

Specters of Slapstick and Silent Film Comediennes

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INTRODUCTION

SPECTERS OF SLAPSTICK AND SILENT FILM COMEDIENNES

My dissertation explores two fundamental, opposed approaches to laughter that emerged contemporaneously with cinematic technologies and their industrial organization: laughter as a civilizing force versus laughter as a symptom of historical rupture and contingency. I investigate these contradictory approaches to new societal problems of laughter through four major spheres of early film research: 1) attractions and pre-narrative form; 2) industry geopolitics and film nationalism; 3) early auteurism and the visual language of narrative morality; 4) proto-classical cinema explored through the death of the trick film and its conjunctions with suffragette social politics. I thereby analyze how laughter's inner tensions influenced cinema's emergence on many levels, including visual form, industrial geopolitics, storytelling codes, and contemporaneous social and political movements. Focusing on figurations of female metamorphosis, my dissertation traces a trajectory whereby images of bodily transformation become no longer infinitely changeable. I argue that women's bodies in early films become increasingly rigid in conjunction with the textual and the industrial solidification of classical cinema.

Standard film histories claim that the silent film spectator transitions from an active body attracted by exhibitionist images (at vaudeville theaters, fairgrounds, and traveling shows), to an absorbed, passive spectator immersed in a fictive film universe.

However, these bodily metaphors frequently miss the point of what happens to the spectator on the cusp of these two different modes of address. The ambivalent position of the in-between spectator, whom I call “the laughing spectator,” has eluded historical representation. Looking at both early trick comedies, and nineteenth and twentieth century archives of laughter (studies of hysteria and human physiognomy, film comedy fan scrapbooks, and philosophies of comedy), I challenge and displace the tendencies to segregate objects of laughter from representations of laughers. I thereby make a contribution to conceptualizations of laughter by emphasizing their entanglement with film history, textual aesthetics, industrial economics, and cultural politics. I argue that one cannot think film history without accounting for larger theoretical issues of gender and the politics of laughter.

I focus on two fundamental, opposed approaches to laughter that emerged contemporaneously with cinematic technologies and their industrial organization: those are, laughter as a civilizing force versus laughter as a symptom of historical rupture and contingency. Henri Bergson’s notion of laughter as a “social corrective” is probably the best known account from this period of laughter’s civilizing potential. As Bergson puts it, laughter is “a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absent-mindedness in men and in events.” I have found a number of texts and writings from this period that, like Bergson’s, seem influenced by moving picture culture in their efforts to rationalize laughter’s inner contradictions and unruliness. A few other key examples include Charles Baudelaire’s *Essence of Laughter*, James Sully’s *Essay on Laughter*, Agnes Replier’s “A Plea for Humor,” George Vasey’s *Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*, and Boris Sidis’ *Psychology of Laughter*. Many writings such as these view

comedy as an intrinsically social force used to single out and to correct defects in one's fellow man. Above all, laughter demands distance between subject and object: it is an expression of moral and psychological superiority, as Sully puts it, "to laugh away something in [society's] members which it sees to be unfitting" (411).

While philosophers and writers like Bergson, Baudelaire, George Meredith, and Agnes Replier advocated a civilizing laughter—a laughter that disciplines society by correcting inappropriate behavior—Georges Bataille, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Mikhail Bakhtin explored the possibilities of unruly comedy: a comedy that would provoke jubilant laughter and thereby actively participate in transforming social politics. Although unpredictable and ultimately ephemeral, this unruly laughter would have the lasting potential to effect concrete changes in the world. It would be aligned not with instrumentality and reform, but with the rupture, contingency, and the existential finitude characteristic of industrial modernity.

I analyze the dialectical tensions between "corrective laughter" and "unruly laughter"—as these forms of comical violence are exercised on women's bodies—in hundreds of comic and trick films from the mid-1890s through the late 1910s. I identify a trajectory in these films, in which women's bodily metamorphosis becomes more and more difficult to overwrite cinematically. In other words, women's bodies transition from almost limitless flexibility and animation, to a kind of traumatic rigidity or brittleness. For example, in very early films, women's bodies can more or less do anything and it does not matter. Women are made to vanish spontaneously and then to reappear unscathed—or women are ground through sausage machines, transformed into spiders, shot into outer space, or violently set on fire, and then magically reemerge in their

original form as if nothing had ever happened. Whereas male metamorphosis in early cinema often emerges as a site of terror or the uncanny (in films such as *Tit-for-Tat* and *The Disintegrated Convict*), female metamorphosis is pure fun. For example, male escaped convicts slither into snakes or flatten their entire bodies while on the lam, only to be recaptured at the end. In contrast, women's bodily transformation appears to be limitless, and is always ultimately reversible in these films.

However, around the late 19-aughts and early 1910s, women's bodily metamorphosis itself underwent a radical break. Instead of vanishing and magically reappearing through a trick splice, women were more likely to break off their own limbs (*The Kitchen Maid's Dream*), or to miniaturize their bodies (*Princess Nicotine*) in order to adapt to the visual and narrative hierarchies of the screen. In other words, women's bodily shape-shifting was made to conform to the emergent system of narrative film grammar. Female corporeality became more brittle and rigid with the industrial and narrative codification of cinema as a storytelling medium.

Focusing on the relationship between the film aesthetics of metamorphosis and the social politics of transformation, I ask what kind of laughter these early slapstick comedienne films provoked, and how they might provide object-lessons for rethinking our own notions of laughter today.

Although I have organized my four chapters roughly chronologically, their trajectory traces the derealization of women's bodily metamorphosis: from corporeal shape-shifting in early trick films to the total abstraction of the body by the solidification of narrative film syntax. Chapter 1 periodizes various tropes of film metamorphosis (such as instantaneous and gradual mutations, dismemberment, miniaturization, and

disappearance) in order to rethink historiographic methods through theories of comic destruction. My approach, indebted to poststructuralist ideas (Derrida, Malabou, Bataille, Parvulescu), explores various accounts of the slippery lines separating laughter from terror and more troubling registers of comical catastrophe. I integrate ideas of historical rupture and comedic spontaneity in order to account for the many absences and omissions that riddle the terrain of feminist archival film history. In this chapter, I look at hundreds of early film shorts, interpreting them through materials including semiotic theory, industry trade press reviews, patent law case histories, and nineteenth century newspaper reports of women who actually combusted while doing housework (“crinoline conflagrations”).

I extend this textual and methodological analysis to look at comic women's bodies as sites of struggle over national differences during a moment in American film history when the industry was increasingly invested in emphasizing and exploiting these differences. Chapter 2 focuses on the construction of film nationalism through the transitional era (1908-1917). I undertake a comparative studio historiography between the French Pathé and American Vitagraph Companies. I make the claim that Pathé trick films attempt to obscure their cultural specificity through surrealistic aesthetics (women's enhanced metamorphosis), while Vitagraph films use tricks as springboards for visual narration by subjecting their (often female) perpetrators to ridicule and punishment (disciplinary metamorphosis). I relate Vitagraph's and Pathé's national and gendered differences in techniques for comedic film narration to contemporaneous debates about the idea of laughter. Again, these debates unfolded between those who advocated “thoughtful laughter” as a culturally civilizing instrument (Baudelaire, Bergson, Replier,

Mantegazza, Sully), and those who embraced the madness of laughter as a philosophical window onto the subjective and cultural contradictions of industrial modernity (Freud, Benjamin, Bataille, Dent, Goldman). I argue that these disagreements about the social meaning of laughter continue to haunt our tendencies to narrate early film modernity as a teleological progression, when in reality it was an uneven development consisting of multiple arcs, sprawling directions, and repeated mutations.

D.W. Griffith, mythologized as the father of narrative morality in film storytelling, was a major proponent of using the medium to improve and socially uplift its masses of spectators. Chapter 3 looks at D.W. Griffith's transitional narrative filmmaking for the Biograph Company (1908-1913). I focus on the porousness between comedy and melodrama, specifically the melodramatic uses of women's bodily gestures inherited from Griffith's early work in slapstick comedy. This "body language" was instrumental in articulating a system of film images that constructs a moral and psychological position for its spectator. I make the claim that Griffith's narrative film language is orchestrated around opposed images of female corporeality: "the spirituelle" (Mary Pickford and Lilian Gish), and "the voluptuary" (Mabel Normand and Florence Lawrence). These slapstick comediennes provided foils for acting out the visual codes of classical film narration before these codes were yet firmly established. Their performances, which have been made invisible by film histories that exclude them, represent evidence of how laughter's complex contradictions were smoothed over by the economic rationality of the classical film industry.

While Chapter 3 focuses on the gender coding of narrative cinema, Chapter 4 returns to the gender disruption of trick cinema. I analyze the displacement of the trick

film as a popular genre in the 1910s through feminist suffragette political histories. I draw connections between the visual integration of trick techniques into narrative storytelling codes, and the aesthetic mainstreaming of suffragette social politics. Militant suffragette tactics that animated grotesque or unsettling images of women's visibility and embodiment (such as hunger strikes, suicidal automobile accidents, and violent protests) were marginalized from central movements for women's legal rights and political representation. I interpret these political divergences between different proponents of early feminist movements as echoing the philosophical and social contradictions driving the cultural construction of laughter. I do this by focusing on comical motion picture depictions of suffragette politics on the cusp of the classical era; I argue that suffragist politics were domesticated in conjunction with the aesthetic and industrial containment of film tricks by the classical cinema.

I conclude by asking when and why we still enjoy laughing at images of horrific violence inflicted on women's bodies in present day entertainment culture. I compare tropes of self-immolation, dismemberment, decapitation, and disciplinary ridicule in early trick films to uses of CGI (Computer Generated Imaging) metamorphosis in contemporary media—I focus on the television series, *American Horror Story*. I argue that we are still fascinated and attracted by slapstick comediennes from the early 19-aughts because they animate paradoxical notions of the material finitude and the limitless malleability of the image. Women's bodies in early cinema appear to be able to do anything: to inhabit any imaginable change in form. Yet, the digital archiving economies that resurrect and re-circulate these images of mangled female corporeality emphasize not

the limitless manipulability of these images, but the material instability of the nitrate film stock that records and captures them.

Whereas women's CGI metamorphosis in contemporary media represses the physical existence of women's bodies, women's archival metamorphosis in early cinema hits us over the head with issues of finitude, risk, and the potential for physical catastrophe. We thereby urgently need to rethink the status of women's aesthetic, socio-political, and archival shape shifting in order to understand the contemporary media politics of referentiality: the relationship between recorded images and the lived realities of our everyday existence. In other words, we are still haunted by the specters of silent film comediennes—all the more so when we laugh uncontrollably at their intermittent returns and disappearances.

CHAPTER 1

DESTRUCTIVE METAMORPHOSIS: THE COMEDY OF FEMALE CATASTROPHE AND FEMINIST FILM HISTORIOGRAPHY

Introduction

Images of women spontaneously combusting while doing housework constituted a popular trope in early film comedy, though like the flammable subjects of these films, few traces of it have survived into the present. *Mary Jane's Mishap* (G.A. Smith, UK, 1903), an especially iconic example that is still extant today, features a British maid who accidentally blows herself to smithereens and erupts out of the chimney while attempting to light a hearth fire with paraffin [see fig. 1]. Comic and trick films conjure an endless variety of permutations on this volatile scenario. In *A Shocking Incident* (Biograph, US, 1903), an Irish domestic gets electrocuted by a battery-wired turkey while she is preparing dinner. A flirtatious Irish maid falls victim to an exploding bowl of flour when her employers' son plays with fireworks in *Nora's 4th of July* (Biograph, US, 1901).

Women's bodily metamorphoses, their abilities to assume different shapes and textures in conjunction with ongoing formal changes to the motion picture medium, provide lenses through which to re-engage the uneven and messy development of film history. Bringing together feminist historiographic methods with semiotic discourses of "destructive plasticity," I trace a dialectic between "elasticity" (reversibility) and "plasticity" (irreversible change). Techniques in film editing increasingly derealized the

irreversible violence exercised on slapstick comedienne bodies: from vanishing ladies who always reemerge unscathed, to self-immolating housemaids who undergo permanent bodily traumas. Most film studies scholarship about comedy emphasizes the status of objects in comic constructions (such as a man slipping on a banana peel). However, metamorphic comediennes internalize the instabilities of the outside world through their constant recourse to bodily transformation. Women's metamorphic bodies mediate and ambiguate these usual oppositions between subject and object. Male bodies do this too, but they do so in different aesthetic and social contexts: whereas male metamorphosis is obsessed with excretion—and trans-metamorphosis by displacement or substitution—female metamorphosis is haunted by the thematic of reincorporation. Example of female metamorphosis such as *Mary Jane's Mishap*, *Madame's Cravings* (Alice Guy-Blaché, France, 1906), and *A Sticky Woman* (Alice Guy-Blaché, France, 1906) in fact change the way we think about comedy.

Fundamentally, I define comedy as the attempt to preserve pleasure and mystification against the rupture and historical finitude characteristic of industrial modernity. Early film comediennes internalize the instabilities of the outside world, and the rampant contingencies of modern life, through their gleeful bodily mutability. They offset a teeming world of slippery and lost objects by partially becoming, embodying, and metamorphosing into these impossible objects of desire. Drawing on works by Georges Bataille, Catherine Malabou, and Anca Parvulescu, I propose a theory of film comedy premised on the subjective instabilities of laughter, above its objective instruments, through readings of these combusting, contagious, and consuming comedienne film archives.

While female bodies exploded comically on-screen, women's proper places in the domestic sphere encountered seismic ruptures. Momentous societal changes wrought by industrialization and the gendered reorganization of the labor force, the rise of commercial consumerism that catapulted women into the public sphere, and suffragist political activism all dovetailed with the technological devices enlisted to manipulate female corporeality in motion pictures. Quite literally, slapstick comedienne housemaids exploded onto the public sphere (from out of the chimney) in early film comedies. Given the fluidity of national borders characterizing early film's distribution market, focusing on America's social politics and exhibition climate would not represent a parochial example of national film culture. Rather, this national focus reveals the extent of America's domestic traversal by international film markets through the early 1900s—though more work needs to be done on social and industrial contexts of female metamorphosis in other countries.

Women's visual metamorphoses on-screen often intersected with anxieties about the societal changes were likely provoked and certainly represented by the new medium of cinema. In *Laughing Gas* (Edison, 1907), a slightly later more complex variation on the exploding housemaid genre, an African-American woman given nitrous oxide by her white dentist liquidates social barriers by causing everyone around her to succumb to uproarious fits of hysteria. *Madame's Cravings* (Alice Guy, 1906) suggests comparisons between women's violent metamorphoses in trick films, and women going into labor, something not often represented in this cinema. A young pregnant woman wanders in public contexts, disrupting bystanders' leisure time by attempting to consume every comestible that enters her field of vision. (The actual event of giving birth is depicted at

the end of the film with a jump cut.) From immigrant Irish housemaids, to migrant African-American women, to pregnant female consumers, comical visions of women undergoing dually physical and social transformations haunted the silent screen.

Yet, why were self-immolation and other forms of barbarous violence—which were routinely exercised on women’s bodies in early cinema—incitements to laughter rather than terror? This chapter historicizes the obsession with comical representations of women who spontaneously combust while doing housework. Connecting these to nineteenth century incidents of “crinoline conflagrations,” I argue that early comedic catastrophe films traffic in actual histories of female immolation in order to laugh off the embodied dangers of modern industrial living. Catastrophe, from the Greek *katastrophe* meaning “overturning” or “sudden turn,” always has the potential to become comical; like catastrophe, comedy hinges on surprise, spontaneity, and punctual shock. More than just smoke screens for anxieties about women’s bodily infiltration of the public sphere, early comedienne catastrophe films become funnier the more they encroach on reenacting the very disasters that they purport to defer. In other words, laughter and terror provide co-conspirators for spectators to embrace the underlying instabilities of historical change—and women’s mangled, dismembered, and incinerated bodies were among the principle protagonists in this endless cycle of looming catastrophe and uproarious release.

Crinoline Conflagrations and the Everyday Perils of Female Combustion

The comedy of female catastrophe finds its source materials in the everyday dangers of female embodiment—especially as they concern the administration of gender, race, and class differences by a capitalist division of labor. According to nineteenth and

twentieth century news discourse, women's shifting social roles would erupt in all-out catastrophe: social change tended to get figured in terms of comic-horrific calamities, rather than the slower, subtler fluctuations that permeated everyday living. Actual incidents of women accidentally combusting while doing housework were common subjects of journalistic interest throughout the nineteenth-century. Women's bulky, starched dresses frequently caught fire while women were attempting to heat their homes or cook meals for their family. Female combustion became a trope providing an avenue of legibility for processing the everyday impacts of industrialization. A March 16, 1858 article in *The New York Times*, titled "The Perils of Crinoline," reflects on the impulse to transform these modern calamities into gendered objects of comic ridicule:

Almost every fact in human life, we are told, has its serious and its comic sides, and each deserves attention. Of the availabilities of crinoline, considered comically, perhaps enough has now been made... But the crinoline question has graver aspects, which are forced upon us afresh by accounts today of the frightful death in Boston, on Friday night last, of a young lady... who was standing near the chimney-piece when her garments suddenly took fire, and before the requisite pressure could be brought to bear upon them, were entirely consumed, inflicting injuries so many and so severe that she survived but a few hours.

As in the temporality of the comic, which is often premised on spontaneous eruption and ephemeral duration, women caught flame in a burst and often succumbed before they could be extinguished: she "suddenly took fire...[and] survived but a few hours." If crinoline victims perished all of a sudden, the derisive obituary discourses that these women's accidents spawned were tenacious and enduring.

The simultaneity of comic and mournful reactions provoked by these astonishing accidents might be referred to broader philosophies of the comic. Pushing against Henri Bergson's reductive account of laughter as an instrument of derisive ridicule, Georges Bataille views laughter as "part of a range of possible reactions" to a traumatic

occurrence: “I have said that the problem of laughter should not be isolated, that it must on the contrary, be linked to the problem of tears, to the problem of sacrifice, and so forth” (92). For Henri Bergson, who defines laughter as a social corrective,ⁱ comic sacrifice is always inflicted upon a victim or scapegoat. This corrective laughter wards off the alienation of commodity capitalism: “The comic is that side of a person which reveals his likeness to a thing...which, through its peculiar inelasticity, conveys the impression of pure mechanism, of automatism, of movement without life.” In contrast, Bataille contemplates the turning inward of the comic: when laughter’s orientation towards an object gets internalized by the self.ⁱⁱ Whereas Bergson invokes laughter as “a slight revolt on the surface of social life,” Bataille sacralizes laughter by locating it as the very essence of the unknown. “That which is laughable may simply be *the unknowable*. In other words, the unknown nature of the laughable would not be accidental, but essential...*The unknown makes us laugh*” (“Un-Knowing: Laughter and Tears,” 90). Given Bergson’s emphases on mechanization and human automatism, his definition of the comic has received quite a lot of play in theories of film comedy.ⁱⁱⁱ However, I suggest that we reframe our analysis of these mechanized and accident-prone bodies in comic trick films in order to account for the deeper subjective ambivalences that they provoke. Destructive film antics at once produce pleasure through their disavowal of real violence, and hold out a deeper promise or potential for reinvigorating our desensitization to modern life.

As *The New York Times* article exemplifies, female victims of crinoline conflagrations were repeatedly enlisted to stabilize the proximity between comedy and catastrophe, both of which were starting to feel all too mundane. The article reports that

an average of three deaths per week occurred from “crinolines in conflagration,” which, *The New York Times* opines, “ought to startle the most thoughtless of the privileged sex; and to make them, at least, extraordinarily careful in their movements and behavior, if it fails (which of course it will) to deter them from adopting a fashion so fraught with peril.” The reporter’s wry, mocking tone wavers between a comforting register of ridicule, and a sober plea for cultural reform. The comedy of crinoline catastrophe haunted 19th Century journalistic discourse, inspiring derisive news articles including “The Crinoline Terror,”^{iv} “The Spectre of Crinoline: Thrilling News for People Who Must Live in Crowds,”^v and “From Fig Leaf to Crinoline.”^{vi} In these exposés, the comic and the horrific thereby traffic in one another, diffusing atrocity through recourse to mockery, while appealing to humor’s inherent ambiguities in order to conjure the traumatic violence of people actually combusting.

Female conflagration was in fact an everyday household danger throughout the entire nineteenth century. To stay warm during winter, it was common for women to wear upwards of 37 pounds of clothing, 19 of which hung from the corseted waist. The physical necessity of donning such bulky garb made women especially vulnerable to catching flame when too close to the fireplace, which was the primary means for heating many homes.^{vii} A woman’s flammability was such a commonplace incident that Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe give advice for how to manage it in a section called “Miscellaneous Directions” in their widely read domestic manual, *The American Women’s Home: Principles of Domestic Science*. Alongside myriad tidbits about cleaning combs, fixing broken earthenware, and waterproofing gardening shoes: “If your dress catches fire, do not run, but lie down and roll until you can reach something in

which to wrap yourself tight” (352). They continue, “Keep young children in woollen dresses in winter...to save from risk of being burnt.” While Mary Jane’s reckless overuse of the paraffin causes her to ignite, it is very possible that Mary Jane’s grandmother or mother could have immolated herself by grazing the hem of her dress against a hearth fire—or from a spark jumping out of the fire—even during moments of sober vigilance. Again, the sheer bulk of the garb, as well as certain pernicious fashion trends, made it very difficult to stop, drop, and roll.

Many household servants lost their lives to the unwieldy flammability of nineteenth century women’s fashion. In a fatal accident in 1863, when a young servant Margaret Davey, age 14, caught fire in her employers’ home, a jury ruled: “Accidental death by fire, caused through crinoline.”^{viii} These accidents did not just afflict working class women: crinoline petticoats were the great equalizers. In 1857, the Paris correspondent of *The New York Times* reported a non-fatal accident in which two “elegantly-dressed” women spontaneously caught fire in the street after leaving a café. It was believed that a lighted cigar had rolled under one lady’s dress, “but the balloon-like form of her skirts and the confined air” delayed conflagration until she got up and started to walk outside. (July 27, 1857). Her friend attempted to stanch the flame and also caught fire. Luckily, this incident occurred in public, and passers-by rushed over to help them—unlike the working-class domestics ignited at their employers’ hearthside, neither woman here was seriously harmed.

The nexus among comic affects, changing social politics, and female combustion found a medium in early cinema. Frequently, the comedy of female catastrophe provided a figural space for representing social ambivalences about immigrant labor. The

association between sexual promiscuity and physical eruption in these early films corroborated deeper social fears about the effects of a “melting pot” workforce on American culture. Consider the Irish component of this humor. Following the exodus from Ireland in the wake of the Great Famine, the United States accepted over five million Irish emigrants between 1845 and 1921. According to Peter Flynn, between 1895 and 1909, a total of 109 films representing the Irish in America were produced by the domestic industry. “Virtually all of these films are comedies...[and] 28 feature the Irish maid, making Bridget far and away the most popular representative of the Irish in the earliest years of the American cinema...Bridget is a broad caricature, a wild gesticulating clown, leaving chaos and destruction in her wake” (10). From their temptations to philandering husbands to their proclivities for spreading deadly disease (invoking actual “Typhoid Mary” epidemics)^{ix}, these Bridget caricatures marked efforts to defuse the ideological contradictions between American dreams of labor opportunity and realities of ethnic hostility.

The trope of female combustion and its allusion to real-life incidents bear visible traces of the ethic and labor tensions of their moment. For example, Bridget’s electrocution by a battery-wired turkey in *A Shocking Incident* evokes prejudicial notions of foreign uncleanness. According to Flynn, the Bridget trope harkens back to the unhygienic conditions in preindustrial American homes, which fell prey to “constant invasion[s] of ‘insects, barnyard animals, dust, dirt, and manure’ resulting in a profound domestic disorder and conditions ripe for the spreading of disease” (4). Ironically, in this film, electricity provides an impetus for the food itself to become contagious. Even though the turkey has been wired by a young prankster playing a joke on Bridget, this

electric animal's re-animation is rhetorically motivated by the maid's own ethnic and sexual difference. Bridget's haphazard body paradoxically sparks images of pre-industrial domestic disorder and uncleanness, resurrecting these images as placeholders for ethnic prejudices.

Destructive Plasticity and Feminist Film Historiography

Invoking not-so-distant histories of female immolation, filmmakers experimented with new ways to fictionalize the perils of women blowing up. The visualization of female combustion oscillated wildly in conjunction with cinema's formal and narrative emergence as a medium. Metamorphosis of women's bodies held an intimate relationship with the practice of cinematic technology when the period's consciousness of this technology was still very new. Starting from early jump-cut shorts about exploding women like *How Bridget Made the Fire* (Biograph, 1900), films played with the narrative potential of what women's bodies might look like in the wake of their destruction. A good example is *Mary Jane's Mishap* itself. The film narrativizes the aftermath of the maid's physical eruption; it unfolds through the interarticulation between Mary Jane's bodily metamorphosis and cinematic tactics in post-production cutting and editing.

Mary Jane explodes out of the chimney through a vaporous jump cut: she bursts into a puff of smoke and then rains down over the village skyline in dismembered bodily pieces. Although her dismemberment is temporary, her violent metamorphosis is irreversible. At the end of the film, Mary Jane returns as a specter at her own gravestone, reassembled but permanently altered into an ectoplasmic version of her former self. She terrifies bystanders in the cemetery and does a gleeful, taunting little dance in front of her

own epitaph, which reads, “Here lies Mary Jane, who lighted the fire with Paraffin: Rest in Pieces.” Just before departing again, Mary Jane conjures an ectoplasmic icon of her deadly paraffin bottle, reincorporating this destructive object into the negative form of her own spectrality. She holds the bottle over her head, and then lowers it over her abdomen, eventually sinking with it and vanishing back into the earth.

Both a feat of film editing, and a fantasy of reincorporation, *Mary Jane’s Mishap* positions its spectator somewhere between the subject and the object of laughter. As an embodied, laughing spectator, *Mary Jane’s* viewer inhabits that nebulous space between the speaking subject of the film text, and the living body of the film viewer. We do not simply laugh and point at Mary Jane’s antics, thereby learning self-discipline by means of negation and distance from her example (as in Bergson’s theory of laughter). Rather, our own relationship to the world of the screen shifts and slips along comically with Mary Jane’s various transfigurations: from the disheveled body, to the dismembered body, to the ectoplasmic spirit. Mary Jane draws us nearer and nearer to the phantom world of trick cinema when she literally incorporates her own comic prop, the paraffin bottle, and absorbs it into her trick corporeality.

Mary Jane’s liquidity between subjective-person and objective-thing inflects this short trick film’s narrative syntax. Her spectral return at the end of the film motivates a new innovation in the film’s visual effects. It transitions from a close-up of Mary Jane’s tombstone to a full view of her surroundings with a vertical wipe—an innovative and “very unique” use this device according to Barry Salt. The visual resemblance between the vertical wipe and Mary Jane’s ectoplasmic ascent is striking. More than just an aesthetic parallel, the rhetoric of woman’s destructive metamorphosis provides an

impetus for filmmaking strategies to experiment with their own forms of self-rupture: the very techniques in visual fragmentation intrinsic to the articulation of film narrative. Metamorphic corporeality thereby co-emerges aesthetically with the articulation of narrative film grammar.

Rather than reading women's figural tropes as gauges of the medium's technological sophistication at any given moment, it is important to emphasize the uneven development of these filmmaking devices. The explanation for how film aesthetics move from point A to point B—from single-shot exhibitionism to integrated multi-reel narration, or from debased vaudeville novelties to staples of bourgeois culture—represents a vital terrain of debate in contemporary film studies. By re-reading film history through the archives of female combustion, we can hone our historiographic methods for understanding of how film industry standards change over time. It is a truism that from the motion picture's invention around 1894 to the solidification of film classicism around 1917, momentous upheavals in both film signification and industry economics were occurring routinely. Rather than corroborate the idea of early film history as a linear trajectory—an approach subject to criticism for at least three decades—we might sharpen our sense of pre-classical cinema's hybridity through the messy aesthetics of woman's trick metamorphosis. These aesthetics themselves shifted in conjunction with the changing conditions of film history.

As Jennifer Bean argues, our present day understanding of early film historiography is foremost shaped by its ellipses and blind spots. "Briefly, then, the choice to bracket slightly more than three decades of cinema with the term 'early' has little to do with intimating resemblance and similitude and everything to do with

dissonance and difference as, precisely, the early period's unifying trademark" (6). Of course, for Bean, emphasizing the thematic of *difference* reinforces the feminist politics of unearthing lost or forgotten histories about women's extended (and since unprecedented) participation in every capacity of the early film industry.^x

Methodologically, these gendered histories of early film rupture, or as Bean puts it "the glorious ruins of our disciplinary terrain" (15), evoke discourses of destructive plasticity in poststructuralist theory. Catherine Malabou defines the term in *Ontology of the Accident*: "Plasticity is the form of alterity when no transcendence, flight or escape is left. The only other that exists in this circumstance is being other to the self" (11). Drawing on Freud's distinction in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* between plasticity and elasticity, Malabou emphasizes the traumatic irreversibility bound up in certain forms of destruction. "Plasticity and elasticity are two forces which are irreducible to one another. What is the most significant difference between them? A plastic material, once shaped, cannot go back to its previous state. An elastic material on the contrary is able to return to its initial form after it underwent a deformation" (44). Plasticity for Freud stems from the indestructability of our earliest psychic formations, which he contrasts with the reversibility of conscious sense-impressions received after the ego-formations of the psyche have already been developed.^{xi} What makes the archetypal plasticity of the psyche so destructive is precisely its override: its ability to undo the complex formations of the ego.

Malabou meditates on the relationship between plasticity as destruction and as deconstruction in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*. "To my mind...[a] major advantage of the concept of plasticity...derives from the fact that this concept can signify both the

achievement of presence and its deflagration, its emergence and its explosion” (8).

Malabou thereby associates with the destructive consequences of irreversible transformation with the violence inherent in deconstructive theories of epistemological breakthrough. This is precisely poststructuralism’s claim about the decentering of the subject: that the pursuit of a radical truth paradoxically involves the destruction of all our subjective certainties and assurances. Derrida playfully articulates this paradox in his seminal 1965 paper “Structure, Sign, and Play,” declaring that “the center also closes off the play that it opens up and makes possible... The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, so the center does not belong to the totality... The center is not the center” (279). Foregrounding this dual elasticity between metamorphic destruction and theoretical deconstruction would be especially fruitful both for the field of feminist early film historiography, and for the philosophical problem of comedy. Bataille once joked that as a young man he believed that if he could solve the problem of laughter, he would know everything: “It seemed evident to me that solving the problem of laughter and solving the philosophical problem were the same thing” (“Un-Knowing,” 94). By historicizing this type of belief in laughter’s mystical plenitude of insight, we can gain a more precise understanding of how comedy operates in relation to philosophical rupture.

Early film metamorphoses both envision and defer new perceptions of women’s potential bodily and social transformations. Elasticity and plasticity point to the dialectic between permanence and reversibility shaping female corporeality in these comic and trick films. Women’s bodies in these films always re-emerge, frequently unharmed but rarely unchanged by their comical accidents. For example, if we could not to witness the vanishing lady’s return at the end of the film, or Méliès’ dancing lady in *Baron*

Munchhausen's Dream metamorphose back from a spider into a human form (see fig. 2), we might be left with a disturbing question about what *really* happened to these women during the interim. We might be forced to confront ourselves through the plasticity of a grotesque transformation, at first playful and amusing until rendered permanent. As Karen Beckman puts it in *Vanishing Women*, “the magician—perhaps even in cahoots with the smiling lady—distracts our attention away from the more insidious ideological work that takes places before our eyes, leaving us feeling—wrongly—content and relieved at the apparent absence of violence about which we were momentarily so concerned” (8). While this violence is made more *visible* in films like *Mary Jane*—in which the maid explodes out of the chimney—her subsequent bodily metamorphosis from opaque flesh to a translucent specter derealizes the calamity that it simultaneously exposes.

What if we thought about these comical images of violence as provocations for rewriting film history? Early film comedies of female catastrophe provoke the spectator to laugh rather than quake at the grotesque violence exercised on women’s bodies: from accidental self-immolation, to limb dismemberment and decapitation, to punitive laceration. Mary Ann Doane defines catastrophe as “discontinuity within an otherwise continuous system” (228) in the context of television news discourse. As Doane argues, catastrophe coverage asserts a unique instance of rupture and contingency against the ideologies of continuity and liveness intrinsic to televisual flow: television thereby authenticates its own signifying problematic through recourse to catastrophe, natural disaster, and the interruption of its scheduled programming. Unlike late capitalist television, early trick films and comedies beat their spectator over the head with their

own indexicality and aesthetics of contingency. What would it mean, then, to identify the discontinuity within a system already premised on foregrounding—rather than concealing—its own rupture and fragmentation? As Beckman suggests, this latent image of catastrophe would emerge through the discarded shots in-between the trick splice.

The female specters of comedic catastrophe survive into the present day to haunt our recurring interventions in the field of archival film historiography. By synthesizing the medium's constant ruptures as paradoxical forms of stability, we threaten to override the significance of their alternative possibilities. To return to the Women Film Pioneers Project, how does the plasticity of female bodies in early trick genres corroborate the gaping methodological and archival oversights that led to women's erasures from visibility in film history for so many decades? Both preoccupied with the necessary but impossible condition of rewriting history over images of erasure, feminist film historiography and deconstructive plasticity stand to gain a great deal from their intermediation. By grappling with the simultaneity of destructive change and reassuring reversibility intrinsic to combusting comedienne films, we might gain footholds (or as Beckman puts it "eyeholds") into the operative forms of disorder, accident, reversal, and contingency driving early film history.

Periodizing Women's Metamorphosis

Although a device as slippery as metamorphosis is difficult to categorize, it is possible to pinpoint eight discrete figurations of metamorphosis, each of which enjoyed varying degrees of popularity at different moment from the 1890s through the 1910s. The following periodizations represent generalizations of filmmaking trends; there are of

course exceptions to and overlaps among these different categories. These include: **1) Combustion (1900-1903):** women exploding (*Mary Jane's Mishap*, *Nora's 4th of July*, *How Bridget Made the Fire*); **2) Micrographia (1901-1903; 1907-1910):** women figured in miniature (*Princess Nicotine*, *The Red Spectre*, *The Wonderful Mirror*); **3) Quick-change Metamorphosis (1896-1906):** like the vanishing lady trick, this designates a total change in appearance or visibility usually through a jump cut (*Tit-for-Tat*, *Vanishing Lady*, *Madame's Cravings*); **4) Gradual Metamorphosis (1903-1910s):** like Mary Jane's ectoplasmic specter rising from the ground, a gradual bodily transformation through dissolves, superimpositions, pans, wipes, etc. (*The Cigar Box*- see fig. 3, *Daisy Doodad's Dial*, *The Elusive Miss Pinkhurst*^{xii}); **5) Tableau-Vivant (1899-1907):** women posing as statues or paintings and then spontaneously rousing to life (*Martyred Presidents*, *Kiss Me*, *The Poster Girls and the Hypnotist*); **6) Dismemberment (1907-1910):** the live-action animation of women's body parts (*The Kitchen Maid's Dream*, *The Dancing Legs*, *An Odd Pair of Limbs*); **7) Undercranking (1910s-):** the absurd speeding up of bodily movements (*Matrimony's Speed Limit*, *Lea and the Ball of Wool*, *Rosalie and Her Phonograph*); and **8) Slapstick Corporeality (1895-1910s):** the reverse image of a metamorphosis, here the body refuses to undergo change, even if this means defying every conceivable law of physics (*Aunt Sallie's Wonderful Bustle*, *Eva Is Tired of Life*, *The Acrobatic Maid*).

It is important to note that not a single one of these techniques was used exclusively for representing women. *Mary Jane's Mishap* is a British remake of an American Bridget film in which Bridget is played by a transgender, *The Finish of Bridget McKeen*. (I read Bridget's sexual reversal as a substitution for her bodily metamorphosis,

because the film ends with her combustion.) Men's bodies were routinely undercranked (*Onésime, Clockmaker*) and dismembered (*The Thieving Hand*) in any number of Vitagraph, Pathé, or Gaumont trick films. I would say that micrographia and tableau-vivant posing especially, and both quick-change and gradual metamorphoses to lesser extents, privilege female subjects. Moreover, the social and industrial contexts of these different figurations of metamorphosis varied dramatically. There is a world of difference between Mary Jane's specter dancing at her own gravestone in 1903 Britain, and a chorus girl dissolving into a cigar in a 1907 French trick film (*The Cigar Box*).

More pointedly, the temporality of female metamorphosis from the earliest years of the medium to what film historians call the "transitional era"^{xiii} shifts decisively from *too soon* to *not fast enough*: from comic instantaneity to a dilation of that instantaneity. The important scholarship on early cinema now tends to designate three distinct period paradigms for the silent era: "early" (1895-1907), "transitional" (1908-1917), and "classical" (1918-1927). Bean's decision to group three decades of women's film history under the term "early" helps to fix the specifically feminist stakes in temporal metaphors and categories of film periodization. For Bean, Negra, Gaines, Hastie, and others, the notion of "earliness" seems to corroborate a sense of social latency. The argument goes that women such as Alice Guy-Blaché and Lois Weber^{xiv} participated in motion picture production—to an extent that women still have not rivaled to this day—because the medium was not yet "itself:" to invoke the Lumières, cinema was an "invention without any future." As Jane Gaines puts it, "No one knew that motion pictures would become big business. This was not yet a significant industry and with so little at stake (so little power, so little capital), much more could be entrusted to women" (105).

While pre-classical film's "earliness" connotes a turn away from the teleological nomenclature of "primitivism" for scholars like Tom Gunning and André Gaudreault, who instead emphasize the significance of its "attractions" or "kine-attractography," the "early" in early cinema has been the locus of its historiographic politics for feminist scholars. Foregrounding the "earliness" that persists through "transitional" and "classical" paradigms reveals the catastrophic historicity of women's bodily comedy: the looming disaster that accumulates every time we turn a blind eye (both aesthetically and meta-historically) to the politics of female metamorphosis. "Earliness," suggesting both rupture and latency, crystallizes the gendered contradictions of "working on lacunae" (Bean, 13).

It is striking how thoroughly women's trick corporeality in the early 1900s hinges on spontaneous jump cuts, startling bodily reanimation (from a still pose), and spectacular explosions. In contrast, the look of metamorphosis by the early 1910s tends more towards the complex manipulation of temporality either through undercranking, or through composite images and gradual dissolves. I read both acceleration and deceleration as attempts to dilate the element of spontaneity as the primary impetus for laughter. From early Bridget films in which the woman's explosion correlates with the end of the film itself (*How Bridget Made the Fire*, *The Finish of Bridget McKeen*), to the narrative integration of women's bodily metamorphosis in the wake of the accident (Mary Jane's return as a specter), the temporality of the comic itself undergoes a metamorphosis. Whereas early film catastrophes hinge upon the temporality of the *too soon*, historically, we can say that this dynamic shifts with efforts to make film metamorphoses conform to the dictates of classical, industrial film storytelling: invisible

narration, moral uplift, cross-class legitimacy, efficient productivity, multi-reel duration, and commodity standardization.

Looking at the changing logic of cinematographic metamorphosis, it is evident that women's physical plasticity becomes more brittle and traumatic in conjunction with industrial transformations of cinematic technologies. Women's bodies on-screen literally bend over backwards and break apart in the process of accommodating the industry's increasing emphasis on multi-reel duration, moral censorship, commodity standardization, and narrative transparency. For example, in *The Kitchen Maid's Dream* (Vitagraph, 1907), in lieu of combusting, an overworked and overtired housemaid's limbs detach from her body and perform her chores for her while the rest of her body relaxes. Like Mary Jane and Bridget McKeen, the kitchen maid destructively transforms her own body in order to complete her household labor. From a synopsis in the *NY Clipper*: "In mysterious manner, her hands become detached—Remove rug from floor and sweep room—Dishes wash themselves—Knives and forks do likewise, and unaided, climb into knifebox."

While most female limb dismemberment antics such as in *The Dancing Legs* (Vitagraph, 1908) and *An Odd Pair of Limbs* (Vitagraph, 1908) focus on the nether regions, *Kitchen Maid's Dream* uniquely zeroes in on the hands. The kitchen maid sells her own body for parts in order to resolve the impossible contradictions between her labor expectations and her embodied existence. Meanwhile, the image of inanimate objects coming to life corroborates our understanding of the liveliness that's already been sapped from the kitchen maid's alienated spirit. Perhaps this is why the socially transformative potentials of metamorphosis so often erupt in scenarios of destruction: in

order for static objects to come to life, life must be removed from what we already believe to be animate.

Performing the potential terror of an instantaneous cut between exhibitionism and planned production, an economic transition simultaneously underway in the film industry, the kitchen maid becomes inconsolable upon awaking when she realizes that her callous employers remain completely oblivious to her dream. In lieu of breaking off her hands, the kitchen maid shatters all of the dishes and “assumes a commanding attitude awaiting further developments.” This woman experiences a political revelation upon rediscovering the physical gap between her own body and the objects that employ it. While motion pictures’ commodity formats were becoming more standardized and less flexible for re-cutting by exhibitors, the alienated kitchen maid must learn that in reality her hands cannot re-attach post-dismemberment. In the end, the dishes break where the body will not.

Mediating the disjuncture between the dream scenario and realist frame scenario, the maid’s dismemberment heightens the importance of cutting in post-production editing. That is, in addition to increasing her labor productivity, the brittleness of the maid’s limbs provides a physical rationale for setting up the relations to the next shot. Her metamorphosis is intimately connected with the film’s integration of continuity editing techniques. Cinematographically, *Kitchen Maid’s* stop-motion filmmaking overlays the momentous rupture of her embodied position (her spontaneous dismemberment) with incremental, frame-by-frame adjustments to the locations of her various parts. The kitchen maid’s dismemberment indexes the film’s own hybridity between live-action recording and stop-motion animation. Belying any notion of early

cinema's medium ontology, the film's disjunctive camera and editing techniques parallel the maid's physical disassembly. They also necessitate the film's intermedial impurity, which encompasses stop-motion animation, proflmic realism, and vaudeville sketch comedy. Both the maid's and the film's figural and cinematic dismemberment differ acutely from the exploding comedienne tropes popular just a few years earlier.

In his later theorizing, Eisenstein revised his early notion of "attractions" in conjunction with his new interest in something he called the plasmatic. Eisenstein's early notion of attractions, which calls for the spectator's aggressive subjection to "a sensual or psychological impact," has been an animating metaphor for describing early cinema's mode of address. Now attractions were not exemplified by the circus act, but by fire, in order to designate the limitless transformative play among different forms and figures as they unfold over time. When something significant can happen anywhere on the screen, and when any figure can potentially give way to any other figure—a woman can leap out of a painting or transform into a racialized caricature of an ape-man—detonation provides closure to the problem of infinite metamorphosis. However, as the business incentive to make longer films that could be exhibited interchangeably by theaters developed, the thematic of combustion or explosion no longer represented a hard and fast limit to the medium's play of physical and temporal reversals. Rather, metamorphosis itself was transformed into a transitional technique in film editing for explaining the disjunctive relations between shots. The impetus to depict the diegesis in the wake of its combustion provided a self-reflexive horizon^{xv} for working through the film medium's own articulation and syntax.

Transitional Metamorphosis Between Elasticity and Plasticity

Dual invocations of elasticity and plasticity drove the rhetoric of woman's metamorphosis in transitional filmmaking. They provided both frequent returns to and irreversible departures from the comic signifiers of earliness: instantaneity and ephemerality, rather than diluted temporality and editing. This ambivalence between women's elasticity and plasticity reflected broader uncertainties about the trajectory of filmmaking during the transitional period. In D.W. Griffith's early Biograph short, *Deceived Slumming Party* (1908), a rural couple visiting Chinatown, Esra and Matilda get startled by escaped rats while they are inspecting a sausage machine. "Matilda is much interested in the operation when a Chink brings in a lot of rats which escape causing her to leap upon a table, and losing her balance falls into the machine and is soon transformed into a sausage. But by reversing the machine she is recovered, none the worse for her experience."^{xvi} Here, Matilda's physical metamorphosis is figured as totally impermanent and elastic. An early iteration of Griffith's melodramatic obsession with female rescue, specifically with saving white women from ethnic contamination, Matilda's trick mechanization anticipates the narration of desire and suspense.

In contrast, in a rare trick short made early in the career of another prolific melodrama director, *From Death to Life* (Lois Weber, 1913), a woman is turned into a statue. The film depicts a Roman scientist who invents a formula for turning living things to stone, thereby simultaneously preserving and annihilating all organic matter that comes into contact with it. Fortunately, the scientist discovers a second process whereby this fatal mummification can be made reversible. Representing fantasies intrinsic both to comedy and to film spectatorship, that living bodies can be dually preserved and re-

animated, *From Death to Life* reportedly provoked intense, borderline hysterical responses from some female viewers.

A 1914 issue of *Universal Weekly* touts the headline: “Woman Deeply Affected By ‘U’ Drama Faints.” A report from a theater proprietor in Crosby, Minnesota elaborates “a queer thing [that] happened tonight while I was running *From Death-Life*. It so affected a lady in the audience that she fainted twice before she could be taken home. Two doctors worked on her several hours before she came fully out of it. Hard lines, but good advertising for me.”^{xvii} Although trick effects make *Death to Life*’s violence ultimately reversible, the panacea does not emerge from the deployment of cinematic technologies: the film dramatizes the invention of a prop object, an elixir, to make the woman turn back from stone into flesh. Therefore, unlike the sausage-ladies in *Deceived Slumming Party*, the woman’s body in *FDL* is more plastic than elastic. If there were no threat of permanent transformation, then finding an antidote to her metamorphosis would not be a matter of dramatic suspense.

Despite its extensive uses of comic genre devices, including trick tableau-vivant posing and the total reversibility of physical injury, *From Death to Life* evokes a more troubling register of the comic—one that returns us to Bataille’s meditation on the slippage between laughter and catastrophe. Bataille’s interest in laughter, specifically its traumatic potential to shatter our impressions of the known world, opens onto the temporality of philosophical critique. Just as jokes lose their punch once explained, philosophical critique compromises its depth and traction once knowledge becomes stabilized categorically (apriori and a posteriori). Bataille contemplates this dialectic between laughter and critique through the discourse of comic sovereignty, whereby “the

laughing philosopher” gains insight into his/her own passionate outbursts “through a process of rapid self-division” (Bataille invokes Baudelaire).^{xviii} As Anca Parvulescu has put it, “The experience of laughter teaches Bataille an important lesson: sovereign is he who knows *when* to lose his head” (85).

Parvulescu superimposes an intriguing web of feminist connotations over the (typically male) laughing philosopher’s metaphorical decapitation during this rapid process of self-division —“he knows *when* to lose his head”— by associating it with the Medusa-Perseus myth. Rereading this Greek myth through Hélène Cixous’ foundational essays “Laugh of the Medusa” and “Castration or Decapitation?,” Parvulescu recuperates Medusa’s laughter by suggesting that we read it differently. By dissecting the impossible consecutive temporality through which Perseus rouses Medusa, fashions his shield into a mirror to petrify her by her own reflection, and decapitates her with his sword, Parvulescu finds a gap between Medusa’s awaking to life and her turning to stone.

Performing this paradoxical temporality through her deconstruction of the myth, Parvulescu at once preserves and transforms Medusa’s mystifying laughter. Like Bataille’s, Parvulescu’s ideas challenge the status of the comic object as the primary impetus for laughter. In scholarly readings of slapstick cinema, these comic objects have been discussed through Bergson’s target of ridicule, Freud’s butt of the joke, and Neil Harris’ operational aesthetic—on which Rob King, Matthew Solomon, Tom Gunning and other comic film scholars have drawn extensively. Emphasizing slapstick’s reversals between means and ends, whereby the spectator’s pleasure arises from the elaborate absurdity of the device itself, King, Solomon, and Gunning (each in different ways) reinvest comic uncertainty in a safely externalized object: the Rube Goldberg machine,

“up-to-date magic,” or the madcap Keystone “fun factory.” By revealing the dubious temporality of Medusa’s re-awakening, decapitation, and petrification, Cixous and Parvulescu suggest a different approach is possible. Their account negates the terror of the Gorgon’s impossible visibility. Medusa gets transformed from an un-seeable object into an echo of a very different version of the comic. Parvulescu summarizes Bataille: “Laughter is... ‘an inflamed gushing forth,’ in which the subject is consumed, joyfully. The now-proverbial and much-abused ‘death of the subject’ is understood by Bataille as a death by laughter” (92).

Shifting the focus from destructive comic film objects to unstable laughing subjects, the idea of laughter as “an inflamed gushing forth” resonates keenly with the dual liquidation and reassertion of boundaries performed by woman’s metamorphosis in early cinema. Female figures in early trick films internalize the constant potential for rupture and change in the exterior, visible world of the film by embodying the accident. Women’s visual and formal instability highlights the unknowability of objects themselves, from destructive props in slapstick films to the vicissitudes of the indexical sign. Both physical trace (the footprint) and deictic pointer (the weathervane), the contradictory indexical sign has been the subject of recent film studies debates about medium ontology. As Mary Ann Doane puts it, “What is the relation between the index as trace or impression and the index as pointing or deixis?” These women thereby act out the underlying semiotic instabilities intrinsic to a photochemical medium premised on representing movement. They index the violence and contingency of the world around them by partially transforming into it.

Like Matilda's elastic deferral of exposure to "the Chink's rats" in *Deceived Slumming Party*, many trick films animate identity inversion or racial masquerade as comic escapes from imminent, horrific atrocity. While dancing women morph into stenciled butterflies to escape the terror of scientific dissection in artistic trick films like *Tit-for-Tat* (Gaston Velle, 1906), tropes of racial and sexual masquerade "otherize" visual transformation. In a light-hearted example, *The Subpoena Server* (Biograph, 1906) varies the already exhausted formulas of the comic chase film by portraying racial and gender elasticity as avenues for disguise and escape. As Alice Maurice puts it in *Cinema and Its Shadow*, "The disguise moments work two ways to help increase the tension of the chase...and they also keep the chase going, adding a new way for [it] to go, and a new way for the pursued man to escape" (67). Similarly, in *The Stolen Pig* (Vitagraph, 1907), a black man who has stolen a white farmer's pig first disguises himself as a scarecrow, and then disguises the pig as his child, in order to elude capture.^{xix} Whereas gendered metamorphosis tends to smooth over the disjuncture between cuts by embodying it, disguise and masquerade defer awareness of diegetic difference through recourse to racial and sexual caricatures of the "other."

The Watermelon Patch (Edison, 1905) depicts the reverse side of how fluid disguises become impetuses for irreversible racial violence. In the film, white farmers dressed as skeletons and their dogs pursue a group of African-American men who have stolen several of their watermelons. The white men's costumes become alibis for the film's crude racial stereotyping: the rhetoric of disguise legitimizes over-the-top caricature. In the end, the mob torches the black family's cabin, where members of the community had been dancing and enjoying the watermelons, forcing them all to climb

out of the window to receive their punishment. Despite the film's referentiality to racial lynching (there were 62 lynchings in America in 1905^{xx}), the film's playful emphasis on masquerade, which inflects the black characters' own grossly exaggerated performances, clearly works to derealize the actual violence awaiting them by the white thugs outside of their burning cabin. (The film ends before their "retributive justice" ensues.)

On a less palpably (but perhaps equally) disturbing register, *Laughing Gas* (Edison, 1907) has recourse to racist stereotypes to naturalize black bodies' possession by destructive technologies. The film depicts the contagious hilarity of an African-American woman, Mandy (Bertha Regustus), who is administered nitrous oxide by her dentist. She infects passersby in the streets and on a tramcar with her gleeful hysteria, causes her bourgeois white employers to knock over their dinner table, and even compromises the sobriety of a justice of the peace and several police officers who are attempting to indict her. However, the end of film reverses its carnivalesque whimsies by reframing the device, the laughter-inducing nitrous oxide, as a bit of a red herring. Mandy goes to her all-black church, where everyone is carrying on as if the whole edifice had been bombed with laughing gas. Jacqueline Stewart interprets this as a resolution rather than a continuation of the film's destructive antics. She observes: "Mandy's uncontrollable laughter is virtually indistinguishable from the gesticulations of Black religious ecstasy... By showing that this Black female domestic is...a member of the Black community, the film segregates her safely away to achieve narrative closure." (120). Mandy's visit to the black church resolves the contagions of racial difference precipitated by modern technologies.

Laughing Gas deploys racial stereotypes to naturalize what at first appears to have been an event of metamorphosis. The film's most ostentatious trick, a substitution splice, also occurs early during the dentist scene. The doctor removes an enormous tooth from Mandy's mouth that horrifically turns out to be substantially larger than Mandy's head. This decoy metamorphosis further corroborates the film's racist suggestion that black bodies are naturally prone to hysterical behavior. As Sianne Ngai has put it in her discussion of race and animatedness, "the surprising interplay between the passionate and the mechanical" has transformed this burning affect "into a racializing technology in American cultural contexts" (92). By representing the *plastic* body (that changes irreversibly) as *elastic* after all through recourse to racial stereotyping (which is the film's comic punchline), *Laughing Gas* further derealizes its own referential violence.

Puncturing and prolonging the instantaneity of comic metamorphosis, Mandy's bodily frenzy draws out the ambivalence and uncertainty underlying the film's provocations for involuntary laughter from its spectator. The film is framed by close-ups of Mandy—a conventional practice, famously used to assault the spectator in *The Great Train Robbery*—her swollen head wrapped in gauze, visibly in pain but laughing back at the laughing spectator. Mandy's emblematic shots represent uncanny mirrors of the laughing spectator's own oscillation between comic distance and horrific investment. Exemplifying Bataille's theory of laughter, Mandy's hilarity traffics in the proximity between comedy and catastrophe: between the jubilant glee and the utter terror triggered by the social scenarios depicted in this film.

Women's Mediumship and the Wombs of Plasticity

The slippage between cinema's technological contagions and its potentially disruptive socio-sexual changes defined the very idea of "mediumship" during the decades before the motion picture's invention. "Mediumship," a gendered vocation designating women's politically subversive capacities to conjure the dead, provided avenues of resistance to traditional domestic norms throughout the 19th Century. Ann Braude traces the interlocking histories of women and mediumship in *Radical Spirits*. She discusses the distinguished professor of medical jurisprudence R. Frederic Marvin, who diagnosed women's "mediomania" as a symptom of "utromania." "The angle at which the womb is suspended in the pelvis" represents the dividing line between sanity and insanity. He argues: "Tilt the organ a little forward...and immediately the patient forsakes her home, embraces some strong ultraism—Mormonism, Mesmerism, Fourierism, Socialism, oftener Spiritualism. She becomes possessed by the idea that she has some startling mission in the world" (160). Marvin frequently associated the physical risks to inciting "utromania" with modern technologies such as the railroad, as well as the with the projection devices that women mediums used to abet their reincarnations of the dead. Womb tilt represented a symptom of the effects of rupture and spontaneous movement on the female body.

As Rae Beth Gordon, Zhang Zhen, Lynne Kirby, and many others have demonstrated how women's comic depictions in early cinema were often entangled with contemporary scientific discourses of neurasthenia. "The correlation between neurasthenia^{xxi} and modern life was made again and again" (Gordon, 228). Like neurasthenia, which was said to somaticize external stimuli, female metamorphosis

internalizes its comic object by attempting to embody the external potential for accident. These entanglements between motion picture metamorphosis and scientific anxieties about “womb tilt” may be illustrated by Alice Guy’s trick film about pregnancy, *Madame’s Cravings* (1906), which comically invokes latent anxieties about uteromania. In this film, a voracious young woman on the cusp of her due date gads about town wreaking havoc by stealing items of corporeal desire from bewildered bystanders; meanwhile, her desperate husband trails behind her doing damage control and toting their already born child in a pram.

Madame’s oral cravings are fitfully heterogeneous: she seizes a lollipop from a young child, a glass of absinthe from a “wine-lover,” a herring from a crippled beggar, and a smoking pipe from a traveling salesman (see fig. 4). With each indulgence, the cut between visual desire and carnal pleasure is bridged by an exhibitionist view of Madame directly addressing the spectator while she consumes her treat. Finally, the couple chances upon a cabbage-patch where the child is born through a trick splice, in a throwback to Alice Guy’s 1896 trick fairytale about biological reproduction *The Cabbage Fairy*.

It is very curious and significant that Guy reserves the main trick for the scenario of birth, but not for those of physical consumption. Early films such as *The Big Swallow* certainly did not shy away from scenes of trick orality. However, in *Madame’s Cravings*, the premature emergence of the trick would verge too closely on inhabiting a pregnant woman’s womb. If Madame were to test the cinematographic limits of her cravings, thereby swallowing the camera, now where would that put the spectator? In *Cinematernity*, Lucy Fischer reads vanishing lady films through the lens of maternal

anxieties: the psychic terrors of the “dreadful woman” and the “domineering mother” motivate the womb iconographies often surrounding trick vanishings. In its partial narrativization in *Madame’s Cravings*, the gendered trick splice—here the event of human reproduction itself—deliberately lingers as an unrealized possibility throughout most of the film. A premature metamorphosis would threaten to collapse the tenuous line between laughter and terror that the trick film works so hard to safeguard by mystifying the very location of this line.

According to Malabou, the notion of a metamorphosis *without* a transition, of a spontaneous transformation that takes place too soon or before its time, is a potential site of absolute terror for the body that dis-identifies with its own image. Malabou discusses Marguerite Duras, who represents herself in her novel *The Lover* as an “aged girl:” “A woman [changed] by accident, too soon, subjected to a destructive plasticity” (55). Duras recounts having changed overnight at the age of 18 from a “pretty young girl” to a “ravaged” old woman. Duras’ very being was “broken at an unlocatable point, forcing it to change direction, to become other...a snapshot of an absolute metamorphosis” (55). Rupturing the fluidity of elastic metamorphosis, plasticity gets aligned with the stasis underlying movement: “a snapshot of an absolute metamorphosis.”

In *The Big Swallow*, cinema ingests its antecedent medium when the posing subject swallows the still photographer: a trick shot tails a photographer down a voracious poser’s throat and gullet and then back out through his mouth and lips. Rather than risk exposing the viewer to Madame’s hungry uterus, *Cravings* defers any encounter with its own line between stasis and animation: between the instantaneity of the trick splice and the lived duration of gestation and labor. Madame, the comic object of

ridicule, can inhale an entire grocery stand if she pleases, her extreme behavior no doubt driven by her hyperactive womb movement. By literalizing the subjective instabilities of the comic through recourse to tropes of hysteria,^{xxii} *Madame's Cravings* invokes utromania as an alibi for the inner terrors provoking modern laughter. In the end, according to the film, difference can be safely quarantined inside an "other's" irrationally behaving body, and then, like the exothermic reaction of combustion, instantly secreted with a trick splice.

Conclusion

From early attractions to proto-classical narratives, pre-classical cinema obsessively represents and rehearses its own processes of formal and industrial transformation through images of visual metamorphosis. From combusting housemaids, to spontaneous public pregnancies, to hysterical African-American dental patients, the different temporal iterations of comic metamorphosis intersected with gendered political histories. Here, I have attempted to look at early and transitional trick films' rhetoric of metamorphosis—of ushering figures spontaneously from one form to the next—in order to think about how they perform their own historiographic meta-narratives: how they reflect upon the aesthetic and social changes that they simultaneously perform. I have argued that destructive metamorphosis represents an endpoint in early films accident films like *How Bridget Made the Fire*, but gets re-articulated and deployed as interim devices during the transitional period in films ranging from *Mary Jane's Mishap*, to *Laughing Gas*, and to *From Death to Life*.

Vanishing women can dissolve into cigars, metamorphose into spiders, or moonlight in cross-ethnic drag before reappearing through a trick splice; they can disembody their own limbs in their stop-motion dreams, and under-crank their bodies to desecrate their family homes. Yet, launching themselves forward in fantasy times, their films always seem to pull back from physical transformations that might occur too soon. Bridging the terror of a metamorphosis without any transition, these self-reflexive bodies thereby suture the wounds of film history, with their revolving door mechanization and re-incarnation of their own slapstick comedienne antics.

CHAPTER 2

SLAPSTICK COMEDIENNES IN TRANSITIONAL CINEMA: BETWEEN NATIONAL BODY AND MEDIA INDUSTRY

Women's bodies emerged as sites of struggle over national differences during a moment in American film history when the industry increasingly hinged on emphasizing and exploiting these differences. This chapter focuses on the engendering of national identity through comic and trick filmmaking from about 1907 to 1915, particularly on the different ways in which motion pictures integrated women's comic bodily gestures into their emergent systems of film narration. The codes of narrative film storytelling were very much in flux during this period. My slapstick comedienne historiography foregrounds the gendered and national tensions underlying experiments with narrative codification. I thereby trouble the linear tendencies of mainstream film histories by emphasizing the speculative and punctuated emergence of classical film form. I argue that comediennes' unruly gestures in transitional filmmaking made their marks on the articulation of film style during a number of formative moments in filmmaking history. Slapstick comedienne archives, then, provide meta-texts for scholars to rethink the co-emergence of narrative film style and film industry geopolitics.

I focus on two exemplary film companies—one American and the other French: American Vitagraph and French Pathé-Frères. Richard Abel has persuasively argued that Pathé was the backbone of the global silent film industry, before being ousted from the American market by aggressive and xenophobic industry campaigns. Whereas Pathé has

received significant historical attention recently as a leading early film manufacturer, Vitagraph's stylistic range and prolific productions have, if anything, have remained undervalued and largely unnoticed. Scholars including William Uricchio, Roberta Pearson, Robert Spadoni, and Kristin Thompson have relegated Vitagraph to the annals of middle-class aspiration, focusing almost exclusively on Vitagraph's limited output of "quality" film adaptations: condensed versions of the great works of theater and literature such as *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Oliver Twist*. I raise questions about why a company as productive and versatile as Vitagraph could take on a synecdochal with such a limited portion of their output. I argue that this fetishistic vision of film industry history—equating Vitagraph with a small part of the whole picture—emerges from the very aesthetics of Vitagraph's filmmaking. Vitagraph films innovate techniques in fetishistic vision par excellence—perhaps to the detriment of their own broader historical visibility.

I focus on the aesthetics of female transfiguration across a range of genres in transitional narrative filmmaking, investigating the impact of gendered bodily illusionism on the emergence of film style. Both the American Vitagraph and French Pathé companies deployed weird configurations of female corporeality to experiment with the possibilities of narrative filmmaking across film genres. While magic films were a specialty of both company's, techniques of magic inflected their dramatic and comedic articulations of cinema. I argue that spectacles of female metamorphosis covered over the signifying excesses of uneven and transitional film languages. It is pressing to revisit these relatively invisible archives of transitional female film metamorphosis in order to

understand the semiotic and geo-cultural underpinnings of film language, film nationalism, and the industrial codification of cinema.

Vitagraph and Pathé pursued similar marketing strategies, courting artistic legitimacy through “quality” productions while simultaneously cashing in on the mass appeal of film spectacle. However, Vitagraph’s and Pathé’s filmmaking techniques exhibit opposite tendencies for accommodating narrative storytelling demands. In other words, the two companies often formulated likeminded visions of cinema, while following very different paths to arrive at them. Nowhere is this dynamic clearer than in the trick genre, which I approach symptomatically in order to explain broader strategies at work across multiple genres and different iterations of film form.

Both Vitagraph and Pathé trick films mobilize the camera to provide a series of intricate views and framings on various episodic phenomena (both banal and extraordinary). However, Pathé disarticulates camera view from spectator viewpoint, thereby emphasizing absurdity and surrealism, whereas Vitagraph thoroughly psychologizes its fields of vision. Both companies frequently enlist women’s slapstick comedy to mediate the various disjunctions and alignments between camera position and spectator positioning. For example, Pathé films such as *The Wonderful Mirror* and *The Red Spectre*—in which female magicians conjure their own physical transformations—play around with close-ups and frequent changes in framing to provide different looks on surrealist or anarchic scenes. In contrast, Vitagraph films emphasize comedic psychology over aesthetic integration. For example, in *The Haunted Hotel* (the trick film that helped Vitagraph dominate the European market in 1907), a rubish traveler staying at a rural inn witnesses mysterious and spectral forces manipulate his food and clothing: “The food on

the table prepares itself, his clothes leave the room on their own and the room seems to tumble end over end. Several hooded figures dance around his bed, and a demon finally tears away one wall and seizes him.” *The Haunted Hotel* represents a particularly cinematic kind of magical thinking by inducing the spectator to disidentify—and to disidentify strongly—from the diegetic characters who provide proxy witnesses to these magical acts of transformation.

Disavowal takes on an explicitly gendered dimension in subsequent Vitagraph trick films, such as *The Kitchen Maid’s Dream*, *Hypnotizing the Hypnotist*, and *Princess Nicotine*. In these films, women’s bodies get dismembered, contorted, or miniaturized alongside and even in place of object animation—such as *Haunted Hotel’s* automatically self-slicing bread loaf. Whereas Pathé’s comedienne magic mystifies the spectator, both figurally and cinematographically, Vitagraph’s comediennes provide objects of ridicule for canny spectators to hedge their subjective viewpoints in conjunction with women’s bodily mutilations. In other words, the spectator’s double-position—both canny subject of derisive laughter and fascinated object of structural violence—was authenticated by the literalism of women’s bodily dismemberment and metamorphosis.

These aesthetic contrasts further co-emerged with industry discourses of film nationalism. The obsession with demarking national identity and national character through motion picture discourse consumed the American film market around 1907. Opportunistic attempts to circumscribe the national identity of film taste, which characterized American films as authentic and realistic and French films as exotic and artistic, had significant effects on the types of French films (especially by the world renown French Pathé Company) that found distribution and favorable reception in the

American market. According to American trade industry discourse, which frequently spoke on behalf of national film spectators, French filmmakers excelled in artistic and technological innovations, but were potentially corrupting influences when left to the business of realistic or even psychologically motivated storytelling.

I relate these nationally driven differences in techniques for film narration and film aesthetics to contemporaneous debates about the idea and definition of laughter. Nineteenth and twentieth century cultural critics and philosophers debated the social use values of laughter. Henri Bergson, Charles Baudelaire, Agnes Replier, and others argued that comedy could be enlisted as an agent for social improvement. By instilling desires in the spectator to avoid behaving like a country rube, laughter would thereby have a civilizing effect on film audiences. In tension with these approaches focused on the social instrumentality of laughter, Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Mikhail Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, and Sigmund Freud emphasized the madness of laughter: its irreparable connection to the rupture, contingency, and the existential finitude characteristic of industrial modernity.

I argue that laughter always cuts both ways: even the most disciplinary comedies cannot safeguard their spectator from laughter's reversals and instabilities. I thereby approach comedic film form—which can never be completely divorced from dramatic or suspenseful film form—as an intersubjective horizon. It is impossible to comprehend the textuality of transitional filmmaking without accounting for films' imbrication with women's everyday lives and social politics. Following from Miriam Hansen's *Babel and Babylon*, Jacqueline Stewart's *Migrating to the Movies*^{xxiii}, Vicki Callahan's *Reclaiming the Archive*^{xxiv}, and other feminist provocations to look at female film spectatorship as a

diffuse daily practice, I think about the larger social transformations that were both reflected and precipitated by female shape-shifting in cinema. Women's violent-comic eruptions and uncanny transfigurations on-screen, I argue, represent self-reflexive horizons (to invoke Hansen's notion of "vernacular modernism"^{xxv}) for processing women's shifting social positions—including their significant participation in industrial labor, suffragist political organizing, and unprecedented access to the public sphere primarily as commodity consumers.

Rapidly oscillating systems of freedom and constraint at once opened new doors to women while circumscribing the limits of their impact outside of the home. Gendered modernity was thereby characterized by an endless abundance of new social opportunities for women, and an increasing rigidity circumscribing what these new social gains might yield. When the promises of industrial transformation so thoroughly belied everyday lived social realities, fantastic iterations of violent rupture such as dismemberment and metamorphosis attempted to resolve these contradictory notions of gender equality. The implications of this gendered dialectic between freedom and constraint are as national as they are intermedial, which I demonstrate through a focused comparison between the rivaling American Vitagraph and French Pathé companies' strategies for regulating their highly commercialized images of women's bodily comedy.

Negotiating Social Uplift

Two of the largest international film production companies in the world, and both allied members of the Motion Picture Patents Company formed in December 1908, Vitagraph and Pathé pursued radically different business strategies for maintaining their

global influence. Whereas Vitagraph focused on emphasizing the ascendant cultural legitimacy of its own film productions, Pathé's hegemony hinged on cultivating a flexible constellation of independent affiliates. Decentralizing production in response to the vulnerability of its continued growth and expansion—the company's perceived "crisis of overproduction" and a volatile nationalist climate in the United States industry—Pathé spawned a sprawling network of independent "quality" film producers. In contrast to Pathé's slippery constellation of niche affiliates, the social climbing Vitagraph Company attempted to construct a monolithic image of its radically heterogeneous output. For every adaptation of Hugo or Shakespeare, there were at least 3 times as many split-reel comedies depicting situations like what happens to an African-American maid when her white employer gets drunk and accidentally brings home an elephant.

If films like *An Elephant on His Hands* were Vitagraph's bread and butter, intertextuality was the keyword. Vitagraph sought to establish both its aesthetic legitimacy and international cultural relevance by harnessing cinema's storytelling means to visualize the classics of theatrical and literary canons. These "films de luxe" cultivated the aesthetic and narrative capacities of the medium through cinematic adaptations of everyone from Shakespeare, Hugo, and Dante to ambitious multi-reel biographies of Moses and Napoleon—co-founder J. Stuart Blackton was even dubbed "The David Belasco of Motion Pictures."^{xxvi}

Although Vitagraph's social transformation happened very abruptly (around 1908), its formal development was punctuated and uneven. Frequently, trick techniques, debased modes of film spectacle, and cheap comic gags were deployed to cover over the gap between filmmaking's social ambitions and its signifying capacities. On the cusp of

this social uplift campaign, Vitagraph's filmmaking strategies emphasized trick virtuosity over plot legibility. A strange intermingling of the comic and the surrealistic inflected its early, intertextual experiments. For example, short films about daydreaming artists such as *The Author's Dream* (which uses moving images to represent a writer's inner process) and *A Curious Dream* (adapted from a Mark Twain short story) found pretexts for denarrativizing artistic labor. Typically, the premise of these dream films would be more mundane than grandiose. For example, a young woman would dream that she could write over her own corporeality in order to economize on her household labor; or, a man would dream that a quilt made by his mother-in-law comes to life and terrorizes his domestic space. Dream films, which were especially popular from 1907-1909, navigate between topical curiosity and artistic legitimacy. These films represent an aesthetic of transformation: they exhibit an underlying preoccupation with refashioning the medium's own means. This is why they so frequently thematize the interarticulation between living bodies and film signification—again, the woman who fantasizes in live-action about how her body could do housework in stop-motion.

The thematic of women's physical and social transformations provided alibis for these films to paper over their formal contradictions: the enlistment of spectacle and bizarre experimentation as techniques in film storytelling. This disjuncture between trick photography and narrative transparency was intrinsic to Vitagraph's negotiation of two conflicting but equally necessary modes of address. The same argument could be made about other transitional film companies, to be sure, but Vitagraph's case is exemplary due to the studio's strengths in trick filmmaking, which underwrote the company's narrative and aesthetic ambitions. (As a counter-example, in Chapter 3 I will look at D.W.

Griffith's attempts to compartmentalize between melodramatic storytelling and comedic, trick devices in his transitional Biograph filmmaking.)

As I will demonstrate, the cinematographic disciplining of unruly female corporeality did an enormous amount of work to abet Vitagraph's construction of its cross-class legitimacy. In films ranging from *Princess Nicotine* (1909), *The Female Politician* (1907), *Snow Bound with a Woman Hater* (1910), and *Hypnotizing the Hypnotist* (1912), to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1909), *Norwegian Fairytale* (1910), and *A Florida Enchantment* (1914), Vitagraph sought to refashion film's intertextual narrative capacities through a kaleidoscopic horizon of women's metamorphic bodily configurations.^{xxvii} Women's bodily labor was made productive in front of the camera as the means by which filmmaking could articulate its own language for signifying beyond the medium's still tenuous artistic prestige and market legitimacy.

Film historians considering Vitagraph's various transformations around the formation of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) have focused too narrowly on a specific set of films that seem to corroborate rather than complicate the industry's narrative about its own social uplift. The list of examples deemed worthy of historicizing is now populated by a number of usual suspects: the polite comedies of manners (Sidney Drew and John Bunny comedies such as *When Dumleigh Saw the Joke* and *A Cure for Pokeritis*), and its "films de luxe" adaptations from Shakespeare and historical biographies (*Macbeth*, *Shakespeare's Sublime Tragedy* and *Napoleon, Man of Destiny*). For example, in *Reframing Culture: The Case of the Vitagraph Quality Films*, William Uricchio and Roberta Pearson "explore the interface between film and culture" (5) by focusing exclusively on only eleven reels^{xxviii} of Vitagraph quality productions from

1907-10. They explain their decision to limit their textual examples so dramatically:

“[these films] represented one of the most visible markers of the film industry’s desire to improve its cultural status, explicitly invoking ‘high’ culture referents but offering them in a ‘low’ culture venue, the moving picture shows” (5).

Similarly, Robert Spadoni looks primarily at “quality” adaptations^{xxix} such as Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (Vitagraph, 1911) in his intriguing corporeal historiography of the shot/reverse-shot: Spadoni analyzes Vitagraph’s rear blocking of actor’s bodies as an early form of analytical editing. Kristin Thompson also draws exclusively on dramatic narrative filmmaking in her historiography of Vitagraph’s transition from “primitive” to “classical” film style: *The Inherited Taint* (1911), a melodrama about the genetics of alcoholism; *At the Eleventh Hour* (1912), an adaptation of Guy de Maupassant’s short story, “The Necklace”; and *The Tiger* (1913), about a man who seeks revenge against the circus animal tamer who had wronged his daughter: the most complex and proto-classical of the three, according to Thompson.

Pushing against the retrospective tendency to equate the industry’s narrative and social aspirations with its intertextual “quality” productions, my Vitagraph comedienne historiography foregrounds a very different set of film examples. Vitagraph’s transitional slapstick comedienne films, which textually discipline unruly female bodies paradoxically by giving freer play to their perverse social situations, demonstrate the profoundly messy and uneven co-development between the industry’s social uplift and the medium’s narrative codification. Vitagraph films, exemplified by but not limited to a sub-genre of embodied trick films (*The Kitchen Maid’s Dream*, *Princess Nicotine*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), exercise increasingly tighter control over their

comédiennes' bodily gestures as part of a broader effort to market their theatrical legitimacy. These films meticulously stage women's debased slapstick knockabout and trick dismemberment in depth before the camera. Films such as *The Kitchen Maid's Dream* (discussed in chapter 1) literalize the performer's bodily "integration" into the film's narration by riffing on a familiar vaudeville scenario about the social politics of female daydreaming. Examples such as these, which work through their ambivalent gender and labor politics in conjunction with their uneven formal compositions, are symptomatic of women's profoundly contradictory transitional movie-going positions.

As Miriam Hansen, Shelley Stamp, Alison Kibler, Jennifer Bean and many other feminist film historians have argued, the theaters' ploys to achieve economic and social legitimacy by soliciting female patronage, thereby commodifying women's spectatorship, generated unforeseen consequences. The short-term market interests of bourgeois refinement clashed with the long-term ideological goals of social uplift, giving rise to a surplus of temporary fixes for stabilizing these otherwise gaping slippages of desire. One exemplary symptom of women's impossible positions as transitional film spectators (which I explore in chapter 3) revolves around their ostentatious hat commodities. Laughably excessive 19-aughts fashion trends solicited middle-class female patronage; however, in order to exhibit their middle-class status, these women wore oversized, ornamental hats to the theaters, which then actively obstructed spectators' views of the screen. Vitagraph films provide compelling aesthetic parallels to the woman's hat conundrum of 1909. Vitagraph films across genres from around 1907-1912 are rife with excessive visual details and spectacular flourishes that emerge contradictorily from their efforts to articulate a transparent narrative film language.

In contrast to Vitagraph's aesthetic disciplining of its uneven social politics, Pathé's flexible accommodation of its shifting position in the global film market negotiated film's industrial transformations often by letting women's bodies run wild in front of the camera. The largest global film producer and distributor, whose products had uniquely fueled the United States' Nickelodeon Boom from 1905-07, with over 8,500 exhibition sites in the US by 1908, and vertically integrated control over the French and other European film markets, Pathé's formidable success also made it a target, especially for American producers who were increasingly keen to seize the reins of their domestic industry. As Richard Abel has posed the issue, "So what was the problem? Briefly, the enormity of Pathé-Frères' success made it a threat (and a foreign threat at that) to other companies within the American market, and that success turned out to be dependent on an infrastructure that was anything but invulnerable" ("In the Belly of the Beast," 370-71). As Abel argues, Pathé responded to the prescribed sensitivity of national film spectatorship by focusing on "quality" productions, affiliating itself with the industry's new cultural institutions such as Film d'Art and SCAGL (*Société cinématographique des auteurs et gens de lettres*).

Women's enhanced range of bodily contortions and physical mobility in Pathé films contrasts sharply with Vitagraph's tendencies to aestheticize female bodily rigidity. Where women's limbs would break apart in a Vitagraph film, they would bend and stretch beyond human proportions in a Pathé film. This obsession with female elasticity reflects Pathé's broader obsession with cultural, geographical, and technological flexibility. From its schemes to rival Eastman Kodak in the production of film negative (an investment decision that the company committed to fully in 1912), to its exclusion of

excessively “foreign” Pathé productions from its increasingly limited distribution access to the United States market, Pathé rehearsed its geo-industrial positioning through the range of techniques it enlisted to discipline the many unruly female bodies that populated its comedic film productions.

Culturally marginalized and economically censored^{xxx} in its key United States markets by what Abel has famously described as a *Red Rooster Scare*, Pathé’s aesthetic strategies reflected its existential bid for increased structural flexibility, a driving economic motivation that co-emerged aesthetically with its transitional articulations of film syntax. If Pathé signified its social uplift through cultural flexibility by modularizing its own production framework, Vitagraph built itself a monument—literally erecting an imposing “Vitagraphville”^{xxxi} in Brooklyn after its Nassau Street studio burned down in a fire on July, 2 1910. The structural and economic contrasts between Vitagraph and Pathé, which formed in response to the different national contexts of their immense but precarious global authority, are apparent in the striking oppositions in “body language” that each studio pursued in its filmmaking. Again and again, slapstick comedienne performance was enlisted to buttress the cultural legitimacy of film narrative.

The Flexible Capital of Pathé’s Female Metamorphosis

Pathé films experimented with different aesthetic configurations of their own cultural relevance in response to the company’s tenuous position and unpredictable future in its crucial American market. The trope of shape-shifting in films ranging from *Elastic Transformations* to *The Acrobatic Maid* emerged from the volatile reception climate that Pathé faced in the United States. Pathé’s prolific commercial successes elicited a range of

reactions from the burgeoning industry trade press. Journals such as *Motion Picture World* and *New York Dramatic Mirror* often showered Pathé productions with effusive praise for their technical mastery, while insinuating xenophobic remarks to cast doubts about their social morals. Journals would condemn Pathé's comedies (comedies and newsreels were the company's most lucrative genres) as "pointless" or "offensive"—though as "undoubtedly sources of amusement in the countries they represent" (*MPW*, December 1908). Richard Abel has read these negative reviews discursively, arguing that accusations of Pathé's unbridgeable cultural difference helped to construct a sense of America's own film nationality—a national film imaginary that had been glutted with Pathé productions until that point. "During these years [of industry "uplift,"]...Pathé's foreign subjects provided one of the principal 'others' against which to construct an American difference" (*Red Rooster Scare*, 122). It is important to emphasize that the specific iterations of Pathé's "otherness" were extremely broad and varied in their aesthetics, narrative strategies, and cultural contexts.

Whereas mesmerizing spectacles such as *Elastic Transformation*, *Modern Magic* and *Wonderful Rose Design* (all 1909) garnered praise for "their wonderful effects...that will leave spectators spellbound" (*MPW*), more context-dependent instances of female metamorphosis in *The Acrobatic Maid*, *Betty's Fireworks*, and *Romance of a Lady Cabby* provoked critique and condemnation. Even *Betty's Fireworks* take on a metaphorical weight for the *MPW*, which waxes about the film's destructive thematic by describing it as "frayed at the edges," and, more bluntly, condemns the depiction of marital relations in *The Barber's Revenge* as a "questionable flirtation...not *classed* as funny in America" (Dec 1908, italics mine). Simply put, artistic, non-narrative trick films were praised for

their aesthetic virtuosity, while films attempting to integrate comedic antics with narrative storytelling were condemned as immoral and socially perverse.

Pointedly, Pathé and other virtuosic foreign film companies (such as Gaumont, Italia, and Cines) fell prey to industry ambivalences about its largely female film patronage. Like Plato's pharmakon—both poison and remedy—Pathé's colorfully tinted masterpieces signified both supreme artistic achievement and narrative barbarism. Reflecting the middle-class women who blocked the screen with their enormous hats, Pathé films were accused of overly aestheticizing their economic legitimacy. These aesthetic symptoms, produced out economic necessity, were always explicitly gendered; they carried over from vaudeville entertainment: early cinema's primary exhibition venue. As Alison Kibler argues in *Rank Ladies*, "Vaudeville was a key institution in the transition from a marginalized sphere of popular entertainment, largely associated with vice and masculinity, to a consolidated network of commercial leisure, in which the female consumer was not only welcomed but also pampered." This excess of enthusiasm for courting female consumers walked a fine line between cultural uplift and commercial debasement. Vaudeville's female audiences became at once necessary and impossible signifiers of the cultural legitimacy of mass entertainment.

In American cinema from 1907-1912, the shifting, contradictory meanings of femininity, which oscillated between genteel refinement and bawdy transgression, took on a profoundly nationalist weight. As Abel argues, the press discourse often opposed an American "aesthetic of authenticity"—virile, white, masculine, realist, increasingly linear, exemplified by the Western genre—with a foreign "aesthetic of imitation," typified by stenciled coloring and fantastical subjects that purportedly inflamed

audiences' commercial desires. Following from Abel's insights about the heavily gendered rhetoric used to exoticize and marginalize Pathé's output, I would further emphasize how the company's economic and aesthetic flexibility corroborated the sliding and often incoherent imaginary invoked by the signifier "femininity." Pathé's prolific comedienne slapstick and trick films are aesthetically overdetermined by the company's own economic and cultural instability.

Ironically, the by-definition "contingent" newsreel genre proved to be Pathé's most stable and reliable draw in America during this period. *Pathé Weeklies*, which prided themselves on their legibility to female audiences (in contrast with "the more yellow sporting editions"^{xxxii}), covered a variety of global events: from Bulgarian diplomats meeting with the Kaiser in Berlin, to the sinking of the Titanic and coronation of George V, to the suffragette Emily Davison who was trampled by a horse at the 1913 Derby. *The Pathé Weekly* continued to thrive; in contrast, the Pathé Western enjoyed a brief boom before becoming an object of ridicule for its geo-ideological implausibility, and Pathé trick films featuring female magicians became aesthetically obsolete in a market increasingly obsessed with narrative sophistication.

While Pathé's genre distribution patterns shifted in order to accommodate the strategically fickle whims of the American film market, female performers, already prone to bodily transformation, just about broke into pieces in response to the aesthetic maneuvers precipitated by the industry's national reconfiguration. Exhibiting a pointedly double-edged mode of address, Pathé's visions of corporeal metamorphosis played a very peculiar role in abetting the construction of America's own national film imaginary. Pathé's different iterations of comic shape-shifting varied in complex ways in

conjunction with the Company's own formal negotiations of its precarious position in the American film market. From "good" and "bad" women to "good" and "bad" foreign film objects, a whole constellation of interlocking dichotomies buttressed Pathé's discursive role in constructing American categories of taste. Ironically, nowhere are these slippery contradictions made clearer than in the imagery of the trick genre. Pathé's transitional trick films exhibit two overarching but distinct tendencies for representing female metamorphosis:

1) Mystical trick films that systematically derealize their spatial or cultural markers. Women's bodies materialize out of hats or umbrellas (*Modern Magic* and *Mysterious Budoir*), get miniaturized in front of magician's mirrors (*The Wonderful Mirror* and *Satan's Play*), and metamorphose into butterflies and various hovering creatures (*Tit-for-Tat* and *The Cigar Box*). Whatever forms they occupy, it is important that these transformations remain unmotivated by either regional or narrative cues. Like artisanal holdovers from the "cinema of attractions," here there is little to no attempt made to integrate these magical acts into diegetic constructions of concrete spaces and times.

2) In contrast to these de-narrativized trick films that could very well take place anywhere, slapstick comedienne films emphasizing comic rather than fantastic modes of bodily metamorphosis received much more hostile critical reception from the trade press.

In December 1908, just days before Mayor McClellan championed the social reformist cause by mandating the shutdown of all New York City Nickelodeon theaters, *The Moving Picture World* had this to say about Pathé's *The Acrobatic Maid*:^{xxxiii} "This film can perhaps suit the Moulin-Rouge of Paris, but it is not a very proper film to show

to an American audience. If some ignorant spectators laughed at the exhibit of women showing their limbs in their tumbling acts, many other persons, especially ladies, could hardly refrain from disdain.” Repeatedly, French comedies were criticized for telling stories or referencing conventions that would be at best “unclear to Americans”—at worst, “distasteful, unsavory, and culturally repellent subjects on the part of Pathé that should be censored.” About *The Amateur Detective*, the *MPW* begs that “American audiences may be pardoned if they need a diagram to make the fun apparent.” *Jane Is Unwilling to Work* is criticized for its excess of rough-housing, while *Spanish Marriage* makes the link between comedy and regional customs more explicit: “One of those pictures which depict a phase of foreign life that seems wholly foreign to Americans and American ways...It gives a sense of how lightly some of the more serious phases of life are considered by these pleasure-loving people.”

By constructing a dichotomy between metamorphosis’ artistic cachet as pure spectacle, on one hand, and its corrupting influence on the language of film narrative, on the other, the American trade press effectively attempted to resolve its formal and class contradictions. Elaine Bowser argues that by 1907-08, the industry faced “a crisis in film narrative...when longer and more complex stories were being attempted with methods that often could not make them clear to audiences” (*Transformation of Cinema*, 42). In 1910, *The MPW* started a weekly column titled “Education, Science and Art and the Moving Picture,” while picture theaters bucked the trends by hiring women for managerial positions. The conjunction between films’ syntactic experiments in transparent narration and the industry’s recruitment of women to signify its middle-brow legitimization reveals just how intimately interwoven sexual politics had become with film

language. The gaping chasm between ends and means, between the industry's lofty ambitions and its concrete material situation, needed to be traversed instantaneously: at the pace of a jump cut. The temporality of the trick device represented at once a rhetorical counterpoint, and an expedient resolution to the industry's uneven historical development.

Women's metamorphic antics—including their miraculous rise through the ranks of the medium as producers, filmmakers, managers, and exhibitors—arguably humanized a broader industrial struggle concerning the dialectic between class politics and conventions in film signification. Whereas *A Fan* (1909) arranging “various types of beautiful girls in classic poses” represented “an artistically colored film...[and a] masterpiece of trick photography” (*MPW*), *The Acrobatic Maid* epitomized everything that might be wrong with filmmaking. In other words, like comic spectator positioning in well researched examples such as *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show*^{xxxiv}, American bourgeois film nationality was forged by means of negation. While *The Fan*'s anti-narrative virtuosity elevated cinema to the status of art, *The Acrobatic Maid*'s guileless pratfalls innovated film syntax by using a woman's springy limb movement to yoke together discontinuous elements and locations. Pitting the dubious morality of slapstick narrative movement against the formal obsolescence of film “attractions,” either way, the American alternative offered relative improvement: more narrative framing or less moral perversity. In other words, Pathé's foreign difference, the specificity of which metamorphosed with the fluidity of a comedienne trickster, provided an alibi for the specific contradictions between ends and means that plagued American filmmaking during this moment. By means and ends, I refer to the tensions between the industry's

stated goals of social uplift and narrative transparency, and the images of female spectacle frequently enlisted to abet these ends.

As the self-proclaimed “national” Board of Film Censors of New York reported in 1909: “Moving pictures are now the most important form of cheap amusement in the country. They reach the young, immigrants, family groups, the formative and impressionable section of our cities...In their social and educational possibilities, they provide the basis for a neighborhood theatre of the people.”^{xxxv} The industry’s rhetoric of assimilation hinged on making the medium’s versatility both an implicit attraction and a tool for cultural education: “a cheap amusement...[with] educational possibilities.” Motion pictures thereby assumed a privileged cultural significance due to their simultaneous populist appeal and their vaunted reformist potential. In other words, moral uplift was by no means tantamount to narrative transparency, nor were transitional trick film “attractions” devoid of innovations in narrative framing.

The trick film’s ghettoization as an anti-narrative “attraction” represents an explicit attempt by the American industry to marginalize the strengths of its fiercest competition. While ongoing patent wars hindered American film productivity during the Nickelodeon Boom (1905-08), Pathé largely provided the basis for the continued growth of the American film market, averaging sales of about 75 copies of a dozen titles per week by 1906. By emphasizing Pathé’s specific capacities in the trick genre, the trade press ostensibly shored up its foreign competitor’s expertise in a dying art. Indeed, by 1911, trick films such as *The Fan* and *Elastic Transformations* were infrequently produced and exhibited. Harrison Dent laments the trick film’s decline in a 1911 *Motography* article about “Tricks and Magic in Pictures:” “Tricks popular a few years

ago are being abandoned. Sophisticated audiences demand that the ideas be worked out in a logical way...The Pathés were formally acknowledged leaders in the art of producing magic trick pictures...only their incentive [is now] lacking.” (35). Dent’s call for a rebirth of film tricks is no doubt compelling (albeit retrospectively); yet, his identification of trick filmmaking as illogical and purely associative reveals a blatant misapprehension of the developments occurring in the genre on the cusp of its own obsolescence.

Segundo de Chomón’s *Weird Fantasies*

It is useful to look closely at specific Pathé trick films in order to understand how and why they were systematically mischaracterized by the United States industry trade press. For example, many of Segundo de Chomón’s later works during his tenure as the head of trick film production at Pathé (1905-09) belie their descriptions even in laudatory American trade press reviews. Joan Battlioni asserts in her study of Chomón: “He would become, precisely, the highest authority at Pathé in anything that required the intervention of trick photography” (18). In addition to overseeing the trick photography of other directors’ films (working closely with Gaston Velle before his departure for the Italian Cines Company in 1907), Chomón directed dozens of trick films for Pathé. The titles of his films often thematize their visual promiscuity: *The Red Specter*, *Wonderful Mirror*, *Weird Fantasies*, *Haunted Kitchen*, *Living Silhouette*, *Satan at Play*, *Fantastic Umbrella*, *Rebellious Walking Stick*, *Microscopic Dancers*, *Electric Hotel*, and other films that similarly hinge upon animating the threshold between humanity and mechanization, and between the living and the dead. Drawing on a wide range of trick techniques—including transfiguration, substitution, stop-motion animation,

miniaturization, superimposition, and a zenithal camera that simulated vertical movement—Chomón’s films attempt to codify narrative visual contexts for their proliferation of illusory spectacles. Rather than projecting a static, proscenium view as many early trick films do, Chomón’s films take elaborate pains to position their spectators through different, interrelated views of and proximities to the trick objects in the diegesis.

For example, in *Le Sculpteur Express* (1907), a meta-film about trick artistry, Chomón experiments with different arrangements in the visible presentation of his film’s own devices. *Sculpteur* cuts between a general view of the magician sculptor and his female assistant (a theatrical view typical of what Burch calls early films’ “autarky and unicity” of the frame), and a more proximate position for the spectator to observe the sculptures’ metamorphoses. The film thereby partially psychologizes its own moving parts, which are explicitly represented as non-human: the stop-motion transfigurations of the sculpture’s faces. The sculptor never ceases molding his clay—transforming a clown into an old lady and then into a gentleman with a pipe—even while the film’s undercranking and stop-motion substitution abets the artist’s labor in ways that would be unimaginable without mechanical intervention. Similar images of miniaturized women motivate visual alterations in distance and framing in films such as *Red Specter*, *Wonderful Mirror*, and *Satan at Play*.

A number of Chomón’s trick films explicitly riff on Vitagraph trick productions—but with very different subjective and aesthetic effects. *Scullion’s Dream*, a more elaborate version of Vitagraph’s *Kitchen Maid’s Dream*, provides a concrete motivation for its fantastic images of disembodied labor by depicting a magical dwarf

who goes around the room chopping off everyone's hands during an extended dream sequence. Whereas the 1907 Vitagraph film, *Kitchen Maid*, brackets its own metamorphic dreams as a lone woman's private fantasies, the Pathé remake produced several months later, represents its gleeful, object-animated diversions as a collective vision. In *A Scullion's Dream*, an entire kitchen crew is in on the fantasy sequence. This collective acknowledgement of the dream reverie creates a deliberate blurring between the film's mystical trick imagery and the social relations established in its frame story. Unlike the Vitagraph version, the Pathé film blurs the relations between dream interlude and realist frame story; this confusion causes the group, in the end, to beat up an old cook as a scapegoat, blaming him for wasting everyone's labor time on dream-work.

Chomón's trick films express a profound tension between the spectacle of transformation and partial attempts to narrativize these visual "attractions"; they moreover bely trade press reviews that place sole emphasis on their aesthetic virtuosity. Chomón's films repeatedly elaborate a trick syntax, one in excess of Georges Méliès' or Gaston Velle's motivation of trick cuts through elaborate continuities in framing. Rather than "enframing" the movement among a series of fantastic compositions, as in Méliès' late trick film *The Baron Munchhausen's Dream* (1911) in which women emerge as spiders and octopi from patterns in the wallpaper, many of Chomón's films "emplot" their own visual effects, accommodating trick techniques to the emergent position of the film spectator.

Given the American trade press' painstaking attempts to assert a binary between debased foreign narrative films and "exotic" feats of trick artistry, it is important to emphasize the hybridity and interarticulation between these opposed modes of address. I

would locate Chomón's films on the cusp this divide. Their real "sleight of hand" is the dexterity with which they cloak their syntactic innovations and their narrative contexts. Women's magical possession, their all too seamless availability for physical metamorphosis, naturalized the uncanny psychologism of Pathé's trick artistry. An especially iconic example occurs in *Electric Hotel* (an elaborate remake of Vitagraph's 1907 international sensation, *The Haunted Hotel*). The film depicts the mystical adventures of two travelers (played by Chomón and his magician wife Julienne Mathieu^{xxxvi}) who arrive at an "electric hotel" where object-animated devices perform all of their daily tasks. In one segment, a woman stares directly into the camera while an object-animated brush works through her hair, and then the object spins her around while itself transforming into a comb that braids her long tresses [see fig. 5]. (Before brushing Mathieu's hair, the same implement had polished Chomón's shoes.)

Pathé and Vitagraph repeatedly remade and reappropriated different devices from each other's trick films; it would be futile to try to disentangle the play between duplicate devices and their originals across Chomón's and Blackton's trick innovations. (Trick film riffs and remakes include *Haunted Hotel* and *Electric Hotel*; *Kitchen Maid's Dream* and *Scullion's Dream*; *The Disintegrated Convict* and *The Invisible Thief*, as well as *Diabolical Pickpocket* and *The Thieving Hand*.) However, the psychic effects of the spectator's positioning across metamorphic views differ dramatically between Pathé and Vitagraph trick productions. While Vitagraph's tricks often emerge from contexts of disavowal, in which the spectator's view is framed from the unconscious or dubious position of a character in the diegesis (such as a feverish author, a daydreaming kitchen maid, or a rubish country traveler), Pathé's trick views seemingly emerge from nowhere.

The spectator's irrational aesthetic mobility further motivates the complex slippages in framing and distance intrinsic to transitional French trick filmmaking. This is an especially important contrast to consider; fetishistic spectator positions often gets articulated not through tightly framed views, but precisely through outlandish camera movements in classical Hollywood films ranging from Busby Berkeley musicals to John Ford Westerns.

Unlike Vitagraph's *Haunted Hotel*,^{xxxvii} which was best known for a long-take sequence in which moving pieces of cutlery slice bread while a pitcher pours wine into a glass, *Electric Hotel*'s stop-motion cinematography gets exercised on human bodies—rather than just on objects that coexist with humans in the diegesis. Pathé's trick animation of living bodies opens onto questions about the subjective irrationality and even madness provoked by their experimental aesthetics. Rather than compartmentalize between human rube and ingenious things, these films explore the duality and the ultimate instability of subject and object relations—and, since they are coded as primarily comedic, also between laugher and laughed-at. The liquidity between human agents and instrumental objects throws each entity into perpetual crisis, thereby also disturbing the subjective position of the laughing film spectator. I argue that the discursive reception of these films as “foreign” attempted to offset the profound instability of their social aesthetics.

Unlike *Electric Hotel*, the Vitagraph version shores up the position of the spectator. Adapted from an old “haunted hotel” stage act, stunning effects in stop-motion cinematography appear as visual embellishments of the film's impetus for derisive ridicule: object animation is motivated by the hilarity of terrorizing a poor country rube.

However, instead of tearing down the film screen like Uncle Josh, this haunted country rube provides a screen for the spectator to disavow the film's hallucinatory narrative premise, in which ghosts and poltergeists manipulate everyday household items. In contrast, Pathé's *Electric Hotel*, like *Sculpteur Express*, attempts to provide a meta-narrative about its own trick metamorphosis by placing the spectator in contradictory positions that emerge in conjunction with the trick's own devices. For example, when Mathieu stares directly into the camera, with a look too uncanny to be purely exhibitionistic (unlike Florence Georgie's wink in *What Happened on 23rd Street*), her gaze at the spectator provides a kind of reaction-shot to her body's own collision with the film's object animation.

Too deadpan to be melodramatic, but too proximate and tightly framed around the face to be purely incidental, Mathieu's look confronts the spectator: not as a guilty gaze that "looks back" (as in psychoanalytic theory), but as an invitation to feel animated alongside the film's object levitation. The film establishes a syntax foremost associated with the development of narrative integration, instead wielding it here for the purpose of meditating upon the corporeal and social effects of the medium's trick capacities.

In the context of Pathé's own trans-Atlantic market position, Chomón's films parlay xenophobic aversion into hypnotic attraction. That these films resist psychologizing their visual complexities has obscured their contributions to the emergence of film language. They formed part of a constellation of works experimenting with the aesthetic and signifying possibilities of a still very new medium. Rather than simply foregrounding their trick capacities, as in early Méliès or R.W. Paul films, Chomón's films cultivated new techniques for narrativizing their lacks of interest in

storytelling. This is a slippery distinction, but it bears further elaboration, because it opens onto the linguistic and subjective ambiguities of laughter.

While philosophers and writers like Bergson, Baudelaire, George Meredith, and Agnes Replier advocated a civilizing laughter—a laughter that disciplines society by correcting inappropriate behavior—Georges Bataille, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Mikhail Bakhtin explored the possibilities of unruly comedy: a comedy that would provoke jubilant laughter and thereby actively participate in transforming social politics. Although unpredictable and ultimately ephemeral, this unruly laughter would have the lasting potential to effect concrete changes in the world. It would be aligned not with instrumentality and reform, but with the rupture, contingency, and the existential finitude characteristic of industrial modernity.

Perhaps the most famous account of unruly or ambivalent laughter is Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, which he derives from the writings of Rabelais and Dostoevsky. Bakhtin emphasizes that this carnivalesque or festive laughter "is also directed *against* those who laugh." Unruly laughter differs sharply from Bergson's notion of derisive ridicule: laughing and pointing at the other. Rather, festive laughter animates the duality and the ultimate instability of subject and object relations between laugher and laughed-at. Bakhtin argues: "The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it... The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it" (*Rabelais*, 12).

Bataille's theory of laughter as a kind of "mysticism without God," which he refers to as "comic sovereignty," draws extensively on metaphors of dismemberment and

decapitation (like transitional comedienne films). The laugher's metaphorical decapitation provides an image for Bataille to explain how unruly laughter might give rise to new experiences of knowledge and subjective belonging. For Bataille, whether sovereignty refers to conscious knowledge, to categorical truth, or to political hegemony, the sovereign operation is an inherently comic operation. Bataille's laughter activates the deep, underlying truths of philosophy and mysticism, but truths which can never be codified or fully rationalized—which paradoxically can only be thought in the irrational, destabilizing instant of a visceral eruption. As Alexander Kojève once said of Bataille, he puts himself “in the position of a conjurer who wanted his magic tricks to make him believe in magic” (86). Interestingly, Kojève does not accuse Bataille of falling for his own tricks; rather, he compares him to a conjurer, who wants his tricks, which he knows to be deceptive, to make him believe in the real power of magic.

Chomón's films activate the possibility of comic sovereignty: of subjective transformation that arises through spectator laughter. They provoke spectator ambivalence through their interarticulation between their experimental aesthetics and images of female magicians exercising tricks upon their own bodies. For example, in *The Wonderful Mirror*, Julienne Mathieu poses in front of her bedroom mirror and performs conjuring tricks, transforming an everyday reflective surface into a personal screen for projecting miniaturized images of herself. While the tricks alone engage us, the tension between Mathieu's direct address to the spectator, and the private fantasies represented by her uncanny mirror have the paradoxical effect of placing the spectator in a position that the film itself refrains from locating or articulating.

Many of Chomón's films play between narration and spectacle, usually emphasizing the latter through the transparent syntax of the former. To resurrect an old debate between Tom Gunning and Donald Crafton, about whether narrative and spectacle are discrete or interwoven in the comedy genre, Chomón's transitional trick films invert the terms of this discourse.^{xxxviii} Instead of recuperating moments of comic rupture ("pie") by weaving them into the forward momentum of the narrative ("chase"), films like *Electric Hotel* and *Scullion's Dream* traffic in spectacle in order to waylay their complex integration of narrative. In other words, there is narrative complexity without forward plot momentum. The metamorphic appeals of women's capacity to assume contradictory visual forms, from models waving stenciled rose designs to micrographic spawns of Satan trapped in glass bottles, represent figures around which these trick films organize their blatant formal contradictions. A mirror image of the MPPC companies' intertextual "quality" film adaptations from theater and literature, whose storytelling ends often outstripped their narrative means, Chomón's films would incorporate an excess of spectatorial devices given their purported lacks of storytelling ambitions.

Feminist Social Politics and Comedic Labor

These film aesthetics of course do not exist in a vacuum. Thinking about the concrete social politics that co-emerged with transitional film aesthetics helps us to understand the trick film's formal hybridity: its aesthetic over-coding and narrative opacity. In order to appreciate the social meanings of these film aesthetics, it is necessary to think beyond the genre categories that the trade press constructed on the cusp of the trick genre's own obsolescence—again, the separation between these two categories

hinges on a value judgment between “good” mystical displays, and “bad” slapstick pratfalls. Hilarious and mesmerizing metamorphic antics in both slapstick and phantasmagoric trick films including *Living Dolls* (1908), *Overzealous Domestic* (1909), *How to Tame a Mother-in-Law* (1909), *Anti-fat Sanitarium* (1909), and *Rosalie and Her Phonograph* (1911) thematize the difficulties of shape-shifting and transformation. They enact imaginary resolutions to Pathé’s deeper economic uncertainties by reconfiguring images of women’s precarious social opportunities.

As Emma Goldman asserts in “The Tragedy of Women’s Emancipation,” an article published in the inaugural issue of her anarchist journal *Mother Earth* (March 1906):

Emancipation has brought woman economic equality with man; that is, she can choose her own profession and trade, but as her past and present physical training have not equipped her with the necessary strength to compete with man, she is often compelled to exhaust all her energy, use up her vitality and strain every nerve in order to reach the market value. Very few ever succeed, for it is a fact that women doctors, lawyers, architects and engineers are neither met with the same confidence, nor do they receive the same remuneration. And those that do reach that enticing equality generally do so at the expense of their physical and psychical well-being.

Slapstick comedienne films thematizing women’s industrial alienation effectively defused Goldman’s activist politics. Gendered pratfalls in cinema represented a concrete horizon for making women’s bodily exhaustion by their industrial labor economies foremost sources of fun and pleasure, rather than miseries that might incite social rebellions. For example, Pathé’s *Eva Is Tired of Life* (1911) meditates on the increasing economic importance of how women workers would spend their leisure time through the syntax of slapstick film trickery. In a “very laughable picture,” Eva, forlorn and unemployed, unsuccessfully attempts to kill herself; her body’s farcical resilience

repeatedly negates her own efforts to put an end to her exhaustion and misery for good. “She leaps over a bridge to bounce back again; she sits unharmed beneath a builder’s falling shaft; In the fireworks’ [sic] establishment she is rescued unharmed after a terrific explosion” (*New York Dramatic Mirror*, Sept. 11, 1911). Eva comically reflects the alienated and exhausted female laborer,^{xxxix} who, as Goldman asserts, “is compelled to . . . use up her vitality and strain every nerve in order to reach the market value.” Numerous transitional melodramas, such as Lois Weber’s *Shoes* (Universal, 1916),^{xl} sensationalize the plight of the allegorical modern woman, who toils in textile factories, department stores, and bourgeois homes, too exhausted and under-compensated to participate in the commodity pleasure economies that her labor simultaneously supports.

The comedy genre represents a very different facet of the social aesthetics addressing women’s leisure time, one more acutely keyed in to the industrial contradictions of how film language itself gets articulated. “Tired of life,” Eva seeks an existential resolution to the unbearable burdens of her industrial activity, the tolls of which have presumably sapped all of the fun out of her surplus leisure time. Instead of decomposing at the limits of its material value, Eva’s body becomes absurdly productive, thereby regaining energy through the paradoxical image of its destructive hyperactivity: energy expended willy-nilly with no accrued value. However, unlike *Mary Jane* or *Bridget McKeen*, whose existential combustion and spectral return signifies the becoming-fetish or wholesale commoditization of women’s embodied labor (to invoke Marx’s analysis of commodity fetishism), Eva’s body is unable to perform its own spectrality. She is the staggering corpse that will not die—even if just for the sake of returning as undead. Unlike Vitagraph’s daydreaming *Kitchen Maid*, Eva’s slapstick

revitalization is wholly non-productive. By equating the exhaustion of labor productivity with the onset of fun, Eva's body resists providing an image to concretize its own fetishistic accumulation. Rather, she embodies exchange value by parlaying her own use value into pure potentiality.

Moreover, *Eva's* narrative integration of Eva's trick suicides, which literally displaces her bodily harm across narrative space, covers over the reality of this poor woman's own bodily mechanization. Eva rebounds off of a bridge, survives the destruction of a tall building, and, of course, proves resistant to fire and explosion (unlike the 148 women who workers were incinerated in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire just months before this film's New York release). Eva's corporeal resilience indexes the film's diegetic movement across different levels of a capitalist economy. By cutting between alienating textile labor and jubilant fireworks, the film smooths over its visual and social ellipses. Making leisure time fun for so many female spectators through the gleeful spectacle of "non-work," Eva's hyperactive non-productivity effectively holds the film's syntax together. The corporeal rhetoric of *Eva's* transitional narrative form thereby re-energized actual female spectators' bodies during their precious respites from the necessity of constant productivity and labor.

Moreover, given Pathé's immense national problems in the 1911 American market, in which its foreign-ness was increasingly foregrounded, the film's comic disavowal of its own industrial contexts attempted to navigate a hostile trans-Atlantic distribution climate. At once flagging and deferring American perceptions of French cultural perversity, *Eva* displaces its geopolitical problems onto the elasticity and virtual indestructability of Eva's unruly slapstick body. Perhaps this is why American film

reviewers tended to find *Eva*, unlike *The Acrobatic Maid*, a relatively worthwhile film. Moreover, *Eva*'s formal tensions between its constant, variegated narrative movement and its haphazard eruptions of carnivalesque spectacle open onto larger questions about the syntax of transitional cinema's social uplift rhetoric.

The key link between film aesthetics and audience reception hinges on the idea that film content was policed in conjunction with the emergence of a transparent narrative film grammar. In other words, the privatization^{xli} (or "individualization" to avoid using an anachronistic term) of the spectator's position corroborated the politics of social reform and ethnic assimilation in 1910s American culture. However, as many slapstick comedienne trick films exemplify, the aesthetic politics of transitional cinema often cut both ways. In other words, the alignment between narrative positioning and moral content was overdetermined by the industry's messy and uneven historical trajectory. As Constance Balides argues in "Cinema Under the Sign of Money," focusing on the dialectic between capitalism and moral censorship, reformist commitments were hardly antithetical to mainstream desires for commercial amusement. "To the extent that reformers explicitly politicized the emerging realm of commercialized recreations, they made leisure visible in a way that undermines a sense of the period as one involving a simple opposition between reformers...and mass culture audiences" (292). In other words, this disciplinary visual grammar emerged paradoxically from the most carnivalesque and unruly political displays.

Apparatus theorists of classical cinema such as Stephen Heath have described the film spectator as a structure made available: "suture describes not just a structure of lack, but an availability of the subject" (84). The key question with these transitional film

comedies—which experiment with the potentials of writing over the image through trick editing techniques—diverts the road to suture (spectator positioning through invisible film language). The idea that cinema at this moment was on the path to becoming what it later became is explicitly untenable here—not that it ever was a good argument in the first place. How can the spectator-subject of film narration be made available simultaneously in two places at once? This violent double-positioning is precisely what these films would effect if we read them the same way that apparatus theorists have deciphered texts by John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, and Orson Welles. Yet, integrating apparatus theory into the transitional film problematic is not a lost cause, because it raises new questions about the subjective effects of this contradictory and richly uneven film syntax.

Transitional film industries kept proliferating works that firmly place their spectator in at least two different positions at once: *Cunégonde Has Visitors* (Lux, 1912), *Leontine's Boat* (Pathé, 1911), *Lea and the Ball of Wool* (Cinès, 1913), and *Rosalie Moves to a New Apartment* (Pathé, 1911) [see fig. 6]. For example, in *Rosalie and Her Phonograph* (Pathé Comica, 1911), a woman undercranks her own body while animating her livingroom objects in pace with her new phonograph's quick-step musical rhythms. (The film feature Sarah Duhamel^{xlii}, a comically rotund comedienne who played the character Rosalie in a popular French comic series—or Jane in the American version). This example is especially elucidating because of the way that it spatializes different temporalities of film cutting. When Rosalie turns the phonograph on, objects and human bodies alike go haywire: Rosalie, her maid, and her elderly father get splattered all over the room along with their living room set. However, at the very instant that the song ends,

life returns to its normal pacing and bodies lose their fantastic capacity for movement, as do everyday objects and furniture. While the phonograph motivates illogical forms of embodiment, the frequent cutting between rhythmic and banal modes of living further compounds the confusion.

Rosalie's spatial and temporal syncopation with her new media technology—she literally occupies the place of the apparatus—was no doubt instructive for her 1911 film spectator. This spectator was so frequently enlisted to identify with figures who progress diegetically in conjunction with the storytelling codes embedded in film technologies. This *Rosalie* film thereby crystallizes what so many other transitional comic films do more abstractly: it diffuses the nightmarish collapse between Rosalie's bodily productivity and the objects of her everyday leisure time (while, not to mention, cross-promoting Pathé's line of phonograph equipment). As in many Duhamel films (such as *Pétronille Wins the Great Steeple-Chase*, 1912), *Rosalie* rationalizes its slew of sexual and industrial displacements by spatializing them across blatantly irrational yet comically legible film cuts.

Betty Pulls the Strings: Embodying Film Syntax

The visibility of comedienne pranksters in transitional filmmaking reveals the industry's ambivalence about the extent of these women's hysterical impacts therein. Metamorphic women repeatedly re-appeared and disappeared from visibility, attesting to their crucial but tenuous places in film's emergent discourse of cross-class narration. The Pathé *Betty* series' reception by the trade press from 1910-11 demonstrates this trajectory. From a review in *The Moving Picture World* of *Betty's* premier installment, *Rebellious*

Betty (1910): “We have already advertised the fact that Betty was comic, and now she is here...Betty’s antics and pranks are distinctly fresh and laughable; she is a mischievous and willful tomboy who shrinks at nothing so long as she can get her own way.”

However, the next review of *Betty Pulls the Strings* (which I will discuss in detail), although still very positive, begins to register the pernicious effects of the film’s derealized comic violence. The reviewer is apparently concerned by a substitution trick in which “secures an inoffending scarecrow to receive the chastisement intended for her, otherwise she might never have played any more tricks.” Despite the reviewer’s partial investment in Betty’s protection from harm, enough emotional distance remains to secure *Betty*’s favorable comic reception: “Betty is a lively individual whose pranks supply amusement for all to see.”

However, this acknowledgment of Betty’s vulnerability—that her corporeality might differ slightly from that of a cartoon character—quickly provoked Betty’s fall from grace. Unable to recover from the suggestion that Betty’s comic reversibility might yield permanent material effects, the *Betty* series experienced a precipitous decline in favorability among trade reviewers, ultimately leading to the end of its distribution in American theaters, despite its continued production and international popularity. Further, though trade journals made a practice of circulating stars’ names to increase audience investment in these actors’ films and characters, the name of the actress who plays Betty was never cited in any of the prolific reviews and responses to her films (her identity is still unknown—despite quite a lot of archival digging by many film historians, including myself).

The MPW expresses its irritation and lack of patience with Betty's violent antics in a review of *Betty Is Punished*: "At last Betty comes to grief. Her activities at last force the landlord to order her out, and the removal is the direct cause of her punishment...Of course it is a funny picture. It couldn't be anything else with Betty in it, but there is rather too much smashing and rough-house in it to make it desirable." This pronounced difference in reception is at first glance quite puzzling, given *Betty's* continued repetition of its iconic rough-housing antics—brusque devices that had always formed the very basis of the series' popularity. While the social uplift argument provides one possible alibi for *Betty's* sudden marginalization, this would not explain why *Betty* was initially embraced since film morality had been policed across the American industry well before *Betty's* July 1, 1910 premiere.

From "Pathé's much talked-about new comedienne" (*NY Dramatic Mirror*) to an "undesirable rough-houser," Betty's reception continued to spiral. The next three *Betty* comedies, *Betty Rolls Along*, *Betty's Apprenticeship*, and *Betty's Boat* (in which Betty sails a toy boat indoors by filling her employers' upstairs bedroom with water until the whole house is flooded), were all met with disdain. Although the *MPW* concedes that "almost any audience will laugh at" *Betty's Apprenticeship*, it warns that its "disposition to make a rough house of [funny situations] is not to be commended." Then, *Betty Rolls Along* was flatly condemned as "one of those destructive comedies that has no real merit beyond a spree of horseplay, which should be banished from motion pictures."

From a disciplinary "straw man" to an out-and-out villain, *Betty's* example belies Henri Bergson's notion of the comic as a social corrective. As Bergson asserts, "Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself about

getting in touch with the rest of his fellow beings. It is the part of laughter to reprove his absentmindedness and wake him out of his dream” (134). Apparently Betty’s callous absent-mindedness had other than its intended corrective effects: “Fortunately, the way she annihilates everything in sight [in *Rebellious Betty*] because she can’t have her way is a caution;” yet, Betty’s indomitable spirit slides all too quickly from “a material source of audience gayety” to “a madcap prankster...who should be banished from motion pictures.” Crucially, *Betty*’s slippage between contrived pratfalls and comic violence with material consequences reveals the defensive position of transitional film comedies, trying to cater simultaneously to contradictory audience desires and reformist mandates. However, more than just embodying a contradiction between low-brow and middle-brow audience tastes, *Betty*’s mediation arguably orchestrated the terms of the whole debate: her tenacious presence was necessary precisely in order to provide the rhetoric (not to mention the imagery) for her repeated vanquishment and annihilation.

Tom Gunning and Rob King write about early and transitional device comedies by focusing on these films’ obsessions with the reversal between means and ends. For example, a mechanical device is repurposed for other than its intended effect, which incites chaos and disruption. Crazy machines go haywire, and practical instruments are wielded for inappropriate purposes, thereby wreaking chaos, anarchy, and mass destruction. In contrast to films in which the machine goes haywire and destroys the world, transitional slapstick comedienne films depict what happens when the living body substitutes for the destructive object. It is not just that the human body behaves too mechanically, thereby representing fears that modernity turns everybody into automatons. Rather, by incorporating its device objects, the woman’s body inhabits a playful,

transitional form that exposes the conspiratorial relation between the machine and the very idea of the human. Philosophical ideals about the underlying humanity or humanism of laughter get obliterated along with the realities of separate, gendered spheres.

Betty Pulls the Strings depicts an escalating series of gags: Betty wanders through public life while wielding a spool of string. Never relinquishing the string herself, she attaches the other end to a stuffed animal to lure a hunter, to a fake wallet to hoodwink a greedy shopper, and wraps it around various poles and street fixtures in order to thwart passing bystanders [See figs. 7 and 8]. While the duped shopper lurches towards the planted wallet, Betty hides out in a crate of perishables inches away from her victim, manipulating the gag, which has to be timed to go off just as the greedy consumer closes in on the clutch. The eruption of the gag is quite literally indexed by Betty's physical presence: she is the wind that makes the weathervane point. However, the gag itself is but a prelude to the force field of Betty's body, which springs into action in the wake of the eruption, causing at least 3 times as much destruction as the device that preceded it.

Formally, the composition of the frame here collapses the space between rascal and victim that other comic gag films take pains to keep separate. In *A Wringing Good Joke* (Edison, 1900), the boy prankster hides at the limits of the frame, half-obsured by the nether-space of the unrepresentable world off-screen. In contrast, Betty hides out in the thick of the action, condensing separate worlds before they've even had a chance to collide. Betty's position here literalizes the film's impulse for narrative centering—an emerging convention that explicitly strays from what Noel Burch describes as early cinema's "non-centered quality," in which significant details might proliferate from any part of the frame. Literalizing slapstick's conventional structure of stringing together a

piecemeal series of gags, the film's syntax is made legible by Betty's physical connection to the chain of incidents she incites.

When Betty's episodic antics escalate into an all-out chase sequence, Betty rides off into the woods on horseback to evade the angry mob that pursues her. Here she performs a climactic trick that sheds light on the film's own subversion of its increasingly dramatic articulations of narrative space. Disguising herself as a scarecrow, Betty hovers mid-center of the frame while the angry mob blows right by her, still in pursuit of her horse, which is now mounted by an actual scarecrow. In the first part of the film, Betty stands in for the device or machine: the effect of disorder is contingent upon the proximity of her body to the site of the calamity. Now, it is the device or decoy that substitutes for Betty, leading her charging pursuers along a "forking path" (to invoke Gunning's metaphor for early slapstick historiography)^{xliii} that puts as much physical distance as possible between rascal and victim. This substitution joke forces the film to rely on increasingly abstract techniques of montage to cut between the parallel spaces of Betty's "invisibility act" and the runaway scarecrow. I would argue that Betty's recurring position at the center of the frame, more effectively embodied precisely due to her temporary concealment, reflects the ambivalent position of the film's increasingly disembodied, individualized spectator during this transitional 1910 film moment. Laughing both *with* and *at* Betty, her 1910 spectator negotiates transitions in cinema's body politics through this film's ambiguous double-coding: it simultaneously provokes derisive ridicule and festive jubilee.

Betty gives feminist film theory meta-historical traction for rethinking the archival politics of the gendered emergence of spectatorship. As her mixed trade reception

demonstrates, this comedienne's antics suspend the viewer between ambivalent registers of bodily mimicry: for example, between Betty's immobile scarecrow position from which she watches life pass by her, and her gleeful, taunting eruptions once her pursuers have been displaced to a different frame. The oscillation between embodiment and disembodiment that Betty's performance triggers provides a very interesting context for rethinking feminist film theory's crucial return to early cinema. As Hansen argues, early film audiences identify with film images, not for the experiences represented as such, but precisely on the basis of their having been lost. For example, imagine how an urban immigrant in 1910 New York City might feel when Betty takes to the woods on horseback after wreaking havoc in the town.

Betty's maneuvers between the politics of cinematic loss and narrative film's formal rationalization of the signifier gives us traction to rethink the place of the body that gets caught up in processes of cinematic transition. In other words, what types of "mimetic anxieties" circulate between viewer and text in transitional comedienne films? Given the ambivalent position of women in modern industrial culture—for example, their "liberation" as primarily commodity consumers—what does it mean when these "mimetic anxieties" become funny? Just to be clear, by "mimetic anxieties," I refer to the identification with experience through the subject of loss; from the urban immigrant's and black Southern migrant's losses of "nature," to the comic gag's loss of coherence, transitional cinema represents a key site for acting out what one can only understand as the repetition of a prior experience. Always for the second time, how do these mimetic negotiations, when channeled through the locus of the unruly comedienne's body, become impetuses for formal experimentations with the possibilities of the camera?

These “possibilities” designate both the medium’s avant-garde potential—in other words, its “forking paths” and roads not “taken”—as well as its innovative capacities to integrate its own signifiers, which is the discourse of narrative cinema.

Princess Nicotine: Comedy and Subjective Ambivalence

Princess Nicotine; or the Smoke Fairies (J. Stuart Blackton, 1909) inverts the relation between narrative integration and unruly disruption enacted by *Betty*. Whereas Betty’s outbursts get rationalized through the film’s construction of narrative space, *Princess Nicotine* exercises absolute control and restraint over the bodies of its female performers in order to pull off its elaborate visual tricks [see fig. 9]. In 1912, Frederick Talbot described *Princess Nicotine* as “a distinct novelty...dainty in its conception, fascinating in its themes, and finished in its production...all the subterfuges known to the cinematographic trick art were pressed into service, rendering it completely mystifying from beginning to end” (242).

Somewhat late for an American trick film, Blackton’s *Princess Nicotine* derives its innovative optical techniques from its baffling social themes. It depicts the plight of a smoker who dreams that two impish, doll-sized nicotine fairies^{xliv} pay him a visit. The fairies hide out in his cigar box; one lodges herself in his pipe, which he is then unable to light; the other hands him a flower, in which her own head is embedded: he literally chokes on her close-up when he leans in to smell the flower and she blows a puff of cigarette smoke into his face. A stop-motion sequence transforms the rose into a cigar, which the smoker is again unable to enjoy because the fairy siphons away all of the smoke. Finally, he manages to light a Sweet Caporal brand cigarette, while Princess

Nicotine performs a somewhat ritualistic fire dance with his matchsticks. This alarms the smoker, who extinguishes the fire with soda water, and accidentally sprays himself in the process. The hoser gets hosed, but the trick here overshadows the gag: doused with soda water, Princess Nicotine literally melts and then disappears from the image just as the film itself ends.

The visual apparatus orchestrated by *Princess Nicotine* can be seen as a limit case of the trick devices and techniques employed by Smith and Blackton since the early days of the Vitagraph Company. From their extensive use of miniature props and cigar smoke in their Spanish and American War re-enactments, to the thematization of childhood and smoking in their comedies (*A Quiet Smoke*, 1899), *Princess Nicotine* inherits a great deal more from early Vitagraph films than their uses of magic and trickery. Arresting experimentations with cinematic scale were equally vital to Vitagraph's comedic rhetoric. For example, in *A Visit to the Spiritualist* (1899), a country hobo witnesses first his handkerchief and then his hat and coat grow to enormous proportions before transforming into ghosts and hobgoblins. Vitagraph comedies hinged upon the pleasurable experience of split-belief: *Spiritualist* at once ridicules the naïve rube who gets duped by the trick capacities of the medium, while offering an alibi for viewers to indulge in these very trick spectacles. This contradictory desire both to discipline the "other" body and simultaneously to imagine the world from its less canny position no doubt motivates audiences' sheer delight in witnessing these absurd transformations in cinematic scale. When the rube's hat explodes into a hobgoblin, audiences found both a comedic pretense and a concrete image for projecting alternative forms of their aesthetic realities.

Princess Nicotine draws on devices from Vitagraph's early trick comedies and then pushes them to their aesthetic and political limits by projecting them onto the film's central objects of fascination: the tiny bodies of the nicotine fairies. Listing several key aspects of this process will help to tease out the film's dialectic between the comedienne and the medium: 1) the trick apparatus, which strikes an intense juxtaposition between the tiny bodies of the fairies and the almost grotesque scale of everyday life; 2) The gendered dynamic of the smoker's aggression toward the fairies, and the way his aggression stands in for the broader thematic of modernity. For example, in one image, the man blows puffs of smoke in Princess Nicotine's face, which swallow up her tiny body like the onslaught of industrial fuel exhaust; 3) The fairies' elemental attraction to fire, which they seem impervious to, and the very intriguing finale when Princess Nicotine melts and disappears after the smoker squirts her with soda water; and 4) the broader implications of this film for thinking about how the slapstick comedienne's body gets caught up in the medium's negotiations between "exhibitionist" spectacle and the bourgeois legitimacy of film narrative: between its unique innovations and its self-standardization as a commodity.

This film is both completely unique and paradoxically all about its own commodification. It would certainly not be inaccurate to read *Princess Nicotine* as a glorified advertisement for Sweet Caporal brand cigars and cigarettes. For example, in a transitional sequence, when Blackton's stop-motion animation transforms Princess Nicotine's flower into a Sweet Caporal cigar, the miracle of spontaneous appearance gets literalized as an impetus for the exchangeability of value. This transubstantiation from cinematic conjuring to commodity standardization provides an alibi for the nicotine

fairies' own contradictory positions between unruly performance and visual fetishism. At one point, the younger fairy moons the smoker, who frequently peers at her through his magnifying lens. The elaborate on-set optics, which use trick mirrors, larger-than-life props, and hidden wires, solidify the film's apparatus of disavowal. In a crazy, interlocking machine of commodity, psychosexual, and technological fetishisms, this film is all about the aesthetic possibilities of what it means to defer a "traumatic look"^{xlv}—which is how Freud defines fetishism.

Indeed, the representability of the fairies requires a completely different framing and set of objects than the full shots of the smoker in his armchair: looking at these women involves transforming one's perception of what it means to look. Cuts to closer views of the fairies are framed by the smoker's gaze at them through a magnifying glass. In their solo shots, the use of enormous, trick props dwarfs the images of the fairies. These include a cigar-box large enough for the fairies to stand upright in it, a corn-cob pipe with a bowl as large as a barrel, and property matchsticks measuring 30 inches in length.

Susan Stewart discusses the ideological implications of aesthetic scale in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, The Gigantic, The Souvenir, The Collection*. According to Stewart, who invokes Derrida's distinction between the totality of the book and the open wound of the trace, "miniature writing" (micrographia) "depends upon the contrast between the physical and the abstract features of the mark...In those examples of micrographia which form a picture we see an emphasis upon healing the skewed relation between meaning and materiality" (38). Whereas the miniature object—Stewart focuses on the popularity of miniature books in the 19th Century—utterly transforms the physical

scale of the sign, its meaning remains relatively stable. Perhaps this is also why Stewart posits the miniature as an ideal form for the discourse of commercial advertising: it acts upon colossal things, from epic sagas to statuesque pillars, and makes them ever more portable, accessible, convenient and handy for everyday use and consumption.

The commercial appeals of the miniature were not lost on Smith and Blackton, who were famous for churning out adaptations of great literary works as single-reel short films. Their “ability to condense a full-length novel or play to ten minutes of screen time is quite staggering” (Slide, 21). Their adaptations-in-miniature include *Francesca di Rimini* (1907), *Romeo and Juliet* (1908), *Macbeth* (1908), *East Lynne* (1908), *Richard III* (1908), *Oliver Twist* (1909), *Les Miserables*, and *Shakespeare’s Tragedy, King Lear* (1909). “Even D.W. Griffith at Biograph could not boast such an output of literary adaptations.” Special effects adapted from the language of the trick film were frequently enlisted in Vitagraph’s efforts to elevate cinema to an intertextual art. For example, in their ambitious multi-reel production of *The Life of Moses*, as A.E. Smith recounts in his autobiography *Two Reels and a Crank*, the conundrum of how to film the parting of the Red Sea was resolved through recourse to trick photography and the use of multiple exposures. “The closing-of-the-Red Sea episode was made at a place where one might least expect a biblical odyssey of such scope to take place—Coney Island. The scene was done in double exposure” (218). Blackton first shot the Egyptians walking along the wet stony beach, and then exposed two huge waves breaking over the soldiers. “In the finished shot the huge waves cracked effectively against the soldiers from both sides” (218).

Miniaturization was an especially gendered special effect in Vitagraph's discourse of social uplift—which hinged on addressing the spectator as an individualized entity, as opposed to a member of an unruly mass public. The trope of micrographia appears in a number of Vitagraph's quality film productions. Marketed with chichi French labels as “films de luxe,” these intertextual adaptations attempt to smooth over the incoherence of their narratives-in-miniature by making magical appeals to the spectator. For example, plot ellipses in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are quickly forgotten when Gladys Hulette, playing a micrographic Puck, translates an overly wordy intertitle through a series of special effects. Titania magically disappears and reappears, while Puck gets a running start from the back of the stage to “uplift” himself into the sky. *Midsummer's* tricky reconfigurations of stage depth follow Puck “the trickster” across several cuts, through a dreamy split-frame traveling matte shot signifying some kind of ethereal space, to an overlit field where he plucks the herb, and back again on a return journey that mirrors and inverts the first three shots.

Talbot explains this pseudo-narrative proliferation of tricks as an effort to condense the picture play “to the irreducible minimum without forfeiting coherency” (146). Aestheticizing Puck's narrative antics with a dreamy series of traveling matte shots, *Midsummer* at once represents the lengthy intertitles that sandwich this sequence without having to unpack them. A 1910 issue of the *Vitagraph Bulletin* pitches this film: “Students of the great dramatist's works will thoroughly enjoy the careful pictorial presentation of the many scenes, while the whole play is so clearly portrayed that it will not fail to delight the spectator who is not familiar with the works of Shakespeare.” Literalizing the narrative condensation of meaning with their magically tiny bodies,

micrographic women further represented the fantasy of spectatorship as a private or individualized experience. Whether framed through a magnifying glass or on behalf of a wordy intertitle, micrographic women physically corroborated the cross-class dreams of spectator privatization.

Although a “trick film” through and through (as opposed to a narrative film deploying tricks as special effects), *Princess Nicotine* vaunts its intertextual virtuosity by staging its tricks in depth in front of the camera instead of manipulating them in post-production. For example, the shots featuring both the smoker and the fairies refrain from the less sophisticated technique of double-exposure, instead achieving their gross distortions of scale with elaborate on-set optics [see fig. 10]. Blackton shot these sequences by placing the fairies on a large platform in front of the camera, and then filming them through a mirror positioned well behind the smoker, so that the fairies appear tiny in relation to him. The cinematographic trick here literally hinges on the fairies’ mimetic embodiment: their absolute visual disciplining in front of the mirror to stage their narrative unruliness.

What is perhaps most interesting about *Princess Nicotine*, and in contrast with a gag-turned-chase film like *Betty Pulls the Strings*, is the undecidability of its comic gestures. Is laughter the appropriate response when the man blows smoke at the fairy, covering her in a Sweet Caporal brand haze? Moreover, what kinds of gendered and political anxieties does this film awaken, and what does it mean when these anxieties become funny? In *Betty*, our laughter is gleeful and exuberant, rejoicing in Betty’s intimate upturning of everyday norms and conventions; in *Princess Nicotine*, laughter is decidedly more ambivalent. Even the film’s ironic premise as a traditional fairytale

spawned from the desire for modern nicotine consumption comes across as kind of a sad joke. The fairies' performances, although playfully comic, had to be physically meticulous, lest an errant gesture give the lie to the film's flawless aesthetics of distortion. Whereas Betty's antics foreground the thematic disorder underlying narrative cinema's drive for total coherence, *Princess Nicotine* aestheticizes distortion, provoking the filmmakers (Blackton and cameraman Tony Gaudio) to experiment with new means for normalizing the unruly bodies that threaten to expose their elaborate trick apparatus.

Vitagraph Stardom: The Unruly Aesthetics of Spectator Positioning

Both Pathé's and Vitagraph's transitional slapstick comedienne films experiment with irrational techniques and with perverse cultural scenarios to develop strategies for positioning the spectator in the thick of the narration. However, rather than accommodating an explicit moral position through the spectator's escapist absorption, the spectator's ideological positioning paradoxically emerges from these films' messy, hybridized, and ambiguous aesthetics. Again, in both Spadoni's and Thompson's histories of transitional Vitagraph film form, narrative innovations in deep staging are interpreted as instrumental to the later development of classical film style. Spadoni argues: "Through these stagings, Vitagraph was rehearsing aspects of the highly 'absorptive' shot/reverse-shot pattern – for some film theorists have found that *holding the spectator precisely there* is epitomized by shot/reverse-shot's pinning (or 'suturing') the spectator into the spatial system of the classical narrative film" (330). Thompson's reading brackets classical narration as an entity unto itself that "exists alongside" (410) primitive devices; citing David Bordwell in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, Thompson

describes the ideals of classical narration as characterized “primarily by its degrees of knowledge, self-consciousness, and communicativeness” (411). Pushing against Thompson’s teleological proclivities, I would emphasize the interarticulation between “primitive” and “classical” devices in transitional film strategies.

Focusing on comedienne trick films, as opposed to a select canon of “quality” melodramas, provokes us to explore new historiographic methodologies. Rather than charting a linear genealogy that would lead up to something like the corroboration between visual transparency and classical ideology that apparatus theorists have deconstructed (Colin MacCabe, Jean-Louis Baudry, Stephen Heath, Jean-Louis Comolli, Laura Mulvey, the *Cahier* Editors),^{xlvi} transitional slapstick comedienne films are driven by their contradictory relations between visual narration and social positioning. As I have argued, this disjunctive interplay between social uplift and narrative integration assumes very different rhetorical guises between the internationally dominant Vitagraph and Pathé companies’ productions—aesthetic contrasts that dovetail with their different market positions in the increasingly nationalistic American film industry.

Transitional historiographies of Vitagraph productions especially tend to gloss over the impact of the comic to negotiate upheavals in film language. Rather than representing a comedy of movement (to invoke Freud’s adaptation of Bergson) premised on physical action and clowning, Vitagraph films effect a thoroughly ambiguous mode of address. In their experimental attempts to cut up comic vision—epitomized by the fragmented views of the tiny nicotine fairies—Vitagraph narrations hinge on making the part stand in for the whole. These films are fetishistic par excellence. *Princess Nicotine*’s especially fetishistic film antics—premiered on compacting female corporeality as an

impetus for commodity standardization—went part and parcel with the company’s burgeoning star apparatus. Substituting for the trick film’s apparatus of substitution devices (trick splices, stop-motion cinematography, object animation, and multiple exposures), Vitagraph stardom, like its becoming-obsolete trick genres, capitalized on the spectator’s over-investment in the partiality of vision. According to Freud’s definition, the fetish both combats and resurrects the child’s belief in the mother’s penis before his traumatic discovery of her anatomical lack; fetishistic desire is thereby animated by the constant conflict between “an unwelcome perception...and [its] opposite wish” (*Miscellaneous Papers*, 200). In other words, fetishistic vision solicits the perception of a traumatic image, but in a form that defers actual awareness of its traumatic reality. Fetishistic vision hinges on substituting the part for the whole in order to cover over the gaping hole wrought by the inevitable detachment of this moving part.

Vitagraph’s very first moving picture star, Florence Turner (“The Vitagraph Girl”), could be an eponym for the double-vision of star iconicity. A reporter for *Green Book Magazine* lauds Turner’s iconic “versatility,” which inspired “over 6,000 proposals of marriage...all from men who have admired and worshipped her from afar” (Feb, 1912). The article emphasizes Turner’s enigmatic qualities: “She has a wide range of roles; she is pathetic, grotesque, humorous, sentimental. Now she is a comical little ‘Louie Freear;’ now she is a tragedy queen; anon she is a woman of fashion.” The writer then free-associates between Turner’s affective range and her physical ability to perform her own ethnic ambiguity: “Miss Turner has a curious blend of nationalities—Spanish, Italian, Scotch, and American, which makes for great natural histrionic ability...She can absolutely disguise her face or obliterate her own charming personality. She can be

serious; she can romp; she can laugh; she can joke.” It quite appears through juxtaposition as if Turner’s affective range would map neatly onto her ethnic ancestry. The important point is that not a single one of Turner’s alluring qualities would suffice in isolation—it is only interesting that Turner looks Scotch insofar as she potentially also looks Italian or Spanish. Devotion to Turner’s star image thereby demands a total disarticulation between the person and her many shifting appearances.

Turner’s persona concretizes the gendered conflicts between private vision and public exposure that increasingly characterized everyday modern experience. The Victorian truism, “A place for everything, and everything in its place” (Samuel Smiles) was radically and routinely being displaced by what Georg Simmel described as “a new phase of an old struggle...a struggle of life against form *as such*, against the principle of form” (“The Conflict in Modern Culture,” 1914). From Cubist experimentation in painting, to Frank Lloyd Wright’s “open plan” architecture, to surrealist automatic writing, to the trick representability of nicotine fairies through cinematic cutting, the very idea of form (as place and position) emerged paradoxically from playing with the image of its displacement. Michel Foucault describes this fragmentation of form in modern discourse as “the shadow cast by man as he emerged in the field of knowledge...the inexhaustible double that presents itself to reflection as the blurred projection of what man is in truth” (*The Order of Things*, 356). In other words, with the erosion of theological certainties, truth itself—projected onto a blank screen, as it were—can no longer appear as transparent.

In a sense, trick films like Chomón’s *Wonderful Mirror* provides a meta-discourse on the fragmentation of human nature. Women’s bodies as objects of trick manipulation

proved especially ripe for refracting the temptations of philosophical or visual transparency. However, stardom came up with a perfect alibi for deferring awareness of this refraction: the gaze at the other in its mutilated form. Whereas Julianne Mathieu sees three discrete, miniaturized images of herself when she looks into the mirror, Turner's spectator fan cannot help but condense all of the idol's moving parts into one fetishistic totality upon the instance of a close-up.

The fetishization of the motion picture medium's contingencies had a marked impact on discourses of laughter in transitional cinema. Anthony Slide, William Everson, and Walter Kerr all characterize American film comedy from the 1910s, with the notable exception of Keystone, as dominated by "polite comedies of manners." Epitomized by bourgeois domestic farces featuring Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew^{xlvi} (the latter entity refers to Drew's spousal colleague, Gladys Rankin and Lucille McVey consecutively), these comedic shorts strive for George Meredith's ideal of "thoughtful laughter" above embodied hilarity. As Gilbert Seldes waxes in *The Seven Lively Arts*, "In them there was nothing offensive, except an enervating dullness...And apart from the agreeable manners of Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Drew nothing made them successful except the corrupt desire, on the part of the spectators, to be refined." The hyper-visibility of comedy's generic domestication further corroborates the sexist fallacy that women at the time were incapable of playing comedy as well as men^{xlvi}—an implicit premise of Walter Kerr's "seminal" history of silent film comedy in *The Silent Clowns* (i.e. Chaplin, Lloyd, Keaton, Langdon). Yet, there are of course cracks even in the emergent apparatus of Hollywood star industry fetishism.

Female stars' commercial legitimacy, as Turner's example demonstrates so compellingly, hinged upon their ability to hold out against their own legibility: to retain that quality of mystique. In order to proliferate fan desire, this projection of mystique also fostered a sense of perversity that potentially opened onto more overtly politicized experiences of laughter. Laughter so often arises through surprise and reversal. For example, we might laugh if a movie star whom we had presumed to be Scotch all of a sudden appears Spanish or German. Given that national identity was already a fraught topic in 1910s American film culture (and much more so later into that decade)—in no small part due to the industry's own designs—the laughter at Turner's ethnic shape-shifting might not always have been so innocuous or easily commoditized.

While French productions by Pathé, Gaumont, Éclair, and Luxe were ostentatiously marked as not "American," movie stars like Turner were advertised as intriguingly foreign. This interplay between filmdom's exotic allures and its domestic reassurances tapped into the most profound contradictions animating cinema's public architecture as a medium offering increasingly private looks. As Stephen Kearn puts it, "As the public became more intrusive [telecommunications, electricity, photography], the individual retreated into a more strongly fortified and isolated private world. That is why we can observe in this period both a greater interpenetration and a greater separation of the two worlds [public and private]" (*The Culture of Space and Time*, 191). These gendered tensions between the public and the private, between their repeated collapse and innovative re-inscription, assumed a host of different affective guises on the level of vision through motion picture narrative.

Vitagraph films such as *Hypnotizing the Hypnotist*, *The Picture Idol*^{xlix}, *An Elephant on His Hands*, *Nellie the Beautiful Housemaid*, *The Oriental Mystic*, and *Her Crowning Glory* play upon the reciprocal terrors of public exposure and private invasion, repeatedly upturning the spectator's own dramatic immersion in fantasies of insecurity with climactic moments of levity and hilarity.¹ In *Hypnotizing the Hypnotist*, Florence Turner plays the role of a hysterical bourgeois woman, whose theatrical symptoms become the objects of two rivaling male hypnotists. Vulnerable to the ploys of these psychic puppeteers, Turner's character ultimately regains partial diegetic control by having her body fragmented and served up for the position of the spectator. She mimics her own hypnosis, arresting the camera in a close-up on her face (Turner was famous for her facial impersonations) that once intensifies and comically deflects the invasion of her visual privacy.

Similar ambivalent comic climaxes often took the narrative form of enhanced visual framing. Evil stepmother Flora Finch's prized tresses are lopped off in *Her Crowning Glory* (a substitute castration that keeps "the wish" alive). While the film's domestic physical comedy is largely driven by gross contrasts in proportion between the obese John Bunny and his scrawny comic partner Flora Flinch, the close-up of Finch's chopped off hair upturns the film's entire spatial frame of reference, thereby unhinging its harmless clowning at a visual proximity tailored to the position of the spectator. Similarly, in *Nellie the Beautiful Housemaid*, a racial punchline upsets the spectator's ideological comprehension of the film's comic politics paradoxically by intensifying her/his sense of visual immersion in the narrative. The film plays upon the forms of social misrecognition precipitated by disembodied modes of telecommunication. Nellie White

responds to a want ad in the newspaper, requesting a “pleasant young woman as housekeeper for three elderly [white] men. Apply by letter only.” In her application, White describes herself as “23 years of age, good looking, with a stylish figure, and a first class cook.” However, in a comic climax that can be best described as a racial sight gag (to invoke Noel Carroll’s *Comedy Incarnate*), Nellie White startles her employers on her first day work: as Stewart puts it, White turns out to be none other than a “large, gaudily dressed Black woman” (Stewart, 122).

Stewart reads *Nellie* as a metaphor for the racial politics of black female representability in transitional film comedies: “The fluctuation between Black figures as curiosities and characters, known and unknown, predictable and surprising is more pronounced *during* the transitional era than either before or after classical narrative style is codified” (109). Fragmenting the female image for the visual pleasure and private accessibility of the film spectator often mobilized conflicting ideological ends, giving freer rein to scenarios of intense gender, racial, and class unruliness. In other words, the comic flight from public-private tensions—which often took the form of closer visual framing—articulated potentially very dangerous social messages. The relationship between form and content, between visual release and ideological security, was dramatically uneven and contradictory across slapstick comedienne films by Vitagraph and by every other film company.

The industry’s enthusiasm to commoditize its stars’ images for the private enjoyment of the spectator, promoting commercial motives that often outstripped their ideological legibility, sometimes erupted in violent scenes of physical revolt. Miriam Hansen describes the riots that took place at deceased film idol Rudolph Valentino’s

wake in 1924, as tens of thousands of female fans sought to gain entry through threats of physical violence and even suicide. “His female fans assailed the barriers that classical cinema was engaged in reaffirming, taking the star system more literally than the institution might have intended. Once women had found a fetish of their own, they were not content with merely gazing at it; they strove to touch it” (294). Women stormed the scene in their hysterical grief, fighting over buttons from Valentino’s suit, and seizing candles and flowers from the funeral home. “Enabled by the temporary friction between consumerism and patriarchal ideology,” the contradictions between the industry’s short-term market goals and long-term ideological dreams temporarily opened up a space of active rebellion and social protest for thousands of female fans interpellated to the point of hysteria.

Thinking about comedy’s “unknowability” as a form of world-shattering, as a temporary resolution to an unresolvable contradiction achieved by means of upturning, feminist historiographies of film comedy really come into focus. The spectator’s retrenched visual positioning time and again emerged from the scenario of her/his anarchic scattering. Indeed, by expanding the archive of early films that we privilege for present day theoretical analysis, we see how certain comedienne films provide their own historiographic meta-narratives about the uneven emergence of film form and narration. These very social politics of women’s simultaneous visual proximity and thematic uncertainty are explicitly foregrounded in a Florence Turner independent production, *Daisy Doodad’s Dial* (1914, Larry Trimble). The film depicts the plight of housewife Daisy Doodad (Turner), who dreams of entering a face-making competition. Unfortunately, in her excess of enthusiasm she impairs her mimetic muscles and is forced

to stay home in bed with a swollen face while her husband goes on to win the glory. A renewed opportunity presents itself when a second face-making competition is announced in the paper. Perhaps through a kind of social muscle memory, Daisy's facial rehearsals again lead to her undoing: she obsessively practices her facial mimicry in public and gets herself arrested for "disturbing the peace" on a crowded train. While the world of the film is explicitly dominated by men, Daisy's presence therein is literally infectious: the men around her involuntarily mimic her facial caricatures (even over the telephone) while attempting to resolve the many conflicts that her public presence poses. Eventually, Daisy's lack of civic place exhausts her, and she decides to isolate herself alone in her room.

Daisy's private containment becomes an impetus for the film to try to resolve the defensive narcissistic behavior (anti-social face-making in public) that she performs in response to her social exclusion. Alone in her room, Daisy has a bad dream in which she is visited by a horde of spectral superimpositions, one after another, of her own face executing the various comical and grotesque expressions that she had rehearsed on the train. Employing the trick devices of double-exposure and stop-motion photography, the film thereby decontextualizes and derealizes Daisy's public embodiment. While her face (all too cinematically) has become the locus of her potential for social disruption, further disembodying this face [see fig. 11] somehow enacts a temporary means of redress to its civic dangers: in other words, the symptom becomes the cause. *Daisy Doodad's Dial* reflects on its own film historical position by foregrounding the explicit contradiction between the fetishistic images that arrest and emplace the spectator, and their often unruly narrative framing and wayward social connotations.

The Rhetoric of Assimilation: Uncanny Bodies and Trick Obsolescence

Whereas we might appropriate independent productions like *Daisy Doodad's Dial* as feminist meta-texts,^{li} Vitagraph's self-reflexive representations of identity politics were often more enigmatic. For example, *The Oriental Mystic* (1909) orchestrates an intriguing and altogether puzzling interplay among women's slapstick comedy, ethnically-coded metamorphosis and the narrative politics of trick filmmaking. *Oriental Mystic* unconsciously represents these entanglements between foreign bodies' tenuous positions in motion pictures and the becoming-obsolete rhetoric of the trick genre. The film depicts the antics of a Turkish^{lii} mystic Omar, who motivates the trick capacities of the medium by terrorizing Miss Weatherby ("a maiden lady of uncertain years") and her maid. Unlike the shape-shifting bodies of American convicts who break off their limbs and metamorphose into carnival "attractions" (*Disintegrated Convict*), or the micrographic proclivities of transitional slapstick comediennes (*Princess Nicotine*), bodies marked by their national differences exhibit haunting capacities for corporeal camouflage. In *Billboard's* summary: "The police appear, but Omar evades them by vanishing through or into a mirror. They can see him plainly, but at the same time are unable to catch him."

Internalizing the mirror's visual mimesis, Omar takes cinema's assimilationist rhetoric to its embodied limits: his reflexive integration is explicitly represented as uncanny. When not derealizing his body by taking flight in mirrors, Omar literally retreats into the walls, "leaving a Turkish pattern in his wake and at the same time disappearing." He scares the police off the scene by collapsing into his own clothing,

motivating the film's object animation of his body-less pants and shirt. Adorning Miss Weatherby's home with hollowed out signs of his bodily remainders, at once placeless and potentially omnipresent, Omar is literally caught between the medium's trick "attractions" and its impetus for "integration." Taking the idea of "integration" to its cinematic conclusions—as a disjunctive mirror, as an animate absence, and as a paradoxically non-exchangeable sign—Omar inspires terror the more his body becomes like the medium itself.

Omar's fugitive trick theater of visibility and decorporeality is ultimately tied up by a throwback to an earlier mode of comic resolution. In the end, the maid accidentally "produces a body" by rolling up the mystic in an Oriental carpet, which she takes outside and starts beating. Perhaps since the rug already bears an Oriental pattern, it negates the mystic's trick capacities by making their powers of camouflage redundant? In other words, only the rug's Oriental pattern can assert a physical limit the mystic's otherwise limitless bodily metamorphosis (in earlier versions of metamorphic convict escape films such as *Disintegrated Convict* and *Invisible Thief*, the aesthetics of re-incarceration seem much more arbitrary). Either way, the maid has unwittingly trapped and flogged Omar, leading to his arrest and capture by the police. This mode of comic resolution, in which a desexualized woman beats and chastises a wayward or prurient male, is of course a trope of early comic films such as *The Gay Shoe Clerk* (1903) and *Kiss Me* (1904). Yet, here Omar's accidental chastisement by the maid is not quite enough—the film does not end until Omar's punishment gets handed over to the law, to the police who will restore domestic as well as aesthetic order.

Disarming the maid's own legacy of slapstick mischief by means of Omar's uncanny ethnic difference, the film enlists both comic and civil correctives to its gender and nationality problems. It literally pits female antics against ethnic tricks, resolving the one by means of the other. *The Oriental Mystic* thereby rehearses a range of affective responses to the dual enticements and terrors of the body threatening to become too much like the medium itself. Ultimately, *Oriental Mystic* eradicates its foreign intruder by turning Omar's corporeal camouflage against him in a proliferation of racist orientalisms.

While Omar gets incarcerated on the cusp of Vitagraph's own trick obsolescence, Pathé's prolific comic trick film series (*Betty*, *Jane*, *Rigadin* with Mistinguett, and *Little Moritz*) encountered ambivalent and often hostile reception in the US market. In contrast to Vitagraph's fetishistic iterations of the comic, Pathé invested increasingly in action-based narrative images. These grew in quantity with the studio's proclivity for serializing women's bodily performances across dozens of film reels. Having decentralized all of its production units by 1913 (including its popular newsreels and comic series which had been the last two reserved for direct financing), Pathé attempted to regain its footing in the United States market with *The Perils of Pauline* and various "serial queen" adventure spinoffs (*Exploits of Elaine* and *Pearl of the Army*). A similar rhetoric of bodily invincibility and desire to test the limits of women's capacities to withstand physical injuries drove their narrative movement across episodes and diegetic spaces.

The range of strategies to depict how an imaginary film world might materialize in response to women's shape-shifting destructiveness varied from series to series and from serial to serial. Rosalie's (Duhamel) destructive moving day antics mobilize the expansion of diegetic space, motivating a split-screen when she recklessly tears down a

wall in an attempt to hang up a painting (*Rosalie Moves*, Roméo Bosetti, 1911). Less destructively, Pearl White's "perilous" sense of adventure provokes her to uncover hidden caverns and overlooked technologies within her ever shifting serialized universe. For example, in *The Lightning Raider* (1919), Lightning's (White) appetite for criminal intrigue becomes an impetus for registering ethnic difference.

In one episode, Lightning barely escapes from the clutches of a deadly octopus lurking under a trap door at underworld leader Wu Fang's secret hideout. The transgression or erosion of spatial barriers, for Lightning, always presents a threat to her physical safety and moral integrity. In its thoroughly conservative serialization of adventure, *Lightning* displaces bodily play onto spatial enlargement. In all of her film serials, White's body must be perpetually at risk—as she lacks Eva's springy legs or the kitchen maid's re-attachable hands. White's serial antics thereby displace bodily metamorphosis onto spatial or geographical narration. White's corporeality cannot undergo significant alteration, which would be tantamount to irreversible harm, because her body itself is now thoroughly disarticulated from the attractions of the medium technology. In fact, despite these serials' emphases on White's daredevil physicality (or Grace Cunard's or Ruth Roland's), their characters are really not so much bodies but persons: psychologized entities that move through space not to test the limits of movement, but of the character psychology that provokes and motivates movement.

Jennifer Bean describes the adventure queen's discourse as a "technology of early stardom...[that] flaunt[s] catastrophe, disorder, and disaster rather than continuity and regulation" (407). At once mobilizing and containing the female fan's enthusiasm to "touch the fetish," women's melodramatic pratfalls in these serials attempt to humanize

the very indexical lures instantiated by slapstick comedienne domestic disaster films (*Betty's Boat*, *Rosalie Moves*, *Cunégonde Has Visitors*). As Keith and Proctor put it succinctly in 1910: We have “‘high-class patronage’ and want no more silly comedies from Europe” (Bowser, 129). Censoring French studios’ prolific comedienne series (*Rosalie*, *Betty*^{liii}, *Cunégonde*, and Mistinguett’s and Berthe Dagmar’s^{liv} frequent appearances in Pathé Comica and Gaumont series respectively), American exhibitors and trade reviewers instead showered praise on women whose visual unruliness provided moral packaging. Pearl Dare’s and Elaine Dodge’s pratfalls are suspenseful rather than anarchic: they attempt to repair the disjunct between bodily positioning and ideological ambiguity endemic to Vitagraph’s hybridized iterations of comedienne antics. No doubt, this was at least in part due to the heightened scrutiny and criticism that foreign comedies were subjected to by U.S. industry manufacturers and by moral censorship boards. Xenophobic trade press discourse effectively put pressure on foreign producers to resolve all of the ideological contradictions of filmmaking. The format of the serial, with its piecemeal negotiation of its own narrative legibility, provided an amenable format for this task.^{lv}

In contrast, the episodic structure of the film series allowed for slapstick comediennes to indulge, rather than to serialize, the destructiveness bound up in their senses of adventure. Like later television iterations of the standard series form such as *I Love Lucy* and *Roseanne*, no matter how much havoc Betty and Rosalie wreak, all is back to normal by the onset of the subsequent episode. These comedienne series typically motivate their elaborate formal articulations of embodied spaces with improbable but resonant situations of female unruliness. For example, in *Cunégonde Has Visitors* (1912),

Cunégonde and her rubbish family race against the clock to clean her employers' home more expediently so that they can accumulate leisure time. Cunégonde dusts the white furniture with filth from the kitchen; her mother takes ducks from the pond outside and leaves them in the bathtub; her father douses the piano and then the rest of the livingroom with buckets of water until it rains down through the floorboard onto Cunégonde's employers below; and her sister just swats at things with a mop until all of the dishes break. In what Mariann Lewinsky refers to as "their rustic zeal," Cunégonde and her family force the camera into a series of increasingly improbable positions through attempts to offer a coherent rendering of their wildly illogical movements across bourgeois domestic space—including their eventual collapse through the soggy floorboards.

This trope of the unruly maid who destroys hearth and home across a continuous series of views provides a recurring premise for Pathé's *Rigadin* comedies. For example, in *A Shy Youth* (Georges Monca, 1910), Mistinguett and her fellow domestics comically repurpose an array of household objects in increasingly erratic attempts to distract the bumbling young Rigadin (Charles Prince) from their schemes to throw a wild party while their employers are out of town. By the end of a given episode, like in *Betty's Boat* or *Betty Pulls the Strings*, no wall or floorboard of the home has survived the forcefield of the comedienne's undercranked body.

In *Pétronille Wins the Steeplechase*, a very interesting reworking of a standard comic chase plot, Pétronille moonlights improbably as a substitute horse jockey for a rider half her size. After pawning her antique clock to place a "sure bet" on a racehorse whose jockey has been waylaid by a water hazard, Pétronille springs into action, leading

a brigade of racing horses down the train tracks, along a canal, across urban thoroughfares, and through an increasingly inappropriate range of modern industrial spaces. She somehow negates the improbability of her own viability as a jockey with the impossibility of the horses' capacity to maneuver an absurd range of urban landscapes—as is often the case in the comedy genre, two wrongs make a right and Pétronille comes out victorious. In this film, the palpable disjunct between Duhamel's embodied realities and her slapstick mobility as a horse jockey provides an impetus for the film itself to maneuver other incongruities that are within its powers to resolve: its coherent interweaving among discontinuous narrative spaces. Pétronille's unresolvable antics arguably get displaced onto the film's syntax, providing endless fodder for its own idiosyncratic cutting and trick editing.

Reflecting their national and economic positions, Vitagraph and Pathé experimented with codifying different iterations of women's bodily unruliness in order to negotiate the relations between aesthetic spectacle and narrative integration in transitional filmmaking. Texts such as *Princess Nicotine*, *Oriental Mystic*, and *Hypnotizing the Hypnotist* partially maintain while simultaneously troubling the discreteness between women's public and private domains. In contrast, *Betty* and *Rosalie* physically demolish the barriers between the two, and the more conservative *Pearl* finds ever new motivations to re-assert them continuously. Comedienne films' ambiguous coding was implicitly enlisted to corroborate the gaping social contradictions in transitional films' civic and domestic positioning of their spectators.

As the range of examples discussed here demonstrates, comediennes' bodily performances played crucial roles in negotiating industrial transitions in film form;

however, this process unfolded in very different ways. From Pathé's spatial regulation of its unruly comediennes' errant bodily gestures, to Vitagraph's aesthetic internalization of the comedienne's potential for uproarious movements, this tension between the body and the medium is etched upon the most formative histories of film comedy. Nowhere was this tension about the meaning of women's public visibility in cinema more pronounced than in the comedy genre, in which women did everything from moonlighting as overweight horse jockeys, to pantomiming as underfed prairie chickens, to blowing up police stations and threatening the very foundations of twentieth century civilization.

CHAPTER 3

GRIFFITH'S BODY LANGUAGE AND FILM NARRATION: "THE VOLUPTUARY" v. "THE SPIRITUELLE"

"To me the ideal type for feminine stardom has nothing of the flesh, nothing of the note of sensuousness. My pictures reveal the type I mean. Commenters have called it the *spirituelle* type. But there is a method in my madness as it were. The voluptuous type, blooming into the full-blown rose cannot endure. The years show their stamp too early. The other type -*ah, that is different.*"

- D. W. Griffith, *Photoplay* Interview, "What are the chances of a beginner?" (Aug, 1923, p.35)

D.W. Griffith's well-documented obsession with "spirituelle" female performers—as he often put it, with girls who possess "Soul"^{lvi}—arguably dictated his own contradictory visions of film form throughout the many periods of transformation that characterized his career. As Miriam Hansen argues, Griffith's excess of rhetorical flourishes and incompatible systems of graphic inscription belie his own dreams of representing cinema as a universal language in *Intolerance*. Indeed, Griffith's "methodically mad" derealization of the female body—as paradoxically enduring and unbloomed—reveals his impossible but instrumental fantasy of cinema both as a contingent performance and as an eternal flame. Female performances in Griffith's films function as sounding boards for his own articulation of film syntax. Extending the paradigm beyond Griffith's slate of "non-sensuous" female stars to look at the repressed status of the "voluptuous type" in his films, I will focus on "the other" of Griffith's "*different type*:" the voluptuary. Looking primarily at his Biograph career (1908-1913), when Griffith's own experimentations with the discourse of narrative cinema were still very much in their

formative stages, I will trace a dialectic between embodied performance and the emergence of film form in Griffith's oeuvre.

Whereas Griffith's films frequently experiment with the porousness between genres—often intermingling melodrama, sentimental comedy, slapstick, historical biography, adventure, crime, and the Western through their parallel uses of performers' bodies to articulate film narration—historians have focused too narrowly on his innovations in melodrama. The idea of transitional cinema's simultaneous social uplift and medium-specific narration finds the ideal alibi across films from Griffith's Biograph career. Yet, Griffith's prolific early works in slapstick comedy such as *The Jones* series, *Deceived Slumming Party*, and *The Wooden Leg* have received scant historical attention. I would argue that these genre-based blind spots in transitional "uplift" historiography possess significant implications for the way scholars have conceptualized Griffith's contributions to filmmaking across his body of work. Slapstick comedy devices make their mark on Griffith's narrative techniques, especially during the Biograph phase, when he enlisted all sorts of bodily gestures from his performers in order to express corporeally that which his films could not quite articulate visually through cutting and editing. Many comedians, such as Mabel Normand and Mack Sennett, got their starts at Biograph playing in both straight slapstick comedies and slapstick-inflected melodramas. This latter category refers not just to moments of levity in melodrama, but to the deployment of techniques and devices carried over from slapstick comedy. For example, excessive bodily gestures that border on clowning take on a pathetic expressivity in Griffith's transitional melodramas.

Moreover, the idea of slapstick-inflected melodrama raises questions about the conventional limits that distinguish different affective modes of address. The Renaissance humanist Baldassare Castiglione once argued: “Those affectations and curiosities that are but meane, bring a lothsomnesse with them, but whan they be done oute of measure they much provoke laughter” (163). In other words, crossing a certain threshold of excess can make all the difference between melodrama and outright absurdity. The figure of the voluptuary, or the overly corporeal and thereby also wicked woman, resides at the limits of melodrama in many of Griffith’s transitional films. However, rather than provoking mirth for the spectator, the voluptuary’s bodily affectations work to mask the generic hybridity intrinsic to Griffith’s film storytelling language.

This chapter will trace lines of influence between Griffith’s transitional slapstick comedies and corporeal melodramas at Biograph, arguing that film histories using Griffith as an exemplar for outlining broader social and artistic transformations in film form must be rethought inter-generically: melodrama is only part of the picture. Moreover, the frequent trope of feminine doubling between the fleshy voluptuary and “fleshless” spirituelle provided a moral framework for covering over the bodily rhetoric of narration intrinsic to Griffith’s (and to the industry’s more broadly) transitional film syntax. It was just as critical to enlist debased themes of slapstick tomfoolery for sounding out the medium’s artistic vocabulary as it has been to juxtapose the spirituelle to the voluptuary in order to construct any kind of definitive conception of “woman.”

Comedy, Genre, and Feminist Film Theory

The importance of co-historicizing the emergence of film form with narrative experimentations in comedienne clowning bears substantial implications for re-opening certain debates about the place of the body in feminist film theory. For theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Molly Haskell, Carol Clover, Kaja Silverman, and Teresa de Lauretis, thinking about affective valorizations that circulate around gendered regimes of the gaze, comedy's rhetoric of emotional distance would only seem to exacerbate the problem of women's structural exclusion from visual desire. As Doane puts it, both too close and too far from the image itself, "women's relation to desire...is at best a mediated one" (*Desire to Desire*, 12); like Lacan's definition of the hysteric's desire, women's desire would seem to hinge on "the desire for an unsatisfied desire" (12). (Indeed, Salpêtrière^{lvii} was often the nearest that feminists would go towards theorizing "the hysterical.") Feminist scholars have long privileged melodrama over genres of levity for making critical interventions in the capacity of film theory to account for female spectatorship and for women's diegetic representation.

Corroborating Henri Bergson's designation of laughter as antithetical to emotional empathy,^{lviii} Linda Williams specifically excludes comedy from her feminist recuperation of debased body genres (porn, horror, and melodrama): "Physical clown comedy is another 'body genre' concerned with all manner of gross activities and body functions...Nonetheless, it has not been deemed gratuitously excessive, probably because the reaction of the audience does not mimic the sensations experienced by the central clown" (4). Given the hyper-visibility of Griffith's films for historicizing categories of melodrama in American cinema, emphasizing women's inter-generic relations between

excessive pathos and physical clowning could help to re-open feminist debates about visual desire and the place of the body in cinema. Although there is a difference between straight slapstick clowning and slapstick-inflected melodrama, I would argue that all laughter at some level derives from the desire to be taken seriously. To invoke the sixteenth-century physician Laurent Joubert: “The joy we experience [in laughter] can never be unalloyed;” laughter can never be wholly separated from sadness “given that everything ridiculous arises from ugliness and dishonesty” (87). Like bodies themselves, film genres are porous; ignoring the fluidity of film genres threatens to re-inscribe the very hierarchies of difference that have long buttressed the marginalization of certain women’s pictures deemed too “gross” or “excessive” to be taken seriously.

The critical stakes of rethinking this relationship between Griffith’s onscreen female bodies and their purported derealization by his film grammar opens onto further questions about film historical narration. While Griffith historiographies tend to situate the director’s works at Biograph as hinges between early exhibitionism and proto-classical integration, I would further emphasize the messiness of this process of transformation. The bodily performer of early film “attractions” does not simply disappear, or even get pushed to the margins by psychologically motivated and immersive film characters. Rather, bodily performance persists as the very condition of possibility for the narrative integration of Griffith’s discontinuous film fragments. Griffith’s gendered ideology of feminine types—the debased “voluptuary” v. the “spirituelle” ideal—provides an organizing framework around which narrative difference gets made legible. If the “storyteller” pulls the strings, as Gunning asserts in “Weaving a Narrative,” “suspend[ing], interrupt[ing], and yet knit[ting] together actions within

narratives,” (24) Griffith’s actresses often literalize this process. From Mabel Normand to Mary Pickford, Griffith’s heroines play bodily surrogates for absorbing the spectator self-reflexively in the very process at work to negate her/his corporeal participation in the experience of the screening. In other words, the performer’s body provides a self-reflexive screen for identifying with and acting out the spectator’s own “uplifting” disembodiment.

Slide muses, “What made a Griffith girl? Physically, they were all small, slim, and young, the last attribute being perhaps the most important.” Slide quotes Griffith: “We sit in the twilight of the theater and in terms of youth, upon faces enlarged, we see thoughts that are personal to us, with the privilege of supplying our own words and messages as they may fit our individual experiences in life” (13-14). Yet, I would push this linguistic projection further, beyond the personalized nearness of the close-up and towards the encroaching scale of the female body. For example, in a Mabel Normand melodrama *The Eternal Mother*^{lix} (Jan. 1912), Normand’s corporeal unruliness provides a central image of legibility for framing the film’s pathetic moral oppositions. The film plots Griffith’s spirituelle/voluptuary dichotomy in perhaps the most overt terms of all his single-reelers featuring Normand: it pits Blanche Sweet as the title character (named Martha in the film) against Mabel Normand as “Mary the neighbor, restless and thoughtless.” Whereas “the eternal mother” sacrifices her own marriage and renounces all bodily pleasures for the remainder of the film (which follows her into old age), Mary’s “prematurely bloomed rose” flickers out with the onset of motherhood. The temporality of the actress’s “soul” is literally a moral proposition here: it projects a desire for self-sacrifice and asceticism, and precludes any meaningful screen encounter with bodies that

strike us as excessively material. In other words, Mary/Normand's physical inability to sustain herself reinforces the spirituelle's metaphysical virtues. This moral renunciation of the voluptuary's body provides an impetus for renouncing visual pleasure or identification. For example, when first introduced, Mabel figuratively walks into the camera, distorting vision with her overwhelming proximity to the place of the spectator. Representing Mary/Normand's excessive visual proximity here by her overwhelming physical scale, female embodiment functions as a limit case for visual identification. The voluptuary walks a fine line between framing enjoyment and totally oversaturating it.

More pointedly, motherhood, or subordinating the pleasure of the drives to the necessities of biological reproduction, is the beginning of the end for the voluptuary's fleeting duration. After giving birth to John's child, Mary spends the remainder of her screen time languishing in the lower left corner of the frame and waiting to die. Motherhood proving fatal to Mary's voluptuary womb, "the eternal mother" Martha adopts the child as her own and raises it while many years pass. Having "nothing of the flesh" herself, Martha does not seem to mind enduring several decades of living next door to John before allowing him "to find rest in [her] arms." "The eternal mother" (as an intertitle reminds us in-between images of a young and aged Martha looking out at John in the field) seeks reconciliation not temptation; she only lets John back into her home when the image in the reverse shot has proven sufficiently bent-over and arthritic. As Miriam Hansen interprets Lillian Gish's "eternal mother" character in *Intolerance*, "The Cradle Shot undermines its own attempts to structure the excess of femininity that troubles *Intolerance*, to organize it into clearcut oppositions and parallels...[However,] pitting a fatal femininity against an innocent maternity allows these oppositions to slide

into affinities” (“Riddles of Maternity,” 211). Lacking the multi-reel ambitions and transhistorical complexities of *Intolerance*, *The Eternal Mother* lays bare Griffith’s own “affinities” by cranking them out as clearcut oppositions.^{lx}

Symptomatically, Slide debunks the spirituelle’s “ethereal” mythos by taking recourse to gender dichotomies: “It is always said, foolishly, that the Griffith heroine was always ethereal...If anything a Griffith heroine had many masculine traits, in that she would fight for what she desired, and if she did not get it, it was not through want of trying” (15). Misogynistic implications of equating masculinity with the persistence of desire notwithstanding, Slide seems to miss the point of his own metaphor. Indeed, in *The Eternal Mother*, it is the very persistence of Blanche Sweet’s desire to renounce her own desire that marks her as the most “spirituelle”—or the more spirituelle, I should say, since Martha’s emblematic identity is relentlessly contrasted with Mary’s, who even bears Martha’s child for her so that her motherhood can remain a “divine conception.”

The self-reflexive contexts of *The Eternal Mother*’s simultaneous damnation of and fascination with embodied femininity can be traced back to Griffith’s very early films at Biograph. If Griffith’s 450+ film corpus (most of which survives on 35mm or 16mm, with more and more circulating digitally) has been made too historically legible, the key words enlisted to abet this transparency would be “father,” “pioneer,” “auteur,” and “virtuoso.” Edward Wagenknecht sums it up by quoting James Agee: “To watch his work is like being witness to the beginning of melody, or the first conscious use of the lever or the wheel: the emergence, the coordination, and the eloquence of language” (467). For all of Griffith’s much vaunted *techne* (the first really “human” filmmaker to

discover film language as a tool?), there are major blindspots in the way his eloquent discoveries have been historicized.

Griffith's early comedies especially too often get bracketed as ephemeral flirtations produced out of economic necessity, of little critical interest to researchers now, and distractions from the larger project of narrating Griffith's career as a trajectory. For example, Griffith's early farce *Deceived Slumming Party* (July 31, 1908), about a Chinese sausage machine that transforms white women's bodies into sausages and then back into white women when run in reverse, has been deemphasized in its linkages to Griffith's nascent film style. Cooper Graham speculates: "There was probably another director involved besides Griffith...It would be interesting to know how much of this film was simply filmed using vaudeville and burlesque sets and actors" (*Griffith Project*, vol. 1, 34). Rather than corrupt Griffith's historical trajectory, Kristin Thompson makes a similar move in her commentary about *A Politician's Love Story* (Feb. 22, 1909): "It seems to reflect more the talents of its star, Mack Sennett, here giving one of his early star turns in a film that prefigures his Keystone days" (*GP*, vol. 2, 99). While many of Griffith's early dramas have been recuperated in genealogies leading up to his feature film work—from *The Zulu's Heart* (Oct. 1908) to *The Fugitive* (Nov. 1910) to *Birth of a Nation*^{lx} (March 1915)—Griffith's prolific spate of early slapstick comedies remains critically under-theorized.

Parsing Griffith's narrative inheritance from his early "investments" in the comedy genre is crucial for troubling the linear historical trajectories that circulate around the director's memory and body of work. I would argue that Griffith's early experimentations with film comedy deeply influenced his subsequent legacies of

narrative innovation across genres.^{lxii} What other modes so fundamentally hinge upon the “eloquent” malfunction of “levers and wheels”? Indeed, comedy’s playful temporality and idiosyncratic narrative logic have provided sounding boards for articulating new film languages throughout the history of cinema. Griffith’s adaptations of longstanding comedic film tropes are evident in his early Biograph comedies, which feature Florence Lawrence,^{lxiii} Mack Sennett, Marion Leonard, Flora Finch, and many others. These dozens of films, including the *Mr. and Mrs. Jones* series, *The Wooden Leg*, *Those Awful Hats*, and *Eradicating Aunty*, rehearse storytelling techniques that Griffith would later transpose from comic devices to melodramatic narration in his bid for the film industry’s bourgeois legitimacy.

The Wooden Leg (March 8, 1909) is an instructive example, as it has often been enlisted to emblemize why Griffith’s early comedies do not merit serious critical attention. Kelly Brown demonstrates this tendency in her biography of Florence Lawrence: “Other subjects are so *insignificant* that a half-reel seems infinitely long for them. *The Wooden Leg* is one of these; Florence was Claire, a girl who successfully rebuffed an unwanted suitor by pretending to have a wooden leg” (31) [italics mine]. Steven Higgins echoes Brown’s suspicions in his commentary about *The Wooden Leg* in the *Griffith Project*: “In attempting to meet the overwhelming demands of the Biograph Company’s heavy release schedule...sometimes [Griffith] had to settle for filler.” Higgins enumerates the film’s many deficiencies: “It is acted in a slipshod manner and staged with an awkwardness uncharacteristic of Griffith even in his most disinterested moments...Mack Sennett acts a very broad tramp indeed, and it is only his mugging to the audience while partially hidden in the armoire at screen right that lets us know this is

supposed to be a comedy.” While it is by no means my intention here to rescue *The Wooden Leg* from the nadirs of historiographic value judgment, nor to suggest it as even a minor “failed masterpiece” in the spirit of Hansen’s resurrection of *Intolerance*, I do find it troubling that *Wooden Leg* has been deemed so “insignificant” that it should be altogether beyond signification. (Indeed, the attempt to wield signs as themselves “non-signifying” is what ideology tries to do at its core.) Even slipshod works of debased burlesque lineages warrant critical reading. However, Higgins discounts the film entirely: “Even at 240 feet, *The Wooden Leg* is neither inventive enough nor funny enough to hold our interest.”

The film unfolds in four scenes across two different framings and locations. First, father (John Cumpson) introduces Claire (Florence Lawrence) to a marital prospect whom the *Biograph Bulletin* describes as “a wealthy old fossil, of whom he [father] knew little but the extent of his pecuniary assets.” We cut to a different location where Claire enjoys an intimate moment with her boyfriend Harry (David Miles), then back to father’s office while he expresses his disapproval of Harry’s prospects. Most of the action unfolds in the fourth scene, which takes place in the second location (presumably Claire’s boudoir). In despair, Claire wields a small knife threatening to take her own life, while Harry consoles her, growing enthusiastic as he spies something through the window: an encouraging vision that turns out to be none other than Mack Sennett, pantomiming “broadly” as an amputee hobo. Harry and Claire stuff the tramp in the wardrobe, outfitting Claire with his surrogate leg. Some time later Harry returns with “the wealthy fossil.”

The brusquely staged and farcical ruse among Claire, her “fossil,” and the amputee hobo’s fake limb unfolds with Harry and the tramp frequently and haphazardly ducking out from behind the couple’s backs (from behind the bedpost and inside of the wardrobe respectively) to express gleefully conspiratorial, framing reactions to the “fossil’s” increasing alarm. Despite the film’s many technical shortcomings (as it were), it makes a significant effort to spatialize character motivations and psychological reactions within a single framing, displacing the relations that would be articulated between shots onto tropes of bodily limb fragmentation. Just on the cusp of the wooden leg’s farcical exposure, character blocking obscures the simultaneous visibility of Harry from behind the bed and the tramp peeping out of the wardrobe. These partially obscured counter-views forge a kind of syntax of alternating reactions to the film’s exhibitionist climax, staging a collision between its different modes of address: between bawdy spectacle and traces of psychological framing. In retrospect, for present-day viewers, perhaps the trope of female limb fragmentation here naturalizes the signs of narrative cutting achieved through blocking. We expect to see different parts cut up and staged within the same frame and therefore cease to think about what their positioning might signify [see fig. 12].

In *The Gibson Goddess* (November 1, 1909), Marion Leonard moonlights as an attractive limb prankster who, at the bidding of her devious maid, wards off potential mashers at the seaside by stuffing her stockings with raw cotton, “which gives her a Gargantuan appearance, at least as to her nethers” (*Biograph Bulletin*). (In a touching conclusion, Leonard accepts the stiff-upper-lipped Commodore who dutifully sustains his affections even while believing that her legs are thicker than average.) *The New York*

Dramatic Mirror, a recent convert to the potential merits of the dubious motion picture medium,^{lxiv} was not impressed by the film, dismissing the ending as “neither clever nor convincing... This sort of thing can be done on the vaudeville stage without offence.” Charlie Keil, who intriguingly suggests *Gibson Goddess* as an antidote to Griffith’s heavy-handed October 1909 lineup (including *A Change of Heart*, *His Lost Love*, and *The Expiation*), at the same time echoes the *MPW*’s skepticism by describing the film as “basically a throw-away” (*GP*, vol. 3, 198). Unlike Brown or Higgins, Keil engages with the film’s psychosexual signification, despite its lack of formal complexity, describing its examination of “the voyeurism/fetishism inherent in cinematic fascination. However, in most of these commentaries, value judgment provides an alibi for avoiding venturing any interpretation. Alternating accounts of the early comedies’ “lack of interest” or attribution to a different author like Sennett characterize Griffith’s early comedy entries in *The Griffith Project*—the place, I would argue, where his comedies have been dealt with the most extensively.

Griffith’s early works at Biograph draw on an irreconcilable variety of different genres and discourses: slapstick comedy (*Eloping with Aunty*), suspenseful melodrama (*Adventures of Dollie*), cowboy Western (*The Red Man and the Child*), African jungle film (*The Zulu’s Heart*), urban drama (*The Song of the Shirt*), high literary adaptation (*Edgar Allen Poe*), crime drama about psychic delinquency (*The Criminal Hypnotist*), and so many other modes. Yet the early melodramas have received a disproportionate amount of historical attention, no doubt due to the dominance of that genre mid-way through and later in the Griffith’s career. Given how many different types of films Griffith produced consecutively during his first years at Biograph, it seems problematic

to privilege a single genre as retrospectively more worthy of historical interest based on Griffith's later genre affinities [i.e. melodrama, or a sentimental register of comedy exemplified by *The Sunbeam* (Feb. 1912), *True Heart Susie* (June 1919), and *Sally of the Sawdust* (Aug. 1925)].

Griffith's concomitant innovations in film narration and negotiations between melodrama and comedy represent overlooked aspects of his historical trajectory—a decisively uneven and non-linear process of development. Indeed, the organization of Griffith's early comic film narration around theatrically staged, caricatured reactions to female limb antics possesses major historiographic implications for thinking about the emergence and solidification of Griffith's "narrator system." Griffith's practice of generating suspense by interrupting actions on the cusp of their unfolding continued to hinge upon tropes of female bodily fragmentation carried over from the early days of his rabid productivity at Biograph. The humorous premise of inciting deception or misunderstanding by a woman's temporary bodily self-difference was adapted to the relations established between shots.

For example, slapstick bodily antics hinge upon the simultaneous excessive corporeality and physical indestructability of the comic's body. However, for many female comedians on the cusp of film classicism, the problem of the body's duality as both hyper-vulnerable and invincible was intensified by the mandate to remain physically attractive. As Alan Dale puts it in *Comedy Is A Man In Trouble*, "Sennett affirmed, men don't want to laugh at pretty girls, not convulsively anyway, and so the actresses who specialize in all-out slapstick tend to be women like Marie Dressler, Phyllis Allen, Louise Fazenda, Polly Moran, Dot Farley, Charlotte Greenwood, Martha Raye, and Judy

Canova, whom the ordinary male wouldn't think of romantically anyway" ("Girl Heroes," 105-106). However, with the rise of the feature film, commodity tie-ins to the fashion industry, and impetus for comic tensions to get resolved by romantic coupling, the conditions of female stardom seemed to leave less comic leeway than those applied to male comic clowns, who could get whacked in the head willy-nilly. Women's "watered-down" comedic opportunities, exemplified by Keystone's slate of "bathing beauties" such as Mary Thurman and Maude Wayne, perhaps precipitated *The New York World's* assertion in 1926 that "The screen has failed to develop any comedienne to compete with Chaplin, Lloyd, Maclean, Griffith, Langdon or Hines. Mabel Normand, Bebe Daniels and Gloria Swanson approach nearest, but Paramount seems to favor the dilution of the Daniels and Swanson comedy by wardrobe contrasts" (61).

While Mabel's excess of embodiment helped flesh out the moral stakes of Griffith's narrative melodramas, in her comedies especially, Normand's rhetoric of bodily pratfall often hinged upon bracketing her dual identities. For example, in Biograph's *Katchem Kate* (Mack Sennett, 1912), Mabel cross-dresses as an undercover detective in order to foil an anarchist bomb plot, thereby using transvestism as an alibi for her simultaneous sexual glamor and physical recklessness. In *Mabel and Fatty's Married Life* (Keystone, 1915), Mabel's bodily slapstick takes the form of a displacement from somatic symptoms to object animation when the hat upon her head physically shudders after she reads too many criminal detective novels. In films such as *Mabel's Strange Predicament*, *Tillie's Punctured Romance*, *The Fatal Mallet*, and *Mabel's Married Life*, Mabel's comic timing and deadpan pantomime function primarily to avert the head-on collision that looms between the two contradictory personae that her slapstick

performances simultaneously suspend: physical glamor and comic humiliation.

Ironically, Mabel always refused to use a body double in her stunts. Marie Dressler recounts, “She was the first great comedienne of the screen. Always willing to risk life and limb to give the fans a thrill, she used to spend half her time laid up in hospital for repairs” (*Women in Comedy*, 88).^{lxv}

Like the mad king who really believes that he is a sovereign, to invoke Alenka Zupančič’s Hegelian study of humor, the comic “subject-actor appears as that gap through which the character relates to itself, representing itself” (*The Odd One In*, 36), embodying “an impossible sustained encounter between two exclusive realities” (54). Mabel’s characters frequently incite laughter by at once performing the contradictory, industry-dictated double standards that circumscribe her film stardom. However, in Mabel’s Biograph melodramas, the nervous contradictions intrinsic to laughter get re-circuited to provoke sentiment through the rivalry between feminine dualisms. Slapstick comedy represents the ideal as material—a displacement intrinsic to the *batacchio*’s (“slapstick”) exaggerated noise effects; in contrast, melodrama strives to dematerialize that which is fatally corporeal (*Dark Victory*, *Trueheart Susie*, *Stella Dallas*). Whereas melodrama sublimates its incessant physical suffering, slapstick comedy provokes mirth by displaying an abstract ideal, and then exposing its concrete, even idiotic construction. These differences and identities between comedy and melodrama are concretized by Griffith’s manipulation of his two distinct types of female performers: the embodied “voluptuary” and the ethereal “spirituelle.” The conflict between these two images of woman arguably provides an ideological framework for fleshing out the melodramatic stakes of Griffith’s narrative conflicts.

Unseen Enemy: At the Limits of Pathos

Griffith's deployment of film language as a differential system, in which meaning emerges through the differences between shots as opposed to the positivity of their sequential progression, hinged crucially upon embodied differences as much as semiotic ones. Harnessing motion pictures' unique set of signifiers to adapt complex plots from literature and the legitimate stage, Griffith's films attempt to narrate stories by transforming the basic function of the image from "showing" into "telling." Using techniques such as parallel editing and cut-ins, which interrupt the unfolding of the action in order to incite the audience's engagement in its resolution, Griffith's Biograph films attempt to renounce the various bodily surrogates of prurient nickelodeon fare (such as "Dancing Legs" and "Thieving Hands") with stories that would unfold above all in the spectator's mind. Cutting the text to pieces with frequent interruptions in the action to build suspense, literal continuities (both temporal and geographical) were dislocated by the articulation of narrative clarity.

In order to tease out the persistence of these slapstick-inflected bodily oppositions, I will now focus on close readings of three melodramas that Griffith filmed in 1911-12, well after the formation of the MPPC and initial legitimization of film as a bourgeois medium: *The Mender of Nets* (Feb, 1912), *Her Awakening* (Sept 28, 1911) and *An Unseen Enemy* (Sept, 1912). These films all hone techniques in alternating patterns that were by then well worn for Griffith. Further, as Charlie Keil argues in "Transition through Tension," Griffith's later Biograph films too often fail to receive serious historical attention, "as if the director were merely marking time between the early

successes and the advents of the later features” (22). The first of these three films (like *The Eternal Mother*) pits comedienne Mabel Normand^{lxvi} as “the weakness: his old infatuation” against another variation on Griffith’s spirituelle ideal: Mary Pickford as “the mender of nets.” The thematic of feminine dichotomy in both *Her Awakening* and *An Unseen Enemy* is more complex, as are their corroborating structures of embodied vision. The title character of *Unseen Enemy* refers to the Gish sisters’ “slattern maid” (Grace Henderson), who plots to rob them of their inheritance at gunpoint after the death of their physician father. The paradoxical hyper-visibility of the “unseen” enemy, whose ominously brusque and disheveled introduction foreshadows her literal visibility to the sisters through a hole in the wall during the scene of the crime, provides an alibi for a subtler thematic of feminine doubling that unfolds between the Gish sisters. Formally, aesthetically, and ideologically, unseen distinctions between Lillian and Dorothy provide concrete motivations for the organizational logic of the camera. These nuances between “the younger sister’s nerve” and the lack of adjectives and gestures used to define older sister Lillian shadow the broader, overstated contrasts between the slattern maid and the innocent sisters.

The film enacts a fundamental conflict between vision and the body, between the visibility of danger and an anxiety about the physical perils of its premature articulation. The three planes of action alternate among the maid and her confederates attempting to break open the safe, the terrified sisters at the other side of a wall attempting to phone the brother while ducking the maid’s gunshots through an uncovered stove-pipe hole, and the brother forming a rescue crew and racing to the scene of the crime. The physical barrier of the wall provides an impetus for parallel cutting between victim and perpetrator, which

the physical trespass of the maid's revolver dramatizes. A parallel litany of physical obstructions defers the brother's arrival: he must learn of the sisters' danger through the less expedient aural means of the telephone, obtain a car from a friend and rally his vigilante team, and traverse a veering bridge that seems timed specifically to foil his heroism. As the situation escalates, cuts between different planes of vision are often motivated by diegetic impasses: the safe will not budge, the gunshots trap the sisters in a corner, and the bridge waylays the brother. As in many of his suspenseful rescue films, such as *Lonedale Operator*, *Lonely Villa*, and *Girl and Her Trust*, Griffith inter-articulates his suspenseful interruptions of vision through cutting via literal roadblocks to the unfolding of the action.

The narrative implications of Griffith's organization of vision around the limits of diegetic bodily mobility are legion. Tom Gunning's theory of the "narrator system" that emerges throughout Griffith's filmmaking at Biograph provides a helpful framework for fleshing out the place of the body in this complex system of narrative exchange. Gunning draws extensively on the work of the French literary theorist Gérard Genette. For Genette, the process of creating a narrative world—a story in which what goes unsaid can be inferred based on character motivation and patterns of events—relies upon the printed word: the narrative discourse of the novel. For Gunning, the narration of film's signifying discourse (the moving image) hinges upon the medium's ability to make "showing" do the work of "telling." "The dominance of showing over telling is the concealed reef over which the concept of the filmic narrator sails in peril. Does a film 'tell' a story?" (17). Indeed, the medium's economic advantage over the novel, its capacity to condense details into a single frame that it would take the novel pages and pages to narrate, becomes its

fundamental obstacle. Gunning describes this as the medium's inherent "excess of mimesis over meaning:" its proclivity for magnetizing every contingency that flits in front of the lens.

Griffith's art of narrative deferral, his construction of an absorbing narrative universe by interrupting events on the cusp of their unfolding, asserts order over these fragments. Genette refers to this as a process of narrativization: literally the force that binds everything together. These components include the story (the universe we infer), the narrative discourse (what we see on the screen), and the narrator (how the film structures or plots its narrative devices). Narrativization makes the story world materialize from its procession of fleeting, contingent images. Moreover, this theory provides a framework for understanding the relationship between the narrator and spectator, between the plotting of filmic devices and the inscription of the viewer within the film text itself.

Film historians from Tom Gunning to Kristin Thompson have acknowledged the concomitant effects on the spectator's body of this psychologically absorbing film language. The articulation of film writing as "a structure made available" (Heath)^{lxvii} to the spectator, as opposed to a self-explanatory image, was corroborated by comprehensive efforts to constrain spectators' bodily conduct during film screenings. In an article titled "Wage War on Shows" published in *The New York Tribune* on the eve of motion picture reform and industry self-censorship, Mayor McClellan and NY clergymen emphasize the physical conditions of exhibition almost to the exclusion of motion picture content. In addition to the usual complaints about inadequate theater lighting encouraging unsavory hanky-panky among audience members, "Mayor McClellan discovered...an

utter disregard of the law or decency...in reference to providing exits. In one instance an exit led to a swimming pool. In another the exit led to a stairway with twenty-five steps leading to the roof.” Francis Oliver, Chief of the Bureau of Licenses, echoed the mayor’s outrage about the physical locations of motion picture “escapes:” He “visited twenty-five moving picture places and had found safety exits leading into saloons, into airshafts, and between walls. In each case of a violation discovered[,] the place was closed” (*NY Daily Trib*, Dec 24, p. 4). I pause on this reformist concern about the physical traffic between motion picture safety exits and neighboring dens of vice in order to raise questions about the social contexts in which Griffith’s films dramatize proximate cutting.

While theater escape routes no longer hooked up with saloons or swimming pools, physical barriers in the diegesis increasingly opened onto perilous locations of bodily danger or contamination. Indeed, the very notion of “film escapism”—of the spectator’s ability to navigate abstract visual alternations by means of psychological investment—hinges on the experience of bodily disavowal. The suspension of the spectator’s own embodiment is mobilized by the ceaseless deferral of sources of physical danger or stimulation in the diegesis. Unlike early film “attractions,” which incite audiences to corporeal promiscuity with their exhibitionist modes of address, the cinema of integration purportedly takes place solely in the spectator’s mind. The characters entangled in the unspooling actions must themselves play as signs in order to abet the spectator’s process of adjustment to the industry’s nascent “mental machinery.” In the analysis that follows, I will trouble this myth of a pure cinema of integration by drawing attention to the genre slippages between pathetic and comedic corporeality in *An Unseen Enemy*. To return to my earlier opposition between melodrama and comedy—that

melodrama sublimates physical suffering, while comedy exposes the material basis of abstraction—the spectator’s fantasy of disembodiment hinges on this film’s suppression of its own slapstick possibilities. *Unseen Enemy* at once activates and denies its inner comedic proclivities in order to smooth over the aporia between corporeal engagement and linguistic abstraction at work in its narration.

The film’s transmission of its own pathos leans heavily on its repeated postponement of imminent confrontations. *The Unseen Enemy* at its core attempts to integrate the spectator’s impetus for deferral, pushing the desire to become immersed in deferring desire to its narrative limits. From the girls’ absent father, to their physically remote older brother, to the younger sister’s “boyish lover,” the “law of desire” (i.e. the father) is chronically absent. Moreover, the physical menace of the slattern maid in the next room and her protruding phallic gun that she wields through a peephole in the wall are more menacing not because of what they will do, but because of what they will have done before the men return. A triangulation among these three spaces and temporalities—the “now” of the sisters, the “will have been” of the slattern maid, and the “not yet” of the male rescue team—dictates the film’s immersive unfolding. The film’s navigation of various temporal possibilities is kept balanced by its rigorous spatial policing of different gender roles. If melodrama, according to Linda Williams’ “Anatomy of Film Bodies,” hinges on the fantasy temporality of the “too late!” (9), and comedy on the spontaneity of premature eruption, *Unseen Enemy* seems to play with different bodily and affective possibilities of how to organize its own diegetic temporality.

For example, the scene in which the sisters discover and react to a threatening disturbance off-screen enlists a slightly mystifying form of sensory communication to

signify almost intuitively what does not quite get articulated visually. In carefree spirits the sisters enter a room in which they will shortly be trapped, having just said goodbye to the younger one's "boyish lover" (whom she refuses to kiss goodbye). The film cuts to the other side of the wall while the slattern maid locks the door, shivers, and then beckons her confederate miscreant through an open window. A matching breeze from a different open window in the sisters' room stirs Lillian's hair to offset her supreme bodily restraint while the maid's noisy stirrings in the next room arouse the older sister's suspicions. In order to understand the spatialization of the sisters' ensuing alarm, and its abstraction to establish psychological relations between the different planes of action, we must attempt to read the body here as more than a sign.

Repeatedly, the actors' own gestures are enlisted to explain the film's grammatical organization, to act out the relations amongst shots, making them legible not just emotionally but cinematically. In cuts between the two sides of the wall, between the progression of the maid's burglary plot and the sisters' attempts to duck for cover while calling for help, the film's own suspenseful syntax is corroborated by the abstract orchestration of diegetic space mimed by the two sisters. For example, just as the older sister discovers the burglary plot—her aural suspicions immediately projected for the spectator as a concrete image—her attempts to communicate this information to her younger sister mirror the film's own editing. The older sister carves out a V-shape with her movements: she inches towards the door and then retreats abruptly as if magnetized to her sister's location in the back right corner of the frame. Erecting an imaginary physical barrier to mimic the danger at the other side of the wall, the older sister's initial attempts at aural and gestural explanation elicit a revealing misunderstanding from her

younger sister, who mistakes these signs of danger as provocations for arousal and excitement.

This sensory miscommunication between sisters emphatically heightens the narrative stakes of preserving a distance between shot and counter-shot: it acts out a reassurance for the spectator, the certainty of a gap between comprehension and signification intrinsic to melodramatic pantomime's distinction from slapstick. In slapstick comedies like *The Fatal Mallet* and *Mabel's Strange Predicament*, actions and their meanings become legible primarily through their mystification. For example, when Charlie (Chaplin) believes his wife (Mabel Normand) has cuckolded him with what turns out to be a boxing dummy that she has purchased to help toughen him up in *Mabel's Married Life*, the joke derives from the viewer's excess of prior comprehension: we laugh harder as Mabel and Charlie continue violently to fall victim to a misunderstanding that should have been resolvable before it even got off of the ground. In contrast, melodramatic sympathy is animated by the deferral of terrifying violence. To return to *An Unseen Enemy*, the younger sister's initial ignorance of her own vulnerability, which results from the older sister's misconstrued bodily signaling, helps keep at bay the violence that would have long since erupted in a slapstick comedy. It is significant that this partial deferral of visual knowledge arises through the attempt to stage its transmission through a theater of bodily gestures. Excessive pantomime, which might otherwise border on clowning, becomes distinctly pathetic here due to its instrumental function to defer a traumatic visual revelation.

The two sides of the wall that we can see will remain separate, spaced apart by a concrete (though not impenetrable) physical barrier, so long as there emerge linguistic

interruptions in the physical communications staged between the sisters inside of their room. On the one hand, the alternate cutting between the “spirituelle” sisters and the scheming, “voluptuary” maid provides a stark moral contrast to mark the psychological stakes of dividing up such spatially proximate locations. Good and evil are literally separated by a thin wall. The suspense of keeping the wall intact as a spatial barrier is of course intensified by the film’s alternate third space: the far-away location of the brother’s rescue team as its members encounter a litany of physical obstacles to reach the sisters before the wall between good and evil is compromised. Noel Burch uses the terms “proximity” and “alterity” respectively to distinguish between these different ranges of parallel editing. Here, proximity marks primarily a moral difference, while alterity represents a suspenseful distance. Yet, there is still a remainder that exceeds both psychological motivation and narrative suspense—a remainder whose visual logic attempts to internalize bodily that which the film wagers syntactically.

Repeatedly, the space of confinement becomes a scene for rehearsing the various forms of difference and relation that underpin the film’s entire narrative universe. This conversion of cinematic vision into bodily performance hinges on three forms of exchange: visual, economic, and gendered. First, phenomenological sensation gets transposed into visual premonition: aural and gestural communications among the siblings (between the sisters and into the telephone) bear a mystifying but credible connection to the film’s parallel horizons of interweaving locations. Second, perhaps to suture over the corporeal excesses of the film’s visual narration, the body itself is abstracted as a form of currency. For example, the sisters’ physical vulnerability is repeatedly wagered against the value of their inheritance stashed precariously in the safe

on the other side of the wall.^{lxviii} The locked room in which the terrified sisters contemplate exchanging their own physical safety for the purpose of preserving their financial inheritance becomes alternately a scene of risk and a site of opportunity. This exchangeability between economic value and physical vulnerability again corroborates the film's integration of its own visual forms of imbalance. (In her notes on the film, Lea Jacobs emphasizes its continuity errors and omissions of critical details that would reinforce narrative and character motivations.)

Third, the gendered thematic of doubling and its obstruction by the wall buttress the moral dichotomies between virginal purity and feminine evil. These moral oppositions take on an affective reality that both exceeds and becomes intrinsic to the film's signification. The older sister's almost supernatural "sense"—like the character of "the eternal mother" in *Intolerance*, she literally possesses the ability to see between shots—is offset by the younger sister's physical "nerve."^{lxix} *Unseen Enemy* seems to dichotomize Mabel Normand's star dualities: she possesses both two bodies (one hyper-vulnerable, one seemingly invincible), and a double morality (one naively sentimental, and one carelessly cruel). If women like Normand's comic personae simultaneously suspend two mutually exclusive realities, films like *Unseen Enemy* divvy up comedy's menu of contradictions by pinning their paradoxical simultaneities onto separate female bodies. The spirituelle older sister is "fleshless," the "slattern maid" all-flesh, and the "nerve-y" younger sister oscillates between different affective temporalities, freed up by the strong sense of moral framing established by the oppositions between the two other women.

It is useful now to unpack the ideological implications of these subtle distinctions between the older sister's "sense" and the younger sister's "nerve." Unlike the good-woman/bad-woman oppositions that haunted Mabel during her brief career with Griffith, the moral contrast between the slattern maid and the "well-kept" sisters serves primarily as a decoy for the subtler but equally instrumental difference between the two sisters. In his 1923 *Photoplay* interview about the qualities he looks for in screen actress beginners, Griffith projects all of the paradoxes of the medium itself onto his image of the ideal actress. "The girl, to have the real germ of stardom, must suggest—at least in a sketchy way—the vaguely formulated ideals of every man. Again, she must suggest—and this is equally important—the attributes most women desire." From the difficulties of embodying the ideals of male and female viewers, Griffith waxes metaphysical. "To me the ideal type for feminine stardom has nothing of the flesh, nothing of the note of sensuousness...Commentators have called it the *spirituelle* type."

Griffith's most iconic "spirituelle," Lillian Gish, epitomizes this quasi-theological image, manifesting an uncanny ability to transcend phenomenological sense with cinematic vision. Proximate cutting to the maid at work on the safe in *Unseen Enemy*, although not subjectively anchored, almost seems to emerge from Lillian's preternatural knowledge of the image at the other side of the wall. The film literalizes this slippage between visual knowledge and physical danger during a dramatic escalation in the home robbery plot. When the maid breaks open the stove-pipe covering to produce a hole between the two sides, it is remarkable that neither party utilizes its visual opportunities. Instead, the possibility for voyeurism, the secret look, is rendered redundant or obsolete by Lillian Gish's miraculous conversion of physical sense into disembodied vision.

Voyeurism, which hinges on the privacy and physical concealment of the viewer, is precluded here by direct physical penetration. The slattern maid wields a handgun that she fires haphazardly into the sisters' room in order to keep them at bay (away from the telephone or the window) while she and her crew attempt to blow open the safe.

The plot narration of this scene, the way in which its discontinuous looks and interrupted actions become legible for the spectator, gets circuited through Lillian's pantomime: her gestures to her younger sister, the physical symptoms of her "silent voice" relayed over the telephone, and the way that Griffith spatializes her increasing terror through blocking. In Genette's terms, she is the film's voice: "The traces of telling left in the text through which we sense a storyteller addressing a real or implied audience" (Gunning, 16). As a side note, it is surprising that the *Motion Picture World* at the time did not think more of the "beginner" sisters' performances: "The little girls are charming; they are not yet actresses, but in a good place to learn acting." Perhaps Griffith's novice ideal—the "rose" that has not yet but presumably one day "will have bloomed"—was too convincing for his critics. Here performance style props up the film's suspenseful techniques in narration: both come to be paradoxically in the future perfect tense. Whereas film as a medium indexes "what was" and projects it as "what is," Griffith's narrator system adapts these paradoxes between present and past to dramatize their potential meanings for the future.

The suspenseful temporality of the film's ensuing robbery and rescue plots attempts to integrate a driving obsession with deferring portentous signs into its own visual narrative grammar. Lillian tries to reach her brother on the telephone while Dorothy stands in the background, looking quite as much excited as she does intimidated.

Her image seems to strike a middle ground between Lillian's terrified composure and the maid's scheming untidiness, which is represented in the next shot. In a desperate attempt to get the girls away from the phone, the maid picks up a gun, and decides to flaunt it through the uncovered pipe hole in lieu of unlocking the door. After the intertitle, "They silence the children while they work," a dramatic closeup depicts the frame in the sisters' room falling off the wall and a handgun sliding through in its place. The gun directly addresses the camera as if breaking the fourth wall (as it were). The next shot depicts a frantic progression while the older sister screams into the phone, the younger sister flails her arms in the background, and the maid's arm lurches out of the hole to fire from the left hand side of the frame. As in *The Gibson Goddess*, though now more finely interwoven into the narrative apparatus, female limb dismemberment does the work of formal articulation. The maid's protrusion motivates "the unmotivated," prefacing a cut back to the clerk trying to summon the girls' brother, and explains the unseen movement of the sisters' bodies to the back left corner of the room.

A cut-in reveals the girls' emotional turmoil, with Dorothy standing taller and covering most of Lillian's body—most but not all: Lillian's large, piercing eyes jut out and grab our attention, upstaging the girls' cowering bodies. In an ideological flourish to reinforce our already solid comprehension of the maid's "slattern" ways, she takes a break from her strenuous gun wielding to chug a few mouthfuls of liquor, which gives the younger sister a golden opportunity to make her move. The following shots somewhat confusingly depict simultaneous actions, so that we see each event consecutively from three different locations. The maid puts down her gun and takes a long drink; the brother

is located and led to the other end of the telephone line; and we watch the maid's hand retreat and vanish back into the wall.

In a somewhat elliptical negotiation between the aural and the visual, the film cuts back and forth anachronistically between the brother shouting into the telephone and the younger sister making her move across the room after the recession of the gun. A cut-in to the sisters' corner refuge focuses on Dorothy, whose gliding movement out of the frame towards the off-screen telephone gradually uncovers her sister's cowering body. Lillian reaches for Dorothy's body just as it exceeds the limits of her grasp, and then for some reason covers her ears, which prompts a cut back to the other end of the telephone line. Little sister reaches the telephone in safety, thank heavens, and is able to communicate the urgency of the situation to her brother while her older sister gazes intently off-screen in the direction of the next room. Hearing these developments, the slattern maid (who, *surprise*, is also a lush) returns to her post now haphazardly firing bullets into the room with the sisters, despite her inability to focus on (or to avoid mortally wounding) her targets, whom she had originally intended to intimidate not to annihilate. The brother overhears the gunshots and drops the phone to rally his rescue team, while Dorothy manages to crawl back to her corner.

In classical sound films such as *Sorry, Wrong Number*, the ambivalence of aural transmission is repeatedly linked to female paranoia; Barbara Stanwyck plays a hysterical cripple stalked by a murderer over the telephone, her own confined field of vision an alibi for the uncertain status of events in the plot. Seeing is believing in the classical cinema, and unlike the voice, the image never lies. Griffith's thematization of female paranoia over the telephone in *Unseen Enemy* proves unusually decisive in its prophetic capacities.

When the sisters sense something amiss, the film cannot wait to cut in order to substantiate their premonitions, sometimes even reversing the order of their plotting. As long as Lillian Gish can hear a window opening ominously in the next room or see across a telephone circuit, women in transitional cinema have every right to be paranoid!

Indeed, their paranoia is crucial for making the film's plotting legible to the spectator. Their embodied sense perception explains the plenitude of meanings articulated by the plot, by its complex interweavings as it struggled to establish a voice that would be truly "transparent." To use Griffith's own terms, the spirituelle may have "nothing of the flesh," but she is not completely ethereal either. Her embodied deployment as a narrative sign again represents that which remains: "the voice," "the trace of telling left in the text," and the plenitude of meaning sustained by film's narrative discourses while the codes themselves were still in flux (not that they ever became entirely fixed or static). Rather than abetting the total disembodied absorption of the spectator, which is the fantasy of a pure cinema of integration, the spirituelle provides a moral cover for the film's recourse to exhibitionism and to more gestural modes of articulation.

In our intermittent side views of the maid firing bullets, her acting evokes something between an epileptic fit and a demonic possession. The sisters huddle together in suspense between alternating views of the brother's rescue car getting waylaid by a moving bridge. Again, the visual plot is suspended when the brother must explain the situation to the bridge operator through the less expedient means of aural communication. Repeatedly, invocatory tensions (the maid's voice, telecommunications, and the bridge delay) stand in for visual devices, such as the peephole's use for tactile instead of visual

ends. While the brother is held up at the bridge, the younger sister again makes a break across the room during a respite in the gunfire. This is announced by an intertitle: “The Younger Sister’s Nerve.”

The scene depicting this “nerve” is especially memorable. The younger sister creeps toward the hole in the wall, with the older sister in the background extending out her arms in terror. The younger slowly approaches the hole, wavering between whether she wants to peer into it or to reach out for it—an indecision between seeing and touching that the older sister’s arm gestures from behind her head reinforce. Lillian attempts to restrain Dorothy, whom she cannot reach and who cannot see her, solely for the benefit of the spectator. The visual contrast between Dorothy’s “nerve” and Lillian’s apparent nervousness drives the tension of this dramatic escalation. Abruptly, the maid’s gun juts out from the hole, causing younger sister to faint and collapse [see fig. 13].

Griffith continues in his *Photoplay* interview: “The imaginative type can picture the glamorous future with its possible great success—and is always nervous. Imagination—and nerves—are highly essential.” Literally the sinew or tendon that relays impulses between the brain and the spinal cord, the word “nerve” also denotes “boldness, audacity, impudence, and impertinence.” Nervousness, in contrast, denotes “acute apprehension and uneasiness.” Walter Benjamin theorizes “nervousness” as a defense against the constant potential for shock and rupture that characterizes modern experience: like laughter, nervousness wards off shock by partially internalizing it.^{lxx} However, “to be nervous” and “to have nerve” designate different modes of experience. Whereas “nervousness” invokes an excess of sensitivity to the potential for shock, “nerve” conjures a denseness to this potential. This dulled sensitivity to danger is literalized by

Dorothy's need to faint in response to the gun's totally foreseeable third reemergence from the wall.

Griffith's slippage in his *Photoplay* interview between the "nervous" and one's "nerves" sheds light on the broader contradictions internal to his definition of the "spirituelle" type. These contradictions arguably get covered over in their rhetorical opposition to the "voluptuary type:" "the full-blown rose [who] cannot endure." *Unseen Enemy* provides such a helpful example for teasing out these internal contradictions because it does not represent any "voluptuary" type as such: the "bad woman" is portrayed as drunken and untidy not lascivious,^{lxxi} and the younger sister, although audacious, gets clearly marked as pre-sexual by her coy reluctance to kiss her "boyish suitor" (Bobby Harron) before his departure for college. Moreover, the ideological triangulation of "woman" among three different types—"slattern," "nervous," and "nerve-y"—sheds light on the ways in which narrative truth gets hierarchized through the senses, from vision on down to aural and tactility.

If the image is to cinema what the printed word is to the novel, *Unseen Enemy* exposes the limits of the image's narrative transparency. Repeatedly, the cut presents itself as a solution to the embodied limits of vision: the brother's telephonic remoteness (both aural and geographical), the sisters' mortal deterrence from the pipe hole, and, for the burglars, the impenetrable contents of the locked safe—which is the economic and psychosexual metaphor underpinning the whole narrative apparatus. The film's triangulation of feminine types corresponds with the film's hierarchy of narrative discourses: the older sister's uncanny ability to see into the next shot, the younger sister's

nervy bolt for the telephone, and the maid's characterization primarily in terms of her sensual gluttony and untidy physical appearance.

Women in a Hierarchy of Discourses

While female bodily tropes provide both literal and moral motivations for this hierarchy of discourses in *Unseen Enemy*, their organization becomes significantly more transparent (i.e. “unseen”) in the classical cinema. In his article on Brecht and film realism, Colin MacCabe discusses narrative cinema as a “hierarchy of discourses” in which the image dominates. Using a literary example from Sergei Eisenstein's *Film Form*, MacCabe deconstructs the enlistment of this hierarchy to make different subjective discourses appear as transparent realities. Despite their significant ideological differences, Griffith's filmmaking was of great interest to Eisenstein, who adapted Griffith's montage techniques to Soviet political ends. In “Griffith, Dickens, and the Film Today,” Eisenstein marvels at the semiotic interplay between “Small-Town America” and “Super-Dynamic America” in Griffith's parallel montage sequences, using film to define national identity between contradictory iterations of domestic intimacy and industrial enterprise. Eisenstein avows: “That the cinema could be incomparably greater, and that this was to be the basic task of the budding Soviet cinema—these were sketched for us in Griffith's creative work, and found ever new confirmation in his films” (204). MacCabe criticizes Eisenstein for misconstruing Griffith, for treating each term in the montage as a “cell”—as a positive meaning put into play to construct a third term, as if each term itself were not relationally defined.

MacCabe's ideological deconstruction of Eisenstein hinges on the discourse of gender, an instructive terrain for parsing the inter-articulation between Griffith's emergent film language and his mise-en-abyme of feminine dichotomies (i.e. spirituelle v. voluptuary and their variant oppositions). Drawing on "Word and Image" (an earlier chapter in *Film Form*), MacCabe quotes Eisenstein's example from the American satirist Ambrose Bierce's *Fantastic Fables*:

‘ A Woman in widow's weeds was weeping upon a grave.
“Console yourself, madam,” said a Sympathetic Stranger.
“Heaven's mercies are infinite. There is another man somewhere, beside your husband, with whom you can still be happy.”
“There was,” she sobbed – “there was, but this is his grave.” ’

What is so fascinating and cinematically instructive about this humorous passage is the way that two different images of “woman” are generated from the separate, contradictory discourses of the “sympathetic stranger” and of the weeping woman. Whereas the stranger sees the woman in relation to the law and to the contractual obligations of marriage, the weeping woman identifies herself primarily in relation to desire. The concise exposure of these misrecognitions is animated by the comic upturning at the end: the man infers from her “widow's weeds” that she is mourning her husband, an expectation that she troubles in her reply when she implies that the grave belongs to her lover and that her own husband might still be alive. A negotiation between contradictory notions of “woman” as either dutiful or promiscuous propels the attempt to establish an objective narrative voice in this brief passage. While the man's and the woman's statements are clearly bracketed as subjective and partial, even the seeming objectivity of the opening line, “a woman in widow's weeds was weeping upon a grave,” is called into

question by the end of the fable. As MacCabe puts it, “It is the expectation created by the juxtaposition which is undercut by the final line uttered by the woman” (12-13).

Whereas Bierce conjures two images of woman from one body using devices of literary irony (the incongruence between appearance and reality), Griffith’s narrative discourse frequently plays upon tropes of female doubling in order to establish the objective authority of the image. Given the dialectical intimacies between comic and melodramatic forms of transitional film narration, it is instructive to return again to Griffith’s early comedies: to the films that have been historicized as at best “inoffensive filler...and it is hard to think of much else that could be said about [them]” (Ben Brewster on *A Sound Sleeper*, *GP*, vol. 2, 129). In order to trouble the all too comfortable fit between Griffith’s innovations and film history teleologies about the birth of cinema as a narrative art, we must revisit the “blemishes” in Griffith’s corpus, lest his disinherited affinities become historiographic blind spots. From the multi-reel masterpieces that romanticize Klan politics to the early split-reel “throwaways” that thematize limb dismemberment, new lines of historical legibility can be drawn through Griffith’s least likely pairings.

For MacCabe, realism hinges upon the transparency of the metalanguage: within the classical realist text, the metalanguage assumes the voice of the object language; the narrative voice attempts to naturalize its presence by concealing its own difference from the narrative text. A metalanguage is transparent when it is not regarded as material—when a film erases the signs of its own narrating. Whereas Griffith’s later Biograph melodramas like *Unseen Enemy* attempt to prop narration upon the transparency of women’s bodily signification, his early comedies foreground this dynamic. For example,

again, *Gibson Goddess* and *Wooden Leg* display female limb antics as narrative resolutions—not just to conflicting character motivations, but to the problem of settling these conflicts by drawing attention to a specific zone of the image. *Those Awful Hats* literalizes the semiotic links between female embodiment and narrative visual hierarchies in the very gesture of lampooning them. In a short self-reflexive film meant to play at the beginning of the program, too many ladies (including Flora Finch, Florence Lawrence, Linda Arvidson, and Dorothy West) wearing large and ornate hats threaten to obstruct their seat neighbors' views of the screen. This problem forces exhibitors to install a large crane that bodily removes the ladies (hats and hat offenders alike!) from their theater seats.

The problem of gentrification, of luring conspicuously middle-class female patrons to legitimize the dubious space of the nickelodeon, literally gets turned on its head in *Those Awful Hats*.^{lxxii} During this 1909 transitional film moment, just months after Mayor McClellan shut down all of the New York City nickelodeon theaters to mandate their textual uplift and physical regulation, *Hats* offers a screen for re-imagining and acting out comically the types of social transformations simultaneously taking place in the theaters themselves. The indispensable status of middle-class female patrons to abet industry uplift becomes an impetus for physically uplifting women's bodies: the real joke here is that the film takes its own wisdom all too literally.

Like Bierce's satire about the weeping woman, Griffith's film version of *Lucky Jim* plays upon contradictory expectations evoked by the image of a beautiful woman juxtaposed with the institution of marriage. The film was adapted from the lyrics of a popular ragtime song by Charles Horowitz:

“By chance we found we loved the same sweet maid...Jim was happy, I a bachelor stayed...Ah, Lucky Jim, how I envied him!...Years rolled on, poor Jim passed on to heaven, With grief and sorrow in his grave was laid. When time drug by I married his dear widow, Jim was lucky, I unlucky stayed. Ah, lucky Jim, how I envied him! Ah, lucky Jim, how I envied him!”

Like many of Griffith's early comedies, *Lucky Jim* condenses dual and conflicting images of “woman” into a single character: Gertie (Marion Leonard), narrative voice Jack's (Mack Sennett) and “Lucky Jim's” (Herbert Yost) coveted bride, who turns out to be less desirable than initially imagined. After winning the girl, Jim quickly tires of life, for Gertie is an abominable cook, and prone to violence at the slightest signal of her husband's gastronomical displeasure. As *The Moving Picture World* puts it, “Jim suddenly dies of acute indigestion, in which perhaps there is a hidden insinuation of the average bride's ability to prepare the cuisine.” The contradiction between Gertie's pleasant appearance—she is far from “slattern”—and her surprisingly violent behavior drives the narrative development of this short film. (*Lucky Jim* split a reel with *Twin Brothers*, about a man who moonlights in gorilla skin as a caged zoo fighter, only to realize that his tawny opponent is actually his twin brother donning a lion's pelt). Whereas the lion turns out to be a lamb, Gertie is pure jungle cat (to evoke Anita Loos's 1939 opening title sequence for *The Women* in which each star of the all-female cast is represented as a different animal, with Joan Crawford as a cheetah). When Jack “complains of the coffee...the large part of the crockery is smashed over his head before the widow is finished with his discipline” (*MPW*). Again, the image never lies; Griffith uses slapstick to stage a narrative collision between established appearances and well-worn tropes of film action.

In the end, Gertie's split-identity becomes a foil for reiterating the fraternal themes of the twin-brothers-as-exotic-animal-cage-fighters film: Jack's driving motivation remains to envy Jim. Taking Jim's picture from the wall, Jack "repeats with every indication of sadness those well-known lines, 'Lucky Jim. How I envy him'" (*MPW*). Whereas Jack's admiration of Jim gets reduced to a visual sign—from wanting to *be* Jim, he envies the framed portrait of Jim—Gertie's visual allure becomes emphatically embodied. In contrast to *Unseen Enemy*, in which women's bodily expressions represent traces of the film's all-but transparent narrative voice, Jim's voice, which keeps repeating "those well-known lines," is given a narrative trajectory by Gertie's violent physical displays. Although Griffith's visual plotting of this trajectory, as Ben Brewster points out, causes the film "to lose the double-take ('or even double-entendre') character of the song," if anything, the joke of "the voice" is slowed down by the lack of transparency of the body. In other words, Gertie's visceral outbursts in the film interrupt the punning condensation of her image into two contradictory types, which is instrumental to the movement of the song. Instead of using a visually-oriented comedic device like the sight gag to retain the punning quality of Gertie's reversals, the film gives free play to her violent slapstick knockabout. In the end, the body again gets covered over by returning to the refrain pun—Jim is "lucky" because now Jack would rather be dead than married to Gertie.

The narrative drive to eliminate visual and other sensory traces of corporeality from the film world characterizes a typical Griffith comic trajectory. This is by no means the case for all slapstick comedies, nor even the norm for other studios at the time. For example, Vitagraph's comic trick films such as *Princess Nicotine* (Aug, 1909) and *A*

Kitchen Maid's Dream (Nov, 1907) play on the visual and cultural uncanniness of women's changing social positions—miniaturizing women's bodies, chopping off their hands, and even blowing them out of the chimney to incite and resolve comic narrative tensions. (Even in his early comic films, Griffith repeatedly abstains from using trick devices like mystical jump cuts and fantastic multiple exposures.) In a typical Griffith comedy, some sort of trace of female corporeality gets instrumentalized as the cause of narrative difference. The solution to this problem involves blowing it up in the storyline, not visually but narratively, until it disappears. For example, in *Eradicating Auntie*, Matilda Scroggins (Florence Auer) pays her niece Flora (Florence Lawrence) and husband Tom (Owen Moore) a visit, relentlessly attempting to censor their displays of physical affection. The problem of the aunt's presence is “eradicated” by the antics of the couple's friend Bill Corker (Herbert Prior), who dresses up as “a fire-eating cowboy” and chases after the aunt with stage guns until she leaps onto a moving train.

John Cumpson pays off burglars to remove a litany of aural intrusions—including a squawking parrot, phonograph, and trombone—when his sister Lena and her son Fritz pay him a visit in *Schneider's Anti-Noise Crusade*. As Mr. Jones, he turns Mrs. Jones' (Florence Lawrence) prim mother into an ostentatious floozie in order to provoke her removal in *His Wife's Mother*. Including the Bibbs's antics in *A Smoked Husband*, Griffith made eleven entries in the comic Jones series;^{lxxiii} most of these films revolve around narrativizing the comic escalation of various bodily intrusions. As with all series, the borderline apocalyptic pratfalls introduced in one episode disappear without a trace by the onset of the next one. The source of comic tension usually revolves around the physical differences between the attractive young wife and her pudgy, curmudgeonly

older husband. In *Joneses Have Amateur Theatricals*, a pantomime love scene between Mr. Jones and Mrs. Trouble (Marion Leonard) incites a series of physical eruptions that, like *Awful Hats*, acts out corporeally the tensions between bawdy exhibitionism and bourgeois restraint that were simultaneously transforming the theaters where these films were exhibited. Similarly, in *Jones at the Ball*, Mr. and Mrs. Jones attend a swank party; however, Jones gets trapped in the dressing room with another man's wife, which eventually leads to an all-out rumble and Mr. Jones' evacuation in his underwear through a several-story window. The clash between bodily license and social legitimacy drives the narrative of every episode in this comic series.

In the discourse of the trade press, the problem of selling motion picture uplift to audiences often boiled down to resolving the corporeal and class contradictions of female spectatorship. In a mandate to "Play to the Ladies" from Feb, 1909, the *Nickelodeon* journal advises exhibitors: "A woman's curiosity is strong, but it is not a man's curiosity... When the exhibitor has enlightened himself as to where his money is coming from, it is time for the next lesson. And that is, to give some thought as to what women really enjoy—the pictures that tell the kind of story they dote on." What do women *really* want to see in their motion pictures? Rather than attempt to assert a definitive answer to the question that Freud spent the better part of his scientific career puzzling over, I would suggest the question of female desire as a broader framework for moral legibility in transitional film narration. Griffith's films attempt to parlay a fundamental ambivalence about women's visual desire into a driving source of narrative tension. The bodily implications of how this process played out across genres are legion.

Again, in *Unseen Enemy*, the slattern maid's primary association with sensuality and tactility—which the sisters are denied—bears major historical implications for thinking about how Griffith's films negotiate formal transitions from early cinema's embodied exhibitionism to classical cinema's purported narrative transparency. Transitional techniques in film narration, in addition to making stories legible to an imaginary spectator, also faced the rhetorical difficulty of representing their own formal transformations to a historical spectator. From Griffith's early Biograph comedies such as *Those Awful Hats*, which foregrounds problems of the spectator's bodily repression, to his early crime dramas alike such as *The Criminal Hypnotist* (Jan, 1909),^{lxxiv} Griffith's self-reflexive discourse of embodiment indeed became more transparent. If anything, this discourse became more acutely integrated into his films' own syntax for visual narration.

“The Weakness”: A Slapstick Comedienne in Three Melodramas

Mabel Normand's brief but robust corpus under Griffith exemplifies the gendered system the director established for acting out bodily that which his films proffer visually. For example, Griffith pits Mary Pickford's melodramatic poise against Mabel Normand's quasi-comedic unruliness in *A Mender of Nets*, articulating a complex syntax that emerges between the different techniques enlisted to depict Pickford's “spirituelle” and Normand's “voluptuous” bodily performances. Whereas Pickford stills the frame, calling for soft lighting and a linear organization of space, Normand's gestures often threaten to spill out of the edges of the screen. Pickford's net mending provides a euphemistic image for the uneven arrangement of different embodied spaces both in this film and throughout Griffith's corpus. Just as narrative meaning itself is constructed through difference, from

the psychologism of the reverse shot to the immersive thrill of parallel editing, so too is the ethereal spirituelle as it were “stamped” by her comic, haphazard, and palpably embodied voluptuary double.

Again, *The Eternal Mother* plots this dynamic the most straightforwardly of all of Griffith’s films featuring Mabel Normand. In the actress’s second featured role for Griffith in *Her Awakening*, Mabel plays a more ambivalent version of her “thoughtless neighbor” character: “the thoughtless daughter.” So self-conscious about her humble means, the daughter all but literally throws her poor old mother (Kate Bruce) “under the bus” to save face in front of a potential suitor. After disavowing any relationship to her mother, whose sacrifices for her beloved daughter know no bounds, the heartbroken mother ambles away and subsequently gets mowed down by an automobile. Here, the good-woman/bad-woman dichotomy undergoes a temporal alteration. Mabel’s ephemeral embodiment gets displaced onto her mother, the rag woman in the attic. The mother sacrifices herself physically so that her daughter might experience some sort of spiritual “awakening,” in which she learns to renounce the fleeting luxuries of material temptations.

The daughter’s moral redemption allows her to shift between two spheres of juxtaposition: to the poor old mother (sympathetic but worn out), and to a slattern colleague. In an early scene, the daughter toils away at the laundry where she works, positioned in the left foreground, while a buxom, gum-chewing employee in the background saucily flirts with every gentleman who walks into the shop. In a world without Pickfords or Sweets or Gishes, Mabel’s own bodily ambivalence more or less negates itself. On the one hand, the daughter’s difference is offset by the oafish shop

employee positioned to the back-right of her: a displacement of bodily otherness to abet the redemption of an otherwise morally dubious character. On the other hand, the ragpicking mother's impetus for invisibility—her recession both visually and socio-economically—provides an alibi for the daughter's vice even during the moments when her voluptuary ways feel the most palpable. By erasing herself from the picture, the mother exchanges her own moral salvation for her daughter's. Again, whereas the daughter's juxtaposition to the slattern colleague takes the form of displacement, her juxtaposition to the mother takes the form of exchange—codified and made emotionally legible by the trope of maternal sacrifice.

Like Bierce's weeping woman "in widow's weeds," the perception of "woman" as such in relation to the institutions either of marital law or of transgressive desire depends on its discursive framing. Almost like a joke, Bierce's juxtapositions between the weeping woman's discourse and the sympathetic stranger's results in an amusing reversal of expectations. Working with a very different set of tools than print literature, Griffith adapts these contradictory discourses of "woman" to instrumentalize the language of film narrative. In his own mythologized quest to "father" the narrative logic of moving images, Griffith organizes film meaning through the very tensions between the contradictory discourses of "woman" at hand. Throughout this messy transitional era at Biograph, a nuanced constellation of gendered dichotomies propels Griffith's efforts to tell stories through the discontinuous plotting of moving images.

The film's narration of the daughter's redemptive exchangeability with her "more spiritual" mother is nothing short of sensational. The suitor encounters mother and daughter in the street in an attempt to return an umbrella that the daughter had left behind

on their date. All three occupying the same frame—the clueless suitor, the self-conscious daughter, and the well-meaning mother—Mabel casts her mother a glance whose meaning needs no translation. “Her old heart broken,” the mother banishes herself to the next shot and there walks straight into moving traffic. Instead of the voyeurism that would constitute the climax of a thoroughly classical maternal melodrama like *Stella Dallas*, in which maternal sacrifice means occupying the concealed position of the spectator, Griffith opts for a more embodied resolution.

Just before her accident, the mother gazes vertically off-screen at the sky. Having spent her life visibly abstaining from the temptations of commodity exchange, the mangy mother transubstantiates the logic of capitalism itself into a form of spiritual exchange. Later, while the mother “is sinking” on her deathbed, the daughter prays in the next room, shocked into spiritual awakening by her mother’s traumatic traffic accident. Again, meaning here is by no means self-explanatory. What we see includes two women exchanging looks behind a man’s back, a forlorn woman’s departure and her look up at the sky, and then a traumatically abrupt change of course with a spontaneous automobile accident. From these looks and events, we glean psychological motivations, narrative causations, as well as abstract theological subtexts. In this transitional 1911 film moment, narrative plot points get signified by motivating throwbacks to female bodily disappearance (think of Méliès’ *Vanishing Lady* and Hepworth’s *How It Feels to be Run Over*), as if acting out the disembodied spectator’s own erasure from the diegesis.

Her Awakening culminates with a happy romantic reunion after the mother’s funeral. Mabel’s visual and narrative wavering between spirituelle and voluptuary identities meets somewhere in the middle with heteronormative coupling. In contrast,

most of Mabel's films with Griffith pigeonhole her as the unsavory type, pitting her against a lineup of untainted spirituelles like Mary Pickford and Blanche Sweet. This organization of narrative vision around an inflexible dichotomy, which disavows "woman's" ambivalent range of meanings, has the effect of either bracketing her romantic possibilities or rendering them entirely futile. In *The Eternal Mother*, coupling becomes desexualized, separating its lustful impetus for biological reproduction from its spiritual horizons. In *The Squaw's Love*, moonlighting as a Native American named Wildflower, diving girl Mabel's aquatic agency, employed to salvage her doomed romance, gets bracketed as a romanticized vision of primitive Native American life—as David Mayer puts it, "apparently untouched by white civilization" (*GP*, vol. 5, 360).

Her Awakening associates Mabel's spiritual redemption with her domestic transformation: at first the old mother and poverty provide excuses for the daughter to compartmentalize her public and private lives, and to conceal her home from her friends and suitor. Her actions are the most malicious when done for the purpose of public visibility. Scott Simmon, in his research on Griffith's women's films, explains this privatizing trajectory as a "content-form split." Deciphering an early Biograph melodrama with Mary Pickford and Arthur Johnson, *To Save Her Soul* (1909), Simmon argues: "The story line takes its stand against what the film going situation promotes – the public display of women" (*The Films of D.W. Griffith*, 70). In other words, Simmon identifies the cinematic tension between public and private iterations of femininity as a content-form split.

While the paradoxes abound regarding Griffith's public construction of private familial ideals across his corpus, the conversation about the meanings of Griffith's gender

contradictions—specifically their deployments to construct film meaning—can and must be pushed farther. It is not simply that Griffith's films militate against women's public visibility in content while paradoxically assuming this visibility in form, a contradiction between signified and signifier. Rather, the relations between form and content are overdetermined: mutually determining and partially autonomous. Two starkly conflicting iterations of "woman," again the "spirituelle" and "the voluptuary," brush up against Griffith's fragmentary editing techniques. Parallel editing responds to these two notions of woman by making them linguistically generative, codifying their formal discontinuity by rendering them humanly legible.

Mender of Nets blurs the boundaries between public and private in order to abet its temporal thematic of eternity. The circularity of the film's narrative structure provides a guarantor of the spirituelle's own everlasting life: that which recurs cinematically will endure somatically. The film opens and closes with nearly identical fading images of a girl (Mary Pickford) sitting by the sea and mending a fishing net. Yuri Tsivian invokes Ecclesiastes in his notes on the film: the "last shot – a mirror image of the first – seems to say 'What has been will be again' (1:9)" (*GP*, vol. 6, 393). Like the Moirai, the three female weavers of fate in Greek mythology, the girl's net mending in this parable bears mortal ties to the lives of the characters around her. For Griffith, this vital metaphor of mending becomes enmeshed with the film's own visual articulation of its recurring, interweaving narrative threads.

Griffith often associated the thematic of recurrence with the aesthetics of the seaside. In *The Unchanging Sea* (May, 1910), inspired by the Charles Kingsley poem "The Three Fishers," a young husband suffering from amnesia after a shipwreck at last

regains his memory by spending years watching his children virtually relive his own experiences: what recurs biographically will return psychically. However, events and motivations that remain opaque and ambiguous in *Unchanging Sea* become almost narratively transparent in *Mender of Nets*. This clarity is achieved primarily by identifying the film's own plotting from the net mender's quasi-metaphysical viewpoint. For example, recurring images of the village fishermen toiling along the shore are framed in connection to the net-mender's position, while often depicting her looking away or up at the sky in a reverse shot. These juxtapositions to the net-mender sitting on her rock include her sweetheart walking along the waves after their betrothal, and an atypically busy (for this film) full shot of the workers carrying their loads. This has the effect of organizing the film's thematic visions of seaside labor around her position without literalizing them as her subjective visions, indeed mystifying them as images seen paradoxically only while she is looking away.

In contrast, the voluptuary woman gets marked as too partial and fragmented to be either seen or unseen. As in *The Eternal Mother*, Mabel's character (here allegorically named "THE WEAKNESS: His Old Infatuation") lurks around the edges of the frame, often leading "The Sweetheart" (Charles West) to a murky off-screen space extending from the lower right corner. "The Weakness" creates a ripple in the film's visual symmetry, a form of difference or violence that drives the tension of the narrative and must ultimately get gathered up and mended back together. While the net-mender spools some string and lounges with her sweetheart by the seaside, a visibly perturbed and disheveled Mabel possesses the reverse shot. Though "the weakness" may veer towards the edges of the frame, she can certainly see straight herself. This disturbing image of

sweetheart and net-mender is both perfectly centered and unambiguously anchored in the weakness' point of view: her subjective gaze is revealed in a reverse shot.

At this moment, the net-mender's eternal vision gets physically suspended by the weakness' temporary substitution for the position of the spectator. Mabel beckons the boy from her lookout atop a rock, addressing him in secret behind the mender's back. The weakness' thick-bodied older brother discovers their meanderings and swears vengeance against the boy for dishonoring his sister. On the cusp of irreversible physical violence, the metaphorically all-seeing net-mender regains her vision. She borrows her father's binoculars to look out from behind her usual position in front of the sea, in search of her sweetheart who has now been absent for quite a long time. Using a technical instrument to reclaim her visual authority, she spots the men exchanging fisticuffs. This visual reversal initiates another form of narrative difference between the spectator's comprehension of the reverse shot and the net-mender's. Misinterpreting her own artificially elongated position, the net-mender springs into action. She sees the men fighting blind to the cause: her voluptuary doppelganger who has precluded the net-mender's courtship before it even got off the ground. The narrative difference between the mender's subjective position and her cinematic vision propels her to recuperate physically that which she has relinquished visually.

Whereas "cinematic vision" refers primarily to a metaphorical position for the net-mender, who sees the ebb and flow of the tides as they wash over everyday life, the weakness commits the mortal sin of embodying vision [see fig. 14]. Her jealous, sideways looks at the happy couple from atop her perch initiate the cycle of misrecognitions that threaten to damn the whole village. An intertitle announces: "The

net-mender, ignorant of the cause of the quarrel, attempts to save her sweetheart.” The drama escalates with a complex series of visual reversals. The brother stalks the sweetheart through a window and then lunges at him with a gun just as the net-mender herself arrives at the window; meanwhile the weakness languishes in the next room, having been silenced by her vengeful brother.

Just as bad goes to worse, the net-mender drops a counter-stitch by flinging herself bodily into her own point of view shot. She throws herself in front of her sweetheart while the mad brother closes in on him with a gun. The reconciliation occurs, and at last the spirituelle and the voluptuary are allowed to occupy the same frame. The little mender pantomimes her terrible discovery while the weakness shudders despairingly, only about half of her body visible at the right edge of the frame. Finally “the little mender learns the truth of the other girl’s sorrow.” From here, the film’s proximate cutting serves more to assert connections than to psychologize differences. The three wander in out of different frames, the net-mender exiting and reentering the front door, and again end up in the same room all three hand-in-hand. Rejected, the sweetheart finds comfort in his old infatuation while the title character announces, “I’ll mend the nets.” Again, the film closes with a mirror image of its opening (as Stephen Heath might put it, the film moves from $S \rightarrow S1$).^{lxxv}

For Heath, writing on Hollywood classical cinema in “Film, System, Narrative,” “What distinguishes the fiction film is not the absence of a special work of the signifier, but its presence in the mode of *denegation*, and it is well known that this type of presence is the paradox—or better the tourniquet—of the narrative: denegation, it brings with it, states, the heterogeneity and process it seeks to contain” (137). Widely mythologized as

the “great father” who gave “birth” to this film syntax, who simultaneously inaugurated and covered over the visual tools for rendering film meaning, Griffith often imagined “denegation” as a moral opposition between ethereal and excessively embodied iterations of “woman.” As if trying to map the medium’s temporal and visual paradoxes onto juxtaposed portrayals of women, Griffith’s films make good on their own debased tropes (which include everything from blackface minstrelsy to vigilante chase sequences) by coordinating a moral trajectory around the embodied collisions of these paradoxes.

Conclusions: Between Slapstick and Melodrama

In a late Biograph comedy originally titled *Brute Force* (April, 1914), a prehistoric bricoleur “Weakhands” (Bobby Harron) is provoked to fashion the bow and arrow as a weapon when a neighboring women-less tribe steals his wife “Lillywhite” (Mae Marsh)—along with the mates of his kinfolk. Weakhands’ invention of the arrow makes the film cut itself a lethal proposition; it instrumentalizes the visual and physical traversal of distance for the purpose of returning Lillywhite’s and the other cave women’s bodies back to the original shot. Our loyalties are clearly aligned with the co-ed clan, not with the women-less tribe that presumably would not know how to integrate women’s bodies into its kinship structure by any means other than “brute force.” In a poetic stroke, after launching the fatal arrow into the flank of his main competitor “Brute Force,” Weakhands literally runs into his own POV-shot in order to beat a wounded Brute Force over the head with a stone hammer. Acting out physically a device that had been transparent visually, the “weak-handed” inventor then reclaims his bride from a position

that he had previously watched from afar, thereby sustaining the fantasy that vision is embodied after all.

I have focused here primarily on Griffith's inheritances from his early work in slapstick comedy in his later Biograph melodramas. To take an object lesson from Griffith, I would like to conclude now with an example of their negation. *Brute Force* uses a prehistoric dream sequence as an impetus for narrating a conventional dramatic scenario this time as straight comedy. I have argued that slapstick gestural techniques, typically embodied by wicked voluptuary women, mask the construction of Griffith's visually transparent film language. Comedic actresses like Mabel Normand act out the very visual excesses of the motion picture's storytelling toolbox, and thereby provide a moral alibi for the slippages and limitations inherent in film grammar. Invoking a scandalous pre-history to the prohibition of incest, wherein exogamy created the incentive for marriage outside of the clan, *Brute Force* reverses its genders along with its genre. By learning to invent a tool, which becomes instrumental for preventing Lillywhite's traffic to another clan, Weakhands inhabits the corporeal effects of his own gaze: he walks into his own point-of-view shot. There is no bad woman in *Brute Force*, no voluptuary to provide a moral cover for the initiation of linguistic violence. Rather, comedy itself, the convention of suspending mutually exclusive realities in order to provoke laughter, defers the awareness of psychosexual difference. If the voluptuary, a holdover from Griffith's early investment in slapstick, is the black sheep of transitional melodrama, then naturally comedy would be the antidote to her evil interference.

CHAPTER 4

TRICK FILM AESTHETICS AND SUFFRAGETTE POLITICS

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the relationship between women's aesthetic shape-shifting in popular motion pictures, and feminist political transformations driven by suffragette movements through the 1910s. While women organized to lobby for the vote—as well as other forms of civic involvement and liberation from the domestic sphere—female metamorphosis in motion pictures reached a gridlock. The constraints upon women's bodily elasticity in trick cinematography was precipitated by the industrial decline of trick filmmaking, as well as by the formations of a narrative film syntax that rationalized experimental changes in aesthetic form. I thereby analyze the displacement of the trick film as a popular genre in the 1910s through feminist suffragette political histories. I do this by focusing on comical motion picture depictions of suffragette politics on the cusp of the classical era; I make the claim that suffragist politics were domesticated in conjunction with the aesthetic and industrial containment of film tricks by the classical cinema.

As I have argued, women's corporeal transformations in pre-classical trick films and comedies shifted from elasticity to plasticity: from temporary bodily changes (elasticity) to irreversible physical transformations (plasticity).^{lxxvi} I associate this movement toward permanent and potentially traumatic rupture with the formations of classical film syntax, including the hierarchical visual organization of both the frame

itself and the relations established between shots. The distinction between bodily elasticity and plasticity provides a framework for grappling with the potentially lasting effects of comedic reversal: whether carnivalesque transgressions of the norm provide an inoculation against lasting social changes, or whether their effects have the power to linger and to inhabit bodily realities beyond the screen and the film theater. In this chapter, I look closely at the spate of carnivalesque comedies (both pro- and anti-suffragette propaganda) produced during the 1910s in order to think more concretely about how these images of physical transformation index the changing social, economic, and political relations that were unfolding simultaneously in the world beyond the screen.

While the liquidation of political and domestic spheres in real life provided fodder for endless lampooning in film comedies, the aesthetics of film comedy increasingly conformed to the visual rationality of narrative storytelling. Trick films went from genre staples to marginal oddities—and from self-sufficient attractions to integrated special effects—during this period. This dialectic between the decline of trick films and the cultural mainstreaming of suffragette politics speaks to the plasticity of female metamorphosis in the transitional period that I have explored. Women's brittle and potentially irreversible metamorphoses (dismemberment, miniaturization, undercranking) both conformed to the visual hierarchies of film storytelling, and registered the lasting effects of ongoing social and political transformations. These changing relations included: the blurring between public and private spheres and professionalization of domestic labor (laundry, baking); influx of immigrant populations to the United States from Western and Mediterranean Europe; integration of female and immigrant labor into the industrial workforce; social reformist movements, which often walked a fine line

between “moral improvement” and the “feminization” or commodification of civic life; and, as this chapter investigates, the local, national, and international coordination of suffragette political movements.

Suffragettes and the Law: Laughter, Difference, and Paradox

Hundreds of suffragette-themed comedies were churned out during the 1910s, reflecting the growing cultural visibility and lingering political ambivalence about suffragette movements. Feminist arguments during this decade focused on women’s needs for self-representation under the law: as the lawyer Catherine Waugh McCulloch put it, for women to protect themselves broadly from “discriminatory man-made laws” (Kraditor, 55). Anti-suffragette propaganda, to combat these expediency arguments, dramatized the potentially extreme societal disruption of women’s enfranchisement. Describing women’s suffrage as “petticoat government,” anti-suffrage propaganda proliferated images of broken homes and dysfunctional legislatures that would surely ensue were women to be granted the vote. Whereas suffragettes emphasized the urgency of their needs for even partial self-representation, anti- and traditionalists exaggerated the catastrophic potential of political reform. Sexual difference thereby came to stand in for the paradoxes of the law under representative democracy: primarily the paradoxes between universal citizenship and pervasive disenfranchisement. Questions of change hinged on the negotiation between identity and difference—both sexual and democratic—which at once subjected citizens to the law and barred them from the means to participate in altering it. Democracy’s deeper contradictions between abstract rights

and material exclusions were repeatedly mapped onto the social and psychosexual differences between men and women.

The effects of women's enfranchisement on the law and the state apparatus were thematic obsessions in suffragette film comedies of the 1910s. The list was legion of films exploring various social permutations of the law's relation to women; some of the many, many titles include: *If Women Were Policemen* (Clarendon, 1908), *The Elusive Miss Pinkhurst* (Warwick, 1912), *When Women Vote* (Lubin, 1907), *When Women Win* (Lubin, 1909), *When Women Rule* (Selig, 1912), *How They Got the Vote* (Edison, 1913), *Courting Across the Court* (Thanhouser, 1911), *Milling the Militants* (Clarendon, 1913), *For Mayor—Bess Smith* (Pathé, 1913), *The Suffragette Sheriff* (Kalem, 1913), *Scroggins Takes the Census* (Cricks and Martin, 1911), *Cousin Kate's Revolution* (Éclair, 1912), *Love and the Law* (American, 1913), *The Girl and the Mayor* (George Kleine, 1913), *Suffragettes and the Law* (Universal, 1913), *Down with Men* (Lubin, 1912), *A Busy Day* (Keystone, 1914), *The Pickpocket* (Vitagraph, 1913), *Oh Wat'er Wet Day* (Lux, 1913), and *A Cure for Suffragettes* (Biograph, 1913). A typical film would depict women gaining some portion of political power—anything from absolute sovereignty to the love interest of the mayor—with imminent disaster looming. Comedy was the principal mode of address. Images of extreme reversal and anarchy were meant to provoke laughter rather than terror. To the extent that laughter at some level always refers to reality, these films were both empowering and profoundly discouraging. As Freud has put it, “What...jokes whisper may be said aloud: that the wishes and desires of men have a right to make themselves acceptable alongside of exacting and ruthless morality” (*Jokes*, 131). These films at once indexed the inevitability of political change in response to suffragette

demands, and attempted to preserve the norm by depicting all change as inherently catastrophic. They operated in extremes. Rather than allow for partial adjustment, these films dealt with the fragmentation of the political by the transformations of the social through the ambivalences of laughter. The problem of film politics boiled down to the effects of film laughter: could laughter's effects become permanent, or were they wholly ephemeral? Did laughter represent an impetus for embracing difference, or a mechanism of disavowal?

In a dialectic with the language of film laughter, suffragette activists were often tasked with explaining how some change could be different from all change—and how partial rights could be admitted while deferring the trauma of total social transformation. The lawyer Harriet Burton Laidlaw perhaps put the matter to rest rhetorically in 1912: “insofar as women were like men they ought to have the same rights; insofar as they were different they must represent themselves” (Kraditor, 111). The late trick film *How They Got the Vote* (Edison, 1913) figures the suffragette conundrum in cinematic terms. In the film, a suffragette's suitor possesses two statues: one called “Sleep,” which creates immediate stasis, and another called “Progress,” which returns everything to motion. Halting traffic and paralyzing all forms of life on the London Bridge, Picadilly Circus, and the Bank of England, the suffragettes coerce Parliament into granting them the vote by aligning their rights-based political demands with the very development of modernity—and with the most infinitesimal substance of matter and instant of temporality. Time will stand still and motion will freeze as long as political enfranchisement is waylaid.

Although these films do their best to elide the nuance and particularity of both pro- and anti- suffragette arguments, they remain especially instructive as symptoms of the fragmentation of political power. In contrast to dominant suffragette arguments, which focused on the urgency of specific civil reforms that directly pertained to women, carnivalesque suffragette comedies revel in their utter legal and political abstraction. Woman becomes the absolute sovereign, implicitly healing what Carl Schmitt has referred to as “the crisis of parliamentary democracy.”^{lxxvii} (Schmitt argued that representative democracy’s dilution of decisional authority had precipitated a crisis of political indecision.) Through their decisive negation of the norm, women restore the ruptured potency of sovereign authority. They embody the exception to the law—the basis of decisional sovereignty—which had become fragmented by escalating social debates about the injustice of democracy’s inherent exclusions. As Schmitt puts it, “the essence of democratic principle...[refers to] an assertion of identity between law and the people’s will” (*Crisis*, 26). When women take over the police force and dictate that all men wear knee-length skirts and inherit the biological ability to give birth (*When Women Win*), or hold time itself hostage to the progress of sexual equality (*How They Got the Vote*), they simultaneously shore up the very unity of the law that their campaigns implicitly seek to question.^{lxxviii}

Suffragette arguments during this period were repeatedly tasked with explaining the paradoxes of representative democracy through the lens of sexual difference. The contradictions whereby some citizens were bound by a law that they could have no voice in legislating mapped all too seamlessly onto the sexual division of labor. The opposition between active- male citizen and passive- female object also sustained the separation

between public and private spheres; productive and reproductive labor; reason and irrationality; and civic politics and domesticity. The range of strategies for dissolving these oppositions varied widely within the movement. Reformist proponents of small-scale participation butted heads with feminist advocates of structural transformation.

The humanitarian Jane Addams emphasized the interrelation between civic reforms and domestic rights, describing municipal government as “housekeeping on a large scale.” Sanitation and public health regulations, fresh food and pure water standards, and police enforcement had a direct bearing on the quality of life in the home, which was still widely perceived as woman’s “natural sphere.” More radical feminists prioritized federal over municipal legislation. This defining conflict between municipal reform versus federal enfranchisement caused a major splintering within the United States national organization when, in 1913, the Congressional Union (later reformed as the National Women’s Party) broke from the National American Woman’s Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Whereas militants including the Pankhursts in Britain and Alice Paul and Lucy Burns in the United States insisted on universalism, deploying force when necessary to inherit the deferred promises of democracy, reformist leaders of NAWSA (Anna Howard Shaw, Carrie Chapman Catt, Jane Addams) focused on the social expediency of women’s partial enfranchisement. Abandoning the objective of a federal amendment, NAWSA leaders worked on state-level and municipal campaigns to carry out targeted civic reforms such as improving public health and safety standards.

As a theory of democracy, feminism seeks to extend the same individual rights of liberalism to all citizens; however, as a theory of sexual difference, feminism emphasizes collectivity and the needs for special rights to protect a specific constituent of people. “A

peculiar transience is in play” here, “for when women are named by their protagonists as those who are excluded, this platform must aim at its own dissolution – the melting-back of women into the order of humanity by means of the franchise” (Riley, 68). These antagonisms between identity and difference have always haunted discursive constructions of woman—linguistically, psycho-sexually, and politically. As a practical matter, they became a major point of contention about how feminist social transformation should even be envisioned.

Feminism gained visibility as a serious political question throughout the 1910s through the framework of these internal debates between humanist-feminists and womanist-feminists. Whereas Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Olive Schreiner urged women to “exercise their full human capacities in useful work of all sorts” (Cott, 41), Ellen Key and Havelock Ellis attacked Gilman and Schreiner for setting their sights on arenas already dominated by men. Key pushed for the state recognition of traditional forms of women’s work, lobbying for “maternity protection” laws whereby the state would compensate unwed and single mothers for their reproductive labor. She sparred publicly with Gilman, describing the consequences of women working outside the home as “socially pernicious, racially wasteful, and soul-withering” (Cott, 48). Avowing her politics as humanist, Gilman feared that feminism would valorize women’s work without transforming it: “Even those modern protagonists of women whom we call ‘feminists’ find some difficulty in proving equality; much more, superiority in women, as we know them” (“Feminism and Social Progress”). Katherine Anthony asserted at the time that feminism had two “dominating ideas:” “the emancipation of woman both as a human-being and as a sex-being” (Cott, 49). As Cott argues, these “divergent emphases did not

cause real fissures within Feminism at the time. Rather...they represented Feminism's characteristic doubleness" (49): the contradictions between identity and difference that shaped women's articulation of their specific political demands.

Although less alert to the nuances of feminist debates, suffragette films enlisted comedy to wrestle with the most general levels of paradox between abstract ideals and concrete realities. Typically, these films deal in absolutes—even a marginal inclusion of women in civic politics precipitates a total reversal of life and the law. For example, in *A Cure for Suffragettes* (Biograph, 1913), "Caroline Spankhurst and her Suffragette Brigade... in their dauntless enthusiasm...forget their babies peacefully reposing on the sidewalk." Their babies thus become the wards of the traffic squad, which prevents the traffic guards from keeping the streets cleared and of course also leads to chaos and anarchy. While this film is extremely carnivalesque in its conception of the world, its actual scenario is quite specific. "A small sized riot is taking place, but every mother's a suffragette so why cry 'Help?'"^{lxxix} This is ostensibly an absurdist version of the debate that Gilman and Key were simultaneously arguing.

These films, although fantastical, represent fantasy structures that were quite pointed in their aims. As Shelley Stamp argues, "although wives oppress husbands in these alarmist dramas, their inverted structures all but acknowledge that existing divisions of labor might also be less than fair" (*Movie Struck Girls*, 159). To read these films, which are albeit very problematic, as sheerly sexist would undermine the complexity of their historical contexts. The extreme and anarchic reversals depicted in these films really serve as decoys from their active entanglement with open questions about sexual

politics—not just whether equality would be of value to society, but precisely what issues it would have to navigate given that it was already underway.

Women take over the police force (*The Suffragette Sheriff*) and fire brigade (*Fire! Fire! Fire!*); become municipal leaders (*When the Men Left Town*); get elected to government office (*When Helen Was Elected*); preside over jurisdictions (*Courting Across the Court*); enlist as army cadets (*When Their Wives Joined the Military*); seek justice against their male tormentors (*Down with the Men*); and become consumed with politics to the exclusion of their traditional duties (*Lea the Suffragette*). As a result, there is a degree of confusion about how society could or should be governed given the liquidation of traditionally separate spheres. Would neglected babies spontaneously appear and then hamper civil officers to the detriment of all society (not that abandoned or unattended babies were a societal problem specific to feminist activism)? Would men then be tasked with contributing to domestic housework? Were women even tough enough for politics, or were their naturally delicate constitutions better suited for other capacities (like prostitution, sweatshop labor, and childbirth)? The point is that these films were not ridiculous incidentally: they were ridiculous deliberately. Men give birth and parade about in hoop skirts, machines break down, traffic halts, time itself freezes, innocent men are wrongly convicted and sentenced to prank executions, and nations go to war on a whim. Nonsense was a tactic for managing the terror of the irrational, and the necessary forms of tension and confusion that any form of change must engender.

Strategically, as a movement, feminism sought to inherit its internal contradictions, accusations of its formlessness, and to sustain them as strengths. This perpetual awareness of contradiction, imminent rupture, and fragmentation was of course

intrinsic to the experience of modern life. Walter Benjamin describes modern visibility through the medium of the “dialectical image:” “the image of what has been...must be caught in this way, flashing up in the now of its recognizability. The redemption enacted in this way, and solely in this way, is won only against the perception of what is being irredeemably lost” (*Writer of Modern Life*, 160). The language of comedy is all about managing and learning to find pleasure in the simultaneous suspension of mutually exclusive realities—for example, the wildly contradictory image of women who are both militant enough to depose men from public governance, and so overwhelmingly “feminine” that they would abdicate the reins immediately at the call of a crying baby.

Often enough, the anti- arguments that feminists were tasked with debunking edged the line between illogic and the ridiculous. For example, biological rationales for women’s disenfranchisement asserted first that women were naturally too delicate to withstand political life, and second that women’s “predominance of sentiment” would overpower and streamroll the public sphere. Octavius B. Frothingham argued that women’s excess of emotional intuition, while ideally suited to the private sphere, “renders her essentially an idealist...She can make no allowances for slowness...Her reforms are sweeping. She would close all the bars and liquor saloons, and make it a crime to sell intoxicating drink” (Kraditor, 19). (Frothingham’s characterizations of female temperament bears striking resemblances to Schmitt’s condemnation of representative democracy as “a liberal individualism burdened by moral pathos and a democratic sentiment governed essentially by political ideals”—see note ii.) This image of women overpowering civic government with their broad sweeping reforms provides a partial explanation for how suffragettes attain power so easily in many of these comedies.

The New York Clipper warns: “Things in general are going to be vastly different *When Women Win*.”^{lxxx} As a writer for *Variety* described this terrifying transformation, “If women ever come to the fore in civic and state supremacy—women postmen, policemen, court officers and other public officials are shown with knee-length skirts over the long pantaloons of the male gender.”^{lxxxi} *The Suffragette’s Dream* (Pathé, 1909) depicts several masculine suffragettes strolling through “a park where men are seen as nurse maids, and one big husky fellow is crocheting for dear life” (*Moving Picture World*).^{lxxxii} Civic empowerment also gets figured as a spontaneous genetic inheritance in a variety of ways: while men give birth in *When Women Win* (Edison, 1914), Amazon women bully and tower over their emasculated husbands in *Was He a Suffragette?* (Republic, 1912). Most of these films enact extreme role reversals, which occur immediately upon women’s enfranchisement, and then are quickly reversed as they make society completely unlivable for anyone else.

Women “make no allowances for slowness, for tentative or compromising measures” in these films (as Frothingham warned), but they simultaneously manifest the other pole of anti-suffragette arguments about female biology: excessive physical and emotional vulnerability. Woman’s “alleged weakness, nervousness, and proneness to fainting would certainly be out of place in polling booths and party conventions” (Kraditor, 20). The Reverend Walsh delivered fiery orations condensing these inconsistent philosophies before mass audiences for the Anti-Women’s Suffrage Organization:

The best wife and mother and sister would make the worst legislator, judge, and police. The excessive development of the emotional in her nervous system, ingrafts on the female organization, a neurotic or hysterical condition, which is the source of much of the female charm when it is kept within due restraints.

In...moments of excitement...it is liable to explode in violent paroxysm...Every woman, therefore, carries this power of irregular, illogical and incongruous action; and no one can foretell when the explosion will come.

Harkening back to the *pétroleuse* of the French Revolution—the violent, unruly, and sexually dangerous woman who iconized the Paris Commune [see fig. 15]—the possibility of society’s eruption and “the excess of emotional development in [woman’s] nervous system” emerged as co-conspirators: the subordination of women represented the health of the state.

These contradictory figurations of female physiology, as at once unimaginably vulnerable and irresistibly overpowering, provided the perfect narrative framework for absurdist suffragette film comedies. Stamp summarizes their formula: “Women learn that they cannot perform ‘male’ tasks in society, while men are demeaned through domestic labor. Titles like *When Women Vote*, *When Women Win*, and *When Women Rule* all imagine life after women have been granted full citizenship” (Stamp, 157). While women gain power easily in these films, they are comically ill-equipped for executing it. In *When Women Win*, “fastidious, white-gloved ladies clean city streets, business meetings become chatty tea parties, and Friday is declared bargain day at the market” (157). In *When the Men Left Town*, women learn the hard way that “‘tidying up the whole town was subtly different than dusting the parlor and tying the velvet bows on the what-not.’ Trolley cars grind to a halt because ‘nobody dared to monkey with the dingusses that make the car go’” (158). As Stamp elaborates, “The mere sight of women running trolleys, delivering mail, putting out fires, policing city streets, or administering the judicial system generates comedy in a whole range of films where equal enfranchisement is figured as a feminine invasion of public space” (157).

Despite their paradoxical language, premised on the free play of opposites, these films of course were also deeply complicit in thwarting crucial suffragette claims. Whereas Lucy Stone argued that women required a direct legal voice to ensure sexual justice^{lxxxiii}—citing the puny sentences meted out to convicted rapists and sex crime perpetrators, and the absurdly low age of consent in most states—*Jane the Justice* portrays a female judge who swoons over a handsome criminal and then pardons him in a jury-less trial. Most often, it is women who end up behind bars. In *The Pickpocket*, a husband tricks his suffragette wife into accepting theater tickets, which he then reports as stolen, refusing to bail her out until “after extorting a promise from her to retire from the suffragette club” (*MPW*). More anarchically, women storm the mayor’s office and start a small riot leading to mass arrests after an exciting meeting at their suffragette club in an Italian comedy, *Lea the Suffragette* (Cines, 1913). “In her cell in prison, Lea has ample opportunity for calm reflection and quite rapidly her political ardor cools” (*MPW*). In the end, the re-masculinization of the men and return of women to their proper domestic sphere provide for a total restoration of traditional order. In their most extreme carnivalesque visions, suffragette film comedies shatter the law and then resolve all of the law’s inherent contradictions by allowing for its absolute, unquestioned reinstatement.

Gendered Labor and Revolutionary Laughter

Although American women’s suffrage emerged in conjunction with pre-Civil War abolitionism—spearheaded by the Seneca Falls Convention organizers including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Frederick Douglass—racial, ethnic, and class alliances were repeatedly called into question as the feminist movement gained steam.

Placating Southern^{lxxxiv} and bourgeois cosmopolitan constituents alike, suffragettes appealed to rampant racism and xenophobia to express their claims for enfranchisement. They argued that the woman's vote would offset the growing influence of the uneducated and the foreign-born on public life: "Now, most suffragists were willing to claim the vote because all human beings, native and foreign born, were *not* equal, and the inferior ought not to rule the superior" (Kraditor, 127). The once famous abolitionist Cady Stanton revised her rationale for women's suffrage in a resolution at the 1893 NAWSA Convention, now urging an educational qualification for the vote, because: 1) It would limit the foreign vote; 2) It would decrease the ignorant native vote; and 3) "It would dignify the rise of suffrage in the eyes of our people" (Kraditor, 133).

Suffragette leaders had a similarly ambivalent relationship with the interests of labor, at once cultivating cross-class coalitions while emphasizing social uplift and moral improvement over economic egalitarianism. Like comedy, which wavers between lasting change and momentary reversal, suffragette politics courted labor activism while promoting essentially bourgeois ideals. Harriot Stanton Blatch and Alma Lutz reflect in their memoirs: "We all believed that suffrage propaganda must be made dramatic... We saw the need of drawing industrial women into the suffrage campaign... these women needed to be brought into contact, not with women of leisure, but with business and professional women who were also out in the world earning their living" (*Challenging Years*, 93-94). These difficulties cut both ways: labor leaders enlisted alliances with women's suffrage, while seeking to delimit the extent of their influence. Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick describe the alliance between The Women's Trade Union League and the American Federation of Labor as "inevitably a difficult one... [though] the

League acted as a goad to the further organization of women by Federation affiliates, it was also an irritant. Federation leaders might praise the League for its services...but they stopped a long way short of the kind of action which would have made the League's continued existence unnecessary" (*Century of Struggle*, 239). The women who populated the industrial workforce sought the increasing support of both trade unions and suffragette organizations.^{lxxxv} While labor networks like the AFL bracketed feminist politics, it also became clear that the interests of women workers could not be supported by the vote or civil rights alone.

Given the complexities of feminism's inevitable antagonisms but partial alliances with interests of labor, a more nuanced reading of the revolving door between reversal and normalization in suffragette film comedies becomes possible. *Oh! You Suffragette* (American, 1911)—which split a reel with *A Cure for Laziness*, about a doctor who invents a medical remedy for female laziness—imagines feminism as the implicit cause and the natural target of capitalism's economic contradictions. In other words, the collapse of separate spheres—as opposed to structural inequality and capitalist exploitation—become the imaginary causes of poverty and insanitation in the world. "This comedy shows how the suffrage germ interfered with family affairs until some brilliant genius conceived the idea of introducing a few mice into the room. The result is magical."^{lxxxvi} A street peddler who had been excluded from the suffragette meeting buys a cage of mice (or "rats" according to some reviews) from a farmer and unlooses them on the women at their rally. This rodent gag walks a fine line between magic trick disappearance and verminous infestation. (Rats were repeatedly weaponized against feminists in films including *The Suffragettes' Downfall*, or *Who Said 'Rats,'* and *The*

Revolt of Mr. Wiggs.) While Upton Sinclair sensationalized a critique of the Chicago meatpacking industry with tales of immigrant children getting locked in the factory overnight and eaten alive by rats, the filthy symptoms of industrial exploitation here enact resolutions to feminism's "high ideas and high ideals, [which] vanish in a trice."^{xxxvii}

Democracy's economic contradictions between abstract equality and material subjugation finds an alibi in gendered caricature. Rodent invasion somehow neutralizes the contagious "germ" of suffragette politics. The British comedy, *Suffragette's Downfall, or Who Said 'Rats,'* makes this connection explicit when a husband discourages his suffragette wife from playing golf by unleashing a cage of rats on her at the golf course. Pinning the failures of democracy on feminine squeamishness, these films subtly suggest that poverty and insanitation really stem from the liquidation of separate spheres.

It is my argument that suffragette comedies substitute political transformation for bodily metamorphosis: social reversals stand in for physical shape-shifting. As *Motography* writer Harrison Dent lamented in 1911, "Tricks popular a few years ago are being abandoned. Sophisticated audiences demand that the ideas be worked out in a logical way. This forced manufacturers to drop the obvious or merely ingenious and have recourse to news topics." Films such as *Eva Is Tired of Life*, *The Kitchen Maid's Dream*, and *The Acrobatic Maid* imagine the effects of trick editing on women's bodies in order to resolve the impossible contradictions between women's lives and women's work (see chapter 2). In *The Kitchen Maid's Dream*, a young housemaid fantasizes that she can dismember her own limbs in order to keep pace with her impossible labor expectations. In *Eva Is Tired of Life*, a young woman, whose labor energy has been exhausted, gets her

limbs transformed into springs when she unsuccessfully attempts to commit suicide. Jumping off of bridges and then bouncing back again, Eva comically epitomizes industrial alienation, as her body metamorphoses from living being into mechanical thing.

In trick comedies about women's labor, trick editing exercised on the body comically resolves the disturbing social realities that provided key motivations for suffragette and labor activist reformists.^{lxxxviii} Union organizer Mary Mother Jones wrote on the horrors of women's working conditions in a Milwaukee Brewery in 1910: "Condemned to slave daily in the wash-room with foul-mouthed, brutal foremen...the poor girls work in the vile smell of sour beer...Rheumatism is one of the chronic ailments and is closely followed by consumption" (Zinn, 338). Belying anti-suffragette arguments that politics would corrupt women—that the dirty business of decision-making is somehow antithetical to feminine purity—suffragettes aligned with labor emphasized the effects of industrialization on ideals of femininity. Feminist socialists like Crystal Eastman, Rose Schneiderman, and Josephine Casey sought to ally the suffrage question with the labor question, using force when necessary to underscore the far-reaching implications of how sexual identity should be addressed by the law.^{lxxxix} The WTUL 1909 *Handbook* reported on the conditions for women workers in steam laundries: "How would you like to iron a shirt a minute? Think of standing at a mangle just above the washroom with the hot steam pouring up through the floor for...17 hours a day! Sometimes the floors are made of cement and then it seems as though one were standing on hot coals, and the workers are dripping with perspiration" (Zinn, 339). These vivid descriptions of working women's bodily suffering both broadened suffrage's populist

appeal, and exposed the absurdity of stereotypes about women's physical incapacity for strenuous politics.

Stemming from this populist advocacy for feminist labor reform, trick comedies about women's industrial labor participated in defusing the actual class tensions entangled with issues of gender inequality. Explicit images of women sweltering in laundries or giving birth to stillborn babies on picket lines were at once evoked and displaced by the frivolous contexts of feminine over-exertion in these films. The spectator was thereby encouraged to laugh off anxieties generated by other incitements to activism, such as those mobilized by suffragette and WTUL literature and pamphleteering.

In comedies such as *Cousin Kate's Revolution* (Éclair, 1913), women of humble means get lionized as the antidote to the bourgeois perils of suffragette ideology. *Cousin Kate* depicts an overt alliance between labor struggle and domestic duty. In this film, the Stronges, a "strenuous suffragette" and her "puny husband" who is a writer of "moribund romances," are visited by their rural, spinster cousin Kate. The Stronges "are both 'victims of the artistic temperament'—and their home shows it, from the dirty-faced children to the untidy rooms and the slovenly maid."^{xc} They are moreover doubly coded as bourgeois idlers and as base citizens—their untidiness is due to laziness induced by sexual role reversal, and not to economic deprivation. "They leave cousin Kate alone to make herself at home. The way in which she does this—starting in to make the house clean and orderly—is one of the most amusing film plays ever put on the screen." Kate's body becomes motorized in fast-motion when she attempts to engage an engine-powered vacuum cleaner, and she narrowly skirts self-immolation when using an electric iron. The

“revolution” invoked in the film’s title becomes a pun on both Kate’s modernization—as she comically learns to wield up-to-date domestic devices—and Kate’s reassertion of tradition in the Strong’s morally backwards home.

The implicit argument of the film is that squalor arises from immoral ideology instead of from political exploitation. This gets humorously narrated through rural stereotypes, focusing on Kate’s idiosyncratic methods for cleaning home. Although primitive, Kate’s methods counter urban modernity with rural tradition, reasserting domestic order against women’s civic engagement. “One of the most amusing film plays ever put on the screen” according to the *Moving Picture World*, the spectator’s derisive laughter at the strenuous suffragette wife finds a relatively innocuous outlet in Kate’s domestic gags. Marx’s call to modernize the rural peasantry (as a precondition for revolutionizing the social relations of production) gets instrumentalized as a counterweight to the reversal of sexual divisions of labor depicted in this film. Kate becomes technologically modern so that the Strong’s can return to ideological tradition.

In France, Hubertine Auclert argued that the disenfranchisement of women was tied to the depoliticization of the social question: women’s rights are about popular sovereignty and the ability of the social to represent itself. In this French-produced comedy that found a popular audience in the United States, women’s rights are negated along with the revolution. “Votes for women” enunciates a revolutionary language by challenging the status quo of the law; *Cousin Kate’s Revolution* disarms this law-breaking syntax by making it private, redeploying political struggle to the proper sphere of the home. However, rather than reading this shift from derisive to fetishistic laughter^{xci} as mere displacement, there is also a sense in which the very orientation of laughter

breaks down along with the sexual division of labor. At whom is laughter directed here: at the couple who have been androgynized by the wife's political commitments, or at the cousin, whose bodily labor gets technologized in order to heal the rupture between separate public and private spheres? Cousin Kate's very embodiment is revolutionized; her antics absorb the shock of industrial labor upon domesticity. She becomes an electric woman the moment she takes to the engine-powered vacuum cleaner. Kate's bodily difference is thereby subjected to plasticity—permanent and violent metamorphosis—in order to suture the film's disarticulation between private femininity and public masculinity.

Revolution, which appeals to a humorous temporality by asserting a future that has yet to emerge, always has the capacity to become funny. As Bonnie Honig argues in *Emergency Politics*, claims for new rights reveal the paradox inherent in revolutionary time because “they presuppose the world that they seek to bring into being” (44). As the lawyer Stephen Holmes puts it, “In retrospect, nothing could appear more laughable than the French Revolutionary attempt to restart the calendar at Year I.” Honig unpacks Holmes's assertion by comparing revolutionary rupture to the laughter provoked by novelty and surprise.^{xcii} “Laughable, yes, but this is what new claims and new orders do: elicit laughter, especially at the moment of their still contested emergence or, as with the revolutionary calendar, after they have failed (hence Holmes's honest ‘in retrospect’)” (62). Honig derives a structural relationship between revolution and laughter, citing “this incident [as] an apt metaphor for revolutionary politics generally, since what revolutionary politics aim to do is restart time” (62). Like the French Revolution, which revolutionized mass politics while itself failing to achieve many of its ends, revolutionary

laughter at once incites and defers broad-sweeping societal transformations. Unlike the suffragette tricksters in *How They Got the Vote*, who hold temporality hostage to the instantaneity of progress, social revolutions must always grapple with the latency and recurrence of the traditions that they seek to annihilate.

By embodying the extremities of revolutionary possibility, anarchic suffragettes in popular representations stabilize the historical paradoxes of revolutionary politics through recourse to the paradoxes of comedy. They conjure the pétroleuses of French Revolutionary culture: the firebrand women, “liable to explode in violent paroxysm” (to invoke Frothingham), who fantastically embodied the destructive realities of revolutionary violence. Again, the pétroleuse (unruly woman) of anti- Paris Commune iconography was used to equate women’s excesses with the excesses of revolution. Joan Wallach Scott describes popular characterizations of these pétroleuse figures: they were “torch-wielding furies who supposedly set out to raze Paris during the last days of the uprising against the newly established government” (101). She continues: “Indeed the Commune itself was depicted as an incendiary woman whose raging passion threatened to burn up the systems of property and government that were the bases of social order. Thus one observer wrote: ‘the women behaved like tigresses, throwing petroleum everywhere, and distinguishing themselves by the fury with which they fought’” (Scott, 101). As Scott argues, paraphrasing Auclert, the female political subject was inherently a revolutionary subject because she called into the question the automatic equation between masculinity and citizenship.

Trick comedies animate women’s bodies technologically in order to disavow the possibility of their transformation politically. On the one hand, these films provided

aesthetic relief for the repeated eruption of traditional femininity in modern culture: with the professionalization of domestic duties, influx of immigrant populations, and constant potential for wider forms of social and geographical rupture. On the other hand, these anarchic attempts at ideological damage control could not help but proliferate the very historical instabilities that they sought to compartmentalize. Politically, laughter liberated the culturally repressed contradictions between traditional and modern designations of femininity. Aesthetically, as I have argued, female metamorphosis reached a breaking point in 1910s filmmaking. Playful changes in form gave way to traumatic images of physical rupture as women's bodies were made to conform to the visual hierarchization of the screen. This irreversibility of once fluid metamorphoses stemmed from the economic dictates of film storytelling, which emerged in conjunction with social movements to reform working-class nickelodeon theaters by regulating the morality of film content.

Given this crisis of female metamorphosis unfolding on screen, suffragette parody provided the ideal visual alibi for the impossible persistence of the trick film: the deadlock of trick narration epitomized by women's plasticity. Carnavalesque situations of women becoming justices, serving on juries, abandoning their homes, giving public orations, or even staging "comical" hunger strikes in prisons provided endless fodder for popular desires to imagine visual permutations of gender differences in society—in the wake of the trick film.

Suffragettes in the Mainstream

*The Suffragette will smash the pane
And dynamite the jail,*

*Drive tall policemen half insane,
Make men of moment pale;
Yet people say with manner wise,
“You’ll never see a lass
Or portly matron sternly rise
And smash a looking-glass!*

*“You’ll never see her grab a brick
And heave it true and straight,
With noble aim to shatter quick
A slivered clear French plate;
For woman’s vain as vain can be,
And always without end
The mirror serves her—surely she
Would never harm a friend.”*

*But oh, beware of tempting her!
‘Twould never do to set
Bright mirrors where show windows were
Before the suffragette.
She’d quickly on her sisters call
And they would raise a storm.
Then smash those mirrors one and all
To see themselves perform!*

(“Great Temptation,” *Buffalo Evening News*, Sept. 18, 1913—[see fig. 16])

Around 1913, suffragette-themed film comedies were transitioning from the most extreme visions of women’s political rule, to polite romances that distilled suffragette ambitions to their mildest reformist agendas. From anarchic visions of women’s law-making violence (always followed by the re-assertion of men’s law-preserving violence)^{xciii}, film comedies began to censor these images of feminist rupture. Filmmaking in the late 19-aughts and early 1910s provided for the plasticity of female corporeality as trick surrealism ran up against the realist codes of narrative film storytelling. Women’s bodies and social positions alike became sites of profound rupture

in-between contradictory modes of address. As the freelance poem quoted above indicates, suffragettes were both widely visible but still sinisterly characterized by 1913.

The impossible temporality of this poem's climax, which describes suffragettes watching themselves through mirrors that are themselves in the act of being shattered, reveals the broader ambivalences intrinsic to suffragette depictions. Although derisive, this poem is especially illuminating; it formulates an indecision between the desire for popular recognition and the impetus for destructive transformation: a major contradiction within the feminist movement. It was of course also in 1913 when the American militants Alice Paul and Lucy Burns formed the radical Congressional Union, breaking ties with the more conservative National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Cott describes this split within the national organization: "Paul's and Burns' iconoclasm, leading the CU to act boldly even if that caused affront, to reject the predictable decorousness of NAWSA and to affirm that women had political strength (if only they would show it), appealed to women who held the broader agenda of Feminism" (57). Whereas suffragism aimed at concrete ballot- and rights- oriented objectives, feminism instrumentalized these goals as part of a broader coalition movement for structural transformation. Disagreement over which societal and economic differences this transformation should encompass only added fuel to the flame for feminist leaders.

Visibility was a key tactic for feminist and suffragette activists: to effect lasting changes through spontaneous, spectacular ruptures in societal perceptions of women. "The more fashionable or renowned the perpetrators of unladylike deeds on behalf of suffrage, the more sensational and newsworthy their behavior appeared" (Cott, 55). As with humor, wherein sudden reversal comes easy but lasting change is always tenuous,

the spectacle of suffragette politics walked a fine line between punctual shock and permanent change. It was therefore just as crucial for suffragettes to codify a visual language of political difference, even while it remained necessary to keep this language open for the possibility of shock and astonishment—therein lay the paradox of suffragette aesthetics in the 1910s. Spectacles such as annual parades, incendiary speeches, propaganda films, and tactically astonishing transgressions of stilted social norms did not simply commodify the potential for political transformation. Rather, they represented just one pole in a dialectic between the constant spectacle of change, and the contradictory desire for these new changes to achieve permanence. These conflicting drives for imminent rupture and for future-perfect stability (new developments that will have endured) emerged from democracy's deeper paradoxes between political freedom and the precedence of the law. In the language of suffragette aesthetics, comedy did an enormous amount of work to navigate this double-bind between the impetus for spectacular novelty and the political endpoint of stability and legitimacy.

Earlier into this decade, the cultural mainstreaming of suffragette politics constituted an event unto itself. Less than a year before Paul and Burns coordinated a spectacular 1913 Washington D.C. Suffrage Parade the day before President Wilson's inauguration, suffragettes in New York City marched down Fifth Avenue in their annual parade. A news report from the time remarks on a decisive turn in public opinion about the parade participants:

All along Fifth Avenue...were gathered thousands of men and women of New York. They blocked every cross street on the line of march. Many were inclined to laugh and jeer, but none did. The sight of the impressive column of women striving five abreast up the middle of the street stifled all thought of ridicule...women doctors, women lawyers...women architects, women artists, actresses, and sculptors; women waitresses, domestics; a huge division of

industrial workers...all marched with an intensity and purpose that astonished the crowds that lined the streets.

From laughter to astonishment, reactions to the NYC parade indexed broader shifts in suffragettes' cultural signification. Despite the mistreatment of some marchers by rowdy spectators, the 1913 D.C. parade exhibited a similar triumph of iconic display over political friction. (The desire to project a widely palatable image of suffragette culture led to further conflict and exclusion within the movement when Southern delegates persuaded Paul to segregate African-American women from the main processions.^{xciv}) Newsreel Company filmed actuality footage of an elegant fashion tableau and pageant staged on the steps of the Capitol.

Inez Milholland led the parade in a crown and long white cape while mounted atop a large white horse named "Gray Dawn," with five mounted brigades, ten bands, twenty-six floats, and eight thousand marchers in tow. *Moving Picture World* boasted of the celebrity power documented in actuality footage of the parade: "Among the mounted Amazons are shown splendid personal pictures of Mrs. Gus Rublin, wife of the famous athlete, and Miss Florence Lawrence." The *MPW* writer adds: "Even their Antis are forced to admire the manner in which the American Amazons win the 'right of way' through a throng that might easily throw into confusion a St. Patrick's Day Parade."^{xcv} *MPW* reviewers did not hesitate to cash in on the star power that adorned the parade, emphasizing among "the floats and various features of the pageant...a view of Florence Lawrence on a finely caparisoned charger. She faces the camera with her most charming smile." (A number of readers sent letters after the parade inquiring whether Lawrence was actually herself a suffragette, which the *MPW* refrained from affirming with any certainty.) *The Woman's Journal and Suffrage News* headlined by emphasizing the

simultaneous spectacles of crowd abuse and of the suffragettes' fashionable iconicity. Captions like "Nation Aroused by Open Insults to Women," "Cause Wins Popular Sympathy," and "Striking Object Lesson" are juxtaposed with enormous photos of women marching in historical costumes, movie stars, decorative floats, and Inez Milholland atop her great white horse.^{xvii}

Mainstream filmmaking about suffragettes rehearsed a similar trajectory from mockery to desire and commodification in dozens of motion pictures from 1912-1915. *Bunny for the Cause*, *How They Got the Vote*, *Jane the Justice*, *Suffrage and the Man*, *Votes for Women* and *The Eternal Feminine* all iconize politics in order to reframe the cultural meaning of women's enfranchisement. These films parallel—even while undermining—the visual strategies of forceful contingents of the suffragette movement. They rely upon the simultaneous recognition of suffragettes as alien others and as sympathetic protagonists. Paradoxical significations of suffragette culture—as at once inimical and essential to the very meaning of femininity—were thus necessary in order to express an underlying visual ambiguity between antipathy and identification.

Bunny for the Cause—a comedy, which the Vitagraph Company shot partly on-location in D.C. with John Bunny and Rose Tapley marching in the Suffragette Parade—exemplifies how this paradoxical suffragette language was adapted to mainstream film comedy. Bunny plays a member of the virulently anti-suffrage "Fat Men's Club." From the outset, any uncertainty about the image of women in politics gets neutralized by the comic spectacle of these fat men, who preach to the choir that women have "not enough brain capacity to qualify them for the ballot."^{xviii} The lovely Tapley plays Bunny's wife; she counsels him and helps him out of business difficulties through her "excellent

judgment” so many times “that he change[s] his mind” about suffragette politics. It is worth noting that this film was released the same year as *The Pickpocket*, another Vitagraph comedy in which Bunny appears across from his usual partner, Flora Finch, whose scrawny stature and avian features lend themselves to slapstick humiliation considerably more than Tapley’s normative image of femininity. In *The Pickpocket*, Finch’s “excursions into feminine politics leave Bunny in the lurch.” *The MPW* adds: “There will be many hearty laughs as the worm turns and the whip falls [back] into his hand.”^{xviii} Rather than subjecting feminism to social correction through laughter, *Bunny for the Cause* surprises its spectator by insisting that suffragettes, after all, are also “women” (in the traditional sense, slightly adapted to modern times). Bunny is converted and elects to march in the Suffragette Parade of his own volition—a humorous but sincere image—which also persuades several of his fellow “Fat Men” to adopt the cause. The film thereby animates dual notions of suffragettes as transgressively unnatural, and as more or less socially acceptable. Humor then arises primarily through surprise generated by various permutations of these contradictory images of women in politics.

Most conventionally, a political compromise between suffragettes and antis-would arise through romantic coupling. Many films, including *Love and a Lemon*, *The Girl and the Mayor*, as well as even suffragette film propaganda like *Eighty Million Women Want*—^{xcix}, allowed for women’s partial civic inclusion as long as it remained subordinate to their heteronormative romantic coupling with men in official positions of power. From biopolitical nightmares of women using civil force to police male pregnancy (*When Women Win*), derisive but potentially disruptive laughter gave way to polite amusement. Suffragettes were typified less as “mannish” or hysterical hellcats bent

on revolution, and more as attractive, well-meaning but slightly misguided women exploring the social world between latency and matrimony.

However, even in films that subordinate the possibility of change to the necessity of heteronormative (social and biological) reproduction, suffragette politics represent an excess that can never fully be integrated into the plot. This very excess itself defines the structure of the narrative. In *For Mayor—Bess Smith*, a machine party candidate, Joe Jones, gets caught on a phonograph attempting to bribe his female, mayoral opponent, Bess Smith, to drop out of the race. Despite this incriminating evidence of Jones's corruption, Smith decides to accept his proposal of marriage, because "in case she lost the office, it might be a good thing to be the wife of a mayor."^c The political danger inherent in this new form of evidence never really gets dealt with; rather, it is given a motivation within the plot. The film argues that spousal influence represents a necessary antidote to men's potential vulnerability to corruption, documented by the phonograph. The film advocates neither for nor against enfranchisement; rather, it seeks to manage the complexities of how cultural instruments might abet feminist politics. During this time suffragettes were persuasively incorporating motion pictures, audio recordings, photographic slides, and other media tools into their publicity campaigns to great effect. *For Mayor—Bess Smith* concedes some ground: it acknowledges the inevitability of women's shifting social positions, and possible expediency of their municipal reforms; but it does so at a price: the phonograph as an instrument or means is neutralized by dictating the extent of its object or ends. The phonographic recording becomes a device for motivating a romantic encounter, rather than a possible weapon in a more profound form of political struggle.

Stamp emphasizes the commodification of feminist politics in her chapter on “Civic Housekeeping” and suffragette filmmaking. Like anything else involving women and societal change, this dynamic cuts both ways: consumer culture both provided women a platform for reaching popular audiences, while filtering all of their political demands through the desires of commodity consumption. Stamp quotes a very revealing 1913 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*: “A suffragette has been defined...as a woman who wants something and thinks it’s a vote...There are women who want the vote as a suitable personal attribute, as they might covet a pearl necklace, or a house, or a frock” (188). As psychoanalytic theory argues, female desire inhabits the uncertain rupture between biological need and symbolic structure in language. If “need” (the baby’s pre-symbolic need for nourishment) always refers to a concrete object that can satisfy it, the entry into language inaugurates a trauma of unspecifiability. Desire emerges from the rupture between wish and fulfillment endemic to language and to the law of the symbolic: the “no” of the father (from the French pun on “non” and “nom” as the “no” or the “name” of the father). “Demand” in language, as opposed to pre-symbolic, biological “need,” can never be more than tenuously satisfied because it lacks a specific object. The integration of suffragette political demands, women’s rights as subjects of the law, into the amorphous construction of desire in commodity capitalism bears a striking relation to the gendered formation of the subject in psychoanalysis.

According to Freud, women’s libidinal rigidity after latency derives from the sheer exhaustion of feminine subject formation. In effect, woman seeks out a love partner “in accordance with the narcissistic ideal of the man whom the woman had wished to become” (“Femininity”).^{ci} Freud argues: “It is said that the influencing of the ego by the

sexual object occurs particularly often with women and is characteristic of femininity” (Freud, “Dissection,” 63). Female sexuality thereby arises from a paralyzing loss of ego flexibility: in order not to become shattered, the feminine ego is wholly constrained by the drive toward the romantic fulfillment of a retroactive loss. (This poem, “The Great Temptation,” can be read as a metaphor for the difficulties of female subjectivity in language—one sustained, shattered mirror stage.^{cii})

Freud never really explains how the gendered laws of sexuality also get codified politically—which might shed some light on the psychosexual justifications for women’s political exclusions. However, in this introductory lecture on “Femininity” (published in 1933), Freud adds: this explains why “women have made few contributions to the history of civilization...[and] must be regarded as having little sense of justice,” and also [as] “weaker in their social interests.” He elaborates this argument: “A woman of thirty often frightens us by her psychical rigidity...Her ego has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development...as though...the difficult development to femininity had exhausted the possibilities of the person concerned.” Women who squandered their reserve of remaining “energies, that should have been devoted to reproduction and nurturing on intellectual or physical activities, were thought to be sterile or to produce sickly or defective offspring” (Tickner, 186). This negative stereotype had a pointed economic function within the sexual division labor, as it provided yet another alibi for the state to neglect supporting unwed or widowed mothers (again, Key, Stanton, and Eastman, as well as Adele Schreiber and Helene Stocker were all international advocates of “maternity protection” laws).

More generally, suffragette tactics managed cultural perceptions of feminine rigidity by integrating voting rights activism into the endless slippages of desire under commodity capitalism. Women compared electoral decisions to comparison shopping, arguing that prudent shoppers (i.e. women) made for responsible voters. By 1918, George Earnshaw asserted in his *Infants Department* magazine: “Had the suffragettes been able to work through the department store instead of through women’s clubs, churches, and lectures...the feminine vote would no doubt be universal by now.”^{ciii} From motion picture propaganda, to fashion tableaux staged on the lawn of the Capitol, to a variety of commodity goods including Kewpie dolls, sunflower badges, and “womanalls” (overalls for the modern women), suffragettes embraced these slippages of desire to instrumentalize their political rights campaigns. While the law said “no” to women, women shifted the impetus for this “no” through strategic recourse to the fluidity of referents in capitalist media language.

It is very fitting, then, that the radical anarchist Emma Goldman would disown enfranchisement; she proclaimed: “Our modern fetich is universal suffrage...woman clings tenaciously...to the very power that holds her in bondage...condemn[ing] woman to the life of an inferior...[as] a modern prison with golden bars.” Within both the suffragette movement, and among the various institutions that sought to commodify feminist discourse, there was a severe degree of anxiety about just where this marriage between rights and goods might lead.

Stamp points to the film industry’s ambivalence about how suffragettes capitalized on their own entertainment value to mobilize on behalf of their cause. She argues: “In virtually any other context...the use of cinema by respectable, reform-minded

women...would have held unanimous appeal for the early film industry. But...suffragists' explicit aims to mobilize film patrons demonstrate the complex negotiation of cinematic space...that cinema's expanding female audience provoked" (194). This fundamental uncertainty between activism and commodification is manifest in the films themselves, which oscillate between polite and derisive provocations for laughter. George Meredith once argued that an "excellent test of the civilization of a country...[is] the flourishing of the Comic idea and Comedy; and the test of true Comedy is that it shall awaken thoughtful laughter." Meredith contrasted the spectator's derisive laughter at brute slapstick violence with this thoughtful laughter. "The laughter of satire is a blow in the back or the face. The laughter of Comedy is impersonal and of unrivalled politeness, nearer a smile; often no more than a smile. It laughs through the mind, for the mind directs it; and it might be called humour of the mind." Although Meredith compartmentalizes between derisive laughter and thoughtful laughter, both share an underlying impetus for instrumentality. Whereas thoughtful laughter civilizes through restraint, derisive laughter polices social behavior by means of negation—as Bergson has put it, "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 all of the liberties taken within it. It would fail in its objective if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness" (92). Suffragette film comedies, doubly coded to mobilize and to civilize, were ever yo-yoing between spectacles of humiliation and images of restraint.

Perhaps no other film better exemplifies this double coding of laughter—as both derisive negation and as polite morality—than *The Suffragette Sheriff* (Kalem, 1913). "A

laugh provoking satire on Western politics” (*MPW*), this film is all about the slippery slope between shifting appearances and changing realities. The plot is indeed ludicrous: old man Rattlesnake Bill’s wife, under the influence of her spinster suffragette older sister, gets herself elected to the office of mayor. She “left the kitchen to enlighten those of her sex who dwelt in darkness. Bill, unaccustomed to work of any kind, found the household duties decidedly irksome...[so] he unfolded the deep-laid plot.”^{civ} Bill would pretend to commit a murder, with his friend Old Judge Soft presiding over his trial; meanwhile, Bill’s wife, the sheriffess, would be moved to shirk her duties and abandon the law in order to save her husband, thereby restoring her to her “natural” place in the home. “The trial was a weird affair. Bill could scarcely control his laughter and the judge more than once forgot his dignity as he beheld the spectacle which the lady officials presented by their earnestness.” However, having overheard the men plotting earlier, the wife doubles down on the charade and calmly proceeds to execute Bill’s sentence. “The sheriff attended to the adjusting of noose and trap with unusual dexterity. Bill’s cry of ‘this has gone far enough!’ was ignored.”

The film resolves its mise-en-abyme of misperceptions with a climactic gag that literalizes its gallows humor. “The trap was sprung and the schemer fell—not into oblivion, but into a tank of water which had been installed by the sheriff and her deputies.” By repeatedly raising the stakes of these various social masquerades, the film refrains from integrating its own social tensions into the stability of the world imagined, instead deploying them to drive forward the narrative. The wife might belong in the home, or she might do more good in civil society; the husband’s buffoonery might outshine the spinster suffragette sister’s ill ambitions, or it might not; the gag at the end

might resolve all of the differences in the narrative and restore normalcy, or it might just herald the beginning of further societal transitions. The point is that laughter and feminism act as co-conspirators for authorizing their respective contradictions. Comedy establishes a framework for entertaining dual perceptions of suffragette culture, while the antagonisms of suffragette politics motivate simultaneously instrumental and anarchic experiences of laughter. To give an example, the trial farce activates two modes of address: the polite, civilizing laughter mediated through the wife's awareness of the charade, and the raucous, unruly laughter of the infantile men, which becomes increasingly irrational as their deep-laid plot unwinds. Laughter in this film keeps getting out of hand, only to be re-subjected to fresh layers of rationalization. The possibility of an actual feminist politics meanwhile hangs in the balance with each new mocking pretense and then with its imminent irruption. Politics are explicitly not foreclosed in order that they be made available for pathologically compulsive disavowal—laughter repeatedly generates unruly social possibilities, which then get foreclosed by wielding them to incite yet more laughter.

Motion pictures attempted to censor unruly laughter not by eradicating it entirely, but by diverting it towards social and political antagonists. Mild suffragettes increasingly provoked polite laughter in romantic comedies, while unruly laughter was reserved for anarchists, socialists, foreigners, transvestites, rabble-rousers, militants, Amazons, androgynes, and racial and ethnic minorities. The roughest or most crude gags tended to get inflicted on male actors cross-dressing as suffragettes. In *A Busy Day* (Keystone, 1914), Charlie Chaplin moonlights as a militant rabble-rouser who keeps getting into fisticuffs after blocking the view of cameramen attempting to record a military parade.

After knocking out several policemen, mooning at least half of the crowd, and undergoing various “unladylike” pratfalls, Charlie finally gets shoved into the river, wherein “she” performs several aquatic somersaults before going under. As Kay Sloan puts it, “Sputtering and spewing, Chaplin’s caricature slowly sank, and no one came to her rescue. The final bubbles rising from the water’s surface seemed to promise the last gasp of the votes-for-women movement” (419). While newsreels like *Suffragettes Again* (Pathé, 1913) provoked terror by depicting British militants setting official buildings ablaze, audiences were encouraged to laugh off these destructive antics by inflicting counter-violence on cross-dressed male surrogates.

Laura Horak argues in her dissertation, “Girls Will Be Boys,” that cross-dressing in transitional filmmaking served primarily conservative functions: the notion of sexual reversal in silent cinema as inherently subversive is a “specious fallacy” (84). Rather, cross-dressing represented a strategy for industry uplift by linking the motion picture medium to the legitimate stage—Horak focuses on the hundreds of transitional films depicting women cross-dressing as men from 1908 to 1919. I would echo Horak’s argument here: despite the film’s manifest emphasis on debased bodily slapstick, cross-dressing acts as a safety valve for disassociating Chaplin’s crude pratfalls from the film industry’s aspirational class ambitions. Moreover, subjecting the transvestite body to derisive laughter provided a surrogate for policing gender normativity.

Cross-dressing and the public performance of masculinity were tactics for combatting what Elizabeth Cady Stanton elsewhere referred to as women’s cultural inheritance of perceived ineptitude in civic engagement (“The Matriarchate,” 1891). Stanton argued that the ballot and civic participation would decouple woman from her

existential place in the home. For the radical French feminist, Madame Madeleine Pelletier, in order for women to free themselves from domestic servitude, each woman would be individually responsible for shattering conventional images of femininity. “The vote, she thought, would have a ‘virilizing’ effect on women by eliminating one of the more powerful structural supports of female/feminine difference...the goal of feminists must be to eschew feminine behavior” (Scott, 136). Whereas Stanton emphasized the ballot as a way out of the double bind between feminine cultural inferiority and women’s legislative exclusion, Pelletier saw the vote as an instrument to virilize women. At once a radical individualist and structural masculinist, she typically donned a men’s suit, bowler hat, and cane. In its dual performance of unique individuality and symbolic commonality, her image was not dissimilar from that of Chaplin, perhaps even bearing a strong resemblance [see fig. 17].

Pelletier drew a direct line between the law of the state and the lives of its subjects, arguing that the goal of feminists must be to renounce feminine behavior. She scorned all women who clung to the signifiers of femininity. As Scott notes, Pelletier once declined to perform an abortion for a woman in the postal service who had been raped while both were involved in a strike, and declared: “May all feminists who are only half-feminists be treated the same” (138). When Laura Lafargue, daughter of Karl Marx, was named vice-president at an international congress of socialist-feminists, Pelletier described her mockingly: “She appeared with her face swathed in a thick veil; from afar she looked like a package of clothe.” Pelletier condemned the overall display: “Naturally the socialist women were very careful not to appear sexually liberated. Rosa Luxembourg wore a long dress, long hair, a small veil and flowers on her hat...In those days hats were

held on with large pins, and when Clara Zetkin spoke from the podium, her broad gestures made [her] hat flop from right to left—the effect was comic” (138).

Pelletier’s derisive laughter certainly evokes Thomas Hobbes’ *Elements of Law*: “The passion of Laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with ourselves formerly.” However, for Pelletier, laughter marked an ethical limit more than a political wager. Pelletier believed that women ought to refashion themselves as individuals if they hoped to achieve any legitimacy under the law; this would be necessary in order to negate the cultural inheritances of femininity. I emphasize this point because it in many ways resembles the logic of transvestism in motion picture comedies. Both hinge on the desire to filter politics through the irreducible position of the individual.

Cross-dressing authenticated cross-class identification in transitional cinema. Whereas Pelletier believed that masculine performance held the key to gender equality for women, transitional film comedies depict male-to-female cross-dressing to affirm the existential appropriateness of traditional gender roles. For example, in *Billy the Suffragette*, a young man impersonates a famous suffragette leader named Mrs. Spankhurst—smoking, drinking, cursing, and behaving outrageously—in order to re-educate his potential love interest about her proper duties. His secret betrothed, Ada, wears a pretty sash with “Suffragettes” on it, but her shrewish aunt Mrs. Cockle will not permit the engagement. Cross-dressing here represents a transitional device within the film for inscribing its normative bourgeois values—and again, as Horak argues, culturally within the industry for aligning motion pictures with the legitimate stage. Moreover, both

film examples such as *Billy* and Pelletier's notion of ethical feminism attempt to perform cross-dressing as a tool for making collectivist politics about the self-determination of the individual. *Billy*'s normative morals and Pelletier's transgressive activism represent two sides of the same coin whereby political movements become ultimately about ethical individuality.

Pelletier advocated a meritocratic form of politics, centered on the intellectually self-striving individual. As Scott argues, "male identity is achieved positively through things such as male citizenship (membership in the polity confirms possession of the phallus) and negatively through the exclusion of women" (139). Pelletier never really jettisoned the structural dichotomy between masculine and feminine positions, she just sought to decouple them from biological sexuality. Cross-dressing thereby represented a means of self-interpellation for Pelletier. Whereas cross-dressing abets class aspiration in these film comedies, it authorized social self-determination for feminists like Pelletier.

If gender masquerade also allowed filmmakers to depict suffragette roughhousing without lowering the position of the spectator—in films including *A Busy Day*, *Billy the Suffragette*, and *The Comedian's Downfall*—racial and ethnic masquerade rehearsed crude ideological experiments on minoritarian subjects. Native American culture was repeatedly enlisted as a testing zone for suffragette politics, which were implicitly equated with compressed modernization. Feminist ideas infect idyllic tribal society like the smallpox, and can only be eradicated through romanticized, racist notions of Native American physical and moral simplicity. In *The Indian Suffragettes* (Kalem, 1914), "Dishwater, a member of the Oompah tribe, returns from the Government school a militant suffragist."^{CV} Although she encounters initial resistance from her fellow squaws,

Dishwater beats the skeptics into submission using a quintessential feminine commodity prop: her umbrella (presumably financed by taxpayer dollars). “As the result of their demand for equal rights, the squaws succeed in assuming the occupations formerly pursued by the braves, while the latter take care of the papooses and do the housework.” Primitivist order is restored when the squaws go on a hunting expedition and encounter a war party from a rival tribe, forcing them to call upon their henpecked husbands to rescue them. “The suffragettes’ pleas for help are ignored by their own braves until a solemn promise is registered that in the future the women consent to play second fiddle. This done, the Oompah warriors help defeat their foes.” This film explicitly aligns suffragist ideas with commodity capitalism, thereby naturalizing the sexual division of labor by imagining Native American life as more or less untainted by modernity.

As Frederick Engels argues in *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, “The division of labour between the two sexes is determined by causes entirely different from those that determine the status of women in society” (61). Engels discusses how Western constructions of femininity de-value women’s work: “The social status of the lady of civilization, surrounded by sham homage and estranged from all real work, is infinitely lower than that of the hard-working woman of barbarism” (61). In contrast, *Indian Suffragettes* condenses modern tropes of femininity with racist depictions of Native savagery. Agreeing “to play second fiddle” again in the hierarchy of labor, the Oompah women signify a capitalist anachronism: the “ladies” of what is clearly figured as a pre-civilized tribal formation. The inherent absurdity of the scenario—manifest in details like “Dishwater,” the umbrella, and the blurring between warrior violence and

papoose domesticity—serve as decoys from the film’s actual contradictions between “natural” gender roles and the sexual division of labor in modern society.

In other suffragette comedies, marginal characters depicting non-white women authenticate male outrage at the perversion of gender roles in capitalist society. In *The Revolt of Mr. Wiggs*, a gypsy fortune-teller encourages a cowed husband to suppress his militant suffragette wife (who is leading a suffragette parade on horse-back) by informing him that he is the direct descendant of gladiators and fighters. In *The Suffragette* (Selig, 1913), Waggy Bill and his cowboy friends masquerade as Native-Americans and abduct an elderly suffragette orator, Samantha Roundtree. Interestingly, they visit a curio shop where they rent their costumes, thereby commoditizing tribal artifacts in order to traffic in Native identities. A Western satire in the vein of *The Suffragette Sheriff*, *The Suffragette* uses ethnic masquerade as an excuse to inflict carnivalesque violence directly on women. The men “tie her to a tree and pile brush about her as if to make a funeral baked feast.” Again, the perception of Native savagery authenticates the desire to maintain separate spheres. However, rather than depicting the suffragette as an unnatural presence within racially normative white modernity, these comedies enlist the ethnic other as a foil for making an argument that was starting to seem unpalatable (or unpopular) when figured too directly.

As Charlie Musser argues, 1913 marked a turning point in public perceptions of feminist politics: “a cultural transformation that made feminism and suffrage mainstream issues.” Writing about intermediality in the arts, Musser focuses on the ideological positions espoused by star personalities, especially the French stage actress Sarah Bernhardt. From dismissing the “Votes for Women” cause on the basis that her “sex isn’t

rational” and characterizing British militants as “fools” in 1912, Bernhardt avowed after the Annual Suffragette Parade in NYC in 1913: “I think it is a shame that women do not have the vote...If they are capable of controlling and operating commercial undertakings, it is only just that the woman proprietor who has 50 or 100 men working for her should have a vote in the affairs of her country as well as the men she employs in her business.” Bernhardt’s publicity further reveals the attempt to elide class divisions within international suffragette movements, instead emplacing suffragettes (at least aspirationally) as members of the property owning class. Amy Shore emphasizes the profound imbrication between feminist social politics and motion picture visibility. She argues that suffragettes’ “activist use of film was one of the first instances in the United States that a social movement recognized and harnessed the power of cinema to transform consciousness and, in turn, transform the social order” (*Suffrage and the Silver Screen*, 1). Suffragettes increasingly allied themselves with the language of popular culture—and with the viscosity of fetishistic desire under commodity capitalism—in order to drive home their case for popular sovereignty.

The Laughing Spectator: Between Life and Language

While suffragettes staged parades and fashion tableaux, produced romantic comedies about civic housekeeping, and promoted their own commodity lines (jewelry, hats, playing cards, buttons, badges, and tea sets), more radical wings of the movement enlisted force to lobby for structural reform. The British Women’s Social and Political Union, helmed by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Christabel and Sylvia, engaged in violent protests, and led hunger strikes in Holloway Prison after their arrests. Militants

blew up mail boxes, tampered with fire alarms, threw stones at the windows of Parliament, upturned voting urns, and committed spectacular acts of martyrdom, throwing themselves bodily in front of moving traffic to draw attention to the injustice of their political exclusion. As F.W.P. Lawrence put it, “Women have rightly realized that even if their action be lawless...it is better to break the law in defence of liberty, than by a tame submission to unjust laws to allow liberties to be filched away” (109). In December, 1912, the British government claimed that over “5,000 letters had been damaged—by red ochre, jam, tar, permanganate of potash, or varnish and various inflammable substances, especially phosphorous—while some 425 false fire alarm calls had been made” (Parvis, 203). A number of militants were incarcerated at Holloway Prison, where they demanded recognition and treatment as political prisoners; when denied this, they led hunger strikes, inciting violent force feedings that gained them mass sympathy and further radicalized the women protesters involved.

Suffragettes in the United States, led by Alice Paul who had worked with the Pankhursts in Britain, integrated militant tactics into their federal amendment campaigns. Paul and Lucy Burns formed the Congressional Union in 1913 (re-formed as the National Women’s Party in 1916), which splintered off from the more conservative NAWSA—the CU advocated more aggressive tactics to campaign for the federal amendment, while NAWSA espoused softer approaches to gaining piecemeal reforms. Although the CU for the most part avoided unlawful violence, many were jailed on trumped up charges under the Espionage Act for leading public protests outside of the White House after the United States engaged in World War I: they waved banners comparing President Wilson to the German Kaiser. On November 15, 1917, also known as the Night of Terror, dozens of

suffragette protesters were brutally beaten by the police, knocked unconscious with cracked ribs, lacerations, and severe concussions. WP protesters were jailed in the Occoquan Workhouse in Virginia, where they organized hunger strikes to demand recognition as political prisoners. As in Britain, force-feedings were initiated, which added fuel to the flame of protest, and gained wider public sympathy for the WP's cause. A British suffragette reflected on her radicalization in prison: "Every woman came out of prison more determined than ever to fight for the cause unto the end. She went in a suffragette, she came out a living flame" (Lawrence, 125).

While liberal suffragettes sought reforms by approaching the laws of the state through the elasticity of commodity desire, radical militants enlisted direct force, making a spectacle of the gaping aporia between the law and life itself. "Revolutions cannot be made with rosewater...the blame for them rests, not with those whose sense of liberty compels them to rebel against injustice, but upon those who by denying justice make revolution the only available means to obtain redress" (Lawrence, 104). Suffragettes' bodily protest emerged strategically from the excesses of the law: physical rebellion was staged to signify the material gap between juridical right and the will of the people. Without the consent of the masses—whether obtained ideologically or through coercive repression—the law's enforcement became increasingly precarious and uncertain. Women's public rebellion and spectacular self-annihilation aimed to draw attention to the aspects of the law that transgressed popular sovereignty. As Lady Constance Lytton declared in a 1910 speech, which articulated "the first political theory of the hunger strike" according to Ewa Ziarek, self-hurt as a weapon represented "a political strategy of the last resort by an 'army' of the dispossessed" (Ziarek, 159). This disarticulation

between state law and its application had a broad impact on the language of popular culture. Popular representations of suffragette activism provoked a variety of resistant and even violent reactions from their addressees.

Although suffragette films (both pro- and anti- propaganda) sought to mobilize citizens politically, their impacts on public life were also palpable in their exhibition venues. *The Moving Picture World* reported a very revealing incident in the spring of 1913 in its “British Notes” section:

American exhibitors showing suffragette pictures be prepared! At a metropolitan picture palace the other evening a lady applauded the representation of a burnt-out mansion, the work of the militant suffragettes. A member of her own sex sitting behind her showed her disapproval by smartly bringing down her umbrella on the other’s hat. Then the manager had the delicate duty of separating the two hostile women.

Beyond mobilizing women to action in the streets, suffragette films organized a distinct mode of address that inhabited the gap between film form and its embodied reception: between the speaking subject of the text and the living body of the spectator. Exemplified by this film magazine’s mocking summary of the events, which recasts a fight about politics as a clash of commodities (hat versus umbrella), struggles over the injustice of the law inflected the language of popular criticism.

As I have argued, laughter always cuts both ways. Arising from an uncertainty or contradiction in life and language, laughter seeks to redeem subjective stability by asserting a hierarchy between laugher and laughed-at; however, it always does so very tenuously. In *The Essence of Laughter*, Charles Baudelaire declares: “Laughter is satanic, and, therefore, profoundly human. It is born of Man’s conception of his own superiority. Since it is essentially human, it is also essentially contradictory, that is to say it is at once a sign of infinite grandeur and of infinite wretchedness...It is from the perpetual shock

produced by these two infinities that laughter proceeds” (117). For Baudelaire, feelings of infinite grandeur and of infinite wretchedness arise from man’s comparison of himself to the animals and to God respectively. This metaphysical hierarchy is the condition of possibility for laughter, which emerges from the disjunction between spiritual aspiration and material idiocy. In the suffragette context, with the democratization of absolute power relations, the dynamic between subject (laugher) and object (laughed-at) gets increasingly murky.

The example from *Moving Picture World* quoted above is so puzzling and at the same time potentially elucidating because it seeks to eradicate a cause by means of its symptom, using derisive mockery as a tactic for disarming a more disturbing, inappropriate laughter: the lady’s gleeful reaction to militant violence. It is, of course, significant that the incident takes place in a “metropolitan picture palace” between “a lady applauding” and a “disapproving member of her own sex,” both of whom also exhibit their class status with their choices of weapon. Further, the burnt-out mansions on-screen—wealthy domiciles in ruins—point to the potential vulnerability of their exhibition venue. Could this metropolitan picture palace meet a similar fate as a result of the violence that might erupt between the “two hostile women?” As popular culture (especially cinema) represented an increasingly crucial means for the unconscious dissemination of state ideology, motion picture theaters came to shadow the official political venues where suffragettes waged physical protest. How do you fight back against a screen image with nothing behind it? The film magazine’s derisive laughter seeks to stabilize this destructive volatility by emphasizing the contrast between violence and politeness: she “*smartly* [brought]...down her umbrella on the other’s hat; “at a

metropolitan picture palace...a lady applauded the representation of a burn-out *mansion;*” and “the manager had the *delicate* duty of separating the two hostile women.” Humor emerges between contrasting class signifiers—polite dress versus unruly behavior—in order to deemphasize the potential terror of a laughter that would misconstrue or re-appropriate its textual impetus.

Again, as Stamp argues, “In virtually any other context...the use of cinema by respectable, reform-minded women...would have held unanimous appeal for the early film industry. But the feminist polemics of the suffrage cause...on the screen and in theaters” open onto the broader ambivalences “that cinema’s expanding female audience provoked” (194). At once signifiers of middle-class respectability and potential incitements to spectator hysteria, these female audiences indexed the profound instability of shifting film publics. In the suffragette context, quite pointedly, female spectators heralded the political excess that might accompany managerial efforts to capitalize on women’s growing public participation.

The suffragette spectator emerged between the screen and the audience: between the spectator positions coordinated by film texts, and the embodied conditions of their reception. Just as suffragette citizens inhabited the aporia between sovereign law and citizen life, suffragette spectators occupied the gap between speaking subjects of film language and living bodies of film viewers. To invoke Baudelaire again, “It is from the perpetual shock produced by these two infinities that laughter proceeds.” Baudelaire refers “to the infinite wretchedness by comparison with the absolute Being who exists as an idea in Man’s mind; and...infinite grandeur by comparison with the animals” (117). Very generally, we might say that the film viewer’s laughter is always motivated by a

simultaneous knowledge and disavowal of the ideal conditions of the screen—of a perpetual shock produced by the two infinities of imaginary absorption and bodily awareness. Just as film images refer to the world beyond the screen, spectator embodiment is grounded in the social conditions of everyday living. Between film form and bodily materiality, the place of the suffragette spectator extends from the suffragette citizen's political suspension between the rigidity of the law and the fluidity of the social. Film laughter provided a crucial context, and an inevitable reaction, for exploring the myriad contradictions between life and the law.

The antagonisms between speaking subjects and living bodies that mobilized the suffragette spectator inhabited three separate but interlocking terrains: 1) *Citizenship*; 2) *Spectatorship*; 3) *Psychosexual Subjectivity*. 1) The suffragette-citizen was bound by a law that she herself could not actively participate in legislating. 2) The suffragette-spectator was complicit in legitimizing a mode of address that favored the language of the screen over the bodily conditions of its reception. 3) The sexuated-suffragette-subject attempted to signify a different image of femininity through recourse to a linguistic structure that necessitated her subordination in order to be able to signify anything. “The question of what a woman is...always stalls on the crucial acknowledgement that there is no guarantee that she *is* at all. But if she takes up her place...then her sexuality will betray, necessarily, the impasses of its history” (Rose, 43). The problem fundamental to these three spheres is that women's physical subjugation is intrinsic to the legibility of the text that she seeks to participate in molding. Women's struggles—as citizens, as spectators, and as psychosexual subjects—could not help but emerge as the awkward remainder of the gap between langue and parole: between linguistic structure and its

contingent enunciation. It is my argument here that comedy provided a co-conspirator for suffragettes to navigate the incoherent terrain between life and the law. Comedy, with its slippery borders between repressive mockery and subjective transformation, adhered to the figure of the suffragette during this process.

Derisive but potentially subversive laughter proliferated on both sides of the debate—as well as on both sides of the screen. The British slapstick film, *Milling the Militants: A Comical Absurdity* (Clarendon, 1913), exemplifies the type of anti-suffragette filmmaking that might provoke the wrong kind of laughter: either brutal, vindictive laughter or a less pleasurable burst of affect entirely (terror, rage, disgust). The film opens with a typical scenario of role reversal: a wife leaves her husband in charge of their two kids so that she can go march in a parade. The wife wields a hammer, and dons a Native headdress along with a bold-lettered apron: “WOMEN’S SUFFRAGE: BE MILITANT.” The husband watches the procession out of his window while balancing one child under each arm as if they were bags of golf clubs, and the film cuts to actuality footage of a real suffragette parade. This structure of parallelism emphasizes the domestic tolls of women’s civic engagement: domestic disorder analogizes rising civil anarchy. The film fabricates footage of a dozen suffragettes, led by the wife still with hammer and headdress, smashing a window and then lighting a bonfire while dancing around it. Meanwhile, the husband calls in the maid to tend to the children and dreams of his retributive justice while nestling in a cozy lounge chair.

The comical dream sequence is bracketed by an intertitle: “Brown sleeps and dreams that he is the Prime Minister. He legislates for the suppression of the suffragettes.” The film dissolves back to Brown dozing in his chair, and he imagines

waking up while still within his dream as two official looking men bring him a document announcing his appointment as Prime Minister. Brown decides: “Gentlemen! We’ll make the punishment fit the crime.” After a brief interlude of Brown orating furiously in a small Parliament room with an all-male group of Cabinet Ministers voting unanimously on every question, “Brown’s new laws are put into effect.” A window-shopping suffragette in a fancy hat that vaguely resembles the wife’s headdress gets arrested by the police: “Misdemeanor No. 1. Punishment for striking policeman. 14 days hard labor in the streets.” While the actual misdemeanor is omitted from the image (we just see the woman gazing in a store window and then getting apprehended by the officers), her punishment is depicted at length. She and several other women shovel heaps of horse manure into a cart while three police officers stand over her; several times she tries to stop, but they physically place the shovel back into her hands and force her to continue.

This disciplinary effect intermingles physical force and social negation, “making the punishment fit the crime.” The women cringe and struggle against being tasked with physical labor in public (shoveling horse manure from the streets was typically men’s work); the use of force to prolong their punishment is thereby justified to emphasize an “unnatural opposition.” The tension between women’s labor and men’s work generates a contradiction that is sustained through force by the police officers, and presumably laughed off by the spectator. The next scene emphasizes the link between disciplinary violence and corrective role reversal. A group of suffragettes break rocks with a hammer (like men on a chain gang), while several gentlemen in top hats and coattails bark instructions at them. One suffragette still in her “Votes for Women” sash smokes a pipe; she coughs and drops the pipe into the street, but one of the gentlemen picks it up and

forces it back into her mouth. The humiliation of behaving “mannishly” in public gets rendered as a coercive display. The prisoner is disciplined bodily to do the types of things that she is presumably being condemned for.

In stark opposition to Foucault’s biopolitical subjects of the Panopticon, who internalize a surveillant gaze in order to learn how to police their own social behavior, the prisoner here gets disciplined through direct force to re-enact rather than to suppress all of her deviant symptoms. Laughter, which always intermingles imaginary perceptions with visceral eruptions, here mediates between disciplinary coercion and the spectacle of social reversal. As Freud argues, when we see a comic buffoon expending an excess of physical energy to perform a relatively simple task, we mimic the buffoon’s gestures in our imagination and then laugh off the surplus. Jennifer Bean aptly summarizes Freud’s notion of “ideational mimesis:” “Suspended in the instant, the ‘same moment’ of acting like the other and remembering the norms of the self, the energy generated for mimetic play is recognized as unnecessary, or ‘superfluous,’ and ‘free for use elsewhere.’ The elsewhere, that is, of laughter” (257). Unlike the comic “art of imitation” that Bean invokes—but also unlike the disciplinary self-surveillance that Foucault describes—the corrective performance of mimicry, in *Milling the Militants*, gets policed through direct force.

“Misdemeanor No. 2. For annoying cabinet ministers.” Women are put in the stocks, exchanging the humiliation of sexual equality (forcing women to smoke pipes) for this medieval apparatus of public immobility. The wounded parties, the pestered cabinet ministers, rally a large crowd by gesturing with their canes, and then depart as a mob encircles the women and laughs and points at them. Again, here, repressive force is

enlisted to police the social corrective of laughter—lest it was unclear to the spectator whom the subjects and objects of laughter should rightly be.

In reality, militants deployed a variety of tactics to make their point after all women were barred from cabinet ministers' political speeches—for "heckling the audience." First, they sought out ministers at other times and locations; second, they would enter the halls furtively and deliver their protest speeches from the roof; third, male friends would ask about the vote on women's behalf at meetings; fourth, women would hold street demonstrations outside of the meeting halls, and then throw stones at windows when the streets were barricaded. All of these tactics elicited actual force and suppression by the police. In addition to "an immensely increased police force, street barricades, and the use of subterranean passages by Cabinet Ministers" (Lawrence, 103), these tactics provoked "special taunt[s]" by critics: "'If it was men acting in hot blood,' they have said, 'this agitation might be serious; but bah! It is only women playing at revolution'" (104). Actual suffragette suppression thus relied upon a similar intermingling of derisive ridicule and physical force. However, more than just smothering women's bodily protests, this force was enlisted to police the very impetus for laughter—lest repressive mockery swing the other way and become a disruptive weapon of protest.

Teresa Billington-Greig's 1907 essay, "The Woman with the Whip," represents a potent satirical counter-force to the derisive policing of women. As one example, Greig discusses the treatment of women at meetings and asserts: "Insult of this kind could only come from curs, and for them the dog-whip was the fitting punishment." Greig herself employed the dog-whip as a defense against harassment in her early suffragette

campaigning, but kept it as a memento, instead wielding it as a rhetorical weapon “against the accumulated wrongs of centuries” (46).

“Misdemeanor No. 3. For firing pillar boxes. Six weeks in trousers.” This scene evokes parade actuality footage, anchoring the camera in the lower left corner of the frame while a procession of women draws nearer from the background. Dressed as mendicants, many with their heads buried in kerchiefs, women again are forced to exaggerate versions of their transgressive behavior. It is hard to say how “the punishment” (marching in trousers) “fits the crime” (blowing up mailboxes) in this example—other than to note that the camera’s placement also coincides with the potential location of a pillar box. We might say that the impetus for punishment (the destroyed object) haunts the spectator’s visual positioning, while the objects of ridicule (the suffragettes in trousers) loom toward the spectator’s immediate field of vision. The film’s comical syntax thus initiates a split between different forms of spectator positioning: the place of the camera versus the impetus for laughter. This visual composition compounds the film’s peculiar effects—its laughing-suffragette mode of address—by blurring between positive and negative cues for spectator positioning. The location of the camera emplaces the spectator, while the encroaching spectacle of the suffragettes displaces this position. Unconsciously but pointedly here, the film explores a comical mode between formal affirmation and affective negation—between subject positioning and its bodily reception.

“Misdemeanor No. 4. For Hunger Strikes.” By far the most disturbing of the comical dream scenarios, a protesting suffragette prisoner observing a hunger strike, instead of getting force-fed, is tied to a chair attached to a long lever and ducked

repeatedly into a pond [see fig. 18]. Substituting mandatory rehabilitation (force-feeding) for medieval humiliation (milling), this image is perhaps the baldest in its motivations: to reassert the unity of the law against the fissures in its application through recourse to laughter. This scene echoes the film's underlying fantasy to re-align repressive sovereignty with populist persuasion. Brown the dreamer, a surrogate for the spectator, legitimizes the Prime Minister's popular sovereignty by himself assuming that authoritative position. Brown becomes both the one who *decides*, and the one who invests feeling on behalf of all those who live with the decision.

Ziarek argues that suffragette militancy "reenacts the democratic duty of revolt...and thus saves the law from ossified obsolescence. In so doing, suffrage militancy also protects the future of freedom, which cannot be limited to contemporary political forms created by former male generations" (38). For Ziarek, militant corporeal tactics reinvest the law with life. "In suffrage agitation, the contestation of women's exclusion from the political and the very instability of the signifier of 'women' leads to the reclaiming of the right to an ongoing revolt, without which the vote loses its political value and becomes a 'banal,' 'respectable little thing'" (28). In *Milling the Militants*, by contrast, laughter inverts suffragette politics, along with gendered stereotypes. The law regains its sway over the living; it does so by coupling visceral laughter with forceful oppression, and thereby doubling the law's physical control over its wayward subjects.

In a final appeal, the husband's fantasy is given physical motivation in reality. He is rudely awakened by his wife heaving a bucket of cold water on his head just as his fantasy suffragette is getting ducked again into the pond. He comes to with a jolt and cowers in terror while his wife, still in headdress and "BE MILITANT" apron,

approaches him with her hammer—the film cuts to black with domestic violence looming [see fig. 19]. Rather than resolving the tensions of the narrative, the closing scene motivates the terrifying laughter of the dream sequence. The fundamental conflict of this film derives from the disarticulation between the law and its application: between sovereign authority and its social legitimacy. Again and again, the film attempts to unify physical force and its social perception through a combination of bodily repression and repressive mockery. While physical force holds the suffragette's on-screen body in place, derisive mockery presumably holds the suffragette-spectator in place ideologically. Moreover, by forcing suffragette perpetrators to masquerade as men—holding a pipe in her mouth while her sisters break rocks—the film also polices the disarticulation between masculine and feminine subject positions in language. Social rebellion gets reduced to sexual inversion, and thereby preserves woman's imaginary place as a negation of the phallus. To invoke Rose again: "Woman is not inferior; she is *subjected*." By representing a physical motivation for Brown's punitive dream images (the wife splashing him with cold water), the film further entrenches its imaginary unity between social fantasy and bodily coercion.

The structure of this film mimics the logic of its comic political argument. The frame story provides a concrete, material motivation for the specific images of the dream scenario, while granting them plausible deniability. The otherwise horrific scene of ducking a woman who is protesting her imprisonment by refusing to eat—with actual images of suffragette prisoners' force-feedings looming in the public's mind—is here presented as a "comical absurdity." (Some women, such as Grace Roe and Kitty Marion, were force-fed over 200 times under Britain's 1913 "Cat and Mouse Act"—which

stipulated the temporary release and then reincarceration of prisoners suffering life-threatening conditions due to hunger-strikes.) Bergson describes absurdity as an inversion of common sense. The absurd “consists in seeking to mould things on an idea of one’s own, instead of moulding one’s ideas on things,—in seeing before us what we are thinking of, instead of thinking of what we see” (87). Bergson cites the famous example of Don Quixote mistaking a windmill for a giant, charging a material resemblance with his own imaginary fixations, as an instance of comical absurdity. In relation to the frame story of *Milling the Militants*, which is all about sexual liberation as the reversal of social hierarchies of violence, the dream sequence appears as purely absurd, in that it revises reality to conform to fantasy. (Of course, the logic of this dream sequence is far too rational to resemble unconscious dream-work.) The excess of the dream derives from its palpable reference to the actual suffragette violence beyond the screen. In their respective social contexts, the difference between a giant and Don Quixote’s windmill was much greater than the difference between force-feedings and coercive millings for a 1913 film spectator. *Milling the Militant’s* comical absurdity therefore does not just impose its social fantasies on material things: it inflicts them on women’s bodies.

Biopolitics and the Laughing Philosopher

While Bergson’s theory of laughter explicitly asserts a division between the subject and object of laughter, Baudelaire’s metaphysics of comedy leaves open a window for the interpenetration between these subject and object positions. Baudelaire elaborates his definition of the comic, which hinges on laughing off a perpetual shock produced by two extreme opposites. Baudelaire’s laughter is ultimately a derisive

laughter, because the laugher's perception of incongruity derives from a comparison of the self simultaneously to inferior and to superior entities. He continues (117-118):

The sense of the comic, the ability to laugh, is in him who laughs, and not at all in the object which excites his laughter. It is not the victim of a fall who laughs at his own misfortune, unless, that is, he happens to be a philosopher, in other words, a being who, as the result of a long habit, has acquired the power rapidly to become two persons at one and the same time, and can bring to bear on what happens to *himself* the disinterested curiosity of a spectator.

In other words, identifying with the object of laughter, without circumventing the pleasures of laughing, would itself be an exercise in philosophy, because it would require the deliberate consideration of two contradictory subject positions. Whereas laughter discharges the conscious awareness of discontinuity, the laughing philosopher suspends this experience. Laughter-as-philosophy thereby extends the conscious awareness of contradiction to the antagonism between affect and comprehension—between the pleasures of laughter and the rigors of its analysis.

Bataille, who was deeply invested in the idea of “comic sovereignty” as a form of knowledge that arises from the emptying out of conscious certainties, drew on this image of the laughing philosopher in his public journal and secret society *Acéphale* (from the Greek “akephalos,” which literally means headless). Decapitation was the wager, the condition of possibility, for the philosopher to understand what it would mean to laugh at oneself with the “disinterested curiosity of a spectator.” To laugh at oneself while suffering the pain of a fall, to experience a comic sovereignty that creates knowledge by troubling lordship, would result in no less than violent transformation and rupture for Bataille. In this context, the collision between laughter and philosophy springs from the rupture between linguistic form and bodily matter; it inhabits the aporia between the law

and the living while seeking to understand the various terrains of difference that generate this aporia.

The laughing suffragette, as I am defining this figure, would refer to a historically specific constellation of political, psychosexual, and mediatized differences that played out contemporaneously in the theaters and on the streets during the 1910s. While the suffragette spectator laughed at documentary images of women's activist destructiveness, the anti-suffragette spectator made light of women prisoners on death's doorstep—of women who offered up their own bodies as both weapons and targets, in the absence of any other means. Suffragettes on hunger strikes practiced corporeal self-annihilation, evoking Bataille's later fixation with the laughing philosopher's self-decapitation, in order to appropriate the repressive violence of the state apparatus.

Marion Wallace Dunlop first employed this tactic in June 1909 in Holloway prison, adapting a method used notoriously in Russian prisons by Russian prisoners: "The hunger strike is passive resistance carried to its extreme limits. It offers no active resistance to wrong, but it frankly stakes life in the effort to win justice" (Lawrence, 121). The paradox whereby the most extreme form of passivity comes to stand in for active rebellion must strike us as a logical outcome of female subject-formation, and of its myriad double binds. Reading the language of militancy through Arendt's concept of revolution, Ziarek argues that militants re-framed rights-based questions as structural contradictions. "It is the experience and justification of female militancy that propelled suffragettes to redefine the right to vote as a more fundamental women's right to revolt" (22). Negated by language—politically, cinematically, and psycho-sexually—militants inherited the necessity of their own negation and transformed it into a political wager.

Ziarek reads the political act of the hunger strike through Agamben's figure of the *homo sacer* (adapted from Roman law): the "sacred" or "accursed" man who cannot be sacrificed, but can be killed with impunity by any citizen. With the mutation from sovereignty to biopower—an ongoing transformation of the political under industrial modernity and representative democracy—the suffragette hunger-striker embodied that "inassimilable remnant that still remains the target of sovereign violence" (39). As Agamben puts it in *Homo Sacer*, bare life ceases to be the exclusion of the political, and becomes its inner hidden norm: "Bare life gradually begins to coincide with the political realm" (9).

However, for Ziarek, the hunger strike is more than just a historical precedent for the solidification of biopower; "it reveals new possibilities of the mobilization of bare life in the struggle for freedom" (159). According to Agamben, the democratic subject of rights is characterized by a hidden aporia between abstract freedom and the subjection of mere life—which derives from the split between *zoe* and *bios*. (From the Ancient Greek, "zoe" refers to natural life, while "bios" designates a qualified form of life such as the polis—bare life then emerges from this distinction between *zoe* and *bios* for Agamben.) Paraphrasing Agamben, Ziarek describes this exercise of inclusion without integration as intrinsic to "modern politics, [which] is about the search for new racialized and gendered targets of exclusion, for the new living dead" (145). Ziarek emphasizes the historical specificity of how precarious subjects at once mobilize and are subjected to biopower, which leads her to accuse Agamben of "political formalism," which, she argues, he "reproduc[es]...by subjecting all living materiality to biopower" (147).

I would emphasize the inherent difficulty of thinking historically or agentially about any of Agamben's claims. The exercise of biopower, for Agamben, is of course rooted in the sovereign paradoxes of "the state of exception." The sovereign *decides* when it is necessary to suspend the law, thereby constituting the system through its very excesses. "The sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law. This means that the paradox can also be formulated this way: 'the law is outside itself'" (*HS*, 15). By mobilizing law-breaking violence in their struggle for political representation, suffragettes attempted to appropriate the paradoxes of sovereignty, ultimately channeling them through their own corporeality. (As Agamben reminds us, only in totalitarianism does the metaphor of the king's "two bodies"—the existential entity versus the mortal human—actually crystallize in one figure.) This is not to say that the example of the suffragettes revolutionized the nature of sovereignty. Rather, the instability of sovereign legitimacy—of defining the law by its exception—under representative democracy, at this historical juncture, encountered the eruption of women's negation by the law. At just this moment, the law spoke through women's bodies, in their very (r)enunciation of its blatant injustice.

Rather than exhibiting their bodies, in excess of the law, as ultimately recuperable by the exercise of biopower, militant resistance was an awkward and ambivalent language: nobody knew quite what to do with it. Returning to *Milling the Militants*—a most symptomatic anti-suffragette film—the major conflict of the dream sequence stems from its indecision between disciplinary visibility and coercive repression. The display of humiliating inversion (women smoking pipes, marching in trousers, shoveling manure) is policed through direct force, rather than through a pervasive anxiety about one's potential

surveillance. The punishments depicted at once exemplify and contradict the technologies of a biopolitical apparatus as Foucault outlines them in *Discipline and Punish* (213-214):

With the police, one is in the indefinite world of a supervision that seeks ideally to reach the most elementary particle, the most passing phenomenon of the social body...the infinitely small of political power. And in order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception.

The fantasy of this film's dream sequence is ultimately a sovereign one: it imagines the top-down unity of the law, and the seamless execution of the law's enunciation.

Absurdity, "moulding things on one's fantasy," defers the mechanisms of a biopolitical apparatus: "the infinitely small of political power...like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception." The penal subject in this film does not internalize her own potential surveillance by an invisible social field; her conduct is not regulated through invisible instruments of power; she is not even "made to live" as the hunger-striking suffragettes in Holloway Prison were when food was piped into the stomachs through rubber tubes inserted into the nose or mouth.

I am arguing that the film's manifest fantasy of physical control derives from its underlying insecurity about its own mode of address: are suffragettes funny? As I have discussed, around 1913, suffragette culture was mainstreamed. No longer equated with the torch-wielding furies of the Paris Commune,^{cvi} suffragettes became fashionable signifiers for the expediency of societal reform. The splintering of suffragette movements between palatable reformists and force-fed militants precipitated a crisis of suffragettes' cultural representation. To put it bluntly, one side was too safe for ridicule, while deriding the other side would be potentially horrific.

Like the “homo sacer,” the figure of the “laughing philosopher”—who virtually decapitates himself in order to understand pleasure as an idea (loosely paraphrasing Baudelaire, or summarizing Bataille’s project)—goes back to antiquity. Democritus,^{cvi} a citizen of Abdera, was known widely as “the laughing philosopher.” According to an apocryphal tale by Hippocrates, a fellow Abderan once visited Democritus to witness his apparent insanity, which manifested itself as constant cheerfulness ever on the brink of uncontrollable laughter. The visitor began to “weep in a loud voice in the manner of a woman weeping at the death of her child” (Skinner, 153). However, even at this woman’s misery, Democritus merely laughed. Hippocrates chastised Democritus for his insensitivity, but Democritus responded: “I am only laughing at mankind, full of folly and empty of any good actions,” and at a world in which men pursue “matters of no value, and consume their lives with ridiculous things.” Skinner concludes this anecdote: “Hippocrates was greatly impressed, and on leaving Abdera thanked the people for enabling him to talk with ‘the very wise Democritus, who alone is capable of giving wisdom to everyone in the world’” (153). Skinner focuses on Democritus in order to emphasize the derisive nature of mirth in his study on “Hobbes’s Classical Theory of Laughter.”

Hobbes is often quoted: “To fall on the suddaine, is disposition to Weepe, to see another fall, disposition to Laugh” (*Elements of Law*). According to the classical humanists and physicians, who were all well versed in ancient Greek philosophy, laughter could never be the expression of unalloyed joy or delight. Rather, mirth is always scornful, consisting in the momentary elevation of the self at the expense of the

other. As Aristotle put it, “Jesting is witty contumely...the disgracing of another for his own pastime.”

I mention this anecdote about Democritus’ wisely indiscriminate mirth because its interpretation has had an undue impact on the philosophy of laughter as a critical instrument. Democritus’ inappropriate laughter reinforces the image of both comedy and philosophy as requiring distance from its object of engagement. Whereas laughing at another’s fall represents cruelty according to Hobbes, laughter at extreme vulnerability—a woman weeping at the death of her child—somehow parlays derision into insight. (At the other end of this spectrum, of course, would be something like Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque, in which laughter and death—childbirth, labor, and death throes—all intermingle in a gleeful, but ephemeral liquidation of societal norms.^{cvi})

The extreme politics of suffragette militancy—law-breaking violence, hunger strikes, and martyrdom—can thus be read as a provocation for a different idea of laughter than either derisive mockery or carnivalesque jubilee. Caught in a cultural discourse whereby laughter adhered to suffragette iconicity, the language of militancy collapsed the distance intrinsic to the cruelty of laughter. Society’s repressive laughter and the image of a man falling was condensed in the figure of the militant when she incited her own bodily repression as a radical weapon of protest. At the nexus of sovereign rule and bodily discipline, as Ziarek argues, suffragette militancy incited laughter as a last gasp to make legible the ongoing collapse between language and affect: between the law and life, screen and spectator, and sexuation (sexuality in language) and sexual difference (sexual biology).

Milling the Militants manifests this political implosion by coupling derisive laughter with coercive force—in Bergson’s account, comic laughter requires that the victim’s injury arise through accident and not intention. “Rigidity, automatism, absent-mindedness, and unsociability are all inextricably entwined; and all serve as ingredients to the making up of the comic in character” (71). In other words, Bergson emphasizes accident and contingency, and not sovereign or physical coercion, in order to regulate social behavior through laughter. However, by needing to have their rigidity imposed on them forcefully by the state apparatus, suffragettes defied their comical historicity: the contingency of their clowning. Moreover, they threatened to destroy the very separation between laughter and laughed-at. Rather than animating a purely derisive laughter, which appears to be these films’ intentions, these grizzly suffragette comedies approach an abject or boundary-shattering form of laughter. By confusing sovereign and biopolitical forms of control, they also throw the very discreteness of their objects of laughter, and therefore also the stability of their subject-laughers, perpetually into crisis.

Two Deaths: Emily Davison’s Trampling and the Recession of the Trick of Film

Death #1

On June 4 1913, the British suffragette Emily Wilding Davison threw herself in front King George V’s horse Anmer and was trampled to death at Epsom Derby. Davison, a militant activist for the Women’s Social and Political Union, had been jailed nine times and force-fed forty-nine times at Holloway Prison. Controversy persists among historians about whether Davison had meant to martyr herself, or whether she had really stepped out onto the racecourse in order to attach a WSPU banner to the horse’s

bridle. Gaumont Graphic captured the event in an actuality that was quickly marketed and distributed as *Exciting Derby Race Film*.^{cix}

What is undoubtedly the most remarkable topical film ever brought to this country reached New York from the Gaumont Company of London. This film covered the recent derby race at Epsom Downs, in which Emily Davison, a militant suffragette, threw herself in front of King George's horse and sustained fatal injuries. On the occasion of this year's Derby the Gaumont Company had fifteen cameramen stationed on the course, two being located at the famous Tattenham Corner. This is the most interesting spot in the whole Derby course, and here it was that Miss Davison chose to sacrifice her life in order to call attention to the cause that she advocated.

Although Davison had clearly walked onto the racecourse with an object (the WSPU banner), and possessed a ticket stub for a return railway journey from the Derby, activists and media publicists alike immediately seized upon the event as a spectacular act of suffragette martyrdom.

The notion that the king has two bodies—the body politic and the body natural—has long been a tenet of political theology. Agamben provides a semiotic juridical reading of the king's metaphysical dualism: the sovereign's division and simultaneity between the transcendent body that lives on, and the material body that dies. He argues: "That the sovereign is a living law can only mean that he is not bound by it, that in him the life of the law coincides with a total anomie. . . . And yet, precisely because he is identified with the law, he is held in relation to it and is indeed posited as the anomic foundation of the juridical order" (*State of Exception*, 69). The problem of the king's two bodies exemplifies a structural problem of juridical law for Agamben—the problem of defining the political by the very thing that exists in excess of it.^{cx}

After falling and trampling Davison with its hooves, Anmer did a somersault and then got up again to resume running the race. Anmer, named after a small English village

in Norfolk, here evokes the Saxon mythic symbolism of the king's horse as a sign of sovereign fertility; Anmer's oval-shaped course reinforces the eternal circularity of divine time. Meanwhile, suffragettes heaved stones at the windows of parliament, bellowed their interrogations at cabinet ministers from the roofs of meeting halls, and undermined the King's decisional authority "to let live" with organized hunger strikes. Suffragette filmmaking further punctured the circularity of divine time by envisioning terroristic freeze-frames that would hold commerce hostage to the instantaneity of political difference (as in *How They Got the Vote*). Emily Davison's apocryphal martyrdom (because it is doubtful that she meant to martyr herself) thereby epitomizes the clash between divergent notions of political time: theological return versus activist punctuality.

More than a violent rupture between the King's horse, along his repetitive course, and Davison's bodily interruption of traffic, this Epsom Trampling became infamous as a media image. In the film actuality footage [see fig. 10], a camera placed in the stands and across the track at Tattenham Corner captures Davison from afar—registering foremost the interruption. Davison's scale is diminished by distance and obscured by the passing horses. Her presence does not become legible visually until after the horse and jockey have already fallen, and bystanders have rushed onto the track. Film spectators at the time subjected themselves to repeat viewings to try to catch a glimpse of Davison wandering onto the track before the accident. Regarding the main event of this documentary in the future perfect tense—*this will have been*—suffragettes and antis- alike no doubt associated the imminent shock of this physical collision with the potential transformation of the law represented by women's suffrage. If Emily Davison will have been trampled to death, might that also mean that one day women will have gained the vote—and who

knows what else? (Anything from men's biological inheritance of the capacity for pregnancy to the apocalyptic destruction of all of Western civilization would ensue according to popular suffragette film comedies of the time.)

As an epilogue to the public of 1913's international saturation by this spectacular image of protest, I would like to draw attention to a scene featuring Mabel Normand as a substitute horse jockey in the feature-length romantic comedy, *Mickey* (August, 1918). Released more than five years after Pathé News capitalized on the funeral of *The Woman Who Dared* (June 14, 1913), *Mickey* depicts the plight of an orphan (and unwitting heiress) raised in a mining settlement by the former partner of her father, after her father died in a gold mining accident. In one scene, Mickey (played by Normand) decides at the very last minute to stand in for a horse jockey, who is planning to throw the race on which her friend and potential love interest has placed a substantial bet. A series of binocular views, inter-cut between reverse shots of familiar characters watching the race in the audience, reveal Mickey in close-up as she deftly maneuvers the horse. Just after the corrupt schemer accuses his partner—"you double-crossed me"—Mickey falls from her horse. The image of the fall bears a decisive resemblance to the prolific actuality footage of Davison, with the camera placed across the track and at a distance from the incident [see fig. 21].

Perhaps more interestingly, in the scene leading up to Mickey's duplicity, after hearing of the plot, Mickey dives headlong through a trapdoor onto the horse, knocking out the jockey, just before they were about to run through the gate. (It is worth noting that Mickey slips by a drunken African-American attendant just before this; the film thereby displaces Mickey's feminine otherness through crude stereotypes about Black

masculinity.) A series of impossible angles fragment Mickey's position on the cusp of her first fall from passive spectator to active racer. **1)** Filmed from somewhere in the ceiling, Mickey leans out above the paddock as the mounted racers pass by below her; **2)** filmed from below in the paddock, Mickey looks off-frame at the horses entering the track; **3)** the film cuts to a flashback of Mickey, overhearing the devious plot, from a visually centered position; **4)** there is a repetition of shot #1 in which more horses bypass; **5)** the spectator is placed at a level view from the horse in question, alone in the frame, with Mickey's torso hanging through the trap door as she prepares to leap into the paddock [see fig. 22]; and **6)** we watch Mickey jump onto the horse from a bird's-eye-view.

Editing in this scene of Mickey's first fall obviates the need for her physical mangling during the more traumatic incident of her second fall while the race is underway. *Mickey's* complex continuity editing—its quick temporality, parallel cutting, and varied uses of different angles, positions, and scales of distance—epitomizes classical film syntax. Language is established through the relations between shots, with no need for the woman's body as an intermediary to make these abstract relations legible to the spectator. Whereas female plasticity—rigidity and brittle corporeality—erupted when her fluidity of metamorphosis in early cinema was made to conform to the industry's nascent storytelling grammar, here, female plasticity is purely abstract: Mickey's dismemberment takes the form of a visual relation with no impact on the body. It does not matter that Mickey falls a second time, this time “for real,” because the film's editing has thoroughly derealized the physical fragmentation of her body.

Death #2

In one of his most ambitious films, and also one of his very last films, *The Conquest of the Pole* (1912), Georges Méliès plays Professor Crazyloft, a mad scientist who races to the pole against a rival party of balloonists. *Conquest* teems with spectacular flourishes, including trick effects, jump cuts, multiple exposures, toy props, fantastical machines, astonishing acrobatics, and unmotivated transmutations—none of which are subordinated to the economic constraints of the film’s narrative, which is very loose. Although *Conquest* spans two reels, as in many of Méliès’ popular early films, the science-fiction narrative provides at most a weak pretext for visual spectacle.

Early in the film, before the voyage, “suffragettes who want to go along interrupt the Assembly’s serious work,” which at that moment is focused on congregating in front of a globe and gesturing at a poster illustration of what looks like a cross between a dinosaur and a hot air balloon. The Delegation of Suffragettes storms in with picket signs, one of which tongue-in-cheekly avows that women would like to go “à bas” (“to the bottom”) along with the men. (This phrasing is especially peculiar considering the scientists’ objective to reach the *North Pole*.) The suffragettes are all clad in silk knee-breaches, a throwback to mid-nineteenth Century French fashion of the moderate bourgeois revolutionaries, against whom the “sans-culottes,” radical leftist, urban laborers positioned their economic and civic demands. Like the anachronistic iconography of Professor Crazyloft’s wonderful aeroplane, which strikes its contemporary spectator as at once *au courant* and prehistoric, the suffragettes are envisioned as a throwback to a moderately revolutionary historical theater. They resemble a liberal vanguard, too concerned with appearance to get left behind with either

pole of history; they will move forward through their very desire to temper the potentiality for historical change.

If the suffragettes cannot ride to the North Pole in Professor Crazyloft's wonderful aeroplane, perhaps it is not they who have been excluded from the future of the voyage, but Méliès himself who must absent himself from history in an already outdated imagination of time travel. On the cusp of Star Film's bankruptcy, Méliès' emphasis on aesthetic spectacle and magical mystification no longer captivated international film audiences, who were increasingly persuaded by a growing web of trade press discourses to value narrative and moral uplift above fantasy and experimentation. Méliès' products simply did not travel well. While suffragettes gained mainstream cultural viability and political traction in their advocacy for rights-based representation, Méliès' irrational visions of historical movement—premised on rupture and mutation above progress and reform—would hypothetically journey as far as the moon or the North Pole in order to find an audience.

The radical anarchist Emma Goldman, who frequently acted as a gadfly to push suffragette movements to the left of their reformist positions, provides a different framing of the relationship between feminist politics and fetishistic spectacle. "We boast of the age of advancement, of science, and progress. Is it not strange then that we still believe in fetich worship? True, our fetiches have different form and substance, yet in their power over the human mind, they are still as disastrous as were those of old. Our modern fetich is universal suffrage." Her chief opposition to American suffragette campaigns, which were focused on gaining women the vote, hinges on the identification of a substitution: that of legal inclusion for structural transformation. Instead of confronting the institutions

that “condemn woman to the life of an inferior...[these] modern prison[s] with golden bars”—the State, civil society, religion, war, and the home—“woman clings tenaciously...to the very power that holds her in bondage.” Goldman argues that women’s suffrage performs a political bait and switch, equating voting with the purification of the political, when in fact, she claims, it would serve as an alibi for the hopeless corruption of modern state institutions. “Woman, essentially a purist, is naturally bigoted and relentless in her effort to make others as good as she thinks they ought to be.” Thus, female reformists in states where women had already gained the vote, including Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, and Utah, premise their enfranchisement increasingly on the exclusion of those who would discredit it: prostitutes, militants, anarchists, labor agitators, or simply poor women with few economic options who would provide a less appealing face or a less tolerable voice for the cause. For these reasons, Goldman characterizes the American suffrage movement as a “parlor affair, absolutely detached from the economic needs of the people.”

Goldman accuses female reformists, in a sense, of aestheticizing politics—of fighting a campaign centered on visibility and token inclusion, in exchange for the possibility of a radical dis-identification with their own marginalized positions. There are striking resonances between Méliès’ caricature of suffragettes in *The Conquest of Pole* and Goldman’s call for “the necessity [of woman] to emancipate herself from her emancipation” (“The Tragedy of Woman’s Suffrage”). In contrast to the flying women who moonlight as star and orbital formations during Méliès’ “impossible voyage” to the extremities of the earth, the suffragettes get left behind from the magician’s band of scientific misfits. This moment has been read narrowly by film historians as a sign of the

film's sexism, and even as an index of how Méliès' own filmmaking style was rapidly going out of fashion. Though masterful in temporal illusion and reversal, the magician had somehow fallen behind the times, both aesthetically and politically.

While the trick film's financial decline in the early 1910s precipitated the rationalization of trick devices as "special effects"—subordinated either to the development of the narrative or to fetishism of the technology—suffragette movements gained mainstream visibility and political legitimacy. The United States Congress ratified the Nineteenth Amendment, which prohibits any citizen being denied the right to vote on the basis of sex, on August 18, 1920. The British Parliament's 1918 Representation of the People Act, which granted all male citizens over 21 the right to vote, also began to phase in women—mostly married and property-owning women over 30; women were not fully enfranchised on the same terms as men until 1928. Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, women gained both municipal and national—and qualified and unqualified—voting rights across Western Europe, Soviet Republican States, and Latin America (Ecuador, Uruguay, and the Yucatán), and remaining territories in the Oceanic where they were not already enfranchised. For the most part, these rights-based victories precipitated the dissolution of feminist movements, which was factionalized by separate interests (class, ideology, race, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, municipality) lacking a common central objective.

In defining the emergence of feminism, Nancy Cott emphasizes coalition-building across contradictory political goals and psychosocial desires. Returning to the paradoxical legitimacies that haunted suffragette arguments—the universal humanism of right, and political expediency of special needs—Cott asserts: "Each of these points had

been made at some time, piecemeal, by women before. In the 1910s a significant minority of women elevated these demands to new flamboyance and intensity in combination, naming their constellation Feminism” (49). Cott announces the emergence of feminism as a politics of formlessness, “conceding the revolutionary openendedness and sometime internal contradictions of their project and making that formlessness, that lack of certain boundaries, that potential to encompass opposites, into a virtue” (49). As Denise Riley has put it in *Am I That Name?*, “the drive towards political representation exposes the fluctuations of ‘women,’ philosophically as well as strategically.” Instead of the dualism of the king’s two bodies, feminist politics emerged from the antagonism between abstract universalism and sexual difference; difference as such fragmented and displaced political theology.

However, in the language of popular sovereignty—animated by the still relatively new and exciting, but now firmly established medium of cinema—feminism’s “politics of formlessness” opened onto the crystallization of classical film form. From female plasticity in transitional trick filmmaking, the articulation of film language re-unified this feminist aesthetics of mutation (dismemberment, undercranking, metamorphosis, immolation) for the imaginary position of the film spectator. Whether rehearsing temporary role reversals or inciting extreme disruptions of social order, these suffragette film comedies were caught in a dialectic between visual reform and cultural transformation. On the cusp of their obsolescence as attractions unto themselves, film tricks were rationalized in conjunction with the visual mainstreaming of suffragette politics.

CONCLUSION

METAMORPHIC COMEDIENNES AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY LAUGHTER

“Why are men, taken on average and as a whole, funnier than women?”

—Christopher Hitchens (“Why Women Aren’t Funny,” *Vanity Fair*, Jan. 2007).^{cxi}

Women and Comedy

Throughout this dissertation project, I have taken for granted that the fundamental question of whether women *are* funny would not be a generative framework for the rigorous analysis of how bodies get gendered through the operations of laughter in media culture. My argument has been less concerned with the agency of the clown than with the subjective instabilities of a society that repeatedly inflicts its laughter upon women’s bodies. The thematic of metamorphosis has represented an impetus for reopening theories of laughter, which overwhelmingly assume emotional distance and clear-cut psychological distinctions between the subjects and objects of laughter—for example, between the laughing spectator and the housewife who spontaneously combusts in any number of early film comedies. Metamorphosis upsets affective and corporeal boundaries alike with its inexhaustible shape shifting, distorted appearances, and identity reversals.

Drawing on foundational notions of laughter as a “social corrective” or derisive instrument espoused by philosophers from Plato, to Hobbes, to Bergson, recent media comedy criticism has defined laughter as an implement or tool that yields to human

control and agency. I have focused on the dialectical relationship between the emergence of cinema as a media industry and the very idea of comedy: how motion pictures animate the temporal and physical contradictions of modernity in conjunction with the paradoxes of comedy. (By paradoxes of comedy, I refer especially to the tendencies of comedic forms—from verbal jokes, to slapstick knockabout, to ironic asides—to presuppose the opposite of the reality that they explicitly address and spring from.) Alternative concepts of comedy, which foreground laughter's excesses, anarchism, and provocations for political transformation, co-emerged with the irrational images of time, space, and physical existence propagated by the then-new medium of cinema. The argument that women fail as clowns or comedians—the comedienne fallacy, let us call it—founders under the pressure of these non-instrumental approaches to laughter.

Neo-conservative popular culture columnist Christopher Hitchens' contentious claims about gender and laughter—although ideologically bald-faced—represent the logical conclusion of an underlying cultural belief that techniques of comedy serve to shore up, rather than to dissolve or even shatter, the subjective unity of the ego. Hitchens asserts: "For men, it is a tragedy that the two things they prize the most—women and humor—should be so antithetical. But without tragedy there could be no comedy. My beloved said to me, when I told her I was going to have to address this melancholy topic, that I should cheer up because 'women get funnier as they get older.'" Hitchens' punch line—mediated through the voice of the butt of his joke—betrays a double misrecognition: that the temporality of laughter hinges on chronology, and, more insidiously, that being funny is tantamount to being mocked. The joke here, true to form, belies its own premise: the irreducible antithesis between women and humor. But what is

so funny about women aging—or more generally, about women’s subjection to uncontrollable and potentially irreversible physical transformations?

It has long been a truism of sexist media culture that women fail as slapstick comediennes because audiences feel less comfortable laughing at women—whom they expect to regard as fetish objects—suffering the pain, violence, and utter humiliation intrinsic to slapstick conventions. Female pain might be all well and good in sentimental melodramas such as *Dark Victory* and *Now, Voyager*, but “it’s apparent that men don’t like to laugh at women, certainly not the women they’re attracted to...[in] rougher slapstick” (Pierce, 102). In other words, according to Alan Dale, who cites Mack Sennett, Irving Thalberg, and Frederick Lewis Allen, women in slapstick films exist primarily as fetish objects; their objectification naturalizes the piecemeal corporeality inflicted almost exclusively on male bodies—hence Dale’s book title, *Comedy Is a Man in Trouble*. While fetishism disavows totality by substituting or mistaking the part for the whole, slapstick comedy obviates this impulse: slapstick literalizes fetishism’s totality of the fragment by cutting bodies into pieces willy-nilly—and with effectively no consequences. In women’s slapstick, instead offering up her foot (*The Gay Shoe Clerk*) or hair (*Vertigo*) as a fetish object, the slapstick comedienne might get her limbs severed (*The Kitchen Maid’s Dream*) or her head decapitated (*The Boy, the Bust, and the Bath*). She thereby exaggerates, and in a sense disarms, her own bodily reification by swapping the-part-for-the-whole with the traumatic reality of the hole from the part: an irrefutable image of the appendage’s very extraction.

Moreover, refuting the historical evidence again and again enlisted by present day comedy critics—that audiences have never enjoyed laughing at women’s bodies at risk—

the archives explored in this dissertation set the record straight. In popular silent film comedies from the early twentieth century (through World War I), women spontaneously combust while doing housework; women dismember their own limbs to keep pace with their impossible household or factory labor expectations; women's bodies are racialized or nativized in conjunction with their amorphous corporeality; women get burnt at the stake or sadistically ducked into a pond as retributive justice for their social activism; women get trampled by lynch mobs, sexually violated by inanimate objects, and molested in public by mashers who exploit their mechanical alienation as sexual vulnerability/ Again, all of these things happen in genre comedies.

Shape-shifting and Feminist Theory

As a meta-disciplinary issue for feminist theory and for gender and sexuality studies, foregrounding slapstick's anatomical obsessions—such as tropes of cross-dressing and bodily transformation—raises questions about the disarticulation between sexual anatomy and sexual identity. As Bakhtin defines carnivalesque role-reversals, these festive moments of upturning are circumscribed and delimited in their lasting effects, but they indeed make their marks on everyday sociality. Engaging the carnivalesque resonances of queer and trans- feminist politics helps us to push against their pervasive theoretical tendencies “to throw the baby out with the bath water:” to assert an ontological or total disarticulation between sexual biology and gendered constructions of sexual identity in language and culture. In other words, troubling conventional gender dichotomies (through slapstick reversals, or through any other means) does not rid us of gender binaries entirely. We inherit these gender dichotomies

unto the present day: they haunt us, most poignantly through our fantasies of doing away with them and destroying them altogether.

Just to be clear, I am not suggesting that sexual and gender identities are anything other than overdetermined: multiply determined and mutually determining. If normative sexuality is an “achievement” (to invoke Freud), queerness, trans-identity, a-sexuality, or any other orientation marked as non-normative arises through everyday lived struggles that exist in relation to their social and cultural regulation and to their embodied contexts of experience. To cite an already widely cited (and often critiqued) example, in *Gender Trouble* and in various locations throughout her writings, Judith Butler designates gender identity as a self-authored entity that can be performed in the moment at will. Turning to questions of conscience and guilt, Butler identifies the inevitable failures of *interpellation* (of state administered subject formation) as impetuses for the self-authorization of identity, which thereby also remains structural. She argues in *The Psychic Life of Power*: “The inaugurative scene of interpellation is one in which a certain failure to be constituted becomes the condition of possibility for constituting oneself” (197). For Butler, the “wounded attachments” of melancholia—the desire to hold onto impossible or lost objects—create fissures for internalizing the repressive voice of a state apparatus, or of any other nefarious operation of power. These powers “become psychic only through the movement by which they are dissimulated and ‘turned’ [a pun on the performative action of being interpellated]...Regulatory power becomes ‘internal’ only through the melancholic production of the figure of internal space...By withdrawing its own presence, power becomes an object lost—‘a loss of a more ideal kind’” (197).

However, by focusing on the figures and phantoms of lost objects in slapstick comedy, instead of just in the melancholic humors, we would no doubt arrive at a very different version of interpellation—one that is also both performed by the subject and shot through with the repressive powers of the state apparatus. Crucially, slapstick melancholia de-instrumentalizes the rehearsal of impossible fixations. Defined as the willful incapacity to let go of one's own destructive objects—from Mary Jane's paraffin addiction, to Lucille Ball's inability to learn from negative punishment—slapstick melancholia opens onto subjective and structural transformation. By conjuring bad objects as spectral instances of jubilee and euphoria, slapstick melancholia pokes holes in its own solidification of power, thereby modulating its inner voice: "the regulative instrument of the psyche," according to Butler. (Again, this "inner voice" refers to something like the moral superego that the subject internalizes to fill the gaping lacks effected by melancholia.) Whether incited by cross-dressing performers, who mobilize the surprise generated through gender reversal to imagine alternative social configurations, or by working-class women who chase their own dismembered body parts beyond the grave, slapstick melancholia short-circuits its own automatic reproduction of repressive social control. Of course, comic disarticulation does not do away with these dominant apparatuses entirely, but it does help us to locate the cracks and lines of vulnerability that run through them—and to do so joyfully, not just lugubriously!

Why do slapstick comediennes in early cinema insist on reincorporating their lost appendages when they perhaps would do even better functioning without them? And why do we continue to laugh at these images, if not of "wounded attachments," then of re-attached wounds, into the present day?

Digital Film Comediennes

Our interest in unearthing and resurrecting fragmented nitrate prints of slapstick comediennes who spontaneously combust while doing housework in the early 1900s stems from the anxieties and fantasies of our current moment. While the proliferation of digital imaging techniques has provided for a seemingly “unprecedented manipulability of pictorial or compositional elements” (Rosen, “Old and New,” 307), the material status of surviving early film reels seems more precarious than ever. “Nitrate Won’t Wait!” has become the battle cry of film archivists, scholars and enthusiasts alarmed about the increasing portion of our silent film fragments lost every day to progressive decomposition. Anthony Slide romanticizes film nitrate as the material base of a lost art, too unstable to support its own beauty. “With its high silver content and its rich tones, there was, and for many still is, no better film for black-and-white photography than nitrate film. However, it had two major drawbacks...it was highly flammable and would eventually decompose” (*Nitrate Won’t Wait*, 1). More interestingly for our purposes, the perils of nitrate film storage overspill from the frame itself and threaten the bodies of living spectators.

Like the destructive slapstick comediennes preserved on the material stock, nitrate’s chemical instabilities become physical liabilities for the future of the world that it captures. Slide warns of its hazards: “Nitrate film’s chemical composition is very similar to that of guncotton, used in the manufacture of explosives, resulting in its burning 20 times as fast as wood...It can self-ignite at 300 degrees or less, and the burning nitrate film gives off a gas which can form nitric acid in the lungs, possibly

leading to death” (1-3). The industry wide transfer from nitrate to nonflammable, acetate-based safety film was precipitated by a large number of archival conflagrations in the hot summer of 1949. “Because nitrate film is chemically unstable, it is in a permanent state of decomposition...In the summer of 1949, a number of fires in New York City resulted from storage of decomposing nitrate film, and it was determined that self-ignition was taking place at a temperature of 106 degrees” (3).

The furor for decrying and correcting inadequate film preservation methods has spawned what Anthony Slide refers to as a “glamorization of film preservation.”^{xxii} Initiatives to restore already highly visible and prestigious films such as *Metropolis*, *A Star Is Born*, and *Lawrence of Arabia* “have also glamorized film preservation, which is, in reality, a far from glamorous occupation” (6). (Despite significant preservation efforts since the 1950s, archivists have estimated that over 90% of silent films produced before 1929 are no longer extant—and more than half of the silent feature films made between 1912 and 1929 have not survived.) If this drive to resurrect materially decomposing star images of Janet Gaynor and Brigitte Helm—of effectively giving nitrocellulose an acetate makeover—has led to a “glamorization” of film preservation, combusting comedienues such as Mary Jane and Bridget McKeen humanize the perils of self-igniting film nitrate. Women’s comically incinerated and dismembered “resting pieces” provide a body for animating fantasies of archival rescue, which stem from the terrors of archival lack precipitated by nitrate’s chemical instability [see fig. 23].

The archival resurrection of these nitrate comedienne hell-raisers—metamorphic bodies that seem to anticipate digital dreams of limitless malleability—speaks to the ideological contradictions of digital film archiving. What is the status of a body that can

potentially do anything, except survive through its own material base? Phil Rosen addresses the entanglement between “digital” and “indexical” (or referential) imaginaries bound up in digital cinema’s claims to absolute rupture and radical novelty. Rosen summarizes the dreams of a digital utopianism: “Digital imaging is...a matter of...sundering the contact between world and image, and between machine and reference, which is the very currency of the indexical. The digital can make any kind of an image, of the existent or nonexistent, out of whole cloth—or rather, whole algorithms” (306). The preponderance of digital techniques has provoked some conservative scholars to circumscribe the idea of cinema as the very remainder of the digital, asserting “cinema” and “digital media” as diametrically opposed forms. These digital cinema debates take a distinct shape in the field of archival film historiography. While some archivists embrace digital curating tools as panaceas to the problem of material finitude, others (most notably Paolo Cherchi Usai) decry certain pernicious tendencies of archival digitization.

Like Rosen, who historicizes the idea of digitization through “old” (i.e. indexical) media, Usai compares the hunger for digitization to previous archival conversions: from nitrocellulose, to acetate, to polyester—as well as to archaeologies of art preservation through wood, canvas, glass, and stone. “The fact ought to be faced that the most stable medium known to human civilization is not film...Gelatine. Animal bones crushed and melted into a semitransparent layer intermixed with crystals of silver salts. It won’t last: it can’t” (*The Death of Cinema*, 113). Despite their differing methodological approaches, both Rosen and Usai valorize the analogical or the indexical precisely through its inherent hybridity, fallibility, and material corruption. Inheriting the debased histories of

film—with its nitrate flammability, its acetate “vinegar syndrome,” and its polyester discoloration—Rosen and Usai each decode digital ideology as an attempt to purify or whitewash a pockmarked century of cinema. Usai asserts: “Digital technology offers the seductive promise of a real miracle: perfect vision, eternal moving images that can be reproduced ad infinitum with no loss of visual information—as blatant a lie as the claim that compact discs and cd-roms will last a lifetime” (113).

Rosen emphasizes not the preservationist ethics, but the referential politics of these digital fantasies of perfect visibility and eternal legibility. He argues, in reference to the use of digital media for military spy satellites: “The ‘purity’ of ‘pure data’ cannot mean the obliteration of referential origins, for without referential entities or events preexisting the data itself, that data would have no informational value as surveillance” (307). Thereby aligning the referential with the informational, Rosen arrives at the oxymoron, “digital indexicality.” It is precisely this idea of digital indexicality that is at stake with the restoration and recirculation of archival slapstick comediennes. These nymphs of nitrate trace a gendered genealogy that further nuances Rosen’s account of “the internal contradictions in ideals of the digital:” the hybridity between manipulability and referentiality that riddles digital signification.

The sheer physical malleability of these comedienne figures, both narratively and meta-archivally, stems precisely from their catastrophic combustion. They represent bodies that at once anticipate and belie digital fantasies of the image’s total sundering from reality. The specters of early slapstick film comediennes haunt twenty-first century digital media production. Figures like Mary Jane—whose rampant mutations only

intensify in the wake of her corporeal obliteration—provide meta-narratives about what it means for archives to outlive their own finitude: for cinema to survive its own death.

The discourse of animation in media studies has emerged at the nexus of debates about digital indexicality and renewed excitement about historicizing popular modes of film experimentation. (Slapstick comedienne films that integrate hand-drawn and live-action techniques—such as *The Kitchen Maid's Dream* and *The Magic Hoop*^{cxiii}—would exemplify this form of an avant-garde aesthetic produced for popular audiences.) In her introduction to *Animating Film Theory*, Karen Beckman argues: “As the increasingly digital nature of cinema now forces animation to the forefront of our conversations, it becomes ever clearer that for film theorists, it has really never made sense to ignore animation” (1). In other words, rather than limiting the idea of cinema as the antithesis of the digital (whatever that is), Beckman engages the hybridity of digital cinema to recuperate lost objects from the history of a medium that has at times been very narrowly defined. “In this volume, the primary goal is to explore the kinds of theoretical questions that have remained underexplored because we have allowed ourselves to be constrained by too narrow a sense of what cinema is” (19). Alongside *Betty Boop*, *Loony Tunes*, and manga comics—as well as works by avant-garde animators such as Norman McLaren, Harry Smith, and the Quay Brothers—I would emphasize the place of live-action bodies, stretched and contorted beyond the limits of even the most versatile cartoon sketches.

No doubt, the reason that figures like Mary Jane, Betty, Princess Nicotine, and Méliès' spider-women are still so attractive and compelling for us today is because of the status of their bodily animation. Given our longstanding cultural ambivalence about how new technologies inhabit and transform human identities and subject positions—

especially in relation to gendered and raced bodies—we would be remiss to ignore the imbrication between animation techniques and the politics of gender and sexuality. Elaborating animation as something like a meta-discourse for envisioning new interventions in film theory, Beckman enlists a slew of animated figures as impetuses for representing film theoretical arguments just on the cusp of their articulation. “Animation, like theory, seems to provide a way of grappling with [social and physical] changes before they are properly understood” (13). Animated lines provide imaginative fodder for rigorous theoretical work.

In the context of gender politics, we might do well to take a cue from Beckman’s provocation. Archival slapstick comediennes present meta-images for imagining the future of feminist film theory. Indeed, film theory’s feminist commitments have become troublingly tenuous at this historical juncture. Often more of an afterthought than a cohesive theoretical project, the discourse of ideology critique in film theory is a far cry from the anti-patriarchal writings of Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane, Kaja Silverman, and their feminist interlocutors in the 1970s and 1980s. Since much of the research about gender in film studies today tends towards the historical—exploring politics of archival invisibility as opposed to structures of textual misrecognition—we might flip the question around; we might ask how these vanishing comedienne figures provide historical meta-narratives for provoking new debates in feminist film theory.

As I have argued, any feminist politics emerging from metamorphic comedienne bodies would have to account for issues of rigidity and plasticity. In other words, what are the technical and ideological limits that constrain figures who themselves appear to be able to do anything—to take on any physical changes in form? While the decomposition

of film nitrate provides one approach to this complex question, the problem of destructive finitude—even in the slapstick genre—exceeds the literalism of a perishable material base. When women’s elasticity (limitless flexibility for assuming impermanent mutations) ran up against the codification of narrative film syntax around the late 19-aughts, tropes of metamorphosis shifted from elasticity to more permanent forms of destructive bodily change: dismemberment, miniaturization, and even the melting of women’s bodies to mark the end of the narrative.

These comediennes’ bodily plasticity, both aesthetically and archivally, speaks to our own critical concerns in the humanities about the rise of digital media. From print restoration techniques, to 3-D simulation, to Computer Generated Imaging, digital cinema has come to represent the fantasy that technical manipulation can, in fact, now achieve anything. As a parallel line of thought, recent feminist theorists including Butler—as well as Wendy Brown, Drucilla Cornell, and Heather Love—have argued that sexed and gendered bodies can instantaneously assume any new identity positions at will. They can do so long as they are willing to let go of their “wounded attachments.” Again, these “states of injury” refer to the melancholic fixations on one’s impossible or lost objects of desire. As Butler and Brown argue, the subject fills these gaping voids by internalizing the repressive voice of the state—or of some other apparatus of power and control. Yet, might this notion of self-interpellation stem from the same sort of fantasies and anxieties behind the dreams of digital utopianism? Both imagine a total disarticulation between identity form and bodily matter in order to assert a potentially liberatory politics.

Between digital malleability and sexual self-authorization, slapstick film comediennes compel us to rethink our own assumptions about the fabrication of bodily and subjective formations. They raise urgent questions about the ways in which political, corporeal, and affective transformations get mediated: evident questions that are often overlooked precisely due to their transparency.

Specters of History and *American Horror Story*

More than a meta-archival figure, the metamorphic comedienne—whose body continues to undergo a spectrum of violent changes in form—tenaciously inflects our present day media representations.

For example, Ryan Murphy's comedic-uncanny anthology series, *American Horror Story*, depicts a litany of grotesque mutations exercised on female bodies in order to provoke something between laughter and terror from the spectator. Season 3, "Coven," centers on a group of Salem witch descendants who spar with voodoo-practicing, black female antagonists in present day New Orleans. ("Coven" is especially relevant for thinking about how female metamorphosis now gets serialized televisually.) *American Horror Story's* narrative form draws both on the seriality of the soap opera and on the episodic structure of the standard series sitcom. This formal hybridity possesses women's bodies at every turn.

There is a profound imbrication between bodily difference and narrative sequence: the metaphysics of women's corporeal shape-shifting repeatedly gets enlisted to rationalize the sprawling genealogies of the show's transhistorical plot. Coven family trees get teased out through women's spectacular returns from the dead. For example,

Myrtle Snow and Misty Day are each burnt at the stake and then resurrected to help explicate political debates about coven governance. Cordelia Foxx (Sarah Paulson) has her eyes blinded by acid, causing her to develop a “second sight,” which she then loses upon stealing seeing-eyes from other coven members; however, she later decides to gouge these new eyes out of her own head in order to regain her fleeting telepathy. Like Snow’s and Day’s immolations, Foxx’s eye-gouging becomes a narrative tool to explain plot history through recourse to her mental telepathy. Fiona Goode (Jessica Lange), the “Grand Supreme” of the coven, uses sorcery to battle cancer and the deterioration of her aging female body: a literalization of the coven’s decline under her narcissistic reign. Queenie is a living voodoo doll who practices violence on her own figure in order to injure others around her. Most iconic of all, Madame Delphine LaLaurie (Kathy Bates), plays an “immortal racist,” a former slave owner who was made immortal through voodoo sorcery by Marie Laveau (Angela Bassett) and then buried alive as retribution for having disemboweled her black male slaves (including Marie Laveau’s lover) on her mid-19th Century Louisiana plantation. LaLaurie’s living corpse effectively functions as a time capsule for detailing the emergence of power structures between the two witch covens.

Unburying LaLaurie in the present day, various witches attempt to re-educate her (still immortal and as racist as ever) in conjunction with the refashioning of her undead corporeality. While Fiona Goode dresses LaLaurie in maid’s attire and forces her to tend house—specifically to wait hand and foot on Queenie, the only African-American member of the Salem coven—Marie Laveau decapitates LaLaurie, and orders Queenie to throw her head away in the trash. Instead, Queenie places LaLaurie’s decapitated (but

still virulently racist) head on a TV stand, and forces her to marathon all eight hours of the TV mini-series *Roots* [see fig. 24]: adapted from Alex Haley's novel about the history of American slavery. LaLaurie attempts to resist this televisual re-education, shutting her eyes and loudly singing the minstrelsy classic, "I Wish I Was in Dixie:" "I wish I was in the land of cotton, Old times they are not forgotten; Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixieland." Although one hundred and fifty years of life beyond the grave never dampened LaLaurie's dogged racism, somehow eight hours of television melts away her ideological resolve, provoking tears and even remorse from the body that can no longer experience the violent pain it once inflicted so gleefully on others (the cellar of LaLaurie's plantation was effectively a torture den for her black male slaves).

I take this detour through the annals of 2014 televisual metamorphosis in order to underscore the ways in which archival comediennes get remediated, restored, and put back into circulation by present day media markets. As I have argued, tropes of female bodily fragmentation played crucial roles to buttress the articulation of a medium-specific film syntax: the weaving of continuous narrative threads from the discontinuous relations established between different framings and shots. There is a sense in which whatever has survived from these fragmented female film archives, in fact, indexes the very remainder of the meaning of cinema. In other words, these mutilated comedienne figures would somehow suture the sundering between reality and the film image: between arbitrary simulations and motivated, referential signs.

What effects does digital cinema's potentially limitless manipulability of the image have on our own laughter at women's bodies in present day entertainment culture? What specters or limits remain to haunt and to make their marks on the boundless

derealization of the female body? In the context of early cinema, the catastrophic female body animates a modern industrial climate in which risk and human finitude might erupt at any moment. As Jennifer Bean puts it, referring to early film shorts serializing female perils (such as *The Perils of Pauline* and *The Hazards of Helen*), “the technologies of early stardom...flaunt catastrophe, disorder, and disaster rather than continuity and regulation” (407). In contrast to these early comediennes-cum-“catastrophe machines” (414), metamorphic women such as the decapitated, immortal racist LaLaurie point to the opposite phenomenon: the utter derealization of any actual risk to the human body or, really, to material history.

While LaLaurie’s comical decapitation is aggressively disarticulated from any real or lasting bodily violence, in effect papering over the slavery that prevents her from dying, there exist a horde of counter-examples. Lena Dunham’s gross bodily comedy on the HBO series *Girls*—which markets Dunham’s feminine-grotesque sexuality as the show’s gimmick—keeps proliferating ethical limits to its own provocations for laughter. From condemnations of the show’s lack of racial diversity (exemplified by audience frustration that a singular black character turns out to be a Republican), to controversies about Dunham’s airbrushing in her first *Vogue Magazine* cover [see fig. 25], interlocutors keep trying to circumscribe the contexts in which Dunham’s body is allowed to act out and change form. Whereas graphic sex scenes, unglamorous instances of nudity, and compromising incidents at the gynecologist’s office are hailed as legitimately uproarious, their enthusiastic reception has been marked by a certain politically correct earnestness. Implicitly, Dunham’s slapstick body is only allowed to incite laughter paradoxically if her shape-shifting is perceived as both physically “natural” and as ideologically

responsible. Again, her female grotesque humor (to invoke Mary Russo) is perceived as inauthentic when it does not simultaneously abet an inclusive sense of identity politics—or of photo-indexical “realness.” In the contrast to LaLaurie’s comic-horrific digital malleability, Dunham is only allowed to be funny in bad taste when her performance comes across as both politically correct and photographically un-corrected.

Specters of Laughter

A specter is haunting our media. Metamorphic comediennes of early cinema haunt us, both tangibly and meta-archivally, compelling us to rethink the politics of gender and sexuality, feminist theory, media criticism, and laughter in our present day media culture. At once elastic (infinitely renewable) and plastic (permanently marked), these figures embody contradictory forms of being, and thereby open onto a politics of comedic transformation. Early slapstick comediennes provoke crucial questions for twenty-first century viewers and readers, who have perhaps forgotten how to laugh at the hybridity between bodies that change temporarily, and bodies that change irreversibly. Given the glut of comedic news media sources (*The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *The Onion*), perhaps we have also forgotten that laughter signifies truth through its latent connotations and irrational impulses—not just through its manifest meanings and instrumentalized ridicule.

As a historical question for the present day, we might then ask how early slapstick comedienne films provoke us to think differently about our own objects of laughter. Could a character such as Mary Jane—whose metamorphic body at once “flaunts catastrophe” and revels in its own manipulability—exist in present day entertainment

culture? As a related question, can we imagine an instance of laughter that could trigger something like the transformative experience of world-shattering theorized by Bataille? If not, why not? And if so, in what technological and social contexts might this 21st Century jubilee unfold?

APPENDIX A: IMAGES



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

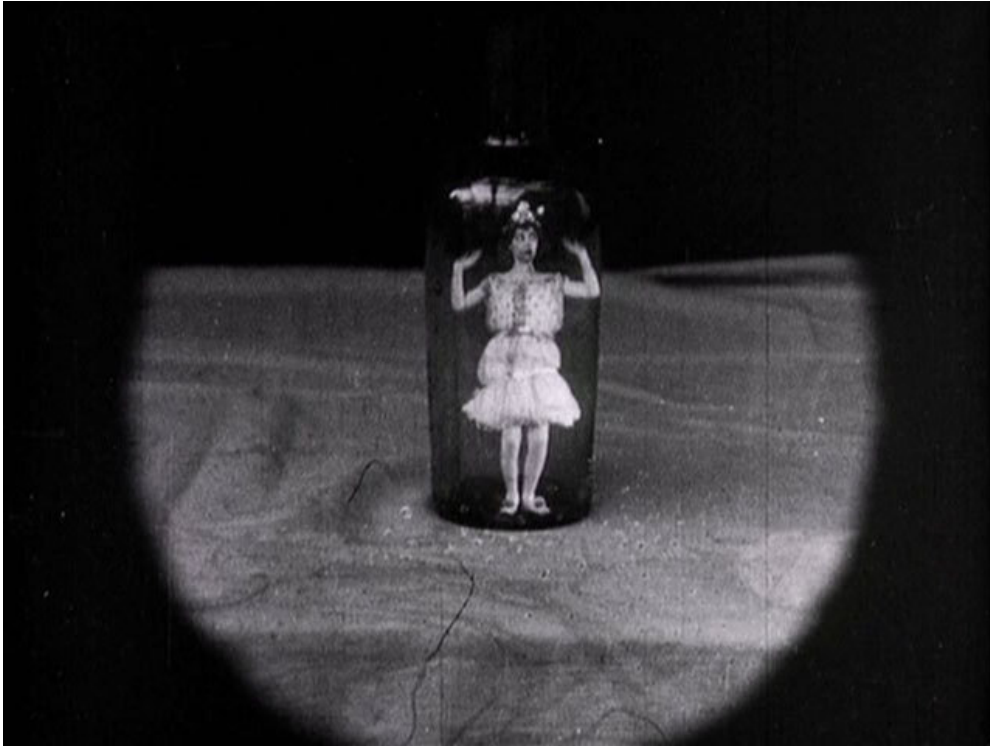


Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Film strip showing the effects of nitrate decomposition to the image.

Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

APPENDIX B: FILMOGRAPHY

CHAPTER 1

The Cabbage Fairy (Alice Guy-Blaché, 1898)
Vanishing Lady (J. Stuart Blackton, 1898)
The Poster Girls and the Hypnotist (AM&B, 1899)
How Bridget Made the Fire (Biograph, 1900)
Aunt Sallie's Wonderful Bustle (Edison, 1901)
Martyred Presidents (Edwin S. Porter, 1901)
Nora's 4th of July (Biograph, US, 1901)
The Big Swallow (James Williamson, 1901)
Mary Jane's Mishap (G.A. Smith, UK, 1903)
A Shocking Incident (Biograph, US, 1903)
The Great Train Robbery (Edwin S. Porter, 1903)
Kiss Me! (Biograph, 1904)
The Watermelon Patch (Edwin S. Porter, 1905)
A Sticky Woman (Alice Guy-Blaché, France, 1906)
Madame's Cravings (Alice Guy-Blaché, France, 1906)
The Subpoena Server (Biograph, 1906)
Tit-for-Tat (Gaston Velle, 1906)
Laughing Gas (Edwin S. Porter, 1907)
The Cigar Box (Segundo de Chomón, 1907)
The Kitchen Maid's Dream (Vitagraph, 1907)
The Red Spectre (Segundo de Chomón, 1907)
The Stolen Pig (Vitagraph, 1907)
The Wonderful Mirror (Segundo de Chomón, 1907)
An Odd Pair of Limbs (Vitagraph, 1908)
Deceived Slumming Party (D.W. Griffith, 1908)
The Acrobatic Maid (Pathé, 1908)
The Dancing Legs (Vitagraph, 1908)
The Thieving Hand (J. Stuart Blackton, 1908)
Princess Nicotine (J. Stuart Blackton, 1909)
Baron Munchhausen's Dream (Georges Méliès, 1911)
Eva Is Tired of Life (Pathé, 1911)
Rosalie and Her Phonograph (Pathé, 1911)
Onésime, Clockmaker (Jean Durand, 1912)
The Elusive Miss Pinkhurst (Warwick, 1912)
From Death to Life (Lois Weber, 1913)
Lea and the Ball of Wool (Cines, 1913)
Matrimony's Speed Limit (Alice Guy-Blaché, 1913)

Daisy Doodad's Dial (Laurence Trimble, 1914)

CHAPTER 2

**Archival Abbreviations: LoC (Library of Congress); MoMA (Museum of Modern Art in NYC); EYE (Amsterdam Filmmuseum); BFI (British Film Institute, London).

Vitagraph:

A Quiet Smoke (July, 1899)

A Visit to the Spiritualist (Dec, 1899)

The Acrobatic Burglars (July, 1906) [LoC]

The Jail Bird and How He Flew, A Farce Comedy Escape (July, 1906) [LoC]

Mother-in-Law: A Domestic Comedy (Oct, 1906) [LoC, fragments]

Juvenile Chicken Thieves (Nov, 1906) [LoC]

The Haunted Hotel (Feb, 1907) [LoC]

The Stolen Pig (May, 1907) [LoC]

How to Cure a Cold (June, 1907) [LoC, fragments]

A Window Demonstration (July, 1907) [LoC, fragments]

Athletic American Girls (Aug, 1907) [LoC, fragments]

The Boy, the Bust, and the Bath (Aug, 1907) [MoMA]

The Disintegrated Convict (Sept, 1907) [LoC, fragments]

The Veiled Beauty, Or, Anticipated and Realization (Oct, 1907) [LoC, fragments]

A Crazy Quilt (Nov, 1907) [LoC, fragments]

A Kitchen Maid's Dream (Nov, 1907) [LoC, fragments]

The Thieving Hand (Feb, 1908) [DVD]

Francesca di Rimini, or the Two Brothers (Feb, 1908) [MoMA]

Macbeth, Shakespeare's Sublime Tragedy (April, 1908) [DVD]

The Dancing Legs (April, 1908) [LoC, fragments]

An Odd Pair of Limbs (May, 1908) [LoC, fragments]

Nellie, the Beautiful Housemaid (May, 1908) [LoC, fragments]

She Wanted to Be an Actress (May, 1908) [LoC, fragments]

East Lynne, or Lead Astray (June, 1908)

"Leap Year" Proposals of an Old Maid (June, 1908) [LoC, fragments]

Romeo and Juliet, A Romantic Story of the Ancient Feud Between the Italian Houses

Montague and Capulet (June, 1908) [DVD]

The Female Politician, Mrs. Bell Is Nominated for Mayor (Aug, 1908) [LoC, fragments]

Richard III, A Shakespearean Tragedy (Sept, 1908) [DVD]

By a Woman's Wit (Sept, 1908) [LoC, fragments]

The Elf King, A Norwegian Fairytale (Nov, 1908) [LoC, fragments]

Julius Caesar, An Historical Tragedy (Dec, 1908) [BFI]

Shakespeare's Tragedy, King Lear (March, 1909) [DVD]

The Life Drama of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Empress Josephine (April, 1909)

Napoleon, the Man of Destiny (April, 1909)

Bridget on Strike (May, 1909) [LoC, fragments]

Oliver Twist (June, 1909) [BFI]

The Oriental Mystic (June, 1909) [LoC, fragments]

Washington Under the British Flag (June, 1909)
Washington Under the American Flag (July, 1909)
The Adventures of Fifine (July, 1909) [LoC, fragments]
Princess Nicotine; or, The Smoke Fairy (August, 1909) [DVD]
Les Misérables (Nov, 1909)
A Midsummer Night's Dream (Dec, 1909) [DVD]
The Life of Moses (5 reels, 1909-1910) [LoC]
Indiscretions of Betty (March, 1910)
Betty Becomes a Maid (March, 1911)
Troublesome Secretaries (April, 1911) [LoC]
The Inherited Taint (March, 1911) [MoMA]
Snowbound with a Woman Hater (July, 1911)
Her Crowning Glory (Sept, 1911) [DVD]
Vanity Fair (Dec, 1911) [MoMA]
Hypnotizing the Hypnotist (Dec, 1911) [BFI]
The Picture Idol (May, 1912) [BFI]
At the Eleventh Hour (Aug, 1912)
An Elephant on His Hands (Oct, 1912) [MoMA]
The Reincarnation of Karma (Dec, 1912)
The Vengeance of Durand; or the Two Portraits (Jan, 1913)
Red and White Roses (March, 1913)
The Tiger (Sept, 1913)
A Florida Enchantment (Aug, 1914) [DVD]
Between the Two of Them (April, 1915)
When Dumleigh Saw the Joke (April, 1915)

Pathé:

The Rebellious Walking Stick (Dec, 1906)
Fantastic Umbrella (June, 1907) [MoMA]
Weird Fantasies (June, 1907) [MoMA]
The Red Spectre (Aug, 1907) [DVD]
Le Sculpteur Express (Aug, 1907)
Easter Eggs (Oct, 1907) [DVD]
Satan at Play (Oct, 1907)
The Enchanted Pond (Nov, 1907) [DVD]
The Wonderful Mirror (Dec, 1907) [DVD]
Artistic Rag-Pickers (Feb, 1908) [LoC]
Scullion's Dream (Feb, 1908) [MoMA]
The Frog (March, 1908)
Modern Sculptures (April, 1908) [MoMA]
Sleeping Beauty (April, 1908) [MoMA]
Diabolical Pickpocket (May, 1908) [MoMA]
Microscopic Dancer (1908)
Living Dolls (1908)
Haunted Kitchen (Sept, 1908)
The Magic Album (Nov, 1908)

The Acrobatic Maid (Dec, 1908)
Modern Magic (Dec, 1908)
Electric Hotel (Dec, 1908)
Living Silhouette (Dec, 1908)
The Invisible Thief (1909) [MoMA]
Overzealous Domestic (1909)
Wonderful Rose Design (1909)
The Barber's Revenge (June, 1909)
The Fan (July, 1909)
Elastic Transformations (Aug, 1909)
Anti-fat Sanitarium (Oct, 1909)
Spanish Marriage (Nov, 1909)
The Amateur Detective (1909)
Jane Is Unwilling to Work (1909)
How to Tame a Mother-in-Law (1909)
A Shy Youth (1910)
Rebellious Betty (1910)
Betty Pulls the Strings (1910)
Betty Is Punished (1910)
Betty Rolls Along (1911)
Rosalie and Her Phonograph (1911)
Rosalie Moves (1911)
Betty's Apprenticeship (1911)
Betty's Boat (Oct, 1911)
Eva Is Tired of Life (Oct, 1911)
The Perils of Pauline (Louis Gasnier, 1914)
Exploits of Elaine (Louis Gasnier and George Seitz, 1914) [LoC]
Pearl of the Army (Edward José, 1916) [LoC]
The Lightning Raider (George Seitz, 1919) [LoC]

Other:

A Wringing Good Joke (Edison, Dec, 1900)
Aunt Sallie's Wonderful Bustle (Edison, 1901) [LoC]
The Finish of Bridget McKeen (Edison, March, 1901) [LoC]
What Happened on 23rd Street (Edison, Aug, 1901)
Foxy Grandpa (Biograph, 9 episodes from 1902-1903)
Mary Jane's Mishap (UK, April, 1903)
The Gay Shoe Clerk (Edison, Aug, 1903)
Kiss Me (Biograph, 1904) [LoC]
The Baron Munchhausen's Dream (Méliès, 1911)
When Two Hearts Are Won (Kalem, Sept, 1911)
Cunégonde Has Visitors (Lux, 1912) [EYE]
Pétronille Wins the Great Steeple-Chase (Gaumont, 1912) [EYE]
Polidor Against His Mother-in-Law (Pasquali, 1912) [EYE]
Calino, Love Tamer (Gaumont, 1912) [EYE]
Onésime Goes to Hell (Gaumont, 1913)

Onésime Gets Married...So Does Calino (Gaumont, 1913)
Lea and the Ball of Wool (Cinès, 1913)
Daisy Doodad's Dial (Turner Films, 1914) [BFI]
Shoes (Lois Weber, 1916)
His Wooden Wedding, Leo McCarey, 1925)
Young Mr. Lincoln (1939)

CHAPTER 3

D.W. Griffith Filmography

Deceived Slumming Party (July 1908)
The Adventures of Dollie (July 1908)
The Red Man and the Child (July 1908)
The Zulu's Heart (Oct. 1908)
The Song of the Shirt (Nov. 1908)
Jones at the Ball (Dec. 1908)
The Criminal Hypnotist (Jan. 1909)
The Criminal Hypnotist (Jan. 1909)
Those Awful Hats (Jan. 1909)
A Politician's Love Story (Feb. 1909)
Edgar Allen Poe (Feb. 1909)
Joneses Have Amateur Theatricals (Feb. 1909)
His Wife's Mother (March 1909)
The Wooden Leg (March 1909)
Lucky Jim (April 1909)
Schneider's Anti-Noise Crusade (April 1909)
Twin Brothers (April 1909)
Eloping with Aunty (May 1909)
Eradicating Aunty (May 1909)
The Lonely Villa (June 1909)
A Change of Heart (Oct. 1909)
His Lost Love (Oct. 1909)
The Expiation (Oct. 1909)
The Gibson Goddess (Nov. 1909)
The Unchanging Sea (May 1910)
The Fugitive (Nov. 1910)
The Lonedale Operator (March 1911)
A Sound Sleeper (April 1911)
Her Awakening (Sept. 1911)
The Squaw's Love (Sept. 1911)
The Eternal Mother (Jan. 1912)
The Mender of Nets (Feb. 1912)
The Sunbeam (Feb. 1912)
An Unseen Enemy (Sept. 1912)
The Girl and Her Trust (March 1912)

Brute Force (April 1914)
The Birth of a Nation (March 1915)
Intolerance: Love's Struggle Throughout the Ages (Sept. 1916)
True Heart Susie (June 1919)
Sally of the Sawdust (Aug. 1925)

Other

How It Feels to be Run Over (Cecil Hepworth, 1900)
Kitchen Maid's Dream (Vitagraph, 1907)
Princess Nicotine (J. Stuart Blackton, 1909)
Katchem Kate (Mack Sennett, 1912)
Mabel's Married Life (Mack Sennett, 1914)
Mabel's Strange Predicament (Mabel Normand, 1914)
The Fatal Mallet (Mack Sennett, 1914)
Mabel and Fatty's Married Life (Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, 1915)
The Women (King Vidor, 1937)
Dark Victory (Edmund Goulding, 1939)
Stella Dallas (George Cukor, 1939)
Sorry, Wrong Number (Anatole Litvak, 1948)

CHAPTER 4: SUFFRAGETTE FILMOGRAPHY

Kansas City Saloon Smasher (AM&B, 1901)
Why Mr. Nation Wants a Divorce (Edison, 1901)
The Consequences of Feminism (Alice Guy, 1906)
The Voter's Guide (Hepworth, 1906)
The Kitchen Maid's Dream (Vitagraph, 1907)
When Women Vote (Lubin, 1907)
A Day in the Life of a Suffragette (Pathé, 1908)
If Women Were Policemen (Clarendon, 1908)
The Acrobatic Maid (Pathé, 1908)
The Suffragette's Dream (Pathé, 1909)
When Women Win (Lubin, 1909)
Scroggins Puts Up for Blankshire (Cricks and Martin, 1910)
The Suffragettes and the Hobble Skirt (Kineto, 1910)
Courting Across the Court (Thanhouser, 1911)
Fire! Fire! Fire! (Gaston Méliès, 1911)
How Women Win (Powers, 1911)
Scroggins Takes the Census (Cricks and Martin, 1911)
The Suffragettes' Downfall, or Who Said 'Rats' (Acme, 1911)
True Womanhood (Barker's, 1911)
Oh! You Suffragette (American, 1911)
A Suffragette in Spite of Himself (Edison, 1912)
Cousin Kate's Revolution (Éclair, 1912)
Down with Men (Lubin, 1912)

Love and a Lemon (Nestor, 1912)
Suffrage and the Man (Éclair, 1912)
The Conquest of the Pole (Star, 1912)
The Elusive Miss Pinkhurst (Warwick, 1912)
When Helen Was Elected (Selig, 1912)
When Women Rule (Selig, 1912)
A Cure for Suffragettes (Biograph, 1913)
A Husband's Trick (Vitagraph, 1913)
A Militant Suffragette (Thanhouser, 1913)
A Trap to Catch a Burglar (Vitagraph, 1913)
Billy the Suffragette (Powers, 1913)
Bunny for the Cause (Vitagraph, 1913)
Die Suffragette (Urban Gad, 1913)
Eighty Million Women Want---? (Unique, 1913)
Eva Is Tired of Life (Pathé, 1913)
Exciting Derby Race Film (Gaumont, 1913)
For Mayor—Bess Smith (Pathé, 1913)
Funeral Procession of the Woman Who Dared (Warwick, 1913)
How They Got the Vote (Edison, 1913)
Lea the Suffragette (Cines, 1913)
Love and the Law (American, 1913)
Milling the Militants: A Comical Absurdity (Clarendon, 1913)
Oh Wat'er Wet Day (Lux, 1913)
Suffragette Pageant and Tableau (Newsreel, 1913)
Suffragette Parade in Washington (Newsreel, 1913)
Suffragettes Again (Pathé, 1913)
Suffragettes and the Law (Universal, 1913)
The Baby Question (Crystal, 1913)
The Baby Question (Universal, 1913)
The Child of a Suffragette (Kineto, 1913)
The Comedian's Downfall (Edison, 1913)
The Girl and the Mayor (George Kleine, 1913)
The Game That Failed (Crystal, 1913)
The Pickpocket (Vitagraph, 1913)
The Revolt of Mr. Wiggs (Vitagraph, 1913)
The Suffragette (Selig, 1913)
The Suffragette Sheriff (Kalem, 1913)
Two Sides of a Boat (British and Colonial Kinematograph, 1913)
Votes for Women (Reliance, 1913)
A Busy Day (Keystone, 1914)
A Militant Suffragette (Pathé, 1914)
Jane the Justice (Beauty, 1914)
The Eternal Feminine (Selig, 1914)
The Indian Suffragettes (Kalem, 1914)
The Militant Imp (William Daly, 1914)
The Reformation of the Suffragettes (Gaumont, 1914)

The Sheriff's Master (Reliance, 1914)
When the Men Left Town (Edison, 1914)
When Their Wives Joined the Regiment (Joker, 1914)
Mickey (Mabel Normand Feature Film Company, 1918)

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ “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, of movement without life. Consequently it expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture and that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and events” (Bergson, 46). By quite mistakenly collapsing mechanization and inelasticity, Bergson deduces that the impetus for laughter can be safely externalized and isolated in the object of ridicule alone.

ⁱⁱ In *Inner Experience*, Bataille discusses the affective metamorphosis between experiences of pleasure and anguish, leveling his critique further at Freud’s compartmentalization between the death drive and the pleasure principle.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example, Noel Carroll uses Bergson’s essay on laughter as a lens through which to read Buster Keaton’s *The General* (1926) in *Comedy Incarnate*; Alan Bilton interprets Chaplin’s oeuvre through Bergson’s notion of automatism in *Silent Film Comedy and American Culture*; Tom Gunning takes automatism as a springboard for his analysis of early device comedies in “Mechanisms of Laughter;” Bergson references pepper King and Paulus’ reader on *Slapstick Comedy*, Andrew Horton’s *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* collection, and Karnick and Jenkins’ *Classical Hollywood Comedy* anthology. Throughout, Bergson’s definition of laughter is invoked as an explanation of how comedy operates in cinema, without providing counter-readings of how film comedies contemporaneous with *Laughter* trouble many of Bergson’s arguments.

^{iv} *The New York Times*, February 14 1893. “The Crinoline Terror” reports on attempts to legislate prohibitions on “the sale, loan, or wearing of hoop-skirts.”

^v *The New York Times*, February 5 1893.

^{vi} *The New York Times*, July 21 1912.

^{vii} This information draws on Susan Strasser’s research in *Never Done: A History of American Housework*.

^{viii} *The New York Times*, (Feb 13, 1863): p. 9.

^{ix} An emigrant from Cookstown, Tyrone County Ireland, Mary Mallon (better known as “Typhoid Mary”) was identified as an asymptomatic carrier of the pathogen associated

with Typhoid Fever. She was accused of infecting over 50 people, several of whom died, throughout her career as a cook in New York City, and was twice forcibly quarantined. She also inspired numerous cultural caricatures in print and film.

^x For more information about research on women's extensive participation in all aspects of the early film industry, see the website of Women and Film History International, <<http://www.wfhi.org/>>.

^{xi} Freud worked through this dialectic between elasticity and plasticity, between the reversibility of psychic impressions and the indelible traces of repressed unconscious experience, during WWI in an essay titled "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death."

^{xii} In this 1911 trick film about the British suffragette activists Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, whose hunger strikes in prison later elicited women's force-feedings under the 1913 "Cat and Mouse Act," trick photography is used to depict a chase scene between a cabinet minister and suffragette.

^{xiii} Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp periodize this as the decade from roughly 1908-1917 in their anthology on *American Cinema's Transitional Era*. They argue: "No other decade in U.S. film history encompasses such broad-ranging transformation...[reflecting] the sheer diversity of representational, institutional, and exhibition practices that co-exist during this moment of transition" (2).

^{xiv} Shelley Stamp associates Weber's empowerment as an "independent" producer and filmmaker in the 19-teens with the rhetorical and economic marginalization of independents in the film industry. (2012 Boston SCMS paper, "Women's Labor, Creative Control, and "Independence" in Early Hollywood: Lois Weber Productions.")

^{xv} The idea of early cinema as a "self-reflexive screen" extends from Miriam Hansen's notion of "vernacular modernism," which she defines as "a sensory-reflexive horizon [discursive form] for the experience of the contradictions of modernity and modernization" (10)—"a matrix for the articulation of fantasies, uncertainties, and anxieties" (14).

^{xvi} Paolo Cherchi Usai, Eileen Bowser ed., *The Griffith Project* (London: BFI, 1999-2008), #34.

^{xvii} "Woman Deeply Affected by 'U' Drama Faints," *Universal Weekly*, no. 5 (Jan 31, 1914): 32.

^{xviii} Charles Baudelaire, "The Essence of Laughter and, in General, on the Comic in the Plastic Arts" (1855), *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays* ed. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Phaidon, 1964): 147-65. James Leo Cahill rethinks Baudelaire's "laughing philosopher" as a "laughing spectator" through readings of Cecil Hepworth's early automobile accident films. "The essence of Baudelaire's laughing philosopher—the acquired ability to perform a rapid and mirthful auto-analysis, to face the self as other in a split second, and to think the unsublimated copresence of contradictory forces and

ideas—is distilled by spectacular scenes of an unexpected fall and falling apart occasioned by the accident” (289).

^{xix} From a review: “Darkey gets home, puts pigs in cradle, and is calmly “rocking the baby to sleep” when the pursuers arrive. Not being able to find the pig, they go away, and Rastus and his mammy have plenty of young, tender pork to eat.” *The Billboard* (May 18, 1907): 35.

^{xx} NAACP, *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* (New York, 1919).

^{xxi} “Neurasthenia, similar to hysteria, but less marked in the way the symptoms manifested themselves, became ‘the malady of the century’ in the first decade of the twentieth century...the symptoms of the disease consisted of suggestibility, an exaggerated exaltation of the nervous system, and lack of will” (*Why the French Love Jerry Lewis*, 228).

^{xxii} The word hysteria, of course, comes from the Greek word “hystera,” meaning uterus.

^{xxiii} Stewart re-historicizes the emergence of cinema as the predominant form of American entertainment in conjunction with the mass migration of hundreds of thousands of African-Americans from their “traditional homes” in the South to increased social and economic opportunities in Northern cities.

^{xxiv} Callahan’s project helps reframe the crucial entanglements between genealogies of feminism and archival film historiography: “*Reclaiming the Archive* presents an ongoing engagement with two key questions: (1) What are the different models available to us in feminist film history; and (2) How might feminist strategies in film history serve as paradigmatic for other sites of feminist and related forms of progressive intervention?” For Callahan, in order to think critically about social histories of women’s everyday movie-going reception, it is necessary to “expand the field” of what counts as “cinema” in the present, without foregoing longstanding metaphors that inflect our understanding and investment in the idea of the cinematic: “What the cinema and feminism represent *historically* are new ways of seeing and thinking about the world, and as such, the cinematic metaphor is a central one, I would argue, to a feminist agenda. It is precisely this dynamic that needs to be reinserted into a debate within our discipline regardless of whether the external veneer or cinema or feminism (or cinema studies) has changed” (5).

^{xxv} Hansen defines vernacular modernism as “a sensory-reflexive horizon [discursive form] for the experience of the contradictions of modernity and modernization” (10)—“a matrix for the articulation of fantasies, uncertainties, and anxieties” (14).

^{xxvi} *Blue Book Magazine* ran a feature article comparing Blackton to the theater director David Belasco: “like Belasco, Mr. Blackton has the natural ability to respond to the demand of the times” (245).

^{xxvii} The premise of convicts on the lam provided a fertile source of motivation for images of corporeal metamorphosis in trick films from 1905-08. From *Juvenile Chicken Thieves* and *The Jail-Bird and How He 'Flew,'* to *The Acrobatic Burglars* and *The Disintegrated Convict*, fugitives resorted to every means imaginable to avoid re-incarceration. These antics ranged from painting stripes onto hobos' clothing, to performing racialized masquerades of scarecrows, to dismembering their own limbs and flattening their entire bodies. In *The Disintegrated Convict* (Vitagraph, 1907), an escaped felon literally snakes through a small hole in a barrel, makes his body two-dimensional to shimmy through a window, and shatters into a pile of black-and-white blocks in order to elude re-capture. In these films, the convict's corpus would stop at almost no limits in order to evade the powers-that-be across different cinematic times and spaces. Historically, these convict scenarios seem to vanish on the cusp of the industry's campaigns for moral reform and cross-class uplift (around 1908), and were instead displaced by more fantastic and intertextual scenarios of metamorphosis, including numerous gendered Lilliputian riffs in films such as *Princess Nicotine* (1909), *The Elf King* (1908), *Slumberland* (1908), and *The Water Sprite* (1908).

^{xxviii} The eleven reels that Uricchio and Pearson discuss at length tend to circulate around epic or tragic male heroes from history and literature: Dante's *Francesca da Rimini* (made 1907, released 1908); Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1908); *The Life Drama of Napoleon Bonaparte and the Empress Josephine* and *Napoleon, the Man of Destiny* (1909); *Washington Under the British Flag* and *Washington Under the American Flag* (1909); and *The Life of Moses* (five reels, 1909-10). Paraphrasing Uricchio and Pearson's argument, the historical evidence surviving from these films' production and reception is scant at best—Vitagraph did not keep thorough records, and many reels of its footage were lost to a massive studio fire in 1910. Given Vitagraph's fragmented historical remainders and relative paucity of historiographic attention (compared to the much smaller and better historicized Biograph Company), it is especially crucial to diversify the set of textual examples enlisted to "reframe" the company's industrial and aesthetic significance during this period of uneven social uplift.

^{xxix} Spadoni also discusses several dramas, including *Red and White Roses* (1913), *The Reincarnation of Karma* (1912), and *The Vengeance of Durand; or the Two Portraits* (1913).

^{xxx} The MPPC limited each trust producer to a maximum of 4,000 feet of Pathé positive film stock per week (Abel, 371).

^{xxxi} In an article about her "Trip to Vitagraphville" for *Motion Picture Magazine*, reporter Agnes Kessler exclaims: "Well, I've gone and done it! I've had the greatest, most delightful and thrilling day of my life! Where? In that modern wonderland, Vitagraphville, Flatbush-By-the-Sea. I am going to nickname this little world and call it 'Happyville-By-the-Sea,' for that is what it really is" (83). In eight effusive and hyperbolic pages, Kessler reveals behind-the-scenes anecdotes about meetings with some of Vitagraph's star actors and directors (Maurice Costello, Norma Talmadge, Van Dyke

Brooke), while attempting to reconstruct the studio's make-believe formations of concrete motion picture "worlds." She is especially struck by the filming of a comedy about female suffrage: "On one side of the platform stood an old, dilapidated taxi, and before I could say boo, the thing commenced to plow through a crowd of suffragets and straight into a stone wall. Shrieks! More shrieks! The infernal thing went clean through the wall! Now...when you see 'The Boob; or He Danced Himself to Death,' you'll be thrilled just as much as I was" (87). Kessler describes director Ralph Ince perched on an eleven-foot platform next to his three cameramen, and the band of suffragette extras all sporting "Votes for Women" sashes, their faces illuminated by arc lamps, whom she watches filming in the yard through a peephole in a fence. What Kessler intentionally omits—in her rhetorical gesture to put herself in the position of the spectator-fan despite her own access to the virtual construction of these explicitly gendered special effects—is the rigorous bodily positioning of the protesting women who all miraculously survive a direct automobile assault by the infernal taxi. In Kessler's account, the magic of thrilling effects, which she espies from a concealed, quasi-voyeuristic position behind the studio fence, supersede the virtuality of their elaborate construction with arc lamps, multiple elevated cameras, and a meticulously choreographed machine accident. "What a sight met my gaze!" (87).

^{xxxii} According to the *MPW*, "*The Weekly* is competing with those who dispense baseball slang on some of the more yellow sporting editions. Possibly some of the male auditors and all of the female may not understand the significance of such a statement as 'Zimmerman Lacerates the Pill.' As a matter of information he made a hit" (Summer, 1912).

^{xxxiii} From a Feb, 1908 synopsis of *The Acrobatic Maid* in *Views and Film Index*: "A young woman hires out as a maid in a family, every member of which is an athlete from father down to the youngest child of the household. They consuct a physical culture school and gymnasium, and now, that the poor girl has entered upon the duties of servant to the strenuous bunch, they proceed to make her an athlete also. She is new at the game but nevertheless manages to make things interesting for all concerned. Her first stunt is to lift some heavy dumb-bells, which she does with an awful struggle; then she puts on the gloves with another female, and soon they are in an interesting and scientific bout, but she gets the worst of the affair. They show her to the kitchen, where she gets mixed up with the pans and kettles and makes a terrible muss of the place in her vain effort to be strenuous. Next she goes into the dining room, where, she smashes everything in sight, and finally lands in the bedroom, where another lady teaches her how to turn hand springs on the bed. She gets so strenuous here that she leaves the place, looking as if a cyclone struck it. Finally all the family enter into the spirit of the fun and the new maid has them all on the jump trying to keep pace with her in her clever stunts. They stop at nothing and when they finish the place, of course, is a complete wreck."

^{xxxiv} In this film, a country rube tears down the film screen mistaking the illusory image for a material body. As many film scholars have argued (Jane Gaines, Thomas Elsaesser, Stephen Heath, Miriam Hansen), Josh's rubishly comic belief in the projected image

positioned the film's own historical spectator by means of negation: the spectator was disciplined through her/his comic distancing from Josh's corporeal antics.

^{xxxv} Herbert A. Jump, "The Religious Possibilities of the Motion Picture" (New Britain: CA, "Printed for Private Distribution," Dec., 1910).

^{xxxvi} Unlike Méliès and Blackton who frequently featured themselves in the role of the magician, Chomón most often cast his magician wife Julienne Mathieu in this role. Mathieu appeared as the magician or trick agent in over 25 trick films, including *Easter Eggs*, *Modern Sculptures*, *Wonderful Mirror*, *The Magic Album*, *The Frog*, *Microscopic Dancer*, *The Enchanted Pond*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Satan at Play*.

^{xxxvii} The Vitagraph version sold 150 copies in Europe through the company's Paris office alone, inciting French filmmakers to employ similar techniques in stop-motion cinematography (Abel, *Ciné Goes to Town*, p. 280).

^{xxxviii} Performing a detailed reading of the oscillation between "pie" (spectacle) and "chase" (narrative) in a Charley Chase slapstick short (*His Wooden Wedding*, Leo McCarey, 1925), Crafton focuses on the irreparable discord between comic gags and melodramatic arcs in order to critique the implicit valorization of narrative over spectacle in classical cinema. "I disagree with [Gunning's]...unwillingness to polarize the two components. While other genres work to contain their excesses, this opposition is fundamental to slapstick...carefully constructed to remain an unbridgeable gap." Instead, Gunning views the relationship between spectacle and narrative as the dialectical motor of the comedy genre, with moments of pie-in-the-face rupture orchestrating the very terms of difference around which comic narrative moves toward restoring stasis and order.

^{xxxix} Economic equality was a central campaign waged in conjunction with female suffrage and equality under the law. Suffragist publications such as Alice Henry's *Life and Labor*, Dr. Mary Putnam-Jacobi's "*Common Sense*" *Applied to Woman Suffrage*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Women and Economics* foregrounded the importance of equal pay, fewer hours, better accident protection, and unionization for the growing constituency of women workers. According to Leo Wolman (*The Growth of Trade Unions, 1880-1923*), approximately 76,748 women joined a union in 1910 (in garment trades, textile and cloth weaving, book binding, shoe making, tobacco, retail, and in musical and theater arts), which represents about 1.5% of women wage earners at the time, and only 5.2% of women working in manufacturing. As Eleanor Flexner and Ellen Fitzpatrick put it, "It can not be repeated too often that for women working a ten- or twelve- hour day, whose earnings were almost half those of men, whose lives were often bounded by the sweatshop, and whose relation to their employer lacked any safeguards to personal dignity or job tenure, 'equal rights' was a question of more than education or getting the vote. For them equality also meant better pay for their labor, security from fire and machine hazards or the unwanted attention of a foreman, and a chance to get home to

their domestic tasks before complete exhaustion had overtaken them” (*Century of Struggle*, 239-240).

^{xl} For more on *Shoes*, see Shelley Stamp’s forthcoming book *Lois Weber in Early Hollywood*.

^{xli} Historian Ruth Dudley Edwards argues that *The Economist* introduced the term “privatisation” in the 1930s in its discussion of Nazi German economic policy (*The Pursuit of Reason: The Economist 1843-1993*, p. 946). I use the term to think about the ideological conjunction between early twentieth century media’s economic privatization of forms of political governance, and the narrative emergence of film voyeurism.

^{xlii} Sarah Duhamel, “the first important female comic” (*Ciné Goes to Town*, 388). according to Richard Abel—and whom David Robinson once referred to as “a Gallic Marie Dressler”—employed her hefty stature and forceful public presence to great hilarity in a number of French comic films for the Pathé, Gaumont, Éclair, and Comica companies from 1909-1916.

^{xliii} See “Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy” in *Classical Hollywood Comedy* [eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins]. New York: Routledge, 1995.

^{xliv} The older of the two fairies is played by vaudevillian child performer Gladys Hulette.

^{xl} The fetish, for Freud, provides a crucial form of defense against the reality of the split ego, “coming to a halt halfway” and “fixing on the last impression *before* the uncanny or traumatic one” (154).

^{xlvi} As Phil Rosen puts it, “There have been a number of...angles from which to the relation of film ideology in terms of subject position. For example, we have seen that Colin MacCabe’s Lacanian analysis of the classical text has as its goal a political-ideological evaluation of narrative structures in terms of their subject-effects. And in “The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” Jean-Louis Baudry argued for the close fit of a transcendental subject implied by the apparatus with certain tendencies in phenomenological (i.e. idealist) philosophy. The list of such examples could be a lengthy one” (Introduction to “Part 3: Apparatus” in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology*, p. 375).

^{xlvii} Drew films such as *When Two Hearts Are Won*, *Between the Two of Them*, and *When Dumleigh Saw the Joke* typically play upon differences in language, using a title pun as a springboard for resolving romantic tensions in marriage.

^{xlviii} For a thorough debunking of this fallacy, see Kristen Anderson Wagner’s dissertation, “*Comic Venus: Women and Comedy in American Silent Film*. Dissertation, University of Southern California (2009).

^{xlix} Sumiko Higashi has analyzed *The Picture Idol* as an attempt to normalize the fetishistic impulses represented by the emergent star discourse in order to disarm their potential to disrupt traditional norms of femininity. The film depicts the plight of teenager Beth Ward (Clara Kimball Young), a passionate moving picture fan, who develops severely anti-social tendencies, forsaking her responsibilities and ignoring her family and peers in pursuit of a hopeless obsession with Vitagraph picture star Howard Hanson (Maurice Costello). As Higashi argues, “Destined to become a middle-class wife and mother...the young girl finally submits to the constraints of gender roles. She had chased Costello with singular determination, but the idol helped put her back in her place” (“Vitagraph Stardom,” 267).

ⁱ Comediennes rehashed different social contexts for physical metamorphosis in any number of Vitagraph films from the late 19-aughts. The examples are legion: *The Dancing Legs*, *An Odd Pair of Limbs*, *The Female Politician*, “Leap Year” *Proposals of an Old Maid*, *The Kitchen Maid’s Dream*, *She Wanted to Be an Actress*, *Bridget on Strike*, *By a Woman’s Wit*, *Nellie the Beautiful Housemaid*, *A Crazy Quilt*, *A Window Demonstration*, *The Adventures of Fifine*, *The Veiled Beauty*, *How to Cure a Cold*, *Mother-in-Law: A Domestic Comedy*, *The Boy, the Bust, and the Bath*, *Athletic American Girls*, and many others. The most common impetus for female trick metamorphosis in Vitagraph’s repertory stemmed from the underlying problem of how to accommodate women’s increasing physical presence and participation in everyday public life. Over and over again, women’s civil involvement and often times troubling visibility in the workforce inspired all sorts of fantastical resolutions. Through the visual possibilities of trick substitution, every problem from sex trafficking, to gendered labor protest, to the social and sexual threats posed by immigration, to the political demands of suffrage, to the putative annoyance of mothers-in-law could be eradicated.

^{li} There are of course also limits to this type of reading. As Shelley Stamp has argued in her work on Lois Weber, women’s independent film production companies, while providing them temporarily with greater creative control, simultaneously marginalized their positions within the increasingly consolidated film industry.

^{lii} According to a 40-volume report by President Roosevelt’s 1907 Dillingham Commission, the demographics of immigrants to the United States had shifted from Northern and Western Europeans to Southern Europeans and Russians during the 1890s and early 1900s.

^{liii} *Rosalie et Léontine* or *Jane and Betty* were the French and American names for these comedienne tricksters respectively; I have been referring to them as Betty and Rosalie primarily for aesthetic purposes. Pathé’s Betty, of course, is not to be confused with Mabel Normand’s contemporary Vitagraph series character in films such as *Indiscretions of Betty* (1910), *Betty Becomes a Maid* (1911), and *Troublesome Secretaries* (1911).

^{liv} Jean Durand, the leading director of slapstick comedies at Gaumont, frequently featured his wife Berthe Dagmar in leading roles, often as exotic animal tamers. For

example, in *Calino, Love Tamer* (1912), an installment in Gaumont's *Calino* series starring Clement Migé, Dagmar appears as a professional lion tamer who "returns the cats to their home after their little walk" following an elaborate, and immensely destructive chase sequence across town. In a farce about economies of exogamous exchange, *Onésime Gets Married...So Does Calino* (1913), Dagmar parlays her wild animal taming skills into marital leverage, diverting a fight that ensues over a mixed-up bride mishap into a wrangle over a decapitated pig's head at the wedding banquet, into an eventual resolution by actually swapping brides on the night of the honeymoon.

^{lv} It is especially revealing that the serial breathed new life into Pathé's US marketability, driving the company to invest extensively in a format that would dramatically diminish in financial viability after the war.

^{lvi} According to Anthony Slide, "Soul was an expression Griffith would often refer to when discussing film acting...The quality which made [his] actresses so special, the quality which Griffith saw in each of them...was, I believe, 'soul.' By 'soul' I mean emotion, an inner quality that could be brought to the surface and exposed before the camera: an inner quality that might remain dormant until its possessor came into contact with a mesmerist, a Svengali, a D.W. Griffith" (*The Griffith Actresses*, 15). Among these "Griffith Girls" who possess "soul," Slide focuses on Mae Marsh, Lillian and Dorothy Gish, Blanche Sweet, Mary Pickford, Miriam Cooper, Clarine Seymour, and Carol Dempster.

^{lvii} Jean-Martin Charcot, the French clinical neurologist, conducted his studies on female hysteria at the Pitié-Salpêtrière teaching hospital in Paris. Believing that female hysterics were especially susceptible to hypnosis, Charcot experimented publicly with techniques in somatic manipulation such as electroshock therapy and genital stimulation in order to induce hysterical symptoms in these women.

^{lviii} Bergson asserts: "Try, for a moment, to become interested in everything that is being said or done; act, in imagination, with those who act, and feel with those who feel; in a word, give your sympathy its widest expansion: as though at the touch of a fairy wand you will see the flimsiest of objects assume importance, and a gloomy hue spread over everything. Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy" (*Laughter*, 11).

^{lix} Although interpreted as a biographical projection—perhaps a redress to his jilted wife Linda Arvidson for having set his sights on Dorothy West—*The Eternal Mother* no doubt contains as much allegory as it does personal history.

^{lx} Griffith curiously inverts Martha's and Mary's roles in the New Testament—as if this film were a response to the word of God: "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'

‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her’” (Luke 10:38).

^{lxi} In his book about *The Films of D.W. Griffith*, Scott Simmon analyzes *Birth of a Nation* by tracing a genealogy of its key conventions back to Griffith’s Civil War-themed Biograph films including *House with Closed Shutters*, *In Old Kentucky*, and *The Fugitive*.

^{lxii} The principal filmmaker for the American Biograph Company, Griffith’s corpus spanned as broad a range as the tastes of the public. According to Griffith, in a 1913 *Photoplay* ad, he was the sole director at Biograph for two years from the summer of 1908 (though his assertion seems highly dubious).

^{lxiii} Known to fans as “The Biograph Girl,” Lawrence is remembered for being one of the industry’s first stars. (Griffith insisted on keeping his stars’ names secret well after other studios made theirs publicly visible.) According to Lawrence’s biographer Kelly Brown, Harry Solter recruited Lawrence to Biograph from Vitagraph in mid-1908. After Marion Leonard left Biograph to embark on a stage tour, Griffith gave Solter specific instructions to hire Florence Turner (“The Vitagraph Girl”). Smitten with Lawrence, Solter instead extended her the offer. After appearing in nearly 100 films for Griffith, Lawrence and her husband Solter were fired in June 1909 and blacklisted by “The Trust” due to rumors of studio disloyalty; they had solicited offers from Essanay in order to negotiate higher salaries and to reclaim top billing after Mary Pickford started landing roles that Lawrence felt she should have received. The pooled patent structure of the newly formed MPPC forbid players from attempting to negotiate their own contracts. According to Brown, “By approaching another company on their own, the Solters would remove some of the power that these licensed companies had over a player. Such an action was unheard of at the time” (37). Banned from working at any of the studios included in the Trust, Lawrence and Solter joined the Independent Motion Picture Company (IMP) under the direction of Carl Laemmle.

^{lxiv} *The New York Dramatic Mirror* did not review or comment on films, nor was it widely circulated among film exhibitors and insiders, until the appearance of Frank E. Woods’s column “The Spectator” in June, 1908. According to a (albeit exaggerated) testimony by Linda Arvidson, “Woods dissertated through some columns on the merits and demerits of the movies, and thus became their first real critic” (63). Arvidson associates Woods’s efforts with a broader movement to establish film’s artistic legitimacy. “Frank Woods now set about to criticise the pictures with the same seriousness he would have criticised the theater” (65).

^{lxv} In her autobiography, *My Own Story*, Dressler relates another Normand anecdote that reveals the actress’ comic hybridity between derealized cruelty and saccharine sentimentality: Mabel was asked by a reporter, “What is your favorite recreation?” “Her voice was dripping with naivete: ‘Must I tell you the really-truly truth?’ ... ‘Well,’ said Mabel dreamily, ‘I love windy days when houses blow down on old people and squash ‘em. I adore watching criminals crim, and I dote on mothers who neglect their children

because it shows they have the good of the child at heart. But best of all,' her voice had grown softer and softer, 'best of all, I love to break babies' legs...nice little fat babies legs with white stockings on 'em!" (244-245). Mabel uses cruelty as a tactic for managing the incessant incitements to sentimentality that she encountered as a female comedian.

^{lxvi} Although featured as a Vitagraph comedienne in a series about a mischievous young woman named Betty, Mabel made only melodramas under Griffith, afterward appearing in a number of Biograph comedies (such as *Tomboy Bessie*, *Katchem Kate* and *The Fatal Chocolate*) directed by Mack Sennett before the two left for California to start Keystone.

^{lxvii} For Heath, the spectator refers to "a structure made available" by the complex operations of suture. A psychoanalytic concept first introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller's interpretation of Jacques Lacan, suture is literally the stitch that binds the spectator to the text. This occurs despite all of the lacks and limits imposed between the presence of spectator's body and the absences that hover over the projected image: the limits of the frame, the flatness of the screen, the pastness of the image, and the stasis of the photograms. The key debates of suture theory concern the temporality of how the spectator gets woven into the text. Jean-Pierre Oudart and Daniel Dayan assert a precise moment of retroactive inscription through the entity of "The Absent One:" the "no-body" who becomes a "some-body" through the shot / reverse-shot. In *Questions of Cinema*, Heath critiques the sovereignty of the Absent One, arguing that a third shot, the return of the first shot, is required to effect the suture: the only dualisms in psychoanalysis are imaginary ones. Further, Heath argues that suture can take place through any number of techniques, including the close-up, depth-of-field, or a more intellectual identification with a film's experimentation. "Suture names not just a structure of lack but an availability of the subject, a certain closure, much as the turn of the second fundamental operation in Lacan procures the subject: the 'I' indicates availability well enough" (84).

^{lxviii} Literalizing structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss' definition of culture as the prohibition of incest, because it incentivizes the marital exchange of women's bodies outside of the clan, Griffith repeatedly capitalizes on the visual alternation between female bodies and exchange value on the market in films such as *The Girl and Her Trust* and *The New York Hat*.

^{lxix} Although it is beyond the limits of this chapter to do so, it would be interesting to explore the connections here between visual "sense" and physical "nerve" in *Unseen Enemy* and Dorothy's and Lillian's roles as the blind Louise and her sister caretaker Henriette in Griffith's French Revolutionary melodrama *Orphans of the Storm* (1921).

^{lxx} In *Writer of Modern Life*, looking at Baudelaire's description of a traffic-crosser as a "kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness," Benjamin discusses nervousness as a technique for training individuals to navigate the constant potential for shock characteristic of modern life—the very everydayness of shock. "At dangerous intersections, nervous impulses flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery" (141).

^{lxxi} Although “harlot” is a secondary denotation of the word “slattern,” the maid’s image does not really conjure sexual or lascivious connotations.

^{lxxii} According to Linda Arvidson, pay for overtime evolved from filming *Those Awful Hats*. “Out of the unseen ceiling, soon there dropped an enormous pair of iron claws (supposedly iron) that closed tightly on the hat and head of the shrieking Miss Finch, lifting her bodily out of her seat and holding her suspended aloft in the studio heaven. How many times that scene was rehearsed and taken! It grew so late and we were all so sleepy that we stopped counting” (*When the Movies Were Young*, p.75).

^{lxxiii} These eleven films of the series include *The Smoked Husband* (released Sept 25, 1908), *Mr. Jones at the Ball*, *Mr. Jones Entertains*, *Mr. Jones Has a Card Party*, *Jones and the Lady Book Agent*, *The Joneses Have Amateur Theatricals*, *Jones and His New Neighbors*, *Her First Biscuits*, *The Peach Basket Hat*, *Mrs. Jones’s Lover*, and *Mr. Jones and the Burglar* (released Feb 18, 1909).

^{lxxiv} Thematizing techniques of “mental telepathy,” *The Criminal Hypnotist* depicts the exploits and eventual subversion of a celebrated Professor of Hypnotism who induces women somnabulistically to give up large sums of money stashed away in their own homes.

^{lxxv} For Heath “S” and “S-prime” refer to different forms of stasis at the opening and closing of the classical film narrative, respectively before difference is initiated and after order is restored.

^{lxxvi} Drawing on Freud’s distinction in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*^{lxxvi} between plasticity and elasticity, Catherine Malabou emphasizes the traumatic irreversibility bound up in certain forms of destruction. “Plasticity and elasticity are two forces which are irreducible to one another. What is the most significant difference between them? A plastic material, once shaped, cannot go back to its previous state. An elastic material on the contrary is able to return to its initial form after it underwent a deformation” (“Plasticity,” 44).

^{lxxvii} Schmitt posed this problem quite pointedly in 1926, arguing that the crisis of parliamentary democracy, which refers to a crisis of political impotence precipitated by representative indecision, emerges from the contradiction between liberal individualism and democratic homogeneity. “Even if Bolshevism is suppressed and Fascism held at bay, the crisis of contemporary parliamentarism would not be overcome in the least. For it has not appeared as the result of the appearance of those two opponents; it was there before them and will persist after them. Rather, the crisis springs from the consequences of modern mass democracy and in the final analysis from the contradiction of a liberal individualism burdened by moral pathos and a democratic sentiment governed essentially by political ideals. A century of historical alliance and common struggle against royal absolutism has obscured the awareness of this contradiction. But the crisis unfolds today ever more strikingly, and no cosmopolitan rhetoric can prevent or eliminate it. It is, in its

depths, the inescapable contradiction of liberal individualism and democratic homogeneity” (“On the Contradiction Between Parliamentarism and Democracy,” 17).

^{lxxviii} The film industry capitalized on suffragette politics in order to assert the film theater, and not the legislature, as a key site where popular sovereignty gets imagined and enacted. *The Moving Picture World* praised a theater manager for wedding popular culture with populist politics through suffragette film screenings. “The cause of Votes for Women through moving pictures has found a new and useful avenue for its energies far better and more effective than any other, even excepting the Albany Legislature, for the reason that in the last analysis the power of the people is paramount. And...the moving picture is always the working field of popular power.”

^{lxxix} “A Cure for Suffragettes,” *Moving Picture World* (November 17, 1913): p. 1076.

^{lxxx} “When Women Win,” *New York Clipper* (November 27, 1909): p. 787.

^{lxxxi} “When Women Win,” *Variety* (November, 1909): p. 13.

^{lxxxii} “The Suffragette’s Dream,” *Moving Picture World* (Spring, 1909): p. 269.

^{lxxxiii} “Pardoning the Crime of Rape,” *Woman’s Journal*, May 25, 1878, p. 164.

On the other hand, emphasis on retribution for the crime of rape repeatedly targeted black males in the South. The African-American Suffragette Ida Wells-Barnett wrote prolifically about the racialization of sexual justice in the *Memphis Free Speech*. In 1892, when three black men successfully running a grocery store were lynched near Memphis for allegedly raping a white woman, Wells “point[ed] out that the punishment for the rape of a white woman was a cover-up for the lynchers’ economic motive: the victims had been prospering and were becoming threats to the white storekeepers who wanted to take over their trade” (Flexner and Fitzpatrick, 180-181).

^{lxxxiv} Kraditor argues that “the final divorce of woman suffrage from abolitionism was accompanied by the rise of a woman suffrage movement in the Southern States” (173). Laura Clay of Kentucky and Kate Gordon of Louisiana were appointed as secretaries for NAWSA. Gordon staunchly opposed a national amendment, wanting to preserve states’ rights to dictate their own versions of equality and enfranchisement. Gordon hoped that an anti-federal dissection of voting rights would further undermine the national scope of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. She once wrote President Taft a letter: “The Democratic South is nothing else but a concise way of expressing anti-Nigger” (177). She attempted to parlay this racist, anti-federalist position into further leverage to enlist the support of white Southern males for white women’s state-by-state enfranchisement.

^{lxxxv} Although many unions did not keep thorough records of their membership by sex, historians have estimated that a total of 76,748 women joined unions in 1910 alone, especially in garment trades, textiles and cloth weaving, book binding, shoe making, tobacco, retail, and musical and theater arts. 1907 was a key year when women trade workers emerged as union leaders and organizers: Mary Anderson and Emma Steghagen

of the shoe workers, Rose Schneiderman of the cap makers, Agnes Nestor and Elisabeth Christman of the glove makers, Melinda Scott of the hat trimmers, Josephine Casey of the railway ticket takers, Stella Franklin of the department store clerks, Elizabeth Maloney of the waitresses, and Maud Swartz of the typographers (Flexner and Fitzpatrick, 237).

^{lxxxvi} “Oh! You Suffragette,” *Moving Picture World* (April 8, 1911): p. 787.

^{lxxxvii} Ibid.

^{lxxxviii} There were major debates among suffragettes, radical feminists, and women labor advocates about the scope and extent of suffragette campaigns. NAWSA leaders like Carrie Chapman Catt and Anna Howard Shaw were more concerned with social reforms carried out at the municipal and state level, and were willing to concede the federal amendment campaign to the exigency of these demands. Radical militants in the United States (Alice Paul) and the United Kingdom (Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst) were willing to abandon coalition politics with working-class women, black women, immigrants, and other marginalized groups lest these coalition interests fragment the central goal of enfranchisement. This caused a certain amount of resentment especially between suffragettes and labor activists.

^{lxxxix} Labor strikes proliferated throughout the first decades of the twentieth century: from 4,000 strikes in the United States 1904 alone, after the financial panic of 1907, there were general strikes in 1907 (New Orleans levee workers); 1909 (ten thousand US steel workers in McKees Rocks, PA, and twenty thousand women garment workers in New York); in 1912 in Lawrence, MA, the IWW and WTUL rallied fifty thousand garment strikers—mostly immigrant workers from Eastern Europe—in a general strike against the American Woolen Company that provoked the governor to call in the local militia, state police, and eventually to declare martial law.

^{xc} “Cousin Kate’s Revolution,” *Moving Picture World* (May 3, 1912): p. 668.

^{xci} As Rob King argues in *The Fun Factory*, drawing on T.W. Adorno’s late writings on technology, the pleasures of technological mystification displaced and substituted for the lampooning of ethnic and working-class social politics in 1910s Keystone slapstick film comedies. “To paraphrase Adorno, the technical ‘how’ of mass culture increasingly supplanted the social ‘what’ of Progressive-era creativity” (199).

^{xcii} The physician Girolamo Fracastoro argues in *De Sympathia* (1546): “The things that generally move us to laughter must have a certain novelty about them” and must appear before us “suddenly” and “unexpectedly” (Skinner, 156). A number of Fracastoro’s interlocutors, including Francisco Vallesio, Juan Luis Vives, Baldassare Castiglione, and (slightly later) René Descartes, similarly emphasize the punctuality of mirth. As Vives puts it, laughter “arises out of a novel sense of delight...sudden and unexpected things

have more effect on us and move us more quickly to laughter than anything else” (Skinner, 155).

^{xciii} Walter Benjamin draws the distinction between conservative law-preserving violence and transformative law-making violence in order to explore the endless cycles between means and ends that keep proliferating violence in the pretense of justice. “The question would remain open whether violence, as a principle, could be a moral means even to just ends. To resolve this question a more exact criterion is needed, which would discriminate within the sphere of means themselves, without regard for the ends they serve” (*Reflections*, 277). As Benjamin argues, the legal means of violence always overpower and dominate the ends of justice. Only by conjuring a form of “pure means,” which he articulates as a “divine violence,” can this apocalyptic crisis of tautological justification be broken open.

^{xciv} The leading suffragette organizer from Chicago, Ida Wells-Barnett, was asked not to march with her own Illinois Delegation in the 1913 Washington Parade the day before Wilson’s first inauguration. “She was told that southern women in the line of march would not agree to such interracial participation, and that she must march with a ‘colored delegation’” (Flexner and Fitzpatrick, 299). However, Barnett disregarded these instructions, disappearing at the beginning of the parade and then emerging midway through: she “stepped unobtrusively from the sidewalk into the Chicago paraders, flanked on either side by white supporters, and finished the full line of march” (299).

^{xcv} “Suffragette Parade in Washington,” *Moving Picture World* (April 4, 1913).

^{xcvi} *Woman’s Journal and Suffrage News* (March 8, 1913): p. 1.

^{xcvii} “Bunny for the Cause,” *Moving Picture World* (September 26, 1913): p. 155.

^{xcviii} “The Pickpocket,” *Moving Picture World* (July 23, 1913): p. 334.

^{xcix} Stamp raises the question of feminine desire in response to the film’s elliptical title, *Eighty Million Women Want—?*: “Whereas the book [on which the film is based] unequivocally defines ‘what women want,’ the film poses women’s desire as an enigma. The blank line visible in the revised title suggests as much the impossibility of defining what women want, as it does the obviousness of the answer; the feminine libido is at once enormous and unsignifiable” (187).

^c “For Mayor—Bess Smith,” *Moving Picture World* (June 14, 1913).

^{ci} It would be difficult to argue that Freud’s thesis was totally original, as any number of 1910s suffragette film comedies depict striving women abandoning their political ambitions in order to marry a man in an official position of power.

^{cii} The mirror stage, as Jacques Lacan has defined it, takes place just on the cusp of the infant's entry into the symbolic, which provides for the awareness of difference and the initiation of the law of the father (lack, cutting, the third term). At this moment of incipient ego formation, which takes place between 6 and 18 months of age, the child misrecognizes its own mirror image as an extension of her/his body. The unified mirror image is meant to represent an ideal substitution for the infant's own puny, fragmented body—with its early childhood motor incapacities. The suffragette's shattered mirror stage moment provides an intriguing inversion of the infant's mirror stage; here subjective fragmentation takes the place of the unified mirror image. Fragmentation, rupture, and feminine rigidity themselves become gleeful, ideal imagos. To invoke plasticity, here, the psychoanalytic notion of "imago" as ideal image also intersects with the biological designation of "imago" as the last stage of metamorphosis (for the insect).

^{ciii} *Infants Department* (May, 1918).

^{civ} "The Suffragette Sheriff," *Moving Picture World* (July 2, 1913): p. 1201.

^{cv} "The Indian Suffragette," *Moving Picture World* (November 6, 1914).

^{cvi} In early 1900s film comedies, suffragette leaders basically epitomize updated versions of the Paris Commune's pétroleuse. For example, in Carrie Nation film comedies, including *Kansas City Saloon Smasher* (AM&B, 1901) and *Why Mr. Nation Wants a Divorce* (Edison, 1901), Carrie Nation and her hatchet brigade are depicted as axe-wielding furies who would wreak violence, anarchy, and domestic turbulence in the name of enfranchisement and prohibition.

^{cvi} Democritus was an atomist, who believed in the indivisibility of atoms, arguing that if everything were theoretically divisible, nothing would prevent the smallest magnitude from having been already divided at every point. A limit to divisibility thereby emerged as the only way out of an endless philosophical paradox. Moreover, in attaining the smallest magnitude, infinitesimally divided layers shed from atoms inhabited the atmosphere and transformed human perception, even penetrating the human eye. Since thought as well as sensation derives from images imposed on perception from the outside, the loophole out of one paradox gave way to the emergence of a new paradox. The residue, these microscopic films, engendered by the ultimate indivisibility of the atom, now posed fundamental questions about the material basis of human knowledge—which was later deployed as evidence against the very existence of the Gods.

^{cvi} Bakhtin emphasizes duality and the momentary liquidation of opposites: "Carnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world—the new year, the new spring, the new kingdom. The old world that has been destroyed is offered together with the new world and is represented with it as the dying part of the dual body. This is why in carnivalesque images there is so much turnabout, so many opposite faces and intentionally upset proportions" (*Rabelais*, 410).

^{cix} "Exciting Derby Race Film," *Moving Picture World* (November 10, 1913): p. 189.

^{cx} Freud elucidates this mystifying paradox of sovereignty by foregrounding its inherent comedy. He recounts an anecdote from the German philosopher Kuno Fischer's 1889 work, *Über den Witz*. Louis XV commanded a courtier known for his wit to come up with a joke on the spot that would take the king as its subject. The courtier responded immediately, "But the King is not a subject."

^{cx}ⁱ <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/01/hitchens200701>.

^{cx}ⁱⁱ Slide emphasizes the distinction between "preservation," which often simply involves transferring decomposed nitrate stock to an acetate base, and "restoration," which demands significant curating expertise—such as deciphering a film's narrative using several incompatible, incomplete prints from different film archives.

^{cx}ⁱⁱⁱ *The Magic Hoop* (1908), which depicts a young girl who gads around the village transfiguring live-action objects into stop-motion drawings through the use of a magic hoop, has been included in recent compilations of Cohl's work with the disclaimer: "We include it here despite the advanced deterioration of the nitrate stock."