped bring industrial production back to pre-Depression levels. Roosevelt's function here is thus that of a great reconciler. His presidency not only affords resolution in narrative terms (he pardons the Stooges), but it also provides magical resolution to ideological fissures between philanthropy and federal aid as responses to economic crisis: aid comes from presidential decree, but a decree issued by the *president acting as individual philanthropist* ("I shall arrange personally").

In the process, however, *Cash and Carry* provides the Stooges' clearest demonstration of the limits of throwback slapstick as a vehicle for the ideological forms



FIGURES 37–38. From the hardships of “Hooverville” to the saving presence of FDR. Frame enlargements from *Cash and Carry* (September 1937).

of New Deal-era populism. The core of the film’s comedy cleaves closely to the intrusion plot of so many of the team’s films: the trio enters a prosperous domestic space and destroys it, here tearing out the walls and burrowing into the basement in their search for riches. Yet, atypically, the domestic space in question is empty and unoccupied: there is no society dinner in progress, no wealthy residents for the Stooges to exasperate. Instead, the mansion has long since been abandoned, sold to the team by a pair of con artists with a false promise of hidden treasure within. The destructive trope is thereby retained, but the destruction is no longer meaningfully directed against a social class; it is simply a deserted building that bears the brunt of the Stoooge-induced chaos. It is as though the liberal populism enshrined in the New Deal-era theme of mutuality is unable to reconcile itself to the comic destructiveness typical of the Stooges, whose hostile energies must in consequence be displaced onto an empty room.

This, then, was the situation into which the Stooges and their writers found themselves forced at Columbia by their own comedic vested interests: to have committed to an “old-time” comedic mode that could engage the populist tropes of the New Deal only by withholding its underlying premises. Since the conception of class material was for the Stooges a conflictual one, their formulas could engage the forms of New Deal populism only by displacing the conflict that was their comedy’s essential foundation—either by suggesting that class difference masks an unexpected sameness (the route of *Hoi Polloi* and others) or by literally hurling the Stooges’ violence into a void (*Cash and Carry*). We have, in other words, the paradox of a raucous and divisive proletarianism struggling to reconcile itself with a vein of liberal populism that sought to suspend such divisiveness. Since the charitable motif was for the Stooges something like the negation of their comic dialectic, it would surface again in only a handful of further Stooges releases: in *Oily to Bed*, *Oily to Rise* (October 1939) and *Loco Boy Makes Good* (January 1942),

both of which feature the team helping an old widow; in *Nutty but Nice* (June 1940), where the Stooges reunite a little girl with her kidnapped father; and finally in *Even as I.O.U.* (September 1942), in which the trio aids an evicted mother. But none of these films found any more satisfactory resolution to the contradictory populist logics of mutuality and class conflict, and as the New Deal order dissolved into the war years, so did these motifs disappear entirely from the Stooges films.¹⁰⁸ After a few remaining stabs at contemporaneity in the wartime satires *You Nazy Spy* (January 1940) and *I'll Never Heil Again* (July 1941), the Stooges settled back into the "old-time" destructiveness that was their stock-in-trade.

*

To bond together through shared laughter or to derive derisory satisfaction from comedy's aggressive instincts, to laugh with or to laugh at: these two possibilities circulate through the history and theory of comedy as opposed dynamics of comedic pleasure. There is, for instance, the theoretical dichotomy separating Soviet linguist Mikhail Bakhtin's festive paradigm of an inclusive "carnavalesque" laughter from more divisive models of laughter as a marker of boundaries, what Henri Bergson dubbed a "social gesture" to exclude the aberrant.¹⁰⁹ But there is also, we can now see, a corresponding *historical* alternation in the changing comedic modes of early twentieth-century American populism: on the one hand, the class-inclusive, sentimental Capra/Rogers/Laurel-Hardy/and so on paradigm that chimed with the political rhetoric of the New Deal; on the other, the class-conflictual, Sennett-Keystone template spawned from the more virulent class antagonisms of the turn of the century. It was the curious fate of the Three Stooges, I have been arguing, briefly to have tried to be both, just as it was the curious fate of Columbia's short-subjects division to have sustained the earlier style in a decade whose populist energies lay elsewhere. If Sennett-style slapstick was nostalgically recycled in the 1930s as merely "good old-fashioned" fun—as was the case at Columbia—this was because its moment as a vehicle of class symbolization no longer really held sway. This, then, is perhaps the final meaning of slapstick's nostalgic appropriation during this decade: that any style of comedy passes ineluctably toward the "old time" when the populism inherent in its form can no longer readily be made to agree with an existing political rhetoric.

We conclude with a remarkable text almost two decades later, in 1952, in which Jules White surveyed the changes to the short-subject market since his start at the studio. Written in the throes of Hollywood's postwar box-office slump—when profits declined from \$120 million in 1946 to \$30 million a decade later—the article evoked two-reel slapstick comedy as, by this point, both a virtually forgotten commodity and, at least according to White, a possible remedy for industry blues:

A visiting film exhibitor at Columbia Studios recently flabbergasted his guide by asking, "Have you a two-reel comedy shooting? I'd rather see one of those being

made than anything else. On my theater marquee," added the showman, "I bill two-reelers right alongside a big AA feature. And do I pack them in!"

The sentiments of this exhibitor were right in line with those of Jules White, head of the shorts department at Columbia. He feels that these comedies are a vital and necessary part of the industry and that with the abolishment of double-bills, the two-reeler will return to the high position it held in the nostalgic past.

"Right now," says White, "during the wave of talk about the boxoffice decline, television, the worry of producing bigger and better pictures to meet the public's demands for strong entertainment or else, film folk can't seem to see the trees of two-reelers for the forest of 10-reelers. Their producers are relatively unknown, except to the oldtimers, and the fact that year after year, percentage-wise to their production cost, these comedies' profits compare favorably with the big budget hits, is a revelation."¹¹⁰

Again, the same constellation of meanings that this chapter has been tracing: the value of Columbia slapstick for outlying exhibition markets ("oldtimers") and the association of that value with nostalgia. The last of the major producers of short-subject slapstick, Jules White continued to bend his efforts to that market only through dreams of a return to the business conditions of the "nostalgic past," which, for him, referred to the era before the widespread diffusion of double features. But, by this late point, more had changed than business conditions alone; for if slapstick had long since passed into nostalgia, then one reason, this chapter has suggested, was that a certain connection between slapstick's raucous energies and their associated social meanings had long since become untied. Indeed, a sense of untimeliness was by this late point inscribed in Columbia's comedies as a formal element of film construction, as, faced with declining budgets, filmmakers now routinely cannibalized the unit's early films, not only for their plots but for entire scenes' worth of stock footage—a process that began in earnest with the Stooges' *The Pest Man Wins* (December 1951), which reused the pie-fight footage from *Half-Wits' Holiday* (January 1947), and which continued until the unit's termination in 1957. "Who the hell was going to care, anyway?" Jules White later reasoned, justifying the use of recycled footage. "Moe and Larry hadn't changed enough that anyone would notice. . . . The public never cared who did what in them."¹¹¹ Indeed, by the end, "new" Stooges films were typically assembled out of new scenes shot in just two or three days—sometimes just one—bridged with stock footage from earlier releases.¹¹² Curly had been replaced by Shemp, and Shemp, following his death in 1955, had in turn been replaced by Joe Besser; yet Larry and Moe continued, alternating from scene to scene in their final films with their younger selves. The production of short-subject slapstick at Columbia thus ended its days by collapsing explicitly into a self-perpetuating synchrony, a conflation of comedians past and comedians present that stood for the suspension of slapstick's relation to diachronic social time.