MACHINE-AGE
COMEDY

MICHAEL NORTH

Machine-Age Comedy

Modernist Literature & Culture

Kevin J. H. Dettmar & Mark Wollaeger, Series Editors

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Foreword

Michael North's founding insight in *Machine-Age Comedy* is simple yet potentially transformative: new forms of comedy emerging in the twentieth century suggest that artists found technological modernity intrinsically comic. North analyzes a broad array of cultural forms—fiction, drama, essays, cartoons, readymades, and films—to construct a cultural history that takes in Buster Keaton and Dziga Vertov, Wyndham Lewis and Samuel Beckett, Mickey Mouse and Felix the Cat, Henri Bergson and Walter Benjamin, Charlie Chaplin and David Foster Wallace. The breadth of *Machine-Age Comedy* is dazzling; at the same time, it is tightly focused, rendering the argument both remarkably lucid and extremely suggestive.

Given the unprecedented mass violence experienced throughout the world over the past century, one might hypothesize that machine-age comedy was intended as some kind of desperate defense, or perhaps, as Robert Polhemus has put it, comprised a form of "comic faith" that either supplemented or substituted for the consolations of religion. But North argues that modern writers and artists found something inherently comic in new experiences of repetition associated with—enforced and made inevitable by—industrial mass production, mechanical reproduction, and a growing suspicion of the fundamentally machinic nature of human beings. North is therefore interested not only in the representation of machines and how recording technologies created new forms of representation. He also explores how the mass production of everyday consumer goods created new kinds of aesthetic objects that were recognized as such by artists highly attuned to cultural transformations wrought by the machine age.

North returns to classic accounts of aesthetic modernism to show how the comic, typically slighted, is fundamental in hitherto unrecognized ways. Marcel

Duchamp's readymades, for instance, can be seen as biomechanical puns, and Rube Goldberg's famous machines have the structure of a joke. The energy-saving mechanism of humor—we laugh to avoid wasting energy on tears and frustration—is thus revealed as an analog for the modern machine as labor-saving device. Prudently, North does not offer a definition of comedy, but his case studies always fold back to reflect on influential theories of the comic. Duchamp's puns, it turns out, are told at the expense of Henri Bergson's theory of comedy, which claimed that comedy serves to purge the human of its tendency toward the mechanical by humorously excoriating any human behavior that smacks of automatism. Duchamp and Golberg, in contrast, are more interested in the ease with which boundaries between the human and the mechanical can be blurred, and in the comedy inherent in such blurring. Bergson was not wrong about comedy's hostility to the mechanical; rather, his account, like Freud's, actually reveals a more complex relation between the human and the machine, "a circuit . . . not a simple opposition": insofar as laughter can seem automatic—a kind of mechanical reflex—laughter's humane corrective to seemingly inhuman automatism is itself part of a machine process. "If the work of humor," North points out, "can be considered a kind of machine, then perhaps machines are not just an obvious menace to humor but also a novel source of it."

The provocations of *Machine-Age Comedy* undoubtedly will elicit supplementary and competing accounts. Some may wish to view Joyce through the lens North provides. Others may want to devote more attention to the fascinating connection North establishes between visual abstraction and comic form. Still others may ask whether comedy in the machine age was a boys-only playground. The questions posed in *Machine-Age Comedy* and those it will inspire exemplify the aims of the Modernist Literature & Culture (MLC) series. MLC was established to explore the cultural bearings of literary modernism across multiple fields, geographies, symbolic forms, and media, publishing books that synthesize close attention to literary texts with interdisciplinary cultural approaches: innovative and energetic books that explore the breadth and depth of modernist studies. We are delighted to launch the series with the energy of this book.

Mark Wollaeger and Kevin J. H. Dettmar

Preface

Authors of general interest books on comedy sometimes feel it necessary to warn their readers at the outset that analyses of humor are not usually very funny. In an academic book on the topic such a warning is probably unnecessary. It might be necessary, though, to warn the reader that no general definition of comedy will be attempted in the pages to follow. Even after studying the topic for some time, I don't feel any better equipped than anyone else to explain why it should be amusing to watch people fall down. Nor do I have a new theory of the structure of verbal comedy, a topic that will receive very little attention in the chapters of this book. Even before giving so much attention to the subject of comedy, I felt that the term gave a specious unity to a ragged assembly of verbal routines, dramatic techniques, and visceral responses, and that attempts to isolate the essence of the form and identify it with the joke or the pratfall were compounding a basic mistake.

Instead, it has been my ambition to follow some hints from Walter Benjamin and explore the relationship between modernity and comedy. On the one hand, it seemed obvious that there were concrete forms of the comic in the twentieth century that had not existed before. On the other hand, it seemed to me that these forms, silent comedy and cartoons in particular, drew upon certain aspects of the modern condition in such a way as to suggest that there is something inherently comic in it. At the very least, I felt, comedy and modernity inform one another in so many ways that an investigation of their relation should illuminate the two terms, even if it does not result in a comprehensive theory of either one.

I hope that the particular examples chosen for the chapters to follow will constitute a mixture of the obvious and the unexpected. I have not attempted to provide a catalogue of comic forms or of the modern arts, though I have taken a look

at cartoons, paintings, readymades, novels, and films, both live and animated. My intent has been to provide enough examples, from enough different kinds of modern art and literature, to make my case; but I have not attempted to provide an exhaustive account even of this limited topic, so as to avoid exhausting the reader. It will be obvious that the examples in part I are a little more limited in time than those of part II, though it should be noted that the accounts of Disney and Duchamp bring us fairly close to the present. Though the early part of the twentieth century is clearly a defining moment for my argument, I see the development of machine-age comedy as something that still continues, and thus part II spreads itself across the century as a whole.

I want especially to thank Paul Edwards for his very generous help and advice in regard to the art of Wyndham Lewis. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Sandra Martin and Tracey Walker of the Manchester City Galleries and Lorna Kirwin of the Bancroft Library, University of California, who did extensive detective work on my behalf. I would also like to thank the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, for kindly sending me some materials from the papers of Boris Kaufman. Parts of the work in progress have been presented at the University of Arizona, Indiana University, the University of Michigan, and the University of Tulsa, and I would like to thank the organizers of those events and the audiences who were kind enough to listen and respond.

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Whether it is his walk, the way he handles his cane, or the way he raises his hat—always the same jerky sequence of tiny movements applies the law of the cinematic image sequence to human motorial functions. Now, what is it about this behavior that is distinctively comic?

—Walter Benjamin, 1935

I

Before trying to answer Benjamin's question,[1] one he never explicitly answers himself, it might be worth wondering why he poses it at all. It does not seem a particularly characteristic inquiry, coming from a writer usually thought of as "intransigently melancholic, fixed to his work and the sadness of it,"[2] whose only full-length published work was on the German tragic drama. And yet, in all of Benjamin's speculations on the political significance of film, Chaplin is virtually the only performer mentioned by name, with the significant exception of Mickey Mouse. Thus, the very serious questions raised by the invention of mechanically reproduced works of art are approached primarily by way of comic examples, which sometimes seem to embody the most positive aspects of the new media. Benjamin even suggests in an early essay on Chaplin that laughter is "the most international and the most revolutionary emotion of the masses" (*SW*, 2:224).

However, this interest in comic performers does not seem to have been prompted originally by the fact that they are funny. Instead, Benjamin is fascinated by the traces of mechanical reproduction written into the performance style of comedians like Chaplin, who seem to have made themselves into little windup toys, as if

their movements were not just recorded but actually created by the hand-cranked cameras of the silent period. It is a secondary consideration for him to wonder why this sort of mechanization, so oddly reminiscent of the discipline of the assembly line, should turn out to be funny, and he is finally undecided about the social and political significance of the laughter it excites.

Benjamin was not the only serious critic of the time to wonder at this apparent paradox. Early in the 1920s, Viktor Shklovsky also suggested that the essence of Chaplin's humor is to be found in its mechanical quality, but he could not decide, any more than Benjamin, why this should be so.[3] The situation is puzzling in part because comedy has traditionally been associated with the spontaneous, the illogical, the organic, and the primitive, so that a comic style that arises from repetitive, machinelike movements seems almost a contradiction in terms. The theory of Henri Bergson, though it derives comedy from the mechanical, changes rather little in this respect because it depends on the notion that laughter is an expression of the natural hostility of organic life to the machine. Bergson's theory was thus of little use to critics of a revolutionary persuasion, wondering at what seemed like the genuine delight of the masses in comic routines that embodied modern mechanization.

Puzzling over these difficulties, as Benjamin and Shklovsky did, should make it clear that Chaplin's peculiar way of moving on-screen is only a minor revelatory example of a much larger problem, that of accounting for mass-produced comedy in general. Comedy has been traditionally thought to depend for much of its effect on surprise.[4] What happens to this valuable comic resource when the same routines can be seen in exact repetition dozens of times? The plays of Aristophanes, it is worth remembering, were meant to be produced only once, and though English stage comedies were certainly reproduced in repertory by the Elizabethan period, repeat performances were more the exception than the rule. In any case, the funny bits, which were often at least partly improvised, could be done a little differently at each performance. Nothing like this spontaneity is possible in the case of film. In Chaplin's routines, however, the reproducible quality of the comedy is not just suffered but actually embraced, since the repetitious bits of comic shtick, the cookie-cutter motions that so intrigued Benjamin, are simply intensified reflex versions of the repetition intrinsic to film. Rather than trying to modify this quality, Chaplin makes it the essence of his performance, turning himself into a "walking trademark," as Benjamin puts it, one whose immediate recognizability was the very basis of its appeal (*SW*, 2:200).

Chaplin was just as popular for always appearing in the same costume—the famous cane, bowler hat, and tiny mustache—as he was for surprising his audience with outrageous gags. The repetitious aspects of his performance—the squared-off turns, the hackneyed flourishes of the arms—were just as amusing as the prat-

falls, which were themselves usually telegraphed far in advance. And there turned out to be a very particular kind of amusement, one not generally available before the twentieth century, in going back to see the same pratfall, which seemed in some cases to be all the funnier now that it was no longer a surprise. Later, radio and television would make this peculiar kind of amusement their stock-in-trade. When Jack Benny faces a holdup man in one celebrated radio routine, the audience laughs because it knows, without Benny having to say a word, that the question "Your money or your life?" is one he simply cannot answer. Dick Van Dyke gets laugh after laugh out of the same ottoman because the audience expects he will fall over it yet again. To wonder at this, to ask why the purely repetitious aspects of a comic performance should be just as funny as the novel parts, is to pose Benjamin's question about Chaplin in a different and larger context. It is to wonder whether there might be something potentially comic in mechanical reproduction itself.

Of course, comedy has never been entirely spontaneous or original, and it has often exploited stock characters, stereotypes, and repetitive actions. But Benjamin's inquiry suggests that within Chaplin's general resemblance to a Punch-and-Judy puppet there is a different quality arising from the unprecedented situation of the audience, which, even in its first exposure, is watching a reproduction. Chaplin's robotic routines remind the audience of this fact, and that seems part of their enjoyment. Thus the machine age seems to have brought, along with all its other dislocations, a new motive for laughter and perhaps a new form of comedy. Entertaining this possibility, at any rate, should tell us a good deal about the equivocal significance of mechanization in the modern period, especially as it affects the arts. And it may tell us something as well about the relation between modernism and modernity, which is governed so largely by the variable ratio between mechanical repetition and incessant novelty. If there is something inherently funny in mechanical reproduction, then it is also possible that modernity itself is governed by a comic rhythm, even when it is not particularly amusing.

II

Far more than any other literary or artistic form, comedy is thought to be unchanging and thus to lack a history, except in the most trivial sense. "In the millennia since Susarion," as Erich Segal puts it, "none of the stimuli that arouse laughter have changed."[5] Of course, establishing perfection at the very outset does mean that any development will be a decline, so it is not odd that Segal believes that "after reaching its apogee with Figaro, comedy had nowhere to go but down."[6] Actually,

it would be truer to the form and organization of his book, which is called *The Death of Comedy*, to say that comedy had nowhere to go once it had produced Aristophanes. For Segal, comedy simply survives in a more or less steady state, until it starts to change and thus to decline, finally hitting rock bottom in 1896 with Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.[7] However, the inability of this theory founded on classical precedents to cope at all with any comedy after 1896 suggests another possibility: that Segal's original premise is wrong and that the sources of laughter change over time just as they vary from place to place.

For the Romantics, in fact, there was an implicit association of comedy with freedom that made it quintessentially modern, not ancient. Schiller, for example, took the view that comedy is humane, expansive, and unconstraining, in utter contrast to an older view, most often associated with Hobbes, that comic spite is one of the chief ways in which society punishes difference.[8] In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, comedy stands at the culmination of the process of spirit's self-conscious realization, in which the abstract and alien are revealed as mere aspects of self-consciousness. The resulting "self-certainty" is, according to Hegel, "a state of spiritual well-being and of repose therein, such as is not to be found anywhere outside of this Comedy."[9] In this view, comedy is to be found not at the dawn but very close to the end of history, as one of spirit's freest and highest expressions.

From the Restoration on, the English often congratulated themselves on their comic spirit, which could not have developed, they felt, without a long history of humane tolerance and political freedom.[10] In the Victorian period, however, comedy seems almost to have disappeared from the English stage: Allan Rodway claims not to have found *any* complete comedies in English stage history between 1830 and 1870.[11] Victorian novels, of course, are full of famous comic turns, but it is hard to think of a novel after *Pickwick Papers* in which the comedy is not significantly diluted by uplift or sentiment. For the Victorians, comedy, like so many other things, was held to be fine in moderation, but it was not to be enjoyed for its own sake alone. Thus Victorian comic theory emphasized the necessity of constraining comedy within a formal balance and taming it with a strong sense of realism. As Henry Jenkins has suggested in his account of this tendency, Victorian suspicion of unmitigated comedy was closely related to more general fears of social instability and possible upheaval.[12] Comedy still enjoyed a general association with freedom, but only in the context of a measured and responsible realist form, in which the comic remained firmly in its place. Anything formally inorganic, obtrusive, or mechanical was held to be not just inartistic but also socially suspect.

By the end of the century, in the English-speaking countries at any rate, comedy had been firmly tucked into place as a pleasant recreation, a mild reminder of

dreams of freedom now subordinated to a higher responsibility. On the Continent, however, comedy enjoyed for its own sake, to the very point of aesthetic anarchy, had become the stock-in-trade of a particular branch of the avant-garde. When Charles Cros delivered his comic monologue "Pickled Herring" in 1867, he was hailed as having invented an entirely new comic form, but he had also inaugurated a long and influential series of avant-garde provocations.[13] Based at a series of venues, from Le Brasserie du Bon Bock to the Chat Noir and Quat'z'Arts cabarets, grouped together in a number of loose associations, including the Hydropathes and the Incoherents, and publishing poems, stories, and drawings in a series of publications, including those famously sponsored by the cabarets, these artists, including Cros, Jules Lévy, Emile Cohl, Emile Goudeau, André Gill, Maurice Rollinat, Rodolphe Salis, and many others, developed a new artistic attitude that is often considered the earliest ancestor to dada and surrealism. As some of the names suggest, these groups broke with the past primarily by promoting a general comic inconsequence, a stance of provocative nonsense, the sting of which can still be felt today when Segal complains of *Ubu Roi* that it "was nothing less than the first blow in the campaign that ultimately would destroy all cherished—that is, coherent and logical—dramatic form."[14]

Perhaps because their work seemed so different from the comedy of the past, these groups coined or adapted a whole series of new terms for it, the most common and enduring of which was *fumisme*. Essentially undefinable, *fumisme* could be discerned mainly in its opposition to common artistic requirements of balance, consequence, and realism, which it answered with extravagance, incoherence, and nonsense.[15] *Fumisme* was closely associated with *Je m'en foutisme*, with a committed irresponsibility, and it tended to produce satires and takeoffs rather than original works of art. Until it gave way to *blague* in the next century, though, *fumisme* stood as the name for a new kind of comedy, typical of the modern age.

Groups like the Hydropathes or the Incoherents, most of whose actual works were in ephemeral forms, may seem minor and unimportant after so many years, but in the aggregate they illustrate a series of important convergences that helped to constitute the modern period. These groups were in fact closely associated with the European avant-garde, from Mallarmé and Manet to Picasso and Satie. They were also representative of the ways in which popular entertainment, particularly that of the cabaret, would influence artistic movements in the twentieth century. Finally, many individual members of these groups were vitally interested in new developments in mechanical recording, including Cros, who is sometimes credited with inventing the phonograph, and Cohl, who is sometimes called the first film animator.[16] As Donald Crafton shows in his excellent extended study of Cohl's

life, the common factor unifying an otherwise disparate existence, extending from the cabarets of Montmartre to the film studios of New Jersey, was a particular kind of humor, developed out of *fumisme* and displayed to its fullest in animated cartoons.

This comic technique, born as the in-joke of the avant-garde salon, worked just as well in cartoons generated for a mass American audience in part because roughly similar changes had been taking place, on both sides of the Atlantic, in popular humor. As Jenkins shows, there was widespread interest in and anxiety about something called the "New Humor" in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Sober critics were concerned simply by an apparent increase in the sheer amount of humor, which raised the alarming possibility that America would "become a laughing nation, a country of frivolists and hypergelasts, a culture dangerously out of control."[17] But it was also the quality of this humor that raised concern. The New Humor was associated with the new mass-market publications coming into prominence at this time and thus with their readers, who, though not exactly unlettered and unwashed, were still less educated and apparently less serious than the readers of the old-line quarterlies. A little later in the twentieth century, though, the New Humor also came to be associated with vaudeville and thus with audiences, performers, and performance styles that were inevitably, if not always accurately, linked to recent increases in immigration. What this meant in practice, as Jenkins shows, is that "materials previously restricted to the masculine culture of the saloons and the oral discourse of the ghetto were now gaining national prominence through the industrialization of amusement."[18]

Though the New Humor raised alarm primarily because of its content, it was just as threatening to genteel critics in its form. Though the stories, poems, and stage routines loosely grouped for criticism under this rubric were "industrialized" only in the crudest sense, they did seem to be alarmingly more "mechanical" than humor of the past. Vaudeville performers, for instance, came to rely on "human horsepower, size, electricity, energy, zingo," according to Robert Lytell, writing in 1925.[19] Having made themselves into humor machines, such performers inevitably tended to favor striking, intense effects over the slow development of comic plots. Gags came to predominate over humorous situations, to the distress of older, more measured comedians such as Sidney Drew, who complained about this "'mechanical appeal' to spectator emotions."[20] But the mechanics of comedy had come to be treated almost as a science, or a set of industrial techniques, so that George M. Cohan and George Jean Nathan could define "a vocabulary of basic mechanical devices, insertable into any performance regardless of context, and calculated to produce an immediate and outward response."[21]

In other words, the machine age had begun to affect comedy even before very much of it was mechanically reproduced. The antics of the Hydropathes resemble American vaudeville routines in rejecting the cardinal rule of the Old Humor, which is that amusement should grow naturally out of a realistic situation. Instead, the new humorists favor gags and stunts, nonsensical routines that amuse because of their inconsequence, and repetitive, stereotyped bits of shtick that spark a laugh of recognition, as well as surprise. In accepting and advancing these changes, comics were embracing an aspect of modern experience, the way that so much of it seemed to be mechanically organized, that was otherwise causing widespread dismay. Critics reacted so harshly to the New Humor not just because it was ill-mannered but also because it was creating laughter from the very aspects of modern life that well-intentioned people were supposed to fear and dislike.

Comedy therefore came well prepared to the age of mechanical reproduction. Many of the early experimenters in film comedy, artists like Cohl in France or J. Stuart Blackton in the United States, were attracted to the medium by the machine itself. They were tinkerers, whose interest in expanding and refining the possibilities of machine-produced art was communicated to their audiences, who were often amused simply by the processes of mechanical reproduction.[22] The kind of excitement that is now created around elaborate special effects was first made possible by such simple stop-action routines as the chalk drawings that Blackton made appear on film, apparently out of thin air.

Animations of this kind, which depend so obviously on the mechanics of film, seem to distill pure comedy out of the facts of mechanical reproduction. In the beginning, film was exciting for the blindingly simple reason that it made things move.[23] Bringing the previously inanimate world of pictures to life looked a lot like bringing the inanimate itself to life, which is what the animated cartoon did on a more basic level. Crafton has suggested that early cartoons fascinated in part because they brought the thrilling self-propulsion of the airplane and the automobile to everyday objects, so that anything could seem dynamic.[24] Animations and stop-action trick films made the inorganic world seem to live, communicating the speed and freedom of self-propelled machines to objects that had no such powers themselves, spreading the message of technology, which is that nothing needs to remain fixed in place.

Early stop-action films often focused on explicitly modernistic situations, such as the *Hotel Electrico*, filmed by Ferdinand Zecca in 1905, where a young couple is mystified and confused as everything in the hotel whirls about under its own power. However troubled the characters might have been, the audience was supposed to find their situation hugely amusing, just as they were supposed to find