

Introduction

Keyword: Hokum

The word “hokum” is one of several examples of stage slang whose meaning, at a certain point in the 1920s, was much debated. According to a 1926 article in *American Speech*, it was the “most discussed word in the entire vernacular” of popular entertainment (another was “jazz”).¹ The term seems to have origins in the late nineteenth century, perhaps deriving from “oakum” (material used to caulk the seams of a ship; by extension, “sure-fire” gags and other material used to secure the success of a stage act) or, alternatively, as a combination of “hocus-pocus” (sleight-of-hand, trickery) and “bunkum” (nonsense). Still, those origins are sufficiently questionable that novelist Edna Ferber, in her 1929 *Cimarron*, could claim that the term was of exclusively twentieth-century derivation. (“The slang words hokum and bunk were not then [1898] in use.”)² The ambiguous sources of “hokum” also correspond to a split in its development, which, by the 1920s, had seen the sense of “sure-fire” shift in the more disparaging direction indicated by “bunkum.” Writing in 1928, a reporter for the *New York Times* expressed incredulity that a term once describing material that “‘get[s] over’ . . . with an audience” was now synonymous with “hooley, tripe, apple-sauce, blah and bologna.”³

The word seems to have something to do with comedy, although this is not invariable. An article in the *Times* of 1923 indicated a possible melodramatic reference as well, describing hokum as “old and sure-fire comedy. Also tear-inducing situations,” which suggests hokum’s applicability to anything that traded in strong or obvious effects, whether of comedy or of sentiment.⁴ “Hokum is not always comedy; sometimes it borders on pathos” echoed the essay in *American Speech*.⁵ Still, the reference to comedy, specifically of the knockabout, slapstick variety, was primary.

One early piece, from 1917, parsed the term generally as “low comedy verging on vulgarity.”⁶ Others were more specific, concentrating a retrospective sense of the term by referring it to residual traditions of comedic performance. “It is doubtful whether the most inveterate of theatergoers knows what is meant by the term ‘hokum stuff,’” noted one writer in 1915, explaining, “It is an old-time minstrelman equivalent for slap-stick comedy.”⁷ A decade later, *Vanity Fair*’s Walter Winchell referenced circus clowning: “Actors who redden their faces, and wear ill-fitting apparel, and take falls to get laughs are ‘hokum comics.’”⁸ The *New York Times* meanwhile used cinematic examples, relating “hokum” to one- and two-reel slapstick shorts of the 1910s:

When Charley [*sic*] Chaplin smeared somebody’s face with a custard pie, that was considered good gag [*sic*]; but when every comedian of the one and two reels made use of the idea, then it became hokum.

A considerable number of rarely humorous devices for laughter were invented by the old Keystone Comedy [*sic*]; and every once in awhile, some of these ancient tricks crop out [*sic*]. Then somebody acquainted with the true meaning of the word, cries “hokum!”⁹

It is difficult to read far in the flurry of these articles without perceiving in “hokum” the symptom of a shift in comic sensibility. The word had more than merely ambiguous meanings: it had an unmistakable trajectory that shifted from description (gags that “get over”) to denigration (“old-time,” “apple-sauce”). That trajectory, moreover, crested sharply around the mid-1920s, when the term was apparently never more widespread. (A Google Ngram search reveals that the word’s frequency was highest in 1926, constituting 0.000023 percent of words in now-digitized US books, an over 15,000 percent increase from the start of the decade.)¹⁰

The later sense of “old-time” is not surprising: one of the characteristics of knockabout or slapstick comedy is that it has often been disparaged as passé, a disavowed yardstick ever since the movement in American variety theater toward polite vaudeville in the 1880s and 1890s. Yet the sudden popularization by the mid-1920s of a cant or slang term for that status bespeaks a more confident spirit of devaluation. In this sense the secret meaning of hokum’s ascendancy is the decisive banalization of a comedic style that, in vaudeville as in film, had once formed a contested mainstay of early twentieth-century mass culture. This book will track the sources and processes of that devaluation as it unfolded in the years to come. My focus will fall squarely on film—already by the 1920s the primary venue where slapstick was encountered by the American public—and within that focus, I will be concentrating not so much on feature-length films as on the one- and two-reel subjects where, according to the *Times*, hokum was commonest currency. The introductory pages that follow flesh out my reasons for these choices and establish the historiographic premises that will underpin my investigation.

THE “END” OF SLAPSTICK? TWO PREMISES

Premise 1: Rethinking Sound

The idea that film slapstick sank into abrupt decline in the late 1920s may seem familiar. One of the hoariest clichés of comedy history holds that Hollywood’s conversion to sound—beginning in 1926 and completed by 1929—profoundly changed the course of film comedy’s development. The coming of sound, it is said, represents a decisive turning point at which the art of the great silent clowns—Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and others—came to an end, hinging instead into the crude realism of lesser talents like the Three Stooges. But it is precisely this sense of an “end” that we might first want to come to grips with here, since it will be part of my argument that film slapstick’s troubled history from the late 1920s on has been misleadingly framed. Why, for instance, has the coming of sound commonly been thought of as a kind of Rubicon moment vis-à-vis screen comedy? Why is comedy, uniquely among film genres, so clearly divided into silent versus talkie eras? After all, as film historian David Kalat has suggested, there is no comparable discrimination that would mourn the end of the “silent western” as though technological change alone amounted to a decisive generic mutation.¹¹ With comedy, though, it is as if sound has come to constitute nothing less than an allegorical gap dividing screen comedy’s Edenic glories from its subsequent Fall. Three classic accounts can serve as evidence.

James Agee’s eloquent 1949 *Life* essay, “Comedy’s Greatest Era,” is perhaps the most celebrated of these, establishing many of the basic premises of this master narrative. Agee’s essay was crucial in positioning the silent features of Chaplin, Keaton, Harry Langdon, and Harold Lloyd as a kind of Mount Rushmore of comic achievement, and it did so by using sound as a kind of whipping boy against which the performative virtuosity of the silent clowns might best be measured. “When a modern [i.e., sound] comedian gets hit on the head,” Agee wrote,

the most he is apt to do is look sleepy. When a silent comedian got hit on the head he seldom let it go so flatly. He realized a broad license, and a ruthless discipline within that license. It was his business to be as funny as possible physically, without the help or hindrance of words. So he gave us a figure of speech, or rather of vision, for loss of consciousness. In other words he gave us a poem, a kind of poem, moreover, that everybody understands. The least he might do was to straighten up stiff as a plank and fall over backward with such skill that his whole length seemed to slap the floor at the same instant. Or he might make a cadenza of it—look vague, smile like an angel, roll up his eyes, lace his fingers, thrust his hands palms downward as far as they would go, hunch his shoulders, rise on tiptoe, prance ecstatically in narrowing circles until, with tallow knees, he sank down the vortex of his dizziness to the floor, and there signified nirvana by kicking his heels twice, like a swimming frog.¹²

But such pantomimic virtuosity simply did not lend itself to dialogue, which, in Agee’s opinion, belonged to an entirely separate performative tradition. “Because [the motion picture now] talks, the only comedians who ever mastered the screen

cannot work, for they cannot combine their comic style with talk.”¹³ Agee’s is, in this sense, a kind of technologically determined history of performative practice: cinema’s silence demanded a newly expressive form of physical performance—one requiring the “talents of a dancer, acrobat, clown and mime”—that could not “combine” with dialogue humor.

This basic sense of incompatibility would carry through a quarter century later into the first scholarly overview of film comedy, Gerald Mast’s 1973 *The Comic Mind*. Once again, a technological limitation (silence) is said to have created a performative form that simply could not survive the altered climate of talking pictures. With sound, we are told, a “particular kind of comedy died.” “One of the reasons great physical comedians developed in the teens and twenties was that the potential of the medium demanded their services. The physical comedian who communicated personality, social attitudes and human relationships by physical means . . . was an outgrowth of a medium whose only tools were movement, rhythm, and physical objects and surfaces.”¹⁴ Mast’s conclusion from this sounds perplexing—“Sound comedy is structural, not physical”—but by this he means simply to convey the idea that sound comedy is more structured insofar as it is “carefully molded in advance” by the director and writer. If the essential relation in sound comedy is between the writer and the page, Mast proposes, then the kernel of silent comedy was the bond between the clown’s body and the camera.¹⁵

The idea that silent comedy was *not* “carefully molded” at the scripting stage is completely spurious, of course, at least as concerns the overwhelming majority of slapstick shorts and features from around the mid-1910s on. Yet despite these vagaries, Mast does introduce an important addition to the Agee template by premising his argument on an explicitly stated theory of filmic art, which a brief footnote attributes to Rudolph Arnheim’s classic 1933 study, *Film as Art*. As Mast glosses Arnheim: “It has often been said that art is a function of limitations, that the province of art is precisely that gap between nature and the way nature can be imitated in the work of art.” Hence, Mast concludes, film comedy became art to the degree to which comedians found expressive physical means to “compensate for [the] gap” that the medium’s silence had installed.¹⁶

It is this position that critic Walter Kerr would develop two years later, in his magisterial 1975 study *The Silent Clowns*. Arnheim is no longer cited, but Kerr’s language makes the indebtedness unmistakable. “Logically, art begins in a taking away,” Kerr argued. “Each limitation on the camera’s power to reproduce reality . . . [paved] the way to an exercise of art.”¹⁷ (Compare the wording of Arnheim’s 1933 text, which argues that cinematic artistry depends on “robbing the real event of something”—on withholding attributes of color, three-dimensionality, and sound—such that silent film therefore “derives definite artistic possibilities from its silence.”)¹⁸ For screen comedy, this distance from reality became the foundation of the form’s silent-era achievement as fantasy: the appeal of the silent clowns, Kerr argued, rested in their liberation from the laws of the ordinary

physical world. “None of the limitations of the silent screen . . . seemed limitations to its comedians. Rather, they seemed opportunities for slipping ever more elaborately through the cogs of the cosmic machinery, escaping the indignities of a dimensional, hostile universe. Fly through the transom when a policeman locks the door? Why not?”¹⁹ Sound, in restoring the realism of the filmed image, killed the fantasy on which comic artistry depended.

[Sound] gives the lie to the very kind of comedy—the very original kind of comedy—audiences had cherished: comedy in which the real world had not only been tamed but, in its dreamlike submission and in its swift unexpected conjunctions, made lyric. . . . With the form itself gone, we could no longer see [the silent comedians] as we had once seen them: as mysteriously mute archetypes who had made bizarre bargains with a half-imagined, half-authentic world. The game was over.²⁰

We will have cause to unpack these models further over the course of this book. For the present, it is important only to note how their prioritization of technological factors produces, in each case, a historiography grounded in discontinuity. The technological properties of cinema—its original silence and subsequent voice—are approached as decisive mutations in comedic representation: the former generates a new performative tradition as an “outgrowth” (Mast) of the medium, while the latter stops it dead. What we get by way of explanation is thus little more than the “random autonomy of invention” from which other forms of causation (cultural, economic, etc.) are excluded from the outset.²¹ What we might better pursue is an approach that, without discounting the genuine difference that technological changes make, nonetheless understands those changes as what media theorist Ian Hutchby calls “affordances” that frame—but do not inevitably prefigure—possible directions of development.²² Only when we stop confusing a technological property with a comedic tradition will it become possible to conjoin screen slapstick before *and* after the conversion era as a developing trajectory whose historical explanation exceeds a merely technological determinism.

Premise 2: Displacing Features

But it is perhaps not only the reification of silence that is a problem for the history of screen comedy. Historical apprehension of slapstick’s varied fortunes into the sound era has also been obstructed by a focus on the individual careers of the canonized slapstick clowns. To the extent that film historians have prioritized the careers of Chaplin, Keaton, Langdon, and others, they have fractured the history of slapstick into a series of incommensurable narratives. Buster Keaton’s career, we learn, was derailed by a coincidence of personal and professional misfires that were his alone: the loss of artistic control when he signed with MGM in 1928; the deterioration of his marriage to Natalie Talmadge; his growing alcoholism. Harry Langdon fell victim to hubris in firing his director, a young Frank Capra, and opting to direct himself in three disastrously received subsequent features—*Three’s*

a Crowd (1927), *The Chaser* (1928), and *Heart Trouble* (1928)—that torpedoed his career at the moment of the industry’s transition. Charles Chaplin meanwhile became an outlier many times over, in part through artistic choice (alone among his peers, he refused to capitulate to the talkie trend until he finally allowed the tramp to talk in *The Great Dictator* [1940]), in part by inactivity (he completed only two features in the 1930s, *City Lights* [1931] and *Modern Times* [1936]), in part by his socialist political commitments. My point here is not to question the at times quite dubious accuracy of these narratives (the story of Langdon’s “hubris,” for instance, originates in Capra’s autobiography and is hardly disinterested).²³ Rather, I am concerned with the ways these explanatory models displace any apprehension of the larger province of slapstick filmmaking within which these comedians worked: a historiography oriented around the great silent-era clowns inevitably collapses into the irreducible singularities of so many careers. It is, perhaps, the very incommensurability of the great comedians’ passage through these years that gives a spurious legitimacy to the one thing they all shared—the transition to sound—as a master explanation.

This problem commends a shift of focus to short subjects. Such a shift would not only, by definition, pull the historiography of American film comedy out from the shadows of the famed feature-length comedians, but it would also restore a fuller sense of film slapstick’s place within what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu would have described as the “field” of comedy production during this period. The notion of a field, as developed primarily in Bourdieu’s 1992 *The Rules of Art*, designates in the most straightforward sense the “social microcosm”—the relations and interactions among individuals, groups, and institutions—that makes up a given sphere of cultural production (so that one may speak, for instance, of the “literary field,” the “intellectual field,” and so forth).²⁴ I will take up later the question of how field analysis opens onto surrounding social formations; for the present, I only want to note how receptive the short-subject sector is to such an approach, allowing for a more complex inventorying of the variables and controversies involved in slapstick’s sound-era decline. The world in which short-subject comedians and their filmmakers moved was not simply a miniaturized enclave of the film industry; it was a sphere of filmmaking shaped by a sui generis network of interpersonal, professional, and institutional relations radiating out of the studio gates into the larger fields of vaudeville, burlesque, circus, and even literary humor within which hierarchies of comedic value—and slapstick’s place within them—were defined. Sam Warner, of Warner Bros., recognized as much when he assigned to ex-vaudevillian Bryan (“Brynie”) Foy the initial responsibility of managing the earliest Vitaphone shorts, until 1931: formerly one of the Seven Little Foyes, Brynie’s résumé made him uniquely suited to call in the talents of the nation’s best vaudeville acts, in the process shaping a house style at Warner of “virtual Broadway.”²⁵ Professional networks were also defined by prior affiliation within the film industry, often

reaching back many years. A case in point is provided by the short-subject unit at Columbia Pictures under the stewardship of Jules White, first appointed to the studio in 1932 by Columbia boss Harry Cohn. “He [Cohn] never bothered me,” White recalled. “He didn’t consider my department important enough to bother with”—a hands-off policy that allowed White, together with his brother Jack, to chase up professional connections from their years in silent comedy and build a roster of veteran comic talents.²⁶ Outside of above-the-line talent, meanwhile, the social microcosm of short-format comedy was also shaped by new technical and musical personnel brought into the industry during the transition to sound: the Hal Roach Studios’ 1928 contract with the Victor Talking Machine Company, for instance, would bring to the studio a number of Victor employees—sound engineer Elmer Raguse, A&R man Leroy Shield—who would play major roles in innovating the soundscape of early talkie comedies. In sum, if we seriously want to understand the transformations in sound-era slapstick, we need to patiently enumerate the full range of different agencies and actors that mediated these transformations; we need, that is, to “follow the natives,” instead of abstracting a handful of “artists” (Chaplin, Keaton, etc.) or mobilizing a few global causes (sound, modernity, etc.) to which are attributed a mass of effects.²⁷ The short-subject sector, qua field, permits just such an analysis.

Also favoring shorts is the very direct optic they provide on audience taste and demand. Not only was the short subject the most widely disseminated filmic format for the slapstick idiom—the major studios typically produced and/or distributed between two and three dozen one- and two-reel comic shorts every year—but it was also the only one whose function was framed in purely representative terms. It was simply as comedy that each slapstick short was promoted by exhibitors (common tags in newspaper ads were “plus two-reel comedy” or “news, comedy, cartoon”), and it was simply as comedy that each was assessed. “Here’s a comedy that is a comedy,” “Not [Charley] Chase’s best comedy, but still a comedy,” “Sold to us for a comedy, but is poor.”²⁸ The seeming circularity of such evaluations bespeaks the absence of any presumption that short-subject comedy might be evaluated outside of the simple criterion of funniness: the value of short-subject comedy was simply that it should “be” comedy, with no expectation of surplus, of, say, artistic experiment or idiosyncratic deviation. The very transparency of these expectations indicates the short subject as a streak-free window onto changing sensibilities: if short-subject slapstick “declined” during the 1930s, then this was surely in part because the style of comedy in question no longer answered to audiences’ entertainment needs, at least within the industry’s primary markets.

The same conclusion follows from the peculiarities of short-subject distribution during this period. One of the distinctive aspects of the short-subject sector, in comparison with features, was the greater flexibility for exhibitors to select from each studio’s offerings, based on their predictions or understandings of

audience demand. An early case in point was provided by Warner Bros., which by the summer of 1928 yielded control over the choice of shorts to the exhibitors who had contracted for its services, offering a catalog that included newer titles alongside previous releases. As film historian Charles Wolfe notes, “The Vitaphone shorts were [thus] treated less as motion-picture events than as a commercial library of recorded performances . . . that could be rented and replayed on an ongoing basis” and, presumably, selected according to the tastes of local audiences.²⁹ Other studios did not go quite that far but, at least after 1933, permitted varying degrees of exhibitor choice. In that year, the practice of what was called “full-line forcing”—a controversial extension of block booking, whereby the major studios had forced theater owners to take their full lines of shorts as a condition of accepting features—was outlawed under the auspices of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Whereas previously exhibitors had often been forced to accept many more major-studio short subjects than they could possibly play in a single season—a strategy designed to freeze out independently produced shorts—the NIRA’s Motion Picture Code was more equitable: distributors could now force shorts only in proportion to the number of rented features.³⁰ Exhibitors’ subsequent freedom of selection can be illustrated by the case of the Interstate circuit in Texas, which drew interested trade commentary when it took the unique step of establishing its own short-subject booking department in 1934: the department’s five-person team—headed by the appropriately named Besa Short—would preview short subjects, assemble them into programs for the circuit’s different theaters, and arrange subsequent bookings based on audience feedback, practices that remained in place at Interstate for the rest of the decade. “No other film property has the latitude and elasticity in booking as has the short subject,” Short proclaimed.³¹ It is in fact this very margin of elasticity that renders shorts so receptive an interface for examining patterns of exhibitor need during this period. Again, if short-subject slapstick declined in the sound era, then a plausible hypothesis would surely posit a lack of primary-market demand. We will want, further, to examine this in terms of distribution: where, if anywhere, were these films reliably booked? and where no longer?—questions I take up in chapter 3.

The final justification for short-oriented history is the most straightforward: historiographic neglect. Perhaps no area of American film comedy has been so entirely overlooked as the field of the slapstick short subsequent to the coming of sound. To the extent that the sound-era short has drawn any scholarly attention, it has been not as a mainstay of the American clown tradition but as a laboratory for working through the textual and technological practices of the sound film more generally: Warner Bros.’s pioneering sound-on-disc Vitaphone shorts thus loom large in conventional histories of the coming of sound, as do Walt Disney’s early experiments with sound-image relations in cartoons like *Steamboat Willie* (November 1928); more recently, scholars like Jennifer Fleger and Katherine

Spring have explored the role of musical shorts in carving out an aesthetic identity for film sound.³² There is also, in the existing literature, a familiar defense of the short subject during this period, one that defers to their important role within the “balanced program” concept of the era’s exhibition practices. Short subjects, this line of argument goes, had value not only as a necessary “buffer” to the feature presentation, but also in ensuring the diversity of appeal necessary to sustain a mass audience. Travelogues, cartoons, slapstick, and sing-alongs all constituted just a fraction of the many and varied genres of shorts during this period, to say nothing of the more outré examples, featuring, for example, talking dogs (MGM’s *Dogville* comedies, 1930–1931), golf instruction (Vitaphone’s *How I Play Golf*, by *Bobby Jones* shorts, 1931–1932), and glee club recitals (Educational’s *Spirit of the Campus* series, 1932–1933), among many others. Still, none of this quite gets us to the specific historicity of the short subject qua short subject; that is, the changing parameters—industrial, economic, textual, and so on—that shaped short-format filmmaking during this period. Nor, again, does it really have anything to say about the comedies that constituted so sizable a portion of the short-subject field. The latter omission is particularly startling given the historic importance traditionally ceded to slapstick two-reelers of the *silent* era—for instance, Charlie Chaplin’s Mutual releases (1916–1917), Roscoe Arbuckle’s Comique two-reelers (1917–1920), or Buster Keaton’s Metro/First National shorts (1920–1923). By comparison, the names of short-subject comedians from the early sound period—Clark and McCullough, Andy Clyde, Edgar Kennedy, and Thelma Todd, among many others—testify to a largely forgotten history. Even the Three Stooges, despite their longevity as slapstick’s leading practitioners in two-reel talking pictures (1934–1958), have drawn next to no academic interest.³³ The slapstick short has in this sense been a structuring absence in the historiography of early sound Hollywood; this book aims to rectify that.

THE SOCIOLOGY OF RESIDUAL CULTURAL FORMS

This monograph is a follow-up to the historiographic project commenced in my previous book, *The Fun Factory: The Keystone Film Company and the Emergence of Mass Culture* (2009). There, looking closely at the Keystone Film Company (1912–1917), I examined how slapstick, as a “low” cultural form with roots in plebeian and working-class subcultures, was transformed during the 1910s into a mass-cultural cinematic genre with cross-class appeal. Keystone’s popularity, I argued, was characteristic of the cultural and commercial energies of the period, which saw a proliferation of cheap commercial entertainment forms that outstripped their original audience to forge a new “mass” cultural orientation. Slapstick was just such a form—a “lively art,” to borrow the label coined by critic Gilbert Seldes to describe forms like jazz, comic strips, and vaudeville comedy—and its

popularization bespoke an era in which cultural boundaries were being redrawn by the mongrel energies of modern mass culture. In this sequel, by contrast, I explore the reverse image of that process, tracking the constitutive processes that troubled and eventually undermined slapstick's mass appeal, precipitating its decline into cultural banality during the years of the Depression.

In this sense, *Hokum!* is a study of how once-dominant cultural forms become "residual" in the precise sense suggested by Raymond Williams. Any culture, Williams tells us, includes "available elements of its past" that nonetheless remain "active in the cultural process." A residual element is one that no longer retains its former efficacy but nonetheless remains sufficiently "live" that it will in most cases have to be incorporated if the new dominant culture is to retain any coherence; which is to say that it will have to be reinterpreted or resignified—idealized, diluted, reified, what have you—so that its continued presence does not register as a threat. (One of Williams's examples is the idea of rural community, whose potential challenge to the values of urban industrial capitalism is blunted by its very idealization as pastoral nostalgia.)³⁴ But what is it that leads cultural forms toward the residual? For Williams, the answer is found in terms of the standard Marxist categories of class analysis: cultural forms pass into residuality when the social formations that produce them are displaced by the "formation of a new class, the coming to consciousness of a new class."³⁵ Applied to the case in hand—the changing fortunes of film slapstick—Williams's hypothesis provides a valuable starting point: changes in comic sensibility beginning in the 1920s can indeed be linked to changes in the class nature of American society, specifically the emergence of what Paula Fass calls the "peer society" of 1920s urban life—a perspective that will be developed in my first chapter.³⁶ But, in and of itself, Williams's master key cannot account for how, for instance, these new class configurations were themselves energized by and swept up in a broader metropolitanism that in fact outstripped the boundaries of class; nor does it secure a perspective on film history that would avoid the one-to-one reductionism of reading industry determinants directly back into social formation. We have not gained much if we simply replace a *technological* determinism in terms of the coming of sound with a no less simplifying *social* determinism in terms of class.

Again, Bourdieu can help us here. The concept of a "field of production" implies the imperative of analyzing the structure of that field at a number of levels, both "internal" and "external," that resist the positing of any single determinism in the last instance. As the sociologist explains (he is talking about literature):

The science of cultural works presupposes three operations which are as necessary and necessarily linked as the three levels of social reality that they apprehend. First, one must analyse the position of the literary (etc.) field within the field of power, and its evolution in time. Second, one must analyse the internal structure of the literary (etc.) field, a universe obeying its own laws of functioning and transformation,

meaning the structure of objective relations between positions occupied by individuals and groups placed in a situation of competition for legitimacy. And finally, the analysis involves the genesis of the habitus of occupants of these positions, that is, the systems of dispositions which, being the product of a social trajectory and of a position within the literary (etc.) field, find in this position a more or less favourable opportunity to be realized.³⁷

This formulation seems to me to have the advantage of comprehending a given field in terms of the social processes in which it is enmeshed (in terms, e.g., of its position within a given field of power, in terms, too, of the social dispositions and backgrounds of its “occupants”), even as it allows the literary field an autonomy (“its own laws of functioning”) that exceeds any direct or unmediated anchoring in external determinants. The concept of a field of production thus usefully allows for forms of determination that are both “internal” and “external”: the former, as noted, covers the “structure of objective relations between positions occupied by individuals and groups” *within* a given field, including its own hierarchies of power and legitimacy; the latter addresses the social trajectories that bring individuals *into* the field, as well, I would add, as the field’s interface with its surrounding public/audience. With respect to the short-subject industry in the years following sound, the internal dimension will, then, cover such areas as the complex economic and institutional realities negotiated by short-subject producers within the broader film industry (yes, the transition to sound, but also factors like the major studios’ growing involvement in short-subject production/distribution, the advent of double bills and changing exhibition practices, etc.), as well as the “competitions for legitimacy” among comedy producers; the external dimension meanwhile encompasses the backgrounds and dispositions of short-subject filmmakers themselves, as well as the processes that continually shaped and reshaped the constitution of slapstick’s audience.

Within this framework, I would like to posit three key “moments” in slapstick’s passage to cultural residuality. (This list is not meant to be a broadly applicable model but simply covers those processes emerging from the present study.) The first—what I will call *rehierarchization*—addresses the way formal and stylistic innovations within a given field of cultural production serve as catalysts for establishing new distinctions within that field, so that formerly “dominant” forms become demoted and passé. The innovation of sound, I will argue, served as a catalyst in just this latter sense. Its introduction spurred a kind of land rush on the part of short-comedy filmmakers to explore the possibilities of what producer Al Christie labeled the “new style” of dialogue comedy, with the result that slapstick came to occupy the contrasting role as the “old.”³⁸ The second moment is what Bourdieu has theorized as *banalization*, which refers to the ways in which devaluation is inseparable from social change within a given form’s audience. What counts here is the way a formerly dominant cultural

product comes to be considered *déclassé* when it finds a new audience among a devalued social group—a process I trace through the marketing of slapstick to small-town audiences during the years of the Depression.³⁹ These first two moments concern the various *positional* shifts—internal and external, respectively—that govern residuality within a given field: (a) the changing position of a cultural form vis-à-vis the hierarchy of other forms, (b) its changing position vis-à-vis the hierarchy of possible publics. (These two dimensions are strictly correlative.) By contrast, the third addresses the *affective* logic that invests residual forms with a kind of surplus value and, as such, renders their residuality not only safe (like the pastoral idealization of rural life) but also profitable. Within the mass cultural marketplace, that process has long been fulfilled via the operations of nostalgia, of which an early example, I will suggest, is evidenced in the “old-time” slapstick craze of the mid- to late 1930s. Nostalgia here stood for the affective logic whereby the “old” could be reinvested as “old-time,” the outdated reclaimed as throwback; it was the very process through which slapstick as a residual form nonetheless sustained a lingering place and economic function within the mass cultural market.

At this point, the skeletal framework of my argument is starting to come into focus. One last methodological point, however, deserves brief mention before I turn to a more formal chapter-by-chapter overview. I have pointed a few times to the notion of mass culture as the broader framework for my analysis, by which is meant the interconnected culture industries that, for much of the twentieth century, orchestrated the production of cultural goods on a rationalized, assembly-line basis, guided by the dictates of the market. In my earlier study of *Keystone*, I sought to demonstrate the constitutive hybridity of mass cultural forms, citing Max Weber to the effect that the marketplace overrides cultural distinctions by requiring the producers of cultural goods to fuse genres and cross boundaries to achieve the broadest spectrum of appeal.⁴⁰ I would now like to supplement this by reading mass culture more explicitly in terms of its function of *managing difference*—that is, of organizing diverse publics into imaginary associations configured around textual forms and the modes of their circulation.⁴¹ The media’s “mass” functioning, in this sense, depends upon modes of discursive address that negotiate social divisions which might otherwise hinder this circulation; moreover, particular divisions (of, say, class, gender, race, or region) will, at particular times, become more or less prominent within the industry’s market operations in response to processes of social change. The history of mass culture might then be thought of in terms of the various “differences” that, in any given period, are prioritized within these modes of address and configured into the imagined entity of a “mass” public (with the caveat that the terms of this configuration can always be contested by those who refuse the place thereby assigned them, as we will repeatedly see in what follows). Slapstick’s ascendancy in the

1910s, for example, was predicated on its ability to perform this role in relation to the class differences that provided early Hollywood with arguably its most prominent dichotomy (this is the one-sentence version of *The Fun Factory*). The hypothesis, then, will be that a form becomes residual when changes in those dichotomies disable this function, consigning the form in question to one or the other side of a new set of orchestrating divisions. Slapstick's decline in this sense bespeaks changing hierarchies of comedic value that were no longer primarily governed by the dichotomies of class that spawned the form's initial success (which will turn out to be the one-sentence version of *Hokum!*—but please keep reading).

CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

My argument proceeds through five chapters, divided into two parts. Part 1 establishes contexts—both the cultural context of new directions in comic sensibility from the late 1920s on (chapter 1) and the film industrial context of the marketplace for short subjects (chapter 2), each of which secured the slapstick short's progressive obsolescence in the decade after sound. The first chapter accordingly begins by marking a paradox for contemporary scholars who have interpreted early twentieth-century slapstick as a quintessentially “modern” comedic form; namely that, by the end of the 1920s, film slapstick's modernity was already significantly qualified, the form increasingly perceived as outdated, as evidenced by a series of disappointing box-office showings for prestige slapstick features like Charlie Chaplin's *The Circus* (1928), Buster Keaton's *The General* (1927), Harry Langdon's *Three's a Crowd* (1927), and Harold Lloyd's *The Kid Brother* (1927), all of which drew receipts far lower than the comedians' previous work. Further, the very years that witnessed these comedians' first notable falterings also saw the emergence of a new critical perspective associating modern humor not with film slapstick at all, but with a new vein of metropolitan absurdism exemplified by the city wits who staffed publisher Harold Ross's *New Yorker* as well as by a new cohort of “cuckoo” comedians like the Marx Brothers and Joe Cook who began to dominate the Broadway scene. The effort to define this vogue means that my argument starts, paradoxically, by pushing short subjects—indeed, film in general—to the back burner in order to establish the larger cultural coordinates that shaped new directions in comic sensibility. Older class-based hierarchies of cultural value, I show, were being recast during this period in terms of cultural geography, inaugurating a dichotomy between the urbane cultural vanguard and small-town hokum that will resonate throughout this book. The opening chapter strikes these themes by first examining the era's argot of comedic “lunacy” and “goofyism” as a new vocabulary of metropolitan distinction, before turning to short subjects for a case study of the comic style of Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough, the duo that best

enshrined this cuckoo mode in shorts, first at Fox (1928–1929) and subsequently at RKO (1930–1935).

The second chapter turns more singularly to the film industry, to offer a synoptic overview of the short-subject industry's main lines of development in the decade following sound. My focus here falls in part on a number of significant challenges faced by the short-subject sector during this period: the advent of sound, of course, as well as the trend of the double bill, which drastically restricted the scope for shorts on theater schedules. More centrally, however, I am concerned with the changing role of shorts within the industry's evolving understanding of its public, pre- and post-Depression. In the earliest years of sound, the Hollywood studios had characteristically addressed their public in terms of a new language of metropolitan distinction: Hollywood initially conceived of sound cinema as a means of cultural dissemination and uplift bringing the Broadway vanguard to a nationwide audience divided by geographic and cultural distance. Consumer resistance to these marketing strategies, particularly in the heartland, soon provoked a change of tack, however, as the industry next began to seek a newly populist appeal informed by New Deal-era ideals of civic inclusivity. The rhetoric of cultural distinction and hierarchy thus yielded to one of public service as modes of audience address. This chapter shows how these two modes flanked the period of this study, where they were enshrined in the competing market strategies adopted, first, by Warner Bros. for the launch of its pioneering Vitaphone sound shorts beginning in 1926 and, second, almost a decade later, by MGM's revamped short-subject unit under Jack Chertok. The short-subject comedies of Algonquin wit Robert Benchley—first at Fox (1928–1929), later at Chertok's MGM unit (1935–1940, 1943–1944)—will provide the culminating case study of the book's first part, to illustrate how these alternative frameworks of address were articulated through comedy.

Part 2 consists of three chapter-length case studies of individual short-subject producer/distributors, each designed to yield a richer understanding of the determinants and forms of what I thematize as slapstick's "social aging" during this period, its passage toward the *déclassé* or out of date.

The third chapter explores the history of Educational Pictures (slogan: "The Spice of the Program") from the transition to sound to the company's decline in the late 1930s. Established in 1915 by Earle W. Hammons, Educational had, by the end of the silent era, become the industry leader in short-comedy distribution, serving over thirteen thousand exhibitors with a regular program featuring comedians Larry Semon, Lloyd Hamilton, Charley Bowers, and others. Yet, within five years of the transition to sound, the company's reputation had sunk precipitously, its sound shorts notorious as a bargain-basement home for aging comedians. In assessing the implications of that decline, I focus on how industry developments squeezed the company's output out of major urban markets and so underwrote

slapstick's assumed affiliation with the "naïve" tastes of hinterland publics during this period. Industrial marginalization was thus conflated with cultural devaluation as Hammons's organization now had little choice but to reorient its output for those selfsame publics. Notable here was an upsurge in rural comedies (especially with the ascendant popularity of "hick" comic characters at Educational, like Andy Clyde, Harry Gribbon, and even Buster Keaton), as well as a growing incorporation of hillbilly and southern music traditions into the company's films. As such, moreover, Educational's fate exemplifies the operations of banalization as a mode of the social aging of cultural forms—that is, the way certain cultural practices (in this instance, slapstick) become outmoded through a process of social change in their audience.⁴²

For the fourth chapter, the focus shifts to the Hal Roach Studios and the distinctive role that music played in negotiating Roach's passage through the upheavals of the early sound era. In focusing on the studio's experiments with musical formats for comedy, this chapter aligns itself in part with emerging scholarly trends focused on the convergence of film and recorded sound industries wrought by the introduction of electrical sound technology to cinema.⁴³ New corporate relations with the Victor Talking Machine Company brought Roach talented musical personnel and technicians who innovated new wall-to-wall (that is, continual) scoring practices that drew upon modern, Tin Pan Alley-style jazz idioms. But these experiments with slapstick musicality would take a quite different turn a few years later, when Roach's efforts to leverage his company toward the production of features resulted in a spate of feature-length Viennese-style operettas starring Laurel and Hardy in period costumes (*The Devil's Brother*, 1933; *Babes in Toyland*, 1934; *The Bohemian Girl*, 1936). In embracing operetta as a format, Roach's filmmakers were not only elaborating on the pioneering musical tendencies evident in their earliest sound shorts; they were also cautiously opting for the security of middlebrow "family" appeal to mollify the financial risks of moving into features. Excised from the contemporaneity of vernacular idioms—both comedic (slapstick) and musical (jazz)—Laurel and Hardy were now conscripted to what Susan Stewart theorizes as the "infinite time" of fairy tale.⁴⁴ What was cemented was thus a second mode of slapstick's social aging, the resignification of the clown no longer according to the lumpen typology of turn-of-the-century vaudeville and early film but as a pantomime-like figure for childhood reverie.

The final chapter turns to the aforementioned old-time slapstick vogue of the late 1930s and the role of nostalgia in "re-membering" slapstick's meaning and function as a residual form. The term "re-membering" I derive from sociologist Barbara Myerhoff, for whom it refers to a type of nostalgia that seeks the "reaggregation of [a group's] members, the figures who belong to one's life story."⁴⁵ By the end of the 1930s, I suggest, Hollywood was gripped by a similar project of nostalgic

investment, as it sought to respond to widespread criticism that it had lost touch with its audience. Within these efforts, moreover, silent comedy came to serve as an emblem for the industry's "gay and goofy" past in whose image Hollywood now sought to reimagine itself. The focus of my analysis here falls primarily on the output of the Columbia short-subject department, which, beginning in 1932, was reorganized under the supervising team of Zion Myers and Jules White. Of all short-subject firms, Columbia's seems to have been most oriented toward the throwback market, a haven of sorts for out-of-work slapstick veterans who, together again, assembled a pastiche style that restored the knockabout energies of earlier Mack Sennett/Keystone-era comedy—most famously in the rough-and-tumble farces of the Three Stooges (1934–1958). This chapter reconstructs that comedic restoration. But it also seeks, finally, a *political* vector to slapstick's outdatedness by assessing the relationship linking popular cultural forms (like slapstick) to populism. At a surface level, the nostalgic restoration of 1910s-vintage slapstick in the context of the 1930s makes a certain cultural sense: both were populist eras, the latter perhaps forcing memory to return fondly to the cultural forms of the former. But this could not be accomplished without abstracting from the very different political conceptions that animated those earlier forms: put simply, the *class-conflictual* populist style that Columbia inherited from Sennett was not the same as the *civic-inclusive* populism that came to characterize New Deal America's political rhetoric, resulting in strange contortions of comedic formulas whenever the studio's filmmakers sought to engage the present. The Depression-era retrofitting of Sennett-style farce as nostalgia only confirmed that the form's moment as a "live" vehicle of social representation had long since passed—the third and final trajectory of the form's social aging.

*

Rather than an official conclusion, *Hokum!* closes with a coda, which tracks the ongoing rewriting of slapstick as nostalgia in subsequent decades. The market for "old-time" comedy that first opened in the 1930s proved to be a geyser that continued to spout reissues for many years to come, for instance, in the cycle of vintage-comedy anthologies that began to take off in the late 1950s (e.g., the numerous Robert Youngson-produced compilation films, *When Comedy Was King*, *Days of Thrills and Laughter*, etc.) as well as in the recycling of early comedy shorts in syndicated children's television programming (e.g., *The Funny Manns* and *Fractured Flickers*) beginning in the early 1960s.⁴⁶ This is where historiography and autobiography become inseparable for me, for it is here that my own connection with slapstick was first made. I have indelible memories of the compilation TV show *Harold Lloyd's World of Comedy*, produced by Time-Life for PBS in the early 1970s and a staple of early evening programming in Britain (where I'm from) a decade later. After the kids' shows had finished on the main channels and my mother

was cooking fish fingers, I would switch to BBC2 and wait for the memorable theme song (“Hooray for Harold Lloyd / doo-doo doo-doo doo-doo doo-doo doo doo!”). In evoking this affective bond, I claim no singularity. The historiography of slapstick cinema has long been stained with nostalgia: few writers on the form have failed to include some kind of personal reminiscence.⁴⁷ And while it might be true that nostalgia is not history—that it “cannot replace the difficult task of reconstructing and interpreting the past”—there is something to be said for a historicizing of nostalgia itself and an accounting of its sources.⁴⁸ This finally is what *Hokum!* seeks.