

Comic Violence: From *Commedia dell'Arte* to Contemporary Cinema

by

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ABSTRACT

A comic view of violence involves a shift in moral view that requires an alleviation of concern or a temporary freedom from moral constraints. The semi-taboo nature of the moral action of comedic violence necessitates its moral coding. The joke or punch-line of a joke direct“Comic Violence: From *Commedia dell’Arte* to Contemporary Cinema,” Ph.D. s the audience toward a comic interpretation of the events before them, while the comic coding and/or comic world of the violent gag enables the violence to be interpreted or received with laughter.

By examining the entirety of this detailing of reception codes we can see that the butts of comedic violence have travelled in focus from the easily removed, distanced other (ostracised by race, appearance and behaviour), to victims uncomfortably identified with the audience. This shift mirrors and activates to some extent the evolution of the genre from classic to parody to critique. However, despite these changes the abiding goal and mechanism of comedic violence remains the same.

Violent comedy is a pressure-releasing game of moral chicanery. In comedic violence, particularly its more recent self-conscious manifestations, one can witness an audience probing, even searching, for limits and moral boundaries that receive group confirmation. Often this probing is searching for a shared (through laughter) denial of the stringency of societal morality. But with this probing there is the reassuring re-establishment of a more lenient but also more solid moral boundary. Thus comedic violence uses thresholds of humour to re-affirm social taboos.

Self-reflexive commentary is most often achieved through the disruption of the moral game-playing of comedic violence. In a near reversal of the purpose and effects of comic

coding, self-reflexive comedic violence effectively pulls the morally protective rug out from under the audience. This shocking removal of moral protection leaves the audience suddenly aware of the moral game-playing inherent in comedic violence and thus implicates their desires within the comic process. Self-reflexively violent comic films and plays support and effectively prove by their success the central tenet of this thesis – namely that for an audience, comedic violence is a comic release that is shrouded in moral deception, placation and dishonesty by the comedian.

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Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
1. THE COMIC WORLD	8
2. VERBAL VIOLENT COMEDY	82
3. PHYSICAL VIOLENCE	
Physical Violence	132
Violence to the Face	174
Fantastical/Decapitation	180
Corpses	188
4. SEXUAL	
Gender	194
Sexual	211
Violence to the Genitals	216
5. NOVELTY	
Inventiveness and Finesse	220
Weapons	223
Victims: The Acceptable Versus the Sacred and Taboo	240
Self-Inflicted Comedic Violence	252
6. SELF-REFLEXIVE COMEDIC VIOLENCE	260
CONCLUSION	285
WORKS CONSULTED	289

Introduction

This thesis argues that a comic view of violence involves a shift in moral view that requires an alleviation of concern or a temporary freedom from moral constraints.

The segments of accidental suffering aired on America's Funniest Home Videos reveal what an audience requires to comfortably laugh at the sufferings of others. The broadcast of the show assures the audience that no one is seriously harmed in the program. This alleviation of concern leaves the audience free to laugh at another's suffering without showing or suggesting the audience's moral corruption.

In a television interview about their film There's Something About Mary (1998), the Farrelly brothers told of a test screening of an early version of their film where in one scene, after being hit in the face with a snowball, Cameron Diaz came into the frame with a bloody nose and none of the audience laughed. However, when the brothers removed the blood from test prints, their audiences roared with laughter. Here, then, the test screenings provide proof of the sometimes simple and often delicate restrictions and codings which support the audience's ability to laugh at violence. This thesis explores the moral games that drive violent comedy, showing how such comedy is a pressure-releasing game of moral chicanery. This thesis is a history of these moral shifts and of the tactics which enabled, encouraged and finally confounded them. The comic codings which allow for the comic reception of violence are tracked from the *Commedia dell'Arte* to contemporary theatre and film. As well, the fluctuations of the boundaries of public moral taste which necessitate such coding are examined, proving that such barriers (protective limits for society's participation in this shirking of moral responsibility) are essentially tenuous and of an almost arbitrary nature.

Jason Jacobs in "Gunfire" questions why we, the audience, want violent entertainment. While his focus is on violence which is not comic, his attitude is one which is commonly

directed at violent comedies in that he desires a lack of connection between intelligence and “base” pleasures. This attitude revolves around a question expressed crudely as “I’m intelligent and compassionate, so why do I like this crap?” Leaving aside an audience’s possible desire for violence and the excitement generated by it, we are still left with the question of how we accommodate or placate such seemingly superior concerns for intelligence, compassion and, more importantly, morality within our appreciation and enjoyment of violent entertainment. The focus of this thesis and particularly of the first chapter, then, is not “why do we laugh?” but rather “how do we laugh?” - how do we enable our “intelligent, caring and social” selves to adhere to or abide by societal morals and yet laugh at violence and cruelty?

Of course, why a particular violent gag is funny can never be completely removed from a consideration of how the violence is enabled to be funny. The joke or punch-line of a joke directs the audience toward a comic interpretation of the events before them. So, while the comic coding and/or comic world of the violent gag enables the violence to be interpreted or received with laughter, it does not make the violence funny. For example, in the Warner Brothers cartoon Plop Goes the Weasel (1953) when Foghorn Leghorn tells the barnyard dog “Put me where I belong”¹ and the dog proceeds to ram the large rooster through a small hole in a wooden fence, the extreme comic world of the Warner Brothers cartoons still requires the “whys” of the joke to make the scene comic. In this scene, for example, to focus on the most obvious humour, there is a surprising play upon words present in the dog’s interpretation of and reaction to Foghorn’s request (in that Foghorn expects to be returned to the chicken coop where he belongs, while the dog interprets and acts upon the euphemistic sense of the line and treats the irritating Foghorn in a way that his behaviour incites). The dog’s interpretation and

¹ All quotations from films and television shows are from the films and shows themselves, not from the notoriously unreliable and often unavailable screenplays.

its surprising cruelty are both comically shocking. The shock of the culturally forbidden is also present here, as the anthropomorphized dog (all the animals of the Warner Brothers cartoons are anthropomorphized) does as he pleases free from any concern for societal approbation. This disruption of societal expectation adds to the comic excitement of the dog's actions (the exciting taboo of violent action can often be comically shocking for the audience). As well, the physical impossibility of Foghorn's passing through so small a hole is itself comically ridiculous. The rooster's "ow"s and "ouch"s (comically minimal considering the ordeal he is suffering) are yet another comic denial of our expectations. This moment of violence then, while set in a comic world which removes from the audience's mind concern for the physical suffering of its characters and thus frees violence for comic interpretation, is nonetheless made comic through a series of denials of the audience's immediate expectations (the most frequent route to comedy). Without the allowance of the comical world of the cartoons (its incredible physical possibilities and inherent unreality – discussed in detail in chapter one), this scene would be horrific despite the humour of the dog's creative interpretation of Foghorn's request. The gag stimulates the comic interpretation of the violence while the comic world allows it.

Chapter One is an examination of the moral allowance created by the comic worlds and comic codings of particular films and plays. The chapter details the effects of these comic techniques and, in doing so, points to the necessity of such moral negotiations for the comic reception of violence. It assumes that the humour of most scenes described herein will be apparent from the descriptions provided and thus makes no attempt to describe why a particular scene or gag is funny, but rather focuses on the question of how the violence is coded to advocate a comic interpretation.

In order to answer this question for contemporary film, this thesis presents what is

fundamentally a history of the violent comic gag. The violent comic gag is defined here as a piece of comic business for which violence is integral to the humour. I begin with the *Commedia dell'Arte* because of the prominence of violent *lazzi* in this dramatic form. From the *Commedia* this study proceeds chronologically, focusing on the most prominent and extreme comedic violence in drama and in film (extreme, here, meaning the most violent or unabashedly cruel manifestations of violent comedy). Puppetry and the Punch and Judy tradition leads to *Ubu Roi* and eventually to vaudeville and early film.² The focus on early film comedy proceeds from Georges Méliès to the stars of silent film who made most frequent use of violent comedy: Mack Sennett, Charles Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Roscoe Arbuckle. The comedy of this period is star-driven and dominated by personae which recur in each of these stars' films, thus necessitating a star-focused approach to this comedy. Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy provide the links from silent film to the sound films of *The Three Stooges*. Surrealism and absurdism are touched upon briefly as a means to understanding the possibilities of cartoons (for which the Warner Brothers cartoons, really the most sophisticated of the popular cartoons, are used as the best examples of the form) and the surrealist and absurdist strains of Monty Python. And, finally, the chapter concludes with a focus on the main locus of popular and extremely violent gags in the eighties and nineties, the action film.³

This chronological approach crosses generic boundaries and drifts from a concentration on stars and auteurs in order to focus on the popular prominence of the violent gag itself. While genre, stars and audience reception must necessarily impact upon the effects and comic codifiers of these violent gags, the effects of such influences and the accompanying theory are

² The early films discussed in this thesis have a history of being considered funny, whereas the most recent films I discuss are proved comic by the intentionally provoked laughter I have heard during screenings.

³ The cut off date for the central films and plays discussed in this thesis is 1994 (though the occasional brief reference to more recent material does appear).

expansive and beyond the limits of this thesis and so are dealt with cursorily. These gags, then, are studied to some extent in isolation from some of the broader influences (genre, sociology, psychology) which shape them in order to study the mechanics and comic codifiers of the violent gag itself at its most basic level.

With comic coding in mind, this thesis then goes on to detail and analyze the popular, extreme and ground-breaking comedic violence of film and theatre by grouping these examples of violent comedy into what are essentially moral categories: verbal, physical, sexual and novelty. These four chapters and particularly their numerous subsections highlight the tactics, targets and objects of comedic violence and account for the general difference in the moral perception of different kinds of violence. For example, violence to the face has a different set of moral boundaries and implications than the morally provocative comedy involving sexual violence. Within each category the gags common to that section are detailed. As well, the notable and groundbreaking exceptions to these common gags are explored as these gags most often reveal the moral boundaries of the comedy explored in each section. With these extreme and notable gags the negotiations required to circumvent moral boundaries (in order to guarantee the comic reception of such violence) are most prominent and so they prove to be a useful method of dissecting the moral negotiations of the categories to which they apply.

A chronological approach while useful as an organizational tool also provides an awareness of the notability of the exceptional examples of each category. This chronological notability often points to changes in moral perception and comic license.

Having confirmed the moral chicanery of comedic violence, this thesis then concludes with a chapter devoted to self-reflexive comedic violence. This final chapter shows how this self-reflexive commentary is most often achieved through the disruption of the moral game-

playing that the previous five chapters have detailed. Thus in a near reversal of the purpose and effects of comic coding the films and plays discussed in chapter six effectively pull the morally protective rug out from under the audience of comedic violence. This shocking removal of moral protection leaves the audience suddenly aware of the moral game-playing inherent in comedic violence and thus implicates their desires within the comic process – essentially the audience’s enjoyment of the comic release of the tensions of violence is interrupted and the normally carefully protected audience is caught red-handed and forced to question their own moral relationship with the comedy. These self-reflexively violent comic films and plays support and effectively prove by their success the central tenet of this thesis – namely that for an audience, comedic violence is a comic release that is shrouded in moral deception, placation and dishonesty by the comedian.

This thesis makes frequent use of Henri Bergson’s Laughter and Elder Olson’s The Theory of Comedy. Bergson’s notion of the mechanistic aspect of the humorous and Olsen’s theory of *Katastasis* (both discussed through examples throughout this thesis) are the most useful theories for understanding the mechanics of comic coding for comedic violence. Walter Kerr and Raymond Durgnat provide additional over-arching theories which explain how filmmakers justify their choice of comic butts to an audience and how the filmmakers create the desire for comedic violence to be directed at these same comic butts. These four theorists provide the only broad approaches to comedy which account for a complex codification of violent comedy. Contemporary theorists have generally focused on specific films and specific directors and consequently, while their work is helpful for specific examples, it is most often only partially applicable to an overall understanding of comedic violence. Nearly all contemporary writing on film comedy refers back to two or more of

these theorists, and therefore their influence justifies their presence as the theoretical base for this study.

Chapter One

The Comic World

The comedic violence examined in this thesis must first be placed in context, and, that is the purpose of this chapter. When discussing comedic violence, one must examine the codifiers which designate it for comic consumption, the comic world in which this violence occurs, and also the real one from which these narratives derive. Northrop Frye asserts the importance of the real world on the reception of drama when discussing the cruelty and brutality of Roman drama: “One sometimes gets the impression that the audience of Plautus and Terence would have guffawed uproariously all through the *Passion*. We may ascribe this to the brutality of a slave society” (Frye, 178). Frye notes that the Roman slave could face the mill, being flogged to death, crucifixion, or having his head dipped in tar and set on fire, all actual punishments for slaves (Frye, 178). Obviously the audience that would encounter such brutal violence as forms of public judicial punishment would react differently than contemporary audiences to acts of violence on the stage.

One must not forget how public these punishments were (and some scholars, most notably Margaret Ellen Owens, have examined the relationship between the theatrical stage and execution stage).¹ One need only note the gruesomely detailed list of punishments (in most cases these punishments were reduced to beheading) which were assigned to Sir Walter Raleigh upon his conviction for treason in 1603 to have a sense of the extremes of what might be considered “acceptable” public spectacle for a different time:

You shalbe drawne vpon a hurdle through the streetes to the place of execution and ther to be hanged and cut down alive, and your body shalbe opened and your privye members cut of, and your hart and bowells pulled out and throwne into the fire before your eyes, then your head to be strecken of from your body, your body shalbe devided into fower quarters, to be disposed at the kinges pleasure. (John W. Shirley, 317)

¹ Owens discusses this relationship in her Ph.D. thesis *Dismemberment and Decapitation on the English Renaissance Stage: Towards a Cultural Semiotics of Violent Spectacle*. University of Toronto, 1994.

For this study, the existence of such different attitudes towards violence can only be borne in mind as we examine the comic worlds in which these gags appear, until someone establishes a chronology which compares comedic violence with the real-life violence of the period from which the comedy arises.

Puppetry and *Commedia dell' Arte*

Perhaps the most unrealistic comic world of this study is that of the puppet stage, a world which Marjorie H. Batchelder has described as presenting the juxtaposition of “the real and the imaginary, endowing both with equal plausibility” (Batchelder, 292). Allardyce Nicoll has noted that the comic business which drives and characterises the figures and narratives of comedy is “most commonly based on a folly or stupefaction so exaggerated as to leave the world of actuality far behind” (Nicoll, 146-7). Indeed, the plausibility of the unreal is the domain of not just the puppet theatre but of comedy in general. The characters of Punch and Judy and also the *Commedia* tradition prove these points with an exaggerated physicality and emotionality (detailed later) which is a grotesque representation of reality.

The very basic conventions for puppetry and *Commedia* mark them apart from realistic narratives. Nicoll notes that for *Commedia* these conventions provide an allowance or tolerance of things forbidden in the real world: “The mathematical and musical patterning, the fantastic adventures, the admixture of masked and unmasked actors, all combine to draw us from the real world into a world of the imagination - so that what might have been thoroughly distasteful with a comedy naturalistically presented can here be accepted within the framework of the palpably fictitious” (Nicoll, 149). The conventions of puppetry have a similar effect on an audience. However, an unrealistic approach, no matter how riddled with conventions, still interprets or reacts to (even if just in its differences) a real world, or a world which is relevant to ours. A connection to the real world seems necessary for comedy’s

appeal, and for the appeal of all narrative art.

What the comic worlds of these comedies do achieve is a morally comfortable distance from real life. One of the ways in which the comic world of *Commedia* distances its audience from its more brutal comedy (detailed in the chapters which follow) is through repetition: “The very familiarity of the vulgar episodes attracts attention away from their subject matter to the skill with which they are integrated into the plots and particularly to the skill with which they are interpreted” (Nicoll, 149). Certainly the repetition of plots and *lazzi* of the *Commedia* would bring about an awareness in the audience which would encourage a distancing or a separation from the comic world and violent acts which they were observing.

Such unreality and repetition is equally found in the Punch and Judy show, as illustrated by George Speaight in his discussion of the history of the Punch figure. “Perhaps that is the fundamental reason why we laugh at Punch, and are not horrified. ...we have sensed with a sure instinct that the beatings and the killings are only a convention with no relation to reality, and that behind his wooden victories there lies the arch-type of “he who gets slapped,” the primitive and eternal clown” (Speaight, 184-5). Additionally, with the daily repetition of the text of the Punch and Judy show, the audience possesses a special relationship to the characters and their situations: “Not only Punch but also Judy and the Baby and all the other victims of his stick reappear day after day - and are thus immortal” (A. R. Philpott, 204). There is for the audience a recurring relationship with all the characters, even with those who are killed, which suggests that an audience need not have any real concern for the characters as they will all return the next day unharmed and ready to endure the punishment once again.⁵

Some, such as Pierre Louis Ducharte when speaking of Brighella, are quick to note that this pain is, after all, inflicted in a pretend manner, that “the blood he spills by his knife-play

⁵ This is an emotional distance which we will pick up with Henri Bergson on pg. 28. The moral conditioning which such repetition might engender is addressed by several of the film-makers discussed in the final chapter of this thesis.

is, after all, only a little wine or quite innocent red ink” (Ducharte, 293). While this sense of play-acting is true, it is hardly a satisfactory approach to the violence. The off-stage rape and mutilation of Lavinia in Titus Andronicus is pretend (and presumably understanding that this is a representation is what allows us to watch without interfering with the action of the play), but the rape affects contemporary audiences as their hearing of an actual rape might, provoking concern and agitation and an uncomfortable tension during the comic scenes which follow it.⁶ The complications of this view are surely what Peter Greenaway is trying to provoke in his film The Baby of Macon (1995) with the real (real within the fiction of the film) gang-rape of an actress providing the “fictionalised” pretend rape of the character she performs in a play. Pointedly, the effect for the oblivious audience (of the play) is exactly the same whether her rape is real or pretend.

Both *Commedia* and the Punch and Judy show make attempts to enhance the effects of the violence of their plots with the use of slapsticks. Pierre Louis Ducharte feels that enhancement is pursued “in order to heighten the comic effect” (Ducharte, 36). Certainly, by increasing the unreality of the violence, the comic interpretation of the violence is made more palatable for the audience. However, the amplification of the sound of the violence, much as it is hugely exaggerated in contemporary film, can also add to the shock and impact of violence. It makes, and would have made, an audience wince in recognition of the pain of the violence. Indeed, in contemporary films it is no longer sufficient to punch someone without a huge aural accompaniment. In a moment of comic violence the shock of the sound draws the focus of the audience to the violence, thus raising their concern and the tension of the scene, but then the faces and reactions of the victims provide a release from real or

⁶ Of course, as with all audiences, there are as many reactions as there are individuals and audiences. When speaking of audiences in this thesis I will use generalisations (in my opinion the only possible interpretation of an audience) and avoid the complications of the necessarily numerous exceptions and subjective reactions to any given event.

displaced concern.

Additionally in these traditions there are physical actions which suggest that the comic world is not one which is bounded by the limits or founded on the concerns of the real world; as a case in point, in many of the Punch and Judy shows there is a figure who enters, stretches his neck out to an impossible length, pauses, shrinks down to normal, and then exits (John Collier, 35). Moments such as these, and the many accoutrements of both traditions (masks, exaggerated features, swazzle-effects for the puppet's voices), create a domain of unusual physical possibility, one which frees the audience from its usual emotional concerns.

In this difference from the real we encounter a conundrum of puppetry and the comic world in general. Antonio Pasqualino has noted how puppets appeal to Bergson's notion of the humour in being perceived as a thing (Pasqualino, 23), and puppets are obviously things. But Paul McPharlin (as quoted in Steve Tillis' Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet: Puppetry as a Theatrical Art) suggests that the thingness of puppets has no effect on an audience: "When puppets come alive... one ceases to think of wood and wire; one is absorbed in the action.... The audience, accepting the convention of puppets, projects itself into them with the same empathy that it feels for any other actors"⁷ (Tillis, 47). McPharlin is right - an audience can accept and embrace the conventions of puppetry, just as they do the obvious conventions of the theatre. However, Tillis is quick to point out the flaw in McPharlin's simple assumption: "No audience member above the age of five will be able to overlook completely the essential fact that the puppet has no real life" (Tillis, 49). Batchelder feels that this is the strength of puppetry: "Direct characterisation is the puppet actor's strongest quality. There is no pretence. A puppet *is* the character it portrays; it is not a human being dressed up and pretending to be that character" (Batchelder, 288). Tillis disagrees with

⁷ This quotation is originally from McPharlin's The Puppet Theatre in America: A History. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1949.

Batchelder, pointing out the real pretence in puppetry: “The actor pretends to be *someone* other than he or she is; the puppet pretends to be *something* other than it is, by pretending to have life” (Tillis, 38). There is obviously something true in all of these suggestions, and the common problem of puppetry scholarship lies in accepting the form’s seemingly conflicting aspects. Tillis provides a solution to this problem with a concept of double vision: where the audience acknowledges the object and its imagined life simultaneously (Tillis, 59-85). This double vision is necessary for the Punch and Judy show, which has a character (the bottler) who is played by a human, thus illustrating within the context of the show the difference between the puppets and a human.

Tillis’ double vision is very similar to aspects of the theatrical semiotic system proposed by Jean Alter in A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre. For Alter, theatre has essentially two functions that are key to its appeal, a performative function and a referential function. The audience’s focus shifts between these two functions throughout a performance; thus while fully embracing the narrative of a play, they never more than momentarily forget the real performers (or unreal puppets) who create the production. Double vision, of course, raises the question of how this way of viewing affects an audience’s reception of violence. The dual awareness of the audience, while it allows emotional attachment and affect, also diffuses the real affects of witnessing such acts, or at the very least provides the audience with a constant release from horror.

This diffusion and release explains the freedom accorded puppetry shows. While this freedom manifests itself most obviously in the political content of some puppet shows, it is also applicable to their violence: “The puppet... being nothing more than a theatrical ‘object,’ cannot be construed as having the “living” responsibility even of the actor, and so the successive murders of a dozen or so characters become a cause for laughter, and not concern”

(Tillis, 34). To be accurate, Tillis' statement needs to be amended in this way, "... and so the successive murders of a dozen or so characters can become a cause for laughter, and not concern". The lack of responsibility conferred on an object introduces comic possibility for violence, it does not necessarily create comedy.

Tillis' description of a lack of responsibility accounts for the freedom of puppets in the wrong way. What puppets have is license, and comedians possess this as well. It is the historical purpose of the fool, in fact it is precisely his or her responsibility, to comically probe that which is forbidden to normal citizens.

Phillip John Stead agrees with the fool's prerogative when he suggests that this freedom, this license, is part and parcel of the fact that Punch and Judy is a comedy: "How has Punch got away with it when all the others are punished? By making us laugh. He does but poison in jest; no offence in the world" (Stead, 149). The lack of offence is crucial. Punch intends to offend many people within his play, but no one within his audience, and that is where his freedom comes from. *Commedia* is no different in that it intends its audience no harm, and so in their eyes can do them none. The appeal of these comic characters is that they can do no wrong by doing wrong. They are figures of great moral liberty (Bill Baird, 103), and in many ways their world bestows a moral liberty upon their spectators as well.

Ubu Roi

Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi (1896) presents a comic world which purposely confuses notions of the real. Jarry took pains to achieve such an effect through his use of puppet techniques for the human stage: "Besides imitating the typical jerkiness of marionettes' movements, the actors also wore masks.... [The actors] were also encouraged to develop special voices appropriate to their roles" (Harold B. Segel, 88). Jarry's detailed embracing and co-opting of the techniques of puppetry in the first production of his play thoroughly ensured its denial of

the tropes of French realism.

What is important for students of comedy, here, is the world created by Jarry's conflation of puppetry and human acting. Essentially, Jarry made a world of human puppets, much in the way called for later by Gordon Craig. This had an explicit effect on comedy, particularly that involving the body. Gerald Mast has suggested that there are six ways in which a comic climate can be achieved in film: through title, characters, subject matter, dialogue, self-consciousness and cinematic tools (Mast, 9-11). A note on character can point to how Jarry's Ubu Roi creates its unique comic world: "One-dimensional characters who represent comic types, either physically or psychologically, also line up our responses in the intended direction" (Mast, 10). Physical types, whether they involve stereotypes of dress, of physiognomy or of physical behaviour, can immediately code and prescribe the world which the play inhabits and the rules by which it is governed. And what happens in the case of puppet-like characters is that the audience experiences what John Fraser has described, in the case of cartoons, as "a de-realising of the physical" (Fraser, 52). It is this de-realising which characterises the comedic violence of Ubu Roi: as in the following scene where Ubu has just been shot, "Ow! Ouch! I'm wounded, I'm holed, I'm perforated, I'm administered, I'm interred! Oh but all the same! Ah! I've got him. (*He tears him to pieces*)" (Jarry, 108). Ubu's wounds and physical abilities belong to the world of his will rather than that of reality and thus are open to comic manipulation and interpretation.

Fraser's de-realising can account for much of the inhuman and unreal violence of both cartoons and puppetry and, to a great degree, the violence of Ubu Roi. The unreal, the de-realised, is not bound by the real limits of pain or the "real" limits of public morality, and it allows a character, an artist, and society to explore the more vicious sides of its humours. However, what is interesting amidst all these explanations and qualifications is ultimately not

the ways in which a comic world can morally accommodate its audience's desire to watch fictional violence, but the manner in which these worlds of comedic violence are similar to the real world. Jarry, quoted here by Linda Klieger Stillman, felt that it was this very coincidence which was so troubling for members of his original audience: "Ubu, giant and ankylosed marionette, is nevertheless made of flesh and bone. A human being gives him blood and breath. The confrontation of the two orders was judged intolerable by the original public.... Man made himself an object and a monster to mock his fellow man" (Stillman, 49). This aspect of performance is the great difficulty in understanding the conflict of impulses present in our production and consumption of comedic violence: are puppets to be taken as icons for humans, or as actors, or are they icons of specific characters? Ubu points to the iconicity of all actors: an obvious point, but one which must be accounted for, and accepted. The coding which couches this violence as part of a forgiving comic world does so in order that we might laugh at these figures, these characters, these people being hurt.

There are, of course, other violent pleasures offered in the impossibilities of the physical world of Ubu Roi. The same amusement which might appear in an audience when Ubu tears someone to pieces might be found in an account of early puppetry passed on by Henryk Jurkowski:

At the end of the eighteenth century Johann F. Schutz recalled a show about the martyrdom of Saint Dorothy in which the puppet player repeated the scene of the saint's decapitation in response to the demands of the audience who shouted "once again!", "once again!" He put the dismantled head back onto the wooden torso and allowed the puppet executioner to satisfy the demands of the spectator. (Jurkowski, 161)

The inventiveness required to achieve the incredible and extreme violence of Ubu Roi becomes a pleasure in itself, and it is one which often, like puppetry before it and filmic special effects now, provokes astonished laughter from its audience. This astonishment and appreciation is yet another audience reaction which can remove a degree of reality and allow

for a less morally complicated reaction to violence.

Georges Méliès

This astonishment is often one of the appeals of Georges Méliès' films. Mast stresses that "Méliès let everyone know he was watching artifice and fiction" (Mast, 35). This is certainly the case for an audience watching a film like Extraordinary Illusions where Méliès constructs a woman from pieces of a photograph, turns her into a pile of feathers and then later tears an interfering cook to pieces. The action of the cook being torn to pieces can be seen as a direct descendant of the action of Ubu Roi and an example of how that effect might have been done (and perhaps this points to the illusionistic stage as yet another influence upon Jarry).

The impossibilities displayed in Extraordinary Illusions (approx. 1908) hearken to Fraser's de-realising of cartoons. Again, as in Ubu Roi, we are forbidden any qualms we might have about the violence of the piece, by the announcement through Méliès' costume and performance that we are witness to the actions of an illusionistic stage-show.⁸ That stage carries with it certain expectations which may be understood through John Fraser's work: "The de-realizations involved here, in other words, are of the sort that enables one to withdraw temporarily, with a clear conscience, from the complexities of human behaviour and from certain kinds of ethical claims" (Fraser, 53). The physical actions of Méliès' films are fantastic, not dangerous or hurtful. If the audience, unaware of the innovative but basic trickery (so often presented as part of comic business) of the then new invention of the film camera, believed the trickery of Méliès' films, they would observe them with the awe of those witnessing the fantastical rather than the physically dangerous.

For Mast, the recognition of the illusion has important ramifications for the comedy of

⁸ While Méliès' tricks are achieved with the aid of the camera, they are nonetheless founded upon his many years as a stage illusionist. His studio was a copy of his illusionistic stage and many of his tricks are transplantations of his stage work.

Méliès' films: "That we do not believe in comedy's reality, that we consciously recognise the imitation as imitation, produces an intellectual-emotional distance from the work that is the essential comic response" (Mast, 15). It is this distance which allows the intellect of the viewer to enjoy the humour of *Hydrotherapy Fantastique* (1908) without being viscerally disturbed by its moments of violence: A doctor drills into the side of a fat man. He inserts a syringe, withdraws water and then hooks him up to a pump. He later puts him into a steam machine, where the pressure gets so high that it explodes. The fat man's body parts are all around the room flipping around like fish out of water. The doctor takes the living head and other pieces and puts them together with glue. The fat man is now thin. The doctor shows a before and after shot of the fat man. Thus, the body in Méliès' films is capable of the impossible. With the emotional reality of the fat man removed, Méliès is able to take the offer of such thinning techniques to ridiculous and violent extremes: "What makes us laugh is alleged to be the absurd realised in concrete shape, a "palpable absurdity"" (Bergson, 177). This is certainly the case with Méliès' films, and it is hardly surprising when one examines the places where such films were often shown. Méliès' films would have to compete with the other attractions of the fairgrounds and cafés. It was a world of fantastical and absurd delights which bears lengthy description:

Films were shown to the accompaniment of roaring lions, noisy traction engines, organ music and the hurly-burly of the crowds. Waxworks were popular. Large tableaux like *The Last Moments of the Illustrious Poet Victor Hugo*, *Gorilla Seizing a Young Girl* and a mechanical *Raft of the Medusa* could be seen, and *actualités* encapsulating news events: portraits of Dreyfus; the Czar on his death-bed; and Vidal, the murderer of women. Theatres of *tableaux vivants* stood side by side with puppet theatres that presented shows like *A Trip to the Moon*. Next door to menageries would be anatomical museums of morbid exhibits and scientific curiosities: the corpse of a man who had died from hunger, a drowned woman, preserved crocodiles and octopi, and a back room, full of freaks, strictly reserved for gentlemen. One showman, who claimed to be a defrocked priest, exhibited "the child Voltaire's skull". A brown bear with its head shorn of fur became "The Pig-Faced Lady". Shoals of trained goldfish, secured to toy boats by fine wires, enacted naval engagements, and oysters smoked pipes. "Glass Tank Swimming Shows"

were extremely popular: performers ate and drank under water, played cards and retrieved coins with their mouths. Magic lantern slides were projected on to the voluminous, bat-winged dress of a danseuse, while the “woman-screen” performed a Serpentine Dance. At the café-concerts, crippled, hunch-backed and blind performers were particularly appreciated. Tattooed men and women, albinos, the armless and legless, giants, dwarfs, bearded ladies, skeletal and obese persons.... (Paul Hammond, 95-6)

Presumably the fantastical violence of Méliès’ films would be less of a surprise for an audience brought up on such anomalies than one might have expected: the fantastic, the absurd and the freakish were the staple of the world of entertainment within which Méliès’ films discoursed. Thus the films could comfortably present outlandish worlds where the comedy of the body need know no moral or physical bounds.

Owens’ discussion of the moments in Faustus which are similar to the body comedy of Méliès suggests an additional appeal behind such forms of comedy: “This is a body that has appropriated some of the miraculous and numinous qualities usually assigned to the sacred. As many critics have observed, the magical regenerations enacted in the encounters with Benvolio and the horse-courser appear to parody the Christian miracle of resurrection” (Owens, 207). To be sure, in a play like Faustus concerned with spirituality and the soul, the body comedy provides a purposeful echo of Christian miracles, but this is not the case with Méliès, who avoids the genuinely spiritual in his comedy. Instead, Méliès’ work deals with the comedy inherent in the body’s limits: “His marvellous world is one of objects in flux, of objects that find it impossible to retain their identity (and because humans are treated as objects too, there is just a hint of madness, of schizophrenia, behind Méliès’ genial exterior)” (Hammond, 89). If there is madness in Méliès’ work it is a playful, healthy madness. Thus in a film like The Untameable Whiskers (1904) where Méliès goes through a series of facial mutations, it is a physical game which he is playing. The changes in character he undergoes for each new transformation represent playful masks, not psychological shifts.

Finally, Méliès' films present a comic world where even the inanimate cannot be trusted to behave as they should: in The Inn Where No Man Sleeps (1901) coat-stands come to life to attack the innocent, and walls and beds become insubstantiate at just the wrong time.⁹ Thus, combined with the unpredictability of the body, Méliès' films present a comic world where the improbable is probable and physical logic is non-existent.

D.W. Griffith

The one important moment of comedic violence in Griffith's films comes in the auspiciously titled Eradicating Aunty (1909). In the film, a comedian helps a couple scare off their irritating auntie and her friend, a pastor. The comedian eventually comes in dressed as a cowboy, and after various displays of poor manners and general brutish behaviour, ends the film by firing his guns at their feet, whereupon the auntie and pastor dance around, and are chased out of the house and onto a train, all the while continuing their dancing. This film provides an example of what is necessary for such moments of comedic violence to succeed. Here, the comedy can arise because it is safe. The film presents what is basically behind much comedic violence, in that the audience knows that it presents no real threat to the victims of the comedy, but they do not know this and so react as if it did. Elder Olson explores the effects of such a moment on the viewer with the story of Sancho, who is hanging off a ditch edge which he believes to be a cliff:

Here are streams of thought and feeling flowing in opposite direction: the serious, from my sharing his pain to my sharing his view of its cause, even though I know that this is false; the comic, from my rejection of his view to rejection of the pain which is its effect, even though I know that this is real...; it has made us creatures of different, indeed contrary worlds, so unlike that I take pleasure in his pain. (Olson, 18)

As Olson has pointed out, this story calls into question every urge and desire behind comedic

⁹ Hammond also recounts a film Punch and Judy (1906), where the "marionettes become human and attack the puppeteer" (Hammond, 90). There is another connection to the comedic violence of the past in The Magic Lantern, which presents characters from the *Commedia* tradition, but surprisingly their appearance is strictly for their costumes and not for their potential as instigators of comedic violence.

violence. The cruelty becomes very apparent in that we see that every protection in such scenes is for the audience; we know that the stakes are not high or real, and this protects us from being concerned. Ultimately, the concern is for ourselves rather than the victim. We want to think that our laughter is not cruel, but we do nonetheless, as Olson points out, want to laugh at characters' pain. We take and enjoy our advantage of knowledge over them and, fully cognisant of their fate, laugh like gods as our victims absurdly (to our eyes alone) fret and worry about the doom they perceive.

Olson notes a similar god-like state for audiences of comedy: "It involves achieving a state of mind in which we can view human frailties with smiling indulgence" (Olson, 40). However, behind such god-like positions there is a much less benign view much more in accord with a reference to Hobbes made by Olson: "Hobbes, [has a]... view of laughter as "sudden glory" - that is, sudden rejoicing in one's superiority to another" (Olson, 6). Hobbes' view is behind Eradicating Aunty in that the film celebrates the audience's superiority over the oppressive forces of relatives and religion. The use of popularly hated victims is a standard tactic and goal of comedy and is particularly effective for moments of comedic violence because it achieves a further removal of concern for the viewers.

Mack Sennett

This removal of concern can be more completely achieved through the creation of an entirely separate comic world. The films of Mack Sennett introduced the very defined comic world of American slapstick. The Keystone world is vicious, but unthreateningly so. In a film like Astray from the Steerage (approx. 1917) a man can be strangled and smashed in the face twice and then thrown in a closet but when he exits the closet he does not come out bruised and bleeding but wanders around like a stunned drunk. There is no painful result to the violence; it is separated from emotional reaction and leaves the character with the stunned

comic imperviousness usually reserved for the drunk. Mast denotes this distinction well:

No human body could possibly bear the physical torture of the Keystone world. And yet we have absolutely no fear for the health and safety of the Keystone clowns (this despite the fact that four people once died filming a Keystone short!) because we don't think of the Sennett people as human bodies but as machines - which might break but can always be fixed or replaced. (Mast, 50)

There is, of course, a performative thrill associated with watching the incredible stunts and action of the silent clowns, for we know and can tell that the bulk of the physical work is done without trick photography or other such protections. However, there is nearly always, with a few very notable exceptions, the assurance when watching a film that the actors have survived, and without serious disfigurement.

Furthering the lack of concern for the comic butts is the fact that the Keystone films generally avoided an audience's identification with the characters, "Keystone clowns were bodies, not brains" (Mast, 51). Mast points out that this simplification has implications for the audience's relationship to such characters: "They were physical types, not three-dimensional beings; externalised personages with funny costumes and makeup, not internalised hearts, brains, and souls. The acting style in the Keystones - demonstrative, excessive, ridiculous burlesques of human attitudes and emotions - further reduced men and women to dolls and dummies" (Mast, 50). Thus the stakes of moments of comedic violence are removed and the action becomes one which is appreciated intellectually (with an emotional removal) and therefore comically by the audience. This removal or absence of concern in the Keystone films points to Elder Olson's focus in The Theory of Comedy:

Comedy removes concern by showing that it was absurd to think that there was ground for it. Tragedy endows with worth; comedy takes the worth away. Tragedy exhibits life as directed to important ends; comedy as either not directed to such ends, or unlikely to achieve them. If we call action of the latter sort *valueless*, we may define comedy as an imitation of valueless action, in language, performed and not narrated, effecting a *Katastasis* of concern through the absurd. (Olson, 36)

Olson's *Katastasis* is the key to the unconcerned laughter of most slapstick comedy.

This *Katastasis* is present in much of the comedic violence of Sennett's films. While much of the absurdity and valuelessness of which Olson speaks is achieved by the previously noted two-dimensionality of the characters of these films, the violence itself is instrumental in securing this valuelessness. This is because, in the Sennett world of comedy, violence has a completely different set of results than in the real world. His Bread and Butter (approx. 1917) displays some of these different rules, with its shoot-out where Ben Turpin's character shoots another and misses, even though it looks as if he did not miss, and then misses again and again from a very close range. It is as if the guns in Sennett's world can only make smoke. While it is certainly possible that some of the inept characters of Sennett's films would incorrectly load their guns, the ultimate reality for the characters of the films, whether they know it or not, is that guns are far more frightening than dangerous. Mast notes how moments such as these end up establishing their own logic:

Sennett put puppets into a puppet world. He endowed this world with a comic life by making it a completely enclosed universe with its own laws of nature, bearing little relationship to the real world of nature or actual human life. This separate, "unnatural" universe also produced the detachment that comedy requires, for the audience perceives that mortality and injury are absent from such a world and that bullets, knives, collisions, and falls can neither hurt nor kill. (Mast, 50)

While the characters of the Sennett world are rarely seriously hurt, the comedic violence of the films does nonetheless depend upon pain for its punchlines more often than not. Thus, while the shells which a destroyer shoots at the submarine in Submarine Plot (1915) never explode or seriously damage the submarine, they do puncture the walls of the submarine in order to poke Syd Chaplin in the backside. The comic reaction is achieved through the poke in the behind, which hurts, but does not wound. The pain is always fleeting.

In addition to the effects of character and violence in the Keystone films, the shooting style of the films helps to delineate this unique comic world: "Tricks with camera speed, with pace and rhythm further diminish the impression of reality and increase the sense of a surreal

netherworld. People cannot move in reality the way they move in Keystones” (Mast, 52).

Thus the comic world of Sennett’s films is safely removed from that of the audience in a way which provides further moral allowance for even the most vicious of violent comedy.

Fatty Arbuckle

The films of Fatty Arbuckle provide a route to further defining the comic world of silent film comedy. This is a world which revels in hyperbolic extremes like those found in Fatty and Mabel Adrift (1916) where the villain chews dynamite, drinks gasoline and has a business card which reads, “Brutus Bombastic: Abductions, Robberies, Murders: Lowest Rates - Best of References”. This is a world which can be partly defined by a verbal humour where the extremes of exaggerated description are made real to comic effect.

Brutus Bombastic, however, is obviously meant to be an exceptional individual and so does not offer insight except into the possible extremes of the comic world . Much more revealing are the actions of the protagonists of these films, and as with the Sennett films the key to the pain and damage resulting from the violence of these worlds is that it is fleeting. So, when in The Knockout someone is hit by a brick in a huge melee the camera cuts to a close-up of the victim going “owww” rather than displaying any serious damage. The violence does not create any wounds; rather it provokes an impossibly fleeting, almost child-like reaction from the character.

The effects of guns are most revealing of a physical world different from our own. In Out West (1918) Fatty is shot three times and his reaction is simply to hold his backside and, like the previous victim, silently mouth “Owww”. Later, when Indians shoot numerous arrows into his backside, he is again able to walk away. Similarly, in a shoot-out in the same film Buster Keaton and a bandit repeatedly shoot each other in the backside (with a seemingly infinite supply of bullets), and it seems as if the bullets provide only a sharp sting. Guns

provide a simple sharp shock to the victims, one which seems equal in effect to the harmless but shocking sound of a gun. Indeed, it often seems that the prime effect and use of guns is their huge bursts of smoke, and the sound which the smoke encourages us to imagine.

Guns, however, are capable of killing villains, as the aforementioned shoot-out between Keaton and the bandit proves when it ends with the bandit's death.¹⁰ One can only imagine that the reason for his death lies in the number of hits that he received, despite how close that number must be to the number of hits received by the unscathed Keaton. Thus, the result of most of the violence lends the protagonists an imperviousness. Mast notes that this imperviousness is part of the unique logic of the comic world: "Although the events and characters of a comedy might seem improbable in relation to reality, they must seem probable, lifelike, and "real" in relation to one another" (Mast, 26), and indeed they do. While there is a pleasure and humour which arises from the recognition of the impossibility of the imperviousness and of the coincidences which make the lives of these characters so humorous, these impossibilities do sustain a logic which allows the moments of violence to have a believability which can provide not only excitement but also amoral safety for an audience.

This imperviousness allows for the inclusion of the spectacular without risking any of the characters in the films, as in The Surf Girl (1916) when, during a battle, a man is kicked off a Ferris wheel. We see him fall but not land and then later we see him being pulled out of the nearby sand. Similarly the imperviousness allows characters to engage in acts of seeming unconcerned heroics, as when a lassoed Fatty in The Knockout spins his captors around on the rope and then jumps off a pier with them trailing behind. Fatty, we know, will survive unharmed, while the villains, we imagine, will suffer for their actions. Thus Fatty's jump is

¹⁰ Guns also kill the occasional secondary character, as in The General when a sniper kills off a cannon's crew, one by one. However, these deaths occur in a war, a situation which stretches the rules of comedy.

an act which assumes, and therefore declares as a constant, Fatty's imperviousness.

As well, the imperviousness can be recognised and mocked within the films which create it, such as in Out West, when a villain who is bothering a woman has a dozen bottles broken over his head and, when this provokes no reaction, is ineffectually shot four times and is finally tickled into submission. While this business plays upon the mythical toughness of the cowboy it also can not help but mock the aforementioned imperviousness of characters and suggest, through the effectiveness of the tickling, that it is all an act. Which, of course, it is.

Particularly important in removing the audience's concerns for these characters are the faces of the protagonists when they are the victims of violence. Their "Owww" expressions provoke sympathetic winces but also provide the release from any real concern. Bergson notes that "the comic character is often one with whom, to begin with, our mind, or rather our body, sympathises" (Bergson, 186). Thus, sympathising with the "Owww" expression, we know the characters have been hurt, but that they will also be all right soon enough.

Often the reactions of characters are avoided, as in a moment in Out West where a shack containing a villain is pushed off a cliff and is seen to burst into splinters with no sign of the villain. The result of the action urges us to forget our concern for the villain, because it is not necessary. Olson defines the rules which govern all these acts of comedic violence:

"Comedy imitates an action which it makes a matter for levity" (Olson, 36). The moments of violence all have stakes to ensure excitement and interest, but the stakes are kept within mockable extremes which directs the audience to forget the imagined "real" pain of these events, as they are taking place in a special world. This is a world which, as Bergson suggests, urges us to perceive things without thinking logically, as if they were a game or dream (Bergson, 186). Bergson asserts that this world enables the audience "to indulge in play" (Bergson, 186). The audience, like the performers, gets to pretend that what they

witness is real, and in that, they are players as much as the actors on screen.

Charlie Chaplin

For numerous reasons, Charlie Chaplin must be the central focus of any study of comedic violence in drama. His work spans decades of both theatrical and cinematic comedy. As well, he is the clearest link between the British Music Hall tradition (the American equivalent is vaudeville) and silent film comedy and managed to work with many of the great names of both media.¹¹ Finally, his body of work also crosses between silent and sound film comedy.

Perhaps the most important issue when examining the film comedy of Charlie Chaplin and his contemporaries is the effect their recurring characters have on our consumption of their material. Mast points out how important these characters were to these films: “Buster, Charlie, Harold, and Harry were heightened essences, archetypes of certain kinds of human behaviour. The actions of their films focus exclusively on the archetypes’ reactions to metaphoric situations” (Mast, 203). Dan Kamin feels that this is integral to the freedom these comedies enjoyed: “Since most of the characters share the same cardboard quality, no particular moral judgements are made” (Kamin, 57). The shallow depiction of most of the characters (particularly the butts of the violence) allows for a moral freedom in the comedy, because there is little which suggests that these characters should be taken seriously.

Mast also notes, however, that the protagonists of these films are not always so easily written off as types: “Chaplin and Keaton, despite the comedy, deliberately maintained an element of believability and sense about themselves and their actions” (Mast, 153). The separation that exists here between the depth of the main characters versus the two-dimensionality of their comic butts is essential to the freedom that allows these characters to be so comedically vicious towards the “lesser” characters. Mast also asserts that these

¹¹ Staveacre provides a concrete tracing of slapstick film’s roots in Slapstick: The Illustrated Story of Knockabout Comedy, London: Angus and Robertson, 1987.

protagonists were whole human beings: “Charles Chaplin and Buster Keaton revealed a soul, a mind, and a brain within the body” (Mast, 61). This soul and wholeness also aids the comedy, because it encourages the audience’s identification with these characters and this is the essential difference between the protagonists and the other characters.

The believability and human complexity of the Tramp allows us to laugh with him and to commiserate with the comedy of his life. In addition, as Mast notes, “Even when Charlie gets sad (and we feel sad with him), we still remain in the region of the comic” (Mast, 15). This is partially due to the “comic climate” of the film which, as Mast notes, “assures us that we will not feel sad for long” (Mast, 15) (usually through a quick appeasement or a comic alleviation of any sadness). The effects of the comic climate are important for the scenes of comedic violence. The “climate” or comic world of Chaplin’s films ensures that if we do see pain in the scenes of comedic violence, we do not see it for long. And, pointedly, there are no lengthy pain scenes except for those where the character is protected from pain, as with drunkenness – something which Chaplin made frequent use of, much in the style of his predecessor Max Linder. Linder’s film Max et la QuinQuin (1911) provides an excellent example: Max is thrown around, thrown down some stairs, spun over someone’s head and out a window (though here he is obviously a dummy and some of the comedy arises from this obviously unreal manipulation of a body). He is able, or more likely we are able, to endure all of this punishment because he is drunk and therefore, in the comic world, impervious. The pain felt by the characters of these films is brief and fleeting (the characters quickly return to normal) and, therefore, much easier to dismiss.

The emotional or human side of Chaplin provides what Mast considers the major problem with Bergson’s views on emotion and comedy;

Bergson insists on denying emotion a place in his comic universe. Of course, his subject is *not* comedy (his title is “Laughter”). But his refusal to show how

“laughter” and “comedy” interrelate dooms him to fail at explaining the comic mysteries of a Chaplin or a Shakespeare, whose comedy includes much that is not laughable. (Mast, 4)

Bergson’s view of laughter, while extremely helpful in any analysis of comic business, does fall short in any analysis of character. But this suggests an important point of understanding for this study of violent comedy: comedic violence is most often a small or short moment with a character that can be broken down into gag reflexes and, importantly for this chapter, is heavily coded within the gag so that essentially the gag has its own logic. This logic at times defies or ignores the reality which one might expect these “real” characters to inhabit.

Durgnat provides a useful understanding of the comic world which these “real” characters inhabit: “In crazy comedy, whether a Mack Sennett farce or a Tom-and-Jerry cartoon, a general oddity of appearance and gesture, precedes, and provides a comic context for, action in which the melodramatic tussles with the derisive and makes the most of a highly implausible immunity from consequences” (Durgnat, 44). Thus, in The Idle Class (1921), when a golfer starts fighting a golfer whom Charlie has duped and then befriended, and Charlie carries on walking unconcerned, the strange appearance of the three men, particularly the two fighting, frees us from concern, and judgement. The bizarre and heightened appearance of the fighting men echoes the two-dimensionality of their characters, and ensures our safely coded enjoyment of their battle. Essentially, we echo Charlie’s lack of concern for the two men.

Raoul Sobel suggests that Chaplin’s costume has a large impact on our interpretation of his actions, “Emotions which would have appeared sinister or unpleasant in a character dressed normally were now not only liberated through the absurdity of Chaplin’s garb, but were actually made acceptable by it” (Sobel and Francis, 169). Sobel ignores the ways in which Charlie’s costume is so quickly accommodated in the viewer’s mind (especially over

several films), and how pathetically Chaplin inhabits it. The costume's impact on the comedy of the films is primarily the warm reception and assumptions it provokes for the Tramp.

The oddity of appearance can also apply to some oddities of situation, as when in The Kid (1921) the young boy uses a hammer on the orphanage owner's head. The size of the hammer in comparison to the boy, and the difference in size between the two opponents, adds an oddity to the scene which makes it comic. As well, the smaller boy, and this is equally applicable to the diminutive Tramp, gains underdog sympathy when he takes on a larger opponent. With the audience's sympathies behind him, there is no moral doubt inhibiting an audience from finding the violence comic.

Despite Mast's assertion that Chaplin employed no cinematic tricks (Mast, 66) (an attribute more justly applied to Keaton's long shots), his films have plenty, and some very basic ones which are essential to our amoral enjoyment of his comedic violence. Kamin illustrates the impact of the under-cranking which was used, it seems, by all but Keaton, "It also serves to make the knockabout comedy - essentially a comedy of force and pain - less "real", and hence comfortably removed from life. No one ever seems to get hurt in these films, though exaggerated comic expression of pain and discomfort accompany the falls, blows, and burns which the comics sustain" (Kamin, 22). At times, it even adds to the effects of the violence, as in Triple Trouble (1915) where a butler unknowingly dusts and sets off a tiny explosive which prompts him to run around dusting at high speed. Thus his fear, expressed in his unrealistic movement, is made comic.

Walter Kerr, in The Silent Clowns, also reminds us that the silent film comedies were meant to be shown sped up to approximately sound speed. Both of these attributes of the silent comedies, as Kamin suggests, remove a layer of reality from the violence of these films,

and thus make them all the more open for comedic interpretation. The failure of some of the regular speed slapstick in The Great Dictator supports Kerr's point.

Kerr asserts that there was a similar effect caused by the impact of silence in these comedies: "The fantasy of silence suspended our obligation to feel, whenever we wished to suspend it. The look of life remained; the sensations associated with it disappeared. We were freed to stare at sights we might, but shouldn't, enjoy without penalty, without any unpleasant exercise of our own sympathies or any concern for the performer's well being" (Kerr, 27-28). Thus, suggests Kerr, a physical reality of violence is communicated, but left unfelt: "A comedian could be shot in the seat of the pants and never be wounded. The comedian taking the shot presumably felt it; he jumped. But we did not feel him feeling the shot; we simply laughed and asked no questions when he came down intact and begging for more" (Kerr, 27). However, in Kerr's description of the woundless jumping clown, it seems clear that the silence is only a part of the coding which encourages us to view the action less seriously. While Kerr suggests that "the camera had given us reality. Silence took it away again" (Kerr, 26), there is, as we have previously pointed out, much that is unreal in what the camera has captured.

Kerr also notes that in reality the movies, while filmed without sound, would not have been projected without sound: "If one clown hit another on the head with a mallet he knew that the accompanying sound heard in the theatre would not be literal. The theatre organist's screech when the mallet struck in a silent film was - in spite of the camera's visual reality - much nearer the piercing harmonic stab heard in animated cartoons today" (Kerr, 34). Curiously, Kerr attributes the unrealities of the performances of the comedians to the demands laid down by the limitations of the medium:

Because silence and its blood brother, music, had destroyed the literalness of the effect, the clown did not have to be literal in creating it. He was liberated by the two

formalities that guaranteed him immunity to fantasise in his own way - adopting extravagant positions, executing majestically insane windups, striking as though his colleague's head offered the resistance of Vulcan's forge. (Kerr, 34)

Kerr's view, however, ignores all the theatrical traditions which preceded silent film and informed its every move. The exaggeration is a part of the coding and humour of the comedy; the silence and sound effects merely enhance it.¹²

Achieving this exaggeration can be done in a number of ways, but always its effects are to push the situation beyond the real. Kamin illustrates this with the moment from The Cure (1917) where Charlie is slamming Eric Campbell's broken foot in a revolving door: "The very exaggeration of the foot in its huge bandage and the frequency of assaults upon it serve to make the foot a comic object and prevent the viewer from painfully identifying with Eric's plight" (Kamin, 43). And as Sobel notes, the impact of the artistry of the comic business nearly always works away from reality: "It is all done with panache and agility and the victims help to soften the violence by reacting so unrealistically that no-one could ever imagine them to be really hurt" (Sobel, 104). Durnat, quoting James Agee, confirms how important and extreme the reactions of the comic butts could be: "When a silent comedian got hit on the head[...]he gave us a... vision for loss of consciousness. In other words he gave us a poem, a kind of poem, moreover, that everybody understands"¹³ (Durnat, 73). The grimaces, twitches and movements of the silent film comedian who has just taken a hit are bizarre and extreme but, as Agee and Durnat point out, they make extreme, and therefore comic, sense.

Additional to all these methods of securing the comic interpretation of violent gags is the comic application of rhythm. Kamin notes how rhythm is used for punctuating many of

¹² Kerr's assertion that it is sound and its inherent realism which makes the deaths of the scientists in The Great Dictator fatal similarly ignores the huge difference in subject matter and tone in that film from those of the early silent period. He would be wrong in suggesting that the changes in the comedy found in The Great Dictator and Monsieur Verdoux from Chaplin's early comedy are attributable to the demands of the changing medium.

¹³ Durnat is quoting from Agee on Films: Vol. I, Reviews and Comments. Beacon Press, 1964.

Chaplin's gags, and adds that "dance and other graceful movement reveals in the films a spirit of play that softens his aggressive and sexual impulses" (Kamin, 82-4, 91). Such a rhythm can be found in Shanghaied (1915) where Charlie, in graceful, repeated movements, hits a succession of men on the head with a mallet when they are brought to be shanghaied. The rhythm sets up an expectation that is satisfying when it is maintained, and yet absurd and therefore funny in its continuance and repetition. Thus a brutal side of life is made comic.

The fantastical can also ensure a lack of concern and therefore a freer environment for comedy to arise: "One kind of film comedy deliberately flaunts its impossibility (The Gold Rush [1925], most of Mack Sennett), exuberantly reducing reality (or elevating it!) to the "worthless". These films are sequences of events that could never possibly happen; in fact, the artist wishes us to take them as such" (Mast, 14). Numerous scenes in the cabin from The Gold Rush come to mind, but this effect can be found in smaller moments of elevated reality such as those in the fight sequence of The Kid where the ridiculous looking bully's punches knock holes in brick walls and bend lamp posts. The impossibility of the action elevates the bully's threatening presence into the unreal, and ensures a comic view of Charlie's fear of him.¹⁴

On top of all these comedy-enabling tactics there is performance itself, and many of these tactics serve to remind us of that fact: "The representation of a cruel act on the stage is at least two, and probably three, removes from reality.... Because we know that it isn't real, we are enabled to dissolve in laughter. For we know full well that after the final curtain there will be no welts on the back, no bruises on the buttocks..." (Elmer M. Blistein, 64-5). Thus in The Adventurer (1917) when Charlie is shot with a rifle we are unconcerned for his well being. In fact, we assume that he is okay and wait in anticipation as he tricks the cop who shot him

¹⁴ Here this kind of violence is fantastical and comic, whereas in films like Terminator 2, similar results from the punches of the two terminators are frightening because of the fact that these androids do not comically disrupt reality but rather import a new reality into the otherwise contemporary world.

and kick the cop in the backside when he assumes that Charlie is dead.¹⁵

Kerr goes on to discuss the comedians as a sort of shadowy people from waking dreams (Kerr, 28). This notion of a sort of ghostly half presence is flaky at best and avoids the simple fact that the comedian is part of a very coded representation. Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik are much closer to the mark with their observations. "There is a butt, a target of aggression, involved in all humour, despite the variations in its structure of address. That target is, to use Freud's term, "reality" itself" (Neale and Krutnik, 75). This attack on reality is essential to the comedic violence of Chaplin's early films and, as we have noted previously, it sets up a form of Jean Alter-like double vision: "Double perspective exists when the reader or the spectator is simultaneously aware of a feeling of identification with a fictional character and of a feeling of detachment from this character on the side of the author or director" (Claudia Clausius, 3). Here, as with Tillis' similar (though differently motivated) double vision for puppets, the director (and performer) codes the action so that it is felt, but unfeared, so that the audience may shift between the reality and the extreme mirror of the unreality.

Blistein partially supports the arguments for double vision with his belief that we can never forget that we are watching a representation:

When we laugh at stage or screen representations of violence, cruelty, brutality or death, we are probably laughing at the representations of the acts, not the acts themselves; when we laugh at practical jokes that really cause pain, we take time to gasp in horror. This time that we take, unconsciously to be sure, enables us to ascertain that the pain does not exceed the stated limits: hurt, but not maim; abuse, but not kill. (Blistein, 64)

Interestingly this type of humour is often problematised when it appears in a film. The supposed realism of film (its photographic value) is present but, as Blistein states, as realistic as it is, it is still never real. However, Blistein's suggestions deny the possibility of an Alter-

¹⁵ As we have noted earlier in discussions of the Keystone films, bullets were rarely fatal: "During Mack Sennett's reign, millions of cartridges must have been fired as comedians whipped out revolvers and let fly in all directions. No bullet ever dropped a clown. These men were immortal" (Kerr, 28).

like shift between the two perspectives: “Do we willingly suspend disbelief for the time that it takes for us to smile, or laugh? I doubt it. We smile or laugh because disbelief is not suspended. We know we are laughing at the unreal, not the real. We are the sophisticated, so we laugh. The unsophisticated might give forth a shriek of horror” (Blistein, 51).

If Blistein’s suggestion is true, then it calls into question why any semblance of reality is necessary. Douglas Riblet’s comments on the issue further complicate Blistein’s suggestion: “Though a certain element of fantasy and unreality was essential to achieve a comic distance, a certain level of clearly expressed pain was also essential to the dark comic edge of these films” (Riblet, 173). Riblet’s “clearly expressed pain” leans towards a realism which problematises Blistein’s suggestions. It seems that while ultimately we never forget that we are watching a representation, we do allow ourselves to temporarily (or partially) believe in it. The ultimate awareness provides an always present safety net with which to believe in the representations.

This question of belief is part of an age old debate on the effects and purposes of dramatic art. With regard to comedic violence, it is worth considering Durgnat’s suggestion that children will generally feel concern for the victims of comedic violence: “It’s their parents who reassure them that “they’re only pretending”, that it’s a game, that laughter is the right, robust reaction” (Durgnat, 25). Pointedly, Durgnat is here talking about circus clowns, and though young children are sophisticated consumers of television and film, stories of a child being overly concerned about an incident on stage are common. Theatre, of course, carries with it the impact of the live event happening to a real and present person, something much more difficult to dismiss for the unsophisticated viewer. The difference in a child’s reception of stage and screen is also attributable to, and perhaps proof of, the careful and extremely effective coding of film and television. One need only think of the irritating though

undeniable effects of a tear-jerking Bell ad to acknowledge the affecting manipulation available in film and television.

This comic coding is what allows us to laugh when in A Day's Pleasure Chaplin beats and kicks and punches a man who is seasick. This scene, however, pushes against the limits of comic brutality when it ends with the man hunched over, looking as though he will vomit, while Charlie punches up and into his abdomen. As comically as this scene may be coded, the aggression is still very important to the pleasure of the comedy of the scene. Durgnat suggests this with his comment that "what turns aggression into comedy is what turns a blow into a tickle; it feints an attack, but it is also a mock attack" (Durgnat, 37). This brutality, of course, prompted concern in some circles as is evident here in a 1914 review of The Property Man (1914) in "Moving Picture World": "Some of the funniest things in this picture are too vulgar to describe.... There is some brutality in this picture and we can't help feeling that this is reprehensible. What human being can see an old man kicked in the face and count it fun" (Sobel, 140). Indeed, the scene with the old man in The Property Man is another very brutal moment in Chaplin's comedies (it is discussed in a Chapter Three). But obviously, given Chaplin's popularity, he was providing something which audiences enjoyed and, most importantly, wanted.¹⁶ Sobel notes that this viciousness was also part of Burlesque at the time: "One of its [Burlesque shows] worst aspects was its increasing cruelty. Grotesque, misshapen creatures were used as the butts of low comedians, and even thrown about the stage, in much the same way as was happening in the circus" (Sobel, 104). He later tells of venues hiring bad performers for the purpose of being pelted off stage with vegetables (Sobel, 104). Obviously the cruelty of the silent films was of its time.

Durgnat, like many others previously quoted, feels that this laughter can not help but be

¹⁶ That same year he received one million votes for the best male comedian in "Motion Picture Magazine" (Sobel, 146).

aggressive:

Laughter is aggressive in the sense that it is directed at others (but we may also feel them to resemble ourselves), in that it is directed against assumptions..., in that it is irresponsible (but then this also diminishes its aggressive seriousness), and in that it comports a dramatic deflation (which also minimises the damage done). [Durgnat's parentheses]. (Durgnat, 37)

As Durgnat suggests, laughter, in its most basic form, is inescapably aggressive. His later comments, however, suggest that it need not necessarily be cruel in content: "Aggressiveness is the catalyst of humour rather than its content. Even where aggressiveness is the mainspring, it is, usually perhaps, only a means to an end, the end of sudden pleasure, and a relief of one's own tension" (Durgnat, 37). Thus the laughter is not a celebration of the cruel. Kerr confirms this with his comments on cruelty in silent film comedies:

To say that the conduct is heartless is not to say that it is cruel. Not quite. There was an unspoken law of silent comedy under which no one ever got hurt. When someone is seen to be hurt, the image is immediately false and unattractive, a violation of the form's promise. These comedies are pre-emotional; we are never to be disturbed or even concerned. (Kerr, 63)

This law appeals to our intellect and allows us a distance which permits an uninhibited participation in the ideas of the comedy: "Our intellect toys with the ideas presented and our emotions derive comfort and relaxation from the playing" (Clausius, 35). Thus, carefully coded comedy allows us to enjoy another's suffering. Kerr, here, illustrates the differing effects of violence in comedies, and the pleasure they may offer:

When, in an early Keystone comedy, Chaplin kicks Mack Swain in the stomach, it isn't particularly funny. When, in a later feature-length film called The Pilgrim, he kicks a small boy in the stomach, it is marvellously funny. Both acts are outrageous, in the original Sennett manner. If anything, the second is a great deal more outrageous - closer to our private but suppressed fantasies of dealing with children - than the first. But the second is funny for a reason that goes deeper than the bizarre physicality of the act. Chaplin has taken great pains earlier in the film to make us thoroughly detest the little monster, to make certain that we shall be immensely gratified when he gets exactly what is coming to him. We not only laugh at the deed, we applaud it. Chaplin has justified whatever is fantastic about the gesture, made it conform to an emotional reality. Violence has been rooted in sanity. (Kerr, 74)

In a perfectly illustrated example of comic coding, Kerr points to these narratives creating a demand for comic violence, and then gratifying it, “We not only laugh at the deed, we applaud it”.

Despite Kerr and Clausius’ comments (and Durnat’s earlier comments about training children to laugh at comedic violence), Kerr’s example confirms a suggestion of Durnat’s that this enjoyment of another’s suffering is natural and that our concern is false: “In the presence of genuine suffering we have been trained, and have trained ourselves, to feel either compassion or guilt, or both, and, even in apathy, respect. So we can’t laugh at suffering except in the absurd-mild forms of slipping-on-a-banana-skin or of sick jokes” (Durnat, 25). As point of proof, Durnat relates a story of a group of people from a non-western country laughing at the real foaming mouth and violent convulsions of a dying old man (Durnat, 25). His comments suggest that our laughter at suffering is natural, and that our comic coding frees the natural impulse which our society has so carefully suppressed.

That comic coding is always driven by a moral judgement with which it assumes the audience will agree: “Comedy must and does make value judgements. It emphasises reality, not illusion; truth, not falsehood; intellect, not emotion” (Blistein, 129). Durnat supports this seeming contradiction of comedy’s separation from reality: “I’ve never known an audience to laugh at pain. It often feels intense moral sadism when a villain comes to a well-merited comeuppance; but it doesn’t laugh, and its sadism is at least moral” (Durnat, 32). Thus, it is only the moral limits of comedy which are a transposition of our reality. If we support or agree with the moral comic coding we may confirm Durnat’s assertion that “we are *also*, on a sometimes conscious, sometimes repressed, level, as callous, saturnine and base as our jokes suggest we are” (Durnat, 40).

Of course, part of this moral coding is revealed in the way violence is depicted

uncomically in a comic world. The Circus (1928) provides several examples. In this film the circus owner beats his daughter in an uncomic way. The seriousness is conveyed in the straight-ahead approach (with no comic coding), the long, uninterrupted monotony of the beating, and in the pity-provoking reactions of the daughter. Charlie then steps in and beats the father in a serious way and, as a token of the beating's seriousness, we later see the father with an extremely realistic swollen black eye - this in contrast to a scene from The Fireman (1916) where Charlie hits himself and later Eric Campbell with a huge axe, and neither of the men suffers any wounds. A similar moment of serious violence occurs in The Vagabond (1916). In the film a young woman is being hit on the back and slapped by a huge, severe-looking man. As well, the man has a whip in his hand, which, although unused in the scene, maintains a constant fear (for the audience) of a more severe beating. As in the scene at the circus, Charlie reacts in a horrified way, essentially telling the audience how to experience the violence. Later, the big man beats Charlie in an identical way, but the scene is made comic by Charlie's fast, furtive reactions, and his falling in a barrel of water - a sure route to comedy. The primary difference between the scenes is that the audience feels that Charlie could escape the brute, whereas the woman could not. Later still, the man returns to beat the woman, but this time he uses the whip. It seems that once the beating has been made comic by its application to Charlie, the stakes have to be raised in order to return it to seriousness and provoke horrified concern from the audience, so the whip is used and the beating is lengthy. It should be noted that The Vagabond is a particularly melodramatic piece in the Chaplin catalogue (complete with lost children discovered by birthmarks), but it does point to the ways in which serious violence is differentiated from the comic in a comic world.

Chaplin's embrace of sound brought about different films and a different kind of comedy with The Great Dictator (1940) and Monsieur Verdoux (1947). Clausius illustrates the

fundamental difference of this new comedy from that of Chaplin's previous films with the deaths of the two scientists in The Great Dictator;

A man is shot dead and another killed on the sidewalk below; unlike the Sennett characters we know we will not see these people again. Behind the comic business remains the serious depiction of the maniacal leader of a dangerous political party. In the earlier days of film the slapstick tradition took advantage of the primitiveness of the film medium to augment the *fantastic* comic chaos of the film world. Now, however, Chaplin reverts to this tradition in order to characterise the nonsensical, irrational *reality* behind the comic events. Where earlier comedy granted comic immunity to the characters by making them immortal within the film, now the comedy points up human frailty and vulnerability. (Clausius, 128-9)

Despite the sad pessimism of much of the comedy of these films, they still possess the usual slapstick comedic violence. One example is the scene in The Great Dictator where the barber fights a storm-trooper who had been painting "Jew" on his store-front window. The fight, despite its serious historical roots, quickly turns to a typical slapstick battle of thrown paint and blows on the head delivered by a frying-pan, complete with amplified sound effect.

There is a curious tone found in The Great Dictator's mix of historically based violent comedy with more traditional slapstick, and the delight of the taboo is present in many of these battles: "Laughter is not, simply, derisive, towards other human beings, or one's own values; it is also a gurgle of relief, of triumph, at breaking a tabu (but with the approbation of others - that is, not breaking a tabu), at finding one's weaknesses, humiliations and indignities (the point of so many jokes), shared" (Durgnat, 37). The fight with the storm-trooper and so many of the other moments of comedic violence in The Great Dictator, revel in this breach of tone and the release it provides. The Great Dictator delights in the injection of the unsafe comic world into the extremely serious melodrama of the recent world.¹⁷ The comic world of the film is one of melodramatic absurdity with the seriousness of the situations anxious to be

¹⁷ Ernst Lubitsch's To Be or Not to Be (1942), and Mel Brooks' 1983 remake of the film mine similar territory as that of The Great Dictator. In one scene from the remake a clown who is helping some Jews escape through an audience of Nazis labels some of the Gestapo with stars, says "Juden", and then pulls out a toy gun and shoots at them. A Nazi flag rolls out of the barrel of the gun when its trigger is pulled.

burst by the impropriety of comic intrusion. This is the comic environment of the film: a curious world defined perhaps no more simply than in the amusing similarity of the world's two most iconic moustaches.

Monsieur Verdoux presents a similarly delicately balanced comic world. Mast states the issues raised by the film: "What is the relationship between ends and means? What is the relationship between human morality and animal survival? Is morality a function of character or of action, wish or deed? Is moral virtue possible in an immoral world?" (Mast, 118). In this film, more than any of his others, the comedy centres around the audience's morality, and the comedic violence is driven by it. Mast states of Verdoux's encounter with the ex-prisoner that "his moral system will not permit him to murder this girl" (Mast, 120); but it is far more likely the audience's moral system which inhibits the action.

The film is constantly testing and challenging the moral system of the audience and so it presents a comic world which is always in danger of collapsing. But the film makes comedy of this near collapse with its several glances at the audience (examined in chapter six). While Clausius states that comic detachment "consists in a kind of transcendence rather than a removal or rejection" (34), the comic world of Monsieur Verdoux forbids that kind of transcendence because it acknowledges and probes, rather than protects, the audience with its comic take on a real world.

The comedy of this film presented a very different relationship between Chaplin and his audience from that of his other films, and it was not a popular one (though this seems to have more to do with his final anti-war speech than with the overall comedy of the film). Chaplin ascribes this change to the war (this was his first film after the war): "I could hardly come on again [after the war] in baggy pants, pretending that life is still all Santa Claus" (Theodore

Huff, 296).¹⁸ And this points to another change in his comic world: the Tramp is gone.

Along with most of the other codifiers of his previous films, the moustache, the costume and the physicality are replaced by a “realistic” and morally difficult protagonist. The audience can no longer gage the morality of the protagonist with ease. His every move challenges the audience rather than reassures it.

Monsieur Verdoux’s comedy forces a consideration of its own comic world and the societal motivations which create it:

For whatever gentle thing our culture may make out of us, we are each born with the brain and nervous system of a timid yet belligerent savage, and we achieve that gentility not without the checking of many little continual impulses of wrath and retaliation. These may be imagined to become dammed up in the course of time, into a great reservoir of abstract hostility in the parts of our brain that are not conscious, and this reservoir can be tapped at any moment by anyone who will offer us an opportunity to pick on a fellow savage with propriety and no danger. And humour, because it is upon its negative side playful, and upon its positive side concealed and secondary and not too straightly spoken, offers such an opportunity in a most engaging form. (Max Eastman, 32)

Chaplin’s comic direct address in Monsieur Verdoux (explored in detail in Chapter Six) pokes holes in the positive concealment he used to provide, in order to leave the negative sides of comedic violence embarrassingly exposed.

Buster Keaton

Buster Keaton’s films were much less violent than those of his predecessors. He presents a comic world which is very much in keeping with the rules which governed the comic world of Chaplin’s silents. What differentiates his comic world from those of other silent comedies, more than anything else, is his debatably “expressionless” face (and here he is an interesting link with the iconic influence of Chaplin’s Tramp on the reception of comedy). Keaton noted the effect of his face on his early vaudeville routines with his

¹⁸ There is also a sense that Chaplin feels he has risen above the slapstick of his earlier films, and pointedly when slapstick next appears it is marked by nostalgia in Limelight or all but once performed by children in A King in New York.

parents: “The longer I held it, why, if we got a laugh, the blank pan or the puzzled puss would double it” (Tony Staveacre, 44). Peter Kramer notes that “To transform acts of wilful maliciousness and intense pain into comedy, performers had to signal clearly that their actions were mere make-believe, and constituted highly accomplished athletic routines” (Kramer, 200). Keaton’s face seems to deny this acknowledgement of make-believe. While not nearly as inexpressive as many critics make it out to be, Keaton’s face seems to communicate neither pleasure, humour nor pain [we will come to what it can communicate after the dead pan is dealt with]. Indeed, this lack of communication seems to have been a problem for the audiences of the Keaton family’s early violent comedy, as noted in one newspaper critic’s request to tone down the violence directed at the young Buster in the family act: “There is no doubt that the London audiences’ concern was heightened by the child’s obvious unhappiness. He never smiled, never gave any indication that he might be enjoying himself, and preserved a stony-faced indifference” (Staveacre, 44).

Keaton, with his stoic face (and body), would seem to be Bergson’s comic ideal: “Indifference is its [laughter’s] natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (Bergson, 63). If, as Bergson notes (as well as Frye and Olson), the pity or affection evoked by emotions must be removed for us to laugh, Keaton’s seemingly unemotional face would appear to permit laughter. However, his expression is not to be mistaken for a manipulable, and therefore dangerously ambiguous, neutrality, but more comically, for a confused and, for an audience, confusing emotion; confusing because it is not what we expect of “normal people” in such circumstances. Olson notes how this denial of expectation falls into the realm of the comic: “Emotion is comic when it is the wrong emotion, or there is too much or too little of it, or it is of the wrong quality, or related to the wrong thing” (Olson, 64).

As well, at times there is a disconnection between Keaton's face and his body, "The activity of the body plays in counterpoint to the inactivity of the face" (Mast, 129). This counterpoint is applicable to Keaton's numerous sufferings. There is an almost robotic drive to Keaton's endurance through all his suffering (a loose precursor to The Terminator (1984) and other cyborg films): "Keaton's physical comedy is essentially a synthesis of malleable human flesh and Bergsonian encrusted machine.... Keaton is both machine and man at once" (Mast, 131). And, just as there is often an astonished humour to the unstoppable will of the cyborg, Keaton's physical imperturbability is always funny.

The comedic violence of Keaton's films, however, is often ineffective. In comparison to his incredible stunts, his comedic violence is often obviously faked, and even poorly shot. Keaton stays away from guns and pitchforks, and his comic fights are nearly always settled within two punches. Keaton's character has to be taught how to fight, and even then, he does so without any relish: "That's what that's for" his father says in Steamboat Bill Jr. (1928) after he has taken Keaton's hand, curled it into a fist and made it punch a deck-hand. In many ways, the quickly edited sequence of Keaton entering the diegesis of the film within the film in Sherlock Jr. (1924) is indicative of the purpose of characters like Keaton, and later Ash in Evil Dead II (1986): they are comic sufferers; they have everything thrown at them, they are generally powerless to alter their situation and, most importantly, they can only react and improbably endure. Their comedy arises from their comically improbable endurance and their reactions (or lack of reactions in Keaton's case) to the impossible obstacles which they face.

After Keaton's face is repeatedly punched at high speed by a constable in Reckless Romeo (1917), his face looks fine. This is the standard facial reaction to received violence in Keaton's films. A similar moment is found in The Cameraman (1928) when a policeman

checks Keaton's reflexes to see if he is high. The policeman does all the usual knee taps and, after receiving no reaction from Keaton, belts him over the head with his truncheon. Keaton then kicks him and runs away. Thus Keaton's inhuman imperviousness is shown to have its limits and humour is found when Keaton reacts and comically shocks both the policeman and the audience by defining those limits in a human way. There is also, though, plenty of humour along the way with Keaton's suffering the cop's increasingly brutal tests. Perhaps this is what Keaton was referring to when he separated the audience's reactions to his films and to those of Arbuckle: "The audience laughed *with* him whereas the audience laughs *at* me" (J. P. Lebel, 20). And the audience is right to laugh at Keaton, because he personally carries his imperviousness beyond the bounds of sense and into the comic world of pain. This is perhaps no more simply expressed than in a scene from The Goat (1921) where Keaton sticks a pin into a mannequin and gets no reaction. At this point, Chaplin's tramp would stick it in some passer-by's backside, but Keaton sticks it into himself.

While Keaton's face has limited reactions to comedic violence, his body and the bodies of the other characters in his films do not. When the "Alabama Murderer" punches a man in the warm-up room in Battling Butler (1926), the man does a back flip. This over-reaction is made additionally comic by the nearby observation of the incident by a worried Keaton. This sort of athletically extreme reaction of the body is common to his films. In a scene in Convict 13 (1920) Keaton gets punched and does a series of back-flips. Similarly, later in the same film, when a guard is shot off a wall, he lands and does a ridiculous number of extended leg twitches that remove any real concern for the character.

There are, however, numerous moments of real violence in Keaton's films. In Convict 13 the comedic violence is interspersed with beatings of guards which, because of the sheer number of assailants, appear cruel and therefore real. Similarly, in Battling Butler the beating

which Keaton endures at the conclusion of the film suggests, because of its duration and apparent brutality, a genuine and therefore real suffering that must be taken seriously.

Similarly, when Keaton starts effectively to fight back it is not funny until he gets tired and sloppy (and even then his conviction seems cruel). This fight becomes real through the psychological backgrounds/motivation of the characters:

He and the film therefore deliberately break through the limiting conventions of comedy into the fuller world of naturalistic drama, and the remarkable result is as if an animated cartoon figure had suddenly become a real person, or as if a puppet had come to life. (Daniel Moews, 206-7)

Moews illustrates a change which seems to colour the comic/serious climate of most of Keaton's films: there is a very delicate comic boundary to the violence of this almost comically naturalistic world.

Harry Langdon

Harry Langdon presents a curious comic world with The Strong Man's (1926) depiction of the first World War. Langdon's comedy works against the seriousness of the war in one scene where Langdon, having previously discovered his accuracy is better with a sling-shot than with a gun, shoots at his lone German opponent with his sling-shot. Later he throws onions, which prompts the German to use his tear-gas helmet as protection (similar to the Limburger cheese gag in Chaplin's Shoulder Arms 1918). Here, to provoke the comedy of the situation, it is necessary to reduce the war to a conflict between two uninterested children who would obviously rather be somewhere else. The comical childishness of their attitude and weapons is a belittlement of such conflicts. Mast points out that such commentary is often activated by comedy: "Comic films, because of their "worthlessness" and often deliberately flaunted incredibility, detach the emotion of the spectator from the illusion of the work, leaving the intellect free to perceive the issues of the work" (Mast, 18). This is precisely what is happening in this scene in The Strong Man, where war is revealed to be no

more than a childish conflict with impressive costumes.

An important complication of this comedic view of the war occurs in the film's use of footage of real World War One trench warfare. This usage is of its time and makes one aware of the decorum which seems to have prohibited the combination of real war footage with comedy since television footage of the Vietnam War brought some of the reality of war to the public eye.¹⁹ During Langdon's time, such footage provided high production values, and the shock of the comic interpretation of the extreme situations of these wars.

Langdon's only other significant contribution to a history of comedic violence, since he never fights in his films, is in his standard reaction to moments of violence. Joyce Rheuban provides detail:

Harry's unconventional response to a blow on the head and other conventional kinds of direct physical assault, hostile or sexual, may be a moment of total immobility after which he slowly and gently lowers himself from standing to sitting position or else curls up comfortably into fetal position, as in a brawl in Saturday Afternoon. In this most atypical Mack Sennett free-for-all, Harry is blasted in the ear with an automobile horn, punches himself in the nose, is punched in the nose, is hit squarely on the head with the head of a hammer, is punched squarely on the jaw, and never takes a pratfall. (Rheuban, 42)

Olson's exploration of comedy illustrates the mechanisms at work in Langdon's comic world: "The comic character is *unlike us, insofar as he is comic*, and the misfortunes, insofar as they are comic, either are not grave or are deserved. The comic action, thus, neutralises the emotions of pity and fear to produce *the contrary - of the serious*" (Olson, 37). This difference from the audience is extremely important for the character-driven silent film comedies. The comic world here is defined by Langdon's character and his reactions to the world around him. We are not able to take anything which happens around him seriously, because he is a freak, and because he is a freak, and therefore not like us, we can laugh and shake our heads as he fuddles his way through life. He is an amusing, and therefore

¹⁹ One wonders whether or not the daily horror of television footage of the war brought about this decorum.

temporary, aberration from the logic of our world.

Harold Lloyd

Harold Lloyd's films provide some further understanding of the comic world of the silent film comedies. While most of the comedies avoid any indication of suffering or serious damage to the bodies of those engaged in comedic violence, Lloyd's Speedy (1928) offers a contrary vision. At the conclusion of the enormous and at times brutal battle which concludes Speedy, there is a shot of the "good guys" after the fight, all heavily bandaged and repaired. An inter-title states "the outcome of the fight was eight broken noses, three broken wood legs, two cracked glass eyes...". This is a rare depiction of the consequences of the fights of these films. However, the film, of course, is careful to construct all the suffering comedically, with "broken noses" followed quickly by the damaged inanimate objects of wooden legs and glass eyes. Thus the noses are not to be taken too seriously, given the other elements on the list; and, as well, the image of the men shows them bandaged to the point of near mummification in an exaggeration which, despite the brutality of the fight, seems extreme within the comic world of the film and therefore not to be taken seriously.

Lloyd's personal history needs to be mentioned as part of our understanding of the comic world of his films. It was common knowledge (through a story which he purposely told differently at different times in his life) that Lloyd lost two of his fingers when a real bomb was mistakenly used as a prop during a publicity photo shoot for one of his films. This incident, again as with Keaton, points to the real-life danger inherent in much of this dangerous and violent comedy. People, of course, do die making movies and, as Mast points out, Lloyd's films thrive upon a suspense which does seem enlarged by a sense of real-life danger (160). However, because a scene has been used, we know that Lloyd will not be seriously harmed in the scene. While this is not a comic coding, it is, however, a comic

moral code which affects the film's consumption in a similar way. Until recently a film scene which caused the death or serious injury of a star would never be used - this is an unspoken contract with the mainstream film audience. Thus, as with Keaton, the risks involved (something the film companies always stressed in publicity) add to the excitement and then the comedy of many scenes, without any serious doubts as to the outcome of any violence and danger.

Laurel and Hardy

Laurel and Hardy utilise the comic codings common to silent film comedy, but bring a gentle and childish brand of cruelty to comedic violence that adds a few unique rules to the usual ways of defining a comic world. Walter Kerr describes Laurel and Hardy perfectly as "those most gentle of violent men" (Kerr, 318). Insight into this gentle violence is found in an interview between Ray Allen and Oliver Hardy:

They had no malice, no cruelty. Babe [Hardy] told me, "That was Stan. Stan insisted on taking the pain out of comedy.... The first thing was, don't show the fall, that's cruel, it's funnier when you only imagine it. But, when you *do* see, you're not hurt. We were cartoons, we always came back; we tore our fur off but we always came back in the next scene with our fur back on. That's the way Stan wanted to do it. (Bruce Crowther, 134)

It was their unusual reactions to violence which give Laurel and Hardy this gentle air: "Laurel and Hardy were the most destructive of all comedians... but they did it methodically, experimentally, really without malice. They were objective, detached about such damage as might be done" (Kerr, 331-2). While Kerr is speaking more about the destruction of property here, Laurel and Hardy's frequent tit-for-tat excursions were a mixture of both property and human damage, and it is their strange compliance or embrace of this methodical, almost courteous approach to violence (embraced by all the characters of their films) which gives it a strangely mannered feel: "The rules held: Do not react, except to show a degree of resignation; hold for the next slish, the next rip, the next blow and then count ten before

deciding on the form of reply. The victim, whoever he might be, would remain available” (Kerr, 332). Perhaps it is more genteel than gentle violence, and in many ways, as Kerr points out, this was their most unique contribution to violent comedy:

Thus the *comedy* of Laurel and Hardy came to consist of the pauses between the effronteries. The comedy of the effronteries themselves, the acts of violence, we had had before, endlessly. What is distinctly funny about these two men is the time-lag, the unemotional patience, even dignity, with which the unthinkable is accepted, allowed to play itself out. They *chose* to be emotionally uninvolved while in all other respects being horrendously involved: it was a matter of temperament; of comic philosophy, of personal honour. The choice is also, of course, their form of fantasy. Normal men, real men, have much shorter tempers. (Kerr, 333)

In many ways this “dignity” plays into Bergson’s views on the comic: “In the case of emotion that leaves us indifferent, and that is about to become comic, there is always present a certain *rigidity* which prevents it from establishing a connection with the rest of the soul in which it has taken up its abode” (Bergson, 151-2). This lack of connection, in Bergson’s mind, allows us the freedom of viewing such characters, and nearly anything which might befall them as comic.

However, one thing which complicates these views of Laurel and Hardy’s comedic violence is their suffering, and as Charles Barr notes, they “both give exceedingly vivid impressions of pain” (Barr, 28). Barr places this pain at the root of their appeal:

They don’t learn and they don’t, for long, resent. But pain is by no means anaesthetised. Few actors suffer so vividly as (in particular) Ollie, or transfer their pain so fully to the audience. The films are highly therapeutic in letting us repeatedly indulge our violent urges by making us laugh at and judge them at the same time. They are the clearest illustration of the Aristotelian idea of purging. No one can like Laurel and Hardy without entering keenly into their marvellously direct kicks, punches, pokes in the eye, and other acts of violence; but who is inspired to emulate them in real life? Nor, like the violent heroes of certain gangster movies, do they get a token and delayed comeuppance at the end: when they are violent, retribution is decisive and painful. (Barr, 30)

Indeed, much of the violent comedy of Laurel and Hardy emphasises the pain. Such a moment can be found in Brats (1930) when Laurel shoots Hardy in the backside (having

missed a mouse which was on him), and Hardy runs around going “Ewhohoho”. Later, when he gets liniment oil on the wound, he pauses while he thinks about it and then bursts out with a pained “Ahhhh!”. While the pain is obviously disproportionate to the violence; the minimised pain is still the major focus of such comic moments.

Crucial to understanding the comic world of Laurel and Hardy is an appreciation of its childishness. Mast rightly places the childishness in the motivations of the plot: “Dominating the films is a childishly barbaric equation of revenge and justice.... In a sense, the Laurel and Hardy comedies are unintentional comic parodies of the Revenge Tragedy – reduced to childish spite” (Mast, 192-3). Hal Roach thinks this childishness is essential to the silent film comedians: “Visual comedians essentially imitate children” (Staveacre, 111). While this childish sense of revenge is present it is not at the level of parody which Mast suggests, it is at a much more simple, almost representational level. Barr comes closest to understanding this aspect of Laurel and Hardy when listing their childlike qualities: “their innocence, their forgetfulness, their squabbling, and at the root of everything, their logic. They are a pair of overgrown babies who, in Freudian terms, have not grasped the “reality principle”: they have not learned to separate their own ego from the outside world” (Barr, 58). Their childishness is eventually parodied in Big Business (1929) when a cop asks “Who started all this?” and they all start crying like children (including the crowd watching, and eventually the cop himself). Barr feels that this childishness represents the stance which such violent comedy takes against society:

The film is an extended playing not only of primitive violence against ordered society, but of childhood against maturity. There is the same balance here in our responses; we value maturity while liking to get back into childhood. This is the basis of Laurel and Hardy’s comedy. Society is stronger if it takes account of primitive energies of which, in a sense, it is the denial; maturity is stronger if it doesn’t cut itself off from the sharper childish drives which it by definition tames. All that Orwell... says of the Donald McGill postcards, can be applied to Laurel and Hardy. “Like the music halls, they are a sort of saturnalia, a harmless rebellion against virtue”. They represent a less

responsible man who “is inside all of us, can never be suppressed altogether, and needs a hearing occasionally”. But they go far deeper than McGill by giving us not only the “static” other side of our responsible selves but the deeper roots of ourselves, from a time before the irresponsible and the responsible had to be separated. (Barr, 31-2)

Part of allowing this more primitive side to be explored is, of course, the allowance created by the comic codings familiar to silent film comedy.

Laurel and Hardy made use of these standard codings, but with the advent of sound in film there were new avenues available for comic coding. Staveacre notes that “in the comedy of violence, how it *sounds* is all-important. A slap makes a more satisfying noise than a punch – even more so if the impact is accentuated by a stagehand providing a synchronised “clap” from the wings” (Staveacre, 47-8). Laurel and Hardy were the major contributors of the effect of sound to film comedy: “Laurel and Hardy used sound creatively, to maintain and extend their fantasy world” (William K. Everson, 31). And, as Everson points out, the use of unreal and exaggerated sound effects keeps the violence fantastical and therefore safely comic.

Staveacre notes that the slapstick was designed for “creating the maximum amount of noise with the minimum injury” (Staveacre, 48). And, just as gunpowder was used to enhance the sound of the slapstick in the nineteenth century, drums, cymbals and gongs were used for similar comic enhancement in vaudeville and early film (Staveacre, 48). Films have since taken these effects to incredibly loud and graphic extremes. An example of this comic enhancement can be found in The Live Ghost (1934) in a scene where a captain twists Laurel and Hardy’s necks off camera with exaggerated sound effects but no visible physical consequences when they return to frame. There is a similar accompaniment found in You’re Darn Tootin’ during a lengthy battle where Laurel repeatedly kicks Hardy and numerous other people in the shins and finally gets it in the shins himself. The vicious attack is made comically painful with the addition of a loud sound effect “boinyer”. Thus the pain is

emphasised but enhanced into the unreal and therefore morally safe territory of comedy.

The Three Stooges

The Three Stooges carry the sound effects of Laurel and Hardy to an extreme. Their effects are louder and more absurd but remain constant throughout their films: there are five or six common sounds which are consistently applied to certain types of violence to the face and head. This consistency is in itself comic. The amplified sound effects keep the violence and imagined pain prominent but they also take it into the realm of the absurd and ensure its comic reception.

The films of The Three Stooges are full of physical impossibilities which mark their world as different from that of the audience. The Stooges take the usual physical imperviousness established in Keaton's films and push it to the realm of comical impossibility. In Grips, Grunts and Groans (1937) a wrestler spins Curly's foot in impossible circles. Similarly in Three Uncivil Warbrides (1946) Curly is stabbed in the backside with two bayonets and the bayonets end up bent beyond belief. In both these situations Curly screams in pain, but his body is seemingly impervious to serious or permanent harm.

The opponents of The Three Stooges are not so lucky. In Three Little Pirates (1946) one of the stooges throws a dagger into a pirate's leg and, unlike the bayonets, the dagger sinks in up to the hilt sending the pirate off limping and screaming "yeow". The pirate's "yeow" keeps the violence in the realm of comedy, not as absurdly as the violence done to the Stooges but, of course, the un-named pirate ultimately does not matter; he is there to be hit.

Peter Brunette provides an interesting concluding point on the nature of the Stooges' violence:

The violence of the Stooges is, finally, a parody as well. No one really gets hurt in their films because theirs is the violence of cartoon figures, a kind of counter mimesis that curiously reverses the usual direction and relation of visual signifier to signified. Their violence is not real; it is a trope, a figure. Although their use of their own names

threatens always to collapse the space of representation, nevertheless, because we watch them on film, we must always watch them as characters, even as characters who represent themselves, rather than as themselves. The spacing of representation, however minute, can never be fully effaced. The same is true of their violence. Filmed, it will always be a represented violence, and that dynamic, that space of representation, turns the real slap into a fake slap, even if they are the same, even if the slap has caused real pain. Which is not to say that real pain is not itself always also a representation, always spaced from itself. (Brunette, 185)

As Brunette points out, there is a fictionalising effect with film that makes real violence a part of the fictionalised narrative, and if the violence is part of this fiction it is, to some extent, fiction itself. In many ways Brunette's statement points to what we would like to think as we consume comedic violence but, as Alter points out, the narrative is not the only appeal of dramatic art. While the performers in a film are not there for the audience, their real bodies were there, and this can never be fully out of the minds of the audience when they witness them enduring any manner of punishment for the sake of a laugh. This can never be far from an audience's mind during a Stooges film as the Stooges' "representation" of violence is created through a very rough real violence. In many ways the real violence of the slaps that the Stooges share back and forth adds to the excitement and shock of their comedic violence.

Surrealism and Absurdism

Surrealism and Absurdism do two things for the comic world; first, absurdism makes the normal bizarre, and second, surrealism makes absolutely anything possible. In The Bald Soprano (1958), much of the play's humour revolves around the inability of the characters to be shocked during moments of shocking behaviour. A good example of this is the fireman's cheery account of his work: "There are, luckily, though this is pretty rare too, one or two cases of asphyxiation by gas. Last week, for instance, there was a young girl who asphyxiated herself" (Eugène Ionesco, 106). Death loses its sacred position, in a moment of what for the audience must be a comically shocking display of emotions opposite to what they expect.

The result is a comic world whose emotional frame of reference is comically unpredictable in

a way which questions an audience's reactions to similarly "horrible" events.

A play like The Spurt of Blood²⁰ (1925) invents a world of possibility which can be - though is not always intended to be – comically incredible. In the following note of stage action we can see that in The Spurt of Blood we are no longer bound by the limits of the physical world: "A host of scorpions crawl out from under the Wetnurse's dress and start swarming in her vagina which swells and splits, becomes transparent and shimmers like the sun" (Artaud, 65). Ignoring the question of impact for this fundamentally unproduced play, we can take it as indicative of the climate of incredible possibility opened up by the surrealists' exploration of the unconscious. This is a world not bound by our views of the normal, or even the abnormal, and as such it thwarts and questions any judgement based on the "normal" world's moral criteria, creating great possibilities for comedy.

Cartoons

It is cartoons (particularly the "Looney Tunes" series) which most capitalised on the possibilities offered by surrealism to the comic narrative (the Monty Python films being the live action equivalent). The "Looney Tunes" cartoons present a world in extreme: in Nasty Quacks (1945), Daffy is knocked out through a roof and travels a mile through the air until he hits a power-line post. Not only does this world operate in extreme but it also works towards a dramatic extension of moment which comically rests in the impossible. This impossibility is perhaps most memorable in the numerous moments when Will E. Coyote hangs in the air before falling off a cliff. A moment of recognition allows for the communication of a recognised impending suffering (the realities of this suffering are addressed on pages 59-61), that is more important comically than the bounds of any reality. Indeed, the physical bounds

²⁰ Antonin Artaud's play is listed in the works cited for this thesis as The Jet of Blood. The translation that I have quoted is far superior to Wellworth's "Jet"; unfortunately The Spurt of Blood translation appears to be untraceable and bears no indication of the translator or the larger text from which it originates. I offer Wellworth's translation as a disappointing, timid alternative.

of reality can be stretched for the purpose of underlining or increasing the suffering of the comic butt.

The physical laws governing the world of “Looney Tunes” are similar to those of slapstick films in that they allow for an invincibility which permits comic suffering without fatal consequence. Thus the coyote can accordion-walk away after a fall off a cliff. Indeed, invincibility seems to be the most frequent route to comedy in these cartoons, as in Rabbit Seasoning (1952), where Daffy is repeatedly shot in the head only to end up with his bill stuck in some incorrect position on his face. Each time he is shot, humour is found when the gun-smoke clears and we see the angry look on his newly rearranged features that he then quickly sets to right.

The realm of possibility is stretched in scenes like the one in Zoom And Bored (1957) where Will E. is able to shoot his own rear-end as he sticks his head around an impossibly long fence. Again, the comic world allows anything which will disrupt the temporary confidence of these characters and lead to their suffering. Similarly, in Plop Goes the Weasel (1953), the comic bounds of the physical world allow the dog to shove Foghorn Leghorn through the impossibly small hole in the fence after he demands that the dog “Put me where I belong!”. Of course, Foghorn suffers vociferously in this stretching of the physical bounds, and indeed that seems to be the rule of thumb in the world of cartoons – the audience’s desire to witness comic suffering over-rides and controls the laws of the physical world.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (1988), with its convergence of the cartoon and “real” worlds of cinema, allows us to investigate the comic world of cartoons. Eddie Valiant very quickly demonstrates the difference between the two worlds when he steps out of a cartoon building into the air and stays there for a second before falling. The pause prolongs his dread of his seemingly inevitable suffering. This is perhaps never more apparent than in the

moment during the chaos in the kitchen when Roger lifts a fridge off his head, grabs Baby Herman, smiles and then notices the fridge floating above his head. He is given just enough time to wince before the fridge comes hammering home upon his head: the comic world of cartoons allows the characters to temporarily do the impossible only to punish them again.

The argument between Roger and the director, which opens the film, defines the lack of physical limits which exist for the “toons”:

Roger: Please Paul, I can give you stars. Just drop the refrigerator on my head one more time.

Paul: Roger, I dropped it on your head twenty-three times already.

Roger: I can take it. Don't worry about me.

Paul: I'm not worried about you, I'm worried about the refrigerator.

Roger then hits his own head to prove that he can give the director stars instead of the birds which floated around his previously damaged head. Later in the film Roger's limits are spelled out clearly for Valiant and audience alike: “He's a toon, you can drop anything you want on his head, he'll shake it off. But break his heart – he'll go to pieces”. Indeed, the violence which is so prominent in the world of the toons seems no more harmful than the disappearing ink which is squirted on Valiant's shirt:

Valiant: You think that's funny.

Guy: Oh it's a panic. (*It disappears*) No hard feelings I hope.

The disappearing ink is indicative of the nature of the violence of the toon world: it only appears to damage. It is surface appearance only, and meant more for shock than anything else. So, though the coyote might be crushed into an accordion-shape, he always seems more perturbed than hurt. The injured (damaged is perhaps the more appropriate word) characters often suffer without screaming or appearing to be in pain. The predominant post-traumatic attitude is one of perturbation – they are perturbed that they will have to rearrange their newly transformed body back to its original design.

Who Framed Roger Rabbit? makes the boundaries of the cartoon world apparent, with

the constant interaction between the cartoon and real worlds; and guns seem to define these differences clearly: "Be careful with that gun, this ain't no cartoon, you know". The weasels of the film are made particularly ominous because they hold real guns. Because their guns are not cartoon, the wounds they cause will not be cartoon-styled transformations but the permanently damaging transformations of the "real". They violate the code of the cartoon world by utilising real weapons.

Films such as Babe with their impressive special effects raise the question of whether the comedic violence of Who Framed Roger Rabbit? would be funny with a "real" rabbit. The answer, of course, is no; these scenes would be horrifying with real or realistic animals; unless the complete lack of harm could be expressed, we would always be concerned for the seemingly real rabbit.²¹ Roger's role is to be the feeler. Like many clowns, and like Ash from Evil Dead II and Smoot of Mump and Smoot, his character cries, laughs, screams and loves more than anyone else. He feels in extremes, but just as easily he recovers in extremes. He never suffers from anything with any physical permanence and this impermanence is an incredible concern-freeing attribute for an audience engaged in the moral negotiations that are necessary to make violence comic.

Monty Python

Wes D. Gehring has said of black comedy: "Unlike the populist film's rational world fantasy, where justice prevails because of a man-of-the-people leader, black humour offers only an absurd environment, where the individual does not count" (Gehring in Nysenholc, 144). This is certainly the case with nearly all of the Monty Python films. Often this absurd

²¹ George of the Jungle (1997) carries the rules of the animated cartoon from which it originated into live action film without generating undue concern for the "real" participants. Nearly all the comic action of the film is accompanied by exaggerated sound-effects, and the bodies of the victims of comedic violence have the usual expressiveness and quickly healed elastic bodies of cartoons (an example is found in one moment where George is able to establish himself as a perpetual punching machine, with his fist and elbow bouncing between two opponents). Of course, George of the Jungle quickly establishes the difference between the film's care-free world and the real world despite the occasional resemblance between the two.

environment is founded in reality or an imagined reality, as with these lines from the witch burning scene in Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1974):

“We found a witch. May we burn her?”...
 “Burn her anyway!”...
 “There are ways of telling if she’s a witch.”
 “Do they hurt?”
 “Burn her!!!”

The comic obsession of the bloodthirsty peasants is especially funny because it echoes in a comical extreme what one imagines to be a fairly truthful witch-hunt attitude. Similar to this scene is one from Monty Python’s Life of Brian (1979) which begins with the title card “Roman Coliseum: Children’s Matinee” and is followed by a shot of people cleaning up body parts left over from the previous entertainment. Again, the scene (not the title), with its removal of body parts, presents a seemingly comical extreme of what was likely a truth.

The Pythons find such moments in contemporary life as well. In Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life (1983) these sorts of extremes are even found in a restaurant fish-tank: “Hey look, Howard’s being eaten”. This is the violence of everyday life. Later in the same film a rugby match is shown where some young boys are playing against much older boys who push, trip and kick them while the young boys’ masters cheer them on. There is a cut to a World War One trench that links the two contests by an identical shot of a distressed character played by the same actor. Again, an extreme shows the prevalence of violence in everyday life. The rugby game is comic in its mismatched struggle and the seemingly truthful willingness of the teachers to see it. The comparison of the cruel rugby match to war mocks the romantic view of armed conflict, and caps the belittlement with the inauspicious title of the new section: “Fighting Each Other”.

Besides the inclusion of extremes of the real world in the comic world of the Python films, there is also the frequent acknowledgement of façade in these films. This is perhaps

most apparent in scenes from The Holy Grail where the “real” contemporary world and the Arthurian world intrude upon each other. In one scene a “famous historian” providing some narration has his throat cut by a passing knight. In another, a huge Alexander Nevsky-style battle is about to erupt when it is stopped by the arrival of a police car and paddy wagon. The comedy arises from the juxtaposition of two moments which could not be juxtaposed in real life, but also through the disruption of the film’s world (up to that point). Ellen Bishop notes that “the Pythons undermine the film” (Bishop, 61) with moments like these and that essentially this undermining “pulls us into a carnival participation with the film” (Bishop, 61). Bishop suggests, throughout his article, that the Pythons take us back to the carnivalistic grotesque. What this assertion suggests, for this study, is that the comedy has no victim. Bishop believes that the Pythons laugh at everything, including themselves, and that they invite their audience to participate in this all-encompassing laughter. While the idea that the Pythons’ comedy is without victims is incorrect (they are as prone as any comedians to taking down specific targets), there is often an atmosphere (carnivalistic or not) which suggests that every aspect of the world is worthy of laughter and not merely any individual or group in particular.

The Python films also present an endless collection of extreme and absurd worlds of fantasy. In The Meaning of Life, heaven is shown to be a comically bizarre restaurant which has “real authentic Hawaiian cuisine served in an authentic medieval dungeon”. In the restaurant we see a sickly, skinny old man being branded in a surprising display of literalness and comic juxtaposition. Stillman describes such scenes of comedy when discussing tragicomedy: “This modern hybrid is the crossroads where horror, terror, corruption, and nonsense meet the lark of a personal liberation from conventions. It is the encounter of extremes: delirium and hyper-lucidity. The “receiver” – reader or spectator – laughs (or

hollers) because there is no appropriate response to the rupture of a coherent cosmic order” (Stillman, 54).

It is not always the rupture of the cosmic order which is at stake in these scenes; often it is the presence of one or two individuals who present a serious challenge to convention. One such moment is found in a scene from The Meaning of Life, in which two men dressed as a tiger are accused of stealing an officer’s leg: “Oh c’mon, do we look like the kind of fellows who’d creep into a tent, anaesthetise him, tissue type, amputate”. The list describes their bizarre behaviour exactly. Their detailed denial is comically revealing and damning. The scene is humorously capped by the absolute oddity of the two men’s behaviour. This is a comic world where anything can happen and often does.

The Python films also present a world of gruesome extremes. Their films relish the gore and effluent inherent in the body, In The Meaning of Life an officer says “Nasty wound you’ve got there” to a soldier whose head is severed from his body. The soldier replies, “Thank you very much sir”. After this the officer says “C’mon Private” to another soldier, and when he taps him on the shoulder, the soldier slides into dozens of bloody pieces. The absurd and the grotesque mingle here with a comic focus, on the obliviousness of the officer class, which mines the decorously unexamined aspects of real life in a comic world of absolute possibility and frequent extremes. The Python films are places of moral befuddlement where little can be trusted and much is confusing. The films often thwart moral judgement because all normal gages have been perverted or removed.

Action Films

The comic world of the action film is also one defined by extremes. “Stallone and Schwarzenegger may seem more monolithic and flighty than Batman and his *bande dessinée* brothers. But there is a caricatural dementia about both parties. Exaggerated size, strength

and steadfastness are no less surreal than hyperbolised speed, agility and quick-change expertise” (Nigel Andrews, 148).²² The extremes themselves signal the comic coding within which the violence of these films is consumed.

As for violence, the muscle epics like the comic book genre have courted a high-style cartoony excess. Fantastical weapon arsenals have been favoured ... and shamelessly implausible numbers of villains are put away, as giggles vie with gasps among an audience aware that license is being taken not just with the numerology of rough justice but with the whole concept of violence as a safety valve for audience aggression. (Andrews, 149)

And as Andrews further notes, the extremes of contemporary genres are bringing about a collision of their shared codings:

It’s [action film] a medium whose perpetual-motion character and impulses encourage diametric opposites to meet. The more violent an action thriller, the closer it comes to the hyper-kinetic brinkmanship of farce. (Directors like Tarantino and Rodriguez are still upping the ante on this proposition). The more farcical a comedy, the closer it approaches to free-form violence. (Movies like The Mask [1994] and The Naked Gun [1988] are today’s live-action answer to Tom and Jerry, with punchball humans replacing punchball cartoon animals). (Andrews, 150)

The horror film, too, can be included in this meeting of genres embracing their extremes. In all these genres the conventions have been exploded outward to a genre-conscious, meta-coded extreme which parodies the very tropes of the entertainment they provide and, as such, adds a level of remove which allows for the comedification of nearly all their contents.

Andrews notes how the extremes of the action genre call attention to themselves in a way which provokes a level of comic awareness. “The new action movies and thrillers not only rejoice in a plurality of perspective, they are *about* the plurality of perspective. They offer audiences adventure thrills while inviting them simultaneously to laugh at exaggerated characters, outlandish decor and pulpy dialogue” (Andrews, 150). The films often point to this sophisticated awareness with irony-laden dialogue, as in Hard Boiled (1992) when the

²² For this study, Schwarzenegger is emphasised to the near exclusion of Stallone and some of the other prominent action film actors. The reason for this is that Schwarzenegger is the most consistently comic in violent action roles and his comedy is indicative of the best of the comedic violence of action films.

chief yells at his disobedient officer: “Give a guy a gun and he’s a superman, give him two and he’s god” (Hard Boiled). The chief is correct in his jab at his officer: the men in these films are capable of anything when armed with their pistols and their never-ending supply of bullets. Indeed, the villain of Hard Boiled is greatly mistaken when he says “the cop’s just a human being with a gun. He’s not immortal”. Reality is not a concern in these films, particularly for the heroes once they have set upon their mission. There is often an early moment of reality in the form of a motive-producing death of someone close to the hero. But from that point on, the bounds of reality bend around the drive of the hero and create a *laissez faire* attitude towards physical suffering which often allows for its comic consumption.

As well, action films are fantasies which deny the limits of the body. So although the comic coding of extremes dominates much of the violence of these films, the films are also peopled by macho supermen who, as a habit, downplay their physical suffering (this is taken to an extreme with the physical imperviousness of the terminators). Linda Mizejewski describes the importance of invulnerability to Arnold Schwarzenegger’s characters: “In the case of Schwarzenegger, the promised pleasure of this body is its massive invincibility” (Mizejewski, 26). Seagal’s character in Under Siege 2 (1995) pokes fun at this very convention just as he supports it:

Porter: You’ve been shot.

Seagal: No, just nicked. You think this is being shot – this isn’t shot.

Susan Stewart provides a perfect description of the pain which is most common (there are always plot motivating exceptions) in the comic context of the action films. “‘Hurt’ is defined in terms of the body’s capabilities to reverse damage” (Stewart, 64). Reversible physical damage is nearly always allowed a comic consumption in action films.

As well, with the bigger budget action films, the star has an enormous impact upon the reception of the film. “In Predator (1987), Twins (1988) and Terminator 2: Judgement Day

(1992)... Schwarzenegger's "personification" foregrounds the continuities of the star's image over and above differences of character" (Paul McDonald in Richard Dyer, 185). While there is no room in this thesis for an exploration of the impact of star theory on comedic violence, and McDonald himself calls its value into question, evident in McDonald's comment is a persistence of a persona which is found in many of these star-driven action films, and its impact is considerable.²³ "Arnie as cop, as Hamlet, as "Arnie" are all on the same level, sharing the same cartoon consistency" (Jonathan Romney, 9). Thus, much like the silent comedy stars, the presence of many of these stars immediately suggests a set of values for the world of the film. While many of these stars suggest a world of violence, they also frequently carry with them the suggestion that the violence will be coded in such a way as to allow the comic dispatch of characters deemed unimportant by the film.²⁴

The popularity of such stars restricts them from particularly cruel or morally ambiguous actions. James Cameron suggests this restriction with regard to Schwarzenegger's impact on a film audience. "I can't have Arnold mowing down a police station full of cops with machine guns in 1991, with the kind of world-wide following that he has. It's not the film I would want to do" (Ana Maria Bahiana, 22). Quentin Tarantino tells of some of the same sort of moral pressures for some of the high budget action films. "He [a hero of a hypothetical movie] can't kill the victim with his bare hands, why don't we have him punch him and have the victim fall on something – so then he killed him but he didn't really mean to so he can go back to his family and everything is cool, we can still feel good about liking him" (Gavin Smith in Film Comment, 42). For most of these films starring major action stars like Schwarzenegger, Willis, and Stallone, a sort of unspoken moral contract with the audience

²³ "A severe limitation of all spectatorship theory is that it hypothesises the positioning of moviegoers without researching if moviegoers occupy these positions" (McDonald in Dyer, 190).

²⁴ However, the choice of those deemed unimportant is, of course, not without frequent complications and misjudgements by the film-makers: witness the sexist and racist choice of comic butts in True Lies.

accompanies the film. And, more often than not, this code allows for comedic violence which is directed at comic butts deemed morally expendable.

The hero is not, however, the sole focus of these films. The films feed upon a need for and a delight in great operatic and balletic extremes of motion and violence, “Great prototypes of movie heroism or antiheroism that used to command our respect, however wry, now command – indeed insist on – a gleeful, lyrical, blood-fed hilarity” (Andrews 144). These films are veritable amusement parks of violence, where danger is not a concern; faces are never shot (or if they are, they present a neat hole in the forehead, not the exploding head of the Zapruder film). The lack of shocking, concern-provoking violence (the exploding head, for instance), for any but the revenge-coded and the supremely villainous, keeps “the show on the road” for what Andrews again correctly notes as entertainment-driven cinema: “far from trying to hide itself, the caricatural aspect of these movies has gone on to play its role in one of the great sensibility revolutions of late-century cinema. Violence as Variety show” (Andrews, 145).

This “violent variety show” is driven by a fantasy which becomes clear when the films present a fantasy within their fantasy. In True Lies (1994), Schwarzenegger’s character indulges in fantasy after the man who he suspects is having an affair with his wife gives an objectifying description of her. Schwarzenegger belts the man in the face, leaving him bleeding and unconscious. A quick shift of focus shows the adulterer laughing and unharmed, and we realise that we have just seen Schwarzenegger’s character’s fantasy. This quick moment points to action films as a place of fantasy where the male protagonist can do what he wants without repercussions. Pointedly, the audiences that I have seen the film with had no problem laughing at this moment of violence, and they only laughed harder once the fantasy was revealed. With consequences gone, the common comic codings for violence are

all the more morally palatable for audiences of the action film.

Home Alone (1990) codes the type of comedic violence found in action films for the consumption of children. The adult villains who are on the receiving end of the comedic violence are portrayed as bad children, which in some sense reduces the violence of the film to the level of play. The violence, however, is elevated to a vicious level and a very careful coding is required to ensure its comic consumption. After every moment of violence that the two robbers suffer, the shots emphasise their faces, usually with a slightly quirky camera angle. The camera angle adds to the comic interpretation of the men's suffering, but the comedy is ensured by the always visible expressions of the men (they are forever falling on their backs or into frame): their most common expression after suffering violence is surprise, not pain. Seeing the faces of the men after they have been hurt assures the audience that they are not dead and have not suffered horribly. And, when there is pain, the camera angle makes it clear from the expressions of the men that if they are hurt, they are just as equally surprised, angry and alive.

The robbers' over-reactions to pain push them into the "ow!" level of cartoons and silent slapstick, and indeed they even resort to the cartoon swearing of "Frazaraza" when hit in the genitals. Cartoon swearing removes their suffering to the level of cartoon pain, which is ultimately without serious consequence.

There are, however, many moments of comedic violence in Home Alone which, for an adult viewer, seem to go beyond the pale of comedy. At one point one of the boy's traps burns the hand of one of the robbers and a whiff of smoke is seen to rise in a disturbing moment of "realistic" damage to the man's body. At times like these, one becomes aware of the comic coding which the music of such sequences ensures. When the men are on the receiving end of violence, the violence is always accompanied by light music. In a film such

as this one, targeted at children, the music forcefully directs the interpretation of all events. For the action sequences there is music which creates mild suspense as the robbers creep toward their impending suffering, and then, once they are hit by the violence, a playful leitmotif ensures a comic reaction.

During the boy's final confrontation with the robbers (when the two robbers have the boy cornered and it appears that he might lose out to them), there is a threat of violence which makes the coding of this comic world especially clear:

“What're we gonna do to him, Harry?”

“We're gonna do exactly what he did to us. We're gonna burn his head with a blow-torch”.

“Then we're gonna smash his head with an iron, hit him with a paint-can maybe, or shove a nail through his foot”.

“First thing, I'm gonna bite off all his little fingers one at a time”.

This moment illustrates the effects of comic coding in such films, because here the list of possible tortures for the boy sounds awful, despite the fact that all but the biting off of the fingers has been done to the men to comic effect. The power dynamic of the trapped boy (the underdog cornered by two more powerful adversaries) affects the audience's interpretation of the list but, pointedly, the listing is also accompanied by ominous music which makes the scene slightly frightening. As well, here we cannot see the actual acts of violence, and so in imagining them we fear (because of the musical coding) the worst – whereas when this violence has happened to the men, the focus on their faces has let us see their mock-pain and fear and has allowed us to keep their suffering temporary and therefore within the realm of the comic.

A film like My Name is Nobody (1973) acknowledges the frequently mockable conventions of action genres (and in this case the particularly heightened conventions of Spaghetti Westerns). In a couple of scenes, the impossibly high-speed dexterity of some Western heroes is mocked, with Nobody grabbing a gun from an opponent's holster and then

slapping the opponent repeatedly, so quickly that the opponent can only stare in bewilderment. Here the exaggeration points out the near impossibility, and therefore its unsuitability as a subject of concern, of the violent action in many Western and action films.

In another scene from My Name is Nobody, Nobody tells of having shot three men with one bullet (two of whom were outside the building he was in). Such a scene is literalized in A King in New York (1957) when a film called “Terror Rides Again” is seen by the protagonist, in which five men in a line are shot down in an impossible display of lone gunmanship.

While My Name is Nobody plays upon the heightened action of the Spaghetti Westerns (much like the heightened action of Hong Kong action films), the foreign variants (the Spaghetti Westerns) it spoofs all play upon the codes of the action film genre from which they originate; and while the action of these films may seem heightened to a level of kitsch (and therefore worthy of parody) for North American audiences, they are essentially no less real or more ludicrous than the original “purer” product which inspired them. John Woo has been said not to understand the laughter which accompanies his films when they are screened in North America.

Mention of the Spaghetti Western brings consideration, as well, of the coding achieved by the presence of the always supremely cool action protagonist.²⁵ Mast notes that “Keaton’s presence makes The General [1927] take place in a comic world – despite the fact that the film is full of adventure, suspense, war, and death” (Mast, 9). Most action-film stars carry an unreality with them that is similar in effect to Keaton’s presence in the world of The General. As previously discussed, when Arnold Schwarzenegger appears in an action film he immediately carries with him a number of expectations which, most importantly for this

²⁵ Cool is defined on page 69.

study, include a coded reality which does not correspond to the viewer's reality. Pauline Kael, discussing Magnum Force (1973), notes a different phenomenon with similar effects achieved through the early acting style of Clint Eastwood:

Eastwood's lack of reaction makes the whole show of killing seem so unreal that the viewer takes it on a different level from a movie in which the hero responds to suffering. In Magnum Force, killing is dissociated from pain; it's even dissociated from life. The killing is totally realistic – hideously, graphically so – yet since it's without emotion it has no impact on us. We feel nothing towards the victims; we have no empathy when they get it, and no memory of them afterwards. As soon as one person gets it, we're ready for the next. The scenes of carnage are big blowouts – parties for the audience to gasp at in surprise and pleasure. (Kael, 171)

This lack of focus on the victims of the violence is similar to the lack of focus found in some comedies. But what is of prime interest here is both the indifferent cool of the lead character and the charisma generated by that indifferent cool (something Kael does not account for). Action films are in part fantasies of male physical prowess, and the cool of these characters (defined as their lack of concern, and their ability to be flippant and stylish in the most dangerous of situations) is an essential part of this fantasy. These are supermen whose attitude is to be emulated. These actors are stars - everything about the films they star in and the lives they lead guarantees their magnetism and our attention, and no even slightly coded butt of comedic violence is going to cause this attraction or sympathy to waver for the majority of most audiences.

There is, however, a constant tension and concern around the comedic violence of action films that is perhaps best understood through Owens' observations on theatrical violence in the Renaissance:

The theatrical body may be identified as a substitute or double for the body of the spectator. In an age in which the body was so vulnerable to illness and suffering and to the fierce penalties exacted by magistrates, the theatre may have provided an arena in which the body could be brought under some semblance of control and thereby reclaimed and recovered. (Owens, 60)

One may counter that we do not live in a world assailed by such physical vulnerability, but we

do live under a relentless media bombardment which would have us believe in a constant threat of attack from murderers, thieves, gangs, police, or government. And this persistent suggestion of threat, with the media's emphasis on how much the innocent victims are like the readers or listeners, places the audiences of these films under a fear for the body that is tantamount to that which fostered a similar physical focus in the Renaissance. Its effects are similar as well:

The fascination with violent spectacle evident in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama may also bespeak a desire to reclaim the body, to restore to it some of the centrality it held in the earlier religious drama. It seems possible that violent spectacle registered the culture's affirmation of the human body more than its supposed repudiation of the body. (Owens, 11)

This affirmation of the body (without the religious overtones), is fairly obvious in action films, but such assertions become interestingly confused in the contemporary comic extremes of horror-comedy.

Evil Dead II

Much horror is consumed with a genre-consciousness which allows much of the violence and horror of horror films to be comic. However, this awareness is often manifested as a false sophistication pompously directed at low-budget and elementary film-making skills. This false sophistication leads to a near refusal to take the film or the concerns of its characters seriously. This genre-consciousness is also often used as a distancing or relief device to keep the viewer emotionally free from the horrifying impact of the film. This audience filter is imposed as a viewer's tactic rather than a film-maker's one (though of course some film-makers pander to this tactic with an arch awareness of their audience) and as such warrants little consideration for this study.

Where horror does become interesting for a study of comedic violence is in a film like Evil Dead II, where the horror is coded comically. Evil Dead II is a film which takes the

supposed “fear” which tends to drive violent entertainments, “a manifestation of a general desire not to be reminded of disturbing possibilities inhering in the body” (Fraser, 67), and turns it in upon itself and revels in the disturbing possibilities and impossibilities of the body. Much as with Mr. Caruso in Monty Python’s the Meaning of Life, where the exploded details of the obese glutton are comically celebrated, in Evil Dead II the horrors of the body are comically eviscerated and animated in what John McCarty has called “splatstick”.

Evil Dead II is immediately coded as comic. The film is full of extroverted camera-work which calls attention to its artifice and separates the real from the fantastical comic world. Chief among these camera moves are the various flying point-of-view shots which occur throughout the film; the flying eyeball and the numerous Ash-as-projectile shots²⁶ are like the flying bowling-ball and flying iron POV shots of Home Alone and the flying knives POV of Who Framed Roger Rabbit? These effect a playfulness which is not unlike the fun of a non-frightening haunted-house.²⁷

Evil Dead II also possesses the fantastical possibilities of many zombie and ghost films. Chief amongst these is that there is life after death, and that life is capable of enduring incredible physical punishment. These two physical possibilities, and Michael Arzen’s described unpredictability, open up immense possibilities for comedic violence. Zombies can be hit, chopped, shot, chain-sawed, and in general endure all forms of gruesome punishment, and will never be in danger of provoking audience sympathy or moral concern. Pointedly, when Ash’s zombie girlfriend transforms herself back to normal appearance (thus temporarily garnering some sympathy) to try to avoid punishment at the hands of Ash, the

²⁶ Ash is the protagonist of the film.

²⁷ As well, the film’s precursor, Evil Dead, established numerous conventions for this series of films. The bizarre nature of these conventions gave the film immediate cult status, which urged multiple viewings, created an extreme awareness of the film’s oddities, and made their anticipation and delivery a code and convention of their own. Examples include the impossibly huge cottage, flying POV shots, Ash’s repeated falls, and Ash’s continuity-disrupting cleanliness.

camera looks away when he saws her to pieces. Zombies are violent comic butts par excellence.

Essential to the comic interpretation of Evil Dead II and to so many other films of comedic violence is the protagonist. In Ash, the film has a paragon of horror-comic possibility; the wide-eyed, super-expressive opposite of Keaton, he is the ideal comic sufferer for contemporary comedy. Here is perhaps a key to the difference in comic suffering of contemporary and of silent films. Keaton, the physical sufferer of the silent age, was debatably all but expressionless, with a visage which freed the audience from any moral restraints which might have hindered the comedic violence of that age. Ash feels more than anyone else, and like the boy of Home Alone, Smoot of "Mump and Smoot", and Roger of Who Framed Roger Rabbit?, his extreme expressions of pain, fear and suffering are the comic code required to free contemporary audiences from moral concern.

Ash's is a comic world of confirmed insanity, and he provides the index to its incredulous consumption. His extreme reactions (understandable considering his environment) achieve an audience distance from realistic concerns and generate both sympathy and an incredulous laughter not terribly unlike his own incredulous, insane laughter.

After Ash's role as the extreme feeler, which dominates the comic suffering of the first half of the film, he transforms himself into a horror-film version of the action hero, thus ensuring the audience's comic consumption of his revenge. Tired of his endless suffering, he achieves a resolve and a physical restructuring; he replaces his severed hand with a chain-saw, and adopts a heightened macho confidence and cool which enables him to take on the role with genre-coded gusto. After putting together his saw-arm and outfit of weapons, he adeptly spins his shotgun, holstering it over his shoulder, and pronounces in a confident baritone,

“groovy”. His combat is similarly coded: in one scene his muscled arm appears through a cellar door, hauls his body up to see a zombie to whom he dog-whistles, and then, with a nod of the head, he says “let’s go”. The coded cool of the action hero makes everything Ash does morally right and lets his super-cool violence-capping witticisms (“swallow this” as he shoves his shotgun in the mouth of a zombie) be received with assured humour.

Mump and Smoot

The comic world of films like Evil Dead II to some extent informs the comic coding of the clown work of “Mump and Smoot”, Toronto’s self-described clowns of horror.

Borrowing from horror and the Python films as well as from silent slapstick (in Caged, 1996, they utilise a strobe to add a silent film effect to a series of typical silent clown gags), theirs is a comic world of infinitely grotesque and absurd possibility. In Something (1996), they use the head of a friend’s corpse as a yo-yo, and in Caged they are able to remove their evil nemesis’, Tagon’s, head and put a smaller one on his body. Pointedly, when it comes to the body, the limits and concerns of reality do not apply.

Beyond this physical freedom, there is a focus, unusual for the stage, on the gore of the body. Mump and Smoot are the theatrical purveyors of comic viscerality (excluding the bloody scapegoat rituals of the live performances of Gwar and the visceral drive for offensiveness in plays like Cannibal Cheerleaders on Crack, 1992). In The Doctor (1996), the doctor removes blood from Smoot’s leg in a gross spray. The detailed realism of this effect is shocking. As well, in a theatrical context generally unconcerned with realistic details, the gory detail and the drive for such detail is itself amusing. Such moments, though, are sometimes coded in an uncomic way, as in Caged where blood is taken from Smoot for a sacrifice. Frightening music and the obvious pain on Smoot’s face keep this in the realm of the fearfully real, pointing to this comic world’s typically thin line between horror and comic

horror.

At once, however, upon attending a Mump and Smoot play, the audience is made aware, by the clowns' appearance and language, that they are entering a different world with necessarily different rules. As well, the childishness of the clowns puts the violence of their world into a more easily carefree framework. Smoot is the filter through which all pain in these plays flows. Like Père Ubu, he has the selfish honesty of a child, and like Ash he is the extreme feeler who reacts honestly and unrestrainedly for us, again much like a child. Filtering the comedic violence of these plays through the emotions of a child, engenders an audience superiority which allows the audience to condescendingly minimise their moral concern. These plays, however, are also dallying with the pity and concern which necessarily accompanies the placement of a "child" in moments of horror.

Reservoir Dogs

The drive for gory detail, and to some extent realism, which is found in the plays of Mump and Smoot can be found in the films of Quentin Tarantino. Reservoir Dogs (1992) is unusual for its time in that it emphasises the very real suffering of its characters even when they are the victims of comedic violence. The film focuses on the pain of all the wounded characters of the film, providing a constant contrast with the expectations created by lines like

"Did you kill anybody?"

"Just a couple of cops. No real people"

Pointedly, it is the riveting and disturbing torture of a policeman which tests the boundaries of the realistic depiction of suffering within a comedic context.

While Arzen claims that "Contemporary culture has become anaesthetised to the shock value of gore since 1968 [the release date of Romero's Night of the Living Dead]" (Arzen, 179), Kim Newman speaks of a contrary effect on screen violence created by Tobe Hooper's The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), and in many ways what he says is applicable to

Reservoir Dogs (1992): “Hooper’s achievement is that he brings back to the movies an awareness of violent death lost through the slow-motion sentimentalization of Bonnie and Clyde [1967] and the contemptible distortion of TV cop shows in which a shot victim has a penny-size red spot on his pristine shirt and time for a five-minute monologue before he goes” (Newman, 53). While Newman is speaking of the seventies, Reservoir Dogs achieved a similar shock of awareness in the nineties: for despite the convincing arguments of Tom Mullin and Jason Jacobs about the impact of the Zapruder film and Vietnam War footage on the realistic depictions of screen violence, one still sees little red bullet holes in foreheads in many violent films.²⁸ Pointedly both versions of reality are used. The little red hole is used most often when a comic interpretation (with a fairly unemotional impact) is desired.

Tarantino’s films, however, do not shy away from their violence. When film violence reaches a point of emotional shock, as with the torture scene in Reservoir Dogs, members of the audience often employ tactics to defuse or manage the emotional and visceral impact of such scenes. Isabel Christina Pinedo details the effects of moments where audience members talk out loud to horror movies - “don’t go in there” (something which occurs at screenings of Reservoir Dogs and of many action films, with audience members reacting to the events and characters of the films with expressions of excitement, concern, disbelief or superiority.

1. On the simplest level, they evoke the tension-breaking laughter that steers us away from being terrorised.
2. They constitute attempts to master the situation by taking an authoritative stance; the speaker indicates that s/he would *never* be so foolish as to do that.
3. As Tudor (1989, 112)²⁹, points out, the competent audience member knows that the warning is futile but nevertheless issues it to express his or her own ambivalence about the dangers of risk-taking. This entails a splitting of the ambivalence, whereby the narrative character performs the dangerous activity while the audience member remains secure, yet vicariously enjoys the danger.

²⁸ These arguments are found in Mullin’s “Livin’ and Dyin’ in Zapruderville: A Code of Representation Reality and its Exhaustion”, in Cineaction #38, pages 12-15, and Jacobs’ “Gunfire” in Screen Violence, Ed. Karl French. London: Bloomsbury, 1996, pages 162-170.

²⁹ Tudor’s argument is found in Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

4. The collective response serves as a reminder that “you are not alone”, “it’s only a movie”, and thus serves to reanchor the viewer near the shores of reality.
5. These remarks serve as forms of interaction with other members of the audience, who monitor each other’s responses and react to them in turn, with laughter or remarks of their own. (Pinedo, 43)

These tactics and their impacts partly secure the comic world of such films. They can serve to help make manageable such uncomfortable moments as the comedy which accompanies the torture of the policeman in Reservoir Dogs (though many people left during early screenings of the film).

The Last Action Hero

Pinedo notes the relevance to horror films of Frederic Jameson’s notions of pastiche, in a way which is directly relevant for the action film. “Jameson refers to the cannibalisation of past productions as pastiche, an ironic self-awareness that calls attention to its own constructedness” (Pinedo, 47). The cannibalisation of action films in the late eighties and early nineties reaches such a height that the conventions of the genre can be parodied in The Last Action Hero (1993) without any hint of subversiveness. The main focus of the parody of The Last Action Hero is the conventional comic world of these films.

The layer of the film world within the “real” world of the film provides a constant comparison which addresses the numerous conventions of violence in popular entertainment films. The boy protagonist provides a canny description of the rules for characters like himself in action films. When he first arrives in the movie he announces his right to freedom from being harmed: “Don’t shoot me, I’m Danny Manigan. I’m a kid”. Later, once Danny has evolved from his protected child status into the role of a sidekick, Schwarzenegger’s character appeals to his knowledge of the genre to keep the boy from harm:

Schwarzenegger: Kid, what happens when the hero says stay in the car and the guy doesn’t.

Danny: He saves the day.

Schwarzenegger: Or gets killed.

Danny: I'll stay in the car. (The Last Action Hero)

More interesting than the rules for children and sidekicks are the rules for the action hero. Ultimately there is a body of conventions of imperviousness which are guaranteed the minute Schwarzenegger is cast (and pointedly the impossibilities of Schwarzenegger's body are illustrated in the fact that he is the one man in Hollywood who can have a baby – in Junior, 1994). The conventions of the action hero are clearly parodied at the outset of the film when Danny spells out its guaranteed outcome: “Jack Slater can't lose – never has, never will”. This guarantee provides specific rules for the body of the hero: after easily brushing tar off himself, Danny comments to Slater, “You know, tar sticks to some people”. And, here one might add, some people get shot in the face, and some do not walk away from getting shot. Even Slater is capable of recognising the impossibility of his unique fortune: “The craziest part is I keep surviving”.

The Last Action Hero spells out the conventions of the comic world of action films when Slater crosses over to the “real” world of the film. When he punches his hand through a window, he notes with astonishment, “my hand hurts”. When he plays chicken with another car and he hits it, he exclaims, “that hurt”. Slater is the pristine example of the much feared influence of television and movies on those who do not know better (and, of course, Slater cannot possibly know better). Once he arrives in the real world, Slater's belief in action film values is patently absurd for even the most undiscerning viewer.

The Last Action Hero plays with the dismissal of concern which is usually integral to comedic violence by suggesting, opposite to our expectations, that it is only in film that the lives and suffering of others are a matter of concern. This twist of understanding is spelled out by the villain when he arrives in “real” New York and approaches a man in a back alley:

“I wonder if you'd help me test a theory” [*He shoots him, listens and checks his watch. He shoots some more.*] “Hello! I've just shot somebody. I've just murdered someone

and I want to confess”.

[*Someone from an apartment yells out “Shut-up down there”.*].

The gist of this scene is, of course, that the real world does not care about human lives, and that, by some extension, it is only in film that such concerns arise. While the comic world of the action film within the film is pointed out as unbelievable and mockable, the action film world is also presented in scenes like this one as a desirable alternative to a sad, uncaring and immoral reality (that filmic “reality” is of course a fantasy as well).

Ultimately the only real intrusion of reality in the film is found when Slater becomes frightened of dying:

Slater: “I’m going to buy it soon too”.

Danny: “No way. You can’t buy it till the grosses go down”.

This scene presents what is perhaps the only slightly subversive note in the film, as it points out that the fiscal reality controls the realities and fantasies of blockbuster action films.

Natural Born Killers

Natural Born Killers (1994) is another film which mines the unstable barrier between the real world and the fantasy of violence. The most obvious and affecting moments of focus are found in the hyper-saturated sitcom of “I Love Mallory”. The seedy undercurrent of the sitcom fantasy is brought to the forefront in a comic world which confuses and accuses the audience with its incongruous sound-effects and canned laughter. At one moment when the father (played by Rodney Dangerfield) is hit on the head with a tire iron, tweety birds dance around his head in a further connection to the coding of television violence. The satirical attack here (discussed in the final chapter) upsets the usual comic coding of the sitcom, with reprehensible and repugnant behaviour (the norm of the recent Jerry Springer shows) being encouraged and lauded by the supposed studio audience.

Gavin Smith sees a moment in the prison break-out in the film, where the camera looks

through the recently shot hole in Wayne Gayle's hand, as indicative of the film's violence: "This bullet-hole-through-hand moment is most representative of Natural Born Killers' approach to violence: cruel, mean, gratuitous even – but above all, absurd, blatantly cartoonish. The unmistakably parodic manner is established [in the first scene of the film]" (Smith in Sight and Sound, 8). As Smith notes, much of this parody is achieved through the extremes of the representations of violence. There is also, however, a pointed humour which is achieved through the frequent disruption of the coding of the violence of the film. In the first killings a heroic opera soundtrack accompanies a bullet as it is shot from Mickey's gun. The bullet stops in front of the cook that it is to hit, remains spinning for a moment, and then hits him. A knife is thrown at another person with the same operatic accompaniment and following POV shot as it breaks through a window and finally kills its intended victim. Here, the film calls attention to its own construction, making the audience aware of the decisions which make any of these moments beautiful or horrific or both. Similar questions arise from the numerous changes of film and video stock, and the unconventional camera angles and editing, where again the film calls attention to its construction: "the film flips in and out of different planes of reality – as if criss-crossing a half-dozen parallel universes – producing extraordinary moments of suspension and dissociation" (Smith in Sight and Sound, 9). These moments of dissociation prompt an awareness of the coding which usually shapes violence (both comic and serious) and the moral expectation/demands which such coding placates.

Jackie Chan

The film audience's desires and moral demands must surely be questioned in any discussion of the films of Jackie Chan. The footage which appears at the end of all his films, showing him and his stunt crew suffering during their accidents, emphasises the risks inherent in such action films. In the A&E biography of Chan, one commentator states, "It's a

documentary, it's a newsreel of the pain he's willing to endure for his audience". The primacy of Chan's stunts in his films has similarities with Keaton's work, particularly with the long, unedited shots which emphasise the fact that he himself is actually doing the crazy stunts. "Jackie Chan is the special effects" (A&E Biography). Here again arises the suffering of the slapstick actor, but with an acknowledged danger (as with Lloyd's stunts) which complicates the comic world of these films. These films of comic suffering, though not made at the cost of lives, are the product of a real suffering which again calls attention to itself. This knowledge leaves the viewer with the less than guilt-free wincing and laughter which accompanies the witnessing of the comic daredevil doing the audience's bidding.

These films (Natural Born Killers, The Last Action Hero and Jackie Chan's films) disrupt and call into question the desires and moral concerns which necessitate the numerous tactics, detailed throughout this chapter, which make violence palatably comic. The extensive and subtle comic codings of some films and the distinctive comic worlds of others provide a moral assurance which these films suggest is worthy of questioning (this disruption is the subject of chapter six).

There are obviously numerous ways in which comic worlds (and the sometimes similar worlds of action and horror films) can guide and ensure the comic reception of violence. The collection of devices and systems which can code violence as comic, as explored through the plays and films discussed in this chapter, is extensive, flexible and at times subtly effective. With an awareness of such comic tactics we can now explore the acts of comedic violence categorically in order to understand the moral principles and effects of particular types of comedic violence, and of violence involving specific victims or particular parts of the body for the purpose of comedy.

These chapters, grouped by physical action or physical target, are fundamentally moral

categories. These moral divisions are necessary because we judge and view such violence through moral parameters. The remainder of this thesis is a study of moral boundaries, an examination of the moral implications and necessary negotiations of violence that is made comic.

Chapter Two

Verbal Violent Comedy

It is tempting to view comedic violence on a scale of moral severity, where the pie in the face is much more morally excusable than the application of a chainsaw. The realm of the verbal, where violence is used to punctuate or enlarge a joke or jest and where the verbal makes violence funny, will seem at first glance to be the tamest form of violent comedy because it does not inflict irreparable physical harm. However, as this thesis will illustrate, moral standards fluctuate independently of this scale of severity and its hypothetical gradations. And, perhaps more importantly, severity can also be a measure of the moral honesty of comedic violence. Each of the categories and sub-categories of this thesis are essentially moral classifications, as violence to the head or the genitals or the mind each have a different moral gauge by which their appropriateness for comedy is judged. This chapter examines the “tamest” of comedic violence by chronologically itemising the major contributions to verbal comedic violence and, en route, establishing a typology for this category in order to contribute to a final conclusion that provides some sense of the moral boundaries and moral implications of verbal comedic violence.

Many of the examples of comedic violence found throughout this thesis can rightly fit into several of its categories. The gags are explored within the categories for which their inclusion provides significant understanding of the category’s definitions and moral implications, and/or for which they are major contributors to the repertory of gags which dominates that category.

As Chapter One has detailed how violence can be made comic, in the remaining chapters this thesis pursues its examples with the assumption that the reader can now bear in mind that such comic coding or comic worlds shape the reception of this violence. With the receptive

mechanisms of comedic violence now assumed, the remaining chapters will in most cases avoid the classic trap of writing on comedy by not explaining why a particular gag or joke is funny but relying instead upon sufficient description to allow readers to discern the intended humour of the piece themselves.

In most instances the humour examined in this thesis can be tied to surprise and the denial of expectations. For the sake of this thesis (in order to maintain a focus on the typology of the sections and their moral implications), the origins of the laughter-provoking mechanism of comedy can be summarised as the surprise of; shock, honesty, indecorous behaviour, inhuman behaviour, and mechanical and rigid behaviour.

The *Commedia dell' Arte*

In addition to the physical activity usually associated with the *lazzi* of the *Commedia dell' Arte*, the *lazzi* are also full of a verbal wit which is often punctuated by violence. The mildest of this verbal wit comes in the form of humour about violence:

Mezzetin: But I am a gentle, peaceful, and easy-going man; my disposition's as smooth as satin. Why, I lived six years with my first wife without ever having the least little contention -

Isabelle: That is indeed remarkable.

Mezzetin: Except once when I snuffed some tobacco and wished to enjoy my sneeze. She was stupid enough to interrupt me, and I nearly choked to death. I therefore took up a candle-stick and broke her skull for spite. She died a quarter of an hour afterward. (Ducharte, 174)

The mildness is, of course, in the fact that the violence is heard and not witnessed. The violence recounted by Mezzetin is reminiscent of the brutal abuse of the wives in *Ubu Roi* (1896) and the Punch and Judy tradition. However, unlike these other dramas, it is solely the character's attitude toward the violence which is humorous. The violence is not humorous (and therefore not of interest for this study).

Mezzetin's surprising lack of feeling about his acts of violence is a common route to comedy in the *Commedia dell' Arte*. This type of comedy is often found in scenes where

Aeagus: But I've already *hit* you!
 Xanthias: No-o-o! You swear?
 Aeagus: I'll go and hit the other fellow. (*He strikes Dionysus.*)
 Dionysus: When?
 Aeagus: Just *did* it!
 Dionysus: Wouldn't you think I'd *sneeze* or something?
 Aeagus: Funny... I'll try this other chap again.
 Xanthias: What are you waiting for, then? (*Aeagus strikes him.*)
 Oh!
 Aeagus: Why "Oh"?
 It didn't *hurt* you?
 Xanthias: No... Suddenly thought
 'Twas time my Diomean rites were held!
 Aeagus: The man's a marvel!... Now back over here. (*Strikes Dionysus.*)
 Dionysus: Hey!
 Aeagus: *What?*
 Dionysus: Hey look! Yonder's the cavalry!
 Aeagus: Why *weep* about it?
 Dionysus: Onions... Can't you smell?
 Aeagus: No *pain*, by any chance?
 Dionysus: Not in the least!
 Aeagus: I'll step across and take a crack at *him*.
 Xanthias: Golly!
 Aeagus: You mean...?
 Xanthias: My foot... a blasted thorn!
 Aeagus: Now what the deuce...? Well, back again we go.
 Dionysus: O Lord!... *of Delphi and of Delos fair!*
 Xanthias: Aha! *That* stung him! Did you hear?
 Dionysus: Not me!
 Just trying to recall Hipponax' words
 Xanthias: You're getting nowhere. Crack him in the ribs. (Aristophanes, 309-10)

The Xanthias routine recurs throughout violent comedy. It provides one of the few "verbal" moments of violent comedy found in silent films. Within the context of this thesis the scenes can be described as verbal because their comedy arises from a deceptive communication which mirrors the verbal denial of the scene from The Frogs. So, in The Freshman (1925) when Lloyd is covertly having his pants repaired behind a curtain while he talks to a woman, it is the straight face which Lloyd tries to maintain while his tailor repeatedly stabs him with his needle which gives rise to the humour of the scene.

Chaplin makes frequent use of the Xanthias gag. In The Adventurer (1917) a variation

appears with Chaplin and Campbell back-to-back trading back-kicks through a curtain.

Again, the humour arises from each man trying to suppress his emotions and pretend that nothing has happened. Similarly, in The Pilgrim (1923), Chaplin's character must keep his cool as a "cute" little kid repeatedly belts him, culminating with Charlie painfully smiling after the child pokes his backside with a knitting needle.

Chaplin provides another variation of the Xanthias routine in Shoulder Arms (1918), where Charlie, disguised as a German officer, is forced to pretend he does not know his captured friend. Charlie goes through a bizarre hot and cold routine where he throttles and kicks his friend when the other soldiers are looking, and hugs him when they look away. Charlie is no longer ignoring physical pain, but here the gag is removed one step by focusing on the emotional pain of having to hurt a friend.

One of the best variants of the Xanthias routine appears in The Circus (1928) where Chaplin hides from the police by pretending to be part of a fun house display of animatronics. When the villain appears, Charlie sets up a routine where he hits him on the head with a blackjack and then turns and tilts his head back to laugh. Again, the humour arises from someone (the villain), having to pretend that nothing untoward is happening to him. Each blow registers in the dwindling control on the villain's face and his absurd (though necessary), denial of pain and emotion. The humour is enhanced by the mockery of Chaplin's cruel robotic laughter. As the cops scrutinise the two men, the tension fuels the gag to its finale where the villain humorously slumps to the ground, trying to deny his humanity to the very end. Bergson would approve.

Keaton makes little use of the Xanthias gag. His only variation appears to be found in The Garage (1920). In the scene, Keaton and his older partner at the garage are trying to delay a customer whose car is a mess. Keaton signals for the customer's attention, holds the

old partner's face and then boots it, knocking him down. The old man is a willing receiver of this punishment, and, as such, he provokes the laughter customary to the Xanthias routine.

A twist on the Xanthias routine is found in Three Ages (1923), where caveman suitors are being tested by being bonked on the head. All of the men pass the test by not reacting to the violence, but of course when it comes to Keaton's turn, the bonk on the head knocks him down. Thus, try as he might to follow the model of the Xanthias-like test, the comedy arises from his deviation from that routine and the suffering which Keaton is unable to conceal.

Laurel and Hardy make frequent use of a variant on the Xanthias gag with their Tit-for-Tat violence. In these moments each of the characters involved in the violence (not just Laurel and Hardy), stands still and allows his assailant to punish him. Then, when his turn is over his assailant waits patiently and calmly while he now winds up or grabs some object to inflict violence upon him. A major variation from the Xanthias routine here is that the characters do express their pain quite clearly when they are hurt, (their willingness to wait while their assailant thinks of something to do to them is comically absurd, and is addressed in later sections).

The *Commedia dell' Arte* continued

Emotional distance from violence allows and leads to moments of nonsense such as that described by Gordon for the "*Lazzo* of Beating his Father": "The newly-born Zannilet begins beating everyone because he is hungry. By hitting the others, Zanni demonstrates to Zannilet why he should not beat his father" (Gordon, 17). Gags such as these give perfect illustrations of David Madden's observations that: "The *lazzi* is a visual analysis of the logic of absurdity.... In these bursts of *lazzi*, the participants enacted chaos seeking form, they exhibited form courting chaos" (Madden, 60). Chaos is the route to humour for the illogicality which leads to an innocent bystander becoming painfully embroiled in the fights

of the Zannis (“*Lazzo of the Innocent By-stander*” Gordon, 15). This violence to the bystander reaches the height of absurdity in the “*Lazzo of the Cuff*”: “At the conclusion of an argument, Aurelia is hit by Flaminia, who exits. Pantalone, who happens to wander by at that moment, is struck by Aurelia, who then departs. Pantalone then beats the newly-arrived Coviello, who in turn strikes Lelio, who beats Franceschina, who hits Zanni, the last arrival” (Gordon, 15-17). The surprise of each new victim is like that of the audience as the moment breaks their expectations. Then, as a warped logic is established within the *lazzi*, the pleasure comes from the now superior audience (superior in their knowledge of this illogicality and its impending violence), watching a new character collide with the absurd world to which the audience is privy.

At times this world is illogical because of the stupidity of one of the many brainless characters who populate the *Commedia*, as in the “*Lazzo of Counting*”: “Directed to beat Zanni (or Arlechino) ten times, the Captain (or the Turk) loses count repeatedly. As he flogs Zanni, the Captain counts “One, two, three...What comes after three?” Zanni shouts, “Ten!” The Captain begins again, “One, two, three,...No, four comes after three.” He starts the count again” (Gordon, 17). More often than not, however, the stupidity is feigned and more indicative of the cruelty that runs through so many of these *lazzi*.

Absurd cruelty is common to many villains throughout the history of drama. Such a villain is the king in Thomas Preston’s *Cambyses* (1569), who, on being accused of being a drunkard says he will drink and then shoot an arrow at his accuser’s son’s heart, and if it hits he is no drunkard. This threat is carried further when the arrow hits and the king has the accuser’s child’s heart cut out (v. 172-217). These moments are demonstrations of will, of power, and of thought carried to literalness, but generally not of comedy.

Commedia relishes such moments and finds the comedy in its less vicious manifestations.

The cruelty is apparent in such moments as the “*Lazzo of the Shampoo*” (Gordon, 15), where Pantalone’s shampoo is done using a rake. However, *Commedia* was capable of much more elaborate and inventive cruelty such as that found in Harlequin as Doctor, when Harlequin advises the Captain about what to do for his toothache:

Take a pinch of pepper, some garlic, and vinegar, and rub it into your arse, and you’ll forget your pain in no time. [As the Captain is about to depart Harlequin adds:] wait a moment! I know a better remedy than that: take an apple, cut it into four equal parts; put one of the pieces into your mouth, and hold your head in an oven until the apple is baked. I’ll answer for it if that won’t cure your toothache. (Ducharte, 141)

Thus Harlequin exchanges pain for pain in a verbal display of the inventive cruelty and stupidity that was common to the comedy of *Commedia*.

Punch and Judy

The puppetry plays of Europe have many intersections with the *Commedia* tradition. Their mutual and intersecting origins and influences are hotly, yet rarely conclusively debated. It will suffice, since it is not my purpose to provide an exact chronology of comedic violence, to simply note, as does Henryk Jurkowski, that they probably borrowed from each other and that there is proof that they performed together and alongside each other and that often the same companies did both forms of performance (Jurkowski, 104-6). For similar reasons it will suffice to focus on the Punch and Judy tradition as a useful and well explored example of comedic violence in puppetry.

There are several Punch and Judy texts. The origins and the “purity” of the texts are something that is again rarely agreed upon, but as John Stead suggests, we can utilise these “impurities” as a barometer of popular public entertainment: “The Punch-play is a whispering gallery in which linger the voices of centuries of popular entertainment. Here are the ghosts of the *Commedia dell’Arte*, the ghosts of the fair-ground, the rumours of old music and half-forgotten songs, mingling with the catchwords of the pantomime and the song-hits of the

Regency” (Stead, 97).

Punch’s encounter with the Doctor provides an excellent example of the comedic violence found in the play, as well as its similarities to the *Commedia dell’ Arte* in its choice of victims. John Payne Collier’s record of a performance of Piccini’s Punch and Judy, while a hotly debated text because of Collier’s later infamy as a literary forger, nonetheless provides an excellent, and the earliest, example of the comedic violence of the encounter between the Doctor and Punch;

Doctor: Physic, Mr. Punch. (*hits him*) Physic for your hurt.

Punch: Me no like physic: it give me one headache.

Doctor: That’s because you do not take enough of it. (*hits him again*). The more you take, the more good it will do you. (*hits him*).

Punch: So you Doctors always say. Try how you like it yourself.

Doctor: We never take our own physic, if we can help it. (*hits him*) A little more, Mr. Punch, and you will soon be well. (*hits him*)

(During this part of the dialogue, the Doctor hunts Punch to different parts of the stage, and at last gets him into a corner, and belabours him until Punch seems almost stunned)

Punch: Oh, Doctor! Doctor! No more, no more! Enough physic for me! I am quite well now.

Doctor: Only another dose. (*hits him*)

Punch: No more! - Turn and turn about is all fair, you know. (*Punch makes a desperate effort, closes with the Doctor, and after a struggle succeeds in getting the stick from him*) Now, Doctor, your turn to be physicked. (*beating the Doctor*)

Doctor: Hold, Mr. Punch! I don’t want any physic, my good sir.

Punch: Oh, yes, you do; you very bad: you must take it. I the Doctor now. (*hits him*) How do you like physic? (*hits*) It will do you good. (*hits*) This will soon cure you. (*hits*) Physic! (*hits*) Physic! (*hits*) Physic. (*hits*)

Doctor: Oh, pray, Mr. Punch, no more! One pill of that physic is a dose.

Punch: Doctors always die when they take their own physic. (*hits him*) Another small dose, and you never want physic again. (*hits him*) There; don’t you feel the physic in your inside? (*Punch thrusts the end of the stick into the Doctor’s stomach: the Doctor falls down dead, and Punch, as before, tosses away the body with the end of his staff*) He, he, he! (*laughing*) Now Doctor, you may cure yourself, if you can.

(Sings and dances to the tune of Green grow the rushes, O). (Collier, 38-40)

This sequence is indicative of nearly all of Punch’s encounters with the other characters of the puppet-play. The metaphorical play revolving around the word “physic” is similar to that applied to the Beadle:

Beadle: Do you see my staff, sir?

Punch: Do you feel mine. (*Hits him again*). (Robert Brough, 148)

and to the hangman:

Jack Ketch: You must come to prison: my name's Ketch.

Punch: *Ketch* that then. (*Punch knocks down Jack Ketch, and continues to dance and sing*). (Collier, 47)

and to the various manifestations of the black servant character:

Nigger: I cannot get lodgings anywhere.

Punch: I can find you lodgings. Take that! (*Hits him with his stick*). Now stop there. (Michael Byrom, 51)

Punch is always able to turn about his situation in both word and deed. This turnabout is, in many ways the drive of Punch and Judy, or at very least the drive of Punch. The turnabout respects no limits; indeed, Punch relishes the extremes of his revenge as is evident in his thrusting of the stick into the stomach of the Doctor and the gleeful line which accompanies it: "There; don't you feel the physic in your inside" (Collier, 40). Stead is quick to point out that this probing of the boundaries of revenge and spite are what Punch was all about:

Irrepressible, devoid of respect for the virtues, boastful, cowardly, violent, mischievous, and yet utterly what people wanted him to be, Punch always broke the rules. Royalty, patron saints, figures of scripture, modern heroes - all those whom the voice of Education says "Thou shalt revere", Punch derided. He personified the instinct which makes people pull away the chair when Respectability is about to sit down.... In an age in which sentiment was becoming increasingly the thing Punch remained a cynic. In a mannered society, he was instinctively uncouth. Virtue was in the air, so he was naughty. There was one law for the rich, and another for the poor? [sic] He broke them both. (Stead, 64-5)

As Stead suggests, Punch progresses, almost methodically, through a series of sacred figures (including his wife and child - discussed later), and dispatches them without hesitation or moral concern.

Of course, Punch is not without his excuses for what he does, and his absolutely self-righteous justification is part of his appeal. There is, however, an element of truth in his excuses:

Jack Ketch: Mr. Punch, you're a very bad man. Why did you kill the Doctor?

Punch: In self defence.

Jack Ketch: That won't do.

Punch: He wanted to kill me. (Collier, 47)

Punch is right. Many of his encounters with the other characters come to violence because he chooses to defend himself. While his initial murder of his child should be enough to remove any sympathy for him and provide cause enough for all that befalls him, there is a moment in each encounter where Punch is severely beaten to the point where sympathy for him arises and a reversal (as found in the Doctor encounter), is desired by the audience. There is a similar point in the beginning of the play where Punch is trying to comfort his child, and similarly befriend the dog Toby, and he is unsuccessful and punished by a bite from the dog and a wail from the child. His frustration, while extreme and too quickly activated, is nonetheless understandable.

John Stafford suggests that Punch is a hero whose only crime is his independence:

“Punch is the most generous fellow there is; a carefree independent fellow. He doesn't want security or comfort; he just wants to live his own life, think what he likes, and sing in the streets. And the only reason he gets into trouble is because so many people try to stop him doing just this” (Byrom, xii). Stafford is a contemporary Punch-man, and it should be noted that contemporary Punch shows have significantly softened Punch's violence and vitriol.

However, there is much to what he says about Punch's independence, and this seems to be his likely audience appeal and route to sympathy during his moments of comedic violence.

Many puppet scholars have stressed the importance of the time of Punch's popularity in shaping his basic character:

The hand puppet Punch was a product of his time: not by chance was he an anarchist who destroyed the representatives of social institutions and figures of authority, offering a special catharsis to all who were unhappy with the oppressive regime of Victorian society, where most elements of life were well organised and controlled for the sake of the Kingdom and empire, and for all the middle-class ideals. (Jurkowski,

305)

And so, when Punch encounters the confident power of the Beadle, he achieves the desirable, for the audience, by verbally and physically inverting the figure's power:

Beadle: Do you know who I am, sir? Do you know that I have got an order in my pocket to lock you up, Punch?

Punch: And I have got one in my pocket to knock you down! (*Does so*). (Byrom, 43)

Jurkowski and Stead's assertions are easily accepted when they apply to the very obvious figures of power like the Beadle, and the hangman, and the Doctor. However, Punch's interactions with the black servant complicate his morally safe "anarchist of the people" image. His beating and murder of the servant can find motivation and defence within Jurkowski and Stead's destruction of figures of power easily enough, as the servant is there on his master's behalf; but what is not easily digested into this clarification is Punch's special mockery and threat of the servant:

Punch: Do you call this a bell? (*patting it*). It is an organ.

Servant: I say it is a bell, a nasty bell.

Punch: I say it is an organ. (*striking him with it*) What you say it is now?

Servant: An organ, Mr. Punch.

Punch: An organ? I say it is a fiddle. Can't you see? (*offers to strike him again*)

Servant: It is a fiddle.

Punch: I say it is a drum.

Servant: It is a drum, Mr. Punch. (Collier, 41)

Punch plays a similar word game with Scaramouche (as does Petruchio with Kate - "Nay, then you lie: it is the blessed sun" The Taming of the Shrew, IV.v.1-25); however, it is only with the servant that Punch maintains and glories in his superior position as a kind of torture. Considering that he kills everyone he encounters, this might seem like splitting hairs, but here the verbal torture game is a moment of cruelty, like that of his treatment of his wife and child, in that it can not fit into anyone's description of Punch as a political hero of the masses, and thus weakens the moral stability of his position as a perpetrator of comedic violence.

There is, indeed, much in Punch and Judy that feels like cruelty for cruelty's sake. The plays often present a possible conflict and then tease the audience with its possibility, until, presumably, much to their satisfaction, it delivers:

Scaramouche: (*arrives with his stick*) You have been beating and ill-using my poor dog, Mr. Punch.

Punch: He has been biting and ill-using my poor nose. - What have you got there, sir?

Scaramouche: Where?

Punch: In your hand?

Scaramouche: A fiddle.

Punch: A fiddel! What a pretty thing is a fiddel! - can you play upon that fiddel?

Scaramouche: Come here, and I'll try.

Punch: No, thank you - I can hear the music here, very well.

Scaramouche: Then you shall try yourself. Can you play?

Punch: (*coming in*) I do not know, 'till I try. Let me see! (*takes the stick, and moves slowly about, singing the tune of the "Marche de Marseillaise". He hits Scaramouche a slight blow on his high cap, as if by accident.*)

Scaramouche: You play very well, Mr. Punch. Now, let me try. I will give you a lesson how to play the fiddle. (*takes the stick, and dances to the same tune, hitting Punch a hard blow on the back of his head.*) There's sweet music for you.

Punch: I no like you playing so well as my own. Let me again. (Collier, 25-7)

Punch then knocks Scaramouche's head right off, in a move which the audience must find very satisfying after they have been teased by the suspense of the verbal interplay and near physical interaction of the two characters.

George Speaight suggests that the Punch play serves a noble purpose through its appeal to our crueller instincts:

Why do we laugh? We do not know. This is a mystery of the human soul. Perhaps the spectacle of his fierce assaults releases from our inner consciousness aggressive primitive hidden repressions; and the devil's issue out of our lips in gales of laughter. Certain it is that Punch fulfils some deep seated instinct of human nature, that his little drama has always acted as a cathartic agent upon society. The man who laughs at Punch beating Judy is all the less likely to beat his own wife, and the child who laughs at Punch killing the constable is all the less likely to trouble the policeman round the corner. (Speaight, History, 199)

Certainly, Punch does what we want him to do. But whether Speaight's suggestion that the play's comedic violence acts as some release or salve (a common view of comedic violence),

is unverifiable and I would suggest inconsequential as far as the Punch tradition is concerned. What is important is that audiences wanted him to be this way. This implication of audience desire is supported by his history and popularity and, most importantly, the play's ending. Audiences do not condemn Punch and they do not wish him to be punished, and so he isn't.

Punch's final defeat of the devil feels like a hyperbolic echo of his encounter with Jack Ketch the hangman. Punch's encounter with Ketch is an excellent example of the impulses and effects of verbal comedic violence. First is the use of humour as power. We have seen this effect throughout the play in Punch's many demonstrations of power over other characters, most notably the black servant.

Next for Punch is the pun which mocks or finds humour in the misfortunes of someone who is the victim of violence, here the hanged hangman: "Why, the poor fellow fell in the water and I have hung him up to dry" (Byrom, 55). This humour is a route to mockery (almost always for the purpose of belittlement), something that has become very important for comedic violence in recent action films. Here, Punch's cruelty is able to extend its influence even past the hangman's death, through his trivialization of his death by making it the subject of a mild pun. This is usually the humour of an extremely cruel villain, as found in William Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus when Aaron mocks Lavinia's rape and mutilation with a series of crude sexual puns:

Aaron: Why, she was wash'd and cut, and trimm'd, and 'twas
Trim sport for them which had the doing of it. (Titus Andronicus, V.1. 95-6)

Punch's cruelty is to a large extent new or unique to comedy, in that Punch possesses the cruelty usually forbidden a protagonist of a popular narrative. The popularity of Pulcinella and other characters of the *Commedia dell'Arte* has paved the way for such a morally ambiguous character to possess the focus and interests of the audience.

Punch's form of cruel verbal mockery can be most effective when it is established before

a forecasted act of violence, such as the moments where the audience eagerly observes

Punch's trickery of the hangman:

Jack Ketch: Now, Mr. Punch, no more delay. Put your head through this loop.

Punch: Through there? What for?

Jack Ketch: Aye, through there.

Punch: What for? I don't know how.

Jack Ketch: It is very easy: only put your head through here.

Punch: What, so? (*Poking his head on one side of the noose*).

Jack Ketch: No, no, here!

Punch: So, then? (*poking his head on the other side*)

Jack Ketch: No so, you fool.

Punch: Mind, how you can fool: try if you can do it yourself. Only shew me how, and I do it directly.

Jack Ketch: Very well; I will. There, you see my head, and you see this loop: put it in, so. (*putting his head through the noose*)

Punch: And pull it tight, so! (*he pulls the body forcibly down, and hangs Jack Ketch*) Huzza! Huzza! (Collier, 49-50)

From the start, it is obvious what is going to happen (particularly for an audience schooled in the Punch tradition) and Punch's trickery, like all of his encounters, becomes a verbal tease which dances about the violence which we have come to expect and enjoy. This form of tease for the audience is common in revenge plots where the audience waits in anticipation of the villain's comeuppance. The anticipation of this moment in Punch and Judy is similar to that of a Titus as he offers an unsuspecting Saturninus his sons to eat:

Saturninus: What, was she ravish'd. Tell who did the deed.

Titus: Will't please you eat? Will't please your highness feed? (Titus Andronicus, V. iii. 53-4)

These become jokes for the audience who are equipped with all the knowledge to make these moments tension-filled. The verbal tease of tension is probably most apparent when words become a trigger which will unleash the violence, as in the following encounter between

Punch and Toby's master:

Proprietor: Now, you don't begin till I say "time". (*Punch knocks Jones down*).

Mr. Punch, that wasn't fair.

Punch: Why, you said "time".

Proprietor: I didn't.

Punch: What did you say, then?

Proprietor: I said, "You don't begin till I say "time".

Punch: There! You said it again. (*knocks Jones down again*). (Brough, 153)

This moment recalls the stoning scene in Monty Python's Life of Brian, where the word "Jehovah" is capable of launching a barrage of well-aimed rocks at the speaker. Both scenes set up the imminent action like a coiled spring, making the verbal the exciting and comically loaded trigger for the violence and the release of tension.

It is frequently the verbal accompaniment of these acts of violence that makes them seem all the more brutal. While Punch's murder of his child seems severe, it is his reaction to his violence which morally complicates the humour of Punch and Judy:

Judy: Where's the boy?

Punch: The boy?

Judy: Yes.

Punch: What! Didn't you catch him?

Judy: Catch him?

Punch: Yes; I threw him out of window. I thought you might be passing. (Brough, 148)

Punch's levity and unrepentant reaction to his murders is the great challenge facing any analysis of his character. Certainly there are special rules and reactions for the physical world of puppets (as addressed in Chapter One), but Punch's reactions to everything are so unconcernedly selfish:

Jack Ketch: But you must come out. Come out and be hanged.

Punch: You would not be so cruel.

Jack Ketch: Why were you so cruel as to commit so many murders?

Punch: But that's no reason why you should be cruel, too, and murder me. (Collier, 49)

Admittedly, Punch endures many beatings throughout the play and he has unusual reactions to the violence inflicted upon him: "Softly, I say, softly. A joke's a joke!" (Collier, 32). His words point to the reaction to the violence that the play intends, for there is no punishment of Punch. He lives on to continue his selfish and murderous existence. When the beadle from

a script of the 1940's demands that Punch show contrition with the words, "Little boys and girls, I have been a very bad man and I am going to suffer" (Byrom, 63), no one in the audience demands or desires this of Punch, and pointedly, this is where he hangs the beadle. Perhaps the play suggests that, by this moment, such a request is misplaced in such a tradition, and indeed, it would be, were it done.

John Stead has noted that, "he is the hero of the only morality play that has an immoral ending" (Stead, 147). There are many immoral protagonists: Richard III, Faustus, and Don Juan to name the obvious, but by the end of all their plays, good is restored and the protagonists die. Punch is more akin to an action hero who must take on a series of difficult challenges, and, like nearly all popular action heroes, he must live on to carry out his assault on all that is sacred. Scott Cutler Shershow in quoting Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant's An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology,³¹ has suggested that Punch's popularity is an underhanded political necessity: "The canonisation and celebration of Punch as the authentic voice of the popular finally offers, in Bourdieu's words, little more than "a sham inversion of dominant values," which produces "the fiction of a unity of the social world, thereby confirming the dominated in their subordination and the dominant in their superordination" (Shershow, 175). Shershow's suggestion is applicable to nearly all popular entertainment narratives. They offer the fantasy of rebellion and subversiveness but maintain it as a subject suitable only for fantasy. There are, in these popular narratives, subversive moments when an audience as individuals, recognises and admits that they all think the subversive thought (desire the takedown of an authority figure for example), laugh in recognition and admittance with the group, and then as a group dismisses and dispels the effect of the subversive, with a laugh. In this way the potentially subversive comedic

³¹ U. of Chicago Press, 1992.

violence is kept safely contained within the world of the narrative, and therefore within the world of fantasy.

UBU ROI

Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* is another "safe" exploration of comedic violence. While much of its initial audience did not think so (because of how they felt assaulted and targeted by the play – to be discussed later), *Ubu Roi*, through its absolute preposterous extremes, is able to make violence comfortably comic.

The most exciting shock of the play is the character of Ubu himself: like Polchinelie and Punch before him, he is possessed by a cruelty and selfishness which he sees no reason to hide. Jarry's interest in puppetry and its desired connections to *Ubu Roi* are discussed by most critics of the play, but what is of major interest here, in a discussion of the verbal violence of the play, is the child-like selfish honesty which is common to all these characters, but seems to reach a peak with Ubu: "With this system I shall soon have made my fortune, then I'll kill everybody and go away" (Jarry, 76). Judith Cooper concurs: "Ubu is basically an overgrown child, although a malicious one, and as such evokes in all of us the mirage of a return to a state of primeval innocence" (Cooper, 68). It would be a mistake, however, to focus on the childishness of Ubu's honesty, for what is most important is the fact that, for an audience, Ubu's intentions are always shockingly clear and unrestrained: "Ubu is the personification of all our baser instincts and negative qualities" (Claude Schumacher, 41).

Keith Beaumont has suggested that these are all qualities which are meant to be perceived negatively by an audience: "Jarry is inviting us to laugh at the grotesque stupidity of Mankind as well as deploring its moral ugliness" (Beaumont, 116). Surprisingly, Beaumont seems to miss the point that it is these very qualities which appeal to an audience. Linda Klieger Stillman describes their appeal thus: "He symbolises absolute freedom from society's

regulations. Like a child, Ubu can be engagingly repulsive.... He upsets and disgusts his spectators, who nevertheless find themselves rooting for this anti-hero” (Stillman, 44).

Stillman, however, does not feel that Ubu’s appeal is without consequence for an audience: “King Ubu presented a ritual of psychic unveiling, forcing the audience to confront the images and the discourse of their unconscious” (Stillman, 57-8). Stillman suggests that this psychic unveiling is essential to the appeal and effect of comedic violence: “Black humour derives from the triumphant release of man’s repressed double. It is for this reason that the belly-laughs Ubu elicits are tempered by an uneasy titter. Like the clown, Ubu embodies man’s transcendent potential, his liberty, but also his alarming inhumanity” (Stillman, 53). Cooper suggests that this laughter places an audience in a somewhat guilty allegiance with Ubu:

By the honest admission of his own vices, by his very enjoyment of them, Ubu is forcing us into complicity with him.... As grotesquely monstrous as Ubu is, we cannot help recognising our basic identity with him and admitting that he is merely the exaggeration of our own secret vices and desires. Ubu seems to be aware of this fact; he mocks us while we are mocking him. (Cooper, 71)

It is this accusation of complicity, or the assumption of complicity, that would create the scandal which accompanied the first production of the play: “Jarry’s audience in 1896 was right to feel itself somehow vaguely threatened by the play and its performance for the “anarchic” humour, as it has been called, of Ubu Roi was intended deliberately to shatter the cosily coherent, rationalistic view of the world of his contemporaries - and of many of our own” (Beaumont, 118).

Ubu Roi possesses many of the standard verbal plays on comedic violence. Perhaps foremost is the almost cheeky, unfeeling way in which Ubu pronounces all his threats of violence: “We’ll have the infantry on foot at the bottom of the hill to receive the Russians and kill them a bit” (Jarry, 103). Ubu’s order to “kill them a bit” is indicative of the way in which

all his threats attempt to remove the logic of the body. This removal of logic is echoed in one of Ubu's favourite expressions "torture and decapitation of the neck and head" which separates and objectifies the intended victim. Both of these lines remove any feelings (from the body parts and the person), that anyone (audience included), might have for the characters being assaulted. And, as Bergson has pointed out (and we have discussed in Chapter One), this absence of feeling is key to nearly all laughter (Bergson, 62).

Ubu makes the sort of threats of violently literalized metaphor and word play which are common in much of the verbal comedic violence which precedes Jarry: "Listen well, or these gentlemen will cut off your earens" (Jarry, 74-5). What is original, however, is the mocking politeness and delicacy with which Ubu sometimes makes such pronouncements:

I have the honour to announce to you that in order to enrich the Kingdom I'm going to have all the nobles put to death and help myself to their property (Jarry, 63).

The inappropriate politeness, wit and eloquence, forecasting similar moments in British dramas like Kind Hearts and Coronets (1949) and One For the Road (1984), mocks the conventions of manners and ultimately mocks the feelings of his victims and, pointedly, those in the audience who would care for them.

Additionally there is comic appeal in the absurdity of some of Ubu's threats. While Ubu can say something as vicious as "I'll cut you to pieces" (Jarry, 62), this is just as likely to be followed by "I'll tread on your toes" (Jarry, 25). In Ubu's eyes, as with those of a child, these threats are equally vicious.

The last item of interest amongst Ubu's verbal comedy is the barrage of insults which accompanies his final battle with Bougrelas:

Bougrelas: (*striking him*). Take that, coward, vagabond, braggart, miscreant, mussulman!

Ubu: Take that, Polognard, drunkard, bastard, hussar, tartar, dozener, cozener, liar, savoyard, communard!

Mere Ubu: (*beating him as well*). Take that swindler, porker, traitor, play-actor,

perjurer, dog-robber, bolster. (Jarry, 152-3)

This is the beginning of a long tradition of verbal comedic violence which is alive and well today in the trade of insults of such action films as Die Hard (1988) and Commando (1985). The scene with the French knights in Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1974) all but replicates its extremes and its absurdities. The humour of the absurd insults is easily understood, but what is not is the combination of insult and violence which has become so popular and almost necessary in today's action films. It raises the difficult question, important for this entire chapter, of whether the violence adds to the comic insult or the comic insult to the violence. In Ubu Roi's case the decision is difficult. The violence is so rampant in the play that any variation seems to make it more effectual, and in some ways makes the insults the more affecting attack. However, the play and the character of Ubu have such little concern for decorum and rules that it is difficult imagining the characters caring about absurd name-calling when there are skulls to be split. Ultimately Ubu, both play and character, are narratively concerned with power, and Ubu has proven how unimportant names and titles are by dispatching anyone who possesses one. In this instance it is violence which wins out in importance, and comic insults can only add to its effects.

Silent Film Comedy to The Three Stooges

Verbal comedy in silent films is rare for the obvious reason that they generally contain little or no dialogue. In Arbuckle's Out West (1918), Buster Keaton has a moment of verbal humour which plays into the usual flippant attitude towards the serious in order to provoke its laughs: in the short, a bartender is shot during a hold-up and Keaton immediately (and stonefacedly), flips up a "Bartender Wanted" sign.

Another moment of verbally violent humour appears in Fatty's Faithful Fido (1915) when a character, in a moment reminiscent of Rozencrantz and Guildenstern's comeuppance,

arrives on the scene with a sign which states “Have the wearer of this sign well choked”. As with other verbal humour, the shock of the juxtaposition of the pleasant (the decorum of the letter), with the unpleasant provokes the laughter.

In his silent films, Chaplin employs a similarly comic “improper” attitude for violence: in a scene from The Immigrant (1917), four or five waiters beat up a customer and then say to Charlie “He was ten cents short”, with the help of an inter-title. There are other similar moments in his films, such as Hynkel’s line in The Great Dictator (1940): “Schultz, you need a vacation, fresh air, exercise. I shall send you to a concentration camp”. There is, of course, a great difference between these last two jokes. The concentration camp joke of The Great Dictator is a sick joke about violence and its consequences. In The Immigrant, the waiter’s comment shifts our view of the rough justice as we realise that Charlie is in the same boat as the unfortunate customer. The joke is indicative of the focus of this chapter in that it is the verbal which makes the violence of the scene comedic.

A similar comic effect is achieved in The Great Dictator when the scientist unsuccessfully demonstrates his bullet-proof vest (and is shot dead), prompting Hynkel to say “far from perfect”. It is Hynkel’s comment which allows the violence to be viewed comically. Similarly, when a second scientist jumps out of the window and falls to his death demonstrating his compact parachute, it is Hynkel’s “Herring, why do you waste my time like this” which secures the comedic reception of the scene with his surprising complete lack of concern. Clausius, however, does not feel that the humour is so simple: “We realise the incongruity between the actual deaths and Hynkel’s resigned irritation; the incongruity is not merely humorous, however; it reveals itself as the symptom of the evil which completes and sustains the incongruity” (Clausius, 128). Nearly all the sick and violent humour of The Great Dictator possesses a morose echo because of the realities which the film comedifies;

however, within the logic of this scene, the comedy does not comment on the nature of evil, like some of the more explicit moments of the film, it is strictly about Hynkel's uncaring attitude.

There are other kinds of comic disruption found in the verbal comedic violence of Chaplin's films. In Shoulder Arms (1918) Charlie nonchalantly shoots over a trench and puts a chalk mark for each kill he makes (one for each shot). Notably, in both the war comedies the severe violence occurs off screen (the two deaths of the scientists and the five of the trenchmen). A decorum is observed for these more severe situations, at this time, in order to explore their comic sides. When he gets his hat shot off he erases a mark, shoots again and then remarks it. While this moment of comedy is not strictly verbal, it does fall into this category, as each chalk mark acts as an utterance. The comedy, founded on these deaths, is provoked by the disruption of the expectation which Chaplin's verbal pattern initiates.

The comedy which arises from the levity with which some of the characters of the war comedies embark upon their serious acts reaches its fullest potential in Monsieur Verdoux (1947). Verdoux's light-hearted and fastidious airs comically oppose the seriousness of his actions: "It was then I became occupied in liquidating members of the opposite sex... The career of a Bluebeard is by no means profitable. Only a person with undaunted optimism would embark on such an adventure". Monsieur Verdoux is full of similar moments, which combine incongruous positive and negative traits for comic effect.

The key to most of the comedy of Monsieur Verdoux, however, is the irony which the privileged audience finds in Verdoux's constant double entendres. The irony is rampant in the dialogue which surrounds Annabella's accidental thwarting of Verdoux's plans, but it only truly comedically caps violence in a phone call which immediately follows the off-screen killing of Lydia: "No, I won't be in Paris for some time.... I have one or two matters to clean-

up first”. All the irony comes from Verdoux in a manner that, while diegetically motivated, feels deliciously conscious of the audience (and indeed, Verdoux addresses the audience repeatedly – a topic which is discussed in chapter six). His comments to his son are ironic winks at our privileged knowledge and poke at the possible fallacies behind good parenting stereotypes: “Peter, don’t pull that cat’s tail. You have a cruel streak - I don’t know where you get it... you play too rough. Remember, violence begets violence”. Verdoux’s partly sympathetic family scenes, with his crippled wife and lovely boy, are carefully constructed comic jabs at the audience which wants to pigeon-hole him.

The irony reaches its full writerly sadism when one of Verdoux’s neighbours asks “how long’s he going to keep that incinerator going?” Mast notes: “Chaplin’s comically finicky character informs us how to view the grisly activities in his incinerator” (Mast, 10). And, indeed, he does. The constant audience-aware irony, the glances to the audience, and the final direct address, all stress the performance of this character. This is a performance tailored to naughty provocation which, much like Punch, smiles all the while that it laughs both with, and at, its audience.

Another type of verbal humour occurs in The Kid (1921) during the fight with the bully when the woman says “Remember - if he smites you on one cheek, offer him the other”, whereupon Charlie belts him in the face. As Mast says, “Turning the other cheek would make great sense - if life weren’t life” (Mast, 94). Charlie’s disruption and denial of the trite biblical aphorism provokes much of the comedy, but as well, it is rooted in a favourite of verbal comedic violence, that of literalising the figurative. So, when the bully offers him the other cheek, Charlie comically destroys the moral with the reality of a brick.

One is reminded in such scenes of the playful metaphorising which happens throughout the *Commedia dell’ Arte*. Indeed, such a moment occurs in The Vagabond (1916) when the

gypsy scratching her messy hair is offered a rake by Charlie. Here, the absurd hyperbole of “The *Lazzi* of the Rake” resurfaces in the silent comedies.

The usually quiet Keaton adds little to the verbal humour of comedic violence.

However, in *Spite Marriage* (1929), dialogue is used to make violence comic. In the scene, Keaton is about to belt a ship’s engineer. The engineer says that he will get the failing ship’s engine going if nothing is done to him. Keaton leaves him be and waits while he fixes the engine. When the engineer is done Keaton asks: “Are you sure it’s fixed?” When the engineer nods the affirmative, Keaton belts him unconscious. Again, the verbal, with its selfish hidden honesty and telegraphing of the action, makes the violence all the more funny.

In *The Goat* (1921), Keaton translates the typically verbal violent punning into his preferred visual punning in a scene where he dumps a wagon load of rocks onto a policeman and then puts a few flowers on top as if it were the policeman’s grave. Thus again, the pun (here an utterance made visual), raises and caps the humour of the violence with its unnecessary and seemingly contradictory sympathetic gesture.

In the films of W.C. Fields the verbal is used to make violence funny. In *The Dentist* (1932) a golf-player sets up the joke while Fields’ ball is in flight by saying: “This is certainly a great game for your health”. The ball, of course, hits him in the head right after the line. Fields provides a capper for the joke after the victim has been dragged off the green, by saying “Move those teeth, they’re in my line”. Fields’ attitude towards the suffering of others is his major contribution to comedic violence. He also specialises in witty shocking asides that bear the threat of violence. In *International House* (1933) Fields, having just arrived in China and had an idiotic conversation with a frustrating character played by Gracie Allen, asks “What’s the penalty for murder in China?” He is the comically shocking, uncaring, unsympathetic anti-hero *par excellence*.

The Three Stooges are fond of similar forms of verbal/violent irony. In Three Uncivil Warbrides (1946) the Stooges make a toast to their wives “To a long and happy life”; within minutes, they are being strangled by their wives for having spilled drinks on them. The Stooges also make use of the usual literalization of metaphors as in All the World’s a Stoooge (1941) when Moe tells Curly that a dental patient wants “to be knocked out”. Curly promptly picks up an improbably handy mallet and bashes the patient on the head, thus rendering him unconscious. Grips, Grunts and Groans (1937) has a similar literalising moment when, in the middle of a wrestling match, Curly is told to pin his opponent down and immediately sets about poking the wrestler with a pin. In the world of the Three Stooges metaphors are immediately and surprisingly (surprising in their seemingly limitless ability for literalising and the outrageous stupidity of their choices) converted to the Stooges’ common parlance: violence.

Absurdism and Surrealism

Absurdism’s main contribution to comedic violence was through its extension of moral possibility. The moral assault of absurdism is found in the verbal antics of characters in such plays as Firebugs (1958) and The Bald Soprano (1956). The Bald Soprano sets about destroying all codes of verbal conduct, but it is not until Firebugs that such verbal honesty enters the realm of verbal comedic violence. It is the arsonist Eisenring’s constant, almost mocking, honesty with his intended victim which provides most of the humour of Firebugs:

Eisenring: I sent him out for some sawdust.

Biedermann: Sawdust?

Eisenring: It helps spread the fire.... You haven’t seen a detonator cap? (48-9)

This constant irrational honesty and the victim’s absurdly accommodating reactions make the eventual arson which concludes the play especially comic. It is this defiance of expectation which is absurdism’s greatest contribution to comedic violence. This defiance of expectation

is found in the black-comedies of England and then carries on in more physical and surreal terms in cartoons and in the work of the Monty Python troupe.

Cartoons

The Looney Tunes cartoons seized upon the possibilities of cartoon comedic violence with the greatest success. In Plop Goes the Weasel (1953), the same denial of expectation found in Firebugs again surfaces when the farm dog, hearing the screams of Foghorn Leghorn, says to the audience "I can't stand to hear the big shnook suffer like that", and then promptly dons earmuffs. Here, the cartoon comically plays upon the audience's morals when it acknowledges our sympathies and then promptly ignores them.

The expectations of the characters of these cartoons also provide a route to comedy through violence, as when Daffy Duck cockily states to the audience, "Little does he realise I have on my disintegration proof vest" when looking down the barrel of a disintegration gun in Duck Dodgers in the 21st and a Half Century (1953). The verbalised confidence adds to the humour when all but the vest is disintegrated.

The verbal joking which has become the usual accompaniment of violence in action films is found in Duck Dodgers when Porky Pig says "Happy b-dee, b-dee, birthday, you thing from another planet, you" and hands the Martian a lighted stick of dynamite which explodes right after the Martian says "Why thank-you".

Cartoons also used the comedic literalization which was so common in early film comedy: in Feather Dusted (1955), Leghorn says "I'm a battleship. Sink me" to his young protégé and is promptly sunk by the boy's fleet of dangerous little toys (of course, Leghorn sinks like a ship). Firmly within this tradition is the popular invitation to a belting found in such lines as "Put me where I belong" (Plop goes the Weasel), and "What's up sister? Out with it" (Lovelorn Leghorn 1951).

Rabbit Seasoning (1952) introduces a variant on the invitation to violence with the favourite of Bugs Bunny: the pronoun reversal:

Bugs: He doesn't have to shoot you now.

Daffy: He does. I demand you shoot me now. (*Daffy is shot.*)

And later,

Daffy: Pronoun trouble: It's not you, it's me. (*Daffy is shot.*)

And later still,

Bugs: Shoot him here or wait till you get home.

Daffy: Oh no you don't. Shoot me at home. Nyah. (*They walk off. The sound of a gun. Daffy returns obviously shot.*) You're despicable.

Each time, the verbal set up makes the violence all the more comic.

This form of comedic accompaniment for violence reaches its apex in Duck Dodgers in the 21st and a Half Century, when Daffy uses a gun whose bullet stops inches from the Martian and unscrolls a message. The Martian uses a weapon labelled "answer gun" that similarly stops inches from Daffy, but upon opening, rather than receiving a message, Daffy is shot. To complete the cycle, Daffy sends back another message bullet which says "Ouch".

Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (1988) continues the verbal tradition in cartoons with an inventive moment of verbal/violence conflation when Valiant is doing his rhyming vaudeville routine and seems to end out of rhyme:

Goon: Nose? But that don't rhyme with walls.

Valiant: No, but this does. (*He kicks him in the balls.*)

The Simpsons introduce to cartoons a more sophisticated level of humour which comments on popular culture. A verbal example of such comic commentary can be found in a scene where a World War II soldier is seen pulling the pin of a hand-grenade and beginning a long oath: "This one's for you Kaiser Wilhelm, from the boys in company....". The camera pans to the left, an explosion is heard and then a pair of boots fly into frame. The absurdity

of such final oaths of revenge and justice in films of conflict is here comically mocked with a form of reality and violence.

Comedy of Attitude

There is a genre of comedy, which could properly be called comedy of attitude, that exhibits a strain of violent comedy. The defining characteristic of the comedy of these predominantly British films and plays is the “inappropriate” attitude that more often than not these characters have toward morally repugnant violence and death. The strongest initial appearance of this branch of violent comedy is found in the general attitude of the Ealing comedies and never more so than in Kind Hearts and Coronets (1949). The start of the film signals much of what is to follow as an executioner is asked if he’s being kept busy and he replies: “Oh just nicely. Poisoned a baby-farmer at Holloway this morning”. This is tone disruption pure and simple. The executioner’s chipper reply is the polar opposite of what an audience would expect and to some extent desire. Such a disparity of tones is found throughout the film and provides most of its comedy. When the protagonist, Louis Mazzini, talks of “pruning” his family tree “of the dead members”, it is his ability to calmly pun about his murderous plans (rather than the pun) which provokes the strongest laughs. The film is full of such puns and joking: “I was dismissed on the spot. I decided to repay him in kind”, and “I shot an arrow in the air, she fell to earth in Berkeley Square” (as he shoots down an air balloon carrying a relative).

There is a humorously shocking honesty in Mazzini’s discussions of the demise of his family members: “Sometimes the deaths column brought good news, sometimes the births column brought bad. Fortunately an epidemic of diphtheria restored the status quo and even brought me a bonus in the shape of the duchess”. His deadpan demeanour seems unbreakable throughout the film: “I was sorry about the girl but found some relief in the

reflection that she had presumably, during the weekend, already undergone a fate worse than death” (sleeping with a relative he dislikes).

There is also frequent use of irony around the violent events of the film. This irony is present during the vicar’s poisoning: “Your visit has brought me something that I couldn’t expect from any churchman in the country”. The Ladykillers has similarly ironic lines following the fatal fall of one of the men:

“Is he up there?”
 “No, no. He came down.”
 “Is he hurt?”
 “I don’t think he felt a thing”.

Kind Hearts and Coronets riffs off these ironic situations and disruptions of tone, playing for its comedy upon our superior knowledge of events and intentions.

There is a precursor to this type of film comedy, to be found in Arsenic and Old Lace (1944), the filmic adaptation of the Joseph Kesselring play. Much of the film’s comedy arises from the tonal incongruities offered by the well-meaning, sweet old spinsters who kill lonely old men “to help them find peace”. The women’s values are so skewed that they smile with pride when Peter Lorre’s character compares their murders to the evil nephew’s and notes “You got twelve, they got twelve: they’re just as good as you”. Their inability to understand Cary Grant’s character’s reaction to learning of their murders provides spins on the incorrect attitude route to comedic violence:

“I know why he’s so upset”.
 “Why?”
 “He just got married”.

Grant, in a performance of hysteria that is the precursor to much of John Cleese’s work, keeps the disparity of the women’s attitude to their actions prominent. This prominence is attained most often by his extreme reactions to their sweet inability to understand his concern:

Grant: You admit that you poisoned twelve men down there?

Aunt: Yes, but, I wouldn't tell a fib.

Grant's confused distraction comedifies all the violence around him, as when he observes the final battle between the police and his evil brother and calmly comments to a cop who is hitting the brother on the head, "Oh that won't work, I tried... oh it did". His final, seemingly inappropriate dispassionate calm in the centre of all the violence is constantly comic.

Alfred Hitchcock's The Trouble with Harry directs this inappropriate attitude towards a corpse. The film presents a succession of characters, all of whom at one point or other believe they killed Harry, acting inappropriately around his corpse. The corpse is buried and dug up four times and it is kicked to determine his condition "He's dead – that's an unprofessional opinion". A couple courts each other over the corpse and then it is calmly sketched by an artist. Hitchcock even shoots the corpse with an irreverence that is comic. The corpse is shot with its feet hugely dominating the foreground and then the same shot is returned to after the corpse has had its shoes removed. The comedy here all revolves around the comic excitement of the characters' disregard for societal expectations regarding corpses.

The plays of Joe Orton next pick up this strain of comedy most prominently, none more so than Entertaining Mr. Sloane (1964). This play reprises many of the situations popular for these comedies of attitude but the play lets the darker side of this comedy come through. Again, it is the tone of the play which is of comic interest: it is the selfish amorality of normal people, unlike those people that we see in Harold Pinter's plays (notably in The Homecoming), which is always so sinister. Pointedly, Orton has the violence occur early in his plays, thus removing suspense, whereas Pinter's plays are full of deception, uncertainty and the expectation of an ominous surprise. The amorality of Entertaining Mr. Sloane starts gently at first, but after Kemp's murder an attitude arises which is incongruous with what we

would expect. John Lahr correctly positions this comedy of attitude on Sloane, the person that the audience would expect to feel most guilty and disturbed by the events of the play: "Sloane feels no guilt and his refusal to experience shame is what disturbs and amuses audiences" (Lahr, 16). However, this style of comedy is also found in the surprising focus of Ed's concerns: "I'm a citizen of this country. My duty is clear" (Orton, 134). Ed's comical priority here is as a citizen, not a son. The concern is never emotional and this detachment is the prominent source of the comedy. Concern is always misplaced. The shock of this attitude is that it is unusual, but not unreal: "Like all great satirists, Joe Orton was a realist. He was prepared to speak the unspeakable; and this gave his plays their joy and danger" (Lahr, 7).

Entertaining Mr. Sloane also makes use of the obliviousness of Kath to make the violent events of the play additionally comic: "The Dadda won't say anything, dear [he is dead], if that's what's on your mind. He'll keep quiet" (Orton, 130). The irony of Kath's words is also found in some of the punning about the murder:

Kath: Is he in trouble?

Ed: Dead trouble. (Orton, 131-2)

Orton's Funeral Games (1970) also makes use of the sort of misplaced moral concern that is found with the old ladies of Arsenic and Old Lace: "A mutilated corpse isn't something that'd slip my memory. But you young people are heartless" (Orton, 354). Of course, McCorquodale comically forgets to factor into his comments the fact that the corpse which he is speaking of is that of his wife, whom he murdered.

British comportment provides comedy of attitude for The Loved One (1965). The comedy surfaces when a group of English men with a misplaced concern about the British reputation for calm and decorum, comment upon Gielgud's having hanged himself from his diving-board: "Bad form Gentlemen, bad form.... That pool with all those cracks". The

comedy is found in their obvious lack of concern for the deceased and their behaviour's contrast to what we would expect.

Peter Greenaway's Drowning by Numbers (1988) tests the boundaries of outright cruelty in humour by bringing the cruelty to the surface. It has moments of sick mockery: "the loving memory of an unemployed non-swimmer" (for a boyfriend who drowned as a result of the speaker's trickery). But generally it is driven by the mix of misplaced concern and comically disturbing frankness common to these films:

"I didn't kill him, he drowned, I drowned him.... I didn't like him".

"That's not a reason to kill him".

"... Will they give me bail?"

"Well you only had one husband, so you can't drown another, so they might".

The comedy here, like much of that found in Orton, arises from the unexpected brutal honesty of the three women of the film, and the lack of moral concern with which they go about their immoral actions. The women's attitude disrupts societal morality and therefore denies the weight of such morality.

The Monty Python films take the usual inappropriate but shockingly honest and truthful blend of callousness and misplaced concern in the comedy of attitude and approach it with a nod to surrealism. In Monty Python's The Meaning of Life (1983) a sequence about birth presents doctors who are more concerned about their precious machines than their patients. A brutally insensitive post-birth treatment has the head doctor say "frighten it", prompting another doctor to sever the umbilical cord with a butcher knife, followed by "and [now] the rough towels, and isolate it" whereby they place the baby into a small cool chamber. The brutality of this treatment is a surprise, but ultimately it is only an exaggeration of the real insensitivity of some hospital staff; we laugh at the similarity of the extreme to the comically revealed truth.

The extremity of the birth scene from The Meaning of Life is topped by the infamous

crucifixion finale from Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979). Here, Mast's comments about dark comedy are realised in the extreme: "This style of comedy – dark irony; metaphoric, almost allegorical examinations of human and social values; outrageously outlandish or horrifying events presented with the most good-humoured matter-of-factness - is the particular gift of our own century" (Mast, 16). At the conclusion of the film, as Brian is suffering his crucifixion, another character presents a bizarrely positive outlook on all the events in a song which soon has all the other crucifixion victims singing along, kicking their legs and waving their heads to the rhythm of the music:

Cheer-up Brian...
 When you're chewing on life's gristle,
 Don't grumble, give a whistle,
 And this'll help things turn out for the best.

... Always look on the light side of death,
 Just before you draw your final breath.
 Life's a piece of shit,
 When you look at it.
 Life's a laugh and death's a joke it's true.
 You'll see it's all a show,
 Keeping laughing as you go,
 Just remember the last laugh's on you.
 - Cheer up you bugger. Give us a grin.

By destroying the sombre decorum expected for depictions of the crucifixion, the song derides the seriousness of the situation, the sacredness of its significance and that segment of society who would not have it the subject of comedy. "Comedy can only begin at the point where our neighbour's personality ceases to affect us. It begins, in fact, with what might be called a *growing callousness to social life*" (Bergson, 147). This film itself provides enormous support for Bergson's assertion of the unsociability of comedy, and the crucifixion scene, surely one of the most sensitive ever tackled by such incorrect comedy, relies upon the shock of its inappropriateness and its unsociability for its comic appeal.

The disparity of attitudes is the starting point of most British comedy and nothing has

received more attacks and mockery in the Python films than the British tradition of keeping a stiff upper lip in all situations. This attitude is extensively derided in a sequence about the first Zulu War in The Meaning of Life. The piece begins with the narration: "It has always been the calm leadership of the officer class that has made the British army what it is". Immediately we are shown the extensive carnage of a bloody battle and in the middle of the battle a British officer calmly shaving himself. This concern for appearances and comportment and the complete lack of concern for what one would expect of a battle provides the humour for the scene. It is capped by the officer calmly walking through the fighting, saying "excuse me" as his men stop fighting and salute him. Violent stabbing is everywhere, and at one point the officer's servant is stabbed as he is helping the officer dress. The officer calmly takes his jacket from the servant as he falls down dead.

This decorum receives its fullest ribbing in a later scene from the Zulu War: one of the officers is visited by the company doctor because his leg has been bitten off. The scene is a catalogue of false calm and decorum, the officer keeping his sense of humour in an inhuman way:

"Bitten sir, during the night".

"Whole leg gone, eh?"

"Yes".

"How's it feel?"

"Stings a bit".

"Mmm. Well it would, wouldn't it. That's quite a bite you have there".

"Yes, beauty isn't it".

"Any idea how it happened".

"None whatsoever. Woke up right now – one sock too many". (*He is casually flicking through a book*).

"Well we sent for the doctor"

"Hardly worth it"

"Well, yes, better safe than sorry".

The arrival of the doctor continues the show of calm and his dialogue is peppered with the pithy lies which doctors so often tell patients:

“Been in the wars have we? Any headache? Bowel all right? Yes, well let’s have a look at this one leg of yours then eh? Yes, yes, yes. Well this is nothing to worry about. There’s a lot of it about, probably a virus. Keep warm, plenty of rest and if you’re playing football or anything, try and favour the other leg”.

“Oh right-o”

“You’ll be right as rain in a couple of days”.

“So it’ll grow back in a couple of days or so”.

“Well I better come clean with you. It’s not a virus”.

These scenes approach the comedy of attitude with purpose: mocking the inhuman decorum of the British upper-class, their complete ignorance of the real world and its consequences, and by extension their unsuitability as leaders. The distance from real life that the upper-class maintains is made explicit when a soldier comes in and reports the numbers of dead and wounded and the head officer replies: “Yes, well I’ve got a bit of a serious problem here. One of the officers has lost a leg”. Paired with the devastation of the battle scene, this statement becomes a humorous but strong comment against the inhuman priorities engendered by the British class system.

In Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1974) the Python crew turn their comic guns on romantic notions of combat. The scene of Lancelot killing nearly everyone in a castle depends upon his pleasure in the violence for its humour. Every time he starts killing, he gets carried away, starts yelling “Ha ha”, and is backed up by a majestic score seemingly activated by his killing. This is romantic combat made comic by the inappropriateness of its instigation and its victims. As well, the scene mocks the notion of the mannered gentlemanly knight:

Lord: You killed eight knights.

Lancelot: Ah. Oh, yes. Sorry...

Lord: You killed the bride’s father.

Lancelot: Well, I didn’t really mean to.

Lord: Didn’t mean to, you put your sword right through his head.

Lancelot: Oh dear, is he all right?

Again, the morally inappropriate collision of attitudes and actions provokes the laughs in

these scenes.

In the opening scene from And Now for Something Completely Different (1972) the Pythons present another twist on the inappropriate attitude with a fake government reel on “How not to be seen”. In this reel, every time someone steps out from their hiding spot, he or she is promptly shot, thus “demonstrating the value of not being seen”. Eventually, one of those hiding does not expose himself but stays behind his very obvious place of concealment - a lone bush in a field. The bush is blown up and his screams are heard. The next scene presents a problem because there are now three bushes. One after another all three are blown up, with the last one provoking screams and the sight of a body: “Yes, it was the middle one”. The next scene blows up a holiday cabin to which the subjects had run off; it also blows up the neighbour who revealed them, the house he lived in, and the place where he was born. The piece concludes with the narrator sitting at a desk in an open field laughing hysterically, saying “And now for something completely different” and being blown up himself. The deaths of these people for the purpose of this comically pointless public service announcement are all received with a constant comic tension created by the absurdity of the calm and assured narration of the government speaker. This scene thrives upon the comic tension of the absurd and the bizarre presented as absolutely, even officially, and therefore frighteningly, normal.

The Pythons also explore socially unsuitable attitudes in a way which supports Bergson’s assertion that “to these impertinences society retorts by laughter, an even greater impertinence. So evidently there is nothing very benevolent in laughter. It seems rather inclined to return evil for evil” (Bergson, 186). This is perhaps never more evident than in a recurring scene from Monty Python Live at the Hollywood Bowl where a man sings in a serious tone “Never be rude to a nigger, a kike, a spic or a —”, at which point he is blown up.

This scene provides support for one of Bergson's essential tenets that "Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness" (Bergson, 187). This correction (here of the racism espoused by the singer), is precisely what is achieved by the violence in this scene. However, the Pythons are always playing with the tensions of the inappropriate and the extreme, so although the bigot is here mocked and punished there is also a canny manipulation of the tension which arises when racial epithets are used. The explosion provides the comical release of that verbal tension.

And Now for Something Completely Different makes a joke out of the possible impact of humour with the creation of the funniest joke in the world. The man who first comes up with the joke dies soon after he writes it down. His wife, on discovering the joke (thinking it a suicide note), dies as well. The piece now turns into a Pathé war newsreel with the news of the lethal joke: "A joke so deadly it could work at a range of up to fifty yards". Some officers watch from a bomb proof bunker as a private is shown the joke and dies. The joke is translated into German (with the "translators working in joke-proof conditions, working on one word at a time") and shown being used in battle as soldiers run through fields chanting the translation and causing German soldiers to burst into fatal paroxysms of laughter. This is followed by a shot of a field hospital full of bandaged soldiers laughing hysterically. The absurdity of the power of this joke (which we never get to know – though we do hear Hitler's less successful variant: "My dog's got no nose", "How's it smell?", "Awful"), plays upon the slogans for comic success: "knocking them dead", "slaying them", etc. The scene also provides what is perhaps the only "real" instance of verbal comedic violence – though the notion that words and comedy can kill, is, of course, a large part of the absurd humour here.

In The Holy Grail, the Pythons provide a precursor to the verbal insults which often accompany violence in action films. A French knight hurls bizarre insults at the British knights, often as livestock are rained down upon them from their castle: “I fart in your general direction.... Your mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries.... And make castanets of your testicles”. This scene, with the raspberries and face pulling which accompanies it, reveals the pointlessness of the taunts which often accompany such violence, and proves (as with the similar moments in Ubu Roi) that it is action and superiority which matter most to the characters in these situations.

Action Films

The Bond films took the British dominated comedy of attitude and applied it to the action narrative, in the process beginning what was to become a convention of the action genre. A significant part of Bond’s appeal is his ability to remain cool in extreme danger. His cool is often demonstrated by the witty quips he utters after having dispatched a villain: “Egyptian builders” after Jaws knocks blocks down on himself (For Your Eyes Only, 1981), “shocking, positively shocking” after electrocuting a villain (Goldfinger, 1964), “Bon Appetit” after he throws a henchman into a pool of piranhas (You Only Live Twice, 1967), and “I think he got the point” after spearing a villain with a spear-gun (Thunderball, 1965). Bond also incorporates his quips into his violent actions, as in Diamonds are Forever (1971) when he puts a bomb on a villain’s helicopter and says “If God had wanted man to fly...” after it takes off. The explosion punctuates the line perfectly and makes Bond’s “He would have given him wings” all the more funny. Even Bond’s usual calm tie-straightening after winning a fight is a comically cool dismissal of his villains. Bond’s composed commentary is a humorous dismissal and minimisation of his opponents and a reinstatement of his cool supremacy for both him and his audience.

The action film takes the taunting of the French Knights and the coolness of Bond one step further, with its pairing of violence and verbal humour. Nigel Andrews traces the roots of action film jocularity to comic books: “Both the muscle films and their larger brotherhood of comic book movies use dialogue like speech balloons: with a fondness for laconic one-liners, catchy exhortations (“Hasta la vista!”...)” (Andrews, 149). *Die Hard* (1988), because of its verbal humour and its strong simplicity, presents the perfect example for this section of the action films of the eighties. Early in the film there is a moment of verbal comedic violence which is revealing of the psychology behind such humour. One of the terrorists enters the office building recounting a basketball game. He walks up to the security desk and shoots the security guard in the head while punctuating his story with “Boom. Two points”. This joke accompanying the violence points to the real nature of such humour, in that it is a cruel celebration of a victory scored. The same character reverts to a sport metaphor again when celebrating the rocketing of an armoured car: “Oh my god, the quarterback is toast”.

There is also, however, an element of mockery that is important to the comic appeal of such lines. The mocking humour of the villains provides an obvious example of the cruelty in laughter asserted by Bergson:

The pleasure caused by laughter, even on the stage, is not an unadulterated enjoyment; it is not a pleasure that is exclusively aesthetic or altogether disinterested. It always implies a secret or unconscious intent, if not of each one of us, at all events of society as a whole. In laughter we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate.... (Bergson, 148)

Bergson’s comment proves why such humour is so easily paired with violence: violence and humour both seek to humiliate and dominate their victims. With the villains, the mockery signifies their cruelty and inhuman disregard for life and suffering:

“You’ll just have to kill me”.
Hans: “Okay”. (*He shoots him*). “Tony, dispose of that”.

The morally safe comic butts of the good guys, however, allow their mockery to be safely

comic. Molly Haskell states that “Comedy as a personal style is the weapon of the outsider, the defence against the world of normal, happy people from whose ranks he, by reason of his ugliness, smallness, or clumsiness, is excluded” (Haskell, 62). Haskell’s definition points to the surrogate nature of these heroes: they enact, for an audience beset upon by their relative struggles, a fantasy of physical imperviousness, comic superiority and ultimate coolness that is reflected in these heroes’ cool jocularity.

Ultimately the cool of action heroes is demonstrated and defined, as with Bond, by their ability to be calm, witty and suave in the face of danger. So, when a terrorist has a gun pointed at a prone Willis and says “Next time you have the time to kill someone, don’t hesitate”, Willis lets the man finish his line so he can oh-so-coolly reply “thanks for the advice” as he shoots the man, thus negating the villain’s cocky presumption with his own. This cool is contrasted in Die Hard with the bumbling cockiness of the SWAT team who are quickly dealt with by the terrorists. Cool is defined in these films as the nonchalance of the impressive and effective lone outsider.

Mast states that “the great silent comedies revolve about the body and the personality of its owner” (Mast, 23). Mast’s statement is applicable to action films, which are nearly silent but for their monotone quips and Keaton-styled impervious approach to all that besets them. Never is this monotone jesting more obvious than in Commando (1985), which provides a clear view of this sort of violent punning as it is filtered through the film persona of Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger’s films make constant use of terrible puns: “Don’t disturb my friend: he’s dead tired” (about a man he’s just killed and propped up to appear as if asleep)³², “I let him go” (about a man he dropped off a cliff). Again, as with Die Hard, the same sort of punning when done by villains (and there is lots of it in Commando) is shown to

³² This line is similar to Bond’s line about a recently shot villainess in Thunderball, “Do you mind if my friend sits this one out [from dancing] she’s dead [tired]”.

be cruel and excessive by its extreme bloodshed and its inappropriate or un-coded butts.

Schwarzenegger's terrible punning about recently committed acts of violence is made all the more funny by his heavily accented deadpan.

Schwarzenegger's deadpan is particularly comic when delivering terse verbal interjections which accompany a surprise act of violence:

"Ever since you threw me out of your unit I've wanted to pay you back. You know what today is?"

"Pay-day". (*Schwarzenegger shoots him*).

"Remember when I said I'd kill you last, Sully?"

"That's right, Matrix, you did".

"I lied". (*Schwarzenegger drops him off a cliff*).

"And if you want your kid back, then you've got to co-operate. right?"

"Wrong". (*Schwarzenegger shoots him*).

These lines are about set-up and delivery: long-winded set-up followed by curt deadpan

turnabout. Ultimately they correspond to the very simple turn around of contradiction

"Right? Wrong.", followed by violence. This turnabout reaches perhaps its simplest and

most archetypal form in the scene from Commando where Schwarzenegger kills Cook:

(*Cook has a gun pointed at Matrix*). "Fuck you, asshole". (*He pulls the trigger and it clicks, empty*).

Matrix: "Fuck you, asshole". (*Matrix gives him the biggest punch of his life*).

This simple "Fuck you" – "Fuck you" is the violent verbal turnaround pun at its most basic:

essentially it says "You die" – "No, you die". The pleasure of these moments is predicated

upon a moment of concern for the hero, followed by immediate violent and verbal dismissal

of that concern and defeat of the opponent's cocky expectation. And, of course, this

disruption of expectation is at the root of much humour.

Steven Seagal's films make use of the same deadpan humour that has become an institution for these films: In Under Siege 2 (1995) a woman distracts an opponent with her bosom, saying "I broke my bra", and when Seagal belts the man, he adds, "It's to die for". In

this film, however, the humour is used by the villains in a far more comic way than is usual for action films. Toward the beginning of the train-jacking a villain approaches the engineer with a gun hidden from all but our view and says "Someone's been shot". When the engineer says "Where?", the villain reports "Here", as he shoots him. There is a moral freedom in this film that seems to adhere to these types of exchanges even for the villains. Because it is a quick shot (not the "excessive" machine-gun spray of Commando), there is really very little separating the comic moment of this villain from those of Seagal. The audience, because of its superior knowledge of the gun, knows what will happen, and so enjoys the comedy free from any focus on the suffering or wounds of the innocent, though expendable, victim. The victim's expendability is curious. It can be ascribed to his lack of sympathy-evoking screen time. It does seem, however, that this gag, when it is not explicitly coded, now carries its own morality with it, which suggests that these are films whose content is essentially amoral unless otherwise coded. Indeed, perhaps the only thing separating the villains' violent wit from that of the hero is that now it is the villains who are doing the emotionless dead-pan, differentiating their behaviour from Seagal's soft voiced amusement.

Mastering this sort of violent wit is shown as the route to becoming a man (a man here defined as someone who can handle himself in violent situations), through the character of the young male sidekick. In the film the young porter starts off as ineffectual and bumbling and is pointedly contrasted with Seagal's capable daughter. The young man achieves "manhood" when he is able to wittily dispatch a villain:

Bad Guy: Empty out your pockets.

Porter: The only thing I got in my pockets is (*turns and shoots him with a hidden pistol*), yo ass.

Thus, within the action film, it is now necessary to achieve superiority through a witty style.

This witty style reaches ridiculous (though not for the audience) heights when Seagal

makes a bomb (employing a tone-breaking swizzle-stick to mix the chemical ingredients), programs a small computer timer for it, and then later throws it to a villain. When the villain catches it, he reads the liquid crystal display which shows the countdown and reads “You be fucked”, at which point the bomb explodes, killing the villain. Thus, this use of a capping joke to declare superiority functions above any concern for reality in this already unreal world (unless we are to believe that Seagal’s character is so cool that he could program the message before throwing the bomb).

This action hero cool is comically undercut in Demolition Man (1993), in which Sylvester Stallone’s tough-guy character has been reprogrammed with various calming social habits, one of which is knitting. This undercutting reaches comic prominence after a car crash, when the female partner is worriedly looking at Stallone’s damaged jacket for wounds and he replies “Don’t worry, I’ll fix it up with a needle and thread later”, at which point both the characters halt in recognition of Stallone’s character’s comic juxtaposition of seemingly incongruous attitudes.

As in the Bond films, the comic quips of the action heroes provide a mocking finality to the violence and lives of the villains. In Die Hard Maclean says “Happy trails, Hans”, when the head terrorist falls to his death. “Happy Trails” was the weekly parting song for Roy Rogers’ television show: “Happy trails to you, until we meet again...” Roy Rogers is the cowboy alias adopted by Maclean for his walkie-talkie communications with the terrorists. In Total Recall (1990), after Richter, who is trying to pull Schwarzenegger down to a fall with him, has his arms cut off by an elevator, Schwarzenegger throws the arms down after him and adds, “See you at the party, Richter”. The final verbal jab declares, secures and adds to the superiority of the hero of the frequently comic action film.

True Lies (1994) has the usual Schwarzenegger-styled witticisms such as “Here’s my

invitation” (as he presses a detonator for some huge explosions). In a fight scene he says to his opponent “here, cool off” as he bashes his head into a urinal and then flushes it. But the film also offers an inventive twist on verbally violent comedy in a scene where Schwarzenegger has been given truth serum:

Torturer: Is there anything you want to tell me before we start?

Schwarzenegger: Yeah, I’m going to kill you pretty soon.

Torturer: Really. How exactly?

Schwarzenegger: First I’m going to use you as a human shield, then I’m going to kill those guards over there with the pallas and trocar [surgical instruments] on the table and then I was thinking about breaking your neck.

Torturer: And what makes you think you can do all that?

Schwarzenegger: You know my handcuffs?

Torturer: Mmm?

Schwarzenegger: I’ve picked them.

There is a pause for humour’s sake and then Schwarzenegger does exactly everything he said (with some gruesome embellishments). The calm mechanical honesty, in its perfect description of what Schwarzenegger will do, makes the actual violence comic.

Terminator 2 (1992) presents a semi-parodic approach to verbal comedic violence because of the fact that the terminator has a programmed artificial intelligence. There is an element of genre awareness when John teaches the terminator to swear, in a scene of what is essentially action hero programming:

John: You can try combinations.

Terminator: Chill-out dick wad.

And, true to form, the terminator applies this sort of cool, flip attitude when engaged in violence: “*Hasta la vista, baby*” (as he shoots the frozen T2). It is no surprise that, with the androids, this sort of capping mockery is even applied to their body parts. John adds a mocking “*Adios*” as he throws the T2’s arm into the cauldron.

The terminator’s programmed mission makes for some pointed moments of humour in the comedy of attitude vein:

John: You were going to kill him.
 Terminator: Of course, I'm a terminator.
 John: You can't just go around killing people.
 Terminator: Why?

John: Now you're not going to kill anyone.
 Terminator: I swear I won't kill anyone. (*Moments later he shoots a guard in the knees*).
 John: What're you doing?
 Terminator: He'll live.

The callousness of the terminator provides a perfect definition of the rules for comedic violence: anything but death is acceptable. We want the hero to kill the villains but not permanently or in a real world. The terminator's way of looking at humans ("massmorph" reads his computer) and his obliviousness to the tragic is all funny, and while his obvious mechanical qualities are the perfect proof of Bergson's theory of the humorously mechanical, they also point to the mechanical coding of all the genre's protagonists.

The sort of obliviousness demonstrated by the terminator is taken to comic extreme in The Naked Gun: From the Files of Police Squad (1988), with Franklin's numerous insensitive comments about the suffering or demise of various people. In front of Wilma, Norbert's wife, he says "they won't take him back if he's a vegetable", while she weeps by her wounded husband's side in reaction to Franklin. Franklin's obliviousness is capped in the line "Life isn't fair - just think, next time I shoot someone I could get arrested". He is inappropriateness personified. His bumbling obliviousness (with its parody of the public's suspicions of police) provides the comic capper to the suffering of others.

The horror film, developing at the same time as the action film, developed many of the same comic vocal stylings. So, in a comic horror film like Evil Dead II (1986), after a monster runs at Ash saying "I'll swallow your soul", Ash delivers what is expected in full action film tradition by levelling a shotgun at the monster's mouth and saying "swallow this" before blowing its head off. The character of Ash (normally an extreme feeler like Smoot or

Roger Rabbit) has to become action-hero cool to survive. He does this with a mixture of Buster Keaton dead-pan and action hero wit. However, in a film as parodic as Evil Dead II this cool is constantly mocked: after the shooting of the monster, Ash coolly blows the smoke out the end of his barrels and does an elaborate and absurd Western-style spin of his shotgun in order to holster it.

The Last Action Hero has an inventive moment of verbally activated comedic violence in a scene where Slater catches a villain and is comically selective in his reactions to the villain's infractions:

(Slater punches the villain). "That was for blowing up my second cousin's house. And this, this is for blowing up my ex-wife's house". (He lightly slaps the villain's wrist). "And this is for my daughter's black eye". (He picks him up and violently throws him).

More significant are the times when The Last Action Hero (1993) takes the level of violent punning of action films a step lower with its collection of groaners. Early in the film Slater says to one man "Hey, do you want to be a farmer? Here are a couple of acres [achers]" and then kicks the man in the groin. The pun effectively parodies and puns on these terrible jokes themselves. It begins a series of jokes around the violent verbal humour of action films. In a comically improbable scene with Slater playing Hamlet, he utters the simplistic negations common for Schwarzenegger: "Hey Claudius, you killed my father. Big mistake", and then throws Claudius through a window. In the discovery scene Polonius begs "Stay thy hand, fair prince", and Hamlet replies "Who said I'm fair?" as he shoots over his shoulder. And finally Hamlet says, "To be or not to be? Not to be", as explosions go off throughout the castle.

Danny cites the puns first in his determination of the filmic world that he has entered: "Wait a minute. The bad puns, the voice, the hard rock – this is happening", and as if in proof Slater's puns reach their purposeful all-time low when he causes one villain's head to be

impaled on an ice cream cone: “Iced that guy. Cone a phrase”.

Quentin Tarantino’s major contribution to this field of comedy lies in a variation of the pairing of comically inappropriate attitudes with violent situations. His is not the bizarre propriety of the murderers of English comedies. The American version of the inappropriate attitude is always far more brash. Indeed, this brashness is comically contrasted with the English attitude in Apartment Zero (1988) in a scene where Brady, the American murderer, disposes of a body with his always decorous and therefore often horrified roommate present:

(He lifts up the body). “Oh – what a whale. What you think, should we cut her in half – kidding. Watch this”. (He steps on her to push her into the trunk. There is a loud crunch). “I should have been a chiropractor”. (Later as they dispose of the body at the dump). “Ah c’mon, lighten up will you”.

Tarantino’s version of the inappropriate attitude is characterised by the seemingly irreverent mixture of the trivial with violence. In a scene from Pulp Fiction (1994), a ridiculously serious discussion of hamburgers is carried out around a confrontation which eventually leads to the murder of three young men. Later in the film there is The Wolf’s calmly pedantic notation of the details of “the Bonnie situation”, the accidental shooting of a man in the head (his final note is “no head”).

Tarantino’s major moment of verbal comedic violence is in the much talked about torture of the policeman in Reservoir Dogs (1992). Mr. Blonde cracks numerous jokes at the policeman’s expense:

“Alone at last”.
 “I think I’m parked in the red zone”.
 “Was that as good for you as it was for me”
 “Don’t go anywhere, I’ll be right back”.

Here, the humiliation and mockery of the policeman (with the sexual allusions suggesting all that Mr. Blonde might do to him in his position of power) are reminiscent of the humiliation in Pasolini’s Salò, except here it is complicatedly funny. Mr. Blonde’s jokes play upon a

mock intimacy which belies his discomfort from being alone with a man (a homoerotic undertone and exploration of male intimacy is found throughout the film).

A first on behalf of Tarantino is the use of the song “Stuck in the Middle With You” to achieve more verbal comedic violence. The song’s lyrics provide a perfect description of the policeman’s situation:

Well I don’t know why I came here tonight.
I got the feeling that something ain’t right.
I’m so scared in case I fall off my chair.
And I’m wondering how I’ll get down the stairs.
Clowns to the left of me, jokers to the right.
Here I am, stuck in the middle with you....

The song even makes mockery of the policeman’s suffering with its repeated refrain of “Pleaeaeaease”. Mr Blonde’s shuffle reinforces the ridicule in the song, and indeed it seems as if life itself mocks the policeman with the coincidence of the radio’s song paired with the glimpse of the balmy, happy suburb outside (complete with the sounds of happy children and the chirping of birds). The framing of some shots, with the toilet in the background mirroring the placement of the policeman, adds a visual mockery to a scene which is already a masterful conflation of cruelty and ironic humour.³³

After Mr. Blonde has severed the policeman’s ear, the jokes become specific to the policeman’s suffering:

(Into the policeman’s severed ear), “Eh? What’s going on?”
“Can you hear that?”

Here verbal comedic violence has returned to the domain of the mocking villain seeking to define his power over another. Tarantino keeps the scene uncomfortable for the audience by maintaining the humour and charm of the torturer but removing all the usual codings which leave the viewer morally free to laugh at the sufferer’s situation (the scene is carefully shot to

³³ *Man Bites Dog* plays with such ironic juxtaposition in a more literal sense with its discussion of Benoit by Benoit’s family “Such a darling boy”, being immediately followed by shots of him killing people.

foreground the suffering of the policeman). Mr. Blonde's superior mocking mirrors the position of the audience throughout most moments of comedic violence: "It's amusing for me to torture a cop".

In this explicit and extreme example Reservoir Dogs points to the latest role for verbal comedic violence: while in the past the verbal was used as a trigger for making morally sanctioned violence comic, now the verbal often serves, particularly in action films, to mock the comic butt and confirm the superiority of the protagonist and his supporters. The verbal is now part of the torture. As can be seen from Reservoir Dogs, much of Schwarzenegger's work and as far back as the Bond films, recent verbal comedy in scenes of violence is nearly always mocking and dismissive. While the verbal has previously been part of the insult or dismissive intent of comedic violence, notably with Punch and Judy and Ubu Roi, the verbal was foremost part of the comically shocking and abrasive charm of the character performing the violence. The verbal is now rarely combined with violence to create comedy, instead the verbal mirrors or echoes the dismissive intent and action of violence and it is often essential to the character's cool. In the past the verbal was connected to violence more often through witty interpretations of words, as with Foghorn Leghorn's request "Put me where I belong" in Plop Goes the Weasel (discussed in detail in the introduction). Now, the most prominent verbal comedic violence, is the dismissive retort that accompanies the violence as with the "Consider that a divorce" scene in Total Recall (discussed on page 209). This shift in the general use of the verbal is also a moral shift, as the verbal comedy now explicitly matches the moral intent and result of violence. Verbal comedy is now no longer the light-hearted, humour-clinching addition to an act requiring moral coding (i.e. violence), but rather more often a moral action in itself, requiring moral coding similar to that of violence, in order for its carefree comic consumption.

Chapter Three

Physical Violence

This chapter begins with a chronological general account of physical comedic violence so that the more specific moral categories of physical comedic violence which follow (some of which appear later in this chapter, such as violence to the face, fantastical/decapitation, and corpses), can be compared to the broader context from which they arise. Such comparison allows for an analysis and understanding of the moral boundaries and moral implications of each type of comedic violence. Thus, for example, at the end of this chapter we can see how the corpse stands out in the field of comedic violence as a route to comedy which almost solely revolves around the disruption of decorum. Similarly, the comedy involving violence to the face is seen to be utilised as a frequently vicious extension of the shame and humiliation common to much comedic violence, and therefore it is often all the more dismissive of its victims. The bulk of this chapter is a survey (with some specific departures) of the common tactics, targets and moral objects of physical comedic violence, focusing on the more customary methods of making violence comic or using violence for comedy. These methods for making violence comic are by nature moral negotiations.

The *Commedia dell' Arte*

Physical violence is essential to the greater portion of *Commedia lazzi*. Even when not violent, the *lazzi* possessed a spitefulness or aggression common to much comedy at its simplest roots. Harold Knutson, in his discussion of the drives of *Commedia* reasons that: “The Italian *lazzi* tended to express strong drives and emotions, bodily functions. In other words, these *lazzi* portrayed creatural man, that part of us closest to our animal forbears. *Lazzi* cluster around: anger and aggression; fear; fatigue; hunger; thirst (especially for alcohol); lust; excretion” (Knutson, 281). These are also, of course, the drives of many of the

plots of the *Commedia* scenarios. The most basic drives are never far from exploding into chaotic dominance of the plays, as detailed in what Gordon has called the “*Lazzi* of the *Bastonate*”: “Whenever a performance seems not to be going well, a *Commedia* performer pulls out his *bastone* (stick) and starts beating his partner. The whole performance concludes in a free-for-all” (Gordon, 18). *Lazzi*’s such as that of the *bastonate* were apparently sure successes.

A similar surety of success was the introduction of a character like Pulcinella, “whose sole purpose seemed to be to torment other characters” (Gordon, 14). Pulcinella is the personification of the spirit which sends the *Commedia* into a free-for-all. Stead has described the appeal of Pulcinella’s descendant, Punch, as that of an “underworld” which we have made forbidden: “Bold and comic... with the remembrance of our own lost anarchy” (Stead, 148-9). It is moral anarchy which best describes the comedic violence of the *Commedia* and Punch and Judy shows. The comedic violence of these two forms is cruelty for the audience’s sake and the impossible coincidences of these *lazzi* support this fact. The cruelty motivated coincidences are apparent in the impulsive chaos of the “*Lazzo* of the Knock”: “Pedrolino, just arising from a sleep, bumps his head into his master, Cassandro, and then crushes Cassandro’s bunioned toes with his enormous shoes. When Cassandro kicks him, Pedrolino unconsciously responds by striking him in the face” (Gordon, 15). Little, narratively, is required to provide the audience with its cruel comic pleasure.

Sack Routine

Perhaps one of the most revealing of the audience’s desires in the moments of physical comedic violence is the “*Lazzi* of the Sack”:

A popular routine where the victim is either secreted or tricked into a cloth sack: (a) Zanni (or Arlecchino) hides in a sack, which the Captain (or Scaramouche) trips over and begins to beat in anger. (b) Hoping to be sneaked into his beloved’s house or a room full of riches, the Captain (or Pantalone) is tricked into hiding in a sack; the

Captain is then delivered into a pork butcher's hands, whose sounds of delight and knife flourishing frightens the Captain. (Gordon, 14)

This *lazzi* eventually resurfaced in Keaton's The General (1927), where Annabella is hidden in a sack which is roughly placed on a train and has all manner of heavy objects thrown upon it. This is a comedy of endurance, like that of Xanthias and Dionysus in The Frogs, except here the sufferer's face has to be imagined and the victim cannot even be heard. There is something symbolic of the audience's desire for comedic violence in this comic turn. While the inability to see the sufferer's face is important, the situation of the observer, here Keaton, is more significant: once the violence starts there is nothing Keaton's character can do but watch during this scene (though he has been rather rough with her himself). Annabella has all manner of items, the most recognisable being a keg, thrown on her by oblivious soldiers. Keaton watches and winces. Later, he unknowingly walks across her while trying to rescue her. Critics are often anxious to protect Keaton from any serious misogynistic intentions in this scene (discussed in detail in Chapter Four). Whatever the political implications of Keaton's act, it does present a morally perfect gag for comedic violence. If he interferes, more harm could befall her (and him pointedly), and so he, like the audience, must watch as the violence continues and can therefore wince safely and imagine her suffering almost free of moral blame. Because the audience knows the kind of film they are watching they also have the assurance of Annabella's certain survival. So the comic game becomes one of anticipation mixed with a knowing and safe fear; the fear is for how much she will endure en route to her certain, essentially uninjured survival. The comedy is thus free to erupt from the winces as each astonishingly heavy item is brutally piled on top of her. This scene shows the typical perspective of Keaton's comedic violence: that of comic suffering.

A version of the sack routine appears in Lloyd's Haunted Spooks (1920), when Lloyd, thinking he is fighting a ghost, hits his wife with a stick, when she hides under a blanket.

And, in a similar turn with a blanket we find the sack routine in The Circus (1928) where Chaplin does a switch in a battle and leaves a cop beating a girl under a sheet.

An interesting variant of the sack routine is found in Griffith's A Sound Sleeper (1909). A sleepy bum crawls into an ash barrel to sleep and thus begins a gag similar to the sack routine in execution and humour. He has loads of ashes poured over him and is then picked up by a horse and wagon for a rocky ride to an ash pile where he is then tipped out violently. This piece possesses moral protection for the audience because there are no real concerns for the character; when we see him at the end of the scene he just stretches and wakes up, having been oblivious to the rough treatment. However, the pleasure of the piece occurs without such moral protection, for the state of the bum is unknown and must be imagined throughout his ride in the ash can. The audience's "blindness" to the bum's suffering accentuates their reaction and makes them wince in commiseration of imagined suffering; and it further accentuates their reactions through the suspense offered by having to wait to see the final condition of the sufferer. This "blindness" or ignorance has the added benefit of releasing the audience from actually witnessing any real harm.

The same sort of suffering occurs in Mack Sennett's Astray from the Steerage (date unknown) where a drunk hides in a travelling chest, and, again, is bashed around until eventually the trunk falls off a truck and is slammed by a train. Here, Sennett has taken further advantage of the technique by using it as a morally safe, implicit way to depict the incredible violence of the train impact. And, again it ensures all the imaginings and implications of the ash can in A Sound Sleeper.

The sack routine is a moral sleight of hand which removes blame from the protagonist (and therefore, by extension, the audience), for what is usually a fairly severe beating for an innocent character.

Punch and Judy

Other times, however, the audience can and wants to glory in the violence of a character, hence the vicarious pleasures offered by a figure such as Punch. Stead positions Punch's emergence historically³⁴: "It is significant that his glory begins in Renaissance times, when the thinking world was drunk with the discovery of the human personality in all its power and wonder; our iconoclast Punch epitomises the individual" (Stead, 146). Punch takes the fantasies of the individual to an extreme when he kills the devil (Collier, 52-3). One of his final exchanges with the devil is revealing of Punch's character: "Pray, Mr. Devil, let us be friends. (The Devil hits him again, and Punch begins to take it in dudgeon, and to grow angry) Why, you must be one very stupid Devil not to know your best friend when you see him" (Collier, 52-3). Of course, Punch is being beaten, and so would say anything to escape, but his own perceived connection to the devil is a significant one (and, of course, the image of Punch is very similar to that of certain devils, sometimes even achieving a curious hybrid). However, despite this perceived association, Punch shouts for joy once the devil is dead. This is because the Devil is a figure of justice who comes to take Punch to hell and thus he is the final limit on Punch's activities: "Bravo! Horay! Satan is dead - and now we can all do as we like!" (Stead, 117). This final line from the Punch Opera reveals Punch's purpose for the audience; he is symbolic of unpunishable will: "Identifying themselves with him, the spectators enjoy a sort of delirium of unlimited power" (Pasqualino, 20).

Punch's command of freedom is different from the *Commedia* sense of justice, here described by Giovanni Bertelli (18th century) in Marionette e Burattini: "My stage is truly a court of justice, today the Doctor gives the rope to the rogue Pulcinella; tomorrow Pulcinella will beat the quack Doctor; today the Devil tosses Pulcinella on his horns; tomorrow

³⁴ See also Jurkowski on pg. 96-97.

Pulcinella will murder the Devil. Here the big stick of authority and the staff of justice pass from one hand to another, and all are liable to the reckoning of their accounts” (Byrom, 77). The flexibility of *Commedia* justice results from its revolving around slightly different scenarios for each show. Punch and Judy shows, however, are nearly the same every time. The plot is unimportant for Punch and Judy; everyone knows what will happen: the defeat of the symbolic figures of authority, control and responsibility (which can include Judy and the Baby), remain the most important duty of the play and its violent comedy.

Ubu Roi

This spirit is taken up as zealously by Jarry’s Ubu with much the same results for the physical comedy. What is interesting and unique for the physical comedic violence of this play are its seemingly limitless extremes:

Ubu: I’m going to cook you by inches. Light the fire, Financial Gentlemen. Oh! Ah! Oh! I’m dead. It must be at least a cannon ball that’s hit me. Ah! My God, forgive me my sins. Yes, it’s certainly a cannon ball.
 Bordure: It’s a blank cartridge from a pistol.
 Ubu: Huh! You’d make fun of me, would you! Again! Into my pocket with him. (*He flings himself on him and tears him to pieces*). (Jarry, 110-111)

Ubu is as capable of his own enormously decorated demise as he is the instant destruction of an enemy. The physical violence provides the capper of a series of jokes playing upon Ubu’s almost reversed sensitivities to himself and his victims, and the instant shock of the ease and immediacy of his destruction of others makes it all the more comedic.

The Lumière Brothers

The denial of expectation is at the root of all film comedy and most pointedly at the root of the first film comedy, the Lumières’ L’Arroseur Arrosé (1895). Mast has broken down the fifty-eight second water-hose gag (detailed below) into four simple elements reminiscent of

many semiotic plot systems³⁵:

- 1) a comic protagonist wants to perform a task. (*A man is trying to water a garden*).
- 2) a comic antagonist interferes with that performance. (*A boy steps on the hose, stopping the flow of water*).
- 3) a comic object begins as a tool and ends as a weapon. (*When the man looks into the hose the boy releases the water. The man is soaked*).
- 4) the protagonist makes a comic discovery of the problem and takes action on the basis of that discovery. (*The angry man turns the hose on the boy and sprays him*). (Mast, 32)

It is the third element which is most important here in Mast's analysis of the Lumières' film. His comment on the title of the film ties in with this third element and reveals the nature of most visual and physical silent film comedy to come: "the essence of the action is surprise and reversal" (Mast, 31).

Mast neglects to mention another pleasure of that routine - the anticipation of waiting for the man to be doused. Similar anticipation occurs in a un-named short by the Lumières which shows a man whose newspaper has been set on fire. The audience, with great anticipation, watches the logic of the scene play out as the paper burns enough to shock the man and prompt his getting up, causing another man on the opposite end of the bench to fall off. There is the progressive logic of a train set here: we can see what will happen, and there is a comic pleasure in the connection of each event and the surprise which the characters feel as the events progress in a way which we can predict with some superiority.

Méliès

The physical violence of Méliès' films is nearly always comedic in its often fantastical consequences. The characters of Méliès' films do not suffer wounds or bleed: when dealt a swift blow, they explode in a cloud of dust. In *A Trip to the Moon* (1902), the monsters on the moon, when thrown or hit, explode into smoke. Similarly, the nearly identical demons from *The Inn Where No Man Rests* (1901) burst into smoke when kicked. And finally, in

³⁵ The same gag appears in *Mabel and Fatty's Wash Day* (1915).

The Conquest of the Pole (1912), someone falls from an air balloon, hits a chimney and explodes in a cloud of dust.

It is difficult to know whether or not the demons, when they burst into smoke, are merely reappearing elsewhere as in The Cook in Trouble, or dying, but the fate of the explorer falling from the balloon in Conquest of the Pole would suggest that the burst of smoke signifies their end. The disappearing of tackled demons in The Cook in Trouble (1904) suggests an intangibility which betokens invulnerability and therefore comedic violence which is not cruel.³⁶ The exploding characters of the other films turns the violence into fun. Obviously, without wounds and with disappearing consequences the audience is urged not to dwell upon any real consequences for the violence, letting these acts occur safely in the realm of amusement.

Similarly, the consequences for the explorer eaten by the huge snow-monster in The Conquest of the Pole, are reversible: despite the fact that the monster is shot with a huge gun, the explorer is regurgitated unharmed. Moments such as these are indicative of the spirit with which Méliès presents his comedic violence. These are happy, exciting stories, nearly always palatable for children.

In The Inn Where No Man Rests the comedic violence is of the kind which is common to slapstick: the drunken character is forever falling through and into things, and confusion always leads to the wrong person being hit. But the action is rapid, distant and mostly concerned with the kinetics of shock and surprise. The violence punctuates the speed of the film and forbids any real concern. Hammond has pointed out that this surprise and shock is the key to Méliès' films: "a game whose driving force is the denial of expectancy and the exploitation of the dynamic instant between the anxiety of dislocation and its release in the

³⁶ This effect is similar to that generated by the always spectacular falls of cartoon characters like Will E. Coyote.

ensuing humorous or dreamlike image” (Hammond, 90).

This denial of expectancy can find its perfect physical fruition in Hammond’s description of Up to Date Surgery (1899): “a mad doctor who, diagnosing acute indigestion, chops his patient up into little pieces and then reassembles the bits in the wrong order...” (Hammond, 51). Méliès thrives on such physical illogic, and pointedly here this possibly disturbing image is meant to be consumed as a morally free game playing upon a denial of expectations and not within a reality of pain or consequence.

It is this freedom from consequence which allows the comedy of another film of Méliès described by Hammond, Jack Juggs and Dum Dum (1903): “a magician treats a man as if he were a nail, using a hammer on the man’s head to drive him into the stage” (Hammond, 56). Méliès’ comedic violence is a celebration of the illogical as it applies to the body. The violence is a means to comically achieve the illogical and deny expectation.

D.W. Griffith

The films of D.W. Griffith possess very few moments of comedic violence. His comedies are not particularly good (he has little sense of humour), but they do point to some of the beginnings of the later work of Mack Sennett who was under his employ at the time.

Trying to get Arrested (1909) provides a standard slapstick battle where the wrong person gets booted in the backside at the wrong time. The film is very poorly and primitively executed, possessing none of the sophistication of situation, setting or character found in Méliès’ films, but what is of interest is the violence which it uses for comedy. While it is basically the same as that which Sennett eventually presents, it is very noticeably fake. That is, it is very obvious when the characters miss each other. In general, the violence is so poorly staged and delivered that it never possesses the excitement or viciousness found in later slapstick. It is a moment of unexciting play-acting, without the disturbing thrill of most

comedic violence.

Mack Sennett and the Keystone Films

Gerald Mast aptly pinpoints Sennett's approach and major contribution to physical comedy: "By using human beings as projectiles and missiles, Sennett effected the conversion of people into "Bergsonian" things. The Sennett figures are not mortal beings of flesh and spirit but mechanical toys of steel and bolts" (Mast, 50). Human projectiles are found throughout His Bitter Pill (1916) where characters are continually thrown onto and through various things. A scene from The Clever Dummy (1917) capitalises upon the momentum of projectiles by having the servant booted down some stairs. As he falls, he rolls into a gentleman who then boots him down another flight of stairs. These gags build momentum and thrive upon a physical logic: the violence and movement must always continue and if not in the same direction, then it must bounce back upon its instigator (the dummy routine on the next page gives some excellent examples of the bounce back phenomena). Mast has noted that "the essence of the Keystones was movement - not thought, emotion, desire, need, or human reaction" (Mast, 49), and here he could not be more correct.

There is often, however, emotion involved in the comedic violence of Sennett's films:

Sennett's world of Keystone was fundamentally one of absurdity, in which dignity and refinement were revealed as a sham and replaced by vulgarity and ridicule. His comedians thumbed their noses at convention, and life on the Keystone screen was stripped of the masks society had imposed upon human behaviour. Impulse and emotion replaced reason and rationality as the motivators of human action, and the hypocrisy of society's sacred institutions was laid bare for all to see. (Kalton C. Lahue, 277)

Thus it is impulsive emotion which fuels the comedic violence of scenes like that found in The Clever Dummy, where a jealous fiancé throws a potted plant at a servant but hits his wife-to-be's father instead. The servant then hits the father with a brick, puts the pot on the father's head and then drops his foot on top of the bucket. Impulse is the key to breaking the

control of reason and rationality and providing the laughs provoked by such surprising breaches.

Astray from the Steerage reveals a similar breach of societal decorum with a recently arrived immigrant who is strapped to a chair and spun as a test. Later, as he is having his knee and arm reflexes tested, he reacts and boots or socks the nearest person. Thus the scene revels in the impulses of the body and connects its unconscious workings to the aforementioned “Bergsonian” comical conversion of a person to a thing which reacts mechanically without human reason.

The Dummy Routine

This type of conversion is nowhere more fully explored than in Sennett’s The Clever Dummy, where Ben Turpin’s character plays both a servant and a robot which is modelled after the servant. Interestingly, the first thing which the dummy does when it comes to life is to unexplainably hit someone on the head. The mechanical in Sennett’s films has a natural proclivity to violence. Thus, when a prop-man attempts to set up the stiff dummy, he gets repeatedly hit as everything he does brings up another arm or leg. Pointedly, the only successful control of the dummy is achieved by hitting him. This film and the activities of Turpin’s dummy provide exaggerated confirmation of the central tenet of Bergson’s comic theory: “The attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (Bergson, 79).

Bergson’s assertion receives full confirmation when the servant pretends to be the dummy modelled after the servant. The violence continues and eventually the two men thinking of buying the dummy are given a hammer with which to test the dummy. They hammer his knees and chest and then take off his hat and hammer his head. All the while, the servant character stifles his reactions in a way which recalls Xanthias and Dionysus’

similar deception in The Frogs. This moment provides further validation of Bergson's assertion of the connections between comedy and the mechanical: "A laughable expression of the face, then, is one that will make us think of something rigid and, so to speak, coagulated, in the wonted nobility of the face" (Bergson, 76). This comic rigidity is found in Turpin's servant's pained attempts at maintaining such a mechanical rigidity of expression. The comic situation is a reversal of the comedy of the dummy and makes the comedic violence all the more humorous. The fact that the servant is imitating someone or something is, according to Bergson, additionally humorous: "To imitate anyone is to bring out the element of automatism he has allowed to creep into his person... This is the very essence of the ludicrous, [because it is so against human nature]" (Bergson, 81). Of course, because Turpin's servant is in fact imitating a machine the humour is expanded, and because the machine is imitating the servant and Turpin is playing both characters, we have a piece of comedy which revolves full circle, ensuring the reign of the ludicrous.

The ludicrousness of Turpin's imitations ends with the police viciously beating the dummy, which they think is the thieving servant. This final, potentially disturbing moment of comedic violence points to a general outlook which is found in the Keystone studio's output: "It was a rather cynical commentary on society and American life of the early 20th century, yet audiences detected a large grain of reality sprinkled among the cynicism" (Lahue, 279). Sennett's films thrived on a cynicism which was suspicious of most institutions and representatives of decency, order and rationality. These figures proved to be excellent foils and victims for comedic violence, because people were so happy to see them duped, struck down a few pegs, or have their thrones pulled out from under them.

The dummy routine remained popular after these films. The routine is often resolved to the simple act of an object which is punched bouncing back to hit the hitter. This is the case

in Fatty Arbuckle's The Knockout (1914) where Fatty is belted by his boxing dummy while practising with it.

The faked dummy returns in Arbuckle's The Surf Girl (1916) in a complex set-up involving a Coney Island ball game where the punter can throw balls at full-size figures on a conveyer belt. The usual case of mistaken and pretended identities places two men as dummies at various times, again entering the Xanthias and Dionysus situation where the character pretending to be a dummy has to endure the pain. This variant on the scene makes use of the fact that there are multiple dummies. In searching for the impostor, ample opportunity is provided to inflict brutal damage to the fakes, raising the anticipation of the encroaching pain awaiting the real man. Thus the violence inflicted upon the fakes becomes a source of humour as we watch and/or imagine the man dreading his fate but having to hide his fear and eventually his pain.

The dummy routine is also used by Chaplin in Mabel's Married Life (1914). Mabel has a standard encounter with a boxing dummy where she hits it and it swings back and gets her. However, Charlie raises the mirth by arriving home drunk and verbally berating this stranger (the dummy) in his home. Push comes to shove and Charlie is repeatedly knocked down no matter how many dirty tricks he tries - and there lies much of the comedy in Charlie's case, his belligerence is always turned back on himself.³⁷

The dummy routine appears in Lloyd's The Freshman (1925), where Lloyd's character becomes the enthusiastic tackling dummy for the football team. His ridiculous enthusiasm in the face of the inglorious punishment which he receives provides much of the humour of the scene, and then, as his enthusiasm wears out, we laugh as his concern registers for the coach's urgings of his players: "That's not hard enough". The scene is capped by the coach's use of

³⁷ The Uncle Remus story Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby has similarities to this scene and its comedy.

him to demonstrate how not to hurt themselves; all the while the coach hurts Lloyd. The scene is full of little gags, all of which play upon the comedy of Lloyd's harm-begetting enthusiasm in the face of this punishment. It ends with a great visual joke when Lloyd looks down and for one scary moment sees his leg bent at an impossible angle only to discover that it is in fact the leg of the previously destroyed dummy.

Fatty Arbuckle

Arbuckle's films are, like the Sennett films, in essence about movement. Fatty's films are full of flying projectiles (bricks, fists, pies), which always manage to hit the last person that the thrower would wish (the father, the girl, the big guy) (The Knockout, The Surf Girl, Noise from the Deep (1913), Fatty's Faithful Fido (1915)). Madden has stated that "Slapstick is the comedy of force" (Madden, 66), and this certainly describes the projectile business of much of Arbuckle's films and seems the definition of the "test your strength" bell routine which appears in The Surf Girl, which is furthered in Fatty at Coney Island (1917): Keaton, when swinging the mallet for the "test your strength" booth, accidentally hits Fatty as he walks by. Keaton sits on the lever and laughs. Fatty picks up the mallet, slams Keaton's head, and the dial spins away. Thus force remains a constant throughout the routine and the audience can laugh as it registers its impact on each man.

Indeed the final bell of the "test your strength" routine points to another tactic favoured for silent film comedy and that is the index of the force. Though here it is the bell, in many films it is a character landing in water (The Surf Girl). In Fatty at Coney Island, the force of Fatty being punched is sprayed back at his assailant through the ice cream in his mouth. Thus force begets force and sends it humorously back at the assailant with a novel index of the interchange to add to the humour of the surprise.

The comedy of force is perhaps never more explicit than in a small piece of action from

Fatty's Hoodoo Day (1914). Fatty uses his hand to fold his other hand into a fist. His opponent does the same and they both hit each other. The opponent swings at him but misses because Fatty is tipping over from the force of the previous blows. The opponent flips over from the force of his own momentum. The camera cuts back to Fatty, who looks stunned at his luck, but tips over anyway. This sequence illustrates much of the mechanical pleasures of the battles of Arbuckle's films which show the forces these characters engage, taking them farther than they expected and bringing them to their predictably unpredicted conclusions.

Fraser suggests that there is a visceral appeal in moments of violence: "In a culture as starved of physicality as ours, the enduring appeal of a good many violent works is not just that they are violent but that they re-immense us vicariously in physical action" (Fraser, 63). Arbuckle makes frequent use of this vicarious appeal and the surprises that such physicality can supply in The Knockout, which is full of people ducking to avoid being hit and then standing up, looking pleased, and then getting one in the mouth. Chaplin plays the referee and provides numerous moments of comedy by being belted at moments of supreme innocence. The comedy of force here seizes upon the humour of the shocked innocent. The humour is augmented by Charlie's inappropriateness as a target for such violence (he is tiny and frail looking while Fatty and the Cyclone are huge and oblivious of their careless strength).

While all silent film comedies used the humour of an unintended victim receiving the damage, Arbuckle's films loved to have the inappropriate person receive it. While in The Knockout it is the weak Charlie Chaplin, this route to comedy finds disturbing perfection in Fatty's Tintype Tangle (1915) where a husband and wife wrestle with Fatty. During the mix-up, Fatty sneakily exits the fight, leaving the oblivious husband pounding his wife. The shock of such an unfair fight, while seemingly much more shocking for us than its earlier

audiences (because of our greater sensitivity to wife abuse), pulls the rug out from under our enjoyment of the fighting by removing the safety of the hardy recipient (Fatty), and shocking us with the mixture of appeal and repulsion inherent in the beating of an inappropriate victim.

Fatty is one of the more fully developed characters of the silent film comedies, and as such he offers opportunities for more subtle and more devious routes to violent comedy. Such is the case in a moment of Fatty's Tintype Tangle where Fatty is shot in the heart and falls clutching his hand to his breast. His assailant checks on Fatty's condition and while he is going "oh my", he rests his hand on a meat grinder. In a moment of incredibly brutal comedy, Fatty cranks the meat grinder, thus crushing his assailant's hand. There is a comedic pleasure in watching the cruelly resourceful Fatty achieve turnabout after turnabout in all his scenes. His predictably inventive and childish selfishness (paired with his childish attacks - such as biting his assailants in The Knockout and Fatty's Faithful Fido), is something which an audience anticipates and something at which it can laugh in recognition.

While not as cruel or extreme as Ubu, Fatty is the silent screen's closest relation to the King (though the early films of the Tramp were unparalleled for their selfish cruelty). Mast describes what knits these disparate characters together: "The clowns - Keaton, the Marxes, Fields, Tati - destroy social expectations, conventions, and assumptions in the very assertions of their being. If all men asserted themselves in such a way, there would be no society at all" (Mast, 338). And this is the key to much of what makes Fatty funny. His acts of violence are those of the child who does not care for or understand the social expectations which he so humorously destroys. There is a comedic joy in the way all his crudely childish actions, be they violent or not, bump and jostle the moral conventions of society.

Additionally, Fatty's childish stupidity (an attribute of many of the silent film comedians), adds to the humour of his brutal actions. So, in The Butcher Boy (1917) when

Fatty pours boiling water over Keaton's foot to unstick his foot from molasses, we laugh at Fatty's stupidity and the incredibly brutal results it produces. Boiling water is almost never used for comedic violence in contemporary films, but in this film, Fatty even accidentally pours it over an old man's head. The boiling water is far too brutal a piece of violence for contemporary comedy, because of the supraréalism of today's films, which, despite their comedic conventions, would amplify the sound and the sensations that the water would produce.³⁸ Without such accompaniment, Arbuckle is able to use the water as an admittedly brutal, but tolerable piece of violence for the sake of comedy.

Charlie Chaplin

Chaplin's films introduce a wealth of variations on physical comedic violence, provoked by the numerous confrontations which his character seems unable to resist: "the Keystone films generally revelled in the protagonist's outlandishly amoral, cruel behaviour" (Riblet, 174). With Chaplin much of this comedy was made available by his pursuit of humour in all aspects of life: "With Shoulder Arms [1918] Chaplin seemed to assert fully and for the first time that anything human was laughable and anything laughable was human" (Mast, 81).

Much of Chaplin's comedic violence achieves its humour through surprise and expectation. The pleasure of surprise can be found in the simple action of Charlie's wife pulling the chair out from him when he returns home drunk in The Rounders (1914). This gag receives modification later in the same film when Fatty is being laughed at by a bellboy leaning on a chair. Fatty hooks his cane around the chair leg and drops him.

Continued surprises can stretch out the comic pleasure of the confused victims as in The Property Man (1914) when Charlie and the strongman fight behind a stage backdrop. As

³⁸ A similar moment of seemingly brutal comedic violence occurs in The Surf Girl when Fatty accidentally sets a man's beard on fire when he lights his cigarette with a blow torch. The way in which Arbuckle achieves the comedy of this moment is by making the actual burning a quick moment without dwelling on the results, thus ensuring that it is a moment of levity.

they throw things at each other they miss and hit the drop, continually belting a confused performer on stage.

The surprise often erupts from a mistaken identity, as in The Idle Class (1921), when Charlie is beaten because he is mistakenly believed to be a pickpocket. Charlie's astonishment, of course, lasts throughout his beating and ensures its comedification. Blistein suggests how the comedy of surprise works:

The primary reason we laugh in each instance is that the beating is undeserved. If the victim had done something wrong, we might believe that the beating is both deserved and real. Since the victim had done nothing wrong, we permit ourselves to take refuge in the theatrical bromide: "they make love in jest, they poison in jest"; and we add one of our own: "they beat in jest". Since the beating is undeserved, it is obviously unreal. We can, therefore, laugh; we do not have to take action.
(Blistein, 50)

Blistein's suggestion that the undeservedness of a beating makes it unreal is a poor and slightly inexplicable deduction, but he is right to focus on the undeserved aspect of the Tramp's victimhood. Because his beating is undeserved, Charlie peppers his reactions with all his usual expressions of indignant and righteous grievousness, all to little, and therefore comic, success. The comedy of this scene arises from Charlie's inability to maintain his indignant attitude throughout the continuously surprising hail of attacks that he suffers.

The boxing match of The Champion (1915), though really any long brawl will do, provides numerous instances of comedic surprise, what with the ducks, overspinning hits, trick kicks, referee beatings and premature assumptions of victory. The comedy arising from the surprise in fights is always from a character having his attitude (be it innocence, safety, imperviousness, etc.) violently refuted.

Sometimes the surprise is for the audience, as when in Easy Street (1917) Chaplin picks up a pot to drop on Eric Campbell's head, but then decides that it is too small and picks up and drops a stove instead (in the same film he makes inventive use of a bent street lamp to gas

Campbell). The extremes of the violence are made comical by their surprising escalation.

However, the comedy is most often enhanced when the audience can anticipate the violence which will surprise another character. A fine example of this occurs in The Kid (1921) when Charlie thinks the policeman's hands on his neck and shoulders belong to the policeman's wife and then gets throttled. The surprise is all for the oblivious Charlie, the audience with its superior knowledge is free to enjoy the changes in Charlie's expression as the grip on his throat tightens.

This brings us to the effects of expectation on comedic violence (though it does still usually involve the surprise of a character). In Dough and Dynamite (1914) we see the neighbouring bakers pound a man from Charlie's kitchen over their fence, so that we associate the back-yard of the kitchen with the threat of the bakers. When Charlie goes out back and obliviously throws some water on the baker's heads, we know what must happen. The anticipation builds as the bakers mass around Charlie and do a multiple assault on his head. The expectation or forecast and Charlie's obliviousness to the looming violence, and his eventual surprise and ignorance to its motivations once it starts, all ensure the scene's comic reception.

At times, the audience's expectations are toyed with, as when, in The Fireman (1916), Charlie does an elaborate set-up for assaulting another fireman: he rolls up his sleeves and pants, picks up a huge axe and then puts it down to give the fireman a huge boot in the backside. If anything creates a huge expectation in silent film comedies, it is the backside. Anytime anyone offers his or her backside as a target, it will get booted. Kerr feels that this expectation defied all narrative concerns: "At Keystone, no kick ever needed to be justified. The invitation of an available backside was motivation enough. If one man had a pitchfork in his hand and another man, entirely unoffending, was observed bending over, there was just

one thing to do: use the pitchfork” (Kerr, 74). Riblet feels that Kerr overstates the lack of narrative motivation for slapstick violence in Keystone’s films, and in many ways he is right. However, Kerr is obviously referring to Making a Living (1914), Chaplin’s first film, where the actions of Chaplin’s character seem unusually cruel and unmotivated when compared to his later films. But, these cruel actions are motivated; they are motivated by the cruelty of Chaplin’s character in the film. Unlike the tramp of later films, this character is driven to a comically surprising viciousness every time an opportunity presents itself (As in Kid Auto Races in Venice [1914] and Tillie’s Punctured Romance [1914]). Ultimately, he is a darker version of the later character, free from the sentimentality which safely codes much of the comedic violence of Chaplin’s later films.

Despite these motivations, there are admittedly the odd boots in the backside for the boot’s sake. In The Rink (1916), a woman sits by Charlie and continuously bounces her leg on her knee. Of course, Charlie must eventually bend over and accidentally get one in the backside. In His Trysting Places (1914), Charlie plays upon the expectation of the backside by delicately lifting the rear of the bent-over Mack Swain’s jacket as if he were unwrapping a present. The moment drags out and delights in the simple expectation of the bent-over backside.

A variation of the boot in the backside is found in Shoulder Arms where Charlie’s character, after offering a cigarette which is promptly thrown away, gives a German officer a spanking. Another variation is found in The Pilgrim (1923) where Charlie burns the backside of a friend with a candle and then receives the same treatment in return. All of these instances play upon the special status of the backside as target. Kamin quotes a letter to Chaplin from an admirer commenting on the subject: “there’s no doubt about it: the arse is the

seat of self-consciousness” (Kamin, 12).³⁹ Of course, the backside as a favoured target could be accounted for through its being one of the least vulnerable parts of the body; however, of more importance is the fact that the booted backside provokes a reaction from the characters which is always revealingly and comically intimate. It always manages to stop the victim: for a moment he or she is forced to take intimate stock of his or herself after such a shock. The facial reactions to this subconscious intimacy are always comedic.

Another route to comedic violence used by Chaplin is where a body is turned into an object. Chaplin does this type of comedy most often by turning himself into a projectile. Such an instance can be found in both By the Sea (1915) and the boxing match of City Lights (1931), where Chaplin does lots of flying leg plants into the bellies of his opponents. This is typically Keystone-style violence, and has prompted Kerr to say of such moves “if laughter once accompanied them, it has to have been the laughter of breathlessness” (Kerr, 64). Indeed, the breathless excitement of the action is a large part of the humour of such scenes, but Kerr misses the comedy to be found in moments such as these where characters deny their feelings by turning their bodies into objects. This transformation, of course, is Bergson’s view of comedy, and Chaplin provides numerous instances of its comedic possibilities.

Similar humour can be achieved by another character treating a person as if he were an object. This is used to comedic effect in The Circus where Charlie is kicked to make him cough-up a horse pill. The humour of this seemingly inappropriate brutal treatment is furthered by the fact that the treatment works. Another version of this comic treatment of another as an object can be found in In the Park (1915) in an example of a staple of slapstick where Charlie, after having felled an opponent, walks over him. Kamin, speaking about Chaplin’s slapstick, has said: “His treating himself as an inanimate object functions to

³⁹ Kamin incorrectly cites the quotation as coming from page 217 of Chaplin’s My Autobiography. There is no such letter mentioned on the page in question but it is the content of the quotation, not the possible sources that is of interest here.

minimise the sense of pain we assume a falling body would feel” (Kamin, 42). Here, Chaplin is reversing such an assumption and achieving the comedy by the fact that these characters are feeling pain because of his treatment of them as inanimate objects. Kamin’s assertion is incorrect: the comedy of these scenes is found or furthered by the disruptive combination of a denial of pain with the full realisation of its necessary existence.

Chaplin also makes use of repetition to make violence comic. A fine example of repetition can be found in The Kid during the tramp’s battle with the bully. The bully repeatedly stops Charlie from leaving and then swings to hit him. Each time, Charlie ducks and then hits him on the head with a brick. These actions repeat until the bully is wobbly, and then Charlie invites him to try again, whereupon Charlie ducks and belts him again. The comedy is found in the absurdity of the bully’s seemingly mindless repetition. His lack of wisdom here is matched by the stupor which appears on his face after several beatings (the scene ends with him saying “oh well, I guess he’s not in”). Exact repetition achieves a comedic effect by its absurd mechanical quality.

Bergson’s belief in the mechanical route to comedy can be confirmed in the moments which depict a machine-like human in Chaplin’s films. An example is found in a scene from Shoulder Arms where Chaplin takes his mechanical marching to bed and ends up booting a sleeping soldier in the head. An altogether different variant of mechanical comedic violence can be found in moments where, as in The Vagabond, Charlie hits someone and a domino-effect is achieved when he knocks down a succession of people. Other times, just the behaviour of the characters begins to replicate a machine, such as in a scene from In the Park where the thief kicks Charlie who kicks the man on the other side of him, who turns and kicks Charlie back, prompting him to kick the thief, and in effect the violence bangs back and forth like a set of office balls.

Another variant of the mechanical can be found in the scene from Easy Street where Charlie sits on a hypodermic full of amphetamine and runs around beating everyone at high-speed, complete with super-human punching spins. The incredible speed of the tramp's violence is machine-like (or at the very least inhuman); however, it is the crazy speed itself which provides the comedy of the scene.

A last example of the mechanical can be found in a moment where the tramp becomes part of the mechanism, as in City Lights, where he ends up getting the bell rope caught around his neck so that every time he goes down the rope is pulled, declaring the round over. However, each time Charlie approaches the corner for his much needed rest, he inadvertently pulls the bell rope again and the next round is on, and he is promptly punched, sending him down and starting the whole process yet again. The comedy appears in Charlie's oblivious entrapment and the punishment that he suffers as part of it.

The boxing-bell machine calls attention to a type of comedic violence that is funny because of its inventiveness. Such a moment is found in The Count (1917) where Charlie exchanges boots in the backside with an opponent while dancing. The comedy is found through the ways in which each of them works his kicks into his dance moves so that his partner does not notice. A smaller moment of comedic inventiveness is found in Charlie's fighting move where he jumps onto his opponent's chest or shoulders, knocking him/her down and leaving him secure to box his/her face for as long as is funny (this is used often in The Tramp 1915).

Kamin suggests that transformations like these are the route to comedy most often employed by Chaplin. These transformations are most often seen in Charlie's turnabout moves when he is trapped or losing a battle. In one instance in The Kid, he is being held by an opponent, so he spins the holder around and uses him to hit a cop. A simpler version of

this occurs with the “what’s that in the distance” gag during a battle, as in Behind the Screen (1916), where Charlie hoods his eyes with his hands, Eric Campbell turns around and looks to see what it is that Charlie supposedly sees, and Charlie hits him. A similar transformation is achieved in a battle in The Bank (1915), where Charlie hands his jacket to an opponent in a middle of a fight, and while the opponent holds the jacket, Charlie belts him.

A more practical and inventive transformation can be found in The Count, where, after being repeatedly elbowed in the gut, Charlie transforms the situation by donning a sandwich-board so that the elbower hurts himself with each blow. Chaplin employs a variant of this gag in Flirting with Mermaids (date unknown), when, after swapping stomach punches with an opponent, Charlie sticks something under his shirt for similar results. Similar turn-around is found in Dough and Dynamite when a baker talking to Charlie carelessly points a knife to his belly. Charlie delicately turns it around and then gives it a poke. These gags create comedy through these inventive transformations which comically surprise Charlie’s assailants.

The transformations can become more elaborate, as in Shoulder Arms, where Charlie disguises himself as a tree in order to dish out violence. The comedy is accentuated by his use of his disguise as a weapon, as when he uses his sharp branches to poke opponents in the backside. Perhaps the greatest transformation gag in a Chaplin film is found in A Dog’s Life (1918) (it is Kamin’s clearest example of his transformation theory). It begins with Chaplin returning to the two drunken thieves who previously robbed his female partner. He knocks one thief on the head through a curtain. The other thief sitting opposite the first is oblivious of this action, so Charlie sticks his hands through the curtain and pretends that they are the hands of the now unconscious first thief. He mimes a request for the stolen money and when the first thief starts coming to, he hits him with his fist. He then motions for the other to

come closer, whereupon Charlie hits him with a bottle. When the two men come to, they set upon each other, each believing the other to have robbed him. Thus much of this violence is made comic by Chaplin's constant transformation of the relationships between these men (Kamin, 50).

Absurdity is also used to make violence comic in Chaplin's films. Chaplin employs: absurd situations, as in Easy Street where, during an interview to become a policeman, Chaplin is punched as a test (he of course returns the punch); absurd ailments, as in Modern Times (1936) when Chaplin's character goes crazy and attempts to tighten noses and nipples with his wrench; and absurd images, as in Making a Living, which ends with Charlie and another man belting each other on the cow-catcher of a moving train. Each time, the curious absurdity of situation disrupts all normal reactions to the violence and frees the comic response.

This absurdity can be found in the tramp's often bizarre emotional connections and reaction to violence. In A Jitney Elopement (1915) he kisses bricks before throwing them back at a car following him; in The Pawnshop he is kicked in the backside by a co-worker and then promptly shakes his hand; and in The Masquerader Charlie promptly tips his hat at his director after getting booted in the backside. Often, as Gehring points out, this comedy is achieved through incongruity (Gehring in Nysenholc, 144). At times the incongruity is absurd, as in His New Job (1915), when a man whom the tramp has knocked down keeps trying unsuccessfully to get up. Finally the tramp helps him up only to belt him on the head again.

Often times the incongruity is achieved by applying the emotion opposite to what one would expect. In Triple Trouble (1915) a crazy man is keeping Charlie awake in a flop house. Charlie picks up a bottle and goes over to the man, and, just as we expect the hit, he

puts the bottle down, gently puts the man on the ground, folds down the bed for him, and puts him back in bed. And now that we're thinking "how sweet", he picks up the bottle, gently smooths the man's hair out, and wham! - he smashes it over the man's head. Charlie then catches him, gently manoeuvres him into bed, tucks him in, kisses his forehead and puts the covers over his head. Thus, in an incongruous mix of sweetness and vicious practicality, comedy is found.

Part of the reason that these moments are funny is that there is a truthful honesty in these incongruities. Such honesty drives the cruel smashing of Eric Campbell's bandaged foot in The Cure (1917), the tramp's instructions on how to fight dirty in The Kid, and the tramp's use of a mallet to put his friend asleep and to wake him up in The Tramp. The behaviour is incongruous with societal morality, but it is honest action for the Tramp. A similar moment can be found in Shoulder Arms when the tramp sends a candle boat over to burn the feet of a snoring friend. The comedy is achieved through the shock between the honest action and the expected dishonest moral decorum, the honestly uncaring and the dishonestly caring.

Other times this incongruousness is just a product of the tramp's obliviousness to another's suffering, as in His Musical Career (1914) when the tramp rests a piano on Swain's back. After discovering the problem, the tramp walks across Swain to lift the piano away.

This incongruity, however, is most often the product of a selfishness that can be found in the characters of the Tramp, Ubu, Benoit in Man Bites Dog (1992), and in Sloane in Entertaining Mr. Sloane (1977). In all these works, it is the same self-serving drive paired with an obliviousness or lack of concern for the harm caused to others which provokes the humorous take on the violence. Mast's comments on the First National (a film studio) comedies made between 1918 and 1923 provide a useful understanding of how these scenes work: "the dominant conflict ... is between instinct and masquerade, nature and artifice,

essence and form” (Mast, 87). This conflict details the comic shock of these incongruities: they pit instinct against the decorum demanded by public morality, and instinct always wins. There is a shock and laugh of recognition which accompanies many of these moments of violence as the Tramp always masterfully acts upon and displays the honest emotional instincts which societal decorum suppresses. These decorum and morality defying instincts are integral to his comic appeal.

Buster Keaton

There is little comedic violence in the vast work of Buster Keaton. This lack of comedic violence is due, in part, to the fact that a great deal of the enjoyment of his films is derived from the suspense which accompanies his ability to avoid violence and catastrophe. The comedy of his films most often arises from his near misses with these forces and his obliviousness to his incredible luck.

These near misses are often wrapped up in Keaton’s pretended physical ineptness. Of course, this ineptness always leads to humorous mistakes as in Steamboat Bill Jr. (1928), where Keaton’s father tells him to punch the jail guard. “What, this shrimp hit me?” “If he ever hit you on your jaw he’d break it”. The guard beckons for Buster to hit him. “No, I’d hurt you”. He beckons again and without guile Keaton belts him in the stomach, leaving the guard on the floor and the father laughing.

More often than not, however, the comedic violence of Keaton’s films focuses on his comic suffering, his other major comic appeal. A scene from Seven Chances (1925) is indicative of this focus: in the scene Buster visits a show but does not see the sign advertising the show’s female impersonator: he comes back out with his hat broken over his head and a black eye. Thus, typical of Keaton, the gag remains visual and the violence unseen. His wounds are a comic index to his recent surprise.

Mast notes that, "The comic films are full of pain" (Mast, 342), and this is perhaps never more apparent than with the often substantial physical sufferings of Buster. In Three Ages (1923) Buster the caveman is dragged behind an elephant through a cactus patch. In the football game of the same film, a huge man keeps belting him. Much of the humour of his scenes of suffering comes from his rigid almost unrevealing face and the seeming imperviousness of his body. Mast perfectly describes the gracefully stolid Keaton as "that small piece of elastic granite" (Mast, 130).

Often, as with other silent film comedies, there is a rhythm which adds to the humour of the violence of Keaton's films. So, in Spite Marriage (1929), when Buster taps a man on the shoulder before belting him in the face, we get the rhythm of tap, turn, hit, drop. George Wead adds understanding to the effects of rhythm with his examination of Keaton's more visual humour: "As Parker Tyler once noted about the impact of silent film, "normal people suddenly fixed on the moving image the concentration of the deaf". Their fascination made it clear that silence increases the value of motion" (Wead, 162).⁴⁰ The emphasis on the visual makes the rhythm of the violence very apparent and allows for its comedic interpretation. There is such a rhythm to be found in a scene from Go West (1925) where the people in a store are all throwing things at Buster. He fires a shot in the air, they all hide, he turns, and then right on the beat he gets hit by a projectile. In many ways this sort of comedic rhythm looks forward to the shave and a haircut gag from Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (1988).

Momentum is often used in the rhythm gags of silent film comedic violence. In Steamboat Bill Jr., when a man kicks hard at Keaton's crouched behind, the momentum knocks Keaton into the Captain who then falls off the boat with a splash. The momentum maintains a rhythm which, through its surprising yet desired syncopation, adds to the laughter

⁴⁰ Wead is quoting from The Hollywood Hallucination. New York, 1944. Pg. 76.

of the turnaround of events. Another version of this momentum and rhythm is found in Convict 13 (1920) when a prisoner knocks an incredible succession of guards over the head as they run through a doorway. Yet another variation is found in Spite Marriage, when the female protagonist distracts a succession of men with various cutesy poses while Keaton sneaks up behind and knocks them unconscious. The anticipation and expectation provide much of the comedy of this improbable streak of success, and this anticipation is furthered with the last man, whom Keaton misses several times before finally hitting him. In the same film a similar rhythm and expectation is comedically exploited when Keaton enters the kitchen and gets ready to knock the cook unconscious: first he tests the weight of the frying pan and decides that it is not good, next he tests a water jug, and then finally, right on rhythmic cue, the cook passes him a rolling pin which Keaton promptly uses to bash the cook. Lebel points out another comic element that is important for all of these rhythmic bashings: “His way of coshing people is nothing short of gentlemanly, making a slight apologetic bow as he brings the club down, bending his torso in a graceful and, at the same time, terribly efficient homage. Keaton is always elegant, even when he’s braining people” (Lebel, 85).

Often Keaton’s comic suffering prepares the audience for what Mast calls “the Keaton Imperative”, which he explains as “Buster *must* do something – something that the character he plays would never do, yet somehow must” (Mast, 135). Battling Butler (1926) presents such a moment when Keaton receives a beating from an overzealous observer who sits beside him at a fight and repeatedly punches the air and Keaton in excitement. Buster makes numerous comically feeble attempts to avoid being bashed by the much larger neighbour, thus displaying his character’s timidity. Later, he is put into a situation where he must reluctantly engage in a fight. And, as Lebel points out, “punching terrorises him almost as much as being punched” (Lebel, 86). Keaton’s reactions to the punches he receives are always funny.

There is the surprise which accompanies his initial slightly haughty attitude when he is hit, and later stupidity and childishness usually add to the humour of his suffering. As well, his simple physical reactions are so extreme that they provoke laughter: early in his training in Battling Butler, he is hit once in the mouth and crashes instantly to the floor.

There is also comedy to be found in Keaton's stupidity in the boxing ring, and the punishment which he receives for it. This humour ensues when Buster pays too much attention to his trainer and gets hit in the face as he listens. The fact that he doesn't learn from his brutal beltings makes his repeated look of surprise all the more comedic. The humour of this scene is furthered when Buster's sparring partner sets up a punishing rhythm where he punches Buster in the stomach, causing Buster to guard his stomach, and then the partner hits his head, causing Buster to protect his head, which then frees up Buster's stomach for another belting. This up/down, up/down rhythm capitalises on Buster's comic obtuseness and plays right into one of Bergson's tenets for comedy: "The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing, that aspect of human events which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism" (Bergson, 117).

Keaton makes frequent use of the comedic effect of surprising consequences for his character. Mast provides the details for this type of humour: "Such disproportion between act and result, intention and consequence is another blend of sense and nonsense. A man can control his actions, not their consequences" (Mast, 134). Instances of this sort of comedy are found in The Goat (1921) when Buster throws a horse-shoe for good luck and it hits a cop in the face. Similarly, when Buster has a gun, chances are, as is the case in Go West, that he will accidentally set it off and hit someone in the rear end.

Keaton also uses an audience's superior knowledge of a situation to make his violence comedic. This can be found in the simplest of ways in The Scarecrow (1920) when Keaton

disguises himself as a scarecrow and boots two oblivious men in the behind, eventually provoking them into shoving each other around until Keaton jumps and does a spread-legged kick which hits them both. The audience's awareness of the reality which escapes the victims of the violence ensures the comedic interpretation of the men's surprise. Another variant on this route to comedy is found in The Paleface (1921), when Buster puts his disguise (a blanket) on an unconscious man (unconscious because Buster landed on him) so that his pursuers beat up the innocent man by mistake. A third variant of this type of situational comedy is found in another scene from The Paleface, where Buster is being burned at the stake but remains calm because he is secretly wearing an asbestos suit. Again, our superior knowledge of the reality of the situation makes the onlookers' perplexed reactions all the more funny.

Keaton is also fond of visual gags which comically frame his violence. One such instance is found in Convict 13, during a battle between rock-throwing prisoners and gun-toting guards. The guards use their rifles as baseball-bats to return the rocks, but as they are hit on the wall, the guards pop up and down like targets in a shooting gallery. Thus, in one gag, Keaton frames the violence as two different games, ensuring its light-hearted and consequently comedic interpretation.

Harry Langdon

Harry Langdon's The Strong Man (1926) has a solid piece of physical comedic violence where Langdon accidentally inflicts various injuries on a woman who is pretending to be unconscious as he carries her on his back (she falls over a ladder and down some stairs and slides down a banister). His characteristic obliviousness provokes the laughter from us as we wince in recognition of the obvious damage which she must incur in doing her Xanthian fakery.

Harold Lloyd

Lloyd's character offers some complex freedom for physically violent comedy. The extreme earnestness and stupidity of his character is absurd and therefore dissuades the audience from taking him or what befalls him seriously. Lloyd, however, also quickly gains underdog status in all his films and this generates sympathy for all his characters (thus necessitating his final triumph in every film).

Lloyd's films are full of moments of wincing laughter for an audience that can observe his endless, earnest and unsuccessful attempts to fit in. In the football game in The Freshman, we see Lloyd's face being walked across and then see him walking around stunned. The camera shows us the damage he has received with an image of double vision, but still, because of Lloyd's ridiculousness, there is laughter (if sympathetic).

In At the Old Stage Door (1919), a man keeps hitting Lloyd and knocking his hat off. Lloyd gestures for the man to wait, puts his hat down, and then offers himself to be throttled. Such moments as these are separated from a stupidity that might provoke sympathy by the sheer illogic of Lloyd's actions. They are less the actions of a stupid man than those of someone whose cares we cannot share, because he does not care himself.

This stupidity shifts to an obliviousness in Lloyd's later films. This obliviousness is used as a route to comedy in a scene from Lloyd's Never Weaken (1921) where he performs some fake chiropractic moves upon a person who he thinks is a friend faking an ailment. The comedy again arises from our knowledge of the contrary and our realisation of the damage he must be inflicting upon his victim.

Lloyd's obliviousness and stupidity are employed in a scene in Why Pick On Me? (1918) where Lloyd is hit every time he winds up to hit his opponent. Here, we laugh at his repeatedly punished stupidity, but later when he hands his jacket and hat to his opponent and

then belts him, we laugh at his violent triumph. It is the illogic of the *reductio ad absurdum* of the first action which provokes the comedy and, as well, the surprise and illogic of his triumph which provides the comedy of the later.

Another *reductio* appears in Lloyd's Speedy (1928), where an old man bonks a man on the head with a board, and then revives him with a splash of water, and then bonks him again, and revives, *ad infinitum*. The old man's actions achieve humour through their illogical repetition, but especially because there is a logic in their illogic: it makes sense for the old man to punish his opponent repeatedly and to not let the opponent's unconsciousness protect him from the violence which he helped instigate. The unconsciousness of the victim is important for understanding some of the mechanisms of the humour of the scene: there is a moral code in these films and in our lives which suggests that it is unusually cruel or unfair or morally wrong to beat an unconscious opponent regardless of the suffering which he or she has previously inflicted. This scene breaks that decorum, mocks it, and does so in a light-hearted way which adds to the humour, and proves that ultimately "the Queensberry rules" mean nothing in a real fight.

An important element of many of the comically violent moments of Lloyd's films is surprise. With Lloyd this inventiveness is most often found in the numerous identity changes and tricks which end up directing violence away from Lloyd toward someone else. A fine example of this occurs in The Non-Stop Kid (1918), where, in order to evade a troublesome professor, Lloyd belts a cop then tickles a professor so that when the cop turns around he can only see the professor laughing at him. The cop then knocks the professor unconscious and drags him away. A similarly inventive moment is found in Never Weaken, when Lloyd, troubled by a cop, throws a penny behind the cop, and a poor man with a sign on top of his head bends down to pick it up and inadvertently knocks the cop on the head with the sign.

All of the comically violent scenes in Never Weaken are motivated by Lloyd's need to hand out chiropractic cards to people. Much of the humour of the film comes from his follow-up to his cruel actions, when he promptly gives his victims his friend's chiropractic card (or slips it into their pockets if they are unconscious). The capper of these scenes occurs when Lloyd puts soap powder on a street that is being watered. After each of the pedestrians falls, he gives him a card. A policeman chases Lloyd, and when the policeman falls down, Lloyd gives him a card (and later falls himself). The humour of the scene is increased by Lloyd's repetitively mechanical action of offering the card, as well as his cruel inventiveness, and the cruel decorum-breaking truth behind a chiropractor's need for business.

Laurel and Hardy

Laurel and Hardy have countless moments of comedic violence throughout their films. Most of these bits of business are so common to the films of their predecessors that they do not necessitate detailing. They did, however, introduce several variants. In The Live Ghost (1934), there is a scene which utilises sound to further the comedy of its violence. In the scene, the shanghaiing Captain throws sailors down an open hold. The camera stays on the Captain while he listens and after a long pause we hear a thump and a loud "Oww!". This sound builds up the expectation and comic impossibility (due to the overly long fall) of the violent action.

Laurel and Hardy were fond of repeated gags and stretched them seemingly well past their limits. In Flying Elephants (1928), Hardy gets clubbed on the head while talking to another caveman's girl. The next time he is talking to a woman, he gets clubbed from an assailant hiding above him. The third time he is seemingly safe out in an open field. But, as he starts talking, a ram runs onto the screen and butts Hardy's backside. Part of the comic pleasure of these extended gags is the seeming impossibility of their extension, as well as the

inventiveness required for that extension.

Laurel and Hardy's major contribution to comedic violence is found in their curious attitude towards it: "sado-masochistic exchanges of savage, yet well-ordered and almost "civilised", violence" (Everson, 29). In many ways theirs is an extension of the standard fighting gag where one of the fighters tries to position the other for a good hit. However, in those gags the person doing the positioning usually gets belted once he or she winds up to hit his or her unwilling target (a situation found in the boxing fight of Brats 1930). In Laurel and Hardy's unique take on the gag, the target waits to be hit:

The argument, of course, starts over nothing at all; a misunderstanding, an imagined insult, a pure accident. The initial blow is merely a mild chastisement, designed to put an immediate end to the bothersome business; but the retaliatory gesture is stronger and more painful, and demands a correspondingly more powerful comeback. And thus it builds with a kind of businesslike and casual sadism. (Everson, 29)

As Mast points out, it is this attitude to personal violence which makes it comic. "In the Laurel and Hardy world, human activity looks insanely bizarre because human motivation and passion have been so rationally and realistically reduced to such a petty, vengeful, vicious norm" (Mast, 193). It is the fact that this is a universally embraced rule of conflict which makes the irrationality of violence absurdly ordered in their films: "It is one of the rules of the game that the victim make no move to protect himself or his property... and suffers silently and stoically, almost as interested in what is going to happen to him next as are his tormentors" (Everson, 29).

Barr points out an appeal that the attitude of Laurel and Hardy's approach to violence encourages:

Their coolness allows them to act with the decisiveness which in real life we attain only in agonised reconstruction of events: "Now when he did that, what I *should* have done was...". Stan and Ollie and their antagonists don't have these worries, which helps to explain why they are able to dismiss their grievances so quickly from memory. They are purged, and we who watch are purged with them. (Barr, 78)

In some strange way, this appeal, as absurd as it is, creates an allowance of logic which permits its lack of sense and, of course, secures its comedification.

Durgnat ascribes this unique attitude towards suffering as part of a code of behaviour:

How absurd yet how strangely persuasive are those “tit-for-tat” sequences..., each lets the other do his worst before retaliating - perhaps in obedience to some strange relic from the Code of the West; perhaps deliberately stoking up his own indignation and therefore strength; perhaps out of bravado; perhaps out of obedience to some streak of masochism which, if Laurel and Hardy films are any guide, must be more compulsive in human nature than unaided common sense would have us believe. (Durgnat, 93)

Gehring places it more precisely as a comment upon society:

Thanks also to the tit-for-tat encounters, one sees just how thin modern urban man’s veneer of civilisation is. Interestingly enough, despite the cleansing total comedy violence, Stan and Ollie and their comic combatants still take turns while wreaking havoc. This telling residue of politeness – even in violence – nicely demonstrates the artificial façade of graciousness with which modern urban society frequently covers its stress points. (Laurel and Hardy, 135)

Indeed, Gehring’s interpretation of this societal cover supports Bergson’s views of comedy:

“What has just interested us is not so much what we have been told about others as the glimpse we have caught of ourselves – a whole host of ghostly feelings, emotions and events that would have fain come into real existence, but, fortunately for us, did not” (Bergson, 164).

Laurel and Hardy’s politeness in violence seems to strain this societal restriction. Barr (like Freud), points this aspect of violent comedy to the purpose of comedy in general:

Doesn’t this represent a classic subversive function of comedy – to take us back to our “hunting” past where we can be as ruthless as we like with people and yet, because of the comic framework, avoid being “Fascist”? (The violence in much of their work is too direct and cruel for one to invoke merely the safer word “anarchic”; at least, if it wasn’t comic it would be worse than anarchic). It’s much easier for comedy to have it both ways since we can more naturally feel both forces at once – the positive energy, blurred by “civilisation”, which we have to share; the destructive irresponsibility which we have to reject... The pre-literate, “hunting” past of the race has its equivalent in the ruthless solipsism of the child. (Barr, 31)

Anarchic seems the far more appropriate description for the violence which, as Barr himself notes, often ends with Laurel and Hardy’s impact upon society: “The last scene of many of

the early films is a massive, intoxicating, social chaos” (Barr, 31). Indeed, this appears to be the meaningful end result of the couple’s mannered exploration of violence:

Society (crowds) may be infected by their violence, but never by their laughter. Authority can’t share their laughter... It [authority] makes itself absurd either by being laughed *at* or by joining in the tit-for-tat violence. Stan and Ollie may even, having started a scene of chaos, blithely dissociate themselves, having proved that an anarchic force is latent in all of us, and all the better for being released once in a while. (Barr, 32)

W.C. Fields

W.C. Fields’ contribution to comedic violence was his cruel, uncaring attitude. In The Dentist (1932) his golfing partners complain when he throws his clubs in the water and he replies “I can do whatever I want” and throws his caddy into the water. Mast notes that “like Groucho, whatever it was, Fields was against it” (Mast, 288). Often enough this was expressed mostly through attitude and cruel little quips about those around him. When his films did possess some of the physical comedic violence common to the early film comedies it was usually a more vicious take on the gags. Later in The Dentist, Fields drills viciously into a patient’s mouth. The patient’s legs spin around in a humorous display of pain. When the drilling is done, the patient spits out a mouthful of teeth. Of course, Fields can not leave it alone and adds “You can’t say that hurt you”. This scene displays the cruel streak of Fields’ humour best summarised by Fields himself: “I never saw anything funny that wasn’t terrible. If it causes pain, it’s funny; if it doesn’t, it isn’t” (Staveacre, 10). This pain is most often an emotional cruelty rather than a physical one. Indeed, Fields’ much touted dislike of children and animals (a taboo of sorts) rarely graduates to physical action. One of the few instances of this dislike coming to action is found in My Little Chickadee (1940) when he pushes some young boys out between train cars during a battle with Indians. “Get out there and fight like a man.” Fields assaulted morals and egos, not bodies.

The Three Stooges

The Three Stooges comedy thrived upon comedic violence. They reduced the physical and emotional ingenuity of the comedic violence of silent film and simplified it to its most kinetic core. Their comedic violence is immediate, fast, simple, excessive and fantastical in effect. It is pointless listing the numerous ways in which they hit someone (suffice it to say that, with over 200 films they hit each other and others in nearly every way imaginable). Their violent play focused primarily on the head and face (and as such will be discussed in more detail in the section on violence to the face) and was driven by a childishly immediate revenge. "The Stooges authorise childish violence, childish activity of all sorts, in the world of the adults, especially the general carnivalesque attack launched against the "responsible adults", the men (usually) who are in charge" (Brunette, 183). This revenge against those in charge usually happens toward the end of the film, but en route, as with Laurel and Hardy, there is plenty of time for petty, childish interaction which always leads to crib-styled violence; pulling ears (Grips, Grunts and Groans) (1937), pulling hair and crushing noses (Three Little Pirates) (1946) and the infamous and ever-present pokes in the eye.

Brunette suggests that the Stooges "stand in for the children watching them", through their childish behaviour and appearance, but this seems the usual critical tactic (similar to that levelled against Laurel and Hardy) to dismiss the unsophisticated appeals of some of the less artful and intellectual purveyors of comedic violence. While these less sophisticated comedies might appeal to children more than earlier comedies, they ultimately appeal to the same sense of humour as the early films but remove much of the moral coding and sophistication which previously made such violence palatably comic. Theirs is honest comedic violence that does not care for such niceties because it acknowledges that the violence is all fantastic, and thus revels in it.

The routes to this comedy are always laughably arbitrary or childishly simple and

clichéd: in Grips, Grunts, and Groans the old “your shoe’s untied” is used to sock Curly in the chin, but of course the indestructible chin of Curly leaves the assailant’s hand sore. Later in the same film Curly reprises a version of Chaplin’s hypodermic of amphetamine gag when he smells wild hyacinth (already coded as something which drives him crazy). Curly does a high-speed freak out, beats a wrestler, then the other stooges, and then grabs the bell and clunks them all on the head (including the police). The mayhem eventually ends when the bell lands on him. Staveacre notes of the narrative simplicity of this violence that “they reduce the give-and-take of knockabout comedy to its most primitive fundamentals, punctuated only by grunts, squeaks and moans. Their horseplay is a *ritual*, perfected by hours of painstaking practice” (Staveacre, 127).

Brunette notes that the ritual is a narrative in and of itself: “In each Stooges’ short, the violence always has a life and trajectory of its own. It is anticipated, set up, and provided for, and it always follows its own painful logic, the logic of the *surenchère*, of the ever-increasing stakes of one-upmanship. Thus, each violent outburst contains its own mininarration, its own plot” (Brunette, 175). This mini-narrative is apparent in any altercation between the Stooges and, usually begins with Curly’s refusal to do something and leads to the persuasive violence of the other two (such as their attempts to get Curly into the ring in Grips, Grunts and Groans). This sheer focus on violence, suggests Brunette, makes the Stooges’ films transgressive: “The Stooges are transgressive because their films, quite simply, are about violence. Violence is celebrated, continuously and joyously reinvented, even revelled in” (Brunette, 175). Indeed, while in the silent film comedies it was the moral attitudes which surrounded moments of violence which were transgressive, in the films of the Stooges, the formulaic, simplistic narrative and its absolute focus on violence makes the films themselves transgressive.

Cartoons

The Looney Toons cartoons make frequent use of violence for comedic effect. In The Foghorn Leghorn (1946) Foghorn hits the barnyard dog every time he gestures to him. In The Hair-Raising Hare (1946) there is Stooze-style eye gouging and an inventive piece of beating on Bugs' part where he accurately hits a piece of wall concealing a monster which is stalking him, and it falls right through the wall stunned. In Nasty Quacks (1945) Daffy engages in a knife-fight, and, after knocking the knife out of his opponent's hands, offers to let him pick it up again. When the opponent bends over to pick it up, Daffy gives a flick of the eyebrows to the audience, winds up his foot and then kicks the man down the stairs. When the man finishes falling down the stairs, Daffy is waiting for him, and says "touché", followed by his trademark "whuhoo whuhoo". When the man pursues him, he slams a door in his face and says "touché #2". Violence is *de rigueur* and available at every turn in these cartoons.

John Kricfalusi's Ren and Stimpy cartoons depend significantly upon suffering and the grotesque for their humour but turn to violence less often than one would expect. However, the Itchy and Scratchy segments of *The Simpsons*, a parody of everything "bad" in contemporary teen cartoons like Ren and Stimpy, turn to violence constantly. In one segment Itchy stabs Scratchy, then shoots a rocket launcher at his head which causes Scratchy's eyeballs to pop out, which he then replaces with small bombs which quickly explode. The segment, like most others, relies on its inventively extreme cruelty for its humour. As well, its secondary comic appeal is through its parody of the less clever appeals of its contemporaries. In a sequence from *The Simpsons* which advertises for an imaginary Itchy and Scratchy movie, a segment is shown where Itchy pokes Scratchy's eyes, violently shaves his face, uses a torch to burn his head through to the skull, shoots the top of his head off, and

finally jumps in and rips apart his brains. After an announcer proclaims that the film has “great suspense”, over a segment showing Scratchy slowly moving towards a circular saw, Itchy gestures for the conveyor belt to speed up and then impatiently jumps on and chops him to pieces. The humour of these scenes is found in their entire content being made up of violence, in how far and inventively they will go, and their morally “inappropriate” target audience of children. There are still many of the same comic appeals here as can be found in much less explicit and gratuitous comedic violence. The absurd manic energy of the scenes, when paired with their gruesomely detailed inventiveness, is always surprising, frequently shocking, and therefore funny before the scenes become framed by the culture conscious parody and satire that form the base of the more sophisticated comedy of *The Simpsons*.

Monty Python

This sort of gruesome detail and extreme violence is often used for comic purposes in the Monty Python films. In Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979) a scene of two groups of insurgents fighting in the palace is made comic by their instant halting of all fighting as soon as a guard appears and then its immediate resumption as soon as the guard passes. The start and stop keeps the fight comically petty and childish.

A scene from And Now for Something Completely Different (1972) where Arthur Pewtie meekly suffers a series of indignities and then has a sixteen ton weight dropped on his head plays with Bergson's notion that “the comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence” (Bergson, 65). The scene makes the concentration on an individual seem cruel through its choice of a harmless wimp (who is obviously always put upon) as its focus of comic corrective. The skit explicitly mocks any concern for this extreme character, making this explicit with a final title-card announcing “So

much for Pathos”.

In the same film there is a scene of comedic violence which reaches the absurd heights typical of the Python films. A sergeant is conducting a self-defence class where he has been teaching his recruits how to defend themselves against being attacked with fruit. When he finally cajoles a soldier into attacking him with a banana, the sergeant calmly shoots him and then “disarms” him by eating the banana. The absurd taken seriously is often the route to comedy for the violence of the Python films.

Contemporary Film and Theatre

In Home Alone (1990) the comedic violence is comically coded because it is essentially all unconsciously self-inflicted by the villains of the piece. It is nearly always enacted by an intruder-catching trap that the villains trigger in their attempts to catch the young protagonist. However, because all these traps are very carefully engineered and enjoyed by the protagonist, they do fall into the realm of comedic violence. Thus the carefully tarred stairs are the perfect shoe-removing set-up which leads to the robber’s bare foot stepping on the pre-set upturned nail. This type of violence is always carefully coded, as where the robber, played by Joe Pesci, threatens, “You’re dead, kid”, and immediately activates a trap which viciously burns his own hair into a monastic shape. A variant on the “innocence” of the boy in this violence is found when he drops a spider on the face of one of the robbers and it prompts the other robber to try to hit the spider with a crowbar, which prompts the first robber to hit him back. Thus the potential for comedic violence is provided by the boy, but he retains a technical innocence of its perpetration. When his involvement in the violence is active, as when he uses a b.b. gun, his actions are always coded as blameless by being acts of necessary self-defence. Thus the boy and the violence are always guiltless and in possession of the audience’s sympathy – a sure step towards the moral allowance of comedic violence.

In Naked Gun (1988) the physical violence is driven by a Keystone-styled riffing where the frequently physical jokes are endlessly topped. After inflicting some violence upon a now immobile villain, Lt. Drebin states, “He’ll be all right in a minute”, whereupon the villain falls over a ledge, where a bus drives over him, followed by a steam-roller and then a marching band performing “Louie, Louie”.

In Evil Dead II (1986) the projectile is king and is often used to provide comedic violence. In one scene a spirit throws a man up in the air to hit a light-bulb (as with a similar bit of business in Who Framed Roger Rabbit?). In another, a possessed Ash throws the same man into a tree. Both times, overt camera-work guarantees the comedy (the head flying into frame in the first, and a flying man p.o.v. for the second).

Thus with a general survey of some of the standards of physical comedic violence and the moral manoeuvring which allows for their comic interpretation, we can now progress to an understanding of the more stringent moral categories of specific targets and types of violent actions.

Violence to the Face

Comedic violence possesses specific rules, codes and allowances when it uses the face as its target. Often the face offers only another site for cruelty to be visited upon a comic butt; “The Doctor (or Arlecchino disguised as a Dentist) fools Pantalone into thinking that rotten teeth are causing his noxious breath. Using oversized or ridiculous tools, the Doctor extracts two or more good teeth from Pantalone’s mouth” (Gordon, 14). Here in the “*Lazzo* of the Tooth Extractor” the face provides for a particularly vicious piece of comedy. Its apparent viciousness is due to the fact that this *lazzi* will leave Pantalone physically altered forever; the bruises from a slapstick will heal, but Pantalone is here being surgically punished for his gullibility.

In fact, all the injuries which involve the head and face are moments of unusual cruelty in already cruel plays. In Punch and Judy, Punch talks the Doctor down so that he is eye-level with Punch's foot and then kicks him in the eye (Collier, 38), and in Le Tonneau, by Duranty, there is another moment of seeming excessive cruelty;

Polichinelle: (*Pushing the cask onto Baillenflé*) Take that!
 Baillenflé': Ow! Ooooh! Help, help! I'm being squashed!
 Niflanguille: (*Getting up*) Ah, that's better!
 Polichinelle: What's the matter, Niflanguille? You're still complaining?
 Niflanguille: No, its that idiot under there. (*Baillenflé continues to cry out.*
Polichinelle and Niflanguille roll the cask onto his head.
 Baillenflé: Hey! You're crushing my head! (*Polichinelle laughs*). (Baird, 105)

What stands out in these scenes is the severity of the punishment paired with the uncaring attitude of the character doing the violence. While this could be ascribed to moral values different from our own or a tolerance for violence different from our own, the severity of these scenes arises from the fact that violence to the face and head has the possibility of severe and permanent damage.

The face is also the most frequent site of attempts at humiliation, perhaps because it is the place that humiliation most quickly registers. The most popular act of comedic violence involving the face is the pie in the face, and in the "*Lazzo of the Royal Taster*", we find its ancestor. "The sacrificial king, Arlecchino is treated to a sumptuous banquet. But just before Arlecchino can feast on each course, the royal Physician grabs each dish from him, explaining that it causes apoplexy. Finally, Arlecchino pushes a plate of food into the Doctor's face" (Gordon, 22). The pie in the face is a seminal act of comedic violence. Its violence is safe, as it is, after all, just a pie, and yet it achieves the shock, humiliation and punishment intended by most other forms of comedic violence. The pie in the face is gentler than a slap and more humiliating than a kick in the pants and it marks the recipient as punished and/or humiliated well after the sting of the violence has faded.

The pie in the face has another and more severe ancestor in the “*Lazzo of the Chamber-Pot*”: “The servant-girl empties a chamber pot out the window. It hits Pantalone as he serenades Isabella” (Gordon, 32). By over-stepping the bounds of humiliation and safety The “*Lazzo of the Chamber-Pot*” confirms the delicate balance achieved by the safe punishment and humiliation of the pie.

Laurel and Hardy attempt to close the book on the pie-in-the-face gag with a characteristic repetition of the gag in *Battle of the Century* (1927). In the film, thousands of pies are thrown, and every available permutation is recognised, explored, and stretched to its limits (the uses of the pie are further detailed in the weapons section of Chapter Five).

There is plenty of violence to the face in Chaplin’s films. Chaplin’s most common attack on the face is a move found in *The Pawnshop* where Chaplin, after destroying a customer’s clock, grabs him by the face with one hand and shoves him away (usually leaving him to fall to the ground). The bigger men of these films were capable of an even more humorous variation, such as that found in *The Masquerader*. In this film, the director argues with Charlie until at one point he picks Charlie up by the face with one hand and throws him away. The face shove, in both cases, shuts the complainant up and also belittles him by easily denying the importance of the site of identity, the face.

Most often the face makes violence seem particularly vicious. This viciousness is apparent in the pulling of men’s (usually Jewish men’s) beards in *Police!* (1916), or in a moment in *The Pawnshop* where the tramp throws acid in his boss’s face. Later in the same film, the tramp smashes his co-worker in the face with a bass-fiddle, and eventually ends the fight by doing a back kick at his co-worker’s face. These moments of violence come from some of Chaplin’s “nastier” comedies, and part of the humour of this violence is to be found in how vicious it is. There is a shock and a groan of recognition for much violence to the

face: the viewer engages in a sort of animal commiseration, where the viewer's body winces in comic acknowledgement of how much this impermanent damage would smart.

Trapping the head was also popular in Chaplin's films; there are numerous headlocks in By the Sea, and Eric Campbell's head gets stuck in a trap door in Behind the Screen and in a revolving door in The Adventurer (1917). Each time, the crushing of the doors, and the beatings which accompany the headlock, are particularly comical because they allow the audience to observe the seat of pain (the face) as it receives the pain. These gags boil the comedic violence down to its ultimate focus on the reception and expression of pain by the butt of the violence.

Keaton makes little use of the standard gags of comedic violence which involve the face. As usual, Keaton's variations focus on comic suffering. In Battling Butler there is an uninspired bit of business where Keaton gets hit in the face by a paddle as he is towed along in the water. Like most of his violence, it lacks the viciousness or believability of Chaplin's violence. Keaton seems loathe (despite his incredible durability) to take one in the face for a laugh. He is much more prone to depict scenes where the violence can be imagined and the suffering mimed. Such a moment is found in The Scarecrow when Buster is having his tooth pulled by a string. A few little tugs on the string produce a series of humorous grimaces from Buster. Then, after the string has been tied to a door, Buster stands at the ready but the door opens in, hits him in the face, and is then slammed shut, thus finally pulling out his tooth. Again, most of the comedy revolves around Buster's expressive "oww"s.

Laurel and Hardy continue this emphasis on the expressiveness needed to confirm the comedy of a piece of violence by ensuring that much of the violence towards the face receives an enhanced sound effect for comedic effect and to distance the violence from reality. One such moment is found in You're Darn Tootin' (1928) where Laurel kicks Hardy in the chin

and the blow is given a special boxing sound effect.

Laurel and Hardy also made use of the eyes as a painful target of comedic violence. In Brats, when Hardy peeks through a door-knob hole, he gets the knob shoved back in his eye. This particularly sensitive part of the body presents an additional excitement for the comedy of suffering because it almost demands a physical reaction from the audience in recognition of the imagined pain. A blow to the eye produces a pain which is universal and discomfoting enough to be unforgettable and thus prone to identification.

This identification is something upon which The Three Stooges were quick to capitalise. They make the usual use of the head as a humorously noisy and sensitive target for violence, such as in Three Little Pirates where heads are hit with mallets. However, The Stooges in their ever increasing pursuit of extremes were endlessly inventive. Later in the same film Moe puts Curly's head against a spike and hammers it, and in a particularly brutal example of Stooze violence, Moe uses a saw on Curly's forehead (almost as vicious as Moe's protracted, intense pulling of Curly's gums in All the World's a Stooze (1941). All of these actions are accompanied by the usual loud and extreme sound-effects which only add to the shock of such violence (and are sometimes also paired with the destruction of the weapon as it hits its victim, for the same effect: see a moment in Back to the Woods [1937] where Curly hits an Indian over the head with a log so hard that the log breaks).

Brunette finds additional reasoning behind the focus of violence upon the head: "It is the face, the head – again, the seat of reason, truth, control, the Logos – that must be punished, banished, made to disappear in the general celebration of the nether regions of the body" (Brunette 181). Indeed, the violence of the Stooges films is all about the mind: the deranged, the illogical, the pedantically logical, the stupid, the stunned and the stupefying actions of three minds seemingly bent on maintaining the skewed logic of their violent world – it is no

accident that the bulk of their violence is directed at the site of these minds.

Of course, the most famous of the violences preferred by the Stooges is the eye gouge. It often caps many of their give-and-take routines and is their common choice for quickly and temporarily putting an opponent out of commission. Brunette pairs it with the effects of most violence to the head: “Given the Stooges’ predilection for eye gouging (arguably their most notorious form of violence), we can see in their assault on the eye a more general assault, outlined by Bataille, on all that the eye can represent – the reason, the mind, vision, the father, and meaning itself” (Brunette, 180). The necessary mention of Bataille points to the sexual possibilities of this type of violence, but here such sexuality is absent and Brunette is again correct to associate this violence with the mind.

The infamous sliced eyeball of Un Chien andalou (1929) is one of the most shocking pieces of violent comedy. Its frank detail is the precursor to much of the gory comedy of cartoons and horror films: The moment falls within a near barrage of narrative-defying but meaning-laden images and scenes. Sandwiched between images of clouds cutting across a moon in a movement similar to the slicing of the eyeball, and the lines “there was on time” and “8 yrs. later”, the moment becomes an absurdly meaningless visual pun on time and suffering. Here is thought attempting to be free of control, reason and preoccupation, but becoming unavoidably, even slavishly, comic through a collision - which haunts narrative surrealism - of meaninglessness, literalness, cleverness and suspicion.

Faces are rarely hit by bullets in films. If they are shot, this usually just produces an impossible (as Zapruder’s film proves), tidy little hole in the centre of the forehead (or occasionally a hole in the eye-socket). This preference is most likely ascribable to the facts that wounds to the body are the wounds which are most easily separated from the person. They can appear cleaner and less consequential than in real life, and it is much easier to

imagine a reversal of the damage done to any part of the body other than the face and head.

Terminator 2 (1992) capitalises upon this custom with a scene where a hole is shot clean through the T2's head. In seeming recognition of the novelty of this wound, the camera pans around and lets us see through the hole. This camera keeps the hole as a surprise and the literalness of the effect is humorous for the audience.

Evil Dead II is able to take the comical shock of the face as a site for violence several steps farther when in one scene the severed and animate head of Ash's girlfriend bites his hand and then stays attached. He screams and bashes it against walls in an attempt to remove it – in a comically fantastic moment of absurdity.

Because of the imagined severity of violence to the face, such violence is often the surest route to comic shock for victim and audience alike. The shock of this violence, really an immediate and intense exposure of the victim, often makes the face the target of choice for humiliating cruelty. This shock necessitates the reassurance of moral license more than with most comedic violence, as can be seen by the popular victims of violence to the face like the terminator or zombies who offer considerable moral freedom.

Fantastical: Decapitation

While there are special rules for the world of comedies, there are also comic worlds which have a logic that is fantastical even amongst the worlds of comedy. The fantastic can manifest itself in gags which approximate the fantastical, such as the "*Lazzo* of the Hands Behind the Back": "Arlecchino (or Pulcinella), attempting to hide behind Scaramouche (or Lelio), places his arms around him, making all the hand gestures for him. In this way, Arlecchino torments Scaramouche by slapping his face, pinching his nose, and so forth" (Gordon, 12). Thus a very natural phenomenon explains a very humorous independence in Scaramouche's limbs. This gag is revived by Chaplin in A Dog's Life (previously detailed),

and in My Name is Nobody (1973) where the protagonist uses a dummy with outstretched arms to box and slap the face of an assailant. The gag reaches its full fantastical potential in Evil Dead II, when Ash's hand becomes possessed and sets out to destroy him, even after having been severed from his body. These gags work by setting up their own skewed logic, and, once the audience has accepted it, by revealing the humour of its collision with the logic of the real world.

The fantastical comedic violence can boil its humour down to that found in the simple “*Lazzo of the Chair*”, where the character has a chair pulled out from under him just as he is about to sit down (Gordon, 18). This gag, like much comedy, reveals the shock that often lies between expectation and reality. This is a humorous shock that is repeatedly used for comedy, with the animated furniture and shenanigans of invisible or disappearing spirits in films like The Inn Where No Man Rests and Evil Dead II. The basic shock (in this *lazzi* explainable by the action of a mischievous character), can be found in most fantastical comedic violence where the character and/or audience's expected reality is flipped, and logic challenged.

Reality in fantastical comedic violence is often grotesquely challenged, as in the “*Lazzo of Being Brained*”: “Scaramouche hits Arlecchino so hard on the head that Arlecchino's brains begin to spurt out. Afraid that he will lose his intelligence, Arlecchino sits and feasts on his brains” (Gordon, 23). The absurd logic of this piece effectively pulls out the chair from the audience's expectations of such a moment and forecasts the moments of extreme absurdism and gore in such contemporary comedy as Evil Dead II and Who Framed Roger Rabbit?. The “*Lazzo of Eating Oneself*” continues this vein of self-inflicted violence but removes its instigation from the world of violence: “Famished, Arlecchino can find nothing to eat but himself. Starting with his feet and working up to his knees, thighs, and upper torso,

Arlecchino devours himself” (Gordon, 23). Much of the comedy here can be seen to arise from one of Bergson’s “aspects” of a humorous character: personifying opposing directions – effectively making them a marionette (Bergson, 111). Thus Arlecchino in both these *lazzi*’s acts on a self-preserving impulse (the most common impulse in the comic world) in a most unhealthy way: he preserves as he poisons himself, he sustains as he destroys himself. We are not meant to digest these incidences so logically, but the comedy nonetheless arises from the illogic of his actions. While much of the humour of both the “*Lazzo of Being Brained*” and the “*Lazzo of Eating Oneself*” comes from the absurdity of Harlequino’s actions, there is an element of sympathetic humour too that arises in an audience. In the extremes of Harlequino’s actions the audience can find a root of identification that will make them laugh in seeing a variant of “so hungry I could eat a horse” realised. These scenes realise the possibilities of a defiantly fantastical comic world with an absurdism aroused by an extreme animal logic.

The fantastical, comic world is often manipulated by comic characters for their own means, as in the “*Lazzo of the False Arm*”: “Using a false or wooden arm, Gratiano (or a thief) allows himself to be held by suspicious characters. When they begin to beat him, he escapes, leaving the bewildered characters with the wooden arm” (Gordon, 29). While here easily explained, the momentary impossibility of Gratiano’s removable limb is something which is often played with in film comedy, beginning with the fantastical spirits of Méliès’ films, the zombies of Evil Dead II, and the physical impossibilities of cartoon characters, so comically explored in Who Framed Roger Rabbit?.

There are numerous figures in the puppetry plays whose bodies are capable of any physical impossibility (Jurkowski, 355-6). Jurkowski quotes the report of a puppet-play from 1872 which had a fantastical moment which reveals the special abilities of the puppet: “When

the inevitable Policeman, getting in the way of a cannon, is blown to pieces and coolly takes himself up and reunites his scattered fragments, there is a shout of merriment from the juvenile portion of the spectators” (Jurkowski, 363). Jurkowski’s quotation records a comical shock of the fantastical similar to that achieved by contemporary special effects like those found in the Terminator films.

This comic shock is also part of the pleasure offered by the fantastical decapitations of Méliès’ films. Hammond offers a description of The King of the Sharpshooters (1905) which points to the games behind most of Méliès’ comedic violence: “a rifleman provides a candelabrum with five duplicates of his head, four of which he proceeds to shoot away. His body is eventually reunited with the remaining head” (Hammond, 101). Hammond feels that moments such as these are infused with a psychological undercurrent: “Sado-masochistic images like these have an unconscious vitality all of their own. They are retributive (under the auspices of humour the magician retaliates against replicas of himself) yet egotistic (he fabricates his duplicate, then destroys it to assert his uniqueness)” (Hammond, 101). The films of Méliès do present an obsessive concern with the body and its limits. It is important to note, however, that the illusionistic stage has had a similar obsession, with its transformations and manipulations of perceptions of the body. For any audience, it would be the body which is the most reality-grounded element of the physical world, and so it is not surprising that illusionists turn to it to astonish their audiences. This is precisely what Méliès, previously a stage magician, is doing in The Man With the Rubber Head (recounted by Hammond), when Méliès inflates and then blows up a head exactly like his own [a duplicate of his head] (Hammond, 49), and this is why Méliès is repeatedly drawn to headless and decapitation gags (American Spiritualistic Mediums [1903], The Enchanted Spring [1908], An Up to Date Mountebank [1892], The Four Troublesome Heads [1895] and

Melomaniac [1903]). These illusions are easy for him to achieve with the film-camera and, because they disrupt presumptions about the body, they have a great effect on an audience.⁴¹

Another comic appeal provided by decapitation and dismemberment is achieved when the severed parts possess independent life. This happens in Terrible Turkish Executioner (1904) where some recently severed heads peek out of the barrel into which they were thrown, reassemble themselves, and then grab the executioner and cut him in half across the waist. His two legs walk around while the top half calls to them, grabs them, and unites to chase after the men who split him in two. Again, Méliès uses the defiance of expectation to achieve his comedy and uses the rigid definition of the body to achieve the greatest surprise.

This defiance of expectation is most exploited again by the surrealists, most notably in Un Chien andalou. Bunuel is quoted in an introductory title card to the film as stating that “Our only rule was very simple: no idea or image that might lend itself to a rational explanation of any kind would be accepted”. Irrationality provides for numerous fantastically comic violent moments in the film. At one point the man wipes away his own mouth and gets the woman’s armpit hairs in replacement. In another, ants crawl out of a hole in a severed hand, and later the hand is found in a box. All of these moments call to mind the possibilities of the body explored in the frequently comic horror films of the 70’s and 80’s (most notably Evil Dead and even Blue Velvet, 1986). The body altered, severed, transformed and misused is an absurdly disturbing and potentially comic sight. These mutations are the often comic results of violence – images which jar our assumptions and coded understanding of the body, and as such provide a shock which, depending on the viewer, can be seen as horrific or comic or – sometimes - both.

It should come as no surprise that the frequently grotesque Python films have comic

⁴¹ The mere act of a decapitation can be funny because of the trickery or illusion involved in representing such an act of violence. The decapitations in the fall of Babylon sequence in Intolerance (1916) are comic because of the seemingly unrealistic ease and speed of their achievement.

scenes which depend upon decapitation and the fantastical for humour. In Monty Python's The Meaning of Life (1983) there is the exploded but still functioning body of Mr. Caruso, the man who eats to excess. This is a moment of the surreal realised, the body defining its limits with a cliché of overeating literalized.

The most memorable moment of comedic violence involving dismemberment is surely the fight between Arthur and the Black Knight in Monty Python and The Holy Grail (1974):

Arthur chops off the knight's arm.

Black Knight: Tis but a scratch.

Arthur: A scratch? Your arm's off.

Black Knight: No it isn't.

Arthur: Well what's that then?

Black Knight: I've had worse.

Arthur: You liar.

Black Knight: C'mon ya pansy.

The Black Knight runs screaming at Arthur who easily chops off his other arm.

Arthur: Victory is mine. We thank thee Lord that in thy mercy –

The Black Knight kicks Arthur in the head.

Black Knight: C'mon then.

Arthur: What?

Black Knight: Have at you.

Arthur: You are indeed brave Sir Knight, but the fight is mine.

Black Knight: Oh, had enough eh?

Arthur: Look, you stupid bastard, you've got no arms left.

Black Knight: Yes I have.

Arthur: Look!

Black Knight: Just a flesh wound. *(He kicks Arthur).*

Arthur: Look stop that.

Black Knight: Chicken. Chicken.

Arthur: Look, I'll have your leg. Right. *(He cuts off his leg).*

Black Knight: *(He's hopping around).* Right, I'll do you for that.

Arthur: You'll what?

Black Knight: Come here.

Arthur: What're you going to do, bleed on me?

Black Knight: I'm invincible.

Arthur: You're a loony.

Black Knight: The Black Knight always wins. Have at you. C'mon then. *(Arthur cuts off his other leg. The Black Knight looks down at his lack of legs).* Oop. All right, we'll call it a draw.

Arthur leaves.

Black Knight: Oh, I see. Running away eh? You yellow bastard. Come back here and take what's coming to you. I'll bite your legs off.

The absurd extremes of this comically gory scene find additional humour through the insane denials of the Black Knight - a mockery of the macho code of most heroes of narrative fiction. As well, the Black Knight's taunts of "Chicken. Chicken" break the macho code by bringing it down to playground level and making this whole encounter a moment of extreme, deluded insanity which mocks the romantic tropes of heroic drama.

Mast has noted that "The comic artist reminds us that such abstractions ["Progress, Justice, Wisdom, Law, Virtue and Happiness"] are merely the unattainable inventions of fallible beings and are therefore less concrete, tangible, and real than a pie in the kisser" (Mast, 340). In The Meaning of Life this comic debunking of progress is bloodily pursued in a piece entitled "Live Organ Transplants". In the scene a healthy, living man is forced to give up his liver because he signed an organ donor card. The donation is achieved through a bit of living-room surgery with blood spraying everywhere and the victim constantly screaming. This scene is an extreme take on the fears and myths associated with the signing of such forms. As well, the calm attitude of the surgeons (they have tea while they operate), the accepting attitude of the wife (she makes the tea and flirts with one of the surgeons), and the excessive gore all add to the comedy of the scene. By keeping the patient off screen the scene is kept comic – the patient exists as a source for blood, screams and organs without any pathos-evoking facial expressions to interfere with the comic focus and intent of the scene. Scenes like "Live Organ Transplants" are driven by the juxtaposition of comic pleasure and shock.

However, at times these scenes represent a sort of comic love of the sense of play offered by extremes. Witness a piece of animation (Gilliam's animation is shown here to be the precursor to much of the extreme animation popular today) from And Now for Something Completely Different, where a man hums while covering first his beard and then his entire

face with shaving cream. The scene concludes when he takes his straight razor and calmly chops off his entire head.

Evil Dead II, being a film about zombies and demons, provides numerous moments of fantastical comedic violence. There is the comical decapitation at the beginning of the film (which leads to the previously mentioned hand biting scene) where Ash chops off his possessed girlfriend's head with a shovel. The decapitation is safely coded through his girlfriend's demonic possession – she is both herself and not herself).⁴² Later in the film, yet another severed head bites Ash's foot, whereupon he throws it across the room, slams a cellar-door on it and then jumps on top of it, causing an eyeball to pop out, fly across a room, and into the screaming mouth of a woman who is watching. This, then, is the twisted progeny of Keaton's endless motion gags. The overt film-making (a close-up profiles the flying eyeball and then another shows its p.o.v. as it flies towards the open mouth of the screaming woman) enhances the comic reception of such comically fantastical moments.

Possession provides more moments of comical dismemberment in the severed hand of the film. Ash's severed hand is given a personality which provides much of the humour of the scene. At one point, Ash misses while trying to shoot his hand. It drums its fingers in impatience and goes "Nyah, Nyah, ha, ha" somehow (it squeaks), while he reloads. The fingers are then accidentally snapped in a mousetrap, which prompts Ash to celebrate with a loud "Ha!" as the hand squeaks in pain. Later, when it gives him the finger, Ash shoots it in its wall hiding place. The comedy of these scenes is derived from the sheer fantastical absurdity of them, but also by the coy cat-and-mouse game that the two opponents play with each other (the cute personification of the hand goes far enough that its death is too sensitive to show - we know that it is hit because of blood coming from the wall that it has been hiding

⁴² The comedy of Ash's girlfriend's head talking despite her decapitation recalls the comic shock of the decapitated head in Aguirre, The Wrath of God (1972), which finishes counting after being separated from its body.

behind).

While decapitation can evoke the comic shock of extremes and often define the body's limits, the fantastical provides pure possibility for the comical manipulation and denial of these limits. Because of its extreme difference from the real world, the fantastical can accommodate comedic violence without the slavish concern for moral coding which is necessary for comedic violence staged in worlds with closer ties to our own.

Corpses

The use and manipulation of corpses forms a special branch of comedic violence. While this thesis is not concerned with violence to things, corpses are of course very special, once human, things with a set of rules and decorums and routes to comedy which are very much a part of the tradition of comedic violence.

Skeletons are a popular manipulation for the films of Méliès and those of contemporary horror film-makers. However, while they might at one time have encompassed the horror with which we can react to corpses, they are really beyond having such effects due to their very obvious separation from the person they formerly supported. Skeletons do not independently call to mind the person from which they came, and so they can be used without encountering the same extreme reactions and set of decorums which morally regulate the use of corpses for comedy.

Much of the comedy attached to the brutal or inappropriate treatment of corpses arises from the shock that such acts engender. Thus, when Punch is tricked into thinking that a corpse has pulled his leg, and he sets about beating it (Byrom, 52), while there is the comedy of his deception, there is also the additional comedy of his socially inappropriate treatment of the corpse of a person whom he has just recently murdered. The disrespect accorded the dead is the same as the shocking irreverence with which Punch dispatches them. While Punch's

actions are shocking enough, they become additionally so when we see that Punch's mockery is not in any way hindered by any sense of remorse.

There is a comic moment in Fatty's Tintype Tangle which is similar to a popular use of corpses in contemporary films. In it Fatty is shot in the backside, so he turns around and uses his assailant's wife as a shield. She is shot in the backside, and then Fatty throws her away. Thus, in a manner which forecasts Arnold Schwarzenegger's use of bodies in Verhoeven's Total Recall (1990), Fatty provokes laughter by his unconcerned but honest use of someone for protection. This action in part points to Bergson's assertion that the comedic character must be unsociable. Fatty's honesty breaks our expectation of societal decorum: that no-one, including Fatty, would use another person as a shield from violence. Fatty's action destroys that expectation by essentially turning the woman into a corpse (an object), something about which his audience need not be concerned.

Kamin feels that the moments which treat "human bodies as if they are objects" soften the violence of Chaplin's work (Kamin, 42), but one must wonder how some of these moments can do anything but harden the mood of his films. There are the usual instances in silent slapstick of the body used as a weapon (a fine one is found in Shanghai'd Lovers when a dummy meant to be Harry Langdon is used by a resourceful Captain as a weapon), but these are easier to comically reconcile than some of the following found in Chaplin's films. There are often moments (as in Behind the Screen), where people are walked upon in a complete disregard for their bodies. The most spectacular is to be found in A Day's Pleasure (1919), where Charlie uses a woman as a gangplank. In The Circus, Charlie pulls an unconscious man over to him, in order that he may stand on him to peek through a tent-hole. A similar instance is found in The Bank, where Charlie sits on the head of a robber after he has knocked him unconscious. Each time, the use of the body is comically shocking. The shock achieved

by this disregard for the body is obvious. Its comedy is achieved by its decorum-smashing practicality, morally enabled by the fact that the unconscious victims would likely feel nothing.

Keaton makes similar decorum-smashing comedy with a body-gag in Spite Marriage where Keaton has to move his drunk and unconscious wife onto their bed. His clumsiness leads him to an awkward and rough treatment of her, eventually causing him to drop her repeatedly. Again, as with Chaplin, by treating her body as an object, and by breaking the decorum (though not as nastily as Chaplin), Keaton evokes humour from the situation.

Orton's Funeral Games (1970) makes use of a corpse for some of its humour. In order to provide proof of a faked murder, Caulfield takes off the hand of the wife's corpse: "I couldn't get her head off. It must be glued on" (Orton, 347). Caulfield's explanation, and the subsequent scenes where the hand is hidden and eventually discovered in a cake tin (a comically inappropriate hiding place, particularly as it is associated with food), use the hand for a comic teasing of our sensitivities and expectations for the treatment of corpses.

The Loved One (1965) goes farthest with the humour of corpses, in a series of scenes where Mr. Joyboy manipulates the face of Gielgud's character's corpse. He manipulates it into various inappropriate funereal expressions; surprise, and ecstasy (the inappropriate expressions pointing out the inappropriateness of the act itself). Later, Mr. Joyboy flirts with the hairdresser through the faces of the corpses that he passes on to her. This misuse of the body is made additionally comical through the perpetrator's obliviousness to the moral impropriety of his actions. This obliviousness is echoed in a scene where, at a pet cemetery, a dog's corpse is dropped into a freezer from which a drink and sandwich are casually removed. Of course, these improprieties point out, and to some extent mock, our own unnecessary reservations about corpses and so subject to scrutiny a central taboo in our

culture.

Drowning by Numbers (1988) has an interest in corpses which revolves around the Great Death game which the boy Smut plays with the world around him. The game is bizarre in its intricacies: he numbers all corpses that he finds, using yellow paint for certain days, red for others. He then sets off fireworks to celebrate each corpse, and later an old man (an ambiguous god/death figure) comes to collect the corpses. This peculiar ritual of Smut's and the others' acceptance of it is humorous in its detailed strangeness.

The Monty Python films make use of the mistreatment of corpses for comedy. In a scene from The Holy Grail the Black Knight is seen dispatching a knight by throwing his sword through the knight's face. The next shot shows the impressed reactions of Arthur and Patsy, and then the film cuts to the Black Knight unceremoniously pulling his sword out of the knight's head, using his foot as a brace. The editing and action both comically emphasise the lack of ceremony accorded the corpse in this world.

Perhaps the most famous comic abuse of a corpse is to be found in the "Dead Parrot" skit from And Now For Something Completely Different. In this scene, a pet owner engages in a series of violent demonstrations of his recently purchased bird's lack of life, most notably by violently hitting it against a counter and fiercely yelling "hello Polly" into its ears. This decorum-breaking abuse becomes comic through its necessarily lengthy and extreme demonstrations (the shop-owner refuses to acknowledge the death of the bird).

Nothing could trump the corpse decorum-breaking effect of the Python's "Undertaker" skit. In it, a man is eventually persuaded by an undertaker and his assistant that they should all eat his dead mother and, as the undertaker helpfully points out, "if you feel a bit guilty about it after, we can dig a grave and you can throw up in it" (Monty Python's Flying Circus, episode 26). This scene presents the complete disavowal of the moral demands surrounding

corpses (though pointedly the scene remains verbal and thus only suggests the possibility of all but its lesser moral violations).

In Total Recall, Schwarzenegger's character uses someone's body as a shield to protect himself from bullets, and then throws the body at his attackers when it is done with. At the end of this scene the villains run over the body. The sheer outrageousness of the treatment of an innocent person's body produces a comic shock of disbelief. In a semi-reversal of this moment, Schwarzenegger (as the terminator) in Terminator 2 uses himself as a shield to protect John Conner. The laughs produced by this scene are produced by Conner's surprise (he expects the terminator to try and kill him) and the practical stoicism with which the terminator endures the torrent of bullets.

In Something (1996), Mump and Smoot play with a corpse at a funeral parlour. Once they discover the severed arm of the corpse they quickly resort to comic play which ends with them scratching their back with the arm. This scene, like much of Mump and Smoot's work, plays upon our shock and horror at their disruption of decorum.

Reservoir Dogs (1992) pushes this mixture of comedy and repulsion with Mr. Blonde's moment with the policeman's severed ear (a corpse of sorts really). Blonde plays with the ear with a mixture of amusement and disgust (the disgust seeming to arise more than anything from the fact that the ear belonged to a policeman). Blonde has a moment of sick comic mockery when he jokingly talks into the ear. "Eh? What's going on?". This moment pushes the audience's boundaries as it displays Mr. Blonde's inappropriate comic disregard for the suffering of the policeman. Again, the comic shock of the outrageous is present here, but it is quickly silenced by the prominent suffering of the policeman.

Man Bites Dog also has a revealing comic scene involving corpses. Benoit drops his weighted corpses off a bridge into a water-filled ravine. The humour arises when a corpse

hits part of the bridge on the way down. Much like Brady's forcing a corpse into a trunk in Apartment Zero (1988), the scene is a comic breach of the expected propriety due a corpse. This improper laugh is secured in Man Bites Dog by the immediate humour of the fact that Benoit's professed knowledge of how to overcome the buoyancy of corpses proves immediately false.

Thus the mistreatment of a corpse offers a distinct branch of physical comedic violence which centres on the comic shock of the disruption of decorum. The comic shock of the disruption achieves a temporary disregard of, and release from, society's moral demands.

These moments of physical comedic violence are all careful to placate our moral concerns (as detailed in Chapter One), but much of their success as comedy hinges upon the shock and excitement of probing and testing these very same moral boundaries and expectations. This, then, is a careful ridicule or comic testing of our morals.

Chapter Four

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In a time of political correctness certain humour stands out as having crossed a line of taste or morality. As we study comedy we realise that every age has its morally correct and accepted forms and butts of comedy, and that nearly all humour offends someone in at least some small way. In many ways, by exploring humour that probes the borders of taste and morality, this thesis charts the drifting and at times seemingly arbitrary, moral limits of acceptable humour.

This chapter first examines the comedic violence for which gender is integral and then the plays and films which use sexual violence for the purposes of comedy, with a special focus on the genitals as a target. This category explores some of the delicate moral extremes of comedic violence for contemporary audiences. Sexual comedic violence is all but taboo for contemporary audiences, and thus provides an indication of the limits to the moral negotiations which define comedic violence and the limits of the comic probings which provide comedic violence with its excitement.

Gender

Comedic violence is dominated by men. While this is hardly surprising, given the male dominance of violent crime and popular culture, it does mean that nearly any time a woman has an active and central role in a violent gag, gender becomes a pivotal part of the humour of the gag. This section investigates gendered violence to help us understand the distinct role, as both victim and perpetrator, that women often play in violent comedy.

The violence directed at women in *Commedia* is in many ways in keeping with the standard gags of the tradition. Thus Filesia, in a variation on a standard gag of faking death or sleep, receives a common form of punishment for her deception: “Arsenio bemoans the

'death' of his beloved, Filesia. Trappola enters and suggests to Arsenio that he need not worry, the way to revive women is to pull their hair or twist their arms" (Gordon, 17).

Obviously, within a frequently brutal tradition such as *Commedia*, where characters have teeth removed or their brains knocked out for the purposes of comedy this scene does not present unusual or harsh treatment.

The "*Lazzi* of Urinating on Her", however, seems to suggest that there is also a type of cruelty reserved for women: "Seeing Lidia tied to a tree and begging to be released, Zanni and Gratiano, both drunk, decide to urinate on the nearest tree, which is the one Lidia is tied to" (Gordon, 33). While this form of humiliation is similar to that which is directed against other characters in the scenarios (the "*Lazzi* of the Enema" comes to mind), the fact that Lidia is helpless and blameless in earning this degradation makes it worse than most *Commedia* punishments. There is also present here the sexual nature of her humiliation, but, again, that is not unique to her character as comparison to the "*Lazzi* of the Enema" (page 211) proves. However, for the "*Lazzi* of the Enema" the victim is Pantalone and like most victims in *Commedia* he earns his victimhood – in his case by being a conniver, a lecherous man and, at times, for just being stupid. Lidia is none of these things. In the *Commedia dell'Arte* women are allowable victims, at times for no other reason than they are women. Women are integral to the sexual machinations which drive most of the *Commedia* plots, and while they are, more often than not, essentially powerless pawns in those machinations, they can make themselves worthy of the sort of comic punishment usually reserved for the more mischievous males just by working towards their own happiness or autonomy. *Commedia* is, after all, a great equaliser and frustrator of all ambitions and assumptions that a character might possess.

There is a similar hazard in analysing the violence against women in the Punch and Judy show, because Punch is vicious to everyone he encounters. The conclusions of his conflict

with Judy, however, and his reaction to her death reveal special treatment:

JUDY: Oh pray, Mr. Punch. No more!

PUNCH: Yes, one littel more lesson. (*hits her again*) There, there, there! (*she falls down with her head over the platform of the stage; and as he continues to hit her, she puts up her hand to guard her head*) Any more?

JUDY: No, no, no more! (*lifting up her head*)

PUNCH: (*knocking down her head*) I thought I should soon make you quiet.

JUDY: (*again raising her head*) No.

PUNCH: (*again knocking her down, and following up his blows until she is lifeless*)

Now if you're satisfied, I am. (*perceiving that she does not move*) There, get up Judy, my dear; I won't hit you any more. None of your sham-Abram. This is only your fun. You got the head-ache? Why, you only asleep. Get up, I say. - Well, then, get down. (*tosses the body down with the end of his stick*) He, he, he! (*laughing*) To lose a wife is to get a fortune. (*sings*)

“Who'd be plagued with a wife

That could get himself free

With a rope or a knife,

Or a good stick, like me.” (Collier, 33)

Unlike the other conflicts of the puppet play, this one ends with a long beating of a cowering, plaintive victim. One begins to feel for Judy as Punch's violence goes on beyond the tit for tat violence of the play. She has beaten him, but with good cause (the murder of their child). What is of most interest is Punch's reaction to her death. His concern, if you can call it that, lasts for a beat, and then he is immediately celebrating his new found freedom. There is only gain to be had from her death, and pointedly, this version of the show all but rewards him with the immediate arrival of Pretty Pol, with whom he exits dancing. Thus his wife is turned into just one more shackle to escape from.

Punch's point of view can find contemporary reflection in Howard Stern's Miss America, where a section entitled “My Fantasy Fuck List” explores in crude detail the women that he could or would like to sleep with if his wife were dead. Amongst these women is Savannah, a dead porn star who receives a “chance of scoring” of 100 percent because “she can't run away.” The piece is also accompanied by a photo of Stern suggestively dipping a woman over the open coffin of his wife (Stern, 170-188). Thus women here are seen as a hindrance

to the happy male life, and Punch sees to it that he is free of such restraints.

Punch's attitude when he is accused of his wife's murder is also revealing of the special status granted women in the play:

OFFICER: You must go with me. You killed your wife and child.

PUNCH: They were my own, I suppose; and I had a right to do what I liked with them. (Collier, 46)

While these lines seem like an index to a different set of values where women and children were property (and certainly the 1828 publishing date of this script supports this possibility), they are meant to be as shocking and funny as all of Punch's callous and flippant explanations for his violence. Excuses abound for Punch's behaviour, none more than from the puppeteers themselves: "They should laugh at him. Because he doesn't hit the Judy in a wicked way. He rolls her round the stick; he does it knowing that she is going to come back and hit him such a wallop. This is the British humour" (Byrom, xi). Whatever the qualifications that may be heaped upon his actions, the intent is still severe even within the world of the show.

Shershow suggests reasons for the inclusion of Punch's violence towards Judy which are echoed by many critics: "In the Punch who kills his wife and baby with comic nonchalance, it is not hard to see an element of wish fulfilment that might appeal to men of a class in which divorce was virtually impossible" (Shershow, 167). To be sure, the Punch and Judy show is a fantasy, not unlike that of Howard Stern, where the common man is free to be unrestrainedly common. Speaight similarly attributes Punch's actions to the desires of the male members of the audience: "There is now no rhyme or reason in Punch's treatment of his wife, but at one time he must have expressed the subconscious desires of many suffering husbands in the audience" (Speaight, 192). Speaight also compares the murder of the child to "the momentary emotions of every parent of a howling baby" (Speaight, 193). But, pointedly, Judy does not present the frustrations of a child (and she hits Punch in only one of

the many variants of the script), and so Punch's violence to her becomes a disturbingly shocking and therefore funny moment of unprovoked fantasy and a denial of societal morality. The astonishingly honest desire and remorseless will of Punch are comical, not the actions themselves. His actions fuel the shock, and so raise the comedy for an audience.

However, the audiences, of course, are not just made up of like-thinking men, and the actions of Punch, as directed against representatives of members of the audience, offer a complicated reception that is not as simple as the puppeteers and their supporters would like to believe:

The show in no sense represents liberation for its second titular character [Judy], an utterly obvious point to which commentators, with their celebratory rhetoric, often seem strangely blind. More specifically, Punch's violent relations with his wife manifest not just masculine wish fulfilment but also what numerous recent scholars suggest is a bourgeois displacement of wife beating onto the lower classes. (Shershow, 167-8)

This complicated reception is the case with much comedy, particularly older comedy whose values often differ from our own (though Stern's popularity proves that aspects of Punch's character are still popular for comedy today). Comedy is most often thought to be a confirmation of its audience's values, and to contemporary minds, for which wife-assault can not be funny, it is difficult to discover a confirmation of any but domineering male values in the play. Likewise the displacement of these comedic crimes onto a member of the lower classes does not make them safe or provide verification of the entire public audience's values.

While certainly some members of the audience would find sufficient distance and some confirmation from Punch, it would seem that another route to the comic distancing was required for the audience. This distancing is available in Shershow's description of Punch as "a kind of overdetermined, parodic image of phallic masculinity" (Shershow, 174). The audience need not find anything but exaggeration in the character, and thus they could probably avoid comparisons to any but their most fleeting and safely avoided impulses, and

similarly avoid the sociological realities that a contemporary audience is likely to find in such a representation.

Despite these assurances there is a political result for a play like Punch and Judy where an everyman figure overcomes archetypal challenges to his independence. Punch becomes for the audience an everyman who because of his clown-like nature is able through his behaviour to criticise that which is morally prohibited. "He is free where we are bound. He expresses what we know but are forbidden - and have forbidden ourselves - to express" (Stead, 150). He becomes pure, unbridled passionate and puerile male thought, and as such his actions represent a victory for such thought. The murder of Judy has an effect similar to that noted by Derek Cohen for the murder of Lavinia in Titus Andronicus: "Patriarchy renews itself through the killing of an innocent woman" (Cohen, 80). Punch, like Titus, is able symbolically to restore the patriarchy through a symbolic murder.

Women are more actively involved in comedic violence in film than in theatre. Gerald Mast suggests that Mack Sennett's films are a reaction against some of the general views espoused by film at the time: "They were an exuberant, vital reaction to the seriousness of the 'genteel tradition' that was then only beginning to invade the movies" (Mast, 54). Much of the comedy involving women plays upon this reaction as in Astray from the Steerage (1921) when a man flirts with and tickles the chin of a woman immigrating to America. She thrashes him and continues to do so, chasing him until he falls in the water. Interestingly, these chases always end in the water. The water offers the same lasting humiliation as the pie, but here it has the additional connotation of sexual failure. Her vicious pursuit of the man disrupts the convention of helpless women which was common in the popular melodramas of the time.

While there is a sexual politics inherent in such comedy, especially where they repeatedly

contradict the expectations of the time, Mast's discussion of the emotions of Sennett's characters calls into question any serious political assertions about the Keystone films: "They are devoid of genuine human emotion. All emotions in the films - love, jealousy, lust, anger, greed, vengefulness - are strictly literary conventions..., conventional and irrelevant. The films do not depend on psychology or credible motivation" (Mast, 53). As Mast suggests, Sennett's films use character and emotion as conventions to achieve and motivate his gags; the only politics that rule such scenes as these revolve around the defiance of expectation. Sennett's comedy, like much comedy, is achieved through surprise and the defiance of expectation. The ruling politics of the day provide an ample arena within which to achieve such defiance. So while Sennett's films are consciously comical, they are rarely consciously political.

Arbuckle's films assert the presence of the women in such comedies. Fatty is often booted or hit by women, and Mabel is capable of knocking down two men with one hit (Fatty at Coney Island 1917). Most often this violence is in reaction to advances made by men, as in Fatty and Mabel Adrift (1916), where Mabel bashes Fatty to rebuke his advances. The comedy of such violence usually revolves around the dreamy obliviousness of the man being beaten and his unflagging pursuit of the woman despite his punishment. Much of this comedy requires a comic climate free of any concern about sexual assault and stalkers.

Haskell has noted of the silent film comedies that "a female comedian automatically disqualifies herself as an object of desire" (Haskell, 62). Mabel and other women seem to disprove this assertion, as in many of Arbuckle's films the desirable woman is just as likely to receive brutal comic treatment. In Reckless Romeo (1917) Fatty's female dance partner is dropped, spun around, flipped and thrown all over the dance floor. While sound speed lessens the reality of the scene and leaves her looking like a dummy, this treatment of her is

quite severe in the scheme of comedic violence and ultimately derives some of its humour from its rough denial of any special treatment for women.⁴³

This denial of an expected special treatment of women is integral to the laughter provoked when Fatty and another man fight each other in drag in Moonshine (1918). The comedy is derived from the fact that this incredibly brutal fight is done by two men pretending to be women. Their crude manner and brutal actions disrupt the expectations created by their dresses and make the violence nothing but comic. This scene is matched by a beautiful piece of comedy found in Good Night, Nurse! (1918) where Keaton flirts with Fatty, who is in drag. It progresses from pat, pat to shove, shove to punch, to belt, and then finally Fatty belts Keaton into a flip, picks him up, and then throws him. Again the masculine manner and the “masculine” violence are made funny by their discordance with the expectation of behaviour roused by the accoutrements of women.

The presence of women in the violent comedies of Arbuckle reaches disturbing fulfilment in a scene in Moonshine which combines many of the previously mentioned moments from Arbuckle’s films: a man gets beaten by his girlfriend for flirting. She then gets brutally spanked by her father with a stick. Fatty then intervenes and surprises us by saying “girl, don’t hit your father like that”. He then throttles her and throws her in a pond. The capper of the scene has the woman come out of the water, in love with Fatty. Here, Arbuckle humorously and shockingly mocks and destroys the decorous demands which society places upon the relationships between men and women and ultimately leaves anyone so inclined doubting the honesty of such a society. It is anti-social comedy at its shocking best, and its humour thrives upon its violence.

⁴³ Sound speed (twenty-four frames per second) projects silent films faster than the speeds at which they generally would have been shown (commonly estimated to be about eighteen frames per second). However, while sound film speed is uniform, silent film speed varies within the film and is generally fastest during action scenes.

A similar moment of violence leading to love occurs in Lloyd's Girl Shy (1924), where Lloyd spans a flapper over his knee and then throws her against a wall, where a shelf falls on her head. This action leaves her in love with Lloyd. The violence, and particularly the end result, mock the woman, and leave her seeming stupid. While the violence is coded as comic, it does, with its final result, belittle its female victim and point to her suitability as a butt for such comedic violence. Her suitability is denoted by her frivolity and stupidity, here assumed to be the characteristics of a flapper and, in no small way, of a minor female character. And thus, as a type rather than a person, she is all the more open to being ridiculed and beaten without provoking concern from the audience.

The women of Chaplin's films often participate in the comedic violence with results similar to the men's involvement. The women are nearly always as brutal and proficient at violence as the men. There are some moments, however, where the fact that a woman is performing the violence becomes the source of the comedy. Such an instance is found in Tillie's Punctured Romance (1914) when Tillie is arrested. Her generally rough, supposedly rural, manner motivates much of the comedy in the film, but here, in the police station, it explodes. Her strong rough-housing ends with her giving several cops the back kick, for which she is sentenced to thirty days. This prompts her to bite the sentencer's finger until he sentences her to sixty days. Her huge size, her strength and her rough ways are all anomalies of urban womanhood that make her every move, violent or not, comical.

Tillie's roughness also allows Charlie to be overly (and in this case, therefore comically), rough with her: throughout the film, when he is caught between his two women friends, he solves the problem by booting Tillie away. There is a comic shock in his selfish cruel treatment of her and Tillie's ability to endure it.

Chaplin does a similar play upon a woman's rough manner in A Busy Day (1914) by

playing a woman (I would argue not a man in drag) and beating various men. The comedy is the same as Tillie's, with Chaplin's character wiping and picking his nose with his dress providing comically unladylike roughness. This roughness is also the source of Chaplin's comically "masculine" style of fighting with men. The fights in the film are long and vicious, providing ample opportunity for comic disparity. Perhaps the most interesting moment in the film is at the end where Chaplin is thrown off a pier and slowly sinks underwater as the film ends. One is always in dangerous territory when interpreting Chaplin's politics in his early films, but here the message seems to suggest that this is the only fitting end for such a rough woman. She is an anomaly that we can laugh at carelessly to the extent that she can perish in a film (a very unusual ending for a character in a silent comedy) without any risk of pity arising from an audience.

The usual motivation for the inclusion of women in the violence of these films is a domestic disagreement. A fine example is found in The Rounders (1914) with a series of fights involving Charlie, Fatty and their respective wives. The women are strong fighters and as vicious as the men. What stands out in the fight is a moment between Fatty and his wife (the fight that starts them all), where Fatty jumps up and strangles his wife. Strangling is nearly always reserved for women. The only time that it comes up regularly involving men in a Chaplin film is in Police! (1916) where Charlie's thief friend strangles him every time he does something stupid. In these silent films strangling is used for frustration, and that is why it is so often used on women. For this period of comedy, strangling is the violence that is directed at someone the perpetrator loves. The seemingly incompatible mix of love and violence in these films is always (despite our contemporary concerns about abuse), a source of comedy.

Of similar interest amongst the interactions between men and women in these films are

the moments of courting, which always tend toward violence. In A Woman (1915), Charlie, dressed as a woman, belts another man as a form of flirting. A similar instance can be found in A Night Out (1915) when Charlie flirts with a woman in the lobby. He bumps her repeatedly and then eventually gives her a little backwards boot. Thus, as with the Arbuckle films, mild violence is part of a flirtation game. It is always more extreme than we would expect, and the shock, for both audience and recipient, provides the comedy of these scenes. In The Masquerader (1914) the tramp uses this violent flirting to his advantage against the director with whom he has been fighting for most of the movie, by dressing up as a woman and throwing things at him as a form of flirtation. The director is happy to receive this punishment when it is in the guise of flirtation. But, again, the scene is made comic through the tramp's overly violent form of flirtation, and the director's increasingly strained attempts to smile and endure the punishment as flirtation.

There is a similar type of violence which is even used for discussions of flirting. In The Circus (1928), Charlie buys a ring for his girlfriend from a clown and the clown gives him a little hit as if to say "you sly dog". And, of course, Charlie turns and gives him a backwards boot. A similar moment is found in The Adventurer (1917) when Charlie, suspecting that the maid is hiding a lover, gives her a similarly playful but accusing tap. Ultimately, this is not meant to be perceived as violence but, like the play of courtship, it is comical by virtue of its being one step up in a gradation of violent horse-play.

Perhaps the most curious of these moments is the violence which Charlie uses to express his glee after a woman has flirted with him. In The Count (1917), after a woman has returned his flirtations, he starts belting people and things out of smitten glee (he uses a can). He then exchanges blows with one man, and in keeping with his habit of topping the last blow, he throws a glass in the man's face, and then a whole punch bowl follows. An essentially

identical scene is found in The Circus, after Charlie overhears a fortune-teller tell the woman he likes that love is on the way. He does a happy little dance which involves booting a man in the stomach and tipping things on him. He then hits a mule that has been bothering him and then boots another man in the stomach. Then, after seeing the woman and acting bashful and cute with her, he returns to the first man and boots him in the backside and sprays him in the face. Again, violence is an expression of happiness, but also here there is the addition of the tramp's bashful feelings. The happiness is something he can barely contain, and so it must come out somehow, and this mild violence is the easiest way. This is confirmed in a final scene from The Floorwalker (1916) where a similarly girl-happy Charlie pushes an innocent man off a chair and then pushes his face away when he looks at Charlie. Another man kicks him in the backside to hurry him along (he is working in a shoe store), and here he turns around thinking that it is the woman he has been flirting with. This "flirtational" kick delights him and makes him giggle, so we are left with the view that violence can be casual, and that it can be innocuous, to both the audience and the characters. And, pointedly, all of this violence really is not all that violent - it would not make sense in our world, but in the world of these films it is minor to the point of being almost unnoticeable.

Keaton provides some variations on the silent film standards of comedic violence involving women. In Seven Chances (1925) an army of would-be suitors for Buster, at the high point of their mania, flatten two football teams as they chase after him. The football players are carried away on stretchers, emphasising the unsterotypical force of the women. Similarly, in Three Ages (1923) the Roman Buster wrestles and loses to a woman who flips him around in a comedically uncharacteristic show of strength. The cavewoman of the same film bashes Buster off a cliff when he tries to pull her away by her hair.

The most discussed moments of silent film comedic violence involving a woman are the

scenes involving Annabelle in The General (1927) and, while the mechanics of the scene have already been discussed, the sexual politics of the gag deserve further scrutiny. As mentioned, many critics are anxious to protect Keaton from any charges of misogyny. In describing the sack routine of The General, Moews describes Buster as “recoiling in horror” as he watches the sack being buried under heavy furniture (Moews, 233). Keaton does not recoil in horror. Kerr is closer to the truth in his similarly motivated defence of the scene: “Let it be said that he winces” (Kerr, 260). Moews even underplays Buster’s heavy throw of the sack onto the train, “He next walks forward and gently deposits his bag inside the car” (Moews, 233). Regardless of the motivations of these protective critics, Buster’s interactions with Annabelle are purposefully, shockingly violent. The violence is all the more comically shocking because it is directed at a seemingly “defenceless” woman.

Haskell comes closest to the truth in her assessment of the role of women in silent film comedy when she says, “She is celebrated and feared as separate–but–equal by American directors like Keaton and Hawks” (Haskell, 40). Despite this obvious difference from the reverence for women found in Chaplin and Griffith’s films, the women of Keaton’s comedies were still placed on the low rungs of secondary characters: “Keaton’s ultimate feeling for his leading ladies comes through in Go West [1925], when he uses a cow as the ingenue” (Mast, 138). Keaton’s views of the female characters support this view: “There were usually but three principals – the villain, myself, and the girl, and she was never important.... The leading lady had to be fairly good-looking, and it helped some if she had a little acting ability” (Keaton, 130). Mast concludes that “The only reason he seems to care about the lady is that the plot would have it so” (Mast, 138). This statement is, of course, true of nearly all the characters in Keaton’s films (and the majority of comedies and nearly all melodramas). The characters are tools for comedy, and tools are used, not revered.

Haskell provides a perfect description of Annabelle's purpose in The General in her definition of what she calls the sweetheart: "a hardy if foolhardy specimen, who can be counted on to do something enchantingly imbecilic at the crucial moment" (Haskell, 254). Thus Annabelle's incompetence (understandable and pointedly not unlike Buster's) fuels the frustration of Buster, leading him to his comedic abuse of her. This abuse starts small as when he throws a small piece of wood back at her after she offers it to help him burn down a bridge. His impatience and minor violence are funny, but do not explain why Mast sees Annabelle's treatment (particularly her moments in the sack) as a form of poetic justice: "[the violence directed at Annabelle in the sack is] designed to be as painful and undignified for her as possible" (Mast, 139). Mast's view of poetic justice here is strange: no one else in the film is treated as severely. Really, the comedic violence involving Annabelle provides humour rather than any sense of justice, and, as with the films of Chaplin, her treatment is in keeping with that of all comic butts in these films. However, Keaton does utilise the shock of the unexpected rough treatment of a woman to fuel his comedy.

The Laurel and Hardy films made frequent use of women for variations on the flirtational violence gags. In We Faw Down (1928) there is a lengthy, comedically violent flirtation between Laurel and a woman. The woman starts playing games with Laurel, poking him and touching him all in good fun. Laurel then happily slaps her shoulder. She playfully shoves him and then he shoves her right off her chair and says "Whoopee" (an allusion to an earlier gag about "making whoopee"). The woman gets up, laughing, thinking that Laurel is hysterical. They shove each other some more, with her again being knocked off the chair. This happens for a third time, with the chair going over as well. A fourth time he does this unprovoked, and throws a few things around and says "Whoopee". The unprovoked unseating is a bit severe, and as if to explain this move, Laurel says, "I don't like her, she's

too fat". The woman becomes enraged and orders him out and chases him around the table. Here, the playfully violent game of flirtation embraces its darker side, all the while comically playing with the audience's expectations by pushing the politically correct boundaries of such interactions every time the audience adjusts to them.

The Python films present a few moments of comedic violence which depend upon gender for their laughs. In And Now for Something Completely Different (1972) a women's league presents a dramatisation of the battle of Pearl Harbor by fighting each other in a muddy field. The action is sped up, but the comedy arises primarily from the fact that the fighting is done by well-dressed women in high heels with handbags for weapons. A similar comic appeal, like that of the "Hell's Grannies" (discussed on page 249), is found in the blood-thirsty ferocity of the women at the stoning in Monty Python's Life of Brian (1979). The commitment of the women to the violence (admittedly comically coded) humorously violates the decorum and disinclination toward violence expected of women.

In the macho world of eighties and early nineties action films the role of women is nearly always motivational and not active, and so when women participate in the violence of a film it is often seen as unusual and frequently comic. Commando (1985) makes numerous comments on the gendered and macho nature of its own violence, and has a scene of comedic violence which grows out of the film's commentary on gender. The character played by Rae Dawn Chong uses a rocket launcher to shoot an armoured car. Her first shot fires out backwards (she has the weapon pointed the wrong way – an easy confusion with this rather nondescript device), and destroys a car.⁴⁴ However her next shot scores a direct hit and incapacitates the armoured car and its drivers. Both shots provoke laughter and are capped verbally with this final anti-male comment:

⁴⁴ This same weapon is one whose operation Michael Douglas' character in Falling Down needs explained to him by a movie-savvy boy.

Schwarzenegger: Where'd you learn how to do that?

Chong: I read the instructions.

This scene is a far cry from the involvement of the women of Keaton's action films and provides comic comment on the macho coding of contemporary action films while still relying upon that coding for its comedy.

In Under Siege 2: Dark Territory (1995) the female villain is thrown from a helicopter to land on a train at the end of the film. There is an especially cruel laugh reserved for the female villain of this film. This laughter is provoked by the ease of her comically spectacular elimination but also from the desire to see her eliminated from the film. This laugh is a patronising dismissal of her disruption of action film's gender roles. The laugh declares her to be a temporary novelty (this is how she is used in the film). The same sort of mockery here is found in the patronising view of Jamie Lee Curtis' character becoming a spy at the end of True Lies (1994).

The female villain of Total Recall (1990), played by Sharon Stone, combines the gender transgressions of the female villain of Under Siege 2 with the fears of betrayal by the trusted woman (as detailed in the discussion of True Lies on the next page). Her demise possesses the usual cruel comic finality reserved for the female villain:

Stone: You wouldn't hurt me, would you, sweetheart? Sweetheart? Be reasonable – after all, we're married.

Schwarzenegger: (*Shoots her in the head*) Consider that a divorce.

Ticotin: That was your wife? (*He nods*). What a bitch.

Stone's character earns this comic Punch and Judy-style punishment because she betrays Schwarzenegger but also, as in other films, because of her transgressions in the world of violence (she engages Schwarzenegger in a vicious hand-to-hand fight right before this scene). The comedic violence effectively "puts her back in her place" (a place of inferiority) and secures the male action hero's superiority.

With its misogynistic beliefs stated early in the film (“Can’t live with them, can’t kill them”) True Lies exposes some of the sexual and emotional insecurities of masculinity along with the physical ones usually explored in action films. When Curtis’ character is captured in a fake sting operation engineered by Schwarzenegger’s character, her reaction is stereotypically female: she kicks Tom Arnold’s character in the groin and bites Schwarzenegger. Her violence, while stereotypical, is still effective and therefore comic for both those reasons. Later in the film, when Curtis shoots a gun, the recoil knocks it out of her hand causing it to drop, down some stairs, shooting all the while and killing some villains. She is denied being effectively violent except with the female villain (one feels because Schwarzenegger could not legitimately kill the female villain). The women have a stereotypical cat-fight (complete with scratching, from a symbolic engagement ring) while Schwarzenegger observes as the two women who desire him fight it out. Much of the humour of this combat arises from the patronising assuredness that it is more amusing than exciting or serious.⁴⁵

Thus, in comedic violence, women are most often a novelty that is frequently used for its comic shock value. The shock value of women in comedic violence arises when they are used as either an inappropriate target or an indecorous and/or surprisingly effective instigator of violence.

⁴⁵ All of the gender coding of True Lies is a continuation of the action genre’s male fantasy of power in impossible situations. The misogynistic body politics are Cameron’s exploration of the male fears of love, trust and the body (suggesting why it was the woman who sacrificed herself in The Abyss 1989). This is the action film as an extended male fantasy of dealing with the male fear of trust and infidelity. We witness the male fantasy of control over the female body (in the interrogation, the vette bashing, the male-controlled striptease, and the final “she hates him too” dismissal of the car salesman). These scenes are a very clear desire for absolute control of the “trusted one’s” body, in a supreme display of action hero cowardice (though with the impervious enormity of Schwarzenegger’s body, his actions hardly ever seem brave). The hero wishes for the female body to be an extension of the hero’s, needing him for her protection and her pleasure. Cameron has explored the most phallogentric fears of the male, in a fantasy which denies but reveals both the physical and emotional limits of maleness and the inherent importance of these limits to the gender-coded violence of the action film. It is not surprising that this view is made explicit around the rise of the action heroines (such films as Terminator 2, La Femme Nikita [1991], and Aliens [1986]).

SEXUAL

This subsection of this chapter deals with sexualised comedic violence and also addresses comedic violence which targets the genitals. This section finds that sexualised comedic violence goes beyond the line of the sacred target of the woman and probes, what is for our culture, a comedic taboo.

In keeping with the other animal drives which are present in the *lazzi* of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, there are, of course, the sexual. The sexual *lazzi* have much in common with most violent *lazzi* in that they combine pain and humiliation for the perpetrators' and audience's triumph. The most popular of the sexual *lazzi* (recorded in many illustrations) is the "*Lazzo of the Enema*": "This involved one of a number of actions.... (b) Arlecchino gives an enema to Pantalone's mule as he rides it. (c) Analysing Arlecchino's urine, the Doctor declares that Arlecchino needs an enema, which leaves him pregnant. (d) Held by a servant with his posterior exposed, Pantalone is unwillingly given an enema by Zanni" (Gordon, 32). The enormous prop enema syringe depicted in illustrations (Gordon, 40), suggests the novelty and excitement which would encourage the frequent use of such a device to humiliate another character.

The humiliation of the "*Lazzo of the Enema*" is to some extents reversed in the "*Lazzo of the Flogging*": "After mistakenly making love to an old woman, the Captain, in a rage, hoists her on Zanni's back and beats her" (Gordon, 17). The humiliation here is severe, though it would likely have been lessened or dismissed somewhat as the old woman would probably have been presented as a stereotypically repulsive witch. The Captain's reaction is disturbingly uncomic. Here, the desired effect of comedic violence - an almost instant triumph - is made appallingly transparent in this *lazzi's* humourlessness for contemporary audiences.

There is a moment of sexual comedy in Titus Andronicus which is unrivalled in its disturbing effects for a contemporary audience:

Enter the Empress' sons with Lavinia, her hands cut off and her tongue cut out and ravished.

Demetrius: So, now go tell, and if thy tongue can speak,
Who 'twas that cut thy tongue and ravished thee.

Chiron: Write down thy mind, bewray thy meaning so,
And if thy stumps will let thee, play the scribe.

Demetrius: See how with signs and tokens she can scowl.

Chiron: Go home, call for sweet water, wash thy hands.

Demetrius: She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash;
And so let's leave her to her silent walks.

Chiron: And 'twere my cause, I should go hang myself.

Demetrius: If thou hadst hands to help thee knit the cord. (II.iv.1-10)

The intentions of this piece of comedy are hotly debated. Jonathan Bate suggests that the only difficulties with the scene are those which arise from the cultural gap between the intended and contemporary audiences:

But does comedy effect a simultaneous heightening and release of tension in the audience here, as it does in the Porter scene in Macbeth, which occupies a closely comparable structural position? I suspect that it is intended to, but that the cultural gap between our audiences and Shakespeare's makes it difficult for us to share in the release. Among our few taboos are having a laugh at the expense of people who haven't got any hands or women who have been raped. (Bate, 10-11)

The cultural gaps which are discovered through a study such as this are useful as ways of understanding the rules which govern the comedic violence of our own time. Integral to contemporary scenes of comedic violence is the very obvious and real separation between perpetrator and victim. This separation regiments the kinds of violence which can be depicted comically today: these days no one is strangled to death comically, just as no one is raped with laughter being directed at the victim. These types of violence are physically too personal. Their intimate violence demands that the perpetrator be so close to the victim that the victim cannot be ignored and unlike a punch the contact is maintained for some time. A gun keeps comedic violence impersonal and quick: speed removes the chance of identifying

with the victim. The necessary lack of contact, as a maintenance of impersonality, is just one more way in which the audience's needs are similar to those of the perpetrator.

An important difference between the needs of the audience and those of the perpetrator arises in the rape of Lavinia. The implications of the comedy are enormous and play into a discomfiting rapid shift between what Bate has described as a "simultaneous heightening and release of tension" (Bate, 10). Richard T. Brucher suggests that this combination is deliberate, and that the laughter is an almost nervous by-product of the outrageousness and extremity of the violence:

Some staged atrocities are so outlandish that they seem funny. I contend that the playwrights deliberately made some violence comic in order to thwart conventional moral expectations. I have in mind a form of violence which is shocking in its expression of power and evil, and yet so outrageous in its conception and presentation that it causes laughter as it disrupts our sense of order in the world. (Brucher, 73)

The humour of Chiron and Demetrius is really an act of moral violence which takes their whole encounter with Lavinia into the realm of extremes of which Brucher speaks. Brucher feels that our laughter is a sign of our participation: "Comic violence vividly depicts the dissolution of commonly held values because it implies that there is no sane order in the world to make the violence seem legitimate. Our laughter signals our participation in the disorder" (Brucher, 79). There is, however, no laughter from an audience during Lavinia's rape and mutilation. The comedy comes after, with Chiron and Demetrius' mockery of her. And the laughter first arises because, as sick as they may be, Chiron and Demetrius' comments are humorous. The outrageousness and shock of which Brucher speaks make the laughter less secure and therefore more extreme.

Laughter of this kind will always accompany such absurdly painful moments, and it is likely to be particularly excessive for those actions which are of a sexual nature, because of the fragile and seemingly fallacious moral codes which attempt to govern sexual practice.

These extremes are present in the concordance of moral absurdities found in Joel-Peter Witkin's photograph The Kiss, 1982. The photograph shows the severed withered heads of two similar-looking old men (actually the same man's head sawed in half), locked in an open mouthed kiss. This photograph single-handedly disrupts moral codes of sexuality and funereal decorum by assembling an image of homosexuality, incest, and necrophilia which denies all rules of propriety for the dead. It is indicative of the moral chaos which an audience experiences in a play such as Titus Andronicus. Its humour is like that of Chiron and Demetrius in that it challenges normally unquestioned values which deny but also propagate fascinations with the morbid, the cruel and the improper. While laughter often endorses an accepted social morality it can, as here, transgress that morality and be indicative of the moral incertitude which accompanies the fascination of the forbidden.

One of the most famous combinations of sex and comedic violence is found in The General when Buster strangles and then kisses Annabelle. Haskell quotes Sarris's description of it as "one of the most glorious celebrations of heterosexual love in the history of cinema [in that it encapsulates the love/hate relationship of many couples]" (Haskell, 71). Obviously the comic appeal of this scene plays upon the shared recognition in the audience that is suggested by Sarris's quote, but ultimately this is a moment which capitalises upon a standard of comedy: two opposing and seemingly inconsolable drives taking place in the same instance. The moment of change is comic, the duration of the kiss is not.

In Diamonds are Forever (1971) Bond has a sexually-charged violent encounter with a woman that is indicative of an earlier, less successfully comic Bond:

Woman in Bikini: Can I help you?

Bond: Yes. There's something I want you to get off your chest. (*He rips her bikini-top off her and wraps it around her neck and begins to interrogate her*).

This is not a terribly successful or likeable moment for Bond. The word-play, while weak, is

part of the Bond tradition, but the actions and the sexual air which accompany them, while providing the punch-line, add an air of menace which slightly dampens the humour of the scene.

A darker combination of sex and comedic violence arises when Nicolas in One For the Road engages in a sickly form of joking about the sexual violence that Gila has suffered:

Nicolas: Do you think we have nuns upstairs? (*pause*). What do we have upstairs?

Gila: No nuns.

Nicolas: What do we have?

Gila: Men.

Nicolas: Have they been raping you? (*She stares at him*). How many times? (Pinter, 21)

This is the cruel rhetoric of torture. Nicolas' games are disturbingly funny for an audience who by this point in the play should be beginning to feel the guilt and implication which are so essential to the play's success. Nicolas' mocking humour makes explicit the urge for superiority inherent in much humour:

Nicolas: How many times have you been raped?

Gila: I don't know.

Nicolas: And you consider yourself a reliable witness? ... You're a lovely woman. Well, you were. (Pinter, 21-2)

Sexual violence is reserved for women in Pinter's plays (and in most dramatic narratives, because they are written by men; around men, it is generally only the fear of sexual violence which is used, sexual violence is rarely actualised (for exceptions see Pulp Fiction 1994 and Deliverance 1972). The mocking sexual jokes provide a further degradation of the victim. Nicolas' jocularly removes all power from Gila and demands that she acknowledge her powerlessness in a display which is an extreme example of the power "games" of much comedic violence.

Almodovar is perhaps the only contemporary purveyor of comic rapes. Kika (1994) has an infamous rape scene in which Kika is raped for an inordinate amount of screen time. The

comedy of the scene arises from the strange attitude of Kika, who at times seems almost bored or inconvenienced by the rape. "Rape is one thing, but this is taking all day. I have to pee. I have to sneeze. I don't like this", she says. There is also strange humour to be found in the contrast between her "boredom" and the rapist's determined focus. Despite the fact that he is holding a knife to her face she is able almost to calmly complain, "at least you could have the courtesy to wear a condom when you're raping someone". Further humour is found at the end of the scene in the inept attempts of two policemen to pull the rapist off Kika. Here the scene degenerates into messy slapstick.

Despite the strangeness of such humour for North American audiences, the scene is at times successfully comic. Any comic interpretation of the rape hinges upon Kika's disavowal of the emotional impact of the rape. Her attitude (not unlike the mild displeasure of someone stuck in a long line in a grocery store) permits the attempts and the occasional success of the comedy. Were she to express duress, fear, pain, or horror the rape would be too real to allow any attempt at comedification. As it stands the scene only works (for these North American eyes) if it is viewed as a sort of pathetic penetrationless rubbing, which the framing, focus and physical action of the scene slightly support through their minimisation or ignorance of the physical reality of rape. Thus the scene's success as comedy depends on the removal of all that points to the reality of rape, leaving the physical actions in the realm of nearly innocent pretence.

Violence to the Genitals

Like the rear end (not a completely sexless target itself) the genitals are a special target for comedic violence, and as such, violence to the genitals requires special consideration. It is surprising that there is only one major violent genital encounter in the *lazzi* of the *Commedia dell' Arte* considering Gordon's summary of the work of the *Zannis*, "The infantile

and adolescent aggressions of shit and urine throwing, humiliation through exposure, of mixing food and feces, of placing one's ass in another's face, and the telling of dirty jokes" (Gordon, 32). According to Gordon, the "*Lazzo of Circumcision*" is the only comic turn in *Commedia* which deals specifically with the genitals. "Cola (or Pulcinella) in desperate need of money, goes to borrow from the Jews. Informed that there are two rates of interest - a very high one for Gentiles and a lower one for Jews - Cola decides to convert. The Jews gather round Cola then and start to circumcise him" (Gordon, 18). There is generally special treatment reserved for comedic violence involving the genitals. Here, for the man, the genitals are a place of special pain and discomfort. The male genitals generally act as an Achilles heel that can be used to inflict extreme pain and embarrassment. A man may be belittled or mocked via his genitals but in the *Commedia* tradition his genitals are never a site of the sexual violence or disgrace that is sometimes directed at women in comedy. While the female can easily lose her virginity and honour, it takes extreme mutilation or removal of the male genitals to effectively damage masculinity and male honour. Here, pointedly, the violence is enacted by men - when a woman directs violence at a man's genitals the effect is completely different.

The female genitalia become the focus for comedic violence in a scene from Chaplin's *A Day's Pleasure* (1919) where Chaplin repeatedly attempts to fish a woman out of the water with a large deck-hook. Each time he does, the position of the hook and the expression on the woman's face suggest that the hook is inside her and that he is likely pulling her up by her vagina. The woman's face here communicates a comic mixture of shock and intrusion. The woman's expressions and the Tramp's repeatedly abandoned attempts to pull her out of the water turn the carefully hidden implication (under the water and out of sight) to comedy.

In *True Lies* there is comic damage done to the genitals of the villain when he is

straddling the Hawker Harrier jet and is made to slide and hit the jet's tail. There is a humorous groan of commiseration which accompanies less violent attacks on the male genitals, but here it is also wrapped up in the sexual focus of the film. Witness a scene where Tom Arnold's character is shot at, touches his genitals, says "oh thank God" and then kisses his finger and touches the pole which protected him. Like the face, the genitals are the other place that almost never gets shot; damage there must never be visible or permanent. This, then, is the light-hearted norm of the use of the genitals as a sensitive and commiseration-provoking target.

The example from True Lies finds its predecessor in the sexual climate of the Bond films: Bond's genitals are often the potential target of an encroaching laser or buzz-saw, but the violence only connects with his genitals once. In Diamonds are Forever Thumper, the female villain, says "First we're gonna have a ball" just before she knees Bond in the groin. Here the violence is made comic by Bond's reaction to the pain, but the pain is kept fairly prominent as a way to gain audience sympathy and approval for Bond's subsequent victorious fight with two female villains.

Despite the guaranteed pained sympathy provoked by the use of the genitals as a target, this pain is never taken very seriously. In Home Alone (1990) one of the robbers is shot in the genitals with the boy's b.b.gun. The moment is kept comic by the cartoon-styled swearing ("Frazzarazza"), which keeps the pain in the realm of the cartoon. The robber's cartoon reaction is indicative of the desired effect of the comedic violence directed at the genitals: the male genitals are a popular target because they provoke an extreme, yet not serious, reaction from the comic butt.

Thus sexual comedic violence provokes extreme reactions whether it is viciously or light-heartedly inclined. The more vicious sexual comedic violence enhances and focuses upon

the humiliation and/or the power games of the violent gag – thus making the moral and power machinations of comedic violence prominent. The lighter use of the super-sensitive genital target brings a focus to the comically absurd mix of intimacy, shock and surprise that fixes on the face of a victim.

This chapter, with its focus on sensitive targets, both women and genitals, reveals some of the moral bounds of comedic violence and the delight which results when these bounds are prodded and tested comically. Comedic violence is comedy which thrives upon probing the moral boundaries of its audience. The comedy gains an excitement from the sheer immorality of its actions, which in turn feeds the comic energy of its debunking of what are often fallacious moral boundaries. These moral negotiations are never more apparent than with the sensitive targets and actions of the comedy discussed in this chapter.

Chapter Five

Novelty

During the past two decades there has evolved an almost competitive race, in depictions of violence (both comic and serious), for the newest novelty in weapon choice and mode of dispatch.¹ This race was fuelled by the horror and suspense films of the late seventies and eighties when Brian DePalma and others ransacked the suburban American garage for entertaining new weapons for their films. The action film carries on this search for new ways to inflict pain. This chapter tracks the changing arsenal of common and novelty weapons for comedic violence and discusses the impact of novel violence, weapons and victims on comedy.

This examination begins with a discussion of inventive approaches to violence before venturing on to the main focus of this chapter, weapons. Within the section discussing novel weapons the hose and pie gags receive special focus as they are a staple of comedic violence. The use of novel victims for comedic violence is then investigated and this section leads on to a discussion of self-inflicted violence where a character is both perpetrator and victim at the same time. This chapter is an examination of the use of the novel in the drive for entertainment in comedic violence. Novelty is also seen as an attempt at maintaining the surprise that is integral to comedic violence by utilising the unusual or the taboo. Finally, the use of the taboo and the sacred in comedic violence returns this study to its prime aim, that of tracking the moral negotiations which permit comedic violence and proving that comedic violence is itself essentially a moral negotiation.

Inventiveness and Finesse

A partial root of novelty in comedic violence is found in the inventiveness of some of the

¹ I should stress that the word “novel” in this thesis is not intended to mean “unique” or “original.” Rather, the word is used as a derivative of novelty; I use it to denote an entertaining or pleasing drift from the norm (the suggestions of toys and play are also welcome in my usage of the word).

perpetrators whose violence often possesses an unnecessary finesse or is just plain unnecessary itself. The latter can be found in some of Chaplin's earlier films where the tramp character chooses the nastier route to achieve a goal. Triple Trouble (1915) provides an example when Charlie lights a match off a man's bare feet and then, after lighting his cigar, places the still burning match between the toes of someone sleeping nearby. He watches the toes twitch and shake, and then he laughs and shrugs. Later he ashes his cigar in another man's mouth. These examples of wilful, selfish cruelty provide comic delight through their surprising and cruel inventiveness.

While such moments of completely unmotivated cruelty are not common, there are occasions when the tramp goes out of his way to increase the pain or discomfort of another: in The Vagabond (1916) he knocks a man unconscious and then pushes the man off a small bridge. What is unusual about this is that not only is he encumbered with the weight of his heroine, but he is also in the middle of a frantic chase. In these early films, the Tramp is an element of chaos that comically disrupts our expectations with his sometimes careless, sometimes eager and often anti-social use of violence. This is the character, after all, who in a car chase from The Adventurer (1917) kisses each brick that he throws at the cars behind him.

Contemporary manifestations of the inventive violence of Chaplin's tramp can be found in some of the inventive moves of action heroes. In The Last Action Hero (1993), Schwarzenegger grabs the gun-hands of two men standing on either side of him and uses them to shoot each other. He then electrocutes another man to make him shoot his gun at a target of Schwarzenegger's choosing.

In Man Bites Dog (1992), in a scene reminiscent of Archibaldo's scaring a nun into an elevator shaft in The Criminal Life of Archibaldo De la Cruz (1955), Benoit illustrates a novel

approach to murder when he gives an old woman a heart attack by yelling at her (he noticed her heart medicine), “It saves me a bullet. It’s easier on the neighbours, on me, and on her. I like to work out new methods”. Pointedly, the audience also appreciates the inventiveness.

The other focus of this sub-section, finesse, is seen most often in the comedic violence of cartoons. Most interesting and unique for comedic violence is the use of costumes and role-playing in cartoons to enhance the effect and pleasure of comedic violence for the perpetrator. In Hair-raising Hare (1946), Bugs performs a costumed manicurist gag, complete with meaningless chit-chat, with a large monster. When he puts the monster’s claws in two little soaking dishes, two mouse-traps snap on the monster’s fingers. Bugs’ momentary lapses into real world mundanity (and the monster’s confused playing along), are comically absurd flashes of confusion in their battle. As well, they provide one more set-up that lets Bugs sucker his victim into a comically violent trap.

Another such moment is found in Lovelorn Leghorn (1951) where Foghorn slaps a melon on the dog’s face and then kicks it off his head while wearing full football gear. The farm field is even transformed into a football field with goal posts to complete Foghorn’s fantasy. In The Leghorn Blows at Midnight (1950) Foghorn, in full golfing outfit, knocks a golf-ball off the head of the dog. These costumed set pieces (so easily and instantly done in cartoons) situate the violence in the realm of play and performance and add to the enjoyment and comedy for both the perpetrator and the audience.

The Ren and Stimpy cartoons are one of the contemporary purveyors of this form of role-playing violence: in Nurse Stimpy (release date unknown), Stimpy engages in a torturous nursing of Ren while in full nurse regalia. At one point he slaps a blood pressure sleeve around Ren’s entire body and inflates it, both choking and inflating him.

These inventive approaches to violence, be it the deft finesse of action or the role-playing

which shapes it, are always humorously surprising. The artfulness of these actions seems to contradict the moral impulses behind such actions. When this contradiction arises in a properly playful environment, the result is comic surprise.

Weapons

The inventiveness of villains and killers is most often displayed in their choice of weapon. In Hollywood film, this is a product of the constant need to supply new and more exciting thrills for a genre-jaded audience, but earlier forms of drama also employed inventive weapons as a route to comedy. Thus Scaramouche's ability to box the ears of his fellow actors with his foot was bound to provoke a laugh-filled delight from his audience (Gordon, 12). Chaplin does a similar trick in The Count (1917), where he does a handstand in order to kick a woman in the face. This, then, is the ancestor of the horror film novelty-kill.

This novelty sometimes extended to disguises for weapons. Baird's The Art of the Puppet shows a poster for Holden's Marionettes which shows a clown shooting a man's head off - literally - with a machine-gun which is hidden in a camera (Baird, 159). The pun between the camera and the gun is a type of humour which arises again in the outrageous weapons of Ubu Roi (1896) with the Sabre of Shittr, the financial hook and the constitution stick. In these disguised weapons, one can find the roots of the humorous tours of Q's laboratory in the James Bond films.⁴⁷

The comic use of a novel weapon arises in Méliès' Terrible Turkish Executioner (1904). Four men have their heads in a row in a single set of stocks. An executioner takes out a huge scimitar and knocks off all their heads in one sweep, exaggeration and efficiency creating the novelty which forms the entire comic appeal of this short film.

Fatty adds to the comic arsenal in Fatty's Faithful Fido (1915), with the introduction of a

⁴⁷ The weapons of Q's laboratory, while often humorous, are never applied in moments of comedic violence. They are most often used to conclude a suspenseful fight. The comedy of the Bond films remains strictly verbal with Bond's post-violence quips securing the comic interpretation of the use of a weapon.

heated iron (also found in Lloyd's Speedy 1928). An angry storekeeper heats up the iron and puts it in Fatty's shirt, where it burns him. Fatty cools off in a water trough. Our astonishment at the cruelty of the shopkeeper adds to the humour of the piece, and the speed of the scene works to minimise the suffering of Fatty, keeping this potentially vicious weapon in the realm of the comic.

Novelty is used throughout Chaplin's films and he introduces many new weapons to the arsenal of comedic violence. Usually, however, novelty is created through the use of some of the more popular tools for comedic violence: pins (stuck in backsides in A Day's Pleasure 1919), pick-axes (Pay Day 1922), ladders (The Pawnshop [1916] and boards to the same effect in His New Job 1915), bricks (wrapped in his hobo sack in The Tramp 1915), swinging doors (His New Job), hot pokers (Shoulder Arms 1918), hammers (Behind the Screen 1916), mops (Sunnyside 1919; a hot one in The Bank 1915), truncheons (Easy Street 1917), and his ever dextrous cane (most notably in A Night Out [1915] and The Rink 1916).

The pitchfork, a weapon that had appeared in other silent films, is used extensively in The Tramp. Immediately after being given the pitchfork to do work with, the tramp spikes a man's foot and then knocks the man's head with the handle. Then, on seeing another man irresistibly bent over, he pokes him in the backside. When the man stands up, the tramp apologises, and in his gestures manages to poke him in the stomach. The man shows him how to safely carry the pitchfork, and the tramp pokes him hard with the blunt end of the pitchfork, then swings and hits him again. The man rearranges the pitchfork for a final time, bends over, and the tramp spikes him again in the backside. Immediately after, the tramp uses the pitchfork to poke and steer the man around while he is carrying a large sack on his head, eventually sending him up a ladder with pokes in the backside. The one weapon provides numerous novel permutations for comedic violence. The weapon is milked of its

every comic possibility no matter what its cruel results may be. In many ways this weapon sets the moral tone of the film. There is no way to avoid the viciousness of the pitchfork: it cannot be softened, so, in this film, the character of the tramp is particularly vicious.

The sword is also part of the popular arsenal. It receives lengthy use in Carmen (1915), where Charlie engages in a sword fight with another man, but when he draws from his huge sheath he reveals a short dagger. He grabs the other man's sword and sharpens his dagger on it, and then stabs him with the dagger. He then bashes a man over the head with the longer sword, bending it in the process. In order to straighten his sword, Charlie bashes the man with it a few more times. Later, after more fighting, Charlie cleans his sword like a pool cue. Again, a simple, even common to the point of being boring weapon is used as a starting off point for a spree of riffing which ensures its comedy through the dextrous inventiveness of its wielder and director.

Beyond the usual choice of weapons there are many imaginative choices found in Chaplin's films: conductor's batons in A Night in the Show (1915), large metal doors (Modern Times 1936), medicine balls and weights (The Champion 1915), flies (flicked in faces in The Vagabond), horseshoes (hidden in a boxing-glove in The Champion), trap-doors (Behind the Screen), a mallet marked "Liberty Bonds" (to club the Kaiser with in The Bond 1918), people on roller skates (The Rink), and gas lamps (bent over Campbell's head in Easy Street).

There is some imaginative riffing throughout Chaplin's films on the match and cigar as weapons. The tramp often lights matches off people he does not like (The Circus [1928], In the Park [1915] and Triple Trouble to name a few), but the possibility offered by these tools is taken further in several of his other films. In The Adventurer, the tramp burns Campbell's hand on the sly with a cigar. In In the Park, while finishing a cigar the tramp comes across a

man sleeping with his mouth open. He pauses, considers (as does the audience), and then plops the cigar into the man's mouth. A variation of this moment appears in A Night in the Show when, after lighting a match off the bald head of a tuba-player, the tramp drops the lighted match down the tuba, leaving the player to choke and cough.

Finally, in Chaplin's collection of weapons for comedic violence, there is the bizarre: in His New Job Charlie tries to saw off another man's backside, and both Shoulder Arms and The Count make use of the bizarre slapstick staple of Limburger cheese (and Behind the Screen does essentially the same olfactory damage with some onions). In Shanghai'd (1915) Charlie is hit with a big piece of meat, and in Flirting with Mermaids (date unknown) he is hit in the face with a long fish.

Novelty weapons were not limited to the inanimate. Dogs were a popular variance on the usual comedic violence. A dog bites people on the backside in The Champion. A change from the dog is found in Flirting with Mermaids, where a long-billed bird pokes the tramp's backside repeatedly. The scene has a bizarre excitement to it because of the unpredictability of the bird, which makes the violence nervously comical. A further variation on this theme is found in the same film, when the tramp's backside is bitten by a large fish, possibly a shark. A final variation on the violent animal is found in His New Job, in a scene where a group of men are trying to get through a door all at once and a man bites the tramp's leg.

Variations on the violent animal are found in Keaton's films as well. In Seven Chances (1925) there is humour in the charging brides being chased away by stinging bees. In Go West (19125) Buster gets bitten by a snake and his sudden jump ensures the scene's comedic interpretation. The Cameraman (1928) takes the violent animal gag farthest in a scene where a monkey operates a machine-gun. No one gets hit or hurt, but the comedy arises from the

sheer absurdity of the animal mastering the device. A man goes to stab the monkey, but a comedic turnaround is achieved when the monkey repeatedly stabs his assailant in the backside. The turnaround and absurdity of the situation ensure the comedic interpretation of the otherwise vicious violence.

Keaton's comic suffering is often the product of his accidental collisions with nature and the inanimate. However, his strange mixture of good and bad luck is also part of the violence of his films. His luck comes into play at times as simply as his accidentally crushing a prisoner's hands with a press, in Convict 13 (1920), but more often than not, the comedy arises from his sturdy ineptitude. In The General (1927) his ineptness with the cannon is considerable, but the true comedic violence of the war scenes centres on his sword. He accidentally stabs his officer in the rear-end when he attempts to draw his sword. The frequent dangerous near-misses that occur when his blade flies off the hilt every time he draws it culminates in a scene where his blade accidentally kills a sniper who has been killing the men around him every time Buster gestures with his sword.

The introduction of novelty weapons in Keaton's films often arises as a by-product of his inventive drive, here described by Mast, "All these Keaton figures reveal the same habits of mind – composed, careful, pragmatic, completely certain of the task to be accomplished, wildly imaginative in accomplishing it if that is the most sensible method, extremely flexible at responding to new obstacles, dogged about reaching the goal" (Mast, 129). Such inventiveness is found in The Paleface (1921) when Buster uses a spinning door to bonk two Indians on the head. Later in the film he pulls the stake that he is tied to out of the ground and uses it (still tied to him) to bash another Indian on the head. In Convict 13, Buster rigs a heavy bag onto the end of a string and, by swinging at them, manages to take down a pile of prisoners. Finally, in Three Ages (1923), Buster uses his club as a baseball-bat when

projectiles are being thrown at him, and later he uses himself as a missile by shooting himself off a catapult to land on an opponent. In each of these instances the comedy arises from the inventive and seemingly incongruous use of people and objects for weapons.

In Speedy, Lloyd introduces as a weapon a wooden leg with a nail jutting out from its end. Lloyd's character puts the nail through the old man's leg and lets him test it on Lloyd himself. It is a big nail and seems very cruel, but Lloyd's jump at the testing of it situates it in the realm of a severe comedic pin-prick.

Lloyd's films also introduce a couple of animals to the list of tools of comedic violence. Hens peck the back of Lloyd's head to comedic annoyance in Haunted Spooks (1920), and in Speedy a crab hangs out of Lloyd's pocket and causes all sorts of troubles when it pinches people's backsides.

Laurel and Hardy contribute some novel additions to the arsenal of violent comedy. They add to the possibilities of the car with their numerous uses of it for destruction: in Lucky Dog (1920), Laurel gets hit by a car and ends up trapped in its fender. In Flying Elephants (1928) Laurel accidentally spears a man while spear fishing. Laurel and Hardy give their opponent an exploding cigar in Big Business (1929), and in You're Darn Tootin' (1928) Hardy has his backside burned by a blow-torch when he falls down a manhole, forcing him to drag his rear-end along the ground to put it out.

Laurel and Hardy also make use of animal assailants for their violent comedy. In Flying Elephants Hardy is butted off a cliff by a ram. In the same film, Laurel, his girl and her father hide under a wagon to escape a bear. The bear goes under the wagon and the wagon begins shaking around as if they're being torn to pieces as the screen slowly fades to a comically ominous black. Finally, in the ironically titled Lucky Dog, a dog chases after Hardy and another man with a stick of dynamite in its mouth. Hardy and the man later return

slightly charred while the dog is nowhere to be seen – the pleasantly cruel shock of the dog's off-screen expenditure adds to the comedy of the gag.

The Three Stooges make frequent use of the standard weapons of comedic violence for their films; plates (All the World's a Stooge 1941), rocks, mud, fish, hornet's nests, logs, and hot coals down the pants (Back to the Woods 1937). They do, of course, stray from the usual, as in The Little Pirates (date unknown) when a pinball machine with a mallet becomes both an assailant and a weapon in one of the battles of the film. The use of weapons is also taken to typical Stooge extremes, as when a patient's mouth is dynamited to clear it of cement. The patient is, of course, fine, and thanks the Stooges on his way out (All the World's a Stooge).

The Looney Toons cartoons were fond of novel weapons as long as they made an interesting sound. In The Leghorn Blows at Midnight the dog puts a plate cover over Leghorn's head and then hits it. Earlier in the same film, Leghorn takes an accordion and plays it through the dog's head. The Looney Toons cartoons depended more than most upon inventive sound effects to increase the pace, novelty and comedy of their pieces; the sounds provided by weapons were always one more way to increase the comic suffering of the butt.

The British films, with their more verbal humour, were less prone to inventive weaponry for their comedy. Their few uses of novel weapons tend towards a witty use of a weapon. In Kind Hearts and Coronets (1949) a mantrap is used to ironically dispatch the poacher-hunting Duke with a note of poetic justice by the protagonist, who notes that his "principles will not let me participate in blood sports". In The Loved One (1965), Joyboy's mother is eating live lobsters which turn on her and claw her to death.

The Python films introduce a number of novel weapons to the field of comedic violence; none more prominent than the cross. Mast has said (306) that "great comedy is always

impolite” and his assertion is perhaps never more apparent than in the jokes which revolve around the crucifixion of Brian in Monty Python’s Life of Brian. There are numerous jokes which belittle the suffering of the cross: “Get a move on, big nose, there’s people waiting to be crucified out here. Ha ha ha”; “You’ll probably get away with crucifixion”; “See, not so bad once you’re up”. These jokes are capped by the bizarre ramblings of the masochistic jail prisoner:

Guard: You know what the penalty is for insurrection?

Prisoner: No.

Guard: Crucifixion.

Prisoner: Oh.

Guard: Nasty, eh?

Prisoner: Could be worse.

Guard: What do you mean it could be worse?

Prisoner: Well, you could be stabbed.

Guard: Stabbed? It takes a second. Crucifixion lasts hours. It’s a slow, horrible death.

Prisoner: Well at least it gets you out in the open air.

Guard: You’re weird.... Have you ever seen someone crucified?

Prisoner: Crucifixion’s a doddle.

Guard: Don’t say that.

These humorous minimisations of the pain of crucifixion carry with them the added comic excitement of their impropriety. This impropriety would be too offensive (these days) if it made light of Christ’s suffering on the cross (and, as it is, it was predictably too much for a very vocal percentage of the population during the film’s release); however, the film’s comedy always has the impropriety-diverting focus of Brian (rather than Christ) as its prominent victim. This focus on Brian is a careful (even cheeky), comic game of is and is not, where implicit reference provides a comic excitement to the comedy but, because of the difference in victims, it is the viewer who makes the association. Of course, there are many who will not see it this way.

The crucifixion scene of Monty Python’s Life of Brian comes at its subject purposefully. Mast has said that “the greatest film comedians are antisocial, but in this antagonism they

reveal a higher morality” (Mast, 21), which is true of some of the comedy of the crucifixion in this film. Perhaps the purpose of the comedy is made most explicit by the seemingly sick presence of the souvenir crucifixes which are on sale along the route to the crucifixion site. These crucifixes and the comedy of the cross call attention to a similarly sick-seeming idolatry of suffering in the church that at times can seem no less perverse to an unbelieving mind than a comic exploration of the event can to those of faith. The Pythons’ comedy pries at the tension around this sacred subject, and through the film’s comedy provides both release and understanding.

The holy hand-grenade of Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1974) brushes against some similar comic ground in the lightest manner. The hand-grenade is used to blow up the killer rabbit.⁴⁸ The humour of the holy hand-grenade revolves around the stately, even lyrical passage which introduces and excuses it: “Oh Lord, bless this thy hand-grenade, that with it thou might blow thy enemies to little bits in thy mercy. And the Lord did grin.... Lobbeth thou the hand-grenade toward thy foe, who, being naughty in my sight, shall snuff it”. When the grenade is thrown the sound of a holy choir is heard before it explodes. This mixture of anachronistic weaponry, church doctrine, and the grinning personification of God comically attacks the positioning of Catholicism in matters of war and conflict, and attacks as well Catholicism’s history of hypocritical domination through a juxtaposition of lyrical tone and devastating result.

The “Crimson Insurance” scene from Monty Python’s the Meaning of Life (1983) introduces a collection of pirate weapons inventively devised from standard office gear for a scene of comedic violence. Daggers are made from the combination of rubber stamps with paper stakes, fan blades become scimitars, coat racks become hooks, and filing cabinets shoot

⁴⁸ The rabbit is another absurd and novel new weapon for comedic violence. The killer rabbit is a variant of the violent animal, achieving its comedy through the juxtaposition of its bloody decimation of expert knights with its harmless appearance.

their drawers out like cannons.

And finally, Monty Python's Life of Brian takes the novel weapon to its simplest form with its comically violent stoning, complete with stones that can be purchased for the event:

“Feel the quality of that. That’s craftsmanship sir”.

“All right, we’ll have two with points and a big flat one... and a packet of gravel”.

This scene presents the basic archetype of the novel weapon.

The action film is the contemporary repository of the novelty weapon. There is always a cache of fetishised weapons in action films. In Commando (1985), perhaps the most weapon obsessed action film of the eighties, there is both the ridiculously stocked surplus store (though of course in several states one can buy rocket launchers and front-line mines in mall gun shops) as well as the fetishised tool shed of the final conflict. These veritable armouries are identical to the buried weapons cache in Terminator 2 (1992), the armoury in Hard-boiled (1992), the suburban basement of Home Alone (1990), and the cottage tool shed of Evil Dead II (1986). The weapons are lovingly shot by the camera and become symbolically charged symbols or frozen action that demand use.⁴⁹

The tension of weapons’ imminent and creative use is fetishised by the convention of the detailed loading of all guns, clicking on of uniforms, and sheathing of knives in Commando, which is almost identical to the creation, loading and mounting of weapons in Evil Dead II. In each instance the camera closes on the final click and snap of each loud action. In Home Alone, a variant is achieved through the detailed preparations of the boy’s complex system of traps. And, like the coiled springs and lines of the boy’s traps, all these weapons are tense and waiting, like the audience, to spring into action.

And spring into action they do. In many ways there is an Elder Olson-like Katastasis of

⁴⁹ The Last Action Hero spoofs this convention to some extent when Slater is told to put his gun down and he removes seven guns and a knife from his outfit – a virtual portable toolshed. As well, later in the film the villain proudly shows off his wrist dagger which pops out automatically: “Great isn’t it”.

concern in the relief of the chainsaw actually being used. There is relief from tension in the victory over the villain, but there is also a relief from the anticipation of violence and pain.

In Commando Schwarzenegger puts a pitchfork in an assailant's chest, throws a circular saw blade to cut off the top of another's head, puts an axe in a man's groin and then machetes off another man's arm – all in an explosive flash of garden-shed ingenuity.

In Home Alone there are the novelty weapons of the iced walks, tarred stairs, heated doorknobs, glass ornaments (for bare feet), fan-blown shaving cream and well-aimed cans of paint on rope. The boy also sets up a trigger which sends a heated iron down a laundry chute to land on a robber's head. As with Keaton's motion gags, there is a comic pleasure in watching these coiled comic "machines" be freed to go through their motions.

In Evil Dead II, where the body is the focus of the film (as in the Terminator films), the body becomes the novelty weapon. Ash turns himself into a killing machine (again recalling the Terminator films) in the toolshed scene. After attaching the chainsaw to his handless arm, Ash saws off the barrel of his shotgun, coolly knocks it off with his elbow and then spins the gun round to holster it over his shoulder (all with industrious military music). This comical gear fetishisation is ultimately derivative of Leone's Westerns.

The chainsaw (first used as a novelty weapon in DePalma's Scarface 1983) provides a moment of comedic violence early in the film in a scene where the headless corpse of Ash's girlfriend enters a room with the chainsaw and manically attacks him. He hits the blade of the saw so that the saw turns upon her corpse and cuts her to pieces. When Ash replaces his severed hand with the chainsaw, it provides for some more novel comedic violence, as in a scene where Ash severs a zombie's arms and head in ridiculously beautiful slow-motion arcs mocking Peckinpah's approach to intense bloodletting. The scene, like many of these others, is a celebration of the physical dynamics of violence and gore, but also, as with the

Terminator films, of the literalization of the body as a weapon.

The Pie and the Hose

Mack Sennett's films introduce one of the ultimate novelty weapons: the pie. Lahue denotes its purpose: "[The pie is] used to reduce one's dignity to zero in a matter of seconds" (Lahue, 218). While its precise first appearance in film is often disagreed upon (and ultimately unimportant for this study), its roots and the roots of the other favourite weapons of the Keystone films go far back: "there are pistols, rocks, bricks, buckets of water, sticks, boots (good for kicking others in the pants), and, of course, custard pies (good for "schlupping" others in the face). Such objects were clear descendants of that first hose in *L'Arroseur Arrosé* [1895]" (Mast, 51). While the connection is clear, some of these objects (the bricks and rocks, etc.), seem more the descendants of the stick. The pie, after all, while violent, involves safe violence, like that of the snowball. The pie is much more an instrument of humiliation: as with the hose, the victim is left looking funny, soaking wet or covered in pie.

The hose appears in another of the Lumières' shorts (unnamed) where two fighting men are doused with a hose until they stop and stand dejected. Like the pie, it provides instant humiliation. The hose reappears in Lloyd's *On the Fire* (1918) where it is directed in a long series of gags at the contents and clients of a restaurant to much the same effect.

The pie is something which Arbuckle and Keaton use explosively in a huge battle in *Butcher Boy* (1917). The battle culminates with the two of them up on their store shelves throwing everything off the shelves onto the men below. This film also points to another pleasure of the pie gag, and that is the incredible skill with which the comedians are able to throw the pies – the wide framing of these scenes emphasises their ability during long-distanced and well-timed volleys. The dextrousness of Keaton and particularly of Fatty (because it seems at odds with his large body) adds amazement to the humour of this comic

business.

Chaplin made frequent use of hose and pie gags in his films. The hose gag was often used towards the end of his films as a final burst of chaos which disrupted and ultimately ended the narrative. More often than not the hose (from this point on usually a fire-hose), was turned on nearly everyone (Flirting with Mermaids and The Fireman 1916). An added element of humour is found in these scenes because the hoses are so strong that they knock their surprised victims down.

In A Night in the Show, a fire-hose is used to douse a fire-eater (and then, of course, it is turned on the rest of the audience). Here the hose pressure is high and the water violent. In a bizarre turn of events in A King in New York (1957), Chaplin's character ends up spraying with a fire-hose a row of congressmen at a congressional committee. The gag is extended when a lawyer walks through a door and asks "what's happened?". He is sprayed just as we anticipate it. In effect his entrance creates the desire to have him blasted, and the scene comically satisfies the moment.

There are variations of the hose gag to be found throughout Chaplin's films. In Modern Times Charlie squirts everyone with an oil can. In Tillie's Punctured Romance (1914), at one point when Charlie is punched and kicked, he squirts water in his assailant's face as an uncontrollable reaction. The water is not his fault, and his face seems to say this to his assailant, making the scene all the more comic. Comic pleasure is also found in the action having an immediate and visible reaction: punch equals squirt.

Flirting with Mermaids has a similar moment where Charlie's arms are being pumped to clear his lungs of water and with each pump he squirts water out and into an old lady's face. These large jets of water are the precursors of Mr. Caruso's huge jets of vomit in Monty Python's the Meaning of Life, and the countless, enormous jets of blood found throughout

Evil Dead II. The impossible amounts of liquid heighten the unreality of the scene and free up the laughs available from this incredible grossness.

The pie gag is found throughout a number of food fights in Chaplin's films: food and water in The Fireman, in a restaurant and then a dough fight in the kitchen for Dough and Dynamite (1914), pies, tomatoes, apples and ice-cream at the singing duo in A Night in the Show, face-powder in The Masquerader (1914), dough in The Pawnshop, and snowballs in The Gold Rush (1925). Along with the usual give and take of any comedic violence, the pie and food fights possess the ability to defrock the pompous, as in His Trvsting Places (1914), where an innocent gentleman is belted in the face with a pie, thus soiling his perfect demeanour. The distinguished are automatically pompous in the slapstick world, and by dressing the part these people are essentially "asking for it" within the coding of these comedies. Nothing answers this demand more effectively than a pie or hose.

Another innovation on the pie gag is found in Modern Times where the feeding machine applies the punishment. As essentially a mechanical pie thrower, it rubs corn in Charlie's face and nose, hurts him with a rough mouth-wiping machine, throws soup at him, pushes bolts into his mouth, and then splats a pie in his face.

The food-fight between the leaders of Germany and Italy in The Great Dictator (1940) takes the implications of the soft violence many steps further by punctuating each hit with a threat: "I'll take the Bacterian people like this" (Hynkel stretches some spaghetti and it hits Napaloni in the face). Thus the scene ricochets between the juvenile and the severe, making for a comedic comparison of war and the playground.

The ultimate pie-throwing scene in Chaplin's films is found in Behind the Screen, during the filming of a scene which just can not go right. The scene is full of the usual action of innocent victims getting hit full in the face. At one point during the melee Chaplin turns a

table over for protection and looks over it with a pair of military binoculars, comparing the pie fight to trench-warfare. This scene is a prescient moment for this study, pointing out, as it does, the echoes of war which are present in any violence, and the occasionally arbitrary and forever sliding scale of morality in violence (this scene's numerous self-reflexive moments are discussed in the final chapter).

The dextrous Keaton made little use of pie and hose gags. He did, however, provide a twist on the pie-throwing gag in Day Dreams (1923), where he accidentally shovels horse-droppings at the face of a sewer worker. There is also a fire-hose gag in the same film where he hoses down a truck-load of public speakers. He makes use of the same gag in Go West when some firemen hose down police, innocent bystanders and then finally some genteel types in a fancy open car. During each of these scenes the surprise and the composure of the victims makes their embarrassment desirable and comic.

Hal Roach's Wild Poses (1933) contributes to the pie and hose gags with a camera that Buckwheat fills with water so that the father and later the photographer both get hit in the face several times with a surprising squirt of water. Of course, the poised demeanour of both men drips off their serious faces just like the water that has so quickly and effectively debased them.

Laurel and Hardy made the greatest contribution to the pie gag with their film Battle of the Century (1927) where they made use of three thousand pies in every conceivable combination in an enormous mass chaos conflict. After this seeming end all of pie battles, they substitute mud for pies in Should Married Men Go Home? (1928), and rice for pies in The Hoose-Gow (1929) (Scott Allen Nollen, 21).

Madden says of the pie: "Like slipping on a banana peel, the pie in the face is an elementary *lazzi* for the downfall of authority or false dignity. 'It represents,' says Sennett,

“a fine, wish-filling, universal idea, especially in the face of authority, as in the cop or mother-in-law situation” (Madden, 84).⁵⁰ Laurel and Hardy provide very concrete proof for Madden and Sennett’s assertion in a scene from Big Business where an opponent is hosed down (an equivalent to the impact of the pie) by Laurel and Hardy, and also has the last few hairs on his head clipped off. This mockery of his hair is perfectly matched by the embarrassment of his being hosed down. Neither Madden nor Sennett accounts for the violence-halting impact of the pie as found in a scene from We Faw Down (1928). In this scene a man goes for Laurel with a dagger and Laurel puts a pie in his face. Here the pie prevents further combat by reducing vision, lowering the “maturity” of the conflict, and embarrassing the opponent, effectively halting him in his tracks.

Laurel and Hardy also make use of tomatoes in Two Tars (1928), where tomatoes are thrown and then Laurel rubs one in an opponent’s face, plops it on his head, and then squashes his hat on top. Later in the same film, as part of a tit-for-tat sequence, Laurel places some cement on an opponent’s head and, again, puts the man’s hat back on his head. The hat provides the perfect irreversible capper to the embarrassment of the action.

Also in Two Tars there is a scene where two women get involved in the conflict, and after the one messes the other’s hair, the second returns the gesture by squirting oil in her attacker’s face. In all these encounters the victims (just about everybody by the end of the films) have all their pretensions trampled upon:

No group of people is sacred in the Laurel and Hardy films, as the boys, with their alternative relationship, are the only persons who, in the final analysis, are likeable human beings. When they are involved in a dyadic encounter that contains violence, they are able to forgive one another, but, if other persons are involved, the conflict escalates to a state of complete anarchy. No matter how advanced a person may be in the eyes of society, all human beings are reduced to the same level in the Laurel and Hardy films. Even those films which feature Stan and Ollie as middle- or upper-class citizens show them humiliated and disillusioned in the final frames. (Nollen, 88)

⁵⁰ Sennett is quoted on pages 37-40 of Film Makers on Film Making. Ed. Harry Geduld. Bloomington: Indiana U. Press, 1967.

Again, nothing achieves this reduction with more accompanying embarrassment in the Laurel and Hardy films than the pie or hose gag.

The Looney Toons cartoons are fond of the pie gag: in Leghorn Swoggled (1951), a toy train is used to carry a pie into the dog's face. In The Leghorn Blows at Midnight, a pumpkin is catapulted at Leghorn's face. Later in the same cartoon, Leghorn pies the dog in the face, and then, in an extension of the gag, shaves the cream off the dog's face, puts a boiling hot towel on him, and then, when the dog is yelping in pain, says "Ahh shut-up" and tightens a stove-pipe around the dog's neck until he begins to choke. As with most cartoon comedic violence the riffing on the gag is almost boundless.

My Name is Nobody (1973) has a pie sequence where two black men with their heads through a sheet are having eggs, melons and pies thrown at them, at which point Nobody arrives and pays to try the game but instead belts the white man running the booth. The scene is a perfect demonstration of the necessary comic coding of victims of comedic violence, as the violence involving the obviously unhappy black men is brutal and this brutality makes hitting the proprietor in the exact same way a comic pleasure.

Evil Dead II has the most extreme version of the hose gag in a scene where Ash is sprayed with a horizontal geyser of blood.⁵¹ The geyser of blood eventually turns black and knocks him over, only to recoil back into the wall when it is done. The gag takes on an even further extreme and fantastical turn when one realises that essentially the blood is Ash's, as it appeared immediately after he shot his possessed severed hand from the bullet hole in the wall where his hand was hiding. This scene presents the final revolution of the L'Arroseur Arrosé where not only does he direct the hose at himself but supplies the material of his humiliation as well. And with Evil Dead II, the symbolism of the scene matches the effects of the pie and

⁵¹ This gory pie in the face has its horror film precursor - William Paul correctly describes the projectile vomit of Regan into the face of Father Karras in The Exorcist as a pie in the face (Paul, 313).

hose gags. Ash is soaked in his own insides much as the insides of the victims of other pie and hose gags well up in a beet-red display of humiliation (as their blood rushes to their faces).

The pie and the hose are a novel instrument of humiliation for a correctly coded comic butt. While the violence and pain are minimal, the humiliating effects, as in much comedic violence, cling to the victim much longer than with most other violent gags and often provide a novel halt to a comic battle.

Victims: The Acceptable Versus the Sacred and Taboo

The identity of the victim of comedic violence can create novelty. Often the victims of both comedic and non-comedic violence are chosen politically: “The victims of the violent *lazzi* are usually Pantalone and the Captain. This is especially true in the early 1600’s, when the Captain was still associated with the Spanish conquerors” (Gordon, 14). This tradition continues today with the villains of American action films having followed the political enemies of the day: Russian to Arab to drug-dealers to South-Americans, South Africans and back to Arabs; and now, in supposedly more politically correct times, we have some less racially identifiable targets, such as environmental villains. At times, the currency of such recently newsworthy villains adds novelty to comedic violence.

Novelty and humour are also often provoked by having characters engage in violence with sacred or seemingly invincible characters. Such is the case with Punch’s seemingly impossible victorious battle with the devil. This sacredness is also provoked by less imposing but still morally incorrect recipients of violence like the blind man of the Punch and Judy tradition (Collier, 44). Punch’s attack on the blind man forbids or eliminates any sacred cows the audience might have, and mocks their pity for the blind man. Stead feels that it is “an essential feature of the Punch-play that Punch shall attack all conventional beliefs and

verenerations” (Stead, 102). Punch’s attack is taken to its fullest moral extent in his treatment of his child:

Pheu! Nasty child! Judy. I say! (child continues to cry). Keep quiet, can’t you? (hits it a box on the ear) Oh you filthy child! What have you done? I won’t keep such a nasty child. Hold your tongue! (strikes the child’s head several times against the side of the stage) There! - there! - there! How you like that? I thought I stop your squaling. Get along with you, nasty, naughty, crying child. (throws it over the front of the stage among the spectators) - he! he! he! (Collier, 31)

Baird notes a similar event in a play by Duranty called La Mère Gigogne: “Polichinelle tries to pay off the notary with a child, instead of money, and when the offer is refused, Polichinelle throws the infant at the ungrateful man” (Baird, 104). The defencelessness of the child, like that of the blind man, provokes much of the shock found in such humour. Additionally, as with much of Punch’s violence, the shock of Punch’s honesty - an honesty which suggests an audience’s dishonest denial of such impulses - is comically disturbing when it is directed towards such socially protected targets as the blind man or the child.

Off to Bloomingdale Asylum, one of Méliès’ films, shows a revealing change in the acceptable victims of comedic violence:

An omnibus arrives drawn by an extraordinary mechanical horse. On the top are four negroes. The horse kicks and upsets the negroes, who are changed into white clowns. They slap each other’s faces and by the blows become black again. They kick each other and become white once more. Finally, they are all merged into one large negro, and when he refuses to pay his carfare, the conductor sets fire to the omnibus and the negro bursts into a thousand pieces. (Hammond, 45)⁵²

Hammond’s discussion avoids any racial comment on the film: “The melee between black and white recalls the tussle between the miller with a sack of flour and the chimney-sweep with a bag of soot which was a favourite music-hall turn of the day” (Hammond, 46). Méliès regards all aspects of the body and physicality as opportunity and site for gags, and race is no different for him. To be sure, the violence here seems particularly vicious, though there are

⁵² Hammond takes his description from Star Film Catalogue. New York, 1903-8. “Incoherent pagination”.

countless other moments in other films where the white Méliès suffers equally brutal treatment for the sake of a joke. The lack of concern for the victims of this violence reveals a film-maker driven to find humour in all aspects of the body, but also confident of the fact that, at the time, a black person presented a morally safe butt for any joke. Unfortunately, because only a description of the film is available, I can not discuss the impact and relevance of the appearance of these characters, but we can note that at the time, in films a black person was often instantly funny and that this was something upon which Méliès capitalised.

A similar moment occurs in Arbuckle's Out West (1918) in a scene where there is a long brutal mocking of a black man who has to dance while everyone (including Fatty and Keaton) shoots at his feet. Disturbingly, this is the one thing around which all the characters of the film unite. Kerr is dismissive of such concerns: "If most of these usages are offensive now, they were simply unconsidered then.... The American air was simply being thoughtlessly inhaled" (Kerr, 113). Of course these were movies by white people to a large extent for white people, and the black man provided an instantly acceptable comic butt, not unlike the equally offensive racially selected butts of contemporary action films.

An unusual comic victim is found in Arbuckle's The Surf Girl (1916) where a real ostrich is beaten after it has swallowed a locket. This is an extremely strange moment of comedy. The violence provokes a disturbed reaction from the audience because of the innocence of the Ostrich. It seems obvious that the bird does not know what is going on, and there is a strange mix of pity, evoked by the bird's apparent defencelessness, and fear because of the potential and unpredictable attack by the bird. The discomfort provoked by the animal illustrates how carefully comedic violence must be coded but also how comically exciting a helpless and therefore forbidden target can be.

Gerald Mast comments that there is a similar incorrectness in the choice of victims for the

Keystone comedies: “[the comedies] lack two of today’s dominant social attitudes - self-consciousness about who might be insulted and guilt for all the suffering that has been inflicted on the downtrodden by Society and History” (Mast, 54). To contemporary eyes, there appears to be incredible latitude for the more violent comedy of the Sennett films. One wonders when and why this changed, and how these concerns arose or were discovered. Ultimately, though, this study, and the self-reflexive comedies discussed in the final chapter suggest that such lines of moral correctness are ever changing, incredibly fragile, and ultimately dishonest.

Lloyd’s Mad Wednesday (1947) has a scene where a black man listening to a horse race rocks back and forth like a jockey, in his excitement. An excited white woman beats him with a rolled-up newspaper as if he were her mount. Again, the comedy arises by capitalising on common stereotypes of the films of the day and creates an image whose racial and sexual echoes shock and surprise us with a frank comedic lack of concern. Perhaps Moews sums up best the social implications of such comedy in his discussion of racism in Keaton’s College (1927):

Like the heroines, however, the ethnic figures are not conceived as real; nor are they necessarily intended to be taken as real. Where the former are merely conventional romantic stereotypes, the latter are only conventional comic stereotypes, stock jokes rather than actual people. In the films, the hero alone is allowed what seems a full and convincing existence. The others are... decorously devoid of any social concern. The films hold tightly to the repressive beliefs of their time. And this, if not necessarily a major moral flaw in what are socially amoral entertainments, is for later times no strength either. The virtues of the films, certainly, are not those of an art that promotes social understanding and a sympathetic respect for the individuality of all people.... But then, of course, not all art should be required to do these things. (Moews, 252-3)

Moews calls attention to a scene from Seven Chances which provides a concrete illustration of the hierarchy of the comic butt in silent film comedy (Moews, 264). In the scene Buster, desperate for a suitor, approaches a succession of increasingly comically “inappropriate” possibilities”: the first is a Jewish woman, she is followed by a black woman, she is followed

by a wooden dummy, and the gag is ended with a female impersonator. While the female impersonator is particular to the nature of Buster's search, the others are not. They lay out a clear racial hierarchy which, with the defining nature of the dummy, shows the only possibility for these races in silent film comedy: that of comic objects.

Nearly any person different from the protagonists and their audiences is destined to become a comic butt. One such example is a dwarf. Lloyd's films introduce the dwarf as a popular victim. Evidently the Dwarf in his difference was a safe butt for cruel humour. In The Non-Stop Kid (1918), a dwarf tries to egg Slim Pollard into fighting him. Pollard scoffs at the dwarf and knocks him down by pushing his face away. Nearly identical scenes are found in both At the Old Stage Door (1919) and On the Fire. The dwarf as victim returns in My Name is Nobody where Nobody shoots the stilts out from under a Dwarf. Here, as with the other scenes, the Dwarf earns this retribution by hurling insults and inviting a conflict that is physically "above" him. The comedy delights in proving his presumptuousness. It is important that the dwarf needs to earn his retribution. The hero in all these cases, and presumably the audience, is reluctant to engage the dwarf in a fight. However, once the fight is embarked upon the sacred target provides quick comic delight for the audience. The pleasure arises from the comic dismissal of a societal moral protection for a victim.

Chaplin has some butts of violent comedy which stand out from his usual collection of weasels, hoods and cops. One such victim is an old man in a scene from The Property Man (1914). In this especially cruel sequence, the tramp piles a trunk on the old man, crushing him. The tramp gets on top of it in an attempt to pull it off the moaning man, and belts and taps the old man with his boot when he will not shut up. The old man is saved by a strong man who, then, proudly flexes his muscles. The tramp then positions the old man and belts the old man's head, boots his backside and then the tramp flexes his muscles. The old man,

with his long beard, is possibly meant to be a stereotypical Jew, but it is difficult to be certain about this. What is of interest is how the comedy is furthered by the outrageousness of the tramp's treatment of this obviously worn out old man. The success of this humour is dependent and driven by the thrill of such unexpected and in many ways unacceptable treatment of the old man. It is exciting comedic violence which combines comedy with the thrill of the taboo.

There is a similar thrill of the taboo found in Keaton's My Wife's Relations (1922) when we see Buster getting ready to clock a threatening old man by locking the room door so that the man's sons cannot save him. The anticipation of the scene is great, but the scene denies our expectations and achieves a bigger laugh with the surprise of the old man beating Buster to the floor. Thus, our excitement about the taboo victim is turned upon itself and we are shown that Buster's behaviour is truthful but still suffering from a presumptuousness similar to our own.

In many ways these scenes of silent film comedy play both sides of the coin with sacred victims as they enjoy both the effect of the taboo as well as the protection offered by a comic mechanism which attempts to achieve a sort of victimless comedy (as detailed here in Moews' discussion of Seven Chances:

Both the hero and the brides are presented as monomaniacs, characters so concentrated on a single activity that they are nothing more than that activity. They are people so simplified, so restricted in their behaviour, that temporarily at least they become comic machines programmed to repeat comic patterns, and as machines they feel no pain, either physical or mental. Almost one-dimensional characters, at the most two-dimensional cartoons come to life, they inhabit an idyllic if chaotic world of laughter, where the sort of thing that is not at all funny if it happens to real people in real life can for a short time be turned into pure and painless comic pleasure. They do not really feel, they single-mindedly act; and watching, the viewer is excused from feeling sorry for them and can instead harmlessly laugh at their outlandish appearance and behaviour, cheerfully cradled in the comfortably sustained illusion of his own superiority. (Moews, 157)

There are two key character-defining moments in Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (1988) that

further illustrate some of the rules of victims and comic butts in violent comedy. In the bar scene, the judge describes whom he is looking for by saying “about yay-big” and pushing down a midget to the desired height; then he uses the empty sleeve of a war amp to wipe off a chalkboard. Both these actions are cruelly comic and brand the judge as a villain because neither of these men has been coded as a mockable butt and they are not seen with the one-dimensionality that Moews describes. In the world of comedy these two men are the innocent wounded, and therefore are not allowable comic butts within the generally good-natured comedy of Who Framed Roger Rabbit?.

The Ladykillers (1955) plays with the humour inherent in the sacred victim during the various attempts of the criminals to kill the sweet old lady of the film. The cowardly debates of the supposedly immoral criminals (which eventually lead them to drawing straws) provides a humour which is mindful of the limits of the choice of victims for the comic butts of violent comedy:

“You’re the one who’s told us all how much you hate old ladies”
 “Not down there in her own room, in front of the parrots”.

Entertaining Mr. Sloane (1964) plays upon the very same sacredness of the older victim and plays it for a comically shocking opposite effect:

Sloane: He deserves a good belting.
 Ed: You may have something there.
 Sloane: I thought you might be against me for that.
 Ed: No.
 Sloane: I thought you might have an exaggerated respect for the elderly.
 Ed: Not me. (Orton, 122)

Here, we laugh at the impropriety of the men’s attitude. This humour continues even after the death of Kemp, the elderly man in question:

Ed: Attacking a defenceless old man!
 Sloane: He had his stick. (Orton, 133)

Lahr notes that this form of comedy is essential to Orton’s work: “He teased an audience with

its sense of the sacred, flaunting the hard facts of life people contrived to forget. Man was capable of every bestiality; and all moral credos were heroic daydreams, the luxury of affluence” (Lahr, 7). Indeed, this type of humour is exciting because of a shock founded upon an unacknowledged truth or suspicion.

The Pythons love the comic impact of violence against sacred or shocking victims. In a segment entitled “Upper-Class Twit of the Year” from And Now for Something Completely Different (1972), the twits go through a series of tasks involving special victims: kicking a beggar, running over an old lady (a cut-out), and shooting a rabbit which is staked to the ground. Despite the fact that this skit is mocking the obliviousness of certain members of the upper-class, it is only the rabbit which seems real enough to evoke even a minimum of sympathy, since generally the comic focus is on the moronic twits.

In another part of the film a man plays music by hitting mice, which have been arranged in order of squeak tone, with a mallet. Despite their proclivity for such insensitive and pity- or taste-provoking skits, the Python crew seem to need to attach a cop-out clause to such pieces. In both this skit and the previously discussed “The Undertaker” the scene is stopped by an attack from the audience.⁵³ While this attack might seem to mock the moral outrage of an audience, it provides instead a narrative voice for such outrage and it releases any tension aroused by the scene in a show of comic cowardice unusual for the Pythons. The Pythons considered “The Undertaker” their most offensive skit and considered cutting it, and their inclusion of an outraged audience is a placation of the fear they have of that audience (or of the audience’s power over their television show). Both these pieces would be impressively devastating in both their comic and moral impact if they did not end with the censorious and distracting (and therefore relieving) impact of the imagined audience. This is indeed strange,

⁵³ “The Undertaker” is discussed in the corpses section of Chapter Three.

for the Pythons are aware and happy to use the comic impact of the shock provoked by sacred or inappropriate victims: quite apparent in Monty Python's Life of Brian when baby Jesus/Brian, crying in a manger, is slapped and told to "shair-up" – though, again, the shock is quickly dispelled when the camera shows the glowing manger of the real Jesus. Despite that assurance, though, there is still the giddy taboo-breaking comedy of a struck baby present in the scene.

Staveacre defines a comic archetype whom he calls "He who must be taken down a peg" as: "A player who does not immediately engage the audience's sympathy. Far from it. He is gross, overbearing and obnoxious. The audience can't wait for him to get his come-uppance. They cheer when he does" (Staveacre, 164). These figures are easy to find (particularly in British comedy with its class sensitivity); however, the Python films often prefer a victim whom I will call "He whom one does not dare to take down a peg". Their films are full of such characters. The Pythons make use of the excitement offered by the revered, the sacred, the young and the old for violent comedy. In Monty Python and the Holy Grail there is a scene which preys upon the shock of just such an inappropriate victim:

"Bring out your dead"

The old man is dropped onto the cart. "Here's one".

"I'm not dead".

"What?"

"Nothing".

"He says he's not dead".

"Yes he is. Well, he will be very soon. He's very ill".

"I'm getting better".

"No, you're not. You'll be stone dead in a moment".

"I can't take him – it's against the regulations".

"I don't want to go on the cart".

"Oh, don't be such a baby".

"I feel fine".

"Oh, do us a favour".

"Well, can you wait around for a couple of minutes? He won't be long".

"I think I'll go for a walk".

"You're not fooling anyone, you know. Isn't there something you can do?"

"I feel happy. I feel happy". (*The cart-man thumps the old man over the head with a*

club).

“Ah, thanks very much”.

“Not at all”.

The old man is a sympathy-provoking figure. His attempts at saving himself are always sweet, never irritating and keep the comedy focused on the public morality-breaching honesty of the other two men’s impulses and negotiations.

The Pythons turn this sort of sympathy on its head in a “nice bit about old ladies attacking young men” from And Now for Something Completely Different. Gangs of old women (“Hell’s Grannies”) beat up innocent people (usually fit young men). “Putting the knee in the groin. We like pulling the heads off sheep – and tea-cakes – yeah”, says one of the grannies. This reversal of expectation, and the mixture in tone of the sweet and the immoral, provides a comically mocking jab at media-manufactured hysteria (and ends typically at the heights of absurdity). The Pythons are the masters of mining the comic possibilities afforded by the confusion provoked by morally sensitive subjects and targets.

The action film chooses its victims of comedic violence carefully and pusillanimously. Most often its novelty is the American public enemy of the year – neatly summed in the list of possible kidnappers in Commando: “It could have been the Syrians, the South Americans, the Russians, a terrorist group” (one might add drug-dealers, occultists and polluters to the list of favourites). The Naked Gun (1988) plays upon this list in its opening scene of Stoooge-styled beatings of Yasir Arafat, Idi Amin, the Shah of Iran – all at one time members of the list of “correct” villains for past American action films (however, in some ways, the political position of these men keeps this gag in the realm of shock violence [much like the film’s later humour involving Queen Elizabeth]).

In True Lies (1994) the villains are Arab terrorists (essentially fresh from the Gulf war), complicated by an unusually piercing (for an action film) political observation by the head

terrorist: “You have killed our women and children from afar and you call us terrorists”.

However, to further differentiate the terrorists from the audience, the film attempts to make them all, and by extension all Arabs, seem moronic. When they are video-taping their demands, their battery runs out, and later they shoot a missile backwards, killing one of their own men. The idiocy of the terrorists in these two scenes makes nearly anything that happens to them laughable. The Arab villains are a perfect fit for Bergson’s definition of the comic type who must be “troublesome to others, so that they may repress it without pity, but immediately repressible, so that our laughter may not have been wasted” (Bergson, 171).

Action films are, of course, careful to simplify the villains to ensure that they fit securely into the sympathy-less standing of good and bad so that the comedic violence suffered by the villains of the action film can be dismissed as simply as in this exchange between Curtis and Schwarzenegger in True Lies:

Curtis: Have you ever killed anyone?

Schwarzenegger: Yeah, but they were all bad.

Fraser confirms that this simplified distancing is the only way that comedic violence can present its targets. “They are only endurable because of the very mechanism that makes them funny, namely that the mind, directed at first towards real people or kinds of people, recognises almost instantaneously that what is really under attack is certain other kinds of people... and so veers away from a serious contemplation of the objects themselves” (Fraser, 52). This “other” is most often coded as someone who is beneath the audience (the audience’s superiority is the one thing which all comic theorists agree upon). Mullin, however, takes this too far in some of his discussions of specific films: “When an audience revels in the synchronously timed tortures in Home Alone (1990) and Reservoir Dogs (1992), it celebrates the pain of a diminished “other”. These victims lack screen presence. They exude no charisma. They are filmic nonentities the camera wishes – desires – to kill. Their

faces allow for no worship” (Mullin, 15). Mullin is incorrect in suggesting that the villains of Home Alone are nonentities – they are important and fleshed out enough that the violence done to them needs to be carefully coded to be consumed as safely comic. And, as for Reservoir Dogs, the policeman is nothing but sympathetically presented and photographed, and the camera and audience desires anything but his suffering. Mullin comes closer to the mark in his discussion of Natural Born Killers (1994) but here, as well, he overstates the case: “In the past 10 years, audiences have found sport and amusement in the destruction of the “inferior”: the folks in the roadhouse of Natural Born Killers must die because they’re obnoxious, because they’re not hip...” (Mullin, 14-5). Some of the characters of the opening scene of Natural Born Killers “earn” their punishment for the very reasons which Mullin states; however, there are others (the waitress seems most prominent) who pointedly do not earn that suffering and complicate the opening scene of the film. Mullin’s comments are those of the critic who feels ostracized by these works of violent comedy, and here, because of the increase of violence, he imagines a cruelty directed at his values which is really not present in Home Alone and Reservoir Dogs. However, with Natural Born Killers he is right because the film fails in its attempts at disrupting the charisma involved in such stories (explored in Chapter Six). His misunderstanding of Reservoir Dogs is a reaction to Tarantino, a film-maker schooled in the violence of contemporary culture and capable of deconstructing its victim-coded values with perceptiveness (less obviously but far more successfully than Oliver Stone in Natural Born Killers).

Mullin would be more correct directing these comments towards some of the more racist and sexist forms of violent entertainment found in action films. Mast concludes his book by saying that “Although comedy may doubt that human beings are capable of heeding its comic warning, it does warn us not to take our assumptions so seriously that we misjudge or mistreat

those who appear different. Beneath the surface, we are all members of the same race” (Mast, 342). But one must disagree here and note that this assertion is not true for the comedy of today. Contemporary comedy is in constant pursuit of new “correct” comic butts. It is repeatedly trying to depict its audience as superior - racially, morally, or mentally. Whereas the novelty victims of early film comedies were most often the sacred, contemporary film comedy frequently gains additional humour through the use of very current and very identifiable public or political villains. Mainstream comedy today is often a comedy of ostracism that is worthy of Mullin’s moral concern. Novelty victims add to the excitement and humour of comedic violence by keeping the comedy current and occasionally on the moral edge through forays at the morally forbidden.

Self-Inflicted Comedic Violence

The self-inflicted violent act is yet another route to comedic violence that because of its unusualness gains additional shock and humour for its violence. Self-inflicted violence is often comedic because it is caused and/or hampered by stupidity. In a world such as that of the *Commedia dell' Arte* we do not worry about a character being depressingly pushed to doing himself harm, but rather enjoy his ineptness at it:

Despairing over Columbine’s forthcoming marriage, Arlecchino decides to commit suicide. He mimes hanging himself, taking on the roles of the accused and the hangman. He draws a knife on himself but then decides suffocation is a more Arlecchino-like death. He covers his mouth and nose. Discovering the difficulty of self-asphyxiation, Arlecchino attempts to tickle himself to death. (Gordon, 49)

As is apparent with this example, there is often no real risk in the attempts at self-inflicted violence in a comic world. However, in the few cases where such violence is effective, such as the “*Lazzo of the Stones*”, it is comedic because it demonstrates an incredible stupidity: “Arlecchino lies on the floor chewing stones, which seemingly break his teeth and cut his throat” (Gordon, 18). Frye’s discussion of comedy reveals some of the emotions at play in

such a scene: “Comedy seems to raise the corresponding emotions [to those of tragedy – pity and fear], which are sympathy and ridicule, and cast them out in the same way” (Frye, 177). These are the emotions at play in the Xanthias scene and these two *Commedia* scenes. The pain in these scenes brings about some sympathy, but the stupidity which produces the pain dispels or balances the sympathy with ridicule.

Méliès’ films present numerous scenes of self-inflicted violence, in the tradition of illusionistic stage transformations. One example of such moments in Méliès’ films will suffice to understand this type of comedic violence. In Melomaniac (1903) a character played by Méliès throws his own head onto a musical staff over and over again to make a musical score. This gag is indicative of most of those by Méliès: it deals with a manipulation of the body, it is directed at himself, and it is driven by novelty. Unlike the previous examples, stupidity is not at play here, the comedy revolves around the novel and surprising manipulation and denial of the body’s limits.

One of the most prominent moments of self-inflicted comedic violence in film is found in Barney Oldfield’s Race for a Life (1913). The film ends with the villain shooting and killing five policemen and then trying to shoot himself in the head. When the gun doesn’t work, the villain in a fit of exasperation violently strangles himself and then exaggeratedly spins around and dies. This scene lacks any real stakes, as Ford Sterling both looks and acts in a most exaggerated fashion. The impossibility of his strangling himself provides the humorous punch to what is really a fit of frenzied ridiculousness.

Chaplin’s films are full of accidental moments of self-inflicted violence. He is forever hitting himself with hammers and the like (His New Job, Behind the Screen, The Champion). But what is of major interest for this section are the moments when a character consciously chooses to hurt himself, and really in Chaplin’s films there is only one major scene like this.

In The Pawnshop, after having fallen for an old con-man's sob story, Charlie slaps himself and then hits himself with a mallet. Charlie's self-punishment secures its amusement through the combination of an irrationality (his hurting himself) and recognition (we understand why he hits himself).

There are two comic suicides in Chaplin's films. One is a minor gag from City Lights (1931) which becomes comic through Charlie's entanglement in the events. He becomes literally entangled in the suicide's rope and rock gear and ends up following the rock into a lake. In the Park has Charlie helping a man kill himself by elaborately preparing and then booting him off a bridge. The suicide remains comic because the scenes before their encounter make sure that the audience knows that the would-be suicide is a "wimp" and that therefore we should not care for him, and if that was not enough, the man falls safely into a shallow pond (a big splash guaranteeing comic reception).

The films of Harold Lloyd have a surprising number of scenes depicting comedic suicide attempts. There are scenes of long, pathetically unsuccessful suicides by Lloyd in Never Weaken (1921) and Haunted Spooks. At the Old Stage Door embraces the cynicism and sadness of these scenes when Lloyd's character ends the film by sadly inhaling gas as the film fades to black. Lloyd's expression is sorrowful and almost embarrassed at being observed by the camera. His gaze seems to suggest that this is the only escape left to him from the complications of the film's world. The fade suggests that the suicide is a success, and it is important to note here that his actual death requires a decorum which will not allow us to witness his final moments. This is a comedy of sadness which finds a pathetic humour in a sadly humorous character.

The cartoon world is able to embrace self-inflicted violence without generating much in the way of audience concern for the characters involved. There is an absurd song and dance

routine in Who Framed Roger Rabbit? where Roger sings “It feels so great, so concentrate and you will feel no pain, no pain”. The song skips while Roger keeps breaking plates over his head for longer than he obviously intended, thus comically mocking and painfully disproving his claims of comic invulnerability. In Ren’s Toothache, Ren is tricked into pulling out his own nerve endings to leave under the pillow for the “nerve fairy”. We laugh in horror at his idiocy while he painfully pulls them out himself. Here again stupidity is the route to comedy.

Monty Python’s Life of Brian makes comedy out of the masochistic jailer’s desire for suffering: “they bring me down for twenty minutes, which I think is fair considering what I did, and if nothing else it’s given me a great deal of respect for the Romans”, and later, after he witnesses Brian being spat on he says, “You lucky bastard – proper little jailer’s pet. I hang awake all night dreaming of being spat at in the face”. The comic absurdity of his masochism reaches its height in his calls to the passing crucifixion party: “You lucky bastards!”.

Absurdity is the key to all of the self-inflicted comedic violence of the Python films. Absurdity is present in the piece where a wrestler named Colin Bomber Harris wrestles himself - one body, two contestants – eventually (after the double overhead nostril move) knocking himself out (Monty Python Live at the Hollywood Bowl 1982). Absurdity is also the key to the comedy of the closing competition of the “Upper-class twit of the year” contest where the contestants have to shoot themselves. Of course, their attempts are pathetically inept. The capper to the Pythons’ absurd moments of self-inflicted violence is perhaps found with the members of the Crack Suicide Squad from Monty Python’s Life of Brian who show up with musical fanfare, open a panel in their armour, stick their sword in the open panel and then die as their leader says “that showed them, huh?”.

Groundhog Day (1993) presents numerous occasions for its essentially immortal protagonist to inflict violence upon himself; he drives off a cliff, he electrocutes himself in a bathtub full of water, steps in front of a moving truck, and swan dives off a building. We never see the moment of death in these comic scenes, and so, as well, we never see the character suffer. This ensures the comic possibility of the scenes, but the comedy is achieved largely through the cutting and through Bill Murray's resigned visage as he faces each death. In the electrocution sequence, he drops a plugged-in toaster into his water-filled bathtub and the camera cuts to the lounge of the bed-and-breakfast, full of people, where the lights all temporarily blink out and then everyone continues on with their lives. The death under the wheels of the truck is made comic by both the POV of the truck and the unemotional face of Murray (memories of Keaton here) as he calmly steps in front of the truck with his arms held out as if in surrender or crucifixion. The jump off the building achieves a transition from comedy to sympathy for the character as it switches to a contemplative slow-motion and ends with a shot of him in the morgue. Contemplation underlines the pain behind this emotionally mixed comic section.

Mast notes that "from the beginning, comedy has been bent on destruction – of objects, egos, social assumptions, society's leaders, and the goals of society itself" (Mast, 338), and really it would seem only a matter of time until comedy turns its focus to the self. Evil Dead II takes comedy one step further toward that focus with its comic scenes of self-inflicted extreme violence. Unlike the accidental violence of a terminally clumsy character like Norbert from The Naked Gun, Ash's scenes are conscious (if unstable) choices of self-mutilation. The possession of Ash's hand complicates (and starts) this mutilation. Once possessed (and still attached), his hand grabs his face, breaks plates over his head, grabs the back of his head and starts smashing it against a sink, punches him, flips him and then, with

the help of a few more plates, knocks him unconscious. This is a brilliant piece of absurd physical comedy reminiscent of the man who wrestles himself in Monty Python Live at the Hollywood Bowl.

The real moment of self-inflicted comedic violence (for after all, this hand has its own personality) is found when Ash severs his hand from his body. Ash stops his hand's attempt to grab a knife by slamming an ice pick into the hand, thus pinning it to the floor. Ash screams, and then with mocking pride states, "That's right. Who's laughing now?" He starts a chainsaw, and then, while again screaming "Who's laughing now?!!" he proceeds to sever his hand from his body while blood sprays over his pained, screaming face. This is the ultimate victory over the body, and within the context of these films, Ash is rightly proud of his actions. This scene is an open conflation of the violator and violated which seems to lurk beneath many horror and some action films. This turning point, much like the scene where Ash strangles himself in the mirror (the contemporary permutation of the mirror gag), is indicative of the contemporary accusatory and/or self-loathing bent of comedic violence.

This self-loathing is perhaps best understood through the previously discussed scene (236) which ends this sequence, where after shooting and killing his hand, Ash is sprayed with a torrential spout of blood – his own blood. The humiliation of this variation of the pie gag becomes apparent when the action is taken to its extreme with the feast of shit in Salo (1975). For the feast, the violence has disappeared but for the threat which hovers over the actions of everyone in the film. The "pie" of shit is willed into the face as a demonstration of power, a fetish, a route to excitement that is in its extreme moments a support of both Freud and Fraser's belief that such a craving exists in all of us. The victim or butt of most of this comedy has gone from various technically "correct" other, who are obviously different from the audience, and begun to turn in upon itself to less easily distanced victims. Unconsciously

in tune with the political direction of films like Man Bites Dog and Natural Born Killers, Evil Dead II presents the protagonist as both violator and violated. Not only has the perpetrator/victim been doused with liquid but now it is his own blood, a perverted explosion, celebrating or damning him with Senecan vigour for the war he has been fighting with his body. While the *Arroseur* of the Lumière film directed his punishment at his own face as a result of misplaced trust, here Ash's crime is merely his will to endure, to outlast the physical and emotional limits of his body, and for that he is poetically punished.

Stillman comments that an age which values consumption (we should add, consumption of violence) over production encourages a narcissism which is reflected in the culture it consumes:

Recurrent images of decapitation and castration and the constant anxiety that accompanies them illustrate the pathologically narcissistic fantasy of the body's being cut into pieces. Repetitive mention of knives, swords, daggers, and other trenchant objects embellishes the fantasy and explicitly links the fear of dismemberment to desire.... Typical of narcissistic fantasies, the cutting of the body and the implicit image of the separation combine with the characters' narcissistic object-choice, that is, the desired object represents some aspect of the character's own self: his love is directed toward his own image. (Stillman, 148)

Stillman's quotation inadvertently describes the shift of focus achieved by the horror, suspense and action films of the 80's; and having reached this cultural shift's final self-reflexive locus, it is only natural that this shift launches a wave of self-reflexive comedic violence (explored in the next chapter).

This sub-section presents what is perhaps the ultimate novelty for comedic violence. The victim has a wholly unique relationship with the perpetrator (since he plays both roles). The audience is no longer separated from the victim by his previously common stupidity but sympathetic to his suffering as both perpetrator and victim of violence.

These novel violent gags are not, as Moews suggests (253), "socially amoral entertainments". They are the contrary. While novelty in comedic violence always reveals

the drive for entertainment which shapes much of these plays and films, the moments where this novelty intersects with the taboo reveal the very careful way in which our morals are both tested and denied but also, most importantly, how these morals are continuously reinforced by the tension-easing laughter provoked by such testing.

Chapter Six

Self-Reflexive Comedic Violence

This chapter examines self-reflexive comedic violence, that is, violent comedy which examines or comments upon itself or other comedic violence. Self-reflexive movies that contain comedic violence do not often critique their violent comedy and so there is less material to be examined than one might expect. In analysing the films that contain self-reflexive comedic violence we find that the audience is implicated through what is really a complete repudiation of the function of comedic violence. Most comedic violence establishes a moral freedom and stimulates the release that can arise from that freedom. Self-reflexive comedic violence disrupts that release by making explicit the deception and protection inherent in the coding which shapes the reception of most comedic violence. To be sure, there is much comedic violence that probes taboos and as such is an interrogation of moral values; however, most comedic violence is a temporary, pressure-releasing game which ultimately reinstates dominant moral values, thus reinforcing the lies which sublimate or cover our baser instincts. Self-reflexive comedic violence thus provides a morally free zone allowing for a temporary guiltless comic pleasure in the suffering of another (like nearly all comedic violence), and then abruptly exposes these moral sleights of hand, leaving the viewer unprotected and forced to acknowledge the fallaciousness inherent in comic coding and the societal restrictions which necessitate them. Such disruptions can also make an audience-member acknowledge the ways in which society's moral restrictions on behaviour and thought create a need for release such as that offered by comedic violence.

Méliès is the first of the artists that I have examined who presents comedic violence that implicates its audience. In Unexpected Fireworks (1905), a man falls asleep outside a fireworks store. Some sailors come by, pick his pocket, break into the store, set-up

fireworks, light them, hide (facing the camera), and watch. When the fireworks go off the man jumps around excitedly. The sailors come out from hiding, dance up to the camera and look at us proudly and then smile and leave. Here in a rare moment of direct address, Méliès implicates his audience by having us watch the sailors watch the results of their cruelty. The film implies that the sailors do, essentially, exactly what we want them to do or, more importantly, what we would like to see them do. Their stare at the end of the film does not allow the usual freedom from implication which is present in Méliès' other films. The sailors make us acknowledge that we are there, and that they know we are there, and their knowing smiles imply that we are as amused as they are by the antics of the frightened store-keeper. Mast provides some insight into this film: "Méliès' films were also another kind of jest or prank. In them, the prank is not perpetuated by a mischievous boy but by the mischievous film-maker. Méliès becomes the prankster and the audience the butt of his pranks, but so delighted a butt that we also applaud" (Mast, 35). And herein lies the difference between Méliès and an artist like Jarry: while Méliès, like Jarry, preys upon his audience's expectations, and disrupts them just as shockingly, he does so to amuse rather than challenge. While the effect of Unexpected Fireworks is an implication, the result is hardly a lasting or very forceful interrogation of the audience. Méliès' assault here and elsewhere is never upon his audience but rather upon logic and expectation.

Arbuckle was capable of similar pranks upon his audience's expectations. In Moonshine (1918) Fatty digs Keaton out of the sand with a pick-axe. It looks as though Fatty is digging through Keaton's stomach, until Keaton gets out of the sand with his body behind him, and we realise that he was safely out of reach of the pick-axe. The visual pun laughs at the audience's misconceptions and encourages them to laugh in like fashion.

Later in Moonshine, there is a much more explicit meta-comedic moment when Fatty is

tied to a chair with some lighted dynamite. In a moment of comedic cool he lights a cigar off the fuse. This is followed by an outside shot of his shack exploding, and then the shot reverses (the shack reassembles), and Fatty coolly walks out. This filmic prank provokes laughter through its manipulation of the audience's temporary belief in the medium. The filmic tricks of this gag and the visual tricks of the pick-axe gag mock any belief we might have in either narrative and bring to mind a more explicitly meta-filmic piece of comedy found in Mabel's Dramatic Career (1913). In the scene a character played by Sennett sees Mabel in a film, and thinking the film real, shoots at the screen to save her from a villain. This scene invites the audience to laugh at Sennett's character's confusion of the real and illusory, but ultimately for us the film must remind us of Fatty's exploding shack and our similar temporary belief in the narrative of a gag. By depending upon obvious artifice the dynamite gag provokes a startled appreciation of the mechanisms of film comedy and the construction of narrative. This obvious artifice provides a comic relief from the anxieties provoked by the gag. Arbuckle's examples are a gentle ribbing of the gullible audience member and again, like Méliès, provide little lasting interrogation of the audience.

The most meta-filmic scene of comedic violence in Chaplin's films is found in a satirical look at his time at the Keystone studio in Behind the Screen (1916). Chaplin and Campbell are hired to pitch pies at each other after one of the previous actors storms off saying "I don't like this high-brow stuff". The director's instructions for the scene are "He ducks and you get it". The staged battle quickly becomes personal and predictably out of control and soon everyone is covered in pie. There is little comment on comedic violence here other than the line which begins this scene: "The comedy department's rehearsing some new material," which of course pokes fun at the frequency with which these films (particularly those of the Keystone studio) would resort to pie gags for laughs, and as well, the limited humour of such

gags.

More affectingly self-reflexive moments are found in pieces of action like the clock scene in The Pawnshop (1916) which ends with Chaplin viciously belting a customer in the forehead with a hammer. After the man walks away stunned, Charlie checks the hammer and bends it, seeing that it is made of rubber. The question here is whether this examination of the hammer is for the audience or for Charlie? Does Charlie want to reassure the audience that the violence is faked, or was he disappointed that the hammer did not do more damage? Of course, everything in these movies is for the audience; however, Chaplin does not really acknowledge us in the scene. He takes two tiny quick glances at the camera that share nothing with the audience and seem more an indication of his shiftiness. Ultimately this scene plays both ways by revealing the methods or tools of comedic violence and therefore releasing the audience from any moral concern, but at the same time, the scene furthers the nastier side of Chaplin's character and his violent humour.

A similar, but far more forgiving moment for the audience is found at the end of Carmen (1915) where Charlie stabs Carmen in the heart, and then stabs himself. Moments after this action, both actors stand up smiling in a close-up and then demonstrate the mechanism of the retractable dagger in their hands. They then smile as the film ends. This moment is all about release for the audience in a recognition of the possible concern provoked by performed violence, but at the same time it is an attempt to temper the more serious sides of this unusually serious Chaplin film.

A less directly disruptive moment from Carmen has a similar effect in ensuring the interpretation of the events as fantasy: Charlie ends a fight with his rival by seemingly strangling the life out of him and then thrusts a bending, curling blade into his chest. The stabbing is left in the realm of obvious play-acting. This bending blade is important because

it suggests (as does the previously discussed ending of the film), that Chaplin could not count on his audience's interpretation or acceptance of the stabbing. He has to force their recognition of the "play-acting" all the while that he asks them to believe in the scene for the sake of the narrative. This scene makes the moral kow-towing (present in all comedic violence) embarrassingly explicit. This is drama for the over-sensitive and comedic violence that is a pretended moral freedom for the sensitive status quo.

Walter Kerr suggests of early film comedy that "this is play, but it is primeval play, play in the treetops before mores were heard of, play without cause or consequence or social feeling" (Kerr, 63), and while these previous scenes ensure an audience's recognition of play, Kerr is really speaking about a form of play that is not overly concerned with moral bounds. At times these films acknowledge or play with such notions. In The Idle Class (1921) Chaplin's character uses a hammer to get a man out of a suit of armour and accidentally knocks him unconscious. Charlie then looks at the hammer, then at the audience and puts the hammer down. While this moment is about Charlie's incompetence and guilt, there is also an echo into the performative world, where in striving for the great violent gag, these actors enter the realm of real violence and real pain. This is perhaps never more clear than in Limelight (1952):

"You were killing yourself".

"You know what they say, 'Anything for a laugh'".

The final scene in Limelight where Chaplin's character hurts his back in a pratfall that leaves him stuck in a drum reveals much about this hazardous drive for comedy, for when he is carried out in the drum and tells the audience that he would like to go on but he is stuck they laugh. The audience does not understand the real wounds and risks involved in such comedy and ultimately they do not want to know of them. And, really, for the success of the comedy, the audience cannot know of these risks. The heart-attack which ends the film confirms this

necessary ignorance, for it must happen backstage - the real has no place in comedy. The suggestion of the physical suffering of comedians for the sake of a gag can leave an accusingly sour taste in the mouths of caring audience members.

Monsieur Verdoux (1947) is one of comedy's self-reflexive masterpieces. The film is constructed in a way that constantly tests and challenges an audience. Chaplin's much discussed closing speech attempts to politicise his film and place the blame on the audience, but it is the moments of comedy that are far more effective at this, as they go about their implication much more craftily. The audience is always but a look away for Verdoux. When a character talking about Verdoux's money (thinking that he earned it from the stock exchange), states "You must have made a killing", Verdoux rolls his eyes in ironic recognition of the double meaning of the man's words. The rolled eyes and ironic dialogue of the film (discussed in Chapter Two) is something that Verdoux, and ultimately Chaplin, shares with the audience.

Verdoux's most important connection with the audience occurs when he spares the girl's life:

After Verdoux spares the girl's life, he turns to the camera - and laughs. This laugh indicates a crucial element of the style and technique that lets Chaplin get away with the film's macabre premise. We are partners in Verdoux's murderous activities. We vicariously experience the joy of bumping off these women - who are all repulsively old and unpleasant; we feel as clever as Verdoux, in on the game with him. Before the scene with the girl, he turns to the camera and says, "And now for the experiment". (Mast 120)

There is much to disagree with in Mast's statement. The women are not repulsively old - Annabella is charming and the audience is just as likely to root for her as for Verdoux in her scenes. Mast does not allow the audience a more sophisticated relationship with Verdoux. It is less a case of whether or not we are complicit, because by nature of the medium, we explicitly are not. The medium ensures that we are powerless, and we are amused by our

powerlessness. Our powerlessness permits us to relax and enjoy these scenes and Verdoux is careful to point this out for us, forcing us to ask whether we need this powerlessness because it allows us to enjoy his actions and the comedy of the film without guilt.

Mast suggests that our relationship with Verdoux lessens the impact of the murders: "Chaplin artfully detaches us from the illusion of the film; we take the murders no more seriously than the silly ending of Easy Street [1917]. We accept the film as comic metaphor, not murderous reality. And because we laugh, we think. And because we think, we laugh" (Mast, 121). How Mast thinks we can be both partners and detached at the same time is anyone's guess, and ultimately wrong. As Verdoux reminds us (even slightly taunts us), we are powerless to do anything here, we are his guests (for only he acknowledges us). His acknowledgement of us keeps his actions firmly in the realm of the pretend and this fact permits us to laugh. The fact that we laugh forces us to consider why we find such dark subject matter comic.

While Mast and Chaplin wish to encourage the political implications of Monsieur Verdoux, Sobel has suggested that the absurdity and incongruities of Chaplin's films set up a language which does not allow for analysis or even outside meaning (Sobel, 218-22). While Sobel's comments have some truth for many of Chaplin's films, they are not true for Monsieur Verdoux which wishes, at times painfully, to comment upon and effect the outside world. Where Monsieur Verdoux is outwardly affecting is in the ways in which the film forces the audience to notice what it is laughing at. Verdoux's constant irony and several glances at his audience shock them out of their fourth wall safety and force them to acknowledge and question their moral relationship within the comedy: His looks intimate "I am doing this for somebody, and that somebody is you". Verdoux knows we are there and so forces us to sit up and admit the prominence of our presence and desires in the process of the

comedy.

Gehring contradicts Sobel when he suggests Monsieur Verdoux maintains a connection to the real world through its black humour: “Just as Verdoux’s crematorium for one wife’s disposal cannot help but remind the viewer of the Nazi concentration camps, black comedy art is forever hard pressed to outshock the real world” (Gehring, Chaplin’s Film Pioneer, 144).⁵⁴ These momentary outside comparisons are, of course, inescapable and so, while this film finds its primary shock in its implicating and thought-provoking glances at the audience, these glances carry an additional shock, for the audience is not only forced to consider their own significance in the comic and filmic process, but also the outside moral implications of their involvement.

Keaton is the great meta-film-maker of silent film. Despite the self-reflexive emphasis of Keaton’s films, he applies it to violence only in The Cameraman (1928). In one scene, Buster’s character (an aspiring newsreel photographer) documents the real fight between two men. During the fight, when one of the men drops his dagger, Buster puts it back in the man’s hand. This scene’s social criticism is really about the nature of journalism and violence, as is a later moment when Buster hits a man on the head when he gets in the way of his camera. Another scene in the film shows Buster inciting violence for his camera by throwing out some light-bulbs to simulate the sound of guns and explosions. The Cameraman only interrogates violence as it pertains to journalistic film-making. While his pointing to the media and therefore our desire for violence are of some interest to this study, they do not contribute to our understanding of the role of violence in comedy other than to point, with the humour of the cameraman’s inappropriate furtherance of the violence, to our seemingly inappropriate desire to see such violence. This scant comic commentary is not

⁵⁴ This scene has striking similarities to the second murder in Kind Hearts and Coronets, where smoke in the background of a shot indicates a demise.

really a curious oversight in Keaton's self-interrogation for pointedly his are the least violent of the silent film comedies.

Harold Lloyd's films have a few moments of meta-comic violence. The most significant occurs in The Freshman (1925) when Lloyd puts his rapier into an open light socket and is electrocuted, much to the delight and laughter of a huge audience. This is a moment of comedic violence that must call to question our similarity with the audience in the film, for theirs is a response which precisely mirrors our own response to Lloyd's actions. The scene does not address The Freshman's audience directly, but the situation forces an audience to acknowledge the similarity, and question their laughter at another's suffering.

Many contemporary films are much more direct than silent films in their examination of comedic violence. Who Framed Roger Rabbit? (1988) with its numerous frames of reference - the real, the cartoon, and the film set - facilitates an understanding of the nature and purposes of violent comedy. There are explicit references to the mechanics of comedic violence found in the director's discussion with his editor: "No, no, no. Wait until he gets to his feet, then hit him with the boulder". This discussion brings to the audience an understanding of what they laugh at: in this case, the butt is led to think that he has escaped his fate, and at that precise moment he is punished for that assumption. We want to see comic butts who think that they have escaped life's cruelty, have cruelty trounce them the moment they believe they have escaped it. In that moment we are superior, because we did not fall for the momentary pause in the suffering: our laughter suggests that we are above such moments of hopeful gullibility. The director's instructions for his editor lead the audience to consider the implications of such a desire on the part of the audience of comedy.

Like Limelight, Who Framed Roger Rabbit? alludes to the potential suffering behind the pretend suffering of most comedic violence: "Nobody takes a wallop like Goofy. What

timing. What finesse. What a genius". Roger's comments gain their humour from the absurdity of both a cartoon having thought, let alone genius, and from the seeming contradiction in the genius of being hit. However, Roger's comments also raise the implications inherent in the fact that real-life slapstick involves the tolerance of real-life pain for the sake of an audience's enjoyment: "The line between the 'nap' which is pulled (which doesn't hurt) and the 'straight nap' (which does), is a very fine one, and the road to the audience's heart is littered with broken limbs and damaged organs" (Staveacre, 45). Roger spells out the overpowering rules of comedy in another scene from the film:

Valiant: You mean you could've taken your hand out of that cuff at anytime?

Roger: No, not at anytime. Only when it was funny.

These remarks about the sacrifices made by comedians for the sake of comedy would provoke sympathy were they said by human comedians who suffer for the sake of their audience, but here they remain absurd aspects of another world. These remarks make explicit the comedian's lot: to suffer for the audience.

Some of the judge's comments in Who Framed Roger Rabbit? warn against the effects of comedic violence. He repeatedly warns the weasels "You know what happens when you can't stop laughing, one of these days you're going to die laughing". The weasels, like us, laugh at the pain and discomfort of others. Their uncontrollable amusement eventually leads to their own deaths and, within the context of the film, forms a cautionary and judgmental note about finding cruel amusement at the expense of others. The weasels will laugh at any violence and suffering, safely coded or otherwise, and that, the film suggests, is a problem and one which cannot help but reflect outwards towards the audience who often laugh with the weasels.

The culture-conscious The Simpsons has frequent moments of meta-cultural genius. The Itchy and Scratchy cartoons which the Simpson children watch are satires of the

contemporary teen cartoons that the Ren and Stimpy and Beavis and Butthead shows made popular. In one episode of The Simpsons, Itchy the mouse is seen in a sweet old-fashioned cartoon which resembles the first “Steamboat Wylie” cartoon of Mickey Mouse. The cartoon immediately switches to the violence of Itchy and Scratchy’s regular clips with Itchy shooting Scratchy down to the bones and then directing him into the furnace of a locomotive only to pull him out later and laugh at his charred skull. This sequence both points to some of the roots of cartoon comedic violence and at the same time mocks our gullibility in thinking that the early Itchy and Scratchy films could be anything but brutally violent. The naiveté of the early Disney cartoons is mocked as something for which the Simpson children and, by extension, today’s young audiences have no tolerance.

The Itchy and Scratchy clips also mock the desires of those who enjoy the Ren and Stimpy styled cartoons. The theme song for Itchy and Scratchy is the repeated high-pitched refrain of “fight, fight, fight”, and fighting is all that the show contains. An advertisement for “Itchy and Scratchy – The Movie” calls it “the defining event of our generation”, and while this section is mocking the hyperbole of film marketing, it also suggests that these types of entertainments are currently and pathetically the defining cultural phenomenon of the younger generation.

The Itchy and Scratchy segments also mock the oft-professed concern about the impact of these cartoons on children. In one episode, after Lisa watches Itchy and Scratchy, she knocks Homer on the head in a scene shot like Psycho (thus resonating for adult audiences who consume violence). In the same episode a shot shows the insides of Bart’s mind with the subtitle of “the imagination of a boy” and absolutely nothing happens. These are the typical accusations of those who decry the violence and morals supposedly espoused by entertainment such as the Itchy and Scratchy cartoons. While here these accusations are

mocked by showing precisely that which is predicted, there is a general criticism in The Simpsons shows levelled at the lack of sophistication of such shows as Ren and Stimpy and their seemingly moronic pandering to the lowest common denominator in violent entertainment.

The satirical The Simpsons is also a successfully broad show: i.e. a culturally unsophisticated audience member can enjoy the show while missing the satire (witness the show's popularity with children who are unaware of the constant film allusions), whereas a more sophisticated audience member can engage in the cultural discourse which drives the show. The show is full of moments that are equally funny, to the same effect but with different connections, for both types of audience: witness a scene where an advertisement for the "Itchy and Scratchy Movie" shows a huge billboard with a camera that is repeatedly smashed onto Scratchy's head causing blood to spurt out onto the heads of some newlyweds parked nearby in a convertible. The laughter of the newlyweds is absurd for both kinds of audience members. However, for the more sophisticated viewer only, the laughter is a pointed commentary on the absurdity of the popularity of the seemingly amoral and unsophisticated excess of some contemporary violent comedy.

The Pythons use a moment of self-reflexive comedic violence for humour in Monty Python Live at the Hollywood Bowl (1982). In the scene a professor gives a lecture on the methods of comedic violence, beginning with board gags (turning with a board on the shoulder to hit someone else's head), and then on to tripping, pulling out a chair and then ending with an inventive series of pie jokes. Each of these gags is performed by three assistants wearing coveralls who enact the gags in a very slow, deliberate manner, thus removing all sense of the surprise natural to the gags. However, once the gags get to the pies, a clever string of surprises is used on the assistants (all elaborately built up so that they remain

surprises for the audience and thus remain comic). Some of the comic pleasure (not much) comes from the ridiculously serious tone and language of the lecturer for such pleasantly base pursuits: "The ribald connotations of an edible missile". Through its mix of tones and the unimpassioned act of demonstration, the scene mocks the justification and the unnecessary explanation offered by academic texts such as the one you are reading right now. As well, the initial dead-pan deliberateness, with its almost slow-motion enactment of the gags, removes the gag's humour, leaving just the absurdity of the ultra-serious enactments. With much of the humour gone, the audience is left to question the pleasures of such comedy. The injection of the successfully comic element of surprise later in the scene provides an answer and quickly negates any prolonged serious moral consideration of the material.

The action film, like many entertainment genres, relies upon the awareness of its genre-savvy audience, and the films make frequent references to the action genre's codes and conventions, as in Die Hard (1988), where Willis comments that "they got missiles, automatic weapons and enough plastic explosives to orbit Arnold Schwarzenegger". This action film awareness and the general familiarity of the violence in contemporary popular film are referred to in a scene from Falling Down (1993) where a boy gives Douglas' character instructions on how to shoot a rocket launcher ("I saw it on TV") and then asks him "What's the name of the movie you're making?". After Douglas blows something up, the boy comments "Cool". The violence and convention-consciousness of these films goes so far that the boy cannot distinguish between film and reality (or he is quite comfortable standing on a film set). A genre-reflexive film like The Last Action Hero (1993), however, points out that audiences are completely aware of the difference between film fiction and reality, with the film's constant gags about the realities and unrealities of violence (discussed in Chapter One as part of the audience's recognition of the conventions of the action genre). The comedy of

The Last Action Hero depends upon both the audience's understanding of the difference between reality and film fiction and, as well, their understanding of the conventions which code and rule over the violence of the action genre.

With this sort of audience savvy in mind we can approach the self-reflexive work of Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers (1994). While not a deconstruction of the action film, Natural Born Killers is a not always successful criticism of a culture and society obsessed with violence and violent people. Natural Born Killers' primary focus is on violence and the culture and media that pander to it, but there are a few moments with particular relevance for a discussion of comedic violence.

The most overt examination of comedic violence in Natural Born Killers is found in the sitcom spoof entitled "I Love Mallory". Every time the father, played by Rodney Dangerfield, says or does something crude and offensive, it is accompanied by canned applause or a laugh track:

Father: (*to Mallory*) "You watch your language or I'll kick the shit out of you like I do her". (*He molests her....*) "I'll show you a little tenderness later. I'll come up and she won't see my face for an hour".

The laughter and applause that accompany such scenes mock the sacredness of middle-American values and the empty culture accompanying such values, thus suggesting the offensive drives and the results of such hypocrisy. We are left with the feeling that this perversion is more realistic than TV; that such values are ultimately what is underneath simplistic television relationships.

The laugh tracks in the sitcom are always inappropriate, most blatantly when they accompany the frequent suggestions of the father's sexual abuse of his daughter.⁵⁵ These moments of canned laughter leave the viewer questioning the values that the viewers support

⁵⁵ The complexities of audience, reception and identification are discussed on page 280.

with their laughter. As well, the programmed nature of the laughter suggests the lack of choice involved in the morality which television espouses.

The other way in which Natural Born Killers interrogates comedic violence is through the sometimes tongue-in-cheek, flippant attitude that Mickey and Mallory take towards their violence. In many ways this is the great failing of Natural Born Killers. Two of the teenagers interviewed during Mickey and Mallory's trial make the revealing statement that Mickey and Mallory, when compared to Manson, are "way cooler. They're the best thing to happen to mass-murder". And here we see spelled out one of Stone's enterprises within the film. He is attempting to attack the mystique and charisma of mass-murderers, but he fails miserably.

Fraser speaks of "the American ambivalence towards law and order, the general desire for order and resentment of laws" (Fraser, 16), and this is a great part of the appeal of outlaws like Mickey and Mallory. Stone tries to undercut the audience's identification with the killers with frequent cuts to the murdered victims, but he cannot beat the charismatic pull of their personalities. And so, while he makes frequent excursions into Monsieur Verdoux-styled didacticism ("we just call it industry" says Mickey echoing Verdoux's comments on war), and there are numerous moments of ignorant irony on the garrulous Mickey's part, the ironic humour about the violence of the film never manages to overcome or even complicate the magnetism of the film's two protagonists.

Mickey wonders "why are they making all these stupid movies? Doesn't anybody believe in kissing anymore?" and his comments point to the central failing of the film as cultural commentary. While Mickey's lines about the violent films he has been watching on TV are a comically ironic declaration of his ignorance of his violent nature, the lines about kissing point to one of the great appeals of the film. Natural Born Killers tries to be a

commentary on the obsession with violence in our culture but instead it ends up telling one of the great love stories of its generation. This is the film where the charismatic Bonnie and Clyde survive.

And while the close of the film might be seen as a ridiculous parody of peachy-keen endings, it too ultimately fails. Certainly the conclusion of the film can be seen as a final jab that suggests that the American dream has altered to one where success is achieved through selfishness and brutality and that essentially anyone, regardless of class and creed (but notably not race) can become a famous and charismatic serial-killer. However, the film and its protagonists, despite their brutal actions, are just too much fun for such a reading. Come the end of the film, the viewer's position (especially young viewers schooled in the MTV-styled editing, the animation and the video-game values) is not challenged. While it may be argued that Stone is striving for a more ambiguous, ironic tension in his film, under my rubric the film is not a successful commentary or deconstruction because the film contributes to the romanticised myth of the killer more than it disrupts the myth. Natural Born Killers has a stylish and contagious breakneck speed which drives the film forward as an exciting, crazy and surreal love-story that leaves the often ironic and ambiguous commentary about violence as simply the amusing and cool quips of cool outlaws.

The film's inability to overcome the inevitable charisma of outlaws is ultimately its greatest commentary on contemporary youth-culture's fascination with violence. The charisma inherent in such characters is insurmountable today.⁵⁶ Natural Born Killers, as far as comedic violence is concerned, is a failed attempt at self-reflexive film-making. To be sure, much of the film's discussion of the media's love of violence is at times successful.

57. One must wonder whether Tarantino's original script might have had more of a critical effect had it been approached with some of the less culture-conscious intensity of Reservoir Dogs (1992). Such a choice would have undoubtedly removed much of the commentary-disabling fun of Natural Born Killers and pushed the boundaries of viewers to the point of introspection, much like Reservoir Dogs' Titus Andronicus-like wallowing in the extremes of violence.

However, the humorously ironic quips of Mickey and Mallory are always more comedy than commentary.

Thomas Schatz has said of film genres:

It would seem that, throughout a genre's evolution from transparent social reaffirmation to opaque self-reflexivity, there is a gradual shift in narrative emphasis from social value to formal aesthetic value. Because continued variation tends to sensitise us to a genre's social message, our interests, and those of the filmmakers, gradually expand from the message itself to its articulation.⁵⁷ (40-1)

With violent comedy, however, self-reflexivity does not necessarily lose its social aspect.

Certainly a self-reflexive film like The Last Action Hero is in no way a lasting social critique.

The film reinforces the values that it so pleasantly derides. Schatz notes that "what is so fascinating and confounding about Hollywood genre films is their capacity to 'play it both ways', to both criticise and reinforce the values, beliefs, and ideals of our culture within the same narrative context" (35) and this is certainly the case with The Last Action Hero.

However, the difference found with a film like Man Bites Dog (1992) is that it removes any pleasantries from its deconstruction. The critique in The Last Action Hero is an entertaining game of Hollywood genre savvy that makes fun of some of the more obvious and ludicrous conventions of the action genre. In Man Bites Dog the attack on the comedy is vicious, punishing and offers no pleasant escape. The entire purpose of the film is thought provoking implication. Here, the formal deconstructive side of the film is ultimately an interrogation of the social aspects of comedic violence.

Man Bites Dog has numerous self-reflexive moments that comment on film-making and the medium in general. These moments are much like the implications of the media in Natural Born Killers, but are far more effective. The implication of the media is finally not very important for this study other than to note that the crew's eventual involvement with

⁵⁷ I do not mean to suggest by my use of genre theory to comment on comedic violence that comedic violence is a genre or that I am only speaking about the comic genre. The writing on the conventions and evolutions of popular entertainments is often applicable to comedic violence beyond the bounds of genre and overall narrative.

Benoit, the serial killer whom they are documenting, begins to create a sense of unease or suspicion in the audience (if the fact that the crew is documenting a serial killer is not enough of a moral provocation). The crew's physical help of Benoit (helping dispose of bodies, chasing victims) and Benoit's eventual financial support of the film-makers (from the money he takes from his victims) pushes the audience to a realisation of, by extension, their financial support of the film (and its comedy).⁵⁸

A more lasting damnation of the audience results from the trap the film-makers have laid in the comedic violence that dominates the film. The film is full of violent comedy (much of it detailed in the preceding chapters) which like the bulk of the comedy discussed in this thesis is a type of sanctioned comic cruelty. Benoit is charming, funny and always entertaining and the violence is quick (and quickly forgotten) and easily consumed within a comic context.

The good-natured laughter of the audiences in the first half of the screenings that I attended - three in Toronto (one at the film festival with the directors of the film) and one in Paris - lends credence to Eastman's unpopular assertion that laughter "is not an act of rejection but of acceptance" (7). The audiences of the screenings I attended accepted the comic presentation of Benoit's early murders. In fact the only judgement of Benoit early in the film is of some of his more hypocritical statements. When we laugh at his comment that "everyone agrees that violence is the scourge of society" our laughter (and judgement) is directed at his pompous obliviousness to his own part in this "scourge". Benoit's contribution to the violence of his society is not judged or laughed at. It is his attitude and obliviousness that provoke the laughs.

The audience's comic reception of the violence begins to cease for every audience

⁵⁸ Benoit is eventually even critical of the film-maker's support of him. At one point they watch some footage of Benoit killing someone and Benoit, while analysing his methods, notes that as far as teamwork was concerned, he could not count on the film-makers.

member at some point during the second half of the film, when the murders have longer screen time and drift towards less socially acceptable victims. The first of these victims is a child who is smothered after his parents have been killed during a house invasion. At first the child escapes Benoit's capture and a long chase is required to bring him back to the house. The child's screams and his struggle while he is being smothered under a pillow put a morally sensitive victim's suffering into the mind of the viewer for the first time in the film. This scene, however, merely weakens the comic climate of these murders. However, after he kills the boy, Benoit goes on a long, comically hypocritical diatribe against infanticide ("kids aren't good business") and has a bizarre moment of concern for the family he has just killed "It's those three innocents. There ought to be a law. Well I'm... I'm not... I'm not a lunatic". Despite the sensitivity of the age of the victim, the scene is dominated by its comedy.

Bergson has suggested that "you would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others. Laughter appears to stand in need of an echo" (Bergson, 64). And it is partly for this very reason that the comic climate of Man Bites Dog begins to crumble. The laughter throughout the murder of the boy is, no matter how unthinking the audience, at the very least less hardy than throughout the earlier comic murders of the film. The social support of the audience for the comedic violence is no longer entirely stable. With this instability in place, the next few scenes ensure that the attention of all the viewers is eventually aroused.

Mast indirectly describes the impact of these next scenes in his discussion of the comic climate:

If comedy does indeed depict matters of life and death, then the reason such depiction remains comic is because it *has not been handled as if it were* a matter of life and death. This device will, at some point, lead the audience to reflect that it has been lulled into taking the supremely serious as trivial – a reflection that is precisely the aim of much

contemporary comedy. (Mast, 9)

For North American audiences this realisation in Man Bites Dog occurs during a gang rape and double murder that follows a night at a bar. The good mood of the bar scenes is shockingly destroyed when Benoit and the film crew break into an apartment and take turns raping the seemingly pregnant occupant. Benoit and the crew drunkenly joke throughout the long rape scene. The next morning a waking crew member films the aftermath, which reveals that Benoit and the crew have passed out, there is blood everywhere, the male occupant has been killed and the woman has been killed and disembowelled. This scene is the end of the comedic honeymoon of the film and the audience is left depressed, disgusted and inescapably implicated.

Unlike the rapid-fire montage of the comic gun murders of the first half of the film, these problematic deaths all take time (screen time). We see the victims flee and/or struggle. We feel their pain as they are tortured. The camera uncharacteristically lingers on the suffering, forcing a contemplation of that which we have previously laughed at. This change in focus and duration illustrates why comedic violence is so easy in the age of the gun; it can be fast, distant, impersonal, even accidental. A successful strangulation or rape would have great difficulty overcoming its lengthy duration, its contact with the victim, and the visibility and duration of the victim's struggle. We the audience would care far too much to permit ourselves to laugh at such struggle and suffering.⁵⁹

The rape scene in Man Bites Dog forces an audience to recognise what it has been laughing at. The comedy throughout the rape is no different than that found throughout the

⁵⁹ However, Almodovar has presented comic rapes in Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! (1990) and Kika (1994). The rape in Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! focuses its comedy on the threat-deflating incompetence of the rapist, though the comedy of the scene does seem to be of a European or Spanish sensibility that does not translate wholeheartedly for North American audiences. In Kika the rapist succeeds (discussed in detail in Chapter Four's section on sexual comedic violence). As was previously discussed, part of the strange comedy of the scene is that the rapist is too successful (he achieves orgasm several times and the rape goes on for a long time). The comedy in this scene stems primarily from the woman's strange almost calm detachment from the act and her verbal admonishments of the rapist which make her seem more annoyed than anything else.

film. However, in this instance the victim is to some extent sacred (she appears to be pregnant), the violence is lengthy, extremely personal and taboo, and the aftermath receives significant focus. All the coding and techniques that usually accompany comedic violence are here affectingly absent.

Interestingly, a Belgian friend of the film-makers told me that it was the scene before the rape which shocked Belgian audiences. In the bar scene, Benoit and the crew play a game where they weight olives to sink in their drinks as if the olives were bodies being hidden in water (as Benoit was wont to do). There is much discussion about body weight ratios and the gasses produced by a decomposing body. However, it was the name of the game, “Le Petit Gregory”, which was most shocking for the Belgians. The name refers to a boy who was the victim in a fairly recent scandalous murder case where a member of the Belgian royal family was implicated.⁶⁰ All night at the bar the name is bandied about and the men eat their “petit Gregory” when it comes floating to the surface of their drink. This name was too sensitive for the Belgians (because of the scandal, the age of the victim and the currency of the event) and here we see that the technique is the same for audiences on both sides of the Atlantic; a taboo is used to provoke the audience to moral consciousness.

After the Toronto Film Festival screening where I first saw this film, the audience was in shock. Many people left shortly after the rape scene, and amongst those who remained for the question and answer period with the film-makers a common point of view was expressed by the question: “Why did you have to do that scene with the rape of the pregnant woman? I was having such a good time up until then”. This disruption was, of course, the point of the entire film.

⁶⁰ The public did not know which member of the royal family had killed the boy. The royal family effectively protected the murderer amongst them by their refusal to disclose the killer’s identity to the authorities.

Morally complex scenes such as these have obvious implications for the reception of the comedic violence of the scenes and thus raise some of the questions explored by reception theory. In Understanding Popular Culture John Fiske makes the perhaps obvious point that there is no such thing as a stable, unified audience. In “British Cultural Studies and Television”, Fiske seizes upon Stuart Hall’s work in “Encoding – Decoding”, and points out that reception is negotiated from different positions. Using Hall’s notions of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings, he points out the varied readings which are possible within the same audience of a cultural event. Reception theory argues that reception is active and that meaning is constructed by each viewer in ways that are influenced by their individual contexts, as well as their shared experience as a member of an audience. This is obviously the case with the “petit Gregory” scene, where the audience member’s knowledge of the murder will have a significant impact on how he or she reacts to the comedy of the scene.

These meta-comic moments of violence raise many issues which have been examined by feminist theory. The rape scene in particular all but demands such a line of questioning. Feminist body theory and psychoanalytic theory complicate simple assumptions about audience identifications during scenes of comedic violence. The identifications, posited by feminist theory, with the gaze and the image have ramifications for nearly all discussions of violence in film and theatre. As well, identification with the perpetrator or the victim of the violence, and the potential constant shift or simultaneity of all these identifications, complicates any reading of comedic violence.⁶¹ However, the arguments presented by the

⁶¹ A few noteworthy texts and writers point to possible routes of inquiry. Yvonne Tasker in Spectacular Bodies, and Paul McDonald and Richard Dyer in Stars, discuss the body and the star as signs which convey ideologies and compel identifications. Linda Badley in Film, Horror and the Body Fantastic, discusses the body as a sight of identification and a symbol of the real. In several books and articles (chief amongst these is The Future of an Illusion: Film, Feminism, and Psychoanalysis), Constance Penley discusses the identifications, manipulations and implications of the camera as apparatus. Teresa DeLauretis, Carol J. Clover and Linda Williams (in Alice Doesn’t: Feminism, Semiotics, and Cinema, Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film, and Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible” respectively), detail the processes of multiple identifications that can ignore gender and sexual identity.

writers of these fields are neither simple, brief nor resolved. The focus of this thesis necessitates simply noting that the possible plural perspectives of audiences and individuals exists for such scenes, and that previously footnoted theory would be important for any detailed discussions of such plurality.

In many ways the directors of Man Bites Dog circumvent these complications through their use of a comprehensive succession of taboos which as a whole ensure the reaction that the filmmakers desire from their audience. The film challenges the disassociation necessary for comedic violence by crossing the line of sacred and taboo victims and actions. The film also suggests how arbitrary or relative this line is, as the moral action of comedic violence is essentially the same, either side of the line of taboo. The net result of these implications and realisations is that the audience is forced to recognise the inherent cruelty that drives all comedic violence under the protection and disguise of comic coding.

Freud suggests the pertinence of suppressed violent urges to comedy: "From childhood, our hostile impulses against our fellow men have been subject to the same restrictions, the same progressive repression as our sexual urges. We have developed new ways of releasing hostility, and lifting inhibition – and laughter is the most important of these" (qtd. in Staveacre, 9). The reactions of audiences of this film give credence to Fraser's assertion that violent entertainments are "addressed to instincts that people don't like to gratify except with the help of ingenious disguises and a rather childish hypocrisy. These instincts, which are the most deeply rooted in the human psyche, are, on the one hand, fear, on the other, the taste for blood and death" (Fraser, 10). This appetit or "taste", as Lahr points out, is integral to comedy as well: "Comedy always acts out unconscious wishes suppressed in daily life" (Lahr, 19). Thus when these disguises and hypocrisies are exposed, so too then are the audiences who seek to disguise such impulses. As Man Bites Dog proves, this exposure is never more

discomforting than when the exposure is to oneself. This exposure forces the audience to acknowledge that they are now in the position where “One is in some degree simultaneously the victim of the violences, one’s own consciously-judging, civilised self being shocked by them, and the violator” (Fraser, 86).

Here again we are directed towards some of the central tenets of reception theory. Many of the films discussed in this thesis are for the most part what Umberto Eco in The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts calls “closed texts”. However, when comedic violence utilizes taboos or engages in self-reflexivity the films and/or the comic scenes within the films are “open texts”. The ambiguity of an open text again points to the extreme subjectivity of the perception and reception of such scenes of comedic violence. Certainly a woman’s experience of a comedic rape of a woman will likely be very different from that of a male audience member. Audiences are obviously made up of people with differing subjective points of view. Despite the shared experience of a film or play, audience members will all create individual perceptions and meanings from the experience of viewing such scenes. They will influence each other’s reception of these films and plays through laughter, tension and shock, but the influence of the group on the individual will also be subjectively received and interpreted.

Man Bites Dog keeps the audience in the position of the violator with a few more increasingly humourless murder scenes, the most notable being a birthday dinner party for Benoit where he shoots one of the guests in the head. His actions at the party leave the guests around the table stunned, frightened and covered in blood. Their position mirrors our own. Later when Benoit and the crew discover that the grotto where they dump bodies has been drained, the audience is forced to look at the grisly result of the murders which amused them throughout the first half of the film. The bodies, lying in a disgusting, decaying heap bring to

mind images of the holocaust. This unrelenting horror leaves the audience tainted, judged and unable to escape their shame at their comic approval of the earlier murders.

While all comedic violence is taboo (and this taboo is no small part of the excitement and pleasure of comedic violence), the comedy of Man Bites Dog, and many of the other films discussed in this chapter, use greater taboos to disrupt the comic coding and climate in order to leave the audience exposed to the machinations of comedic violence and their complicity within such machinations.

Self-reflexive comedic violence fools audiences into a moral trap, forcing them to trace the authority of their sanctioned comic cruelty back to themselves. This trap is the ultimate accusatory turnaround for a moral game that usually frees the audience from responsibility. This is a moral about-face for a type of comic business which, as this thesis has taken pains to point out, is a series of moral negotiations designed to titillate, tease, test and ease the pressure of societal and individually imposed moral limits. These final films echo this assertion to their audience and in the process suggest that comedic violence often hides a disturbing hypocrisy that has potentially harmful effects on an unperceiving audience.

Conclusion

During the eighties and early nineties, comedic violence appeared most commonly and prominently in action films (and sometimes horror films). Because the action and horror film genres depend upon an awareness, conscious or not, of the respective genre's codes, this awareness brought about a wave of self-consciousness in the comedy found in these genres. This self-consciousness prompted or heralded the wave of film-makers who deconstructed comedic violence.

Comedic violence, while not actually a genre, has gone the route of most genres in that it has reached a state of deconstructive self-reflexivity now that its conventions and codes have become common knowledge. As Christian Metz has detailed in Language and Cinema (148-161), genres commonly change from classic to parody to contestation to deconstruction. The films and plays discussed in the final chapter of this thesis reveal the apogee of comedic violence. While comedic violence will never leave the screen (because of the irremovable presence of violence in American cinema) this wave of self-reflexivity does seem to herald the swan song of this type of comedy's creative pinnacle. Comedic violence will quickly become hackneyed and untillating and comedians and comic writers will move on to other taboos. There will always be the need for morally protected releases from societal expectations.

Annette Hill's work on horror films points to the needs of audiences of comedic violence: "Movies use thresholds to provoke reactions, and it is part of the process of viewing violence that participants identify thresholds to violence. Some thresholds are social; they re-affirm social taboos (such as female rape) and signify collective fears" (Hill, 106). Hill's statement is equally applicable to the comedic violence discussed in this thesis. Comedic violence uses thresholds of humour to re-affirm social taboos. Hill says of violence in movies, "movies act

as a safe way of exploring the issue of violence and provide a forum for complexities of response” (Hill, 107). Comedic violence provides “a safe way of exploring the issue” of morals, and, for comedic violence, the response is most often expressed through shock and laughter.

Despite the fluctuations of the moral boundaries which can appear, because of their moral implications, to be quite significant, there is also a continuity to comedic violence and its reception and popularity despite changing historical and cultural circumstances. It is often the evolution of comedic violence that reveals the permanence of this type of comedy. The tools of the pie and hose gag “evolved” from the relative safety of water and pies to the more violent and disturbing projectiles which include rocks, bottles, faeces, vomit and blood. While these changes are part of the quest for novelty, they are also in tune with the changing choice of victims for comedic violence with the excretions of the body being part of the final assault on the self which leads to the recent self-reflexive vein of comedic violence. However, within these changes we can see that the abiding goal and mechanism of such comedic violence is the same across the ages and across the genres. In this case, the messy projectile is the lasting method of choice for achieving the humiliation of the victim.

Of course, comedic violence is not just a probing of morals, but the semi-taboo nature of its moral action necessitates its moral coding. These coding methods work towards framing the work as concern-free often by denoting it as what Nicoll has called “the palpably fictitious” (149). This thesis presents a theory and typology of coded reception for violent comedy. Feminist theory and reception theory point the way for research into the possible plural perspectives at work in the moral negotiations inherent in comedic violence.

By examining the entirety of this detailing of reception codes we can see that the butts of comedic violence have travelled in focus from the easily removed, distanced other (ostracised

by race, appearance and behaviour), all the way to victims uncomfortably identified with the audience. This shift mirrors and activates to some extent the genre-like evolution of comedic violence from classic to parody to critique. Thus the choice of target for comedic violence has gone from the use of two-dimensional others (in *Commedia dell'Arte*, puppetry, and slapstick) to characters representative of certain institutions but still possessing individuality (in many of the British films and plays and contemporary North American films), to the protagonists with whom we identify (horror and action films) and then finally, with the films discussed in the final chapter, to the audience itself.

This transition from the safety of the distant other to the discomfort and accusation of the audience lends credence to Otto Fenichel's assertion of the essential guilt inherent in comedy:

The motive for the telling of a joke always consists of an attempt to get the approval of the audience for the underlying guilt in the offensive impulses concealed in the joke.... But the jesting also has an exhibitionist quality, and is an attempt to get confirmation from the spectators, and to seduce them to participate in the jesting sexual or aggressive acts. (qtd. in Staveacre, 141-2)⁶²

At the same time there seems to be a questing for meaning in these moral extremes. Mullin states,

It seems appropriate that the century of Verdun and Auschwitz, of year zero in Cambodia and the Gulag, of Rwanda and Hiroshima should end with gross parodies of violence masquerading as entertainment.... There is no great emotional response and none is intended. Filmic murder is now as devoid of humanity as a Tomahawk missile where the only controlling intelligence is staring at a video monitor. (Mullin, 15)

Yet, I suggest that in comedic violence, particularly its more recent self-conscious manifestations, one can detect a discomfort with the issues voiced by Mullin and to some extent, as Fenichel and Hill suggest in combination, we witness audiences and artists probing, even searching, for limits and moral boundaries that receive group affirmation. Often this probing is searching for a shared (through laughter) denial of the stringency of societal

⁶² Staveacre takes this passage from Fenichel's *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Neurosis*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1972. He does not provide a page number for the quotation.

morality that does not conform to the audience member's point of view. But with this probing there is the reassuring re-establishment of a more lenient but also more solid moral boundary. So while the edges of moral limits are questioned and temporarily infringed upon, the more concrete core (often expressed through untouchable taboos) is solidly reconfirmed. The temporary debasement of figures, icons and boundary markers of morality is a predictable result of these very icons and boundaries. However, the sheer temporariness of the comic action and its result keep such comedy from the realm of the truly morally rebellious and revolutionary and ultimately reinstates the moral status quo.

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